

**KIERKEGAARD AND THE TRINITARIAN GRAMMAR
OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**

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Abstract: *Although the writings of Søren Kierkegaard contain few explicit references to the Trinity and no discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity as such, his writings are profoundly dependent nevertheless on an orthodox Christian understanding of the triune nature of God. That is especially evident in his account of how we are brought into relationship with God, and is made explicit in the form of his prayers which are often addressed to Father, Son and Spirit.*

Thomas F. Torrance, whose theological concerns this journal seeks to advance, was a trinitarian theologian. He was utterly committed to speaking of God only as the communion of persons, Father, Son and Spirit, because this is who God has revealed himself to be in Jesus Christ. To speak otherwise of God is to place at risk the church's confession that the God who is the Creator of all things has made himself known, has acted in Christ and through the Spirit to reconcile the world to himself, and calls us to live in faithful covenant relationship with him. "The doctrine of the Trinity," Torrance writes, "gives expression to the fact that through his self-revelation in the incarnation God has opened himself to us in such a way that we may know him in the inner relations of his divine Being and have communion with

him in his divine Life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹ To think Christianly, Torrance insists, is to think within the framework of thought articulated and safeguarded through the doctrine of the Trinity: “the doctrine of the Holy Trinity constitutes the fundamental grammar of Christian theology, for it is upon our knowledge of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, Three Persons, that all Christian faith and worship depend, and from it that they take their essential orientation and significance.”²

Getting clear about what Christian faith consists in, both conceptually and existentially, was the principal concern of the nineteenth century thinker Søren Kierkegaard. The fundamental idea of his whole authorship, Kierkegaard declares is “what it means to become a Christian.”³ This involves conceptual clarity, to be sure, but for Kierkegaard, our knowledge of the truth is inseparably bound up with the form of life we live, with our mode of existence. The two cannot be separated. Without that lifelong “becoming” — that lifelong effort at obedience, and the repeated experience of grace and forgiveness when we fall short — one cannot “know” what Christianity consists in. Christian understanding, that is, cannot be reduced to the parroting of doctrinal formulae. Christianity must be lived in order to be understood.

Although Torrance discusses Kierkegaard at length only in one relatively short article,⁴ he refers to him frequently throughout his theological writings and always with appreciation. Torrance regards Kierkegaard as a great thinker of the Christian tradition who understood “more profoundly than all his predecessors and

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1.

² Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 4.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, “The Point of View for my Work as an Author,” published in *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 92.

⁴ See “Kierkegaard on the Knowledge of God” in *The Presbyter* 1.3 (1943), 4-7.

contemporaries" the threat to Christian faith posed by certain errant movements in the theology of Kierkegaard's day.⁵

Torrance appreciates especially Kierkegaard's recognition of the dangers inherent in the supposition that knowledge of God is to be founded on some capacity or other of our own, rather than upon the gracious self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ. Writing of Kierkegaard's influence on Karl Barth, Torrance observes that it is "the Truth of God incarnate, encountering us objectively, which therefore calls in question the illusion that truth arises from within us, from the depths of our own memories."⁶ Kierkegaard was concerned, Torrance further explains, "to find a mode of knowing appropriate to the fundamental nature of the Truth. The Truth with which we have to do in theology is the Being of God in space and time, the movement of the Eternal in our temporal existence, the Life of God in human history, in the concrete particularity of Jesus Christ."⁷ Kierkegaard sought to recover an account of what it is to know the Truth in accordance with God's giving of himself to be known in the person of Jesus Christ. He sought an account that conforms to the "fundamental grammar" of Christian theology. Torrance clearly approves of Kierkegaard's efforts, and yet, Kierkegaard pursues his project with almost no reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. What sense can there be then in regarding Kierkegaard, as I propose we ought, as a trinitarian theologian? Is it legitimate to ascribe to Kierkegaard a trinitarian frame of thought when he has

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965) 72. As a further indication of Torrance's high regard for Kierkegaard, note his repeated and approving quotation of Barth's attribution of his own theology to "an ancestral line which runs back through *Kierkegaard* to *Luther* and *Calvin* and so to *Paul* and *Jeremiah*." See Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 46; cf. 47, 53. Italics original.

⁶ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 45.

⁷ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 73. Torrance does not approve in this context of Kierkegaard's description of this mode of knowing as a "leap of faith," but this is for Torrance no more than a minor quibble. Elsewhere, Torrance invokes Kierkegaard's concept of the leap of faith without critical comment. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2008), 26.

almost no use for classical trinitarian terminology and makes no attempt to develop a doctrine of the Trinity?⁸

The Primacy of Faith

The paucity in Kierkegaard's work of classical trinitarian formulations does not itself justify the conclusion that Kierkegaard is no trinitarian theologian. After all, as Torrance observes, "the Holy Scriptures do not give us dogmatic propositions about the Trinity, but they do present us with definite witness to the oneness and differentiation between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, under the constraint of which the early Church allowed the pattern and order of God's triune Life to impose themselves upon its mind."⁹ If this be true, then the lack of dogmatic trinitarian propositions in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard need not preclude the possibility that the "pattern and order of God's triune life" as testified to in Scripture has also imposed itself upon *his* mind so as to become the foundation of his theological work. That possibility will occupy our attention in the investigation that follows. Following Torrance's own prescription as cited above — "The doctrine of the Trinity gives expression to the fact that through his self-revelation in the incarnation God has opened himself to us in such a way that *we may know him* in the inner relations of his divine Being *and have communion with him* in his divine Life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit" — ¹⁰ I will proceed by investigating the extent to which

⁸ On the paucity of trinitarian terminology in Kierkegaard's writings, see David R. Law, *Kierkegaard As Negative Theologian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 182, n.1. But note also the contention of several commentators that the paucity of explicit attention to the Trinity belies Kierkegaard's trinitarian understanding of God. Sylvia Walsh, for instance, notes that "while [Kierkegaard] affirms the doctrine of the Trinity, it is not an organizing principle of his theology." See Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 53. Per Lønning agrees that "The dogma of the trinity does not play a dominating role [in Kierkegaard's thought], but it can be accentuated clearly enough." Per Lønning, "Kierkegaard as a Christian Thinker," in *Kierkegaard's View of Christianity*, eds. Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1978), 163-81 [166].

⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), ix.

¹⁰ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 1 (my emphasis).

Kierkegaard's account of our knowledge of and communion with God depends crucially upon a trinitarian theological framework.¹¹

Before proceeding, let me reiterate the point already hinted at above: Kierkegaard has no interest in doctrinal formulations for their own sake. Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus explains that the formulation and the understanding of doctrine is not the same thing as understanding what it means to be a Christian. Christianity is not a philosophical theory; it is a form of existence. It can be understood only insofar as it is lived. "Christianity itself," Climacus explains, "must indeed regard as false Christians those who merely know what Christianity is."¹² Climacus refers here to those who treat Christianity as if it were merely a system of knowledge to be understood, and who know nothing of what it means actually to follow Christ, to venture out in faith. Arnold Come puts the matter well: according to Kierkegaard, "revelation occurs as an event in which I am involved in my total being in an activity in the life of Jesus as the Christ."¹³ This does not mean, for Kierkegaard, that theological deliberation is of no use. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, for example, Kierkegaard, again through a pseudonym, speaks positively of "Dogmatics" but only when it begins "where it properly should begin,"¹⁴ namely in the actuality of faith. Kierkegaard takes an Anselmian view of the task of theology. It is faith seeking understanding where faith is the lived life of Christian discipleship. He has no time, therefore, for the speculative approach of his own age (notably, that of Hegel) that prefers to skip over faith in favour of philosophical deliberation. "While it may be alright for a learned theologian to spend his whole life learnedly investigating the doctrine of Scripture and the Church, it would indeed be

¹¹ There is insufficient scope within an article of this nature to undertake a comprehensive study of Kierkegaard's treatment of these themes through the whole of his extensive corpus. My strategy, therefore, will be to present selections from his work that demonstrate, I suggest, the trinitarian logic that undergirds the whole.

¹² See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 371.

¹³ Arnold Come, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering My Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 16.

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 10.

a ludicrous contradiction if an existing person asked what Christianity is in terms of existence and then spent his whole life deliberating on that—for in that case when should he exist in it.”¹⁵ This concern with actual existence helps to explain why, if Kierkegaard is trinitarian in his thinking, we find very little discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity as such. The problem that concerned Kierkegaard in his own day, was not doctrinal error; he did not seek a revised formulation of Christian doctrine. The problem, rather, was the confusion of Christian discipleship with loyalty to the values and social conventions of respectable Danish society, a society whose Christian character was (mistakenly) taken for granted. Christian faith, so it was supposed at the tail end of Christendom, involved nothing other than going along with the crowd. The unmasking of that error was the task to which Kierkegaard’s life’s work was devoted. He sought to get clear about what it means to follow Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity is of interest, accordingly, only insofar as its formulation arises out of and informs the life of faith. Sylvia Walsh correctly observes that, “For Kierkegaard, the individual’s God-relationship is the lens through which the Trinity is encountered and known in human existence.”¹⁶

Our Knowledge of God

That God exists and can be known was not a point of dispute in Kierkegaard’s corpus. He felt under no obligation to defend belief in or argue for the existence of God, but was concerned instead with the question, *how* is God to be known?¹⁷ Kierkegaard did not share the confidence of many of his contemporaries that human reason provided comprehensive and ultimately infallible access to all truth, including that Truth which concerns us ultimately, and which Christian faith confesses to be revealed in and through Christ. Nor was he enamoured with the Romantic counter-proposal that aesthetic sensibility was the basis upon which the

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 370.

¹⁶ Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 53.

¹⁷ It is essential to note here that Kierkegaard is wary of the suggestion that we may have “knowledge” of God. His reticence, however, is due to the equation of “knowledge” with assent to true propositions about God. Kierkegaard does not deny that the relation of faith, by which the believer lives contemporaneously with Christ, has cognitive content.

edifice of theological understanding could be built, or with the presumption, gathering momentum during Kierkegaard's life, that historical-critical enquiry would clarify at last what it really means to say that God is revealed in Christ.

Dissatisfaction with these proposals set Kierkegaard in opposition to the three most influential theologians of his era, G. W. F. Hegel, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, and, a generation later, D. F. Strauss. The fault in each of their systems of thought, Kierkegaard contended, lay in the assumption that knowledge of God rests crucially upon some capacity or other of our own — reason in the case of Hegel, aesthetic sensibility in the case of Schleiermacher, and the newly developed historical criticism, in the case of Strauss.

Kierkegaard's opposition to the presumption that knowledge of God depends crucially on any of these human capacities rests on three considerations. The first is an astute awareness of the epistemic consequences of human finitude and sin. Our knowledge is, at best, partial and provisional; it is often compromised by partisan interests and its scope is constrained in some respects by our particular cultural location. The presumption that human reason is capable of establishing infallible access to the truth and that nothing lies beyond its gaze fails to take proper account of the limitations of the existing human being who does not view the world *sub specie aeterni*, as God does. The pretension to omniscience, which Kierkegaard detected in Hegel, merely reveals that Hegel had "forgotten what it means to exist" as a finite human being.¹⁸

The second consideration that leads Kierkegaard to reject the idea that knowledge of God rests crucially on our own epistemic capacities is "the infinite qualitative difference" between God and everything that is not God. God is of a different order of being than the creation, yet the theological proposals of Hegel, of Schleiermacher, and of Strauss variously annul that distinction. The Hegelian system does so by making creation, and especially human beings, a part of the history of God's self-realisation. The infinite qualitative difference between God and creation—the *antithesis*, in Hegel's terms—is revealed in Christ to be merely dialectical and is ultimately transcended (*aufgehoben*) through a *synthesis* of the divine and the human. For Hegel, the unity in Christ of the divine and the human is

¹⁸ See Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 249.

no unique synthesis pertaining only to Christ, as has been confessed by the Church's creedal tradition, but reveals what is true of us all. We all share in the divine life in virtue of our capacity for rational thought. Schleiermacher, for his part, collapses the distinction between God and creation by construing the divinity of Christ as a function of his humanity: "The Redeemer is like all men," Schleiermacher writes, "in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of his God consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in him."¹⁹ Divinity turns out to be, in Schleiermacher's Christology, nothing other than the fullest possible realization of a human capacity. Finally, Strauss removes the distinction between God and creation by proposing that theology must be undertaken within the bounds of immanent causality. Human society as a whole takes the place of Christ as the embodiment of divinity, while all talk of the supernatural is consigned to the realm of myth.

The third and most basic reason for Kierkegaard's opposition to the presumption of theological knowledge founded upon human capacity is the offense of Christ. The reality of God's appearance among us in the lowly figure of Jesus of Nazareth who becomes a servant, spends time with the outcast and the despised, and eventually, at Calvary, becomes despised and outcast himself, confounds our human estimations of who God *must* be, and of how God should behave. Jesus of Nazareth, the God-Man, is in person, so the New Testament proclaims, the primary and definitive locus of divine revelation.²⁰ Kierkegaard remains faithful throughout his authorship to an observation he made as a student: "Christian dogmatics, it seems to me, must grow out of Christ's activity, and all the more so because Christ did not establish any doctrine; he acted. He *did not teach* that there was redemption for men, but *he redeemed men*."²¹

¹⁹ F. D. E. Schleiermacher. *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 385.

²⁰ See, for instance, the first chapters of John's Gospel and of the Epistle to the Hebrews, although the theological claim is implicit throughout the New Testament.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 7 vols., I/412, I A 27, November 5, 1834.

The Offense of Christ

And yet, Kierkegaard repeatedly observes, the very one who is our redeemer is also the cause of offense. He who comes as Savior among us; he who promises rest to all who are weary and heavy laden, appears among us as the most unlikely of Saviors. Our natural inclination, well supported by rational deliberation, is to look elsewhere for the presence of God. Kierkegaard notices, however, that our well-reasoned estimations of how God should behave typically contradict the New Testament declaration that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The epistemic resources of flesh and blood — reason, imagination, historical enquiry — are found wanting; they are not the means by which God is recognised (cf. Matthew 16:17).²² We need God’s help, rather, to recognise the God who comes among us in servant form.

An “Invocation” offered by the pseudonym Anti-Climacus²³ at the beginning of Kierkegaard’s book, *Practice in Christianity*, addresses Jesus thus:

Would that we might see you as you are and were and will be until your second coming in glory, as the sign of offense and the object of faith, the lowly man, yet the Savior and Redeemer of the human race, who out of love came to earth to seek the lost, to suffer and die, and yet, alas, every step you took on earth, every time you called to the straying, every time you reached out your hand to do signs and wonders, and every time you defenselessly suffered the opposition of people without raising a hand—again and again in concern you had to repeat, “Blessed is the one who is not offended at me.” Would that we might see you in this way and that we then might not be offended at

²² Kierkegaard refers to this passage in *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 128.

²³ Anti-Climacus is said by Kierkegaard to be “a Christian on an extraordinarily high level.” *Journals*, VI/6433, X¹ A 517) *n.d.*, 1849. Kierkegaard thus presents Anti-Climacus as one who, on the basis of his extraordinary existential expression of Christianity, understands well what it is to be a Christian. Kierkegaard does not wish to present himself in that position.

you!²⁴

To see Jesus as he is, the lowly man who is also the Savior and Redeemer of the human race, is a matter of *prayerful* attentiveness. Attentiveness alone will not do it. We must seek God's help. That is the advice implicit in the invocation with which Kierkegaard begins *Practice in Christianity*.

The pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, proceeds in *Practice in Christianity* to critique the presumption that the truth about Jesus, the "god-man," can be uncovered through historical enquiry. "Can it be demonstrated from history that Christ was God?," Anti-Climacus asks.²⁵ The question is directed toward the "Quest of the historical Jesus" as it would later be named, a Quest that in the 1840s was gathering considerable momentum. We need not investigate here the details of Kierkegaard's critique of the Quest; it is sufficient for our purposes to note Anti-Climacus' insistence that, "one cannot *know* anything at all about *Christ*; he is the paradox, the object of faith, exists only for faith." The kind of knowledge Anti-Climacus has in mind here is the ideal promoted in "the age of reason": knowledge is attained through dispassionate and objective enquiry; it keeps its object at arms length and takes the form of objectively true and demonstrable propositions. The reality of Christ, however, is not accessible by these means and cannot be constrained in this way. The God who is present with us through abasement, who suffers, and is crucified, eludes the grasp of rational and historical-critical deliberation. The only way to recognise God in the lowly figure of the suffering servant, the only way to see his glory, is through what Kierkegaard calls, the autopsy of faith.²⁶ Faith, Kierkegaard insists, is not a human capacity; nor is it a condition that we can generate for ourselves.

Another of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, insists that the condition of faith is pure gift, given by God himself: "the god gave the follower the condition, the condition to see [that the servant is God] and opened for him the

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 9-10.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 26.

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 70.

eyes of faith."²⁷ Although Johannes Climacus presents this claim under the guise of a "thought experiment," it is clear that the position he elucidates is that of the New Testament. It is "my Father in heaven" Jesus explains, who reveals to Peter that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16-17). Similarly in John's gospel, Jesus advises the disciples that when he departs he will send the paraclete (John 16:7) who will "take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). Jesus explains further that, "All that the Father has is mine" (John 16:15). There is a clear trinitarian structure to the disciples' apprehension of who Jesus is. All three persons of the Trinity are involved. This logic undergirds Kierkegaard's contention, expressed pseudonymously in the texts considered so far, that God is involved in our knowing of him.

Although Anti-Climacus insists, as noted above, that "one cannot *know* anything at all about *Christ*," faith does involve cognitive content; it is not of the kind, however, that lies within the constraints of Modernity's preferred epistemology. The kind of knowledge of Christ that Kierkegaard thinks *is* possible is unlike the kind of knowledge we may claim to have of propositional truths and much more like the kind of knowledge we may have of other persons. Amongst Kierkegaard's papers we find the following note, penned apparently in an early draft of *Philosophical Fragments*: "[I]f the situation... is such that the teacher gives the condition, then one of course cannot know without being known by him, and one knows him only in so far as one is known."²⁸

That our knowledge of God is utterly dependent upon God is emphasised again in the Discourse published under Kierkegaard's own name, "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection." Kierkegaard explains that it is precisely in virtue of a person experiencing the need of God that one truly "comes to *know God*."²⁹ Without God, the person is "capable of nothing at all."³⁰ Our need of God is multi-

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 65. The Danish word translated here as "follower" is *Discipel*.

²⁸ The passage is cited in the editors' supplementary notes to *Philosophical Fragments*, 198.

²⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 321. Emphasis original.

³⁰ This phrase is repeated throughout the aforementioned *Discourse*.

faceted but includes especially our need of God's assistance to recognise him in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Divine Incognito

The servant form of God's presence with us in Christ exercises Kierkegaard a good deal. He stresses repeatedly that God appears incognito.

And now the God-man! He is God but chooses to become this individual human being. This, as said before, is the most profound incognito or the most impenetrable unrecognizability that is possible, because the contradiction between being God and being an individual human being is the greatest possible, the infinitely qualitative contradiction. But it is his will, his free decision, and therefore it is an omnipotently maintained incognito.³¹

The appearance of Christ incognito is motivated, Kierkegaard says, by love. It is out of love for humanity that Christ appears as one of us. It is out of love that he suffers. It is out of love that he comes as a servant — as one who serves our need of forgiveness and reconciliation. This theme is developed in a number of places in Kierkegaard's corpus, notably in the parable of the king and the maiden in *Philosophical Fragments*.³² Johannes Climacus ponders the situation of a king who loves a lowly maiden, but who is troubled by the vast inequality between them. The inequality is bound to frustrate the king's desire for a relation of mutual love. If the king were to appear to the maiden in all his splendour, she might forget herself in adoring admiration but this would not overcome the deep inequality between them, nor achieve the mutuality the king desires. Conversely, if he were to house the maiden in his palace and clothe her in royal finery, this would enable him to enjoy her company but only at the cost of a deception. The inequality cannot be overcome by a mere change of costume. "Who grasps the contradiction of this sorrow," Climacus asks: "not to disclose itself is the death of love; to disclose itself

³¹ See especially, *Practice in Christianity*, 127-33.

³² See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 26-34.

is the death of the beloved.”³³ Conceiving the situation as analogous to God’s love for humanity, Climacus then goes on to propose that the problem is overcome by a descent. “[The god] will appear, therefore, as the equal of the lowliest of persons. But the lowliest of all is one who must serve others—consequently, the god will appear in the form of a *servant*.” Eager to avoid any suggestion of Docetism, however, Climacus continues: “But this form of a servant is not something put on like the king’s plebian cloak, which, just by flapping open would betray the king... but it is his true form.”³⁴ The extent of the god’s adoption of the servant form is stressed by Johannes Climacus. He remarks a second time: “But the form of the servant was not something put on.”³⁵

Therefore the god must suffer all things, endure all things, be tried in all things, hunger in the desert, thirst in his agonies, be forsaken in death, absolutely the equal of the lowliest of human beings—look, behold the man! The suffering of death is not his suffering, but his whole life is a story of suffering, and it is love that suffers, love that gives all and is itself destitute.³⁶

A Trinitarian Theology

Kierkegaard’s deliberations upon the reality of “the god” coming among us in servant form reveal his commitment to the creedal Christology of the Christian tradition. It is truly God who becomes incarnate among us in Jesus, and the form adopted—that of the servant—is no pretence, but a genuine adoption of our humanity. These rudiments of orthodox Christology give rise to and are essential elements of the doctrine of the Trinity. The recognition that in Jesus of Nazareth we have to do with God himself is the fundamental impetus toward the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. That Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Fragments*, and again in *Practice in Christianity*, supports these orthodox Christological claims, albeit

³³ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 30.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 31-2.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 32.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 32-3.

pseudonymously, lends weight to the contention that Kierkegaard's theology presumes and is informed by a trinitarian understanding of God.³⁷

What of the work of the Spirit in this account of God's self-disclosure? Does the Spirit have a part to play? We do not get much hint of this in *Philosophical Fragments* for Kierkegaard's point in that work is to establish the decisiveness of Christ in our learning of the Truth. The importance of the Spirit does become apparent elsewhere, however. At the beginning of *Works of Love*, for instance, Kierkegaard offers a prayer successively addressed to the Father, "God of Love, source of all love," to the Son, "our Savior and Redeemer" who "revealed what love is," and to the Spirit: "How could one speak properly of love if you were forgotten, you Spirit of love, who take nothing of your own but remind us of that love sacrifice."³⁸ The trinitarian form of God's self-disclosure is more readily apparent here: God in three persons is the source of love, the revealer of love, and the one who enables recognition of that love. The allusions in the prayer to Jesus' teaching on the role of the paraclete in John 14:26,³⁹ and in John 16:13,⁴⁰ confirm the Spirit's key role in enabling one's apprehension of the truth of Christ.

Elsewhere Kierkegaard appeals directly to the testimony of the Spirit:

There is only one proof for the truth of Xtnty: the inner proof, *argumentum spiritus sancti*. This is already hinted at in 1 John 5:9. If

³⁷ John D. Glenn Jr. contends that "Trinitarian Christianity is not denied in the *Fragments*, but it is not essential to Climacus' approach to the Incarnation and the Atonement." John D. Glenn Jr., "Kierkegaard and Anselm," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus* (Macon GA., Mercer University Press, 1994) 223-43, 239. I suggest however, that, while the doctrine of the Trinity is certainly not explicit in the *Fragments*, the unmistakable invocation of a dual nature Christology cannot be sustained outside a trinitarian frame of reference.

³⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3. The prayer to the Spirit "who takes nothing on his own" alludes to John 16:3 which makes explicit the Spirit's role in guiding "you" into all truth.

³⁹ "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and *remind* you of all that I have said to you." My emphasis.

⁴⁰ "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for *he will not speak on his own*, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." My emphasis.

we accept hum. [*sic*; read "human"] witnesses (this means all historical proofs and arguments) "the witness of God is greater," i.e., the inner proof is greater. And now, in v.10 "Whoever believes in the Son of God has this witness within."⁴¹

The witness of the Spirit is straightforwardly regarded here as "the witness of God" and that witness gives rise to belief in the Son of God. It should by now be clear that Kierkegaard's account of God's self-disclosure and of how one may learn the Truth, to use Climacus' terminology, is grounded in a trinitarian theological framework. God makes himself known through his Son, the "god-man," who comes among us as a servant and is recognised as such through the gift and guidance of the Spirit.

Communion with God

As suggested already, the knowledge of God given through revelation is not primarily a matter of propositional or cognitive information. It is rather, as Kyle Roberts explains, "a relational knowledge that effects a personal, spiritual transformation of the self."⁴² Kierkegaard himself writes, "in becoming known by a person [God] wants to create in him a new human being."⁴³ Thus, in Kierkegaard's view, the divine work of making himself known is bound up with the work of making new persons of us. That transformation takes place, as it turns out, precisely through relationship or communion with God. We turn now to consider then, the extent to which God's work of creating "a new human being" is also predicated in Kierkegaard's mind upon a trinitarian understanding of God. How are the Father, the Son and the Spirit respectively involved in the work of bringing about this new reality?

We may build here on what has already been discovered in *Philosophical Fragments*. In that work, Johannes Climacus considers the possibility that the

⁴¹ Kierkegaard's *Journals and Notebooks*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelorn et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), vol. 6, 105.

⁴² Kyle Roberts, *Emerging Prophet: Kierkegaard and the Postmodern People of God* (Eugene, OR., Cascade Books, 2013), 20.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 325.

process of learning the Truth necessarily involves a transformation of the individual. Within the terms of the thought experiment set up by Climacus the individual is posited as existing in untruth and as bereft of the condition to learn the Truth. Recall that Kierkegaard is concerned here with the Truth present in Jesus the god-man.

Pursuing further his alternative to the Socratic model, exemplified by Kierkegaard's theological contemporaries, Climacus proposes that, since we are bereft of it, we need to be given the condition for learning the Truth. The "condition" Climacus later discloses, is not reason but *faith*.⁴⁴ This involves, furthermore, a transformation of the learner. "Let us call this change *conversion*," Climacus suggests.⁴⁵ Indeed, the making of a new person, involves a *rebirth*.⁴⁶ But who can bring about such a change? It is not the learner him or herself; otherwise we return to the Socratic. The change must be brought about by one who can give the condition and along with it the Truth.⁴⁷

Let us call him a *savior*, for he does indeed save the learner from unfreedom, saves him from himself. Let us call him a *deliverer*, for he does indeed deliver the person who had imprisoned himself, and no one is so dreadfully imprisoned, and no captivity is so impossible to break out of as that in which the individual holds himself captive! And yet, even this does not say enough, for by his unfreedom he had indeed become guilty of something, and if that teacher gives him the condition and the truth, then he is, of course a *reconciler* who takes away the wrath that lay over the incurred guilt.⁴⁸

Learning the Truth, Climacus explains, requires that we be reconciled by and with the one who is himself the Truth. Kierkegaard does not use the term, but he is

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 59.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 18. Italics original.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 19.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 17.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 17. Italics original.

speaking here of what Torrance refers to as communion. The life of the Christian is a life of reconciled relationship with God.

Philosophical Fragments provides the rudiments of a trinitarian theology in which reconciliation with God is brought about through the work of Jesus, the god-man, but we must look elsewhere in Kierkegaard's work for more explicit reference to the trinitarian structure of the work of reconciliation. A Journal entry from 1852 offers further insight: Kierkegaard here considers the words of Jesus presented in John 6:45: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." "As a rule," Kierkegaard says, "the relationship is presented thus: it is Christ who leads us to God; man needs a mediator in order to come to God. But this is not the way it is presented in the New Testament."⁴⁹ It begins with the Father, to whom, as children, we might imagine ourselves to exist in direct relationship. But with maturity, Kierkegaard explains, comes the realization of our infinite distance from God and thus also of our need for a mediator. "Then it is that God directs one to the Son, to the Mediator."⁵⁰ The Mediator makes atonement, to be sure, but Kierkegaard is equally keen to point out that, "The Mediator is also the prototype."⁵¹ Christ makes atonement for us. "Yet, the 'Atoner' must not supplant the 'prototype'; the prototype remains with his demand that there be a striving to be like him."⁵² It is important to stress here that, for Kierkegaard, there can be no question of salvation by works. Salvation is entirely a matter of grace. But salvation involves a transformation of the individual; it issues in a new form of life which Kierkegaard repeatedly characterizes as "following" Christ in the way of lowliness, servanthood, and suffering. In a prayer, Kierkegaard writes:

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Journals*, II/1432, X⁵ A23 *n.d.*, 1852. The deliberations of this Journal entry have their genesis in a marginal note found in Kierkegaard's copy of the New Testament. Alongside John 6:45, he writes: "It is thus not the Son who attracts (people) to the Father, but the Father who refers (people) to the Son, and the Son refers again to the Spirit." Cited in Bradley Rau Dewey, "Kierkegaard and the Blue Testament," in *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967), 391-409; citation at 407-08. Commenting upon the marginalia, Dewey writes, "Perhaps Kierkegaard was trying to work out a version of the Trinity." 408.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals*, II/1432, X⁵ A23 *n.d.*, 1852.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals*, II/1432, X⁵ A23 *n.d.*, 1852.

⁵² Kierkegaard, *Journals*, II/1432, X⁵ A23 *n.d.*, 1852.

O Redeemer, by your holy suffering and death you have made satisfaction for everyone and everything; no eternal salvation either can or shall be earned—it has been earned. Yet you left your footprints, you, the holy prototype for the human race and for every individual, so that by your Atonement the saved might at every moment find the confidence and boldness to want to strive to follow you.⁵³

When confronted with the call to follow Christ, our need of the Spirit's help again becomes clear. Kierkegaard explains: "[T]he prototype directs away from himself (just as the Father directed one to the Mediator), to the 'Spirit', as if he said: You cannot begin this striving naively; that would even be—as you yourself feel—presumptuous... No, you must have a Spirit to help you."⁵⁴

Summarising the cooperation of the three persons in the work of reconciling us to God, Kierkegaard explains that, "it is the Father who directs to the Son, the Son who directs to the Spirit, and not until then is it the Spirit who leads to the Son and the Son who leads to the Father."⁵⁵ Kierkegaard makes it clear that the relationship established with the Father — the communion, to use Torrance's term — is mediated through the Son and the Spirit. The initiative of the Father, the mediation of the Son, and the enabling of the Spirit are thus to be regarded as essential elements in Kierkegaard's understanding of what it means to become and to be a Christian.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this essay that while explicit reference to the Trinity does not appear often in Kierkegaard's work, his account of how we may come to know God, of how we may be reconciled with him, and of how we may live in communion with him, depends crucially upon a trinitarian understanding of God. Kierkegaard's account of the Christian life is thoroughly Christocentric, to the point

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 147.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Journals*, II/1432, X⁵ A23 n.d., 1852.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals*, II/1432, X⁵ A23 n.d., 1852.

sometimes of obscuring the work of the Father and the Spirit, but the underlying logic is certainly trinitarian. It is true for Kierkegaard too, as it was for Thomas Torrance, that “the doctrine of the Holy Trinity constitutes the fundamental grammar of Christian theology...”⁵⁶

There is much scope in Kierkegaard’s work for further exploration of the contention that his theological deliberations are framed within an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, but, within the constraints of this essay, one final point may be offered in support of this claim. Kierkegaard’s life of prayer, as presented in his writings, frequently reveals a deeply trinitarian sensibility. The successive clauses of a prayer penned in his *Journals*, for instance, are addressed in turn to “Father in heaven,” “our Lord Jesus Christ” and “God the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁷ These invocations are replicated almost exactly in the prayers that precede each of the three discourses in *For Self-Examination*,⁵⁸ and they are echoed, as noted above, in the prayer that appears in the opening pages of *Works of Love*. T. F. Torrance certainly recognised that theology proceeds from doxology. He explains in the opening pages of *The Trinitarian Faith* that, “From the start the theology of the Church took the form, not of a set of abstract propositions, but of embodied truth in which the knowing and worshipping of God and the daily obedience of faith and life interpenetrated one another.”⁵⁹ Consistent with this theological tradition, the explicitly trinitarian prayers found in Kierkegaard’s writings penetrate and shape the content of his searching explorations of how one becomes a Christian and of how the Christian life is to be lived.

⁵⁶ As cited above: Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 4.

⁵⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 6 vols., 3/3423, VIII² B 1433 *n.d.*, 1848.

⁵⁸ See Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination. Judge for Yourself!* ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 13, 56, 73.

⁵⁹ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 6.