

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

REJUVENATING APOLOGETICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:  
TAKING HINTS FROM SØREN KIERKEGAARD

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4 DECEMBER 2002

Many people have abandoned Christian apologetics because of its allegedly innocuous effect. Take for example the testimony of Robert J. Miller. Miller tells that he was once convinced that apologetics could rationally defend and explain the truth of Christianity and Catholicism to any person who was willing to reason carefully through well-constructed arguments. Reflecting upon his former outlook he says:

This mind-set held together until I went to graduate school at secular universities and got to know people who had different religions. For the first time in my life, I got to know people who took other religions as seriously as I took mine. I knew these people were well educated and highly rational, and I could tell from our arguments that they were sincere.... Yet none of them was persuaded by my apologetics. It took several years, but gradually I accepted the fact that informed, intelligent, sincere, and spiritual people are almost never persuaded by apologetics to change their core beliefs. Looking back, I can now see that a big reason for this is that most apologists use assumptions that only insiders take for granted. It is usually only from an outsider's perspective that one can see how problematic these assumptions really are.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, Miller concludes:

In summary apologies almost never reach outsiders. When they do, they are almost never taken seriously; when they are, they are almost never persuasive. So, if the purpose of apologetics is to convince outsiders to adopt new beliefs, then apologies are almost always abject failures.<sup>2</sup>

Today Miller is a voting member of the Jesus Seminar and an advocate of a "Christianity" that is largely indifferent to the historical facts of the first century. This shift to a history-free and unevangelistic faith is likely the result (among other factors) of abandoning his apologetic methodology when faced with his utter failure in it. Even though I believe Miller's complaint can be legitimately criticized on several levels, I want to take seriously his lament that Christian apologetics seems to fail. I suggest that

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Miller, "What do the Stories About the Resurrection(s) Prove?" in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* ed. Paul Copan (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

incorporating the manner of the Danish existentialist, Søren Kierkegaard, can rejuvenate a seemingly dead and failing defense of the faith that critics like Miller find unsatisfying and impotent. Unfortunately, many evangelical Christians reject anything related to Kierkegaard. So, below I will not only argue that incorporating Kierkegaard's apologetic tactics will benefit the contemporary apologist, but furthermore, I will attempt to patch up some misunderstandings evangelical Christians may have with the Danish philosopher.

### **Kierkegaard's Christian Apologetics**

I imagine some people will find it incredulous to suggest that Kierkegaard exercised anything remotely similar to apologetics.<sup>3</sup> In fact, many apologists assume that one role for apologetics is to overcome Kierkegaard's philosophy. Take, for example, Francis Schaeffer who suggests that Kierkegaard dangerously introduced the idea that a "leap of faith" must be made to bring meaning to life because of the failure of reason to provide an answer. Schaeffer writes:

As a result of this [Kierkegaard's "leap of faith"], from that time on, if rationalistic man wants to deal with the really important things of human life (such as purpose, significance, the validity of love), he must discard rational thought about them and make a gigantic, nonrational leap of faith. The rationalistic framework had failed to produce an answer on the basis of reason, and so all hope of a uniform field of knowledge had to be abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

Now Schaeffer is correct in noting that the French existentialist movement of the mid-twentieth century was influenced by Kierkegaard's philosophy, however, he is

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<sup>3</sup> However, see C. Stephen Evans, "Apologetic Arguments in *Philosophical Fragments*" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994), 65-72. He locates at least three, if not four, apologetic arguments within *Philosophical Fragments* that Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus employs.

<sup>4</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, vol. 1, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 17.

wrong to suppose that Kierkegaard was an enemy of rationality or applying rigorous thought to Christianity. In a similar vein, Paul Helm claims that Kierkegaard should be characterized with the likes of Tertullian because they both supposedly deny that reason should have anything to do with faith.<sup>5</sup> More will be said about Kierkegaard's views on faith and reason below, but two points are in order at the present time. First, the phrase "leap of faith" is never found in any of Kierkegaard's numerous writings.<sup>6</sup> The burden of proof weighs on those who claim that Kierkegaard is claiming that something like the "leap of faith" they are attributing to Kierkegaard is representative of his philosophy. In some cases, like Schaeffer's, this is fallaciously done by appealing to one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings (like *Fear and Trembling*) and attributing the surface understanding of the text to Kierkegaard himself.

A second reason to reject a reading of Kierkegaard that denies any connection with faith and reason is that it wholly ignores what Kierkegaard was aiming to accomplish with his philosophical writings. It may be the case that Kierkegaard does not have a robust view of faith and reason that many apologists endorse today, and there is possibly room to improve upon Kierkegaard's thoughts on faith and reason, yet it would be an egregious mistake to attribute to Kierkegaard a non-rational approach to faith.

After all, Kierkegaard wrote for a reason, and that reason was to convince his fellow

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> M. Jaimie Ferreira, "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 207: "The popular association of the leap with Kierkegaard is often couched in terms of the leap *of* faith. It is worthwhile to be reminded, however, and interesting to note, that Kierkegaard never uses any Danish equivalent of the English phrase 'leap of faith,' a phrase that involves circularity insofar as it seems to imply that the leap is made *by* faith."

Danes that something was wrong with their life-view. In a broad sense, this is Christian apologetics because it employs arguments to convince an audience to abandon their way of life for the Christian faith. How Kierkegaard makes his case for Christianity has been ignored, misunderstood, or forgotten by many in the evangelical Christian community, so that is what I shall turn to next.

To some extent, I am sympathetic with those who have misinterpreted Kierkegaard. First, there is the issue of indirect communication. Aside from his journals, Kierkegaard rarely speaks forthrightly about his own views. Instead, he pushes his readers to see the value of genuine Christian faith through the various voices of his pseudonyms. Second, there is a cultural equivocation of terms like subjective and objective. When Kierkegaard speaks of objective truth, he only rejects it as a Hegelian point of view. Regarding the objective correspondence theory of truth, Kierkegaard does not reject it. However, he does claim that it is limited in certain ways. As for subjectivity Kierkegaard does not employ the term as a synonym for relativism, which is what subjectivity means for some apologists today. Rather, subjectivity in the Kierkegaardian sense is *how* one believes, which is not necessarily divorced from truth in today's objective sense. A final equivocation to clear up is Kierkegaard's attack upon Christianity. This attack is not against orthodox Christianity. Kierkegaard's battle is with the institutionalized, dispassionate, detached, Hegelian-synthesized Christianity. To the chagrin of many twentieth century existential theologians and philosophers, Kierkegaard endorsed orthodox Christian doctrine up to the time of his death. At minimum it can be said that Kierkegaard saw no conflict of interest with his methodology and orthodox Christian belief.

The first tactic I believe Christian apologetics could integrate from Kierkegaard is to move one's audience indirectly to the Christian faith. Kierkegaard's earlier writings like *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way* exemplify this. Kierkegaard saw his fellow Danes existing in three possible stages of life. First is the aesthetic sphere, which values pleasure in the moment, artistry, ironic humor, and lacks any substantial meaning. The next stage is the ethical, which embraces one's duties to life through vocation, marriage, and possibly even religion up to a certain point. The final stage which deals with one's guilt and sin and requires passionate faith is the religious stage. Kierkegaard used various pseudonyms to exemplify these life-views and to point his readers to accept the Christian life.

Mark C. Miller has noted that apologists can have an advantage reaching Generation X using Kierkegaard's tactic of indirect communication. Generation Xers feel alienated and apathetic to the world around them due to the epidemic of broken families the majority of them emerge from. Furthermore, Xers have been targeted their whole lives by various marketing and advertisement ploys. As a result, they are cynical and impenetrable to the traditional style of evangelism and apologetics that the church has traditionally employed. Miller believes that Kierkegaard's apologetic method is just what this generation needs to be reached:

Xers need the gospel like everyone else. And Søren Kierkegaard is the philosopher-evangelist to give it to them. I submit that if the church is to communicate meaningfully with Generation X, it must adopt the strategies employed and the convictions passionately held by Kierkegaard.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mark C. Miller, "The Hipness Unto Death: Søren Kierkegaard and David Letterman – Ironic Apologists to Generation X," *Mars Hill Review* 7 (Winter/Spring 1997). Available online at: <http://www.leaderu.com/marshall/mhr07/kierk1.html>.

Among other reasons, Miller suggests that Kierkegaard is perfect for the job because he overcomes the cynical detachment of Generation Xers through irony, a method they will understand. Kierkegaard's approach may be required to reach those who are stuck in apathy and cynicism like the members of Generation X.

Other apologists have subsumed Kierkegaard's message into their works. For example, William Lane Craig uses the philosophy of Kierkegaard to make a case that life is meaningless without God (as an indirect method of evangelism).<sup>8</sup> C. Stephen Evans exemplifies Kierkegaard's indirect approach in his book *Existentialism: The Philosophy of Despair and the Quest for Hope* by highlighting the immanent despair in secular life and the hope found in Christian existence. After showing the disparaging picture of reality that life gives us, Evans offers a Christian hope using three criteria for choosing: 1) it answers human need, 2) it corresponds with reality, and 3) it is a livable framework.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, this is approximately the same method used by Francis Schaeffer who loudly denounces Kierkegaard's philosophy. Schaeffer's method of demonstrating the strength of the Christian worldview by pointing out the despair of non-Christian systems is one of his most celebrated accomplishments. Where Schaeffer's approach to apologetics has succeeded, it has resembled Kierkegaard's methodology of indirect communication.

A second lesson the contemporary apologist can learn from Kierkegaard is his non-evidentialist approach to apologetics. Kierkegaard never makes a serious attempt to prove the existence of God. Instead, he works with the perspective that his audience

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<sup>8</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 55-56.

<sup>9</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Existentialism: The Philosophy of Despair & The Quest For Hope* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 113-18.

currently exists in. For the majority of nineteenth century Danes, the problem was not trying to show them that God exists. The problem, for this context, was that they did not exist in proper relation to those beliefs. Furthermore, Kierkegaard was skeptical about what a “proof” for God’s existence would amount to should a cogent, universal demonstration be found.

These criticisms of the evidentialist approach offer valuable insight for the contemporary apologist. Although independent of Kierkegaard, Alvin Plantinga has defended a non-evidentialist epistemology that takes into account certain “properly basic beliefs,” which would include the Christian belief in God. Plantinga’s theory has profoundly influenced an ongoing shift in moving contemporary apologetics towards a non-evidentialist framework as well.<sup>10</sup> Apologists who have incorporated non-evidentialist principles may find that this humbler case for Christianity may strike a wary, cynical culture as more honest and compelling than conventional approaches to apologetics that try to prove with certainty all the philosophical and historical claims of Christianity in a manner that is supposedly plain and clear to everyone. The non-evidentialist approach not only sheds doubt upon achieving such an enterprise, but furthermore suggests that such substantiation is not necessary to establish the rational validation of Christian theism. Kierkegaard’s non-evidentialist message can be an advantageous ally for contemporary apologists and evangelists to heed today.

A third tactic to be learned from Kierkegaard’s style of apologetics is to incorporate humor as part of sharing Christianity. People often have tacit “non-

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 72-78. For more on a Christian non-evidentialist perspective see Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

arguments” against Christianity. I believe one of these “non-arguments” claims that Christianity is boring and consequently false. While the connection that something “boring” necessarily must not be true is obviously fallacious (although it is a growing sentiment in our entertainment focused culture), the fact that people generally find Christianity to be boring is often the fault of Christians who live and communicate the gospel unbecomingly.

Kierkegaard draws upon humor to enrich and illustrate his writings. Irony, jokes, and witty anecdotes permeate his compositions. Kierkegaard regularly tells jokes in his books as a refreshing demonstration for whatever point he may be making. Not only does Kierkegaard employ humor as a style in his writing, but he also uses humor in a technical sense as a boundary zone between the ethical and the religious stages of life. Of course, when I suggest the contemporary apologist can glean effective styles of apologetics from Kierkegaard, I am referring to his use of humor in style, not necessarily his philosophical doctrine as a boundary zone.

Some Christians may be wary of humor, fearful that it may be antithetical to the serious nature of God, salvation, and the like. Kierkegaard obviously did not find that to be an obstacle. In fact, some of Kierkegaard’s humor requires seriousness to life.<sup>11</sup> As Robert C. Roberts plainly explains, “Humor is not incompatible with being ultimately serious about life; indeed an ultimate orienting seriousness about life gives one’s sense of humor a depth and integrity and scope that it will not otherwise have.”<sup>12</sup> So, there is

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<sup>11</sup> C. Stephen Evans, “Kierkegaard’s View of Humor: Must Christians Always Be So Solemn?” *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (April 1987), 183-84.

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Roberts, “Smiling With God: Reflections on Christianity and the Psychology of Humor,” *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (April 1987), 168-69.

good reason to believe that humor is at least permissible for Christians to exercise in evangelism and apologetics, and I have suggested the stronger claim that humor is to be preferred when presenting the gospel.<sup>13</sup>

If apologists apply humor to their cases for Christianity, it would make apologetic literature more accessible, memorable, and enjoyable without necessarily compromising the standard of academic work that has historically characterized the literature.

Additionally, humor can give a glimpse to those examining Christianity that there is more to the Christian view of life than academic propositional belief. One of the problems implicit in previous eras of apologetics was that it approached all disagreements with Christianity as purely intellectual. It may be the case that some problems people have against becoming Christians are not intellectual at all. As C. Stephen Evans explains:

I also think that Kierkegaard is right in warning us not to allow the modern unbeliever to get away with his claim that his difficulties with Christianity are purely intellectual. If people in “modern” or “post-modern” society have trouble developing Christian faith, the reason may not be at all that we are too intelligent or learned to believe as people of past ages did. The problem may lie in our constricted understanding of what our essential task is as human beings and our impoverished attempts to become selves. It is not that we are too intelligent and learned to become Christians, but that we have deceived ourselves into thinking that intellectual achievements are what human life is all about.<sup>14</sup>

So humor is important not only in order to communicate more clearly the truth of the Christian faith, but it is also integral for communicating the content of the Christian faith.

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<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy to examine cases of humor in the Bible like Balaam’s talking donkey (Number 22:21-35) and when Peter escapes from prison and the believers praying for this very act refuse to believe the servant girl who tells them Peter is at the gate (Acts 12:6-17). Unfortunately, I do not have room to discuss the stronger case that can be made for humor evidenced by texts such as these.

<sup>14</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Christian Psychology* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1990), 119.

After all, it would not seem unfitting for a worldview that claims to be the fulfillment of joy to exemplify some well-crafted humor in its presentation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Kierkegaard Misunderstood Today**

Having established at least three specific ways the contemporary apologist can tactfully share Christ following the example of Kierkegaard, I wish to address some specific issues that apologists may have concerning Kierkegaard's methodology. These include the characterization of Christian faith as absurd or a paradox, his doubtful outlook on the proofs for God's existence, and his apparent ambivalence towards historical and literary criticism on the Gospels.

### **Kierkegaard's Absurd or Paradoxical Faith**

As mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard is fallaciously most often known for formulating the view that religious belief is a "leap of faith." However, Kierkegaard does often write about faith, and some of his writings reflect that faith is absurd or paradoxical. For example, Kierkegaard writes through the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* that faith "is and remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought."<sup>16</sup> In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard, under the name of Johannes Climacus, he writes:

But then is faith just as paradoxical as the paradox [to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think]? Quite so. How else could it have its object in the

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<sup>15</sup> Notice the use of "joy" in passages like Ps. 16:11, 43:4, 63:7, 92:4; Prov. 12:20; Eccles. 2:26; Matt. 13:44; John 15:11; Rom. 14:17, 15:13; Phil. 2:29; 1 Peter 1:6-9; 1 John 1:4.

<sup>16</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 56.

paradox and be happy in relation to it? Faith itself is a wonder, and everything that is true of the paradox is also true of faith.<sup>17</sup>

How are we supposed to interpret this view of faith?

First of all it is important to take the pseudonyms on these works seriously. Both Silentio and Climacus claim not to be Christians. So, we must consider what Kierkegaard was trying to communicate through these pseudonymous voices. I suggest that in this case Kierkegaard is offering an analysis of Christianity outside the perspective of faith.<sup>18</sup> All too often those who have grown up in a Christian family in a Christian church surrounded by Christian friends forget the astonishing claims Christianity makes. Perhaps one purpose that Kierkegaard has in mind is to remind those who suppose Christianity to be obviously true that it is not so obvious to everyone. When a Christian is sharing the gospel with an unbeliever, often the unbeliever perceives Christianity as an absurdity or a paradox. Apologists must meet their audience where they are at, or else they will reach no one.

Secondly, Kierkegaard (even through his pseudonyms) does not employ terms like paradox to mean a strict logical contradiction. For example Climacus claims that life is a contradiction, the tragic is suffering a contradiction, and the comic is painless

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<sup>17</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 65.

<sup>18</sup> Compare this with Robert Miller's comment that apologists use assumptions that insiders take for granted. Perhaps a Kierkegaardian apologist will not make these kinds of assumptions.

contradiction.<sup>19</sup> Evans reminds Kierkegaard's readers the ramifications of these uses of "contradiction" when he explains:

These jokes and situations make it very clear that by "contradiction" Climacus means "incongruity," certainly not logical or formal contradiction.... (...this use of "contradiction" as "incongruity" should give pause to those who insist on thinking that when Climacus and Kierkegaard call the incarnation a contradiction they must mean logical or formal contradiction.)<sup>20</sup>

Given these stipulations, most evangelical thinkers should agree that Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist who believes Christianity includes logical contradictions.<sup>21</sup>

### **Kierkegaard and Proofs for God's Existence**

Kierkegaard, through Johannes Climacus, expresses offense concerning the attempt to prove the existence of God. In *Postscript* he writes:

To demonstrate the existence of someone who exists is the most shameless assault, since it is an attempt to make him ludicrous, but the trouble is that one does not even suspect this, that in dead seriousness one regards it as a godly undertaking. How could it occur to anyone to demonstrate that he exists unless one has allowed oneself to ignore him; and now one does it in an even more lunatic way by demonstrating his existence right in front of his nose.<sup>22</sup>

Climacus follows this argument with the example of a subject before his king. In order to express properly the existence of the king, a subject will honor and obey the monarch. Likewise, the appropriate response for Christians to have towards God's

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<sup>19</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Scientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 513-14.

<sup>20</sup> Evans, "Kierkegaard's View of Humor," 178.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 410: "Kierkegaard was not an irrationalist, as some have claimed, but his use of terms make him sound like one.... Kierkegaard has been misunderstood partly because he has used them."

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 545.

existence is to worship him, not to try to prove his existence. Imagine how a king's subject would be received for demonstrating the king's existence in his presence? Equally, proving God's existence seems to be shameful to God, since the believer is supposed to be in God's court.

Most apologetic literature contains lengthy sections detailing arguments for the existence of God, and consequently, most apologists would have serious difficulty accepting Climacus's criticism. Before the apologist reprimands Climacus, it is important to remember that this is the voice of a pseudonym, which may not necessarily reflect Kierkegaard's own opinion,<sup>23</sup> and as previously mentioned, the audience Kierkegaard was addressing saw theism and Christianity as a live option. Furthermore, I think a careful exegesis of Climacus's parable will show that this is a critique of relying on evidential grounds for faith. Notice that the story has the subject proving the existence of the king for himself or for the king. The parable does not say what the king's subject ought to do if he is in a foreign land where people doubt that he has a king or is under the king's authority.

Evans's criteria for admitting apologetics within a Kierkegaardian philosophy require that the apologetic argument does not eliminate the need for faith or the "offense" of the incarnation.<sup>24</sup> By this standard, any approach to prove God's existence with epistemological foundationalism will certainly marginalize the role of faith and threaten to alleviate the offense of the incarnation. This claim is clearly established when Evans writes:

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<sup>23</sup> Although in this case, I believe there is good reason to believe Climacus and Kierkegaard agree.

<sup>24</sup> Evans, "Apologetic Arguments in *Philosophical Fragments*," 73.

The soundness of the arguments [foundationalist proofs for God's existence] seems to imply that although it is possible and even permissible for a person to believe in God by faith, faith with respect to belief that God exists is not necessary for the person who has grasped the soundness of the proofs. So the arguments can be construed as making faith unnecessary, at least for some people. Furthermore, the arguments would also seem to eliminate the possibility of offense. It is hard to see how any reasonable individual could find rationally offensive what is rationally demonstrable and certain.<sup>25</sup>

I believe Evans (following Kierkegaard) is correct on this analysis. Evangelical Christians ought to be dedicated to a robust view of faith and the incarnation not to allow these doctrines to be compromised by their apologetic methodology.

Additionally, Kierkegaard believes there is a continuity that God provides through existence which disposes one to know God. Climacus compares a pagan who genuinely worships God in ignorance with a Christian who prays dishonestly to God with the right beliefs and deems the pagan to be nearer to the truth.<sup>26</sup> I think the point Climacus is making is that what is more important is *how* one believes, rather than *what* one believes. This does not suggest that *what* one believes is unimportant. Perhaps what Kierkegaard means is that since human existence is linked to the way God made humans, then subjectivity (in the Kierkegaardian sense) will lead the subjective thinker to true beliefs. Evans explains this interpretation of Kierkegaard when he writes:

God's reality is not founded in any human activity. Rather, it is because it is objectively true that there is a God who desires humans to live truly that the world has been arranged in such a manner that finding moral and religious truth is linked to the development of the right kind of subjectivity. It is because of God that finding the truth about God is logically dependent on learning to live truly.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 201.

<sup>27</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Realism and Antirealism in *Postscript*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 174.

From this I believe apologists can learn that arguments and evidence are not the foundation for their Christian faith. Another lesson to be learned from this is that sometimes the right objective knowledge will not win people over to Christianity, if they are not willing to live in agreement with the gospel. Third, even though evidence is not what faith is based upon, I think there is an appropriate place for arguing for the existence of God insofar as apologists are attempting to show Christian theism as a live option and that they recognize that the arguments involve probabilities relative to individuals, not certainties demonstrable to all people everywhere. On my reading of Kierkegaard, I see space for allowing arguments for God's existence and other tenets of Christianity on the basis that these arguments serve as pointers to Christianity, not the basis for it. This view is not far from Plantinga's own anti-evidentialist position.<sup>28</sup>

### **Kierkegaard and the Historicity of the Gospels**

The final complaint that apologists may have with Kierkegaard that I will examine is his apparent ambivalence towards the historical and literary criticisms of the gospels. Climacus in *Postscript* undergoes a thought experiment with scripture. First, he supposes that a defender of the historicity of the gospels can prove with certainty several key points like the harmony of the gospels, apostolic authorship for the documents, and an early date for the books. Given all this, Climacus concludes:

Thus everything is assumed to be in order with regard to the Holy Scriptures – what then? Has the person who did not believe come a single step closer to faith?

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<sup>28</sup> In his unpublished paper, "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," Plantinga writes, "I've been arguing that theistic belief does not (in general) *need* argument either for deontological justification, or for positive epistemic status, (or for Foley rationality or Alstonian justification); belief in God is properly basic. But it doesn't follow, of course that there aren't any good arguments. Are there some? At least a couple of dozen or so." Available online at (also on various other sites): <http://www.homestead.com/philofreligion/files/Theisticarguments.html>

No, not a single step. 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, the *ibique et nusquam* [everywhere and nowhere] in which faith can come into existence.<sup>29</sup>

Next, Climacus supposes that the opponent of the gospel can prove with certainty the opposite case. Imagine the enemy of the gospel can demonstrate with certainty that the gospels are not written by the apostles whose names they bear, that they are written later in history, and incomplete in content. Climacus asks, has the believer lost faith because of this? His answer is no. Even if the skeptic can make this case against the gospels, Climacus believes that does no harm to the Christian's belief or validates the skeptic's rejection of the gospel.

Some apologists find this attitude toward the gospels to be a dangerous proposal. For example, in an address to biblical scholars entitled "Beware of Philosophy," Norman Geisler warns:

At the minimum, Kierkegaard's bifurcation of fact and value is axiologically misplaced. In fact, it has been biblically disastrous, as Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann demonstrate....<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere he writes:

Following Immanuel Kant, Kierkegaard radically separates fact and value, is and ought.... While the historical as such does not bring one into contact with the eternal, neither can the eternal be divorced from real history.... By denying the importance of the historical, he undermines the authenticity of the New Testament, and, with it, New Testament Christianity. The shift in emphasis from fact to value leads to the denial of fact and its support for faith.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Norman Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1999). Available online at: [http://www.ses.edu/journal/issue2\\_1/pdf/2.1Geisler.pdf](http://www.ses.edu/journal/issue2_1/pdf/2.1Geisler.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics*, 409-10.

Examining the full content of Geisler's criticism is not within the scope of this paper, however, I want to focus on his claim that Kierkegaard's view of scripture lends itself to the separation of fact and value. Below I will defend the position that Kierkegaard's view does not *necessarily* lead to a dichotomy between fact and value.

It is important to notice what scope of scholarship Climacus is questioning. When the gospel's challenger proves his case, Climacus does not claim that the challenger has shown the gospels to be false. It appears as though he is merely casting doubt upon the possibility of someone having certainty about the historicity of the gospels, if the skeptic proves the aforementioned case. This does not mean that they are true or false, but merely that there would be no methodological way of knowing which it is. On my reading of Climacus, I suggest that he is pointing out that even if there were evidence either completely in favor or none at all for the gospels, it would still require faith to become a Christian. As mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard reminds us that evidence is not what one has faith in. Evidence serves as a pointer to the truth, not a substitute for the truth itself.

Climacus also does not believe that one could *make* something become true by having a perfect passion of subjectivity towards an objectively false belief. Under the discussion of the proofs for God's existence, I explained that he preferred subjectivity to objectivity because subjectivity will lead one to true beliefs. History is important for Climacus, but his audience is not questioning the history of the gospel in the same way the Bible is questioned today. I believe that Climacus takes it for granted that even the person who doubts the reliability of the gospels is not intending to prove that Jesus did not exist as a figure in history or that simply because one doubts the gospels' historicity

that Jesus was not bodily resurrected from the dead. With these conditions in place, I do not see that Kierkegaard's position necessarily leads to a bifurcation between fact and value. I cannot deny that others have made that inference upon Kierkegaard's influence, but in my opinion that is due to an incorrect reading of Kierkegaard for reasons I have given above.

### **Conclusion**

I now return to the situation of Robert J. Miller who gave up on apologetics and evangelical Christianity because he discovered there were intelligent, good people who failed to see the force of his apologetic arguments. The positive contributions I have mentioned from Søren Kierkegaard seem to amend most of his difficulties. Using indirect communication recognizes that not all arguments work for all people. The presentation of the truth needs to be tailored to people in such a way that it is received to meet them wherever they are at. The non-evidentialist approach acknowledges that there may not be absolutely certain proof in support of religious belief, but that is not sufficient for dismissing religious belief either. Finally, humor has a role in apologetics and evangelism because there are frequently tacit and non-intellectual reasons that people reject Christianity. Humor communicates in a winsome manner that there is more to Christianity than rational propositional belief. These Kierkegaardian lessons could have helped Miller from straying away when apologetics seemed to fail him.

The message to be heeded from all of this is that apologetics, if it is going to continue to be an effective tool in the twenty-first century, needs to adapt Kierkegaard's counsel in a manner that is relevant for the times. As C. Stephen Evans says:

If Kierkegaard were alive today, he would doubtless have new, creative ideas for dealing with the situation [of evangelism], and he certainly would urge us to use our creativity to develop new strategies for encountering our contemporaries.<sup>32</sup>

Apologists have a special calling to share the gospel with skeptics, philosophers, intellectuals, and cynics. We must communicate in a way that appeals to our audience. Otherwise, we may as well remain silent.

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<sup>32</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard's Christian Psychology*, 119.

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