

**The God-Relationship:  
A Kierkegaardian account of the  
Christian spiritual life**

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## Abstract

By drawing on the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, I address the question of what it is to live in relationship with God. In answering this question, it is important to recognise that God, as he is described in the Christian tradition, is a personal God. For this reason, the account of the Christian spiritual life I outline is described as a life of coming to know God personally, rather than as a life of coming to know about God by learning about him. As I argue, a minimal condition for knowing God personally in this way is that an individual has a second-person experience of God. However, one of the barriers which prevents relationship with God from occurring in this life is that the human will is defective in such a way that human beings cannot will to be in union with God. Because of this problem, human beings cannot live in union with God in this life. And so, in order to allow for the possibility of union with God in the life to come, the human will must be repaired; consequently, one of the key tasks of the spiritual life is this task of repairing a person's will by re-orienting it so that union with God is possible. Since a person cannot be in union with God in this life, it is important to give an account of what it is to be in relationship with God in the spiritual life. I present this relationship in terms of being in union with Christ which I describe, drawing from Kierkegaard, in terms of 'being contemporary with Christ'. To be contemporary with Christ, as I explain it, is to experience what psychologists call 'shared-attention' with Christ; one way of experiencing Christ in this way, I argue, is by a person's engagement in spiritual practices. It is by stressing the importance of this concept of contemporaneity with Christ that we can see how an individual engages in the task of re-orientating their will. The reason for this, is that the experience of Christ's presence allows a human being to imitate Christ and thereby heal the damage caused by sin. Finally, I argue, even in experiences of God's absence, a person can develop a deeper relationship with God. In withdrawing his presence from individuals, God allows for a kind of weaning process to occur in which persons develop a more independent, and eventually deeper God-relationship.

# Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Author's Declaration	vii
Introduction	
The philosophy of the spiritual life	1
Why Kierkegaard?	5
Kierkegaard's writings: Pseudonymous and signed	8
Methodology	14
The God-relationship: An outline	17
Part 1 Faith, Union and Empathy: A Kierkegaardian account of the God-relationship	
Introduction	23
Chapter 1 (Inter)Subjectivity and personal knowledge: The epistemology of the God-relationship	
Introduction	26
The objective issue of the truth of Christianity	28
Objective and subjective communication	32
Stump on Franciscan/ Dominican knowledge	37
Objectivity and Dominican knowledge	43
Faith and subjectivity	44
(Inter)subjectivity and Franciscan knowledge	46
An intersubjective account of coming to faith	52
Chapter 2 The Purity of Heart is to will one thing: Despair and the problem of the will	
Introduction	55
Sin, despair, and the self before God	56
Despair and the self	62
Sin and despair	64
Faith as the antidote to despair	66
Double-mindedness and the Purity of Heart	67
Wholeheartedness and reintegration	72
Faith, wholeheartedness and the <i>ordo salutis</i>	84
Conclusion	86

Chapter 3 Incarnation and divine-human union: Mutual empathy in the God-Relationship	
Introduction	87
Empathy and divine-human union	89
Reconstructive empathy and ‘omnisubjectivity’	93
Perceptual empathy and omnipresence	95
The king and the maiden	97
Incarnation and empathy	100
Mutual-empathy and the Incarnation	106
The Incarnation, time and empathy	108
Conclusion	118
 Part 2 Contemporaneity, presence and practice: Religious experience in the God-relationship	
Introduction	120
 Chapter 4 Contemporaneity and presence: An account of union with Christ	
Introduction	122
Historical vs. genuine contemporaneity	124
Contemporaneity, spiritual perception and presence	125
Contemporaneity and historical bridging	127
Personal presence and contemporaneity	128
Epistemic contemporaneity	130
Contemporaneity as an ‘extramundane experience’	134
Contemporaneity and perception: The ‘Alston model’	138
Contemporaneity and presence: An intersubjective model	141
A Kierkegaardian account of the experience of the Holy Spirit	149
Joint-attention and indwelling	152
Conclusion	154
 Chapter 5 Practice in Christianity: Attention sharing and ritual knowledge in the God-relationship	
Introduction	155
The epistemology of spiritual practice	156
Stump on narrative knowledge	157
Cuneo on ritual knowledge	158
Wolterstorff on knowing God liturgically	161
Towards an interpersonal model of spiritual practice	163
‘The Mirror of the Word’: Scripture and presence in the God relationship	166
Scripture and attention sharing	169
Practice in Christianity	174
Practice and community	182
Conclusion	185

Part 3 Connecting the dots:	
Imitation and absence in the God-relationship	
Introduction	186
Chapter 6 The Imitation Game:	
Becoming imitators of Christ	
Introduction	189
Imitation and contemporaneity: the task of <i>true</i> Christianity	191
Imitation as sanctification	195
Imitation and presence	199
Imitation and behaviour replication	200
Imitating Christ: A shared-attention model	207
Conclusion	211
Chapter 7 The Dark Knight of the Soul:	
Weaning and the Problem of Divine Withdrawal	
The problem of divine withdrawal	212
Weaning and the problem of divine withdrawal in Kierkegaard	215
Spiritual weaning in The Dark Night of the Soul	221
The Dark Knight of the Soul	224
Objections: Absolute dependency and spiritual consent	229
Conclusion	238
Conclusion	239
References to Kierkegaard's Writings	243
Bibliography	246

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References. Some of the material in this thesis has previously been presented in different formats. I list the relevant sources here:

**Chapter 3:** Some of the material in this chapter is shared with the paper 'Empathy and Divine Union in Kierkegaard: Solving the faith/history problem in *Philosophical Fragments*' which is published in *Religious Studies*, vol. 51 issue 4, Dec 2015. This paper was also awarded the 2015 Religious Studies Postgraduate Essay Prize.

**Chapter 4:** Some of the material in this chapter is shared with the manuscript 'Contemporaneity and Communion: Kierkegaard on the personal presence of Christ' which is published in *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, forthcoming.

**Chapter 6:** Some of the material in this chapter is shared with the paper 'The Imitation Game: Becoming Imitators of Christ' which is forthcoming in *Religious Studies*. It was also awarded the 2016 Religious Studies Postgraduate Essay Prize.

**Chapter 6:** Some of the material in this chapter is shared with the paper 'You have asked only for imitators: Kierkegaard and the *imitatio Christi*' which is currently under consideration at *The European for the Philosophy of Religion*.

**Chapter 7:** Some of the material in this chapter is shared with the paper 'The Dark Knight of the Soul: Weaning and the problem of divine withdrawal' which is forthcoming in *Religious Studies*.





Teach me, O God, not to torture myself, not to make a martyr out of myself through stifling reflection, but, rather, teach me to breathe deeply in faith.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The prayers that head each of the chapters are all prayers taken from Kierkegaard's writings. Perry D. LeFevre (1956) compiles these together in his volume, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*.



## Introduction

You everywhere present One, when I was considering how I would speak and what I would say, you were present. 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. (JP, 3433, X, A, 210)

### **The philosophy of the spiritual life**

Some might consider the topic of ‘the Christian spiritual life’ to be a puzzling, and perhaps an irrelevant, topic for a PhD thesis in philosophy, something more suited to a doctoral student of divinity or theology.<sup>2</sup> However, thinking about the nature of a life lived in relationship with a transcendent, divine being gives rise to many important philosophical questions: What can we know about God, assuming that God exists? What is it to be in relationship with a being so different in nature to us? What practical knowledge can be gained from engaging in the spiritual practices which Christianity recommends? Whilst much ink has been spilled by philosophers of religion in answering the difficult questions which concern the epistemic merit or even permissibility of religious beliefs, as well as the coherency of Christian doctrine, very little has been written about the nature of the spiritual life by analytic philosophers.

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<sup>2</sup> I should note up front that this thesis discusses the Christian spiritual life, and not the spiritual life more generally. The reason for this will become apparent as the account is developed. As we will see, the Incarnation and Christ’s existence as a human being are essential to what I say about the spiritual life. This is not to say that only Christians can be spiritual and that the spiritual life is essentially rooted in the Incarnation, but, rather, for there to be anything like the picture I develop in which human beings share in a union of mutual love with God, the Incarnation is vital.

What do we mean by ‘the spiritual life’ in this context? The term, ‘the spiritual life’, has been interpreted widely, and the existing work in this field covers a vast array of topics on issues in the philosophy of religion.<sup>3</sup> However, what unites this varied literature is a concern with questions of practice, experience, and phenomenology, rather than with the rationality of religious belief. Mark Wynn, for instance, in his discussion of the spiritual life in *Renewing The Senses*, notes that

[m]uch of the recent philosophy of religion literature has been occupied with various apologetic concerns. Is belief in God justified evidentially? Might religious belief be properly basic? Would it be warranted if true? Is the problem of evil significant counter-evidence to theistic belief? And so on. But “on the street” there is, I suggest, a different, more existentially focused kind of objection to religious belief [...] namely, the objection that religion requires us to adopt a set of evaluations that betray our human form of life, because they require us to sink our attention in a realm other than this sensory world, and thereby to neglect the claim on our time and care and energy which is rightly made by other beings, and by the material cosmos more broadly defined. (2012, 12)

This concern, for issues which go beyond the justification of religious beliefs or the coherency of religious doctrine is shared by others. Kevin Schilbrack (2014), for instance, notes that ‘traditional philosophy of religion has focused on a relatively narrow topic: the rationality of belief in God. Even the philosophers of religion who are sceptics or atheists fit that

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Mark Wynn’s *Renewing the Senses*, and *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding*, Kevin Schilbrack’s *Philosophy and the Study of Religions* for examples of existing work on philosophy of the spiritual life. For works which are concerned with religious practice, see Terrance Cuneo’s *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* and Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *The God We Worship*.

description of the discipline' (2014, 9). Particularly in the recent analytic tradition, the consideration of existential issues relating to the nature of the spiritual life have often been overlooked. Broadly speaking, then, a philosophy of the spiritual life will aim to give philosophical attention to the issues of practice, experience and phenomenology. Because of this change in focus, much of what I say about the spiritual life will assume a certain position. That is, for the purposes of this project, I assume that the Christian God exists, that he is perfect in power and knowledge and that he loves and desires union with human beings. This is not to say that these assumptions are without philosophical interest, or can be assumed without prior argument, but, rather, that in order to focus on these issues of practice, experience, and phenomenology we must side-line some of the more well-worn debates in the philosophy of religion.

What aspect of the philosophy of the spiritual life will this thesis focus on? The prayer which heads this section, taken from the journals of the nineteenth-century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard, is an apt introduction for one of the key themes which I will discuss in this thesis, namely, that the spiritual life is concerned with the experience of God's presence. Theologically speaking, the fact that God is present, and the importance of this for human spiritual transformation, is often taken for granted. That God is present with us is an important theme in Scripture. For instance, the Psalmist asks, 'Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?' (Psalm 139:7). Another Psalm tells us: 'You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence' (Psalm 16:11). And, as God says to Moses: 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest' (Exodus 33:14).<sup>4</sup> The importance of God's presence is also emphasised in spiritual practice. Take the Church of England's liturgy of the Eucharist in *Common Worship*, for instance. One option for the president to begin the opening dialogue (the *Sursum Corda*) is 'The Lord is here', to which the congregation reply, 'His Spirit is with us'. To take another

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<sup>4</sup> All biblical references are to the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

example from *Common Worship*, in the ‘Acclamation of Christ at the Dawning of the Day’, the congregation are invited to say: ‘Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving and be glad in him with psalms.’<sup>5</sup> Additionally, to give an example from another Christian denomination, the practice of the Ignatian *examen*, drawing on the writings of Ignatius of Loyola, invites the participants to cultivate an awareness of God’s presence by looking over the events of the day.

So, there is ample evidence in both Scripture and liturgy for the importance of God’s presence with us, but, unfortunately, this is not something which analytic philosophers of religion and analytic theologians have devoted much time to thinking about, despite the fact that there are many important philosophical questions which a focus on God’s presence raises. For example, Scripture affirms that God is an incorporeal being (‘God is spirit’, according to John 4:24), and when we think of presence, we typically think of one person being in at least physical proximity to another, so how can God, an incorporeal being, be present to a person, a corporeal being? Furthermore, we are told that the experience of God’s presence has many benefits to the religious believer—Brother Lawrence tells us that the experience of the presence of God increases a believer in faith and hope, it transforms the human will, and provides her with a knowledge of God (1691/2005, 54-55). How can an experience of the presence of God have the kind of transformative role the spiritual writers tell us it can? In addition, as both in Scripture and in the lives of Christian believers, some who have experienced God’s presence come to find that God has withdrawn his presence from them; why does a God whose great desire is to be union with us do that?

My approach, in attempting to answer these questions will be to draw on Kierkegaard’s insights into the Christian spiritual life. Before explaining why I think Kierkegaard has a lot to say about how we might answer these questions and come to a better philosophical understanding of the spiritual life, I want to address some concerns some might have about my approach.

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<sup>5</sup> This is from Psalm 95.

## Why Kierkegaard?

Although Kierkegaard may be thought of in some Christian circles as ‘dangerously opening the door to atheism and despair’ (something I was once ‘informed’ of by an enthusiastic but uninformed friend), much of what Kierkegaard writes is focused on issues of Christian spirituality. In *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard writes that

[t]he content, then, of this little book is: what I in truth am as an author, that I am and was a religious author, that my whole authorship pertains to Christianity, to the issue: becoming a Christian, with direct and indirect polemical aim at that enormous illusion, Christendom, or the illusion that in such a country all are Christians of sorts (PV, 23)

Considering the legacy of Kierkegaard’s writings, it might sometimes be forgotten that Kierkegaard describes himself primarily as a religious author. However, even if Kierkegaard has much to contribute to the questions which concern the philosophy of the spiritual life, we might still wonder, however, why I focus so exclusively on the writings of an individual who held no position of spiritual authority, no academic position, and placed himself (and, indeed, Christianity) in direct opposition both to the academy, and to the institution of the Church. My answer to this question is two-fold. First, Kierkegaard’s writings on the spiritual life and the question of what it means to be (or to become) a Christian helpfully bridge the gap between the philosophical tradition and the theological or spiritual tradition. Kierkegaard is an important part of the philosophical canon—his works are taught and studied in philosophy departments across the world, and the questions he raises in his works address important philosophical issues. It is all too common to hear Kierkegaard labelled as the ‘father of existentialism’, and indeed, Kierkegaard’s works have had an important impact in this field. Kierkegaard, along with those who have been inspired by Kierkegaard’s writings have played

an important role in Ethics, Phenomenology, Psychology, Epistemology, amongst other areas of philosophy over the past 200 years. Yet, in Kierkegaard's own words, his authorship is 'religious from first to last' (OMWA, 5-6), and the question which runs through the entire authorship, he claims, is the question of 'becoming a Christian' (PV, 23). So, Kierkegaard's works are an ideal starting point and guide for a philosophical enquiry into the Christian spiritual life. And, secondly, the writings of Kierkegaard have made a significant impression on my own spiritual life—although writing more than two hundred years ago, Kierkegaard's insights have never seemed more relevant, and the stark challenge that Kierkegaard raises for the life of the Christian has had a transformative impact on my own understanding and practice of what it means to live in the 'God-relationship', to use Kierkegaard's own phrase.

So, if the focus of this project is so narrow, should this be regarded as work of historical Kierkegaard scholarship? Whilst my thesis takes Kierkegaard's insights as a starting point, it is worth noting at the outset, before beginning our enquiry, that the primary aim of this thesis is to explore the nature of the Christian spiritual life and to answer the question 'What does it mean to become a Christian?'<sup>6</sup> and not to give an accurate reading of Kierkegaard's position on the spiritual life. Although the question of this thesis is the same question as that which Kierkegaard sought to explore, my project is not the historical project of explaining Kierkegaard's writings as accurately as possible.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the reader is

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<sup>6</sup> The wording of this question is slightly misleading since it implies that my concern is with the nature of Christian conversion and not the Christian spiritual life. I borrow this expression from Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, the label 'Christian' is not something one is, but something one is constantly in the process of becoming. This will become more apparent once we consider the account of selfhood which we find in *The Sickness Unto Death*. I turn to this issue in Chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Torrance's (2016) discussion of the God-relationship, for instance, covers similar ground to that covered by my project, but it is different in both its focus and its approach. Torrance writes, 'This book explores Kierkegaard's response to two questions: (1) How does one become a Christian? and (2)



not required to already be an expert on Kierkegaard to understand what is written. If it transpires that my presentation of Kierkegaard's ideas is inaccurate, or just plain wrong, I will not have failed in my aim to give an account of the Christian spiritual life. Indeed, in places, I am aware that this thesis skews or gives too great a prominence to certain aspects of Kierkegaard's thinking, and not enough attention to other areas. In places, I devote attention to issues which emerge in the secondary literature, and in others, entirely ignore what are contentious issues in Kierkegaard scholarship. This should not be too troubling. For reasons I suggest shortly, there is a good case for thinking that this is an apt way of reading Kierkegaard.

So, what can Kierkegaard contribute to our understanding of the Christian spiritual life? And how does this tie in to the prior comments outlining the significance of God's presence? The reader will notice from the title of this enquiry that one of the focuses of my discussion will be that of the human 'relationship' to God. As Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author 'Anti-Climacus' puts it,<sup>8</sup> the relationship God has to humanity can be summarised as follows:

Christianity teaches that this individual human being—and thus every single individual human being, no matter whether man, woman, servant girl, cabinet minister, merchant, barber, student, or whatever—this individual human being exists *before God* [...] in short, this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God! Furthermore, for this person's sake, also for this very person's sake, God comes to the world, allows himself to be born, to suffer, to die, and this suffering God—he almost implores and beseeches this person to accept the help that is offered to him! Truly, if there is anything to lose one's mind over, this is it! (SUD, 85; emphasis in the original)

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How are we to conceive of God's relationship to a person in and through this process?' (2016, 2). In contrast to projects such as Torrance's, my approach to Kierkegaard's works is not primarily historical.

<sup>8</sup> I will make some remarks on the role of pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's writings shortly.

As we will see, what Kierkegaard writes about the God-relationship (both in pseudonymous texts and signed texts) will help to inform what I go on to say about the Christian spiritual life. Much of what I explore in this thesis is an attempt to be more specific about what it is to 'live on the most intimate terms with God' (SUD, 85). In my opinion, one of Kierkegaard's greatest contributions to the philosophy of the spiritual life is this reminder that God is a subject to be engaged with and not an object to be studied. The Christian spiritual life is not primarily a life of increased understanding of Scripture, or familiarity with doctrine and practice, but, rather, first and foremost, the Christian spiritual life is a life focused on an ever-increasing intimacy with a divine subject.

Before I flesh this discussion out in a more focused way, it will be important to give some context to what I write. For although I do not aim to give an historically accurate account of Kierkegaard's ideas, there are some issues of context which will be important to bear in mind when referring to Kierkegaard's texts.

### **Kierkegaard's writings: Pseudonymous and signed**

There are many excellent introductory texts which set Kierkegaard's works in their proper historical context and outline the biographical and philosophical origins of Kierkegaard's thinking, so I will refrain from repeating much of what has already been explained in detail.<sup>9</sup>

However, it will still be important to offer some brief remarks about reading Kierkegaard's

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<sup>9</sup> In particular, I recommend C. Stephen Evans's (2009) *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* for a general overview of Kierkegaard's life and works, Jon Stewart's (2015) *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity and Crisis of Modernity* for an introduction which focuses more on the historical philosophical context of Kierkegaard's writings, and M.J. Ferreira's (2009) *Kierkegaard*, for an introductory text which outlines impressively all of Kierkegaard's major works. George Pattison's (2005) *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* and Murray Rae's (2010) *Kierkegaard and Theology* also do an excellent job of introducing Kierkegaard's contribution to philosophy and theology respectively.

writings. As M.J. Ferreira writes in her introduction to Kierkegaard, the most important piece of guidance that can be given to a first time reader of Kierkegaard concerns the most unusual feature of his writing—namely, the variety of forms it takes’ (2009, 3-4). We can learn a great deal, she remarks, just by looking at the titles, dates, and the names which are listed on the title pages of Kierkegaard’s works.<sup>10</sup>

<b>The Writings of Søren Kierkegaard</b>	
<b>Pseudonymous</b>	<b>Signed</b>
<i>Either-Or</i> — February 1843 (edited by Victor Eremtia) <i>Repetition</i> — October 16, 1843 (by Constantin Constantius) <i>Fear and Trembling</i> – October 16, 1843 (by Johannes de Silentio)	<i>Two Upbuilding Discourses</i> – May 1843 <i>Three Upbuilding Discourses</i> – October 16, 1843 <i>Four Upbuilding Discourses</i> – December 1843
<i>Philosophical Fragments</i> – June 13, 1844 (by Johannes Climacus) <i>The Concept of Anxiety</i> – June 17, 1844 (by Vigilius Haufniensis) <i>Prefaces</i> – June 17, 1844 (by Nicolaus Notabene)	<i>Two Upbuilding Discourses</i> – March 1844 <i>Three Upbuilding Discourses</i> – June 1844 <i>Four Upbuilding Discourses</i> – August 1844
<i>Stages on Life’s Way</i> – April 1845 (compiled by Hilarius Bookbinder)	<i>Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions</i> – April 1845
<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i> – February	

<sup>10</sup> This table is taken from Ferreira (2009, 16-17).

<p>1846 (by Johannes Climacus)</p> <p><i>The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress</i> – July 1848 (by Inter et Inter)</p>	<p><i>Two Ages: A Literary Review</i> – March 1846</p> <p><i>Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits</i> – March 1847</p> <p><i>Works of Love</i> – September 1847</p> <p><i>Christian Discourses</i> – April 1848</p>
<p><i>Either – Or</i> (2nd edn.) – May 14, 1849</p> <p><i>Two Ethical-Religious Essays</i> – May 1849 (by H.H)</p> <p><i>The Sickness unto Death</i> – July, 1849 (by Anti-Climacus edited by S. Kierkegaard)</p>	<p><i>The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air</i> – May 14, 1849</p> <p><i>Three Discourses at Communion</i> – November 1849</p>
<p><i>Practice in Christianity</i> – September 1850 (by Anti-Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard)</p>	<p><i>An Upbuilding Discourse</i> – December 1850</p> <p><i>Two Discourses at Communion</i> – August 1851</p> <p><i>On My Work as an Author</i> – August 1851</p> <p><i>For Self-Examination</i> – September 1851</p> <p>Articles in <i>The Fatherland</i> – 1854–5</p> <p><i>The Moment</i> – 1855</p> <p>“The Changelessness of God” – September 1855</p> <p>Posthumous publications:</p> <p><i>The Point of View for My Work as an Author</i> – [1848] 1859</p> <p><i>Judge for Yourself!</i> [1851–2], 1876</p>

Just by glancing over the titles of Kierkegaard's works, we see that this is an unusual body of work—the works range from the overtly religious texts such as *Practice in Christianity*, and include provocative titles such as *Philosophical Fragments* (or *Philosophical Crumbs* as it is sometimes translated), and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. In addition to having these unusual titles, the authorship of these texts is slightly unusual, too. Whilst some of these texts have Kierkegaard's own name listed as author, others are presented as written by a pseudonymous author instead.

By looking at this table, we see that Kierkegaard's works can be arranged into two columns—those that are authored by Kierkegaard and those that have another, pseudonymous author, listed on their title page. Notably, there also seems to be some kind of pattern in when these texts are produced—with every pseudonymous work, there is a signed work published at the same time or shortly after. As Ferreira describes this pattern, 'The arrangement does not look accidental; it looks like an authorship that, if not deliberately crafted according to a plan from the outset, at least was deliberately arranged in certain ways as it went along' (2009, 4). Not only does Kierkegaard give his texts pseudonymous authors, but also he insists that the reader approaches these texts as having some independence from him. For instance, at the end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which is penned under the 'Johannes Climacus' pseudonym, there is a short note from Kierkegaard asking the reader to refrain from attributing the contents of the book to him. He writes that, 'in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them' (CUP, 626).

Why does Kierkegaard use pseudonyms in his writing?<sup>11</sup> And why does he go to such lengths to distance himself from what is written in pseudonymous texts? One answer to this

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<sup>11</sup> For a helpful overview of the role of pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's writings, see Mooney 2013.

question, given by C. Stephen Evans (2009), is that certain stylistic features of Kierkegaard's writings, including the use of pseudonyms, are typical of a certain kind of communication which Kierkegaard attempts to use. According to Evans, Kierkegaard is attempting to prompt a kind of reflection in the reader, which could not be achieved by merely putting forward philosophical arguments (2009, 24-45). As I will outline in more detail in Chapter 1, Kierkegaard thinks that certain modes of communication are limited in what they can achieve. In particular, as the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus argues, understanding the truths of religious doctrine and gaining accurate historical knowledge is insufficient for having Christian faith. To have faith, an individual must reflect on her own existence, and, according to Climacus, this is not something that historical and philosophical enquiry allows for.<sup>12</sup> There is a good case to be made for thinking that Kierkegaard uses pseudonymous authors as an attempt to try to provoke the reader into considering her own existence before God, rather than just understanding the truths of religious doctrine.<sup>13</sup> The importance of this kind of

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst it might not be clear why this claim is true here, I discuss the plausibility of it in more detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>13</sup> In discussing his authorship, Kierkegaard suggests that the use of pseudonyms is an attempt to provoke the reader into the kind of reflection I suggest. He writes that

But just as that which has been communicated (the idea of the religious) has been cast completely into reflection and in turn taken back out of reflection, so also the *communication* has been decisively marked by *reflection*, or the form of communication used is that of reflection. "Direct communication" is: *deceive into the truth*. But since the movement is to arrive at the simple, the communication in turn must sooner or later end in direct communication. It began **maieutically** with esthetical production, and all the pseudonymous writings are *maieutic* in nature. Therefore this writing was also pseudonymous, whereas the directly religious—which from the beginning was present in the gleam of an indication carried my name. The directly religious was present from the very beginning. [...] And in order to safeguard this concurrence

reflection and the limits of certain modes of thinking will be explored in more detail in due course. For now, it will be important to note that we cannot straightforwardly take the ideas which are presented by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors to tell us about what Kierkegaard himself thinks. This will help to inform the methodology of my project, as I outline it in the next section.

Before outlining the methodology of this project, it is worth remarking on the scope of my thesis as a discussion of 'Kierkegaard's works'. Although this thesis presents a Kierkegaardian account of spirituality, I will pay particular attention to the writings Kierkegaard pens under the pseudonymous authors 'Anti-Climacus' and 'Johannes Climacus'. In the four works attributed to these two pseudonymous authors (*The Sickness Unto Death*, *Practice in Christianity* (Anti-Climacus), *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Johannes Climacus)) we find a number of important discussions which can inform our philosophy of the spiritual life. The role that Anti-Climacus and Johannes Climacus play in Kierkegaard's authorship is importantly different in a number of ways. Johannes Climacus presents himself as an outsider to the Christian faith, attempting to discover the truths of Christianity (CUP, 16) but failing to comprehend this himself. Johannes Climacus is presented as a Socratic figure who provokes the reader and it is reasonable to assume that Climacus is used by Kierkegaard to invoke a kind of double-reflection in the reader and to prompt her to consider her own position before God. The *Postscript* also ends with a note from Kierkegaard which emphasises that Climacus is the author of this text, and not Søren Kierkegaard. In contrast to this, Kierkegaard's intentions appear to

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of the directly religious, every pseudonymous work was accompanied concurrently by a little collection of "upbuilding discourses"—until *Concluding Postscript* appeared, which poses the issue, which is the *issue* of the whole authorship: *becoming a Christian*. (OMWA, 7-8; emphasis in the original)

be different in his writing of *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. As he writes in his journals (in reference to *Sickness*),

It is absolutely right— a pseudonym had to be used.

When the demands of ideality are to be presented at their maximum, then one must take extreme care not to be confused with them himself, as if he himself were the ideal...

The difference from the earlier pseudonyms is simply but essentially this, that I do not retract the whole thing humorously but identify myself as one who is striving (JP, 6:181)

The Anti-Climacus works present an account of Christian faith which is too idealistic for Kierkegaard to put his own name to. Kierkegaard's motivation here appears to be one of humility, rather than humour or irony. That is, Kierkegaard knows that he cannot live up to the account of faith which he has presented, and thus, he must distance himself from it in some way for fear of appearing in some way judgemental. In addition to these four works, I will also consider some of Kierkegaard's signed texts where relevant and the final chapter of this thesis will pay attention to *Fear and Trembling*, which is attributed to Johannes de Silentio.

## **Methodology**

Whilst it might be tempting to regard this enquiry as a failed attempt at doing serious Kierkegaard scholarship, this would be to misunderstand my motivation and intention.

Primarily, I am a reader of Kierkegaard; I am a single individual who has engaged and reflected on what he has written. And as such, the discussion that follows, although provoked



and inspired by what Kierkegaard writes, is not primarily aimed at historical accuracy.<sup>14</sup> In many respects, this is an apt way of approaching Kierkegaard's work; he repeatedly describes himself as 'one without authority' (FSE, 17) and urges the importance of the single individual's reflecting on what she reads. This has been my aim in reading and presenting Kierkegaard's thinking on the issues of human spirituality and faith. Thus, my project is most definitely 'a Kierkegaardian account of the spiritual life', rather than 'Kierkegaard's account of the spiritual life'.

In many places, Kierkegaard resists putting forwards a systematic account of the spiritual life. Religious faith is a complex and multifaceted diamond—in focusing on one aspect of the diamond we get glimpses of colour and reflections which we cannot see by focusing on another side or angle of the diamond. In looking up close, we see facets that are invisible in trying to look at faith as a whole. Kierkegaard's presentation of the spiritual life fits this picture well. Rather than attempting to give an overview of just what faith is, Kierkegaard focuses on different aspects of the spiritual life through different personas and different philosophical lenses. So, how can I give a Kierkegaardian overview of the spiritual life for the purposes of this project if a focused and systemic view of faith is lacking in finesse and overly

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<sup>14</sup> The approach described here stands in contrast to much of the existing work on Kierkegaard's philosophy of the spiritual life, which tends to take a more historical-contextual approach to Kierkegaard's writings. See, for instance, Christopher B. Barnett, 2016a, 2016b 2014, Gregory S. Clapper 1988 and Andrew Torrance 2015 for examples of historical-contextual discussions of these issues. There is also some relevant secondary literature which draws on strands of Kierkegaard's philosophy of the spiritual life, but which is not directly *about* the spiritual life. For instance, Jack Edward Mulder Junior's (2004, 2010) work on the similarities and differences between Kierkegaard's spiritual philosophy and the mystical tradition (2004) and the Catholic tradition (2010) draws on important questions about the spiritual life. Similarly, Rae (2010) and Pattison (2012) draw on areas of Kierkegaard's philosophy of spirituality in their discussions of Kierkegaard's theology.

simplistic? What I offer in this enquiry is a particular focus on faith and the spiritual life and not the final word. Although I will use what Kierkegaard (as well as his pseudonymous authors) write about faith as a starting point for my discussion, I will not aim to give anything resembling an overview of Kierkegaard's philosophy of the spiritual life. But, rather, I will focus on particular strands of thinking about spirituality and faith which are found in places of Kierkegaard's writings.

However, this is not to say that I will assume a position as Kierkegaard's when it is written under a pseudonymous author, or to think that what Kierkegaard writes on a subject in one place necessarily applies to what he writes about this same subject in another place. My approach to the pseudonymous authors will be, as far as possible, to regard them as distinct authors presenting distinct theses. Where there are similarities or overlaps in how concepts are used or how ideas are presented, I will try and outline the similarities, but in general, I avoid attempting to make sweeping statements about Kierkegaard's opinion or Kierkegaard's position.<sup>15</sup> Although it is certainly the case that I take a more decisive stance on many issues than Kierkegaard himself does, I should still be regarded as one 'without authority' (FSE, 17). My hope is that the reader does not regard this collection of thoughts and arguments as a final word on the topic of spirituality. But, rather, my hope is that this enquiry is a source of intrigue, a cause of irritation and a prompting to reflect on one's own existence before God. As Kierkegaard himself puts it,

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick Goold suggests a similar approach to reading Kierkegaard when he writes that

the more generally a theme is found in Kierkegaard's writings, and the greater the similarity in the conclusions of the various treatments of this theme, the more likely it is that something like the view one can derive from these treatments was actually held by Kierkegaard. (1990, 311)

[m]y task at least exposes me far less to the danger of being trampled down, since it was a lowly servant (but, as I have said from the beginning and repeat again and again, *without authority*) to prompt, if possible, to invite, to induce the many to press through the narrow pass, *the single individual*, through which, please note, no one presses except by becoming the single individual.—And yet, yes, if I were to request an inscription on my grave, I request none other than *that single individual*; Even if it is not understood now, it surely will be. (PV, 118; emphasis in the original)

Finally, given the fact that the focus of this thesis is primarily theological and philosophical, rather than historical, there will be instances where my position departs from Kierkegaard's own. The most notable example of this is my discussion of the role of the Church in the spiritual life, which I discuss at the end of Chapter 5. As I will go on to explain, and as we can see from the above passage, Kierkegaard regarded the spiritual life as a life in which a person approaches God as a single individual. Whilst I take this claim of Kierkegaard's seriously, and it plays an important role in what I go on to say, I give a more important role to the community of believers than Kierkegaard does. This is entirely appropriate for a project of this nature; my account is drawn from Kierkegaard's works, but it is intended to stand alone as a work of philosophical theology in its own right. And so, the fact that I take Kierkegaard to be right about many issues need not commit me to thinking that he is right in all instances.

### **The God-relationship: An outline**

Before beginning our enquiry, it will be helpful for me to give a brief outline of where the discussion is heading. In Part 1, I give an account of the nature of Christian faith and attempt to answer the question what it is to be in relationship with God in this life. I begin, in Chapter 1, by considering Kierkegaard's distinction between an objective and subjective understanding of Christian faith. As I describe it, the kind of knowledge that is lacking from an objective

understanding, yet the kind of knowledge which is necessary for faith, is a personal knowledge of God. What is important for knowing someone personally, is not just knowing *about* them, but knowing *them*. According to Eleonore Stump (2010), one of the basic criteria for knowing a person is a kind of second-person knowledge which is only gained through experience. In order to relate properly to God in the God-relationship, then, we need not only to know about God, but also to know God second-personally.

After establishing the importance of relating to God personally, I then consider what it is that prevents human beings from knowing God intimately in this life. Drawing on the account of faith Anti-Climacus describes in *The Sickness Unto Death*, I describe the problem which sin poses for the spiritual life. For Anti-Climacus, faith is a response to despair, a kind of wilful misrelation to one's self and to others. To be in despair, according to Anti-Climacus, is to fail to relate properly to oneself, and to fail to relate properly to the other. Sin, as he goes on to define it, is a kind of despair before God; it is a failure to relate properly to oneself and to the other, before a personal and intimate God. A Kierkegaardian account of sin can be understood in terms of the will—despair, as it is defined in one of Kierkegaard's later discourses, is a kind of double-mindedness of the will and a failure to will only one thing: the good. Using Harry Frankfurt's (1988) analysis of the will and wholeheartedness, I describe how the human will can be double-minded and consider what it is to integrate the will in the way that Kierkegaard suggests only faith can achieve. Because the will is double-minded, that is, corrupted, it is unable to relate properly to God. Now, it is only by the reception of God's grace, as the reception of a higher-order desire for the good, that we are able to become integrated as a self. Drawing on Stump's (2010) application of Frankfurt to her analysis of the *ordo salutis*, I argue that the task of the spiritual life is the task of sanctification, that is, of orientating our will and desire around this higher-order desire for the good. To have faith, and to 'rest transparently in God' (SUD, 30), as Anti-Climacus describes it, is to move towards willing only one thing. And, as Kierkegaard puts it in his 'Occasional Discourse on the

Occasion of Confession', in order to stand in the correct relationship to God, the Christian ought only to will the good (UDVS, 7).

The process of sanctification, which I describe in Chapter 2, is a process which can only be completed after a person's death,<sup>16</sup> and, hence, a person's being in a state of sin and despair means that union with God is impossible in this life. So how can a person relate to God interpersonally in this life? The answer I give in Chapter 3 is that a person can relate to God through Christ by having a mutually empathetic relationship with Christ. In order for this kind of relationship to be possible, it is important that God can relate to human beings in a human way. Relating properly to God in the God-relationship requires not only for God to know and love human beings, but also for human beings to know and love God. The relationship must be two-way. In order for there to be such a two-way relationship of love, there must then be mutual empathy between God and human beings. Only the Incarnation allows for human beings to experience this kind of mutual empathy with God since, through Christ, God has a human mind and thus we can relate to and share-attention with God through Christ. As I describe in Chapter 3, this is what it is to be in union with Christ, a concept much employed in Christian spirituality, particularly relating to the practice of prayer, but little analysed.

In Part 2, I attempt to give a more detailed account of how an individual can be in union with Christ by experiencing him. Here, I invoke an important concept in Kierkegaard's writings, namely, being contemporary with Christ. In Chapter 4, I consider some potential interpretations of what Kierkegaard might mean by 'being contemporary with Christ'. One suggestion of how we might relate to Christ as contemporary is by experiencing a kind of imaginative relation to the historical Christ, as suggested by Patrick Stokes (2010, 2015). However, there are both historical and conceptual reasons to be sceptical of this proposal. It is

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<sup>16</sup> This is an assumption I will make following David Eford and David Worsley's (2015) discussion of the *ordo salutis*. Arguing for this assumption is beyond the scope of this thesis.

important that Kierkegaard describes contemporaneity as a relation to Christ as a living person, and not a merely historical person. And so, an imaginative account of contemporaneity is inadequate as an account of being in union with Christ. I argue that the best way of understanding what it is to be contemporary with Christ as a living person is in terms of what psychologists call 'joint-attention'. Following Adam Green (2009), I claim that the experience of the presence of Christ can be understood as an experience in which Christ and the believer are aware of each other and are both aware of each other's awareness of one another. This can also be extended to help us think about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, another important aspect of our experience of God in the spiritual life.

We might wonder, however, how an individual can experience Christ in this way. In Chapter 5, I apply the conclusions drawn from this thesis so far in order to give a framework for understanding the nature of Christian spiritual practice. If the aim of the spiritual life is an ever-deepening union with Christ, and this is made possible by sharing-attention with him, then what is the application for our understanding of the specific practices which are involved in the Christian spiritual life? How does praying, reading Scripture or partaking in the Eucharist help us to enter into a deeper union with Christ and to imitate him? I turn my attention in this chapter to consider the nature and purpose of these specific practices in more detail. The answer I give is that these spiritual practices allow us to share-attention with Christ.

After giving an account of the nature of faith in Part 1 and an account of the experience of Christ in Part 2, in Part 3 I attempt to draw these two parts of the thesis together by addressing two important questions:

- (i) How does the experience of Christ's presence allow for a deeper union with God?
- (ii) How does the experience of Christ's absence allow for a deeper union with God?

In Chapter 7, I discuss the relationship between sanctification and presence by drawing on what Kierkegaard writes about the importance of imitating Christ. By relating properly to Christ, according to Kierkegaard, it is important that we do not admire Christ from a distance, but rather that we imitate him in his abasement, share in his suffering and come near to him as a contemporary. How does being contemporary with Christ help us to imitate him? To give an answer to this question, we must adopt a more detailed definition of imitation. To do this, I draw on the extensive work in philosophy of cognitive psychology which seeks to explain the role of imitation in infant development. In the psychological literature on imitation there is a distinction made between different kinds of behaviour replication: (i) emulation—a kind of intention replication often seen in non-human primates, (ii) mimicry—the reproduction of a certain action without attention to a person’s intentions, and (iii) imitation—the replication of a person’s behaviour with a particular focus on their intentions. It is this third class of behaviour replication which is used in the psychological literature to explain the social, cognitive and even moral development in infants. Furthermore, it is this third kind of behaviour replication which can best help us understand what it is to imitate Christ in a radically transformative manner, or so I argue. As I describe it in this chapter, imitating Christ begins by being contemporary with Christ.

Finally, before concluding, in Chapter 7 I consider what I take to be the most pressing objection to my account: If God loves us and so desires union with us, why is it that so many, who once felt close to God and who have subsequently done nothing to precipitate separation from him, now experience only his absence? A metaphor which has been used repeatedly to answer this question, particularly in the Christian tradition, is that separation from God is a kind of spiritual weaning process in which God uses the experience of his absence in order to bring about maturation and greater union with him. After discussing the use of this metaphor in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* and John of the Cross’s poem *The Dark Night of the Soul*, I discuss the question of how someone’s absence could be good for their maturation. From this

discussion of weaning, I argue that that separation has an important role to play in deepening relationships of love; drawing on research in de-adaptation in the psychological and sociological literature, I argue that in order for there to be a union of love, there must be an experience of dependence as well as an experience of independence. This position can explain, or so I argue, why God allows people who engage in the spiritual life to suffer the pain of separation from him.



## Part 1

### Faith, Union and Empathy:

#### A Kierkegaardian account of the God-relationship

##### Introduction

What is it to have faith? This is an important question to answer if we are to give a philosophy of the spiritual life, yet one that lacks a definitive answer in both the theological and philosophical literature. As Lara Buchak (2012) defines it, for instance, to have faith a person must hold an attitude towards a certain proposition; as well as having faith in God, she argues, we can also have faith that our spouse will be faithful, we can have faith that the car will start and we can have faith in someone's promises (2012, 2). What all of these examples of having faith have in common, Buchak thinks, is that 'they involve a relationship between the agent and a particular proposition, between the agent and a particular (actual or potential) action, and between the proposition and the evidence the agent currently possesses' (2012, 2).

Christian faith, Buchak tells us, is a specific kind of faith, and 'the Christian typically sees it as her moral duty to have one or more of the following: faith in God; faith that God exists; faith that God is good; faith in the elements of various creeds; and faith that what God tells her is true' (forthcoming, 1). Or, as Laura Callahan and Timothy O'Connor tell us, although there are many different ways of understanding what it is to have religious faith, at the very least, faith is 'an orientation to forming religious beliefs', 'a worldview', 'a moral orientation' and an 'affective stance' (2014, 13-14). Is having faith having an attitude toward a proposition? Is it holding a set of religious beliefs? A certain way of seeing the world? Or something else? It will be important to take a stance on these issues in order to give an account of the spiritual life.

In this first part of my thesis, I pay attention to this important question concerning the nature of faith, Christian faith, in particular. I begin in Chapter 1 by outlining how it is possible to come to have faith. Often those who write about Christian faith are concerned

with giving a defence of faith to the religious sceptic. However, in contrast to this project of defending the epistemic merits of faith, what we find in Kierkegaard's writings is a disdain for this apologetic project.<sup>17</sup> The reason for this, as I argue in my opening chapter, is that coming to have Christian faith is not primarily the result of an intellectual assent to certain claims about God, but, rather, is the result of having a second-person experience of God.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the barriers which prevent union with God from being possible in this life by giving an account of sin. Sin, on my account, is a kind of defect of the will which prevents a person from being able to enter into a loving relationship with God. What is needed to repair this defect of the will is a kind of single-mindedness in which a person wills the good. The process of realigning the will in this way, as I describe it here, is the process of sanctification which is a process that cannot be completed in this life, an assumption I make following David Eford and David Worsley (2015). Since, as I argue in Chapter 2, union with God is not possible in this life, it will be important to give a more detailed account of the kind of relationship with God that *is* possible in the spiritual life. We can pose the problem as the following question: Given that the process of sanctification for a person is not complete in this life, how can a person enjoy a relationship with God in this life? By entering into union with Christ, or so I propose. To argue for this solution, I take an indirect route through a related, and, in a way, inverse problem: How can God, a perfect, or infinite being, be in relationship with a person, an imperfect, or finite, in this life? Through the Incarnation, or so I argue, drawing on Johannes Climacus's discussion of the king and the maiden in *Philosophical Fragments*. The Incarnation, uniquely, provides for the possibility of mutual empathy between a human being and God, which is what is required for God to be in relationship with human

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<sup>17</sup> For other instances in Kierkegaard's writings where apologetics and rational argument are called into question, see the opening section of the *Postscript* (CUP1, 20-57), the discussion of theistic arguments in *Fragments* (PF, 39-44), the discussion of history and Christian faith in *Practice in Christianity* (PC, 25-32), as well as the preface of *Fear and Trembling* (FT, 5-8).

beings, and through which human beings can be in union with Christ and so then in relationship with God in this life.

## Chapter 1

### **(Inter)Subjectivity and personal knowledge:**

#### **The epistemology of the God-relationship<sup>18</sup>**

Lord Jesus Christ, there is so much to draw us back: empty achievements, meaningless pleasures, unworthy concerns. There is so much to scare us back: a pride that is too cowardly to let itself be helped, a cowardly timidity that shirks to its own ruin, an anxiety of sin that shuns the purity of holiness as illness shuns the remedy. But you are still the strongest—so draw us, and even more strongly, to yourself. We call you our Savior and Redeemer, and you came to earth in order to free us from the chains in which we were bound or in which we had bound ourselves and in order to rescue the redeemed. This was your task, which you have completed and which you will complete until the end of time, for just as you yourself have said it, so will you do it: lifted up from earth, you will draw all to yourself. (PC, 151)

### **Introduction**

According to the pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus, defending Christianity is stupid. He writes,

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<sup>18</sup> Although I argued in the Introduction that the philosophy of the spiritual life is less concerned with the epistemology of religious belief, and more concerned with questions of phenomenology and practice, this chapter does discuss some epistemological issues. However, my focus here is not on the rationality of religious belief (something which has received considerable attention in the analytic philosophical tradition), but, rather, on the question of what it is to know God personally.

[I]t is certain and true that the first one to come up with the idea of defending Christianity in Christendom is de facto a Judas No.2: he, too, betrays with a kiss, except that his treason is the treason of stupidity. To defend something is always to disparage it [...] he who defends it has never believed it. (SUD, 87)

What is so stupid about defending Christianity? Behind Anti-Climacus's dislike for a kind of apologetic Christianity (of which plenty of recent philosophy of religion would be a good example) is the idea that there is something about the Christian faith which is undermined by a rational defence. The 'stupidity' (SUD, 87) of defending Christianity is much like the stupidity of defending your being in love, according to Anti-Climacus. He asks,

Is it not obvious that the person who is really in love would never dream of wanting to prove it by three reasons, or to defend it, for he is something that is more than all reasons and any defence: he is in love. Anyone who does it is not in love; he merely pretends to be, and unfortunately—or fortunately—he is so stupid that he merely informs against himself as not being in love. (SUD, 104)

Kierkegaard uses the comparison between having faith and human relationships to explain its nature in a number of places. Drawing on this comparison, Christian faith, on the account I go on to develop, is neither primarily an attitude toward certain claims about God, nor is it primarily a moral stance or a particular worldview. Rather, having Christian faith is primarily a relationship with God.

In this chapter, in order to characterise what it is to have Christian faith I first address how it is a person comes to have Christian faith. To outline this account, I focus on a distinction which the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus makes between objectivity and subjectivity. An objective approach to faith, as Climacus describes it, requires a person to

assent to certain historical or philosophical claims. However, Climacus thinks, objectivity is an inadequate basis for coming to have faith since it lacks the passionate and personal interest which he takes to be crucial. Only by relating to God in subjectivity, can a believer come to have Christian faith, or so he maintains. Now, it might be unclear what this distinction amounts to. As I describe it, what is lacking from an objective understanding of coming to have Christian faith is a kind of intersubjective knowledge, a kind of knowledge which we can gain only by interacting with another person. Hence, having Christian faith, understood as having a relationship with God, cannot be established in objectivity. As I will argue, in order for a subjective, personal relationship to God to be possible, the individual must have a second-person experience of God, rather than merely by acquiring knowledge *about* God. This then is what is required in order for a person to come to have Christian faith: having a second-person experience of God. If coming to have faith requires having this second-person *experience* of God, then having faith, the state following that of coming to have faith, requires having a *relationship* with God. If this is right, then it is easy to see why objective enquiry will never result in a person coming to have Christian faith, and so never result in a person having Christian faith, and so why there is something futile about the kind of rational defence Anti-Climacus is referring to.<sup>19</sup>

### **The objective issue of the truth of Christianity**

The question which Climacus begins by considering in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is the question of what it is for a person to come to have Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> Climacus's discussion of

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<sup>19</sup> This discussion of the difference between objective and subjective understanding is explored in detail by Torrance (2016, 13-57). The main way that my discussion diverges from Torrance's is in the application of Stump's material as a model of explaining the difference.

<sup>20</sup> Climacus states the important issue to be considered 'is not about the truth of Christianity but about the individual's relation to Christianity' (CUP, 15). 'To state it as simply as possible', he goes on to say,

how an individual can come to have Christian faith is initially framed in negative terms; before giving an account of what it is to come to have Christian faith, he outlines an approach to Christian faith which he thinks is inadequate. The kind of approach to Christianity which Climacus thinks will never produce Christian faith he describes as ‘objectivity’ (CUP, 212). He defines it as follows:

[o]bjectively understood, truth can signify: (1) historical truth, (2) philosophical truth. Viewed as historical truth, the truth must be established by a critical consideration of the various reports etc., in short, in the same way as historical truth is ordinarily established. In the case of philosophical truth, the inquiry turns on the relation of a doctrine, historically given and verified, to the eternal truth. (CUP, 21)

The two targets of Climacus’s critique of objectivity are historical and philosophical enquiry. The approach to Christianity which Climacus is concerned with here is typified by the well-worn questions of Christian apologetics: ‘Is there sufficient historical evidence to believe that Jesus rose from the dead?’, ‘Are the New Testament documents reliable?’, ‘Is the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God consistent with the existence of suffering?’. The question at stake here is whether or not giving an answer to the *de facto* question of whether Christian belief is true or the *de jure* question of whether Christian belief is rationally defensible is sufficient for a believer to have faith in God—Climacus argues not.

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“I, Johannes Climacus, born and bred in this city and now thirty years old, an ordinary human being like most folk, assume that a highest good, called eternal happiness, awaits me as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. I have heard that Christianity is one’s prerequisite for this good. I now ask how I may enter into relation to this doctrine.” (CUP, 16)

There is some justification for the claim that objective enquiry is limited as a means of coming to have Christian faith. The arguments which Climacus constructs have a fairly repetitive structure—by considering the kind of conclusions that can be arrived at by engaging with objective enquiry, and then considering the kind of conclusions required to have faith, we can see that objective enquiry is an insufficient means for having faith. For instance, Climacus thinks that Christian faith allows an individual to enjoy eternal happiness in union with God and that the individual who has faith has an ‘infinite interest’ (CUP, 21) in the truths of Christianity. However, objective enquiry, as he describes it, cannot allow an individual to have the infinite interest required. As he puts this point,

Let the scientific researcher labour with restless zeal, let him even shorten his life in the enthusiastic service of science and scholarship; let the speculative thinker spare neither time nor effort—they are nevertheless not infinitely, personally, impassionedly interested. On the contrary, they do not want to be. Their observations will be objective, disinterested. (CUP, 21-22)

Objective enquiry, as Climacus argues, can never bring an individual to be infinitely interested with the truth it aims at proving. For instance, he argues, historical enquiry aims at providing approximations regarding the likelihood that certain events occurred. As he describes it, ‘with regard to the historical the greatest certainty is only an *approximation*, and an approximation is too little to build his happiness on and is so unlike an eternal happiness that no result can ensue’ (CUP, 23; emphasis in the original). Similarly, historical beliefs are always open to revision, depending on the most recent investigations by historical experts. The problem with this kind of revision, Climacus thinks, is that ‘[t]he subject’s personal, infinite, impassioned interestedness [...] fades away more and more because the decision is postponed, and is



postponed as a direct result of the results of the learned research scholar' (CUP, 27).<sup>21</sup>

Climacus's problem seems to be this: ideally, beliefs which are related to a believer's eternal happiness ought to give her a kind of certainty in her commitment, but beliefs which arise from historical enquiry or philosophical argument are not of this character. Therefore, objective enquiry is an inadequate basis for coming to have Christian faith.

One might think that one way of resisting Climacus's line of argument here is to show that objective enquiry *can* produce the kind of beliefs which are important for Christian faith.<sup>22</sup> This is a strategy that Robert M. Adams (1976) employs in his critique of Climacus's arguments. To take one of Adams's many counter-examples, he claims that even if objective enquiry can only make approximations, 'Surely it is prudent to do what gives you a 99 percent chance of satisfying your strong desire, in preference to what gives you only a 1 percent chance in satisfying it' (1976, 29). Adams imagines scenarios in which objective reasoning produces beliefs of infinite interest (i.e. beliefs concerned with eternal happiness), or at least provides the person with a prudential reason to have such a strong interest in religious claims. Thus, Adams rejects Climacus's arguments since he thinks it is possible for objective reasoning to produce religious faith, even faith with the kind of passion and certitude Climacus claims is essential.

On Adams's presentation of the argument, there is a problem of degree, that is, the problem with objective reasoning is that it is not strong or reliable enough to produce the kind

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<sup>21</sup> As we will see shortly, the reason that I do not give more detail of these arguments is because although I intend to affirm Climacus's conclusion that objective enquiry is an adequate basis for faith, I do not necessarily agree with the specifics of his argument.

<sup>22</sup> But such an enquiry, since it focuses on belief, can never, on its own, produce the *experience* I take to be essential to coming to have Christian faith. A person can believe all sorts of things about God based on all sorts of methods, including historical and philosophical, that is, objective, enquiry, but, if she's never had a second-person experience of God, she has not yet come to have Christian faith, or so I, following Climacus (as I understand him), maintain.

of beliefs which are important for religious faith. Adams's use of percentages to measure strength of belief in the above counter-example suggests that this is what he objects to. However, even if Adams is right in disputing the specific claims of Climacus's arguments, this presentation of Climacus's position lacks a sensitivity for what the overall concern is. As Evans puts it, Adams appears to have 'missed the heart of Kierkegaard's concern, which does not lie in the approximative character of historical evidence, but in the incommensurability between such evidence and the passionate commitment which faith demands' (1998, 107-08). The point of Climacus's argument is not simply to establish that objective enquiry lacks the possibility of allowing a believer to have sincerity or passion. Rather, Climacus's argument attempts to show the incommensurability of objective enquiry and faith-beliefs and this is because of a difference in kind, rather than of degree. By showing that objective enquiry is an inadequate basis for coming to have Christian faith, what Climacus aims to establish is that faith-beliefs are of an entirely different nature to the kind of beliefs which objective enquiry aims at producing. Whilst Adams highlights some flaws in Climacus's arguments, for reasons I go on to suggest, I do not think such flaws undermine the plausibility of Climacus's conclusion.

### **Objective and subjective communication**

To see why Climacus's conclusion is plausible, we must first examine what the difference in kind between faith-beliefs and objective-beliefs amounts to. Climacus explains this difference explicitly when he states that

[i]f Christianity is essentially something objective, it behoves the observer to become objective. But if Christianity is essentially subjectivity, it is a mistake if the observer is objective. In all knowing in which it holds true that the object of cognition is the inwardness of the subjective individual himself, it holds true that the knower must be

in that state. But the expression for the utmost exertion of subjectivity is the infinitely passionate interest in its eternal happiness. (CUP, 53)

Climacus claims that faith-beliefs are of a different kind to objective beliefs here. Faith beliefs are subjective in kind and objective beliefs are objective in kind. It is this difference in kind which will be important for my enquiry, and it is this difference which I will focus on for the remainder of this chapter. The clearest way of seeing what this difference between objectivity and subjectivity amounts to is by looking at what Climacus writes about the difference between the kind of communication which is possible both objectively and subjectively. As we will see, objective communication seeks at communicating facts to a person, whereas subjective communication seeks at provoking a kind of personal reflection in a person.

Let us consider this distinction in more detail. Objective communication is always a form of direct-communication which aims at the transmission of intellectual content, whereas subjective communication aims at a kind of indirect communication in which an individual is caused to reflect. Objective communication is successful if the recipient manages to grasp the intellectual content which the communicator intends to transmit. The history lecturer who tells his student that Napoleon died in 1821, for instance, communicates objectively by presenting a proposition to be understood by the student. As, too, does the mother who tells her child that the River Thames runs through London, or the priest who tells his congregation that the Gospel according to John begins with the sentence 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. This communication of intellectual content, if successful, allows for what Climacus describes as a 'first-reflection'. For first-reflection to occur, the recipient must understand the content of the sentence communicated.

In contrast to this, subjective communication aims at a kind of 'double-reflection', or 'second-reflection' (CUP, 75). When a person engages in double-reflection, not only does she grasp some intellectual content (first-reflection), but also she applies this content in some way

in her own life. The aim of subjective communication is to achieve this kind of double-reflection in a reader. In contrast to the transmission of intellectual content via objective communication, subjective communication aims at provoking a kind of self-understanding in which the individual is led to act, or think differently, in light of what has been communicated. Subjective communication aims at a change in the person's action by provoking the act of self-reflection and thought.

To see more clearly what this difference amounts to, consider Climacus's discussion of gratitude (CUP, 177-79). '*What does it mean*', he asks, '*that I should thank God for the good that he gives me?*' (CUP, 177; emphasis in the original). We can understand perfectly well that God gives us good gifts and that we ought to be grateful. This much can be communicated directly by the pastor, Climacus thinks (CUP, 177-78). Climacus argues that ordinarily, the Christian only employs a kind of single-reflection — that she only goes as far as understanding that God is good and we ought to be thankful. But to reflect singly on these words cannot give us a full answer to the question of what it means to be grateful to God. Rather, the question of how we live gratefully, particularly, how we do this in our own contexts on a day-to-day basis, is not something that a priest can communicate directly at all. In beginning to reflect on this truth subjectively, through double-reflection, we see the complexity of the question more fully:

Always to give thanks—is this something in general, a once-and-for-all kind of thing? Does “always to thank God” mean that once a year, on the second Sunday in Lent at vespers, I bear in mind that I am to thank God, and perhaps do not even do that, for if I should happen to be in a strange mood that Sunday, I do not understand it even on that day. Consequently, thanking God, this simple matter, suddenly assigns me one of the most strenuous tasks, one that will be sufficient for my entire life. So it may take a little time before I achieve this, and if I did achieve it, what is that something higher I should reach for in order to let go of this? [...] The difficulty that here and at every

point in the relationship with God [...] manifests itself as the thoroughfare to the true infinitizing in God, the difficulty of always giving thanks, whereas the pastor's discourse was inauthentic elegance—this difficulty I could didactically express in this way. (CUP, 179)

The second-reflection, which goes beyond mere understanding, relates to human existence and requires the individual to act differently in some way. It is this subjective truth of expressing gratitude to God which is precisely what cannot be communicated directly. It is here that a kind of indirect communication becomes so important—whilst the priest cannot communicate what it means to live in gratitude, by using direct communication, the act of indirect communication aims at this kind of double-reflection. The second-reflection on gratitude also makes the issue much more complicated than in single reflection; there is not one, clear objective way of understanding what it means to live in gratitude.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The distinction between objectivity and subjectivity in the *Postscript* is similar to a distinction Anti-Climacus makes in *The Sickness Unto Death* between understanding and *understanding*. He writes that

[i]t is tragic-comic, all these declarations about having understood and grasped the highest, plus the virtuosity with which many *in abstracto* know how to expound it, in a certain sense quite correctly—it is tragic-comic to see that all this knowledge and understanding exercises no power at all over men's lives, that their lives do not express in the remotest way what they have understood, but rather the opposite. One seeing this tragic-comic discrepancy, one involuntarily exclaims: But how in the world is it possible that they could have understood it? Can it be true that they have understood it? [...] Does this mean that to understand and to understand are two different things? They are certainly. (SUD, 90; emphasis in the original)

Primarily, what Anti-Climacus is concerned with here is with giving a critique of a nominal Christian culture. He describes someone who 'understood how Christ went around in the form of a lowly

We can see now just what an objective understanding of Christianity lacks. According to Climacus, Christianity

protests against all objectivity, it wants the subject to be infinitely concerned about himself. What it asks about is the subjectivity; the truth of Christianity, if it is at all, is in this; objectively, it is not at all. [...] Science and scholarship want to teach that becoming objective is the way, whereas Christianity teaches that the way is to become subjective, that is, truly to become a subject. Lest this seem to be a verbal dispute, let it be said that Christianity explicitly wants to intensify passion to its highest, but passion is subjectivity, and objectively it does not exist at all (CUP, 130-31)

Objective communication cannot achieve the kind of double-reflection which Climacus argues is essential for Christian faith. As Evans explains this point, ‘This is for Climacus simply the difference between [...] religious concerns and all others, since for him it is precisely the [...] religious which have an essential relation to existence’ (1999, 98). Religious claims cannot be established through objective communication since they are essentially personal claims—they require both the epistemic and moral transformation of the individual and thus cannot simply

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servant, poor despised, mocked, and [...] spat upon’ (SUD, 91) and then goes on to ‘set himself up as securely as possible’ (SUD, 91) avoiding suffering and insecurity at all costs. What we need in a culture overly obsessed with the first kind of understanding, Anti-Climacus states, is a ‘Socrates’ (SUD, 92); someone to provoke us into the second kind of understanding. The Socratic distinction which this culture needs to hear is as follows: ‘When someone does not do what is right, then neither has he understood what is right. His understanding is purely imaginary; his declaration of having understood is false information’ (SUD, 92). The difference between understanding and *understanding* is the difference between being able to recite some intellectual content (even if this is related to ethics or theology) and being able to apply this to one’s own life in some way. It is essential, for the task of becoming a Christian that we understand in the second sense and not just the first sense.

be transmitted from communicator to recipient. The individual, through objective enquiry, might reach a point where she thinks the historical Christ existed and the evidence from natural theology and historical research is sufficient to therefore believe that Christ was resurrected and is indeed God. Nevertheless, this individual is yet to have faith. As the Epistle of James describes it, 'You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder' (James 2:19). Because faith, for Climacus, cannot be reduced to mere assent to claims about God, he thinks that objective enquiry will never produce faith.

As I discussed briefly in the Introduction, Climacus's notion of subjective communication can help to explain some of the stylistic features which Kierkegaard uses in his writing. That is, it is reasonable to assume that through his use of pseudonymous authors, hyperbole, parable, irony, and narrative, Kierkegaard is attempting to provoke the reader to reflect on what she reads, rather than just understanding the claims that are being made. In the remainder of this chapter, I offer a more detailed account of subjective understanding which I draw out of Stump's discussion of epistemology in *Wandering in Darkness*. By seeing the importance of subjective understanding, we can see that a key part of what is lacking from the objective kind of understanding of faith, as I construe it, is an intersubjective relation to God. This can help us to give a clearer account of just how an individual can come to have the kind of subjective faith Climacus describes here.

### **Stump on Franciscan/ Dominican knowledge**

In *Wandering in Darkness*, Stump makes a distinction which can help us to see the difference between objectivity and subjectivity more clearly. Similarly to Climacus, Stump contends that there are limits to what philosophical and historical enquiry can teach us. More precisely, although professing an admiration for the achievements of a certain kind of analytic philosophical tradition (of which she cites Aquinas, Plantinga, and Bas van Fraassen as examples), she argues that 'left to itself, because it values intricate, technically expert argument,

the analytic approach has a tendency to focus more and more on less and less; and so, at its worst, it can become plodding, pedestrian, sterile, and inadequate to its task' (2010, 24). In particular, as she goes on to argue, this kind of analytic tradition 'has tended to leave to one side the messy and complicated issues involved in relations among persons' (2010, 25).

Stump's critique of the analytic philosophical tradition is nowhere near as damning as Climacus's, and, although Stump would surely be sympathetic with some of Climacus's conclusions, she is far less severe.<sup>24</sup> However, there are some striking similarities between these two accounts which can help to frame my Kierkegaardian account of faith. Most notable is the prominence that both give to the role of narrative in addressing difficult issues in the philosophy of religion. For both Kierkegaard and Stump, narrative offers a different approach to that offered by the objective analytic philosophical tradition. Although Stump does not develop an account of indirect communication, her discussion of the role of narrative is in keeping with some of Kierkegaard's aims.

Stump's aim is to establish that 'there are things to know which can be known through narrative but which cannot be known as well, if at all, through the methods of analytic philosophy' (2010, 26). In order to show that this is the case, Stump first distinguishes between two kinds or kinds of knowledge. The first, which is typical of the analytic philosophical approach, she labels 'Dominican'. 'The Dominican system', as she explains it, 'is helpful for making clear distinctions focused on details, about which argument is possible and often frequent' (2010, 41). The Dominican system is typical of the kind of knowledge that analytic epistemologists discuss, Stump thinks—its key feature being that this kind of 'knowledge is a matter of having an attitude toward a proposition, of knowing *that*' (2010, 49). However, there is more to knowing than knowing *that*, Stump goes on to argue (2010, 49-50). The alternative kind of knowledge, Stump labels 'Franciscan' (2010, 41). As she describes it,

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<sup>24</sup> In part, this difference in severity could be put down to Kierkegaard's attempt to employ a kind of indirect-communication in his writing.



‘The Franciscan approach is not much help with definitory details or crisp distinctions, but it can be evocative, memorable, and illuminating’ (2010, 41). Franciscan knowledge is typical of what reading narrative can teach us that engaging in philosophical discourse cannot. Narrative and story-telling are essential to the Franciscan kind of knowledge, since what is communicated Franciscanly is not mere propositional content, but, rather, something which cannot be reduced to knowledge *that*. Stump summarises the difference between Dominican and Franciscan most clearly when she writes that: ‘I will call knowledge which cannot be reduced to knowledge *that* “Franciscan knowledge”; I will call the other, more philosophically ordinary kind of knowledge ‘Dominican knowledge’ (2010, 51).<sup>25</sup>

Dominicanly, we can communicate all sorts of facts about a certain character from a novel—for instance, to take Yann Martell’s *Life of Pi*, the Dominican mode of understanding can tell us that Pi is inquisitive and witty, that his thoughts are profound yet humorous, and that he is stranded on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. What a Dominican approach to *Life of Pi* cannot achieve, however, yet what a Franciscan approach can, is to account for what we learn from Pi—the sense of perspective we gain about ourselves and the world from encountering his story and empathising with him. Such knowledge cannot be reduced to knowledge *that*, or so Stump maintains. ‘You had to be there’, as it were.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Note that ‘Franciscan knowledge’, as Stump defines it here, might cover a wide variety of knowledge depending on one’s stance on whether all knowledge is reducible to propositional knowledge (a position often called ‘intellectualism’), or whether there are some things which are not reducible to propositional knowledge (this might include knowledge of persons, knowledge by acquaintance and practical knowledge, for instance).

<sup>26</sup> Does Stump’s distinction between Dominican and Franciscan knowledge map directly on to Climacus’s distinction between objectivity and subjectivity? Care is needed before simply conflating these two accounts. Certainly, what Stump has in mind when she discusses Dominican knowledge is also typical of what Climacus dubs ‘objective’; both the Dominican and objective systems deal in crisp analytic argument, historical proof and aim at providing *results*. It is less clear, however, that

Having made this distinction between Dominican and Franciscan knowledge, Stump then goes on to argue that the distinction makes a difference, that is, that Franciscan knowledge is irreducible to Dominican knowledge, resulting in there being limits on the Dominican system. ‘Analytic philosophy has sometimes remembered’, she goes on to note, ‘that knowledge *that* cannot be all there is to knowledge’ (2010, 49; emphasis in the original).<sup>27</sup> To make this point, Stump appeals to Frank Jackson’s (1982) Knowledge Argument, and, in particular, the story of Mary and her black-and-white room. Jackson’s thought experiment runs as follows:

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black-and-white room via a black-and-white television monitor. She specialises in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like “red”, “blue”, and so on ... What will happen when Mary is released from her black-and-white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual

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Kierkegaard’s account of subjectivity accounts for all that Stump means by ‘Franciscan’. Certainly, an indirect method of communication which aims at double reflection and the grasping of subjective truth is something which the Franciscan model of understanding also aims at. It is not so clear, however, that Stump’s account of Franciscan knowledge is intrinsically related to a person’s motivations or actions in the same way that Climacus’s account of subjectivity is. It is plausible, I think, that we could learn something Franciscanly which would not count as subjective knowledge. I will give one such example shortly. The Franciscan knowledge we gain from having a first-person perspective of the colour red does not look like an instance of subjective knowledge as Climacus describes it.

<sup>27</sup> Bertrand Russell (1910), for instance, makes a distinction between knowing *that* and knowledge by acquaintance.

experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and physicalism is false. (1982, pp. 42-43)

Mary learns something new, Jackson thinks, when she leaves the room and sees a red tomato for the first time.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, he argues, since Mary had access to all of the physical information about colour, minds and vision, prior to leaving the room, and yet learnt something new after the leaving the room, Mary learns something non-physical about minds, colour and vision, or so Jackson argues.

While Stump does not intend to defend Jackson's anti-physicalist conclusion, she argues that the story of Mary can help us see the limits of the Dominican system (2010, 50). More specifically, it looks like we can understand Jackson's story about Mary as demonstrating that propositional knowledge is not all there is to knowing.<sup>29</sup> If we retell the story slightly, Mary has access to everything propositional there is to know about colours, vision and minds (i.e. she has Dominican knowledge about these things), yet, plausibly, Mary learns something new when she encounters a red tomato.<sup>30</sup> What Mary gains, it seems, is some kind of first-

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that Jackson (1995) recants this conclusion in a later discussion of the thought experiment.

<sup>29</sup> Stump claims that what Mary learns is neither knowledge *that* nor knowledge *how* (see the next footnote for more detail on the various positions which have been taken in response to this thought experiment).

<sup>30</sup> It is disputed just what Mary learns by leaving the room, if anything. It has been argued, for instance, that what Mary learns is a certain kind of knowledge *how* (see David Lewis 2004). According to the proponents of the ability hypothesis, what Mary learns is how to imagine, remember or recognise colours and colour experiences. It is also disputed whether or not know-how is reducible to propositional knowledge. Alternatively, some have thought, Mary gains new a new mode of understanding for a fact she already knew plenty about (see Brian Loar 1990) on this point). Stump

person knowledge which could not be communicated propositionally (2010, 50). In fact, it is difficult to see how this kind of first-person knowledge could be understood propositionally at all. To argue for this, we need only attempt to describe this first-person perspective to someone who lacks it. As Stump puts it, ‘when Mary has her first perception of redness, she knows that seeing red is like *this*. But the “this” here simply gestures toward what she knows; it does not reduce it to propositional knowledge’ (2010, 51). The kind of knowledge which Stump thinks Mary learns here, is a ‘candidate for a kind of knowledge which is not knowledge *that*’ (2010, 51)—or, in other words, a candidate for a kind of Franciscan knowledge.

It should be noted that Stump’s claim that Mary learns something non-propositional is a plausible, but not an uncontroversial, claim. Some have thought, for example, that what Mary learns is not something non-propositional, but, rather, she learns something new about an old fact or proposition, in that she gains a new perspective on a proposition which she did not have access to prior to leaving the room.<sup>31</sup> It might be argued that the very fact that Stump

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thinks that there is kind of knowledge which Mary learns which is neither knowledge *that* nor knowledge *how*. In the existing literature on the Knowledge Argument, Stump’s position comes closest to the Acquaintance Hypothesis. Earl Conee (1994) argues that Mary gains acquaintance knowledge since ‘experiencing a quality is the most direct way to apprehend a quality’ (Conee 1994, 144). For Conee, after Mary’s release, she does not gain propositional knowledge about the colour red, but, rather, she is acquainted with the quality for the first time. In contrast to these different ways of explaining what Mary comes to know, Daniel Dennett (1991) argues that there is nothing new that Mary learns since she had all of the physical facts prior to leaving the room. According Dennett, Mary’s response to seeing red for the first time would be something like, ‘Oh, this is what red is like’. Mary would not be fooled, for instance, by a blue banana, and Dennett thinks that she would be able to realise that the banana was the incorrect colour if she did indeed have all of the physical information prior to her departure (1991, 399-400).

<sup>31</sup> See Churchland 2004, for instance.

and Jackson assume that Mary could have *all* of the physical or propositional knowledge about minds, vision and colour begs the question. However, unless we assume a fairly extreme position (such as that defended by Dennett (1991)), many would agree that that Mary's epistemic position has improved in some way after leaving the room, even if all that she learns is an old fact in a new way. Whilst there might not be scope here to make an uncontroversial case for the claim that Franciscan knowledge is not reducible to Dominican knowledge, we can still see that there are differences between those things which can be communicated as propositional information, and those things that require some kind of experience to be known. And so, even if we weaken the conclusion in this way, we can see that there is at least some difference between the two modes of thought that Stump presents.

### **Objectivity and Dominican knowledge**

As we have seen, Climacus claims that objectivity has certain limits. More specifically, it is limited in the kind of communication it can achieve. For whilst objectively speaking, intellectual content about Christianity can be presented historically or philosophically, what it cannot do is achieve the kind of double-reflection which is essential for having Christian faith. Although it is possible to disagree with Climacus's specific arguments, as Adams has done, when we understand 'the heart' of Climacus's (1998, 107) arguments, as Evans calls it, we understand that these kinds of criticisms are misplaced.

In fact, Climacus's point seems to be very close to that which Stump raises in *Wandering in Darkness*, that is, that the Dominican or objective systems of understanding, whilst having their uses, also have their limitations. According to Stump, knowing everything about colour from the Dominican perspective cannot tell us all there is to know about colour, for example. The same extends to Climacus's view of Christianity; it might be the case that historical and philosophical enquiry can guide us towards certain propositions about Christ, the Church and the world. What it cannot do, and what is essential to give an answer to the

question ‘What is it to come to have Christian faith?’, is to relate us to God subjectively. To get to the *heart* of the objective problem of the truth of Christianity, we must see it as another example of the Mary story: whilst the enquiring individual has all of the objective information about Christianity she could have, she would lack something crucial for becoming a Christian which could not be communicated objectively at all: a personal knowledge of God.

## **Faith and subjectivity**

As I have briefly outlined in the previous sections of this chapter, in stating that Christian faith is essentially subjective, Climacus draws attention to the fact that the truth of Christianity cannot be understood as a result, but must be lived out, or actualised, in the life of the individual. It is for this reason, that Christian faith, subjectively understood, brings with it important personal challenges in the life of the individual.<sup>32</sup> At least part of what Climacus is concerned with in putting forward this account of subjectivity is what he describes as ‘inwardness’ (CUP, 189), that is, that Christianity is concerned with the ‘existing spirit’ of the individual which is ‘in the process of becoming’ (CUP, 190). Climacus takes the attention from the object of enquiry—that is, the historical or philosophical claims of Christianity, and turns his focus to the subject as an existing spirit. ‘At its highest’, Climacus states, ‘inwardness in an existing subject is passion; truth as a paradox corresponds to passion, and that truth becomes a paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject’ (CUP, 199).

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<sup>32</sup> It will be important to reiterate here that my aim in this project is not entirely historical. Indeed, much of what I will say about subjectivity in the remainder of this chapter is an oversimplification of what Johannes Climacus writes in the 500 or so pages he devotes to this issue in the *Postscript*. Needless to say, there are some important aspects of Climacus’s discussion (and in Kierkegaard’s wider authorship) which can help us to give a clearer account of the relation to God an individual must stand in the Christian spiritual life.

One of the crucial reasons why Christianity must be understood subjectively is that the truth to be learnt is not some historical claim, philosophical claim, or even some religious doctrine, but, rather, it is the revelation of God as a person. It is this personal revelation of God which enables a person to come to have Christian faith on my account. A crucial component of what it means to understand faith subjectively, is to understand that ‘God is a subject’ (CUP, 200).<sup>33</sup> ‘Objectively, what is reflected upon’, Climacus writes, ‘is that this is the true God; subjectively, that the individual relates himself to a something *in such a way* that his relation is in truth a God-relation’ (CUP, 199). What the Christian relates herself to is not an inanimate object; ‘God is not like something one buys in a shop, or like a piece of property’ (CD, 88), as Kierkegaard puts it in the *Christian Discourses*. But, rather, as Climacus describes,

[t]he existing person who chooses the objective way now enters upon all approximating deliberation intended to bring forth God objectively, which is not achieved in all eternity, because God is a subject and hence only for subjectivity in inwardness[...] The objective person is not bothered by dialectical difficulties such as what it means to put a whole research period into finding God, since it is indeed possible that the researcher would die tomorrow, and if he goes on living, he cannot very well regard God as something to be taken along at his convenience, since God is something one takes along *à tout prix* [at any price], which, in passion’s understanding, is the true relationship of inwardness with God (CUP, 200; emphasis in the original)

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<sup>33</sup> This has received some attention in the secondary literature, see, for instance, Moser and McCreary 2010, and, in places, Evans 1992, 1996 and 1999. The theology of God as a subject is explored in Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, and is explored more often in continental, literary approaches to theology. For an example from the analytic tradition, which emphasises God as a subject, see Moser 2008, 2010 and 2013.

In seeing the inadequacy of objective enquiry as a means of coming to Christian faith, we can give a clearer account of what Christian faith is. Climacus's claim is that coming to Christian faith is not the acquisition of some kind of objective, propositional knowledge, but, rather, it is a gaining of some kind of personal knowledge which is required. Christian faith, for the purposes of this project, should be understood as a relationship with God. However, knowing objective truths about a person does not entail knowing that person.<sup>34</sup>

This way of seeing faith can help us to see what is to come to have faith. There are good reasons for thinking that if Christian faith is understood as an intersubjective relationship, then an objective understanding of Christianity is not sufficient for coming to have faith. To show why this is the case, I turn once more to Stump's discussion of Dominican and Franciscan knowledge. One of the key limitations of the Dominican system, Stump argues, is that it cannot account for the nature of interpersonal knowledge. What transpires from this discussion, is that one of the necessary conditions for coming to have faith understood as a relationship with God, is that a person experiences of God.

### **(Inter)subjectivity and Franciscan knowledge**

It should be clearer to the reader now why exactly objective reasoning could never establish the subjective truths of Christianity. However, perhaps this account of intersubjectivity is not yet as clear as it might be. In particular, more needs to be said for why exactly the knowledge which is gained through intersubjective experience is excluded from objective enquiry. To see why this is the case, we return to Stump's discussion of Dominican and Franciscan knowledge. For Stump, one thing that is lacking from the Dominican, overly analytic, system of knowledge is just what it means to know someone personally. Stump's

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<sup>34</sup> This claim is interesting in relation to what Christ claims in stating, 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6).



discussion of knowledge of persons can illuminate the account of intersubjectivity I offer in this chapter.<sup>35</sup>

As we have seen, Stump argues that by engaging with narrative, a person can come to know certain things which a Dominican (or objective) system of understanding cannot teach them. In particular, the Dominican system is unable to account for a certain kind of knowledge by acquaintance, according to Stump. Even if Stump cannot defend the strong thesis that Mary learns something non-propositional when she is acquainted with red tomatoes, it is at least the case that her epistemic states are improved in a way which no amount of objective enquiry could achieve

The basis of Kierkegaardian faith, as we have seen, is a relationship to a personal God and this can explain what someone with only objective knowledge is lacking. That is, knowledge of persons is a kind of Franciscan knowledge and a kind of knowledge which is precluded by objective or Dominican enquiry. To see why this is the case, let us consider Stump's reimagining of the Mary story:

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<sup>35</sup> This intersubjective aspect of Christian faith is explored by Martin Buber (1937) in his discussion of the 'I-thou' relationship (1937, 1), which is heavily influenced by Kierkegaard. Paul K. Moser and Mark L. McCreary, also maintain that, although Kierkegaard

does not disapprove of objective knowledge as such [...] he strongly warns against approaching God as an impersonal object to be studied. In his words 'God is not like something one buys in a shop, or like a piece of property' [...] Instead, God is a personal agent, a subject with definite redemptive purposes for humans [...] Merely objective knowledge about God does not entail personally knowing God via a God-relationship. (2010, 132)

Imagine then that Mary in her imprisonment has had access to any and all information about the world as long as that information is only in the form of third-person accounts giving her knowledge that. So, for example, Mary has available to her the best science texts for any of the sciences from physics to sociology. She knows that there are other people in the world, and (*mirabile dictu*) she knows all that science can teach her about them. But she has never had any personal interactions of an unmediated and direct sort with another person. [. . .] In short, Mary has been kept from anything that could count as a second-person experience, in which one can say ‘you’ to another person. And then suppose that Mary is finally rescued from her imprisonment and united for the first time with her mother, who loves her deeply. When Mary is first united with her mother, it seems indisputable that Mary will know things she did not know before, even if she knew everything about her mother that could be made available to her in non-narrative propositional form, including her mother’s psychological states. Although Mary knew that her mother loved her before she met her, when she is united with her mother, Mary will learn what it is like to be loved. [. . .] [W]hat will come as the major revelation to Mary is her mother. [. . .] What is new for Mary is a second-person experience. (Stump, 2010, 52-53)<sup>36</sup>

What does Mary lack from her Dominican upbringing? Mary could no doubt have access to plenty of information about her Mother in the room, it is even plausible to think that Mary

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<sup>36</sup> It is not clear whether or not Stump’s reimagining of this example is similar enough to Jackson’s original case to be convincing. In particular, there seems to be a big difference between being acquainted with a property of an object for the first time and being acquainted with a person for the first time. As I will go on to suggest, even if Stump’s thought-experiment is unsuccessful, there is something plausible about the distinction between knowing *of* someone, that is, knowing claims about a person, and knowing someone *personally*, that is, having become acquainted with them.

might know what her Mother looks like, what her preferences are, and so on (as long of all of these things could be explained propositionally). What Mary lacks, however, is what Stump calls a ‘second-person experience’ (2010, 53). Second-person experience is not just an experience in which Mary perceives or experiences her mother for the first time as an object (this is a third-person experience), nor is it the phenomenal feeling that she gets in experiencing her Mother (this would be described a first-person experience), that is, she is not just aware of her own mental states. What is distinctive about a second-person experience is that Mary is aware of her mother and aware that her mother is also aware of her; Mary and her mother enjoy what Stump describes as ‘joint attention’ (2010, 68).<sup>37</sup>

We might think that in using Jackson’s experiment, Stump makes a fairly contentious epistemological claim and it might be the case that experiencing one’s Mother for the first time is relevantly different to experiencing red for the first time. If Stump’s thought experiment fails, is her conclusion, that knowledge of persons requires some kind of acquaintance, false? There are good for thinking not. We can make the case for Stump’s conclusion in much simpler terms. For instance, it seems fairly plausible to make the distinction between knowing *about* someone and knowing personally without invoking a contentious account of propositional knowledge. I know plenty about Eleonore Stump, for instance. I know that she is a professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University and that she has written a book about Thomas Aquinas. From the testimony of those I take to be reliable, I also know that Stump is a friendly and engaging person to talk to and she is generous toward younger scholars. Crucially, however, no one would think that I know Eleonore Stump, regardless of how much information I could learn about her. A very minimal necessary condition for my knowing Eleonore Stump (but note, not sufficient) is that I have had an

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<sup>37</sup> Note, I say more on this later. In particular, joint attention will be an important part of my argument in Chapters 3 and 6.

experience of Eleonore Stump. This is precisely what second-person experience is supposed to explain on Stump's analysis.

Clearly, having a second-person experience of someone is not sufficient for knowing someone personally.<sup>38</sup> If I have a second-person experience of a stranger on the train for instance, and we are both aware of each other as conscious beings, it would seem strange to say that I knew the stranger on the train. Interpersonal knowledge cannot be explained entirely by appealing to second-person experience.<sup>39</sup> As I state above, it does seem reasonable to suppose that we cannot know someone personally without having a second-person experience of them.

However, it seems that in a technological age, there are some obvious examples in which it might be plausible to make this kind of claim. Derek and Jen might have met on an internet dating website, for instance, and have exchanged several personal emails, as well as video messages, but not have got round to actually meeting yet. Jen would be correct in asserting 'I know Derek well, but we've never met'. It is worth pointing out here that Stump's notion of second-person experience is sufficiently weak to account for this counter-example. The only conditions required to have a second-person experience are as follows:

- (1) A is aware of B as a person.

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<sup>38</sup> Matthew Benton (ms.) notes that this difference between knowing *that* and personal knowledge also shows up in our language—it makes no sense to say, for instance,

# I know that Paris is the capital of France, and Derek.

Benton argues that interpersonal knowing is a certain kind of knowledge by acquaintance.

<sup>39</sup> This is something which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Stump (2013) outlines levels of union between persons that might be possible, the most basic of these being having a second-person experience of one another.

(2) A's personal interaction with B is of a direct and immediate sort.

(3) A is conscious. (2010, 75-76)

If Jen and Derek are aware of each other as conscious persons, and are actively engaging in email correspondence (i.e. they are both attending to their emails at the same time), or using video calling, instant messaging, phone conversations, or whatever other methods of communication they might use, then Jen and Derek are having second-person experiences of one another. It is worth noting that if Derek sends Jen an email which she doesn't get round to reading until later in the week, or if Derek sends Jen a letter, then condition (2) will not be met and the experience will be of a third-person, rather than second-person kind.

Furthermore, if Derek and Jan actually do meet, but Derek falls asleep, then Jen's experience of Derek will fail to be second-personal because of a failure to meet condition (3), that the person being experienced is conscious.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the account of second-person experience is sufficiently basic to avoid the obvious counter example. It seems reasonable to think, therefore, that we cannot know someone personally unless we experience them second-personally. Second-person experience is a necessary but not sufficient condition for having what I will call 'intersubjective knowledge' of a person.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> L.A. Paul (2015), in her discussion of the rationality of deciding whether to have a baby, applies Jackson's Mary case as an example of what she describes as a 'transformative experience' (2015, 7). She claims that '[b]efore she leaves her room, she [Mary] cannot project forward to get a sense of what it will be like for her to see red, since she cannot project from what she knows about her other experiences to know what it is like to see color' (2015, 6-7). Before the encounter with the red tomato, Mary is 'epistemically impoverished' (2015, 8), according to Paul and

[t]his means that, when Mary chooses to leave her black-and-white cell, thus

## **An intersubjective account of coming to faith**

Now we are in a position to give a clear analysis of what it is to come to have faith. As I will define it for the purposes of this project, to have Christian faith is to have a relationship with God. And thus, in order to come to have faith, one cannot merely understand facts about God, but one must come to know God personally. We have already seen that a very minimal condition for knowing someone personally is that one has a second-person experience of that individual. The same should apply to our understanding of faith requires an individual to have a relationship with God, and so, to come to have faith, it is necessary that one experiences God second-personally on my account.<sup>41</sup>

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choosing to undergo an epistemically transformative experience, she faces a deep subjective unpredictability about the future. She doesn't know, and she cannot know, the values of the relevant phenomenal outcomes of her choice. (2015, 7)

A transformative experience is an experience which radically changes the individual both personally and cognitively, according to Paul there is no way to rationally project the beliefs and affections that will be present after such a transformative experience. It seems reasonable to claim that Stump's revised Mary story is an example of both transformative experience and radical conversion; Mary learns something new which was previously cognitively lacking to her and which radically changes her beliefs and affections.

Climacus's rejection of objective reasoning and his account of faith is very like this revised Mary story. Although it possible to know plenty about God historically or philosophically, there is a different kind of knowing which is only available through a certain kind of experience. It is this kind of knowledge which is crucial for Christian faith. Mary undergoes a radical conversion in Stump's example; her beliefs change in such a way that no amount of previous evidence could have achieved.

<sup>41</sup> It might be tempting to think that a second-personal relation to God would count as evidence in support of Christianity and thereby undermine Climacus's view that faith cannot be grounded in objective evidence. However, there is an important distinction to be made between publically available

Seeing the importance of second-person experience for coming to have faith can help us to think more carefully about the purpose of the Christian spiritual life. Faith, understood in terms of being in relationship with God has implications on how we approach spirituality; the aim of Christian spiritual life, on this picture, is not primarily an increase in objective or

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(objective) evidence, that is, the kind of evidence which historical or philosophical enquiry provide and privately available (or subjective) evidence in which the individual is related to God. On my reading, Kierkegaard thinks that religious belief cannot be grounded in publically available evidence, but it must be grounded in private, or subjective, evidence in which the individual relates properly to God. Moser and McCreary (2010) make a good case for thinking that Kierkegaard is a kind of evidentialist of this sort. As they put it:

[Kierkegaard] has in mind a personal God who, with authority, calls people to undergo transformation toward God's morally perfect character, and (sacred) knowledge and evidence follow suit. That is, such knowledge and evidence are purposively designed for 'single individuals' who are willing to be changed in the direction of God's redemptive transformation. (2010, 131)

The kind of evidence they have in mind here is not dissimilar to the kind of volitional evidence for God's existence which Moser (2008, 2009) discusses elsewhere. According Moser, God would only reveal himself in a manner which is challenging to the human will and which would result in redemption from sin. This evaluation of Kierkegaard's epistemology is also shared by Evans (2006) who argues that

[Kierkegaard] claims that God's reality is or can be evident to human beings but not to anyone and everyone; to become aware of God a person must have or acquire a certain kind of spiritual sensitivity, must possess that quality or set of qualities that Kierkegaard calls 'inwardness' or 'subjectivity'. (2006, 243)

Dominican knowledge about God. But, rather, the aim of the Christian spiritual life is to grow in intersubjective knowledge of God. Of course, in coming to know another person it is important that I grow in knowledge about them; knowing that my wife's favourite ice cream is pistachio flavoured, or that she grew up in France is important for my relationship with my wife. However, it is also obvious that knowing about my wife's ice cream tastes and knowing about her upbringing (and add to this any number of facts about her) is not sufficient for knowing her. To see that this is true, we only need to imagine a person who knew everything about my wife but who had never met her. It seems clear that we could not describe such a person as having a relationship with my wife. The same must apply to our understanding of being in relationship with God; knowing about God will be never be sufficient for coming to have faith. It is through this lens of growing in interpersonal knowledge of God, and experiencing God personally that I now discuss the nature of the Christian spiritual life—the life of Christian faith.



## Chapter 2

### The Purity of Heart is to will one thing:

#### Despair and the problem of the will

Lord Jesus Christ, you who certainly did not come to the world in order to judge, yet by being love that was not loved you were a judgment upon the world. We call ourselves Christians; we say that we know of no one to go to but you—alas, to whom then shall we go when, precisely by your love, the judgement falls also upon us, that we love little? To whom, what hopelessness, if not to you! To whom, what despair, if you actually would not receive us mercifully, forgiving us our great sin against you against love, we who sinned much by loving little! (WA, 169)

#### Introduction

As I argued in the previous chapter, having Christian faith requires having a personal relationship with God. However, there are significant barriers that prevent us from having such a relationship with him in this life. As I will describe it in this chapter, one of these barriers is a person's sin. I will argue that sin is a distortion of the will in which an individual fails to relate properly to herself and to God. Drawing on Anti-Climacus's account of sin and despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*, I argue that the default human position is a willed distance from God. To explain this position in more detail, I apply Harry Frankfurt's (1988) account of internal fragmentation and wholeheartedness, and argue that what is lacking from an individual who does not have Christian faith is a kind of internal coherence: a person that is in conflict with herself cannot will to be in union with him, since she cannot will to be in union with herself. In order to have Christian faith, an individual must begin to have what Kierkegaard describes as a single-mindedness of the will to will the good (UDVS, 78). It is

only around this desire to will the good that a human being can be wholehearted and begin to enter into relationship with God.<sup>42</sup>

### **Sin, despair, and the self before God**

As I outlined in the previously chapter, having Christian faith requires a person to have a personal relationship with God. However, there is something about the human condition which prevents this relationship from developing in intimacy, and precludes an individual from enjoying union with God—this is the problem of sin. Sin plays a crucial role in what Kierkegaard writes about the spiritual life in a number of places, but one of the most detailed accounts of sin we find in his writing is in the pseudonymous *The Sickness Unto Death*. I outline this account here, before going on to apply this to the discussion of the spiritual life.

According to Anti-Climacus, sin is a state of despair before God. However, contrary to how ‘despair’ might typically be understood, as it is described in *Sickness*, despair is not primarily a phenomenal state of the individual. Anti-Climacus maintains that one can be in despair without even realising it; ‘not being conscious of being in despair, is precisely a form of despair’, he writes (SUD, 23). The reason for this is that despair is defined as a kind of ‘misrelation’ of the self and a failure of the will (SUD, 15). The condition of despair, or, the ‘sickness’ (SUD, 28) as he sometimes describes it, is something which an individual can be inflicted with, even if they do not realise it. Despair, understood in this way, occurs in one of two ways: either by not willing to be oneself or by willing to be oneself (SUD, 13). To understand what this might amount to, we must see what Anti-Climacus means by ‘the self’, here. He defines it as such:

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<sup>42</sup> It might look like these two claims (willing only the good and having a higher-order desire to will the good) are in conflict, and so cannot be used synonymously. I explain why this is not the case by giving a reading of what Kierkegaard means by ‘willing only the good’—as I explain it, willing only the good is a kind of higher-order desire around which all of a person’s desires can be integrated.

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.

Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another. [...] The human self is such a derived, established relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. (SUD, 13-14)<sup>43</sup>

This is Kierkegaard's writing at its most verbose. However, the account of the self which is presented here is less longwinded than it perhaps appears. It is important to note that Anti-Climacus's account of the self is not a metaphysical account which seeks to explain the kind of

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<sup>43</sup> As George Pattison (2005) notes, the description of the self in *Sickness* 'sounds suspiciously like Hegelian abstraction. And of course, in many ways it is' (2005, 62). Contrary to idealist views of the self, however, Pattison points out that the self 'does not and cannot create itself out of nothing' (2005, 62). The similarities and differences between Anti-Climacus's discussion with Hegelian and idealist accounts of the self are peripheral to the dialectic here since my aim is not to provide an accurate historical account of Kierkegaard's philosophy, but, rather, to develop my own account of the spiritual life.

entity a human being is—as Murray Rae puts it, ‘Anti-Climacus [...] clearly rejects the idea that the self is a completed, static entity, a finished product, as it were, that has only to express itself. Rather, the self is a life-long project for which the individual is responsible’ (2010, 93). Anti-Climacus is attempting to give what Evans describes as a “relational achievement theory” of the self (2006, 264), that is, an explanation of how someone can fail to be a self in virtue of certain social or relational criteria. These criteria, for being a self, can be summarised into three distinct claims: (i) the self is a relation, (ii) it is a relation that relates itself to itself, and (iii) in relating itself to itself, it relates to another (Westphal, 2014, 236). Let us unpack each of these claims more carefully.

First, for Anti-Climacus, the self is a relation; this is expressed as a kind of a synthesis of opposing elements (‘infinite and finite’, ‘temporal and eternal’, ‘freedom and necessity’ (SUD, 13)) which are irreducible to one another.<sup>44</sup> Rather than inferring that the human self is composed of distinct substances from the fact that conflicting properties apply to it, Anti-Climacus seeks to describe a human self as something to which both conflicting properties apply. It is tempting to accuse Anti-Climacus of simply being incoherent here, but this would be to misunderstand the point. As Westphal puts it, ‘[f]or Anti-Climacus the so-called “mind-body problem” is not a puzzle or a problem to be solved so much as a mystery to remind us that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14)’ (2014, 237). The tension in our understanding of the human self is neither something Anti-Climacus invents nor seeks to

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<sup>44</sup> As Westphal describes this feature of Anti-Climacus’s account,

Anti-Climacus might better have spoken of a dialectical tension than of a synthesis; for the unity of the elements is paradoxical and unresolved. They do not resolve into some third thing that is neither. [...] The self is an “object” that can be studied by psychology and sociology; but at the same time it is a “subject” that is capable of art, philosophy, morality and religion in ways that are irreducible to these sciences. Both perspectives are true, but neither is the whole truth. (2014, 237)

resolve. As Rae notes (2010, 92), for Anti-Climacus, placing importance on these contrasting elements of the human self is an attempt to give a biblical view of the self which puts emphasis on the fact that human beings are but dust (Genesis 3:19), yet, they ‘have been made a little lower than God’ (Psalm 8:5).<sup>45</sup>

Secondly, the human self is defined as a relation which is self-reflexive. The self is not only defined as a synthesis of opposing elements, but also it relates essentially to itself in some way. We can see what this amounts to in terms of self-consciousness—in being aware of oneself, a person is both an object and a subject. To use William James’s terminology, the self has both an ‘I-self’ and a ‘me-self’ (1890, 291-401); in being aware of oneself, there is the object of my awareness (the ‘me-self’) and the self which is conscious (the ‘I-self’).<sup>46</sup> Seeing the prominence of being self-conscious is key to understanding how despair relates to the self and to the will, as Rae puts this point—it is in virtue of the self-reflexivity of the self that a person ‘may become aware of themselves as a synthesis of the finite, and the infinite, and so on...Precisely in virtue of that self-awareness, the synthesis becomes a task that we are to work at and maintain in proper balance’ (2010, 92).

Thirdly, and finally, for Anti-Climacus, the self exists in relation to another.<sup>47</sup> The key to understanding Anti-Climacus’s claim here is to note that for a complete understanding of the self, it is important not only to relate properly to oneself as a self-conscious synthesis, but

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<sup>45</sup> To see more detail on Anti-Climacus’s discussion of the self as a relation, see Westphal’s discussion of this (2014, 237-40). The International Kierkegaard Commentary on *The Sickness Unto Death* (Perkins, 2006) also contains some more detailed discussion of Anti-Climacus’s account of the self. In particular, see the contributions from Westphal and Alastair Hannay.

<sup>46</sup> Evans makes this comparison with James’s account of self-consciousness (2009, 46).

<sup>47</sup> This discussion of the self as dependent on the other echoes Hegel’s discussion of self-consciousness, which Anti-Climacus clearly borrows from. Hegel claims that ‘self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged’ (1977, 111).

also to relate properly to others. Here, it is even more crucial to see that for Anti-Climacus, ‘the self’ is a task which one is responsible for and not a static entity. Although the talk of ‘other’ in Anti-Climacus’s account of the self clearly has some implications for how one relates to other persons, there is good reason to suppose that this third aspect of the self must be understood theologically. Throughout *Sickness*, despair is contrasted with the ability to ‘rest transparently in God’<sup>48</sup> (SUD, 30) and in introducing this discussion of the other, Anti-Climacus notes that the relation with the other is the relation with ‘the power that established it’ (SUD, 14); ‘a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another’ (SUD, 13).<sup>49</sup> Despair is only overcome when the individual ‘rests transparently in the power

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<sup>48</sup> There is similarity here with Augustine’s claim that God has made us for himself and that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him (400/1961, 1). Rae also makes this comparison between Anti-Climacus and Augustine (2010, 93).

<sup>49</sup> There is some debate in the secondary literature about who the ‘other’ in *The Sickness Unto Death* is supposed to be. Evans (2006, 263-67), for instance, argues that the lack of theological language in the first part of *Sickness* suggests that the ‘other’ should be extended more broadly to other people as well as God as other. I will follow Evans’s assessment of what is intended by ‘other’, here. This discussion of relating to the other and relating to God is also picked up elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s writings. In the ‘Occasional Discourse on the Occasion of Confession,’ which I discuss in the next section, Kierkegaard asks the question in relation to willing the good: ‘*what is your frame of mind towards others?*’ (UDVS, 144), and, in response to this question, he urges the individual to connect willing the good with a kind of unity with all people. He writes that

to will one thing, to will the good in truth, to will as a single individual is to be allied with God— something unconditionally everyone can do—that is harmony. If you sat in solitary confinement, removed from all human beings, or if you were banished to a desert island with animals for company—if you will the good in truth, if you are allied with God, then are you in concordance with all people. (UDVS, 144)

that established it' (SUD, 14). This *power* (the other which the self must relate to in order to truly be a self) is clearly supposed to be God; Anti-Climacus even uses 'the power that established it' and 'God' interchangeably in places.<sup>50</sup>

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Another discussion of this is found in *Work of Love*, in which Kierkegaard writes that the Christian ought to

Love the beloved faithfully and tenderly, but let love for the neighbor be the sanctifying element in your union's covenant with God. Love your friend honestly and devotedly, but let love for the neighbor be what you learn from each other in the intimacy of your friendship's relationship with God. (WL 62)

This is also an aspect of Kierkegaard's work which is developed in Martin Buber's discussion in *I and Thou*, something which I do not have space to discuss here.

<sup>50</sup> However, despite this connection between the other and God, we should resist being overly simplistic here—Anti-Climacus might imply that relating to the other is about our relation to God, but he could certainly be more explicit in this connection. Why might this be? Evans argues that Anti-Climacus avoids labelling the 'other' explicitly as 'God' in order 'to express the idea that, although humans are metaphysically dependent on God, psychologically they are often shaped by other "powers"' (2009, 49). Thus, whilst primarily this external relationship is defined as the God-relationship, somehow this also involves a relation to the other more generally. As Evans defines this relation, '[b]y using this abstract language, I believe he wishes to talk about the formal structure of the self in a way that allows us to understand that God is the ultimate basis of selfhood without claiming that the actual identity of the concrete self is always grounded solely in God' (2006, 270). A plausible reading of what is going on here, is that for Anti-Climacus, to relate properly to other persons is a part of what it is to relate properly to God as other. Kierkegaard makes something like this claim in *Work of Love* in writing that, 'Christianity steps forwards and asks about the relationship to God, whether each individual is first related to God and then whether the relationship of love is related to God' (WL,

## Despair and the self

Having outlined these key claims of Anti-Climacus's account of the self, we can now see how this account of the self is related to the concept of despair. In its most basic formulation, to be in despair is to fail to be a self through some defect of the will. Despair is either (i) 'despair not to will to be oneself—a denial of one's own autonomy and selfhood, or, (ii) 'despair to will to be oneself—an attempt to will to exist independently of one's relation to the other. This account of despair is described in stages of increasing intensity in relation to the human will. Anti-Climacus writes that '[t]he more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also' (SUD, 29). As we can see, despair as a failure of the will is tightly connected to our self-consciousness.

The lowest form of despair (which Anti-Climacus claims is barely despair at all) is also the most widespread. This weak kind of despair is an ignorance in which the individual is not even aware of her own selfhood (and, in particular, she shows an ignorance of the eternal aspect of the self as synthesis (SUD, 42)), and thus fails to will to be a self. One way that it is possible to despair in ignorance is by failing to be self-conscious of oneself as a synthesis. For instance, one might be in despair in ignorance by failing to see oneself as both finite and infinite.<sup>51</sup> We might think that this is close to a kind of naturalism—whilst the naturalist recognises that she is a mortal, physical human being, she is ignorant of herself as an infinite

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108). This importance of love for the other in Kierkegaard's works is explored by Troy Jollimore (2015).

<sup>51</sup> Austin Farrer suggests an account which seems to be a development of Anti-Climacus's account here. He writes,

If the mind is able at all to pass from the notion of the finite to that of the infinite, it is plainly required that the two terms shall be comparable, and in particular that the finite should afford analogy to the infinite. (1943, 27



self who exists before God. This is what Anti-Climacus calls a kind of ‘spiritlessness’ (SUD, 46), a lack of recognition of one’s own existence before God and a lack of recognition of the true nature of one’s selfhood. It is this lack of awareness that one exists as a self before God which leads Anti-Climacus to conclude that despair through ignorance is barely a form of despair at all. Despair is a kind of defect of the will in which a person fails to will to be a self, or wills to only be self (I will explain this shortly), and those that lack the self-consciousness to realise that their will is defective, whilst in despair, lack the awareness to see this. Their despair is not a result of any weakness or defiance of the will, but, rather, it results from a lack of awareness that there is something defective with their will. The analogy of sickness which is used throughout the text is helpful to see what Anti-Climacus has in mind; despair is a sickness of the human will, much like a kind of cancer, and this is the case whether or not one recognises its presence.

An increase in self-consciousness brings with it the possibility of being in despair through weakness or defiance. Anti-Climacus describes despair as occurring in one of two ways: ‘*In Despair Not to Will to Be Oneself*’ (SUD, 49; emphasis in the original) and ‘*In Despair to Will to be Oneself*’ (SUD, 67; emphasis in the original). To fail to will to be oneself occurs because of a weakness of will—whilst such an individual might be aware of herself as synthesis of finite and infinite, etc., she lacks the strength of will to become a self in the appropriate way. For instance, she might become fixated on material possessions and become enslaved by her desire for wealth in such a way that she lacks concern for, or she fails to have the strength of will to pursue, things of infinite value, such as her relationship to God, for instance. In its most basic form this is a will ‘to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self’ (SUD, 53). In contrast to this, to be in despair by willing to be oneself is a kind of defiance in which an individual is conscious of oneself as an eternal or infinite self, but wills to sever the self ‘from any relation to a power that has established it, or severing it from the idea that there is such a power’ (SUD, 68). This kind of despair in defiance is an attempt to exist

independently of God and to create oneself. Although this individual is more self-aware than the person who is ignorant or weak willed, they express a failure to exist in relation to the other which established it—God.<sup>52</sup>

## **Sin and despair**

It is against the backdrop of this discussion of despair that Anti-Climacus goes on to discuss the nature of sin. As Anti-Climacus defines it, sin is to despair ‘before God’ (SUD, 77). Sin ‘before God’ (SUD, 77) is explained as despair in the face of a God whom we are ‘invited to live on the most intimate terms with’ (SUD, 85). Sin is not defined as a disobedience to some external force or obligation. ‘God is not some externality in the sense that a policeman is’ as Anti-Climacus puts it; ‘[t]he point that must be observed is that the self has a conception of God and yet does not will as he wills, and thus is disobedient’ (SUD, 80). Anti-Climacus rejects defining sin in terms of action types; it is entirely possible to be ‘quite in order’ (SUD, 81) having refrained from murder, adultery, stealing, etc., and still fail to relate properly to God. Thus, he argues, the opposite of sin is not virtue, but, rather, faith (SUD, 82). What is lacking from the sinful person is not right action, but, rather, a proper relation to God.

As with his account of despair, Anti-Climacus’s account of sin is closely related to the will. He contends that ‘sin is rooted in willing and arrives at the concept of defiance’ (SUD, 93). And although, strictly speaking, this kind of defiance in the face of a personal God is a rarity, it is true that ‘anyone could knowingly not do the good, or knowingly, knowing what is right do wrong’ (SUD, 90). Thus, he claims that ‘[m]ost men are characterized by a dialectic of indifference and live a life so far from the good (faith) that it is almost too spiritless to be called sin—indeed almost too spiritless to be called despair’ (SUD, 101).

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<sup>52</sup> As Evans describes it, this kind of despair is close to the kind of Sartrean existentialism which stresses the importance of radical choice and a striving to define the foundations of one’s own selfhood in the face of God’s non-existence (2009, 178).

Whilst, strictly speaking, on Anti-Climacus's account, sin is a specific kind of despair in which one knowingly fails to will to be a self before God, in some sense, all despair is a kind of sin. By this I mean that all despair is a kind of sin in the sense that all despair is a failure to will the good, which Anti-Climacus describes simply as 'faith', here. I will return to the question what we mean by 'the good' shortly. Rae sums up Anti-Climacus's picture of sin and despair neatly by noting that

[s]in may be conceived, then, as a mis-relation between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity. [...] Those guilty of such mis-relation exist in despair. This does not mean that they will appear to be miserable; such people may indeed be, and often are, very comfortable and happy. Their despair, consists, rather in their misplaced and thus false hope. They have staked their existence on something that will not endure. [Anti-Climacus] is in no doubt that we are all to be numbered in this group. We all fall short. We have all plunged ourselves into the bondage of sin, and stand in need, therefore of forgiveness and re-creation. We are all afflicted with "the sickness unto death". (2010, 93-94)

The problem of sin, as it is presented here, is that a person is unable to relate properly both to herself and to God. This failure of relation is a failure of the will; the default position of human beings is a distance from God and their will is inclined to reject God. To overcome this problem, we must give a more specific account what it is to have faith. Faith, for Anti-Climacus, can be defined as follows:

Therefore, the formula set forth above, which describes a state in which there is no despair at all, is entirely correct, and this formula is also the formula for

faith: in relating to itself and willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. (SUD, 49)

For Anti-Climacus, Christian faith is the state of being free from despair in which an individual is properly related to both to herself and also to ‘the power that established it’. As Westphal notes, this state of being free from despair is formulated using fairly ‘strong language, suggestive, perhaps, of an always unfinished task of a lifetime’ (2014, 233). This seems correct—the account of having faith on offer here is a process which begins in this life, but is not completed. This understanding of the life of Christian faith also fits with most understandings of the *ordo salutis*; a human being is justified (the beginning of Christian faith) when they receive grace from God, they are sanctified (the task of Christian faith) as they undertake the process of being healed of the effects of original sin, and after death, on the completion of sanctification, a person is deified (the ultimate aim of Christian faith) in which they enter into union with God for eternity.<sup>53</sup>

### **Faith as the antidote to despair**

So how does one move from a position of despair to begin the process of being free from despair? In order to begin this process of coming to have Christian faith, according to Anti-Climacus, God must reveal the truth of a person’s predicament to her, that is, ‘there must be a revelation from God to teach man what sin is and how deeply it is rooted’ (SUD, 96). For this reason, Anti-Climacus writes,

salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible!

This is the battle of *faith*, battling, madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility

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<sup>53</sup> I will return to this discussion of the *ordo salutis* at the end of this chapter, as well as in Chapter 6.

is the only salvation [...] At time the ingenuousness of the human imagination can extend to the point of creating possibility, but at last—that is, when it depends upon *faith*—then only this helps: that for God everything is possible [...] The believer has the infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment. (SUD, 39)

On this picture of coming to have faith, the remedy to despair is the beginning of salvation—a gift of grace from God. However, Anti-Climacus is also clear that having Christian faith involves a task a person must engage with.

This chapter seeks to give an account of the problem of sin, and to suggest how engaging in the spiritual life may provide a solution to this problem. We have now seen how Anti-Climacus describes the problem of sin; a person is unable to be in union with God because of a failure to will to be a self in the appropriate way. We have also seen what the solution to this problem is—faith, according to Anti-Climacus, allows an individual to repair the will in the appropriate way and so to relate properly to oneself and to God. It will be helpful to clarify further how faith allows a person to will to be a self and to will to relate to God in the appropriate way. In order to give a detailed account of how this is possible, it will be important to give some more detail about what Anti-Climacus refers to as ‘the good’ (SUD, 101) and the relation of this to faith. To give an account of willing the good in faith, we must look beyond *The Sickness Unto Death*, however. Before giving a more detailed account of the problem of sin and the solution to this problem, I outline what Kierkegaard writes about the good in his ‘An Occasional Discourse on the Occasion of Confession’.

### **Double-mindedness and the Purity of Heart**

‘An Occasional Discourse on the Occasion of a Confession’ (which has later come to be known simply as ‘The Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing’) presents an account of sin which

can help us to see the role of willing the good more clearly. As with Anti-Climacus's account, Kierkegaard describes the problem of sin and the barriers which prevent a person from having a deeper relationship with God. The problem, as it is presented here is that, '[s]omething came in between them; the separation of sin lies in between them; daily, day after day, something intervenes between them: delay, halting interruption, error, perdition' (UDVS, 7). In light of this distance between the individual and God which is the result of sin, it is important that the individual engages in a specific kind of spiritual practice, namely, the act of confession: 'Then may you give in repentance the bold confidence to will again one thing' (UDVS, 7). Again, we see the connection between the will and sin and the solution to the problem of sin, as it is presented here, is that an individual is able to 'will one thing'. Kierkegaard presents this account through his account of confession; as it is presented here, confession is the act of realigning one's will to ensure that it is single-minded in willing one thing—the good. By expanding on a verse from the Epistle of James (*Keep near to God, then he will keep near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts you double-minded*) (James 4:8, UDVS, 24; emphasis in the original), Kierkegaard explores the importance of the single-mindedness of the will in relation to sin. This 'purity of heart' to have a singleness of the will is connected with being close to God in some way. Kierkegaard describes this connection by noting that,

because only the pure in heart are able to see God and consequently keep near to him and preserve this purity through keeping near to them; and the person who in truth wills only one thing *can will only the good*, and the person who wills only one thing when he wills the good *can only will the good in truth*. (UDVS, 24; emphasis in the original)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard is developing an important theme in Scripture here, that being able to see God and coming close to God depends on our purity of heart. In Matthew 5.8, for instance, Christ says, 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.' We find this theme in the Psalms, too:

The aim of Christian faith is to be in union with God—it is described in terms of being able to see God and to be near to him.<sup>55</sup> However, in order to be in union with God one must have a pure heart, and to have a pure heart requires being able to will only the good. As he goes on to describe, every goal a person can set for himself in life, can be understood in reference to willing ‘the good’ (UDVS, 25). ‘O you unfathomable trustworthiness of the good’, he writes, ‘wherever a person is in the world, on whatever road he is traveling, if he wills only one thing, there is a road that leads him to you!’ (UDVS, 25). Hence, we can see that although Kierkegaard talks about ‘willing only the good’, this does not mean one can will nothing else if one wills only the good, but, rather, all of a person’s other desires must be understood in

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Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me. (Psalm 27:7-9)

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my food day and night,

while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’ (Psalm 42:1-3)

<sup>55</sup> Although we might think that Kierkegaard’s use of ‘nearness to God’ is inappropriate, if we think that God is never distant from us, it is possible to read the use of ‘nearness’ in another way. Although God never distances himself from us, the result of despair and sin is a willed distance from God—human beings choose to be far from God by lacking a purity of heart to will the good. Generally, I avoid this confusion by referring to a ‘deepening union or relationship with God’ rather than using ‘nearness’ or ‘closeness’ as Kierkegaard does here.

reference to this will for the good. As I will describe in more detail in the next section, one way of understanding how this is possible is by invoking a hierarchical conception of the will—on this reading, willing the good dictates all of one’s other desires.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> The connection, between seeing God and purity, is also discussed in the spiritual literature. John of the Cross, for instance, writes that,

The tenth and last step of this secret ladder of love causes the soul to become wholly assimilated to God, by reason of the clear and immediate vision of God which it then possesses; when, having ascended in this life to the ninth step, it goes forth from the flesh. These souls, who are few, enter not into purgatory, since they have already been wholly purged by love. Of these Saint Matthew says: *Beati mundo corde: quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt* [Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God]. And, as we say, this vision is the cause of the perfect likeness of the soul to God, for, as Saint John says, we know that we shall be like Him. Not because the soul will come to have the capacity of God, for that is impossible; but because all that it is will become like to God, for which cause it will be called, and will be, God by participation. (2002, 168)

In Irenaeus we find similar themes developed:

The prophets, then, indicated beforehand that God should be seen by men; as the Lord also says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” But in respect to His greatness, and His wonderful glory, “no man shall see God and live,” for the Father is incomprehensible; but in regard to His love, and kindness, and as to His infinite power, even this He grants to those who love Him, that is, to see God, which thing the prophets did also predict. “For those things that are impossible with men, are possible with God.” For man does not see God by his own powers; but when He pleases He is seen by men, by whom He wills, and when He wills, and as He wills. For God is powerful in all things, having been seen at that time indeed, prophetically through the Spirit, and seen, too, adoptively through the Son; and He shall also



The importance of willing only one thing is what Kierkegaard takes James to be warning against in his contention to *'purify your hearts you double-minded'*—double-mindedness here, is contrasted with the single will for the good. Just as despair is seen as an inability to relate properly as a self, double-mindedness is a failure to will only goodness. Kierkegaard explicitly connects these concepts (and repeats Anti-Climacus's discussion) in writing 'what else is it to despair but to have two wills!' (UDVS, 30). To have a double-mindedness of the will, for Kierkegaard, is to pursue the good for some other purpose, other than for the sake of the good. For instance, a person might will the good for the sake of reward (UDVS, 41), from a fear of punishment, (UDVS, 44), or by only partially willing the good (UDVS, 64) through busyness and distraction.

In contrast to all of these ways of being doubled-minded, Kierkegaard writes that, *'[i]f a person is to will the good in truth he must will to do everything for the good or will to suffer everything for the good'* (UDVS, 78; emphasis in the original). Again, we see the importance of the person's will before God in Kierkegaard's thinking when he states that '[a]bove all, each one separately is to become a single individual with his responsibility before God; each one separately is to endure with his responsibility before God; each one separately is to endure this rigorous judgment of singularity' (UDVS, 50).

Sin, as I have described Anti-Climacus's and Kierkegaard's accounts, is characterised as a failure of the will, and more specifically, a failure to be single-minded in willing the good before God. The discussion of Christian faith and the will here presents a picture of the spiritual life which is involved in the movement of constantly realigning the double-mindedness of the human self from a position of despair, towards the ultimate goal: to will only one thing, the good. For each individual, this is different, as the task of becoming a

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be seen paternally in the kingdom of heaven, the Spirit truly preparing man in the Son of God, and the Son leading him to the Father, while the Father, too, confers [upon him] incorruption for eternal life, which comes to every one from the fact of his seeing God. (2014, IV.20)

Christian is to exist as a single individual before God, for Kierkegaard. The willing of the good, understood as a kind of single-mindedness, which stands in contrast to the double-mindedness of despair, is primarily concerned with the individual's stance before God.

In the next section, I attempt to draw a comparison with the Kierkegaardian account of the will and Frankfurt's (1988) discussion of freedom and the will. My aim is to give a clearer account of what it is to relate properly to God in the spiritual life and what the task of the life of faith consists in.

### **Wholeheartedness and reintegration: becoming a self before God**

If we are to adopt something like the Kierkegaardian view of sin and faith, it is important that we first clarify the terms involved. For instance, it is not clear what we might mean by 'will' in this context, nor what might it look like to will the good. It will be helpful to look further afield in giving a more specific account of these terms. In the remainder of this chapter I argue that Frankfurt's account of the will can provide a helpful way of thinking about how a person might lack single-mindedness in her will in the way that Kierkegaard describes.<sup>57</sup> This kind of single-minded will for the good comes close to what Frankfurt describes as 'wholeheartedness' (1988, 159). I then consider how we should best understand what it means to have faith if we adopt a Frankfurtian account of the will.

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<sup>57</sup> Although the comparison between Kierkegaard and Frankfurt may seem unusual, there is some existing work comparing and contrasting the common themes in their respective writings. See Rudd and Davenport (eds.) 2015 for a collection of essays on Frankfurt's and Kierkegaard's insights on the topics of love, reason and the will.

First, let us consider Frankfurt's account of the will. Similarly to Anti-Climacus, Frankfurt argues that the human will has an essential role to play in our understanding of personhood.<sup>58</sup> He writes,

[i]t is my view the one essential difference between persons and other creatures is to be found in the structure of a person's will. Human beings are not alone in having desires and motivations, or in making choices. They share these things with the members of certain other species, some of whom appear to engage in deliberation and to make decisions based upon prior thought. It seems to be peculiarly characteristic of humans, however, that they are able to form what I shall call "second order desires."  
(1988, 12)

Note the similarity here with what Anti-Climacus has to say: '[t]he possibility of this sickness [despair] is man's superiority over the animal' (SUD, 15). Or, in other words, the capacity to will, or more precisely, a failure to will, distinguishes human beings from other animals. For Frankfurt, to will is to be able to form certain second-order desires. The difference between first-order and second-order desires, as Frankfurt defines it, is that first-order desires are desires 'to do or not to do one thing or another' (1988, 12), whereas second-order desires are desires which are directed towards first-order desires—that is, a second-order desire is a desire to desire something or other. An example will help to make this clearer. I may have the first-order desire to gorge myself on chocolate every night and I might also have the first order desire not to get too fat. Another kind of desire I might have is the desire not to desire

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<sup>58</sup> I appreciate that 'selfhood' in Anti-Climacus's account and 'personhood' in Frankfurt's discussion might not be equivalent, but, as we will see, there is sufficient similarity in what these two accounts are interested in describing that the application of Frankfurt's account of the will is still a helpful comparison to make.

chocolate so often, or a desire to have a greater desire to lose weight—these are instances of what Frankfurt calls ‘second-order desires’. Now, the will, in Frankfurt’s terminology is simply ‘an *effective* desire—one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action’ (1988, 14; emphasis in the original). Willing differs from intending, for instance, in that ‘even though someone may have a settled intention to do X, he may nonetheless do something else instead of doing X because, despite his intention, his desire to do X proves to be weaker or less effective than some conflicting desire’ (1988, 14). Thus, I may fail to will to desire less chocolate if my second-order desire to desire less chocolate fails to be effective. That is, if I want my desire for self-control to trump my desire for delicious chocolate, and I eat the delicious chocolate, I have failed to will effectively. This kind of second-order desire, in which a person wants a desire to be his will, is what Frankfurt calls a ‘second order volition’ (1988, 16).

For Frankfurt, the ability to have second-order volitions is essential to personhood, and, he argues, it is what distinguishes two kinds of individual: the person and the ‘wanton’ (1988, 18). We can imagine two drug addicts who both have the first-order desire to take a drug, as well as the first-order desire to refrain from taking that drug; their desires are in conflict. However, what distinguishes a person from a wanton is that a person cares about which of his desires wins out—he has the second-order volition that the desire to refrain from using the drug will be effective, even if he is unsuccessful in achieving this. The wanton does not care which of his desires wins out.

This distinction between wantons and persons can help us to think about how a person might be defective in their will without even being aware of it. Remember that for Anti-Climacus, the majority of people live in a state of ignorant despair in which they fail to will to be a self before God without even realising that this is the case. In Frankfurt’s analysis, the wanton fails to be a self, precisely because he lacks the self-awareness or capability to have the second-order volition to change his will. Typically, wantons are non-human animals,

children or cognitively impaired adults, and Frankfurt's analysis is supposed to show how personhood is connected to moral responsibility. Clearly, not everyone who lacks faith is a wanton on Anti-Climacus's account. However, an individual can have second-order volitions and still be in despair on this account. As Frankfurt notes,

It is possible for a human being to be at times, and perhaps even always, indifferent towards his own motives—to take no evaluative attitude toward the desires that incline him to act. If there is a conflict between those desires, he does not care which of them proves to be more effective. In other words, the individual does not participate in the conflict. Therefore, the outcome of the conflict can be neither a victory for him nor a defeat. (1988, 164)

Frankfurt helpfully describes how an individual can be in despair through ignorance: just as the wanton addict fails to be concerned over which of his desires is effective, the person in ignorant despair has a conflict or double-mindedness of will, but lacks the second order volition to do anything about this. If Anti-Climacus is correct, this is the state of most people, that is, there is a kind of conflict of the will which occurs by a failure to will in a certain way, but most people lack the reflectiveness to do anything about this. This also helps us to see why Anti-Climacus thinks that despair is related to self-consciousness—the more aware one is of conflict in one's own will, the more likely one will be to exist in despair through a kind of weakness or defiance. We might wonder how one can stand in relation to God incorrectly, if, for instance, one does not even believe that God exists? Although, as we have seen, this is not sin in the strict sense for Anti-Climacus, it is still a kind of misrelation of the will to God. It is

important to recognise that on this account of sin and faith, every person stands in some relation to God, and each person fails to will the good to varying degrees.<sup>59</sup>

We also have a helpful way of seeing what it looks like to be in despair in a more conscious sense, and to fail to will through weakness or defiance. A person who fails to will the good in this way is simply someone with an ineffective second-order volition, much like the unwilling addict. To despair in weakness is to have an ineffective second-order volition. Despair as a failure of the will, understood in these terms, is merely a failure to have effective second-order volitions. Whilst Anti-Climacus does not define his account of despair in terms of desire, applying these Frankfurtian concepts can help us to give a more precise account of willing before God.

There is also a further helpful similarity between the two accounts, namely, the similarity between what Kierkegaard calls ‘single-mindedness’ and what Frankfurt calls ‘wholeheartedness’ (1988, 165).<sup>60</sup> According to Frankfurt, there may be cases of division or

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<sup>59</sup> Although this may seem to be an overly pessimistic view of the human condition, it is essentially a defence of the claim that all human beings fail to be the best versions of themselves, something which seems true and uncontroversial. Pattison makes a similar assessment of Kierkegaard’s thinking about sin:

To see the truth about human beings “annihilation” is to see that we are, have become, and are persisting in being incapable of being the selves we really it in us to be and which we are made and called by God to be. But this recognition is not solely negative since it can become the hinge on which a renewed God-relationship and therewith a renewed self-relationship can be set in motion (2012, 148)

<sup>60</sup> Rudd makes this comparison between single-mindedness and wholeheartedness (2015, 253). He notes that contrary to Frankfurt’s subjective understanding of wholeheartedness, for Kierkegaard, ‘only the Good can be willed wholeheartedly’ (2015, 254).

incoherence in a person's will, and these cases of division may take different forms. For instance, in the case of someone who wants to stop smoking, but is unable to do so, there is 'a lack of coherence or harmony between the person's higher order volition or preference concerning which of his desires he wants to be most effective and the first order desire that actually is the most effective in moving him when he acts' (1988, 164). A case of conflict in the will which Frankfurt takes to be a case of lacking wholeheartedness, in contrast to the smoking addict, is a case where the conflict is '*within*' (1968, 165), that is, where the conflict is not between a person's desire for some external force and her desire to refrain from succumbing to this external force, but, rather, a conflict between desires at a higher level. For Frankfurt, there can be a hierarchy of desires; some of our desires play a more crucial role than others, and some of our less important desires are subordinate to more important desires. My desire to be a morally good person, for instance, trumps my desires for having as much fun as possible. Thus, when my desire for having fun conflicts with my desire for moral goodness, I desire to have the higher-order volition to will the right action, and not the most fun action. Because of the possibility of having hierarchy and structure in our desires, it is possible to lack what Frankfurt calls 'wholeheartedness' (Kierkegaard's term 'double-mindedness' looks just as appropriate here) when our internal desires conflict in some way. In such a case, Frankfurt remarks,

[i]t is not a matter of volitional strength but of whether the highest-order preferences concerning some volitional issue are *wholehearted*. It has to do with the possibility that there is no unequivocal answer to the question of what the person really wants, even though his desires do form a complex and extensive hierarchical structure. There might be no unequivocal answer, because the person is *ambivalent* with respect to the object he comes closest to really wanting: In other words, because with respect to that object, he is drawn not only toward it but away from it too. Or there might be no

unequivocal answer because the person's preferences concerning what he wants are not fully integrated, so that there is some *inconsistency* or *conflict* (perhaps not yet manifest) among them. (1988, 165)

In order for there to be wholeheartedness, there has to be some integration of my desires — there has to be a coherent hierarchy of volitions to ensure that the will lacks inconsistency. Here is where the application to the Kierkegaardian view of Christian faith is apt. For Kierkegaard, the possibility of having Christian faith is the possibility of being wholehearted as a self, that is, it is the possibility of properly willing to be a self by relating properly to oneself and to the other. Let us spell this out in more detail.

Kierkegaard describes despair as a kind of 'double-mindedness' — this implies that despair involves a kind of internal conflict, but it is less clear what this conflict of will amounts to. As I have already discussed, this cannot mean that in order for a person to will the good she must only have one desire. Willing the good has to inform all of a person's choices and desires in some way. It looks like we can understand the kind of conflict in double-mindedness and the lack of conflict in single-mindedness by employing a hierarchical account of desire *à la* Frankfurt. On this reading, by 'only willing the good', we can see Kierkegaard as meaning 'willing to will the good'. This higher-order volition to will to will the good is able to unify all other desires in a kind of single-mindedness or wholeheartedness. Hence, by willing only the good, one is able to will all things in reference to the good.

But what is the cause of the conflict in a person's desire, for Kierkegaard? As both Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus describe it, human beings are unable to be content until they 'rest transparently in God' (SUD, 30) and 'will only the good' (UDVS, 24). So in order to make sense of this account in Frankfurtian terms, we must say that all human beings have an inherent first-order desire for the good which will always conflict with one's other desires until one becomes wholehearted. This desire for the good looks like it can be understood in



reference to what Anti-Climacus writes about resting in God. Rudd describes something similar in discussing the kind of inherent knowledge of God which Kierkegaard thinks human beings have. He writes,

Kierkegaard's real claim is, I think, in line with Augustine and a long tradition in Christian theology. Firstly, we do have a deep inward knowledge of God (who is True and the Good) but, secondly, we have for the most part a very limited and inadequate awareness of that knowledge that we possess; and, thirdly, that this is not because of some accidental forgetfulness that we have suffered from, but is because we are inclined to repress and turn away from that knowledge. (2015, 251)

Although Rudd describes the human awareness of God in terms of knowledge here, it seems fitting to think that the same applies to our desires. If one can only be content by resting transparently in God, then one way of making sense of this is that resting transparently in God satisfies a certain desire, even if one was unaware of this desire. It is only when one is able to have an effective higher-order volition to will the good that a person's desires become structured in such a way that there is no conflict and when one can be said to be wholehearted or single-minded.

However, the application of Frankfurt's account of wholeheartedness might not explain entirely what it is to relate properly to God. Whilst Frankfurt's account of the will is helpful in giving a clearer account of the relation between despair and selfhood, it is not without its problems. Bruce Waller, for instance, has argued that Frankfurt's account of the will is not a very plausible one since it cannot explain away some important counter-examples. He cites the following case to show his point:

Eve is a strong, independent young woman. She longs for an education and career of her own. Unfortunately, she has been born into a strict, religious community. In that

community, women are expected to be meek and compliant, to accept male authority, to remain uneducated, and maintain a subservient societal role. Eve rejects those values and “insists that she be respected as fully equal to anyone else”. But after years of “failure, condemnation, and psychological and physical abuse”, she breaks down. She starts to accept the subservient role. She becomes a willing convert. (2011, 61)

The problem with this case, and many others like it, is that it looks a good example of what Frankfurt calls ‘wholeheartedness’: Eve’s higher-order desires are no longer in conflict once she submits to the authority of her community. However, we should be reluctant to say that Eve’s will is free, according to Waller and, so Frankfurt’s analysis of freedom as a wholeheartedness of higher-order desires is inadequate. As Susan Wolf (2003) notes, on Frankfurt’s account, someone who was brought up in a particular environment could well develop a wholehearted higher-order desire for cruelty, and still be entirely free (2003, 379-81). The problem stems from the fact that Frankfurt’s notion of wholeheartedness is a structural property of the will; as long as one’s higher-order desires are ordered in an appropriate way, then there will be no conflict and a person will be free. What Waller puts pressure on is that there are clearly cases in which a person’s higher-order desires lack conflict, but which look problematic as cases of a will’s being free.

However, there is an important difference between the account of wholeheartedness we find in Kierkegaard, and the one that Frankfurt defends. These differences mean that a Kierkegaardian account avoids the problems we find with Frankfurt’s account. For Frankfurt, on the one hand, there is no one objective good which allows for wholeheartedness in a person; wholeheartedness is a structural property of one’s desires and there is no single good which allows for the integration of desires. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, we have seen

that there is a single objective good which underpins single-mindedness—<sup>61</sup>single-mindedness is the condition of willing ‘the good’.<sup>62</sup> Whilst Frankfurt can give no reason why Eve lacks wholeheartedness, and hence freedom of will, for Kierkegaard, until a person’s will is single-minded in willing the good, she is in despair. The difference being, that for Kierkegaard, there is something objectively wrong about the case with Eve; she lacks the wholehearted desire for the good and hence, her will is not free.

In contrast to the Frankfurtian account of the will, as Rudd argues,

[o]n the [...] Kierkegaardian view [...] I need to appeal to standards outside of me—to the True and the Good—and if I find I am averse to them, then this is not something

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<sup>61</sup> Note that the use of ‘objective’ here is different to how it is used in the discussion of objective truth in Chapter 1. In Chapter 1, the objective/subjective distinction was used to distinguishing knowledge which involves knowing a subject and knowledge which does not. Here, by ‘objective good’, I mean that the good for a person is not determined by that person’s preferences in any way, that is, ‘good’ is not relativized to a person. The good for every person is to know and desire God. This might be further confused since this objective good involves reference to a subject, however, the intention is to distinguish Kierkegaard’s account of wholeheartedness, in which there is a single and universal good for a person, from Frankfurt’s, in which there is no such good.

<sup>62</sup> Alasdair McIntyre (2001) connects Kierkegaard’s discussion of the good to a Kantian notion of goodness. Pattison is in agreement that there is something Kantian about Kierkegaard’s use of the good in the Occasional Discourse. He writes that

[t]he Kantian ambience of Kierkegaard’s argument can be indicated by reference to Kant’s comment on the categorical imperative that, as opposed to the hypothetical imperative [...] “there is one imperative that, without being based upon and having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by certain conduct, commands this conduct immediately. (2005, 100)

to be accepted, but to be struggled against. If there is a genuinely authoritative standard, then choices made with reference to that standard are not arbitrary. This can I think, help us to see the force of Kierkegaard's claim that it is only through being orientated to God that the self is able to hold together the elements of transcendence and immanence in creative tension, and that the loss of that orientation necessarily results in the internal conflict, or self-mutilation that Kierkegaard calls "despair" or "sin". At any rate, we can see why it seems plausible to claim that the self needs an orientation to the Good to prevent it from despairing in this sense. (2015, 258-59)

Whilst Frankfurt's account can help us to see how self-consciousness is related to personhood, there is no objective account goodness which can explain how the will should be orientated.<sup>63</sup> A Kierkegaardian account is clearly in conflict with Frankfurt, and Rudd even suggests that Frankfurt's notion of wholeheartedness would result in a kind of despair on Anti-Climacus's account (2015, 259).

So, in order to have a single-mindedness of the will, we must invoke an objective account of goodness. The consequence of this is that it is only by submitting to the will of God that a person can be truly free. The ultimate good for human beings, as we have seen Anti-Climacus repeatedly emphasise, is to 'rest transparently in God' (SUD, 30), or to draw near to God (UDVS). One way of interpreting this claim is to say that the highest good for a person is to rest transparently in God in this way, or, to put it another way, to be in union with God. In order for there to be single-mindedness of the will, then, the higher-desire for union with God must prevail above all other desires, and other desires must be informed by the

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<sup>63</sup> This response is similar to Susan Wolf's (1993) solution to the problem. Wolf cashes her talk of 'the good' out in terms of rationality, however. The account I offer describes the good in relation to God.

desire for the good.<sup>64</sup> It is not the case, though, that desiring union with God is more important than desiring success or a happy family, for instance, but, rather, as Rudd puts this point, ‘our sense of the Good serves as the standard by which we form higher-order volitions and thus evaluate and order our particular desires; it doesn’t do away with those desires’ (2015, 255).

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<sup>64</sup> This account of the good comes close to how Stump expands Frankfurt’s account of the will in arguing for a Thomistic account of the good. As Stump discusses in her application of Frankfurt’s account of the will, what is lacking from a person with internal fragmentation is a higher-order desire around which all of her other desires can be integrated. For Stump, the desire which meets this criterion is the desire to be in a union of love with God (2010, 109). Stump’s discussion of the will and the *ordo salutis* are developed from her reading of Thomas Aquinas. See Stump 2003, 61-91 for a discussion of Aquinas’s account of goodness, and her 2003, 278-306 for an account of Aquinas on the will. Stump carefully draws out where Aquinas is developing Aristotelean ideas in his discussion of goodness and the will. I will avoid the discussion of the historical aspect of Stump’s work by considering her thesis apart from its Thomistic influences. Another interesting but peripheral issue here, is the relation between Aquinas and Kierkegaard. There are some clear parallels between Aquinas’s and Kierkegaard’s model of the will in relation to God. Kierkegaard even uses what might appear to be a reference to Aquinas in discussing the importance of ‘willing the good’. However, although Kierkegaard would surely be aware of Aquinas’s work (he directly refers to Aquinas in a couple of journal entries), Kierkegaard never writes about Aquinas’s ideas in any detail. Thus, it is not even obvious whether Kierkegaard talk of ‘the good’ is taken from Aquinas, or whether it is a development of the Ancient Greek discussions of the good in Plato and Aristotle (source material which both Aquinas and Kierkegaard draw heavily from) or whether Kierkegaard is using a more Kantian notion of ‘the good’. Jack Mulder, Jr. (2010) discusses some of the parallels between Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition. The chapter comparing Kierkegaard’s views of hell with those views in the Catholic tradition (2010, 153-77) explores Kierkegaard’s and Thomas’s account of the will. Again, this is not an issue which I will explore in any detail.

## **Faith, wholeheartedness and the *ordo salutis***

This account of wholeheartedness can help us to see how Christian faith and sin are related to the will in more precise terms. The result of human sin is that human beings lack the resources to come into union with God, since their desires are not aimed at the good. They fail to will to be a self since they lack the higher-order desire which can fully integrate their will.

We can now see how this account of the will is related to the process of faith, which, as I have described it, has both a beginning and a completion. We can put these stages of faith in more theologically explicit terms to tease out the account in more detail. By looking at the stages in the *ordo salutis*, we can see how the problem of sin is overcome by the life of Christian faith. Typically, a theological account of salvation will consist in an explanation of justification—the beginning of faith and reception of God’s grace, sanctification—the process of repairing the damage of sin in this life, and deification—the completion of faith at the beatific vision when a human being is perfected and brought into union with God.

So, to put the discussion in Kierkegaardian terms, the process of faith, which seeks to integrate the human will around the desire for union with God, begins with the process of justification. What is needed is some kind of revelation or gift from God—in Anti-Climacus’s account, the individual receives a revelation that she is in despair. We might think, borrowing from Stump’s analysis of justification, that this revelation can be understood in terms of a person receiving a higher-order desire for union with God as a gift of grace (2010, 163). It is the awakening that occurs when a human self receives the higher-order desire to will to will the good, which explains why only the Christian can truly understand the sickness unto death. It is only by God’s gift of grace that human beings are able to realise their misrelation to God.

However, the process does not end with justification, or with the realisation that one is in despair. The second stage in this process of transformation is sanctification. Sanctification of human beings requires the re-orientation and integration of our desires in accord with the

higher-order desire for union with God.<sup>65</sup> As Stump writes, sanctification is the ‘process in which God cooperates with a human person’s higher-order desires’ a process which will ‘eventually culminate in a state of complete moral goodness’ (2010, 160). Sanctification is then the process in which God help a person to integrate her higher-order desire for union with God with her first-order desires. However, as I have assumed, sanctification is never completed in this life; union with God is not possible before death. As Anti-Climacus describes it, ‘to be cured of this sickness is the Christian’s blessedness’ (SUD, 15).

This account of the *ordo salutis* in relation to the Kierkegaardian account of sin and the will, can have inform our understanding of the spiritual life. The task of the Christian spiritual life, as it is presented here, is one of orientating our will around the good. If the human self is defined relationally, as Anti-Climacus defines it, then the reintegration of our desires around the higher-order desire to will to will the good is the antidote to despair and what Anti-Climacus terms the movement of ‘faith’. The reason that this reading is helpful is that it shows why Christian faith overcomes both forms of despair which Anti-Climacus talks about. Remember, despair is both ‘not to will to be oneself’ and ‘to will to be oneself’ (SUD, 13). That is, despair is a misrelation both to oneself and to God. The Frankfurtian account of internal integration helps us to make sense of these two kinds of despair—by receiving the will to desire the good, our will eventually becomes less fragmented, since all of our higher-order and lower-order desires are eventually integrated around this higher-order desire (once the task of sanctification is completed). The result of this is not only that we relate to ourselves as a self, but, in so doing, we are able to relate to the other, both to other persons, and, crucially, to God and, after death, to enter into a perfected ‘God-relationship’.

And finally, the process of salvation ends after a person’s death in the restoration of the human will in the process of deification. As Kierkegaard describes it, God provides ‘both the beginning and the completing’ (UDVS, 7) of Christian faith. In providing the beginning of

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<sup>65</sup> The importance of sanctification and the imitation of Christ will be discussed at length in Chapter 6.

Christian faith, God provides for our justification. In providing for our deification, God provides for the completing of Christian faith, when, having completed the process of sanctification, we will be made like him in being made like Christ, who is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1:15). As John the Evangelist writes, ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2).

## **Conclusion**

The account of faith that I have outlined in this chapter, as standing in a right relation to God, provides a foundation for the ideas which the rest of this account of the spiritual life explores. We have seen that we can understand faith and sin in relation to the will; I defined sin as a kind of despair in which a person exists in a willed distance from God. Faith somehow provides the antidote to a person’s despair. By using Frankfurt’s analysis of wholeheartedness, we have seen a way of understanding what it is to be in despair by being conflicted in one’s will. We have also seen how faith provides the solution to this problem; in receiving the higher-order desire to will to will the good, a person can integrate her desires around the good, and, eventually, come into union with God after death. In the rest of the thesis, what I seek to give answer to is what is involved in this process of reintegration, sanctification or, coming out of despair. The beginning of faith is the moment of conversion or justification, in which the individual is given the higher-order desire to will the good. The task of the spiritual life is to reintegrate the self around this good.



## Chapter 3

### Incarnation and divine-human union: Mutual empathy in the God-Relationship

Lord Jesus Christ, whether we are far away or nearby, far away from you in the confused human throng, in worldly busyness, in earthly cares, in temporal joy, in purely human loftiness, or far away from all this in solitude, in forsakenness, in unappreciation, in lowliness—and closer to you: draw us, draw us wholly to yourself  
(PC, 259)

#### Introduction

As I discussed at the end of Chapter 1, the spiritual life is a life of coming to know God personally. A minimal condition for knowing God personally is that one has a second-person experience of him. However, whilst having this kind of experience is necessary, it is not sufficient. I have second-person experiences and shared-attention experiences with people every day that I do not know. In buying a loaf of bread, or a cup of coffee, we engage interpersonally with shop assistants and baristas every day. We have moments of shared-attention with complete strangers on busy buses, in crowded lecture theatres and on street corners. Surely, if we want to define the prime good for a human being in terms of their union and relationship to God (as I discussed in the previous chapter), then the level of intimacy involved in this union ought to surpass the relationship we have with countless people we know nothing about and are likely to never see again.

However, we have also seen, in Chapter 2, that the problem of sin means that a person cannot will to come into union with God because of her sin and despair. And so, it looks problematic that the Christian spiritual life is explained in terms of having a relationship with God. The problem is this: a person, even one who has received the higher-order desire for

union with God, lacks the single-mindedness of will to will the good and so to be union with God. As Kierkegaard reminds us, a person must constantly engage in the act of confession in realigning the will towards the good. Whilst there can be progress in this process of realignment of the will; there cannot be completion of the process of sanctification until after a person's death, something I assume for the purposes of this project, and so there cannot be union with God in this life. We can expand on this assumption in the following way. In contrast to human beings, God is an all-powerful being, and whilst he desires to be in a union of love with human beings, he cannot force that union for this would be a union of coercion rather than a union of love. Since human beings are in a state of sin and despair, they cannot will this union with God in this life, even though it is their highest good, and so, because God cannot, on his own, create this union between himself and human beings, a union of love between God and human beings is impossible in this life.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> This seems to be a theme throughout Scripture, too; God seeks after human beings and offers them the resources for reconciliation and redemption, but human beings repeatedly will distance from God. The lament in the book of Hosea is a good example of the faithfulness of God and Israel's repeated rejection of God. This theme is also reflected in Eucharistic Prayer F in Order One of *Common Worship*,

You fashioned us in your image  
and placed us in the garden of your delight.  
Though we chose the path of rebellion  
you would not abandon your own.

Again and again you drew us into your covenant of grace.  
You gave your people the law and taught us by your prophets  
to look for your reign of justice, mercy and peace.

Now, if human beings cannot be in union with God in this life, what kind of relationship *can* they have with God in this life? In this chapter, I seek to answer this question. But I do it indirectly. In order to solve the problem of how we can be in relationship with God in this life, even though we are in a state of sin and despair, I will first solve the problem of how God, an incorporeal being, can relate to us, corporeal beings. The solution to this latter problem will provide the key for solving the former problem, namely, the Incarnation; it is the lynchpin which allows for the possibility of the God-human relationship, that is, both for the possibility of sinful human beings being in relationship with a perfectly good God and for the possibility of an incorporeal God being in a relationship with corporeal human beings. To argue for this, I will draw on Johannes Climacus's account of what it is for two persons to be in a union of love in *Philosophical Fragments*. On his account, a union of love requires mutual empathy, which, in turn, requires a kind of equality between the two persons. When applied to how God can have a union of love with human beings, this then requires God to become incarnate, for only an incarnate God can have the mutual empathy with human beings required by a union of love on Climacus's account. But then if God is incarnate, then this allows for human beings to have a relationship with God, even a perfectly good God, in this life, despite their sin. For human beings, even sinful human beings, can enter into union with Christ, since as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, '[W]e do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4.15)

### **Empathy and divine-human union**

One of the key questions which Climacus considers in *Philosophical Fragments* is the question of how union might be possible between a human being in a position of sin and ignorance, and a

God who is perfect. Although God seeks a union of love with human beings, there is something about the human predicament which prevents union from occurring.<sup>67</sup>

The love, then, must be for the learner, and the goal must be to win him, for only in love is the different made equal, and only in equality or in unity is there understanding. Without perfect understanding, the teacher is not the god, unless the basic reason is to be sought in the learner, who rejected what was made possible for him.

Yet this love is basically unhappy, for they are very unequal, and what seems so easy—namely, that the god must be able to make himself understood—is not so easy if he is not to destroy that which is different. [...] The unhappiness is the result not of the lovers' not being able to have each other but of their being unable to understand each other. (PF, 25)

The kind of 'understanding' which prevents love from occurring is clearly not best interpreted as a kind of intellectual understanding in which both parties understand information about the other. Understanding facts about someone is not sufficient for building a relationship with them; I made a case for this claim in Chapter 1. One way of interpreting Climacus's concern for the importance of mutual understanding in a relationship of love, then, is in terms of empathy. Although it is contested just what empathy is and how it occurs, at a very basic level, empathy is a kind of understanding of another person's emotional and mental states. As Peter

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<sup>67</sup> The reader need not worry overly about the terminology used by Climacus here. The terms 'teacher' and 'learner' hark back to the previous chapter in *Fragments* in which Climacus considers whether truth can be discovered Socratically, that is, whether truth can be drawn out of a learner by a skilled teacher such as Socrates. The alternative picture Climacus pretends to 'invent' is a scenario in which a learner lacks both the truth and the condition for understanding for truth and hence requires a divine teacher who can provide her with the condition for knowing the truth as well as the truth itself.

Goldie and Amy Coplan describe it, empathy is important because it allows us to ‘gain a grasp of the content of other people’s minds’ (2011, ix). This kind of emotional understanding is key to forming relationships and the ability to grasp one another’s thoughts, feelings and emotional states makes possible relationships of love. Without mutual empathy, it is difficult to see how two persons could be united in love. And, so, empathy seems to be a good interpretation of the kind understanding Climacus is describing.

Alvin Goldman (2011) argues that there are two distinct kinds of, or ‘routes to’, empathy: ‘the mirroring route and the reconstructive route’ (2011, 44).<sup>68</sup> These are not competing hypotheses of what it is to empathise with another person, according to Goldman, but, rather, two different kinds of experience which allow a person to share in the emotional states of others.<sup>69</sup> The ‘mirror route’ (2011, 44) is a kind of empathy via perception in which an individual sees the emotional states of others in an immediate and non-inferential way. For instance, one can see that another person is angry without having to infer from certain social cues and facial expressions that this is the case.<sup>70</sup> This non-inferential experience, which is often described as a kind of ‘mindreading’ has been discussed in detail with reference to the recent neuroscientific discovery of ‘mirror neurons’, that is, neurons in the brain which fire both (i) when I am in a certain mental state and (ii) when I see another person in that same mental state, thus allowing for a kind of ‘mirroring’ experience in which I directly perceive the

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<sup>68</sup> Karsten Steuber (2006) makes a similar distinction between ‘basic’ and ‘re-enactive’ empathy (2006, 131).

<sup>69</sup> Whereas much of the literature on empathy attempts to defend one of these routes to empathy, Goldman attempts to unify two distinct accounts of empathy in this discussion. It seems plausible that both routes to empathy are possible, and I will resist coming down on either side here as to do so would take us far beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>70</sup> See McNeill 2012b, for a defence of this position.

mental states of others.<sup>71</sup> The route to empathy which Goldman labels ‘mirror empathy’, I will call ‘perceptual empathy’ here.<sup>72</sup> The reason for this is that the role of the mirror-neuron system in empathetic experiences is disputed in the current philosophical and psychological literature.<sup>73</sup> However, the fact that human beings appear to be able to perceive emotional states in others in a direct and immediate way seems to be true regardless of the specific psychological mechanisms which make this experience possible, and so I will refrain from committing myself to unnecessary scientific hypotheses here.

Reconstructive empathy, as Goldman describes it, occurs when we try and put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, by reflecting on their position in a process which requires effort and intention (2011, 36).<sup>74</sup> For instance, I can empathise with someone by imagining what it would be like to have had a certain experience without having to experience their emotional states directly. The main difference between a kind of perceptual empathetic experience and a reconstructive empathetic experience is that the first is an automatic process, and the second is an effortful process requiring imagination and thought (2011, 44).

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<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed discussion of mirror neurons and their relation to empathy, see Gallese 2005, 2003, 2001 and Goldman 2011.

<sup>72</sup> I borrow the description of ‘perceptual empathy’ from Green (2016, 3).

<sup>73</sup> There is some disagreement about the role of mirror neurons in knowing the intentions or beliefs of others, for instance, see Borg 2013 and Hickok 2014.

<sup>74</sup> According to a ‘theory theory’ account of empathy, for instance, we understand another’s mental states in virtue of our theory of mind and infer certain mental states from certain behavioural traits. For example, when we see someone performing a certain action, we apply our maxim (perhaps tacitly) that ‘when  $x$  performs action  $y$ , they are in mental state  $z$ , and then we come to believe certain things about  $x$ ’s mental states. This can be contrasted with a ‘simulation theory’ of empathy which categorises empathy as aiming to simulate the minds of others by imagining ourselves from their perspective. According to the simulation theory, I do not need to employ any theory to discover your mental states; I only need to imagine myself in the particular circumstance that you are in.

So, how does this discussion of the two routes to empathy help us to understand the nature of the God-relationship? There have been some recent attempts to apply some of the observations on the nature of empathy to our understanding of how God might relate to others empathetically which can help to inform my account of the spiritual life. In particular, Linda Zagzebski (2008, 2013) has argued that by a kind of reconstructive empathy, God can know what it is like to be any conscious being and thereby make possible some kind of union with them, she calls this the attribute of ‘omnisubjectivity’ (2008, 231). Stump (2013) has also argued that God’s empathy can explain the nature of divine-human union, but, contrary to Zagzebski, she explains this by an application of the perceptual route to empathy. Following this, I consider whether Stump’s proposal fares any better as an explanation of what it is to relate to God in this life.

### **Reconstructive empathy and ‘omnisubjectivity’**

Put simply, omnisubjectivity is ‘the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness the first-person perspective of every conscious being’ (2008, 231). It is entailed, Zagzebski claims, by the attribute of omniscience (2013, 31-33): if God knows everything there is to know, he not only knows *that* I enjoy eating KitKat Chunkies, for example, but also he knows what it is like for me to experience the taste of a KitKat Chunky. As Zagzebski defines it, subjectivity ‘is the feature of consciousness that allows us to say there is such a thing as *what it is like* to have a conscious experience of a certain kind’ (2013, 10; emphasis in the original). It is commonly held, she argues, that no one knows exactly what it is like for me to have the experiences of the world I have. Thus, there is a certain kind of knowledge such that ‘a person must have been in a conscious state of a certain kind in order to know what it is like to be in such a state’ (2013, 13). According to Zagzebski, this kind of subjective knowledge of ‘what X is like’ or ‘what it is like to X’ is not reducible to propositional knowledge.

This raises a problem for our understanding of God, Zagzebski thinks. Any traditional Christian account of God maintains that God is omniscient and God's omniscience entails that he has maximal propositional knowledge (and this includes facts about human mental states). However, it looks like there is more to know about his creatures than merely propositional knowledge, in particular, there is also a kind of non-propositional subjective knowledge of what it is like to have the kind of mental states conscious persons have.

Thus, Zagzebski argues that God's omniscience entails the attribute of omnisubjectivity. That is, not only does God have maximal propositional knowledge, but also he knows what it is like to be each one of his creatures. In order to explain how omnisubjectivity is possible, Zagzebski applies a reconstructive account of empathy to show how God might gain knowledge of a person's subjective experiences. The account of empathy she discusses comprises of the following five claims:

- (i) Empathy is a way of acquiring an emotion like that of another person. (2008, 238)
- (ii) *A* thinks that the fact that *B* has a given emotion is a reason for her to have the same emotion. (2008, 238)
- (iii) When *A* empathizes with *B*, *A* takes on the perspective of *B* (2008, 239)
- (iv) When *A* empathizes with *B*, *A* is motivated from *A*'s own perspective to assume the perspective of *B*. (2008, 239)
- (v) An empathetic emotion is consciously representational. The empathizer does not adopt the intentional object of the emotion she represents as her own intentional object. (2008, 240)

Drawing on this account of empathy, Zagzebski proposes that a kind of 'total perfect empathy with all conscious beings who have ever lived or ever will live [...] is the property [...] omniscience' (2013, 29). In order to know what it is like to be in a certain emotional state,



God employs the same kind of reconstructive imaginative process that we might go through in wondering what it is like to have lost a loved one, or to be in a situation of immense suffering, for instance. However, whilst our imaginative capacities might be limited, since God is omniscient, he is able to empathize perfectly with every conscious individual in this way. And so, God knows not only every non-phenomenal fact, for example, that  $2+2=4$ , but also every phenomenal fact, for example, what it is like to see a red tomato.

Zagzebski's account of omnisubjectivity describes a God who has 'total, unmediated intellectual comprehension of us' (2013, 51). According to Zagzebski, if God is not only omnisubjective, but also omnipresent, then God has the power to 'enter into the consciousness of a human' (2013, 34), resulting in a kind of divine-human union in which we can feel 'understood, accepted, sustained, and loved' by God (2013, 52). Hence, for Zagzebski, understanding God's empathy for human beings is key for understanding how human beings could be in union with God.

### **Perceptual empathy and omnipresence**

Let us consider another way in which God might empathise with us. Stump's account of union relies on her understanding of presence. For Stump, being close to a person can be expressed in terms of the kind of mutual presence which they enjoy. As she notes

[m]utual personal presence manifestly comes in degrees. There is the minimal kind that can arise when one catches the eye of a total stranger on a bus. At the other end of the scale, there is the kind of intense personal presence possible between those united through mutual love. In mind-reading, one person somehow has within himself something of the mind of another. In mutual love between persons, there can be something stronger than such an asymmetrical relation; there can be a mutual 'in-

ness' between the persons united in love, in a way that yields powerful personal presence. (2013, 64)

In order to explain the notion that God is omnipresent, Stump employs a version of the mirror-neuron account of empathy. According to Stump, this can explain how an individual and God can be united in love by powerful personal presence.

Let us consider the account of presence she outlines. First, she notes that there can be cases in which a human individual is present at a time and in a space, but there is an absence of personal presence, for example: 'She read the paper all through dinner and was never present to any of the rest of us' (2013, 64). What is lacking in this case is a kind of 'second-personal psychological connection' (2013, 64), according to Stump. This connection is what is required to have a personal presence '*with* or presence *to* another person' (2013, 64; emphasis in the original). Secondly, in order to have a mutual personal presence, the individuals involved must experience what Stump describes as a kind of 'shared or joint attention' (2013, 69).<sup>75</sup> Joint-attention is the kind of experience in which there is a mutual awareness of one another as well as awareness of each other's awareness (2013, 69).<sup>76</sup> According to Stump, to be present does not require individuals to actually share-attention, but merely the '*availability of joint attention*' (2013, 70; emphasis in the original). When we say that Paula is present in the room, we mean that she is available to share attention with us.

Thirdly, in addition to this minimal kind of personal presence, a richer kind of presence is possible between humans, Stump thinks (2013, 71). This she describes a kind of 'mind-reading' or 'empathy' (2013, 71) in which one individual can know the intentions or

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<sup>75</sup> For a more detailed account of joint attention, see Elian, Hoerl, McCormack and Roessler (eds.), 2005.

<sup>76</sup> The importance of joint-attention for our understanding of the spiritual life will be revisited in Part 2.

emotions of another in an immediate way. It is this kind of empathy which Stump takes to be essential for closeness and, hence, union between persons. Stump argues that the mirror-neuron system makes mind-reading possible since it has been observed that there exist certain neurons in the brain which ‘fire both when one does some action oneself *and also* when one sees that same action or emotion in someone else’ (2013, 73). Thus, for example, when Paula witnesses Jerome cutting himself with a knife, ‘Paula’s mirror neuron system produces in Paula an affective state that has at least some of the characteristics of the pain Jerome is experiencing’ (2013, 73). Whilst Paula does not actually experience the physical pain which Jerome feels, she does experience some kind of feeling of pain, according to Stump. This can be extended to cases in which, for example, Paula experiences Jerome’s intentions or feelings through a kind of mind-reading, according to Stump (2013, 75). In human mind-reading, she argues, human beings are able to read intentions or thoughts in an immediate way and the mirror-neuron system enables a kind of ‘intermingling of minds’ to be possible (2013, 75). The most intimate kind of presence, according to Stump, occurs when two persons are ‘united in love’ (2013, 75). This occurs when two individuals ‘are mutually mind-reading each other in intense shared attention’ (2013, 75). This intimate kind of second-personal presence is how we ought to understand the orthodox Christian views of omnipresence, Stump claims (2013, 76). For God to be present to a person is for God to be available to share-attention with a person. For God to be in a relationship of love with a person is for there to be mutual personal-presence and mindreading between God and that person on Stump’s account.

### **The king and the maiden**

We can see how effective these accounts of divine-human empathy are by considering how Climacus goes on to solve the problem of divine-human union. In response to the problem that is raised, of how there can be understanding between persons who are not equal in status or kind, Climacus proposes a story (or a ‘poetical venture’ (PF, 26) as he describes it) to

explain how this gap of understanding might be closed. He tells the story of a powerful king who falls in love with a poor maiden. The king considers whether the maiden could be forced into marrying him; however, the king fears, if this occurred, then the maiden would be happier to remain in poverty, loved by an equal rather than being forced to change her entire life (PF, 26-27). The problem, as Climacus describes it, is that even if the girl agreed to the relationship, because of the vast difference between them, mutual understanding would be impossible (PF, 27-28). Climacus maintains that the king's predicament raises a similar problem for his account of faith: the learner is in untruth yet he is the 'object of the god's love' (PF, 28). How can the learner in his state of untruth and a God who is perfect ever expect to understand, and so be in union with, one another? If there is an insurmountable epistemic distance between a king and a maiden, the difference between God and humanity must be vast. Thus, Climacus takes upon himself the 'poet's task' (PF, 28) of finding a solution to this problem.

First, he considers whether union can be brought about by a kind of 'ascent' (PF, 29) in which 'god would then draw up the learner toward himself, exalt him, divert him with joy lasting a thousand years' (PF, 29). Likewise, the king might appear before the maiden, revealing his love for her and presenting his own status and wealth in order to win her. The problem for this kind of ascent is that, although it might have resulted in the girl's happiness, it could never make the king happy, since 'he did not want his own glorification but the girl's, and his sorrow would be very grievous because she would not understand him' (PF, 29).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> My discussion focuses entirely on the importance of understanding and empathy, here. But there is also clearly an important claim about the freedom of the will in Climacus's story. The maiden cannot choose the king freely because the union is forced upon her. But crucially, the reason why she cannot choose him freely is because she cannot understand him.

Analogously for God, any revelation through a kind of ascent would remove the possibility of union (PF, 30).<sup>78</sup>

Since union by ascent fails as a solution, Climacus considers whether union can be brought about by a kind of ‘descent’. This solution looks more promising. According to Climacus, to win the heart of the maiden, the king must descend to her level, present himself as a peasant and hope that the maiden will love him freely. In doing so, the king can facilitate a union between equals. For Climacus, the same applies to God; in taking on the ‘form of a servant’ (PF. 31), God descends to the level of the learner in order to make understanding possible.<sup>79</sup>

On Climacus’s picture of faith in *Fragments*, Christ’s Incarnation is presented as a solution to the problem of union between unequal persons and is the only way to bridge the gap between a learner in the state of *untruth* and a perfect God motivated by love. On this account, God’s descent to human form enables a kind of mutual understanding between God and the learner so that faith can occur. However, this is not a kind of deception, as with the king, since God does not merely imitate a servant to force a union with humanity; rather, he actually takes on human form. The story of the king and the maiden provides us with a

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<sup>78</sup> As I will go on to argue, the problem with ascent seems to be similar to the problem with Zagzebski’s account as an explanation of divine-human union. Whilst the king understands the maiden fully, on Zagzebski’s picture, the king is not an equal to be loved by the maiden and she cannot love him since she lacks the ability to truly understand him. Whilst Zagzebski can explain how God can empathise with human beings, she cannot account for the reciprocity of this relationship.

<sup>79</sup> This solution clearly echoes Paul, the Apostle’s, description of Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (2 Philippians 2:6-8)

parallel which gives us an insight into Climacus's perspective on the relationship between God and humanity and helps us to see how central the Incarnation is to his account of faith.

However, although this parable provides us with the starting point for thinking about God's relationship to humanity, it is not altogether clear just how the Incarnation makes possible the kind of union between God and humanity which occurs between the king and the maiden in Climacus's parable. In the next section, I consider how the Incarnation helps to allow for empathy between a person and God.

### **Incarnation and empathy**

One of the key problems with Stump's account of empathy is that there are some important differences between God and an ordinary human individual. Whilst God can know *that* Jerome intends to hit Paula (since he is omniscient), having a mirroring experience of Jerome seems to be excluded for God, since, as Stump describes the problem, '[a]n immaterial God cannot form an intention to move his arm to hit [...] because he has no arm to move' (2013, 77). Since there is such a difference between a human and divine mind, God cannot empathize with human beings in the way that mirror-neuron system allows. We might be tempted to conclude that 'the sharing and the presence that is the hallmark of the knowledge of persons is ruled out for God' (Stump, 2013, 77).

However, for Stump, the Incarnation provides the solution to the question of how God could empathise in a perceptual way. She argues that the Chalcedonian formula for the Incarnate Christ allows us to see how a perceptual kind of empathy might occur. According to Stump, since God has both a human nature and a divine nature, Christ's human mind enables God to mind-read human persons in a human way (2013, 77-78). Furthermore, because of Christ's two natures, she thinks, not only does God have the ability to mind-read and share attention as any other human might, but also, because of his divine mind, Christ can mind read 'miraculously, in a way that human persons otherwise could not do' (2013, 78). Stump

thinks that by focusing on the incarnation, we can give a coherent account divine-human union; since God has access to a human mind, God's knowledge of persons is achieved through the kind of empathy or mind-reading which she previously describes between two human beings.<sup>80</sup>

Whilst this proposal has potential to explain what the Incarnation allows God to know, we might think that Stump's account of divine empathy appears to be too restrictive since it depends on a kind of human mind-reading experience. Firstly, for instance, Stump's account of mind-reading is drawn largely from research which focuses on the cognitive impairments of autistic children. As Stump notes, autistic children lack the ability to mind-read or empathize in the same way as non-autistic children (2013, 71-72). The problem that arises from this is that if union with God depends on mind-reading, then autistic individuals appear to be excluded from this union. Furthermore, since union depends, at least in part, on Christ's human ability to mind-read, we might wonder if God can empathize with animals being tortured and, to take the objection to its extreme, we might worry that Christ's psychological makeup determines who God can empathize with.<sup>81</sup> For instance, as an introverted British

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<sup>80</sup> Hud Hudson (2014, 136-60) discusses embodiment in relation to omnipresence and eternity. Hudson contrasts the positions of Charles Hartshorne (1941), Richard Swinburne (1977), Charles Taliaferro (1994,1997) and Edward Wierenga (1988, 1997, 2006) in order to defend his own 'Hypertime Hypothesis' (2014, 160). Stump avoids wading into this discussion by placing God outside of time; thus, '[b]ecause of the way God is present at a place and in a time, for all persons, in whatever place and time they are, God is at once present, in power and knowledge and also in person' (2013, 71). This is a thesis she defends in more detail in Chapter 4 of her *Aquinas* (2003).

<sup>81</sup> The question of whether animal suffering poses a problem for theism is explored in more detail by Trent Doherty (2014) who argues that, broadly speaking, animal pain is a bad state of affairs which a God aiming at good states of affairs should aim to remove (2014, 30) and, hence, animal pain provides a version of the problem of evil. We might think that if God cannot empathize with animals then this problem is made worse.

philosopher I appear to be able to mind-read other introverted British philosophers more easily than people from different cultures, educations and psychological dispositions. Thus, when I meet someone brought up in another culture or country, my ability to mind-read, or empathize is reduced in some way. The problem comes for Stump when we consider Christ's psychological make-up: if Christ happened to be extroverted, or even autistic, and God's capacity for union with humans depends on Christ's human ability to mind-read, then perhaps those who are most similar to Christ, psychologically speaking, will be able to enjoy union with God more easily than those who are psychologically unlike Christ. More seriously, if Christ were autistic, then God's ability to mind-read might be significantly impaired, which may then impact greatly on his ability to empathize with, and so be in union with, human beings.

There is not a straightforward response to these objections, and there will not be space here for a full defence of Stump's position.<sup>82</sup> However, I will briefly suggest what kind of response could be made on behalf of Stump. Firstly, we should note that the kind of empathy that God is capable of far outstrips our human capacities for empathy. Since Christ has access to both divine power and human mind-reading, his ability to empathize is different not only in degree but also in kind to ours. Thus, to take an example from the Gospel according to John, Jesus is able to read Nathaniel's mind in a manner which is beyond an ordinary human capacity's ability to mind-read.<sup>83</sup> God also seems to be able to communicate in ways we cannot, for instance, in God's speech to Job, he claims to be able to communicate with the ocean and the Leviathan, an enormous beast that human beings could not communicate

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<sup>82</sup> Thanks to Stump for her helpful correspondence regarding these issues.

<sup>83</sup> Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Nathaniel said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." (John 1:47-48).



with.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, research has demonstrated that mammals (and some birds) share the human ability to empathize; thus, some degree of joint attention is possible between humans and animals.<sup>85</sup> This will go some way to alleviating the worries above, since God seems to be able to empathize with all human creatures and most animals in a way impossible for any mere human. However, there is still a worry about God's capacity for union with autistic individuals, that is, that the account is too exclusive. To address this worry, we should, firstly, note that, although Stump refers to the cognitive impairments associated with autism, we do not have a full understanding of how autistic individuals relate socially and even less of an understanding of how they relate spiritually. It may be that autistic individuals are capable of mind-to-mind connection in some other way that does not require the mirror-neuron system. In fact, as Larry Culliford notes in his foreword to Olga Bogdashina's work on autism and spirituality, autistic individuals appear to be more receptive to spiritual experiences than non-autistic individuals (2003, 12-13). Thus, it seems that more needs to be said to show that Stump's account of union is too exclusive.

However, the more serious worry with Stump's account is that it seems to make the link between mirror-neurons and empathy too strong.<sup>86</sup> The proposal is that the Incarnation allows for empathy to occur since it gives God the necessary psychological faculties to mind-

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<sup>84</sup> '[W]ho shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth from the womb [...] and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed"?' (Job 3:8-11), 'Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down his tongue with a cord? [...] Will he make many supplications to you? Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you to take him for your servant for ever? Will you play with him as with a bird' (Job 41:1,3-5).

<sup>85</sup> For discussion of mirror neurons in primates, see Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004, 169-92.

<sup>86</sup> Note that my assessment of Stump's position here is slightly different from what I have argued elsewhere (see Cockayne 2015). In my earlier article, I defend a mirror-neuron account of divine-human empathy, but my position here is slightly weaker, and, hopefully, more plausible because of this.

read individuals in a direct perceptual way. However, we might wonder whether mirror-neurons are really necessary for perceptual empathetic experiences. As Green notes,

God has no mirror neurons to be sure, but God also doesn't have physical limitations. If there is some reason to think we have something very much like a partial perception of what other people are doing, feeling, and thinking, then we should think that God would have to be the ultimate perceiver of other person's and their states. The key here is to appreciate that being related to another person in a second personal manner allows one to have a sense of what that person's experience is like without having to occupy her first personal perspective. (2016, 5)

According to Green, it is entirely plausible that God could be omnisubjective via a kind of perceptual empathy, even if he lacked mirror-neurons. Whilst mirror-neurons might happen to be the mechanism by which human beings experience empathy, it would be a more difficult case to make to state that mirror-neurons are *necessary* for perceptual empathy. Furthermore, if God can empathise perceptually without mirror-neurons then we can avoid the worries with empathy towards animals, autistic individuals and those who are culturally different to Christ.

However, if Green is correct, and God can empathise perceptually with persons without becoming human, it looks difficult to say just what problem the Incarnation is supposed to solve. Nevertheless, whilst Green argues that God can empathise via the perceptual route without the Incarnation, he does argue that the Incarnation allows God to know something experientially which he could not come to know without becoming incarnated, even if he had perfect knowledge of subjective states beforehand. In other words, although the Incarnation is not necessary for empathy, it does change the kind of empathy God can experience. Green argues that

Christ's access to the experience of being incarnated, however, would not be an imaginative simulacrum nor would it be interpersonal perception. Instead, God would for the first time have *first personal* access to what it is like to be human. [...] even an omnisubjective God would learn some new things from the experience of being incarnated (and not simply things accessed in a new way). (2016, 8)

What does God learn from the Incarnation? Well, according to Green, one of the things God can only learn from Incarnation is what it is like to have a limited human perspective (2016, 8). Even if God knew what it was like to be in every subjective state without becoming Incarnated, he could not know what it is like to have a bounded mind, Green thinks, without putting some kind of restrictions on his own mind. There is some theological precedence to this idea that the Incarnation allows God to relate to human beings in a new way. Recall the quotation from the Epistle of Hebrews, expanded here, with which I began this chapter:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

However, even if Green's thesis is correct, and the Incarnation does allow God to know some things which he could not know without becoming human, it is not this thesis which is of the highest concern here. It is not the king's lack of understanding which concerned Climacus most, but, rather, the maiden's inability to understand the king. Something which Green does not mention, but something which is vital for our understanding of relating to God in this life,

is that the Incarnation allows for the possibility of mutual-empathy and not just divine empathy. From a reconstructive perspective, it seems impossible for a human being to ever relate to God empathetically; how does one even begin imagining what it is like to be a divine being? On Zagzebski's account, it looks like God's omnisubjectivity explains how God could empathise with human beings, but it cannot give an account of mutual empathy, which was at the heart of Climacus's concerns. A relationship is a two-way street, and as Ray Yeo (2014) notes in his discussion of omnisubjectivity and its relation to indwelling, on Zagzebski's account 'it is fairly clear that human minds of believers do not share in the subjective point of view of the divine mind' (2014, 218). Yeo thinks that this rules out Zagzebski's account as an explanation of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the same also applies, I think, to an account of how an individual relates to God in love in the spiritual life.<sup>87</sup> We need to know not only how God empathizes with us, but also how we can empathize with God.

Even if God could empathise with human beings in a perceptual way without the Incarnation, as Green has suggested, it is more difficult to think about how human beings would perceive God's emotions in this way. So, perhaps the Incarnation can help us to explain what Climacus describes as a union by descent.

## **Mutual-empathy and the Incarnation**

Now that we have seen how the Incarnation makes a difference to God's understanding of us, I argue it also makes a difference for how a human being can relate to God in this life. The Incarnation allows for human beings to relate to God in a deeply personal way; the writer of Hebrews suggests something like this in stating:

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<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, as with my own account, Yeo's account of indwelling also requires the Incarnation, he argues that 'the human life of Christ functions as the only way into the intra-Trinitarian life of God for humanity' (2014, 232).

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. (Hebrews 2: 14-18)

The suggestion here, as well as in other places in the New Testament, is that it is not primarily God who benefits from his becoming human; the Incarnation allows for human beings to relate to God as a source of help in a way which was previously not possible.<sup>88</sup> As Climacus suggests, God's human form allows for human beings to empathise with God as in some way equal. God is not a distant force, but, rather, a person who has experienced human life and been tempted in every way. One of the reasons that the Incarnation is so important is that in order for God to enjoy deep and mutual personal union with human beings, it is necessary that he *descends* to our level, that is, that he 'appear[s] in the form of a *servant*' (PF, 31). Whilst it might be possible for God to know our intentions or desires without descending, the difference between the divine and human minds would be too great for mutual empathy.

In part, what Incarnation allows for is the possibility of what Stump described as shared-attention, something which will be important in the argument I develop in Part 2.

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<sup>88</sup> As the writer suggests here, one of the key purposes of Christ's becoming human was that it made the atonement possible. This is not something there is scope to explore, and so my discussion will primarily be focused on the difference which Christ's humanity makes to our relation to and experience of God.

Whilst some kind of second-person experience of God might be possible, the possibility of sharing-attention seems to imply a shared perceptual reference point, which God does not have with human beings. And so, what the Incarnation allows for is the possibility of relating to God in a more intimate way. It is the importance of our experience of Christ which will become to the topic of the next Part of this thesis.

Before going on to consider what it is to relate to Christ in this way in Part 2, however, I will first consider some implications for this position for our understanding of Incarnational theology.

### **The Incarnation, time and empathy**

Whilst union with God and mutual empathy with God is not possible in this life, by becoming human, God allows us to relate to him through Christ. The spiritual life, as I define it here, then, is a life of having ever-increasing union with Christ.<sup>89</sup> This will be important for the proceeding chapters in which I discuss how an individual might experience God in the spiritual life.

However, one problem with the position I have developed in this chapter is that we might wonder how an individual can relate to God empathetically before the Incarnation. Moses, for instance, is reported to speak to God ‘face to face’ (Exodus 3:11), yet existed many centuries before Christ. If we must relate to God through the human mind of Christ to have an intimate union with him, then the figures of faith which are described prior to the first-century lack the possibility of union with God. Furthermore, it is not obvious what happens to Christ’s humanity after he ascends to heaven (Acts 1:9-11), and it is even less clear how we

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<sup>89</sup> The idea that relating to God through Christ makes possible our union with God is a very Pauline claim. See, for instance, Romans 14:14, 2 Corinthians 3:14, Galatians 2:17, Philippians 4:13, 8:1, 2 Corinthians 5:19, and Ephesians 1:20.

might relate to humanly to Christ more than two thousand years after his life on earth and his subsequent ascension into heaven.<sup>90</sup>

If my account of what it is to relate to God is correct, namely, through mutual empathy with Christ, then I need to say something about how relating to God in this way is possible before and after the lifetime of Christ on earth. And, in order to do this, I need to say something about God's relation to time and the Son's relation to Christ. I will outline the possible positions one might hold regarding the relation between time and the Incarnation and then discuss which possibilities allow for the kind of interaction I describe.

First, there are two ways of thinking about God's relationship to time—temporalism and atemporalism. On the temporalist picture, God exists in time or enters into time with the creation of a spatiotemporal universe.<sup>91</sup> On the atemporalist view, God exists in an eternal present, and all past, present and future events are eternally present in same eternal moment for God.<sup>92</sup> Secondly, on both the temporalist and the atemporalist picture, there are a number of possible positions one can hold concerning the nature of God the Son as a being who is both fully human and also fully divine. I will outline these positions in due course. As I will show, there is at least one temporalist account and at least one atemporalist account which can adequately explain how one could relate to God through Christ in the mutually-empathetic route that I have described in this chapter.

First, let us consider the possibilities if we maintain that God the Son exists temporally. On one such view, there is a time at which the Son transforms into a physical

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<sup>90</sup> I aim to show that the position I have put forward does not assume a particular view of God's relation to time, or a particular way of understanding the nature of the Trinity or the Incarnation. Whilst this is not essential for an account of the spiritual life, to spend too long outlining particular theological commitments would be an unhelpful digression.

<sup>91</sup> For a discussion of God's relation to time, see Craig 2009, 145-67.

<sup>92</sup> For an atemporalist account of God, see Stump and Kretzman 1981.

human being,<sup>93</sup> since what it is to be a human being is to exist as a physical creature. On another view, the Son transforms into a human mind which has some relation to a human body.<sup>94</sup> Alternatively, the Son does not transform into either a human body or a human mind at the Incarnation; rather, the Son becomes united to a human body and a human soul at a particular time.<sup>95</sup> On this view, Jesus's body and soul as well as the divine person God-the-Son are composites of the whole which make up Christ Incarnate. Whichever of these three positions one holds, one has to say that, to be human, the Son must stand in some kind of relation to Jesus's physical human body. The problem with this, as Jonathan Hill puts it, is that

[i]f to be human means to exist in a certain relation to a human body, then if the Son continues to be human for ever, his human body must exist forever. So to be orthodox, the model requires us to suppose that Jesus's body continues to exist after the exaltation until the end of time; that at any given time, including right now, the statement "Jesus's human body exists somewhere today" is true. (2012, 15)

How could we make sense of this statement? According to Hill there are three possibilities. Either Jesus's body exists somewhere in the universe (2012, 12), Jesus's body exists in a parallel physical universe (2012, 12-13), or Jesus's body exists in a kind of 'hyperspace', a physical dimension which exists beyond time and space. The temporalist, if she wishes to defend the claim that God-the-Son is perpetually human is committed to defending the view that the Son has a human body which exists somewhere. There is not space here for a detailed discussion of which view is most plausible, and all of these views seem at least possible. I will offer some brief remarks about each position. First, if Christ exists in our universe, it is

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<sup>93</sup> See Trenton Merricks 2007, for instance.

<sup>94</sup> See Richard Swinburne 1994.

<sup>95</sup> See Brian Leftow 2002, for instance.



possible that we could discover his body, which seems counterintuitive. But we can address this by arguing either that Christ's body is in some way imperceptible or, at the least, that God keeps it hidden from us. So, the first account is possible, although it comes at an intuitive cost. Secondly, let us consider the parallel universe hypothesis. Swinburne claims that

[i]f we are to rise again with our bodies, as creeds have normally claimed explicitly, there must in another space be a place for us, which if he so chose Christ could inhabit with his human body. (1994, 237)

Swinburne's suggestion is that there could be a location in parallel region of space in which our pre-resurrected bodies, along with Christ's incarnated body, could reside.<sup>96</sup> Thirdly, and

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<sup>96</sup> Hill objects that such a possibility would be implausible since

this parallel space would have to share the same time as our space. This is because, for the temporalist transformationalist, to say that the Son is incarnate now is to say that he is identical with a body now. That body must therefore exist now, which means it must exist within our timeline, not in some alternate timeline to which we are not temporally related. But the notion of a distinct space that nevertheless shares our time is hard to square with modern physics, which considers both space and time to be features of a single "spacetime." Such a view is fundamental to relativity theory, and is so central to modern physics that even the Newtonian theory of space and time is commonly expressed in the same terms for ease of comparison between the different models. But if space and time are as intimately connected as this, there could not be two completely distinct, unconnected spaces which share the same timeline. (2012, 13).

finally, we might think that Christ's body exists in a kind of hyperspace.<sup>97</sup> Rather than postulating a new spatio-temporal universe as in the second account, the hyperspace hypothesis claims that there is a dimension of this universe that we are unable to access, just as a two-dimensional entity could not access anything directly above or below it from a third-dimensional perspective. A hyperspace hypothesis may claim that Christ's body exists in this universe but not in a dimension that we are able to access.

I will not examine these three claims in any more detail here; rather I only need to note that, to defend the Son's perpetual humanity on a temporal model we have to say something about the location of the body. If we are happy to commit to one of these three positions, then it seems unproblematic to think that a person could relate to God *qua* human today. If God-the-Son exists in relation to, or is identical to a human body which exists somewhere in this universe, in a parallel universe or in hyperspace, then the possibility of interacting humanly with God seems to be entirely possible. If the Incarnation makes possible mutual-empathy between a human being a God and the Son remains fully human, then there appears to be no conceptual reason why a temporalist could not defend my conclusion in this chapter if she were prepared to defend one of these three possibilities. Of course more would need to be said about just how this interactive mechanism is supposed to work between a person in this spatio-temporal universe and a divine being who is related to a body in another dimension, universe, or spatio-temporal location. However, if Christ has a human body which has a location (in some sense of the word), then there seems to be no reason why mutual-empathy is precluded for present-day believers.

What about those individuals who exist prior to the Incarnation? Whilst a defence of the perpetual humanity claim will help us to see how individuals relate to God after the Incarnation, it looks difficult to see how Moses or Abraham might relate to God in this way.

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<sup>97</sup> Hud Hudson (2005) has defended the possibility of hyperspace and its relation to Christian doctrine and implies that Christ could exist in hyperspace after the ascension (2005, 180-204).

On a temporalist reading of my position, a person would have to insist that true union with God is only possible through Christ, and that whilst God may show grace and mercy to Moses, Abraham, and others, it is only after the Incarnation that genuine union with God is possible. This may sound a bit odd, but it is not unorthodox. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, there does seem to be some difference in the account of the experience of God's presence before and after the historical event of the Incarnation; Paul the Apostle describes a post-Incarnational relationship to God as one in which 'the veil is lifted' (2 Corinthians 3:14).<sup>98</sup>

What are the possibilities for an atemporal account? For obvious reasons, any account which requires the Son to change or transform in some way is ruled out on an atemporal picture. If God is understood as existing in an atemporal present in which all temporal moments are eternally present to him,<sup>99</sup> then the Incarnation is eternally present to God in the same way as his interaction with Moses and the burning bush, as well as the encounter with Paul on the road to Damascus is.<sup>100</sup> Paul Helm makes a similar point in noting that

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<sup>98</sup> Alternatively, in order to avoid admitting that we have a different access to God than was available to Moses and Abraham, the temporalist would need to say that the Son became Incarnate at an earlier time, say, for instance, at the beginning of time. This might seem too unorthodox for some to accept; however, it is one way of accommodating mutual-empathy prior to the Incarnation.

<sup>99</sup> Or ET-simultaneous to God as Stump and Kretzmann (1981) describe it.

<sup>100</sup> There is some discussion of the nature of eternity and its relation to time in Kierkegaard's writings. For instance, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the pseudonymous author Vigilius Haufniensis's endorses a view of the 'eternal present' which has similarities with the kind of account Stump and Kretzmann give:

The eternal, on the contrary is the present. For thought, the eternal is the present in terms of an annulled succession (time is the succession that passes by). For representation, it is a going forth that nevertheless does not get off the spot, because the eternal is for representation the infinitely contentful present. So also in the eternal there is no division into the past and the future, because the present is posited as the annulled succession. (CA, 86).

if God is Trinitarian then in addition to the one eternal divine standpoint each person of the Godhead has his own eternal standpoint vis-à-vis the other persons of the Trinity, and if God is necessarily Trinitarian then there is necessarily the standpoint that the Son has over against those of the Spirit and the Father. Each of the Trinitarian standpoints is eternal. And if the doctrine of the Incarnation is true then the eternal Son of God is in the closest possible union with what changes, while not himself changing, and the other persons of the Trinity continue to enjoy a timelessly eternal standpoint vis-à-vis the Incarnate second person. [...] Was there a time when God was not incarnate in Jesus Christ? Clearly so. Roughly, during all those years that we denominate as 'BC'. But from the standpoint of the timelessly eternal Creator the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world, there never was a time when the eternal Logos was not incarnate. The first moment of the life of Jesus Christ was not the first moment of the life of the Logos, for there was no such moment. (Helm, 2010, 256-7)

Helm puts forwards a kind of *Logos* Christology here, that is, by drawing from the Prologue of the Gospel according to John where the relation between the 'Word', the *Logos*, and God is discussed, Helm stresses the importance of recognising the eternity of God the Son and the view that the Son is eternally Incarnate.

How can we make sense of this view? And how can we defend the claim that the Son is perpetually human on an atemporal picture? The most promising way of defending an atemeporalist view of Christ's perpetual humanity is by endorsing a compositionist position such as the view developed by Brian Leftow (2002). On Leftow's view, Christ Incarnate is a composite of a temporal human body and soul as well as the atemporal Son. On this view, the Son is always atemporal, yet he is intimately related to a human body and human soul which exists within time. Leftow uses the analogy of a diver's relationship to water and scuba gear to illustrate God-the-son's relationship to time and Christ's body and soul on this model:

Scuba gear is intimately connected to the diver's body. Yet it keeps one diver disconnected from the water it touches: scuba gear lets one swim without getting one's feet wet.... [Christ's soul and body] is the Son's environment suit, letting him manoeuvre in time yet stay dry. (2002, 292)

In describing Christ's perpetual humanity, this view differs from all of the temporalist models we have considered in a key way. On an atemporalist compositionalist account, as Leftow puts it, '[i]f God is timeless and is incarnate, then he just is timelessly incarnate: the whole of his timeless life is spent so' (2002, 295). If God the Son relates to a human mind and body in a certain way, then he does so at all times, 'whether before, during, or after the earthly lifetime of Jesus' (Hill, 2012, 27). An atemporalist is not committed to thinking that Jesus's body must continue to exist after the ascension in order to say that the Son is fully human. Since all times are eternally present to an atemporal God, the Son is able to relate to human minds in a human way at all points in time.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> There is good reason to suppose that Kierkegaard himself would be much happier with an atemporal account of God-the-Son than a temporal account. For instance, Johannes Climacus refers to the relation between an individual and the Incarnate Christ as occurring in a 'moment' in which the individual receives a condition for understanding God. He asks, 'This condition, what does it condition?', to which the response is immediately given: 'His understanding of the eternal. But a condition such as this surely must be an eternal condition.' (PF, 64). Hence, for Climacus, the condition which an individual receives from God through his encounter with God-as-human is this condition for understanding the nature of the eternal.

The idea that the eternal is unknowable and stands at the edge of human understanding is picked up elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings. In the *Concept of Anxiety*, for example, we are told that both the future and eternity lay beyond what we can understand or know, hence Haufniensis's elusive comments that

If an atemporal God can be perpetually fully human, then we also have another response to the question of how an individual can relate empathetically before the Incarnation and after the Ascension. If God-the-Son is eternally Incarnate and thus eternally fully human, then it is possible to relate to him in the way I have described in this chapter. Even for an individual who existed prior to the human life of Christ, such as Moses, for instance, could relate to God in this way. My claim in this chapter is that the Incarnation makes possible a relation of mutual-empathy, but this need not depend on an individual knowing who they are empathising with or knowing anything about the historical event of the Incarnation. Moses could coherently relate empathetically to God-the-Son despite having no knowledge of Christ's future human existence. This would be much like having a second-person experience of someone whom one knew nothing about, or of whom one had only false beliefs about. But crucially, there is no reason for us to exclude the possibility of Moses relating empathetically to God through Christ.

We might worry, however, that this does not look much like the kind of to-and-fro of ordinary interpersonal experience. In fact, if God is eternally present and we are temporally

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[t]he future in a certain sense signifies more than the present and the past, because in a certain sense the future is the whole of which the past is a part, and the future can in a certain sense signify the whole. This is because the eternal first signifies the future or because the future is the incognito in which the eternal, even though it is incommensurable with time, nevertheless preserves its association with time. (CA, 89)

Despite these reasons to suppose that God is eternal in nature and that Christ reveals something of the nature of the eternal to us, it is clear that Kierkegaard would be sceptical of the way of making sense of Christ's eternal nature in the way which Leftow describes. Leftow's approach (and indeed much of contemporary analytic theology) would no doubt be regarded as a kind of speculative and fruitless endeavour of trying to say something about the nature of something which is beyond the limits of human thought and understanding for Kierkegaard.

present, then it looks difficult to make sense of how the kind of engagement required for empathy might be possible. However, it need not be the case that interpersonal engagement is impossible between temporal and eternal persons. As Stump notes, shared attention between persons requires an unmediated and casual cognitive contact between persons. However, she claims, ‘nothing about God’s eternity [...] rules out the mutual awareness of shared attention between God and human beings’ (2016, 72). To make a case for this, she describes the following kind of example:

even as regards the issue of presence between an eternal God and a temporal human person, the doctrine of eternity does not preclude the kind of relations God has with Jonah in biblical story. An eternal God can have the kind of engaged and personally present conversation with human beings the Bible portrays God as having with Jonah. That is because, in one and the same eternal now, God is ET-simultaneous with every moment of Jonah’s life. And in one and the same eternal now, God can will that he make one speech to Jonah which Jonah apprehends at time  $t_1$  and another speech to Jonah which Jonah apprehends at  $t_2$ . God’s one act of will in one and the same eternal now can be for effects in different temporal locations. (2016, 74-5)

Stump’s defence of this position requires God to will a certain temporal event to occur from an eternal present. If it is possible for eternal God to will temporal events (which she argues in great detail that it is,<sup>102</sup> then God can ‘respond’ to Jonah by means of willing that Jonah hear an audible voice at  $t_1$ , or, perhaps, willing that Jonah experience a supernatural sense of God’s personal presence at  $t_2$ . Whilst on my account, it is Christ we share attention with and not God (i.e. God-the-Father or God-the-Trinity), if Stump is right in thinking that it is possible to share attention with an eternal person and it is true that ‘there never was a time when the

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<sup>102</sup> See Stump and Kretzman 1981.

eternal Logos was not incarnate' (Helm, 2010, 257), then there is nothing incoherent about an eternal incarnate person relating interpersonally with a temporal human person.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, there is no obvious reason why the position of mutual empathy and Incarnation need commit us to a particular view of the Incarnation or God's relation to time. Since my concern here is with the nature of the spiritual life, it does not seem necessary to say much more on these issues.

## **Conclusion**

I have discussed in detail both the problem and the solution which Climacus presents concerning the possibility of union between God and a human being. If a union of love requires mutual-understanding and mutual-empathy, then there must be some kind of movement to bring about equality. Clearly, a union by ascent is problematic for a number of reasons, and hence, we must explain union in terms descent. The discussion of empathy sheds light on why Incarnation allows union to be possible between human beings and God; God is able to empathise with human creatures in way which is entirely lacking without a human

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<sup>103</sup> We might also wonder how the nature of the Trinity allows for the kind of empathetic relation I have described. If the Father, the Son and the Spirit are one God, then how can we be in union with Christ and not in union with God? My claim is that whilst union with God (i.e. union with the Godhead) is impossible in this life, union with Christ is possible. It is not clear that this position commits us to thinking about the Trinity in one way. Whatever account of the Trinity we commit to, it is important to recognise that the Father and the Son are distinct persons, and thus it makes perfect sense to relate to each person distinctly, even if these are the same God. Much of Christian tradition already recognises this difference in the persons of the Trinity; for instance, it is typical to pray to the Father through union with the Son in the power of the Spirit. And so, it does not look problematic that I introduce the claim that our relation to each person of the Trinity is somehow different. For an overview of the philosophy of the Trinity, see Rea 2009, 403-30.



mind and a human body. Thus, the account of the spiritual life I develop is one in which human beings relate to God through Christ. The importance of this position will be seen in the next part of this thesis.

## Part 2

### Contemporaneity, presence and practice:

### Religious experience in the God-relationship

#### Introduction

If, as I have claimed, to have faith is to stand in a correct relation to God, and this correct relation to God requires having a second-person experience of God, then, it seems pertinent to ask: How can a person experience God second-personally in this way? What would it mean to experience an incorporeal being interpersonally? And how does this help us to understand what it is to be in ever-closer union with God? My answer to these questions, as I presented it in the previous chapter, was that the individual must relate to God through union with Christ. This chimes with much of what Kierkegaard writes about the spiritual life. To be a Christian, Anti-Climacus tells us, one ‘must be just as contemporary with Christ’s presence as his contemporaries were’ (PC, 9). On the face of it, this is a baffling answer, and one that does not seem to give any clearer a response to the puzzle of how we can experience God second-personally.

This part of the thesis is devoted to the question what it is to be in union with Christ in this life. In order to give such an account, I offer a reading of Kierkegaard’s concept of ‘contemporaneity’.<sup>104</sup> In outlining some prominent existing interpretations of the Kierkegaardian concept of contemporaneity, I develop my own account. In particular, I outline Evans’s (1992) discussion of contemporaneity as a kind of mystical experience of

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<sup>104</sup> It is worth flagging up here that when I talk of our experience of God or our interpersonal relation to God, in places I use this as short-hand for ‘relating to God through our experience of Christ’. At times, I use the more accurate and more specific terminology of ‘experience of Christ’; however, in some instances, this change in terminology is more distracting than helpful and so I use ‘experience of God’ or ‘relation to God’ as shorthand.

Christ's presence and Patrick Stokes's (2010, 2015) reading of contemporaneity as an imaginative co-presence with Christ. I argue that Evans's account is insufficiently detailed to help us see what it means to be contemporary with Christ, and Stokes's account fails to take into consideration the theological importance of Christ as a living person, rather than a merely historical person. My own account of contemporaneity describes being contemporary with Christ as an experience in which an individual and Christ share-attention.

Whilst Chapter 4 gives us a conceptual account of what it is to experience Christ, it may not be clear how a person is supposed to engage with this kind of experience. In Chapter 5, I argue that spiritual practices are vital for the spiritual life because they give an answer to the question of how a believer can experience Christ's presence. After outlining some recent discussions of spiritual practices, I develop a Kierkegaardian account which draws on the account of contemporaneity I offer in Chapter 4. According to this account, one of the key purposes of spiritual practices is to act as a means of allowing a person to become contemporary with Christ by sharing-attention with him.

## Chapter 4

### Contemporaneity and presence:

#### An account of union with Christ

Lord Jesus Christ, would that we, too, might become contemporary with you in this way, might see you in your true form and in the surroundings of actuality as you walked here one earth, not in the form in which an empty and meaningless or a thoughtless-romantic or a historical-talkative remembrance has distorted you, since it is not the form of abasement in which the believer sees you, and it cannot possibly be the form of glory in which no one as yet has seen you. Would that we might see you as you are and were and will be until your second coming in glory, as the sign offense and the object of faith, the lowly man, yet the Savior and Redeemer of the human race (PC 9-10)

#### Introduction

What is it to be union with Christ in this life? My answer to this question will be inspired by Kierkegaard's discussion of being contemporary with Christ.<sup>105</sup> As I will define it in this

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<sup>105</sup> Much of what is written about contemporaneity is found in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, and particularly those written under the pseudonyms 'Johannes Climacus' and 'Anti-Climacus'. Given what Kierkegaard himself writes about the independence of these pseudonymous texts from his own writing (CUP, 617-30), we might wonder what sense we can make of the claim that there is a unified concept of contemporaneity at work in Kierkegaard's writings. Although, as I have already argued in the introduction, care is certainly needed in working with pseudonymous texts, Kierkegaard himself refers to the 'situation of contemporaneity' in different places in his journals and in reference to both pseudonymous and signed works. So, Kierkegaard himself clearly regards this concept as having some kind of consistency of meaning in his writings. More decisively, as we will see, there is also some

chapter, in order to be in union with Christ, a person must become contemporary with Christ. According to Anti-Climacus, for example, in order to become a Christian one ‘must be just as contemporary with Christ’s presence as his contemporaries were’ (PC, 9).<sup>106</sup> Initially, this claim looks problematic. How can an individual existing two millennia after the birth of Christ experience being contemporary with him? To give answer to this question, it is helpful to look at how scholars have interpreted Kierkegaard’s claims about contemporaneity. For instance, Stokes (2015, 2010) has argued that being contemporary with Christ is best understood a kind of imaginative mode of cognition in which an individual reads Christ’s words in Scripture in a particular way.<sup>107</sup> Alternatively, Evans (1992) has maintained that being contemporary with Christ should be understood as a kind of religious or mystical experience in which the individual experiences Christ’s supernatural presence.<sup>108</sup> In contrast to these readings, I argue

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consistency in how the concept is used by both Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors. So whilst the texts should be regarded as somehow independent from one another, there is some overlap in how concepts are used. My approach in this chapter will be to refer to the pseudonymous authors by name, as Kierkegaard requests (CUP1, 617), and to try to draw some common themes from these different uses of the concept of contemporaneity.

<sup>106</sup> The concept of contemporaneity (*samtidighed*—literally, ‘at the same time as’) features in both pseudonymous as well as signed texts. Kierkegaard writes about contemporaneity as early as 1843, in his earliest pseudonymous work *Either/Or* (EO1, 399), and as late as 1855 in *The Moment* (TM, 290), one of the last texts to be written. In this latter text, Kierkegaard writes that this enigmatic concept is the ‘decisive point’ of his life’s work (TM, 290), and he urges his reader to ‘[p]ay sharp attention to the matter of contemporaneity’ (TM, 290). And whilst Kierkegaard’s claims about religious belief as a subjective leap of faith might be more familiar to some readers, it is this condition of being contemporary with Christ which is the defining feature of genuine Christian faith in much of Kierkegaard’s writing.

<sup>107</sup> See Stokes 2015, 2010.

<sup>108</sup> See Evans 1992.

that we should think about contemporaneity in terms of Christ's interpersonal presence *to* another person. I will begin by giving an overview of some of the key claims Kierkegaard makes about contemporaneity before defending my own reading of what it is to be contemporary with Christ.

### **Historical vs. genuine contemporaneity**

First, it will be important to see how Kierkegaard's use of 'contemporaneity' with reference to Christ differs from the more ordinary use of the word to denote the historical simultaneity of persons or events, as in the sentence, 'We were contemporaries at university'. Whilst Kierkegaard does use the term 'contemporary' in this historical sense,<sup>109</sup> the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus, contrasts being an historical contemporary of Christ with being a *genuine contemporary*. It is the latter, Climacus claims, which is a requirement of having faith. It is possible, he contends, that someone who is an historical contemporary of Christ might still lack faith. According to Climacus, both the first-hand witnesses of Christ's life on earth and those from later generations must enter into a relation of genuine contemporaneity with Christ (PF, 69). This relation between the individual and Christ, then, is not one of historicity (i.e. one in which the individual has accurate historical beliefs about Christ informed by first-hand experience or subsequent testimony), but, rather, one of contemporaneity (i.e. one in which the individual somehow relates personally to Christ). Hence, for Climacus, '[t]here is no follower at second-hand. The first and latest generation are essentially alike' (PF, 104-05). Knowledge of historical testimony will never be sufficient for faith. Instead, there is something revealed or received from God himself which is essential in order to have faith.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, one's historical proximity to Christ has little

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<sup>109</sup> See WA, 62-63 or PF, 55, for instance.

<sup>110</sup> We see the importance of this distinction between historical and genuine contemporaneity repeated in *Practice in Christianity* by Anti-Climacus. 'A historical Christianity', Anti-Climacus argues

bearing on coming to faith, and ‘despite his being contemporary, a contemporary can be a noncontemporary’ (PF, 67).

### **Contemporaneity, spiritual perception and presence**

Another important feature of genuine contemporaneity is that there is something perceptual about the kind of experience involved in being contemporary with Christ. Climacus describes being contemporary with Christ as a kind of seeing ‘with the eyes of faith’ (PF, 102), and he depicts the teacher’s revelation as one in which the individual ‘sees the god’ (PF, 65).

However, seeing with the *eyes of faith* is clearly not perceptual in a visual sense, since an individual could see the historical Christ and yet lack contemporaneity in the genuine sense of the term. The kind of perception Climacus is interested in is an experience in which the ‘the believer (and only he, after all, is a follower) continually has the *autopsy* of faith [*Troens Autopsi*]; he does not see with the eyes of others and sees only the same as every believer sees—with the eyes of faith’ (PF, 103). As the Hongs point out, ‘*autopsy*’ can be rendered literally as ‘the personal act of seeing’ (PF, 296). One of the ways in which *seeing with the eyes of faith* is different from other perceptual experience is that it is essentially personal. As Anti-Climacus puts it, ‘[t]he qualification that is lacking’ from the historical relation to Christ, ‘—which is the qualification of truth (as inwardness) and of all religiousness is— **for you**’ (PC, 64; emphasis in the original). Seeing God with the eyes of faith is about relating to God as a single

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is nonsense and un-Christian muddled thinking, because whatever true Christians there are in any generation are contemporary with Christ, have nothing to do with Christians in past generations but everything to do with the contemporary Christ...every generation (of believers) is indeed contemporary. (PC, 64)

This point is also made in an earlier draft of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (CUP2, 36) as well as in Climacus’s claim that historical enquiry is an inadequate basis for faith (CUP1, 23).

individual, a theme which plays a central role throughout Kierkegaard's works.<sup>111</sup> This involves, as Anti-Climacus describes, the individual seeing Christ as one who has a claim on his life (PC, 241).

So, in describing contemporaneity in the language of *autopsy*, or personal seeing, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors draw attention to both the personal nature of contemporaneity and also its experiential or perceptual nature. In emphasising that the individual must see for herself, Kierkegaard resists describing faith as a kind of intellectual conclusion drawn from historical and philosophical premises, a conception of faith which only allows the individual to relate to Christ through the historian, theologian and clergyman, something which Climacus later objects to in his discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in the *Postscript* (CUP1, 19-50).

Whilst both the present-day believer and the historical believer can experience Christ as contemporary, the experience of seeing for oneself is occasioned differently in each case. Climacus argues that those who lived at the same time as Christ had Christ's historical contemporaneity as an occasion for genuine contemporaneity, whereas the present day believer 'has the occasion in the report of the contemporary generation' (PF, 104). And so, historical reports make possible genuine contemporaneity for present-day believers, yet not because the individual believes what is written, but, rather, because these reports provide an occasion for experiencing Christ in a personally transformative manner. Thus, Climacus states, even if Christ's historical contemporaries 'had not left anything behind except these words, "We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died"—this is more than enough' (PF, 104).

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard explains this experience of seeing Christ as a kind of experience of Christ's presence. Anti-Climacus begins *Practice in Christianity* by stating that

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<sup>111</sup> See PV 8-11 for the centrality of this claim to the authorship.



[i]t is indeed eighteen hundred years since Jesus Christ walked here on earth, but this is certainly not an event just like other events, which once they are over pass into history and then, as the distant past, pass into oblivion. No, his presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past [...] But as long as there is a believer, this person [...] must be just as contemporary with Christ's presence as his contemporaries were. This contemporaneity is the condition of faith, and, more sharply defined, it is faith. (PC, 9)

Anti-Climacus tells us that the experience of Christ as contemporary is an experience of Christ's presence. As with the use of 'contemporaneity', Kierkegaard does not fully explain what is meant by the 'presence' of Christ, and much of the proceeding discussion hinges on how best to interpret what experiencing Christ's presence means.

### **Contemporaneity and historical bridging**

The third important feature of Kierkegaard's discussion of contemporaneity is that being contemporary with Christ is supposed to bridge or negate the historical distance that exists between the individual and Christ's life on earth. As Patrick Stokes notes, the opposite of presence in Anti-Climacus's discussion is not *absence*, but, rather, historical distance (2015, 54-5). If faith requires a relation of immediacy and contemporaneity which occurs between individuals more than 2000 years apart, then there must be some way of closing this historical distance, which, for Anti-Climacus, is achieved by Christ's presence on earth, even though he is not physically present on earth as you or I are. This discussion of historical distance becomes an important focus of Anti-Climacus's discussion of faith in *Practice in Christianity* and is the key for understanding the difference between the admirer who stands at an historical distance from Christ, and the imitator, who seeks to become like Christ, even in his suffering and abasement.

Thus, by experiencing Christ's presence, the individual is able to transcend the historical distance between herself and Christ, to see with the eyes of faith and to become genuinely contemporary with Christ. Although Kierkegaard gives us some vague details about the nature of contemporaneity, the puzzle which remains is one of interpretation. How should we understand what it means to experience Christ's presence in a quasi-perceptual manner? How does this help to bridge the historical distance? And how can such an experience be made possible with an historical figure? These are the questions which I now turn to address.

### **Personal presence and contemporaneity**

Since Kierkegaard describes being contemporary with Christ as a kind of perception, and one which involves experiencing Christ's presence, we might think that the best of way interpreting the references to contemporaneity in Kierkegaard's works is by describing the experience of being contemporary with Christ in mystical or supernatural terms. That is, perhaps being contemporary with Christ is a kind of experience in which a believer sees Christ for herself, in the same way as, for instance, I see my friends and family.

This reading of contemporaneity as a kind of mystical experience is in keeping with some of the key claims of my project so far. As we saw in the previous chapter, Johannes Climacus states: 'God is a subject and hence only for subjectivity in inwardness' (CUP1, 200). It seems plausible to think, then, that standing in a relation of contemporaneity to Christ, in contrast to a relationship of historicity, is about the believer's relating God (or Christ) as a subject to be engaged with and not a fact to be understood. We might think that something like Stump's account of second-person experience can help to explain what Kierkegaard means by being contemporary with Christ. Evans suggests something similar to this in his commentary on *Philosophical Fragments*. Evans describes the account of faith developed in *Fragments* as 'the result of a first-person encounter with Christ' (1992, 115), citing an example

from the Russian Orthodox Archbishop Anthony Bloom, to illustrate his point. Bloom writes that

[w]hile I was reading the beginning of St Mark's Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of the desk there was a presence. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me. This was the real turning point. (1970, xxi)

According to Evans, 'Bloom would seem to be a genuine contemporary of Christ, while obviously failing to be a historical contemporary in the ordinary sense' (1992, 115). Although Evans's suggestion that we read contemporaneity as a kind of mystical experience seems fairly plausible, he does not explain this account in detail here (the discussion is less than two pages in length), nor is it extended beyond the Johannes Climacus works.<sup>112</sup> In order to give a more detailed account of being contemporary with Christ as a kind religious experience, then, it will be important to consider some other interpretations of what it might mean to be contemporary with Christ.<sup>113</sup> Before giving my own more detailed account of

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<sup>112</sup> It is also not obvious whether what Evans says about contemporary with Christ fits more broadly with what is written about contemporaneity under Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms, as well as in the signed texts.

<sup>113</sup> The narrowness of Evans's proposal has led some to be sceptical of whether an experiential account of contemporaneity can provide a unified account of what it is to be contemporary with, or to enjoy co-presence with another person. Stokes, for instance, argues that

Climacus' account doesn't seem to contain any clear indication that the follower's encounter with Jesus is an experience of this type. This could be a function of the ostensibly hypothetical character of the argument in *Philosophical Fragments*, but evidence from elsewhere in

contemporaneity, I will first consider the proposal that Stokes has developed, namely, that contemporaneity is a kind of imaginative experience of Christ.

### **Epistemic contemporaneity**<sup>114</sup>

Stokes has claimed that being contemporary with Christ is best understood as a mode of cognition in which the individual's imaginative capacities enable historical events and facts to be present to her (2010, 314-15). In order to develop this reading of contemporaneity, Stokes contrasts his reading with an experiential reading. He claims that

if we attempt to analyse contemporaneity-with-Christ on a cognitive level, there would seem to be two possible interpretations: one which sees such contemporaneity as possible only with Christ, and one which sees contemporaneity as a cognitive experience at least theoretically possible with other intentional objects as well. In other

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Kierkegaard's writings suggests that the form of cognition needed to achieve contemporaneity doesn't belong to such an anomalous register of human experience. (2015, 53)<sup>113</sup>

Whilst Stokes thinks that Evans's account does highlight the importance of becoming contemporary with an historical fact, he argues that describing this in terms of a mystical experience does not fit Kierkegaard's wider use of the concept (2015, 53). And thus, although Evans's model might make some sense of the perceptual nature of contemporaneity in *Fragments*, Stokes points to a number of places where being contemporary with an historical fact will not fit Evans's model. As I will outline in unpacking Stokes's own position, in both Kierkegaard's discussion of Scripture in *For Self-Examination*, as well as his discussion of death in 'At the Graveside' (TDIO, 69-102), there are plausibly examples of contemporaneity from Kierkegaard's writings which do not fit this experiential model well.

<sup>114</sup> Stokes himself never uses the label 'epistemic contemporaneity' to describe his position, and I borrow this from Westphal's very brief discussion of contemporaneity (2014, 255), but it fits Stokes's position well.

words, we have a dichotomy between a form of essentially religious experience and a form of experience that can be directed towards a religious object. The question becomes whether contemporaneity with an historical fact is an extramundane experience, or a specific type of experience directed towards an extramundane object. (2010, 303)

According to Stokes, an experiential reading depicts contemporaneity as an ‘extramundane experience’ rather than a specific experience directed towards an extramundane object. Stokes’s concern is primarily historical here, but this concern can help to motivate a conceptual worry in giving an account of contemporaneity. According to Stokes, describing contemporaneity as an extramundane experience (as he claims Evans does) is not in keeping with the wide use of contemporaneity in Kierkegaard’s writings and he argues that a experiential reading is too narrow in scope to explain Kierkegaard’s discussion of contemporaneity beyond *Philosophical Fragments*. For instance, Stokes claims, Kierkegaard describes a kind of a co-presence and contemporaneity with one’s own death in his discourse ‘At the Graveside’ (TDIO, 75). He suggests that just as experiencing Christ’s presence bridges an historical distance between the believer’s life and Christ’s life on earth, an experience of our death allows us to experience a kind of contemporaneity with death.<sup>115</sup> Another example of contemporaneity which allegedly does not fit an experiential model, and an example which Stokes then goes on to use as a basis for his own account of contemporaneity, is Kierkegaard’s account of reading Scripture in *For Self-Examination*. Here, Kierkegaard advises those who read Scripture to ‘remember to say to yourself incessantly: It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is

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<sup>115</sup> He further extends this model to think about the puzzle of how we can make sense of what Kierkegaard says about loving the dead in *Works of Love* (WL, 358). According to Stokes, just as we can be contemporary with our own death, we can be contemporary with those who are now deceased through a kind of imaginative mode of cognition (2011, 262-65).

*speaking*' (FSE, 35; emphasis in the original). When this is done properly, Kierkegaard claims, 'it asks me (indeed, it is as if it were God himself asked me): Have you done what you read there?' (FSE, 31). Stokes goes on to take these passages to be vital for our understanding of contemporaneity. And, as he rightly points out,

Kierkegaard's detailed discussion in *For Self-Examination* of the appropriate mode of receiving Scripture, explicated through the metaphor of the 'mirror of the Word', contains nothing corresponding to the sort of religious experience Bloom describes. (2015, 53)

Whilst Stokes's concern here is to ensure that our understanding of contemporaneity is wide in scope, what this concern can help us to see is that 'contemporaneity' should not best be understood as an extramundane experience at all, regardless of its role in Kierkegaard's writings. Whilst I take issue with the account which Stokes outlines as an alternative (which I will explain shortly), he is surely correct in stating that 'being contemporary with...' should have a broader application than just to explain how an individual experiences Christ. If being contemporary with is merely understood as the condition of 'being at the same time as', it would be preferable to be able to see how one could have an experience of being at the same time as persons other than Christ, and time periods other than first-century Galilee. So, this issue of scope is both historical and conceptual. I will return to this issue in due course. At the very least, contemporaneity should be able to explain how one can be contemporary with Christ and be contemporary with one's own time, since Anti-Climacus writes that an individual can be contemporary both with Christ's life on earth and with 'the time in which he is living' (PC, 64). First, however, it will be helpful to see whether Stokes manages to give a sufficiently broad account of contemporaneity as an alternative to Evans's reading.

Stokes develops his account of contemporaneity by focusing on Kierkegaard's discussion of having an imaginative, or an 'as if', experience whilst reading Scripture in *For Self Examination*. Drawing on this discussion, Stokes argues that the best way of understanding 'presence' is as a certain mode of cognition. This mode of cognition, on his account, allows the believer to become contemporary with the historical Christ *as if* he were really present or really speaking. Stokes claims that 'certain modes of thought have the power to negate the historical distance between contemplator and contemplated, making them, in some sense, actually present with the object' (2010, 305). Contemporaneity, on this reading, is 'an *immediately self-reflexive* mode of vision, that is, one in which we apprehend *our relation* to what is imagined *within* the imaginative experience' (2010, 314; emphasis in the original). Just as in experiencing the poster in which 'Lord Kitchener Wants You!', Stokes claims, 'you're alone, face-to-face, with Lord Kitchener, likewise, according to Climacus, the believer at second-hand is nonetheless face-to-face with the incarnation of God' (2015, 65). This is not to say that the experience is a merely metaphorical experience, Stokes argues, but, rather, contemporaneity has 'the same status, on the phenomenal level, as direct experience' (2015, 54). According to Stokes, these experiences are possible not only with Christ, but also with the event of my own death, or with those persons who are now deceased.

Is this account of experiencing Christ's presence adequate for the purposes of our understanding of being in union with Christ? As I argue in the next section, one of the main problems with Stokes's proposal is that it describes Christ as a merely historical person and an individual can become contemporary with Christ in the same way as one can become contemporary with Lord Kitchener. This is problematic and does not look like it can explain what it is for a person to enjoy union with Christ in this life.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Does Stokes's proposal fit what Kierkegaard writes about contemporaneity? The pertinent question to ask is whether Kierkegaard's concern, in writing about contemporaneity with Christ, is merely a concern with making an historical event or person present to the individual. If this is his concern, then

## Contemporaneity as an 'extramundane experience'

How helpful is Stokes's extension of the discussion of imaginative experience in *For Self*

*Examination?*<sup>117</sup> It looks problematic that the kind of experience which occurs when reading

Scripture seems to be different in nature to an experience of personal presence, in general.

The examples Stokes uses is Kierkegaard's metaphor of a letter to a lover to describe how we

should think about Scripture's relation to us (FSE, 26-27), yet, our experience of reading a

letter from a living person would surely not capture what it is to experience being

contemporary with that person. In reading a particularly vivid love letter, I might even claim

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Stokes is correct. However, there is a clear indication that Kierkegaard is interested in not only the individual's experience of an historical event or historical person, but also their experience of Christ as a living person. As Anti-Climacus describes, 'Christ is not merely a historical person' (PC, 63). Whilst it is true that Stokes's reading of contemporaneity can be extended further than Evans's suggested reading, since he allows for the individual to be contemporary with her own death in the same way that one can be contemporary with Christ's life on earth, it is not a convincing reading of being contemporary with Christ, particularly not once we see this reading in light of Kierkegaard's theological commitments. In particular, Stokes entirely ignores Kierkegaard's discussion of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist, something which is explicitly linked to the discussion of presence and contemporaneity in *Practice in Christianity*. Kierkegaard, in describing Christ as present at the Communion table, commits to an orthodox Lutheran interpretation of the Eucharistic sacrament in which Christ is truly present in the Eucharistic elements if Christ is present *to* the believer in some way. If Kierkegaard defends an account of Christ being present to the individual by an experience of his presence, then Stokes's reading of contemporaneity cannot give the unified reading of 'contemporaneity' he claims it can.

<sup>117</sup> It is worth noting that Kierkegaard never uses the term 'contemporaneity' to refer to the experience of God in Scripture, and he does not describe this as an experience of Christ's presence, even if he does emphasise Scripture's importance in relating historical events to the single individual.



that 'it is as if my lover were present here', but crucially, it would be unusual to regard this as an example of experiencing my lover's presence. This is a point which Johannes the Seducer makes vividly in the Seducer's Diary:

It would be of real interest to me if it were possible to reproduce very accurately the conversations I have with Cordelia. But I easily perceive that it is an impossibility, for even if I managed to recollect every single word exchanged between us, it nevertheless is out of the question to reproduce the element of contemporaneity, which actually is the nerve in conversation, the surprise in the outburst, the passionateness, which is the life principle in conversation. (EO1, 399)

What is lacking from mere recollection, or imaginative co-presence, is this element of contemporaneity, of genuine interaction and exchange between persons. Whilst reading an historical text might help to bridge a distance between individuals by engaging the imagination in a certain way, it is not an experience of personal presence, and so it looks problematic as an account of being contemporary.

In considering what it is to be contemporary with someone, something, or some event, it is important to first acknowledge the nature of what it is that we are supposedly being contemporary with. Being contemporary with Lord Kitchener's words, or a character in a well written biography, is different from being contemporary with someone in the same room as me. Similarly, being contemporary with the dead is different from being contemporary with the living. What is the difference in these cases? It is a difference in the kind of presence which is available. Even a very vivid imaginative experience with a text will lack the 'life principle of conversation' (EO1, 399) which an engagement with the presence of the living will allow for. However, the condition of contemporaneity remains the same in both cases of being contemporary with the living and with the dead; broadly speaking, both are cases of

being *at the same time as*, but the kind of presence available is very different. If contemporaneity were merely an imaginative mode of cognition with some distant historical event, how would one be contemporary with ‘the time in which he is living’ (PC, 64) as Anti-Climacus writes, or contemporary with a lover through a conversation, as Johannes the Seducer writes (EO1, 399)? Clearly, how we are contemporary with someone, something, or some event, depends on the nature of that person, thing, or event, and the kind of presence which is available.<sup>118</sup>

So how should we understand what it is to be contemporary with Christ? Well, it depends on the nature of Christ. If Christ is a merely an historical figure, then we might think an imaginative mode of cognition is an entirely appropriate account of what it is to be contemporary with Christ. However, this would seem to be a strange conclusion to come to. For instance, Anti-Climacus states that ‘[i]t is now eighteen centuries since he left the earth and ascended on high [...] invisible on high, he is also present everywhere, occupied with drawing all to himself’ (PC, 155). Christian theology typically puts emphasis on the fact that having a relationship with Christ is not having a relationship with an historical figure, but

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<sup>118</sup> What about Stokes’s discussion of being contemporary with one’s own death in ‘At the Graveside’ and the extension of this account to being contemporary with the deceased in *Works of Love*? Although Kierkegaard describes the importance of being aware of death here, and even uses the language of presence, the brief discussion of one’s death being present to a person looks very different to the kind of presence Kierkegaard attributes to Christ in the Eucharist. The experience of death is entirely imaginative in a way that experiencing Christ’s presence is not—the person does not actually experience the presence of one’s own death, nor does she experience the presence of a dead loved one in engaging in an imaginative recollection of the deceased. Kierkegaard’s description of Christ’s presence at the Communion table looks starkly different from these imaginative cases; we do not experience Christ’s presence at the Communion table unless ‘we hear his voice’ (CD, 271). The cases are not analogous, and it is difficult to see how this discussion can be taken as a basis for our understanding of contemporaneity. In fact, Anti-Climacus makes it clear that one of the marks of offense is to relate to Christ at an imaginative distance (PC, 100-01).

rather with a living person. As John the Evangelist states, '[O]ur fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' (1 John 1:3), or, according to Christ himself, 'I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Matthew 28:20). As prophesied in Isaiah (7:14) and then fulfilled at his birth (Matthew 1:23), Christ is called 'Immanuel', which translates as 'God with us'. And so, it looks problematic for Stokes if our account of 'contemporaneity' is too restrictive to account for being contemporary with Christ, even if it can explain how to be contemporary with fictional characters, historical persons and one's own death. We need to understand how one can be contemporary with a living person.<sup>119</sup>

Before giving an account of what it is to be contemporary with Christ as a living person, let us first return to what Stokes writes about contemporaneity as 'an extramundane experience' (2010, 303). Does an account of being contemporary with Christ as a living person fall foul to this objection? Not obviously so. In fact, in the account that I develop in the next section, I argue that our understanding of what it is to be contemporary with Christ should be

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<sup>119</sup> There is fairly compelling evidence to support the claim that this conclusion is in keeping with what Kierkegaard says here. In Cockayne (forthcoming[c]), based on considerations from what Kierkegaard writes in the Communion Discourses, as well as his commitment to the Lutheran doctrine of Christ's Ubiquity (i.e. the fact that he shares in the divine nature), I argue that it is very clear that Kierkegaard is committed to thinking of Christ as a living person whom we can experience today. Consider what he writes about Communion in the following passage, for instance:

At the Communion table the point above all is to hear *his* voice. Certainly a sermon should also bear witness to him, proclaim his word and his teaching, but a sermon is still not *his* voice. At the Communion table, however it is *his* voice you are to hear. [...] At the Communion table there is no speaking about him; there he himself is present in person; there is it he who is speaking—if not, then you are not at the Communion table. In the physical sense, one can point to the Communion table and say, "there it is"; but in the spiritual sense, it is actually *there* only if you hear *his* voice *there*. (CD, 271; emphasis in the original)

informed by our understanding of interpersonal interactions more generally. Whilst it no doubt sounds odd to be present with an invisible divine person, there is nothing extramundane about the nature of this kind of contemporaneity since this is the basis of being contemporary with any other living person. My account also avoids describing contemporaneity as an ‘anomalous register of human experience’ (Stokes, 2015, 53). The way in which living human persons are contemporary with one another (i.e. by an intersubjective experience of one another) is the same as the way in which Christ is contemporary with the believer. Whilst it might be the case that an individual can become contemporary with Christ’s teaching by a kind of imaginative co-presence, to claim that this is a paradigmatic case of being contemporary with Christ is mistaken. It seems obviously true that we should be committed to thinking of Christ as a living person and that Stokes’s proposal fails to account for this.

### **Contemporaneity and perception: The ‘Alston model’**

How should we best understand what it means to experience Christ’s presence and to be contemporary with Christ? Whilst examples, such as the one from Bloom, may begin to help us see what it is to experience the living presence of Christ, it will be important to give a more specific account of what it is to experience Christ in this way. One model which might have potential to explain this kind of experience is William Alston’s (1991) account of religious experience as instance of perceptual experience in *Perceiving God*. Alston defines the conditions for an experience being a perceptual experience by stating that

it is both necessary and sufficient for a state of consciousness to be a state of perceptual consciousness that it (seem to the subject to) involve something’s presenting itself to the subject, S, as so-and-so, as purple, zigzagged, acrid, loud, or whatever. A case of perceptual consciousness is a case of something’s looking, smelling [...] so-and-so to S. (1991, 38)

It is the 'phenomenon of apparent presentation of an object' (1991, 37) which Alston claims is the distinctive feature of perceptual experience and the feature which differentiates it from other modes of consciousness. Alston argues that it is possible for religious experiences to meet the conditions for being perceptual. Since religious experiences are experiences in which an object (God) presents itself to the subject as being 'so-and-so', they should be regarded as perceptual experiences. However, according to Alston, although religious experiences are perceptual, they are not sensory experiences in the same way as, say, visual or audible experiences. Since God is 'pure immaterial' (1991, 19) it makes little sense to say that he could look or sound a certain way. Rather, the believer can be said to be perceiving God in a non-sensory way, for although a perception of God may be accompanied by certain sensory states, God is a spiritual entity and not the kind of thing which can be perceived with the five senses, as might the fruit in the fruit bowl or the orchestra's playing of Bach's *B minor Mass*. Thus, the significant phenomenal character of an experience of God is not found in his visual or audible experiences, but it is the experience of perceiving God as being good or powerful or loving by means of a distinct, mystical phenomenal *qualia*. For Alston, a person perceives God if and only if God appears to her in a mode appropriate to the perception of the kind of thing God is, namely, a spiritual being, and she has an experience of God just in case there is a special kind of *qualia* presented to her consciousness through the 'spiritual sensations' which parallel the five senses.

Alston is concerned primarily with a direct experience of God for the purposes of his account. He focuses on experiences in which God is directly presented to the subject in a non-sensory way. Nevertheless, Alston briefly considers the possibility that we can have direct experiences of God in a mediated way, such as through the words of scripture or through an experience of nature but concludes that although he is not opposed to this possibility, for the purposes of the account, the focus is on 'direct perception of God' (1991, 28). Alston

concludes that direct perception ‘is the simpler phenomenon (involving only one object of perception) and hence it should be thoroughly investigated before we pass on to the more complex two object version’ (1991, 28).

Is it plausible to think that this model might explain what it is to be contemporary with Christ and experience Christ’s presence? Certainly in what Johannes Climacus writes about contemporaneity, as we have seen, there is something perceptual about the nature of religious experience; the believer learns to ‘see with the eyes of faith’ (PF, 102) and Kierkegaard describes the believer as hearing Christ’s voice at the Communion table (CD, 271). Indeed, Evans suggests that there is something perceptual about our experience of Christ understood in Kierkegaard’s terms.<sup>120</sup> Along with the fittingness of Alston’s account to some of what

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<sup>120</sup> Most of Evans’s discussion of Kierkegaard’s model of religious experience comes in the context of explaining Kierkegaard’s religious epistemology. According to Evans, Kierkegaard’s (or, at least Johannes Climacus’s) understanding of religious belief has some similarities with Alvin Plantinga’s (2000) account of religious belief as properly basic. According to Plantinga, some of our beliefs are not inferred from evidence and do not rely on other beliefs in order to be justified or warranted, but they receive warrant if they are grounded in experience (as long as this experience meets certain externalist conditions for warrant such as the proper functioning of cognitive faculties and produced in the proper environment, etc. (2000, 246). For instance, our belief in the existence of a flower is warranted if it is grounded in an experience of a flower which is produced by proper functioning cognitive faculties (2000, 246). The details of Plantinga’s account are not my primary concern here, but it is interesting to note that Evans, in making a comparison between Plantinga’s and Kierkegaard’s epistemologies appeals to a kind of perceptual account of religious experience. In writing about Kierkegaard’s discussion of contemporaneity, he writes that

[w]hat is required is that this encounter be an experience of Jesus in which true knowledge is given. The situation is analogous to a case of ordinary sense perception in which I come to believe that there is a flower before me because I directly perceive the flower. In such a case I

Kierkegaard writes about religious experience, the perceptual model also seems to explain many purported cases of religious experience. This is a point which Alston repeatedly makes in *Perceiving God* and much of the support for his model of religious experience comes from how well the perceptual model fits the various testimonies of religious experience he cites. We might think, for instance, Anthony Bloom's experience, which Evans presents as a paradigm case of contemporaneity with Christ, contains aspects of this perceptual model of experience.

Additionally, although Alston describes perceiving God as something which requires a kind of spiritual sense (a sense he thinks we have in addition to our other five senses), there might be good grounds for thinking that perceiving God, or perceiving Christ in this instance, is an extramundane experience; it is a perceptual experience much like perceiving an apple or a cup of coffee. So, is this a good model for understanding what it means to be contemporary with Christ? As I will argue, the problem with this model as an explanation of contemporaneity, is that being contemporary with a living person does not look obviously like a simple perceptual experience. This model is too restrictive to explain the to and fro of intersubjective experience, and too static to serve as a model for what it is to be in relation with Christ as a person.

### **Contemporaneity and presence: An intersubjective model**

A Kierkegaardian account of contemporaneity is best understood as an experience in which Christ as a living person is present *to* another person in some way. However, it is not obvious that a perceptual model of experience can describe personal presence adequately. George Pappas (1994) and Adam Green (2009) have given some reasons why religious experience is

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do not normally regard the existence of the flower as something that I infer or conclude on the basis of evidence. (2006, 158)

not best understood perceptually, and, as we will see, these objections to Alston are very relevant when considering the best model for understanding contemporaneity.

George Pappas (1994) notes that there is something strange about Alston's description of religious experiences as experiences in which something is 'presented' (1994, 879-80).

Consider Kierkegaard's discussion of experiencing Christ at the Communion table, for instance:

One can point physically to the Communion table and say, "See, there it is," but in the spiritual sense the Communion table is *there* only if you are *known there* by him.

*They follow him.* You do not remain and are not to remain at the Communion table [...] when you follow him, you do indeed leave the Communion table when you go away from it, but then it is as if the Communion table followed you, for where he is, there is the Communion table—and when you follow him, he accompanies you.

What earnestness of eternity, that wherever you go, whatever you do, he still accompanies you [...] The Communion table, to be sure [...] do not forget that where he is, there is the altar, that his altar is neither on Moriah nor on Gerizim, or any visible *there*, but that it is where he is. If this were not so, then you of course would have to remain at the Communion table, take up residence there, never budge from the spot, but such superstition is not Christianity. (CD, 273-74; emphasis in the original)

As Pappas notes (albeit referring to a different example of religious experience), it seems odd to suggest that a religious experience such as this is analogous to perception in any way; the subject does not have an object presented to their consciousness in the same way that I do when I experience the tree outside my window, for instance. There is an important distinction between claiming that God is *present* and that God is *presented* (1994, 880). The latter is a



stronger, perceptual claim, the former is just to have an experience in which it seems to the perceiver that God is close by. Pappas argues that it is difficult to see how religious experiences, even those of the mystics, are best understood as perceptual experiences at all. Usually religious experiences are described in terms which are in ‘contrast with perception, rather than as a perception itself or as something closely resembling perception’ (1994, 880). Pappas’s objection is important to bear in mind when considering how we should understand the concept of contemporaneity. Being contemporary with another person, as we have seen, is about being engaged personally with them, and a perceptual model seems too static to explain what is going on here.

Similarly to Pappas’s criticisms of Alston’s model, Adam Green (2009) has argued that the perceptual model for understanding religious experiences does not fully account for the interpersonal nature of the Judeo-Christian God very well. Green claims that Alston’s model can only work ‘if the *qualia* of the experience are appropriate to an experience of God in the same sense that the *qualia* of a sense experience of an apple are appropriate for an apple’ (2009, 457). When we experience an apple, we experience it having certain qualities such as its colour, size, location, etc., the problem comes when we try to understand the nature of mystical experiences in the same way. To put this another way—it important to remember that ‘God is not like something one buys in a shop, or like a piece of property’ (CD, 88), but, rather, ‘God is a subject’ (CUP, 200). This changes how we understand what it means to experience God. As Green notes, ‘God is not an ineffable joy, a welling harmony, a wafting upwards, or a solemn silence’ (2009, 457). It is, therefore, difficult to see how these experiences ought to be understood perceptually.

Furthermore, as Green goes on to argue, a simple perceptual explanation cannot capture the actions that the mystics often describe God as doing. Alston gives examples of God ‘strengthening’, ‘forgiving’, ‘sympathizing’ and ‘speaking’ (1992, 44), and Green contends that we cannot capture these actions using a simple perceptual model at all. When we are

aware that a person is sad, we perceive their lowered brow, red eyes and sluggish demeanour which present themselves to our consciousness, and we then become aware that this person is sad. However, this is not by means of simple perception; the red eyes of this person are not identical with their sadness. Likewise, Green thinks, when we experience God as forgiving it is difficult to construe this in terms of simple perception—what would it be to perceive God as being forgiving? The Alston model fails, thinks Green, because it is difficult to understand religious experience as merely simple perceptual experiences and disanalogies between religious experience and perceptual experience points to another way of understanding religious experiences which better accounts for the fact that God is a person and not an object.

Green's alternative 'intersubjective model' of religious experience claims that the best way to understand religious experience is as an intersubjective experience of another person (God) as opposed to a perceptual experience of an object. When we experience persons, contrary to when we experience inanimate objects, we do not merely have a third-person experience, but rather, a 'second-person experience' (Stump, 2010, 112). As we have seen, a second-person experience is the very minimal kind of experience required for interpersonal knowledge, and as Stump suggests, it is important that individuals are able to share-attention with one another in order to know one another personally. This discussion can also be applied to our understanding of knowing God. Green applies this importance of joint-attention to help explain what it is to experience God.

Green argues that religious experiences can be understood as instances of joint-attention (or shared-attention) with God, or for our purposes, joint-attention with Christ.<sup>121</sup> To describe it simply, joint-attention is a form of social engagement in which we are aware that another person is 'in engagement with an object or potential object as a process over

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<sup>121</sup> Note that Green talks about shared-attention with God more broadly rather than only shared-attention with Christ.

time' (Reddy, 2011, 137). As Axel Seemen notes in his volume on joint-attention, although 'the discussion of joint attention is anything but unified' (2011, 1), there is a common position which all discussions of joint-attention share. That is, all accounts of joint-attention claim 'that an adequate understanding of the life of the mind has to pay particular attention to its social dimension' (2011, 2), and move from a 'solipsistic conception of mind [...] toward a view of mental phenomena as inherently social' (2011, 2).

An infant's awareness and engagement with other persons develops over time, and this brings with it a kind of dyadic-joint-attention, that is, attention which requires only awareness of another person through a kind of mutual gazing. This basic kind of attention sharing is possible very early on in infants (from zero to two months, according to Vasudevi Reddy (2011, 145). The ability to jointly-attend then develops into a kind of triadic joint-attention, at around four to five months, that is, joint-attention in which an infant gains the ability to focus on some independent object whilst still remaining aware of the other person (Reddy, 2005, 85-87). To clarify with an example: when a child looks her mother in the eye, then points towards an object, and then looks back to the eyes of the mother, if the mother follows the direction of her child's gaze, then they had a dyadic joint-attention to begin with, followed by a triadic joint-attention focusing on the object (Reddy, 2011, 145).<sup>122</sup>

As developmental psychopathologist R. Peter Hobson notes, joint-attention experiences are essential to the development of an infant's ability for intersubjective engagement and mind-reading (2004, 85-109). Hobson cites an experiment conducted in which infants were shown a monitor with a real time feed of their mother and others with a delayed feed of their mother. The infants who engaged with the real time feed responded as if the mother were present in the room, whereas the infants responding to the delayed feed showed signs of distress and looked away (2004, 38-39). What Hobson takes from this study is

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<sup>122</sup> This is similar to an example which Green considers (2009, 460).

that there is a difference between merely responding to certain emotions as they are expressed facially and responding to emotions when we engage in joint-attention with the other person.

Drawing from this discussion of joint-attention in the psychological literature, Green then argues that religious experiences are best understood as instances of joint-attention with God, rather than experiences in which the believer perceives God in some way. Often, when we come to describe religious experiences, Green notes, we overlook the fact that God is a person. If God is an inherently personal being who is aware of all human beings and desires to be in communion with them, he claims, we should expect that his interactions with us would be in some way personal rather than merely perceptual (2009, 461-62). Green proposes a joint-attention model of mystical experience as follows:

One is engaged in dyadic shared attention with God iff one is aware of God as exhibiting some mental state which is directed towards oneself and the mental state which God exhibits involves an awareness of the co-operative nature of the present attention. This co-operation will be invested with an interactive pattern of affect since to experience God is to experience both the source of all goodness and to experience someone who wants to have them most intimate of relationships with one. (2009, 462)

According to Green, this model of religious experience makes sense both of the personal nature of God and of the reports of experiences we find in accounts of religious experience. The joint-attention model offers a way of understanding religious experience which allows for a description of how actions are perceived as well as emotions and intentions. It also means that God can manipulate the media by which we perceive the world (light, sound etc.) to reveal his emotions and actions towards us. According to Green's model, the individual who experiences God through joint-attention does not have to perform an inference to establish that she is experiencing God, but there is a kind of intersubjective relation that occurs

between God and her. The individual experiences something of God's emotions or intentions whether that be God's loving, or God's forgiving or God's imparting mercy. To use an example, when reading Scripture we may become aware that God is present with us (dyadic joint-attention) and then, after reading some words in which God speaks, experience him speak directly to us and have an experience in which he is drawing attention to the pride in our heart (triadic joint-attention), for instance.<sup>123</sup>

This model is much better equipped to explain what it means to be 'contemporary with Christ' than the kind of imaginative reading which Stokes considers.<sup>124</sup> As we have seen

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<sup>123</sup> Green and Quan (2012) apply the joint-attention model to our understanding of God's living presence through Scripture which I will discuss in the next chapter.

<sup>124</sup> Whilst Kierkegaard's writings provide much of the inspiration for the discussion in this thesis, there are some important differences between the position I develop here and Kierkegaard's own position. Although Kierkegaard writes about the importance of Christ's presence in the life of the believer, it is unlikely that he would describe this in the precisely the terms I have used here. One problem being that shared-attention experiences look like they might provide the kind of 'immediate certainty' which Kierkegaard thinks cannot play a role in faith. Kierkegaard makes this point clear in a journal entry in 1848:

Here again is one of the most important points concerning the God-relationship. If a person could have empirical certainty that God wanted to use him as an instrument (as a king, a cabinet member)—how easily he would be able to submit to everything in every sacrifice. But is it possible to have an empirical or even a purely immediate certainty of a relationship to God? God is spirit. To a spiritual being it is impossible to have a relationship other than a spiritual relationship; but a spiritual relationship is *eo ipso* dialectical.—How then does an apostle understand that he has been called by a revelation and the like and has an immediate certainty which is not at all dialectical? I do not understand him—but this can be believed. [...] The relationship to Christ is this—a person tests for himself whether Christ is everything to him, and then says, I put everything into this. But I cannot get an immediate certainty about my

so far in this thesis, our relation to God is best understood intersubjectively, and thus our understanding of religious experience needs also to be understood in these terms. God is a subject to be engaged with, a subject that is present *to* us through our engagement with the spiritual life. Not only is this model of religious experience in keeping with much of what Kierkegaard writes about Christ being present as a subject, but also it fits the account of the spiritual life I have been developing in this thesis much better.

Thus, when Kierkegaard talks about Christ being present *to* a believer through the participation in the Eucharist, for instance, we should understand this as an experience in which the individual and Christ are sharing in attention. This understanding of religious experience moves beyond what Stump describes in second-person experience (as we saw in Chapter 1), to something more intimate. Whilst second-person experience is a necessary condition for a relationship between persons, in order for a relationship to grow closer, shared-attention of some kind of is important. As she goes on to argue,

[a] second-person experience is necessary for minimal personal presence, and it includes (but is not exhausted by) direct and unmediated causal and cognitive contact between persons. Something more—namely, shared attention—is necessary for significant personal presence. Since shared attention comes in degrees, significant personal presence also comes in degrees. Rich shared attention is necessary for the most significant sort of personal presence. And mutual closeness is necessary for rich shared attention. (2010, 119)

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relationship to Christ. I cannot get an immediate certainty about whether I have faith, for to have faith is this very dialectical suspension which is continually in fear and trembling and yet never despairs; faith is precisely this infinite self-concern which keeps one awake in risking everything, this self-concern about whether one really has faith—and precisely this self-concern is faith. (JP, 255 N.B., IX A 32)

As we saw in the previous chapter, for Stump, in order to enjoy union, it is important to be internally integrated that we can share our thoughts and feelings freely. To be close to Christ, we need to enjoy this kind of rich attention sharing with him. So, not only is the phenomenology of shared-attention more suited to the account of experience which Kierkegaard describes, but also it fits the relational model of union which is so important for the spiritual life. In Chapter 6, I will say more about how experiencing Christ's presence allows us to integrate our will around the desire for the good. Before going on to do this, however, it will be important to give an account not only of the role Christ's presence in the spiritual life, but also the importance of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

### **A Kierkegaardian account of the experience of the Holy Spirit**

In writing about the nature of religious experience in the Christian tradition, it is important to consider the role of the Holy Spirit. In the Christian tradition Christ is not only present *to* us, but the Holy Spirit is also present *in* us. In more charismatic traditions, it is the Holy Spirit who is experienced by the believer in her worship. Surprisingly, however, Kierkegaard says very little about the Holy Spirit in his writings. He mentions the Holy Spirit occasionally in referring to specific Bible passages in a handful of places,<sup>125</sup> and refers obliquely to the role of the Holy Spirit in one his Communion Discourses in writing that

every human being has a preacher within him—he eats with him, drinks with him, awakens with him, sleeps with him, in short, is always around him, always with him,

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<sup>125</sup> See EO, 220; CA, 170; CD, 137; SUD, 141; EUD, 278, 139; WL, 3 and CUP, 42 for the other references to the Holy Spirit in Kierkegaard's writings. In his journals, Kierkegaard writes that the Holy Spirit allows us to enjoy a deeper union with God 'he becomes my Father in the Mediator by means of the Spirit' (JP, 1432).

wherever he is and whatever he does, a preacher who is called flesh and blood, lusts and passions, habits and inclinations—so it is also certain that deep within every human being there is a secret-sharer who is present just scrupulously everywhere—the conscience [...] The reason that he is so powerful, punctilious, and always very present and corruptible is that he is in covenant with God. (WA, 182-83)

The only sustained passage in which he explicitly discusses the role of the Holy Spirit is in a short discourse in *For Self Examination*.<sup>126</sup> The discourse is focused on Acts 2:1-12 and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Kierkegaard spends the beginning of the discourse discussing the Spirit's role in conversion and bringing the individual from death to life (FSE, 75-77) and the reception of '*faith*' (FSE, 81). And then in the life of the Christian believer, the Spirit brings the believer spiritual gifts of '*hope*' (FSE, 82) and '*love*' (FSE, 83). Little is said about how this reception of the Spirit's gifts is made possible here, but, more interestingly for the purposes of this chapter, Kierkegaard gives an account of the indwelling of the Spirit in the life of the individual. He explains this by means of a rather long-winded parable of a rich man who bought a 'team of entirely flawless horses' (FSE, 85) to ride. After a couple of years, the horses pick up bad habits 'become dull and drowsy' (FSE, 85) until one day they are

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<sup>126</sup> According to Westphal, whilst, ordinarily, Reformed theology emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit as the testifier of the truth of Christianity, '[f]or Climacus's purposes, the difference between making Jesus Christ the non-Socratic teacher and giving this task to the Holy Spirit is not important. In either case, the recollection model is replaced by one in which the ability to recognise the truth as such depends on the active assistance of God' (2014, 131). Torrance argues that Kierkegaard has good reasons for being silent on the issue of the role of the spirit since '[t]he Hegelianism to which he was so resistant revolved around the concept of the divine spirit (Geist), and this conception of the divine spirit served to endorse a unity between God and human immanence. What made this worse is that Hegel was happy to use the language of 'the witness of the spirit' (2016, 194-95).



ridden by the royal coachman. The effect is that the horses start to ride proudly with a beautiful gait. ‘How did this happen?’ (FSE, 85), Kierkegaard asks. In response he writes,

[i]t is easy to see: the owner, who without being a coachman meddled with being a coachman, drove the horses according to the horses’ understanding of what it is to drive; the royal coachman drove them according to the coachman’s understanding of what it is to drive. (FSE, 86)

This parable supposed to help us to understand the role of the Holy Spirit, according to Kierkegaard. As he continues,

[s]o also with us human beings. When I think of myself and the countless people I have come to know, I have often said to myself sadly: Here are my capacities and talents and qualifications, but the coachman is lacking. For a long time now, from generation to generation, we humans have been [...] driven according to the horse’s’ understanding of driving. [...] Things were different once. There was a time when it pleased the Deity himself, if I may put it this way, to be the coachman. (FSE, 86)

Kierkegaard refers to the passage from Acts in which the Holy Spirit is sent upon the Apostles, and claims that ‘they were men like us, but they were driven well—yes, indeed they were driven well’ (FSE, 87). Kierkegaard ends this discourse with a prayer, urging for the Holy Spirit to do the same with those present, as he did with the Apostles:

O Holy Spirit—we pray for ourselves and for all people—O Holy Spirit, you who give life, here there is no want of capabilities, nor of education, nor of sagacity—indeed, there may rather be too much. But what is wanting is that you take away whatever that

is corrupting to us, that you take power from us and give us life [...] Oh, but if even animals at a later moment understood how good it was for them that the royal coachman took the reins, although it surely made them shudder at first and they at first rebelled, but in vain—should not a human being quickly be able to understand what a blessing it is to him that you take the power and give life! (FSE, 87)

We see, in the only real discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit in Kierkegaard's writings, that Kierkegaard has some concept of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That is, as the metaphor presents, Kierkegaard describes the Holy Spirit as somehow taking control or guiding an individual in a specific way. No doubt, this is in part what he has in mind with his discussion of the secret preacher of the conscience; the Holy Spirit guides individuals by correcting their judgement and convicting them when they act out of sin, rather than willing the good. However, there is something more substantial than just an explanation of the conscience at work in Kierkegaard's discussion. of the Holy Spirit as a coachman. What is distinctive about this brief discussion of the Holy Spirit, is that God is not just present *to* an individual through Christ, but he is also somehow present *in* an individual by the Holy Spirit.<sup>127</sup> As I suggest in the next section, we make some sense of this discussion of the Holy Spirit's indwelling in an individual by extending the intersubjective model of experience we have already outlined.

### **Joint-attention and indwelling**

As Stump describes it, when an individual, Paula, comes to faith, 'the indwelling of the Holy Spirit puts the mind of God within Paula's psyche, in some sense' (2012, 80). As Stump notes,

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<sup>127</sup> Torrance agrees that Kierkegaard defends a model of faith in which the Holy Spirit makes Christ known to the believer and is therefore essential to faith (2016, 174), but he makes no mention of the indwelling of the Spirit at any point.

the Holy Spirit's indwelling cannot be understood merely as God having maximal knowledge about Paula, but 'it is also possible for God to communicate in a direct and unmediated way with the mind of that person' (2012, 80). Stump then goes on to propose a model of indwelling which she draws from the psychological literature on joint-attention, mindreading and mirror neurons. As Stump describes it, a mutually loving union between two persons is one in which there is 'a particularly intimate kind of mind-reading accompanied by shared attention between persons' (2012, 80).

However, even this intimate kind of relation between two persons in love will be not sufficient to explain the intimacy of the Holy Spirit's indwelling, Stump argues. Moving beyond an account of mindreading, Stump then discusses the kind of mind-sharing that would be needed for indwelling to be possible. She notes that in cases of neural dysfunction or injury, 'a patient can suffer the delusion that some part of his body is not his own' (2012, 83). Building on this possibility, of experiencing other's mental states as one's own, Stump argues that

[b]ecause of the systems of the human brain for recognizing some mental states as one's own, it is also possible for a person Jerome to have a sense of the mind operative in him as not his own but someone else's. In a case of this sort, the intersubjectivity of mental states enabled by the mirror neuron system and evident in mind-reading transforms from a mere psychological sharing to something that is ontological. What is in Jerome's mind is not just another person's thought or affect, but in fact that other person's mind. "Indwelling" is not a bad word for this kind of relationship between minds. (2012, 83)

Although at face value, Stump's proposal sounds a little far-fetched, and is certainly beyond the scope of current psychological study of intersubjective relations, it is a helpful way of

making sense of how a person could *indwell* in another. Stump's proposal also makes good sense of the theology of indwelling as it describes God as actually present *in* a human being, rather than merely present *with* or present *to*. It also gives a helpful way thinking about the description of derivative presence I described earlier.

So, by employing the resources that we have already used to best explain the notion of contemporaneity in Kierkegaard's works, we can explain how an intersubjective experience of the Holy Spirit might be possible. Stump's account of the indwelling of the spirit is described entirely in terms in intersubjective relations between persons, and is a kind of mind-sharing experience in which an individual is conscious of another's thoughts in some way. This seems very close to what Kierkegaard has in mind when he describes the Apostles as being driven by a royal coachman; in submitting their will to God's, the Holy Spirit indwells in the minds of the Apostles so that he may guide them in some way. It also gives us another way in which an individual may relate to God personally in this life.

## **Conclusion**

If being contemporary with Christ is an experience in which an individual experiences Christ as being present *to* her in some way, then we have seen that a perceptual model of religious experience would suffice to explain the concept of contemporaneity. However, by using Green's discussion of intersubjective religious experience, we have seen how a Kierkegaardian account of experiencing Christ can be explained. Thus, the experiences of Christ which are so important to the account of the spiritual life defended in this thesis, should be understood as experiences in which the individual and Christ share-attention in some way. Furthermore, I have also suggested how this model might help us to understand the experience of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual life. Although this is perhaps less central to my account, we have seen that an intersubjective model of experience can help to make some sense of how the Holy Spirit is present *in* an individual.

## Chapter 5

### Practice in Christianity:

#### Attention sharing and ritual knowledge in the God-relationship

Father in heaven! What is man that you are mindful of him, a child of man that you are concerned for him—and in every way, in every respect! Truly, in nothing do you leave yourself without witness; and finally you give him your Word. More you could not do. To force him to use it, to read it, or to listen to it, to force him to act according to it—that you could not wish. Ah, and you do more. You are not like a human being. He rarely does anything for nothing, but if he does, he at least does not wish to put to inconvenience by it. You, however, O God, you give your Word as a gift—that you do, Infinitely Sublime One, and we humans have nothing to give in return. And if you find only some willingness in the single individual, you are promptly at hand and are, first of all, the one who with more than human—indeed, with divine—patience sits and spells out the Word with the single individual so that he may understand it aright; and then you are the one who, again with more than human—indeed, divine—patience takes him by the hand, as it were, and helps him when he strives to act according to it—you, our Father in heaven! (FSE, 13-14)

#### Introduction

Since the experience of Christ's presence is so important to the account of the spiritual life I defend, we might wonder how it is possible to experience Christ's presence in this way. The answer I develop in this chapter focuses on the importance of spiritual practice for the person's experience of Christ's presence. What role do spiritual practices have in the spiritual

life?<sup>128</sup> According to the thesis I argue for in this chapter, one of the main purposes of spiritual practices is to give us a greater knowledge of Christ. But what kind of knowledge can we gain from spiritual practice? Before going on to give a Kierkegaardian account of spiritual practice, I first consider three recent discussions of the epistemology of spiritual practice: Stump's (2010) discussion of Franciscan knowledge and narrative, Terence Cuneo's (2014) account of ritual knowledge and religious know-how, and Nicholas Wolterstorff's (2016) account of knowing God liturgically. These accounts are not in tension, but, rather, aim to outline the different kinds of knowledge which spiritual practices can give us. Stump, for instance, maintains that we can gain a kind of non-propositional Franciscan knowledge by reading Scripture in a certain way. Cuneo thinks that engaging in liturgy can help us to gain practical knowledge of how to engage with God. And Wolterstorff thinks that liturgy can give us a kind of knowledge by identification—we come to know God by using what he calls 'appropriate addressee-identification terms' (2016, 10). I aim to add a fourth way that we can know God through spiritual practice, namely, by knowing Christ interpersonally through a kind of attention-sharing. Drawing on Green and Keith Quan's (2012) discussion Scripture and attention-sharing, I aim to develop a Kierkegaardian account of spiritual practice which can help explain how an individual might become contemporary with Christ.

### **The epistemology of spiritual practice**

What can we come to know by engaging with spiritual practices?<sup>129</sup> I will begin by considering some established answers to this question, before going on to give a Kierkegaardian picture of spiritual practice.

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<sup>128</sup> I am considering spiritual practices in a fairly broad sense in this chapter and will consider reading Scripture, the Eucharist, liturgy and preaching.

<sup>129</sup> In his recent book, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, Kevin Schillbrack also argues for the need to focus on spiritual practices to establish how the spiritual life is lived out and to give a broader, more

One answer to the question of what kind of knowledge we can gain from spiritual practice is that it gives us propositional knowledge about God. Reading Scripture, for example, will teach us that Christ turned water into wine and that God loves to give good gifts to his children. Taking part in the Eucharist will remind us that God is gracious and that he desires the redemption of those he loves. Or, we might think, spiritual practices give us new propositional beliefs. Pascal (1950), for instance, maintains that taking holy water and participating in Mass will give rise to the belief that God exists and that the doctrines of Christianity are true. I take it that it is uncontroversial that spiritual practice can play a role in coming to know about God, if God exists. The more significant question, particularly considering the claims which have been endorsed in this thesis, is whether spiritual practice has any role to play in our interpersonal knowledge of God.

### **Stump on narrative knowledge**

We have already seen one answer to the question of what we can learn from spiritual practices in the discussion of Stump's account of Franciscan knowledge from Chapter 1. Although I have devoted most of my attention to what Stump has to say about interpersonal knowledge, the predominant reason that Stump makes the Dominican/Franciscan distinction is to account for a kind of Franciscan knowledge which can be gained from reading narratives. In particular, Stump wants to claim that there is a kind of knowledge which we can gain from the narratives of Scripture which will help to form part of her response to the problem of suffering. By its very nature, this kind of knowledge is difficult to define in precise terms, but what Stump is concerned with is the rich insights that literature and Scripture offer us which cannot be summarised propositionally. Something is lost in the condensing of a psalm or a

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detailed understanding of the nature of religions than is currently available in the literature. Schillbrack rightly points out that the spiritual life cannot be understood fully by merely understanding the propositional beliefs of religious people.

piece of narrative into a set of assertions—in reading the *Wikipedia* plot summary of *Oliver Twist* I may gain most of the same propositional content as I would if I actually read Dickens’s prose, but there is something I learn from my engagement with characters, dialogue and narrative which the *Wikipedia* page could never give me.

It seems fairly clear that as well as the reading of Scripture, what Stump says can apply more widely to spiritual practices. The role of the president in the Eucharist, or the leader of a piece of liturgy, might be described as a kind of story-teller. What we learn by participating in spoken worship or the Eucharist is not solely what we can describe propositionally—there is clearly a kind of Franciscan knowledge which can be gained from engaging in spiritual practice which involves any kind of narrative, whether that be reaching, singing, prayer or meditation. Thus, Stump gives us one way of thinking about the kind of knowledge we might gain from spiritual practice. Narrative in spiritual practice gives us non-propositional Franciscan knowledge.

### **Cuneo on ritual knowledge**

Another significant discussion of spiritual epistemology in the recent literature is Cuneo’s account of ritual knowledge. Cuneo argues that interpersonally knowing someone cannot be described in entirely propositional terms; knowing someone personally, Cuneo argues, also requires a kind of practical knowledge. ‘When one is in rapport with another’, he writes,

one does not simply enjoy some sort of privileged epistemic contact with that person. One also knows how to engage that person and, often, what that person cares about. In this respect, the concept of knowing with which I am working belongs more neatly to a cluster of virtue-theoretic notions according to which knowing someone is not only a mode of understanding but also an achievement, typically accomplished only with time, familiarity, effort, and discernment. (2014, 369)



If this is correct, then we can apply the same claim to knowing God: ‘knowing God consists in (although is not exhausted by) knowing how to engage God’ (2013, 369).<sup>130</sup> According to

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<sup>130</sup> A major hurdle for Cuneo’s position to overcome is the question of whether or not all knowing is a species of knowing *that*. This is a complex and contentious issue that Cuneo can certainly not hope to resolve in 20 pages. (For a more detailed discussion on this issue see Bengson and Moffett (eds.) 2012.) Cuneo supports what he calls his ‘moderate view’, namely that knowing-how is ‘a sequence of act types that an agent can perform’, such as ‘[p]erforming a work of music, swimming the crawl [...] and offer[ing] thanks to God’ (2014, 371). If this view is right, then ‘knowing how to perform an action is a species of objectual knowledge, having as its object not a proposition but a way of acting’ (2014, 371). He gives some support to this view. First, he argues that relating to an object and action are importantly different, is that we can upgrade propositional knowledge but not practical knowledge. For example, it makes sense to say “I not only know *that your mother’s maiden name is “Smith”, but I’m also certain of it*”, but it does not make sense to say “I not only know how to perform [the musical piece] “Giant Steps”, I am also certain of it” ’ (2014, 371). Knowledge *that* can be upgraded to certainty, whereas knowledge how gets upgraded to mastery instead (2014, 371). So, plausibly, these two kinds of knowing are distinct. Secondly, practical knowledge does not seem to be susceptible to Gettier-style counter-examples while knowing *that* is. Whilst coming to know a certain proposition does not count as knowledge if arrived at by fluke, most philosophers think (or so Cuneo claims), gaining knowledge-how to perform a piece of music, for example, still counts as knowledge even if it is acquired entirely by fluke. Accidentally stumbling upon the correct score for a piece of music of which the majority of scores are incorrect, would still give us knowledge how to perform that piece of music even if picking that particular score, rather than one of the defective scores, were entirely by chance (2014, 372). According to Cuneo, these considerations give support to the claim that knowing how is different from knowing that, and that we know some things in relation to action-types, rather than to propositions. Cuneo also admits that his is not the only way of understanding practical knowledge, and states that ‘those unsympathetic with the moderate position—say, those who identify knowing how with a special sort of knowing that—should feel free to attempt to translate what I say into the idioms that belong to their favored version of knowing how’ (2014, 370). Even the intellectualist makes *some*

Cuneo, an individual can gain a certain kind of practical knowledge by engaging in spiritual practices. Taking the example of liturgy, he argues that

liturgy makes available act-types of a certain range such as chanting, kissing, prostrating, and eating that count in the context of a liturgical performance as cases of blessing, petitioning, and thanking God. [...] If this is correct, the liturgy provides the materials for not only engaging but also knowing how to engage God. Or more, precisely: the liturgy provides the materials by which a person can acquire such knowledge and a context in which she can exercise or enact it [...] to the extent that one grasps and sufficiently understands these ways of acting, one knows how to bless, petition, and thank God in their ritualized forms. One has ritual knowledge (2014, 383)

Cuneo argues that this account of ritual knowledge makes sense of why spiritual practices are so important for religious traditions even for those who do not fully understand what they are doing. Cuneo maintains that repetition of spiritual practice gives us a greater mastery of the practice of engaging with God. If we are successful in engaging God in using certain forms of

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distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that, even if these two concepts are ultimately reducible. Typically, the intellectualist understands gaining knowledge by learning how to do something as an example of coming to know a proposition in a 'practical mode of presentation' (Stanley and Williamson, 2001, 427) or 'practical way of thinking' (Stanley, 2011, 130). Even this very thin notion of knowing-how, however, is compatible with Cuneo's thesis—the individual improves her epistemic state by learning how to ride a bike, for example, in the practical way, i.e. by getting on a bike and pedalling it, even if she already knew all of the propositions involved (from reading a manual, for example). Given this, gaining a new perspective or a new mode of understanding for a proposition one already knows is still to improve one's epistemic state and so there is still some relevant difference between know-how and know-that.

spiritual practice, then we genuinely have gained a kind of practical knowledge. What is more, if Cuneo is right in thinking that practical knowledge is an important aspect of our interpersonal knowledge, then our interpersonal knowledge of God has also improved in some way by learning how to engage God better.

### **Wolterstorff on knowing God liturgically**

In light of Cuneo's and Stump's accounts of knowing God through spiritual practices, Wolterstorff (2016) has attempted to offer another answer to the question of what we can come to know by engaging with spiritual practices.<sup>131</sup> Wolterstorff's thesis focuses specifically on the kind of knowledge that could be gained from addressing God in liturgy. According to Wolterstorff, whilst a sermon or a creed might speak about God, '[a]ddressing God is distinctly different from speaking about God' (2016, 9). There are two features of addressing God which allow us to know God: 'one comes to know God by virtue of taking for granted, in one's address, what God is like in certain respects; and one comes to know God by learning to use the appropriate "addressee-identification terms"' (2016, 10). Let us consider each of these features in turn.<sup>132</sup>

First, according to Wolterstorff, we can have a certain kind of knowledge in virtue of what we take for granted. He begins by noting that an important aspect of our social development is our learning how to perform certain social practices in appropriate contexts and at appropriate times, and in so doing, we learn to take certain things for granted. Often,

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<sup>131</sup> Rather than attempting to refute Stump's or Cuneo's accounts, Wolterstorff offers an account of knowing God through spiritual practice which builds on some of Stump's and Cuneo's insights. Wolterstorff repeatedly insists that his account is not a comprehensive one, but one that can coherently stand alongside what Stump and Cuneo have argued about knowing God.

<sup>132</sup> There is a more expanded version of this discussion in Wolterstorff (2015). In particular, Chapter 4 of this book is devoted to thinking about the nature of addressing God.

what we take for granted is ‘sub-doxastic’, that is, many of the things we take for granted (that the world existed before I was born, to use Wolterstorff’s example) never cross our minds and are never called into question. Wolterstorff argues that in taking certain things for granted, we can come to know things about the world. For instance, in taking for granted that the world existed before I was born, it is possible for me to know that the world existed before I was born, even if I never bring this consciously to mind. Thus, ‘in learning to perform various actions, we take for granted what the world is like in certain respects. [...] And if the world is as we take it to be, then we have gained object-knowledge of the world’ (2016, 11).

The application to spiritual practice should be fairly obvious. In the performance and repetition of spiritual practice, and particularly in literature, we take for granted that certain features of God are true. In liturgy we learn to address God in certain ways (“we bless you, O God”; “we praise you, O God”; “we thank you, O God”; “we confess to you, O God”; “we petition you, O God”) (2016, 11) and if God does exist, these addresses can give us a certain kind of knowledge. As Wolterstorff argues,

[t]o participate in engaging God liturgically in the form of addressing God is to take God to be a “thou” whom it is appropriate to address, to take God to be capable of listening, to take God to be worthy of praise and adoration, to take God to be capable of listening, to take God to be worthy of praise and adoration... (2016, 13)

Thus, in taking certain truths for granted, we come to know certain things about what God is like and who God is. This is where the second feature of Wolterstorff’s thesis comes in. As well as the possibility of coming to know God in what we take for granted, we also come to know God in the use of certain ‘addressee-identification terms’ (2016, 13). Although we can use these terms to make declarations about God, Wolterstorff is particularly interested in our use of addressee-identification terms in our addressing God. In stating ‘O heavenly King and

Comforter [...] come and abide in us' (2016, 14), for instance, we are able not only to declare something about God, but also to actually address God. Now, if we are successful in our use of 'addressee-identification terms' (i.e. if it is actually true that God is King and abides in us), then we are able to come to know 'something of what God is like' (2016, 14).

It is worth noting that these accounts are not necessarily in tension and it is entirely possible that all three ways of knowing are available by engaging in spiritual practice. Moreover, as no doubt all of the proponents of these accounts would admit, there is more to be said about what we can know from our engagement with spiritual practices.<sup>133</sup> In the remainder of this chapter, I seek to give an account of knowing God through spiritual practice which contributes a further dimension to the epistemology of spiritual practice.

### **Towards an interpersonal model of spiritual practice**

Where does the Kierkegaardian account of knowing God fit into this picture of knowing God through engaging in spiritual practice? Remember, that according to the account I have developed in the previous chapters, a person must relate to God through her union with Christ. Generally speaking, it seems obvious that even if knowing how to engage someone interpersonally, or knowing how to address them appropriately is important for human relationships and can be a way of gaining knowledge, there is more to knowing someone than merely knowing how to engage or address them. Even if it makes sense to have interpersonal know-how or an appropriate mode of addressing a person without having first-hand knowledge of that person, we might think that this personal knowledge would be improved by

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<sup>133</sup> I think that Cuneo would be in agreement with this claim since he acknowledges that knowing-how is an aspect of knowing a person, but not an exhaustive aspect; however, he does not develop a more exhaustive account in his paper (2014, 369). Similarly, Wolterstorff admits that there is not yet a comprehensive account of what we can come to know from liturgy, never mind spiritual practice in general (2016, 9).

having a second-person experience of that person. Knowing how to engage with a person and knowing the appropriate mode in which to address a person needs to be understood as part of the larger project of knowing someone interpersonally. That is, even if knowing someone requires knowing how to engage them and addressing them appropriately, this does not circumvent the need for second-person experience and mutual personal presence.

The analogous case applies for understanding spiritual practice. Whilst Cuneo and Wolterstorff illuminate a different aspect of spiritual practice which has often been ignored in the philosophy of religion, it seems plausible to think that knowing how to engage with Christ without knowing Christ is in some way lacking. What is important for the account of the spiritual life which is defended in this thesis is that spiritual practices do not just give us knowledge how to engage with Christ, or give us a mode of addressing Christ (even if they do give us this kind of knowledge), but, rather, they also give us a kind of second-personal knowledge of Christ, at least if they are successful.

The analogy with more ordinary human relationships might be helpful here. In human relationships, such as marriage, certain practices or rituals often develop. For instance, the giving of anniversary gifts every year, or perhaps, purchasing flowers on a regular basis, having regular dates, meals out, and so on. These practices can give a person a good practical understanding of how to engage with one's spouse—if, for instance, one partner dislikes Italian food, then the other partner will quickly learn that weekly visits to the Italian restaurant will not improve one's relationship. At a more sophisticated level, we begin to learn how certain body language, behaviour, mannerisms, tone of voice and so on, engage our partner well. Cuneo is surely right that if God exists, then engaging in religious practices can play a similar role. It also seems though, that the practice of going on a regular date, or buying gifts, or whatever romantic practice one favours, can give us a kind of interpersonal knowledge of that person.

However, I do not buy my wife gifts or take her on dates because I want to learn *how* to engage with her, but because I want to know her more. If the argument developed in Chapter 1 is successful, then a necessary condition for my interpersonal knowledge of my wife is that I experience my wife second-personally.<sup>134</sup> It would be helpful to be able to say not only that these practices of engaging in ritual and tradition allow me to gain interpersonal-know-how relating to my wife, but also, to say that they allow me to gain second-personal knowledge of my wife.

Along with second-personal knowledge and practical knowledge, propositional knowledge also plays an important role in our personal relationships too. Although I have given a detailed argument for the claim that having objective (or propositional) knowledge about God is not sufficient for having a relationship with God (in Chapter 1), propositional knowledge can still play an important role. Even if I think knowing about my wife would be insufficient for us to have a relationship, it would be strange to think that I ought to abandon knowing about my wife once I have experienced her second-personally. Indeed, propositional knowledge appears to have a very important role in knowing a person. For instance, one way of improving the closeness of my relationship with my wife would be to spend time learning about the things she cares about. Indeed, coming to have this kind of knowledge would surely improve my practical knowledge and give a new depth to the closeness of my second-personal knowledge of my wife. Analogously, in a person's relationship with God, although second-personal experience is necessary for this relationship, it does not circumvent the need for the Christian to come to know more about God by say, reading Scripture or taking theology classes.

Personal-practices—spending time together, sharing experiences, and so on—are vital to increasing our interpersonal knowledge of a person. We can say the same, I think, about

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<sup>134</sup> Or, at the very least, my interpersonal knowledge of my wife is significantly improved by my having second-personal experiences of her.

spiritual practices. The aim in receiving the Eucharist, or participating in liturgy, or reading Scripture, or prayer, is not merely to engage *with* Christ, for this implies a kind of one-way understanding of spirituality. If Green (2009) (amongst others) are correct, then our experience of Christ is not one in which we perceive him as an object, but a second-person experience in which both parties attend to one another. This understanding of religious experience must change how we approach spiritual practices. Rather than trying to engage with Christ in a one-way manner, we try to engage *with* Christ as a person. The aim of spiritual practices, at least in the account I have put forward in this thesis, should be to know Christ better, to experience him more fully, and to deepen our union with him.

We find in Kierkegaard's writings some vivid descriptions of how spiritual practices may engage us in this kind of interpersonal experience. By giving some specific examples of these, I will aim to apply some of the lessons we have learnt from the nature of religious experience to help construct an interpersonal model of spiritual practice which can contribute to our understanding of the epistemology of spiritual practice.

### **'The Mirror of the Word': Scripture and presence in the God-relationship**

The first example I will consider in developing an interpersonal account of spiritual practice is the reading of Scripture. As I will go to discuss in the proceeding chapter, in Kierkegaard's writings the emphasis on the individual's engagement with Scripture is key to understanding how a person engages with God and imitates Christ. But we can also learn more about what kind of knowledge we gain from reading Scripture in a certain way from Kierkegaard.<sup>135</sup>

Kierkegaard's discussion of Scripture arises out of a lengthy reflection on James 1:22-27, particularly, the command to be 'doers of the Word, and not only hearers of it' (James

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<sup>135</sup> Torrance gives a more detailed analysis of Kierkegaard's views on Scripture (2016, 118-25). I focus on the nature the kind of experience we can have in reading Scripture in way, which Kierkegaard recommends, rather than giving a detailed historical context of the discussion, as Torrance does.



1:22, see FSE, 13).<sup>136</sup> '[I]n order to become a doer of the Word', Kierkegaard thinks, one must first of all be a hearer or reader of it' (FSE, 25). Throughout his discussion here, Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of a mirror; '*The first requirement*' in reading Scripture, he states, '*is that you must not look at the mirror, observe the mirror, but must see yourself in the mirror*' (FSE, 25; emphasis in the original). The scholarly, historical literalism which Kierkegaard critiques looks only *at* the mirror and not *in* the mirror by asking historical questions about translation, interpretation and authorship (FSE, 25-26). As such, this approach misses the challenge which Scripture raises to the individual. Scripture cannot be approached in a detached, objective manner, instead, he thinks, the reader must approach it personally.

To explain the purpose of Scripture, Kierkegaard uses another metaphor, namely, that of a letter from a beloved which is written in a language the individual cannot understand. He writes:

Now think of God's Word. When you read God's Word in a scholarly way—we do not disparage scholarship, no far from it, but do bear this in mind: when you are reading God's Word in a scholarly way, with a dictionary etc., then you are not reading God's Word. [...] In other words, when you are reading God's Word, it is not the obscure passages that bind you but what you understand, and with that you are to comply at once. If you understand only one single passage in all of Holy Scripture, well, then you must do that first of all. (FSE, 28-29)

Rather than merely encouraging a kind of intellectual Biblical scholarship, for Kierkegaard, one of the primary purposes of reading Scripture is to transform an individual. By reading Scripture, we somehow become contemporary with Christ and realise the challenge that

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<sup>136</sup> Kierkegaard begins by discussing the merits and limitations of Luther's thinking on grace and works with reference to this verse.

comes from his words.<sup>137</sup> The risk of looking only *at* the mirror, and not *in* the mirror is that this challenge never occurs. When the reading of Scripture is made into an academic discipline and scholarship becomes primary to the task of being a Christian, then the spiritual practice of reading Scripture loses its ability to transform the individual. Instead, Kierkegaard thinks, the individual must approach Scripture personally and put into action what they understand.

Kierkegaard then goes on to explain how the individual can read Scripture in this transformative and personal way:

*The second requirement is that in order to see yourself in the mirror when you read God's Word you must (so that you actually do come to see yourself in the mirror) remember to say to yourself incessantly: It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking (FSE, 35; emphasis in the original)*

One purpose of reading Scripture is to transform an individual by experiencing the words of Scripture personally. However, this is not merely a matter of understanding the words and then trying to enact them, the practice of reading Scripture is experiential, for Kierkegaard:

To be alone with Holy Scripture! I dare not! If I open it—any passage—it traps me at once; it asks me (indeed, it is as if it were God himself who asked me): Have you done what you read there? And then, then—yes, then I am trapped. (FSE, 31)

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<sup>137</sup> We might also think that we can gain comfort from Christ's words, although this is not something which Kierkegaard draws attention to in any detail.

Hearing God’s voice in Scripture is not merely about understanding the meaning of certain words and sentences, but it is a personal and transformative practice in which God speaks directly to the individual.<sup>138</sup>

What does this view of Scripture add to the previous discussion of the epistemology of spiritual practice? It gestures toward a kind of interpersonal interaction with Christ made possible through Scripture. In the next section, drawing on Green’s (with Quan, 2012) account of experiencing Scripture, I aim to flesh out this interpersonal model in more detail.

### **Scripture and attention sharing**

Green and Quan (2012) argue that one way of understanding the claim that God is present in, and speaking through Scripture is to maintain that Scripture gives us an occasion for a shared attention experience with God. Building on the account of attention-sharing Green describes in his article ‘Reading the Mind of God’, Green and Quan consider how written text might allow one to share-attention. They consider the following two cases:

#### *Case 1*

Becky likes to cook along with the Rachael Ray show. The show is on the Spanish-speaking channel during her dinner hour, and Becky does not speak Spanish, so she follows the English subtitles. When Ray says “Consider the golden brown crust of this

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<sup>138</sup> It is interesting to note that here Kierkegaard says ‘it is as if it were God himself who asked me’ rather than stating that God actually asks, or speaks to the individual. Although we have seen the importance of experiencing God’s presence, actions and words for the practice of imitation, and Kierkegaard himself states that the individual must *actually* be contemporary with the presence of Christ (PC, 9), this does not appear to be what Kierkegaard advocates in his discussion of Scripture. Recall that this was motivation for Stokes’s epistemic account of contemporaneity which was discussed previously. However, we saw the clear reasons why this was a flawed account for understanding every instance of experiencing Christ.

zucchini bake” Becky is able to use her abilities to engage in shared attention as mediated by the subtitles to attend to the zucchini bake pictured on the screen. She then imagines what Rachael Ray would say about the zucchini bake that Becky is cooking and is led to look at the crust of her own zucchini bake, pondering whether it is golden brown as it should be.

### *Case 2*

Alex wins a private cooking lesson with Rachael Ray. He is deaf, so Rachael communicates with him using written notes. At a certain point in the lesson, she hands him a note that reads, “Consider the golden brown crust of this zucchini bake,” at which point he attends with Rachael to the crust. He looks back at Rachael who smiles and holds out a note between them that reads, “You done good.” (2012, 422)

In case 1, Becky does not share attention with Rachel Ray, since Ray is not present for her to share attention with. However, she uses the same abilities that she uses when genuinely sharing attention with another person (2012, 423). Becky’s reading of the subtitles allows her to focus on the object of attention which Rachel Ray wishes her audience to focus on and also to ‘navigate her own environment in light of what she reads’ (2012, 423). Case 2 is an example of genuine shared attention; the first note which Alex reads functions much like a child’s point towards the light, according to Green and Quan and is an example of triadic shared attention mediated by text. The second note is an example of dyadic shared attention in which Alex and Rachel share attention with one another.

These examples serve as the basis for the distinction which Green and Quan make between ‘genuine’ and ‘pseudo’ shared-attention (2012, 423). Pseudo-shared-attention is not an illusion of shared-attention, but, rather, a kind of ‘as if’ attention sharing whereby the individual ‘processes an input in an “as if” mode (e.g., “as if” the person on the TV were

present' (2012, 423). Genuine shared attention through text occurs when two individuals cooperate in attention sharing in either the dyadic or triadic variety (2012, 423). They extend this taxonomy of genuine shared attention further by dividing this experience into an 'instrumental' and 'constitutive' shared attention. They give the following example to demonstrate this difference:

if Rachael Ray hands Alex a note that says, "My producer Buddy is in the next room and he wants to give you a new blender," Alex may then be empowered by the note to have dyadic and triadic shared experiences with Buddy, but the note is not part of any cooperative activity shared by Alex and Buddy. The note is only a means of putting Alex in a position to engage in shared attention with Buddy. (2012, 422)

An instrumental shared-attention experience is different from a pseudo-shared-attention experience in that it alerts Alex to an actual person (Buddy) who is available to share attention with him.

With these different ways of sharing-attention through text explained, Green and Quan then consider how this might help us to understand the claim that God speaks through or is present in the text found in Scripture. It is possible, they argue, that one might have a kind of pseudo-shared-attention experience with God when one reads the story of the healing of the paralysed man in Mark Chapter 2 (2012, 423-24). For example, we might imagine ourselves in the position of the man and read the words 'Son, your sins are forgiven' as if they are being spoken directly to us (2012, 424). However, according to Green and Quan, pseudo shared-experience cannot account fully for God's continuing presence and speaking through Scripture (2012, 425). Pseudo-shared-attention is possible with other literary texts, such as Plato's account of Socrates in the *Republic*, for example. Yet, in the Christian tradition, the

claim is that God is *actually* present in and speaking through Scripture and just that Scripture sparks our imagination in a certain way.

So how can Scripture give us more than a pseudo-shared-attention experience of Christ? Well, to begin with, Green and Quan argue, it is possible for Scripture to allow for instrumental shared-attention experiences. That is, Scripture can alert one to the presence of Christ, a person who is able to share-attention with you. For example, '[w]hen the psalmist writes, "Taste and see that the Lord is good," it represents the world as being a place that includes a divine being whose goodness is available for the experiencing' (2012, 425). So, Scripture can alert us to the fact that Christ is present in some way. This account of Christ's presence in Scripture still looks too weak to explain the claim that God speaks through Scripture, however.

In order to explain this claim fully, we must understand the kind of experience possible as an example having a constitutive shared-attention experience with Christ. Green and Quan fill this out in comparison with the previous example:

Much like Rachael Ray hands Alex a note about the zucchini bake to direct his attention to the zucchini bake in Case 2, so God might, through the Scriptures, direct one's attention to one's pride. Just as Ray hands Alex a note saying he "done good" that shapes how Alex experiences Ray's kindly smile, so God might elect for the contents of Scripture to shape a dyadic experience of the divine. Shared attention requires that the agent one is sharing attention with be experienced as present, even if implicitly. Thus, the constitutive reading draws a tight link between the role that the text plays in facilitating shared attention and God's being present. (2012, 426).

Whilst 'as if' experiences might be the most common kind of experience, it is possible for these kinds of experience to act as a prime for us to experience Scripture in an instrumental

and constitutive way, Green and Quan argue (2012, 427). Pseudo-shared-attention experiences encourage us to engage with Scripture and to enter into the ‘cooperative activity with the divine in which God uses the text of the Scriptures to reveal Himself dyadically or triadically’ (2012, 427).

Green and Quan’s model of experiencing God in Scripture gives us a way of understanding the claims that Kierkegaard makes about hearing the Word of God through the mirror of Scripture. Clearly, what Kierkegaard describes in the passage quoted previously is closest to what Green and Quan call a pseudo-shared-attention experience; Kierkegaard writes that it is ‘as if’ Christ had spoken. Although he does not admit as much in his discussion of reading Scripture in *For Self-Examination*, it is perfectly coherent with the parameters of this project to see this pseudo-shared-attention account as the most basic form of experiencing God through Scripture, rather than an exhaustive account. Indeed, I have shown the importance of genuine shared-attention in a Kierkegaardian understanding of the spiritual life.

What we see gestured towards in Kierkegaard’s work, and then elaborated on in much greater detail in Green and Quan’s discussion, is that spiritual practices can enable not only interpersonal know-how or appropriate addressing of Christ, but they can allow for a kind of interpersonal knowledge of Christ. Even if these experiences are rare, or difficult to achieve, this way of thinking about spiritual practice gives a greater depth of understanding to what has already been developed in the epistemology of spiritual practice. The practice of reading Scripture aims at allowing us to share-attention with Christ. Furthermore, as I will go on to argue, experiencing Christ’s presence is crucially important for the practice of imitating Christ. It is when we experience Christ in this way that we are most able to see the difference between ourselves and Christ and to begin the transformative process of sanctification. Because experiencing Christ’s presence in Scripture has this graded scale which helps us to get closer to genuine, constitutive shared-attention with Christ. The model which Green and Quan offer,

gives us a way of understanding how the discipline of reading Scripture regularly helps us to cultivate the awareness of the presence of Christ.

Green and Quan's account of attention-sharing can be extended much further afield. In fact, it seems clear that any kind of spiritual practice which involves an experience of text could allow for attention-sharing in much the same way. It can also be extended beyond practices which include text, however. In the next section I will give a brief overview of how we might use the attention-model to explain other kinds of spiritual practice.

### **Practice in Christianity: an interpersonal model of spiritual practice**

First, let us consider the less contentious examples of spiritual practice. As I have argued, any practice which includes text allows for attention-sharing in the way that Green and Quan describe. Thus, the application to liturgy, for instance, would seem to be straightforward. The words of the liturgy can allow for pseudo-shared-attention, instrumental shared-attention and constitutive shared-attention. Interestingly, we can also use this model to think about the practice of preaching, something very little has been written on in the philosophy of religion. Whilst, typically, preaching might be considered a prime example of a practice which aims at transmitting intellectual content from speaker to listener, Kierkegaard has different ideas about preaching. In 'An Occasional Discourse at the Occasion of Confession', Kierkegaard discusses the role of the preacher and the congregation by using the analogy of a stage and a play and the importance of directly experiencing God through preaching. He writes that

when it comes to the religious discourse, many people are so foolish as they regard the speaker from a secular point of view and see him as an actor and see the audience as spectators who judge the artist. But this not the way it is, by no means. No, the speaker is the prompter; there are no spectators, because every listener should look inwardly to himself. The stage is eternity, and the listener, if he is the true listener (and



if he is not, it is his own fault), is standing before God through the discourse. The prompter whispers to the actor what he has to say, but the actor's rendition is the main thing, is the earnest jest of the art; the speaker whispers the words to the listener, but the main thing, the earnestness, is that the listener, with the help of the discourse and before God, in silence speaks in himself, with himself, to himself. The discourse is not spoken for the sake of the speaker, so that he may be praised or criticized, but the objective is the listener's rendition [...] at the religious address God himself is present; in the most earnest sense he is the critical spectator who is checking on how it is being spoken and on how it is being heard, and for that very reason there are no spectators. [...] The presence of God is the decisive element that changes everything. As soon as God is present, everyone has the task before God of paying attention to himself—the speaker during his speech has the task of paying attention to what he is saying, and the listener during the speech has the task of paying attention to how he is hearing, whether through the discourse he within himself is secretly speaking with God; otherwise the listeners would also have a task in common with God, so that God and the listeners would jointly check on the speaker and pass judgement on him. (UDVS, 124-25)<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> For other discussions of preaching in Kierkegaard's writings, see SUD, 103 and PC, 236-37. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus connects the importance of preaching directly to imitating Christ:

This fundamental change in the sermon presentation, whereby Christianity was abolished, is the expression, among other things, also for the fundamental change that took place with the Church triumphant and established Christendom— namely, that ordinarily Christ at most acquired admirers and not imitators. (PC, 237)

We see, that even in the practice of preaching, which might be difficult to think of in terms of an intersubjective experience of God, for Kierkegaard, preaching is all about the individual engaging with God's presence in a way that challenges her. The preacher's words should 'prompt' her to remember her own lines before God. Preaching, as Kierkegaard describes it here, has a kind of instrumental attention-sharing role. The preacher alerts the listener to the fact that Christ is present and available for attention-sharing. We might even think that the preacher's words could occasion constitutive attention-sharing between Christ and the listener; in becoming aware that Christ is present in the Church, the listener might suddenly be aware that the words of the preacher are divinely inspired—Christ is speaking directly to her.

So, even in a spiritual practice such as preaching, which might look difficult to think of in terms of attention-sharing, we can apply the model Green and Quan describe. But how about practices which lack written or spoken text? How could these practices allow for attention-sharing? A prime candidate of non-text based practice, is the practice of the Eucharist which he devotes a considerable amount of time to discussing in his *Communion Discourses*.<sup>140</sup> What Kierkegaard writes about Communion can help us to understand how an individual might engage with Christ's presence through spiritual practices. For instance, in one of the *Communion Discourses*, he writes that

[a]t the Communion table the point above all is to hear *his* voice. Certainly a sermon should also bear witness to him, proclaim his word and his teaching, but a sermon is still not *his* voice. At the Communion table, however it is *his* voice you are to hear. [...] At the Communion table there is no speaking about him; there he himself is present in person; there is it he who is speaking—if not, then you are not at the Communion table. In the physical sense, one can point to the Communion table and say, "there it

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<sup>140</sup> Kierkegaard wrote seven of these discourses in 1848, three in 1849, and two in 1851.

is”); but in the spiritual sense, it is actually *there* only if you hear *his* voice *there*. (CD, 271; emphasis in the original)

Note that Christ is actually present at the Communion table only if he is present *to* the individual in some way.<sup>141</sup> For Kierkegaard, the practice of Communion is instance in which a

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<sup>141</sup> There is a good case to be made that in what Kierkegaard writes about the sacrament of Communion that he is affirming a Lutheran position on the Eucharist in claiming that Christ is truly present. Kierkegaard would have been familiar with the claims of the Augsburg Confession, the statement of orthodoxy in the Lutheran Church, which Luther himself approved. In Article X of the Augsburg Confession it states that in the sacrament of the Eucharist, ‘the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present’ (Tappert (ed. and trans.), 1959, 34). We can see most clearly what *truly present* means here in reference to two positions Luther rejects in his writings. Luther devotes a considerable amount of time to refuting the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in the Eucharist, that is, the claim that Christ is corporeally present in the Eucharistic elements. Yet, whilst attempting to refute the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, Luther is keen to resist claiming that the Eucharist is merely a symbolic act, in contrast to the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli. Instead, Luther claimed, Christ was *truly* present in the Eucharistic elements. In order to show Christ could be truly present in the elements, without claiming that Christ is corporeally present, Luther responded to the objection that Christ’s body cannot be present both at the right hand of the Father as well as being located in the Eucharistic elements (1527/1961, 56). To show why this objection has no traction against his position, Luther appeals to the Doctrine of Ubiquity, in stating that Christ, being fully God, shares in the divine nature, and in particular, shares the divine attribute of omnipresence. Thus, Luther contends, since God is truly present everywhere, and Christ shares in the divine nature, Christ is truly present everywhere (1527/1961, 64). Thus, Christ is truly present in the bread and wine on the Communion table (this is often called the Doctrine of Consubstantiation). The objection to Luther which is most obvious here, and one which his contemporaries (and he himself) were clearly aware of, is that if Christ is present everywhere inclusive of the Communion table, then there is nothing distinct about the sacrament. However, the distinctiveness of the sacrament, as Luther goes on to argue, is not that Christ is more

believer can experience the presence of Christ in a real and transformative way. As he tells us elsewhere, it is this experience of Christ's presence that enables the believer to become aware of God's grace and mercy (CD, 294-95, WA, 186-87). As George Pattison describes Kierkegaard's view of Communion, here—it is through a 'concrete encounter [...] with the person of Jesus Christ' that the believer is able to enter into a relationship of love with God (2012, 160).<sup>142</sup> The experience of partaking in Communion is primarily an experience of Christ's presence, but Kierkegaard also defines it as a practice which enables a believer to engage with the presence of Christ beyond the Communion table. He writes that,

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present at the Communion table than anywhere else, but, rather, that at the Communion table Christ is present *to* believers in a certain way. He writes that

it is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present for you. [...] [S]ince Christ's humanity is at the right hand of God, and also is in all and above all things according to the nature of the divine right hand, you will not eat or drink him like the cabbage and soup on your table, unless he wills it. He also now exceeds any grasp, and you will not catch him by groping about even though he is in your bread, unless he binds himself to you and summons you to a particular table by his Words, and he himself gives meaning to the bread for you, by his Word, bidding you to eat him. (1527/1961, 69)

<sup>142</sup> Pattison notes that Kierkegaard's discussion of Communion and redemption is a fairly conventional Lutheran view (2012, 158). Pattison describes Kierkegaard's theology of Communion as one in which

[t]he believer who comes to the altar and receives the sacrament of forgiveness receives Christ himself...Atonement is what brings about the possibility of the individual entering into a relationship of love with his or her creator through a concrete encounter with the person of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ—above all, as we have been seeing, in the sacrament of communion. (2012, 158-60)

[o]ne can point physically to the Communion table and say, “See, there it is,” but in the spiritual sense the Communion table is *there* only if you are *known there* by him.

*They follow him.* You do not remain and are not to remain at the Communion table [...] when you follow him, you do indeed leave the Communion table when you go away from it, but then it is as if the Communion table followed you, for where he is, there is the Communion table—and when you follow him, he accompanies you. What earnestness of eternity, that wherever you go, whatever you do, he still accompanies you [...] do not forget that where he is, there is the altar, that his altar is neither on Moriah nor on Gerizim, or any visible *there*, but that it is where he is. If this were not so, then you of course would have to remain at the Communion table, take up residence there, never budge from the spot, but such superstition is not Christianity. (CD, 273-74; emphasis in the original)

It should be noted that here Kierkegaard’s use of ‘as if’ is doing a different job than it is in the case of Scripture. Here, Kierkegaard states that when a believer leaves the Church, it is *as if* the Communion table comes with her in the sense that Christ’s presence comes with her *as if* she were still at the altar.<sup>143</sup> As he describes it elsewhere, Communion ‘is not merely in remembrance of him, not merely a pledge that you have communion with him, but is the communion, this communion that you must strive to preserve in your daily life by living more and more out of yourself and identifying yourself with him’ (WA, 188). We have in Kierkegaard’s discussion of Communion, then, a way of understanding what it means for Christ to be present to the believer as contemporary through another kind of spiritual practice.

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<sup>143</sup> As I argue elsewhere (Cockayne (ms.)), Kierkegaard’s discussion of Communion provides fairly conclusive evidence that Kierkegaard does not intend to describe contemporaneity in the way that Stokes describes.

We can see that Communion allows a person to experience Christ's presence, 'but how?' we might ask. Straightforwardly, the liturgy and text involved in the Eucharist can allow us to hear Christ's voice ('This is my body broken for you', etc...), if Green and Quan's account of text-based shared-attention is plausible. However, we can see the meal itself as having a role in our attention-sharing, too. If text can allow us to share attention with another person, then so too can an object or an event. I have argued for the plausibility of this claim elsewhere (Cockayne, et al., ms.), and there does not seem to be any reason why attention-sharing cannot be extended to non-text based practices. Consider the following example which we use in our discussion of the Eucharist to make precisely this point:

*Case 3*

Alex and Rachael have been married for 50 years. On their first date, Alex cooked Rachael a steak with peppercorn sauce and green beans. Recently, they have been having difficulties in their marriage, but decide to devote the evening to spend together. Alex comes in the room and looks at Rachael, and presents her with a plate of steak with peppercorn sauce and green beans. Rachael looks back at Alex, without saying anything and smiles at him, whilst placing her hand over her ring finger.

(Cockayne et al., 17).

As we argue in considerably more detail, 'if text can allow for meaningful shared-attention between persons, then so too can objects and events' (Cockayne et al., 17). Cases such as this clearly allow persons to engage in meaningful interpersonal experience which is both dyadic and triadic. The Eucharist, thought of as a kind of reconciliation meal, can play a similar role in the reconciliation between Christ and a person as it can between Rachael and Alex. In such a case, the individual is focused on Christ's presence as well as the importance of Christ's

sacrifice and her own sin. The elements provide an object for mutual attention-sharing between Christ and the person and, thus, for constitutive shared-attention.

This framework can, I think, then be applied to other examples of spiritual practice for which I do not have space to explore. Take, for example, the practice of prayer. Using the model I have described, prayer is a spiritual practice that allows a person to focus their attention on Christ and to share-attention with him. This would make sense of Kierkegaard's claim, in *The Purity of Heart* that 'the function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays' (UDVS, 22).<sup>144</sup>

What we find in this interpersonal model of spiritual practice is a different way of thinking about the epistemology of spiritual practice. As both Wolterstorff and Cuneo admit, there is surely not an exhaustive way of thinking about what kind of knowledge we can gain from engaging in these kinds of practice. However, focusing on possibility of interpersonal experience of Christ through spiritual practices gives an added dimension to this discussion of what we can know from taking part in such practices. That is, spiritual practices can give us an interpersonal knowledge of God akin to Mary's knowledge of her mother after leaving Stump's black-and-white room. Furthermore, this interpersonal account of spiritual practice

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<sup>144</sup> This is not to say that there is no purpose in petitionary prayer—we can read this an account of one kind of prayer, but not as an overview of all prayer, in general. In fact, Anti-Climacus seems to give something resembling an account of petitionary prayer when he remarks that

To pray is also to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing. Nevertheless, possibility alone or necessity alone can no more be the condition for breathing of prayer than oxygen alone or nitrogen alone can be that for breathing. For pray there must be a God, a self—and possibility—or a self and possibility in a pregnant sense, because the being of God means that everything is possible, or that everything is possible means the being of God [...] That God's will is the possible makes me able to pray, if there is nothing but necessity, man is essentially as inarticulate as the animals. (SUD, 41)

helps us to join some of the dots in the Kierkegaardian account which I have been arguing for in this thesis. Interpersonal knowledge of Christ is vital for our union with him. And now we have a model which seeks to show how the individual might engage in this process.

However, despite the progress that this account can make in our understanding of the spiritual life, we might think that it is a fairly flawed account of spiritual practice in that it is entirely individualistic. Before concluding, I will consider this charge in more detail.

## **Practice and community**

A charge that is often laid at Kierkegaard's account of Christian spirituality, and a charge that is pertinent for my thesis to address, is that it is overly individualistic. As Pattison notes, 'Kierkegaard puts the very idea of a Church as such up for question to the extent that what he effectively asks is, simple: Does Christianity actually need a Church?' (2012, 203). What follows from much of Kierkegaard's thought, as Pattison describes it, is the idea or the possibility of 'a kind of Christianity that was able to dispense with the Church' (2012, 204). Even if Pattison is right in his assessment of Kierkegaard's ecclesiology, however, the same need not necessarily apply to my own position, which, as I have repeatedly stated, is a Kierkegaardian account, not Kierkegaard's account.

Nevertheless, the emphasis of our enquiry so far has been entirely on the individual's experience of and relation to Christ and there is a serious worry that this account of the spiritual life ignores something vital about the communal nature of Christian spirituality. In Scripture, it is often Israel or the Church who are addressed by the writers, rather than the individual. In discussing his continued presence on earth after his death, Christ explicitly describes this in communal terms: 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20). And if nothing else, the Eucharist appears to be predominantly a shared meal, and not just a meal between Christ and the single individual. The account of spiritual practice developed in this chapter is individualistic; partaking in



communion and reading Scripture allow us to experience the presence of Christ and to share attention with him, according to my account. So, what role does the Church play in Christian spirituality?

To help give an answer to this question, it is important to see that even if we describe Christian spirituality in terms of personal presence and attention sharing, there is still an important role for community. Consider C.S Lewis's discussion of friendship from *The Four Loves*. For Lewis, an important part of my friendship with other people is my experience of them communally. He imagines,

[I]f, of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but "A's part in C", while C loses not only A but "A's part in B", while C loses not only A but "A's part in B". In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. (1960, 73-74)

This understanding of friendship is not in conflict with the account of closeness and union which we find in Stump's writing. Even if we think of Charles and Ronald's friendship in terms of attention sharing and mindreading, it might still be the case that certain aspects of Charles are only experienced when Ronald is also present. Lewis's claim simply seems to be that there are aspects of Charles's personality which can only be brought out by Ronald, and there is nothing in this claim which precludes the account of personal closeness which is being developed in this thesis. Even in more intimate relationships it also seems to be the case that different people bring out different aspects of other persons. For instance, I enjoy going to

dinner with my wife to certain friends' houses more than others. And not just because of the varying quality of the cuisine. Some of my friends bring out aspects of my wife which others do not, and aspects which even I do not draw out of her.

If this kind of communal experience is the case for our understanding of marriage relationships, then cannot the same apply to the God-relationship? It might initially seem strange to suggest that there are aspects of Christ which I only experience when Derek is present, or Naomi is present; however, this suggestion is more plausible than it sounds. Unless we are fundamentalists about our own particular tradition or spirituality, most of us would admit that we benefit from partaking in different kinds of spirituality. More formal, contemplative worship allows us to engage with God's holiness and approach God with awe, for instance. And more informal worship might allow us to appreciate God's closeness and the normality of God's presence in the everyday, for example. If this is the case for traditions, then surely it is the case for individuals. What are traditions but ways of superficially carving up people's individual relationship with God and religious preferences into broad, yet sometimes helpful, boxes? If Lewis is right in thinking that only Ronald can bring out a certain aspect of Charles, then we should think of corporate worship as playing a similar role in the spiritual life. Yes, engaging in the Eucharist is a means of experiencing Christ's presence to us and sharing attention with him, but the kind of experience of Christ that this allows for, will depend on the tradition we are part of. Let us consider an example to see how this might work:

Jim has been attending a weekly Eucharist service at his local Church and he finds it a profound and engaging way of experiencing Christ in his working week. Now, one day Jim decides to bring Tim along with him. He knows that Tim finds Church difficult, and that he lives with a constant sense of guilt because of a series of regrettable incidents in his youth. Usually, Jim finds his experience of Christ in partaking in the

Eucharist to bring him peace and reassurance, but when he hears the liturgy in the confession, he is starkly aware of what Tim is likely to be thinking. When he receives the elements, with Tim alongside him, Jim approaches Christ as his redeemer and reconciler, but Christ's grace and mercy is made all the more apparent by the presence of Tim alongside him. Not only does Christ give Jim subsistence for his daily life, but he has forgiven him and brought him into closer relationship with him.

For Jim, this experience of Christ's forgiveness is made all the more powerful by his communal experience of the Eucharist. If Tim had not been present, Jim would still have experienced Christ's presence, yet his experience would have been a very different one. And thus, just as the death of a friend can change our relationship to those still living, our relationship and community have a vital impact on our spiritual life, even if spiritual practices are described in terms of our individual experiences of Christ.

## **Conclusion**

I have made apparent why spiritual practices are so important for the Christian spiritual life. In particular, I have shown how the reading of Scripture and partaking in the Eucharist can enable us to experience Christ's presence. These practices are also an important part of what it means to know God personally as, if Cuneo is correct, they give us a practical knowledge of how to engage God. Regular practice of the Eucharist, the reading of scripture, prayer, liturgy, and so on, are therefore crucial for the individual and his spiritual practice in the God-relationship. Furthermore, in the next chapter I will argue that we can imitate Christ by experiencing his presence as well as actions and emotions. If this claim is plausible, then these spiritual practices (along with others I have omitted for reasons of brevity) are also crucial for the task of imitating Christ and being sanctified by him.

## **Part 3**

### **Connecting the dots:**

#### **Imitation and absence in the God-relationship**

##### **Introduction**

Having given both a conceptual analysis of what it is to have faith, as well as a more practical account of what it is to experience Christ, I turn, in this final part of my thesis, to consider how these two accounts are connected by examining two important questions:

- (i) How does the experience of God's presence allow for a deeper union with God?
- (ii) How does the experience of Christ's absence allow for a deeper union with God?

First, in Chapter 6, I consider how the account of contemporaneity and presence which was offered in Part 2 relates to the account of union with God offered in Part 1. To connect these two accounts, I discuss an important concept in Kierkegaard's writings, namely, the imitation of Christ. By looking more closely at the role of imitation in the spiritual life, we can see more clearly how experiencing Christ's presence helps a person to imitate him and why this process of imitation allows for a deeper relationship with God. As I will explain in more detail, the process of imitation is a kind of sanctification process in which a person's higher-order desires are integrated around the good. Drawing on insights from the psychological literature, I show why presence is so helpful for imitation; to imitate a person, rather than merely emulating that person, is helpful to share-attention with them in the way described in the previous part of the thesis.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I consider how experiences of absence can be helpful in allowing for a deeper relationship with God. Many people report experiencing a withdrawal of God's

presence and this presents a problem for my account: Could there be a morally sufficient reason for a loving God to withdraw from those that love him and seek to be close to him? If God loves us and so desires union with us, why is it that so many, who once felt close to God and who have subsequently done nothing to precipitate separation from him, now experience only his absence? Although there has been some discussion in the philosophical literature about why a good God would allow evil in the world or why he would be hidden from non-culpable atheists, little has been said about why God might allow those that love him and seek union with him to experience the immense suffering of divine withdrawal. Putting aside those explanations which seek to locate the reason for divine withdrawal by pointing to the person's sin, her lack of desire, or her experiencing physical and emotional pain, I ask whether God have any good reasons for withdrawing from a person.

A metaphor which has been used repeatedly to answer this question, particularly in the Christian tradition, is that separation from God is a kind of spiritual weaning process in which God uses the experience of his absence in order to bring about maturation and greater union with him. After discussing the use of this metaphor in *Fear and Trembling* and John of the Cross's *The Dark Night of the Soul*, I go on to discuss the question of how someone's absence could be good for their maturation. From this discussion of weaning, I argue that that separation has an important role to play in deepening relationships of love—drawing on research in de-adaptation in the psychological and sociological literature, I argue that in order for their to be a union of love, there must be an experience of dependence as well as an experience of independence. This position can explain, or so I argue, why God allows people who engage in the spiritual life to suffer the pain of separation from him.

Before concluding, I turn to the question of whether this kind of suffering could ever be morally justifiable for God to inflict on a person. I ask whether divine withdrawal could be justified as a kind of non-consensual harm removal which negatively benefits the person in some way. However, built into the problem of divine withdrawal is the premise that persons

are sufficiently far into the process of sanctification that they would not benefit negatively from divine withdrawal. And so it looks like divine withdrawal is an unjustified harm for God to inflict on a person. In order to resolve this problem, I give an account of spiritual consent. Even in the most basic forms of Christian spirituality, believer's consent for God's 'will to be done'. Christian liturgy, hymns and prayers are full of instances of consent that allow God to do whatever he wills for the purposes of our good. Thus, participating in the spiritual life allows God to inflict the suffering of divine withdrawal on a person, even if the benefits are primarily positive.

## Chapter 6

### The Imitation Game:

#### Becoming imitators of Christ

Lord Jesus Christ, you did not come to the world to be served and thus not to be admired either, or in that sense worshipped. You yourself were the way and the life—and you have asked only for *imitators*. If we have dozed off into this infatuation, wake us up, rescue us from this error of wanting to admire or adoringly admire you instead of wanting to follow you and be like you. (PC, 233)

#### Introduction

Having laid out the importance of being contemporary with Christ in Part 2, I return now to the question of what the aim of the spiritual life is. According to the account I described in Part 1, the Christian spiritual life is aimed at developing a deeper union with God, which, it transpired, requires an interpersonal knowledge of God made possible only through an experience of Christ's presence. What could be clearer at this point, however, is just what role the experience of presence plays in a believer's union with Christ. How does coming to know God interpersonally through an experience of Christ help to sanctify a person? What role can an experience of presence play in the re-orientating of the believer's will and desires around the good? And how can the believer aim at putting all of this into practice in her own spiritual life?

I will argue in this chapter that the key to giving a response to these questions lies in our understanding of what it means for a person to be an imitator of Christ. For Kierkegaard, the task of imitating Christ is the essential task of becoming a Christian and something which can help us to distinguish true Christianity from its counterfeits. Kierkegaard also has a clear

answer to the question of how a believer can imitate Christ—namely, by becoming contemporary with him. After briefly outlining some of what Kierkegaard has to say on this topic, I attempt to connect this discussion to the account of sanctification and union with God which I argued for in Chapter 2. Although this discussion can explain the theological significance of imitating Christ, it still gives us little practical advice on what it is to imitate Christ. In order to respond to this practical worry, I draw on the extensive work in philosophy of cognitive psychology which seeks to explain the role of imitation in infant development. As I explain, in the psychological literature on imitation there is a distinction made between different kinds of behaviour replication: (i) emulation—a kind of intention replication often seen in non-human primates, (ii) mimicry—the reproduction of a certain action without attention to a person’s intentions, and (iii) imitation—the replication of an person’s behaviour with a particular focus on their intentions. It is this third class of behaviour replication which is used in the psychological literature to explain the social, cognitive and even moral development in infants. Furthermore, it is this third kind of behaviour replication which can best help us understand what it is to imitate Christ by becoming contemporary with him. By connecting our understanding of imitation with the joint-attention account of experience which I outlined in the previous chapter, we can see why and how being contemporary with Christ is so essential for the spiritual life.



## Imitation and contemporaneity: the task of *true* Christianity<sup>145</sup>

For Kierkegaard, the essential task of the Christian is to be an imitator of Christ.<sup>146</sup> As Anti-Climacus maintains, ‘[o]nly the imitator is the true Christian’ (PC, 256). In *Judge For Yourself*, Kierkegaard claims that it is imitation which distinguishes the ‘true Christian’<sup>147</sup> from a kind of nominal ‘cheap Christianity’:

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<sup>145</sup> There is some literature on the Kierkegaardian discussion of imitation: Christopher Barnet (2006; 2008; 2016, 169-201) has discussed Kierkegaard’s theology of imitation in a number of places.

Torrance (2015, 129-146) devotes some attention to imitation in his discussion of Kierkegaard on the spiritual life. In his discussion of Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, Matthew Kirkpatrick (2011, 139-175) devotes some space to Kierkegaard’s account. Joel Rasmussen (2008) also gives attention to the contrast between Kierkegaard and Thomas à Kempis on the imitation of Christ. Additionally, see Rae (2010, 81-82, 154-57) and Bradley R. Dewey (1968). My primary concern is to give an account of imitating Christ, whereas much of the above literature aims at presenting Kierkegaard’s account of imitation as accurately as possible.

<sup>146</sup> Torrance discusses the relation between faith and imitation in Kierkegaard’s works in more detail—for Kierkegaard, faith is primary to imitation and we cannot imitate Christ without faith, but, despite this, ‘a person does not become a Christian without, to some extent, becoming an imitator’ (2016, 131).

<sup>147</sup> It might appear that Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘true Christianity’, which I also adopt, commits the ‘no true Scotsman fallacy’. That is, when faced with a counter-example to a claim one re-categorizes the description to avoid the counter-example. ‘All Scotsmen eat porridge’, for instance, is countered by noting ‘Uncle Angus does not eat porridge’, but can be replied (using the no true Scotsman fallacy) by noting that ‘Well if this is the case, then Uncle Angus is not a *true* Scotsman’. Does Kierkegaard commit this fallacy? It is not obvious that he does—when he talks about *true Christianity*, we should understand this in reference to his earlier discussions of objective and subjective truth (see, CUP, for instance). The true Christian stands in the correct relation to God in the ‘God-relationship’ whereas the kind of cheap Christian Kierkegaard contrasts this with lacks subjective truth. So ‘true’ is used to differentiate those who call themselves ‘Christian’ and lack subjectivity, and those who stand in relation to God in the God-relationship.

*Imitation, the imitation of Christ*, is really the point from which the human race shrinks. The main difficulty lies here; here is where it is really decided whether or not one is willing to accept Christianity. If there is emphasis on this point, the stronger the emphasis the fewer the Christians. If there is a scaling down at this point (so that Christianity becomes, intellectually, a doctrine), more people enter into Christianity. If it is abolished completely (so that Christianity becomes, existentially, as easy as mythology and poetry and imitation an exaggeration, a ludicrous exaggeration), then Christianity spreads to such a degree that Christendom and the world are almost indistinguishable, or all become Christians; Christianity has completely conquered—that is, it is abolished! (FSE, 188; emphasis in the original)

As we see here, according to Kierkegaard, there is something lacking from a kind of Christianity which gives up on, or scales down, the task of imitating Christ. The result of doing this is a kind of understanding of the spiritual life which displays little concern for the actions of the individual. ‘To be a Christian’ of this kind, Kierkegaard argues, can be combined easily with being a thief or an adulterer and such an individual, he thinks, ‘goes to communion once a year or to church a few times a year’ (FSE, 188-89). This is a *‘noblfjel’* [cheap] edition of what it is to be a Christian’ (FSE, 189). What Kierkegaard has in focus here is the kind of Lutheranism that he thought his Christian contemporaries represented. According to Kierkegaard, whilst Luther rightly reformed a medieval conception of Christianity which placed too great an emphasis on salvation by works, what arises from this understanding of Christianity is Christendom and ‘the illusion that in such a country all are Christians of sorts

(PV, 23).<sup>148</sup> For Kierkegaard, an over emphasis on grace and a lack of emphasis on Christianity's requirement results in a kind of environment in which,

perhaps one hears a little about something that perhaps is Christianity; one reads a little, thinks a little about Christianity, experiences a mood once in a while—and then one is a believer and a Christian. Indeed, one is already one in advance; one is born a Christian. (FSE, 194)

In this kind of culture, imitation falls out of our understanding of the Christian spiritual life; being a Christian is easy and individuals only really admire Christ from a safe distance. As Anti-Climacus describes it in *Practice in Christianity*, the difference between the *admirer* and the *imitator* is that the admirer stands at a personal distance from the person he admires and does not realise that what he admires 'involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired' (PC, 241). Contrastingly, the imitator '*is or strives to be what he admires*' (PC, 241; emphasis in the original). Because of this difference, the admirer is interested only in the *greatness* of Christ and is unconcerned with Christ's suffering and humility since this would require her too to suffer (PC, 245-46). In truly imitating Christ, Anti-Climacus goes on to say, we imitate not his *loftiness* or his greatness, but his *abasement* (PC, 259)—the imitator must

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<sup>148</sup> Kierkegaard is clearly aware of other accounts of imitation—he explicitly refers to Luther, and, according to Dewey, Kierkegaard's library contained two editions of *The Imitation of Christ*, along with other ascetic works by Johannes Tauler and William Law (1968, 112). However, Kierkegaard avoids using the Latin 'imitatio Christi' which would help to situate his discussion of imitation alongside those in the history of Christian theology (Dewey, (1968, 119). Instead, as Dewey notes, Kierkegaard uses the more imprecise Danish word 'efterfølgelese', from the root 'efterfølge', which could be understood as meaning 'to follow', 'to obey', 'to model oneself on a given example' or 'to take advice' (Dewey, 1968), 119-20). Kierkegaard never explicitly indicates which sense of 'efterfølgelese' he wishes to be understood. Despite this, most translators render 'efterfølgelese' as 'imitate'.

strive to be like Christ not just when it is in her own interest, but also in her struggle with God's will, in her obedience to death and her willingness to become nothing.<sup>149</sup>

How can a believer come close to Christ in his abasement? How can she avoid becoming a mere admirer? Rather than standing at a distance, it is only by relating to Christ as contemporary, that a person can realise the extent of her failure and the chasm between herself and Christ, Kierkegaard thinks. He puts it concisely in a journal entry from 1848 in writing that '[b]y becoming contemporary with Christ (the exemplar), you discover precisely that you don't resemble it at all [...] From this it follows, then, that you really and truly learn what it is to take refuge in grace' (NB6: 3 (ed. Cappelørn et al., 2011, 9)). The experience of being contemporary with Christ is essential for the individual to become aware both of her own shortcomings and also of God's grace. It is only with this perspective that she can properly engage in the process of imitation.

Imitating Christ is not an intellectual task, for Kierkegaard; the individual does not imitate Christ by gaining a greater objective knowledge about Christ or by learning certain doctrines. As he puts it in his journals,

And my task is this: myself an individuality and keeping myself that (and in infinite love God in heaven keeps an eye on this), to proclaim what boundless reality [*Realitet*] every man has in himself when before God he wills to become himself. But consequently I do not have a stitch of doctrine—and doctrine is what people want. Because doctrine is the indolence of aping and mimicking for the learner, and doctrine is the way to sensate power for the teacher, for doctrine collects men. (JP, 6917, X#12 A 19)

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<sup>149</sup> For an interesting and comprehensive discussion of struggling with God and spiritual trial in Kierkegaard's works, see Podmore 2013.

As an earlier translation of this journal entry renders Kierkegaard here: ‘doctrine means lazy imitation for the student’ (XI 2 A 19 (ed. Smith, 1965, 190)). This is a helpful way of seeing precisely what Kierkegaard’s issue is; imitation through a kind of objective understanding of Christ is not true imitation. Whilst Kierkegaard still thinks that imitating Christ brings with it certain requirements for how the believer acts, she must approach Christ through a relation of contemporaneity and not historicity. As Torrance puts this point,

[B]ecoming a Christian requires considerably more than a mere objective understanding of Jesus. It involves an interpersonal relationship with the God who is with us and for us in history: the ‘God–man [who] is the truth’. By encountering Jesus Christ, a person is invited to follow him with a life of imitation. And, by being given to relate faithfully to God who is the truth, through Jesus Christ, a person can start out on a life of Christian discipleship. (2016, 135)

One of primary ways that this encounter occurs, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is through a believer’s engagement with spiritual practices. But what remains to be answered is the question of how imitation relates to our understanding of union and the reintegration of the will.

### **Imitation as sanctification**

Before going on to give a more detailed analysis of the connection between imitation and presence in the next section, it will be important to discuss the relation between imitation and the theology of sanctification which was described in Chapter 2. As I have described it, one of the key tasks of the spiritual life is the task of sanctification, of re-aligning our will to will the good in order to make possible union with God and this is made possible by our ever deepening union with Christ in this life.

Another way of describing the same picture of the *ordo salutis* is in terms of imitation. One of the ways in which the problem of sin is presented in Scripture is in the language of image, imitation and emulation.<sup>150</sup> Human beings are made in the ‘image of God’ (Genesis 1:27),<sup>151</sup> but God’s image in human beings is distorted by sin and so human beings are unable to be in union with God (Genesis 3). In Genesis we see that one of the effects of a person’s failure to will the good is that the image of God is distorted in some way.

The account of human restoration and redemption can be described in similar terms. The picture of living in right relationship with God which is presented in the Torah, for instance, is described as a kind of replication of God’s character; God commands the Israelites in Leviticus to be ‘holy because I am holy’ (Leviticus 11:44-45).<sup>152</sup> We can read this command to ‘be holy because I am holy’ as a command to engage in the restoration of the image of God by acting in God’s likeness, or, as a command to will the good. However, this process of acting in God’s likeness faces a problem in the way it is described in the Old Testament; the commands of God are mediated and passed down through specific individuals chosen to decree God’s laws and words to his people. Although Moses is described as communing ‘face to face with God as one speaks to a friend’ (Exodus 33:11), the Israelites could not even look

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<sup>150</sup> There will not be room to give a detailed overview of imitation in Scripture, in particular, one discussion I overlook entirely is the distinction between ‘following’ and ‘imitating’. Christ asks for followers (Matthew 4:19) and not imitators, and it is only in Paul’s writing that the language of imitation (‘mimētēs’) is used in his encouragement to imitate God, Christ and himself. See, 1 Corinthians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 11:1, Ephesians 5:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 2:14. The reason I do not discuss this, is because often in the theological literature, and even in Biblical translation, following and imitating are used synonymously. For more on this difference, see Constable 1992, 145-56.

<sup>151</sup> Kierkegaard discusses humanity as made in the image of God in his discourse ‘How Glorious it is to be a human being’ (UDVS, 192-93).

<sup>152</sup> We see a similar command in Leviticus 19:2, Leviticus 22:28 and Jeremiah 31:33.

upon the face of Moses after being in the presence of God, and the human contact with God is mediated to such an extent that they could only see God's glory reflected in the veiled face of Moses (Exodus 34:34-35).<sup>153</sup>

However, in introducing the importance of imitating Christ, the New Testament shows how this problem might be overcome. We see this contrast most clearly in a passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

[s]ince we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendour. But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:12-18)

Here, Paul discusses the New Covenant between God and humanity in which the image of God is restored through the believer's relationship with Christ. Paul directly contrasts the mediated relationship made possible under the Old Covenant with the New Covenant in which Christ takes the veil away between humanity and God. Whereas the Israelites could

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<sup>153</sup> In the history of theology there has sometimes been a distinction made between 'image' and 'likeness'. Rupert of Deutz, for instance, claimed that after the fall, human beings retained the likeness of God, in virtue of her reason and freedom of will but lost the image of God in her lack of virtue (see Constable, 1995, 167). Rupert maintained that God preordained that humanity would both fall and be restored into his likeness (Constable, 1995, 167).

access the divine presence indirectly through the veiled face of Moses, the Christian is able to approach God ‘face to face’ through Christ.<sup>154</sup> The imitation of Christ then becomes an integral part of how a person is redeemed from sin, can begin the process of sanctification, and, eventually, enter into union with God after death. The believer now has a direct access to God through Christ made possible by the Spirit.

Let us spell these themes out more explicitly. The result of sin is that human beings, although created to be in union with God and to reflect his likeness, cannot be in such a relationship. Because of their sin, human beings lack the resources to come into union with God, since their desires are not aimed at union with God. The process of transformation, which seeks to redeem human beings, begins with justification, a revelation from God of a believer’s relation to him and the reception of the higher-order desire for union with God as a gift of grace. The second stage in this process of transformation is sanctification. Sanctification requires an engagement in the re-orientation and integration of a person’s desires around the second-order desire for union with God. Sanctification is the process of God helping a person to integrate her higher-order desire for union with God with all of her other desires. And we now have a helpful way of thinking about what it means to will the good through union with Christ; by imitating Christ we are provided with a means of engaging in this task of sanctification; sanctification is a process in which the believer both behaves like, and becomes more like, Christ. Finally, this completion of sanctification occurs at the beatific vision which initiates the third stage of this transformation: the process of deification.<sup>155</sup> Through deification, human beings enter into union with God which is made possible only

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<sup>154</sup> Hence we see, even in Scripture, the Kierkegaardian idea of contemporaneity with Christ plays an important role.

<sup>155</sup> See Efir and Worsley’s (2015) critical review of Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness* for a more detailed discussion of this point.



after death in which, 'we shall be like him' (1 John 3:2). Deification is the completion of the restoration of image of God.

By relating to Christ through imitation, the believer is able to engage in this task of restoring the image of God so that she can restore her will to will the good. If God's ultimate aim is for human beings to be fully like Christ and to be restored into the image of God, then the aim of the present spiritual life, is to engage in sanctification; the act of becoming like Christ.

### **Imitation and presence**

Now that we have seen how imitating Christ connects to the account of faith and sin presented in Part 1, we can now go on to consider how this relates to the account of contemporaneity and presence in Part 2. In the remainder of this chapter, I aim to give an account of precisely what the conditions are for imitating Christ. In particular, the claim that I defend in this chapter is that experiencing Christ as contemporary is essential for imitation. To do this, I first show the inadequacy of other potential understandings of imitation. For instance, the simple replication of Christ's behaviour might result in a mimicry of Christ's actions, but it would not allow for the kind of radical metaphysical change of becoming more like Christ. To show why this is the case, and to give an account just what imitating Christ consists in, we must adopt a more detailed definition of imitation. In giving such a definition, I draw on the extensive work in the philosophy of cognitive psychology which seeks to explain the role of imitation in infant development. As I go on to explain, in the psychological literature on imitation there is a distinction made between different kinds of behaviour replication: (i) emulation—a kind of intention replication often seen in non-human primates, (ii) mimicry—the reproduction of a certain action without attention to a person's intentions, and (iii) imitation—the replication of a person's behaviour with a particular focus on their intentions. It is this third class of behaviour replication which is used in the psychological

literature to explain the social, cognitive and even moral development in infants. Furthermore, it is this third kind of behaviour replication which can best help us understand what it is to imitate Christ in a radically transformative manner, or so I argue.

What emerges from this discussion is that imitation, as it is understood in psychology, requires an experience in which the individual somehow perceives the intentions of the person she is imitating. This is where Kierkegaardian notion of being contemporary with Christ is so crucial to our understanding of the spiritual life. Cultivating the awareness of the presence of Christ and sharing attention with him becomes crucially important for the task of imitating Christ, which as we have seen, has a central role in the spiritual life of the God-relationship.

### **Imitation and behaviour replication**

Although the aims of discussing imitation in Christian theology are vastly different from the aims of the discussion of imitation in cognitive psychology, the extensive psychological literature in this area can provide some important insights for the theology of imitation, or so I argue. Of particular importance for psychology, and something which can help focus our theology of imitation is the distinction between behaviour replication and the replication of goal-oriented intentional actions. In order to imitate another person, or so Ellen Fridland and Richard Moore (2014) tell us, the replication of certain behaviour is not sufficient, but, rather, it is also necessary that the imitator recognizes, and aims at reproducing, the particular goal-directed intentions of the person being imitated (2014, 874). As I go on to argue, this difference is crucial for understanding what it means to be imitator of Christ. That is, merely replicating the reported behaviour of Christ will not allow for true imitation of Christ.

As Susan Hurley and Nick Chater (2005) note, ‘imitation is a rare ability that is fundamentally linked to characteristically human forms of intelligence, in particular, to language, culture, and the ability to understand other minds’ (2005, 1). The ability to imitate or replicate certain behaviour occurs very early in human beings, it has been demonstrated that

‘[n]ewborn infants less than an hour old can [...] imitate facial gestures’ (Gallagher, 2005, 70-72). This early skill of imitating another person has an important role to play in the development of language, social skills and even moral behaviour.<sup>156</sup> Imitation occurs both at an intentional, goal orientated level in which the infant aims at copying certain behavioural traits, and also on a subconscious level.

So what does it mean to imitate another person? Straightforwardly, imitation is the copying of certain kinds of observed behaviour in other persons. However, whilst all imitation is a kind of behaviour replication, not all behaviour replication is imitative. Fridland and Moore, in their recent reworking of Michael Tomasello’s (1996, 1999a, 1999b, and Boesch, 1998, and Carpenter, 2005) work on imitation, distinguish between three kinds of behaviour replication: emulation, mimicry and imitation (2014, 858). As Boesch and Tomasello describes it, emulation learning is ‘the process whereby an individual observes and learns some dynamic affordances of the inanimate world as a result of the behaviour of other animals and then uses what it has learned to devise its own behavioural strategies’ (1998, 598). Thus, to take an example, in observing someone using the self-scan till at supermarket, Jill may emulate the behaviour of the individual in front of her since she sees that by scanning the barcode on the item, and then inserting cash into the relevant slots, she may purchase her shopping. She does not aim at reproducing the particular technique of scanning; she is concerned with the manipulation of the self-scan till in order to complete her transaction. As Fridland and Moore emphasise, emulation learning is concerned with ‘the outcomes of others’ activity, but not on the precise actions that they perform’ (2014, 858); the emulative learner takes the behaviour of others to best understand the object being manipulated, and to then use this understanding in

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<sup>156</sup> On the role of imitation in moral development, see Prinz 2005.

achieving one's own goals.<sup>157</sup> Crucially, emulation is not concerned with the intentions of the person being observed, but only on certain outcomes.

Another important kind of behaviour replication which is discussed in the literature, is the mimicry of behaviour. As Want and Harris define it, 'mimicry is [...] the replication of a model's actions in the absence of any insight into why those actions are effective, or even what goal they serve' (2002, 3). A parrot, for instance, mimics human speech without aiming at reproducing any intentions or goals of the communicator (Fridland and Moore, 2014, 859). It is possible, in mimicking someone, to be entirely ignorant of the meaning or intention of the behaviour which is reproduced.

According to Fridland and Moore, although in both mimicry and emulation persons focus on some kind of behaviour replication, neither should be understood as instances as imitation. The reason for this, is that the individual who imitates is concerned both with the intention behind the action, as well as the replication of action. To see how emulation and mimicry differ from imitation more clearly, consider an example from a parallel discussion in the philosophy of artificial intelligence. Alan Turing's (1950) 'imitation game' is a test which aims at demonstrating that machines can think—an interrogator communicates with both a human subject and a digital computer and then attempts to correctly identify which is which (1950, 433-34). If the two subjects were indistinguishable, Turing thought, we would have some evidence for artificial intelligence. Turing's game infers a level of sophisticated mental processing from a replication of human behaviour. However, as Donald Davidson argues, 'Turing's Test eliminates the possibility of telling *whether* a creature or machine thinks without determining *what* it thinks [...] the Test makes meaningful verbal responses the essential mark of thought' (2004, 80-81; emphasis in the original). Or, as John Searle (1980) discusses in his famous discussion of the Chinese Room, a successful computerised imitator can copy the

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<sup>157</sup> It is this process of emulation, according to Tomasello (1996), which is the primary process by which non-human primates learn socially.

syntax of human speech whilst lacking the semantics required for us to know what the computer *means*. In order for us to ask whether a machine can think, Davidson argues, we must be able to tell whether the computer *means* something by what it says (2004, 82). Whilst Turing's machine might be able to do a good job of deceiving an interrogator, determining the meaning behind certain syntax requires not just that we process a collection of data from a subject, but that we observe the connections between the speaker and the world (2004, 83). In order for there to be meaningful interaction (and not merely mimicry), Davidson thinks, we need to interact with the subject in relation to the world and not just receive raw data.

This objection brings out a useful distinction between imitation and other forms of behaviour replication such as mimicry and emulation. The lesson we can learn from Davidson's objection is that not all behaviour replication is imitative. In fact, the replication of human behaviour by a machine is not a good test of intelligence precisely because there is no real imitation in the imitation game, only mimicry. Or, at the very least, it shows us that it would be impossible to detect genuine imitation by using such a technique.

So what, more precisely, distinguishes imitation from other forms of behaviour replication? Although there is a wide range of views on what exactly imitation is in the psychological literature, it seems to be uncontroversial that for psychologists, imitation is more than just replication of behaviour. As Fridland and Moore define it,

*Imitation is the reproduction of an observed behavior where the agent imitating (1) recognizes the behavior of the demonstrator as goal-directed and (2) has some particular interest in or concern for replicating the precise technique performed by the author of the observed action. (2014, 874; emphasis in the original)*

The first condition helps us to see the importance of the person's intention in imitating.

Contrary to mimicry, when a person imitates someone, she is concerned with the intention of

the behaviour. For the parrot, it makes little difference why the person observed utters the words, ‘Top of the morning!’, and the machine which is programmed to ask ‘How are you today?’ is not concerned with emulating the intention of social interaction which the human who programmed it uses such an utterance for. To see that this is true, we only need note that for the computer or the parrot who mimic human behaviour, the replication of meaningless gibberish could be considered just as successful an act of mimicry as the above examples. Although there is disagreement concerning whether a person must be aware of the intention behind the behaviour or merely aware that the behaviour is intentional, at the very least, the minimal condition suggested above is necessary for imitation. Secondly, whereas emulation is ‘outcome-centric’, according to Fridland and Moore, imitation is ‘technique-centric’ (2014, 869). The emulator seeks to get at the same results or ends as the person being observed, whereas in imitation

observers should intend not just to reproduce the outcomes of others’ intentional actions, but, additionally, to match precisely the actions that they produce in pursuit of these goals—in a manner that indicates that this careful matching of the behavior is itself a goal of the imitating subject (and end-in-itself)’. (Fridland and Moore, (2014, 868)

Fridland and Moore’s emphasis on the technique of the action, rather than the goal, is an important distinction which helps to distinguish the kind of behaviour replication which human infants perform from those of non-human primates, which are described and emulative and not imitative. As Tomasello writes, ‘human children are much more focused on the actual actions of the demonstrator, whereas chimpanzees are much more focused on the outcome of her actions’ (2009, 217). To put it succinctly, then, imitation is a replication of

certain observed behaviour in which the person is concerned both with the intention, as well as the specifics of the observed behaviour.

We should note here that the definition of imitation given by Fridland and Moore intends to capture the minimum requirements for imitative behaviour replication, and that this minimum requirement will not be sufficient for imitation in some important cases. Most notably, for instance, it will not account for the kind of imitation which plays a role in infant cognitive development in its fullest sense. It is important for infant development not only that actions are experienced as goal-orientated, but that the goal-orientation of these actions is in some sense transparent to the infant. The transparency of intentions in cognitive development comes in stages. As Tomasello et al. (2005) note, prior to gaining the ability to understand intentions fully, children are able to distinguish between animate and inanimate actions without being able to interpret the content of this in a complex way. So, Fridland and Moore's minimal kind of imitation will occur at the early stages of infant development, but as a child's cognitive capacities get more sophisticated, so, too, will the kind of imitation.

It is important, then, that we consider not only the minimal kind of imitation, but also the kind of imitation which occurs in childhood development. If imitation of Christ is as significant and transformative as described previously, then the minimal kind of imitation will not fit our theology of imitating Christ. I will return to this point shortly. Before doing so, it is important to note that the psychological literature on imitation has drawn extensively on recent findings in neuroscience which, as Hurley and Chater describe it, point towards a 'direct link between perception and action' (2005, 3). Of particular importance for the work on imitation is the discussion of the mirror-neuron system which was discussed in Chapter 3.

It will be important to give a more detailed account for our purposes here. In the early 1990s, Italian neuroscientists discovered that in monkeys, and then as later discovered, in humans, a set of neurons (which have come to be known as the 'mirror neuron system') activated both during the execution of certain 'purposeful, goal-related hand actions' (Galese,

2003, 35) and when observing similar hand actions performed by another individual. This discovery shed light on our understanding of how primates interact, and more specifically, how they respond to the actions of others. According to Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, the mirror system allows humans and non-human primates to ‘*catch in a flash*’ the intentions behind certain actions when they are performed by others (2005, 114; emphasis in the original). And thus, they argue, ‘it is possible to decipher the meaning of the “motor events” observed, i.e. to *understand* them in *terms of goal-centred movements*’ (2005, 125; emphasis in the original).

In human beings, it has been argued, the mirror-neuron system ‘can accomplish a wider range of tasks than that observed in the monkey’ (2005, 124). The mirror neuron system does not just allow for understanding the intentions of certain goal orientated actions, but has a role to play in our emotional cognition of others as well. Christian Keysers and Valeria Gazzola, for instance, note that the mirror-neuron system plays a role in our empathy towards other people; when an individual sees someone in pain, their brain responds by mirroring the pain and the same areas of the brain are activating as occur when we are in pain ourselves (2009, 17-19). Furthermore, this can be extended to our imitation of the emotional states of others, or so Keysers and Gazzola maintain. When experiencing certain emotional states in other individuals, such as pleasure, disgust or indifference, for example, the human brain mirrors the experience and even produces similar facial expressions to those being observed. It has been demonstrated that the replication of facial expressions and emotional states in others is accompanied by the activation of the mirror-neuron system.

The importance of the mirror-neuron system for our current discussion is twofold. First, the direct perception of others’ intentions, emotions and mental states allows for a complex kind of imitation which far surpasses the minimal requirements of Fridland and Moore’s earlier discussion. The ability to ‘mind-read’ as it is often described, then forms the basis of many recent discussions of infant development in a wide range of areas—observing the actions and intentions of others, particularly caregivers, parents and guardians, and then



replicating these actions, is the primary way that children learn complex languages, social skills, and moral values.

Secondly, the discussion of mirror-neurons also points to another interesting feature of the literature on imitation, namely, that imitation is not only an intentional, purposive act of replicating observed behaviour, but also a behaviour that happens at a subconscious level by the mirroring of observed behaviour in others. This points us to two different ways of thinking about imitation—both at the neural, subconscious level and at the intentional level. This mirrors the discussion in the philosophy of empathy which I outlined earlier, and Goldman’s distinction between reconstructive and perceptual empathy. No doubt a similar distinction can be said for our understanding of imitation; for whilst the brain subconsciously imitates others in an automatic and immediate manner, it is also possible to engage in intentional, effortful imitation of another. Both the mirroring and the reconstructive kinds of imitation will be important for infant development, and, indeed, I will argue, for our imitation of Christ.

### **Imitating Christ: A shared-attention model**

What should now be clear is why being contemporary with Christ is so important for imitating him. Imitating Christ by simply copying some feature of his behaviour, is similar to what Fridland and Moore describe as a kind of emulation or mimicry. That is, when encouraged to behave as Christ behaves, it looks like the best one can hope for is either to copy some behaviour which Christ is reported to have performed—such as talking to lepers and outcasts, or sharing bread and wine with one’s friends, or to emulate what one takes the intentions of Christ to be, in order to achieve one’s own goals and ends. We might learn from Christ, in being compassionate towards the woman at well (John 4), that when faced with social outcasts, we should talk to them as equals and be respectful.

However, imitation, as we have seen, at the very minimal level, is the replication of some observed intentional behaviour. At the level required for moral and cognitive development, imitation involves a kind of mind-reading in which a person perceives the intentions of another's behaviour and then replicates this behaviour. Further, we have seen that there is an important distinction to be made between low-level mirroring which occurs subconsciously and automatically, and high-level, intentional replication of another's action. Both kinds of imitation are vital for the kind of transformative development that we are concerned with. However, whilst reading about, and then copying, the behaviour or characteristics of some historical figure might have some impact on a person's own behaviour and attitudes, it certainly will not allow for imitation in the full-blown sense. Thankfully, we already have a solution to this problem. As I have argued for in detail in the previous two chapters, it is important for our understanding of the spiritual life that Christ is not merely an historical figure, but, rather, he is a living person whom the individual can engage with and experience as present to them today. In the rest of this chapter, I show why this account of being contemporary with Christ allows for an imitation of Christ in the full, technical sense.<sup>158</sup>

If the account of experience defended in the previous chapter is at all plausible, then we are able to see why being contemporary with Christ allows us to imitate him. That is, if a believer can engage with Christ as a person and share-attention with him in both a dyadic and triadic way, then plausibly, she can also imitate Christ in a way that is spiritually developmental

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<sup>158</sup> As with the discussion of perceptual and mirror empathy in Chapter 3, it is important not to commit to too strong a thesis here. We can note that whilst a mirror-neuron account happens to be the best current explanation of how an individual can subconsciously imitate someone, the fact that we unconsciously imitate people who we spend time with seems uncontroversial. To see this, we only need to look at how the personalities of couples merge over many years together, or how a person's accent and mannerisms are unconsciously influenced by those they spend time with. My claim is that the same is true with a person's experience of Christ; if a person wants to be more like Christ, and it is possible to experience Christ as present, then this is a good starting point for the imitation of Christ.

and radically transformational. Importantly for us, Green's model of religious experience also happens to be the way that psychologists account for the kind of engagement individuals need to have with one another in order to mind-read, and thus, to imitate.<sup>159</sup> An infant's awareness and engagement with other persons develops over time, and begins with a kind of dyadic-joint-attention, that is, attention which requires only awareness of another person through a kind of mutual gazing. This basic kind of attention sharing is possible very early on in infants (from zero to two months, according to Vasudevi Reddy (2011, 145)). The ability to jointly-attend then develops into a kind of triadic joint-attention, at around four to five months, that is, joint-attention in which an infant gains the ability to focus on some independent object whilst still remaining aware of the other person (Reddy, 2005, 85-87). The ability to follow the gaze of others and mutually focus on objects in a kind of triadic attention develops later, at around nine to fourteen months, into ability of engaging in the process of 'imitating actions' (2011, 145).

As we have seen with Goldman's distinction between higher-level and lower-level empathy, there are different kinds of imitation—imitation occurs a subconscious level when a believer shares attention with a person, but she must also work at the process of imitation herself. Imitation, as a form of sanctification, is a co-operative and purposive venture, not a passive change. And so, imitation, whilst beginning with an experience of Christ's presence, will involve intentional and disciplined action on behalf of the imitator, but this will only be made possible, I maintain, if imitation begins with an experience of Christ.

It may be the case, however, that this account is too restrictive in allowing imitation only to those who have vivid experiences of Christ. This objection should not be too troubling if we recall our earlier discussion. Imitation is a process which will not be complete

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<sup>159</sup> The discussion of joint-attention in the psychological literature is as vast as that on imitation, and I will not have space for a detailed discussion. For an excellent volume, which discusses the importance of joint-attention, see Seeman (ed.) 2011.

in this life. Recall Paul's claim that: 'we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18). Imitation is about *being changed into his likeness*; the verb 'being' here implies that coming into Christ's likeness is not an immediate thing. Indeed, it is not a change which can be fully achieved in this life, as he maintains later, 'now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood' (1 Corinthians 13:12). And so imitation of Christ is something we aim to cultivate but never expect to complete.

Just as an infant's development requires stages of personal presence, according to Reedy (2011, 145), we should also expect the experience of Christ's presence comes in stages. From a minimal kind of presence, such as the one described by Tracey Emin in her Liverpool Cathedral installation, 'I felt you, and knew that you loved me', to the vivid experiences of William James, who claims that 'I could not any more have doubted that He was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two' (1994, 66-67). If our prior account of sanctification was correct, then this is to be expected; sanctification is a cooperative and on-going process which results in becoming more like Christ through the development of spiritual attention-sharing abilities. As Brother Lawrence describes in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, the experience of God's presence requires practice and discipline. The '*habitual sense of God's presence*' (2009, 17; emphasis in the original) Brother Lawrence reportedly experienced was not an immediate experience, but one which required years of worship and confession. Indeed, the other kinds of behaviour replication may be useful here—in emulating or mimicking Christ's actions as they are recorded in Scripture, a believer may open ourselves up to the possibility of genuine imitation and attempt to cultivate an awareness of the presence of Christ. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will turn to the question of God's withdrawal and the lack of experience of Christ's presence in the spiritual life.

Seeking after the presence of Christ is crucial to understanding how the individual imitates Him—if a person wants to imitate Christ, she must aim to spend time with Christ and develop an awareness of his presence. This brings a new significance to the spiritual practises which enable believers to experience Christ's presence and help them to become more aware of this through their practice. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

True imitation, for Kierkegaard, is found in the inward relation between the individual and Christ. Hence, by understanding this notion of contemporaneity we can see how important imitation is to Kierkegaard's account of what it means to be a Christian. Indeed, understanding this notion of contemporaneity can also help us to understand better why presence is so important for imitation. The psychology of imitation sheds light on our imitation of Christ and the importance of cultivating an awareness of the presence of Christ in the Christian spiritual life.

## Chapter 7

### The Dark Knight of the Soul:

#### Weaning and the Problem of Divine Withdrawal

From your hand, O God, we are willing to receive everything. You reach it out, your mighty hand, and catch the wise in their foolishness. You open it, your gentle hand, and satisfy with blessing everything that lives. And even if it seems that your arm is shortened, increase our faith and our trust so that we might still hold fast to you. And if at times it seems that you draw your hand away from us, oh, then we know it is only because you close it, that you close it only to save the more abundant blessing in it, that you close it only to open it again and satisfy with blessing everything that lives. Amen. (EUD, 31)

#### The problem of divine withdrawal

The thesis which I have argued for in detail puts an important emphasis on the experience of Christ's presence in the spiritual life of an individual. As we have seen, the purpose of the spiritual life is to grow a deeper-union with Christ and to reintegrate our will around a higher-order desire for the good. This is made possible by a kind of imitation of Christ, which relies heavily on our experience of Christ and regular practice of spiritual practices which allows us to share attention with Christ. There is an obvious problem that this thesis faces, however: What about those that do not experience Christ's presence in this way? This is the basis of the problem of divine withdrawal which is the focus of this final chapter.

Succinctly put, the problem of divine withdrawal asks how a God who desires union with us could withdraw from us. In particular, and in contrast to the much discussed problem

of divine hiddenness,<sup>160</sup> the problem is focused on those who believe in God, have experienced a felt closeness to God, desire union with God, do nothing to prevent this union from occurring, yet experience an absence of God's presence.

Let us begin with an example to help make the problem as clear as possible. Mother Teresa is regarded by many as an exemplar of the spiritual life—not only did she commit herself wholeheartedly to a life of spiritual discipline in prayer, meditation and the reading of scripture, but also she devoted her life's work to helping those in some of the most deprived and poverty stricken areas in the world. Yet, in her personal spiritual life, Mother Teresa described moments of great anguish and abandonment by God. Not only moments, though: rather than enjoying a spiritual life typically characterized by experiencing God's presence and a felt closeness to him, Mother Teresa's spiritual life was instead typically characterized by experiencing God's absence and a subsequent distance from him. In 1957 she writes,

In the darkness [. . .] Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The child of your love—and now become as the most hated one. The one—you have thrown away as unwanted—unloved. I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer [. . .] Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. Love—the word—it brings nothing. I am told God lives in me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. (2007, 186-87)

Mother Teresa's situation is not unique. In fact, most, if not all, Christian believers will surely empathise with some of her experiences. So why does God seem absent from individuals who once felt close to him if he loves them and desires union with them?

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<sup>160</sup> For a recent discussion of the problem of divine hiddenness see Green and Stump (eds.) 2016.

Whilst in many cases, there is a straightforward answer to the question of why a person experiences separation from God—either her sin, some physical or mental pain, or a lack of desire for union with God—<sup>161</sup>there are more difficult cases, presumably Mother Teresa's, which generate a more difficult question to answer. In such cases,

- (1) that person knows that God exists and has shared in some rich experience of God's presence before,
- (2) that person is not living in habitual sin,
- (3) that person desires union with God, and<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> The possibilities for why there might be separation between God and an individual are explored in detail by Stump (2012) in her discussion of Christ's separation from God on the cross and the cry of dereliction. Stump argues that the reason for Christ's separation from God is that the overwhelming pain of sharing in the suffering of humanity prevents closeness and attention sharing with God whilst Christ is on the cross. For another example of how physical or emotional pain may cause an experience of separation from God, see A.P. Scrutton's (2015) analysis of a Christian approach to depression.

<sup>162</sup> An example of how lack of desire of a person may cause experience of separation, see Anthony Bloom's discussion of prayer in which he claims

[i]f you look at the relationship [with God] in terms of *mutual* relationship, you will see that God could complain about us a great deal more than we about Him. We complain that He does not make Himself present to us for the few minutes we reserve for Him, but what about the twenty-three and a half hours during which God may be knocking at our door and we answer "I am busy, I am sorry" or when we do not answer at all because we do not even hear the knock at the door of our heart, our minds, of our conscience, of our life. So there is a situation in which have no right to complain of the absence of God, because we are a great deal more absent than He ever is. (1970, 2; emphasis in the original)



(4) that person experiences separation from God.

Thus, the question which I seek to answer in this chapter is this: What morally sufficient reason could God have for withdrawing from such an individual?

The answer that I give is that divine withdrawal can be understood as a kind of spiritual weaning process in which God uses the experience of separation from him as a means of spiritual maturation.<sup>163</sup> Metaphorically speaking, the sweetness of breast-milk must be replaced with something more nutritious and enriching for the individual. And although this process is painful for both the mother and the child, it is a process which aims at a deeper union and is this future benefit which justifies the suffering inflicted. This metaphor has been used in various places in the spiritual literature. Here, I focus on two such cases: Kierkegaard's weaning stories in the 'Exordium' from *Fear and Trembling*, and then John of the Cross's discussion of weaning in *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Having discussed examples from the spiritual literature, I then ask how absence and separation could bring about a deeper, or more mature union between persons.

### **Weaning and the problem of divine withdrawal in Kierkegaard**

A theme which is repeated in Kierkegaard's entire authorship, but which receives its most detailed treatment in the pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling*, is that the spiritual life requires suffering and sacrifice.<sup>164</sup> Using the pseudonym 'Johannes de Silentio', Kierkegaard explores

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<sup>163</sup> Something which I do not go into here, but which is worth taking note of, is that the metaphor of weaning is one of the few feminine metaphors to describe God in both Scripture and also the spiritual literature. This is particularly interesting in the context of discussing the withdrawal of God's presence, as the Hebrew 'Shekinah' which is used when referring to God's presence in the Old Testament is a grammatically feminine word.

<sup>164</sup> For a detailed discussion of this theme in Kierkegaard's authorship, see Podmore 2013.

the story of the *Akedah* and God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The discussion of whether Abraham must make a 'teleological suspension of the ethical' (FT, 54) has received considerable attention in the secondary literature, particularly in reference to the discussion of divine command theory and the nature of religious obligation.<sup>165</sup> However, as many commentators draw attention to, *Fear and Trembling* is predominantly a work about faith, rather than ethics—although there are ethical issues discussed in the text, primarily, this text is about the spiritual life.<sup>166</sup> Using the story of Abraham as a starting point for discussion, Johannes seeks to pick out what it is about Abraham that makes him a hero of the faith, or a 'knight of faith' (FT, 38) and an example of the spiritual life lived well.

Although the theme of suffering and separation from God spans the entirety of *Fear and Trembling*, for the purposes of this chapter, I focus here on how these themes are introduced in Johannes' Introduction to the *Akedah* in the 'Exordium', or 'Tuning Up', as it sometimes translated. Here, Johannes recites four different retellings of the *Akedah* from the perspective of a man who is obsessed with understanding Abraham's faith. Whilst these four fictional Abrahams make similar outward movements to the *real* Abraham, their internal response to the situation differs in various ways, and thus are not examples of faith, for Johannes. In the first story, Abraham presents himself as a monster to Isaac to protect Isaac's

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<sup>165</sup>See Philip L. Quinn's discussion of *Fear and Trembling* in his 2006, for instance.

<sup>166</sup>As Evans notes,

*Fear and Trembling* is not the book on which to focus if one wants to understand Kierkegaard's own views on ethics. Kierkegaard's primary concern in creating the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, and through him, *Fear and Trembling*, is not to develop an ethical theory, but to combat widespread nineteenth-century assumptions about the nature of theology and its relation to philosophy and to culture. [...] The book is primarily about faith, and the role faith should play in the formation of the self's identity. (2004, 62)

trust in God. In the second, Abraham loses his faith and trust in God after the event. In the third, Abraham cannot understand why his actions are not sinful and how God could require Isaac's sacrifice from him. And finally, in the fourth retelling, Abraham despairs at the moment of sacrifice, and Isaac notices this but never speaks of it. I will not say much more about the importance of these imagined retellings of the *Akedah* here, but it is worth noting that these stories all attempt to rationalise or humanize Abraham's actions in some way. Crucially, however, none of these four Abrahams have faith, or at least not the faith which Johannes describes in the remainder of *Fear and Trembling*.

Alongside these retellings of the *Akedah*, are four short and intriguing stories of a mother weaning her child. These stories, or parables, as I will call them, are not explained or referred to at any point in the proceeding text and they do not play a crucial role in the discussion which follows.<sup>167</sup> These parables can, however, give us some insight into the problem of divine withdrawal, or so I argue. Although they do not follow on immediately from one another in the text, I present them together here:

When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast. It would be hard to have the breast look inviting when the child must not have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother—she is still the same, her gaze is tender and loving as ever. How fortunate the one who did not need more terrible means to wean the child! (FT, 11)

When the child has grown big and is to be weaned, the mother virginally conceals her breast, and then the child no longer has a mother. How fortunate the child who has not lost his mother in some other way! (FT, 12)

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<sup>167</sup> For a collection of Kierkegaard's parables, see Oden 1989. Oden also gives an excellent overview of the use of parable in Kierkegaard's writings in his introduction to the text.

When the child is to be weaned, the mother, too, is not without sorrow, because she and the child are more and more to be separated, because the child who first lay under her heart and later rested upon her breast will never again be so close. So they grieve together the brief sorrow. How fortunate the one who kept the child so close and did not need to grieve any more! (FT, 13)

When the child is to be weaned, the mother has stronger sustenance at hand so that the child does not perish. How fortunate the one who has this stronger sustenance at hand. (FT, 14)

All four parables focus on the separation and subsequent distance between mother and infant in the process of weaning. In the first two parables, the mother deliberately covers or changes the appearance of her breast in order to encourage the process of weaning, and the result, from the perspective of the child, is an experience of separation from the mother. In the third story, we are told that both the mother and the child suffer in some way through the process of weaning—a level of intimacy is lost as the child begins to learn how to be independent. However, there is a kind of resolution to the parables in the fourth story, as we are told that the mother does not aim at needless suffering, but that she intends to provide ‘stronger sustenance’ for the child in replacement for the milk. Immediately we see that these examples tell a story of an experience of separation and loss of intimacy, but one which has a greater purpose, and a purpose which is beneficial to both the infant and the mother.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> There has been some recent scholarly attention regarding why these stories are included (see Rumble 2015 and Howland 2015), both of which are included in the recent *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide* (Conway 2015)), but the significance of their inclusion is often debated. Some scholars have maintained that the use of an explicitly feminine metaphor with no further

Although the weaning parables are not precisely parallel to Johannes' retelling of the *Akedab*,<sup>169</sup> they do provide an introduction to some of the themes which are developed later in *Fear and Trembling*. As Vanessa Rumble describes it,

[I]n both the tales of Abraham and the stories of weaning, we are confronted at eerie proximity with the prospect of an absent, incoherent, and violating deity, an image of nightmarish proportions, the fact that God's commands are madness, and God's providential care of the smallest and most vulnerable non-existent. (2015, 259)

The weaning stories present a very human, and relatable story of loss and separation for the purpose of achieving some higher good. Although Johannes (or, at least the imagined character we are presented with at the beginning of the 'Exordium') does not understand Abraham's actions, the mother's actions and the infant's experience of loss, in contrast, require no justification. The good which the separation of the child from the mother aims at is transparent in a way that Abraham's separation from God's goodness and Isaac's separation

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discussion is an attempt to communicate indirectly with Regine Olsen, the woman who Kierkegaard broke off his engagement to. Although there is surely some truth in this, the reference to biographical facts from Kierkegaard's life does not fully explain the role of the weaning parables, nor should it concern us greatly here. However, as Vanessa Rumble notes, in her discussion of Kierkegaard's weaning stories, it seems strange that Kierkegaard would have any knowledge about weaning, and so it is odd that this metaphor is included; his mother is never mentioned in his journals, and his engagement with Olsen was brief and did not result in children.

<sup>169</sup> The first weaning story, in which the mother blackens her breast, seems similar to the story of Abraham presenting himself as a monster to protect Isaac's faith in God. However, it is not obvious that the remaining three stories map on neatly to the last three re-tellings of the *Akedab*, and this direct comparison should not be given too much weight in determining the significance of the weaning parables.

from his father's love are not. So whilst Isaac does not understand his father's actions, Abraham does not understand the reason behind God's commands, and the crying infant who experiences separation from her mother does not comprehend the suffering she feels, all three receive something back by their movements. For Abraham, his only beloved son. For Isaac, his life. And for the weaned child, a different, but equally intimate relationship with her mother.

This higher good which separation aims at, I think, is a kind of maturation in relationship. As Edward Mooney describes Johannes's position:

To achieve *independence-in-relationship*, separation that simultaneously acknowledges profound dependence, is exactly the project of Kierkegaardian selfhood. [...] More specifically, *resignation* of something of utmost value (in this case, the child to be weaned), coupled with the assurance that it will be *returned*, is Johannes de Silentio's basic characterization of faith. Faith is the process of weaning the child and welcoming its return. (1991, 31; emphasis in the original)

For Johannes, although weaning plays no further role in *Fear and Trembling*, it is, perhaps, the best explanation of Abraham's actions that we can give (if any sensible explanation can be given at all). The movement of faith is described later in the text as a kind of 'double-movement' (FT, 36). Faith requires a resignation, or a giving up of something which is of great of value, but crucially, faith is not simply the act of resignation, for Johannes. But, rather, it is the receiving back which is crucial—Abraham gives up that which is most precious to him (his only son) and this act of resignation allows for his receiving of Isaac as a gift from God. To put it another way, as Christ proclaims in the Gospel according to Matthew, 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 10:39). This double-movement of faith can be seen plainly and comprehensively in the metaphor of

weaning—to understand the separation or resignation of the infant, we must see the value that comes from weaning—namely, that it is not just an act giving something up, but an act of receiving back. Whilst suffering and separation are an essential part of the weaning parables, it is important to see that the fourth weaning parable speaks of the ultimate benefit of this: ‘the mother has stronger sustenance at hand so that the child does not perish’ (FT, 14).

The metaphor of weaning in *Fear and Trembling* presents us with the basic features which will form the basis of the response to the problem of divine withdrawal which I develop. Namely, that withdrawal can be a means of maturation, and, ultimately, it can be a justifiable infliction of harm for some higher good. Before going on to explain how Kierkegaard’s discussion of weaning as a spiritual metaphor can provide us with an answer to the problem of divine withdrawal, I focus on another use of this metaphor which can help us to develop this account, namely, John of the Cross’s use the weaning metaphor in *The Dark Night of the Soul*.<sup>170</sup>

### **Spiritual weaning in The Dark Night of the Soul**

In *The Dark Night of the Soul*, John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century mystic, explores the themes of suffering and separation from God. For John, the ‘dark night’, in which our spiritual senses are dulled and the believer experiences God as absent, is a means of developing spiritual maturity and, eventually, loving, sensual union with God, the beloved (2002, 25). As with Johannes’ discussion of faith, for John, suffering and separation from God do not detract from faith or undermine belief in God in any way, that is, they do not pose an

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<sup>170</sup> For examples of weaning in Scripture, see Genesis 21:8, 1 Samuel 1:22-24, 1 Kings 11:20, Hosea 1:8. For metaphorical discussions of weaning in scripture, see Psalm 131, Isaiah 28:9, 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Hebrews 5:13 and 1 Peter 2:2.

epistemic problem for us. Rather, suffering and separation from God are an important stage in the development of faith and union with God.<sup>171</sup>

In the two books expounding the meaning of the poetry of *The Dark Night of the Soul*, John discusses the kind of spiritual development which the soul must undergo in order to reach loving union with God. This begins, in the first book, with his discussion of the ‘The Night of Sense’ in which God purifies the believer. Similarly to Johannes de Silentio, John uses the metaphor of weaning to guide his discussion of spiritual development. It is in the *Dark Night of the Soul* that we find perhaps, the most detailed and prolonged use of weaning as a spiritual metaphor. Spiritual development begins, John tells us, ‘[o]nce the soul has completely surrendered to serving God’. In this stage, he writes,

[S]he is nurtured and caressed by him, just like a tender baby with its loving mother. The mother holds the child close in her arms, warming it with the heat of her breasts, nourishing it with sweet milk and softened foods. But as the baby grows, the mother gradually caresses it less. She begins to hide her tender love. She sets the child down on its own two feet. This is to help the baby let go of its childish ways and experience more significant things.

The Grace of God is just like a loving mother. [...] Through grace, the soul discovers sweet spiritual milk and effortlessly drinks in all the things of God. Through grace, God gives the soul intense delight in spiritual practices, just as a loving mother places her breast tenderly into the mouth of her child. (2002, 36)

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<sup>171</sup> It is not obvious whether Kierkegaard is explicitly referring to John of the Cross in his use of the weaning parables, and, as Podmore (2013, 80-81) claims, Kierkegaard was not familiar with John’s work.



For John, this spiritual sweetness which occurs at the beginning of faith brings with it a pleasure in engaging with spiritual practices—the individual finds times of prayer to be blissful and ‘fasting makings her happy’ (2002, 36). According to John, ‘[b]eginners feel such passion about divine things and are so devoted to their spiritual practices’ (2002, 37). It is this first stage of the beginners’ spiritual joy, which John uses the metaphor of the breastfeeding infant to illustrate. At this stage in the spiritual life, God is the source of all of her spiritual nutrition, and without the constant joy of spiritual practice, she cannot develop spiritually.

However, this spiritual milk which is appropriate for beginners is unable to provide and sustain the believer or allow for mature union with God. John goes on to tell us that

[j]ust as Abraham made a great feast when his son Isaac was weaned, so there is rejoicing in heaven when God removes the baby clothes from the soul. He is setting her down from his arms and making her walk on her own two feet. He removes her lips from the milky breast and replaces the soft sweet mush of infants with the crusty bread of the robust. (2002, 75)

In order for there to be any meaningful spiritual development, God must remove the joy of his presence which accompanies the spiritual life of the beginner. This withdrawal and experience of separation is important not only for the believer’s relationship with God, but also for her own development. The result of spiritual weaning, and the experience God’s absence, John goes on to tell us, is that the soul learns to commune with God ‘more respectfully [...] and more courteously’ (2002, 76). Spiritual maturity, through the experience of God’s absence, begins with a greater self-awareness; ‘from this dry night’, John writes, ‘first flows self-knowledge and from this source arises knowledge of God’ (2002, 78-79). Absence from God brings a perspective to the believer of her own insignificance, and God’s greatness, majesty and, ultimately gives the believer a sense of her sinfulness in comparison to God’s

perfection. This realisation and experience of absence is accompanied by the development of the virtue of humility, according to John:

What the soul draws also from the aridity and emptiness of the night of desire is spiritual humility. Through humility, acquired along with self-knowledge, the soul is purified of the imperfections of spiritual pride into which she stumbled during her time of prosperity. (2002, 79)

As we see with cases such as Teresa's, for instance, this process of weaning and spiritual growth is a slow process which often takes years to come out of, if it at all. The move into spiritual maturity is marked by the move from the Night of the Sense, to what John calls the 'Night of the Spirit'. However, he goes on to tell us, 'God may not immediately move her into the night of the spirit. [...] Instead, the soul may spend years cultivating mastery before she is ready to face the impenetrable darkness that leads to union' (2002, 89). So, as John describes it, spiritual weaning is not a process which is finished quickly. This experience of God's separation and the lack of joy in the spiritual life may continue indefinitely in fact.

What we see developed in John's discussion is a more explicit connection between spiritual maturity and the metaphor of weaning which is only hinted at in Kierkegaard's writing. In next section, I apply this metaphor to the problem of divine withdrawal and consider whether a response is possible from what has been presented so far.

### **The problem of divine withdrawal and the Dark Knight of the Soul**

Does this metaphor give us any help in discussing the problem of divine withdrawal? And, in particular, does it give us an answer as to why God would withdraw from someone who meets conditions (1)-(4)? The claim that I have been exploring through both Kierkegaard's and John of the Cross's discussions of weaning is that separation from God for some higher purpose is

justifiable. In *Fear and Trembling*, this is presented as the basis of faith and explained in parallel to Abraham's receiving Isaac back with joy. In *The Dark Night of the Soul*, this claim is given a more detailed explanation, in that separation from God brings about spiritual maturation and development of spiritual virtues such as humility. Are these interpretations of weaning defensible? Or, to put the question more succinctly and more generally: Can someone's absence ever be beneficial for their maturation?

It will be helpful to see this question not just as a spiritual one, but as a more general question about relationships between persons. So how can absence and separation play a role in the development of union between persons? The hypothesis, that separation or withdrawal can create a deeper union of love has some support in the psychological and sociological literature through the discussion what is often called the 'de-adaptation process'.<sup>172</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, uses the early years of a child's life to explain the maturation process which occurs as the infant moves from an absolute dependence on its mother towards a kind of independence. 'Maturity of the human being', Winnicott writes,

is a term that implies not only personal growth but also socialization. Let us say that in health, which is almost synonymous with maturity, the adult is able to identify with society without too great a sacrifice of personal spontaneity; or, the other way round, the adult is able to attend to his or her own personal needs without being antisocial, and indeed, without a failure to take some responsibility for the maintenance or for the modification of society as it is found. (1965, 82-83)

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<sup>172</sup> Note that Winnicott is not an empirical cognitive psychologist writing in the same tradition as the sources I cite to refer to the literature on imitation and shared-attention. Winnicott is a Kleinian psychoanalyst, and as such pays little attention to the neuroscientific causes of the phenomena he discusses.

For Winnicott, maturity is defined in the ability to attend to one's own needs appropriately. In the first few months of its existence, however, the child is so dependent on her mother for her practical needs, that there is no sense of individuality about the child. Winnicott calls this stage 'absolute dependence' (1965, 83). At this stage, any impingement of the infant's needs or failure of adaptation, from the caregiver, can result in serious interferences with the infant's development, and the maturational process, Winnicott notes (1965, 85). Axel Honneth, in writing about Winnicott's discussion of maturation, describes that, in this early stage, there is no sense of individuality about the child; mother and child exist in what Honneth calls 'undifferentiated intersubjectivity' or 'symbiosis' (1995, 98).

Winnicott maintains that it is only by moving away from this absolute dependence stage, that the infant is able to go through the process of de-adaptation. The second stage is a kind of relative dependence, in which the child begins to be aware the world beyond the mother, and develop a sense of self. This can only occur when the infant is able to perceive the mother not as part of herself, but as an object in her environment and something which is beyond her control. According to Winnicott, this stage is a kind of gradual de-adaptation which allows for the development of reflection and independent thought (1965, 86). He uses the example of feeding to show this:

Think of an infant expecting a feed. The time comes when the infant can wait a few minutes because noises in the kitchen indicate that food is about to appear. Instead of simply being excited by the noises, the infant uses the news item in order to be able to wait. (1965, 86)

The less dependent the infant becomes on the mother, the more able she is to process and understand her environment, and eventually form relationships with people other than the caregiver. This gradual de-adaptation allows for the slow development towards independence

and maturation, something which is not fully achieved until adulthood, for most people, Winnicott tells us (1965, 91). It is this move away from absolute dependency which is the mark of maturity, according to Winnicott's analysis.

Honneth describes this process of gradual de-adaptation as the basis of loving relationship; it is essential that independence is achieved in order for love to develop, he thinks (1995, 101). Honneth claims that this gives support to 'the hypothesis that all love relationships are driven by the conscious recollection of the original experience of merging that characterized the first months of life' (1995, 105). 'The inner state of symbiotic oneness', he goes to write,

so radically shapes the experiential scheme of complete satisfaction that it keeps alive, behind the back of the subject and throughout the subject's life, the desire to be merged with another person. Of course, this desire for merging can only become a feeling of love once, in the unavoidable experience of separation, it has been disappointed in such a way that it henceforth includes the recognition of the other as an independent person. (1995, 105)

If Honneth is right, that both dependence and separation are required for a relationship of love, then it is plausible to see the description of the dark night of the soul in terms of de-adaptation. Whilst a person might be entirely dependent on God for her spiritual life, she exists in symbiosis with God; she does not have a good level of self-awareness, or God-awareness. Hence why, for John of the Cross, separation from God brings with it a kind of humility. In being aware of oneself in relation to God, a person is able to perceive her own shortcomings more perceptively. In her state of symbiosis, a person does not have a union of

love with God; the relationship is too one-sided. In order for this to be possible, and for their relationship to mature, God must allow for de-adaptation to occur.<sup>173</sup>

The analogy of weaning is apt to describe this experience of separation discussed in the problem of divine withdrawal. Strictly speaking, although the mother withdraws her breast from the infant in this process, she never withdraws entirely from the infant. The change in

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<sup>173</sup> This claim seems relevantly similar to claims Kierkegaard makes elsewhere. Namely, that an overexposure to God's goodness can have a detrimental effect to the purpose of bringing about loving union; as the later Kierkegaardian pseudonym Anti-Climacus describes it, this can result in a kind of 'intoxication' in which

[t]o exist before God may seem unendurable to a man because he cannot come back to himself, become himself. Such a fantasized religious person would say (to characterize him by means of some lines): "That a sparrow can live is comprehensible; it does not know that it exists before God. But to know that one exists before God, and then not instantly go mad or sink into nothingness!" (SUD, 32)

However, it may not be the case that withdrawing from another person is an effective method of deepening a relationship of love in all contexts. Kierkegaard alludes to this in *Either/Or*, in which the pseudonymous author Johannes the Seducer claims that letter writing is often a better form of seduction than physical presence:

When she has received a letter, when its sweet poison has entered her blood, then a word is sufficient to make her love burst forth. [...] Only traces of ardor can be used in a conversation. My personal presence will prevent ecstasy. If I am present only in a letter, then she can easily cope with me; to some extent, she mistakes me for a more universal creature who dwells in her love. Then, too, in a letter one can more readily have free rein; in a letter I can throw myself at her feet in superb fashion, etc., something that would easily seem like nonsense if I did it in person, and the illusion would be lost. (EO1, 286)

the infant's perception of her mother is enriched by the de-adaptation process, but she never returns to the sweetness of the breast. By the time the child reaches adulthood, the loss of this sweetness is hardly a loss at all. The sweetness of milk is replaced by a deep and two-sided union of love.<sup>174</sup> Spiritually, this gives us a model of what maturation looks like — a person's apparent closeness to God, after a period of great suffering and separation, gives way to an appreciation of God's perfection, her own weaknesses, and ultimately a more genuine union.<sup>175</sup>

Is this an adequate response to the problem of divine withdrawal, and the question of why God might withdraw from someone who meets conditions (1)-(4)? In the next section, I discuss some potential objections to the answer I have given.

### **Objections: Absolute dependency and spiritual consent**

Before concluding, I consider two important objections to the claim that my account of spiritual weaning can give a good response to the problem of divine withdrawal.

First, it might be argued, that unlike a weaned child, human beings never move away from, or ought not to move away from, absolute dependency on God. However, the position I have developed here, argues that both dependence and independence are important for union with God. It is important to note that this tension (between absolute dependency and independence of relationship) is not one that I have introduced to Christian theology, but, rather, I have merely drawn attention to the fact that there is an existing tension in Christian

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<sup>174</sup> This way of thinking about separation is similar to Sarah Coakley's analysis of *The Dark Night of the Soul*; she writes that 'what *appears* to be divine "hiding" is actually a unique form of divine self-disclosure for the purposes of redemption' (2016, 230).

<sup>175</sup> As has been suggested to me, we may even be able to make sense of God's withdrawal from a group of people in order to bring about deeper union, such as in God's withdrawing from Israel at various places in the Old Testament, for instance.

theology between our absolute dependence on God and the need for independence in our relationship with God. Whilst, on the one hand, Scripture affirms that we can do nothing without God, (Christ tells his disciples that ‘apart from me you can do nothing’, for instance (John 15:5)), on the other hand, it also emphasises the need for our initiative and independence in relationship with God (‘Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith’ (James 2:18)). In light of this, it is not my intention to entirely resolve the tension between dependency and independence, but to note that in some sense, both are important for Christian theology.

One way of thinking about how this tension might be resolved, but something which I do not have space to develop entirely, is that talk of absolute dependency in Christian theology can be explained ontologically. That is, we are entirely dependent on God for our continued existence and without his willing, we would cease to exist. However, to talk of independence in relationship with God, is talk of our will and response to God—whilst we are entirely ontologically dependent on God, in order for a relationship of love to be developed, there needs to be some independence of the will. This is not entirely adequate as a response, however, since relationally, a deeper union of love will also require an increased dependence on God (in the same way that a marriage results in increased dependence on the spouse). However, this is very different to the kind of dependence of a new-born and a mother—in order for there to be increased dependency in marriage, for instance, there must be a *mutual* submission of the will, and this looks starkly different to the relation between mother and new-born. Our relation to God, then, is one of ontological dependence, and aims at growing towards the kind of relational dependence, but this dependency must be willed, rather than inflicted. It is through the experience of divine withdrawal, that an individual may wholeheartedly will a relational dependency on God.

The second objection which it will be important to address is the question of whether God could ever have a morally sufficient reason for allowing the kind of suffering which is



caused by his withdrawing. What would count as a morally sufficient reason for this kind of suffering? First, we might think, the suffering must benefit the person in some way. As Stump puts this point,

[i]f what is bad about suffering is that it undermines a person's flourishing or that it deprives her of the desires of her heart or both, then a benefit that constitutes a morally sufficient reason for God's allowing suffering must be something that somehow defeats the badness of suffering so understood. (2010, 13)

It is also plausible to think that not every kind of benefit would count as a morally sufficient reason for allowing you to suffer. To see this, we must distinguish between two kinds of benefit: negative benefits and positive benefits. To put this succinctly: benefits which prevent some harm from occurring to you are negative benefits, whereas benefits which improve your wellbeing without preventing harm are positive benefits. We can see what this distinction amounts to by using a medical analogy. I can negatively benefit you by giving you chemotherapy, something which will cause you short-term harm, but which will prevent you from experiencing the significant long-term harm of sickness and potentially, death. Or, to give another example of a negative benefit: I might harm you by rugby tackling you in the middle of the street, but thereby prevent you from experiencing the harm of falling under the approaching bus. Alternatively, I might positively benefit you by allowing or causing harm. For example, by performing cosmetic surgery on you to straighten your wonky nose, I would allow or cause you harm which would bring about some kind of benefit for you, but crucially, I would not prevent harm from occurring, since the benefits would be only positive. Or, by

locking you in a cellar for four years, I cause you significant harm, but it might have the positive benefit of giving you an appreciation for life's simpler pleasures.<sup>176</sup>

What is the significance of this distinction for the problem of divine withdrawal? Well, it seems to be relatively unproblematic that I could harm you to bring about negative benefit without your consent, at least in some instances. Thus, for example, if you have an accident and were knocked unconscious and a doctor performed invasive but life-saving surgery on you, it seems intuitive that the harm of the life-saving surgery, though non-consensual, is permissible. We would no doubt say the same about my rugby tackling you away from oncoming traffic. Let us suppose, however, that whilst you were unconscious, the doctor also decided to fix your wonky nose without your consent, would we find this kind of harm permissible? Or, suppose my locking you in a cellar for four years brought about significant positive benefits, would this be permissible? At least intuitively, positive and negative cases look different. In cases of negative benefit, consent looks less important. But in cases of positive benefit, consent is vital.

Thus, it looks like the following two criteria are important for giving an account of the morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering:

- (i) The suffering is beneficial to the person, and
- (ii) The benefit of this suffering, if non-consensual, must be a negative benefit rather than a positive benefit.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Stump considers this example of positive benefit in her discussion of the morally sufficient reasons for God's allowing suffering (2010, 392).

<sup>177</sup> Stump develops these conditions in *Wandering in Darkness* (2010, 378-86). Paul Draper (2011) gives a detailed account of why he thinks Stump fails to meet these conditions in his review of her book.

So, can we give a morally sufficient reason for why God allows people to suffer? One way of answering this question is to say that, in some way, all suffering is negatively beneficial to humans. This kind of response has been developed by Stump (2010) to answer to the question of why human beings suffer. According to Stump, human suffering allows for the possibility of eternal and freely chosen union with God and the negative benefit of this suffering is that it prevents eternal separation from God. We do not need to worry about the details of Stump's account here, but we should note that this response will not straightforwardly explain why God allows persons to suffer instances of divine withdrawal which meet conditions (1)-(4). If the above considerations of consent are right, then God is justified in using suffering as a means of preventing separation from him. However, this will allow for a response to cases such as Mother Teresa's—those people who have already begun to be sanctified by God, and who will one day enjoy permanent union with Him. To put to the problem more succinctly—the very case which generates the problem of divine withdrawal is a case in which negative benefit cannot be appealed to in meeting the consent constraint.<sup>178</sup> The reason that this is a problem for my account is that, amongst the conditions required for the problem to be generated is condition (2), the person is not living in habitual sin. In other words, an appeal to the negative benefits received will not help if the case of weaning meets condition (2). The

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<sup>178</sup> This is essentially the problem which Draper raises for Stump's account. Whilst Draper admits that Stump's account of suffering as a means of preventing permanent separation from God fulfils both constraints, he argues that there are instances of suffering which fail to meet these constraints. In particular, Draper is interested in discussing cases in which the consent constraint is not met. In the case of suffering in general, Stump can meet this constraint since it is the negative benefit of removing the harm of permanent separation from God which justifies God's allowing a person to suffer without consent. However, there are people to whom this will not apply, Draper thinks—for instance, if an individual is sufficiently far into the process of sanctification that a permanent lack of union with God after death is not a realistic prospect, then this person's suffering cannot be accounted for as an instance of negative benefit.

benefits received from spiritual weaning will thus be entirely positive, and the constraint condition is not met by my account.

This problem can be avoided by thinking more carefully about consent, however. First, let's consider the role of consent in the case of weaning an infant. Weaning is a process which brings about some harm in order to benefit the infant. Even if we focus exclusively on the positive benefits of my being weaned, such as the benefit of my now being able to enjoy a delicious sirloin steak, for instance, which would be unavailable to me if I had not been weaned, it looks like my not consenting is unproblematic here. Why is this the case? Plausibly, the reason why weaning is justifiable without actual consent is because no rational person would deny consent when they were cognitively able to give it. After receiving the benefit of being able to eat sirloin steak, it would be unreasonable of me to have complaint about the suffering inflicted on me when I was weaned, for instance. Thus, perhaps, we can meet the consent constraint by appealing to a kind of subsequent consent: given the future benefits of the spiritual virtues I will receive, and the intimacy of union with God which spiritual weaning allows, no reasonable person would bemoan the harm done to them through this process, regardless of how difficult it is.<sup>179</sup> The notion of subsequent consent will not get my response to the problem off the hook entirely, however. In case of weaning, the reason that subsequent consent justifies the harm is because the infant is unable to consent. However, the same does not seem to be the case for Mother Teresa.

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<sup>179</sup> We see this kind of subsequent consent for suffering more generally in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Pierre Bezukhov's statement,

Well if someone said to me right now, this minute: do you want remain the way you were before captivity, or live through it all over again? For God's sake, captivity again and horsemeat! Once we've thrown off our habitual paths, we think all is lost; but it's only here that the new and the good begins. And as long as there's life, there's happiness. There's much still to come. (2007, 1118)

It is possible to appeal to consent in the spiritual life without the dubious notion of subsequent consent, however. The specific kind of experience which generated the problem discussed in this chapter is one in which the individual desires a deeper union with God (condition (3)). But if the individual desires a deeper union with God, and this deeper union with God requires a kind of separation from God, then, we might think, the person consents to the suffering which results from God's withdrawal. That is, the account developed in this chapter can meet the consent constraint simply by appealing to fact that for Mother Teresa and others like her, simply by engaging in the spiritual life and by desiring deeper union with God, they consent to God's withdrawal and the subsequent suffering which this brings. The kind of consent I have in mind here is summarised well by the words of the Methodist covenant prayer:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen. (Wesley and Wesley, 1981, 387)

If the person who engages with the spiritual life is willing to make this covenant, or one like it, then, we might think, she consents to whatever means possible to bring about God's will and a deeper union with him. It seems very likely that someone such as Mother Teresa, someone who desires union with God and is sufficiently far through the process of sanctification, would be willing to pray this prayer. In fact, there are many examples of prayers and hymns that contain utterances of consent like this—even the most basic form of Christian spirituality, the Lord's prayer, contains within it what looks to be an utterance of consent: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:10). Or, to give another example, Frances Havergal's hymn 'Take my life', contains the verse:

Take my will, and make it Thine;  
It shall be longer mine.  
Take my heart; it is Thine own;  
It shall be Thy royal throne. (2010, 88)

The hymns, prayer and liturgies which are an essential part of the spiritual life, give examples of the kind of spiritual consent which individuals give to allow God to withdraw from them. The kind of consent that plays a role in spiritual practices looks to be similar to the kind of consent given in the wedding vows. In promising to love one's spouse regardless of the future consequences, one consents to the potential future harm that may be inflicted by the marriage—thus, thirty years after making the vow, if one's spouse suffers a debilitating illness or loses their means of income, one can hardly claim that they have not consented to these harms, even if they could not predict them. Similarly, in partaking in the spiritual life, in praying that God's will be done, and singing that God 'takes my life', I cannot claim to have not given consent to the dark night of the soul, even if I could not predict or anticipate it.

Whilst these similarities between spiritual and marital consent might be helpful in one respect, the kind of consent given in spiritual consent is importantly different in another respect. More specifically, it looks like the kind of consent needed in the spiritual case is a consent to permanent separation from God if this is what God wills, and it would seem strange to suggest that the marriage vows contained anything analogous to this. When a person gives spiritual consent, she must submit to the possibility that if it is in the will of God, she might never emerge from the dark night of the soul.

If this kind of consent is plausible, then just by engaging in the spiritual life (and I take it that engagement is necessary for a person who fulfils conditions (1)-(4)), one consents to whatever harm God wills for the benefits that this brings and the problem is never generated for the position advocated in this chapter.

According to the account I have developed in this chapter, the benefits gained from spiritual weaning are primarily positive—the development of humility, and a deeper, less superficial relationship with God, for instance. The reason why weaning counts as a morally sufficient reason for God’s allowing of harm is that it is entirely consensual. By engaging in the spiritual life, the person consents wholeheartedly to allow God to bring about deeper union with him by whatever means possible.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Another way of responding to this objection is to argue that, in fact, the individual does receive negative benefit from the suffering of divine withdrawal. As Eford and Worsley (2015) note in their critical review of *Wandering in Darkness*, Draper’s objection to Stump can be resolved by focusing on the scope of the negative benefit of suffering. Draper’s objection is successful only if we assume that the negative benefits which of suffering can be accounted for entirely in the moment of justification. According to Eford and Worsley, Draper’s objection relies on the assumption that, for Stump, individuals receive no negative benefits after the moment of justification (2015, 555). Their suggestion to prevent Stump’s account from failing the consent constraint is to argue that sanctification also has negative benefits to the individual. The kind of negative benefit, which is gained from sanctification, is a kind of psychic disharmony, or fragmentation. According to this account, God uses suffering to heal

## Conclusion

The problem of divine withdrawal can be addressed by appealing to the metaphor of weaning as it has been used in the spiritual literature. God can use the experience of separation from him for a higher and ultimately good purpose. The experience of separation from God does not stand against or nullify the importance of experiencing God's presence, but, rather, the experience of God's absence is as important for the believer as the experience of God's presence if she is to experience a deep union of love and a mature spiritual life. We have seen this theme as it is developed in both Kierkegaard's and John of the Cross's work on the spiritual life. Furthermore, this answer to the problem of divine withdrawal has some support from the psychological literature—both dependence and independence are vital stages for developing a union of love. Moreover, by appealing to the kind of consent which is implicit in the spiritual practices involved in an active participation in the Christian spiritual life, we can see that there is a morally sufficient reason for God's allowing a person to suffer the harm of his withdrawal. Whilst the benefits of God's withdrawal are primarily positive benefits (spiritual humility, deepness in relationship to God, etc...) and thus cannot be accounted for by appealing to negative benefit, the harm is a consensual harm and thus, there is no problem with God's allowing this harm to occur.

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our will and our desires in a similar way to the doctor using chemotherapy to heal a cancer. They note, however, that if this defence is to be plausible, then it must be the case that this process of sanctification is never completed in this life (2015, 557). That is, there can never be an instance of suffering which fails the constraint condition, since no one will move past the point in which they cannot negatively benefit from suffering in this life.



## Conclusion

You who yourself once walked the earth and left footprints that we should follow; you who from your heaven still look down on every pilgrim, strengthen the weary, hearten the disheartened, lead back the straying, give solace to the struggling; you who will come again at the end of time to judge each one individually, whether he followed you—our God and our Saviour, let your prototype stand very clearly before the eyes of the soul in order to dispel the mists, strengthen in order to keep this alone unaltered before our eyes so that by resembling you and by following you we may find the right way surely to the judgement, since every human being ought to be brought by you to the eternal happiness with you in the life to come. Amen. (UDVS, 217)

What is the purpose of the Christian spiritual life? According to the thesis I have developed here, the Christian spiritual life aims at bringing about ever-deeper union with Christ in this life and the reintegration of our desires and our will around the good. Importantly, this requires drawing near to Christ personally by an experience of his presence. As I have described it, experiencing Christ's presence is both the means of bringing about union, but also the end—as Anti-Climacus puts this point in *Practice in Christianity*: 'The helper is the help' (PC, 15). That is, the aim of the spiritual life, as I have described it, is to come into deeper relationship with God and the way to come into deeper relationship with God is through experiencing the presence Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Importantly, experiences of God in this life should be thought of interpersonally. 'God is not like something one buys in a shop, or like a piece of property' (CD, 88), Kierkegaard tells us, but, rather, he is a person and a subject. This should influence our understanding of what it is to experience Christ's presence, and, as I have argued, understanding what it means to be contemporary with Christ should be informed by our

understanding of interpersonal knowledge and experience more generally. Being contemporary with Christ's presence is a kind of interpersonal attention-sharing with Christ, much like experiences in any other person to person relationship. Although describing the spiritual life as focused on the supernatural presence of Christ is at risk of sounding unattainable, I have also shown that there are some clear practical ways of engaging with Christ's presence in the spiritual life; the regular use of spiritual practices can help us to engage with Christ presence as well as making us more aware of the possibility of experiencing Christ's presence. Thus, as we have seen, the practices which enable us to share attention with Christ: reading Scripture, prayer, the Eucharist, confession, preaching, and so on, are essential not for an increase in understanding (although this may be a corollary of religious practices), but for our experience of Christ's presence. The experience of Christ's presence is not merely a tool to strengthen our beliefs about God or to make us more aware of where we need to change our will, behaviour and thoughts, but, rather, by experiencing Christ's presence we are able to engage in the process of imitating Christ. Which, as I have argued for, is integral to the sanctification of believers in the God-relationship.

Finally, I considered the experiences of Christ's absence. Which, it might be argued, are more common experiences in the Christian spiritual life than experiences of Christ's presence. If presence is so important for the spiritual life, then why do so many fail to experience Christ in this way? Even in Christ's withdrawal from us, I have argued, God draws us into a deeper relationship with him. Experiences of absence enable us to develop independency in relationship and spiritual maturity. The aim of the Christian spiritual life is ultimately for a deeper relationship with God, and the redemption of our will, so that 'we shall be like him' (1 John 3:2).

As Kierkegaard repeatedly reminds us, the task of becoming a Christian is no easy task. As he puts this point in *On My Work as an Author*,

[f]rom a long time the strategy employed was to utilize everything to get as many as possible, everyone if possible, to accept Christianity—but then not to be so very scrupulous about whether what one got them to accept actually was Christianity. My strategy was: with the help of God to utilize everything to make clear what in truth Christianity’s requirement is—even if not one single person would accept it, even if I might myself might have to give up being a Christian, which in that case I would have felt obliged to acknowledge publically. (OMWA, 16)

If the task of entering in the God-relationship is difficult, then this should not be surprising. The aim of the spiritual life is for a human being to enter into an intimate relationship with a transcendent God—this might be too ridiculous for some to comprehend. As Anti-Climacus puts it, ‘this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God! [...] Truly, if there is anything to lose one’s mind over, this is it!’ (SUD, 85). What must be remembered, however, and what I have perhaps glossed over at times in this thesis, is that

Christianity is just as gentle as it is rigorous, just as gentle, that is, infinitely gentle. When the infinite requirement is heard and affirmed, is heard and affirmed in all its infinitude, then *grace* is offered, or grace offers itself, to which the single individual, each one individually, can then have recourse as I do; and then it works out all right. (OMWA, 16)

If the requirement on the Christian spiritual life is high, then, as Kierkegaard reminds the reader, the believer must take refuge in God’s grace and know that whilst much is required of her, it is in realising this that she also realises that God has grace for her.

Where does this thesis leave us? And what future directions are there for this line of enquiry? There are many areas that could be developed in more detail, which there was not

space to do here. An area that is relatively unexplored both in analytic philosophical theology as well as in Kierkegaard scholarship, is the area of spirituality and spiritual practice. As we have seen, there is much that can be said about this area, but yet, still areas that can be developed further. For instance, whilst Kierkegaard has plenty to say about the nature of preaching, there has not been a detailed discussion of this topic in the literature, nor have his insights been applied to the on-going debate about the nature of the Eucharist. And whilst Cuneo, Wolterstorff and Green have all contributed to our understanding of the epistemology of spiritual practices, this is a relatively new field and the work done in this thesis can, I hope, contribute to this discussion about how we can know God by engaging in certain rituals and practices.

## References to Kierkegaard's Writings

Throughout this thesis I use the following sigla for referring to Kierkegaard's published writings:

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CD *Christian Discourses and The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995)

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vols. I and II, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992)

EO I and II *Either/Or*, Vols. I and II, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987)

EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) FT Fear and Trembling/Repetition, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)

FSE *For Self-Examination* in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990)

FT *Fear and Trembling* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983)

JFY *Judge For Yourself in For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990)

JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Volumes 1-7, Edited and translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Index by N. Hong and C. Barker. 2nd ed. 7 vols. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978. 2nd ed., 1999.

OMWA *On My Work as an Author* (see PV)

PC *Practice in Christianity* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991)

PF *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985)

PV *The Point of View* (includes *On My Work as an Author* as well as *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998)

SUD *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980)

TM *The Moment and Late Writings* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong  
(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998)

TDOIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H.  
Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993)

UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong  
(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993)

WA *Without Authority* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New  
Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997)

WL *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey:  
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