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THE FREEDOM TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

A Kierkegaardian Account
of Human Transformation in
Relationship with God

T&T CLARK THEOLOGY

ANDREW B. TORRANCE

B L O O M S B U R Y

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'Beyond Existentialism: Kierkegaard on the Human Relationship with the God Who is Wholly Other', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16:3 (2014); and 'Kierkegaard on the Christian Response to the God Who Establishes Kinship with Us in Time', *Modern Theology* 32:1 (2016).

ABBREVIATIONS

- BA *The Book on Adler*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and tran. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* vol. 1, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- CUP2 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* vol. 2, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- CD *Christian Discourses*, in *Christian Discourses and The Crisis and the Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- EO1 *Either/Or*, Part I, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
- EO2 *Either/Or*, Part 2, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- FSE *For Self-Examination*, in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- FT *Fear and Trembling*, in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- JC *Johannes Climacus*, in *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- JFY *Judge for Yourself!*, in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7 vols, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978).
- KJN *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vols 1–11, eds Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble and K. Brian Söderquist (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007–).
- M *The Moment and Late Writings*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- P *Prefaces and 'Writing Sampler'*, ed. and tran. Todd W. Nichol (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

- PAP *Søren Kierkegaard Papirer*, vols I–XI–3, eds Peter Andreas Heiberg, Victor Kuhr and Einer Torsting (Copenhagen: Gylendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1909–1948); 2nd edn I–XI–3 and supplementary vols XII–XIII, ed. Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: Gylendal, 1968–1970).
- PC *Practice in Christianity*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- PF *Philosophical Fragments in Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- PV *The Point of View*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- R *Repetition*, in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- SKS *Søren Kierkegaard Skrifter*, 28 vols, eds Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, Alastair McKinnon and Finn Hauberg Mortensen (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997–).
- SLW *Stages on Life's Way* eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
- SUD *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
- TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- WA *Without Authority*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- WL *Works of Love*, eds and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

INTRODUCTION

Kierkegaard reflects:

my whole authorship pertains to Christianity,¹ to the issue: becoming a Christian, with direct and indirect polemical aim at that enormous illusion, Christendom, or the illusion that in such a country all are Christians of sorts.²

In Kierkegaard, we have a scholar who was committed to understanding the nature of human existence. It is no surprise, therefore, that he is often described

1. While this book accepts Kierkegaard's self-assessment, it should be noted that there is much debate over his claim that his 'whole authorship pertains to Christianity'. Some scholars, including Joakim Garff and Henning Fenger, argue that Kierkegaard's later retrospective outlook on his authorship misremembers (or dishonestly remembers) some of his earlier aesthetic works as serving a much more explicitly Christian purpose than they actually did at the time. See Fenger, 'Kierkegaard as a Falsifier of History', in *Kierkegaard, the Myths and Their Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 1–31; Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, tran. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 550–4; Garff, 'The Eyes of Argus: The Point of View and Points of View with Respect to Kierkegaard's "Activity as an Author"', tran. Bruce H. Kirmmse, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, eds Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Moreover, Alastair Hannay claims that Kierkegaard 'nurture[d] a lifelong ambivalence towards Christianity which allowed him to hold it at a distance': Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 39. While this book will not directly engage with the positions of Garff and Fenger, it will hopefully serve to offer a challenge to Hannay's claim. For a critique of Garff's position, see Sylvia Walsh, 'Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff', *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 38 (1999): 4–8; and Garff's response to Walsh in 'Rereading Oneself', *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 38 (1999): 9–14. For a superb analysis of this issue, and a helpful critique of deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard, see Mark Tietjen's *Kierkegaard, Communication, and Virtue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 61–85.

2. *PV*, p. 23 / *SKS* 16, p. 11. Merold Westphal helpfully points out that '[t]his does not mean that he [Kierkegaard] had the whole authorship planned out in advance. Rather, he places great emphasis on the role of "Governance" in his authorship. He senses that he has been guided by God in ways of which he was not aware at the time.' Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 4; see also *PV*, pp. 76–7 / *SKS* 16, p. 56; *KJN* 5, p. 48 / *SKS* 21, p. 49 [NB6:66].

as, or, more accurately, caricatured as, the father of existentialism. Yet, in stark contrast to this portrayal, he saw himself as a thinker who was devoted to a basic theological question, namely, *What does it mean to become a Christian?* His ‘strategy’ in this was quite simple – ‘with the help of God [*med Guds Bistand*] to utilize everything to make clear what in truth Christianity’s requirement is.’³ As he took up his work as an author before God (*for Gud*) and with God (*med Gud*),⁴ he was led to provide a vision of Christianity that was far more theocentric and Christocentric than anthropocentric.

This book explores Kierkegaard’s response to two questions: (1) How does one become a Christian? and (2) How are we to conceive of God’s relationship to a person in and through this process? As we shall see, the account of conversion that emerges does not concern a single event in which a person *suddenly* becomes a Christian, either by a miracle of God’s grace or a Promethean act of will. Rather, it concerns a *formative process* of becoming.⁵ What Kierkegaard has in view here is not, however, a *progressive* journey of spiritual self-discovery, self-understanding or self-denial, a journey whereby a new life evolves out of the old. Rather, it is conceived as a *transformative* journey that is grounded in an active relationship with the God who is present *with* us and encounters us in and through the person of Jesus Christ.⁶ Furthermore, it involves a *growing* in relationship with God that does not simply result from God’s encountering us from the eternal beyond but takes place concretely within the history of this world. Accordingly, becoming a Christian requires responding to God’s historical engagement with us within the limitations of time.

What should also become clear in this study are the ways in which Kierkegaard confronts some of the key errors that arise in overly systematic and reductive accounts of Christian conversion: (1) The inherent weakness of approaches that assume we can dichotomise, and then quantify, the respective contributions of divine and human agency; (2) The inclination to objectify human beings in ways that neglect their subjective existence as living persons who require to be conceived diachronically – persons who are called to take up a *life-long vocation* of becoming Christian; (3) The tendency to reduce God to an amorphous concept, postulate or figment of the human imagination, thereby neglecting God’s active

3. *PV*, p. 16 / *SKS* 13, p. 23.

4. *PV*, p. 24 / *SKS* 16, p. 12.

5. In a journal entry from 1838, Kierkegaard writes: ‘it takes a long time before one truly comes to terms with, finds one’s place (knows where everything has its place) in the divine economy. One gropes around among a multiplicity of moods, not even knowing how one ought to pray. [Christ] does not take on any definite form within us – one does not know the meaning of the assistance of the Spirit, etc.’ *KJN* 2, p. 96 / *SKS* 18, p. 104 [FF:153].

6. For further discussion of Kierkegaard’s understanding of the Christian faith as a journey, see Lee C. Barrett, *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 126–58, and Christopher Ben Simpson, *The Truth is the Way: Kierkegaard’s Theology Viatorum* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011).

involvement in the process of becoming a Christian; (4) The attendant impulse to allow a body of Christian teaching or dogma to displace the actuality of God's personal agency; (5) The overemphasis on conversion as a solipsistic event of individual transformation rather than a process of becoming reconciled with God; (6) The tendency to prioritise epistemology over ontology (that is, over our relationship with God) in discussions of what is involved in becoming a Christian – to focus on the question of 'What I come to *know* as a Christian' rather than 'Who I come to *be* as a Christian'; and (7) The propensity to lose sight of God's loving purpose to draw all human beings into the one true form of existence for which they were created.

Underlying these errors is a failure to appreciate that becoming a Christian involves becoming who we are created to be in and through a personal and, indeed, dynamic relationship with God, whom the Gospel narrative presents as loving in his inmost being. The possibility of becoming a Christian in this way, for Kierkegaard, is grounded in God's assuming human existence in Jesus Christ. In and through the Incarnation, the truth of God is mediated to human beings in a way that makes it possible for persons to participate in right relationship with God. As we shall see, this mediatorial activity does not merely concern the historical life of Jesus Christ, as it occurred 2,000 years ago. It concerns God's continuing relationship with persons in history; it concerns God's gracious activity for us today.

But how can a person really know whether she really is participating in a relationship with the living God? The challenges here, combined with a fear of fideism, generates the inclination to reduce any reference to a relationship with God to something conceivable within natural modes of discourse. This is particularly the case, for Kierkegaard, in the academic setting, where 'Christianity' is repeatedly degraded into something more tolerable for the intellectual palate: something more (immediately) apprehensible, believable, imaginable and appropriate. Under the pressure of certain forms of intellectualism, Christians are urged to play down or sidestep the personal nature of God, and thus to forget that it is a personal God who is at the very foundation of reality.

In a testimony to the governance (*Styrelse*) of God in his authorship, Kierkegaard states: 'it was religiously my duty that my existing as an author express the truth, which I had daily perceived and ascertained – that there is a God.'⁷ This duty led Kierkegaard to proclaim that God is not someone who can be commandeered or tamed by natural human reason, imagination or rhetoric, by the professor, poet, or preacher. God cannot be reduced to the subject matter of a human aesthetic, and nor can Christianity be reduced to a mere cultural phenomenon. Rather, both God and providence are to be believed with a faith, love and hope that humbly look to God as the external object of faith: as a divine subject who transcends the world-historical system.⁸

7. PV, p. 72n. / SKS 16, p. 51n.

8. With this orientation, as Christopher Barnett writes, the person of faith finds that 'Her self-knowledge, as well as the knowledge through which she understands the world,

For Kierkegaard, the existence of God makes all the difference for the Christian life. It is a living God who inspires passionate commitment, humility and ‘fear and trembling’. Furthermore, God does so in a way that human conceptions of God cannot. When Christian conceptions or propositions become the object of the Christian faith (for example, in the form of Christian doctrine), ‘Christianity’ becomes a plaything for intellectual pursuits, cultural sensibilities and political agendas. This is not, of course, to deny that Christian concepts and propositions serve a purpose. Their primary purpose, however, is to serve as a witness to God: to provide us with teaching that helps us to talk about, understand and know both who God is and who we are before God. But, for Kierkegaard, they are not to take centre stage.

So, how does a Kierkegaardian emphasis on the existence of a personal reality of God relate to our title: *The Freedom to Become a Christian*? The concept of ‘freedom’ is notoriously ambiguous. Generally, however, this term points to two things on which this book will focus: (1) The role of human agency in the process of becoming a Christian; (2) The circumstances and dynamics that are required for it to become possible for a person to become a Christian. For Kierkegaard, I shall argue, a person’s freedom to become a Christian depends on him or her participating in an *interrelationship* with God in which human transformation can take place.

The freedom that relates to this process, however, does not only concern a freedom that precedes our existential development. For Kierkegaard, a person can also look forward to a freedom that is received upon becoming a Christian: the freedom to exist in the way that he was created to exist before God. By becoming a Christian, a person is liberated from self-perpetuating bondage, from his sinful will and erroneous perception of reality. In fellowship with God, he finds himself participating in a new life. In this life, he is caught up in a struggle of ‘dying to the world’ and ‘dying to the self’. As we shall see, this is the result of his will being united in correspondence with God’s will, leading him to become conscious that ‘God is the one and only.’⁹

The conclusion that this work seeks to draw is that, for Kierkegaard, Christian belief and understanding are subordinate to a person’s relationship with God. *They do not constitute the relationship itself.* They are nothing more than a witness to and expression of the fact that God actively relates to us in history. As I shall argue, while Kierkegaard recognises that reflection, decision and action are all fundamental requirements for the process of becoming a Christian, he does not think that they can themselves draw a person into relationship with God. Only God draws individuals to himself, in and through Jesus Christ. So, for Kierkegaard, a person’s freedom to become a Christian needs to be understood in terms of a transformation that occurs both *with* God and *in response to* God. It is not the freedom to deliver oneself into the Christian life but a decision to embrace

“rests” in the very foundation of her being.’ Christopher Barnett, *From Despair to Faith: The Spirituality of Søren Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 58.

9. *JP* 4, 5038 / *SKS* 26, p. 405 [NB35:50].

the Christian life into which God delivers a person. With his deep appreciation for this fact, we shall also find that Kierkegaard does not try to offer a systematic answer to the question of how or why a person becomes a Christian. Any attempt to spell out the mechanics of this process is always an attempt to explain a reality that is beyond the limits of human understanding: the mystery of God's wisdom and grace. Ultimately, therefore, the question of a person's becoming a Christian is a matter that must be entrusted to God.

I. Listening to Kierkegaard Alongside His Pseudonyms

One of the major challenges that a person faces when reading through Kierkegaard's writings is that so many of his works were written under a series of pseudonyms. These pseudonyms are 'poeticised personalities, poetically maintained so that everything they say is in character with their poeticized individualities.'¹⁰ Also, they are created to offer a perspective that is very different from Kierkegaard's own. Kierkegaard, therefore, insists that his pseudonymous works must not be confused with his own signed works: 'Anyone with just a fragment of common sense will perceive that it would be ludicrously confusing to attribute to me everything the poeticized personalities say.'¹¹ This does not mean, however, that he completely disagrees with the accounts of Christianity, for example, put forward by his pseudonyms; indeed, we find extensive continuity between the descriptions of Christianity put forward by Kierkegaard and those put forward by his pseudonyms. The major difference concerns how they perceive their own relationship to the account of Christianity that they are considering, which, consequently, has a critical impact on the way they present their respective accounts.

In this study, we shall be guided by a diverse range of insights from a variety of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, including Judge William, Vigilius Haufniensis, Johannes de Silentio and Petrus Minor. The two pseudonyms, however, whom we shall consider most closely, alongside Kierkegaard, are Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus – the non-Christian and the extraordinary Christian.¹² Of these two pseudonyms, it will be Johannes Climacus who will receive the most attention.

10. *JP* 6, 6786 / *Pap* X-6 B 145.

11. *JP* 6, 6786 / *Pap* X-6 B 145. Kierkegaard also notes in this journal entry that he has 'expressly urged once and for all that anyone who wants to quote something from the pseudonyms will not attribute that quotation to me'. See also *CUP*, pp. 625–30 / *SKS* 7, pp. 569–73.

12. See *PV*, p. 43n. / *SKS* 16, p. 25n.; *CUP*, p. 617 / *SKS* 7, p. 560; *KJN* 6, pp. 124–5 / *SKS* 22, pp. 127–8 [NB11:204]; *KJN* 6, p. 127 / *SKS* 22, p. 130 [NB11:209]; *KJN* 6, pp. 132–3 / *SKS* 22, pp. 135–36 [NB11:222]; *KJN* 7, p. 185 / *SKS* 23, pp. 182–3 [NB17:28]; *JP* 6, 6349 / *Pap* X-6 B 48. Notably, as the Hongs point out, the 'prefix "Anti" ... does not mean "against". It is an old form of "ante" (before) as in "anticipate," and "before" also denotes a relation of rank, as in "before me" in the First commandment.' *SUD*, p. xxii; *PC*, p. xii.

a. Kierkegaard and Climacus

Climacus saw himself as an outsider to the Christian faith. As such, he was someone who did not yet recognise the truth of Christianity for himself. However, he also saw himself as someone who was interested in the question ‘How can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that Christianity promises?’¹³ By exploring this question, he was able to develop an outsider’s account of what Christianity is. However, he was more than merely an outsider. He was an observer who thought about Christianity as a dialectician, a humourist and a psychologist. As such, he was the kind of thinker who could easily have settled into the kind of ivory tower conversations that were taking place among the rationalistic and bourgeois Christians in Denmark. Yet, unlike many of the rationalists, Climacus was not stubbornly committed to developing a detached account of Christianity. Rather, he was genuinely interested in the happiness (or ‘happy passion’) that Christianity promises.¹⁴ This enabled him to provide a more attentive account of what Christianity is, evident in his superb understanding for the passionate nature of Christianity. Nonetheless, as we shall see, his deep appreciation for the passionate nature of Christianity could not itself stop him from remaining an outsider.

Kierkegaard’s relation to Christianity was quite different. Through having come to faith, he knew, to some extent, what it meant to be a Christian. In accordance with his particular Christian commitment, his own signed writings did not seek to keep up appearances with Denmark’s highbrow Christianity. Rather, they were primarily devoted to ‘upbuilding’ (*Opbyggelse*) his readers in lives of Christian discipleship.

At the same time, Kierkegaard also sought to challenge the ways in which the cultural and intellectual elite in Denmark were distorting ‘Christianity’ to fit their own particular interests and agendas. According to their brand of ‘Christianity’, the truth of the Christian faith was something to be discovered by way of a scholarly devotion to Christian doctrine and teaching. In order to challenge this perception, Kierkegaard created a character who was able to speak to the rationalists on their own terms: Johannes Climacus. What the non-Christian Climacus was able to do (and which Kierkegaard could not) was stand back as an observer of Christianity and thereby offer a more detached analysis of what Christianity is. Nonetheless, as someone who could grasp what Kierkegaard was seeking to achieve, and as someone who was sensitive to the passionate nature of Christianity, Climacus was also able to question the implications of interpreting the truth of Christianity in purely intellectual terms, or, more specifically, from a Socratic or idealist perspective. As we shall see, Climacus does this by pointing to the coherence of an alternative way of understanding the truth of Christianity – one that contrasted with a Socratic or idealist approach. What becomes apparent

13. *CUP*, p. 17 / *SKS* 7, p. 26.

14. As we shall see, Climacus describes faith as a ‘happy passion’. *PF*, pp. 54, 59 / *SKS* 4, pp. 257, 261.

is that this alternative bears a much more striking resemblance to orthodox Christianity than its 'Socratic' alternative. By using Climacus to point this out, Kierkegaard was able to challenge his readers and help them to recognise the problematic nature of their approach.

It is important, however, to be clear that Kierkegaard was not under the impression that he could use Climacus to translate *the truth* of Christianity into the language of the rationalists. Nor did he believe that the grace of God somehow depended upon his particular communication skills. By speaking to the rationalists in their own terms, through the voice of Climacus, Kierkegaard was able to question them in ways that penetrated their speculative strategies and challenged them to rethink how they were relating to Christianity. He was, in effect, playing them at their own game – by exposing the limits of their position via their own methods.

In this way, he questioned their unyielding confidence in the powers of immanent reason and opened the doors to the suggestion that, for Christian faith, the truth is to be found through a relationship with the God who is *beyond* the scope of unredeemed human reason – the God who cannot be conjured up from within the mind's own resources, that is, by philosophical argumentation or analysis. By presenting them with this alternative, Kierkegaard and Climacus were to draw attention to the essential supposition of the Gospel, namely, that, as Emil Brunner would later insist under Kierkegaard's influence, 'through God alone can God be known'.¹⁵ For Kierkegaard, God is known in and through the reconciliation of our minds, which takes place in Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life, and who thus constitutes, in himself, the condition whereby we are brought into relationship with the truth. This involves the reorientation of our focus back to the one who alone can draw persons into the Christian life.

By using Climacus to converse with the intellectuals of his day, Kierkegaard translated the 'what' of Christianity into a message that related (albeit challengingly) to the subjective mindset of a particular people. Again, however, he did so with an acute awareness that his 'translation' of the Gospel could only go so far. He did not for a moment believe that he could employ his intellectual powers of persuasion to bring people closer to God and enable them to become Christian. He could not translate the presence of God to people, and, therefore, could not draw persons into the spiritual relationship with God that is decisive for coming to faith. He sought instead to undercut the intellectual foundations that were strengthening resistance to the possibility that the truth is to be found through a relationship with the God who is *external* to us. In so doing, he created an opportunity to focus again on the *revelation* that alone defines what Christianity is.

Kierkegaard's concern to shift the focus to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is central to what Climacus is doing in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which, Kierkegaard describes, 'constitutes the turning point in my entire work as an

15. Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934), p. 21.

author, inasmuch as it poses the *issue*: becoming a Christian.¹⁶ When posing this issue, as we shall see, Climacus does not attempt to offer a methodical ‘how to’ guide to becoming a Christian, hence the ‘*Unscientific*’ [*uvidenskabelig*]¹⁷ in the Postscript’s title.¹⁸ He does make some clear assertions about what is required to become a Christian, and, at times, these assertions can come across as quite systematic. But he is also clear that the Christian life is dependent upon a divine activity that cannot be incorporated into a human system of understanding. As Kierkegaard seeks to show through the writings of Climacus, there is an absolute difference between *human ideas* of Jesus Christ and the *divine-human reality* of Jesus Christ: the latter is united with God himself; the former is not. Furthermore, Kierkegaard is clear that a person cannot know what it means to become a Christian without experiencing this in his or her own existence. For these two reasons, he does not think that it is possible for him to communicate directly (either to his non-Christian self or anyone else) what it means to become a Christian.

So what is it about Postscript that makes it a turning point for Kierkegaard? The fundamental answer lies in the fact that it poses question as to what is involved in becoming a Christian. At the same time, however, there is much more to what is going on. One thing that makes the turn in Postscript so decisive – something anticipated in *Philosophical Fragments*¹⁹ – is the extent to which Climacus grounds his account of becoming a Christian in God’s active engagement with particular persons in history. At the centre of this account stands the one whom he calls the ‘god in human form’ or the ‘god in time’: the one who redeems the sinner from the sin that she cannot overcome. In the wake of *Postscript*, Kierkegaard goes on to devote himself to developing a much more Christological account of becoming a Christian, culminating in *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!*

b. Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus

To derive a robust theological account of becoming a Christian from Kierkegaard’s writings, we need to go beyond the relatively skeletal and abstract account provided by the non-Christian Climacus. It is crucial for us to turn to his later writings. That is, we must venture into Kierkegaard’s ‘religious’ writings, where

16. *PV*, p. 63 / *SKS* 16, p. 44 (emphasis original); see also *PV*, pp. 29n., 31, 55, 94 / *SKS* 16, pp. 15n., 17, 36, 73.

17. As Paul Holmer helpfully points out, ‘the Danish word “*uvidenskabelig*” suggests “not-cognitive-like”’. Holmer, *On Kierkegaard and the Truth* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2012), p. 53.

18. See *KJN* 2, pp. 255–6 / *SKS* 18, pp. 276–7 [JJ:411]; see also *CUP*, pp. 617–23 / *SKS* 7, pp. 560–66. Kierkegaard notes that ‘Christianly understood, there is no Christian scientific scholarship, and in any case the Christian scholar should apply to *faith* for the indulgence to dare to occupy himself with scholarship, since scholarship is not superior but inferior.’ *CUP* 2, p. 155 / *Pap.* X-6 B 114 144.

19. *PF*, p. 109 / *SKS* 4, p. 305; see also *CUP*, pp. 9–17 / *SKS* 7, pp. 19–26.

he fleshes out what it means to become a Christian in more explicitly Christian terms. In this later authorship, it is perhaps Anti-Climacus who does this most comprehensively.²⁰ In *Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus provides us with an account of what it means to be in sin and despair before God. Then, in *Practice in Christianity*, he considers what it means for a person to decide to become a Christian: to decide to distance oneself from the sinful ways of the world and turn to God's grace for strength. At the centre of this decision is, once again, the God-human: 'Jesus Christ, the infinitely highest one, true God and true man,' who, 'from on high,' 'will draw all to himself.'²¹

If we were only to turn to Climacus and Anti-Climacus, however, we would end up with an account of becoming a Christian that, in certain respects, is oversimplified. As a non-Christian, Climacus cannot get inside the process of becoming a Christian in a way that would enable him to witness to the complexities that a subject will experience when becoming a Christian. While Anti-Climacus can offer a first-hand account of the complexities, the fact that he is 'more than a human being' holds him back from witnessing to the torment and uncertainty, the confusion and caprice, the anxiety and restlessness that will burden the ordinary person's journey to become a Christian.²²

It is at this point that we benefit from turning to the unextraordinary Christian life of Kierkegaard. He writes:

Never have I fought in such a way that I have said: I am the true Christian; the others are not Christians, or probably even hypocrites and the like. No, I have fought in this way: *I know what Christianity is*; I myself acknowledge my defects as a Christian – but I do know what Christianity is. And to know this thoroughly seems in the interest of every human being, whether one is now a Christian or a non-Christian, whether one's intention to accept Christianity or abandon it. But I have attacked not one, saying that he is not a Christian; I have passed judgement on no one.²³

Kierkegaard was very careful to play down his own Christian existence. By

20. Kierkegaard describes the year of 1848 (in which he worked on *Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*) as 'the richest and most fruitful year, without any comparison, I have experienced as an author' (*CUP2*, p. 167; see also *KJN* 5, pp. 300–1 / *SKS* 21, pp. 289–90 [NB10:60]). In a journal entry from 1849, he describes these two works of Anti-Climacus as 'extremely valuable,' noting that in *Sickness unto Death* 'it was granted to me to illuminate Christian[ity] on a scale greater than I had ever dreamed possible; crucial categories were directly discovered there.' *KJN* 5, p. 305 / *SKS* 21, p. 294 [NB10:69]. Also in 1849 he notes that *Practice in Christianity* 'is quite certainly the most perfect and true thing I have written.' *KJN* 6, p. 267n. / *SKS* 22, p. 265 [NB12:196].

21. *PC*, p. 160 / *SKS* 12, p. 165.

22. *KJN* 6, p. 268 / *SKS* 22, p. 265 [NB12:196].

23. *PV*, p. 15 / *SKS* 13, p. 23. Kierkegaard also denies that he has ever attempted to be pietistically rigorous in his description of Christianity. *PV*, p. 17 / *SKS* 13, p. 24.

reading through any number of the excellent biographies on Kierkegaard, or by delving into his own journal entries, it becomes clear how much more restless and complicated the process of becoming a Christian actually is for him.²⁴ Like so many other Christians, Kierkegaard cannot look back over his life and see a clearly defined progression in his journey of faith. There is no precise moment when he took a leap or made a decisive choice to become a Christian. There is no particular moment when he felt decisively transformed by grace.²⁵ And there is no clear line of existential progression that culminates in his becoming decisively Christian. What Kierkegaard describes as the 'love story' of his life of relationship with God is fragmentary, vacillating and unpredictable, much more so than the accounts of becoming a Christian that we find in Climacus' and Anti-Climacus' writings.²⁶ The inconsistent nature of Kierkegaard's love story is a consequence of the troubled way in which he, or anyone, relates to God in the midst of this world.

Reflecting on his own experience of his relationship to God, Kierkegaard notes that there is no 'immediate God-relationship to appeal to'.²⁷ This meant, for example, that he would not 'dare to say that it is God who directly contributes the thoughts to me'.²⁸ Tied to his own subjective perspective, Kierkegaard ends up describing his relationship to God as 'a relationship of reflection, inwardness in reflection, since reflection is the predominant quality of my individuality'.²⁹ Not

24. For an account of Kierkegaard as a Christian thinker, I would recommend Julia Watkin's *Kierkegaard* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997). However, I would also strongly encourage reading through the collection of Kierkegaard's essays in *The Point of View*. Alastair Hannay's and Joakim Garff's biographies of Kierkegaard are much more sceptical about Kierkegaard's Christian faith. This scepticism, however, I would argue, provides further testimony to the complex nature of Kierkegaard's Christian life.

25. That said, in his well-known Journal entry, written while studying in Gilleleie, he writes: 'What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my own destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die* ... what use would it be in this respect if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, or if I worked my way through philosophers' systems and were able to call them to account on request, point out inconsistencies in every single circle? ... What use would it be to be able to propound the meaning of Christianity, to explain many separate facts, if it had *no* deeper meaning *for myself* and *my life*?' *KJN* 1, p. 19 / *SKS* 17, p. 74 [AA:12], written 1 August 1835. We can see further evidence of decisive changes in Kierkegaard's life in the following journal entries from 1838: *KJN* 1, pp. 9–11 / *SKS* 17, pp. 13–16 [AA:6]; *KJN* 1, pp. 245–6 / *SKS* 17, pp. 254–5 [DD:113]; *KJN* 1, p. 246 / *SKS* 17, p. 255 [DD:117]; *JP* 5, 5430 / *SKS* 27, pp. 291–2 [Papir305]; see also Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 16–22.

26. *PV*, p. 71 / *SKS* 16, p. 51.

27. *PV*, p. 74 / *SKS* 16, p. 53.

28. *PV*, p. 74 / *SKS* 16, p. 53.

29. *PV*, p. 74 / *SKS* 16, pp. 53–4.

for a moment did he think he could assess what was involved in his becoming a Christian from some Archimedean point – not least the dynamics of God's grace. Instead, he accepts that he can only experience the process of becoming a Christian from within his own life of reflection. And it was from the perspective of his life of reflection that he 'served the cause of Christianity'.³⁰

That having been said, we must be careful not to misunderstand Kierkegaard here. While he openly acknowledges his inability to relate himself to God from outwith his own life of reflection, this does not mean that he collapses his relationship with God into his own spiritual life. He saw his life of reflection as inspired by God's governance and was adamant that God was with him in his life, loving him and sustaining him in ways that only he could know – in ways that would be incommunicable to anyone outside of his relationship with God.³¹ For Kierkegaard, however, this was never something that he could immediately understand, and he became much more open about God's presence in his life in retrospect, especially towards the end of his life. Nonetheless, he also insists that he was conscious of God's presence 'from the very beginning'.³²

What Kierkegaard's analysis establishes is that the process of becoming a Christian is much more complex than is often conveyed. The main reason for this is that the Christian life requires participation in a relationship with someone who is neither directly perceivable nor subject to human control. But it is not only the nature of God that makes this process complex. It is also complicated by the fact that persons are unable to take complete control over their own lives before God. Still further, it is then made all the more challenging by the fact that the task of becoming a Christian takes a person right against the stream of this world. For these reasons, Kierkegaard sees the process of becoming a Christian as fraught with turbulence. It is simply confused, therefore, to try to reduce this process to a momentary transformation, a sudden decision or, indeed, a particular series of ordered decisions and transformations. This is not to deny that this process will require momentary transformations and on-the-spot decisions – and, indeed, such events (e.g. when a person first responds to the Gospel and begins the task of faith) can be interpreted, not unjustifiably, as events of conversion.³³ Also, none of

30. *PV*, p. 93 / *SKS* 16, p. 72.

31. *PV*, pp. 71, 76 / *SKS* 16, pp. 51, 55. While Kierkegaard insists that 'Governance has supported me indescribably much', he is also careful to qualify that he did not experience governance 'in any extraordinary fashion, as if I had a special relationship to God'. *KJN* 5, p. 243 / *SKS* 21, p. 233 [NB9:56]. See also Lee Barrett's extremely helpful chapter 'Kierkegaard's Authorship and the Paradox of Divine and Human Agencies' in *International Kierkegaard Commentary on The Point of View*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), pp. 65–75.

32. *PV*, pp. 74–5, 90 / *SKS* 16, pp. 54, 69.

33. In Acts, Luke quite clearly provides accounts of conversion that are much more immediate, for example the first converts (Acts 2.37–42), the conversion of Saul (Acts 9.1–19), the conversion of Lydia (Acts 16.11–15) and the conversion of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16.27–40).