

**THE DIFFERENCE THE INCARNATION MAKES:
The changing nature of *faith* and *offence*
in the pseudonyms of Søren Kierkegaard**

Stephen Backhouse, DPhil (Oxon)

**Director of Tent Theology and Senior Lecturer in Political Theology
Westminster Theological Centre**

stephen.backhouse@icloud.com

Abstract: *Incarnational theologians are right to pay close attention to Kierkegaard when attempting to articulate authentic faith. However, not every book in the Kierkegaardian canon speaks with the same voice. Faith develops throughout Kierkegaard's works in relation to the changing nature of what constitutes an offence, an idea that itself changes from pseudonym to pseudonym. The changes are linked to the self-professed Christianity of the purported author of the text. As the pseudonymous characters become more Christian they notably begin to have a sharper focus on Jesus Christ, the essential nature of the offence, and thus faith occasioned by the Incarnation. This essay provides a close reading of three of Kierkegaard's most important pseudonyms: the non-Christian Johannes de Silentio, the almost-Christian Johannes Climacus and the super-Christian Anti-Climacus. For Johannes de Silentio, having a faith existence means existing as an individual above the universal. Civic morality, the code of ethics that applies to all and is understood by all, is purposefully suspended by God for each individual that relates to him. Thus, Johannes de Silentio sees the offence as that which goes against the laws of society, and as a result of faith. Johannes Climacus reverses the relationship, introducing a greater offence that itself causes the lesser offences found in civil life. This essential offence stands as the gateway to faith, it is not a result of faith. Climacus sees the essential offence as the Absolute Paradox's assault on human reason: the intellectual problem of the God-Man overshadows any lesser problem. Climacus is not overly concerned with the actual life of the God-Man, and*

he takes pains not to clothe the story of the Incarnation in any Christian trappings. Climacus, following Socrates, identifies "sin" with ignorance. Only if reason cedes the throne to the Paradox at this time can there be a happy relationship, a situation that Climacus identifies as "faith" and its opposite as "offence." By contrast, Anti-Climacus hardly ever alludes to the offence against reason. He sees the offence as a matter of obedience to Jesus Christ, not assent to a paradox (Climacus) or an affront to civic morality (de Silentio). In stark contrast to de Silentio and Climacus, in the works ascribed to Anti-Climacus specific details pertaining to the person of Jesus Christ come to the fore. Anti-Climacus describes Christ as the "sign of contradiction" that gives rise to the two forms of "essential offence." These two forms are the ethical aversion faced when this lowly man claims to be God, and when God claims to be this lowly man. Only the one who is contemporaneous with the Incarnation will face the possibility of offence. Only by facing the offence can authentic faith result.

Introduction

Incarnational theologians are right to pay close attention to Kierkegaard when attempting to articulate authentic faith. However, not every book in the Kierkegaardian canon speaks with the same voice. *Faith* develops throughout Kierkegaard's works in relation to the changing nature of what constitutes an *offence*, an idea that itself changes from pseudonym to pseudonym. This is not merely an indication of Kierkegaard's development as an author, but is a deliberate part of his scheme to use the different pseudonyms to represent the varieties of faith available to citizens of Christendom. The changes are linked to the self-professed Christianity of the purported author of the text. As the characters become more Christian they notably begin to have a sharper focus on Jesus Christ, the essential nature of the offence, and thus faith occasioned by the Incarnation. By way of demonstrating the changing nature of faith and offence in light of the Incarnation, this essay will provide a close reading of three of Kierkegaard's most important pseudonyms: the non-Christian Johannes de Silentio, the almost-Christian Johannes Climacus and the super-Christian Anti-Climacus.

In *Fear and Trembling (FT)* Johannes de Silentio only dimly apprehends the true locus of faith and offence. De Silentio couches “offence” in terms of the affront to civic morality that arises when an individual is set against the universal.¹ This is De Silentio’s “teleological suspension of the ethical,” and it is this faith demand that God presents to each individual that he finds so offensive.² Offence in *Fear and Trembling* serves the useful purpose of preventing a facile approach to faith. In keeping with De Silentio’s purpose to understand (and possibly even acquire) faith,³ he is concerned when people assume that they can easily “go beyond” faith.⁴ Only when people are “horrified” by Abraham will they truly understand what is involved in, and required by, faith.⁵ Yet de Silentio is not himself a man who has faith,⁶ and as a result, his opinions about what is offensive are not much more informed than anyone else in Christendom.⁷

Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments (PF)* comes closer to the essential offence by appreciating the importance of inward appropriation of offence, and recognising that offence is inextricably bound up with individual’s response to the God-Man.⁸ However, Climacus intellectualises the offence, locating it in the sphere of reason and understanding. He describes the God-Man as the Absolute Paradox who is actively opposed to reason, seeking its downfall.⁹ It is in the moment when the reason “collides” with the paradox that Climacus finds the

¹ *Fear and Trembling* (attributed to Johannes de Silentio, 1843), trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 52-53, 55-56, 60-61, 66.

² *FT*, 54-67, esp. 59-60.

³ *FT*, 47-48. See also *FT*, 33, 51.

⁴ *FT*, 121-22.

⁵ *FT*, 52-53.

⁶ *FT*, 48.

⁷ *FT*, 55.

⁸ *Philosophical Fragments* (attributed to Johannes Climacus, 1844), trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna, H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37, 39, 47, 49-54.

⁹ *PF*, 47.

offence.¹⁰ Climacus calls this collision the “unhappy understanding,” because the reason refuses to bow to the Paradox.¹¹ He sees that this refusal is bound up with human sin, and he describes sin as ignorance.¹²

Viewed from Anti-Climacus’ higher vantage point, it emerges that both Climacus and Johannes de Silentio have been concerned with lesser offences.¹³ Anti-Climacus speaks of the continual *possibility* of offence,¹⁴ emphasising that the essential offence is not a singular epistemological event, or a unique broach of public mores. Instead, the offence has to do with the constant struggle of man’s will to obey God or not to obey God. Sin is properly understood as disobedience, a matter of the will and not of the understanding.¹⁵ The God-Man presents man not with a problem to solve, but a command to obey. The location of the offence is thus shifted, and it is not defined in relation to the intellect, but instead to the ethical existence of the individual. *Sickness unto Death (SUD)* emphasises that the possibility of offence is always before man, because all of man’s decisions are made before God.¹⁶ Linking the essential offence to sin, and sin to the will, is the most significant development in *SUD* and it leads to Anti-Climacus’ treatment of the offence in *Practice in Christianity (PC)*.

In that book, the continual possibility of offence before God is kept alive through the idea of *contemporaneity*.¹⁷ Significantly, here the language of an

¹⁰ *PF*, 39, see also 37, 47, 49, 50, 53.

¹¹ *PF*, 49. See also 39, 44-45, 46.

¹² *PF*, 50.

¹³ For Anti-Climacus’ judgement on the “Johannes de Silentio” type, see: *The Sickness unto Death* (attributed to Anti-Climacus, 1849), trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna, H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 83, 89, 94 and *Practice in Christianity* (attributed to Anti-Climacus, 1850), trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna, H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 111; On the type of thought Climacus represents: *SUD*, 83, 95, 130-31 and *PC*, 106, 136.

¹⁴ On offence as *possibility*: *SUD*, 83-87, *PC* 139-44.

¹⁵ *SUD*, 87-96.

¹⁶ *SUD*, 85-87.

¹⁷ *PC*, 62-66, 99-108, 144.

unknown being, Paradox and the God-Man is left behind and specific details pertaining to the person of Jesus Christ come to the fore. The reader is not invited to stand before some paradoxical idea of what it is for the finite to co-inhere with the finite. The reader is faced with the man who says, "come unto me and I will give you rest." For anyone standing contemporaneously with Jesus Christ, his demand for obedience will always be keenly felt. Anti-Climacus describes Christ as the "sign of contradiction"¹⁸ that gives rise to the two forms of "essential offence."¹⁹ These two forms are the ethical aversion faced when *this* lowly man claims to be God, and when *God* claims to be this lowly man.²⁰ Only the one who is contemporaneous with Christ will face the possibility of offence. Only by facing the offence can authentic faith result.²¹

Johannes de Silentio, Offence, and Social Morality

It is with Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonym that straddles the aesthetic and the religious stages,²² that offence begins to take on shades of positive importance. Here, it moves from the generalised offence of common parlance, to *the* offence particularly situated in matters of faith. Although the actual word does not come up very much in the text (de Silentio uses the Greek σχάνδαλον),²³ the paradox of faith can be seen to be offensive in that it is "appalling", "shocking" and "horrifying."²⁴ Thus, in common with the later pseudonyms, De Silentio recognises

¹⁸ *PC*, 124-28, 132, 134-36, 141.

¹⁹ *PC*, 121.

²⁰ In *PC* Anti-Climacus calls the first an offence of "loftiness," 94-101; the second is the offence of "lowliness," 102 -121.

²¹ *PC*, 94, 101, 106, 136.

²² See Climacus' assessment in the "Glance at Danish Literature," in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (attributed to Johannes Climacus, 1846), trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna, H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 259-62; and also Kierkegaard's view in *Point of View* (non-pseudonymous 1848/59), trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna, H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 37.

²³ In his translator's introduction, Howard Hong notes that of the key phrases in Johannes de Silentio's lexicon, "offence" occurs least often. *Fear and Trembling*, p.xxxi.

²⁴ *FT*, 19, 30, 52.

that offence is a necessary component related to faith. However, unlike Climacus and Anti-Climacus, for whom offence provides the opportunity for individuals to come to faith, de Silentio's offence occurs only *after* faith has taken hold in the individual. Along with his society, de Silentio remains offended at what a person is led to do once he has faith. Thus, for de Silentio, offence is not a necessary prerequisite of faith. We find that for de Silentio the locus of offence lies in the demand that God makes upon an individual as a test of faith. That demand is constituted by the "teleological suspension of the ethical."²⁵ In other words, it is only when ethics, which de Silentio identifies as "social morality," is suspended and an individual is set against the universal that offence arises.²⁶ It is significant to note here that de Silentio does not differentiate himself from his society on this point. The offence of *Fear and Trembling* is an affront to the public and its code of ethics. Johannes de Silentio's repulsion is Christendom's repulsion.²⁷

Johannes de Silentio's main goal in *Fear and Trembling* is to understand faith, and possibly even to acquire it for himself.²⁸ To that end, he is concerned with gaining a proper sense of what faith is, and what it is not, so that he and others in his society might properly recognise it when (or if) they ever find it. Offence serves his purpose in that it acts as an indication of the presence of authentic faith. Where the offence of the individual over the universal is, there faith will be also.²⁹ One of the biggest problems that he notices about his society is that by assuming everyone should "go beyond" faith, they have reduced its true value.³⁰ To protect faith then, he needs to keep a keen sense of what faith is in the mind of his readers. For de Silentio, it is the offence that accompanies faith that stops faith from becoming a mundane commodity. Abraham is, of course, the model Knight of Faith, and offence

²⁵ *FT*, 54-67, esp. 59-60.

²⁶ *FT*, 55, 60-61, 66.

²⁷ Wanda Berry makes this connection in "Finally Forgiveness: Kierkegaard as 'Springboard' for a Feminist Theology of Reform," *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*, eds. George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 202.

²⁸ *FT*, 47-48. See also *FT*, 33, 51.

²⁹ *FT*, 55.

³⁰ *FT*, 121-22.

dogs Abraham every step of the way. "Let us then either cancel out Abraham or learn to be horrified by the prodigious paradox that is the meaning of his life, so that we may understand that our age... can rejoice if it has faith."³¹ That Abraham is often considered to be socially acceptable is a problem for de Silentio. Wherever Abraham is praised unreservedly, it means that no one recognises the moral difficulties surrounding true faith. De Silentio chastises Hegel and his followers for upholding a denuded version of Abraham's faith:

But Hegel is wrong about faith; he is wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honour and glory as a father of faith when he ought to be sent back to a lower court and shown up as a murderer.³²

It is in this tension that he finds one aspect of the problem of faith, calling to mind the "prodigious paradox" that "makes murder into a holy and God-pleasing act."³³ Johannes de Silentio always keeps Abraham-as-murderer in view alongside Abraham-as-Knight-of-Faith, and his orations in praise of Abraham are tempered by the sobering thought that, humanly speaking, Abraham was an awful man.

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac — but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is.³⁴

Johannes de Silentio realises that his harsh view of the demands of faith will repulse many people, but then again, faith should not be changed merely to enable easier acquisition. If de Silentio can get people at the very least to admit that they do not have faith, then that is no small success on his part.³⁵ The opposite of the

³¹ *FT*, 52-53.

³² *FT*, 55.

³³ *FT*, 53.

³⁴ *FT*, 30.

³⁵ *FT*, 56.

cultured smug citizen of Christendom who assumes he has faith is the fanatic. However, in his opinion this is no better. The fanatic listens to the preacher expounding on Abraham as the father of faith and then attempts literally to emulate the teaching by “sacrificing” his own son.³⁶ De Silentio recognises that there is a hypothetical danger that his writing might encourage such a murderous act, but then promptly assumes that there is no one in his age who is capable of having even that much passion.³⁷ In any case to move away from such a misinterpretation, de Silentio makes it very clear that it is faith he is promoting, and not killing. “It is only by faith that one achieves any resemblance to Abraham, not by murder.”³⁸

Johannes de Silentio prevents any one particular act becoming normative for faith by individualising the demands of faith. Abraham’s (attempted) sacrifice of Isaac is *Abraham’s* test of faith, it is not the picture for *all* faith.³⁹ De Silentio is not equating the offence of faith simply with the horror of murder. Faith is a matter that concerns God and each individual, and so the demands of faith will change according to each person.⁴⁰ Of course Abraham’s actions are offensive, but de Silentio generalises the offence of faith by going behind the singular act of murder. The acts may change, but what remains is the offence of the teleological suspension of the ethical. For de Silentio, it is always offensive when an individual is set against the universal, the individual agent placed higher than the rest of society. This is what he means by the teleological suspension, and he deals with this aspect of the demand of faith in the first of three *problemata* in *Fear and Trembling*. In *Problema I* he states that “the ethical is the universal”,⁴¹ and then that “Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal.”⁴² Finally, de Silentio comes back to ethics, rounding out his definition when he

³⁶ *FT*, 28-29.

³⁷ *FT*, 31.

³⁸ *FT*, 31.

³⁹ *FT*, 59-60.

⁴⁰ See *FT*, “*Problema I*,” 54-67.

⁴¹ *FT*, 54.

⁴² *FT*, 55.

explicitly identifies the ethical/universal with “social morality.”⁴³ Thus, when an individual is set against the universal, what happens for that individual is effectively a suspension of the moral glue that holds society together. For the person with faith, there is no higher law than God, a fact that should make any society uncomfortable. It is this hard teaching that de Silentio recognises will repulse so many people, and in his opinion, rightly so.⁴⁴ It is not his intention to make faith palatable or easy.

The offence of *Fear and Trembling* is felt as an offence against public morality and the “right thinking” of the community. However, de Silentio does not expect that his Knights of Faith will actively make their offensive ways known to the public. That the Knight lives above social morality, and hence is socially repugnant, does not at the same time make him an activist or a social rebel. This is demonstrated by the way de Silentio makes fun of those “assistant professors” (his common term of abuse for the academic and clerical chattering classes that plagued Danish society) who assume that anything of value must be publicly debated and judged by the result.⁴⁵ They expect that any hero of faith worth his salt will shout confidently to his contemporaries, thus justifying his existence.⁴⁶ Instead, we see that the Knight does not go about forcing society to be offended at him. He is culturally invisible like the humble “tax-collector” who goes about his daily business secure in his faith,⁴⁷ and like Abraham, who hides his shocking relationship with God by remaining silent.⁴⁸ For de Silentio this silence of Abraham is offensive in its own right, both ethically and aesthetically. Ethically, the act of remaining silent throughout the ordeal is insulting to Sarah and Isaac, an offence because it “bypassed” what was for Abraham the highest expression of the ethical — family

⁴³ *FT*, 55.

⁴⁴ *FT*, 56.

⁴⁵ *FT*, 62-63.

⁴⁶ *FT*, 62.

⁴⁷ *FT*, 38ff.

⁴⁸ *FT*, 82ff.

life.⁴⁹ Aesthetically, the silence ruins the beautiful poetic tragedy that Abraham could have enjoyed if he were a mere Tragic Hero rather than a Knight of Faith. Not being able to explain his trial to others means that Abraham cannot attract any empathy or universal sympathy.⁵⁰ Note that even here, the offence of Abraham's silence, like the more general offence of the ethically suspended Knight of Faith, is primarily directed "outwardly," its effects not felt by the Knight but by the people around him.

In *Fear and Trembling*, the Knight may not actively court social comment, but nonetheless his very existence stands in opposition to social morality. When Johannes de Silentio reflects on Abraham, he encounters the paradoxical tension that signifies the presence of authentic faith. "Although Abraham arouses my admiration, he also appalls me."⁵¹ Yet de Silentio is not himself a Knight, he cannot make the double movement of faith and resignation.⁵² As a result, he does not stand apart from the rest of Christendom. He is, at best, a more accurate observer than are the others; but like the assistant professors that he criticises, Johannes de Silentio is condemned to dwell on a phenomenon of which he personally knows nothing. It is Johannes Climacus, with his notions of the Absolute Paradox and the offence against reason, who is able to improve on Johannes de Silentio's blind groping.

Climacus, Offence, and Reason

For Johannes de Silentio, offence against the public order turns out to be a consequence of an individual's faith. There is no indication that for de Silentio offence at the faithful person was of a different class than the sort of moral indignation that anyone in civilised Christendom would feel when their cultural sensibilities had been affronted. This is not the case with Johannes Climacus. He is not a Christian, but gives as his stated aim the subjective quest to discover how he

⁴⁹ *FT*, 112.

⁵⁰ *FT*, 112-114. Abraham's silence as indirect communication will be considered in the following chapter.

⁵¹ *FT*, 60.

⁵² *FT*, 48.

might become a Christian.⁵³ Kierkegaard allows Climacus to come closer than Johannes de Silentio did to personally appropriating authentic Christianity. As a result, Climacus also apprehends more clearly the true nature of offence. He is not offended at the outward consequences of faith, rather he is offended at the object of faith. As a result, we will see that Climacus goes part way to discovering the “inward” implications of the offence for the individual.

It is with Climacus that we are introduced to the Absolute Paradox, which is the problem of the God-Man.⁵⁴ Climacus is not concerned overmuch with the actual earthly life of the God-Man, and he is vague about the details: “I shall merely trace [the idea] in a few lines without reference to whether it was historical or not.”⁵⁵ Instead, Climacus devotes his time to the “idea about the different.”⁵⁶ He is interested in the intellectual challenge that the paradox of the “known” coexisting with the “unknown” offers to human reason.⁵⁷ For someone like Climacus, it seems that the apparently insurmountable barrier that stands between himself and Christianity is the vast qualitative difference that exists between these two concepts. In *PF*, Climacus indulges in some metaphysical psychology.⁵⁸ Climacus describes the understanding as suicidally searching for its own downfall, surmising that reason always wants to “discover something that thought itself cannot think.”⁵⁹ As a result, thought is always due for a collision with the ultimate Unknown, which Climacus also calls *the god*.⁶⁰ At the same time reason gropes blindly, attempting to

⁵³ *CUP*, 17.

⁵⁴ *PF*, ch. III, 37-48.

⁵⁵ *PF*, 45.

⁵⁶ *PF*, 45.

⁵⁷ *PF*, 39, 44-45, 46.

⁵⁸ *PF*, 37-39.

⁵⁹ *PF*, 37.

⁶⁰ *PF*, 39. Emphasising his connection to Platonic-Socratic thought patterns, and his attempt to separate the essential ideas from their Christian “clothing,” Climacus usually speaks of “the god” using *Guden*, a noun with a definite article, as opposed to the more common Christian appellation “God” (*Gud*). This usage is unique to Climacus within the authorship. See *PF*, 278 n.13.

understand what cannot be understood and mistaking what it finds with what it already knows. Climacus describes this situation as reason confounding like with unlike, and he gives as an example the idea of a devout worshipper who can't help but wonder if what he is praying to is a construct of his own imagination.⁶¹ Stumbling reason eventually crashes into a terrible conundrum that Climacus dubs the "Absolute Paradox":

... the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute — negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality.⁶²

It is these two functions, the negative and the positive, that Climacus finds so appalling. "Thus the paradox becomes even more terrible."⁶³

The Absolute Paradox is, for Climacus, an explicit offence to reason, seeking reason's downfall.⁶⁴ Climacus, agreeing with the "Socratic principle," identifies sin with ignorance and error.⁶⁵ It is sin that is the cause of the absolute unlikeness, and also the cause of the confusion between like and unlike.⁶⁶ We see that sin, conceived of as misunderstanding, shadows every step that human reason takes. Sin is integrated with the understanding to the point where the paradox's challenge to sin is felt as a challenge to reason itself.⁶⁷ Faith will only occur when there is a "happy encounter" between reason and the paradox.⁶⁸ Climacus is clear that this happens only when reason "steps aside," allowing the paradox to reign in the

⁶¹ *PF*, 45.

⁶² *PF*, 47.

⁶³ *PF*, 47.

⁶⁴ *PF*, 47.

⁶⁵ *PF*, 50. Climacus here refers to Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III, 9, 5.

⁶⁶ *PF*, 47.

⁶⁷ *PF*, 47-48.

⁶⁸ *PF*, 59.

mental life of the individual.⁶⁹ If reason does not rescind the throne, then the relationship with the paradox will be unhappy. Climacus has already named this event. "If the encounter is not in mutual understanding, then the relation is unhappy... we could more specifically term [this] *offence*."⁷⁰

It is in the Appendix to Chapter III of *PF* entitled "Offence at the Paradox (An Acoustical Illusion)" that Climacus fully expounds on the relationship between offence and the paradoxical object of faith.⁷¹ Here offence in the face of the paradox may take the form of mockery, denial or dumb suffering,⁷² but all forms share one common factor: "Offence does not understand itself, but is understood by the paradox."⁷³ To elaborate on what this means, Climacus develops his idea of the "acoustical illusion."⁷⁴ Like an echo, or a mirror image in a funhouse, human reason can only respond to the original impulse imparted by the paradox. In a passage that bears a striking resemblance to Socrates's description of the cave dweller confused by the juxtaposition of light and shadow,⁷⁵ Climacus tells how reason thinks that when it pontificates about the Unknown its judgements are original, but this is only an illusion, for all judgements have been made first by the Unknown itself.

The one offended does not speak according to his own nature but according to the nature of the paradox, just as someone caricaturing another person does not originate anything himself but only copies the other in the wrong way.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ *PF*, 59.

⁷⁰ *PF*, 49, original emphasis.

⁷¹ *PF*, 49-54.

⁷² *PF*, 50.

⁷³ *PF*, 50.

⁷⁴ *PF*, 49.

⁷⁵ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 515b.

⁷⁶ *PF*, 51.

Reason crashes up against the Absolute Unknown, the paradox of like with unlike, and declares that it is absurd.⁷⁷ But the paradox has pre-empted these observations. According to Climacus, whatever human reason says about itself and about the paradox, the paradox has already discovered and claimed as its own.⁷⁸ Everything the offended understanding says about the paradox, it has actually learned from the paradox, “even though, making use of an acoustical illusion, [offended understanding] insists that it itself has originated the paradox.”⁷⁹ It is in this way that Climacus can understand the presence of offence as the paradox’s proof: “[offence] can be regarded as indirect testing of the correctness of the Paradox...”⁸⁰

Johannes de Silentio’s offence was a human invention, born of social morality. Climacus asserts that it is false when human reason “insists that it itself has originated the paradox.”⁸¹ Instead the offence is much more integral to the object of faith than the previous pseudonym supposed: “No, the offence *comes into existence* with the paradox.”⁸² Climacus describes the “coming into existence” as “the moment.”⁸³ The moment is the time of decision when faced with the demands of the paradox.

The moment is actually the decision of eternity! If the god does not provide the condition to understand this, how will it ever occur to the learner? ...without this we come no further but go back to Socrates.⁸⁴

The moment is non-Socratic because it does not involve any immanent knowledge that resides within the individual. As a teacher, Socrates was the “occasion” who

⁷⁷ PF, 52.

⁷⁸ PF, 52, 53.

⁷⁹ PF, 53.

⁸⁰ PF, 51.

⁸¹ PF, 51.

⁸² PF, 51, original emphasis.

⁸³ PF, 58.

⁸⁴ PF, 58, original emphasis.

dealt with the type of knowledge that required only that the teacher unlock the student's latent potential.⁸⁵ Here, Climacus' moment represents an altogether new form of teaching, that of the transcendent Teacher who makes proposals that the learner would have had no way of discovering on his own. "If the god does not provide the condition to understand this, how will it ever occur to the learner?"⁸⁶ The moment marks the point in time when one apprehends the paradox. "If the moment is posited, the paradox is there, for in its most abbreviated form the paradox can be called the moment."⁸⁷ In the moment, we can see that the paradox goes on the offensive. The paradox turns reason into absurdity.⁸⁸ It attacks human understanding, turning everything on its head. Through the moment the learner becomes untruth, he who knows himself becomes confused, and self-knowledge becomes the consciousness of sin.⁸⁹ However, to describe the many possible shades of offence is not Climacus' aim. He sums them all up by maintaining that "all offence is *in its essence a misunderstanding* of the moment, since it is indeed offence at the paradox, and the paradox in turn is the moment."⁹⁰

Here Kierkegaard has once again led one of his characters into a trap. Johannes de Silentio claimed to understand faith.⁹¹ Yet because he does not have faith, Johannes de Silentio does not end up truly understanding faith after all. Likewise, Climacus is a self-proclaimed "outsider"⁹² who is mistaken in his belief that he understands Christianity. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript (CUP)*, Climacus rightly points out that it is only the individual of Religiousness B who can

⁸⁵ *PF*, 11, 58.

⁸⁶ *PF*, 58.

⁸⁷ *PF*, 51.

⁸⁸ *PF*, 52.

⁸⁹ *PF*, 51.

⁹⁰ *PF*, 51, emphasis added.

⁹¹ *FT*, 69, 119. See also the "Epilogue," 121-23.

⁹² *CUP*, 16.

recognise the true offence,⁹³ but Kierkegaard, the “master of irony,”⁹⁴ does not let Climacus fully understand what that offence is. It will take Anti-Climacus to demonstrate the connection between authentic Christianity and the essential offence.⁹⁵ We can see that Climacus is a character who still inhabits the state of Religiousness A, although he has some awareness of Religiousness B. Despite Climacus’ disparagement of speculative philosophy,⁹⁶ he has not himself left speculation’s thought patterns of immanence behind. Although the upshot of *PF* and *CUP* seems to be a set of works that is written against speculative thought and the pride of reason, whatever content Climacus imbues in the moment and the offence, he does so largely only by defining them in reference to the intellectual realm of the understanding. An acoustical illusion of sorts affects Climacus, for he is so concerned with combating speculative philosophy that he does not see that he himself is trapped in the same realm. Climacus makes light of those preachers and assistant professors who use apologetic arguments to “prove” the truth of Christianity, or otherwise promote its relevance to systematic thought.⁹⁷ Yet in identifying sin with error,⁹⁸ repulsion with proof for the presence of the paradox⁹⁹ and offence with misunderstanding,¹⁰⁰ Climacus does not really come any nearer to the true locus of Christian faith and its offensive nature.

For the non-Christian Climacus, offence (along with despair) makes up the “Cerberus pair who guard the gates to becoming a Christian.”¹⁰¹ Rejecting offence is

⁹³ *CUP*, 585.

⁹⁴ Kierkegaard’s MA thesis was later published as *The Concept of Irony* (non-pseudonymous 1841). Trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Occasionally, with his own tongue in cheek, he referred to himself as a master of irony. See *Point Of View*, 66-67.

⁹⁵ See below. *PC*, 94, 101, 106, 136.

⁹⁶ *PF*, 10, 43, 73, 109-10, and esp. *CUP*, 14-15, 50-57, 215-59.

⁹⁷ For example *PF*, 43; *CUP*, 14.

⁹⁸ *PF*, 50, 293.

⁹⁹ *PF*, 51.

¹⁰⁰ *PF*, 51.

¹⁰¹ *CUP*, 372

a “one time only” epistemological event that defines and begins a life of faith. Later in *CUP*, Climacus writes that “the narrow gate to the hard way of faith is offence, and the terrible resistance against the *beginning* of faith is offence.”¹⁰² He sees the offence as the initial, cataclysmic moment in which the understanding is defeated by the paradox. It has been shown how Climacus identifies the moment as the paradox, and *the* paradox as the Absolute Paradox of the God-Man, a historical point upon which everything else turns.¹⁰³ Yet compared to the “clothing” that Anti-Climacus will put on all of this, Climacus’ “point in history” is strangely devoid of much substantive content. God is always “the god,” the “God-Man” is never named as Jesus Christ, and the moment is abstracted away from any recognisable historical event. We see from Climacus’ emphasis on the intellectual concept of offence that he is indeed concerned mostly with the paradox in its most abbreviated form. Climacus is more interested in talking of a moment in which reason collides with the paradox, than of the real life that is lived in “lowliness” and “loftiness” that Anti-Climacus will bring to the category of offence. The picture that Climacus leaves the reader with is, for the most part, a moment of metaphysical and conceptual difficulties (i.e. the “known” with the “unknown”¹⁰⁴), a doctrine that understanding cannot get into its head.¹⁰⁵ It is not “timeless,” but it is bereft of any specific temporal reference point that this moment could be anchored to. Only towards the end of *PF*, and in certain points in *CUP* is there some suggestion of providing earthly/historical content.¹⁰⁶ Here, Climacus writes about the god in human form who was born, grew up, had disciples and was a servant etc. Significantly, however, it is not the facts of a concrete human life that give rise to the offence as they will for Anti-Climacus.¹⁰⁷ Instead Climacus is left stuck at the stage of discursive reason, offended at the paradox as a thought that thought cannot think.

¹⁰² *CUP*, 585, emphasis added.

¹⁰³ *PF*, 51, 58.

¹⁰⁴ *PF*, 39, 44-45, 46.

¹⁰⁵ *PF*, 45, 53.

¹⁰⁶ For example *PF*, 93 and *CUP*, 217.

¹⁰⁷ *PC*, 94-121.

Anti-Climacus and the Essential Offence

With the offence of Anti-Climacus, not only is a development from the previous pseudonyms evident, but from one Anti-Climacus book to the next the idea takes firmer shape as well. *Sickness unto Death* marks a midway point between Climacus and the full development of the essential offence in *Practice in Christianity*. As in *PF*, offence in *SUD* is mainly dealt with in asides to the main work.¹⁰⁸ However, unlike the intellectual content of Climacus' offence (or of Johannes de Silentio's concern with civic morality for that matter), in *SUD* Anti-Climacus' offence tends to focus on the attendant problems of man's will, and his desire to hold onto his sin.¹⁰⁹ As such, the offence becomes directed more towards God than towards public morality or individual reason, and it is given a deep ethical content that is absent from both Johannes de Silentio's and Climacus' understanding.¹¹⁰ *SUD* identifies three levels of this offence ("lowest," "middle" and "highest"),¹¹¹ all of which are fundamentally sins of defiance undertaken before God.¹¹² The notion of continually existing in the presence of God, and of the offence as involving willful disobedience is expanded in *Practice in Christianity*. The possibility of the essential offence becomes the central motif that runs throughout the whole book, intimately connected as it is with *contemporaneity*.¹¹³ Anti-Climacus finds the highest concentration of the offence to revolve around what is most important for authentic Christianity — the person of Jesus Christ. Only the person who is contemporaneous with Christ will face the possibility of offence at the instance of a lowly man who claims to be God.¹¹⁴ Only the person who faces this possibility and chooses to obey

¹⁰⁸ *SUD*, "Appendix," 83-87; 113-131.

¹⁰⁹ *SUD*, 87-100.

¹¹⁰ *SUD*, 83, 85-87 89, 94-95; *PC*, 111, 120-21, 126, 128, 132.

¹¹¹ *SUD*, 129-31.

¹¹² *SUD*, 85-87.

¹¹³ *PC*, 62-66, 99-108, 144.

¹¹⁴ *PC*, 94-101, 102 -121.

Christ's invitation to "come to me"¹¹⁵ rather than be offended at him can be said to have authentic faith.¹¹⁶

Kierkegaard's readers often tend to ignore the particular use that each pseudonym makes of certain concepts in favour of producing a unified "Kierkegaardian" view. As a case in point, to my knowledge it has never been noted in the secondary literature how Climacus and Anti-Climacus differ in their syntax when discussing the offence. Throughout his writings, Climacus overwhelmingly talks of an unqualified "offence." Conversely, Anti-Climacus almost exclusively speaks of the "*possibility* of offence." The discrepancy is important for it underlies the fundamentally different approaches that the two pseudonyms take towards the offence. For Climacus, the offence is a singular event,¹¹⁷ while for Anti-Climacus, it is a live option at all times, and the possibility of offence must always be maintained.¹¹⁸ The "singular event" compared to the ongoing "possibility" also reveals the different places where the two characters find the locus of the offence. It is proposed that Climacus represents the type of individual who does not recognise the offensiveness of the lived life of an actual individual man who is God. It has been shown that for Climacus the offence occurs only with reference to reason and to the comprehension (or not as the case may be) of an intellectual puzzle. Anti-Climacus, on the other hand, will come to find the core offence in the propensity of sinful man to take umbrage at the ethical implications of a person who is God, or a God who is a person.¹¹⁹

Although his "offence" is centred on the ethical, it is not the case that Anti-Climacus here returns to Johannes de Silentio's offence of civic morality. The great offence for Anti-Climacus occurs ethically for the individual subject who faces the possibility of perfect holiness bound by the suffering of utter lowliness.¹²⁰ Johannes

¹¹⁵ Matthew 11:28; *PC*, no. 1, 3-69.

¹¹⁶ *PC*, 94, 101, 106, 136.

¹¹⁷ *PF*, 51, 58; *CUP*, 372, 585.

¹¹⁸ *PC*, 110, 139.

¹¹⁹ *PC*, 94-101, 102-121.

¹²⁰ *PC*, 120-21, 126, 128, 132.

de Silentio located the offence in the place where the faithful Knight transgresses against social morality.¹²¹ Upon inspection it emerges that Anti-Climacus is not concerned with the “do’s” and “don’ts” of mere public mores that make up Johannes de Silentio’s “morality,” but rather with the deeper realm of what is perhaps best termed “ethics.” The distinction between *morality* and *ethics* is not one that Kierkegaard or any of his pseudonyms makes explicit, and for that reason it is acknowledged that employing such a distinction can prove to be problematic. Nevertheless, that there is a difference is apparent from the alternate uses that the pseudonyms make of the same words. Johannes de Silentio’s “ethical” refers to a social morality that is vastly different from Anti-Climacus’ “ethical.” Without inventing a new term or using a consistently recognisable phrase, Anti-Climacus nevertheless alludes to the different levels of “ethical” throughout his books. In *Sickness unto Death*, for example, the “Christian ethicist” apprehends a higher ethics than other thinkers, because the Christian begins with the presupposition of sin.¹²² Anti-Climacus later refers to men who have an inkling of ethics and the religious, but who frame their thoughts according to metaphysics and aesthetics.¹²³ To dwell on such topics Anti-Climacus says is a distraction away from the truly ethical.¹²⁴ From this can be inferred a renewed interest in properly¹²⁵ understanding the “ethical” that is now separated from the “universal” concerns of the previous philosophers and ethicists. The Christian way “reshapes all ethical concepts and gives them one additional range.”¹²⁶ In *PC*, Anti-Climacus applies this higher understanding of ethics directly to the offence. He disparages “natural man” who, endeavouring “to attain a certain civic justice,” has merely a “provisional category” for the offence.¹²⁷ Only with Christianity, he says, will the real possibility of offence

¹²¹ *FT*, 55, 60-61, 66.

¹²² *SUD*, 89.

¹²³ *SUD*, 94.

¹²⁴ *SUD*, 94.

¹²⁵ For Anti-Climacus, “properly” means “Christianly” and “individually.” See *SUD*, 83 and 85.

¹²⁶ *SUD*, 83.

¹²⁷ *PC*, 111.

arise.¹²⁸ Both the “moral indignation” of the respectable citizen like Johannes de Silentio, and the “intellectual challenge” faced by Climacus, pale in comparison with the possibility for deep-seated repulsion that Anti-Climacus claims Christ is courting when he says, “Blessed is he who is not offended at me.”¹²⁹

Offence in *Sickness unto Death*

The possibility of offence in *SUD* suggests an ever-present factor, lived out every day. Climacus was concerned with the incomprehensible concept of the God-Man composite.¹³⁰ Anti-Climacus focuses on the offence that has ethical significance for a whole life, i.e., a life comprising the mundane choices of daily living as well as the singular epiphanies of reflection. By doing so he effectively shifts from *a* moment to the continual possibility of many moments. When Anti-Climacus writes that the offence is “Christianity’s weapon against all speculation,”¹³¹ we are not being invited to view this conflict in the same way that Climacus does. For Climacus, the battle consists in the moment of opposition between comprehension and faith. Those who choose to enthrone reason cannot have a happy understanding with the Absolute Paradox and so are offended.¹³² Climacus does not himself claim to be offended, however, but continues to live at the place where the paradox remains incomprehensible and the understanding refrains from making a decision.¹³³ Anti-Climacus will have none of this, for from his perspective, withholding judgement is also a form of offence, and people like Climacus are as offensive as the “speculators” he is attempting to write against. To see that this is so, we must consider Anti-Climacus’ three types of offence. In the final chapter of *SUD*, Anti-Climacus details “three forms of the offence” which are fundamentally related to the

¹²⁸ *PC*, 111.

¹²⁹ *PC*, 70, quoting Matthew 11:6.

¹³⁰ *PF*, 39, 44-45, 46.

¹³¹ *SUD*, 83.

¹³² *PF*, 49, 59.

¹³³ *CUP*, 617-23.

paradox.¹³⁴ The lowest form is that of the person who negatively states that he has no opinion, who does not believe and who does not care about Christ.¹³⁵ The highest is a "positive" form of offence: the active denial and denunciation of Christ, his work, his message and his existence.¹³⁶ The middle offence is the "negative but passive form."¹³⁷ Although he does not state so openly, it seems that here we find Anti-Climacus' judgement on the mistaken position of his brother. Of the middle form of offence Anti-Climacus writes:

It definitely feels that it cannot ignore Christ, is not capable of leaving Christ in abeyance and then otherwise leading a busy life. But neither can it believe; it continues to stare fixedly and exclusively... at the paradox.¹³⁸

Refraining from deciding is no less offensive to God than apathetic ignorance or active opposition, not matter how much interest and respect one claims to have for the paradox.

Anti-Climacus imbues all three levels of his offence with an ethical quality that Climacus does not recognise. Climacus claims that offence is the "unhappy understanding" between the paradox and reason.¹³⁹ Anti-Climacus refers instead to these offences as variations of "unhappy admiration," an envy directed towards God that grows from man's sinful aversion to holiness.¹⁴⁰ Both pseudonyms have problems with speculative philosophy, but it is Anti-Climacus who most clearly understands the inappropriateness of it for true Christianity, because he

¹³⁴ *SUD*, 129-131. Note that in contrast with Climacus (cf. *PF*, ch. III), Anti-Climacus always readily identifies true religion with Christianity and names the Absolute Paradox as Christ. See for example *SUD*, 126.

¹³⁵ *SUD*, 129-30.

¹³⁶ *SUD*, 131.

¹³⁷ *SUD*, 130.

¹³⁸ *SUD*, 130-31.

¹³⁹ *PF*, 49.

¹⁴⁰ *SUD*, 85-86.

presupposes the sinful corruption of man's reason.¹⁴¹ Speculative philosophy "universalises individual human beings imaginatively into the race."¹⁴² In other words, the corruption that comes from this pattern of thought is to subsume into the "herd" what should be experienced individually. It has clouded the fact that individuals make their choices "before God"¹⁴³ and has reverted to paganism, essentially by making a 'god' out of humanity in general.¹⁴⁴ To emphasise the continuing possibility of offence is to remember that all moments occur before God, and indeed, all offences are committed against God. The individual man cannot hide in the crowd and so avoid his responsibility for sin, for it is only an *individual's* offence against God that "actually makes sin into sin."¹⁴⁵ Sin, for Anti-Climacus, consists in the fact that each man wills not to understand what is right, not merely that he does not understand it, or is part of a culture that has not taught him properly.¹⁴⁶ In *PF*, sin was error and misunderstanding.¹⁴⁷ In *SUD*, "interpreted Christianly, sin has its roots in willing, not in knowing, and this corruption of willing embraces the individual's consciousness."¹⁴⁸ The location of the offence thus makes an "Augustinian" shift, and it is not defined in relation to reason's understanding, but instead to the ethical existence of the individual.¹⁴⁹

Thus offence is related to the single individual. And with this,

¹⁴¹ *SUD*, 83. In his examination of "sin" in *SUD*, Ricoeur refers to the "psychology of evil." "Kierkegaard and Evil," *Modern Critical Views: Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Pub., 1989), 49-59.

¹⁴² *SUD*, 83.

¹⁴³ *SUD*, 85-87.

¹⁴⁴ A common theme. See *SUD*, 87, and especially 116-17. Also *PC*, 81-82.

¹⁴⁵ *SUD*, 87.

¹⁴⁶ *SUD*, 90, 93, 95.

¹⁴⁷ *PF*, 50.

¹⁴⁸ *SUD*, 95.

¹⁴⁹ In the *Confessions*, Augustine asks, "What is iniquity?... It is the perversity of the will, twisting away from the supreme substance, yourself, O God..." *The Confessions of St. Augustine* trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), VII.16 (p. 175). See also VII-VIII.

Christianity [makes] every man a single individual, an individual sinner; and here everything that heaven and earth can muster regarding the possibility of offence... is concentrated — and this is Christianity.¹⁵⁰

Offence in *Practice in Christianity*

With its discussion of sin and offence, *SUD* lays the foundations for Anti-Climacus' specifically Christian understanding of offence in his most important book. Like an underground stream that bursts into the open in full flow, the offence that until now has only been seen in appendices is taken up by Anti-Climacus in his next book as its central theme. In *Practice in Christianity*, the possibility of offence is "present at every moment"¹⁵¹ and is not, as Climacus sees it, a singular moment that only happens at the beginning of the Christian life.¹⁵² More so even than *SUD*, what is most striking about the offence in *PC* is that it is "ethical," not epistemological. In *PC* Anti-Climacus emphasises the "lowliness" and "loftiness" of the God-man.¹⁵³ For Anti-Climacus, the Incarnation as an historical event involving an actual life lived on earth is far more offensive than the reason-confounding concept of the Absolute Paradox. Thus, Anti-Climacus' offence is an offence of the truly ethical,¹⁵⁴ informed by his vision of authentic Christianity. It is not an offence of Climacus' intellect, or of Johannes de Silentio's civic-moral sensitivity. We have seen that Climacus, obsessed with the moment when the understanding encounters the Unknown, has concluded that the offence lies with the inability of reason to comprehend the incomprehensible, and its stubborn refusal to bow to the mystery of the paradox.¹⁵⁵ Anti-Climacus thinks that the intellectual categories of "doubting" and

¹⁵⁰ *SUD*, 122.

¹⁵¹ *PC*, 139.

¹⁵² *PF*, 49, 51, 58-59; *CUP*, 372, 585.

¹⁵³ *PC*, 94-102; 102-121.

¹⁵⁴ *SUD*, 83, 85, 94.

¹⁵⁵ *PF*, 49-54.

“understanding” are too shallow when it comes to the heart of the matter.¹⁵⁶ He moves beyond trying to comprehend the God-man composition, saying that those who try to fête its profundity are merely performing tricks.¹⁵⁷ The real essence of the offence is not in trying (or failing) to understand the composite; it is the composite itself.

the *situation* belongs with the God-man, the situation that an individual human being who is standing beside you is the God-man. The God-man is not the union of God and man - such terminology is a profound optical illusion. 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...¹⁵⁸

Concurrent with the theme of offence is the theme of contemporaneity, where by metaphorically crossing the span of centuries, the would-be believer is removed from the “present age” and places him or herself next to Christ.¹⁵⁹ Climacus has discussed this at some length already,¹⁶⁰ but it is Anti-Climacus who draws out the significance of contemporaneity for the possibility of offence. With true Christianity, there can be no case of the so-called “second-hand disciple.” “If you cannot bear contemporaneity... then you are not *essentially* Christian.”¹⁶¹ It is now that Anti-Climacus is able to add the most content to the category of offence. This content was certainly missing from Johannes de Silentio and Climacus. It is not even apparent in *SUD*. It is in *PC* that Anti-Climacus introduces the possibility of the essential offence as *only* occurring for those who see Christ as a contemporary,¹⁶² that is for people who are able to apprehend that the challenge of the God-Man

¹⁵⁶ *PC*, 81-83.

¹⁵⁷ *PC*, 81.

¹⁵⁸ *PC*, 81-82, original emphasis.

¹⁵⁹ For example, *PC*, 63 and 144.

¹⁶⁰ *PF*, ch. IV, “The Situation of the Contemporary Follower.”

¹⁶¹ *PC*, 65, original emphasis.

¹⁶² *PC*, 106-107.

applies to them personally in inwardness and immediacy. Relegating Jesus to a point where he only exists historically does not make him “actual,” that is, his demands do not impinge on anyone’s immediate life.¹⁶³ Only that which is contemporary (that which is “for you”), is “actual” for an individual.

The qualification that is lacking — which is the qualification of truth (which is inwardness) and of all religiousness is — **for you**. The past is not actuality — for me. Only the contemporary is actuality for me. That with which you are living simultaneously is actuality — for you.¹⁶⁴

In *PC* Anti-Climacus finds that the possibility offence occurs in two forms — that of loftiness and that of lowliness. With the “offence of loftiness” the individual must face the opportunity for moral indignation that *this* man (i.e. Jesus Christ) is, or is claiming to be, God.¹⁶⁵ With the offence of lowliness, the problem comes when one considers that God in all his majesty is *this* man.¹⁶⁶ Anti-Climacus identifies both as “forms of essential offence.”¹⁶⁷ Significantly, both forms of offence can only occur for the one contemporaneous with Christ the God-Man.

The possibility for the “essential offence of loftiness” centres on the possibility that this individual man should be God, or when this man “speaks and acts as if he were God, declares himself to be God.”¹⁶⁸ The possibility for the “offence of lowliness” comes when the “one who passes himself off as God proves to be the lowly, poor, suffering, and finally powerless human being.”¹⁶⁹ We can see that both forms of offence presuppose three things about the individual approaching the Christian faith. First, they presuppose that the individual is standing in a contemporaneous relation to Christ. Secondly that the individual has

¹⁶³ *PC*, 63-64.

¹⁶⁴ *PC*, 64, original bold emphasis.

¹⁶⁵ *PC*, 94-102.

¹⁶⁶ *PC*, 102-21.

¹⁶⁷ *PC*, 121.

¹⁶⁸ *PC*, 94.

¹⁶⁹ *PC*, 102.

an awareness of the majesty of God, and thirdly that the individual apprehends the qualitative gap between the life of God and the life of an individual man, an apprehension that itself presupposes an awareness of sin.

Anti-Climacus does not define either of these categories of essential offence in relation to reason. Indeed, Anti-Climacus insists that it is to Christendom's shame that the preachers have turned Jesus' life and actions into a logical proof for his divinity, for by taking away the possibility of offence at this lowly man who claims to be God, they have taken Christ away as well.¹⁷⁰ Christendom thinks (as a delusion) that the God-man is directly visible.¹⁷¹ The preachers point to miracles as evidence, forgetting that the Biblical accounts have Jesus himself putting no great stock in the persuasive effects of his actions.¹⁷² For example, the gospels tell how when Jesus recounted a litany of his own healing miracles to John the Baptist's disciples, he ended the account by stating that the man who does not take offence on account of Christ will be blessed.¹⁷³ It is significant to Anti-Climacus that these demonstrations do not lead to faith, as if faith was a matter of proof and reasons, but that they instead lead to the possibility of offence.¹⁷⁴ "In order to believe," writes Anti-Climacus, "the person who believes must have passed through the possibility of offence."¹⁷⁵ At first glance this seems to echo Climacus' sentiments, but in actuality, Anti-Climacus' offence is so different from that of Climacus, that, in this respect, the two are almost opposites. The one who is potentially offended at the loftiness of *this* man being God can only do so if he or she is not looking at Christianity as set of propositions, but instead at Christ as a contemporary, and thus is already closer than Climacus is to authentic Christianity. Anti-Climacus' offence is not a blow to conceptual reasoning but instead a gut reaction to an affront, a repulsion at something that produces ethical unease. When discussing the

¹⁷⁰ PC, 94.

¹⁷¹ PC, 95.

¹⁷² PC, 95-97.

¹⁷³ Matthew 11:6.

¹⁷⁴ PC, 95.

¹⁷⁵ PC, 101.

impossibility of direct communication, Anti-Climacus talks of how Christ can only be a sign of contradiction.¹⁷⁶

If someone says directly: I am God; the Father and I are one, this is direct communication. But if the person who says it, the communicator, is this individual human being, an individual human being just like others, then this communication is not entirely direct, because it is not entirely direct that an individual human being should be God...¹⁷⁷

When a particular lowly man invokes the divine by saying "Believe in me"¹⁷⁸, there is a direct statement coming from an *incognito* source, and it is this disjunction between the saying and the person saying it that produces the possibility of offence. One would not be offended if a being who was obviously God claimed to be God. For Anti-Climacus, the contradiction does not produce mental turmoil, as if it involved understanding proofs and propositions. Of this idea he says:

What abominable, sentimental frivolity! No, one does not manage to become a Christian at such a cheap price! He [Christ] is the sign of contradiction, and by the direct statement he attaches himself to you only so that you must first face the offence of the contradiction, and the thoughts of *your heart* are disclosed as you choose whether you will believe or not.¹⁷⁹

Climacus claims to understand that Christianity is not about doctrines,¹⁸⁰ yet his relation to Christianity hints at the fact that "doctrine" is the most accurate category for describing Climacus' approach to the offence. Climacus seems to think of Christianity as essentially a "doctrinal" position that one can either accept or reject. He says in *CUP*: "Although an outsider, I have at least understood this much,

¹⁷⁶ *PC*, 133-36.

¹⁷⁷ *PC*, 134.

¹⁷⁸ Mark 9:42.

¹⁷⁹ *PC*, 136, emphasis added.

¹⁸⁰ *CUP*, 379-81, 570.

that the only unforgivable high treason against Christianity is the single individual's taking his relation to it for granted."¹⁸¹ M. Hartshorne points out that here once again Climacus fundamentally misunderstands the Christian view; the true Christian (according to Anti-Climacus) would be concerned with Christ, the offensive God-man, not with Christianity. "Christianity in its authentic form it does not propose *itself* as a condition of salvation That would be idolatrous."¹⁸²

The discussion on the offence of lowliness provides Anti-Climacus the opportunity to answer Climacus on this point, and to develop the notion of the essential offence as relating to a person's "lived" life.

Christianity is no doctrine; all talk of offence with regard to it as a doctrine is a misunderstanding, is an enervation of the thrust of the collision of offence, as when one speaks of offence with respect to the *doctrine* of the God-man, the *doctrine* of Atonement. No, offence is related either to Christ or to being a Christian oneself.¹⁸³

The concrete, day-to-day existence of an individual cannot be ignored. To be a Christian is to imitate Christ, which means, in the eyes of the world, to suffer every kind of evil, mockery and insult, and finally to be punished as a criminal. This, says Anti-Climacus, is part of the possibility of the offence of lowliness, that God should be abased in this way.¹⁸⁴ The possibility of offence is linked to a continuing life. It is present at every moment.¹⁸⁵ It is expressly not a point devoid of real physical and ethical content, to be mentally struggled over at an abstract early stage in an individual's process towards belief. Instead, Anti-Climacus talks of the sacrifice in life and blood that is made in order truly to be a Christian.¹⁸⁶ The real Christian offence, writes Anti-Climacus, is the remedy for all the petty and

¹⁸¹ *CUP*, 16.

¹⁸² M. H. Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard Godly Deceiver* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 36.

¹⁸³ *PC*, 106, original emphasis.

¹⁸⁴ *PC*, 106.

¹⁸⁵ *PC*, 110, 139.

¹⁸⁶ *PC*, 144.

provisional offences that plague "natural man."¹⁸⁷ Climacus speaks only of reason; Anti-Climacus barely mentions it at all. Because he is standing in the presence of the source of the light, Anti-Climacus is able to differentiate between the lesser and the essential offences, a skill that Climacus does not share.

The argument that Kierkegaard ascribes to blind faith over reason is commonplace amongst the secondary literature. The attribution is rife in popular, introductory and academic discussion about Kierkegaard.¹⁸⁸ Yet each of these accusations is based on a reading of "Kierkegaard" that does not take into account the pseudonymous context, or which does so only in a cursory way. Only if Kierkegaard saw Christianity the way that Johannes de Silentio or Climacus sees it would he have a faith that exists only in opposition to reason. For Anti-Climacus, however, it seems that the opposite of offence is not "faith" as such, but obedience to the lowly man who says, "Come unto me."¹⁸⁹ Obviously, there is an element of faith involved in obeying someone, but the focus is shifted from the battle of the intellect to a battle of the will. The fideist must constantly define faith in opposition to reason. Anti-Climacus takes a different position in which the concerns of reason are transcended. The true Christian is not one who exists because of, or in spite of, reason alone, but one who exists in a life of willed obedience to the person of Christ.

Whether there is such a Christian at all is a question that lies behind Kierkegaard's last writings and his final *Attack upon Christendom*, where he finds

¹⁸⁷ *PC*, 111.

¹⁸⁸ To list but a few examples: Karen Carr argues that Kierkegaard is an "anti-rationalist" and that, for Kierkegaard, Christianity is always a battle with reason in "The Offence of Reason and the Passion of Faith: Kierkegaard and Anti-Rationalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996), 241; Gordon Kaufman accuses Kierkegaard of "unqualified fideism" in "Mystery, Critical Consciousness and Faith," *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, ed. William J. Abraham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 57; Alastair MacIntyre paints a picture of a Kierkegaard who was trapped in an inescapable dilemma of basing truth on subjective passion in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 39-43.

¹⁸⁹ Matthew 11:28; *PC* 3-69, 94, 101, 106, 136.

the ultimate sign of obedience to be imitation of Christ.¹⁹⁰ Anti-Climacus provides hints of what that imitation might look like. At the beginning of the “Exposition” in *PC*, Anti-Climacus sketches out a third type of offence in addition to that of loftiness and lowliness.¹⁹¹ This third offence is not related to the notion of the God-man as such, and Anti-Climacus does not dwell on it. Refusing to call it a form of essential offence, throughout the brief section Anti-Climacus continually downplays this type of offence at the expense of the more important “lofty” and “lowly” expressions, and it does not appear in the summation at the end of the chapter.¹⁹² It is significant that Kierkegaard has Anti-Climacus talk about this offence at all, for it contains an apt description of the kind of criticism Kierkegaard would make under his own name in the next few years of his life. Anti-Climacus speaks of this offence is that of the man who collides with the established order.¹⁹³ Every time an authentic witness transforms truth into inwardness, he says, then the established order will be offended at him.¹⁹⁴ The offence appears to be that the individual is making himself higher than the herd, but this in fact is another acoustical illusion.¹⁹⁵ It is the established order that has said to itself that it is divine — and it is offended by the challenge to this divinity by the individual who stands apart.¹⁹⁶

Conclusion

The developing nature of *faith* in the works of Kierkegaard cannot be long separated from the related theme of *offence*, which itself is intrinsically connected to the later Kierkegaardian focus on the *Incarnation*. Without the possibility of offence there can be no possibility for faith, and the possibility of offence is predicated upon one’s

¹⁹⁰ For example, see *The Moment and Other Late Writing* (non-pseudonymous, 1854-55), trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna, H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 31, 42, 135, 148, 182, 292.

¹⁹¹ *PC*, 85-94.

¹⁹² *PC*, 85, 87, 93, 94, 120-21.

¹⁹³ *PC*, 85.

¹⁹⁴ *PC*, 86.

¹⁹⁵ *PC*, 88.

¹⁹⁶ *PC*, 86-88.

posture towards the incarnate Christ. The transition of faith is the transition that causes one to face the possibility of taking offence at Jesus Christ, and also that of giving offence as one who necessarily stands counter to the world.

Kierkegaard's pseudonyms do not speak with the same voice when it comes to faith and offence. Johannes de Silentio's conception of offence is Christendom's conception. He is revolted by the awful murderous acts that the Knight of Faith may be required to do. For Johannes de Silentio, having a faith existence means existing as an individual above the universal. Civic morality, the code of ethics that applies to all and is understood by all, is purposefully, or teleologically, suspended by God for each individual that relates to him. Thus, Johannes de Silentio sees the offence as that which goes against the laws of society, and as a result of faith.

Johannes Climacus reverses the relationship, introducing a greater offence that itself causes the lesser offences found in civil life. This essential offence stands as the gateway to faith, it is not a result of faith. Climacus' offence is not at the consequences of faith, but rather at the object of it. Climacus sees the essential offence as the Absolute Paradox's assault on human reason. The problem of the God-Man overshadows any lesser problem; it is this that the reason must assent to before Religiousness B can result. Climacus is not overly concerned with the actual life of the God-Man, and he takes pains in *PF* not to clothe the story of the Incarnation in any Christian trappings. Instead, Climacus looks at the intellectual stumbling block posed by the concept of the infinite residing in the finite, and he considers the metaphysical problem of reason coming up against a thought that thought cannot think. Climacus, following Socrates, identifies "sin" with ignorance, and he thinks of the Absolute Paradox as going on the offensive, actively seeking the downfall of corrupt human reason. Only if reason cedes the throne to the Paradox at this time can there be a happy relationship, a situation that Climacus identifies as "faith." The unhappy relationship, when reason resists the Unknown and refuses to bow, is the "offence." However, just as he has already done with Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard does not let Climacus the "Christian outsider" recognise the true locus of the offence. Climacus says that he is against philosophical speculators and assistant professors, yet he proves himself not to have escaped from the same confines by his insistence on treating Christianity as

essentially a set of doctrines to assent to, and the offence/faith dichotomy as fundamentally residing in the sphere of human reason.

By contrast, Anti-Climacus hardly ever alludes to the offence against reason. His is a purer vision of essential Christianity, and in *Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity* he sees the offence as a matter of obedience to Jesus Christ, not assent to the intellectual problem of the God-Man. When Christ says, "Come to me," he is effectively saying he is God; the contemporaneous listener is faced with only two options: *either* believe and obey in faith, *or* refuse and become offended. As opposed to Climacus who seems to think of the offence as a "one-off" event at the beginning of the life of faith, Anti-Climacus insists that this possibility of offence must be kept alive at all times, in order to assure that true faith is not being clouded by delusions of grandeur. This offence is an ethical offence that runs deeper than the affront to civic morality that Johannes de Silentio represents. Anti-Climacus identifies two forms of the essential offence, the offence of loftiness and the offence of lowliness, both of which relate to the incarnate presence of divine holiness in lowly humanness. The deep ethical aversion is faced when the individual considers that supreme goodness is presiding with human sin, or that a lowly human is claiming to be divine. Anti-Climacus is insistent that it is only these two categories that constitute the essential offence, and, as such, they belong only to Christ. But he does briefly consider the possibility of a third type of lesser offence, that of the offence against the establishment. Even here, however, Anti-Climacus is keen to emphasise that it is Jesus who best embodies this offence. However, Anti-Climacus hints at, but does not develop, the possibility for followers to imitate Christ as a sign of offence themselves.

It is, of course, Kierkegaard who takes this mantle on under his own name during his final "Attack upon Christendom," where the pure vision of offence is developed into praxis.¹⁹⁷ Kierkegaard adopts for himself the role of the offensive individual acting as a sign against all of Christendom. The offence in the Attack

¹⁹⁷ The "Attack" marks the final phase of Kierkegaard's life and career when he publicly castigated the clergy and other citizens of Christendom for doing away with Christianity. It is not the title of a single work, but is instead made up of a series of polemical articles which originally appeared in the journal *The Moment* and in *The Fatherland* newspaper from 1854 until Kierkegaard's death in 1855.

builds on Anti-Climacus' essential offence of the individual man who is God, and makes the connection between that offence and the qualitative difference between Christendom and Christianity. Only the one contemporaneous with the incarnate Christ will be able to stand as the sign of offence in his society, in the same way that Christ was offensive to his. Kierkegaard unabashedly brings Jesus Christ into the fray, pointing out that Christ would be considered to be a philistine and barbarian in the cultured sophistication of Christendom. The implication for a Christ-imitator is that he or she too will be actively opposed to their surrounding culture. It emerges in the Attack that authentic Christianity is not just different from the world; in order for it to be authentic, it *must* be a minority religion necessarily opposed to the wider "host" society. By imitating and embodying Christ's offence, Kierkegaard moves into the realm of reduplication, using himself as a sign of contradiction, speaking directly yet, by his very offensive presence, provoking a choice from his listeners that has nothing to do with outward appearances. By imitating the incarnate Christ, Kierkegaard and other Christ-followers themselves become the sign of offence and the occasion for authentic faith.