

RESEARCH ARTICLE

God *de re* et *de dicto*: Kierkegaard, faith and religious diversity

Paul K. Moser*

Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

*Corresponding author. Email: pmoser@luc.edu

Abstract

In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard, writing as Johannes Climacus, famously distinguishes two kinds of religiousness, kind A and kind B. He claims that, even though kind A is basic to kind B, including as represented in Christian religious commitment, kind A both has God ‘in its ground’ and ‘can be present in paganism’ that is atheist or agnostic. This apparent conflict calls for a resolution, if kind A is to be coherent. This article offers a new resolution with a familiar distinction between God *de re* and God *de dicto*, even though interpreters have overlooked the importance of this distinction for understanding Kierkegaard. In addition, the article contends that this distinction is supportable from Kierkegaard’s own writings, even though he himself did not draw it explicitly. The article also explains the importance of the distinction for understanding Kierkegaard on religious diversity in intellectual content. It proposes that it enables Kierkegaard to offer a compelling position on such diversity, given his understanding of God’s perfectly good character and activity.

Keywords: absolute good; faith; God *de re*; God *de dicto*; Kierkegaard; religious diversity; religiousness

Methodological preamble

Reflecting on some of his published writing, Kierkegaard as Johannes Climacus warned his interpreters: ‘It is left to the reader to put it all together by himself, if he so pleases, but nothing is done for reader’s comfort.’¹ Any interpreter of Kierkegaard who has tried ‘to put it all together’ will be inclined to agree. A passionate writer in the missionary tradition of the apostle Paul, Kierkegaard at times hinders his own effort. He sometimes uses hyperbole and makes sweeping statements only to offer subsequent qualifications, and he sometimes uses terms that are striking but cloud what he actually has in mind (such as with his notorious talk of religious commitment in terms of *contradiction* or the *absurd*). The candour of Walter Lowrie, translator of at least twenty of Kierkegaard’s books, is noteworthy: ‘I have acquired such a dread of [certain] words [used by Kierkegaard], any one of which may mean a dozen things, that when my eye glances furtively down the page and foresees that one of them is coming, I am disposed

¹Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (hereafter *CUP*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), vol. 1, p. 298.

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to close the book and give the whole thing up.² Careful interpreters of Kierkegaard can feel Lowrie's dread, but I recommend against despair. We shall consider one line of interpretation that underwrites hope of important explanatory power in Kierkegaard's position, in connection with a distinction between God *de re* and God *de dicto*.

Interpreters without a principle of charity or due caution toward Kierkegaard's passionate literary tendencies will make him look superficial at best. This accounts for the quick dismissal of him by many people. Interpreters also need due caution toward the relation between the views of Kierkegaard himself and those of his pseudonyms. A cardinal rule is to be cautious of ascribing the view of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms to Kierkegaard himself. We should ascribe them to Kierkegaard only when they agree with his self-signed authorship, explicitly or implicitly. I shall draw from only those parts of the pseudonymous writings that agree in substance with themes from Kierkegaard's self-signed writings. This will save us from confusing Kierkegaard's own views with those of, say, Johannes Climacus or Johannes de Silentio. So, I shall use Kierkegaard's name in association with some views of his pseudonyms that concur with his own views in his self-signed writings.

Being religious

According to Kierkegaard, writing as Johannes Climacus for his most comprehensive philosophical work, there is religiousness, and then there is religiousness. The first kind, Religiousness A, is a movement of 'inward deepening' for a person: 'It is the relation to an eternal happiness that is not conditioned by a something, ... consequently conditioned only by the inward deepening.'³ Note that it is a 'relation to an eternal happiness', but we should read Kierkegaard as denying that this happiness is a 'something' in his sense. Religiousness A does not require acceptance of the Christian message of God's becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, although it does figure in the 'how' of Christian faith.

Kierkegaard as Climacus clarifies his position in a manner often missed by interpreters: 'Religiousness A ... has the relation to an eternal happiness as the basis for the transformation of existence. The "how" of the individual's existence is the result of the relation to the eternal, not the converse, and that is why infinitely more comes out than was put in.'⁴ 'The eternal', in his language, differs from a nonpersonal 'something', because it is a personal 'subject' as a someone, to be related to subject-to-subject, that is, 'subjectively'.⁵

The key point now is that 'the eternal' somehow constrains Religiousness A in how it is appropriated, subjectively, by a person. This is important, because it prevents Religiousness A from collapsing into simply *evil* inward deepening, such as merely hateful inward deepening or some other kind of purely destructive deepening. Kierkegaard thus denies that 'anything goes' in Religiousness A, given that it includes inward deepening in 'the relation to the eternal'. There must be, therefore, a constraint in Religiousness A on the 'how' from the eternal. What, however, is that constraint? This question also emerges from Kierkegaard's assumption that subjective

²Walter Lowrie, 'Translator's Preface', in Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 2nd edn, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. viii.

³Kierkegaard, *CUP*, p. 556.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 200.

appropriation in inwardness assumes that some 'thing' is *being appropriated* (if we may use 'thing' loosely, to include personal subjects).

Kierkegaard rejects any kind of direct relation to awareness of God that is free of self-denial before God. He deems any such relation to be a kind of paganism incompatible with Religiousness A.⁶ 'Only when the single individual turns inward into himself ... does he become aware and capable of seeing God.'⁷ The key assumption is that God wants to make something different and new out of humans, but doing so requires that humans will, or resolve to, 'become nothing' before God in their inwardness.⁸ This talk of 'becoming nothing' should be understood in terms of a kind of repentance as turning to yield volitionally to God, even if without corresponding theological intellectual content.⁹ As a result, according to Kierkegaard, 'just as important as the truth, and of the two the even more important one, is the mode in which the truth is accepted'.¹⁰ This role of the *mode* in Religiousness A underlies Kierkegaard's view that 'Religiousness A can be present in paganism'.¹¹ He names Socrates as being 'in the truth in the highest sense within paganism'.¹²

A problem of logical coherence arises. The 'how' of Religiousness A is 'the result of the relation to the eternal', that is, to *God*; but Religiousness A 'can be present in paganism' without God. How do these two claims cohere, if they do? If God has a constitutive role in Religiousness A (via its 'how'), then paganism, if it excludes God, evidently will exclude Religiousness A also. So, Religiousness A will not be 'present in paganism', after all. God cannot be both included in Religiousness A as a constitutive constraint, and excluded from Religiousness A in paganism. Kierkegaard does not resolve this apparent conflict in his account of religiousness, but I shall offer a resolution in terms of a distinction between God *de re* and God *de dicto*. This resolution, we shall see, is grounded in Kierkegaard's own remarks.

The apparent conflict emerges in Kierkegaard's position on God as being in 'the ground' of Religiousness A. 'The mode in which the truth' of the eternal is accepted depends on the nature of the eternal being available to humans. It is not available, according to Kierkegaard, in any 'direct' way free of self-denial, 'because God is in the ground (*Grunden*) [of the God-relationship in Religiousness A] only when everything that is in the way is cleared out, ... first and foremost the individual himself in his finitude, in his cavilling against God'.¹³ If God is in the ground of Religiousness A, however, can Religiousness A 'be present in paganism' that excludes God? If so, how?

⁶Ibid., pp. 243, 245.

⁷Ibid., 243. For Kierkegaard on self-denial, see John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), pp. 110–35; and Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard and Religion* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), pp. 131–8.

⁸Kierkegaard, *CUP*, p. 246.

⁹On the centrality of repentance to the religious sphere, see Kierkegaard, *CUP*, pp. 524–5.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 247.

¹¹Ibid., p. 557.

¹²Ibid., p. 204.

¹³Kierkegaard, *CUP*, pp. 560–1. In agreement with Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Alistair Hannay translates with 'God is in the ground', adding in a note: '*I Grunden*, in the foundation'. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p. 469. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie translate, instead of 'God is in the ground', 'God is the basis', whereas Arnold B. Come translates 'God is the foundation'. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 498; Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering my Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 294.

We can resolve the apparent conflict with a familiar distinction between two kinds of relation of God to humans: *de re* and *de dicto*. God *de re* in a relation to a human is God as a causal reality in relation to that human, even if there is no human recognition, identification or representation of God in terms of intellectual content. In contrast, God *de dicto* in a relation to a human is God as a humanly conceived, or conceptualised, reality in relation to that human. So, God *de re* could be a causal ground for, and a constitutive constraint on the ‘how’ of, the God-relationship of Religiousness A, even when God *de dicto* is not in that relationship.

The causal role of God in constituting the God-relationship for humans does not require a role for God *de dicto* in it, in terms of a human’s intellectual content. God’s causal role in that context does not require the human conceiving, conceptualising, recognising, identifying or representing of God in terms of intellectual content. So, God *de re* can be integral to Religiousness A, while God *de dicto* is not. As a result, Religiousness A can require God *de re* without requiring God *de dicto*. Even if paganism in Religiousness A, therefore, depends (causally) on God *de re*, it does not require acknowledging God *de dicto*, in terms of intellectual content. Given this distinction, Kierkegaard’s claims about paganism and Religiousness A are coherent.

We can imagine a person who lacks a concept or notion of God but still is related causally to God in a religious relationship. God *de dicto* would not figure in that person’s religious relationship; so, that person could be a pagan, from a *de dicto* standpoint in terms of intellectual content. This consideration leaves open the issue of the nature of the causal ground, basis or foundation God *de re* provides in Religiousness A, according to Kierkegaard. We need some understanding of the nature of this ground in order to assess Kierkegaard’s perspective on religiousness.

In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard characterises the eternal, including eternal happiness, in terms of ‘the absolute good’.¹⁴ The absolute good sets an absolute *telos* for a religious person that is to be willed (or decided for) absolutely, and not just for the sake of something else. It does not follow, however, that this person relates to this good *de dicto*, in terms of intellectual content, and can testify to it. Kierkegaard remarks: ‘The pathos [or “the how”] lies not in testifying to an eternal happiness but in transforming one’s own existence into a testimony to it.’¹⁵ He thus denies that there is any human shortcut to the absolute good of eternal happiness, given the difficult demand of transforming one’s existence toward it by willing it absolutely.¹⁶

Kierkegaard’s self-signed treatment of God as the absolute good emerges in his upbuilding discourse of 1843, ‘Every Good Gift and Every Perfect Gift is from Above’. Its centre includes:

Is this not the one thing needful and the one blessed thing both in time and in eternity ... – that God is the only good, that no one is good except God. ... What is the good? It is God. Who is the one who gives it? It is God. Why is the good a gift ... ? Because the good is from God. God gives both to will and to bring to completion.¹⁷

¹⁴See Kierkegaard, *CUP*, pp. 387, 389, 426, 427.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 394.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 428.

¹⁷Søren Kierkegaard, ‘Every Good Gift and Every Perfect Gift is from Above’ (hereafter EGG), in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 133–4.

This is Kierkegaard's core position on the *absolute* good, in contrast with relative goods, and he regards the absolute good as the perfect good. In addition, he takes this good to be a personal, intentional agent who can give humans a gift of the absolute good, namely Godself as the gift. So, the perfect gift is the perfect gift-giver. We thus may think of the absolute good, in Kierkegaard's position, as *perfect-agent* goodness.

Perfect-agent goodness can be incognito to humans and without a *de dicto* apprehension of a personal God by humans, in Kierkegaard's account. Such goodness can be related to a person even while that person fails to recognise or represent it as personal divine goodness. Even if the good in experience is recognised *as good* by a person, this falls far short of recognition of a perfect personal God. This general lesson is illustrated in Kierkegaard's portrayal of Jesus (written as from 'Anti-Climacus') as incognito in *Practice in Christianity*.¹⁸ He 'shows himself far lowlier than he is' in a way that hides his relation to God.¹⁹ The divine aim in being incognito is to allow for a free and willing human response to God with a self-denying decision in inwardness that does not trivialise God's aim for the transformation of humans. Humans are not always ready to give such a response, and therefore God shows patience in being incognito, thereby allowing humans more time for their critical decision in response to the absolute good.

Kierkegaard assumes, I have suggested, that Religiousness A can include a relation to God that is *de re* but not *de dicto*. He thus could make good use of an important passage in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus assumes the role of king:

The king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me'. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'. (Matt 25:34–40)

This passage suggests an important role for perfect agent-goodness that is *de re* but not *de dicto* in relation to people. The people in question are related *de re* to God's good agent, but they lack a *de dicto* relation that recognises or represents the agent in terms of intellectual content about who he actually is. Even so, the people relate positively or agreeably to God's good agent and therefore receive God's blessing. We thus have an analogue to Religiousness A where God's good agent is not recognised or represented *de dicto* but nonetheless is in the religious relation *de re*.

Kierkegaard opens the door for a role for God *de re* without God *de dicto* in referring to someone who 'has no intimation of the little ironic secret that a person, just by describing the "how" of his inwardness, can indirectly indicate that he is a Christian without mentioning Christ's name'.²⁰ This fits with the previous quotation from

¹⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity* (hereafter *PIC*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 127–32.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁰Kierkegaard, *CUP*, p. 613.

Matthew 25. Given that this approach without *de dicto* Christian acknowledgement applies to indicating one's being a Christian, according to Kierkegaard, an analogous approach applies to indicating one's being agreeably related to God, without acknowledging God *de dicto* (namely, in terms of intellectual content). In other words, the 'how' of one's inwardness can be agreeably related to God, and can indirectly indicate as much, without one's mentioning, recognising or representing God *de dicto*.

One might object that the proposed approach opens the door too wide, to an anything-goes approach to being religious. Kierkegaard, in agreement with Climacus, would take exception, on the basis of his understanding of faith in God. He writes: 'With regard to loving, ... a person cannot say what or whom he loves by defining his "how". ... But with regard to having faith (*sensu strictissimo*), it holds true that this "how" fits only one object.'²¹ Indeed, in his view it fits only one object, namely God, even if the person with faith in God does not recognise or represent God *de dicto*. Faith *in* God *de re*, then, should not be confused with faith *de dicto* that God exists, in terms of a believer's intellectual content. This view fits cleanly with the position being developed, because it allows for God to have a *de re* constraint on one's faith-relationship to God in the absence of one's acknowledging God *de dicto*. It thus underwrites a direct analogue to the passage cited from Matthew 25. We have from Kierkegaard, then, an implicit confirmation of the position under development.²²

Avoiding a requirement of a *de dicto* relation in Religiousness A, Kierkegaard similarly avoids any reduction of either the desired religious relation or a needed sign of it to episodic religious experience or awareness. He remarks:

[Suppose that] you demand an identifying sign from the good and the perfect, a proof that it did actually come from above. How should such an identifying sign be constituted? ... Should it be an experience? Is not doubt the very unrest that makes the life of experience unstable so that it never finds peace or takes a rest, is never finished with observing?²³

An experience can be merely aesthetic or immediate, such as in the manner of a mere spectator, in a way devoid of the self-denial found in inwardness and its accompanying suffering.²⁴ So, it will not capture the kind of religious relationship sought by Kierkegaard. That relationship can build on experiential components, but it will be irreducible to an episodic experience, given its dispositional nature of decision-based tendencies toward self-denial before God.

Kierkegaard acknowledges, as suggested, that Religiousness A falls short of distinctively Christian religiousness, or 'Religiousness B'. The latter includes 'a definite something that qualifies the eternal happiness more specifically', and that something is, 'paradoxically', an eternal God intervening as a human in the temporal world.²⁵ Kierkegaard remarks: 'The thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox.'²⁶ He

²¹Ibid., pp. 613–14, footnote.

²²The next section of the article returns to the nature of faith in God, in connection with religious diversity.

²³Kierkegaard, EGG, p. 135

²⁴Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 388–9, 560, first footnote; on the role of suffering in inwardness, *ibid.*, pp. 436–7.

²⁵Ibid., p. 556.

²⁶Ibid., p. 217; cf. pp. 209, 610–11.

uses 'the absurd' with the same sense: 'The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being ...'²⁷ Kierkegaard also invokes a notion of 'contradiction' in this connection, but he does not have in mind a logical contradiction or absurdity.²⁸ He believes that the Christian affirmation of divine incarnation is *true*, and hence not logically impossible.

We have noted that 'Religiousness A can be present in paganism',²⁹ but Kierkegaard takes its presence also to be a precondition of Religiousness B: 'Religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be any consideration of becoming aware of [Religiousness] B.'³⁰ He adds that 'before there can be any question at all of simply being in the situation of becoming aware of [what is essentially Christian] one must first of all exist in Religiousness A'.³¹ In this perspective, 'God can never become a third party when he is part of the religious; this is precisely the secret of the religious.'³² So, Religiousness A is an integral component of Christian faith in God, according to Kierkegaard. He did not typically use the language of 'Religiousness A' and 'Religiousness B' in writings after the *Postscript*, but the main ideas persist in his writings, particularly with regard to inwardness and paradox.³³ We turn to how Kierkegaard's perspective as just interpreted bears on religious diversity.

Religious diversity

In his self-signed work of 1851, *Judge for Yourself*, Kierkegaard talks of 'the Spirit of God' to characterise religiousness from a Christian perspective in contrast with 'just a human' perspective: 'In just a human view, a spirit that gives life is a life-giving spirit and nothing more. Christianly, it is first of all the Spirit who kills, who teaches dying to. In just a human view, elevation is only elevation and nothing more; Christianly, it is first of all humiliation.'³⁴ The Spirit of God 'teaches dying to' as self-humbling in the inwardness of repentance before God, and therefore has a priority in human relating to God. Kierkegaard's unqualified remark that 'before the Spirit who gives life can come, you must first die to' should be put in the context that the Spirit has a priority in 'teaching dying to'.³⁵ Otherwise, we have a self-help project foreign to Kierkegaard's considered position.

Kierkegaard holds that the category of the 'religious' is broader than the category of the 'Christian', that the category of the 'Christian' does not exhaust the category of the 'religious'. He remarks: 'Christianly, indeed even just religiously, the person who never

²⁷Ibid., p. 210.

²⁸Ibid., p. 211.

²⁹Ibid., p. 557.

³⁰Ibid., p. 556.

³¹Ibid., p. 557.

³²Ibid., p. 66; cf. p. 78.

³³For support, see Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, pp. 335–40. See also Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler* (hereafter *BA*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 113–16.

³⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself* (hereafter *JFY*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 98.

³⁵Ibid., p. 79.

relinquished probability never became involved with God. All religious, to say nothing of Christian, venturing ... is by way of relinquishing probability.³⁶ Religious venturing, then, need not be Christian venturing, but it still can be genuinely religious. We saw a suggestion of this position in a previous comment by Kierkegaard on faith in God, and it is central to understanding his position on religious diversity.

The centre of Kierkegaard's position on faith in relation to God is:

The object of faith is the actuality of another person; its relation is an infinite interestedness. The object of faith is not a doctrine, for then the relation is intellectual. The object of faith is not a teacher who has a doctrine, for when a teacher has a doctrine, then the doctrine is *eo ipso* more important than the teacher, and the relation is intellectual. ... But the object of faith is the actuality of the teacher, that the teacher actually exists.³⁷

These remarks about faith confirm that Kierkegaard, agreeing with Climacus, not only needs but actually leans toward a distinction between God *de re* and God *de dicto* with regard to faith in God. They thus fit with the previously cited remarks of his that faith in God fits 'only one object', namely God *de re*. They also fit with Kierkegaard's remark of 1845 that 'there are not, as in confusion, different roads and different truths, ... but there are many roads leading to the one truth and each person walks his own'.³⁸ The diversity here concerns not God *de re* but human perspectives on God *de dicto*.

A qualification is needed. We should not confuse Kierkegaard's talk of 'the actuality of the teacher' with talk of a *judgement* 'that the teacher actually exists'. Instead, we should read that language of Kierkegaard's as denoting a *fact de re* rather than a judgement or any other 'intellectual' or *de dicto* entity. Otherwise, he would be making a claim about a judgement as an intellectual doctrine that contradicts the main point he is making here: 'the object of faith is not a doctrine'. We have, then, a compelling basis for interpreting Kierkegaard on faith in God, at least in some contexts, in terms of God *de re* without reliance on God *de dicto* in term of intellectual content.

Christian faith in God, according to Kierkegaard, is unique, given its role for Religiousness B and the 'paradox' of divine incarnation, but it does not exclude faith in God outside Christian commitment. The best evidence for this position comes from Kierkegaard on the non-Christian Abraham as an exemplary person of faith in God. We can appreciate this evidence without digressing to the fine points of Kierkegaard on 'the knight of faith'. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, writing as Johannes de Silentio, states repeatedly that 'Abraham had faith', and he identifies this with faith in God.³⁹ In addition, he relates this to having 'faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago'.⁴⁰ This example is important now, because it shows Kierkegaard's acknowledgement of suitable faith in God without distinctively

³⁶Ibid., pp. 99–100.

³⁷Kierkegaard, *CUP*, p. 326.

³⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 38. See also Walsh, *Kierkegaard and Religion*, pp. 5–12.

³⁹Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition* (hereafter *FT*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 36; cf. pp. 35, 37.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 36.

Christian commitment. Abraham, of course, was not a Christian, but he was a person of faith in God, according to Kierkegaard.⁴¹

Andrew B. Torrance has proposed that

Climacus and Kierkegaard do not think that it is primarily a new set of beliefs in revealed propositions that decisively distinguishes immanent [A-kind] from transcendent [B-kind] religiousness. ... The Christian relates to the eternal truth by participating in an ongoing relationship with God in time – a relationship that is facilitated through God's sustained and gracious self-giving.⁴²

We can agree with this, with one important qualification: in Kierkegaard's view, Abraham related 'to the eternal truth by participating in an ongoing relationship with God in time'. God intervened in Abraham's temporal life to invite faith, but *not* as an incarnate human being. The Christian difference is not just about God's intervening in a temporal human life, such as Abraham's. Instead, it is about God's becoming *incarnate* in a temporal human being, namely Jesus Christ. We can allow that 'paradoxical' divine intervention to yield a difference in a distinctively Christian relationship with God, but this does not challenge an 'ongoing relationship with God' among outsiders to Christian commitment, such as Abraham and even Socrates.

The key point for religious diversity is that Kierkegaard does not require Christian intellectual content for human faith in God and thus for religious commitment to God. God *de re* can be the (only fitting and actual) object of faith as religious commitment even in the absence of commitment to God *de dicto* with Christian intellectual content. A person's intellectual content regarding God can fail to agree with the reality (and various realities) about God, even while that person has faith in God. Kierkegaard's position allows this not only for Abraham, for instance, but also for a wide range of non-Christian people who have faith in God. As a result, Kierkegaard's position on faith in God is not threatened by religious diversity in intellectual content. God can invite and nurture faith across the boundaries of the world's religions, despite their disagreements in intellectual content.

We need not decide now the issue of a minimum of intellectual content for faith in God on Kierkegaard's view. He does not face this issue directly, even though his position fits well with a distinction between faith in God *de re*, without theological intellectual content, and faith in God *de dicto*, with theological intellectual content. Given this distinction, he still could allow for theologically neutral intellectual content in a case of faith in God *de re*, such as mere demonstrative content (for instance, 'this' or 'that' object). The important point, however, is that God *de re* can constrain and guide faith in God *de re*, even when one's theological intellectual content regarding God is mistaken or absent. Such intellectual content, according to Kierkegaard, does not do the crucial work here. Something deeper is at work, and that includes *the actual God de re* at work in relation to a conforming, self-denying response of faith from a human person. This person is thus related to 'the actuality' of God, regardless of

⁴¹In *CUP*, p. 500 (footnote), Kierkegaard clarifies the role of the 'knight of faith' in *FT*, but his remark does not challenge Abraham's having faith in God.

⁴²Andrew B. Torrance, *The Freedom to Become a Christian: A Kierkegaardian Account of Human Transformation in Relationship with God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. 101.

accompanying intellectual content *de dicto*. This is an implication of the previous quotation from the *Postscript* on faith.⁴³

The proposed approach to Kierkegaard matters significantly. One benefit is that it safeguards the perfect goodness of God. Many people do not have Christian intellectual content (regarding divine incarnation) available to them, and this is an empirical fact. A perfectly good God would not bar such people from faith in God on the basis of that morally irrelevant limitation in their intellectual content. Those people certainly are not morally blameworthy for their not having available Christian intellectual content. In addition, God's perfect goodness and causal influence *de re* in the lives of such people do not depend on the intellectual content available to those people. So, the benefit of faith in God *de re* would be available to such people, even with their shortcoming regarding intellectual content about God *de dicto*. God, as a result, could be the God of *all* people of faith, not just the relatively narrow group of people with the correct intellectual content.

Accommodating the diversity of intellectual content among religious people is integral to divine perfect goodness. Kierkegaard shows awareness of this in not limiting suitable faith to distinctively Christian faith in God. His use of the non-Christian Abraham, in the tradition of the apostle Paul (see Romans 4), serves to illustrate this truth about the religious diversity of intellectual content. We saw that Kierkegaard's view of Religiousness A and its corresponding faith extends even to pagans who do not embrace intellectual content acknowledging God. So, even atheists and agnostics are candidates for faith in God, according to Kierkegaard's position. This kind of latitude regarding faith and intellectual content gives breadth of power to divine perfect goodness in a way that alternative approaches to religious diversity do not. This power is found in the work of God *de re* to attract people to the self-denial characteristic of the faith agreeable to God's transformation of willing people.

The absolute goodness of God, according to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, includes divine love even for the enemies of God. Such love from God can have a causal influence on people that invites and encourages faith, including people who lack intellectual content regarding God. Their response to divine love can include the kind of self-denial central to faith in God. The important point now, however, is that God's love toward a human can be *de re*, without a *de dicto* representation by a human in terms of intellectual content. Kierkegaard thus states that '[your] eternal love-history ... began with your beginning, when you came into existence out of nothing'.⁴⁴ A human does not need to have intellectual content about this divine influence for it to be actual; the influence can be purely *de re* rather than *de dicto*.

The religious life as the 'spiritual' life depends on the influence of divine love, according to Kierkegaard, and he would not limit this to the 'Christian' life. He remarks:

What, in the spiritual sense, is the ground and foundation of the spiritual life that is to bear the building? It is love. Love is the source of everything and, in the spiritual sense, love is the deepest ground of the spiritual life. In every human being in whom there is love, the foundation, in the spiritual sense, is laid. And the building that, in the spiritual sense, is to be erected is again love, and it is love that builds up. Love builds up, and this means that it builds up love.⁴⁵

⁴³See Kierkegaard, *CUP*, p. 326.

⁴⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (hereafter *WL*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 150.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 215. For relevant discussion, see M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 138–42; and Walsh, *Kierkegaard and Religion*, pp. 126–7.

These remarks recall our previous quotation from the *Postscript* on the eternal as the ‘ground’ of the God-relationship in Religiousness A. They prompt the question of how God figures in the love that is the ground of the spiritual life.

Kierkegaard offers a straightforward answer: ‘Can one human being implant love in another human being’s heart? No, this is a suprahuman relationship. ... It is God, the Creator, who must implant love in each human being, he who himself is Love.’⁴⁶ Kierkegaard’s overall portrait is of a God who presents humans with divine love *de re* with the aim of their responding to it freely with ‘faithful love’, even if their intellectual content *de dicto* about the matter is misguided or deficient.⁴⁷ This divine redemptive project, seeking divine–human reconciliation, thus proceeds with or without Christian intellectual content. So, even non-Christians in the tradition of Abraham can participate with a response of ‘faithful love’ to God *de re*. God aims for free human responders to divine love *de re* to erect a fitting building, and ‘the building that, in the spiritual sense, is to be erected is again love’. They can ignore or reject the divine project, but this refusal to cooperate will be theirs, and not God’s. So, God’s perfect goodness will not be undermined.⁴⁸

Kierkegaard acknowledges that the human will is pivotal in responding to God in a way that intellectual content is not. This consideration accounts for his emphasis on the role of uncoerced human decision in inwardness toward God.⁴⁹ It also figures in the viability of faith in God, such as Abraham’s faith, outside the domain of Christian intellectual content. People can decide in favour of the divine love *de re* shown to them without their recognising it as either Christian or even divine. In this regard, religiousness can be present even in people who embrace paganism.

Some intellectual content can be helpful in clarifying the object of a religious response for a person, but it does not follow that the latter response depends on that intellectual content. We have considered a significant role for Religiousness A that makes do without theological intellectual content, but we have not supported an extreme view that renders Religiousness B and Christian commitment superfluous. Kierkegaard, of course, regards Religiousness B and the incarnation to be eminently significant. Indeed, the topic of ‘what it means to become a Christian’, he reports, is his ‘total thought’ as a religious author.⁵⁰ The significance of Religiousness B, he suggests in a journal entry of 1849, bears on the priority of human worship and adoration of God: ‘I have so often pointed out in *Concluding Postscript* that the Christian-religious is a unique sphere. ... Then comes the paradox-prototype (the God-man). ... Here it is a matter of worship and adoration first and foremost—and only through worship and adoration can there be any question of wanting to imitate [Jesus Christ].’⁵¹ So, Kierkegaard thinks of Religiousness B as having a special connection to human worship of God. We can clarify this connection a bit.

Kierkegaard proposes that Jesus Christ intends to be an offence to humans, for a redemptive purpose regarding worship. He claims: ‘The offense *sensu strictissimo* is

⁴⁶Kierkegaard, *WL*, p. 216.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁴⁸For elaboration on the role of religious experience and divine elusiveness in this redemptive project, see Paul K. Moser, *Understanding Religious Experience* (Cambridge: CUP, 2020), chs 7–8.

⁴⁹See Kierkegaard, *CUP*, pp. 129, 193, 203, 221–2, 224.

⁵⁰Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 47; cf. pp. 91, 97.

⁵¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), vol. 4, pp. 295–6, 4454; X¹ A 134 n.d. 1849.

related to the God-man, who is not feeling his way forward in an indefinite quantifying, as it were, to see how high he can rate himself, but defines it qualitatively, that he is God—and insists upon *worship*.⁵² Human movement toward worship of a transcendent God in Christian Religiousness B, according to Kierkegaard, is guided by a message that includes ‘concepts and definitions’ or ‘conceptual definitions’. He holds that ‘Christian awakening’ in Religiousness B toward worship of God requires ‘the firmness and definiteness of conceptual language’.⁵³ In other words, it requires *de dicto* content.

Christian *de dicto* content, according to Kierkegaard, can give stability, definiteness and specificity in one’s relating to the transcendent object of worship, particularly as one’s Saviour from alienation from God in sin.⁵⁴ Religiousness B is accompanied by human ‘incomprehensibility’ of the God-man, according to Kierkegaard, but he does not regard this as precluding worship of God.⁵⁵ Indeed, Kierkegaard holds that Christian commitment and worship must curb some expectations for human understanding of God.⁵⁶ Even so, the Christian ‘conceptual language’ of Religiousness B can have a constancy and a specificity lacking in a person’s episodic religious experience at present, and it thereby can contribute to constancy and specificity in human commitment and worship toward God. In that respect, at least, such language as *de dicto* content is significant and not dispensable in Christian religious commitment. (Arguably, it will have to be grounded ultimately in experience of some sort, but we cannot digress to that complex topic now.)

We have seen that, according to Kierkegaard, God can work *de re* in influencing a religious person without demanding corresponding *de dicto* representation of God from that person. This position allows for the reality of religious diversity *de dicto* that does not threaten the value of religious life before God *de re*. We now see that Kierkegaard’s perspective has the resources to accommodate this important reality. This is a remarkable, widely neglected contribution from his perspective, and it now merits careful attention by his interpreters.⁵⁷

⁵²Kierkegaard, *PIC*, p. 87; cf. *CUP*, p. 585.

⁵³Kierkegaard, *BA*, pp. 114–15.

⁵⁴Cf. Kierkegaard, *CUP*, p. 556 on specificity in religiousness. For Kierkegaard on the distinctive human consciousness of sin arising in Religiousness B, see *CUP*, pp. 583–5; cf. *PIC*, pp. 68, 155. See also Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering My Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), pp. 267–77.

⁵⁵Kierkegaard, *CUP*, pp. 566–8.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 564–6.

⁵⁷I thank referees for the *Scottish Journal of Theology* for helpful comments.