

## KIERKEGAARD'S APOCALYPTIC THEOLOGY

KIERKEGAARD'S APOCALYPTIC THEOLOGY:  
TEMPORALITY, EPISTEMOLOGY AND POLITICS IN *PRACTICE IN  
CHRISTIANITY*

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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McMaster University MASTER OF ARTS (2011) Hamilton, Ontario (Religious Studies)

TITLE: Kierkegaard's Apocalyptic Theology: Temporality, Epistemology and Politics in  
*Practice in Christianity*

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SUPERVISOR: Professor P. Travis Kroeker

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 121.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for the presence of an apocalyptic theological perspective in Søren Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* (1848), one that is of a piece with the apocalypticism that a number of contemporary biblical scholars, theologians and philosophers have located in the letters of the Apostle Paul.

Though familiar motifs (such as the imminent eschaton or the idea of two ages) may be helpful indicators of an apocalyptic theological perspective in a given work, I take the position that apocalyptic theology is fundamentally a matter of settling the question of ultimate lordship or sovereignty. In a Christian context, therefore, where an author manifests a desire to declare the ultimate sovereignty of God (by way of the intervening act of his incarnation in Christ) over and against any worldly counter-claim to sovereignty, he or she partakes of an apocalyptic theology.

I demonstrate that Kierkegaard's apocalyptic theological perspective is manifested in three ways in *Practice in Christianity*, namely, with respect to his thinking about temporality, epistemology and politics. The three chapters that make up this thesis take up these themes in turn. In each case, Kierkegaard's position on these matters is compared with an apocalyptic reading of Paul's letters. I argue that a concern to declare the ultimate sovereignty of God in these three fundamental areas of human experience is one that Kierkegaard shares with Paul. Insofar as Paul is therefore regarded by his scholarly readers as an apocalypticist, so too, I argue, should Kierkegaard be.

Furthermore, just as the identification of Paul's apocalypticism is alleged to provide a coherent framework for his gospel, so too, I argue, should Kierkegaard's

apocalypticism be understood as the substratum that informs his theo-philosophical project in *Practice in Christianity*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisor, Dr. Travis Kroeker, for his encouragement, support and direction during my graduate program and particularly during the research and writing of my thesis.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous impact that the faculty of the department of Religious Studies at McMaster University has had on my academic development over the past two years. To that end, I would like to thank Drs. Widdicombe, Hollander and Planinc for the time that they have devoted to reading and commenting upon my work and for their generous and candid advice on a range of topics.

I would also like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the community of graduate students in Religious Studies. In particular I would like to thank Greg and Joe Wiebe, Grant Poettcker, Jonathan Bernier and John Bolton for their friendship and, indeed, for mentoring me (though I suspect none of them would admit to having done so!).

I am also grateful for the financial support that I received from McMaster University as well as from the Social Science and Research Council of Canada and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program.

Finally, my deepest gratitude I extend to a faithful and caring partner, Sarah McKenzie, for the love and laughter that sustained me when the stress and anxiety that naturally accompanies the completion of a project of this size threatened to overwhelm me.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will show that Søren Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* is informed by an apocalyptic theology that is of a piece with the apocalypticism that a number of contemporary biblical scholars, theologians and philosophers have located in the letters of the Apostle Paul. In the three chapters that make up this study, I will consider, in consecutive order, the three Books that make up *Practice in Christianity* and demonstrate the congruity between the theological and philosophical positions articulated therein and Paul's apocalyptic theology in the first and second letters to the Thessalonians, the first and second letters to the Corinthians and the Letter to the Romans, respectively. My aim is to provide a coherent framework for understanding how the different dimensions of Kierkegaard's thinking in this text relate to one another. Just as Paul's apocalypticism is alleged to provide a coherence to his gospel, so too should Kierkegaard's apocalypticism be understood as the substratum that informs his theo-philosophical project in *Practice in Christianity*.

Before moving to the demonstration of my argument, I will introduce Kierkegaard's text as well as provide a preliminary definition of 'apocalyptic.' I will then discuss the method employed in this study and provide a brief outline of the chapters to follow.

### *Practice in Christianity in Context*

*Practice in Christianity* was completed in December of 1848, a year that Kierkegaard describes as "beyond all comparison the richest and most fruitful" year that

he had experienced as an author.<sup>1</sup> Along with *Practice* and its companion piece, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard either began or completed at least six significant works during this short period.<sup>2</sup> Though he was well into his second (Christian) authorship<sup>3</sup> by the time he had set down to write it, *Practice in Christianity* stands, nevertheless, at the intersection of the various pathways of Kierkegaard's thought. On the one hand, it is a

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Hong and Hong, "Historical Introduction," xi.

<sup>2</sup> These are: *Christian Discourses*, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, *Armed Neutrality*, "A Cycle of Ethical-Religious Essays," *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air*, as well as a piece on the actor J. Ludvig Phister called "Phister as Captain Scipio." Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard's scholarly readers tend to see his work as made up of three periods or 'authorships.' The first (1841-46) is comprised of Kierkegaard's more strictly philosophical works, beginning with his dissertation (*On the Concept of Irony*) and ending with the appropriately titled *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The works that make up the first authorship are among Kierkegaard's most celebrated, including *Fear and Trembling, Either/Or* and *Philosophical Fragments*. They are also collectively referred to as the pseudonymous literature or the 'indirect communication' because (with the exception of the various edifying discourses and, of course, his dissertation) Kierkegaard attributed everything in the first authorship to a pseudonym. The second authorship (1846-51), while prefigured in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, properly begins with the next major work, *Two Ages: A Literary Review*. The reason that the line of demarcation between the first and the second authorship is usually drawn here has to do with a statement made at the end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (the "First and Last Explanation" to his reader) in which Kierkegaard claims responsibility for the previous pseudonymous work and suggests that he is finished with writing (625-30). His decision to write reviews and shorter essays (and, eventually, to take up more demanding literary tasks) in 1846 marks the beginning of the second period. This is also called the Christian authorship and its works are collectively referred to as the 'direct communication.' Kierkegaard signed his name (or listed himself as the editor) for all of these works. While no less rigorous or challenging, the writings in this period (with some notable exceptions, especially in the years of 1846 and 1847) focus directly and specifically on what it means to be a Christian rather than approach this subject (with which Kierkegaard considered the entirety of his life's project to be concerned) directly rather than indirectly through philosophical exploration. In this way, many of the categories developed in the pseudonymous works are 'transfigured' or explained using the language of the Christian faith. The final period (1854-55) is referred to as the 'attack upon Christendom' or just 'the attack literature.' It is made up of essays and periodicals in which Kierkegaard rebukes the leadership of the Lutheran Church in Denmark (with not a small amount of vitriol and hyperbole) for having betrayed the principles of an authentic Christianity. A thorough and thoroughly excellent philosophical treatment of Kierkegaard's works that argues for a stricter separation between the first and the second and third authorships is to be found in Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist* and its companion volume *Kierkegaard as Theologian*. For a more recent study of the second authorship that argues for it being a kind of fulfillment of the first (as I have suggested) see Walsh, *Living Christianly*. Bruce Kirmmse is an indispensable resource for questions regarding the historical circumstances of Kierkegaard's authorship. He focuses on the second and third periods in Part Two of *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*. Walter Lowrie assembled the attack literature into a single volume (though, later, the Hongs would divide it into its constituent parts and these would be published separately). See Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon "Christendom."*

pseudonymous<sup>4</sup> work (unusual for him at this time) that is attributed to Anti-Climacus (also the author of *The Sickness Unto Death*), which clearly suggests a relationship between this work and those written under the name of Johannes Climacus (*Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*).<sup>5</sup> Beyond that, Kierkegaard's treatment of categories such as 'offense' and 'contemporaneity' in this work assume certain ways of thinking about truth, time and subjectivity that were developed in earlier works, not just *Fragments* and *Postscript* but *Repetition* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. On the other hand, *Practice in Christianity* also foreshadows the later 'attack literature.'

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<sup>4</sup> Any attempt to *interpret* (rather than merely summarize) one or more of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works must take a stand on the issue of authorial voice. A responsible commentator ought not speak as though Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms are always and everywhere in agreement. Neither is it particularly helpful to begin trying to sort out which parts of the text Kierkegaard would claim are his own and from which he is trying to distance himself. In my view, we come no closer to really understanding the work by participating in such an exercise. In general, my position is that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms are part of his attempt to allow his readers to come to their own conclusions about the subject matter without coercion by an author; they are an outgrowth of his desire to incite authentic existential movement and Christian passion in his reader. In this way, as John J. Davenport points out, Kierkegaard's reasons are "virtually identical to Plato's reasons for 'indirect communication' through semi-fictitious interlocutors." Each of Plato's major characters, he continues, "*embodies* a certain ethical or theoretical outlook. In much the same way, Kierkegaard's pseudonyms represent *points of view* on human existence that *show* us more concretely than any abstract description could *tell* us what it is like to exist in the attitudes they occupy." Anti-Climacus, the author of *Practice in Christianity* and the pseudonym with which I will deal the most frequently in this study, presents us with an added challenge in this respect because, according to Kierkegaard, he occupies the attitude of the *Christian* in its "supreme ideality." Why would a Christian writer like Kierkegaard distance himself through a pseudonym from an account of Christianity in its ideal form? To my mind, there are two reasons. The first is that such a distancing is in keeping with Kierkegaard's persistent claim that, when it came to matters of Christian faith he always spoke as one "without authority": he was not an apostle or an inspired writer. It is also clear from journal entries and from the signed editorial preface that Kierkegaard thought that the rigorousness – the extremity, even – of Anti-Climacus' account in *Practice* was a necessary corrective for more lenient ways of thinking about Christianity, especially those on offer from the pulpit of Danish churches but, importantly, *not* excluding Kierkegaard's own. Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust," 266; emphasis original.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard writes in a journal entry that Anti-Climacus is "the higher pseudonym" of the two. We should hesitate to treat this as a straightforward hierarchical relationship, however. Climacus treats the subject of Christian living from the perspective of a non-Christian while Anti-Climacus does so from the perspective of an "extraordinary Christian such as there has never been." Anti-Climacus does not negate Climacus or cancel him out. Anti-Climacus' work is rather the dialectical fulfillment of Climacus'. Neither of these should be taken as a complete representation of Kierkegaard's own views (in other words, neither Climacus nor Anti-Climacus can be thought of as the 'real' Kierkegaard). See Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, sec. 6349, 6462. David D. Possen addresses a tendency he identifies among Kierkegaard's readers to attribute the views of Anti-Climacus to Kierkegaard himself. See Possen, "The Works of Anti-Climacus."

Kierkegaard seems to have conceived of it as a kind of ultimatum issued to the Danish church authorities: admit that you have betrayed authentic Christianity or face the consequences.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, his recommendations were ignored and Kierkegaard proceeded to employ more drastic measures; the “stern and loving corrective” gave way to the severity and vitriol of the ‘attack upon Christendom.’<sup>7</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, as I will discuss in chapters two and three, also engages in a critique of the established order that takes its cues from *Two Ages* and endorses an ethic of self-denial that echoes *Works of Love* and the variously occasioned discourses. While I refer to a number of his works throughout the course of this study, my conclusions regarding the apocalyptic nature of Kierkegaard’s thought are, strictly speaking, limited to the disclosure thereof in *Practice in Christianity*. However, due to what I believe is the exemplarity of this text, I am nevertheless convinced that a similarly motivated investigation into any other of Kierkegaard’s major works would reach conclusions similar to mine.

At the time of writing, no such investigation exists. Certainly, Kierkegaard has been widely and appropriately recognized for his tremendous contributions to the Western philosophical tradition and these contributions have been studied and commented upon extensively and with great acumen. Relatively speaking, however, very little attention has thus far been paid to the eschatological dimensions of his thought.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 7. Hereafter referred to in the text as *PC*.

<sup>7</sup> Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden-Age Denmark*, 379. *Practice in Christianity*, Kirmmse continues, “was a sort of time bomb that could only be defused with an ‘admission’ or ‘confession’ by the officials of Christian culture... without some sort of show of honesty and humility by the established Church, there was the very strong implicit threat that sterner measures would have to be taken.” *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>8</sup> That is to say, relative to the existential, the phenomenological, the ethical or the theological (read: Lutheran) dimensions of his thought, the eschatological or apocalyptic is rarely discussed. Oddly, since the translation of Kierkegaard’s works into English, German and French in the early part of the last century, it

Where such attention has been paid, the commentators do not specify this eschatology as ‘apocalyptic.’<sup>9</sup>

### *Apocalypse and Apocalyptic*

A comprehensive genealogy of the term ‘apocalyptic’ will not be necessary to understand how I will be using it here, though a few remarks as to the history of its use by theologians and biblical scholars will be helpful as we move forward.

We begin with the etymology of the term itself. Our English ‘apocalypse’ is derived from the Greek *apokalypsis*, which can also be rendered as ‘unveiling’ (taking *apo* as ‘out from’ and *kalypso* as ‘veil’) or as ‘revelation’ (by way of *revelatio*, its Latin equivalent). Thus, ‘apocalypse’ refers to that which reveals or discloses, while

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seems as though Kierkegaard’s readers catch on to the role that eschatology and apocalyptic play in his work about every twenty years or so. To my knowledge, the first sustained reading of Kierkegaard as an apocalypticist belongs to Jacob Taubes, whose recently translated doctoral thesis on apocalypticism (*Occidental Eschatology*) first appeared in 1947. It is discussed below. Twenty years later, in 1968, George C. Bedell, in an essay adapted from a paper given at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Dallas, compared Kierkegaard’s category of ‘repetition’ to a Christian understanding of “realized eschatology.” The scholarship of Michael Plekon, beginning in the early 1980s, has been attentive to the eschatological in Kierkegaard, though, in this respect, Plekon is principally concerned to connect Kierkegaard’s later criticism of the Danish Church to a prophetic tradition that he (somewhat imprecisely) refers to as “eschatological.” Plekon has also more recently drawn attention to the eschatological implications of Kierkegaard’s category of ‘contemporaneity’ and I refer to his findings in chapter one. Most recently, John J. Davenport has argued for an eschatological reading of the “teleological suspension of the ethical” in *Fear and Trembling*. The two essays in which Davenport makes this argument are not specifically referred to in this study due to the differences in our respective data sets, though they are recommended to the reader for their lucidity and philosophical rigor. See Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*; Bedell, “Kierkegaard’s Conception of Time”; Plekon, “Prophetic Criticism, Incarnational Optimism”; Plekon, “Kierkegaard at the End”; Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust”; Davenport, “Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* in Light of *Fear and Trembling*.”

<sup>9</sup> The notable exception to this rule is Jacob Taubes’ *Occidental Eschatology*, in which he argues for Kierkegaard’s place within a specifically *apocalyptic* tradition. He does so by first distinguishing a number of features of an apocalyptic consciousness – including the assumption of an estrangement between the worldly and the divine as well as a preference for inwardness over worldly action as a result of this estrangement – and then locates these as motifs in Kierkegaard’s writing. I will not challenge Taubes’ interpretation of Kierkegaard in this study because, in fact, we proceed from different understandings of apocalypticism. Without going into details regarding this difference, it will suffice to point out that his is defined according to a comprehensive survey of Western literature whereas mine is derived from a particular reading of a selection of Pauline epistles. For a representation of Taubes’ reading of Kierkegaard, see Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 184-91.

‘apocalyptic’ describes that which is revelatory. In its verbal form, ‘to apocalypse’ (*apokalypō*) means to uncover or to make known what was previously hidden.

As to its technical application, scholars generally use the term in one of two ways.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, ‘apocalyptic’ is employed as an adjective used to describe the generic features (common themes, imagery, narrative structure etc.) of a certain kind of literature called an ‘apocalypse.’ John’s vision in the last book of the New Testament is the only self-described apocalypse in the Christian canon (“The revelation [*apokalypsis*] of Jesus Christ”)<sup>11</sup> and, as such, it has become, for better or worse, the unofficial standard for defining ‘apocalyptic’ as a literary descriptor. In other words, ‘apocalyptic’ is often used to refer to the features of a literary composition that resemble those found in Revelation.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, ‘apocalyptic’ may also be used as a noun, synonymous with ‘apocalypticism’ and referring to a broadly defined of “realm of ideas,” a kind of *Weltanschauung*, out of which the apocalypses themselves are sometimes said to emerge.<sup>13</sup> When apocalyptic is used more specifically as a *theological* concept or set of concepts – as it will be here – it constitutes a variation on this second usage of the term.

The precise relationship between the literary and conceptual uses of the term remains an unsettled question. The Pauline literature is illustrative of this ambiguity.

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<sup>10</sup> An exceptionally productive review of the literature on apocalyptic that includes concise summaries of major contributions to both the literary and theological understandings of apocalyptic is to be found in Sturm, “Defining the Word ‘Apocalyptic’.”

<sup>11</sup> Rev 1:1. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the biblical texts refer to the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Cross and Human Transformation*, 1; Sturm, “Defining the Word ‘Apocalyptic’,” 24.

<sup>13</sup> I have in mind Philipp Vielhauer in his “Introduction to Apocalypses and Related Subjects.” There, he argues that ‘apocalyptic’ primarily refers to “the literary genre of the Apocalypses, i.e. revelatory writings which disclose the secrets of the beyond and especially of the end of time, and then, secondly, the realm of ideas from which this literature originates.” See Vielhauer and Streker, *Introduction to Apocalypses*. Quoted in Sturm, “Defining the Word ‘Apocalyptic’,” 23.

Strictly speaking, Paul did not write an apocalypse, yet some of the imagery (e.g. final judgment and the resurrection of the dead)<sup>14</sup> that he draws upon is certainly apocalyptic. To make matters worse, a careful reading will reveal that apocalyptic commitments inform Paul's writing, even when he does not seem to be drawing upon such imagery.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, there are enough difficulties with this protean term and its varying uses that one scholar has declared 'apocalyptic' to be "a useless word which no one can define and which produces nothing but confusion and acres of verbiage."<sup>16</sup>

We can avoid such confusion here but it requires that we be clear at the outset as to what will count as apocalyptic for Paul and for Kierkegaard. As mentioned, I will treat apocalyptic as a theological rather than a literary term. I will argue for the presence an apocalyptic substratum in Kierkegaard's theo-philosophical project (specifically, in *Practice in Christianity*), one the he shares with Paul.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the apocalypses, both canonical and apocryphal, may also partake in this substratum.<sup>18</sup> But, importantly, it is not my concern here to argue for a shared *indebtedness* on the part of Paul or Kierkegaard to a specific apocalypse. In other words, I will not argue for the veracity of my apocalyptic reading of these authors by appealing to an apocalypse for corroboration

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<sup>14</sup> Classic examples of Paul's use of apocalyptic imagery related to these themes in the undisputed letters are to be found in 1 Cor 15:20-28, 50-56 and 1 Thess 4:13-18.

<sup>15</sup> The original contribution of J. Louis Martyn to the discourse on apocalyptic is to be found in his pioneering attempts to show that Paul is writing in an apocalyptic mode even when he is not drawing upon the 'traditional' motifs of apocalyptic literature. Sturm, "Defining the Word 'Apocalyptic'," 37-42. See Martyn, "Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages."

<sup>16</sup> Glasson, "What is Apocalyptic?," 105.

<sup>17</sup> In my use of the term 'apocalyptic substratum' I acknowledge my indebtedness to J. Christiaan Becker's hermeneutical project. See Becker, *The Triumph of God*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> The two canonical apocalypses are found in Daniel and in the aforementioned book of Revelation. Non-canonical and apocryphal apocalypses include the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Book of Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, the *Ascension and Vision of Isaiah*, the apocryphal *Apocalypse of John* as well as certain portions of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* and selected Qumran texts. Sturm, "Defining the Word 'Apocalyptic'," 18.

(though I will, on occasion, make reference to John’s apocalypse where it helps to clarify what is taking place in Paul and Kierkegaard). In this study, the features that certain biblical scholars have identified in Paul’s writings as evidence of the theological perspective typical of apocalyptic in a given text will be *taken for granted as such* and so too will their presence in Paul’s text. I do not ask: ‘Is Paul an apocalypticist?’ Instead, I begin with the premise that he *has* been so labeled (rightly or wrongly) and I will therefore report on (rather than argue for) the reasons that Paul’s readers have come to this conclusion. I will then proceed to ask: ‘May Kierkegaard be thought of as an apocalypticist for these same reasons?’ Indeed, this is chief among the questions that I will attempt to answer in this thesis.

In his survey of the literature on apocalyptic *qua* theological category, Richard E. Sturm has identified three motifs or themes whose presence in a given work suggests that that work shares in an apocalyptic theological perspective. These are:

- (1) The revelation of an imminent eschaton
- (2) The idea of two ages or Aeons
- (3) The embattled sovereignty of God over time and the cosmos<sup>19</sup>

Sturm argues that an author can be understood as an apocalypticist because insofar as he or she deals with these themes, even if he or she happens to avoid the use of literary-apocalyptic imagery (such as that found in John’s revelation). In her study of 1 Corinthians, Alexandra Brown praises Sturm’s formulation as an effective way of measuring apocalypticism in a given work. But, she adds, it is

only when we turn to Paul for the *internal* criteria that give substance and shape to the more generally derived (and ambiguous!) *external* criteria listed above may

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 36.

we begin to fathom what it means to call him, his thought, his way of arguing, or the effects of his argument ‘apocalyptic.’<sup>20</sup>

I will attend to the themes that Sturm identifies as central to an apocalyptic theological perspective as they appear in Paul but, taking my cue from Professor Brown and enlisting the help of modern biblical theologians, philosophers, ethicists and scholars of religion, I will focus more specifically on how the distinctive way that Paul deals with these themes reveals an apocalyptic substratum to his thought. In doing so, I will demonstrate that, in *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard likewise shares in the substratum of Paul’s apocalyptic convictions, despite the fact that he diverges from Paul by not explicitly addressing these apocalyptic themes.

Another way to say all of this is that Sturm’s motifs constitute the ‘how’ of an apocalyptic theology, whereas my concern is with a more fundamental ‘what.’ For example, the theme of an imminent eschaton is addressed directly by Paul in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Kierkegaard does not deal with that subject in *Practice*. Nonetheless, a careful examination of how Paul attends to that subject reveals certain convictions that he and Kierkegaard share. This is the ‘what’ wherein their respective apocalypticisms meet.

At the heart of this ‘what’ is the matter of lordship. The life, death, resurrection and promised return of Christ is the *apokalypsis Theou* – the singular act of God in which the chasm separating creature and creator is bridged and the final purpose for human existence and, indeed, the entire cosmos is unveiled. What is provided, as one commentator puts it, is “an alternative map of the world in which the present structures of

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Cross and Human Transformation*, 3; emphasis original.

power are not legitimate, not lasting, and not ultimately real.”<sup>21</sup> The *apocalypse* of Christ is, in fact, an answer to a question. Indeed, it is, as Ernst Käsemann has argued, the fundamental question of all apocalyptic theology: “To whom does the sovereignty of the world belong?”<sup>22</sup> The answer, for the apocalypticist, is Christ, the God-man, who was crucified, resurrected and who will return at the end of the ages to consummate his lordship in full. Following Käsemann, my argument here is that when the apocalyptic motifs that Sturm identifies are manifested in Paul’s letters they ought to be interpreted as the means by which he points to the apocalypse of Christ in order to answer this fundamental question of sovereignty.

In sum, Paul is here regarded as an apocalyptic thinker, not primarily because of the apocalyptic themes that appear in his letters, but because the substratum of his thought is the apocalyptic declaration of the God-man’s ultimate sovereignty over the world. This thesis will show that Kierkegaard – even though he does not speak to the apocalyptic themes listed above – is also rightly regarded as an apocalyptic thinker insofar as he too is fundamentally concerned with witnessing to the ultimate sovereignty of the God-man.

### *Method and Thesis Outline*

In this study, I assume the role of the philosopher of religion with respect to these writers. Broadly speaking, this means that I will be approaching this apocalyptic substratum by inviting its participants, Paul and Kierkegaard, to provide their theological answers to my philosophical questions. These will include questions of metaphysics (what do the categories of time and temporality consist of? How do these categories relate

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<sup>21</sup> Meeks, “Apocalyptic Discourse and Strategies of Goodness,” 465.

<sup>22</sup> Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” 135.

to human subjectivity?), epistemology (what can be known? How can it be known?) and social ethics (what is the best or the truest form of human collectivity?).

What motivates this study is a desire to provide a clearer understanding of *why* Kierkegaard provides the answers that he does to these questions by showing how his answers in *Practice in Christianity* line up with those provided by an apocalyptic reading of Paul. Kierkegaard has been asked these kinds of questions before by other commentators, but an apocalyptic reading suggests a new kind of continuity to his thought. Kierkegaard has been read as an existentialist with respect to temporality, an irrationalist with respect to epistemology and a conservative with respect to politics. In fact, I argue, he is an apocalypticist with respect to all three of these subjects. Just as Paul's alleged apocalypticism is argued for by the scholars in this study as a means for providing an understanding of the internal coherence of his gospel, so I refer to the apocalypticism that informs Kierkegaard's writing in *Practice in Christianity* as a means for providing a clearer understanding of how the different aspects of his thought in that text relate to one another.

In chapter one, I take up Kierkegaard's thinking about the nature of time and temporality and compare this with an apocalyptic reading of Paul's first and second letters to the Thessalonians, letters in which the apocalyptic motif of an imminent eschaton is foregrounded. I then turn in chapter two to consider Kierkegaard's epistemology and, more specifically, his concern to identify right knowledge with right living. Enlisting the services of a group of contemporary biblical scholars, I argue that Paul is similarly motivated in his correspondence with the Corinthian church, in which

the apocalyptic motif of the two ages is addressed throughout. In chapter three, I address the issue of political authority and invite Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, to speak to the fundamental questions of political life, namely, what is the best or truest form of social existence and on what authority is such a sociality based? The subjects dealt with in each chapter correspond to what I take to be the principal philosophical issues in each of the three books that make up *Practice in Christianity*.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout, I will return to the issue of lordship. Despite their divergences with respect to the context of their writing, both Paul and Kierkegaard wrestle with the apocalyptic question: “To whom does the sovereignty of the world belong?” It is in the attempt to answer this question that the coherence or substratum of Paul’s thought is to be found, as a number of contemporary scholars and philosophers have argued. Kierkegaard, I am arguing, is making a very similar attempt throughout *Practice in Christianity*. In this way, he can be said to share Paul’s apocalyptic theological perspective. It is this perspective, more than his existentialism, his irrationalism or his political conservatism that helps to make sense of the intricacies of Kierkegaard’s theo-philosophical project in that text.

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<sup>23</sup> Thus, I will address Book I in chapter one, (vis-à-vis 1 and 2 Thessalonians), Book II in chapter two (vis-à-vis 1 and 2 Corinthians) and Book III in chapter three (vis-à-vis Romans).

## CHAPTER ONE: TEMPORALITY

In this chapter, I will focus on the first of Sturm’s apocalyptic motifs: the revelation of an imminent eschaton. To the minds of many of his scholarly readers, this is the most prominent of Paul’s apocalyptic motifs. To some, in fact, it is the *only* motif in his writings that can be properly called apocalyptic at all. This is understandable insofar as apocalyptic is usually regarded as, first and foremost, an *eschatological* position, that is, a doctrine of ‘last things.’<sup>1</sup>

To talk about the idea of an imminent eschaton in Paul’s letters is to raise the subject of Christ’s *parousia* (his ‘presence,’ ‘coming,’ or ‘advent’) because, for Paul, it is specifically Christ’s promised return that signals the eschaton. Christ’s *parousia* is a second *apocalypsis* to accompany the first: a dramatic, cosmic intervention on God’s part that will bring with it a final judgment – a separating of the righteous from the unrighteous – and (of course) an end to time as we know it.<sup>2</sup> It will be remembered that the identification of an apocalyptic theological perspective goes beyond the correct naming of this or that motif. Rather, as I suggested in the introductory chapter, apocalyptic is fundamentally a question of lordship or sovereignty. Thus, Paul evinces an apocalyptic theology insofar as the way that he speaks of an imminent eschaton witnesses to his conviction that God, through Christ, is ultimately, finally sovereign.

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<sup>1</sup> Martinus C. De Boer provides a concise treatment of a number of scholarly attempts to take Pauline apocalyptic beyond the strictly eschatological, while making such an attempt himself. “Apocalyptic eschatology in the letters and thought of Paul cannot,” he writes, “and therefore must not, be confined to those scenarios of the *parousia* nor then to the expectation of such a *parousia*.” See De Boer, “Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology,” 346.

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Corinthians, 1:7 (“So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gifts as you wait for the revealing [*apocalypsis*] of our Lord Jesus Christ”) and 2 Thessalonians (“And to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed [*apokalupsei*] from heaven with his mighty angels”).

Over what is he sovereign, though? With respect to his thinking about the eschaton, Paul's answer is that God is sovereign over time itself. Such a declaration has philosophical consequences insofar as it constitutes a particular way of thinking about the nature of time and temporality. It is at this point that Paul and Kierkegaard may be brought into conversation with one another.

I will accomplish three tasks in this chapter. First, I will explain why Paul's thinking about the eschaton constitutes a particular way of thinking about time. I will do so by turning to 1 and 2 Thessalonians, letters in which this motif is positively central, and by enlisting Martin Heidegger's lectures thereon, which attend to the Apostle's experience of authentic temporality. Second, I will turn to Book I of *Practice in Christianity*, in which Kierkegaard discusses a category that is positively central to his own philosophy of time: 'contemporaneity.' With reference to related works, I will contextualize this term within Kierkegaard's broader philosophy of time. Finally, I will show that, for both Paul and Kierkegaard, God, through Christ, must be declared ultimately sovereign over time. Thus, theirs is a shared apocalyptic theological perspective.

#### *Heidegger and Pauline Temporality in 1 and 2 Thessalonians*

Heidegger's reading of the letters to the church in Thessalonica is neither a historical-critical nor a doctrinal interpretation, but a phenomenological one. As such, it is self-consciously unconcerned with "the object-historical situation of Paul as he wrote the

letter.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, Heidegger provides a rigorous and challenging philosophical explication of these texts that seeks to reconstruct Paul’s “situation,” without recourse to a purely material explanation and without attempting to cull some kind of coherent doctrinal framework from the Apostle’s letters. His focus, as Graeme Nicholson puts it, is “on Paul himself, [Heidegger] seek[s] to understand a life that is lived *in extremis*, thrust forward into the coming end of time.”<sup>4</sup> Heidegger’s premise, though it is enclosed in highly abstract prose, is fairly straightforward. Paul, on Heidegger’s reading, experiences his existence as completely defined by his relationship to Christ. However, certain ontological conditions must underwrite that experience and among these is a particular construal of the temporal. In other words, Paul’s life “*makes itself temporal* in one definite way.”<sup>5</sup> What is decisive for Heidegger (and for us) is precisely this temporal ‘how’ of Paul’s situation or “factual life experience.”<sup>6</sup>

1 and 2 Thessalonians provide Heidegger with fertile soil for such an interpretation. The temporal dimension of Paul’s experience is foregrounded in both letters through his references to and descriptions of Christ’s *parousia* and in his directions to the Thessalonians as to how they ought to conduct themselves in relation to it. Paul declares with authority in chapter 4, “by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.” Rather, “the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first”

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholson, “The End of Time,” 219.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 220; emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 63.

(1 Thess 4:15-17). Heidegger directs us to the “conceptual history” of the term ‘*parousia*’ in order to point out the departure from that history that Paul is making here:

In classical Greek [*parousia*] means arrival (presence); in the Old Testament (for instance in the *Septuaginta*) ‘the arrival of the Lord on the Day of Judgement’; in late Judaism ‘the arrival of the Messiah as representative of God.’ For the Christian, however, [*parousia*] means ‘the appearing again of the already appeared Messiah,’ which, to begin with, does *not* lie in the literal expression. With that, however, the entire structure of the concept is at once changed.<sup>7</sup>

The concept is changed insofar as it is informed by an entirely different temporal experience. In short, “the existence of Paul and his congregation lies stretched out between the first and the second coming.”<sup>8</sup> The *apokalypsis Theou* by way of the Incarnation – the life, death and resurrection of Christ – signals a turning point between the old age and the new. Paul finds himself at the juncture of these two ages; the old is perishing but not yet passed away, while the new has been foreshadowed but not yet realized. Paul anticipates the *parousia* not as an absolute undecidability, nor even as an ambiguity but as a *fulfillment*. There is, as Nicholson puts it, “a bond between the earlier event and the second coming, for the true meaning of the first event will be made manifest in the second one.”<sup>9</sup> The ‘what’ of the *parousia* is known to Paul, and with absolute certainty, as we see in chapters 4 and 5; it is so on account of the particularity of its relationship to the Incarnation. The two events complete each other, with the future event reaching backward to the past and the past event reaching forward to the future.

Yet Paul is reluctant to say anything specific about the ‘when.’ He advises the Thessalonians to be on their guard, for “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 71; emphasis original.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholson, “The End of Time,” 222.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

night” (1 Thess 5:2). He says to them, as well, just prior to this verse: “concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you” (5:1). Does this mean that he is unsure of how much longer he and the Thessalonians will have to wait? Heidegger argues with respect to these verses that, for Paul, “the ‘When’ is already not originally grasped, insofar as it is grasped in the sense of an attitudinal ‘objective’ time.” Paul does not say anything about when (i.e. at what *point in time*) the *parousia* will take place, he continues, “because this expression is inadequate to what is to be expressed, because it does not suffice.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul is not usually read as reticent about the timing of the *parousia* in this letter. While he certainly offers no predictions, it is generally assumed (based on what we have just read in 4:15-17) that Paul thought that the *parousia* would happen within his own lifetime. In fact, one of the reasons that scholars suspect that 2 Thessalonians may not have been written by Paul is that, when we turn to chapter 2 of that letter, the answer he supposedly gave to this question seems to have changed. His is no longer certain of the imminence of the *parousia*. “Let no one deceive you in any way;” he writes, “for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction” (2 Thess 2:3). For the writer of 1 Thessalonians, the second coming is imminent and will take no longer than the writer’s lifetime to arrive, whereas in 2 Thessalonians, the time between now and then has been protracted. Between them he has placed a period of lawlessness and distress (2 Thess 2:4-12).

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<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 72.

Heidegger departs from a conventional interpretation on this issue by arguing that in *neither* 1 Thessalonians *nor* 2 Thessalonians does Paul communicate that he and his congregation are waiting for the *parousia*. In other words, for Heidegger, it is not as though Paul thought at first that he would not have to wait very long at all and then later changed his opinion on the matter (in response to persecutions, for example). “He does not say, ‘at this time or that time the Lord will come again’; he also does not say, ‘I do not know when he will come again.’”<sup>11</sup> Paul is not anticipating the ‘when’ of the *parousia* at all, if that ‘when’ is defined as a point in time that can be measured by days or years. Paul, for Heidegger, stands in relation to a future event that itself stands in a relation of fulfillment with a past event, but the character of his relation is “radically different from all [manner of] expectation.”<sup>12</sup>

“‘Christian religiosity *lives* temporality,’” he continues, quoting from one of his earlier lectures, “it is a time without its own order and demarcations. One cannot encounter this temporality in some sort of objective concept of time. The when is in no way objectively graspable.”<sup>13</sup> If it is not objectively graspable (as the anticipation of a future point in time) how is Paul’s temporality in 1 and 2 Thessalonians to be understood? What is Paul’s answer to the ‘when’ of the *parousia* if it is not ‘at this time or that time’ or ‘I do not know?’ According to Heidegger, Paul “*enacts* the answer in juxtaposing two ways of life” in chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>14</sup> There are those who say, “There is peace and security” and then there are the Thessalonians themselves, who “are not in darkness”

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 73; emphasis mine.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70; emphasis mine.

(1 Thess 5:3-4). Paul urges the Thessalonians to “keep awake and be sober” rather than fall into indolence and intemperance as these others do. What is “decisive” for Paul, according to Heidegger, “is *how* I comport myself to [the *parousia*] in actual life.”<sup>15</sup> To understand the ‘how’ of Paul’s relation to the *parousia* is therefore to understand his answer to the question of ‘when,’ which is, furthermore, to answer the question of the particular temporal mode of Paul’s experience.

We recall Heidegger’s observation that *parousia* takes on a distinct meaning in the Christian context, namely, that of a *re*-appearance. However, the *parousia* as fulfillment of the first appearance of Christ is enacted in the temporal experience of the life of the believer just as much as it is enacted at the cosmic level. For Heidegger’s Paul, the *parousia* refers back not just to the cosmic event of the Incarnation but to the believer’s own conversion (what Heidegger calls the “acceptance of the proclamation” or their “having-become”).<sup>16</sup> Thus, the *parousia* is also foreshadowed in the experience of conversion. This is what Paul means, then, when he says to the Thessalonians, “For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2). “This knowledge,” says Heidegger, “must be of one’s own, for Paul refers the Thessalonians back to themselves and to the knowledge that they have as those who have become [i.e. those who have accepted the proclamation].”<sup>17</sup> The memory of the Thessalonians’ conversion brings with it knowledge of the future. Heidegger insists, though, that, for Paul, this knowledge is not derived from a mystical experience. “Having

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 72.

been blessed with inspiration is not what is decisive; he [Paul] excludes that and does not communicate it.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than “visionary,” knowledge of the *parousia* is “lived-through” as Paul and the Thessalonians “incessantly co-experience” their having-become.<sup>19</sup> Thus, “this knowledge is entirely different from any other knowledge and memory. It arises only out of the situational context of Christian life experience.”<sup>20</sup>

The acceptance of the proclamation, Heidegger continues, means “the winning of a living effective connection with God [and this] being-present of God has a basic relationship to [the] transformation of life.”<sup>21</sup> For Heidegger’s Paul, the acceptance of the proclamation certainly means a “turning-toward God,” but this turning-toward is enacted through a particular way of being in the world that is characterized specifically as “serving” and “waiting.”<sup>22</sup> More generally though, it “consists in entering oneself into the anguish of life,” the experience of which is “an absolute distress which belongs to the life of the Christian himself.”<sup>23</sup> This distress, though “a joy is bound up therewith,” nevertheless “determines each moment of [Paul’s] life.”<sup>24</sup> In turning toward God, one turns away from idol images and from the security and placidity of experience that they offer. Instead, one finds oneself completely determined in relation to God, both in service of him and in waiting for him. One enters into a life of instability, of becoming rather than being. The acceptance of the proclamation, in other words, is a serious venture,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 69. Heidegger supports this claim with reference to 2 Corinthians 12 wherein Paul states that he will not legitimate his apostolic authority with reference to mystical experiences (“visions and revelations”): “But on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weakness.” (2 Cor 12:5).

<sup>19</sup> Nicholson, “The End of Time,” 225; Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 66, 69. Thus, as Heidegger points out, we find Paul saying “we could bear it no longer” at two points in 1 Thessalonians (3:1; 3:5).

fraught with risk and shot-through with uncertainty. Neither Paul nor the Thessalonians can say anything at all about the when of the *parousia*, for they submit their future completely to God in the anguished venturing that accompanies acceptance of the proclamation. As Justin Klassen puts it: “On Heidegger’s reading of Paul ... one must give up one’s identity as objective and possibly ‘written’ timelessly, in order to remain alive to life as enactment.”<sup>25</sup>

It is the refusal to enter into this life of serving and waiting that characterizes those in Thessalonica that have given up working in the expectation of an imminent *parousia*. Speaking of chapter 2 of 2 Thessalonians, Heidegger remarks that these “rejected” ones “occupy themselves with the question (2:2), whether the Lord will come immediately.”<sup>26</sup> They have not understood Paul’s intent in the first letter. This, according to Heidegger, explains why the understanding of the ‘when’ of the *parousia* in 2 Thessalonians is different from that of 1 Thessalonians: introducing the Antichrist and the period of persecution prior to the *parousia* is Paul’s attempt to *increase* the anguish of the Thessalonians, to *heighten* their distress.<sup>27</sup> Paul is no more or less certain about the ‘when’ of the *parousia* than he was in the first letter – the ‘when’ is still beside the point. The only substantial difference is that Paul has intensified his invective against the lackadaisical who “stand around and chat, because they expect him every day,” while also intensifying his encouragement of those who are saved, who have accepted the proclamation and enact their relation to the *parousia* through serving and waiting. “It is

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<sup>25</sup> Klassen, “Heidegger’s Paul and Radical Orthodoxy,” 81.

<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

these,” Heidegger observes, “to whom Paul now answers that the anguish is [proof] of the calling; the others he sharply rejects.”<sup>28</sup>

In sum, Heidegger’s reading of Paul on the apocalyptic motif of an imminent eschaton has given us insight into the Apostle’s apocalyptic understanding of time. Paul’s entire existence, according to Heidegger, is lived out in relation to Christ. He experiences the future as a fulfillment of that which was foreshadowed not only in the Incarnation but also in his and the Thessalonians’ turning-toward God (their conversion). This turning-toward God is characterized by the ever-increasing anguish, distress and uncertainty (but joy also) that attends a life lived in service of and dependence on God as well as in the waiting on his return. Paul rejects the idea that time and temporality are representable ‘whats.’ Rather, he conceives of time as precisely this faithful relation to and reliance upon God.

Once again, one of the guiding concerns of the present study is to articulate how Paul and Kierkegaard answer the fundamental question of apocalyptic - “To whom does the sovereignty of the world belong?” Their respective ways of thinking about the nature of time constitute part of their respective answers to that question: God’s intervening act in the Incarnation opens up a new future. Paul and Kierkegaard are making an even stronger claim, however, namely, that the Incarnation makes possible an authentic temporality as such: past, present and future. God is sovereign over time itself.

Kierkegaard’s authentic Christian in the situation of contemporaneity relates herself absolutely to the Christ revealed at the intersection of time and eternity and, just as

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 79.

with Paul and the Thessalonians, her future is determined by the ‘how’ of this relation. In Kierkegaard’s account, this consists of the self’s relating itself to itself by God. Heidegger shows us how Paul’s account similarly pronounces the future *parousia* as a promise guaranteed to the righteous in their turning-toward God and away from idols and in the anguish and distress that characterizes Christian life experience. In both accounts, time itself is a gift from God and experienced in the life of faith. In both accounts, the self surrenders its sovereignty to the one who established it. We turn now to Kierkegaard’s thinking about time and subjectivity in *Practice in Christianity* and elsewhere in order to elaborate on these remarks.

*Contemporaneity: Practice in Christianity, Book I*

The scriptural quotation with which Book I of *Practice in Christianity* begins is from the Gospel of Matthew: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (11:28). The book itself consists of an extended philosophical meditation on this verse. In the first section (“The Invitation”), Anti-Climacus divides the verse into its constituent parts and considers each in turn.<sup>29</sup> As he does so, Christ’s words of invitation in this verse are dramatically rendered as an encapsulation of the entire Gospel message of salvation and deliverance from sin and bondage, with Anti-Climacus taking us through all manner of burdens and oppressions from which the Inviter offers to liberate the invited. In light of the editor’s preface (written by Kierkegaard) that *Practice in Christianity* begins with – which emphasizes the rigorousness and the “supreme ideality” of Anti-Climacus’ account of what it means to be

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<sup>29</sup> These are: “Come here,” “Come here, all you,” “Come here to me,” “All you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens” and “I will give you rest.”

an authentic Christian – M. Jamie Ferreira points out how strange it seems that “we find [the requirement for authentic Christianity] first approached in terms of a loving invitation to rest, a heartfelt offer of comfort.”<sup>30</sup> Yet this is exactly what we find: “You to whom human society cruelly locked its doors,” says Anti-Climacus, “and for whom no grave has yet mercifully opened; you, too, come here, here is rest, and here is life!” (*PC* 18).

Thus, authentic Christian life begins with the acceptance of an invitation. But, as is noted by Anti-Climacus in the opening paragraph of the second section (“The Halt”), “instead of seeing what might be expected, a vast crowd of people who labor and are burdened who accepted the invitation, you eventually will actually see the opposite, a vast crowd of people who shudder and recoil” (*PC* 23). Why is the invitation not enthusiastically accepted by all to whom it is offered? Anti-Climacus’ answer is that between the invitation and its acceptance by the one invited stands the possibility of being *offended* both by the condition of the Inviter (Christ, the God-man) as well as by what the ‘help’ that he offers consists of. In short, there would seem to be “a penalty that [is] placed on letting yourself be helped by him” (37). In “The Halt,” Anti-Climacus discusses the characteristics of the Inviter as well as some of the practical (and rather daunting) implications of accepting his Invitation, including the possibility of offense.<sup>31</sup> It is here, too, that we find an elaboration of the category of contemporaneity (or contemporaneousness), which Anti-Climacus first introduced in the invocation that prefaces Book I. There, he tells us that “as long as there is a believer, this person, in order

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<sup>30</sup> Ferreira, *Kierkegaard*, 171.

<sup>31</sup> I offer a detailed explanation of the category of offense in chapter two.

to have become that, must have been and as a believer must be just as contemporary with Christ's presence as his contemporaries were" (9). Thus, "contemporaneity is the condition of faith, and, more sharply defined, it is faith" (ibid.).

From this excerpt alone, we can see that contemporaneity is a decisive category for Anti-Climacus.<sup>32</sup> It is the context in which the Invitation is both offered and accepted and is therefore the lynchpin of the conceptual framework of Book I (indeed, of *Practice in Christianity* as a whole).

Contemporaneity, as Kierkegaard construes it, is a term with more connotations and implications than can be properly addressed here. Rather than an exhaustive parsing of the term, I would instead like to focus solely on its use in *Practice in Christianity* (in Book I in particular) as a means of expressing the Christian experience of time. Contemporaneity with Christ, I submit, is the *temporal mode* of the Christian life, according to Kierkegaard. In order to properly grasp this point, it will be necessary to know something about how Kierkegaard conceives of time and temporality more generally. But, before we get to that, I should like to highlight four distinguishing features of contemporaneity. Having taken us through a detour into Kierkegaard's philosophy of time, I will return to these features in the last section, which will also include making clear the resonances that this way of thinking about time has with the Pauline account in 1 and 2 Thessalonians (as read by Heidegger).

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<sup>32</sup> It is a decisive category not just for Anti-Climacus but for Kierkegaard himself, who writes the following of contemporaneity in the eighth installment of *The Moment*: "And this is the decisive point! This thought is for me my life's thought. I also dare truthfully say that I have had the honor to suffer in order to set forth this thought. Therefore I die joyful, infinitely grateful to Governance that it was granted me to become aware of this thought and to draw attention to it in this way." See Kierkegaard, *The Moment*, 290.

First, one is contemporaneous with the God-man's appearance on earth as such and not with this or that event within his life. Anti-Climacus does not make distinctions between Christ's ministry, crucifixion and his resurrection. That Kierkegaard does not see fit to draw distinctions in *Practice in Christianity* should not mislead us into believing that he does not think they need to be drawn. Rather, it speaks to his particular concerns in this text. Thus, for the purposes of arguing that the situation of contemporaneity is the requirement for authentic Christianity, the entirety of Christ's earthly life is treated as a singular event, a single divine intervention. What is decisive for Anti-Climacus is Christ's dual nature – his divinity combined paradoxically with his individual humanity, "that in his abasement he was God, that he will come again in glory" (PC 31). Anti-Climacus needs no more elaborate a Christology than this: that the Eternal has paradoxically entered into time.<sup>33</sup> As Climacus puts it in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "Christianity, therefore, is not a doctrine but the fact that the god has existed."<sup>34</sup> "The fact of the appearance of the transcendent, eternal God in the form of a particular temporal individual," as Mark C. Taylor puts it, "is an utterly contingent and thoroughly positive revelation event that can be neither historically nor rationally mediated."<sup>35</sup> It cannot be historically mediated because it is not a purely historical event. It cannot be rationally mediated because it is not a purely abstract ("eternal") event. Paradoxically, it is an event in time that transcends and, indeed, *relativizes* time itself. In Anti-Climacus' words, "the

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<sup>33</sup> The degree to which Christ was further abased by the material conditions of his life makes no difference to Anti-Climacus' case, therefore. "For God," he says, "it is always an abasement to be a human being, even if he were emperor over all emperors, and *essentially* he is no more abased by being a poor lowly man, mocked, and, as Scripture adds, spat upon" (PC 40; emphasis original).

<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 326.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood*, 123.

inviter [Christ] is and wants to be the specific historical person he was eighteen hundred years ago” and yet “Christ’s life upon earth, the sacred history, stands alone by itself, outside history” (23, 64). This co-mingling of the temporal and the historical in God’s appearance on earth Kierkegaard elsewhere refers to as “the moment” or “the fullness of time.” ‘Moment’ (*Øieblikket*) is a term that can refer to the situation in which the self wins its temporality in dependence upon God from the ravages of time (I will treat its use in this sense in the next section). But it is also Kierkegaard’s philosophical description of the Incarnation. “The pivotal concept in Christianity,” he writes in *The Concept of Anxiety*, “that which made all things new, is the fullness of time, but the fullness of time is the moment as the eternal, and yet this eternal is also the future and the past.”<sup>36</sup> Another way to say this is that “the moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other.”<sup>37</sup> The two senses of the moment (for the self and for the God-man) are intimately related. As Taylor puts it, “this absolute fact [God’s incarnation in the historical figure of Jesus] is the unique revelation of the eternal God through which, paradoxically, the individual can discover for the first time what it means to be an authentic temporal self.”<sup>38</sup> It is the moment of God’s intervention into time by way of his incarnation – this “absolute fact” – that Anti-Climacus is arguing one must become contemporary with.

Second, contemporaneity is not a figure of speech: it involves a genuine temporal displacement. This needs to be kept in mind, lest contemporaneity with Christ be

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<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood*, 129.

confused with, for example, the fond *remembrance* of Christ or the historical investigation into Christ's life and times.<sup>39</sup> Neither of these implies the kind of change in one's experience of time that Kierkegaard attributes to contemporaneity:

But that which has actually happened (the past) is still not, except in a certain sense (namely, in contrast to poetry), the actual. The qualification that is lacking – which is the qualification of truth (as inwardness) and of all religiousness is – **for you**. The past is not actuality – for me. That with which you are living simultaneously is actuality – for you (*PC* 64; emphasis original).

There are two problems that arise when contemporaneity and remembrance (devotional or historical) are confused. The first is an ontological one, which follows from Anti-Climacus' differentiation in the above passage between possibility and actuality. The remembrance of Christ is not a form of contemporaneity because, in such a case, the remembered Christ that one encounters is not *actual* (any more than the figure of the poet's imagination is actual). For Kierkegaard, only that which is experienced as *present* is actual ("that with which you are living simultaneously"). The second is an epistemological one. One cannot be certain that the remembered God-man bears any resemblance to the God-man as he actually is. It is possible (and, indeed, common, according to Anti-Climacus) that the Christ one brings before one's mind is a creation of

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<sup>39</sup> The instances in which Kierkegaard confronts the question of whether it is possible to know something about Christ *qua* God-man by using an historical method are too many to cite here. One could argue, with reference to its subtitle, that the entirety of *Philosophical Fragments* is dedicated to this and related questions ("Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built of historical knowledge?"). See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 1. In *Practice in Christianity* specifically, historical method as a means of coming to know something about Christ is dealt with on pgs. 25-28, 30-35, 37, 63-64, 86, 96-97, 107 and 144. One concrete example of an attempt to do exactly what Kierkegaard would seem to oppose in the above excerpt is to be found in the Quest for the Historical Jesus movement(s) in biblical studies. For an account of Kierkegaard's relationship to the Quest see Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 356-83; Wolf, "Kierkegaard and the Quest for the Historical Jesus."

one's imagination (*PC* 83).<sup>40</sup> Contemporaneity is not a metaphor for remembrance or for historical reconstruction. Kierkegaard means to use the term quite literally. The Christian is co-temporal with Christ; she and Christ are of the same time. In pursuit of the situation of contemporaneity, "the main task... is to be able to get the terrain cleared, to eliminate the eighteen hundred years, so that the essentially Christian occurs now, as if it occurred today."<sup>41</sup>

Third, contemporaneity is a movement undertaken by the self toward the God-man and not the other way around. According to Kierkegaard's account, the one seeking contemporaneity with him does not wait around for Christ to make himself present to her. Neither, though, is contemporaneity something that is brought about by earnest beckoning of Christ to enter one's own temporality.<sup>42</sup> Rather, it is Christ who is the Inviter, the one doing the beckoning, and it is up to the one to whom that invitation has been issued to respond. This is not to suggest that Kierkegaard conceives of contemporaneity as a task to be achieved *purely* of one's own volition without divine assistance.<sup>43</sup> Rather, it is just to say that, in the situation of contemporaneity, it is the self and not the God-man who undergoes a temporal displacement. "There is a great deal of difference," as Eller puts it, "between saying that Christ is contemporary with us and saying that we are to become contemporary with him – the difference [is] in who moves to meet whom and where the

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<sup>40</sup> There is also an *ethical* dimension to the epistemological problem, which I will take up in chapter two.

<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Eller argues that, in fact, Kierkegaard is at odds on this score with "the very approaches to Jesus that are most prominent in churchly teaching and worship." These, he says, are principally motivated by an interest in "bringing Christ to us rather than the reverse." Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 378, 376.

<sup>43</sup> For Kierkegaard, faith cannot be an act of the will because faith – as opposed to *sin*, rather than unbelief – requires first that the self be aware of its own sinfulness. This is a revelation (or a "condition") that can only be given by God. See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 52; Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 82.

meeting takes place. S.K. consistently talked in terms of the latter.”<sup>44</sup> With respect to *Practice in Christianity*, Eller is certainly correct in this last remark. Anti-Climacus challenges the reader directly in Book I. He declares: “If you cannot *prevail upon yourself* to become a Christian in the situation of contemporaneity with him, or if he cannot move you and *draw you to him* in the situation of contemporaneity, then you will never become a Christian” (PC 64; emphasis mine).

Finally, the temporal and the existential dimensions of contemporaneity are inseparable. Contemporaneity, while it is a kind of ‘movement,’ is also a kind of ‘posture.’ To compare this with Heidegger’s reading of Paul, we could say that contemporaneity is a particular way of being in the world, a kind of comportment, as much a ‘how’ as a ‘what.’ It is something one does but it is also the way that one is. In general, Kierkegaard does not think that temporality can be disconnected from how the self conducts itself existentially. This is a point I will return to and expand upon in the next section. Suffice it to say, for now, that contemporaneity is by no means exceptional among Kierkegaard’s categories merely for implying this inseparability.<sup>45</sup>

### *Time and the Self in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Writings*

#### Time vs. Temporality

Contemporaneity is, therefore, a category with theological, Christological, existential and temporal significance. It is also the decisive category of Book I of *Practice in Christianity*. Furthermore, it is also the means by which Kierkegaard is brought into

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<sup>44</sup> Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 357.

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard’s category of ‘repetition,’ for example, is likewise both a ‘how’ and a ‘what.’ See Kierkegaard, *Repetition*. For an account of the relationship between contemporaneity and repetition see Tsakiri, *Anxiety, Repetition and Contemporaneity*, chap. 7-8.

conversation with the apocalypticism of 1 and 2 Thessalonians and the unique understanding of time and temporality developed therein. However, without some prior knowledge of how Kierkegaard conceives of time and temporality more generally (as well as of how these phenomena are related to the theological, the Christological and the existential for Kierkegaard), the significance as well as the apocalyptic character of the category of contemporaneity will elude us. This is because Kierkegaard uses this term in ways that presuppose a particular understanding of time and the structure of selfhood that he develops in detail in other works (specifically, in *The Sickness Unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety*). It is necessary, therefore, to first turn to Kierkegaard's treatment of these subjects in those works before anything more can be said by way of an exegesis of Book I.

Kierkegaard makes a clear distinction between time and temporality. However, his is not a distinction between objective and subjective time or between a physical time (construed as 'time as it really is') and a psychological temporality (construed as 'the experience of time by human consciousness').<sup>46</sup> Instead, Kierkegaard's analysis distinguishes between realized and unrealized time – that which he refers to as the *fullness of time* is time fully realized and that which he refers to as *infinite vanishing* is unrealized time (or time as pure *flux*). These are two distinct modes, yet both of them are 'objective' in the sense that neither is strictly a *product* of consciousness. In addition, both of them are 'subjective' in the sense that both are experienced by human subjects.

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<sup>46</sup> Taylor, "Time's Struggle with Space," 313. Taylor's reading of Kierkegaard on the theme of the relationship between temporality and subjectivity is exceptionally lucid. In this section, I have chosen to make use of an early essay of Taylor's for the sake of clarity and brevity, though his remarks there are greatly expanded upon in his later monographs on Kierkegaard. See Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*; Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood*.

Kierkegaard, somewhat misleadingly, refers to the former as ‘time’ and the latter as ‘temporality.’

As for time (i.e. unrealized time) Kierkegaard defines it as infinite succession.<sup>47</sup> In it, “every moment, as well as the sum of moments, is a process (a passing by), no moment is a present, and accordingly there is in time neither present, nor past, nor future.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, the present “is not a concept of time, except precisely as something infinitely contentless, which again is the infinite vanishing”; therefore “the life that is in time and is only of time has no present.”<sup>49</sup> What Kierkegaard has in mind here is what Heidegger would later refer to as “the vulgar conception of time,” that is, time understood as a “succession of constantly ‘objectively present’ nows that pass away and arrive at the same time.” Time, according to this conception, “is understood as a sequence, as the ‘flux’ of nows, as the ‘course of time.’”<sup>50</sup> This kind of time is conversant with the “objective time” that he (and Paul, he argues) opposes to the temporality of enactment in his commentary on the letters to the Thessalonians. For Kierkegaard, time (and for Heidegger, vulgar or objective time) is an infinite series of now-points, each of which is without duration or essential content and among which there are no qualitative differences (each now point is essentially equivalent to all the others).

But does anyone actually hold the view that Kierkegaard is describing? In fact, this way of thinking about time goes back all the way to Aristotle.<sup>51</sup> In Book IV of his *Physics*, Aristotle argues that time is “movement in so far as it admits of enumeration,”

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<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 386.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, “Time’s Struggle with Space,” 314.

that is to say that “time is a kind of number.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, temporal terms (fast, slow, before, after, etc.) are the ways in which the movement or change<sup>53</sup> that we observe in objects is measured. Change in objects is therefore prior to time. For example, the earth occupies a variety of different positions with respect to the sun; one way of measuring these positions is to use words like ‘day’ and ‘year.’ We can narrow in on one position and call it ‘now.’ Each now-point is merely an attempt at a fixed measurement of a state of affairs, the movement of an object or set of objects in space. Because movement is constant, these now-points have no essential duration. Rather, they are determined entirely by the scope and specificity of our measurement insofar as it is possible to divide each movement or change of state into an infinite series of smaller or more precise changes. Of course we only notice this change of state – the ‘now,’ however construed – because it appears to be different than the last one. Thus, as Aristotle puts it, “it is by means of the body that is carried along that we become aware of the before and after in the motion, and if we regard these as countable we get the ‘now.’”<sup>54</sup> For Aristotle, as well as for contemporary philosophers who subscribe to this *spatialized* understanding of time, each moment of time (each ‘now’) is conceptualized as one point among an infinite series of points along a plotted line.<sup>55</sup> These points can be distinguished as ‘before’ and ‘after’ with respect to a given fixed point but they are qualitatively identical. That is to say that each now-point, as such, is no more or less significant than any other. They persist as an even, infinite, contentless, ever-vanishing succession.

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<sup>52</sup> *Physica*, Book IV, 11, p. 372. Page numbers refer to *The Complete Works of Aristotle*.

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle uses these terms interchangeably.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, “Time’s Struggle with Space,” 315.

This way of thinking about time has its uses (Kierkegaard is not suggesting that we throw away our clocks and calendars). And, indeed, according to Kierkegaard's analysis, time so construed is 'natural' insofar as it is original not only to objects but to the human being *qua* "natural man" prior to the achievement of selfhood. But we are mistaken to think that a meaningful past, present and future are intrinsic to it. They are not, though they appear so when we confuse them with an Aristotelian 'before,' 'now' and 'after.' As Kierkegaard puts it,

If it is claimed that this division [past, present and future] can be maintained it is because the moment is *spatialized*... it is because representation [i.e. philosophical reflection] is introduced that allows time to be represented instead of being thought.<sup>56</sup>

This is this kind of time that Kierkegaard wants to get beyond and to which he opposes his notion of temporality (i.e. the fullness of time or realized time). His objection to the former is that without a meaningful past, present and future, existential movement and the achievement of selfhood is impossible. I will turn to consider his reasons for thinking so in the next section. Suffice it to say that, for the human being who remains strictly in time – the "natural man" who never experiences authentic temporality but only the incessant flux of a perpetual going-by – "all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise," a perpetual dispersal.<sup>57</sup> In short, time and the life in time, considered apart from the temporal structure of selfhood, is pure transience.

It is the task of becoming a self that creates temporality out of time and thus imbues it with meaningful tenses (past, present and future). In order to understand how

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<sup>56</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 85; emphasis original.

<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 149.

this process works for Kierkegaard, more needs to be said regarding his conception of the basic structures of selfhood.

### The Self-System

To put it simply, Kierkegaard conceives of the self as constituted by an aggregation of various components that must be maintained in a delicate (and precarious) balance.<sup>58</sup> Crucially though, there is no guarantee that such a balance need ever be achieved: the human being (i.e. “the natural man”) is a given, but selfhood is not, the latter is rather a task to be accomplished. With this in mind, let us look now at the definition of the self that Kierkegaard gives us in *The Sickness Unto Death*. He writes:

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 [possibility] and necessity [actuality], in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

In 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.<sup>59</sup>

This is, in effect, a kind of ‘snapshot’ of what Taylor refers to as Kierkegaard’s “self-system”: the totality of the human personality, inclusive of all of its constituent components.<sup>60</sup> Once we have a sense for how each of the components within the system relate to one another, this complicated passage becomes much more clear. There are a few

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<sup>58</sup> Taylor, “Time’s Struggle with Space,” 318.

<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, “Time’s Struggle with Space,” 319.

things to keep in mind. First, becoming a self requires that each pair of components be synthesized. Second, when any pair of components is synthesized, it requires the action of a third component.<sup>61</sup> This third component is also a part of the totality of the self-system and is referred to using the generic term “relation.” Third, the term “self” refers to a relation and is here used interchangeably with the term “spirit.” “Self” is itself a component within the totality of the self-system. The latter is the aforementioned ‘task to be achieved,’ while the former is a component there within, merely (one of) the means of its achievement.

This picture is complicated somewhat by what we find in *The Concept of Anxiety*. For one thing, we notice that one of the syntheses is missing: temporal/eternal. As Kierkegaard tells us in *The Concept of Anxiety*, “the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal is not another synthesis but is the expression for the first synthes[es].”<sup>62</sup> More to the point, the various syntheses (infinite/finite, possibility/actuality, psychical/physical) are “to be posited by spirit,” as we saw, “but spirit is the eternal, and therefore this is accomplished only when the spirit posits along with the former synthes[es] the other synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.”<sup>63</sup> This presents us with a problem. As Taylor has pointed out, every synthesis needs a third, but in the case of the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, there is no third because the spirit (which acts as the third in every other synthesis) and the eternal are the same.<sup>64</sup> Taylor argues that the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal is unique among the syntheses and that this helps to resolve

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<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 43.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, “Time’s Struggle with Space,” 319-20.

the above contradiction. He does so by first bringing to our attention yet another synonym for spirit in Kierkegaard's account: freedom ("The self is freedom").<sup>65</sup> We now have four terms to describe the same component within the self system: self, spirit, eternal and freedom. All of these refer to the synthesizing relation (the "relation that relates itself to itself") and, most importantly, they are all interchangeable as descriptors. In other words, the eternal *is* the self and the self *is* freedom and freedom *is* the eternal. This last equivalency gets to the heart of the matter. As Taylor puts it, "that which does not change within the self system is the fact of the self's freedom: the constant capacity of the self to relate itself to itself."<sup>66</sup>

We are not yet able to move past the contradiction though. That will require us, in the first place, to look briefly at the remaining three syntheses. Their constituent components, we find, can be divided evenly into two groups. On the one hand, there are those components that correspond to the human being in her facticity: finite, actual and physical. These are the factors that define the *limits* of what we might become (such as the given facts of our social and historical location or our physical environment). On the other hand, there are those components that correspond to the human being as she might become: infinite, possible and psychical.<sup>67</sup> All of these are imagined alternatives to the given facts represented by the first set of components. Thus, that which is synthesized by the spirit (self, eternal, freedom) is the actual human being one is *and* the human being that one might be become.

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<sup>65</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 29.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, "Time's Struggle with Space," 321.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 322-23.

All of these components, considered collectively, account for the experience of temporality, according to Kierkegaard. Social and historical location is a temporal phenomenon that partially determines one's imagined possibilities, which are themselves temporal phenomena. Kierkegaard means to say that these components of the self are, properly speaking, *generative* of the experiences of time, where 'past' comes about in the experience of one's finitude and necessity and where 'future' comes about in the experience of one's infinity and possibility. To reiterate the relationship between the various terms one more time we can say the following: the self is the eternal, unchanging capacity to relate (or synthesize); the self relates itself to itself by synthesizing (by way of the eternal) its own temporal components, past and future, what one is and what one might become.

Finally, we are ready to resolve the contradiction. The eternal and the temporal are synthesized in a third, not another component of the self but something else, another category altogether: the moment. The term has two uses in Kierkegaard's writings. The first of these refers to the establishment of the self and the second refers to the Incarnation, the paradoxical confluence of the temporal and the eternal in the God-man. We have already seen it used in the second sense in the last section. His remarks in *The Concept of Anxiety* help to explain the first use of the term. To begin with, he states that, "as soon as the spirit is posited, the moment is present" and that "nature does not lie in the moment."<sup>68</sup> He then goes on to say that

the moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited, whereby time constantly intersects

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<sup>68</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 88-89.

eternity and eternity constantly pervades time. As a result, the above-mentioned division acquires its significance: the present time, the past time, the future time.<sup>69</sup>

In other words, whenever the self is forced to set itself to the task of relating itself to itself, there does the moment appear and, in virtue of that moment, the eternal and the temporal are related to one another. As Taylor puts it, “the moment refers to the situation in which the individual is confronted with a choice – it is the moment of decision. In the moment of decision, the eternal and the temporal dimensions of the self system are brought together.”<sup>70</sup>

This reading of *The Sickness Unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety* has provided us with a helpful geography of Kierkegaard’s understanding of the self and the human being. Taylor has also suggested (quite rightly, in my view) that Kierkegaard volunteers a kind of existential temporality in which our experience of the tenses is not a given in ‘natural time’ but is a product of the temporal structures of the self (the past as the facticity of the self, the future as what the self might become). Parsing his remarks in *The Sickness Unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety* has given us a better understanding of exactly how this takes place in Kierkegaard’s thought.

However, as I mentioned earlier, becoming a self (through the complex process described above) is not a given, but a task to be achieved. Tragically, it is a task for which the human being finds herself continually unfit. *The Sickness Unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety* each describe not only the (temporal) structure of selfhood but also the circumstances in which human beings find themselves that prevent the proper

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, “Time’s Struggle with Space,” 324-25.

relationships from forming within this structure. In short, the self-system is in disrepair.

What is the cause of this predicament? As Kierkegaard puts it (just subsequent to the lengthy excerpt with which we began our reading of *The Sickness Unto Death*),

such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self[-system], must either have established itself or have been established by another... The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and relating itself to itself relates itself to another.<sup>71</sup>

Here we have another highly technical articulation of a fairly straightforward point, which is that the *entire* self-system insofar as it is a relation (or series of relations) must itself be related or established in another. This ‘other’ is God. Thus, that which prevents synthesis proper from taking place is, to put it simply, the ultimate misrelation, that of the self and God. Kierkegaard’s term for this failed relation is ‘despair’ (“Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis [the self] that relates itself to itself.”)<sup>72</sup> The causes for this great misrelation are varied. Selfhood is a task that requires commitment, responsibility and perseverance. And insofar as the self is always in *time*, even as it is forging its own temporality from out of time, it is always subject to the perpetual perishing of the flux. Selfhood must therefore be *repeated*, it is a task that must be returned to again and again. According to John D. Caputo, this is the central insight of another of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works: *Repetition*. Caputo writes that, for Kierkegaard,

repetition is the power of the individual to forge his personality out of the chaos of events, in the midst of the flux, the power to create an identity in the face of the incessant ‘dispersal’ of the self... of the dissipating effects of the flux. There is always a ‘remainder’ no matter how much is abstracted from the individual by the

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<sup>71</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 13-14.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

taxing business of everyday existence. Repetition is the exacting task of constituting the self as a self.<sup>73</sup>

Besides being extraordinarily difficult and requiring constancy and perseverance, the task of winning one's own temporality from time requires that the self surrender itself to a God on whom it is ultimately dependent. There are all manner of idols that stand between the self and this relation, according to Kierkegaard. To fall into despair can be the result of allowing one's life, its meaning and its conditions, to be determined by something outside of oneself that is not God. The established order of the Present Age (terms I will return to in chapter three), its categories and its institution, can assume the role that God ought to. Thus, to return to *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus states that "this deification of the established order is the perpetual revolt, the continual mutiny against God" (PC 88). Rather than turn toward God and throw themselves into the task of selfhood, Kierkegaard surmised that his contemporaries, blind to their own deception by a self-deifying established order, were content to languish in enslavement to idols. "The deification of the established order," he writes, "is the smug invention of the lazy, secular human mentality that wants to settle down and fancy that now there is total peace and security, now we have achieved the highest" (ibid.). Instead, Kierkegaard writes,

every human being is to live in fear and trembling, and likewise no established order is to be exempted from fear and trembling. Fear and trembling signify that we are in the process of becoming [a self]; and every single individual, likewise the generation, is and should be aware of being in the process of becoming. And fear and trembling signify that there is a God – something every human being and every established order ought not to forget for a moment (ibid.).

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<sup>73</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 21.

*Temporality and the Sovereignty of God*

Against those commentators that would interpret Paul's thought as fundamentally fragmented, owing to contingency and to the varying contextual demands of this or that letter's composition, J. Christiaan Beker has argued that there is indeed a "coherence" to Paul's theology, which is to be found in the "apocalyptic substratum" that informs it.<sup>74</sup> What constitutes this substratum, according to Beker, is Paul's conviction that God's action in the world in the form of Christ's life, death and resurrection has "opened up a new future for the world."<sup>75</sup> God's intervening act has reshaped the horizon of human possibility. The way that Paul and Kierkegaard's respective ways of thinking about the nature of time constitute an answer to the apocalyptic question of sovereignty, one that takes the form that Becker has just described: God's intervening act in the Incarnation opens up a new future. More than that, however, the Incarnation makes possible an authentic temporality as such: past, present and future. God is sovereign over time itself.

Speaking of Kierkegaard's category of contemporaneity, Michael Plekon describes it as eschatological. "Here," he writes, "'eschatological' refers to not just the 'last things,' the end of this age and beginning of that to come, but to an existential immanence of the divine in the human, the penetration of *chronos* by *kairos*."<sup>76</sup> Or, to put it another way, it represents the divine declaration of victory over the perpetual perishing of natural time, by way of the gift of authentic, realized time.

Neither Paul (as read by Heidegger) nor Kierkegaard devotes much time to demonstrating God's sovereignty over time *qua* world history – although this, too, is an

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<sup>74</sup> Becker, *The Triumph of God*, 62.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> Plekon, "Kierkegaard at the End," 72.

important discursive element within apocalyptic theology. Rather, their respective analyses are focused on temporal experience. Heidegger's Paul, his congregation in Thessalonica and Kierkegaard's authentic Christian in the situation of contemporaneity relate themselves absolutely to the Christ revealed at the intersection of time and eternity. Their future is determined by the 'how' of this relation. In Kierkegaard's account, this consists of the self's relating itself to itself in the various syntheses of the self-system, which it does only by and through relating itself to God. The self wins authentic temporality from the ravages of time by repeatedly returning to this task, in fear and trembling. Heidegger shows us how Paul's account similarly pronounces the future *parousia* as a promise guaranteed in the turning-toward God and away from idols. This too is worked out in fear and trembling, in the anguish and distress that characterizes Christian life experience.

## CHAPTER TWO: EPISTEMOLOGY

The subject of this second chapter is apocalyptic epistemology. In the previous chapter, we saw how the apocalyptic imagination seeks to refigure the human experience of time and temporality. This was an appropriate place to begin our discussion because, along with its political consequences and manifestations (which we will turn to in the next chapter), in many cases, interest in apocalypticism is directed toward the motif of an imminent eschaton and the unique understanding of time that such a motif evinces. But the sorts of questions that would be taken up by an apocalyptic epistemology in particular – questions about knowledge, certainty, authority and justification – are also fundamental to apocalypticism more generally. This much is at least suggested by the etymology of the term itself: *apokalypsis* means ‘revelation’ or ‘disclosure.’ And in its verbal form, ‘to apocalypse’ (*apokalyptō*) means to uncover or to *make known* what was previously hidden. In other words, even before the apocalypse is the event that marks the end of time in the future and that calls for a new way of living together in the present, it is the event by which the human being comes to know something that had been previously hidden. An epistemology of apocalypticism (an apocalyptic epistemology), as a theory of knowledge, should therefore say something about the *kind* of knowledge (the ‘what’) original to apocalyptic as well as the *means* (the ‘how’) by which one properly finds oneself face-to-face with such knowledge.

Here, I will be focusing on the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ of an apocalyptic epistemology. This will involve using this latter term in a specific way, a way that it is not always used in philosophical discourse.

The Western philosophical tradition has developed a particular understanding of the task of epistemology, beginning approximately with Francis Bacon and René Descartes. These men and the various philosophers, schools and movements that have invested themselves in their way of thinking, “have identified epistemology with the task of coming to grips with the problem of knowledge – how we can know things – and then only afterward with the task of determining what we can say legitimately about other things, such as God, the world, and human beings.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, they have depicted the task of epistemology in terms of the pursuit of certain truth – the incontrovertible ground of knowing upon which all other knowledge claims can then be based. This foundationalist epistemology will be of no help when reading Paul or Kierkegaard and would, indeed, leave us with a skewed portrait of their shared project. Instead, I propose that we begin by defining epistemology, as Lois Malcolm does, as “a way of perceiving the world from a specific vantage point.”<sup>2</sup> Paul has an epistemology, I will argue, and so does Kierkegaard, but neither has couched their thinking about wisdom or knowledge in terms familiar to the Enlightenment accounts of a John Locke or a David Hume. Rather, one finds something akin to ‘virtue epistemology’ in these authors; what is argued for is a transformation of the entire self that results in wisdom, the ability to know well or from the proper vantage point.<sup>3</sup> Both Paul and Kierkegaard affirm the principle that “truth is

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm, “The Wisdom of the Cross,” 113.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Malcolm makes note of the etymological support for such a definition: the Greek from which our term ‘epistemology’ is derived is *epistēmē*, which means ‘knowledge’ or ‘understanding’ and which is constituted by the prepositional *epi* (upon) and the verb *histanai* (to stand or place).

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of the epistemic conditions for Christian knowledge that engages directly with the Enlightenment accounts, see Coakley, “Resurrection and the ‘Spiritual Senses’.”

embodied” and that “subjectivity can never be wholly disengaged from the larger background that informs its reflection.”<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I will articulate what I take to be Paul and Kierkegaard’s respective contributions to the field of epistemology. Furthermore, I will show that these contributions are apocalyptic in very similar ways. For both of them, knowing well means to live a life that acknowledges ultimate divine sovereignty, which necessitates a certain kind of suffering in order truly to die to oneself. As for Kierkegaard, I will turn to Book II of *Practice in Christianity*, in which he addresses the matter of ‘offense,’ which is for him a central epistemological category. As for Paul, I will enlist the help of a group of contemporary biblical scholars who attend to the epistemological consequences of Paul’s letters to the Corinthian church, in which he deals with the second of Sturm’s apocalyptic motifs: the idea of two ages.

### *Knowing at the Juncture: Paul and the Corinthians*

We begin with Paul. As J. Louis Martyn puts it, the cross represents an “epistemological crisis” for Paul in 1 and 2 Corinthians.<sup>5</sup> At the root of all that has gone wrong in the Corinthian church – disunity, a lack of discipline and decency, various kinds of immorality and the marginalization of the congregation’s disadvantaged members – is a disordered way of knowing. This is the fundamental problem that Paul is attempting to rectify in his correspondence with the Corinthians. His target, as one commentator has put

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<sup>4</sup> Malcolm, “The Wisdom of the Cross,” 114.

<sup>5</sup> Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” 109.

it, is false wisdom or “human intellectual conceit, the puffed-up consciousness of the cocksure, which prevents knowledge of the self as well as of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians by announcing that the *apokalypsis Theou* of the Incarnation has ushered in a new age with a corresponding mode of perception, “an announcement that disrupts the normal way of seeing and experiencing things.”<sup>7</sup> He then goes on to describe what being situated at this vantage point – after the life, death and resurrection of the God-man – would mean for one’s ability to know rightly. As Martyn writes (of Paul’s related concerns in 2 Corinthians), “he is saying that there are two ways of knowing, and that what separates the two is the turn of the ages, the apocalyptic event of Christ’s death/resurrection.”<sup>8</sup> In the first and second chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul makes use of the apocalyptic motif of the two ages in order to depict these two ways of knowing, as well as the divine action out of which they are born.

Epistemological/perceptual terminology appears below in italics.

For the message about the cross is *foolishness* to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the *wisdom* of the wise, and the *discernment* of the discerning I will thwart’... Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak of God’s wisdom, *secret and hidden*, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age *understood* this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor 1:18-19; 2:6-8).

Paul has apocalyptic judgment in mind as he portrays the message of the cross – God’s breaking into human history – as that which divides humanity into the saved and the

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<sup>6</sup> Gooch, *Partial Knowledge*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm, “The Wisdom of the Cross,” 90.

<sup>8</sup> Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” 95.

perishing.<sup>9</sup> The reference to a lack of understanding among the rulers of *this* age “implies *another* age (opposite the ruler’s age), and thus the two-age schema typical of apocalyptic thought.”<sup>10</sup> There is a way of knowing that sees the cross as foolishness; this is the way of knowing that corresponds to this age, to those who are perishing. It is *kata sarka*: knowing from a human point of view or “according to the flesh” (2 Cor 5:16). And there is a way of knowing that sees the cross as the power of God; this is the way of knowing that corresponds to the new age and to those who are being saved. It is *kata pneuma*: knowing “by the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:10-16). Both ages, the old and the new, come with a particular way of knowing.

To live in the old is to know in the old way, to live in the new is to know in the new way. Thus, as Raymond Pickett notes, “the epistemological point is inseparable from the eschatological one and therefore epistemology cannot be reduced to a matter of individual subjectivity.”<sup>11</sup> Another way to say this is provided by Mark McIntosh. As he puts it, Paul “seems to understand the death of Jesus as opening up a new order of reality in which everything is charged with a different polarity, a new meaning.”<sup>12</sup> There is therefore an *epistemology* (in the sense that we are using the term) for each age: knowing becomes a matter of positioning, either in the old or the new.

Crucially, however, one’s participation in the new age and its corresponding epistemology cannot be *assumed*. Rather, the true disciple receives it by and through his

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<sup>9</sup> As has been shown by Brown. See *Cross and Human Transformation*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24; emphasis mine. The two-age schema that Brown identifies appears throughout the Pauline literature; see Gal 1:4; 1 Cor 1:12; 2:6; 3:18; and 2 Cor 4:4.

<sup>11</sup> Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth*, 155-56.

<sup>12</sup> McIntosh, “Faith, Reason, and the Mind of Christ,” 132-33.

or her “daily death.”<sup>13</sup> This is what is at issue in Paul’s confrontation with the Enthusiasts (i.e. those who have “deceived themselves” by boasting that they possess privileged religious knowledge).<sup>14</sup> Both Paul and the Enthusiasts affirm the apocalyptic schema and the two ways of knowing just described. But unlike for Paul, for the Enthusiasts, the new age has already arrived, fully and unambiguously. By way of God’s decisive action, knowing by the Spirit is a given; complete redemption has already been effected. This kind of full eschatological self-disclosure means that these chosen few are exempt from the requirements of the old age, including the requirement to suffer. Hence, the Corinthian church is replete with moral indecencies.<sup>15</sup> Paul’s counter to this ‘present eschatology’ is a refusal to completely contrast old age with new age knowing. Instead, as Boomershine puts it, “Paul steadfastly confesses to the way of knowing and being known at the *junction of the ages* formed by the cross of Christ.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, “the present eschatology of the [E]nthusiasts is ... picked up but apocalyptically anchored and delimited as it is not with them.”<sup>17</sup> This way of knowing at the juncture of the two ages, Paul calls *kata stauron*: knowing according to the cross. This is the way of knowing Paul prescribes for those living after God’s definitive intervention into human history in the form of Christ – his life, death and resurrection – but before the culmination of that history in the *parousia* (Christ’s triumphant return). The present is a “painful and glorious” point in history, wherein God’s sovereignty is assured but not yet fully realized. Therefore, “those who recognize their life to be God’s gift at the juncture of the ages

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<sup>13</sup> Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” 110.

<sup>14</sup> See 1 Cor 1:18.

<sup>15</sup> Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” 126.

<sup>16</sup> Boomershine, “Rhetoric and Dialectic in Apocalyptic,” 148; emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” 133.

recognize also that until they are completely and exclusively in the new age, their knowing by the Spirit [*kata pneuma*] can occur only in the form of knowing by the power of the cross.”<sup>18</sup> Käsemann represents Paul’s perspective succinctly:

Christ is God’s representative over against a world which is not yet fully subject to God, although its eschatological subordination is in train since Easter and its end is in sight. No perspective could be more apocalyptic.<sup>19</sup>

Paul puts the lie to the self-assurance of the Enthusiasts by undermining the eschatological presumptions that support it. What becomes clear as he does so is that the root cause of this ‘present eschatology’ is, for Paul, the arrogance of the Enthusiasts, their unwillingness to be called into question, to die to themselves, indeed, to suffer on behalf of the message of the cross. For Paul, this is the ethic that accompanies *kata stauron*. Given the situation in Corinth at the time, Boomershine is right to suggest that “Paul’s letters are intended to be profoundly unsettling and precisely humbling for those who fully hear them.”<sup>20</sup> As Martyn puts it, “at the juncture of the ages the marks of the resurrection are hidden and revealed in the cross of the disciple’s daily death, and *only* there.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, Paul argues that, looking at the cross,

we have discerned that one died on behalf of all. Thus, all died! And he died for all, in order that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but rather for him who for their sake died and was raised (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Paul is unapologetically apocalyptic in his correspondence with the Corinthians. He announces God’s having invaded and interrupted the course of human history through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, which ushers in a new age. This new age means that

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<sup>18</sup> Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” 108.

<sup>19</sup> Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” 133.

<sup>20</sup> Boomershine, “Rhetoric and Dialectic in Apocalyptic,” 149.

<sup>21</sup> Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” 110; emphasis original.

the old ways of perceiving things have been superseded. But, at present, this new age has not yet come in its fullness. For Paul, humanity is at a kind of juncture: after the cross but before the return of Christ. This means that it will not do to assume that the vantage point from which one perceives the world (one's epistemology) will provide access to the truth revealed by the cross, as the Enthusiasts did. Rather, one only finds oneself knowing well in the new age when one seeks it out in the old age (1 Cor 2:7) by voluntarily surrendering everything that would cause one to boast – including certainty of knowledge – and being willing to live, even suffer, for the truth toward which such knowing is pointed. For Paul, this is what it means to know 'eschatologically' or 'apocalyptically': to see things from the perspective of the new age by being transformed for it through suffering in this age. This is what it means to have "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).

If we turn now to a reading of Book II of *Practice in Christianity*, we find that Kierkegaard – addressing a very different audience, eighteen hundred years after Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians – appears to have something very similar in mind. The vocabulary is distinctly his own and there is no reference to a turn of the ages, nor is there obvious use of an apocalyptic motif such as there was in Paul. Nevertheless, with respect to the question of sovereignty, Kierkegaard and Paul have the same answer. They articulate this answer in their mutual epistemologies. In both cases, knowing well means to live a life that acknowledges divine sovereignty, which necessitates a certain kind of suffering in order truly to die to oneself.

*Offense: Practice in Christianity, Book II*

The subject of Book II of *Practice in Christianity* is the category of *offense*.

Offense is the term that Anti-Climacus uses to describe what so often happens to human intelligence when it comes upon the God-man, that is, God incarnated in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Just as he is, “the God-man is the paradox, absolutely the paradox” (PC 82). When we, as human beings, are confronted with the reality of this paradox – truly confronted, that is, such that we see it *as a paradox* and not as a “childlike or childish fantasy about something extraordinary” – our “understanding must come to a standstill on it,” because “humanly speaking, there is no crazier composite than this” (82-83). Why? It is because, for Kierkegaard, “God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, their confluence in a single individual is an infinite (i.e. absolute) paradox. The standstill to which comes human understanding when faced with this paradox is what Kierkegaard calls “the possibility of offense.” It is a situation in which one must choose either to be offended by this paradox or to respond to it in faith.

Offense can take a number of forms, as we shall see. But it is worth pausing for a bit of clarification before we proceed to an explication of those forms. I have just said that, for Kierkegaard, the God-man is the Absolute Paradox and, as such, he is the occasion for offense. It is tempting to characterize this relationship between ‘paradox’ and ‘offense’ in cognitive terms. In this way, ‘paradox’ refers to a logical contradiction involved in saying (1) that “God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference” and (2) that this particular human being is, at the same time, fully

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<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 126.

‘God’ and fully ‘man.’ ‘Offense’ then refers to the state of confusion or bewilderment in any rational mind that stops to think about that. So read, Kierkegaard may be easily recognized as an ‘irrationalist.’

This is a misunderstanding both of the nature of the paradox for Kierkegaard and of the relationship between ethics and epistemology more generally. As to the first, we find that Anti-Climacus is rather clear (perhaps more so than Climacus, who also speaks quite extensively about paradox and offense) in stating that the God-man, as such, does not represent an immediate logical contradiction. Rather, he is “the sign of contradiction”:

To justify the name of ‘sign,’ there must be something by which it draws attention to itself or to the contradiction. But the contradictory parts must not annul each other in such a way that the sign comes to mean nothing or in such a way that it becomes the opposite of a sign, an unconditional concealment (*PC* 125).

As David Gouwens puts it, for Kierkegaard, “Christ puts the issue of his identity in the form of a question.”<sup>23</sup> The God-man *qua* formal contradiction is nonsense; this formulation cancels out the contradictory parts, it thereby becomes unconditionally concealed and unknowable. This is the view of Christ attributed to Kierkegaard on the ‘irrationalist’ reading. On the other hand, the God-man who is immediately recognized as such does not point beyond himself; he does not present himself in the form of a question. For Kierkegaard the self encounters the God-man as neither immediately knowable nor immediately unknowable. Instead, he presents Christ as “incognito so dialectically welded to immediate recognizableness as to form a most irritating and inescapable paradox.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 130.

<sup>24</sup> Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 365.

As to the second, we find that the result of this conception of paradox and offense is that the incongruity comes to be seen as primarily having to do not with the relationship of the categories ‘God’ and ‘Man’ but with the self-as-knower and its claim to noetic autonomy and how this claim is called into question by the encounter with the God-man. I agree with Gouwens that, for Kierkegaard, “the contradiction is *passional*; it is an affront against the assumption that one has the truth ‘within.’”<sup>25</sup> The charge of *irrationalism*, of course, assumes some definition of ‘rationalism’ – the idea that we can arrive at substantial knowledge of the nature of the world using (only or mostly) human reason – as the norm. If this kind of disembodied rationalism (however defined) is the assumed epistemic norm or standard, then Kierkegaard appears to relinquish any claim to having genuine knowledge – precisely when it matters the most! In other words, the self encounters in the God-man a claim to truth, “which, for [it], will make all the difference in the world whether it is true or false”<sup>26</sup> and yet Kierkegaard is saying that rational thought – the most reliable, perhaps even *the only* means of acquiring genuine knowledge – is insufficient to adjudicate the matter. In some sense, this reading is correct: Kierkegaard does claim that rational thought cannot comprehend the Absolute Paradox. But irrationalism as such does not follow from this. Rather, Kierkegaard is calling into question the normativity of disembodied rational thought that is assumed by that charge of irrationalism. Genuine, substantive, Christian knowledge is, indeed, quite possible but,

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<sup>25</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 130; emphasis original.

<sup>26</sup> Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 358;. Eller continues, “The claim dare not be ignored, for if it is true it does indeed make all the difference. If Jesus is in fact God, then to accept him is to accept God and, what is perhaps even more fateful, to reject him is to reject God. If Jesus is in fact God, to accept him is to find life, to reject him is to miss life and choose damnation.” See Climacus on the subject of faith as a matter of the “infinite passion of inwardness” in Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 200-04.

just as it was for Paul when dealing with the Corinthians, what it requires is a knowing that is dialectically related to a particular way of living. In the first of the sermons that make up Book III of *Practice*, Anti-Climacus states the matter as follows:

The being of truth is not the direct redoubling of being in relation to thinking, which gives only thought-being... [It] is the redoubling of truth within yourself, within me, within him, that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth approximately in the striving for it... *For knowing the truth is something that entirely of itself accompanies being the truth*" (PC 205; emphasis mine).

Knowing the truth – the truth of Christianity, the truth represented by the God-man – is dialectically related to living or “being” the truth: the one “entirely of itself” accompanies the other.<sup>27</sup> As Merold Westphal puts it with respect to Kierkegaard, “epistemology is rooted in ethos as the sense of what constitutes the good life.”<sup>28</sup> But the reverse is also true for Kierkegaard: knowing well (epistemology) is a consequence of living well (ethics), while proper living must be continually informed and nourished by proper knowing.<sup>29</sup> Thus, what the Absolute Paradox calls into question is the *ethic* of rationalism just as much as its epistemic efficacy. How does Kierkegaard construe the ethic of rationalism? In short, rationalism is a way of knowing rooted in an ethics of autonomy and domination: a thing can be known insofar as it can be made to conform to my epistemic expectations, which I set for myself. As the self-as-(rational-)knower encounters the incomprehensibility of the Absolute Paradox, it is this ethos that is called into question. It is to *this* indictment that the self reacts with offense.

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<sup>27</sup> Climacus, too, clearly emphasizes the dialectical relationship between knowing and being. *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>28</sup> Westphal, “Kenosis and Offense,” 35.

<sup>29</sup> Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, 150.

Having attended to these clarifications, we may now turn to the various forms of offense as they appear in Book II. I will consider three such forms: offense in relation to *loftiness*, offense in relation to *lowliness* and offense in relation to the *imitation* of Christ. The first two forms of offense appear to be purely epistemological: in both cases, offense reveals itself when the self that encounters the paradox suppresses one of its constituent parts – either “loftiness” (God-) or “lowliness” (-man) – in order to make it comprehensible, that is, legitimately knowable through the use of reason (either evidentiary reason or speculative reason). The third form of offense appears to be purely ethical: offense reveals itself when the self refuses to live and suffer as the God-man did. My suggestion is that all three forms of offense are ethical/epistemological in nature, which is in keeping with what I have argued is Kierkegaard’s (and Paul’s) dialectical construal of these concepts.

#### Offense in Relation to Loftiness

Book II sticks as close to the biblical text as did Book I. In this case, however, Anti-Climacus draws our attention to several instances in the Gospels where Christ warns against taking offense. Kierkegaard, as I am attempting to show, is making an important theological and philosophical point in his articulation of the term ‘offense’ but, to begin with at least, he makes use of it simply because it is original to scripture.

Two of the four Gospels depict Christ as saying to the messengers from John the Baptist, “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Matt 11:6, Luke 7:23). He does so in response to the question, which they relate to him from John, of whether he is, in fact, the long awaited Messiah. In other words, what is at stake for them (and for us,

according to Anti-Climacus) is the question, ‘Is Christ actually who he claims to be?’ But Christ does not give them a direct answer, “he does not say: Tell John I am the expected one.” Instead, he lists the various miracles and wonders that he has performed (giving sight to the blind, cleansing lepers, raising the dead), makes reference to his compelling teaching (“the poor have good news brought to them”) and then says, in essence, ‘Do not be offended’ (Matt 11:5, Luke 7:22).

But why would anyone take offense at such things? Are they not clear, irrefutable evidence of the divinity of Jesus? Is it not the case that, having known such things to be true (i.e. that he *has* given sight to the blind and that he *has* preached good news etc.), were we in the position of the messengers, we would respond *immediately* in faith and worship? Are these not the quintessential “demonstrations of the truth of Christianity” (PC 95)?<sup>30</sup>

This is certainly the accepted wisdom in Christendom, according to Anti-Climacus. There, it is thought that the primary obstacle to faith is access to objective, compelling evidence of the truth of Christianity. The disciples and the first witnesses of Christ are thought to be in an enviable epistemic position because, in the situation of contemporaneity (so it is thought) it is “*directly* visible that Christ [is] the one he claim[s] to be” (PC 95; emphasis original). Nineteen hundred years later, the faithful stand at a distance from this evidence: they have not seen the miracles nor have they heard Christ speak for themselves. Their faith flounders as a result. The solution to this problem is to find professional historians willing to engage in rigorous historical research and to write

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<sup>30</sup> We could add ‘fulfillment of prophecies related to the coming of the Messiah’ to this list of demonstrations.

“those enormous folios” in which enough evidence is compiled such that the Christian in Christendom has the same access to the demonstrations of the truth of Christianity as did Christ’s immediate contemporaries.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, they “feel perfectly convinced... and secure against all attack, because every demonstration and every folio end with: ergo, Christ was the one he claimed to be” (95). As Anti-Climacus wryly puts it, “it is as easy as putting one’s foot in a sock.” In short, the epistemological problem in Christendom is that historical distance has eroded the evidence needed to arrive at the truth of Christianity. The historian is the actor best suited to solving that problem. His historical research provides the “ergo,” which can then be used by the preacher to reassure his flock and by the apologist and missionary to “convert the heathen” (96). Once one has all the evidence, faith and knowledge of the truth of Christianity follows as a matter of course.

From this perspective, it would be very curious indeed that Christ would add, “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” Anti-Climacus explains that Christ’s words express a particular truth about who he is. But along with this fundamental Christological truth comes an epistemological truth as well. This becomes clearer as Anti-Climacus continues:

In relation to [Christ] there can be no question of any demonstrating, that we do not come to by means of demonstrations, that there is no *direct* transition to becoming Christian... the demonstrations are able to lead someone – not to faith, far from it (then it certainly would be superfluous to add: Blessed is he who is not offended), but to the point where faith can come into existence (*PC* 96; emphasis original).

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<sup>31</sup> For a startling portrayal of Kierkegaard’s thoughts on the ethical posture of the biblical historian, see Climacus’ parable about “The Tyrant-Historian.” Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 92-93.

The Gospel position, according to Anti-Climacus, is that evidentiary reasoning is not a sufficient means of acquiring Christian truth or of establishing the legitimacy of Christ's claim to divinity. If it were, he says, Christ's response to the messengers' question would be to list the demonstrations and be done with it. But, by summarizing all of the available evidence and then adding, "Blessed is he who is not offended," Christ instead implies (1) that solid evidence of this kind does not lead directly to Christian knowledge but to the possibility of offense and (2) that those who somehow manage to avoid being so offended are blessed. For Anti-Climacus' contemporaries, this is foolishness: knowledge is a matter of access to objective, compelling evidence and the messengers have the most reliable evidence possible. How could they be led to offense in this way?

Informing this disagreement with respect to the question of evidence between what Kierkegaard takes to be the Gospel witness on the one hand and the sensibilities of Christendom on the other is a disagreement about the identity of Christ-as-paradox. Kierkegaard wants to maintain that the individual human being Jesus was not directly or immediately recognizable as God; rather, he appeared *even to his immediate contemporaries* as a paradox. On the contrary, he supposes, "the majority of people living in Christendom today no doubt live with the illusion that if they had been contemporary with Christ they would have recognized him immediately" (PC 128). But what informs *this* disagreement? It is the question of the proximity of God and the human being. Once again, Kierkegaard posits an infinite qualitative difference between God and the human being. Judging from their assumptions about Christ's recognizability, says Kierkegaard, his contemporaries do not share this view. As Anti-Climacus states, in Christendom, it is

said: “*to such a degree* was Christ God that one could immediately and directly perceive it.” While, on the other hand, Anti-Climacus argues: “*to such a degree* was Christ God that he was unrecognizable” (128; emphasis original). If the infinite qualitative difference is assumed, then even the most direct ‘evidence’ of divinity (the most fantastic of miracles, the most compelling teaching, witnessed first-hand!) will be of no help. God is still absolutely transcendent, and this man Jesus appears as lowly as any other. Christ cannot give the messengers anything that will guarantee their coming to him in faith. As Vernard Eller puts it, “the speech is indeed all ‘pro,’ but the speaker is all ‘con,’ and thus that speech in the mouth of that speaker is paradoxical to the extreme.”<sup>32</sup> However, if the infinite qualitative difference is *not* assumed then the evidence is admissible, evidentiary reasoning is effective and the possibility of offense does not arise. But a God-man that is not constituted by these two infinitely different qualities is, according to Kierkegaard, merely a construction of the human imagination, a Feuerbachian projection of human excellence, a fantasy and certainly not a God worthy of worship (99). It is by no means the Christ that one encounters in the situation of contemporaneity.

The upshot of all of this is that Kierkegaard’s contemporaries in Christendom are incorrect to suppose that those who encountered Christ directly were actually epistemically better off than those who came later.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, historical research that purports to legitimate Christian truth by working its way backwards in order to occupy that epistemic position is wrongheaded. In the end, the historian can only give to the

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<sup>32</sup> Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 364.

<sup>33</sup> Climacus discusses at length the equivalent epistemic position of the “contemporary follower” of Christ and the “follower at second hand.” See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 89-110.

preacher, the apologist and the missionary more and better *information*. There is no *evidence* that can verify Christ's claim to be the God-man, the Absolute Paradox.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, Anti-Climacus argues that his contemporaries in Christendom, in the situation of contemporaneity with Christ, are just as susceptible as (and no more so than) those first witnesses of Christ's to becoming offended by his claim to loftiness. This is because what one actually encounters there is

an individual human being who is like other human beings, in whom there is nothing to be seen *directly*, an individual human being who then does miracles and himself claims to do miracles! What does this mean? *It means that this individual human being is making himself more than human, is making himself something close to God: is this not offensive?* (PC 97; emphasis mine)

In sum, the Gospel account, on Kierkegaard's reading, clearly shows that Christ was not immediately recognizable as the God-man. Despite the fact that there was an abundance of sound evidence available in the form of miracles and compelling teaching, it was nevertheless possible – because of the infinite qualitative difference between 'God' and 'man' – to be offended and to turn away from Christ, the lowly, individual human being who is claiming to be the God-man. This is what it means to be offended by the loftiness of the God-man: to look upon the abased man Jesus, see the miracles, hear the teaching and still be offended that he would make such a claim. There were apparently those in Kierkegaard's Christendom who thought otherwise, namely, that poverty of faith owed to a lack of objective, compelling evidence to support it. Once that evidence has been

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<sup>34</sup> Eller correctly points out that, for Kierkegaard, to say that investigation and rational reflection are of no use in deciding upon the truth of the Absolute Paradox is not to say that they are of no use *at all* in the matter. He writes, "[Kierkegaard] has been badly misunderstood on this score. Reason and research do have a role, the real and necessary role of determining whether the claim is truly a paradox or not, whether the is indeed evidence both 'pro' and 'con'... Regarding the claim 'Jesus Christ is God,' research *can* say, 'This claim, indeed, is a true paradox.'" Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 359; emphasis mine.

secured, Christian knowledge follows as a matter of course (the “ergo”). Kierkegaard’s reading of the Gospel passages attempts to undermine the epistemology that supports this position. Evidentiary reasoning, he claims, leads one away from Christian truth and toward the possibility of offense in relation to loftiness.

#### Offense in Relation to Lowliness

Offense in relation to the *lowliness* of the God-man is, at least in part, a mirror image of the movement described above. In the same way, the possibility of offense arises when Christ does not meet expectations of divinity. And in the same way, there is an epistemology at work in Christendom that obfuscates the offense and purports to provide the means of acquiring Christian knowledge. Here too, Kierkegaard argues that the biblical witness subverts such a claim.

The biblical texts that set the stage for Anti-Climacus’ discussion are parallels from Matthew 26 and Mark 14 where Christ predicts Peter’s denial in the garden.<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard’s reading of these passages is that Peter’s denial of Christ is the expression of his offense at the lowliness he now witnesses in the arrest and degradation of the one he thought to be God.

[Peter] believed that Christ was the Father’s only begotten Son. That a human being falls into the power of his enemies and then does nothing, that is human. But that the one whose almighty hand had done signs and wonders, that he now stands there powerless and paralyzed – precisely this is what brings Peter to deny him (*PC* 104).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Matt 26:31, 33 and Mark 14:27, 29.

<sup>36</sup> One finds the same kind of offense in another set of parallel texts from Matthew 13 and Mark 6, wherein the crowds at Nazareth are scandalized that “God is supposed to be the son of a carpenter” (*PC* 103, Matt 13:55-57 and Mark 6:3).

Offense in relation to the loftiness of the God-man is borne out when, as Anti-Climacus puts it, “the qualification ‘man’ is presupposed and the offense is at the qualification ‘God.’” Here, with respect to offense in relation to the *lowliness* of the God-man, “the qualification ‘God’ is presupposed and the offense is at the qualification ‘man’” (PC 82). Thus, “a person brought to a halt by the possibility of offense says: Assuming for a moment that you are God, what foolishness and madness that you are this lowly, poor, powerless man!” (103)

With respect to the biblical record, Peter’s expectations of divine power went unmet when Jesus, by and through his arrest, torture and death, was made lowly. His reaction to these unmet expectations constitutes his ‘taking offense.’ However, as he did with respect to the first category of offense, Kierkegaard speaks as well to his contemporaries about their own expectations and, more to the point, about their epistemological assumptions. In particular, it is the speculative philosophers that have raised his ire.<sup>37</sup> “Speculation,” says Anti-Climacus, “has naturally considered itself able to ‘comprehend’ the God-man” but only by subduing in the God-man “the qualifications of temporality, contemporaneity, and actuality” (PC 81). In other words, philosophical reasoning has no problem making sense of God appearing in human form. In fact, the Christian truth as embodied in the incarnation, so understood, is a matter of a world-

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<sup>37</sup> When Anti-Climacus refers to ‘speculation’ or to the ‘speculative philosophers,’ we are justified, I think, to assume that he is referring here to the “all-reconciling, modified Hegelian Christian speculation” of H.L. Martensen in particular. See Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden-Age Denmark*, 170. For an excellent treatment of the Martensen-Kierkegaard relationship see Thompson, *Following the Cultured Public’s Chosen One*.

historical movement of spirit (Geist) inevitably coming to know itself.<sup>38</sup> The appropriate epistemic position vis-à-vis such truth is, of course, the philosophical, as Hegel and his Danish disciples certainly claimed.<sup>39</sup>

The real scandal comes about when it is further alleged that it is *this* particular human being who is God: “the lowly, destitute man with twelve poor disciples from the commonest class of people” (PC 37). But this, according to Anti-Climacus, is precisely the claim of authentic Christianity:

The God-man is the unity of God and an individual human being. That the human race is or is supposed to be in kinship with God is ancient paganism; but *that* an individual human being is God is Christianity, and this particular human being [the lowly and abased Jesus] is the God-man (PC 82; emphasis original).

Kierkegaard’s objection to the speculative philosophers is not that they have purposefully denied the humanity of Christ (this is not a charge of Docetism, in other words) but rather that by mistakenly supposing that the terms of their speculative discourse – which *can* accommodate the metaphysical union of the divine and the human – are adequate to describe the paradox of God incarnate in the *single*, lowly, individual human being they betray their offense at this lowliness and, indeed, their inability to face the God-man as he actually is in the situation of contemporaneity.

Once again, there is disagreement between Kierkegaard and his opponents with respect to the question of Christ’s identity as well as the question of what epistemic position one must occupy in order to know something about him. The speculative unity of the philosophers is not the Absolute Paradox: as Anti-Climacus states elsewhere, in

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<sup>38</sup> “It is the nature of truth to prevail when its time has come, and... it appears only when this time has come, and therefore never appears prematurely, nor finds a public not ripe to receive it.” Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 44, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood*, 121.

speculative thought, “the qualitative difference between God and man is pantheistically abolished.”<sup>40</sup> Nor does philosophical reasoning lead to Christian knowledge. As Kierkegaard attempts to show through his meditation on the Gospel narrative, in the situation of contemporaneity, the God-man does not and will not conform to human “apriorities”: neither Peter’s messianic expectations nor the philosopher’s speculative unity.<sup>41</sup>

#### Offense in Relation to Imitation

Most of what we have been discussing in relation to the categories of offense so far has been tantamount to putting the ‘meat on the bones’ of the introductory remarks with which Anti-Climacus begins Book II. There, the discussion turns, as it has for us thus far, on who the God-man is and on the various ways that the human knower encounters him (or fails to do so). This makes for a rather tidy intellectual treatment of the nature of offense. However, the reader will note that Kierkegaard spends considerable time in Book II discussing a topic that appears nowhere in the noetically centered introduction. Kierkegaard appears to characterize it as another kind of offense in relation to lowliness. But the offense is characterized in ethical rather than epistemological terms. My argument is that its inclusion among the categories of offense evinces Kierkegaard’s refusal to separate the ethical from the epistemological. Reading the first two forms of offense in light of this third is instructive in this regard and will lead us back to the claim with which we began our reading of Book II: knowing the truth – the truth of Christianity,

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<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 117.

<sup>41</sup> Westphal, “Kenosis and Offense,” 31.

the truth represented by the God-man – is dialectically related to living or “being” the truth: the one “entirely of itself” accompanies the other.

To introduce the topic, Anti-Climacus speaks of

a corresponding possibility of offense, which Christ also speaks about and which likewise is in relation to lowliness... [It] is the possibility of offense when it becomes manifest that the follower is not above his master but is like him (*PC* 106).<sup>42</sup>

The incongruity between the single abased individual and the divinity he claims for himself is incomprehensible and, indeed, offensive to reason. But what Anti-Climacus is now driving at here is that the God-man does not merely demand cognitive assent but *imitation* and that *this* in and of itself also brings with it the possibility of offense. If authentic Christianity is your aim, says Anti-Climacus,

then you must go through the possibility of offense, for truly to be a Christian certainly does not mean to be Christ (what blasphemy!) but means to be his imitator, yet not a kind of prinked-up, nice-looking successor who makes use of the firm and leaves Christ’s having suffered many centuries in the past; no, to be an imitator means that your life has as much similarity to his as is possible for a human life to have (*PC* 106).<sup>43</sup>

The rest of the exposition of this category of offense Kierkegaard devotes to parsing the requirement of imitation of Christ in authentic Christianity (which must include

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<sup>42</sup> Christ’s apocalyptic-inflected speech to the disciples in Matthew 10 is echoed by Anti-Climacus in these passages: “A disciple is not above the teacher nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master” (Matt 10:22-25).

<sup>43</sup> In his parsing of Kierkegaard’s use of the term ‘lowliness’ in *Practice in Christianity*, Jim Perkinson effectively argues that the situation of contemporaneity insofar as it is a temporal movement actually implies social movement as well. Becoming *co-temporal* with Christ, he writes, “can only also mean being in the same social space with him.” In other words, on the assumption that contemporaneity implies a temporal movement in which Christ and his contemporary overcome their historical distance, it seems to follow that the contemporary would “also be faced with a coming to Christ across the space of society [in order to be] ‘present’ with Christ where he is ‘now’ in the concrete reality of lower-class existence.” Perkinson, “A Socio-Reading of the Self,” 163, 165.

“tribulation and persecution... on account of the Word”) and to the difference between Christian suffering and ordinary human suffering (*PC* 114).

What differentiates Christian suffering from ordinary human suffering, according to Kierkegaard, is its “voluntariness” and its “self-contradiction” (*PC* 109-10). As the noetic offenses spring from the humbling of human reason before the Absolute Paradox, so too is this kind of offense the result of an intuitive ethic of ‘fairness’ confronting an account of the same that opposes it at every turn. More to the point, Christian suffering inverts the self’s sense of what it is owed, of what it can expect in return for its strivings, of what it should properly demand of others. As John Elrod notes, “to exist contemporaneously with Christ... entails a decision to love the neighbor and requires a suspension of all action grounded exclusively in self-love.”<sup>44</sup> Adding to that, David Gouwens remarks that such suffering “is an offense to the practical reason that still calculates advantages and disadvantages. It is like being told that one wins by losing.”<sup>45</sup>

How is the self brought to this point? Certainly it is not the bare fact of suffering that leads to the contradiction that Kierkegaard is talking about.<sup>46</sup> Human life is replete with all manner of pains, adversities, disappointments and tragedies; this much is inescapable and, indeed, none of these are properly Christian sufferings, according to Anti-Climacus. First, Christian suffering is suffering taken upon oneself ‘on account of the Word.’ To lose everything – family, possessions, health, security – is unfortunate but is nevertheless an entirely ‘ordinary’ kind of suffering, according to Anti-Climacus. But

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<sup>44</sup> Elrod, “Climacus, Anti-Climacus, and the Problem of Suffering,” 316.

<sup>45</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 176.

<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard thinks there is considerable confusion about this in Christendom today. See his scathing critique of Danish homiletics on the topic of suffering (*PC* 108-113).

to *give up* everything, to voluntarily renounce these things “is a whole scale deeper than the ordinary human sufferings.” This is because only the latter offers up the possibility of self-contradiction. As Anti-Climacus puts it, “there is no self-contradiction in my wife’s dying – after all, she is mortal – no self-contradiction in my losing my possessions – after all, they are losable” (*PC* 110). But there *is* the possibility of self-contradiction in voluntarily renouncing what I already have (and could keep) ‘on account of the Word.’ Why? It is because Christ (as Anti-Climacus discusses at length in Book I) represents himself as “the physician” to the burdened and, indeed, to those who have lost everything. He then compels the one who has come to him for relief to now voluntarily renounce everything! Thus, “the possibility of offense lies in the contradiction that the remedy seems infinitely worse than the sickness” (110). At this point, “the understanding is brought to a halt at the possibility of offense. The help looks like a torment, the relief like a burden; everyone who stands outside must say: He must be mad to expose himself to all that – and the sufferer believed he was going to be helped” (114-15). In sum, the self is brought to the point of contradiction when it responds to the invitation of Christ, hoping to find relief for (ordinary) human suffering only to be told that relief comes though voluntarily taking on suffering. We can call this self-contradictory insofar as it is fundamentally *unfair*. Christ’s invitation calls itself relief, restoration, justice; but it is a justice that, from the perspective of the self’s expectations, is upside-down.

There are therefore (at least) two different ways of talking about offense in Book II. The first is noetically centered or epistemological. In the situation of contemporaneity, the God-man *qua* Absolute Paradox confounds human reasoning, both evidentiary and

speculative. The second is ethically centered. In the situation of contemporaneity, the God-man *qua* ethical prototype confounds the self's intuitive ethic of fairness. What these two ways of talking about offense have in common is that, in both cases, Kierkegaard describes (1) the expectations of the self in the situation of contemporaneity, (2) how Christ does not meet these expectations but rather (3) offers an alternative that is in fact a complete *reversal* of those expectations and that (4) displaces the self as the adjudicator of both wisdom (right knowing, that is, epistemology) and justice (an ethic of self-determined fairness).

When we read the first two forms of offense in light of the third, the result is that Kierkegaard appears to be confirming the claim I had attributed to him and to Paul above, namely, that ethics and epistemology are dialectically related. This was evidenced by remarks from Book III but this same principle represents a powerful undercurrent in Book II as well. This has important implications, not the least of which is that Kierkegaard's critique of a rationalist epistemology in matters of Christian truth can be seen as just as much of a critic of the rational self's claim to autonomy.

Merold Westphal and Stephen N. Dunning, two excellent commentators on Kierkegaard, have both drawn attention to this feature of Kierkegaard's thinking in *Practice in Christianity*, namely, the displacing of the self as adjudicator of wisdom and justice, though neither has phrased it in precisely those terms.

In Westphal's commentary on *Practice*, he argues that Kierkegaard's dialectical movement of faith (which necessitates the refusal of offense) "is the recognition of the relativity of our individual beliefs and behaviors and of our collective theories and

practices – before God.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, offense is the reaction of the self that refuses to be relativized through faith, the self that must remain autonomous. Epistemically, “to acknowledge the Inviter in faith is to allow his alterity to *abolish one’s autonomy as a knower*, to find oneself epistemically decentered.” Thus, “offense is overcome in faith only through cognitive self-denial.”<sup>48</sup> We saw how this worked itself out in Anti-Climacus’ analysis of offense in relation to loftiness and lowliness. In both cases, “the alterity of Jesus is, to use [the philosophical language of epistemic expectation], that of an anomaly. He just doesn’t fit into their conceptual schemes. Hence their offense. Hence their verdict [that he is not the God-man he claims to be].”<sup>49</sup> Where do these conceptual schemes come from? Westphal goes on to argue that, “in addition to a theoretical, intellectual [that is, epistemological] problem, offense signifies a practical, ethical problem,” adding that, “doubtless the two are... closely intertwined.”<sup>50</sup> This is because “epistemology is rooted in ethos as the sense of what constitutes the good life.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, the epistemology of the historian and the philosopher that prevent them from seeing the God-man for who he is is the natural outgrowth of their way of life, their ethical framework. These figures represent different ways of reasoning from within the established order and it is the “ideology of th[is] social group that gets to define what shall count as reason.”<sup>52</sup> It is this ‘privileged’ epistemic position, “the offspring of the social practices of which it is at once the expression and legitimation,” that is the source

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<sup>47</sup> Westphal, “Kenosis and Offense,” 40.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 27; emphasis mine.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> More will be said with regard to reasoning within the established order in chapter three.

of their blindness and therefore their offense. But it would be no better to have been among the “common people,” those disenfranchised by the established order, as Anti-Climacus explains in Book I (*PC* 55-56). What is needed to see the God-man is not suffering *per se*, but Christian suffering, which (as we saw) is voluntary and involves self-contradiction. More to the point, it involves self-displacement: a surrender of noetic autonomy or what Westphal calls cognitive self-denial.

Dunning, in an essay in which he compares the analyses of the various Kierkegaardian pseudonyms with the hermeneutical inquiry of Hans Georg Gadamer, provides us with some of the vocabulary with which to describe how voluntary, self-contradictory suffering opens up new possibilities for the knower.<sup>53</sup> First, Dunning draws out an epistemological reading of the crucifixion (with reference to 1 Cor 1:22-24). He writes,

the obvious meaning of the cross is, of course, death. Theologically, Christ died to redeem the world from sin and thereby makes it possible for believer to ‘die’ to the to the sin in their own life. The epistemological death is to the need to know, the compulsion to understand God’s revelation... This is the crucifixion of knowledge... [it forces] the intellect to choose between its own claim to autonomy and sovereignty and that of God.<sup>54</sup>

Dunning attributes to Kierkegaard the notion (which we have seen expressed repeatedly by Anti-Climacus above) that the result of this dilemma is either offense or “a yielding

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<sup>53</sup> This, he argues, resonates well with Gadamer’s conception of the hermeneutical circle, “in which the interpreter forsakes individual autonomy, constancy, and certainty in order to be changed and empowered to discern a higher universal that unites new horizons with old ones.” Just as the intellect of Christ’s contemporary is run aground when it encounters this Absolute Paradox, so too is the interpreter’s claim to dominance over the text invalidated by the truth of the subject matter itself. Dunning, “Kierkegaard and Gadamer,” 139.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

that is tantamount to death.”<sup>55</sup> To whom does the self yield its claim to noetic autonomy? More, to the point, to whom does the self yield epistemological sovereignty? It yields it to the very source of the offense in the first place, the Absolute Paradox, that is, Christ.<sup>56</sup>

### *Shared Features of an Apocalyptic Epistemology*

A detour through John’s apocalyptic vision will help to clarify what has been discussed here. There is a decisive moment in the narrative that occurs just after John has entered the heavenly throne room for the first time. In the right hand of God is a scroll sealed seven times. It will be opened and this will mark the beginning of the (last) apocalypse; it will mean the culmination of the restorative process begun by the apocalypse of Christ. But someone first has to break the seals and open the scroll. “Who is worthy?” asks one of the angels. The scroll is a royal decree, a symbol and an embodiment of the will of the enthroned King that holds it. As one commentator has put it, the scroll represents “God’s intention to execute justice ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ It entails the setting right of all that is wrong in human history.”<sup>57</sup> John is desperate for the scroll to be opened and when no one immediately steps up to take it, he weeps bitterly.

Who is worthy? It is the slaughtered Lamb, Christ crucified. The Lamb – utterly grotesque in his appearance – takes the scroll and everyone in the throne room begins to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Another point of similarity between Kierkegaard and Gadamer that Dunning does not address is the relationship between (hermeneutical) distance and noetic autonomy that the category of ‘contemporaneity’ suggests. Gadamer himself made this connection between his project and Kierkegaard’s. He states in *Truth and Method* that contemporaneity “means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be.” He then goes on to argue that the proximity suggested by Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity (as opposed to the aesthetic “simultaneity”) short-circuits any attempt by the interpreter to impose meaning on (i.e. dominate) the text from a distance, that is, ‘objectively.’ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 127.

<sup>57</sup> Mangina, *Revelation*, 85.

praise him. It is a bizarre scene. The one with the power to disclose the divine will is a bloodied sacrifice, a symbol of suffering and death. Properly understood, though, there is no incongruity here. As Eller puts it, “the Lamb’s very defenselessness *is* his lion-like strength; his suffering death *is* his victory; his *modus operandi*... always is that of the Lamb, but the consequences, the result, always are a victory that belongs to the character of the Lion.”<sup>58</sup>

This pivotal scene vividly represents the inversion of epistemic values that is at the heart of apocalyptic. The implication is crystal clear: the power that comes with knowledge of the divine will is wielded by the weakest among us. There is indeed something powerful to be known, but coming to know it cannot be accomplished through coercion or through the force of reason. In Levinasian terms, it cannot be accomplished by the reasoned reduction of the other to the same.

Kierkegaard’s opponents and Paul’s opponents are certain that they are in an ideal epistemic position. Paul’s opponents believe that the turn of the ages means that they have been exempted from the need to suffer. They are always already in the right. There is no incongruity between their epistemic expectations and the divine truth they claim to possess. Likewise, Kierkegaard’s opponents think they have found a way to reconcile their own epistemic expectations with divine reality, only to be offended and turn away when they are face-to-face with that reality in the God-man.

In order to refute this “intellectual conceit,” both Paul and Kierkegaard take aim at the ethic that supports it. In both cases, the implication is that right knowing is a matter of

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 90; emphasis original.

right living. More to the point, for both writers, right knowing depends on correctly answering the apocalyptic question: “To whom does sovereignty belong?” A rationalism that expects all truth to conform to its expectations – whether this is manifest in evidentiary or speculative reasoning – claims sovereignty for the self. The movement of faith, which resists the temptation of offense and voluntarily suffers in imitation on account of the truth, willingly denies the self’s own noetic autonomy and relinquishes sovereignty to the divine. This is Kierkegaard’s epistemological vision in *Practice in Christianity*. No perspective could be more apocalyptic.

## CHAPTER THREE: POLITICS

In the previous two chapters, I have spoken of Kierkegaard's understandings of temporality and epistemology by drawing attention to the resonances between these and Paul's in order to locate in Kierkegaard's thought in *Practice in Christianity* an apocalyptic theological perspective analogous to that which contemporary biblical scholars, philosophers and theologians have identified in Paul's writings.

The subject of this final chapter is politics. And yet we are still very much within the realm of philosophy, for the questions that will be posed to Kierkegaard and Paul are theoretical in nature; they are prior to the foundation of this or that political order, prior to the forming of governments or the passing of laws. Among these is the question of what constitutes the best or the truest form of social existence. This is, indeed, one of the basic questions of all political thinking. Inevitably, however, another question must accompany it, namely, on what *authority* is such a sociality based? What truth does it refer to for its legitimacy? In all likelihood, it refers to an anthropological truth: this or that model for social existence is said to be preferred because it conforms to certain facts (biological, sociological, theological) about the nature of the human being.

My argument in this chapter is that Paul and Kierkegaard both articulate an *apocalyptic political theology*. Paul does so in Romans and Kierkegaard does so (partially, at least) in Book III of *Practice in Christianity*. I use the term 'political theology' as a way of referring to a particular way of answering the two questions suggested above. To say that Paul and Kierkegaard each articulate an *apocalyptic political theology* is just to say that their answers to these questions are grounded in a

prior declaration of God's ultimate sovereignty, over and against any and every counter-claim of sovereignty issued by the established order.

In what follows, I will spell out more clearly the meaning of 'political theology.' I derive a working definition of this term from a reading of the encounter between Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt. I then turn to Paul, as read by Taubes and, later, by John Howard Yoder, in order to locate both the 'vertical' and the horizontal' aspects of his apocalyptic political theology. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to Kierkegaard. By way of Book III of *Practice in Christianity* and related works, I argue that Kierkegaard also lays claim to an apocalyptic political theology, one that is conversant with Paul's in declaring the ultimate sovereignty of God, against the counter-claim of the established order.<sup>1</sup> I offer this reading as (yet another) counter to the 'anti-social' or conservative reading of Kierkegaard as well as a counter to the claim that he provided only *negative* answers to the fundamental philosophical questions of political life. Kierkegaard does have a vision for authentic political community, but it may only be approached by way of his apocalyptic.

*Politics and Political Theology: Schmitt, Taubes and Paul's letter to the Romans*

We begin by clarifying the term 'political theology.' It will then be possible to determine where within that discourse an *apocalyptic* political theology fits.

As Jan Assmann has argued, political theology is often understood in one of two ways: either 'vertically' or 'horizontally.' That is, it is either thought of as a theology of

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'established order' is Kierkegaard's. I use it, as he does, to refer to 'the world as it is,' the regnant discourse in politics, religion and culture, the means by which a normative reality is structured. It is analogous to a certain way of understanding Paul's use of the term *exousia* (see, for example, Col 6:15 and Eph 6:12). See Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, chap. 8.

power or a theology of community.<sup>2</sup> The first definition (‘vertical’) sees political theology as a kind of normative cratology, that is, as an explanation of how divine sovereignty is or is not embodied in worldly political powers. Here, political theology is a matter of how one coordinates two realms of power, the earthly and the divine. The second definition (‘horizontal’) sees political theology as a kind of normative sociology, that is, as providing a guide to how communities ought to be formed in order to conform to certain theological or metaphysical truths. In other words, political theology is a means of determining the unifying principle that best conforms to divine realities. As the editors of Taubes’ lectures on Paul surmise, “political theology... alternates between the horizontal-sociological and the vertical-cratological. Some of those who use this concept are thus referring to a theology of sovereignty [or power]; others to a theology of community.”<sup>3</sup>

Taubes effectively argues that Paul commits himself to a political theology in both the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’ sense in his letter to the Romans.<sup>4</sup>

Taubes’ reading of Paul also constitutes a kind of critique of Carl Schmitt’s way of thinking about political theology. Indeed, it would seem that Schmitt takes a position that is antithetical to the one that Taubes locates in Paul. It, too, can be described using Assmann’s terminology.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil*, 15-31. Referenced in Gold, “Apocalypse From Below,” 141. See also Hartwich, Assmann, and Assmann, “Afterword,” 138-42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>4</sup> However, because Paul’s is an *apocalyptic* political theology, his ‘vertical’ statements are, according to Taubes, absolutely negative. I will say more about this shortly.

<sup>5</sup> Taubes’ relationship to Schmitt is a complicated one. Schmitt’s extraordinary insight into the nature of law and politics along with his decision to join the Nazi party and establish himself as one of its leading intellectual supporters in the 1930s has made him a controversial figure in political philosophy, to see the

The political as such, Schmitt argues, can be reduced to the distinction made between friend and enemy.<sup>6</sup> When the political is so conceived, establishing community is ultimately the practice of defining and maintaining clear and absolute boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Only a truly political entity, he writes, is capable of being “the decisive entity for the friend-or-enemy grouping; and in this... it is sovereign.”<sup>7</sup> Determination of the basic friend-or-enemy distinction is up to the sovereign, the ultimate governing authority capable of enforcing this distinction. ‘Friends’ have a legitimate claim upon resources, while ‘enemies’ do not. The sovereign is that which enforces this distinction through the establishment of laws that determine how and to whom these resources are directed. Related to this is Schmitt’s conception of sovereignty as “he who decides upon the *exception*” to the law.<sup>8</sup> The truly sovereign is that which does more than merely legislate; rather, it alone decides when, how and for how long the normal rule of law may be suspended.<sup>9</sup> While Schmitt does not phrase it in this way, the determination of the friend-enemy distinction constitutes the ‘horizontal’ or sociological dimension of his political theology. The divine realities that are accounted for in this political theology are, quite simply, the ‘saved’ and ‘damned.’ The sovereign’s enemies are God’s enemies and vice versa. Schmitt’s is, therefore, a political theology that posits a *negative* unifying

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least. Taubes was one of Schmitt’s harshest post-war critics and yet he acknowledged in several statements toward the end of his life that he was intellectually indebted to Schmitt. For an English-language account of the Jacob Taubes-Carl Schmitt story by Assmann et. al., see Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 97-113. See also Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt*.

<sup>6</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5; emphasis mine.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

principle, one of enmity and suspicion. Political community is a matter of defining who is a friend and who is an enemy (of God and of the earthly sovereign).

Schmitt argues that, in order to maintain legitimacy, any earthly sovereign must be understood (even if not consciously) as divinely ordained. This is the ‘vertical’ dimension of political theology. Modern political theorists, for their part, argue for the sovereignty of the state with reference to the social contract and to the democratically determined will of the people (more on this below), that is, with reference to human reason. Schmitt calls this a kind of false consciousness, declaring that, with respect to their structure (and not merely to their historical development), these and “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>10</sup> That is to say, political philosophy, which attempts to ground the authority of the sovereign through the strict use of reason is, in fact, a kind of disguised political theology because it appeals to something beyond human doing in order to legitimate the rule of the state. Whether it acknowledges it or not, the earthly sovereign claims divine authority. To tie all of this together, we could say that, on a Schmittean account, political theology consists of a theological legitimation of a particular sociology (the friend-enemy distinction overlaps with saved-damned distinction) as well as a theological legitimation of a particular cratology (earthly sovereignty overlaps with divine sovereignty).

We now have a sense for what is meant by the term ‘political theology’ as well as a general understanding of how Schmitt understands it. Apocalyptic political theology – the kind that one finds in the letter to the Romans, according to Taubes, as well as in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 36.

Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* – fits within the framework just described: it has both a 'horizontal-sociological' and a 'vertical-cratalogical' dimension.

As to the 'vertical' dimension, apocalyptic political theology is a decidedly *negative* political theology. If the 'vertical' dimension is centrally concerned with how the sovereignty of God is to be represented or embodied on earth, then a negative political theology occupies a strictly 'theocratic' position: divine sovereignty simply *cannot* be represented by an earthly sovereign of any kind. God is absolutely sovereign and his rule renders every form of earthly rule ultimately illegitimate.<sup>11</sup> Why is an apocalyptic political theology also a negative political theology, cratalogically speaking? The answer is that apocalypticism proceeds according to the principle that God and the human being are separated by an infinite qualitative difference (to use Kierkegaard's terminology) and that this difference can only be overcome through divine action. As Taubes puts it, "the drawbridge comes from the other side."<sup>12</sup> There can be no question of mediating divine authority through political institutions; God's absolute transcendence makes this impossible.

Taubes argues that this negative/apocalyptic political theology is expressed in Paul's argument for the establishment and legitimation of a new people of God, which, Taubes argues, represents a theological *de*-legitimation of all worldly forms of political power.

An example of what Taubes is referring to can be found in chapter 10 where Paul states the following:

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<sup>11</sup> Hartwich, Assmann, and Assmann, "Afterword," 139.

<sup>12</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 76.

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:5-9)

Insofar as this new people is founded on faith *qua* the declaration of Christ’s sovereignty, worldly means of political legitimation (i.e. legitimation of the sovereign as arbiter of inclusion/exclusion with respect to the political body), which includes the law of Moses as well as Roman Imperial law, are invalidated.<sup>13</sup> According to Taubes, “Paul’s political theological intervention was not directed toward establishing a different political system or replacing a political regime through political revolution.”<sup>14</sup> That is to say that, rather than work towards overturning the present power – the earthly sovereign, manifested in its laws and legitimated through an appeal to divine sanction – by instituting a new rule of law that forcibly supersedes the old, Paul argues for the establishment of a political community made legitimate by its direct, unmediated faith-covenant with the Divine. With respect to its ‘vertical’ dimension, Paul’s political theology is an apocalyptic or negative one.

What of the ‘horizontal’ or sociological dimension? Taubes is adamant that, for Paul, these two claims to political legitimacy (law and faith) are strictly differentiated, in theory and in practice. That is to say that a negative political theology *qua* theocracy cannot express itself on earth by using the apparatus of worldly power (e.g. government

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>14</sup> Terpstra and de Wit, “Jacob Taubes’s Negative Political Theology,” 324.

or policing) because this apparatus just *is* the way that worldly power establishes itself as such.<sup>15</sup> To attempt to rule in this way is precisely to admit that the sovereign is *not* God, but God's earthly representative. Insofar as the political body is established not naturally but pneumatically (spiritually), its members are bound to one another not naturally (not according to the earthly laws, determined by an earthly sovereign) but pneumatically. As Taubes puts it in *Occidental Eschatology*, "in contrast to the old, organic allegiances, the Christian community is an inorganic, subsequent togetherness of individuals based on 'pneuma.'" <sup>16</sup> Thus, in Romans 12, Paul speaks of the people of God as "one body in Christ" (12:5). He then goes on to describe the forms that their relations with one another will take: devotion, service, patience and hospitality. "Sociologically," says Taubes, "this means: a new kind of union [or unifying principle], a new intimacy is created."<sup>17</sup> The fact of God's sovereignty – revealed by way of his apocalyptic action in Christ – does not and cannot legitimate earthly political orders but it can and does institute a new way of being together, a new kind of political community, one based on pneuma.<sup>18</sup> It is politics by way of an "alternative map."

Moving forward, we will now have working definitions of political theology and this will allow us to more accurately discern the distinctiveness and significance of an apocalyptic political theology. We remember that political theology has both a 'vertical' and a 'horizontal' dimension. The former has to do with the manner in which divine and

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<sup>15</sup> For a critical investigation into the inherent violence that attends the establishment of any 'rule of law.' See Benjamin, "Critique of Violence."

<sup>16</sup> Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Hartwich, Assmann, and Assmann, "Afterword," 142. This is the decisive difference between Taubes and Schmitt's political theologies, according to Assmann et. al. See also Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt*, 22; quoted in *Ibid.*

earthly sovereignty are coordinated, while the latter has to do with the means by which political community is determined. Paul's apocalyptic political theology in particular takes a negative stance with respect to the 'vertical,' arguing that now that God has disclosed or *apocalypsed* himself through Christ no earthly sovereign – Roman or otherwise – has ultimate authority. Paul's apocalyptic political theology, according to Taubes, also institutes a new way of determining political community, one based on pneuma rather than on the sovereign determination of friend vs. enemy, as would be the case for Schmitt.

This brings us to the principal task of this final chapter, which is to draw out the apocalyptic political theology implicit in Kierkegaard's reflections on the Church in Book III of *Practice in Christianity*. Just as for Paul – with whom comparisons will be drawn here as they have been in chapters one and two – there is both a 'vertical' and a 'horizontal' dimension to Kierkegaard's account. In what follows, I will attend first to Kierkegaard's critique of the politics of his time, which reveals the cratological aspect of his apocalyptic political theology. I will then move to a discussion of the positive, sociological account that is found in *Practice in Christianity*. Subsequent to that, I will return to Paul – this time by way of Yoder – in order to further elaborate on the sociological dimension. At that point, we will be in an ideal position to observe the correspondence between Paul and Kierkegaard vis-à-vis a shared theopolitical vision that is rooted in an apocalyptic substratum.

*Kierkegaard and Politics*

## Contemporary Scholarship

Around the mid-way point of the last century, there was near consensus among Kierkegaard's scholarly readers that his theo-philosophical project was, at best, irrelevant as a resource for serious political and social thought. The solitary Dane, it was deemed, was never really interested in these sorts of questions.<sup>19</sup> Worse yet, his perceived preoccupation with the private, interior life of the single individual made him susceptible to charges rather more serious than mere indifference: from bourgeois decadence<sup>20</sup> to proto-fascism.<sup>21</sup>

In the last two decades, there has been some attempt to correct this 'anti-social' reading of Kierkegaard through a more serious engagement with the second (Christian) authorship. The result has been a number of excellent studies and collections of essays from a variety of disciplinary perspectives that are highly attuned to the historical, social and political context of Kierkegaard's writing as well as to the political dimensions of his thought and the enormous potential that these bear for critical inquiry into the social existence of the human being.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This reading is well summarized by Louis Mackey who has claimed that Kierkegaard "means to say that the individual is really isolated from other beings, receiving from them neither support, insistence, opposition, nor allurements." Mackey, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," 279.

<sup>20</sup> See Adorno, *Kierkegaard*.

<sup>21</sup> See Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*.

<sup>22</sup> For a selection of such scholarship see Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*; Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*; Connell and Evans, *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*; Pattison and Shakespeare, *The Self in Society*; Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*; Bellinger, *The Genealogy of Violence*; Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus*; Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*; Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion, and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*; Walsh, *Living Christianly*; Simmons, *Kierkegaard and Levinas*.

All of this is to say that the battle to defend Kierkegaard's relevance for political thought has already been fought and, indeed, it has been won more often than lost in recent years. I do not intend, therefore, to take up that cause in the present chapter. On the contrary, in light of this abundance of scholarship I take it as a matter of course that Kierkegaard – especially in his second authorship – may be constructively read as a thinker with political significance. My contention is, instead, that these insights are rightly referred to as an apocalyptic political theology, of a piece with Paul's own in Romans.

#### The Politics of Modernity

The historical context of Kierkegaard's writings includes a watershed moment in European political history: the so-called Spring of Nations, which took place in 1848 and consisted of popular uprisings that gave way to the rapid ascension of a bourgeois liberalism in matters civic and economic as well as the transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy and representative democracy. Kierkegaard was quite critical of this movement and for this reason he is sometimes thought of as a politically conservative thinker. There is a case to be made, based on such considerations, for identifying Kierkegaard's *philosophical* opponent in these criticisms as modern political liberalism and its attendant conception of state sovereignty via procedural justice. I am sympathetic to this view. As should become clear, however, Kierkegaard's remarks do not constitute a censure *merely* of certain representative of liberalism such as Locke or Rousseau but of Schmitt too and, indeed, of any other political theorist one could name. Insofar as Kierkegaard's insights are rooted in an apocalyptic political theology they

discern authentic and inauthentic forms of political life apocalyptically, that is, according to its coherence with divinely revealed realities, with the way things *really* are. This is how we ought to understand the two objections that Kierkegaard raises against modern secular politics: that it (1) proceeds according to a false anthropology, which gives rise to (2) a malevolent and destructive sociality.

The modern liberal political imagination is rooted in a particular understanding of the human being. It is this anthropology that supplies the basic political unit: the individual. In particular, it is the individual motivated by certain ends and interests and interminably beleaguered by the ends and interests of others, which conflict with his or her own. Conflict arises because the resources required for the realization of all of these ends exceeds what is readily available. These include not just natural resources but things like technical skill and aptitude, which are also unevenly distributed. The result is theft, violence and the exploitation of one individual by another.

This conflict between individuals provides the impetus for the foundation of political community, according to John Locke. He writes in the *Letter Concerning Toleration* that it is “the pravity of mankind being such that they had rather injuriously prey upon the fruits of other men’s labours than take pain to provide for themselves” that leads individuals to enter into the so-called social contract.<sup>23</sup> Individuals surrender their individual wills to the collective will, which is determined democratically. The state is therefore the sovereign, acting to protect individual persons and their share of the

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<sup>23</sup> Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 47.

available resources (i.e. private property), as Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued.<sup>24</sup> In a liberal democracy, public deliberation, discussion and compromise determine the ends that the collective will pursues rather than any kind of commonly held conception of the good derived from philosophy or religion. As Carl Schmitt, one of the twentieth century's most (in)famous critics of liberalism puts it, the basic liberal principle is that "the truth can be found through an unrestrained clash of opinion and that competition will produce harmony."<sup>25</sup> The extent and precise terms of this restraint (or the extent to which it is absent) is fundamentally all that defines political community. What is decisive is a commitment to a particular procedure for negotiating a compromise of conflicting individual ends.<sup>26</sup> This is a political entity in the way that Schmitt conceives of the term (though one that he personally abhorred). The sovereign is the collective will of the people and its sovereignty manifests itself through procedural justice, which determines who is in (those who will submit their individual ends to the procedural process and allow for the possibility that these will be compromised) and who is not (those who refuse to submit in this way) as well as establishing the rule (and exception) of law.

Kierkegaard's indictment of the politics of his time (which he termed the Present Age) in a work from around the time in which *Practice in Christianity* was conceived – *Two Ages* – points to a number of features of the modern liberal paradigm just described. Particularly troubling for Kierkegaard is the fundamental cynicism that characterizes the political subjects' relationships to one another, a cynicism that is both presupposed and

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<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> There is perhaps no more consistent and articulate a proponent of this feature of modern political liberalism than John Rawls. See especially Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical."

perpetuated by the politics of the Present Age. The liberal-democratic view of society, as we have seen, is that it is composed, at the most fundamental level, of individuals at odds with one another, yet joined together through pragmatic, contractarian association. Despite the attention paid to the category of ‘the single individual’ in nearly all of Kierkegaard’s works, he is nevertheless deeply critical of an individualist anthropology of this sort.<sup>27</sup> As Graham Smith rightly notes, Kierkegaard is in agreement with someone like Locke insofar as they both suppose that “natural man is self-interested, rational and seeks to further his own worldly ends.” Where they part company, Smith continues, “is in reversing [what they see as] the conditions for natural man to emerge.”<sup>28</sup> As I have shown in chapter one of the present study, Kierkegaard posits a distinction between the self and the human being (“natural man”). Kierkegaard’s single individual is in the process of becoming a self, whereas liberalism neither requires nor encourages anything of the sort for the political subject. All that is required is unwavering commitment to the rule of the sovereign and to the ascendancy of the procedures of the social contract. The envy and suspicion that characterizes the relationship between ‘natural man’ and his other is not merely unchallenged but legitimated by the primeval story that Locke and Rousseau recount. Commenting upon this phenomenon, Kierkegaard discusses in a journal entry how

equality has now become a question discussed throughout Europe. Consequently every one of the old forms of tyranny will now be powerless (emperor, kin, nobility, clergy, even money-tyranny). But another form of tyranny is a corollary

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<sup>27</sup> Westphal offers a more detailed analysis of the differences between the kind of individualism that Kierkegaard has in mind and the kind that is on offer in the Present Age. See Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society*, 30-33.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, “Kierkegaard from the Point of View of the Political,” 47.

of equality – fear of men... Of all the tyrannies, it is the most dangerous, in part because it is not directly obvious and attention must be called to it.<sup>29</sup>

The sovereignty claimed by the collective will and its procedures guarantees the (formal) equality of every individual thereby protecting them from (formally) tyrannizing one another. But it does not put an end to the envy that Locke and others themselves seem to recognize as the fundamental social principle for ‘natural man.’ As Kierkegaard argues in *Two Ages*, in the Present Age, envy has become “the *negatively unifying principle*.”<sup>30</sup>

For Kierkegaard, the opposite of envy is admiration, a kind of generosity of spirit that acknowledges and appreciates the other as a spiritual being, an equal before God. But admiration of the other is only possible when there is passion and inwardness; in other words, when one is committed to the task of becoming a self. Each individual relates him or herself to that task absolutely. According to Kierkegaard, “when individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative.”<sup>31</sup> Only authentic selfhood – passionately pursued and “free of any misrelation” – can provide “the model for an individual’s understanding and relationship with others.”<sup>32</sup> Contrast this with the politics of the Present Age, where there is plenty of philosophical analysis and reflection but no passionate inwardness. Here, “another relation supervenes” and the self does not genuinely “relate” to the other but rather “stand[s], as it were, and carefully

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<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 4131.

<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 81; emphasis original.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, “Kierkegaard from the Point of View of the Political,” 47.

watch[es the other], *and this tension is actually the termination of the relation.*”<sup>33</sup> No longer related to the shared task of achieving selfhood, “persons are left simply with each other,” as Robert L. Perkins puts it.<sup>34</sup> “No one has anything for himself, and united they possess nothing, either: so they become troublesome and wrangle.”<sup>35</sup> These are the roots of envy, which becomes the negative unifying political principle of the Present Age.<sup>36</sup> The “leveling” force of the Crowd that Kierkegaard describes in *Two Ages* can be essentially attributed to the denial of a shared existential task of relating oneself to God. This is directly related to a political anthropology that defines the human being as an isolated individual primordially related to the other in a state of conflict and saved from such a state only by submitting herself to the will of the sovereign and to the rule of procedural law. This is a purely external relation between individuals who have resigned themselves from the task of selfhood.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, Kierkegaard rejects the idea that the fundamental political subject is the envious and isolated ‘natural man’ as well as any notion of political community *qua* commitment to the collective will of the sovereign and the rule of procedural law.

Merold Westphal has written: “Kierkegaard’s politics is more like Marx’s than Plato’s in its form... it emerges indirectly, though a critique of what he believes is the overriding sociopolitical defect of the theory and practice of his times rather than as a positive description of the institutions of the society he deems most rational.”<sup>38</sup> Westphal

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<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 78; emphasis original.

<sup>34</sup> Perkins, “Envy as Personal Phenomenon and as Politics,” 119.

<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-84.

<sup>37</sup> This is precisely how Anti-Climacus’ fictitious statesman relates to Christ. See *PC* 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society*, 33.

is correct but only to a point. That is, while there are some aspects of Kierkegaard's understanding of the nature of true political community that are best recognized by simply inverting the forms of community that he criticizes, there is a more robust account than this. However, it is obscured by a distinction between the religious and the secular-political realm that is itself argued for by representatives of the liberal paradigm that we have seen Kierkegaard criticizing. He no less rejects this distinction than he does the political theory that produces it. For Kierkegaard, the fundamental opposition is *not* between political community and the isolated, private faith of the individual but rather between *authentic and inauthentic political community*. Westphal's claim that Kierkegaard's politics only emerge from his criticisms of the politics of his day assumes too narrow a definition of the political. It assumes that because Kierkegaard did not articulate a positive 'secular' political philosophy to compete with the one that he was opposed to he therefore did not articulate a positive politics at all. We need not accept this interpretation. Instead, we can turn to Kierkegaard's writing in *Practice in Christianity* on how the Church ought to be constituted where he, indeed, offers up an account of authentic political community.

*The Church Militant: Practice in Christianity, Book III*

Book III of *Practice in Christianity* is composed of seven discourses and, in keeping with the pattern set by Books I and II, each of these discourses is a careful exegesis of another gospel passage: John 12:32 ("And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself"). Kierkegaard does not attempt to describe or reconstruct the context of these words of Jesus' for the reader, as he did in Book II. Nor is

there anything like a linear exegetical argument that proceeds and is developed from one discourse to the next. Rather, the discourses considered collectively reveal from various angles how this passage is meant to be read, such that, despite the diversity of subjects among them, “one and the same meaning” is disclosed in each.<sup>39</sup>

Presently, our concern will be just with what Anti-Climacus has to say about the constitution of the Church and its role vis-à-vis the predominant form(s) of social and political life of its surroundings in the fifth discourse.

In the last chapter, we saw how Kierkegaard sharply distinguishes between those who think they have grasped essential spiritual truth through the power of their own reasoning and those in whom truth resides as they seek to imitate the God-man. His aim, we saw, was to oppose authentic Christianity to the ersatz religion of Christendom. Now, in the discourses of Book III, we find greater attention paid to the social dimension of this opposition. In the fifth discourse, Kierkegaard introduces the “Church militant” and opposes this to the “Church triumphant” and to “established Christendom.” The first two terms have traditional meanings; only the third category is Kierkegaard’s creation. Traditionally, the Church militant has been taken to refer to the body of Christians still on the earth, as distinct, say, from those in heaven (the Church triumphant). If we take ‘body of Christians’ to refer only to authentic Christians (in the Anti-Climacean sense), then Kierkegaard’s rendering of these two terms assumes much of the traditional meaning.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the Church militant and the Church triumphant represent the two modes of being of

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<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 259. Hereafter referred to in the text as *PC*.

<sup>40</sup> Traditionally, there is a third term, the Church expectant, consisting of souls in purgatory. Kierkegaard makes no mention here of the Church expectant and did not subscribe to a doctrine of purgatory.

the same body, the temporal and the eternal. Anti-Climacus is relentless in his criticisms of another entity that is also called the Church triumphant but that refers to a false claimant to that title: the object of his opprobrium is not the *true* Church triumphant but an earthly imposter thereof.<sup>41</sup> There are therefore four visions of the Church at play in Kierkegaard's discussion:

The Church militant (earthly)  
 The Church triumphant (heavenly)  
 The Church 'triumphant' (earthly)  
 Established Christendom (earthly)

Kierkegaard has a normative vision for the Church and for its relationship with the world. In it, both the Church 'triumphant' and Established Christendom would cease to exist and the earthly Church would be restored to its true form, the Church militant, where it rightly functions as counterpoint to and witness for the heavenly Church triumphant.

Before we get to this normative vision, a detour through Anti-Climacus' critical history of the institutional Church is necessary in order to ascertain what distinguishes these four types.

To begin with, for Kierkegaard, the Church militant is modeled after the "original" Christianity of the pre-Constantinian *ekklesia* (PC 250). Its relationship to the world mirrors that of the early church. The two are incommensurate: "To be a Christian in the Church militant," says Anti-Climacus, "means to express being a Christian within an environment that is the opposite of being Christian" (212). "Christ's church," as is it

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<sup>41</sup> Insofar as it is an eternal, heavenly body, there is not much that can be positively said about the true Church triumphant. Indeed, for as much and as often as the earthly/temporal and the heavenly/eternal are opposed in Kierkegaard's writings, he spends very little time speculating about the latter. As Bruce Kirmmse aptly puts it, "SK devotes about as little attention to Heaven as Karl Marx does to the classless society." Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden-Age Denmark*, 390.

otherwise called, “can truly endure only by struggling – that is, by every moment battling to endure” (ibid.). Its demand of its members is that which Christ demands (as we saw in Book II): “Deny yourself – and then suffer because you deny yourself” (213). Where the Church is true to itself *qua* Church militant, one’s membership therein is “*inversely* recognizable” by the opposition that one endures because of one’s confession of faith (212). Thus, “to the degree that my being a Christian has more truth, to the same degree would this be recognizable by the greater opposition” (ibid.).

The rigorousness of the original struggling Church, says Anti-Climacus, made it impervious to demonic attack. “Satan himself accomplished nothing against it, except to give the heroes of faith the desired opportunity to be surrounded with the incorruptible radiance of martyrdom” (PC 229). Little by little, however, the Church fell victim to self-congratulation and to demonically induced delusions of grandeur. It had survived persecution and “now it should have a good rest after the battle and enjoy the victory” (230). Whereas during the time when the Church was struggling one thought twice about joining it, “after it had been victorious [i.e. after its members were no longer subject to persecution and ridicule] – well, then it won followers by the millions” (ibid.). Eventually (and Kierkegaard probably has in mind the Edict of Thessalonica as a point of historical reference) “all had become Christians” (ibid.). In this, the post-Constantinian era, the Church militant is transformed into the Church ‘triumphant’: “[the] church that assumes that the time of struggling is over, that the Church, although it is still in this world, has nothing more about or for which to struggle” (211). The relationship between the Church ‘triumphant’ and the established order is precisely the inverse of that of the Church

militant. To be a Christian in the Church ‘triumphant,’ says Anti-Climacus, “means to express being a Christian within an environment that is synonymous, homogenous with being Christian” (212). The Church and the world are completely commensurate. And, “as a necessary consequence (for the theater stage is indeed homogeneity) [being a Christian will be] *directly* recognizable by the favor, honor, and esteem I win in this world” (ibid.). Piety mirrors itself directly (and inoffensively, that is, quite reasonably) in status, power and comfort.

At this point, Kierkegaard’s argument becomes a bit more complicated. For while Anti-Climacus certainly heaps plenty of scorn upon the Church, he goes on to state that, as a matter of historical fact, it no longer exists. Instead, the Church ‘triumphant’ has given way to “established Christendom,” its distinctly modern successor. In the (Medieval) Church ‘triumphant’, the clergy represent the highest religious achievement; they are the truest Christians and are therefore (according to the logic of the Church ‘triumphant’) given highest honor and esteem. In modernity, however, where each individual is (formally) equal, a special clergy class is neither possible nor desirable. “But when this distinction of order vanished, the Church ‘triumphant’ also vanished. Because everyone was now supposed to play the game, direct recognizability (the degree of being the true Christian corresponds directly to the honor and esteem one enjoys) ran into a peculiar difficulty that made it impossible” (PC 214). The peculiar difficulty is that, while “the clergyman essentially had nothing else to do but to express what it means to be a Christian... the great number of Christians have something else – externally viewed the main thing – to take care of in the world” (ibid.). In other words, once it became possible

for any individual of any class or station to become a Christian in the highest sense, the possibility of accumulating wealth and praise simply for doing so disappeared. These individuals still had to perform their daily jobs (e.g. shoemaking) but “there was no way for religious excellence to mirror itself straightforwardly and directly in the lives and stations of the mass of people.”<sup>42</sup> Rather than return to the oppositional relationship with the world exhibited by the Church militant, the Church “gave up the externality and relegated being a Christian to inwardness” (215). The social situation in modernity – so the story goes – means that Christianity cannot express itself in the external world and therefore “the true Christian that I am is something by itself, something for myself, something I am in hidden inwardness – just like all the others” (216). But, why *hidden* inwardness? According to Anti-Climacus, even in established Christendom there must be some way to gauge one’s own spiritual progress vis-à-vis all the others. Ironically, in established Christendom the degree to which one *conceals* one’s faith is the measure of one’s seriousness as a Christian. “What an infinite depth of piety,” he adds with derision, “since the whole thing could so very easily be pretense!” (217). Thus, as M. Jamie Ferreira puts it, Anti-Climacus “criticizes the commensurability between the world and the church that established Christendom holds, as well as the kind of incommensurability it holds.”<sup>43</sup> Rather than suffer in opposition to the world, the Church ‘triumphant’ seeks and finds worldly praise, while established Christendom renders the public confession and imitation of Christ a matter of complete indifference vis-à-vis the world. When the Church is militant, church and world are opposed. When the Church is ‘triumphant,’

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ferreira, *Kierkegaard*, 183.

church and world are consonant. Today, when the where the Church is established Christendom, church and world are indifferent to one another because the former is hidden away. Thus, “the Church triumphant resembles the Church militant no more than the square resembles the circle, and ‘established Christendom’ resembles it just as little” (218). The Church militant, the Church of Christ and his contemporaries, represents the authentic earthly church. The Church ‘triumphant’ and established Christianity “are an illusion” (219).

In reviewing Kierkegaard’s argument for the Church’s proper relationship vis-à-vis the world or the established order, we have so far neglected one important question, namely, how does this constitute an explanation of the meaning of Christ’s words in John 12:32 (“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”)? Kierkegaard’s answer, when read against his critical history of the institutional church, finally discloses his vision for the Church and for its relationship to the world.

In order to properly understand his answer, two of Kierkegaard’s basic exegetical principles need to be clarified. First, he wants to emphasize that all of Christ’s words were spoken in abasement. This is precisely what makes of them a possibility of offense, as we saw in the last chapter. “What is extraordinary,” says Anti-Climacus, “is that the one who spoke them was the abased one, that it was the scorned, despised, mocked, spat-upon one who said: I, when I am lifted up, I will draw all to myself” (*PC* 163). Christ, the speaker, is not presently lifted up (i.e. he appears in lowliness) but once he has been lifted up, he promises to draw all to himself. Second, Kierkegaard interprets this promise to draw all to himself as a promise of victory and *rest*; it is a promise that the present

suffering will come to an end and that it will not have been in vain. Thus, the introductory prayer of the fifth discourse, in which Anti-Climacus articulates his vision for the Church on earth, begins as follows:

Lord Jesus Christ, it is indeed from on high that you draw a person to yourself, and it is to victory that you call him, but this of course means that you call him to struggle and promise him victory in the struggle to which you from on high call him, you the great victor. Just as you keep us from all other error, *keep us also from this, that we delude ourselves into thinking ourselves to be members of a Church already triumphant here in this world* (PC 201; emphasis mine).

On Kierkegaard's reading, Christ's words in John 12 are words of judgment against the Church that has given up struggling on behalf of the truth. This is the buried truth of this passage toward which the entire discourse points. Christ invites the faithful to imitate him, to live "in conformity to the prototype," to deny themselves and to suffer as a result. "But, he adds, sometime, at the end of time, I am coming again." "Therefore," Kierkegaard says, "this form of existence makes the Church's whole existence here upon earth into a parenthesis" (PC 202). The folly (and the danger) of both the Church 'triumphant' and established Christendom is that, through a combination of "human impatience and brazen impertinence," they mistake themselves for the victorious, eternal, heavenly Church triumphant, rather than its temporal, "parenthetical" counterpart (224).

### *The Martyrs*

Part of my thesis in this chapter has been that Kierkegaard's thinking about the Church in Book III of *Practice in Christianity* is revelatory of his positive account of authentic political community and thus of his apocalyptic political theology. The strength of that argument turns on the fact of the persecution of the Church and the absolute,

unwavering opposition to the established order that Kierkegaard argues it necessarily evinces. But it becomes necessary to ask: why are the Church and its members persecuted? The answer, according to Kierkegaard, is that “the established order wants to be a totality that recognizes nothing above itself but has every individual under it and judges every individual who subordinates himself to the established order” (PC 91). That is to say that it takes itself to be *divinely authoritative*. As such, it decides of what political subjectivity will consist of, it sets the terms for social existence. Thus, when the individual declares the ultimate sovereignty of God (vis-à-vis an absolute relation to God, that is, in the turning-toward him witnessed in chapter one) she simultaneously declares the sovereignty of the established order illegitimate. If the established order claims the last word on anthropology, then the individual who declares that she is established by God, “who disproves of or rebels against this divinity, the established order – ergo [she] must be rather close to imagining that [she] is God” (PC 87). The established order persecutes the Church militant on the charge of blasphemy! The Church ‘triumphant’ and established Christendom are not persecuted insofar as, according to Kierkegaard, they are complicit in the deification of the established order, in the worship of what is rather than in the witness to what shall come (the true Church triumphant).

Before saying anything more about Kierkegaard’s positive political theology, it is worth reviewing the negative dimension once more. We remember that, in the statesman’s monologue Kierkegaard argues that the vision for political life that established order politics takes for granted is a false one. At the bottom of it, this is because its understanding of the basic political subject is predicated upon an incomplete

understanding of the subject more generally. It is predicated, in other words, on an incomplete anthropology (which gives way to a envious and malevolent form of sociality), one that does not assume the creatureliness of the human being, that is, that she only truly becomes a self by and becoming contemporaneous with the God-man (nor does it assume that the political subject is truest to herself as a subject when she engages with her fellow political subjects as neighbor rather than as rival). This critique constitutes the negative dimension of Kierkegaard's apocalyptic political theology: it is precisely the apocalyptic event of the God-man's appearance that reveals the falsity of the politics of the Established Order. The Established Order imagines politics as a relation between political subjects that, in light of the truth revealed by the God-man's appearance, are shown to be incomplete selves ('natural men'). Thus, the sovereign has no claim upon the 'complete' or authentic self, that is, the authentic Christian in the situation of contemporaneity who recognizes God's ultimate sovereignty over her very existence.

The positive dimension of the apocalyptic political theology expressed in *Practice in Christianity* has been partially revealed by the normative vision for the Church that Kierkegaard develops therein.<sup>44</sup> The authentic political community that such a political theology would point to will proceed according to the logic of the Church militant, with the pre-Constantinian *ekklesia* as a concrete model. It will perpetually struggle. We know, as well, that the authentic earthly Church will, correspondingly, be made up of authentic Christians: those becoming selves before God who have accepted Christ's

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<sup>44</sup> It should be remembered that what we are seeing in *Practice in Christianity* in terms of an ecclesiology and a political theology underwent a number of significant changes, especially toward the end of Kierkegaard's life, as Bruce Kirmmse has shown. This is *a* Kierkegaardian vision for the Church rather than *the* Kierkegaardian vision for the Church. See Kirmmse, "The Thunderstorm."

invitation, refusing to be offended thereby and now suffer on behalf of the truth, facing ever-increasing persecution as they collide with a heterogeneous Established Order (*PC* 212). In other words, authentic political subjects will make up an authentic political community.

If Kierkegaard has the pre-Constantinian *ekklesia* in mind as a concrete model for political community, is there a corresponding concrete model for authentic political subjectivity? I would like to suggest, with reference to Kierkegaard's remarks in *Practice in Christianity* as well as to journals and other writings from this period, that the concrete model for authentic political subjectivity is the martyr.

In *Practice*, Kierkegaard writes, by way of Anti-Climacus:

I have never asserted that every Christian is a martyr, or that no one was a true Christian who did not become a martyr, even though I think that every true Christian should – and here I include myself – in order to be a true Christian, make a humble admission that he has been let off far more easily than true Christians in the strictest sense (*PC* 227).

In a journal entry from this period, he is even less sympathetic to those who manage to avoid martyrdom. He writes: “Everyone who does not become a martyr has in one way or another exempted himself by some knavish trick and is accountable to God for it.”<sup>45</sup>

By making the martyr the highest Christian ideal, Kierkegaard also makes the martyr a model for subjectivity. In chapter two, I argued that the truth of Christianity is lived rather than thought. For both the Paul and Kierkegaard, knowing well means living a life that acknowledges divine sovereignty, which necessitates a certain kind of suffering in order truly to die to oneself and to the world. I also suggested in chapter one that Kierkegaard's venture of faith, in which one accepts the invitation of the God-man at the

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<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, sec. 1901.

expense of all idols, entails a kind of anguish wherein one relinquishes one's claim on the future, opting instead to receive that future back as divine gift in the repeated establishment of the temporal self that relates itself to God. The martyr is therefore one who declares with absolute conviction the ultimate sovereignty of God by their to surrender their future, even to do as by accepting bodily death. The martyr is also one who *witnesses* to divine truth, thereby declaring the epistemological sovereignty of God in an act of noetic self-denial. In short, the martyr embodies true acceptance of the God-man's invitation. We have seen throughout the present study that Kierkegaard takes it as a matter of course that Christian living is the highest achievement of human subjectivity (authentic temporality is Christian temporality, the highest knowledge is Christian knowledge, etc.). Therefore, when Kierkegaard states that the martyr is the Christian in the strictest sense, he is, in effect, stating that the martyr is the model for human subjectivity in general. Every authentic Christian and every becoming self, as such, must then be a martyr in the making.<sup>46</sup>

In journals and other writings from this period, Kierkegaard takes this argument a step further, claiming that the martyr is not just the model for religious life but is, in fact, the model political subject as well. This is an easy step for him to take, since he has been arguing all along that the falsity of worldly politics is in its anthropology. It would seem

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<sup>46</sup> Importantly, for Kierkegaard, the martyr does not invite persecution; rather persecution is inevitable because their very existence is a threat to the ultimate sovereignty of the established order. He makes this point clearly in the following journal entry:

Therefore, the following ought to be noted. (1) One must never ask for suffering... (2) You must certainly ought to venture, for to venture (for truth etc.) is specifically Christian... you must not venture in order to get suffering, for this is presumptuously tempting God... No, but when it is a cause – even though you see that the suffering is, humanly speaking, unavoidable – go on venturing. *Ibid.*, sec. 4692.

Quoted in Imbrosciano, "Inevitable Martyrdom," 113.

to follow, according to such reasoning, that the model for human subjectivity is also the model for authentic political subjectivity.

Kierkegaard suggests as much in the introduction to an unpublished work (“A Cycle of Ethical-Religious Essays”):

At some time, when the purely convulsive seizure is over and the epoch of *political* ministries is past, blood will no doubt be demanded again, more blood, but blood of another kind... of martyrs, those mighty ones who are dead... it will become manifest that only martyrs are able to rule the world at the crucial moment.<sup>47</sup>

The rule of the martyrs differs from that of the “tyrant” or the statesman, however.

Whereas “the tyrant was the egoistic individual who inhumanly ruled over the masses, made the others into a mass and ruled over the mass,” the martyr “is the suffering single individual who in his love of mankind educates others in Christianity, converting the mass into single individuals,” as Kierkegaard states in a journal entry.<sup>48</sup> The statesman, too, seeks to rule over the masses, though he does so by way of procedural machinations rather than through the naked force of the tyrant. One of Kierkegaard’s criticisms of worldly politics, we remember, is that it does not assume that political subjects ought to treat each other as anything other than rivals. The martyr embodies the inverse: she rules by serving and by acting as midwife for religious truth and existential movement in those around her. She witnesses to the true sovereign and points her neighbor thereto. The martyr’s rule, in other words, is manifested in the self-giving love of neighbor. As Kierkegaard states in another journal entry,

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<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 214; emphasis original.

<sup>48</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, sec. 2649.

One must actually have suffered a great deal in the world and have been made very unhappy before there can even be any question of beginning to love the neighbor. The *neighbor* does not come into existence until in self-denial one has died to earthly happiness and joys and comforts... Anyone who clings to earthly life does not love his neighbor – that is, for him the neighbor does not exist.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the martyr as the Christian in the strictest sense is the ideal model of the self-denial necessary for the achievement of genuine love of neighbor. In a sense though, the martyrs are merely further along on a path that every Christian is already walking. As such, they are in a position to rule, not by demanding allegiance but by way of their persuasive testimony, which acts as a midwife for spiritual truth for those around them. As Kierkegaard puts it, “the martyr’s superiority consists in his laying down his life. He conquers as the dead man who returns.”<sup>50</sup>

Michele Nicoletti summarizes Kierkegaard’s position succinctly: “the real government of reality is the one that respects the internal structure of reality.”<sup>51</sup> He argues that, for Kierkegaard, the martyrs “are not those who are defeated by history but those who express authentic sovereignty over history – by refusing every form of absolutization of the political, they restore the world to itself.”<sup>52</sup> The martyrs refuse the established order its claim to dictate the terms of the human being’s social existence, its political sovereignty. The martyrs instead lay claim to an ethic that is coordinated according to an “alternative map,” one that portrays the world as it *really* is, that is, subject to divine sovereignty.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., sec. 4603; emphasis original.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Nicoletti, “Secularization and the Martyr,” 192.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

*A Shared Apocalyptic Vision of Authentic Political Community*

I will close this chapter by arranging these observations on Kierkegaard's writing on politics and the Church into a more concise account of the positive dimension of his apocalyptic political theology.

Authentic political community, for Kierkegaard, is consummated only in the Church militant, a truly apocalyptic *ekklesia* that resonates with a Pauline apocalyptic political theology and is informed by Kierkegaard's own apocalyptic worldview, as discussed in the first and second chapters of the present study. In what follows, I will present what I take to be the two central features of Kierkegaard's vision and compare them with the Pauline account, as interpreted by Taubes as well as by John Howard Yoder.

Militancy and the Authority of the State

Kierkegaard's vision for authentic community is to be found in the only socio-political body about which he had anything positive to say: the Church militant. As we saw, the distinguishing feature of the Church militant is a rigorousness that necessarily puts it at odds with the Established Order. Thus, a certain kind of opposition to this order is one of the marks of its authenticity.

How conversant is Kierkegaard's concept of the Church militant with Paul's messianic *ekklesia* with respect to the relationship between the Church and the established order? Does Paul preach militancy in the same way that Kierkegaard does? A concise statement of Paul's thinking on this matter in Romans is to be found in chapter 13. There, he writes,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment (Rom 13:1-2).

On the face of it, these verses appear to represent the kind of political theology that coordinates worldly sovereignty (the sovereignty of the established order) with divine sovereignty (in other words, a non-apocalyptic political theology). Certainly, there is a way to read these and the following verses that suggests such a position. Yoder gives a terse summary of this reading:

It seems to be said here quite unambiguously that civil government [read: the established order] is established by God and that Christians are therefore to obey their respective rulers, not only because they fear that state's sanctions but because they conscientiously support its function of repressing evil and encouraging good.<sup>53</sup>

But there is another way to interpret Paul's language in Romans that properly treats him as an apocalyptic thinker (rather than as a political conservative) and, at the same time, draws out the similarities between his and Kierkegaard's accounts. This is the tack that both Yoder and Taubes follow, though in slightly different ways. For Taubes, Paul's acquiescence in Romans 13 is simply a matter of survival; it is a pragmatic strategy adopted for a political community whose representative (Paul) recognizes both that its very existence threatens Roman authority and that – in light of an immanent *parousia* – it is better, for the time being, not to stand out.<sup>54</sup> Yoder, contra Taubes, denies that Romans 13 constitutes a pragmatic strategy of survival and reminds us that Paul's use of the term

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<sup>53</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 193.

<sup>54</sup> "This means: under this time pressure, if tomorrow the whole palaver, the entire swindle were going to be over – in that case there's no point in any revolution! That's absolutely right, I would give the same advice. Demonstrate obedience to state authority, pay taxes, don't do anything bad, don't get involved in conflicts, because otherwise it'll get confused with some revolutionary movement." Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 54.

*exousia* (power or authority) needs to be understood in light of its other uses (in the Pauline literature and, indeed, in the New Testament as a whole). The powers that Paul speaks of in Romans 13 are to be understood as fundamentally indistinguishable from, for example, the powers that Paul describes in apocalyptic terms in his letter to the Ephesians.<sup>55</sup> There he states that the struggle of the Christian community “is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present age.”<sup>56</sup> Yoder argues that Romans 13 is also not fundamentally at odds with Revelation 13, in which John depicts the state in monstrous terms. “Neither text calls for active moral support or religious approval of the state; both texts call for subordination to whatever powers there be.”<sup>57</sup> For Yoder, there is a clear distinction to be made between subordination and obedience. Obedience entails moral support, while subordination entails suffering and serving love. Romans 13:1-7, calls for the latter and not the former.<sup>58</sup> This is because God’s apocalyptic action in Christ has secured victory over the powers, to which the Church is called to bear witness through imitation of Christ’s example.<sup>59</sup> Paul’s views on the relationship between the *ekklesia* and the established order ought to be read in their apocalyptic context. We can either opt for Taubes’ *Interimsethik* or for Yoder’s apocalyptic ethic of subordination.

In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, I argued that Paul’s vision for a messianic community constitutes a usurpation of the claim of the established order to

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<sup>55</sup> See Yoder’s chapter “Christ and Power” for a fuller treatment of the “powers language.” Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 134-61.

<sup>56</sup> Eph 6:12

<sup>57</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 201.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

authentic political community. I have argued that Kierkegaard's Church militant functions in a similarly subversive manner. But Kierkegaard also claims that the Church militant *eo ipso* will find itself at odds with the established order; indeed, necessarily so. This is precisely what it means to be militant: to struggle on behalf of the truth in an environment in which falsity is taken for granted. Kierkegaard's opinion is in complete agreement with Paul's apropos the messianic community.

#### Martyrdom and Revolutionary Subordination

The Church militant is an affront to the sovereignty of earthly powers and, as a result, those powers will persecute its members. As Connell and Evans put it, "the one thing self-absolutizing human projects and institutions cannot endure is the presence of one who existentially manifests the ultimacy of God."<sup>60</sup> Such a manifestation is no better evidenced, for Kierkegaard, than in the life of the martyr. That is to say, the martyr is the one whose life is a transparent existential reflection of God's sovereignty and his apocalyptic action, in her own life and in human history by way of the God-man. In the Church militant, the martyr is the political subject *par excellence* insofar as the witness to the truth and the self-denial seeking love of neighbor around which the entire community is formed is the most transparent.

In the established order, political subjects seek their own ends and relate themselves to one another through the unifying principle of envy and suspicion. At a more concrete level, this means that ordinary social roles are performed as a means to those some ends, be they security, prosperity or comfort. To the contrary, Kierkegaard

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<sup>60</sup> Connell and Evans, "Introduction," xvii.

describes that martyrs as those who die to the world in order to see it restored to itself.

The martyr does not retreat from social roles but performs them in light of the divine truth made known to them *kata sarka*.

Therefore the martyr is also a kind of hero for ethical action vis-à-vis the established order. Kierkegaard, admittedly, does not provide us with very many specifics on how authentic Christianity expresses itself at an ethical level in *Practice in Christianity*.<sup>61</sup> One thing is made abundantly clear and that is that unconditional, sacrificial love as revealed by the God-man is the governing principle:

O love – thus to set no stipulation whatever of price upon oneself, completely to forget oneself, so that one is some who helps, completely blind to who it is that one is helping, seeing with infinite clarity that, whoever that person may be, he is a sufferer (*PC* 13).

The martyr as witness to the truth, embodies as perfectly as is humanly possible the ethic of self-denial. It is an apocalyptic ethics insofar as it is impossible without the apocalyptic action of God in Christ. As Philip G. Ziegler puts it, “God’s advent in Christ utterly disrupts and displaces previous patterns of thought and action and gives rise to new ones that better comport with the reality of a world actively reconciled to God.”<sup>62</sup>

What does this action look like for Paul? Taubes reads Paul as going to rather great lengths to convince his audience that the foundation of the messianic community is not exclusionary; it is not defined, as Schmitt would have it, by declaring the Jews or the Romans to be its enemies.<sup>63</sup> Rather, it is a community founded upon the “absolutely

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<sup>61</sup> For this we would turn to *Works of Love*.

<sup>62</sup> Ziegler, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 580.

<sup>63</sup> Hartwich, Assmann, and Assmann, “Afterword,” 129.

revolutionary act” of love toward one’s neighbor as well as one’s enemy, as Paul declares in Romans 12:14<sup>64</sup>

Romans also prescribes the same kind of “revolutionary subordination” that Yoder, for his part, elsewhere identifies in the verses that make up the household codes.<sup>65</sup> Revolutionary subordination is the posture taken by both those to whom power is granted by a particular social role (e.g. masters) and by those to whom subordination has been prescribed. Thus, when Paul instructs the Ephesians to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” he speaks to *both* the superordinate *and* the subordinate. They are to willfully and meaningfully assume their roles but in so doing they actually “[transform] the concept of living within a role by finding how in each role the servanthood of Christ, the voluntary subordination of one who knows that another regime is normative, could be made concrete.”<sup>66</sup> Subordination or subjection so conceived is apocalyptic insofar as it is totally inconceivable if the truth of God’s ultimate sovereignty over and against any and every established order and social arrangement is not assumed. It constitutes, as Yoder puts it, a “freedom from the need to smash [the established order and its concomitant social roles] since they are about to crumble anyway.”<sup>67</sup>

This is what Paul is suggesting in Romans 12:14. Just as the husband transforms the role of husband, witnessing to “another regime” (i.e. God’s ultimate sovereignty) by imitating Christ through self-denial in relation to his wife, so too do the members of the

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<sup>64</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 53.

<sup>65</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 210. The household codes are passages within the New Testament that contain instructions or ‘codes of conduct’ for how Christians ought to perform familiar social roles (e.g. husband/wife, parent/child, master/slave). Scholars identify four such passages: Col 3:18-4:1, Eph 5:21-6:9, Titus 2:1-10 and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

messianic community transform the roles of friend and enemy by denying themselves and subordinating themselves to those enemies through nonresistance, as Christ did. In both cases, what appears to be a completely irrational invitation of one's own self-destruction actually makes perfect sense, if the ultimate sovereignty of God at the (eventual) expense of the sovereignty of the Established Order is assumed.

This is precisely how Kierkegaard's martyr conducts herself. She manifests existentially – that is, in her embodied, day-to-day living – an uncompromising commitment to the truth, to the sovereignty of God. As a result, she enacts revolutionary subordination with respect to the established order by blessing those who persecute her, even to the point of death. Kierkegaard echoes the 'transvaluation of values' evinced by a revolutionary subordination by arguing that the martyr not only witnesses but *rules* in so doing: "The martyr's superiority consists in his laying down his life. He conquers as the dead man who returns." Thus, the Church militant, while opposed to the established order, at the level of individuals, manifests an apocalyptic transformation of this opposition through sacrificial love of the enemy.

## CONCLUSION

We recall that the third of the apocalyptic motifs to which Sturm directs our attention is the *embattled* sovereignty of God over time and the cosmos. If, in our treatment of Paul's letter and Kierkegaard's text, we take 'embattled' to refer to the confrontation between God's claim to ultimate sovereignty and competing worldly claims, then it would seem that this is a motif that they both address.

We have just seen that, for Kierkegaard, the Church, when it is true to itself *qua* Church militant, declares the ultimate sovereignty of God over the cosmos, yet it suffers for this truth as did its founder and as did the members of the Pre-Constantinian *ekklesia* that it takes as its model. The esteemed members of the Church militant are the authentic Christians in the strictest sense: the martyrs. The martyrs refuse to be defined as anything but witnesses to Christ's sovereignty – they are becoming selves, turned-toward God. In the established order, the human being *qua* political subject is little more than a collection of ends, pursued over and against the ends of others in envy and suspicion. The martyr, through self-denial and the demonstration of neighbor love refuses to be merely a "natural man" in this way; she evinces a higher sociality, a sociality dependant upon God's act of reconciliation with the world, thereby making the claim that she is more than a human being so defined. For this she is persecuted by an established order that is scandalized by such a claim. Thus, Kierkegaard points to the motif of the embattled sovereignty of God over time and the cosmos.

This is Kierkegaard's apocalyptic political theology in *Practice in Christianity*. In its 'vertical' form, it renders mute the claims of legitimacy made by the political

discourses of the established order (“only the martyrs are able to rule”), in its ‘horizontal’ form it defines community according to the practices of the Church militant: the martyrs are the ideal subjects, therefore political community is ideally defined by the relations between martyrs.

For Paul, the *apokalypsis Theou* of Christ means that the pneumatic, messianic community thereby made possible has overcome the old forms of political community. No longer does the worldly sovereign’s distinction between friend and enemy determine human social existence (à la Schmitt). In fact, as Yoder points out, part of Paul’s argument in Romans and elsewhere is that the traditional social roles are transformed into sites in which the kind of self-giving love practiced by Kierkegaard’s martyrs might take place.

Much more remains to be said by way of the specifics of this ‘apocalyptic ethics’ and the manner in which Kierkegaard, in texts such as *Works of Love*, finds himself in further agreement with Paul. That will have to remain the task of another study.

Along with attending to Kierkegaard and Paul’s shared apocalyptic vision for authentic political community, I have also treated the subjects of temporality and epistemology in this thesis. As to the former, I argued that the manner in which the self in contemporaneity with the event of God’s incarnation in Christ receives authentic time (as a self relating itself to itself before God, according to Kierkegaard’s existential account of the ‘self-system’) was conversant with Heidegger’s reading of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in which he argues that Paul’s discussion of the imminent *parousia* evinces an account of temporality as life lived in the anguished facticity of serving and waiting upon God. For

Kierkegaard and for Heidegger's Paul, the Christian life is shot-through with uncertainty. This led us to a discussion of apocalyptic epistemology. The movement of faith, according to Kierkegaard in Book II of *Practice in Christianity*, is threatened by offense at the paradox of the God-man. The source of the offense is human intellectual conceit that supposes that it can come to genuine knowledge of the God-man on its own. Speculative reason and historical inquiry, in Kierkegaard's time, exhibit this conceit. Instead, Kierkegaard argues for noetic self-denial when faced with the Absolute Paradox. What is required is a willingness to suffer, to admit the absurdity that the same God-man that transcends human understands also demands imitation. Entering into this way of life – being the truth in this way – is, for Kierkegaard, inseparable from coming to know. Likewise, Paul admonishes the Enthusiasts for their self-assurance. As J. Louis Martyn and like-minded scholars have argued, Paul sees the apocalypse of Christ as having ushered in a new age and with it a corresponding new way of knowing. But, Paul argued, that we live at the juncture of these two ages and so certainty is not a guarantee: no one is exempted from the need to suffer on behalf of the truth. The apocalypse of Christ represents an inversion of epistemic values: the power that comes with knowledge of the divine will is wielded by the weakest among us. There is indeed something powerful to be known, but coming to know it cannot be accomplished through coercion or through the force of reason.

At the heart of all of this is the matter of lordship. The life, death, resurrection and promised return of Christ is *the* apocalypse – the singular act of God in which the chasm separating creature and creator is bridged and the final purpose for human existence and,

indeed, the entire cosmos is unveiled, in which is revealed “an alternative map of the world.” The apocalypse of Christ is an answer to a question, indeed, to the fundamental question of apocalyptic, as Ernst Käsemann has argued: “To whom does the sovereignty of the world belong?” The answer, for the apocalypticist, is Christ, the God-man, who was crucified, resurrected and who will return at the end of the ages to consummate his lordship in full. My argument here has been that when Paul addresses certain apocalyptic motifs (the *parousia* or the two ages, or the competition that God’s sovereignty faces from worldly powers) they ought to be interpreted as the means by which he points to the apocalypse of Christ in order to answer this fundamental question of sovereignty.

I have shown throughout this thesis where and how Paul has been regarded as an apocalyptic thinker, with reference to what has been called the *substratum* of his thought: the apocalyptic declaration of the God-man’s ultimate sovereignty over the world. By way of a comparison of their answers to certain philosophical questions on the subjects of time, epistemology and politics, this thesis has shown that Kierkegaard – even though he does not speak to all of the same apocalyptic motifs that Paul does – is also rightly regarded as an apocalyptic thinker in *Practice in Christianity* insofar as he too is fundamentally concerned with witnessing to the ultimate sovereignty of the God-man. So regarded, we may attribute to the various insights of Kierkegaard’s theo-philosophical project in that text an analogous apocalyptic substratum.

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