

## Kierkegaard on truth

MATTHEW GERHARD JACOBY

*Department of Philosophy, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC, Australia*

**Abstract:** The following paper focuses upon what is possibly the most controversial passage in Kierkegaard's writings. On the basis of this passage Kierkegaard's notion of truth as 'subjectivity' has been interpreted as being 'non-objective referential', that is, as having severed itself from 'eternal truth' altogether, so that the emphasis in the question of truth is entirely upon the *relationship* a person has to what he thinks and that the object of the relationship is a matter of indifference. We shall defend here a reading of Kierkegaard in which the subjectivity that Kierkegaard defines as truth is entirely conditioned by its relation to a specific revelation of eternal truth. In line with this we will also interpret the passage at the centre of the controversy as an 'impossible hypothetical' used for the sake of making a provocation.

*When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of his relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true.<sup>1</sup>*

This passage from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is possibly the most debated and controversial passage penned by Kierkegaard. It may not even be going too far to say that the way we understand this passage will dictate how we both read and apply Kierkegaard today. On the basis of this passage, Kierkegaard has been read as a reactionary against the traditional cognitive-propositional notion of religious truth, inasmuch as he appears to have severed religious truth claims from their alleged objective reference and made them entirely self-referential. In this sense also he has been seen as anticipating the post-liberal cultural-linguistic model of religion according to which religious truth claims derive their meaning and legitimacy (or truthfulness) from their congruency with their own linguistic and existential context.<sup>2</sup> In Kierkegaard, it is thought, this is reflected in

the definition of truth as the relation of one's thought, not with the Kantian object, but with one's own being. In contrast with Kant who had defined truth as the static correspondence between thought and its object,<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard emphasizes the fact that it is empirical being that is the object of thinking, and that with this everything is placed into a 'process of becoming' since the object is unfinished.<sup>4</sup> What ensues from this is that truth is something that includes the thinking subject; it is the manner of the relationship between the mode of the subject's thinking and his/her concrete being. Whether this excludes the Kantian object altogether is the matter of contention here. If Kierkegaard defines truth for the individual as wholly 'self-referential' then perhaps one might see a reflection of George Lindbeck's intra-theological criteria for truth (in which truth claims are legitimized by reference to the linguistic-cultural context in which they are confessed). But if Kierkegaard retains the traditional objective reference point in his truth claims, then he is far less useful for Lindbeck's concerns than has been alleged recently by Stephen Emmanuel<sup>5</sup> and Timothy Houston Polk.<sup>6</sup>

The 'objective-referential debate' is exemplified in Louis Pojman's *Logic of Subjectivity*,<sup>7</sup> in which Pojman argues that Kierkegaard retains the relation of subjective truth to 'eternal truth', in opposition to Louis Mackey, for example, who argues that, for Kierkegaard, subjective truth has no relation to 'eternal truth'.<sup>8</sup> What Pojman's objects to in Mackey's interpretation of Kierkegaard is the allegation that Kierkegaard's notion of truth as subjectivity is *only* concerned with the relationship one has with one's beliefs. Pojman concedes that this is indeed the dominant emphasis in Kierkegaard but that Kierkegaard nevertheless retains the objective reference. A more recent contributor to the debate who has taken up the non-objective referential interpretation of Kierkegaard is Christopher Hamilton.<sup>9</sup> Hamilton argues that Kierkegaard thinks it is not necessary to be related to the right object in order to be in truth. Hamilton writes in opposition to Hannay who defends a reading of Kierkegaard that retains a firm objective reference which is itself the condition of the inwardness. Hannay points out that for Kierkegaard the whole point of these passages is to emphasize that just having the right object is not a sufficient condition for Christian faith. Hamilton agrees with this, but then argues that the object of faith 'is not some metaphysical claim one must *first* believe, on the basis of which one then develops inwardness'.<sup>10</sup> One develops inwardness first and the object of religious affection is entirely secondary and even quite arbitrary. He suggests that this inwardness is completely self affecting though it may 'find spiritual nourishment in a deepened understanding of Christ's life and maybe such an understanding is the most appropriate place to find such nourishment, as Kierkegaard suggests'.<sup>11</sup> However, as the following article will endeavour to demonstrate, this interpretation is quite foreign not only to the intention of the texts in question but also to Kierkegaard's whole authorship. We shall respond to this issue by appealing firstly to Kierkegaard's wider authorship, secondly to the overall drama of the *Postscript* itself, and finally with detailed

attention to the passage in question here along with its alternative expression a page or so later:

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with a knowledge of the true idea 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 passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol – where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol.<sup>12</sup>

### **Kierkegaard's concern**

Kierkegaard is a Christian writer with the agenda of leading people into a true relationship to Christianity and thus to become Christians in the truly New Testament sense. Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard discriminates quite sharply between Christians and 'pagans'. His preoccupation was that Christendom had become a 'baptised paganism' and that individuals within Christendom had been taken up into a purely 'world-historical' Christianity, thus losing their individuality before God. Each person was considered to be a Christian from an objective world-historical point of view. This, for Kierkegaard, is exemplary of the pagan attitude: 'an objective acceptance of Christianity is paganism or thoughtlessness'.<sup>13</sup> It was thought in Kierkegaard's time that the way to becoming a Christian simply involved the acquisition of certain objective truths. But Kierkegaard says that 'to know a confession of faith by rote is paganism, because Christianity is inwardness'.<sup>14</sup> We should note that he is not saying that inwardness is Christianity but that Christianity is inwardness. In an edifying discourse titled 'The narrowness is the way' Kierkegaard corrects what he sees as a popular misunderstanding that if only it were discovered *where* the way is (the way of truth) everything would then be decided: 'And worldly wisdom is very willing to deceive by repeatedly answering the question of where the way is, while the difficulty is ignored, that, spiritually understood, the way is: *how* it is travelled.'<sup>15</sup>

What distinguishes Christianity from paganism is not just the 'what' but the 'how.' In fact the 'how' is the 'what' since the entire content of biblical revelation is an imperative to a certain type of active relationship. If the question is asked, 'what is the Bible about?', the answer, according to Kierkegaard, must be: it is about *how* to live in a relationship with God. Certainly Kierkegaard believed that the Bible tells us *what* the truth is, but it is central to Kierkegaard's philosophy that it be borne in mind that this question is asked in existence, and therefore the question of *what* must naturally become *how*. That 'God is' is the truth, but this is still not the truth *for an existing individual*. The Bible does not concern itself with the fact that 'God is' but assuming this (since the question about the existence of God cannot be posed in existence) it focuses on *how* an individual must relate to God. The whole issue is determined by *existence*. In existence certain questions are meaningful and others are meaningless. The question, 'what is

truth?’ must become, ‘*how* can I live truthfully?’ The abstract question of *what*, when it is purged of the *how*, is meaningless for an existing individual. Hence the ‘where’ of the way of truth is: *how* it is actualized in concrete human existence.

The foundation for the essential difference between paganism and Christianity is laid in *Sickness unto Death*. This work is a psychological exposition of ‘despair’ which is essentially a means of escaping from the God-relationship – the *how*. Human *being* is defined here as a threefold relation in which the self relates itself to itself (since the existing spirit is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, and of freedom and necessity) and thus to the one who established the relation – God. The threefold relation, with the God-relationship as the key aspect, is the authenticity of humanness and is also the difficulty of existence precisely because being human involves relating to God. *Despair* is essentially an escape from selfhood since this involves the ‘problem’ of relating to God. Paganism, for Kierkegaard, is living in spite of the truth – and truth is a mode of being that involves the God-relationship. Paganism is therefore an escape from this mode of being. In *For Self Examination* likewise, Kierkegaard is concerned with this issue of escapism. Here the distinction between Christianity and paganism (the ‘secular’ as it is expressed here) is exemplified by Luther. In this context paganism/secularism is the tendency either to works-meritoriousness or to works-complacency based on a misunderstanding of the doctrine of ‘salvation by grace through faith alone’:

There is always a secular mentality that no doubt wants to have the name of being Christian as cheaply as possible. This secular mentality became aware of Luther. It listened; for safety’s sake it listened once again lest it should have heard wrongly; thereupon it said, ‘Excellent! This is something for us. Luther says: it depends on faith alone. He himself does not say that his life expresses works, and since he is now dead it is no longer an actuality. So we take his words, his doctrine – and we are free from all works – long live Luther!’<sup>16</sup>

What Luther represents here is the fact that the way of truth is *how* it is lived. Kierkegaard points out that while Luther propounded the doctrine of ‘salvation by faith alone apart from works’ yet Luther’s life expressed works. The problem with the ‘secular mentality’ is that it focuses on what the doctrine says whilst ignoring *how* it is to be actually lived. The doctrine itself is intended to liberate a person into a life of active faith.

Kierkegaard is not therefore *uninterested* in the *what*, in the content, in the objective reference of Christian faith. What he is saying is that the *what* is the *how*. The objective reference of Christian faith is the infinite subject God, who is not an object to know in a cognitive sense but a subject to which the individual must relate. Hence the objective *what* which is the object of Christian faith is the subjective *how* – the relationship. Hamilton wants to say that, for Kierkegaard, this *how* is quite arbitrary so that any expression of subjectivity is legitimate. But Kierkegaard explicitly refutes this. In *Authority and Revelation* (the ‘Book on

Adler') Kierkegaard insists that not every expression of subjectivity is *Christian* subjectivity:

And one does not become a Christian by being moved by something indefinitely higher, and not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring. That is to say: emotion which is Christian is checked by the definition of concepts, and when emotion is transposed or expressed in words in order to be communicated, the transposition must occur constantly within the definition of concepts.<sup>17</sup>

The connection between the view that Kierkegaard expresses here and that of Climacus can justifiably be assumed without any detriment to the autonomy that Kierkegaard wants for his pseudonym. The autonomy of Climacus is protected for the sake of allowing what is said in the *Postscript* to be said from that particular point of view. It does not involve altogether different definitions of concepts. Climacus is Kierkegaard's pseudonym, created to serve his own agenda and convictions, and it would therefore be unreasonable to read Climacus in opposition to Kierkegaard. Hence, what Kierkegaard says here about Christian subjectivity being of a certain definite sort may be used to shed light on what Kierkegaard wants to or does not want to say about subjectivity through Climacus.

In Kierkegaard's distinction Christianity is *truth* in so far as it facilitates the reconciliation of the relationship between man and God, and paganism is *untruth* insofar as it seeks to *escape* from this relationship. The problem with objectivity is that it is a form of *escapism*. And Kierkegaard defines the secular or pagan mentality in terms of escapism. Objectivity is certainly not the only form of escapism, and subjectivity is itself not a guarantee that the individual is not 'escaping'. When Kierkegaard argues that 'not every expression of subjectivity is *Christian* subjectivity', it is the same as if he had said that there are forms of subjectivity that are also forms of escapism – such as that of lunacy. The case of Adler is an example of this point. Kierkegaard was faced, in this case, with a person whose subjective revelation was quite deranged. If Hamilton regards Kierkegaard as advocating subjectivity as something that is not predefined by its specific object then indeed any kind of inwardness is legitimate and Kierkegaard can have had no grounds on which to criticize Adler. But Kierkegaard has strong grounds on which to reject Adler and he does this by, in effect, using the *how-what* distinction the other way around. *How* one must be in order to be a Christian is limited by *what* the Christian concept of the *how* is. Elsewhere, the emphasis of Kierkegaard's writing is on qualifying the *what* as the *how* so that the perspective of the 'how' is emphasized. The mistake in the non-objective-referential interpretation of Kierkegaard is that it takes the *how* and ignores that this has a specific content. It is not any *how* but a certain type of *how*. The manner of the God-relationship is distinguished from pagan idolatry by a certain 'definition of concepts'. This definition of concepts is the revelation upon which Christianity is based. Kierkegaard writes: 'It is true that Christianity is built upon a revelation, but also it is limited by the revelation it has

received.<sup>18</sup> Christianity is defined by a *distinct* definition, as Kierkegaard puts it in the *Postscript*, ‘That an eternal happiness is decided in time through the relationship to something historical [is] ... what I now call Christianity.’<sup>19</sup> This relationship is not just one amongst many ways to be in truth but rather it is *the way*. If the way is *how* it is travelled, then this relationship to something historical (the Christ-incarnation – Kierkegaard is not saying that it is a relationship to anything historical – he has something very specific in mind) is to be sharply distinguished from all other ways.

The biblical concept of Christ as *the way* was something that Kierkegaard took with utmost seriousness and quite literally. This is expressed in *Practice in Christianity*. Christ himself is the *how* and thus he himself is the *way* and the *what* of truth. He both embodies the God-relationship and makes it possible through his work of atonement. Hence Christ is also the objective reference of faith. To suggest, as Hamilton does, that Christ is merely one option amongst many (even if he is the best option) for the sustenance of true inwardness is quite contradictory to Kierkegaard. Here, Kierkegaard makes it clear that truth is a person – Christ. The discussion revolves around the question of Pilate who asked Jesus, ‘‘What is truth?’’. Kierkegaard poses a possible reply for Jesus: ‘What any other person may answer to the question ‘‘what is truth?’’ is indeed never entirely true, but I am the only human being who cannot reply to this question, for I *am* truth.’<sup>20</sup> Thus, here again, Kierkegaard is saying that the *how* is not just any *how* but that there is a concrete objective reference for this *how* which is the *way*.

Despite how distasteful this may be to contemporary thought, Kierkegaard must be understood as an exclusivist in every respect. Walter Kaufmann, for example, criticizes Kierkegaard for his lack of consideration for other religions, but there is simply no room in Kierkegaard’s authorship for even the slightest consideration of other world religions.<sup>21</sup> There are two categories in Kierkegaard’s thought: the ‘Christian’ and ‘the pagan’. Kierkegaard is not writing so that, as Lindbeck would urge at points in inter-faith dialogue, the Muslim may be encouraged to become a better Muslim.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not this exclusivist attitude is legitimate is not the question here. The question is: What did Kierkegaard really think in this respect? Few philosophers have been so distorted through secondary literature as Kierkegaard, who, in spite of the overtly Christian agenda expressed throughout his authorship, has been read largely to the point where it has even been questioned whether he was a theist.<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard was a Christian in the Lutheran tradition who held unswervingly to Lutheran doctrine,<sup>24</sup> and who, while he struggled with certain aspects of his childhood faith, never departed from the basic pietist version of the Protestant confession. The major emphases of his writing are conviction of sin, spiritual awakening, faith in Christ, and a life of imitation of Christ. All these are wholly in line with a Christianity that is both biblical and based on a definite objective-truth-reference. The textual support for this from Kierkegaard’s sheer mass of Christian literature is quite conclusive.

### **Johannes Climacus and the *Postscript***

We now turn, for an understanding of the passages in question, to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* specifically, and to the overall purpose of the work and the way in which Kierkegaard seeks to meet his goal through his pseudonym. It is important to note, if we are to understand any part of the *Postscript*, that it is attributed by Kierkegaard to Johannes Climacus, and this for a good reason. Climacus is of great significance to Kierkegaard's effort to 'wound from behind', that is to communicate something indirectly. In the *Point of View* Kierkegaard explains the importance of his pseudonym for his overall purpose:

Once in a while there appears a religious enthusiast: he storms against Christendom, he vociferates and makes a loud noise, denouncing almost all as not being Christians – and accomplishes nothing. He takes no heed of the fact that an illusion is not an easy thing to dispel. ... No, an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed. If it is an illusion that all are Christians – and if there is anything to be done about it, it must be done indirectly, not by one who vociferously proclaims himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by one who, better instructed, is ready to declare that he is not a Christian at all.<sup>25</sup>

What evolves throughout the Climacean Literature (*Fragments, Johannes Climacus* and the *Postscript*) is a kind of dialectical drama in which we gradually come to understand the writer. Kierkegaard's use of Climacus is epigrammatic. What Johannes accomplishes is, as Kierkegaard expresses it, 'the most superb epigram upon [the German professor (the speculative philosopher)]'.<sup>26</sup> In *Johannes Climacus* Kierkegaard tells the story of this young thinker who honestly and naively seeks to do exactly what the philosophizers tell him. In the first place he takes the thesis that 'philosophy begins with doubt', but finds himself back where he started since the thesis cancels itself out once it is sincerely taken up. That philosophy begins with doubt itself must be doubted, and therefore one simply proceeds nowhere. The problem for Climacus is that he cannot ascertain *how* the philosophy of the philosophizers is to be done. He wants to know what kind of relationship he should enter into with philosophy. In order to find this out he inquires into the nature of the philosophical thesis, to find out whether the task is simply to *enunciate it* or to *receive it* in a certain way. But the result of Climacus's sincere desire to do what the philosophizers say ends in disappointment, and as a result he abandons formal philosophy in the conviction that he has been cruelly deceived.

The question that opens the *Philosophical Fragments* is quite continuous with the portrait we are given of the young Climacus in *Johannes Climacus*. The young inquisitor asks whether truth can be learned. The answer is not a simple 'yes' or 'no'. The complexity of the issue has to do with the sense in which Climacus uses the term 'truth'. We will be reminded that 'truth' for Climacus is to be understood,

not in the Kantian sense of the conformity between thought and its object, but as the conformity of thinking with empirical *being*. The object of Kant's correspondence is not rejected altogether but is understood empirically and therefore everything is placed in a process of becoming. If one is to think in conformity with being (the Kantian object understood empirically), then *how* one thinks is the dominant concern in the question of truth. Since truth involves a certain way of thinking, *the subject* is now included in the truth criterion. In this sense truth is a state of personal being. In Kant, only the content of a person's thinking had to be in conformity with the object. Here, the subject is left out of the equation. This is objective reflection. However, in Kierkegaard, the thinker *himself* has to be in conformity with being. This is subjective reflection. If truth were simply a proposition that laid claim to the Kantian correspondence then indeed it could be learned – the task would simply be to *enunciate* it. Whether a person understands it or not, or what the condition of the person is who enunciates is, is irrelevant. Since truth is simply a conformity of thought with a certain object it does not matter *who* it is thought by or *how* it is thought, as long as the correspondence is realized. The case is entirely different, however, when truth involves a certain mode of being. In this case truth must be *received* in a certain way. In order for truth to be received in the right sort of way certain conditions must be present in the subject. The person must be inwardly disposed to the exact kind of appropriation that is truthful. This idea is expressed in the formula of Jesus, 'He who has ears, let him hear'. In order for a person to receive the truth he must, in a sense, already be in truth.

This is the crux of the problem in the first part of the *Fragments*. If truth is to be taught, the teacher must provide the learner with the condition for understanding the truth.<sup>27</sup> The teacher must transform, not reform, the learner. But this is impossible unless the teacher is the very God who created the learner. The introduction of God into Climacus's argument is not accompanied by any apologetic, rather, Climacus proceeds with the assumption that man is created by God and that when God created him He must have given him the condition for understanding the truth. What follows in the *Fragments* is a 'thought project' in which Climacus arrives progressively at the major doctrines of biblical anthropology, christology and soteriology. If man was originally given the condition for knowing the truth, then he must have lost it at some time. Hence, at one point man, obviously through his own fault, fell into untruth. Climacus calls this the state of sin.<sup>28</sup> Since man is now bound in this condition and unable to work himself loose, he thus needs a saviour.<sup>29</sup> The saviour is the one who desires to teach man truth – 'the god'. This god-saviour must be one who bears the guilt of man's fall in himself through a work of atonement.<sup>30</sup> The rest is predictable. It is obvious that Kierkegaard is bringing his pseudonym, via his thought experiment (his *scala paradisi*), to Christianity (though not into Christianity since he does not become a Christian). Once this saviour has achieved his act of redemption, the 'learner' is



able to receive the condition for truth (and thus we move into soteriology). The process in which 'the god' applies this redemptive work to the learner (in order that he may be restored into truth) is called *conversion*<sup>31</sup> and it involves consciousness of sin, repentance, and a new birth.<sup>32</sup> The credit for this whole process from creation to salvation goes to the teacher, 'the god'. No person can do this for themselves it must be done entirely by 'the god'.

Here, Climacus reasons what *must* happen if a person is to learn truth. He has abandoned the philosophical route and now reflects independently. We should note that Climacus here is not a Christian (he expresses this in calling the teacher 'the god'). His reflection is entirely independent. Climacus does here what Kierkegaard explains about him in *Johannes Climacus*: 'It was his delight to begin with a single thought, and then, by way of coherent thinking, to climb step by step to a higher one, because to him coherent thinking was a *scala paradisi*.'<sup>33</sup> The significance of Climacus's reflection in the *Fragments* for casting away the non-objective referential interpretation of Kierkegaard is evident here. Climacus is convinced that the only way a person can learn the truth is by this specific act of God, in which God becomes incarnate, makes atonement for sin, and applies this to the subject by way of a conversion involving a new birth, penitence, repentance, and faith. This is the *how* that is the *what* and the *way* of Christianity. It is therefore either an inconsistent argument on the part of Kierkegaard or an inconsistent reading on the part of the above mentioned commentators that has Climacus express any degree of indifference toward the object of the God-relationship. In the *Fragments*, Climacus has clearly expressed that *truth can only be had in relationship with this specific 'god' who has done these specific things*. How can he then say that the object of the relationship is a matter of indifference? We concede that Climacus appears to be expressing this. However, if the argument is followed through carefully from the *Fragments* to the *Postscript*, and in the light of the portrait we receive in *Johannes Climacus*, this apparent meaning becomes far less apparent and even quite out of place with what Climacus is attempting to do. We shall now discuss this.

Having 'discovered' that if the truth is to be learned it must be given through certain acts of God, as we have mentioned, and received with certain capacities that God likewise gives, Climacus then asks the question, 'How can God be teacher and saviour and still be God?'.<sup>34</sup> The answer is that He must become man: the Incarnation. The way we relate to God is through the Incarnation.<sup>35</sup> Here is the ultimate revelation of God and the way of truth, and one that stands entirely alone, for as Climacus says, 'any other revelation would be a deception'.<sup>36</sup> But it is precisely here that the great problem emerges, the very problem that gave occasion for the *Postscript*. How can an eternal happiness (the Socratic accompaniment to *truth*) be based upon something historical? The contradiction between eternity and time, the fact that the eternal God exists in time and that one's eternal fate depends upon a relation to something historical becomes the absolute

paradox that is the climax of the *Fragments* and a core theme in the *Postscript*. The *Postscript* begins with the conclusion that the *Fragments* have come to and the question that the *Fragments* leave unanswered. The way in question is, of course, Christianity. Climacus had arrived at Christianity (though the word is not used) in the reflections in the *Fragments* and now in the *Postscript* Christianity is the focus. Now Climacus asks the very same questions about Christianity that he asks in *Johannes Climacus* about philosophy. How must I relate myself to Christianity? What is the nature of Christianity? Is it such that the task is simply to *enunciate* it or must it be *received* in a certain way? The transition from the *Fragments* to the *Postscript* is described in the following passage from the end of the *Postscript*:

I Johannes Climacus, now thirty years old, born in Copenhagen, a plain man like the common run of them, have heard tell of a highest good in prospect, which is called an eternal blessedness, and that Christianity will bestow this upon me on condition of adhering to it – now I ask how am I to become a Christian. I ask only for my own sake, yes, certainly that I do, or rather I have asked this question, for that indeed is the content of the whole work.<sup>37</sup>

For Climacus, however, there is a significant degree of difficulty in finding an answer to his question. The drama of *Johannes Climacus* repeats itself. Climacus sees his contemporaries relating to Christianity in ways that are entirely inconsistent with the nature of Christian truth. And the more Climacus elaborates upon the precise nature of Christian truth the clearer the error appears. It becomes apparent to Climacus that the relation of most ‘Christians’ around him to Christianity is a purely ‘outward’ one. The origin of the problem is found deep in the bowels of speculative philosophy and is evident in the nominal pseudo-faith that the church proclaims. Hegel had taken the individual spiritual identity away from the individual and spoken of a collective ‘mind’ (*Geist*). The relation to Christianity thus came to be seen as a collective historical one in which the individual is part of ‘Christendom’ and is therefore a Christian. Christianity was understood by Hegel within his broader philosophical system so that he could speak of a ‘philosophy of religion’. As a finished system within a system, Christianity presented itself as a series of systematically related propositions. The task for the individual, therefore, was simply to *enunciate* these truths. This would happen as a matter of course once various proofs of the truth of Christianity were given. If only the individual was convinced of the truth, then intellectual assent to these truths and enunciation would follow automatically. This was the objective way. If any trace of subjectivity was present in this process the effectiveness of the transition could be corrupted. If an objective series of reflections is the thing that brings a person into Christianity, then the passions and bias of subjectivity could shortcircuit this precise and delicate intellectual ascent and the individual would remain only partially convinced and therefore could not enunciate Christianity with the necessary degree of objective certainty.

But here Climacus finds a dangerous deception and he devotes himself to reversing the damage that speculative philosophy has done to Christianity. What Climacus wants to know now is how he should relate himself to Christianity in order that he might receive its eternal blessedness. He therefore embarks on an inquiry into the nature of Christianity in contrast to its portrayal in speculative philosophy. What we should note here is that Climacus is not asking the question, 'What is Christianity?' rather he is asking, 'How am I to become a Christian?'. Here is where the portrait that we are given of Climacus throughout the Climacean literature becomes important. Climacus is not interested in *what* Christianity is but only in *how* he can become a Christian. His approach exemplifies that which Kierkegaard commends in *For Self Examination*, where the person who finds the truth is only the person who *does* the truth.<sup>38</sup> Climacus simply wants to *do* what Christianity says. His approach follows the same pattern that was set in *Johannes Climacus*. This is also, for Climacus, the point at which speculative philosophy reveals its deceptiveness, that is, when someone like himself comes eagerly to the philosopher wanting to do what he says.

When a person as a learner enthusiastically relates in this way to such a German professor, he accomplishes the most superb epigram upon him, because a speculator of that sort is anything but served by a learner's honest and enthusiastic zeal for expressing and accomplishing, for existentially appropriating his wisdom, since this wisdom is something that the Herr Professor himself has imagined and has written in books about but has never attempted himself. It had not even occurred to him that it should be done. Like the customs clerk who, in the belief that his business was merely to write, wrote what he himself could not read, so there are speculative thinkers who merely write, and write that which, if it is to be read with the aid of action, if I may put it that way, proves to be nonsense, unless it is perhaps intended only for fantastical beings.<sup>39</sup>

What Climacus finds out about Christianity is quite simply that it consists in a *relationship* of faith to God through Jesus Christ, and indeed, this is what he had already anticipated in the *Fragments*. This relationship is the truth content of Christianity's proclamation. Climacus also finds out that faith is an act of the most intense passion for God – it is subjectivity par excellence, what he calls the 'infinite passionate interest'. If faith is an expression of, and indeed the highest expression of, subjectivity, then Climacus concludes, in contrast to what he has found out from speculative philosophy, that 'truth is subjectivity'. He does not say that subjectivity is truth as if subjectivity were being described as truth. The description is vice versa. It is not subjectivity that is being described as truth but truth that is being described as subjectivity. Subjectivity can be false, but truth for the existing individual cannot be anything other than subjectivity. The reason it cannot be anything other than subjectivity is because truth is found only through the God-relationship and the God-relationship is had only through faith, which is the highest expression of subjectivity.

### **The passage in question**

In the light of what has been said both about Kierkegaard's authorship in general and about Climacus and the *Postscript*, we shall now deal in more detail with to the key passage in question. The parable of the two worshippers is really only an illustration of the point that Kierkegaard makes in the former passage quoted above and therefore it is to the former that we direct our attention though of course with reference to the parable.

#### *When the question of truth is raised ...*

The question of truth is that which Climacus has dealt with: 'what must I do or be in order to be in truth?' Truth for Climacus involves the thinking subject and therefore the question of truth is one of *how* rather than *what*: 'how can I be in truth?' rather than simply 'what is the truth?'. The latter question will always return to the former. What is truth? Truth is how one lives.

#### *... in an objective manner ...*

The objective formulation of the question leaves out the thinking subject and therefore becomes entirely a question of *what*. It is an abstract question therefore, inasmuch as it does not concern the individual personally. It is merely a question raised out of intellectual curiosity: the desire to look out upon existence for the sake of understanding it. But this, for Kierkegaard, is already untruth since the mode of approach makes the thinker into a fantastic absolute being who does not himself exist. There is a contradiction in the manner of the questioning before the question is even considered in terms of its content

#### *... reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related ...*

The problem here is that the object to which the knower is related is a *subject*, the eternal subject – God. The mode of approach, however, changes what is approached in the mind of the thinker. The eternal subject, God, is thus replaced with an idol. In order to relate to God objectively, God must be made into an object that gives itself to objective inquiry. But if God is the eternal subject, then the mode of objective inquiry will move further and further away from God as it attempts to reach God in this way. The only way to know God in truth is to relate to God as God has made this possible. Here, we must keep in mind the thought-experiment of the *Fragments*. In order to know God, one must know God according to the way in which God has made this possible, that is, through Christ by the faith that is conditioned by Christ. Knowledge, therefore, is in this relationship and a person cannot know God in any other way than through this relationship. The relationship must therefore become the central issue. But when the question is raised objectively ... .

*Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related ...*

Climacus sees a great irony here. The objective approach wants to know whether it is the truth to which it is related. But truth is the manner of the relationship itself. If they would proceed in the right *manner* (as set out in the *Fragments*), they would come to know God personally since through this way (that God himself has established) God, as the teacher and saviour, imparts both the condition for knowing the truth and brings a person into communion with Himself through the new birth, repentance, and faith. This *specific way* which God has made is *the truth* for the existing individual.

*If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth ...*

Climacus, in effect, brings a Kantian critique to bear upon this approach. The question of the correspondence between the thing as it arises in my mind and the thing in itself, especially when the thing in question is transcendent, is simply illegitimate. This is simply an impossible scenario, since God evades the human intellect completely. The only way a human being can know God is by the means which God might give.

*When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship ...*

The subjective way, as opposed to the objective way, focuses upon whether the relationship *is that which God has facilitated through Christ*. Climacus has made it clear that truth can only be learned according to the specific way through which God has made this possible. Christ is *the way* in the sense that he conditions the exact kind of relationship by which one relates to God and is thus in truth.

*... if only the mode of his relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true*

And here is the focal point of the controversy. The problem is as follows. If a person has his God-relationship conditioned by 'the way' that God has set forth through Christ, and if Christ is thus the way to the *true God*, then how, if a person has this very relationship in order (the relationship in truth), can s/he be related to a false God? The answer is simply that he cannot. And this is precisely the genius of this statement. What Climacus has set forth here is an *impossible hypothetical*. The 'even if' is given as a *provocation*. And Kierkegaard can do this through Climacus without compromising his orthodoxy because the hypothetical is impossible. If a person has the mode of his relationship in truth (if he relates according to the relationship that is conditioned by Christ), then he cannot but be related specifically to the right object. The mode of the relationship, if it to be in

truth, according to Climacus, must be of a very specific sort, namely that outlined in the biblical christology and soteriology. This *way/manner* leads *only* to the *true* object of the relationship, since the object of the relationship is God who set forth this *way* in the first place. The parable restatement of this bears this out also. The hypothetical is: ‘*If* someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with a knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth’. But here the hypothetical is likewise impossible and, just in case there is any doubt whether Kierkegaard uses ‘impossible hypotheticals’, the text explicitly states this. It is said of this one that he ‘prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol’. In other words, if he is praying in untruth, the idea which he has of God cannot be ‘the true idea of God’ that the former statement indicated. The statement about the first situation is therefore an impossible hypothetical. We cannot therefore be accused of reading a foreign meaning into the text if we regard the second situation as an impossible hypothetical also. And this is precisely what it is at close examination: ‘and *if* [emphasis mine] someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol ... [This] one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol’.

This is plainly an impossible hypothetical, and particularly so in the context of the argument of the *Postscript*, because one cannot pray with ‘all the passion of infinity’ to an idol. Why not? We will be reminded that Kierkegaard, through Climacus, is not just speaking of any kind of passion. As Kierkegaard says in the ‘Book on Adler’, ‘not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring. That is to say: emotion which is Christian is checked by the definition of concepts’. Kierkegaard does *not* think that idol worshippers cannot have passion for their idols, what he *does* think is that the *Christian passion* which accords with the specific biblical definition of concepts, cannot be had other than in the relationship that Christ conditions according to Climacus’s thought-experiment. If the relationship to the doctrine must be of a certain specific sort in order to be qualified as truth, then the nature of that doctrine itself must be of such a sort so as to allow only for this specific relationship to it. If the doctrine propounded as true sanctions an approach to it that is itself untrue then the judgement of untruth can be made because it is not with reference to the truth claim itself but is made on the basis of the mode of approach that it sanctions.

Kierkegaard’s point is to make a *provocation*. He writes to a society that distinguishes itself sharply from the pagan world with no little degree of self-confidence. Kierkegaard points out carefully and thoroughly that the objective relationship to Christianity, which is enabling his contemporaries to be so confident, is one that is pagan to the core. Hence, there is more truth in the pagan who worships an idol, if he worships in the passion of infinity, than the ‘Christian’ whose relation to Christianity is really only an idolatrous relationship to a set of doctrines. By changing the notion of truth into something that involves the subject, Kierkegaard is

able to turn his generation's confidence upside down. Kierkegaard wrote in the wake of some of the most ambitious works of continental idealism whose boast was precisely its hold upon truth. This was reflected in the church, whose confessional and systematic theological endeavours had 'flowered' considerably at this point in history. This was reflected in the primacy that was given at that time to the creeds and confessions in church practice, even over the Bible, and in the widespread confessional literacy. And it is in this situation that Kierkegaard plays the part of one naïve thinker who searches everywhere for truth only to declare that it is not to be found either in philosophy or in the church. Provocative to say the least.

### Conclusion

Kierkegaard certainly does have an objective reference in his notion of truth. The relationship itself is entirely determined by certain objective facts about certain acts of God in history for the benefit of man. Kierkegaard's notion of truth as subjectivity is itself based upon what Kierkegaard claims to be an objective reference. On the basis of a revelation that claims to be, and one which Kierkegaard acknowledges to be, eternal objective truth (the definition of concepts), he defines truth as subjectivity. In other words, the truth maxim does not arise from a kind of post-Kantian epistemological despair. Kierkegaard is not minimizing Christianity so that it has a non-objective referential basis. Rather Kierkegaard is *maximizing* Christianity so that by definition it becomes inseparable to its practice. Its *practice* is not primarily outward works but an inward relationship. This is the relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ can condition the kind of subjectivity that validates this relationship. This is 'the definition of concepts' that Kierkegaard is concerned with in the 'Book on Adler'. The point in Kierkegaard is that the revelation itself is an objective absurdity. This objective absurdity facilitates the subjectivity of faith, but does not itself cease to be objective. Revelation is an objective reality (that God has revealed eternal truth in time) that gives itself solely to subjectivity precisely because it is an objective absurdity. Only faith can take hold of this absurdity. Kierkegaard does not say that this truth is not verifiable. What he does say is that the truth revealed eludes all *objective* verification. The subjective approach discards objective verification in order to itself become the verification of truth. In subjectivity, a person knows the *truth by becoming truth*. In subjectivity therefore there is no doubt. Kierkegaard writes in *For Self Examination*:

Yes but who has doubted? I wonder, have any of those doubted whose lives bore the marks of imitation? I wonder, have any of those doubted who have left all to follow Christ? I wonder, have any of those doubted who were marked by persecution? – and when imitation is a given, this follows. No, not one of them. ... The demonstration of Christianity really lies in imitation.<sup>40</sup>

And in *Practice in Christianity*:

For knowing the truth is something that entirely of itself accompanies being the truth, not the other way around. And that is why it becomes untruth when knowing the truth is separated from being the truth of when knowing the truth is made identical to being it, since it is related the other way. Being the truth is identical with knowing the truth, and Christ would never have known the truth if he had not been it, and nobody knows more of the truth than what he is of the truth.<sup>41</sup>

Here it is obvious that a person's knowledge of the truth will always be partial, since a person's being the truth can only be partial (only Christ is the truth in pure form). But this partial knowledge of the truth that one has through being the truth to that extent is indeed of greater certainly to the individual than any amount of objective verification can achieve. Moreover, the truth that one becomes is the *eternal truth*, that is, it is the conformity of oneself to the objective divine imperative. Kierkegaard discusses the irony involved in Pilate's question to Christ, 'what is truth?' when Jesus who stood before him was precisely the truth. In as much as, in imitation, an individual, through his relation to God through Christ, becomes like Christ, then to the extent that this is actualized in his own life, he himself becomes truth – eternal truth. This is far from being a non-objective-referential subjectivity. This point is noted by Pojman who makes the connection between subjectivity and eternal truth in Kierkegaard on these grounds. He concludes: 'In sum, subjectivity seems to be both a necessary and sufficient condition for eternal truth, but because of the process nature of reality, we will never have a complete understanding of the truth.'<sup>42</sup> Pojman points out that in a sense Climacus achieves a result not altogether very far from that of Hegel. Through subjective reflection, the individual arrives at a relation to eternal truth as close as that which Hegel had (falsely) claimed to have achieved through his objective approach. 'In the end, it seems there is a possibility of scaling the heavens and arriving at essential, eternal knowledge – not through objective reflection but through subjective reflection'.<sup>43</sup>

This is evident from a comment made by Kierkegaard through Climacus. In the broad context of his objections to the objective thinker's attempt to transcend existence through realising abstractly the synthesis of the infinite and the finite, he can nevertheless say of the subjective thinker: 'It is only momentarily that the particular individual is able to realise existentially a unity of the infinite and the finite which transcends existence. This unity is realised in the moment of passion.'<sup>44</sup> In this way, the subjective thinker reaches something that is perhaps very close to the ambitious Hegelian goal, as Pojman says, 'via the back door'. The difference between the knowledge that the subjective individual has and that which the objective individual claims to have is that the latter knows through *being*, as Kierkegaard says, he seeks 'to understand the abstract concretely', whereas the former knows abstractly, he seeks 'to understand the concrete abstractly'.<sup>45</sup> When the truth is to be understood concretely, a person can know truth, as we have said, only by being in truth, that is in the relationship with God



through faith in Christ. If truth is to be understood in this way, then the only one who can communicate truth is God. This, we should note, is the truth that Climacus is speaking about, that which is communicated only by God. How anyone can then say that this truth has no relation to eternal truth is a matter of wonderment here. If the truth that Climacus discusses is such that it is only communicated by God, then *God himself* who teaches it is the objective referential basis. How can truth, understood existentially, *not* be related to eternal truth when, precisely because it is existential truth, it is only communicated by God who *himself is* eternal truth? This relationship of subjective knowledge to eternal truth is therefore an entirely necessary one. 'Forgiveness of sins ... involves a relationship between the eternal truth and an existing individual'.<sup>46,47</sup>

### Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (transl.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 178. Hereafter, when I refer to the *Postscript*, I shall be referring mainly to Swenson and Lowrie's translation (in favour of its more dynamic rendering of the text) though I shall at times prefer Hong's more literal translation.
2. As in George Lindbeck *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1984).
3. Immanuel Kant *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith (transl.) (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 97, 532.
4. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Swenson), 169.
5. Stephen Emmanuel Kierkegaard *and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), ch. 6.
6. Timothy Houston Polk *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press), 1997, 4.
7. Louis P. Pojman *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Tuscaloosa AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984).
8. Louis Mackey *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).
9. Christopher Hamilton 'Kierkegaard and religious belief', *Religious Studies*, 34 (1998), 61–79.
10. *Ibid.*, 65.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Søren Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (transl.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 201.
13. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Swenson), 116.
14. *Ibid.*, 201.
15. Søren Kierkegaard *Edifying Discourses: A Selection*, Paul Holmer (ed.), D. F. and L. M. Swenson (transl.) (London: Fontana, 1958) 203.
16. Søren Kierkegaard *For Self Examination/Judge for Yourself*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (transl.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 16.
17. Søren Kierkegaard *On Authority and Revelation*, Walter Lowrie (transl.) (New York NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1955), 163.
18. *Ibid.*, 92.
19. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Swenson), 330.
20. Søren Kierkegaard *Practice in Christianity*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (transl.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 205.
21. W. Kaufmann *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (New York NY: Books For Libraries Press, 1960), 182–183.
22. Lindbeck *The Nature of Doctrine*, 54.
23. E. D. Klemke 'Was Kierkegaard a theist?', in *idem Studies in the Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 69.

24. Kierkegaard *For Self Examination*, 24.
25. Søren Kierkegaard *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, Walter Lowrie (transl.) (New York NY: Harper and Row, 1962), 24.
26. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Hong), 191.
27. Søren Kierkegaard *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (transl.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 14.
28. *Ibid.*, 15.
29. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
30. *Ibid.*, 17.
31. *Ibid.*, 18.
32. *Ibid.*, 19.
33. *Ibid.*, 118.
34. *Ibid.*, 25–30.
35. *Ibid.*, 31ff.
36. *Ibid.*, 33.
37. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Swenson), 545.
38. Kierkegaard *For Self Examination*, 67–70.
39. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Hong), 191.
40. Kierkegaard *For Self Examination*, 67–68.
41. Kierkegaard *Practice in Christianity*, 205–206.
42. Pojman *The Logic of Subjectivity*, 75.
43. *Ibid.*, 60.
44. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Swenson), 176.
45. *Ibid.*, 315.
46. *Ibid.*, 201.
47. I would like to gratefully acknowledge Dr Ian Weeks as a key contributor to my early understanding of Kierkegaard. I would also like to express my gratitude to an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies* for comments made on this article.