

KIERKEGAARD'S INCARNATIONAL REALISM:

The Grammar of Christian Knowledge

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Abstract: *In contrast to common anti-realist readings of Søren Kierkegaard, Thomas F. Torrance correctly sees Kierkegaard as sharing his own theological and incarnational realism. This article argues that Kierkegaard's focus on the subjective "how" of faith does indeed affirm a "Christian knowledge" of a reality outside ourselves, as seen both in his epistemological realism in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and in his stress in *Practice in Christianity* and communion discourses on the believer's relation to the scripturally-narrated Christ, in all his particularity, prompting offense or faith. While significant differences still obtain between their understandings of the "grammar" of Christian knowledge—especially Kierkegaard's "unscientific," pluralist epistemology emphasizing the distinctive passionate aspects of Christian knowledge and theology in contrast to Torrance's interest in seeking a unified account of all human knowledge—they share a realistic "grammar of Christian redemption" that sees "truth" in relation to God's self-giving in Jesus Christ, a shared vision inviting further exploration.*

Introduction

Vast differences obviously obtain between Thomas F. Torrance and Søren Kierkegaard as philosophical and theological thinkers. Whereas Kierkegaard focuses upon the concept of subjectivity as key to understanding ethics, religion, and

Christian faith, Torrance orients himself to objectivity. Whereas Kierkegaard is often critical of “doctrine,” Torrance commits himself to the importance of the dogmatic task. And whereas Kierkegaard critiques comprehensive philosophical or theological “systems,” Torrance champions the ideal of “scientific theology” that seeks a comprehensive account of human knowledge, including both theology and the natural sciences.¹

It would be understandable therefore to see Kierkegaard as a “subjectivist” and Torrance as an “objectivist.” Against this simplistic view I want to explore some points of contact between Torrance and Kierkegaard that subvert a simple opposition between “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” and in particular, I want to argue that both share a profound theological realism, especially in holding to a strong incarnational realism.

Torrance’s “objectivism,” first, is by no means positivist. His appropriation of Michael Polanyi’s thought on “personal knowledge” in both theology and science affirms a “fiduciary” element in all human knowing: “in both theology and the natural sciences discovery begins with faith (belief), which leads to the truth, truth being a fundamental insight into the *real*, as it is independent of the knower.”² Indeed, as Myk Habets notes, Carl F. H. Henry, who advocated a strongly propositional account of revelation, criticized Torrance for “subjectivism,” blaming this on Kierkegaard’s and Polanyi’s dire influence. But as Habets observes, “Torrance understands Kierkegaard’s ‘truth as subjectivity’ as in fact theological objectivity and realism, the subject’s proper relation to the object.”³ For Torrance, this fiduciary “personal knowing” means that “Reality is to be known in faith

¹ Myk Habets, *Theology in Transposition: A Constructive Appraisal of T. F. Torrance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 27–65.

² Habets, *Theology in Transposition*, 63.

³ Habets, *Theology in Transposition*, 101. On objectivity in relation to Kierkegaard, see for example, Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 235.

through an existential encounter with the ultimate Reality — Jesus Christ the incarnate Word (*Logos*)."⁴

But is Torrance right about Kierkegaard? Is Kierkegaard's focus on "subjectivity" compatible with "theological objectivity and realism" rather than "subjectivism"? I want to argue in this paper that Kierkegaard is indeed a "realist," in two ways.

First, Torrance is correct that Kierkegaard is a "realist" in epistemology, and, specifically with regard to the incarnation, that Kierkegaard affirms "Christian knowledge" of a reality outside ourselves. Kierkegaard's theological "realism" is even more remarkable in that it arises from a focus not upon "objectivity" but upon the subjective "how" of faith. Moreover, Kierkegaard's stress on the particularity and reality of the incarnation provides him tools to criticize a range of modern reinterpretations of the incarnation. To support this argument, I will turn to *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, authored by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus.⁵

Second, in his later literature Kierkegaard develops further an incarnational realism, with "realism" now describing Kierkegaard's narrative portrayal of Christ. In some contrast to the Climacus texts, Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*, authored by his Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus, employs narrative to describe Christ's life as the "The Inviter," the incarnate God whose life and actions present the possibility of offense or faith.⁶ The realism of this portrayal resides in its "horizontal" depiction of Christ's life, beyond the "vertical" affirmation of the eternal

⁴ Habets, *Theology in Transposition*, 64, 64n145, citing Torrance's definition of the term "personal knowing" from Torrance, ed., *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1980), 141–2.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Introduction and Notes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Introduction and Notes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Introduction and Notes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

breaking into time that Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* called “more than enough.”⁷

In the conclusion, I will note some of the similarities and the differences in how Kierkegaard and Torrance understand the “grammar” of this incarnational realism.

Incarnation, Transcendence, Revelation, and Realism in *Philosophical Fragments* and Concluding Unscientific Postscript

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus conducts a thought-project: let us ask whether one’s eternal happiness depends upon a moment in time. Climacus in chapter I contrasts Socrates to a nameless Teacher B. Whereas Socrates is merely a midwife who prompts his hearers to discover eternal happiness as the truth they have in themselves, the learner’s relation to Teacher B proceeds on other assumptions: the learner is in untruth, and through his own fault (let us call this *sin*); the learner is unfree and bound, so the teacher must give him the condition for becoming free and along with it the truth (let us call this teacher a *savior, deliverer, reconciler, judge*); therefore the moment is decisive (let us call it *the fullness of time*). The learner must become a person of a different quality (let us call him a *new person, who experiences conversion, repentance, rebirth*).⁸

As Robert C. Roberts notes, in *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus, in remarkably brief compass, deftly outlines the heart of the Christian gospel, the “grammar of Christian redemption,” with its interrelated concepts of sin, salvation, God and Savior, faith, and revelation. Indeed, central to Climacus’ thought-experiment is the concept of a revelation of the God in time, beyond human conception or hope, a revelation that confounds human expectation and confronts any human being with the possibility of offense or of faith.⁹

⁷ Kierkegaard, *PF*, 104.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *PF*, 9–22.

⁹ On “the grammar of Christian redemption,” see Robert C. Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard’s “Philosophical Fragments”* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 26ff. Roberts acknowledges his indebtedness for this concept to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Paul L. Holmer.

Climacus' thought-experiment in *Philosophical Fragments* is a tour de force in addressing a host of theological issues arising in modernity: faith and reason, the logical status of religious belief, the nature of truth, the relation of faith and history, and the meaning of a transcendent revelation. Climacus' critique suggests that a range of purportedly Christian modern interpretations of the incarnation are essentially Socratic. As Roberts and Murray Rae both rightly discern, Climacus' portrayal of the incarnation undermines a range of speculative Christologies, including Hegel's translation of the incarnation into a metaphysical principle of essential divine-human unity and Feuerbach's left-wing Hegelian mythological interpretation of the incarnation as "all theology is anthropology."¹⁰ Even Schleiermacher, who holds Christ as sole mediator, unsuccessfully attempts to combine two incompatible conceptions: the grammar of Christian redemption and the grammar of the Socratic teacher.¹¹ The critique can extend also to more recent Christologies, for example, Rudolf Bultmann's demythologized Christology or John Cobb's process Christology.¹² What emerges in *Philosophical Fragments* is an account of the incarnation much closer to traditional Christian theological beliefs, and also with considerable critical weight.¹³

But even if Climacus' thought-project on the incarnation is identifiably traditional, offering ways to criticize various speculative or anthropocentric Christologies, does not his theme that "truth is subjectivity" undermine this claim that the incarnation is a transcendent revelation, at least in any "realist" sense, thus resulting in a noncognitive fideism? Many students of Kierkegaard do object to describing him as a realist.¹⁴ Some will argue, with some strands of

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 579.

¹¹ Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 41–6 (hereafter *KVI*); Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History*, 30–3.

¹² Rae, *KVI*, 61n29; Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History*, 34–41.

¹³ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 138 and 344n7 (hereafter *KFS*).

¹⁴ Evans cites in particular Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), also mentioning Louis Mackey, Sylviane Agacinski, John Vignaux Smythe, and John D. Caputo. See Evans, *KFS*, 29, 336n2. From a particular Wittgensteinian perspective, one might add D. Z. Phillips.

postmodernism, that for Kierkegaard the multivocality of language precludes any stable referentiality of language to “reality,” with language an endless play of signifiers.¹⁵ For others, such as Richard Rorty, “realism” entails a commitment to classical foundationalism, and hence an untenable claim to direct access with reality.¹⁶ Others, more modestly, see Kierkegaard as advocating, over against Hegel, a Kantian skepticism about our knowledge of the noumenal, suggesting that for Kierkegaard believers should at best hold to belief in God as a regulative concept, bracketing any metaphysical or ontological claims about God’s existence.¹⁷

Yet a number of scholars support the counterargument that Kierkegaard is a realist, even, according to C. Stephen Evans, that Kierkegaard is “uncompromisingly on the side of realism.”¹⁸ Exploring the “realism and antirealism” debate extensively, Evans argues that Kierkegaard clearly is not a “realist” if that means adopting “the Cartesian project of providing absolute foundations for knowledge,” claiming “a kind of unmediated access to Reality,” “possessing a truth that is final and certain.”¹⁹ Kierkegaard agrees with critics of this Cartesian project. So too, Kierkegaard is skeptical of proofs for God’s existence, of claims to unmediated experience of God,²⁰ and of “evidentialist” efforts to ground belief in God in objective evidence.²¹ But the options are not either to “claim unmediated access to Reality that gives us final truth” or else “that there is no such

¹⁵ For an analysis of various advocates of this view, see Lee Barrett, “Doctrines and Undecidability: Kierkegaard on the Indeterminacy of Christian Teachings,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26/1 (2010): 59–74. In addition to Mackey and Poole, Barrett discusses Steven Shakespeare, Michael Strawser, Mark C. Taylor, Benjamin Daise, and Pat Bigelow.

¹⁶ Evans, *KFS*, 43.

¹⁷ George Pattison, “‘Before God’ as a Regulative Concept,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1997*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 70–84.

¹⁸ Evans, *KFS*, 9. See especially chapters 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, and 11.

¹⁹ Evans, *KFS*, 55–6.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 243–5, 600; Evans, *KFS*, 60.

²¹ Evans, *KFS*, 63.

thing as objective truth about the real."²² Kierkegaard's realism is more modest, holding "that there is such an objective final truth, but also... that for finite human beings, such a truth can only be an ideal to be approximated and striven for."²³

The reality of God and the ideality of objective final truth are summed up well when Climacus writes in *Postscript*: "existence itself is a system — for God."²⁴ So too, Climacus' "truth is subjectivity" "does not dismiss the idea of objective truth" but "claims that for us existing human beings, such truth can only be an *approximation* (*CUP*, 189)."²⁵ Hence, Evans claims, Kierkegaard's famous thesis that "truth is subjectivity does not undermine this commitment to realism."²⁶ First, "truth is subjectivity" is limited to moral and religious truth; in the natural sciences and mathematics, for example, truth is clearly objectivity. Second, and more importantly, the thesis "truth is subjectivity" in *Postscript* "is not on the nature of objective propositional truth but on the question as to what makes a person's life true" and indeed presupposes that there is objective truth, even in moral and religious realms of discourse.²⁷ In a famous passage in *Postscript*, Climacus writes of the contrast between the Christian who "with knowledge of the true idea of God" "prays in untruth" while "someone who lives in an idolatrous land... prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol"²⁸: "[W]here, then," Climacus asks, "is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol."²⁹ Climacus here does not deny "the true God"; the question is how one relates truly ("prays in truth") whether to "the true

²² Evans, *KFS*, 56.

²³ Evans, *KFS*, 56.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 118; Evans, *KFS*, 57.

²⁵ Evans, *KFS*, 57.

²⁶ Evans, *KFS*, 58.

²⁷ Evans, *KFS*, 58.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 201.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 201.

God" or "the image of an idol."³⁰ Kierkegaard stresses how finite beings must always *strive* for the truth. This is especially true, again, of moral and religious truth. The significance of "subjectivity" for Kierkegaard is that "subjectivity is no second-best fallback position with respect to religious knowledge" but "is the ground of all genuine religious knowledge in all times" and that "religious knowledge is linked to subjectivity because there is an essential link between the attainment of religious insight and the development of religious character."³¹

Evans' point concerning this "essential link" illuminates a remarkable claim that Kierkegaard makes in his journals about *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, that the entire book is aimed at showing that if one follows the path of subjectivity, the "how," one will, when encountering Christian faith, also be in a position to discern the "what," that "there is a How with the characteristic that when the How is scrupulously rendered the What is also given, that this is the How of 'faith.' Right here, at its very maximum, inwardness is shown to be objectivity."³² Climacus, and Kierkegaard, are misunderstood if interpreted as reducing the "what" of faith (Christ as the incarnate God-in-time) to the "how" of faith. But they do highlight that any knowledge of the true God is grounded in subjectivity, that, as Evans puts it, God "has designed the world in such a way that... creatures can only come to know him if they are engaged in the struggle to become like him."³³ In a remarkable fashion, then, Kierkegaard's portrayal of "truth is subjectivity" never denies the reality of God and of the incarnation, but also insists that knowledge of this reality requires subjective struggle. Evans' account therefore is far from a "naive realism," but attends to the particular logic of reality claims in different

³⁰ Rae, *KVI*, 217, rightly notes: "The point of this example is clearly not the elevation of the idol to the status of the true God such that the truth is simply *what* we believe in with sufficient passion."

³¹ Evans, *KFS*, 63.

³² Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967), vol. 4, entry 4550, p. 351; cf. Evans, *KFS*, 64.

³³ Evans, *KFS*, 63.

realms of discourse. It is no surprise when Evans affirms how his reading of "realism" relates both to Jamesian pragmatism and Reformed epistemology.³⁴

In a recent essay, M. G. Piety agrees that Kierkegaard's notion of "truth is subjectivity" does not result in noncognitive fideism, and that he does so in a manner surprisingly congruent with Patristic theology.³⁵ Piety argues that for Kierkegaard "Christian knowing is not merely about having true beliefs; it is primarily a matter of living out Christian truth as a way of life," "articulating the role that knowledge plays in a life lived in relation to Christian truth as expressed maximally in God's grace, mercy, and love."³⁶ Arguing that Kierkegaard's epistemology holds important similarities with Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, Piety maintains that, for Kierkegaard, specifically "Christian knowledge is a product of revelation, and the specific revelation with which Kierkegaard is concerned can be characterized as an encounter with Christ, or as contemporaneity with Christ."³⁷ In this encounter with Christ as paradox, one learns what one cannot learn by oneself, that one is a sinner, outside the truth, but also that one's sins are forgiven.³⁸ It is only in the passion of faith, the "happy passion," that one receives this good news.³⁹

But is this "faith" really "knowledge of Christ"? Piety here employs the traditional distinction between "acquaintance knowledge" and "propositional

³⁴ On William James, see Evans, *KFS*, 51; on Evans and Reformed epistemology, especially Alvin Plantinga, see Evans, *KFS*, chapters 3, 7, 10–11. Paul L. Holmer says of the contextuality of reality claims: "'[R]eal' is not a name, and there are no irreducible reals... [W]e have to locate the 'real' in each context or each system of discourse in turn." Paul L. Holmer, *On Kierkegaard and the Truth*, ed. David J. Gouwens and Lee C. Barrett III (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 172.

³⁵ M. G. Piety, "Kierkegaard and the Early Church on Christian Knowledge and Its Existential Implications," chapter 11 in Stephen Minister, J. Aaron Simmons, and Michael Strawser, eds., *Kierkegaard's God and the Good Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 191–208 (hereafter *KEC*).

³⁶ Minister, et al., "Editors' Introduction," *Kierkegaard's God and the Good Life*, xvi.

³⁷ Piety, *KEC*, 193.

³⁸ Piety, *KEC*, 196.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *PF*, 54.

knowledge,” in which “the former is the source of the latter, just as our acquaintance with the objects of our experience is the source of our propositional knowledge of them.”⁴⁰ Based on an important early journal entry by Kierkegaard on *Credo ut intelligam* and *Nihil est in intellectus quod non antea fuerit in sensu* [there is nothing in the intellect that has not previously been in the senses],⁴¹ she concludes that for Kierkegaard:

a person meets Christ... in the moment of faith. This meeting yields an acquaintance “knowledge” of Christ. If there is Christian knowledge in the propositional sense, this acquaintance knowledge of Christ both precedes it and provides the foundation for it. To become acquainted with Christ is an experience that is related to the intellect in a manner analogous to the way *sensory* experience is related to the intellect.⁴²

As with Clement, who held that “an ‘august knowledge of the truth’ may be built ‘on the foundation of faith’ (*Stromata* V, Chapter 1),”⁴³ so for Kierkegaard, Piety explains, “Knowledge of the truth... is a product of faith, or of a faithful life.”⁴⁴ It is not that one first possesses propositional knowledge of Christ that is then “applied.” Rather, Piety argues, Kierkegaard holds that “Christian truth, or the truth of Christianity, when viewed merely as knowledge (i.e., as an idea or concept) abstracted from any existential situation, is untruth.”⁴⁵ True Christian knowledge occurs only when the belief that God became man in Christ is grasped, in Kierkegaard’s words, as “the objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness,”⁴⁶ joined with, Piety says, “the

⁴⁰ Piety, *KEC*, 193.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *JP*, vol. 2, entry 1098, p. 4.

⁴² Piety, *KEC*, 194.

⁴³ Piety, *KEC*, 202, 207n49.

⁴⁴ Piety, *KEC*, 203.

⁴⁵ Piety, *KEC*, 198.

⁴⁶ Piety, *KEC*, 200, quoting Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17.

wise person's insight that the only way one can properly relate to this 'knowledge' is subjectively, in the passion of faith."⁴⁷

Striking about Piety's account is how this acquaintance knowledge of Christ entails the individual's *encountering* Christ, or "meeting" Christ.⁴⁸ While the incarnation, as the eternal truth that can be known only in consequence of believing that it has become historical, cannot be an object of "knowledge,"⁴⁹ the encounter with the God in time produces a capacity that a person could not by herself engender, the ability to see herself not only as guilty but as sinner. So too, Christ presents one with the possibility of offense or faith, and the person who then receives faith finds herself utterly and continuously reliant upon Christ in the "happy passion" that is faith.⁵⁰ This acquaintance knowledge itself, what the Patristics called "faith" (*pistis*) as opposed to the Gnostics' intellectualistic and elitist version of *gnosis*, is the foundation for the propositional knowledge that only faith can grasp.

Piety aptly summarizes Kierkegaard's account of this "faith seeking understanding," how faith's "objective uncertainty" merges with a subjective certainty, and how faith entails reality claims: "A person who has encountered God's love is thus able to understand both that he is a sinner and that his sins are forgiven. Not only is he able to understand these things; he is able to achieve certainty, in the psychological sense, that this conception of himself and his relation to God corresponds to reality."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Piety, *KEC*, 200. For more detailed discussion, see M. G. Piety, *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralist Epistemology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 115–60 (hereafter *WOK*).

⁴⁸ Compare Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 156–7.

⁴⁹ Piety, *KEC*, 199. See also Piety, *WOK*, 153–5, 171–7.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *PF*, 54.

⁵¹ Piety, *KEC*, 196.

Incarnational Realism in Narrative Form in *Practice in Christianity*

Thus far we have seen how Kierkegaard's concern with "truth is subjectivity," far from leading to subjectivism or irrational fideism, can be seen as affirming an incarnational realism. More specifically, faith includes a "knowledge of Christ" in which the believer relates to a reality beyond herself.

This does not exhaust Kierkegaard's incarnational realism. In his later writings, such as *Practice in Christianity*, authored by Kierkegaard's Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard explores further the grammar of Christian redemption, and in particular the concept of "offense," with a more detailed narrative account of the person of Christ. This extended narrative account of Christ is absent in the earlier *Philosophical Fragments*, which uses "thin" narratives (the contrast between the Socratic teacher and Teacher B, and the poem of the king and the maiden) rhetorically to shed light on the distinctiveness of the "grammar of Christian redemption" over against Socratic faith.

Turning to *Practice in Christianity* one is struck by its fulsome narrative quality. In contrast to the "algebraic" portrayals of Christ in *Philosophical Fragments*, offense and contemporaneity are now amplified and given texture through extended explication of the narrative structure of the gospels. In *Practice in Christianity*, No. I, Anti-Climacus expounds upon Christ's invitation, "Come Here, All You Who Labor and Are Burdened, and I Will Give You Rest" (Matthew 11:28),⁵² wherein that invitation evokes a variety of responses of "offense."⁵³ Then in *Practice in Christianity*, No. II, "Blessed Is He Who Is Not Offended at Me" (Matthew 11:6), Anti-Climacus rehearses through "Biblical Exposition and Christian Definition"⁵⁴ the different "categories of offense" the incarnation elicits: offense in relation to the loftiness "that an individual human being claims to be God, acts or speaks in a

⁵² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 40–56.

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 62–7.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 71.

manner that manifests God" or offense in relation to the lowliness, "that the one who is God is this lowly human being, suffering as a lowly human being."⁵⁵

Narrative comes to the fore in Anti-Climacus' discussion of the incarnation and offense or faith in *Practice in Christianity* for four reasons. First, narrative illuminates doctrinal theology, the belief in Jesus as the God-Man, with an implicit rejection, as Murray Rae notes, of both Ebionitism as offense in relation to the loftiness of Jesus and Docetism as offense in relation to the lowliness of Jesus.⁵⁶

Second, the narrative of Jesus secures the specificity of his person as God incarnate. As we have seen, Kierkegaard's account of the God-Man serves as a check against speculative or mythological interpretations (Hegelians, right-wing or left-wing), or interpretations seeing Christ as simply intensifying a universal human capacity (such as Schleiermacher's "God-consciousness"). The narrative exhibits Christ to be the unique and unsubstitutable incarnate one. Over against "profane history" that would attempt to demonstrate historically the truth of the incarnation, making it a matter of "knowledge," Anti-Climacus sets a "sacred history" that confronts us with "the story of his life in the state of abasement [and] also that he claimed to be God" prompting not knowledge but offense or faith.⁵⁷

Third, narrative functions to show how this "sacred history" interrogates the hearer or reader, making clear that all who come to faith must go through this possibility of offense.⁵⁸ Rhetorically, Anti-Climacus' reading of the gospel narrative shows how this narrated paradoxical Christ must shock the sensibilities of anyone, in whatever century, who would have faith, clarifying the experiential dimension of encounter with Christ.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 82.

⁵⁶ Rae, *KVI*, 71.

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 30; cf. 25, 64, 221; Joel D. S. Rasmussen, "Kierkegaard's Biblical Hermeneutics: Imitation, Imaginative Freedom, and Paradoxical Fixation," in Lee C. Barrett and Jon Stewart, eds., *Kierkegaard and the Bible: Tome II: The New Testament*. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, Volume 1, Tome II (Farnham, UK / Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 249–84; on Kierkegaard's concept of "sacred history," see 266–9.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 101.

Fourth, the fulsome picture of Christ's "being the truth" in *Practice in Christianity* shows how this experience requires the "redoubling of truth within yourself," in a life that "expresses the truth approximately in the striving for it... just as the truth was in Christ a life, for he was the truth."⁵⁹ "Subjective truth" in relation to Christ is narrated truth in two senses, for it is the narrative of Christ's life that displays truth, and the disciple who strives to follow Christ "redoubles" that truth in the narrative of her or his own life.

As Sylvia Walsh has shown, in depicting this striving to "redouble" the truth within oneself, Kierkegaard operates with an "inverse dialectic," exploring how, for example, Christian faith finds "joy in the strife of suffering."⁶⁰ Kierkegaardian faith involves negative qualifications (the consciousness of sin, the possibility of offense, dying to the world or self-denial, and suffering) but through these negative qualifications Christian strivers live in positive qualifications (faith, forgiveness, new life, love, hope, joy, and consolation), all of which are enclosed within "the broader complementary dialectical framework of Christianity as incorporating both gospel and law, grace and works, mildness and rigor through a relation to Christ in his dual role as the Christian striver's redeemer and prototype for living Christianly."⁶¹

It is important to recognize how, despite Kierkegaard's emphasis on striving, Christ is not only prototype but redeemer. This is especially clear in Kierkegaard's communion discourses, which Walsh rightly sees as "the resting point" of Kierkegaard's entire authorship. The communion discourses show how "the thrust of the authorship as a whole is clearly toward reconciliation with God, which is accomplished through the death and atonement of Christ and made true in the life

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 205; see Piety, *WOK*, 103.

⁶⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses and The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Introduction and Notes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 93–159.

⁶¹ Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 14.

of each person individually by loving Christ much and remaining in communion with him in one's daily life."⁶²

But there still may remain a suspicion that Kierkegaard's portrayal of Christian existence is finally simply the victory of one's own religious experience as a forgiven, reconciled person. Yet, as Andrew B. Torrance observes, citing Eberhard Jüngel, this is to ignore how Kierkegaard's "truth is subjectivity" must be dialectically related to Kierkegaard's equally important understanding that one's "subjectivity is *untruth*." "[T]he reality of God cannot be captured in a subjective human idea and so it is only in and through a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ — 'the way, and the truth, and the life' *who lies beyond human subjectivity* — that a person stands related to the truth of the Christian faith."⁶³ "Beyond existentialism," Kierkegaard holds that "God reconciles the world to himself *in the person of Jesus Christ* and not in the faith of the individual human."⁶⁴

The paradox here is the paradox that, to some extent, confronts all forms of realism: Christians are called to *believe* that their faith in God is not simply a product of their own belief-forming imagination but is grounded in the reality of Christ; they are called to believe that they cannot believe without the one in whom they believe. Without Christ, they can only generate unchristian beliefs.⁶⁵

Kierkegaard's focus upon the narrated sacred history of Christ in *Practice in Christianity*, and the expansive theological vision in the communion discourses of

⁶² Sylvia Walsh Perkins, "At the Foot of the Altar: Kierkegaard's Communion Discourses as the Resting Point of His Authorship," in Warner M. Bailey, Lee C. Barrett III, and James O. Duke, eds., *The Theologically Formed Heart: Essays in Honor of David J. Gouwens* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 241–63, 260.

⁶³ Andrew B. Torrance, "Beyond Existentialism: Kierkegaard on the Human Relationship with the God Who is Wholly Other," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 3 (July 2014): 295–312, 308, original italics.

⁶⁴ Andrew B. Torrance, "Beyond Existentialism," 300–1, original italics.

⁶⁵ Andrew B. Torrance, "Beyond Existentialism," 307. For extensive development of Kierkegaard's vision of the reality of God's personal transformative communion that draws forth human relationship, see Andrew B. Torrance, *The Freedom to Become a Christian: A Kierkegaardian Account of Human Transformation in Relationship with God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

Christ as redeemer and prototype, highlight a final sense in which Kierkegaard's vision of the incarnation is "realistic." Once more in continuity with Irenaeus, this time on the rule of faith, for Kierkegaard "scripture defines the world, not the other way around."⁶⁶ With his central concern for the sacred history of Christ leading to a fully-drawn realistic Scriptural hermeneutics, Kierkegaard witnesses finally, with an Augustinian breadth of vision, to the incarnation as defining reality itself, witnessing at once to the heart's restless desire-filled journey to God and to God's self-emptying journey out of love to each individual, a relation of mutual reciprocity between God and humanity.⁶⁷

Conclusion: Kierkegaard, Torrance, and Incarnational Realism

Thomas F. Torrance and Søren Kierkegaard do not represent a simple opposition between "objective realism" and "subjective anti-realism." I have argued rather that they present complex understandings of objectivity and subjectivity, and that each is committed to "realism," the sense of "truth being a fundamental insight into the *real*, as it is independent of the knower."⁶⁸ Moreover, Kierkegaard and Torrance both hold also to an incarnational realism in that they both "direct our minds to the self-giving of God in Jesus Christ" as the source of truth.⁶⁹

Focusing on Kierkegaard, I have argued that the key to understanding how he relates subjectivity and objectivity in Christian faith lies in this journal entry: "when the How is scrupulously rendered the What is also given, that this is the How of 'faith.' Right here, at its very maximum, inwardness is shown to be objectivity."⁷⁰ Hence, the "how" and the "what" are logically intertwined in non-reductionistic

⁶⁶ Timothy Houston Polk, *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 79. Compare Rasmussen, "Kierkegaard's Biblical Hermeneutics," 251–2.

⁶⁷ Lee C. Barrett, *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013).

⁶⁸ Habets, *Theology in Transposition*, 63.

⁶⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 219, quoting Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 45.

⁷⁰ Kierkegaard, *JP*, vol. 4, entry 4550, p. 351.

ways. For Kierkegaard's theological realism, "subjectivity" does not reduce theological affirmations to expressions of personal affective states. Yet any "knowledge of Christ" as the incarnate one is "truth" only within the context of passionate interest in the encounter with the incarnate one. Kierkegaard holds that Christian affirmations of the reality of the incarnation find their logical home within the passions of faith, hope, and love as a response to Jesus Christ.⁷¹

Kierkegaard fills out this depiction of incarnational realism in a host of ways: an epistemological realism, a stress on the reality and prior actuality of Christ as the incarnate one who challenges all human understanding, affirmation of a specifically "Christian knowledge" that arises from an "acquaintance knowledge" in encounter with Christ, an extended temporal narrative of Christ's life that entails Christ's continuing presence as "redeemer" and "prototype" in both his work and his person, and Kierkegaard's realistic reading of Scripture—all of these together can counter common pictures of a "subjectivistic" or "anti-realist" Kierkegaard. Torrance was therefore correct in seeing "Kierkegaard's 'truth as subjectivity' as in fact theological objectivity and realism, the subject's proper relation to the object."⁷²

In their critical incarnational realism, Kierkegaard and Torrance do share this overall "grammar of Christian redemption": for Kierkegaard the subjective "how" of faith in encountering Christ reveals the objective "what," and acquaintance knowledge of Christ leads to propositional Christian knowledge. Torrance similarly begins with "the evangelical and doxological level" of encountering Christ, but then uses this to explore "the theological level" (the economic Trinity) and then the "higher theological and scientific level" (the ontological or immanent Trinity).⁷³ Yet where Kierkegaard diverges from Torrance is at this point, for he assumes the

⁷¹ I explore these themes of a non-reductionistic reading of Kierkegaard, and the centrality of faith, hope, and love as responses to Christ, in *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁷² Habets, *Theology in Transposition*, 101.

⁷³ Thomas F. Torrance, "The Basic Grammar of Theology," in *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 146–78, 156–61.

doctrinal tradition, but does not develop it dogmatically.⁷⁴ In his expressly Christian literature he aims, rather, as a “poet of the religious,” to enliven for his readers the possibilities of offense or faith.

An even more striking difference between them lies in the contrast between, on the one hand, Torrance’s “scientific theology,” including formulating multi-layered hierarchies of knowledge and reality,⁷⁵ and, on the other hand, Kierkegaard’s “unscientific” reflections. Given Kierkegaard’s suspicions of Hegelian speculative philosophy and theology for reducing “faith” to “science,” he seeks to clarify the logical features of “subjective knowledge” in ethics, religion, and, in its own distinctive way, in Christian discourse. Hence, Kierkegaard does not question Christian knowledge of God. But he is especially alert to the dangers of confusing this knowledge with “objective” in the sense of “non-self-involving” knowledge in the manner, he believes, of Hegel and his own contemporary Hans Lassen Martensen. Rather, Kierkegaard stresses, the logic of Christian discourse, and hence the knowledge of God in Christ, finds its context of meaning in its challenge to the will and to the heart. His goal, rhetorically rather than systematically, is to display how this knowledge challenges our self-reliant “reason,” offends us, and enlists our emotions, passions, and feelings as much as our reflection in responding in faith.

Moreover, Kierkegaard has no interest, as does Torrance, in formulating an integrated and hierarchical account of our knowledge of the world.⁷⁶ Kierkegaard champions, rather, as Piety puts it, a “pluralist epistemology,” a “nonreductionist account of the complexities of human knowing.”⁷⁷ Hence, while Kierkegaard is premodern in his understanding of truth, in his nonreductionist epistemology he is

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard does employ economic trinitarian language. Paul Martens suggests also that Kierkegaard uses this language as a means of “imagining the Immanent Trinity.” See Paul Martens, “Trinity: A Concept Ubiquitous Yet Unthematized,” in Aaron P. Edwards and David J. Gouwens, eds., *T&T Clark Companion to the Theology of Kierkegaard* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020), 177-85.

⁷⁵ Habets, *Theology in Transposition*, 51–65.

⁷⁶ McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance*, 232.

⁷⁷ Piety, *WOK*, 4.

strikingly postmodern.⁷⁸ Content to clarify the distinctiveness of the logic of knowledge-claims within different realms of knowledge in order to prevent conceptual confusion, he sees no need for hierarchical integration of diverse realms of discourse.

Underlying this contrast between them lie different understandings of "grammar."⁷⁹ While they share the basic "grammar of Christian redemption," Torrance's critical realist epistemology aims at a unified account of theological science and the natural sciences, whereas Kierkegaard's "grammatical" investigations—which in no way reject the legitimacy of the methods and claims to "objective knowledge" in such fields as science, mathematics, and history—stress the distinctive differences between types of knowledge-claims, above all how "subjective knowledge" is marked by "objective uncertainty," "approximation," and "striving" in relation to religious truth.⁸⁰

Despite these important differences, however, if Kierkegaard is indeed not subjectivistic, anti-realist, or "existentialist," but in some sense a grammarian of faith, this opens the door to exploring further his place within the broad ecumenical Christian theological tradition, and thus how he may engage doctrinally-oriented theologians like Torrance. Although deeply critical of much systematic theology in his own day for obscuring the contours and dynamics of Christian existence, Kierkegaard, as is clear in his account of incarnational realism, has much to offer by way of critical interaction and dialogue with that tradition, as many students of Kierkegaard are increasingly discovering.⁸¹ Thomas F. Torrance, despite his differences from Kierkegaard, certainly saw the value of engaging with him. My hope is that this essay will stimulate others to explore further possibilities for dialogue between Kierkegaard and Torrance.

⁷⁸ Piety, *WOK*, 4, citing Evans, *KFS*, 42.

⁷⁹ On Torrance on grammar, see again Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*. On Kierkegaard on grammar, see Paul L. Holmer's explorations in relation to Wittgenstein's comments on "theology as grammar." Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁸⁰ Piety, *WOK*, 168.

⁸¹ See Edwards and Gouwens, eds., *T&T Clark Companion to the Theology of Kierkegaard*.