

Kierkegaard on the Nature of Religious Truth: Uncertainty and the Imperative of Choice

Domingos Sousa

The inquiring subject must be in one of two situations: either he must in faith be convinced of the truth of Christianity and his own relation to it, in which case all the rest cannot possibly be of infinite interest, since faith is precisely the infinite interest in Christianity and any other interest easily becomes a temptation; or he is not in a relationship of faith but is objectively in a relationship of observation and as such is not infinitely interested in deciding the question (CUP, 21 [SV VII, 11-12]).

This passage gives expression to one of the most controversial aspects of Kierkegaard's thought, namely, the emphasis he places upon the incommensurability between the objective and subjective realms of religious truth. In his view, only in a context of infinite, passionate interest does religious truth emerge. In other words, truth lies in the mode of the relationship of the individual to a reality beyond himself, not a correspondence of a claim to some external, empirical reality. Thus, the objective inquiry of religion does not have an essential bearing upon the truth of religious claims. This conception of religious truth as unsupported by rational justification has been criticized for playing a "sort of intellectual Russian roulette" with religion.*¹ Some even suggest that for Kierkegaard "every truth claim has no surer warrant than the freedom and the

*¹ J. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism. Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 216.

fervor of him who asserts it".*² A careful examination of Kierkegaard's position, however, shows that these criticisms are unwarranted. While Kierkegaard insists that an existing individual can never arrive at religious truth objectively, this does not imply that truth is a construct of the self.

I

In Kierkegaard's view, the truth of such religious claims as the existence of God and life after death is inaccessible to objective knowledge. The complete agreement of thought and being that constitutes such truth is not available to an existing person who is in a process of becoming (CUP, 196 [SV VII, 164]). An existing person is never whole and complete in his being nor does thought perfectly coincide with the object of cognition. The objectivity attainable in religious truth is always an approximation process and thus a task never completed. "The existing person who chooses the objective way now enters upon all approximating deliberation intended to bring forth God objectively, which is not achieved in all eternity, because God is subject and hence only for subjectivity in inwardness" (CUP, 199-200 [SV VII, 167]).

Thus, Kierkegaard questions the attempt to provide objective evidence and proofs for religious truths by philosophical inquiry and historical knowledge. The problem with such attempts, like the so called proofs of God's existence, is that they presuppose that which they should prove. The ontological argument is a classical example of the fallacy of such proofs.

When, for example, it is said: God must have all perfections, or the highest being must have all perfections, to be is also a perfection; ergo the highest being must be, or God must be—the whole movement is deceptive. That is, if in the first part of this statement God actually is not thought of as being,

*² Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 192.

then the statement cannot come off at all. It will then run somewhat like this: A supreme being who, please note, does not exist, must be in possession of all perfections, among them also that of existing; ergo a supreme being who does not exist does exist. This would be a strange conclusion. The highest being must either not be in the beginning of the discourse in order to come into existence in the conclusion, and in that case it cannot come into existence; or the highest being was, and thus, of course, it cannot come into existence, in which case the conclusion is a fraudulent form of developing a predicate, a fraudulent paraphrase of a presupposition (CUP, 334 [SV VII, 288-289]).

The fallacy of the argument lies in the fact that it does not adequately distinguish ideal and factual being. Referring to Spinoza's version of the argument, Kierkegaard maintains that to correlate being and perfection in such a way that the more perfect an entity is the more being it has and vice versa is a tautology. From the assumption that God's perfection is his being or reality it only follows that the perfection of an entity "is that it has more *esse* in itself, which means that the more it is, the more it is" (PF, 41 [SV IV, 208]). The fundamental problem with Spinoza's formulation of the argument is that it completely circumvents the difficulty of grasping "factual being and to bring God's ideality into factual being" (PF, 42 [SV IV, 210]).

The Truth of such claims as the existence of God and immortality is gained not through detached theoretical inquiry, but through subjective commitment. Kierkegaard distinguishes two possible approaches to religious truth: objective and subjective reflection. He writes:

When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked

subjectively, the individual relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth (CUP, 199 [SV VII, 166]).*³

Kierkegaard's main point here seems to be that it is possible for an individual to believe what is objectively true while being personally in untruth, and vice versa. And if the two collide it is subjective truth that ultimately matters. The crucial question for Kierkegaard is not whether a person's beliefs are objectively right but whether the person has the right kind of relationship to what is believed. He illustrates his claim by the famous comparison between someone who, though living in the midst of Christianity and having a true conception of God prays to Him in a false spirit, and someone who, though he lives in an idolatrous land, prays to his idol with the passion of infinity. According to Kierkegaard, it is at the side of the second man, not the first, that more truth is to be found. "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" (CUP, 201 [SV VII, 168]). What Kierkegaard is suggesting here is that religious truth is truly attained only when it is personally appropriated and rightly acted upon. Although truth exists apart from the existing individual, only in subjectivity can he encounter it.

As to the subjective character of religious truth and faith, Kierkegaard stresses that the degree of involvement of the subject increases to the extent that objective certainty diminishes. Subjective interest in the act of faith reaches its peak when every objective certainty disappears. Where there is objective certainty or security, he says, there can be no question of risk and where there

*³ It should be noted that Kierkegaard's definition of truth as subjectivity applies only to the essential truth, that is, to the truth that has an essential relationship to existence.

"The reader will note that what is being discussed here is essential truth, or the truth that is related essentially to existence, and that it is specifically in order to clarify it as inwardness or as subjectivity that the contrast is pointed out" (CUP, 199 [SV VII, 167]).

is no possibility of risk there can be no faith either. "Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith" (CUP, 204 [SV VII, 170]) .^{*4}

Such a position appears to suggest a religious relativism in which "to say that a belief is true means no more than that it is held sincerely and without reservations."^{*5} In other words, it allows any believer to be counted as in the truth provided only that he is passionately committed to his belief, irrespective of its content. In this sense even an atheist can be considered to be in the truth as long as his atheism is sufficiently profound and unqualified.^{*6} Some have gone so far as to suggest that to reduce faith to a passionate commitment of the will destroys the very basis of Christian faith.

For it implies that there are no common truths for Christians to accept, no common principles by which their lives may be guided, indeed no common Deity for them to contemplate and worship. The Kierkegaardian subjectivity would dissolve these things away into a set of processes in individual minds where there would be as many Christianities as there were persons to exercise their "inwardness" and their passion.^{*7}

Kierkegaard does make the claim that "Truth is subjectivity". This, however, does not imply that truth is a construct of the self. Subjectivity is not to be equated with subjectivism. When he defines faith as the "infinite passion of inwardness" he is not suggesting that a belief is true just because one believes it

^{*4} "When belief resolves to believe, it runs the risk that it was an error, but nevertheless it wills to believe. One never believes in any other way; if one wants to avoid risk, then one wants to know with certainty that one can swim before going into the water" (PF, 83 [SV IV, 247]).

^{*5} P. Edwards, "Kierkegaard and 'Truth' of Christianity," in P. Edwards and A. Pap (Eds.) *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (New York, 1973), 513-514.

^{*6} Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 98.

^{*7} Brand Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," *The Personalist* Vol. 49 (1968): 15-16.

to be true. It should be noted that Kierkegaard mentions “objective uncertainty” in the act of faith. In other words, the subjectivity of the act of faith arises precisely in the relation of the existing individual to an objectively given truth.*⁸ If there was no question of a relation to an objective reality, then there would be no cause for passion nor subjectivity. It is precisely because faith is a response to a reality that is objectively uncertain, that the existing individual must choose with passion. Therefore, Christian faith does not lose its objective content by the thesis that “truth is subjectivity”. Even though he stresses the subjective element in the act of faith he never loses sight of its objective content nor confuses subjectivity with objectivity.

The essential Christian exists before any Christian exists; it must exist in order for one to become a Christian. It contains the qualification by which a test is made of whether someone has become a Christian; it maintains its objective continuance outside all believers, while it also is in the inwardness of the believer. In short, here there is no identity between the subjective and the objective. If the essentially Christian enters into the hearts of ever so many believers, every believer realizes that it did not arise in his heart. (…) It is therefore a volatilization of the concept, a dislocation of all the essentially Christian, when one admits the wordplay that a revelation is a qualification belonging to subjectivity, or is the direct identity of subject-object. (…) No, even if no one had become aware that God had revealed himself in human form in Christ, he still had revealed himself (BA, 117-118 [VII2 B 235, 205-206]).

Here Kierkegaard makes it clear that the object of faith must exist independent of the self and prior to the act of faith. It is true that for him faith is the highest passion of subjectivity. But this does not imply a denial of an

*⁸ J. Heywood Thomas, *Philosophy of Religion in Kierkegaard's Writings* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), 77.

objective reality in the act of faith. His concern is to show that the only possible means by which one comes to relate "in truth" to the object of faith is by developing one's "inwardness" and "subjectivity". In other words, while recognizing that the objective content of doctrines are important, he stresses that the truth about such doctrines can only be gained through subjective appropriation. Kierkegaard tries to prevent both a conception of faith as an objective truth which can be acquired without personal engagement and the volatilization of faith into an amorphous subjectivism. By the principle that "truth is subjectivity", Kierkegaard wishes to tie together the "what" with the "how" of faith into one indissoluble whole.

The remarkable thing is that there is a How with the characteristic that when the How is scrupulously rendered the What is also given, that this is the How of 'faith'. Right here, at its very maximum, inwardness is shown to be objectivity (JP IV, 4550 [X2 A, 299]).

This passage seems to suggest that the degree of passion and commitment to religious beliefs is by itself sufficient to ensure the validity of its objective content. But how can the subjective aspect of faith alone certify the reality of what is believed? The answer must be sought in the nature of the object of faith. The object of faith is not given immediately such that it determines assent. It lies beyond the reach of any rational demonstration and any sort of objective warrant. It is, in other words, a paradox. "When the subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, then truth, objectively defined, is a paradox; and that truth is objectively a paradox shows precisely that subjectivity is truth" (CUP, 204 [SV VII, 171]). It is precisely the paradoxical character of its object which makes the act of faith purely subjective. The greater the improbability that some reality is objectively true, the greater the passionate commitment necessary to accept it. The passionate commitment in the act of faith reaches its peak when every shred of objective certainty disappears. This, however, does not mean that the passionate commitment involved in the act of faith guarantees the objective

truth of the paradox. The paradox is the proper object of faith precisely because there can be no evidence for it.

II

Kierkegaard makes the distinction between simple paradox and absolute paradox. The simple paradox refers to the Socratic view of truth. According to the Socratic model, knowing the ultimate truth was a matter of the existing individual becoming aware of what was present, though dormant, in his own mind, and the teacher's function consisted in reminding him of what he implicitly possessed; it was a matter of recollecting knowledge that was in some sense already there. This truth, however, cannot be fully apprehended by the existing subject, it manifests itself as the unknown. Kierkegaard calls this unknown as the god "against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides" (PF, 39 [SV IV, 207]). The unknown is the frontier of the understanding that is continually arrived at, but which cannot be assimilated by the categories of the understanding. The paradox is not something the existing individual encounters outside of himself; thought itself is paradoxical. By its nature the understanding seeks absolute knowledge, but like everything human it is finite and has limits. At the extreme point of its limits it encounters the unknown that cannot be thought. "This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think" (PF, 37 [SV IV, 204]). The paradox lies in the fact that reason can never reach what it seeks.

The absolute paradox refers to the Christian conception of the incarnation and represents a radically new point of departure for approaching the highest truth. Christianity assumes that the existing individual is not in possession of ultimate truth. Since human beings lack the truth about God, they must receive that truth from a revelation which comes directly from God. In order to make it possible for the individual to receive the truth God appears in human form. There is a moment at which the eternal enters the temporal sphere, taking the

limitations of human existence. However, that a particular human being is also God is something that transcends the possibilities of human knowledge. As Kierkegaard puts it: "This human being is also the god. How do I know that? Well, I cannot know it, for in that case I would have to know the god and the difference, and I do not know the difference as the understanding has made it like unto that from which it differs" (PF, 45-46 [SV IV, 213]).

This surely is a paradoxical state of affairs. It represents what Kierkegaard calls the absolute paradox. For in order to know something about God the human person has to know first that it is absolutely different from him. This knowledge, however, cannot be acquired by human beings "because the understanding cannot even think the absolute different" (PF, 45 [SV IV, 212]). It has to be taught by God Himself. Why is the human person unable to acquire this knowledge? The answer is that in sin human beings have withdrawn from God so utterly that they cannot perceive the separation between God and themselves. If in the Socratic perspective eternal truth was already paradoxical, it becomes an absolute paradox in Christianity where God and the existing subject are totally disproportionate due to sin. The absurdity of the Christian paradox lies in the fact that despite the absolute difference between God and human person, God enters into relation with him to reveal his sinful state and subsequent redemption.

Thus the paradox becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplicity by which it manifests itself as the absolute—negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality (PF, 47 [SV IV, 214]).

It should be clear from the above discussion that there is an essential difference between the Socratic and the Christian modes of thought. In the Socratic view of reality, the existing individual is already in possession of the truth and therefore history is only of accidental importance. It is only an

occasion for making explicit what is already implicit. For at the point one discovers that the truth has always been within the self, the historical point of departure loses all significance. "The temporal point of departure is a nothing, because in the same moment I discover that I have known the truth from eternity without knowing it, in the same instant that moment is hidden in the eternal, assimilated into it" (PF, 13 [SV IV, 183]). By contrast, the Christian view maintains that truth is not within us. Kierkegaard calls the state of untruth sin. The untruth of the existing individual refers then not only to the fact that he is outside the truth "but is polemical against the truth" (PF, 15 [SV IV, 185]). The truth as well as the capacity to receive the truth must be brought to us by a God who enters history. This means that the historical moment is of decisive importance in the pursuit of truth. Since for Socrates the awareness of God results from recollection, the existence of God in time is never an issue. For the Christian, however, the focus of faith is precisely the historical event of God's coming into existence, which for reason constitutes the absolute paradox.

When confronted by the absolute paradox reason is left with only two choices: either to come to a mutual understanding with the paradox in the passion of faith or to reject it and take offence (PF, 49 [SV IV, 215-216]). But how does reason come to an understanding with the paradox? Reason is not "supposed to understand the paradox but is only to understand that this is the paradox" (PF, 59 [SV IV, 224]). The mutual understanding between reason and the paradox occurs "when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the something in which it occurs (…) is that happy passion to which we shall now give a name. (…) We shall call it faith" (PF, 59 [SV IV, 224]). The paradoxical character of God's revelation in Jesus lies in the fact that it is revealed in history, and yet its content is such that it transcends the categories of the understanding. Only by faith can we gain access to it.

Some writers have interpreted the paradox as a logical contradiction. For these writers, when Kierkegaard asks for faith in the paradox, he is asking the believer to put logic aside and embrace what is unintelligible to human reason.*⁹ It is true that Kierkegaard often refers to the paradox as a contradiction; the incarnation is even described as a "self-contradiction" (PF, 87 [SV IV, 250]). The contradiction consists in the fact that the eternal "can become historical only in direct opposition to all human understanding" (CUP, 211 [SV VII, 177]). This contradiction is further designated as the absurd. "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" (CUP, 210 [SV VII, 176]). This is not an object for knowledge; it is only an object for faith. "For all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is purely historical knowledge, and no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is the historical" (PF, 62 [SV IV, 227]). The incarnation as the object of faith, however, is not absurd or paradoxical in the sense that it violates the principles of logic, but in the sense that it absolutely transcends human knowledge.*¹⁰

Although Kierkegaard often speaks of the paradox or absurd as the object of faith that requires one to believe against the understanding, he at times follows the more traditional view of faith as above reason.

⁹ See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 107; Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," 15.

¹⁰ For the view that the paradox is to be understood as above reason not against reason, see Stephen Evans, "Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox and Faith," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 360-363; and *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 78-92; Cornelio Fabro, "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialect," in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, eds. Howard Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 174-178; N. H. Soe, "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox," in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, eds. Howard Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 206-227; Steven Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 45.

Hugo de St. Victor states a correct thesis (···): ‘Faith is really not supported by the things which go beyond reason, by any reason, because reason does not comprehend what faith believes; but nevertheless there is something here by which reason becomes determined or is conditioned to honor the faith which it still does not perfectly succeed in grasping.’ This is what I have developed (for example, in Concluding Postscript) — that not every absurdity is the absurd or the paradox. The activity of reason is to distinguish the paradox negatively — but no more (JP I, 7 [X2 A, 354]).*¹¹

The absurd or the paradox is above reason and therefore not really supported by reason. However there is some way in which reason can affirm what is above it and distinguish between the absurd of Christianity and what may be called vulgar absurdities or nonsense. Therefore the person who embraces the absolute paradox does not believe mere nonsense. The believer “both has and uses his understanding (···) in order to see to it that he believes against the understanding. Therefore he cannot believe nonsense against the understanding, which one might fear, because the understanding will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and hinder him in believing it”(CUP, 568 [SV VII, 495). To reason is assigned the negative but important task of pointing out the incomprehensibility of the paradox.

Kierkegaard’s position bears some similarity to Pascal’s view that God is incomprehensible to the human intellect. According to Pascal reason could neither prove nor disprove the existence of God.

¹¹ In another of his Journal entries he stresses that faith is paradoxical not in the sense that it stands against reason, but rather in the sense that it stands above reason. “What I usually express by saying that Christianity consists of paradox, philosophy in mediation, Leibniz expresses by distinguishing between what is above reason and what is against reason. Faith is above reason. By reason he understands, as he says many places, a linking together of truths, (enchainement), a conclusion from causes. Faith therefore cannot be proved, demonstrated, comprehended, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox” (JP III, 3073 [IV C, 29]).

If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is. This being so, who will dare to undertake the decision of the question? Not we, who have no affinity to Him.*¹²

The decision to believe must be made without the benefit of any objective assurances. In Pascal's celebrated "wager argument" he makes it clear that the decision to believe in the existence of God cannot be made on objective grounds but only rely on purely subjective considerations. "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wavering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is".*¹³ Although Kierkegaard does not put forward a wager-style argument, both thinkers affirm that the object of faith is objectively uncertain and therefore the decision to believe always involves a risk.

III

For Kierkegaard, however, the element of objective uncertainty is not confined to the realm of religious faith. In his view, apart from what is immediately perceived by the senses, all forms of cognition concerning human existence involve uncertainty. Even knowledge of historical facts obtained through historical science is not grounded purely in objectivity. The element of objective uncertainty inherent in historical facts can only be overcome by faith. Faith, Kierkegaard argues, is required by the very nature of the historical event. He distinguishes two types of faith: faith in the ordinary sense which has the direct historical fact as object; and faith in the eminent sense to which corresponds the historical fact of God's coming into existence. It is Kierkegaard's position that "everything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical" (PF, 75 [SV

*¹² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. Oeuvres Complètes. Présentation et Notes de Louis La Fuma (Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1963), 550.

*¹³ Ibid.

IV, 239])).^{*14} The coming into existence of the historical by its very nature is contingent, that is, it could have happened otherwise. Therefore, nothing happens by necessity. "All coming into existence occurs in freedom, not by way of necessity. Nothing coming into existence comes into existence by way of a ground, but everything by a way of a cause. Every cause ends in a freely acting cause"(PF, 75 [SV IV, 239]).^{*15} It is true that the past is unchangeable in that it happened and therefore cannot be undone. But from this it cannot be concluded that the past event is necessary, for it could have been different. The fact that an historical event could have been otherwise introduces an element of uncertainty. Since the coming into existence of an historical event involves always a transition in freedom from non-being into being, such an historical event has an inherent illusiveness that prevents it from being apprehended directly. "The historical cannot become the object of sense perception or of immediate cognition, because the historical has in itself that very illusiveness that is the illusiveness of coming into existence" (PF, 81 [SV IV, 244-245]).

According to Kierkegaard only immediate sensation and immediate cognition provides us with certainty. Since the coming into existence of a historical event

^{*14} The term historical is here used in two senses: the historical as the coming into existence of any event, including natural events, and the historical in the strict sense, that is, the "coming into existence with its own coming into existence." Here Kierkegaard has in mind history in the sense of human history. This category of events not only possesses the contingency of all of nature, but the additional contingency which derives from the freedom of human agents (PF, 76 [SV IV, 240]).

^{*15} Here Kierkegaard is reacting against Hegel's view that historical events occur by necessity. See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 101; Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*. Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 253. For Kierkegaard the necessary cannot come into existence because only that which can change can come into existence. "Necessity stands all by itself. Nothing whatever comes into existence by way of necessity, no more than necessity comes into existence or anything in coming into existence becomes the necessary. Nothing whatever exists because it is necessary, but the necessary exists because it is necessary or the necessary is"(PF 74-75 [SV IV, 238]).

cannot be apprehended directly, historical knowledge is intrinsically uncertain. He uses the example of the star to illustrate what he means. One is certain that a star exists in that immediate sensation and cognition tell that this is the case. However, when one begins to reflect upon the nature of the star, how it came into existence, the star becomes involved in doubt. "It is just as if reflection removed the star from his senses" (PF, 81 [SV IV, 245]). In other words, the immediate sensation of the star is certain, but how it came into existence is open to doubt. For the coming into existence of the star could be, for example, the product of divine agency or simply the result of a natural process.

How then can an historical fact be apprehended with any degree of certainty? Kierkegaard's answer to this question is to be found in faith. According to him, faith is the only faculty capable of overcoming the illusiveness of the historical fact and of bringing certainty.

This is precisely the nature of belief, for continually present as the nullified in the certitude of belief is the incertitude that in every way corresponds to the uncertainty of coming into existence. Thus, belief believes what it does not see; it does not believe that the star exists, for that it sees, but it believes that the star has come into existence. The same is true of an event. The occurrence can be known immediately but not that it has occurred, not even that it is in the process of occurring, even though it is taking place, as they say, right in front of one's nose. The illusiveness of the occurrence is that it has occurred, and therein lies the transition from nothing, from non-being, and from the multiple possible "how" (PF, 81-82 [SV IV, 245]).

Kierkegaard is not denying the value of historical investigation. What he is arguing is that evidence based on knowledge of historical data can never provide the degree of certainty that removes doubt. The uncertainty involved in the coming into existence of an historical event can only be overcome by faith. Faith, however, does not make an historical event objectively certain, for this is a matter of cognition. What it does is to provide the individual with the

subjective certainty that removes doubt and allows him to come to a decision with regard to a particular historical event. For Kierkegaard doubt cannot be overcome by knowledge; it can only be terminated by an act of freedom and will. "The conclusion of belief is no conclusion but resolution, and thus doubt is excluded"(PF, 84 [SV IV, 247]). Although belief and doubt are opposite acts, they have something in common: both are acts of will. When the skeptic doubts the existence of something he does not do so by virtue of knowledge but by an act of will. Fearing being deceived and wrong by the conclusions he draws from what he sees and knows he decides by an act of will to restrain himself from any conclusion (PF, 84-85 [SV IV, 248]). Belief, on other hand, by an opposite act of will, decides to believe what is beyond immediate sensation and immediate cognition, excluding thereby all doubt. In the act of belief the individual always runs the risk of being wrong in his judgments, but nevertheless he wills to believe. "One never believes in any other way; if one wants to avoid risk, then one wants to know with certainty that one can swim before going into the water" (PF, 83-84 [SV IV, 247]).

Kierkegaard applies this analysis to faith in the imminent sense that has as its object the entrance of God into history. In order to believe in this event one must overcome not only the uncertainty that belongs to any historical event, but the difficulties arising from the fact that God being eternal and necessary in his essence comes into existence and becomes temporal. This event takes place in history, but cannot be reduced to a simple historical fact. For the appearance of God in time contains two qualitative opposites: the eternal and the historical, which means "the eternalizing of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal"(PF, 61 [SV IV, 227]). Kierkegaard distinguishes this from other facts of history by classifying it as an absolute fact. The absolute fact is an historical fact and as such the object of faith. But the historical element in it does not have decisive significance (PF, 99-100 [SV IV, 262]). For the appearance of God in time is not something that can be known directly. That an individual human

being is God cannot be demonstrated from history. Only through faith can the individual be aware of the divine that is hidden in the temporal. Historical investigation can provide evidence for the fact that there was a man called Jesus who was born, lived, and died. It can also show that his teaching had a great influence on western culture and has even changed the shape of the world. This evidence, however, cannot provide the basis to the conclusion that Jesus is God. "But what does that demonstrate? At most it can demonstrate that Jesus Christ was a great man, perhaps the greatest of all. But that he was — God — no, stop" (PC 26-27 [SV XII, 25]). With the help of history and by looking at the results of Jesus' life we cannot arrive at the conclusion that he is God, because between God and human nature there is an infinite qualitative difference. If we start with the assumption that Jesus Christ was merely a human being it can never in all eternity be shown that he was also God on the basis of historical evidence (PC, 28-29 [SV XII, 27]).

While Kierkegaard emphasizes the historicity of the incarnation he maintains at the same time that history is of no help in matters of faith. In one passage he seems even to suggest that historical evidence is virtually irrelevant to faith.

If the fact of which we speak were a simple historical fact, the historiographer's scrupulous accuracy would be of great importance. This is not the case here, for faith cannot be distilled from even the finest detail. (...) Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words "we have believed that in such and such a year the God appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died" — this is more than enough (PF, 103-104 [SV IV, 265-266]).

This statement can easily be misunderstood. Kierkegaard is not saying that this minimal historical information is all that is really significant in the biblical account of Christ's life. His point is that history is only an occasion to come to faith and no amount of historical evidence will produce faith in anyone. Therefore, this minimal historical information would be "more than enough" for

faith to occur.

The reason for making faith independent of historical evidence is that faith requires a kind of certainty that historical inquiry cannot provide. According to Kierkegaard the results of historical inquiry can never be more than probable and tentative, always subject to revision in the light of new findings. He illustrates this point by considering the doctrine of inspiration in the Bible. First he assumes the situation in which it is possible to demonstrate the canonicity of the books of the Bible, that they are authentic and their authors trustworthy. What follows from this? Has the person who previously did not have faith come a single step closer to faith? No, not a single step, says Kierkegaard. For “faith does not result from straightforward scholarly deliberation, nor does it come directly; on the contrary, in this objectivity one loses that infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness, which is the condition of faith” (CUP, 29 [SV VII, 18]). Even if scholars could come to a consensus on all matters concerning the reliability of the Bible, from this it would not follow that the Bible is inspired by God. Inspiration is solely a matter of faith, not of knowledge about the Bible. Therefore anyone who begins the investigation of the Bible without faith cannot possibly intend to have inspiration emerge as a result.

Then he assumes the opposite situation in which scholars have succeeded in proving their case against the Bible, that the writers are not trustworthy and the accounts are shown to be false. Have they abolished Christianity? Not at all. Have they harmed the believer? Not at all, not in the least. Has he acquired the right of exempting himself from the responsibility of becoming a believer? Not at all. “Because these books are not by these authors, are not authentic, are not integri [complete], are not inspired (this cannot be disproved, since it is an object of faith) it does not follow that these authors have not existed and above all, that Christ has not existed. To that extent the believer is still equally free to accept it” (CUP, 30 [SV VII, 19]).

IV

For Kierkegaard faith is a sphere by itself; it is both a gift of God and human decision and cannot, therefore, be concerned with theoretical unresolved contradictions. In this sense historical evidence is superfluous to faith. This view of the relationship of faith to history finds support in the thought of major figures of contemporary theology. For example, Paul Tillich, after making the distinction between historical truth and the truth of faith, stresses that faith is its own authentication not historical evidence.

The truth of faith cannot be made dependent on the historical truth of the stories and legends in which faith has expressed itself. It is a disastrous distortion of the meaning of faith to identify it with the belief in the historical validity of the Biblical stories. This, however, happens on high as well as on low levels of sophistication. People say that others or they themselves are without Christian faith, because they do not believe that the New Testament miracle stories are reliably documented. Certainly they are not, and the search for the degree of probability or improbability of a Biblical story has to be made with all the tools of a solid philological and historical method. (...) They are questions of historical truth, not of the truth of faith. (...) Faith can ascertain its own foundation. (...) Therefore, faith cannot be shaken by historical research even if its results are critical of the traditions in which the event is reported.*¹⁶

*¹⁶ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 87-89. For Tillich the attempt to give a foundation to Christian faith through historical research is a failure, for it can provide no more than probable results, able to be the basis neither of an acceptance nor of a rejection of the Christian faith. "The search for the historical Jesus was an attempt to discover a minimum of reliable facts about the man Jesus of Nazareth, in order to provide a safe foundation for the Christian faith. This attempt was a failure. Historical research provided probabilities about Jesus of a higher or lower degree. On the basis of these probabilities, it sketched 'Lives of Jesus' . But they were more like

The fact that faith is not the result of historical evidence places all believers on an equal footing. If the appearance of God in time were a simple historical event the contemporary eyewitness would have an advantage, for they would be able to acquire more exact and detailed information about what happened. But since we are before an absolute fact, which means it cannot be directly known, there is no advantage to be present at the time it occurs. "Divinity is not an immediate qualification" (PF, 93 [SV IV, 256]).

If there was a contemporary who had even limited his sleep to the shortest possible time so that he could accompany that teacher, whom he accompanied more inseparably than the little fish that accompany the shark, if he had in his service a hundred secret agents who spied upon that teacher everywhere and with whom he conferred every night, so that he had a dossier on that teacher down to the slightest particular, knew what he had said, where he had been every hour of the day, because his zeal made him regard even the slightest particular as important — would such a contemporary be a follower? Not at all (PF, 59-60 [SV IV, 225]).

For Kierkegaard there is no direct transition from historical knowledge to faith. Even if absolute certainty in matters of historical evidence could be reached, one would have knowledge, but not faith. Faith is the condition provided by God himself. And it is by virtue of faith that one becomes a true contemporary to the event. The immediate contemporary and the follower of later generations are situated equally in regard to contemporaneity with Christ. To be contemporary in the sense of immediacy can only be an occasion to acquire faith. This means that there is not and cannot be any question of a

novels than biographies; they certainly could not provide a safe foundation for the Christian faith. Christianity is not based on the acceptance of a historical novel; it is based on the witness to the messianic character of Jesus by people who were not interested at all in a biography of the Messiah. *Systematic Theology* Vol.II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 105.

follower at second hand.

There is no follower at second hand. The first and the latest generation are essentially alike, except that the latter generation has the occasion in the report of the contemporary generation, whereas the contemporary generation has the occasion in its immediate contemporaneity and therefore owes no generation anything. But this immediate contemporaneity is merely the occasion (PF, 104-105 [SV IV, 266]).

Kierkegaard makes it clear that the individual's faith does not rest on the faith of those who have gone before, but on Christ who is always contemporary. In matters of faith the believer is not indebted to anyone but is indebted to God for everything. Whether the first generation followers had the faith they testified they had is of no concern for the later generation believer. "It is of no benefit to him and makes no difference to him in coming to faith himself" (PF, 103 [SV IV, 265]). Every believer receives the condition of faith at first hand from God. Thus the believer of whatever generation is contemporary with Christ in the relations of faith. The centrality of contemporaneity to faith is made especially clear in *Practice in Christianity*. Here faith becomes equivalent to contemporaneity.

It is indeed eighteen hundred years since Jesus Christ walked here on earth but this is certainly not an event just like other events, which once they are over pass into history and then as the distant past pass into oblivion. No, his presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past, thus does not become more and more distant — that is, if faith is at all to be found upon the earth; if not, well, then in that very instant it is a long time since he lived. But as long as there is a believer, this person, in order to become that, must have been as a believer must be just as contemporary with Christ's presence as his contemporaries were. This contemporaneity is the condition of faith, more sharply defined, it is faith (PC, 9 [SV XII, 1]).

In other words, the temporal relation to the historical event of God's coming

into existence does not affect what one believes about this particular event. No matter at which point time one is, one comes to relate to this event not through historical evidence but through faith. Evidence and temporal relation will influence the historical understanding of the event but not faith in it. For the evidence that this event leaves behind does not give access to the true meaning of what has occurred. Only through faith can we contemplate in the event what history does not and cannot see, namely, the appearance of God in time. This shows the paradoxical character of faith. In other words, while in faith the believer relates to the eternal through a historical event, there is no direct transition from the historical reliability of that event to the decision of faith in it. According to Kierkegaard the transition from knowledge of an historical event to faith in its eternal significance is a leap. "The transition whereby something historical and the relation to this becomes decisive for an eternal happiness is a (...)leap" (CUP, 98 [SV VII, 78]). For Kierkegaard the substance of the leap is a "pathos-filled transition" which belongs to "the realm of freedom" (JP III, 2339, 2352[IV C, 12; V C, 12]). It is, in other words, a "category of decision" (CUP, 99 [SV VII, 79]). Because of the incommensurability between historical knowledge and faith, the transition to faith involves a volitional leap beyond the sphere of knowledge.

Bibliographical Note

In citing references to Kierkegaard's works I have employed the Standard English translation, which is cited parenthetically in the text by abbreviation and page number, followed by volume and page number of the corresponding Danish text in square brackets.

The following abbreviations are used for Kierkegaard's works:

- BA *The Book on Adler*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Vol. I. edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- PF *Philosophical Fragments*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- PC *Practice in Christianity*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- SV *Søren Kierkegaards Samled Værker*, 14 vols., edited by A. B. Drachman, J. L. Heiberg, and H. O. Lange. Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1901-1906.
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard' s Journals and Papers*, 7 Vols. edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978.