

## THE THEOLOGICAL SELF IN KIERKEGAARD'S *SICKNESS UNTO DEATH*

**Philip G. Ziegler, ThD**

**Professor of Christian Dogmatics, University of Aberdeen**

p.ziegler@abdn.ac.uk

*"For truth, which is what the gospel of justification of the ungodly is about, shatters not a few of what were to us till now self-evident beliefs. But it does this only to generate new self-evident beliefs: ones which can stand before God."<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract:** *With particular attention to *Sickness Unto Death*, this essay explores the place and function of the coram deo motif in Kierkegaard's theological programme, arguing that it serves to secure the fact that the human self is constituted and governed by its relationship to God such that true human subjectivity — a central Kierkegaardian preoccupation — finds its decisive condition of possibility in the transcendent reality of God's sovereign claim and mercy. Kierkegaard's use of the coram deo motif reiterates the essential logic of Luther's theological anthropology, sharpening the explication of human sinfulness and radicalizing the reality of divine grace as the sole possibility of genuine human selfhood.*

### **Introduction**

Approaches to Kierkegaard in contemporary theology vary widely. And among those who take Kierkegaard primarily to be an "expositor of Christian concepts," there is specific debate concerning whether and just how he might stand in formative

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<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), xxxvi.

relation to the traditions and trajectories of Lutheran theology.<sup>2</sup> It seems incontrovertible that Kierkegaard's searching reflections upon the conception of the human person as *coram deo* — i.e., before God — represents a deep investment in a distinctively Lutheran theological motif. This essay explores the place and function of the *coram deo* motif in the Dane's theological programme seeking thereby to discern and account for its significance. Focusing on the text of *Sickness Unto Death* in particular, I will argue that the *coram deo* motif serves to secure the fact that the human self is at once constituted and governed by its relationship to God such that true human subjectivity — one of Kierkegaard's central preoccupations — is shown to have as its decisive condition of possibility the transcendent reality of God's sovereign claim and mercy. More than this, Kierkegaard's use of the *coram deo* motif republishes key features of the essential logic of Luther's theological anthropology, even as it sharpens the explication of human sinfulness and so also radicalizes the appreciation of divine grace as the sole possibility of genuine human selfhood.

What is commonly referred to as Luther's own "relational" anthropology has at its heart the claim that standing "before God" is fundamentally constitutive of human reality as such.<sup>3</sup> As Hans-Martin Barth observes, in light of his "experience of transcendence in the encounter with the word" Luther "saw his life with an

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<sup>2</sup> See Lee C. Barrett, "Kierkegaard as Theologian: A History of Countervailing Interpretations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. J. Lippitt and G. Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 541-543 and more extensively on Kierkegaard's own relation to Luther also Ernest B. Koenker, "Søren Kierkegaard on Luther," in *Interpreters of Luther: Essays in Honor of Wilhelm Pauck*, ed. J. Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 231-252, and Lee C. Barrett, "Kierkegaard's Appropriation and Critique of Luther and Lutheranism," in *A Companion to Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015), 180-192, especially in relation to the themes of justification and conscience, 182-185. Notably, discussion of the concept of *coram deo* itself does not feature in either Koenker's or Barrett's valuable accounts.

<sup>3</sup> For recent summary discussion of Luther's anthropology, see Notiger Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," in *The Oxford Handbook to Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. R. Kolb, et al, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212-232 and Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. T. H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 154-176.

immediacy that can scarcely be exaggerated as existence 'before God,' *coram deo*.<sup>4</sup> That humans *qua* creatures "cannot subsist for a moment by their own strength" but rather rest entirely upon God's creative sustaining is essential to this claim; but so too, and most distinctively, is the idea that human beings are constituted in and by their confrontation with the *iustitia dei* and so ultimately are *per definitionem* those tried by divine righteousness and justified by faith.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the logic of justification supplies, for Luther, the logic of creation as such, in as much as *qua* creature, "human existence is 'justified through faith' existence."<sup>6</sup> As Gerhard Ebeling emphasizes, the phrase *coram deo* announces that reality itself "is only understood for what it is if the word of God, through which it has its being and which is what is truly reality in it, is heard" because human reality is simply and fundamentally "existence in the sight of God, in the presence of God, under the eyes of God, in the judgement of God, and in the world of God."<sup>7</sup>

"Before God" is, of course, a spatial rather than temporal trope. Minimally, it carries the meaning "with reference to God." But such rendering is far too formal to deliver adequately the force of Luther's idea of the existence determining Word of God, i.e., of the divine address that effectively constitutes human reality. To be *coram deo* is to find oneself in a determinative and inescapable encounter with the God of the gospel mediated concretely by God's word, which means *via* both law and gospel. As we shall see, Kierkegaard's own talk of the human self "before God" is substantive in just this way, reiterating as it does the biblical idiom which speaks

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<sup>4</sup> Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 491.

<sup>5</sup> The citation is drawn from Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, *Luther's Works*, vol. 33, ed. P. S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 103.

<sup>6</sup> Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 156. Famously, Luther offers this definition in thesis 32 of his *Disputatio de homine*: "The human being is human in that s/he is justified by faith," see "The Disputation on Man (1536)," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 34, ed. L. W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 137-40. See also William C. Weinrich, "Homo Theologicus: Aspects of a Lutheran Doctrine of Man," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. R. Links et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 29-44.

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1972), 198-99.

of the human being set “before the countenance of the Lord.”<sup>8</sup> In unfolding this case that Kierkegaard is here best understood with close reference to Luther, I am pushing in a quite different direction than other readings of this theme in *Sickness unto Death*. On the one hand, the reading I offer does not concern itself directly with the “social function” of the idea of *coram deo* which others have discerned.<sup>9</sup> On the other, my reading also pulls away from those that restrict their interest either to the role of the idea in the outworking of Kierkegaard’s own poetic autobiography, or else consider “before God” a kind of rational “postulate,” i.e., a strictly formal and “regulative” concept whose meaning is purely “heuristic” and not at all “ostensive,” as Kant himself would put it.<sup>10</sup> For a dynamic, realist account of the concept of *coram deo* allows us to understand the structure and content of *Sickness unto Death* as an elaboration of Kierkegaard’s core conviction, that:

Paganism required: Know yourself. Christianity declares: No, that is provisional — know yourself — and then look at yourself in the mirror of the Word in order to know yourself properly. No true self-knowledge without God-knowledge or [without standing] before God. To stand before the mirror means to stand before God.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Vulgate makes use of the actual phrase *coram deo* regularly in this sense of “in the sight of God,” not least in passages where judgments and solemn declarations of truthfulness are made, e.g., Gen 6:11; Ps 56:13; 2 Cor 2:17, 4:2, 7:13, 8:21, 12:19; Gal 1:20; 1 Tim 5:4, 5:21; 2 Tim 4:1. Luther’s own usage (*vor Gott*) typically means decisively “in the sight of God” — see, e.g., Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” *LW* 33, 239-240; and in comments on Psalm 73:16 (*LW* 10, 418) and Psalm 95:2 (*LW* 11, 252). In Danish language Bibles, *coram deo* is typically rendered by the phrase “for Guds Åsyn.”

<sup>9</sup> Seung-Goo Lee, “A Social Function of *Coram Deo* in the Thought of Kierkegaard,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1 (2007), 153-177, and in quite a different mode also John D. Caputo, “Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith: On Being Dead Equal Before God,” in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. K. Vanhoozer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 95-109.

<sup>10</sup> For the former, see Joackim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. B. H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 542-45; for the latter, George Pattison, “‘Before God’ as a Regulative Concept,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. N. J. Cappelørn et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 70-84. The remark from Kant comes from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 606.

<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journal and Papers*, ed. and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), vol. 4, 40 (X.4 A4120).

## The Despairing Self “Transparent to its Ground” — The Sinful Self “Before God”

The argument of *Sickness unto Death* unfolds in two parts. In the first, Kierkegaard sets out a wide-ranging discussion of the manifold ways in which human beings fail at — and so *despair* of — being “a self.” Famously, he defines the self in reflexive and agential terms, suggesting that a human being is established as a three-fold synthesizing of the finite, the infinite, and the relation between them. If all were as it should be, one would say that “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”<sup>12</sup> As it is, the self perpetuates, suffers, and so becomes a *mis-relation*, namely, “the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself.”<sup>13</sup> Such misrelating is despair. It has as its dual condition of possibility, the constitution of the human self in its proper and “original state from the hand of God,” and the reality of the human self as spirit, i.e., as a free relating that can forfeit its proper and original state by choosing the possibility of relating to itself otherwise from the very moment it is “released from [God’s] hand, as it were.”<sup>14</sup> As Kierkegaard represents it, this “fall” is ceaselessly enacted in the present precisely because it is constantly reproduced by the active mis-relating of the self to itself and its eternal ground. Never just sick, but always also self-sickening, the self spirals through all-manner of variations of despair: suspended in the dialectic of infinitude and finitude, possibility and necessity, the self enacts its constitutive freedom and consciousness in ways that consistently fail at its task and forfeit its destiny of “becoming itself.” The majority of section one of the work schematically analyses the many “forms of this sickness” with alarming acuity *en route* to the final, maximal, “demonic despair” of absolute nihilistic defiance in which a self “in hatred towards existence, it wills to be itself, wills to be itself in accordance with its misery.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 14.

<sup>13</sup> *SUD*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *SUD*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> *SUD*, 42, 73.

As the invocation of “God” in this brief discussion signals, even before the argument becomes explicitly hamartiological in section two, Kierkegaard’s anthropology is already theological in character. All despair is properly “despair of the eternal and over oneself.”<sup>16</sup> That a human being is in despairing mis-relation to itself is something that can only be discerned with reference to the original and final reality of a *proper* relating won in and through relation to God.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard avers here that the reality of the self cannot be conceived correctly in anything other than a theological register, as the concept of the human as *spirit* only really exists here. Below and outwith this register — i.e., without the self being “conscious of itself as spirit or conscious of itself before God as spirit” — all despair will be suffered in ignorance; indeed, Kierkegaard suggests this is the most prevalent form of despair in the world.<sup>18</sup> Never just the self, but the self *and* “the God relationship” — indeed, the self *in* the God-relationship — is what is fundamentally at issue. This is made more patent when Kierkegaard declares that “the opposite to being in despair is to have faith”: the definition of faith is that of genuine selfhood, namely, that “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”<sup>19</sup> This means that the discussion of despair concerns the pathology of unbelief. In view of this, it would be difficult to sustain the view that Part One of *Sickness Unto Death* represents a pure and independent phenomenology of the despairing self; rather, it substantively anticipates the more extensively theological discussion which follows in Part Two.<sup>20</sup> Here we discern an evident parallel with Luther’s *Disputatio de homine*, where the Reformer asserts the severe limitations of the philosophical approach to the

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<sup>16</sup> *SUD*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> *SUD*, 16, 30.

<sup>18</sup> *SUD*, 46, 45.

<sup>19</sup> *SUD*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> For supple and detailed discussion of the interpretative issues involved, see Arne Grøn, “The Relation Between Part One and Part Two of *The Sickness unto Death*,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. N. J. Cappelørn et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 35-50.

question of humanity on the basis that there is “no hope” that one “can himself know what he is until he sees himself in his origin which is God.”<sup>21</sup>

This character of Kierkegaard’s anthropology becomes all the more robust in Part Two of the work with the explicit introduction of the decisive concept of *coram deo* in the definition of sin:

Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself.* Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair. The emphasis is on *before God*, or with the conception of God; it is the conception of God that makes sin dialectically, and religiously what lawyers call “aggravated” despair.<sup>22</sup>

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested in his own 1930 inaugural lecture,

The person who understands himself from the perspective of his possibilities understands himself within his own self-reflection. In revelation, however, the human being is torn out of this reflection and receives the answer to his question only from and before God [*nur von und vor Gott*]. Here we find the fundamental difference between philosophical and theological anthropology.<sup>23</sup>

Kierkegaard’s concern in the second part of *Sickness unto Death* is precisely to display this very difference, as he undertakes an ever-more-explicitly *theological* anthropological reflection; indeed, he explicitly styles his new subject here the “*theological self*” which is simply, as he explains, “the self directly before God.”<sup>24</sup> I suggest that in doing so he specifically echoes Luther’s own use of the parallel Latin

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<sup>21</sup> Luther, *Disputatio de homine*, thesis 17, cf. theses 11-18, *LW* 34, 137-38.

<sup>22</sup> *SUD*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1930. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. C. J. Green, trans. D. W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), vol. 10, 403. Setting out the logic of this claim is the core ambition of Bonhoeffer’s early dissertation, *Act and Being*.

<sup>24</sup> *SUD*, 79.

phrase "*homo theologicus*" in his 1536 *disputatio de homine*.<sup>25</sup> Further, like Luther, for Kierkegaard the theological self is the human being understood firmly with reference to its career as created, fallen, and set under the divine promise of reconciliation and redemption. Theological anthropology organised by the concept of existence *coram deo* is not merely or primarily keyed to the doctrine of creation as such, but rather to the reality of sin, judgment and redemption, and so to soteriology.

The phraseology of the opening remark of Part Two intimates close continuity with the preceding discussion of despair: talk of "intensification" and "aggravation" suggest that the effect of the introduction of the *coram deo* is to effect a *quantitative* adjustment. But Kierkegaard's fuller exposition deploys concepts designed to express the *qualitative* difference at stake with the advent of God most fully into the discussion. The "theological self" is "no longer merely the human self" and the discussion must, now "dialectically take a new direction"<sup>26</sup> because the introduction of the reality of the self *coram deo* amplifies the significance of the situation of the self "infinitely"<sup>27</sup> by placing it in the register of *eternity*<sup>28</sup>; *this* qualification of human existence makes the self a matter of "extraordinary" importance.<sup>29</sup> To place the self before God is to eliminate at a stroke the importance of every partial and measured assessment of human reality as "more or less" or "in part" in which nothing decisive is (or ought to be) taken too far.<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard here suggests that this natural, all-too-human — indeed "pagan" — style of moderate reasoning domesticates and so betrays the radicality of the human situation, a radicality that only dialectical theological reflection can honour. As in other Kierkegaard texts, the ideas of "paradox" and "offense" operate here to announce

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<sup>25</sup> Thesis 28 speaks of Aristotle as one "who knows nothing of theological man," LW 34, 139. The meaning of the "theological self" is spelt out explicitly in theses 20-23, 32, and 35.

<sup>26</sup> SUD, 79.

<sup>27</sup> SUD, 80, 100.

<sup>28</sup> SUD, 105.

<sup>29</sup> SUD, 83, 86.

<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard refers to the golden mean — *ne quid nimis* — here as a shorthand for all of this, *Sickness unto Death*, 86.

the humiliation of reason before the reality of the Christian God whose coming profoundly qualifies our human reality in judgment and grace. As he puts it memorably: "Here Christianity steps in [and] makes the sign of the cross before speculation."<sup>31</sup>

This is all to acknowledge that the introduction of the *coram deo* into the discussion affects both the content but also decisively the form of reflection itself. Both the "what" and the "how" of our thinking and discourse are implicated in the situation of the despairing self *coram deo*, which is to say, in sin. This insight is concentrated in Kierkegaard's claim that the advent of the concept of sin brings with it "the category of individuality" and of "the single individual."<sup>32</sup> In fact, when pressed, the idea of sin *coram deo* properly reduces to acknowledgement of the reality of *the actual sinner*: Sin "cannot be thought speculatively" because the reality of God and of human existence before God disallow such abstraction and instead demand "earnestness" from a discourse that "immerses itself in actuality."<sup>33</sup> This pressure derives from the fact that, as Kierkegaard puts it, such "abstractions simply do not exist for God; for God in Christ there live only single individuals (sinners)... God does not avail himself of an abridgement."<sup>34</sup> Although the *coram deo* arrives late discursively and conceptually, its arrival — when taken seriously — presses the whole business of human self-reflection into the existential situation of a genuine confrontation with God: indeed, merely to think and talk *about* the human *coram deo* is not yet to have suffered and acknowledged the reality of actually having being placed *coram deo*.

It is worth noting that Kierkegaard's exposition of the self in sin *coram deo* also develops along the lines of the traditional Lutheran law and gospel pattern. In the first instance, the encounter with God takes the form of law in the sense that God comes to provide the "criterion"<sup>35</sup> that qualifies and "infinitely magnifies" the

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<sup>31</sup> *SUD*, 120.

<sup>32</sup> *SUD*, 119.

<sup>33</sup> *SUD*, 119-20.

<sup>34</sup> *SUD*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> *SUD*, 79, 81, 114.

desperate human situation. In Ebeling's concise phrasing: "The *coram*-relationship reveals that the fundamental situation of man is that of a person on trial."<sup>36</sup> With the image of the human "before God" Kierkegaard directly evokes the biblical picture of the person confronted with the holiness of God, placed before the divine judgment seat, or addressed by the divine commandment and claim. This is in keeping with the idea that it is exclusively in and through the encounter with God that the reality of sin is disclosed and known as such. In traditional Lutheran doctrine, it is the primary work of the law to aggravate and illumine sin, and so to drive the sinner to despair of his or her own efforts at putting life to rights. The exposure of the self *coram deo* is a compressed depiction of precisely this encounter with the law: "Christianity proceeds to establish sin so firmly as a position that the human understanding can never comprehend it."<sup>37</sup>

But the theological self is finally forged by both law *and gospel*. As Kierkegaard considers, the self is never only *coram deo* but always *coram Christi*, which means it is confronted with the reality of sin because confronted with the reality of *forgiveness* of sins.<sup>38</sup> Now Kierkegaard's specific interest here is not in elaboration of the evangelical promise. It is in expounding the modalities of human sin, including those ways in which sin despairs of the gospel itself, i.e., refuses to entrust itself to the "infinite love of [God's] merciful grace" enacted in the incarnation<sup>39</sup> and so — in the language of the thesis of the work — refuses to "rest transparently in the power that established it." As Kierkegaard observes in the very last sentence of the work, this refusal is precisely the refusal of *faith*.<sup>40</sup> If the gospel is received as gospel, "the person who does not take offence *worships in faith*."<sup>41</sup> But what we have, in effect, is a reflection on how the word of the gospel can and does itself become "law," as it were: confronted by the reality of God come low for us to save in Jesus Christ, the self can and does yet take offense and, despairing,

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<sup>36</sup> Ebeling, *Luther*, 197.

<sup>37</sup> *SUD*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> *SUD*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> *SUD*, 126.

<sup>40</sup> *SUD*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> *SUD*, 129.

declines worship and refuses to believe. Precisely because here the encounter with God is concretized fully and finally in the paradox of the incarnation — because the sinner is before God *in Christi* — this represents for Kierkegaard “the highest intensification of sin.”<sup>42</sup>

It is a matter of note that in all of this *Sickness unto Death* closely parallels the discussion of sin which features in the argument advanced earlier in *Philosophical Fragments*.<sup>43</sup> In that text, Kierkegaard had contrasted what might be involved in coming to know the truth in the situation of ignorance — detailed in the text by reference to Socrates and the Platonic idea of knowing as recollection — with what would be involved in coming to know the truth in the situation of sin, i.e., where one exists in *untruth*. The learner in the latter case is one who exists in “polemical” contradiction of the truth and lacks the very condition of possibility for coming to truth; indeed, such a person cannot even form the question about the truth. Such a person, Kierkegaard says there, “has forfeited and is forfeiting the condition” for coming to the truth.<sup>44</sup> The one who is able to teach the truth in this situation is no less than a saviour, i.e., the one whose coming sets one in a relation to the truth in which the truth itself affords the very conditions for its reception, and so, as Kierkegaard says, effectively delivers a person from “not existing” to “existing.”<sup>45</sup> In spinning out his account of the manifold refusal to “be a self” in despair before God, Kierkegaard is expositing the subjectivity — and so inescapable existential self-involvement — that corresponds to this very scenario of decisive revelatory encounter of the divine with the human being *in sin*. In both texts, the human can and must be *placed into the truth* by the effective advent of God which places our despair into the truth and so renders it sin, even as it overreaches it in judgment and forgiveness. This is what Kierkegaard means when he asserts in *Sickness unto Death* that “sin is a position”: sin can only be acknowledged on the

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<sup>42</sup> *SUD*, 131.

<sup>43</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 14-15.

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 22.

basis of “a revelation of God”<sup>46</sup> because the reality of being “*before God* is the definitely positive element in it.”<sup>47</sup> This important claim, and more fully the close interrelation of the arguments of these two different works — one concerned with the subjectivity of the human being before God and the other with the sheer historical positivity of the eternal moment of saving revelation — makes it difficult to accede the thought that “before God” is, as Pattison suggests, a strictly regulative concept with only the logical and discursive force of an “*as if*.” Instead, it displays the logic of a theology of the Word, in which the divine address effectively delivers its hearers into the truth of its own declaration and judgment (law) and grace (gospel). “That sin is a position,” Kierkegaard observes in this vein, “can be made clear from only one side,” namely from the side of the God before whom the human stands.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusions

Kierkegaard explores the idea of the human self in its despair in order to disclose that the human is a creature in revolt against itself *and its God*, in short, that the human being exists in sin. The presentation is highly schematic, offering as he says an “algebraic” definition of sin capable of expressing the essential logic of any and all its horrid actuations.<sup>49</sup> The concept of *coram deo* proves to be the decisive factor in this algebra: it individuates, infinitely intensifies and qualifies human existence against its sole, ultimately relevant criterion, namely the *absurd, offensive* and *paradoxical* reality of the saving advent of God for us in Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup> But finally, it is in virtue of the reality of the *gracious* regard of God that the self may in faith *rest* — as Kierkegaard has it — transparently in God as its ground. In view of the reality of the incarnation of God in Christ, a truly human life — and so a Christian life of faith — is not beyond our reach. As Bonhoeffer once observed, Christian existence

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<sup>46</sup> *SUD*, 96.

<sup>47</sup> *SUD*, 100.

<sup>48</sup> *SUD*, 99.

<sup>49</sup> *SUD*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> *SUD*, 83.

simply means “that one both may and must live as a human being before God.”<sup>51</sup> He explains,

Since it is unable to place itself into the truth, [the self] “is” only in the instance of God’s decision for it, which must also be understood, of course in some way as its decision for God. In other words, existence “is” in its “being in reference to God”... Only that existence which stands in the truth — that is that stands in the decision — understands itself and does so in such a way that it knows itself placed into the truth by Christ in judgment and in grace.<sup>52</sup>

This existence “in reference to God” is precisely that “theological self” to which the reality and event of human existence *coram deo* gives rise in Kierkegaard’s account.<sup>53</sup> In all this, Kierkegaard has clearly discerned the significance of the core Lutheran conviction that “in the *coram Deo* relationship we see ourselves as we really are — created, forgiven sinners because God sees us.”<sup>54</sup>

Kierkegaard’s hamartologically focused account of the reality of the *theological self* can teach a number of fundamental lessons that are readily forgotten or side-lined in much contemporary theological anthropology. Let me name but two.

The first is the important place that the doctrine of sin has in the elaboration of any theological anthropology. Sylvia Walsh has persuasively argued that Kierkegaard lavishes attention upon the “negative qualifications” of the Christian life, including sin, precisely as a reflective and discursive strategy for making great

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<sup>51</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, DBW 6, trans. I. Tödt, et al. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1992), 404, my translation.

<sup>52</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. W. Whitson Floyd, trans. H. M Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), vol. 2, 96. The language of being “placed into the truth” of course suggests the influence of Kierkegaard’s own idiom in *Philosophical Fragments*.

<sup>53</sup> *SUD*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> Mary E. Lowe, “Sin from a Queer Lutheran Perspective,” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, ed. M. J. Steufert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 82.

the full force of the divine claim and the radicality of divine grace.<sup>55</sup> Beyond this, as *Sickness unto Death* itself makes patent, the reality of sin is self-obfuscating: intrinsic to the dynamic of sin is its capacity to render those trapped within it ignorant of their situation. Attending to this peculiar feature of hamartiology requires that theologians be recalled to acknowledge their own self-involvement in the reality of which they speak, and all the more, that they admit the permeability of the boundary between theological reflection and kerygmatic witness. Concentration upon the question of sin in theological anthropology beneficially reminds theology of its place firmly within that soteriological setting which the word of God bespeaks and indeed establishes as the context of all Christian theological reflection.

The second lesson concerns the cardinal place of faith in the constitution of true human reality. Especially in a time marked by strong interest in the recovery and reassertion of the concept of virtue in the elaboration of theological anthropology and ethics, Kierkegaard here reiterates in his own distinctive way the essential Protestant claim that *to be a truly human being* is to be justified by faith. As he says, himself:

Very often, however, it is overlooked that the opposite of sin is by no means virtue. In part, this is a pagan view, which is satisfied with a merely human criterion and simply does not know what sin is, that all sin is before God. No, *the opposite of sin is faith*, as it says in Romans 14:23: "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." And this is one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity — that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.<sup>56</sup>

While Kierkegaard himself has much to say about the crucial role of discipleship, the imitation of Christ as an exemplar, and the centrality and rigorous practice of the "works of love" within the Christian life, these emphases are misunderstood when taken up as a straightforward insistence upon the life of virtue or as a derogation of faith as the hallmark of Christian existence. It is true that Kierkegaard contends

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<sup>55</sup> Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 13-14, et passim.

<sup>56</sup> *SUD*, 82.

that great “confusion has entered the sphere of religion since the time when ‘thou shalt’ was abolished as the sole regulative aspect of man’s relationship with God,” but he immediately suggests that the most fundamental divine imperative is in fact “*thou shalt believe*.”<sup>57</sup> Faith names that posture of receptivity and utter dependence which marks a human life that relates itself to the truth of God *truly*. As he puts it sharply in his notebooks, a Christian life is one determined by “infinite humiliation and grace, *and then* a striving born of gratitude.”<sup>58</sup> The properly *theological self* is thus constituted first and foremost by suffering this “infinite humiliation” before the judgment of God, and the reality of “grace” before the gospel of God: trust in the saving power of this encounter affords that gratitude from which all Christian witness, service, and moral striving arise and by which they are sustained. Or, as he says programmatically here, “the antithesis of sin/faith is the Christian one that Christianly reshapes all ethical concepts.”<sup>59</sup> In this, again, we have a clear echo of Luther’s own account of the relation of faith and works set out programmatically in *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520) and elsewhere.<sup>60</sup>

Overall, it seems that there is a good deal of interpretative traction to be gained when *Sickness unto Death* is read as a kind of a kaleidoscopic conceptual elaboration of sinful human existence under divine judgment and grace which accords with the anthropological claims advanced in Luther’s *disputatio de homine*. Here, as elsewhere, Kierkegaard’s extraordinary examinations of Christian subjectivity rest, if not on the “robustly metaphysical and ontological version of faith put forward by the Neo-Thomists,” then certainly upon a robustly relational and realist version of the same Christian faith as advanced by Luther.<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard’s theological account of the human person *coram deo* displays the contours of a dynamic Reformation view of human existence — indeed, of the *theological self* — which moves from the fundamental acknowledgement that, as

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<sup>57</sup> *SUD*, 113.

<sup>58</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1:993, 434. Emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> *SUD*, 83.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), vol. 31, 333-377.

<sup>61</sup> The remark is taken from Pattison, “‘Before God’ as a Regulative Idea,” 72.

Karl Barth put it, "What I am, I am in relation to God," because, in view of the gospel "human ontology is not a settled condition, a 'nature' of any kind, but a response to the imposing presence of God, who summons me to live beyond myself."<sup>62</sup> In short, in and through all its despairing reflexivity, the justifying truth of the self is finally a function of God's saving regard with faith as its fitting human corollary. In Luther's idiom, to be justified by faith is what makes a human being human. In Kierkegaard's own idiom, the primary anthropological claim is just this: "according to your faith, be it unto you, or, as you believe, so you are, *to believe is to be.*"<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, ed. R. D. Nelson and trans. R. M. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 89. The last remark comes from Christopher Asprey, *Eschatological Presence in Karl Barth's Göttingen Dogmatics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>63</sup> *SUD*, 93.