

LOVE IS NOT ENOUGH: A KIERKEGAARDIAN PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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In a pair of articles published in *Faith and Philosophy*, C. Stephen Evans argues that Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, understands religious experience as the transforming power of an encounter with the love of God. However, in a book published under his own name, Kierkegaard gives a quite different picture of Christian experience. *For Self-Examination* makes clear that the reception of God's love is a rebirth that can occur in the believer only insofar as he or she has died to the world — to all possessions, even to the possession of God's love. According to Kierkegaard, this “dying to” is the truly transforming experience that characterizes Christian spirituality, and that provides the condition for a life infused with faith, hope, and love.

Few issues bedevil the academic study of religion so much as the question of transformative religious experiences. For the most part, the question is simply ignored, lost in the endless sorting through of historical complexities, linguistic obscurities, and conceptual conundrums. When it does happen to intrude upon the normal discourse of scholarly analysis, the result is either frantic backpedaling or a handy *deus ex machina* that confidently assigns all bizarre claims to a fixed position in some psychological or sociological context.

Although few would dispute this observation in relation to Freud¹ or Weber,² it is also true of those great “founding fathers” of what is now called the phenomenological study of religion. I have in mind particularly William James and Rudolf Otto. No one is more solicitous toward the self-presentations of those who claim to have undergone transformative religious experiences than James, and yet, once he has reported the claims themselves, he can find nothing better to say about them than that they come from some subconscious realm, and that we discount them at our peril.³ For his part, Otto made famous the categories of the numinous and the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which he illustrates richly. But his further analysis seems more concerned with the epistemological process of rational schematization of the experience than with its particular characteristics.⁴ More recent, and more popular, phenomenological writers share in this reticence about the actual stuff of transformative religious experiences. Mircea Eliade may communicate tremendous excitement about the categories of understanding that



structure the religious consciousness, but he never ventures beyond his hermeneutical quest to confront the tacitly bracketed question of what “really” happened.⁵

Perhaps it is just a question of good breeding. Religion is rarely an invited guest at dinner parties and fashionable receptions, and discussions about the religious experiences of individuals are even less welcome than those broaching the economic or political foibles of religious groups and institutions. Paul Tillich, rarely one to practice economy of expression, is uncharacteristically indirect on the question of his deepest personal experiences,⁶ and Martin Buber is elliptical to the point of being evasive in his account of what he calls his “conversion.”⁷ So it should come as no surprise that their common existentialist ancestor, Søren Kierkegaard, is also often reticent about the phenomenological details of transformative religious experiences. These prophets to the present age hold up concrete existence as the basis for their shared vision, but then opt for a mode of analysis that frequently co-opts their own particular concrete existences by virtue of abstract categories (Tillich), narrative lacunae (Buber), or pseudonymous fictions (Kierkegaard).

But Kierkegaard eventually abandoned his pseudonyms, and articulated more directly an understanding of Christian religious experience that is the subject of this paper. I will focus in particular upon one of his most popular later essays, *For Self-Examination*. The Hongs tell us that this little book was often recommended by Eduard Geismar as the best place to start on Kierkegaard, and it was the first of Kierkegaard’s books to be translated into German.⁸ It provides an excellent point at which to begin an inquiry into Kierkegaard’s understanding of transformative religious experiences.

It’s Only Love

In order to set the stage for this exploration of Kierkegaardian self-examination, it is helpful to review what is, to my knowledge, the only recently published work on Kierkegaard and religious experience. In a pair of essays in *Faith and Philosophy* that continue his distinguished work on the texts assigned to Johannes Climacus, C. Stephen Evans argues that, for Kierkegaard, faith first becomes a subjective possibility thanks to the transforming power of a direct encounter with the love of God in Christ.⁹ Evans is responding in these articles to philosophical issues raised by Alvin Plantinga in his influential essay, “Reason and Belief in God.”¹⁰

The tendency I have noted to avoid the issue of concrete religious experiences is also evident in Plantinga’s long article. His argument is that “the Reformed epistemologist” is anti-Foundationalist, rejecting evidence and self-evidence alike as the criteria of “properly basic” beliefs, yet still affirming that such beliefs are not without any grounds or conditions: “There are therefore many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God:

guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, a sense that he speaks, perception of various parts of the universe. A complete job would explore the phenomenology of all these conditions and of more besides."¹¹ Plantinga even admits that "it is not wholly accurate to say that it is belief in God that is properly basic." Rather, examples of properly basic beliefs are: "God is speaking to me," "God has created all this," "God disapproves of what I have done," "God forgives me," "God is to be thanked and praised."¹² These are, Plantinga contends, the sorts of conditions necessary to provide grounds for belief in God.¹³ Thus, he concludes, it is "not the relatively high-level and general proposition *God exists* that is properly basic, but instead propositions detailing some of his attributes or actions."¹⁴

The striking thing about Plantinga's argument for conditions justifying belief in God is that he concludes by calling them "attributes or actions" of God, whereas all of them, with the possible exception of the affirmation of God as creator, can be more simply construed as reports of, or inferences from, experiences of God. To sense God's power and presence, to hear him speak, to be moved by guilt or gratitude toward him — all these are expressions of profoundly subjective and potentially transformative religious experiences. To characterize them as objective attributes or actions of God pure and simple, even while calling for a more extensive "phenomenology," is to perpetuate the familiar tendency to marginalize the issue of concrete religious experiences.

This is where the importance of Evans's articles becomes clear. Although the first article purports to demonstrate only that Climacus offers two analogues for Plantinga's argument, it really calls into question his generally object-oriented discourse. In support of the claim that belief in God is properly basic by virtue of justifying conditions, Evans cites the analogous argument of Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* that "all factual knowledge, all knowledge of what has 'come into existence,' is dependent on 'faith.'"¹⁵ Disputing the common view of this argument as mere voluntarism, Evans characterizes its "logical core" as the anti-foundationalist position that "[p]eople commit themselves or find themselves committed to beliefs which go beyond what is self-evident, or incorrigible, or derivable from what is self-evident or incorrigible."¹⁶ In other words, concludes Evans in language that makes explicit what is only implicit in Plantinga, "[a] subjective contribution must be acknowledged."¹⁷ This is emphasized even more in the second analog, namely, the claim that foundationalism is internally self-contradictory. Plantinga construes its evidentialist position to be that "A is properly basic for me only if A is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for me," and points out that this very proposition cannot satisfy its own criteria, for it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible nor evident to the senses.¹⁸ Here Evans goes even more quickly to the nub of the issue:

“Essentially this argument is a claim that the attempt to eliminate subjectivity from the knowing process backfires because the very attempt is rooted in subjectivity.”¹⁹ He then goes on to discuss the need for precisely that “phenomenology of all these conditions” called for by Plantinga.

It is in his second article on Plantinga and Climacus, however, that Evans actually pursues the phenomenological agenda. After noting that Plantinga seems concerned only with a “belief-forming disposition or mechanism” in which “the transformation in the subject does not seem to be highly significant,” Evans suggests that “seeing experiences as transformative . . . [in more radical ways] would appear not only to be consistent with Plantinga’s position, but as strengthening it.”²⁰ He cites the work of George Mavrodes and William Alston in support of granting more attention to the “subjective requirements,”²¹ and then returns to Climacus for “an example of the kind of phenomenological account Plantinga needs to fill out his account.”²²

Evans recounts Climacus’s argument in *Philosophical Fragments* that faith requires a “leap” which in turn requires an act of the will that “can be accomplished only when the individual receives ‘the condition,’ which is the result of a first-person encounter with the God who has appeared in history.”²³ His concern at this point is to refute those who would interpret the incarnation as opposed to reason rather than simply above it. What is at stake here is Climacus’s concept of paradox: is the apparent contradiction between God and man a metaphysical difference or one caused by sin? If the former, then the paradox is a logical contradiction that can never be overcome. But if the latter, then it is only an apparent contradiction caused by the moral and spiritual alienation of man from God, that is, by sin. If sin is overcome, then such a paradox can be seen as a mystery of God that transcends reason but cannot be adequately understood as anti-reason.²⁴

In the process of demonstrating quite persuasively that the issue for Climacus is more moral than metaphysical, Evans has introduced an important phrase: “first-person encounter.” He never explicitly attributes this phrase to Climacus, but he builds his entire phenomenological analysis on the claim that such an encounter is what provides the condition necessary for the leap into faith. Climacus, however, writes not of “encounter” but of “the moment” in which the follower of God receives the condition,²⁵ and of “immediate contemporaneity” with God.²⁶ Without question Climacus presents the God-relationship as one that must transcend all mediation. But he almost systematically avoids any clear account of just how the follower initially experiences God. Is it a direct meeting, as “encounter” implies? Is the condition for faith according to Climacus a face-to-face encounter in which God and the new believer are united and the old alienation is destroyed?

Evans certainly thinks so. He admits that such an encounter can be characterized in many ways, but affirms as most “plausible” the view that “the

encounter is an experience of the love of God.”²⁷ He takes this encounter to be the “condition” that Climacus says the believer must receive from God in order to become capable of faith.²⁸ As an illustration of such an encounter he cites Metropolitan Anthony Bloom’s testimony about how he was instantaneously transformed from a skeptic into a believer by a direct experience of Christ. Evans concludes that Kierkegaard helps us to see how decisive such a transformative experience is for faith, whereas Plantinga presents it simply as “triggering a natural disposition.”²⁹

Much as Evans offers a much-needed corrective to the sort of approach we find in Plantinga and many philosophers of religion, there is a problem with his analysis. Put briefly, Evans identifies the condition of faith with an encounter with the love of God in a way that neither Climacus nor Kierkegaard does. Indeed, for all his insistence upon the subjectivity of truth and a deepening of inwardness, Climacus never really discusses concrete Christian experiences of *God* at all (hardly surprising, for one who emphatically claims not to be a Christian). Evans’s much-repeated phrase, “first-person encounter,” does not appear in the Climacus writings, nor does anything that carries its mystical connotations. To his credit, Evans never says that his own claims for a first-person encounter with God in love can be found in the Climacus writings. In his earlier article he even admits that, for Climacus, “God cannot be directly present to a person in a sensuous manner.”³⁰ To be sure, spiritual love is not necessarily sensuously perceptible, and Climacus repeatedly stresses the presence of God both in the world and to the believer. But his understanding of this presence remains phenomenologically abstract and indeterminate. In supplying the experience of love to fill the gap left by Climacus, Evans is no doubt expressing a truth of faith as it is experienced by many Christians. But Climacus has not pointed us in that direction. Indeed, if there is any hint in *Philosophical Fragments* concerning the character of the experience that provides the condition for the leap into faith, it is an enigmatic phrase that is repeated twice, “the *autopsy* of faith.”³¹ For some help in elucidating this intriguing phenomenological hint about the actual experience through which one enters into faith, we must turn to *For Self-Examination*.

Unsettled Faith

Whether or not *For Self-Examination* is the best text with which to start one’s reading of Kierkegaard, it is certainly a marvelous gloss on some of the major positions argued by Johannes Climacus. We could say that in *For Self-Examination* Kierkegaard himself comes out for many of the epistemological positions that he had defended pseudonymously in earlier works (especially those attributed to Johannes Climacus), and then elaborates upon their phenomenological aspects. This is immediately apparent in the Introductory

Note to chapter I, in which Kierkegaard insists that a person becomes “an authentic Christian speaker” not by virtue of “an orator’s technique” but “because the essentially Christian is his life” (FSE, pp. 9-10). These words recall the existential dialectic of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, according to which authenticity is a matter of conformity between one’s speech and one’s actual life. Appropriately, the biblical text which follows as the basis for Kierkegaard’s discourse is James 1: 22-27, which includes the famous injunction to be doers as well as hearers of the Word. In a short prayer Kierkegaard praises God for His prompt assistance and divine patience toward anyone who would attempt to understand the Word, and who earnestly attempts to follow its lead in actual life.

The first task Kierkegaard faces is to justify James’s call for Christian works to an audience that is all too familiar with Luther’s famous dismissal of the entire letter an “an epistle of straw.” To this end he employs three tactics: first, Kierkegaard argues that Luther’s teaching was appropriate for a time in which the gospel of grace had been made into a new law, thereby depriving it of its power and joy. As an example Kierkegaard cites not the scandal of the sale of indulgences nor the exploitation of popular veneration of relics, but the monastic rigors that lead to “hypocrisy, the conceitedness of merit, idleness” (FSE, p. 15). Yet he boldly stands against the usual Lutheran line on this question: “The error was precisely there [in hypocrisy, etc.] and not so much in the works. Let us not go too far; let us not make a previous age’s error an excuse for new error. No, take this unhealthiness and falsity away from the works and let us then retain the works in honesty, in humility, in beneficial activity” (FSE, p. 15).

Secondly, Kierkegaard attacks the “secular mentality” that demonstrates by its self-serving enthusiasm for Luther’s radicalism that it “wants to become Christian as cheaply as possible” (FSE, p. 16). Such people celebrate freedom from works on Luther’s authority, but ignore the extraordinary works-filled example Luther set in his own life. Finally, Kierkegaard ridicules the common sense attitude that wants either rewards for its good works or a grace that dispenses with works, but that rejects the “foolishness” of a demand for both works and trust in grace. Yet it is just this foolishness, counters Kierkegaard, that is at the heart of Christianity, whose “requirement is this: your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one thing more is required—that you humble yourself and confess: But my being saved is nonetheless grace” (FSE, p. 17).

It is not clear whether Kierkegaard was aware of the extent to which he is presenting a Lutheran revisionism. His claim that faith in God’s grace must be accompanied by strenuous works is certainly at odds with Luther’s original proclamation of salvation by faith in grace alone. For Luther, the marvel of the gospel is the indicative — that salvation has been accomplished by God

at Calvary — and the only imperative task that remains is to believe (in) that fact.³² Good works are one result, and perhaps even a mark, of such unmerited faith. But it must not be forgotten that anyone who performs good works in this spirit of faith does so in the *assurance* of salvation, not with the tentativeness expressed by Kierkegaard when he writes: “I am deeply and humbly aware that *if* I am ever saved I will be saved by grace” (FSE, p. 15, emphasis added). Rightly or wrongly, the doctrine of salvation by grace alone asserts that faith can be, and must be, absolutely certain *before* there can be any question of righteous works.

In contrast, Kierkegaard does explicitly claim to be following Lutheran tradition in relation to his central point, that “faith is an unsettled thing.”³³ His intentions in employing the word *uroilig* are not entirely clear.³⁴ What Kierkegaard does make clear in the ensuing discussion is that, paradoxically, a person’s faith “should be recognizable in his life” (FSE, p. 19) at the same time that it is a movement “oriented toward inward deepening” (FSE, p. 21). In the sense indicated by James and implied by Kierkegaard, such faith is never complete: it is always in process, and good works simply manifest the vitality of that process. According to this interpretation, the point of Kierkegaard’s question about a resurrected Luther who would challenge the contemporary believer to demonstrate his or her faith (FSE, pp. 17-18) is that faith must never become self-satisfied. As he concludes: “With regard to this excellent Lutheran doctrine [salvation through faith in grace alone], I have but one misgiving. It does not concern Lutheran doctrine—no, it concerns myself: I have become convinced that I am not an honest soul but a cunning fellow” (FSE, p. 24). Who is there, Kierkegaard is asking, who can be absolutely confident of not exploiting the truth of God’s grace in a self-serving and self-indulgent manner?

Following these two introductions, we come at last to chapter I, which deals primarily with the question, “*What Is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?*” This discussion is divided into three sections, and it is here that we find a hermeneutical application of the philosophical categories developed by Climacus. In the first, Kierkegaard explores the metaphor of a mirror used by James for the Word: “*The first requirement is that you must not look at the mirror, observe the mirror, but must see yourself in the mirror*” (FSE, p. 25). The real target of this discussion is academic scholarship: in their effort to be detached and objective, scholars lose the ability to read the Bible as God’s Word. Kierkegaard does not disparage scholarship as such; neither does he contest the historical and linguistic complexities that attend the biblical text. What he insists is that a believer will always read the Bible as a letter, not just an impersonal document but a personal communication that requires a response. Thus, like a lover who has difficulty understanding a letter from the beloved, the believer

“distinguishes between reading and reading, between reading with a dictionary and reading the letter from his beloved” (FSE, p. 27).

These two sorts of reading are an excellent illustration of the meaning of duplexity in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. According to Climacus, every subjective thinker “has comprehended the duplexity of existence in order to be such a thinker.”³⁵ In short, every self experiences the world as both objective and subjective, as an impersonal object and as a matrix of personal meaning. The duplexity of existence is that it can never be simply objective or simply subjective: existence itself is always both. Thus every letter received and every Word that is heard can be interpreted objectively, subjectively, or both.

The duplexity of existence is the basis for Kierkegaard’s famous doctrine of reduplication, which appears in *Postscript* but is defined most clearly by Anti-Climacus as living in actuality according to one’s understanding.³⁶ This demand also appears in *For Self-Examination*: “God’s Word is given in order that you shall act according to it, not that you shall practice interpreting obscure passages. If you do not read God’s Word in such a way that you consider that the least little bit you do understand instantly binds you to do accordingly, then you are not reading God’s Word” (FSE, p. 29). For this reason, the believer wishes to be alone with God’s Word, just as a lover wants solitude in order to read a letter from the beloved (FSE, p. 30). Neither will be distracted by the questions raised by scholars. Both seek only to know what it is that is asked of them, in order to do it if at all possible. “Christendom,” Kierkegaard adds ironically, is like a kingdom in which a royal decree has been issued and no one responds, for “[e]verybody turns into an interpreter” (FSE, p. 33).³⁷

This discussion of the believer’s response to the Word recalls another concept from *Postscript*: double-reflection. During the discussion of communication in which he mentions duplexity, Climacus indicates that only an awareness of duplexity can make a person aware of the fact that all subjective communication is a form of double-reflection (CUP, p. 74). In other words, no one can respect the subjective nature of the other without first understanding that existence itself is thoroughly subjective, which means that there are no objective existential truths that can be imparted by one person to another. In what could stand as a motto for Kierkegaard’s entire pseudonymous authorship, Climacus announces that “just as the subjective existing thinker has set himself free by the duplexity, so the secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the other free” (CUP, p. 74). Double-reflection can occur within the individual’s reflection as well as within social communication. Climacus calls it the “reflection of inwardness,” according to which the individual thinks the universal or objective reality, “but, as existing in this thinking, as acquiring this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more

subjectively isolated" (CUP, p. 73).³⁸ Like the solitude sought by the lover and the believer, the isolation of the subjective thinker is not so much a matter of choice as it is an acknowledgment of the duplexity and subjectivity of existence itself. It is a freedom that presupposes a bond; isolation within genuine relationship.³⁹

The second requirement Kierkegaard lays down for seeing oneself in the mirror of the Word is to repeat to oneself: "*It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking*" (FSE, p. 35). Here the warning against objective scholarship is broadened into a warning against those who slyly affirm that "to think about oneself is . . . vanity, morbid vanity . . . I thereby also make sure that God's Word cannot take hold of me because I do not place myself in any personal (subjective) relation to the Word, but . . . change the Word into an impersonal something (the objective, an objective doctrine, etc.), to which I—both earnest and cultured!—relate myself objectively" (FSE, p. 36). Kierkegaard finds a biblical illustration of his point in the prophet Nathan's confrontation with King David over the sinful way David had made Bathsheba his wife. Nathan concluded a story about a similar sin with the words: "Thou art the man!" (2 Sam 11:2-12:15). This should be our constant thought as we read the Bible, enjoins Kierkegaard. When reading the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37), we should immediately identify with the priest and the Levite, and the example of the good Samaritan should show us our failings, so that Christ's "Go and do likewise" is heard as a direct and personal command (FSE, p. 41).

In this section Kierkegaard has explicitly argued for the very claim that undergirds the concepts of the duplexity of existence and double reflection: truth is subjectivity. This assertion is well known from the title of a sixty-page chapter in *Postscript*.⁴⁰ There is no need to review the entire chapter here. Let me simply recall that, near its beginning, Climacus offers this striking contrast between an objective Christian and a subjective heathen:

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, then, is there more truth? The one [the latter] prays in truth to God although he is worshiping an idol; the other [the former] prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshiping an idol. (CUP, 1:1, p. 201)

In other words, it is the subjective relation between the individual and the truth that determines the authenticity of an individual's relation to God, not the formal correspondence between the symbol worshipped and the true nature of God. Applied to "the mirror of the Word," Kierkegaard is saying that believers will read the Bible not for impersonal propositions and doctrines

about the divine, but to hear God speak directly and personally to them about their lives.

The final requirement that Kierkegaard finds in James's teaching about the mirror of the Word is that "*you must not promptly forget how you looked*" (FSE, p. 44). Here he clearly moves beyond the views of Johannes Climacus. Both are very concerned about the nature of earnestness, but Climacus's concern is primarily a matter of discerning the paradoxical relationship between earnestness and jest, a perfectly understandable preoccupation in one who describes himself as a humorist. In *For Self-Examination*, however, Kierkegaard relates the subjectivity of earnestness to the problem of self-deception: "Earnestness is precisely this kind of honest distrust of oneself, to treat oneself as a suspicious character" (FSE, p. 44). Earnest faith is always an unsettled faith.

But not visibly so. The unsettledness of faith is not an anxious or restless striving that creates a commotion with all its energy and draws attention to itself. Neither does it ever impose itself on the freedom of others. The mark of a faith that is earnestly unsettled is nothing other than silence, just as silence is the only solution to the ills of a world that can no longer hear God's Word: ". . . the very first thing that must be done is: create silence, bring about silence; God's Word cannot be heard, and if in order to be heard in the hullabaloo it must be shouted deafeningly with noisy instruments, then it is not God's Word; create silence!" (FSE, p. 47) In a discussion guaranteed to tease if not antagonize feminists, Kierkegaard reflects on the Pauline advice to women to remain silent in church (1 Cor. 14:34). He emphatically affirms that advice, and significantly illustrates the power of silence by citing two men who were silent—Abel and William of Orange (FSE, p. 46; cf. p. 275, n. 54). Silence, he opines, can be fostered by any woman "in her own sphere," but only by an utterly extraordinary man (FSE, p. 48).⁴¹ Men are so caught up in the affairs of the world that only the woman can create silence in the home, and she can achieve it only if she practices silence herself: "You must see to it that you take time every day to collect yourself in the impression of the divine" (FSE, p. 50). For one who has looked at oneself in the mirror of the Word, becoming silent is a far more certain sign of not having forgotten what has been seen in that mirror than any talkativeness can ever be (FSE, p. 51).⁴²

Lived Faith

The Scripture lesson for the second section of *For Self-Examination* is the Ascension story related in Acts 1: 1-12. However, the text on which Kierkegaard actually bases his discourse is Mt. 7:14: "Strait is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life." Under the title, "Christ Is the Way," Kierkegaard shows in a very succinct manner how the subjective, unsettled faith he has described in chapter I is lived out in the world.

Consistent with the position presented in chapter I, the premise for this entire discussion is that “the proclaimer’s life expresses the teaching: the way is narrow” (FSE, p. 58). Kierkegaard develops this proposition in two parts, explaining first that “it is *narrow in its beginning*” (FSE, p. 58), and second that “*this way, which is Christ, this narrow way, as it goes on, becomes narrower and narrower to the end, to death*” (FSE, p. 61). The initial narrowness refers to Christ’s humble birth and the poverty in which he grew up, and even more to his temptations: whether to be made a ruler or to pass himself off as less than he was, there was always the temptation for Christ to try to refuse his fate, a fate he knew “from the beginning, knew that it was unavoidable—indeed, he himself willed it, he entered into it freely!” (FSE, p. 60) Christ is the way, and this way is a narrow way of temptation and suffering, for Christ and all who would follow him must use their powers to “work against” themselves (FSE, p. 61). Such work culminates in death, a death that is an even narrower way, for in his “passion” Jesus is betrayed, condemned, nailed to the cross, and forsaken even by the God with whom he said he was one (FSE, p. 64).⁴³

From the crucifixion Kierkegaard jumps to the Ascension, the event described in the pericope taken from Acts 1. His statement, “death comes between—then follows the Ascension” (FSE, p. 65), seems to imply an indifference toward the resurrection, and it is certainly true that Kierkegaard does not often discuss the resurrection claim. But Ascension of a dead man presupposes that some sort of resurrection has occurred, and a few pages later Kierkegaard unequivocally states that Easter morning comes between the crucifixion and the Ascension (FSE, p. 77), so there is no question here of an effort to ignore or discount the resurrection story. Rather, Kierkegaard emphasizes that Christ is the way, and that the way to glory (Ascension) is only through humiliation (death). The strait and narrow gate into (eternal) life is none other than death itself. That is why this discourse for Ascension Sunday sounds more like a talk for Good Friday (FSE, p. 65).

In addition to stressing the juxtaposition of crucifixion and Ascension, Kierkegaard wants to draw attention to the modern tendency to dismiss the Ascension altogether. This brings us back to the heart of his hermeneutical argument. The reason so many cannot believe in the Ascension, Kierkegaard insists, is that they never “reach it” (FSE, p. 65).⁴⁴ Many discuss it at length, but few pursue the narrow way, the way of voluntary suffering, temptation, and even death, the way that is Christ. Indeed, there are many narrow ways that are difficult to travel, but “[t]hat which distinguishes the Christian narrow way from the common human narrow way is the voluntary” (FSE, p. 67). The only way to “reach it” is by voluntary imitation of Christ, a choice that will bear unmistakable marks, particularly the mark of persecution (FSE, p. 67).

This return to the subjectivity of truth affords Kierkegaard an opportunity to comment on the inauthenticity of the famous method of doubt. Rather than imitation of Christ and giving all one's goods to the poor, the Enlightenment ideal was to doubt everything — everything, that is, except the position in society that one had secured by purporting to doubt everything. Ultimately, Kierkegaard observes in an insightful historical vein, it was not that initial doubts led to Christian efforts to refute those doubts with reasons, but that the allegedly Christian attempt to provide reasons for faith fostered a culture of doubt (FSE, pp. 67-68).

So doubters can never even get close to the Ascension. They prefer objective demonstration to subjective truth and tolerance to imitation. It is the imitators of Christ, those for whom Christ is the narrow way, who find that all human comforts fail to meet their need when they suffer precisely because they do good. It is such an imitator who “needs . . . another kind of comfort, needs the Ascension of the Lord and Master, and in faith pushes through . . . to the Ascension” (FSE, p. 69). For such a one, the Ascension is a comfort, although Kierkegaard does not say just how the Ascension provides that comfort. In any case, these believers are too busy imitating Christ to indulge in doubt. Indeed, in terms of Christian faith, “all such doubt is actually a self-indictment” (FSE, p. 69).

Born Again Faith

In the liturgical calendar the Day of Ascension occurs forty days after Easter. Ten days later comes Pentecost, identified in Acts 2: 1-12 — the text for this third and final part of *For Self-Examination* — as the day when the ascended Lord sent down His Spirit to give birth to the Church. Here again Kierkegaard departs from the lesson for the day, and offers instead a meditation on related matters. After an introductory discussion on how the widespread belief in “the spirit of the age” and “the human spirit” conflicts with the biblical belief in “the holy spirit,” let alone “an evil spirit” (FSE, p. 74), Kierkegaard concludes *For Self-Examination* with a meditation which takes its title from the opening clause of Jn. 6:63: “It Is the Spirit Who Gives Life” (FSE, p. 75). However, it is death rather than the spirit that dominates his discussion, not the death of Christ, but the death that every Christian must undergo in order to receive the Spirit that gives life.

Recalling his assertion that for Christ “death comes between” the narrow way and the Ascension (FSE, p. 65), Kierkegaard now argues that “[t]here is not one, not one Christian qualification into which Christianity does not first of all introduce as the middle term: death, dying to [*at afdøe*]—in order to protect the essentially Christian from being taken in vain” (FSE, pp. 75-76). The Spirit does indeed give life, but death goes in between. In order to receive the life of the Spirit, “you must die to. The life-giving Spirit is the

very one who slays you” (FSE, p. 76). The Pauline phrase, “die to,” hints at the complexity of Kierkegaard’s meaning here. Just as Paul speaks of dying to sin (Rom. 6:2, 10-11), he also insists that one must die to the holy Law (Rom. 7:4, Gal. 2:19; cf. Rom. 7:12), and even to the Lord himself (Rom. 14:8). Likewise, Kierkegaard observes that the Christian must die to all “earthly hope . . . human confidence . . . selfishness [and] . . . the world” (FSE, p. 77), but his real concern is to radicalize the concept of “dying to” even further. It is not simply the frustration of having a wish or hope denied; nor is it the pain of having to renounce that wish or hope. No, to die to oneself is “personally to have to shatter one’s fulfilled desire, personally to have to deprive oneself of the dearly desired one who is now one’s own” (FSE, p. 79). The example Kierkegaard gives is Abraham, who had to sacrifice Isaac, who in turn was “a gift from God” and “the child of promise” (FSE, p. 79). So the death of Christian “dying to” is death not only to the world and to all confidence in oneself or one’s understanding; it is a “dark night” in which one dies even to all confidence “in God in an immediate way” (FSE, p. 82). The pain of this dying to is greater than that of physical death, for physical death comes to an end, “but dying to is not over in this way, because he does not die, indeed, perhaps a long life lies before him, the one who has died to.”⁴⁵

This, then, is the prerequisite to receiving the life-giving Spirit. The therapy that Christianity offers is eternity, but the medicine (to extend the metaphor) that must be taken is dying to. Christianity is no “quack doctor [who] is promptly at your service and immediately applies the remedy and bungles everything” (FSE, p. 80). Citing Paul’s words in 2 Tim 2:11: “If we have died with Christ, so shall we also live with him,” Kierkegaard emphasizes: “First death—then life” (FSE, p. 81).

Only now can we understand properly the three gifts that the spirit brings: faith, hope, and love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13). Faith is given “only after death has come in between” (FSE, p. 81); it is a faith that is “against understanding” and “on the other side of death” (FSE, p. 82). Likewise, immediate hope must die and become hopelessness before the life-giving Spirit can come and raise it up as hope “against hope.”⁴⁶ Finally, love itself is, in its ordinary forms, merely another form of self-love. “Not until you have died to the selfishness in you and thereby to the world so that you do not love the world or anything in the world, do not selfishly love even one single person—not until you in love of God have learned to hate yourself, not until then can there be talk of the love that is Christian love” (FSE, pp. 83-84).

No one affirms Christian love more emphatically than Kierkegaard does in *For Self-Examination*, precisely because he sees that love from God and love for God become subjectively true only at a very great price — the price of dying to. This demonstrates that Kierkegaard takes the phrase “born again”

far more seriously than many of its contemporary advocates seem to, for it means to him that the Christian really is reborn by the Spirit in faith, hope, and love, but only after death to the world, to self, and even to any immediate possession of the God-relation.

Love Is Not Enough

Perhaps Kierkegaard has demonstrated why religion is not more welcome at dinner parties. Who, after all, wants to entertain with so much talk of death! More to the point of this paper, it shows us why a Kierkegaardian phenomenology of religious experience cannot put the accent on love.⁴⁷ Love is certainly one of the gifts of the life-giving Spirit, and the love of God is vital to all Christian experience. But death comes first, not only as a necessary pre-condition, but as a constant demand. Just as Abraham's faith is characterized in *Fear and Trembling* as a double movement of renunciation of any claim to Isaac and a simultaneous trust that the boy will be restored to him by God, the heart of Christian experience is portrayed in *For Self-Examination* as a dying to those very gifts that are simultaneously and joyfully received back again from God. In an age such as our's, when talk of love is as cheap as talk of grace was in Kierkegaard's Christendom, this is a sobering reminder that love, along with faith and hope, is never a possession. Even the love of God is a gift that we can fully receive only as or after we die to it. As Christ was "forsaken" by God the Father on the Cross, every Christian must also experience the dark night of abandonment. No doubt the duration, frequency, and intensity of such dark nights will vary from person to person, but no genuine Christian, according to Kierkegaard, can escape them entirely. That is why one of the marks of faith is suffering, especially in the form of persecution.

Stephen Evans certainly understands that "transformative religious experience" transforms the one who has it, and that it can so "shatter a person's whole structure of attitudes and beliefs" that the individual now confesses "an openness to having my natural attitude of self-sufficiency and selfishness overturned."⁴⁸ This insight is available in the Climacus writings, but only the cryptic phrase in *Fragments*, "the *autopsy* of faith," offers a hint of the phenomenological analysis presented in *For Self-Examination*.⁴⁹ There we find that self-renunciation is radicalized as the pathos of dying to, of voluntarily shattering one's promised *and fulfilled* desire — of, like Abraham, sacrificing those very gifts of love received from God and affirmed as the basis for one's entire life and hope. According to Kierkegaard, Christian experience is first and foremost the experience of dying to. Only then can it authentically become also the experience of being born again, and receiving back again in love fulfilled that to which one has died.

NOTES

1. Freud's bewilderment over the testimony of his admired friend, Romain Roland, to an "oceanic feeling" as the source of religious ideas is well known. In rebuttal, Freud complains that feelings do not lend themselves to scientific analysis, and argues that the oceanic feeling is, in effect, a momentary regression to infantile narcissism, whereas religious needs are a response to the fear and desire of the oedipal situation. See *Civilization and Its Discontents*, tr. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), pp. 11-20.
2. Weber also focuses on the intellectual dimension, which alone moderates his tendency to explain religion in terms of material needs. Thus he views mystical contemplation as mystical knowledge rather than as "immediate" experience. See *The Sociology of Religion*, tr. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 117, 169-170.
3. In spite of his own methodological intentions, James seems unable to put the question of the origin of religious experiences behind him. His position is that they come either from or through (depending upon the actual existence of external higher powers) a subliminal consciousness. See *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Collier, 1961), pp. 33-34, 192, 199, 398.
4. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, tr. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford Galaxy, 1958).
5. Eliade asserts that his goal is to understand "experiences" of the sacred (*The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, tr. Willard R. Trask [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959], p. 166; and *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969]: Preface [n.p.]), but his actual analyses dwell on symbolic and conceptual "structures" of meaning rather than particular experiences. Thus he imputes religious meaning to subjects who remain unconscious of it (*Sacred and Profane*, pp. 129, 213).
6. Tillich is, of course, nervous about any claim to a direct experience of the Ultimate that would be exempted from the "Protestant principle" of criticism. See *My Search for Absolutes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 131; and *Systematic Theology*, vol. III (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row and the University of Chicago Press, 1963), *passim*.
7. The fascinating thing about Buber's conversion is that it was *away* from religious experience (which Buber terms "ecstatic") and *to* the world of everyday experience. Be that as it may, Buber is still utterly reticent about the actual character of the experiences he refers to as illumination, rapture, and ecstasy, just as he only hints at the suicide of the young man which occasioned the "conversion." See *Between Man and Man*, tr. Maurice Friedman (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 13-14.
8. Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination: Recommended to the Present Age*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. xiii.
9. C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs," in *Faith and Philosophy* 5:1 (January, 1988), pp. 25-39; and "The Epistemological Significance of Transformative Religious Experiences: A Kierkegaardian Exploration," in *Faith and Philosophy* 8:2 (April, 1991), pp. 180-192.

10. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16-93.

11. Plantinga, p. 81.

12. Plantinga, p. 81.

13. Plantinga, p. 82.

14. Plantinga, p. 81.

15. Evans (1988), p. 29.

16. Evans (1988), p. 30.

17. Evans (1988), p. 31.

18. Plantinga, p. 60.

19. Evans (1988), p. 31.

20. Evans (1991), pp. 182-83.

21. Evans (1991), p. 184.

22. Evans (1991), p. 185.

23. Evans (1991), p. 186.

24. Evans (1991), pp. 186-187.

25. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 62.

26. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 69.

27. Evans (1991), p. 188.

28. Evans (1991), p. 189.

29. Evans (1991), p. 189. Cf. Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1970), pp. 9-10.

30. Evans (1988): 27.

31. *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 70, 102. Emphasis in the original.

32. The use of grammatical moods to capture the force of the Gospel — as expressed by Paul in Gal. 5:25 — was a favorite device of Rudolf Bultmann. See "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, tr. Reginald Fuller (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 22; and *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 49.

33. FSE, 17 (translation modified; see Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Væker*, Bd. 17 [Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1964], p. 62).

34. Since *uroilig* and *Uro* are used no less than thirteen times in eight pages (FSE, pp. 17-24), it seems important to pin down their connotations (a subject requiring another paper!). The Honges render *uroilig* "restless," an improvement over Lowrie's "perturbing" (Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves!* tr. Walter Lowrie [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941], p. 42). But the Honges' reference to the purported source in Luther is confusing, for they translate his description of faith as "a living, powerful thing" (FSE, p. 273, no. 20). I prefer to translate *uroilig* by "unsettled" so as to convey less that faith is troubled (Lowrie's "perturbing") or that it is a Romantic and restive immaturity that lacks focus (which the Honges' "restless" could imply), than that it

is always unfinished. A much stronger rendering of *uroilig* as “turbulent” is employed by David Cain, following the Hongs’ earlier translation of *For Self-Examination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1940), p. 16. This does the most justice to Kierkegaard’s comment that faith is “stronger and more violent than the most burning fever” (FSE, p. 18), but risks limiting faith to moments of turbulence in a one-sided way. I am very grateful to Professor Cain for his detailed comments on an earlier draft of this paper. For his illuminating discussion of FSE, see “‘Death Comes In Between’: Reflections on Kierkegaard’s *Self-Examination*, *Kierkegaardiana* 15 (1991), p. 71.

35. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 2 vols., tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 1:1, pp. 74-75. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CUP.

36. See *Training in Christianity*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 123, 133.

37. This ironizing of “interpretation” adumbrates the attack on “methodological” interpretation by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

38. On double reflection, see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), pp. 96-98.

39. The retrieval of the social dimension of Kierkegaard’s understanding of the self is one of the most significant advances in recent scholarship. To cite just two examples, see Michael Plekon’s “‘Anthropological Contemplation’: Kierkegaard and Modern Social Theory,” and “‘Other Kierkegaards’—New Views and Reinterpretations in Scholarship,” published together in *Thought* 55: 218 (September, 1980), pp. 346-375; and Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987). More recently George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans have edited *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992).

40. The Hongs have departed from Lowrie’s translation by choosing to emphasize (as the heading on each page) the other part of the title, viz., ‘Subjective Truth, Inwardness.’

41. That men are inferior to women in the creation of silence is slight consolation to Kierkegaardian feminists, unless they realize that silence is actually more articulate and powerful than oratory. As David Cain puts it: “The need, says Kierkegaard, when there is an inverse correlation between the means and the significance of communication . . . , is to ‘procure silence.’” See “‘Death Comes In Between,’” p. 74.

42. This silence is quite different from Abraham’s silence in *Fear and Trembling*, perhaps because here we have a direct discussion of the silence of Christian faith by Kierkegaard, whereas *Fear and Trembling* offers an indirect discussion of the silence of (pre-Christian) Abraham attributed to the pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio. On the silence of Abraham, see Mark C. Taylor, “Sounds of Silence,” in *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1981), pp. 182-186.

43. It is curious that Kierkegaard says that Jesus kissed Judas (FSE, p. 63), whereas the New Testament narratives state that Judas kissed Jesus; however, Jesus did wash Judas’s feet (Jn 13), which conveys the same idea just as clearly.

44. Gregor Malantschuk observes that Kierkegaard says little about the doctrines of Resurrection and Ascension because they are “reality only to the person who is already within the sphere of faith.” See *Kierkegaard's Thought*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971): 100. David Cain observes that “the reticence of the authorship concerning resurrection and ascension results from concern to keep Christian concepts from collapsing into the aesthetic and superstition, unraveling everything.” See “‘Death Comes In Between,’” p. 76.

45. The Danish translated by the Hongs as “the one who has died” (FSE, p. 79) is *den Afdøde* (*Samlede Væker*, 17, p. 116), which Lowrie renders “the deceased” (p. 99). But a final “to” seems to be required by the sense.

46. FSE, p. 82; cf. Rom. 4:18.

47. To argue that the phenomenological entry into Christian experience is death rather than love in no way implies a psychology of masochism. Masochists seek out pain and seem to enjoy it for its own sake. Kierkegaard suffers the pain necessary to be transformed through death into a new life of faith, hope, and love — hardly the traits of your typical masochist.

48. Evans (1991), p. 188.

49. PF, pp. 70, 102. “Autopsy” comes from a Greek word meaning to see for oneself, which fits nicely with Climacus’ demand for subjectivity. The German term has always been used primarily in a medical sense, but I have not been able to ascertain when it was first used in Danish for the internal examination of a corpse to determine the cause of death. According to the OED, that usage does not appear in English until the turn of the century. In German it was slightly earlier, and in French even earlier. (See the *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen, A-G*, ed. Wolfgang Pfeiffer [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989], p. 105.) It would be nice to know if Kierkegaard had the forensic usage available to him, and could have been enjoying a marvelous *double entendre* with his phrase “autopsy of faith.”