

## **Kierkegaard and the historians**

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Discussions of the relationship between Christian faith and history in the work of Søren Kierkegaard are commonplace among commentators upon the Danish thinker's work, especially, of course, in relation to the works pseudonymously attributed to Johannes Climacus. It is generally assumed in such discussions that Climacus, and indeed Kierkegaard himself, insist upon an antithetical relationship between faith and historical scholarship. Gordon E. Michalson, for example, speaks for many when he attributes to Kierkegaard the view that historical evidence is theologically irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> I propose to argue, however, that this assumption is mistaken. Climacus certainly considered that historical inquiry into the origins of Christianity *can* be harmful for faith, indeed that it often is, but he does not suggest that it *must* be. Indeed a positive estimation of the worth of historical inquiry is not only compatible with Climacus' position but is in some respects required by it.<sup>2</sup>

Although significant differences between the respective views of Climacus and Kierkegaard himself ought not to be ignored the differences are not generally pertinent to the matter at hand. In general, therefore, I shall assume agreement between the two except in a single instance where interest in historical detail is important for Kierkegaard but of little interest to the non-Christian Climacus. In the first and second part of the paper I shall rehearse the reasons for Climacus' suspicion of historical scholarship and review the coherence of his position. The third part examines Climacus' insistence upon the sufficiency of a minimal testimony to the event of 'the god's' appearance in time and in the fourth and final part I shall consider four theses possibly or actually attributable to Kierkegaard which offer a positive estimation of the relationship between historical scholarship and faith.

### **1. Legitimate theological suspicion**

Any attempt to restore historical scholarship to a positive role in relation to Christian faith must be very careful not to compromise Kierkegaard's insis-

tence that faith is not a work of human intellect. No philosophy, no mythology, no historical knowledge, says Climacus, has ever given rise to the idea of God's presence with us in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> Two basic reasons for this incapacity are offered by Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and subsequently in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Both reasons are further supported by Anti-Climacus in *Training in Christianity*.

Firstly, the respective authors contend that there is a fundamental incommensurability between unqualified commitment, trust and love which are the characteristics of faith and the approximate, detached and impersonal character of objective historical research. The necessity of personal engagement with God and the decision either to accept or to reject his presence in Jesus Christ lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's quest for a genuine Christianity. Such engagement and choice is precisely what the objective historical inquiry into the person of Jesus manages to avoid for it places an onus in respect of his identity, not on the individual, but upon the competency of historical scholarship and marks a retreat from the existential demand of the question which Jesus himself asks; 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16:15). Avoidance of such questions will not preclude whole generations from admiring Christ, from being impressed by his commitment to his cause, by the wisdom of his teaching or by his compassionate dealings with others but, according to Kierkegaard, it will not produce Christians. The difficulty with historical scholarship then, is that, although it may encourage admiration of Jesus, by its very nature it will evade the invitation to take up one's cross and follow him (Luke 14:27).

The second reason for Kierkegaard's apparent indifference to the products of historical scholarship is that the object of faith is the Absolute Paradox. The wisdom of the world considers it implausible, even absurd, that the eternal and transcendent God should condescend to take the form of a servant and become a subject within the temporal and immanent realm of human history. But that God has done this is precisely what Christian faith confesses. Historical scholarship may very well investigate the historical life of the man so confessed to be divine but whether or not he is divine is beyond the scope of historical inquiry. The coincidence in the God/man of the eternal and the temporal, the transcendent and the immanent is precisely the reason why the object of faith remains inaccessible to historical scholarship which, quite properly, undertakes its investigations within categories of immanence. Climacus insists, therefore, that an eternal happiness cannot be built on historical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> That proponents of the nineteenth century 'quest for the historical Jesus' thought that their investigations could uncover the transcendent significance of Jesus and similarly that some contemporary theologians should argue that the incarnation must be denied on

historical grounds, represents neither the failure of historical method nor the falsification of Christian faith but rather a simple category mistake on the part of those who make such claims. Climacus himself writes,

... it is easy for the contemporary learner to become a historical eyewitness, but the trouble is that knowing a historical fact – indeed, knowing all the historical facts with the trustworthiness of an eyewitness – by no means makes the eyewitness a follower, which is understandable, because such knowledge means nothing more to him than the historical.<sup>5</sup>

And further,

It is easy to see then . . . that faith is not a knowledge, for all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is a purely historical knowledge, and no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is historical.<sup>6</sup>

Climacus here accepts Leibniz's distinction between the necessary truths of reason and the accidental truths of history. In Western thought at least, historical scholarship is generally pursued under the presupposition that this distinction is self evident. Historical inquiry, therefore, has no jurisdiction in the sphere of the eternal. Any collapsing of the distinction, on the other hand, undermines the infinite qualitative difference between God and the world and falsifies human experience of the contingency of history.

Despite drawing attention to the incapacity of historical scholarship to pronounce upon the veracity of faith, the primary purpose of *Philosophical Fragments* is to propose, by way of an alternative to Socratic Idealism, that an historical point of departure, 'the moment in time', is decisive for faith. In the thought-experiment of the *Fragments*, which is an attempt to elucidate the logic of Christian faith, it is proposed that human relation to that Truth which is decisive for salvation is attained, not through some ahistorical process of reflection, but by engagement with the God who has come among us in the form of a servant and who is himself the Truth. Relationship with this God and indeed recognition of him, are contingent upon a salvific transformation of the individual which is attained in no other way than as a gift of grace. By virtue of this transformation the individual is released from bondage to sin and from her former existence in error. The learner becomes a person of faith, Climacus insists, when the understanding is discharged and she receives the 'condition' from God.<sup>7</sup> Climacus' dismissal of historical investigation then, is not a rejection of the importance of history. He remains insistent that an eternal happiness is decisively dependent upon the individual's relation to the historical figure of 'the god'. The question which has occupied critics, however, is whether it is possible to have the matter both ways.

## 2. Is Climacus consistent?

Given that the historical presence of God in the form of a servant is regarded by Climacus as decisive for faith, and if not we return to the Socratic, is Climacus' apparent indifference to historical detail coherent? There appears to be a basic incompatibility between the conviction that the moment in time is decisive for faith and the equally strongly maintained conviction that any attempt to authenticate that moment through historical research is illegitimate. Stephen Evans, who is sensitive to the charge of inconsistency in the Climackean position, comments,

Both traditional Christians as well as those more liberal Christians engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus would argue that what must go is the cavalier dismissal of historical evidence. These groups have been suspicious of Kierkegaard for what they perceive as his irrationalism. Many contemporary theologians, on the other hand, convinced that making faith dependent on historical evidence is a recipe for disaster, would argue that what must go is the assumption that faith must be grounded in factual historical events.<sup>8</sup>

While Evans himself does offer a defence of Climacus' position, he too expresses some unease that Climacus should be so dismissive of historical evidence. I propose to briefly outline both Evans' defence of Climacus and his residual disquiet before proceeding to consider whether his concerns can be allayed.<sup>9</sup> Before going any further, however, it is necessary to note that the term, 'historical evidence' might well be misleading if it is not carefully qualified. We have seen already that beliefs concerning the transcendent and eternal God are quite beyond the province of historical inquiry. There is no historical evidence, for example, which could establish that Jesus of Nazareth is the second person of the Trinity as is confessed by orthodox Christian faith. I shall assume, therefore, that Evans uses the term 'evidence' to refer to those aspects of Jesus' life which are *consistent* with particular religious beliefs about him rather than to suggest that there might be historical evidence which could *establish* the truth of such beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

Let us proceed then to consider Evans' proposed defence of Climacus. Evans contends that on Climacus' account, faith is to be regarded as 'properly basic' in Alvin Plantinga's sense of the term. This means that faith, which is grounded in a transforming encounter with Christ, is epistemically antecedent to particular historical beliefs about him. Evans argues, correctly in my view, that belief in Jesus as God<sup>11</sup> must surely involve some true historical beliefs about Jesus but, according to Climacus' scheme, such beliefs, rather than being the basis of an encounter with Christ, are produced as part of the outcome of that encounter. In other words, 'a person might believe in the historical record because of her faith in Jesus, rather than having faith in

Jesus on the basis of the historical record.<sup>12</sup> The historical record is then judged to be reliable by virtue of its coherence with what the person of faith already knows on other grounds. Evans proceeds to point out that this epistemological position does not involve any special pleading for religious belief but can also apply to beliefs held about simple items of sense perception. One might add that knowledge of persons regularly functions in the same way. It is epistemologically respectable, for example, for me to believe what might seem to be an outrageous story about a friend of mine simply by judging it to be consistent with my friend's character. Such a judgement can be made without any objective verification. A stranger, however, has no epistemic ground to decide one way or the other about the veracity of the story.

On this account Evans considers that it is philosophically defensible to argue, as Climacus seems to, that faith in the God/Man functions in the same way but he remains concerned about the propriety of Climacus' supposed indifference to historical evidence, an indifference which Evans contends leaves Climacus vulnerable to the falsification of religious beliefs by historical research. It is theoretically conceivable, for example, if not practically so, that historical scholarship might demonstrate that Jesus never existed or that he never said the kinds of things attributed to him.<sup>13</sup> If such falsification of Christian assumptions is even theoretically possible might it not be the case that particular individuals would need to satisfy themselves that such demonstrations are unlikely before they can entertain the possibility of faith? The difficulty here, I think, is not that Evans is wrong – Climacus too wants to maintain the objective ground of faith<sup>14</sup> – but that he conflates Climacus' contention that historical evidence cannot give rise to faith with the claim that historical evidence is irrelevant to faith. I shall try to show why I don't believe that Climacus' espousal of the first view should lead us to suppose that he also intends the second. It is true that Climacus sometimes says that historical scholarship is harmful to faith but his target in such instances is the pretension that historical inquiry can displace the infinite passion of inwardness. Historical inquiry without such pretension might well be another matter.

### **3. How much historical testimony is enough?**

We shall begin our reassessment of Climacus' position by recalling his oft-quoted contention that,

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.<sup>15</sup>

The question to be asked is, 'enough for what?' I wish to clear the ground by suggesting two things that it is not enough for. Firstly it is not enough for one to live one's life as a disciple of Jesus. Kierkegaard, as distinct from Climacus, makes this clear in his acknowledged works where he argues that Jesus Christ is both redeemer and prototype. Clearly, Christ's prototypal role requires that those who wish to follow him have reliable information about the character of his life. Kierkegaard's dependence upon this body of reliable (rather than indubitable) information concerning Christ is abundantly evident in the Discourses in particular, but also in *Works of Love* and in *Training in Christianity*. Climacus, on the other hand, offers no opinion about how much historical evidence is enough to sustain a Christian life. His concern is rather with how the individual becomes a Christian in the first place. As he stands at the limit of his understanding, confronted by the paradoxical claim that God has come among us as a servant, Climacus testifies that the best efforts of the historians are to no avail in his passion to know the Truth.

The second thing for which the testimony of contemporaries is not enough is for the inquirer to decide whether or not the claim of faith is true. This is an important point because many discussions of the issue appear to labour under the misapprehension that this is precisely what Climacus has in mind. This is all the more surprising because not least among the emphases of the Climackean project is the insistence that human beings are never in a position to judge the Truth. Rather, the appearance of God in time judges humanity, calls into question the criteria by which we presume to decide what is and is not possible for God, and requires that we relinquish our allegiance to the categories within which we have understood the world. This is the human decision and the only human contribution – to let go of the understanding.<sup>16</sup> The individual does not also decide that the Truth is to be believed; that privilege comes as pure gift.

What then is the apparently meagre testimony of contemporaries enough for? Climacus himself suggests that it is enough to be the occasion whereby 'the god' grants the condition to the learner. That is all! If the learner confesses, 'I believe . . .' then such confession is by virtue of the condition alone, occasioned though it may have been by the witness of contemporaries. Having made his point that it is a gift of God rather than contemporary testimony which is the decisive condition of faith I see no reason why Climacus should not then be ready to approve of historical inquiry into the life of Jesus so long as it is understood that such inquiry is conducted under the mandate of faith seeking understanding and not the converse. This is the point at which Evans' defence of Climacus comes into play. A prior encounter with Jesus Christ will very likely incline believers to accept the testimony of contemporaries which might otherwise be regarded as incon-

clusive. And, as Evans has shown, there is no reason why we should regard such a procedure as epistemologically suspect. The results of any historical inquiry which is carried out under the mandate of faith may well inform the faith which confesses that Jesus is the Christ by illuminating what it will mean to follow him but it certainly cannot establish it. It may well be that some people come to faith after a wide investigation of historical testimony, as Evans wishes to allow, but it remains the case that the testimony, whether extensive or meagre, is no more than an occasion and, unless attended by the presence of the God who gives the condition, is itself of no avail.

Having attained some clarity about Climacus' immediate concern let us return to the question Evans raises about the possible falsification through historical inquiry of the claims of Christian faith. I have already noted that Climacus insists that Christian faith must be related to an objective ground. Without that objective ground, called 'an historical point of departure' by Climacus, the Socratic proposal for learning the Truth is victorious by default. Thus, although I have spoken above of an apparent indifference to historical detail we would do better to recognise, as I have tried to show, that the assertion that faith is a gift of God rather than the product of historical scholarship, does not at all imply that intellectual effort in the direction of historical inquiry is to be disdained.

In general, neither Climacus nor Kierkegaard consider that the authenticity of the historical reference of Christian beliefs requires much defence but rather treat the biblical witness as *sufficiently* reliable. They would, however, be concerned if their confidence in the Biblical record was shown to be open to serious challenge. It is important to consider, in this regard, what might constitute a serious challenge to the reliability of the Bible. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Climacus allows us to see his own answer to this question. In the course of his discussion about the objective approach to Christianity he considers the efforts of the Biblical scholars before concluding,

So I assume . . . that the enemies have succeeded in demonstrating what they desire regarding the Scriptures, with a certainty surpassing the most vehement desire of the most spiteful enemy<sup>17</sup> – what then? Has the enemy thereby abolished Christianity? Not at all. Has he harmed the believer? Not at all, not in the least. Has he won the right to exempt himself from the responsibility for not being a believer? Not at all. That is, 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.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that Climacus' confidence in the reliability of the Biblical record is not contingent upon a dogmatic defence of its inerrancy. Nor is it under-

mined by uncertainties about authorship, textual variants, redactionary processes and so on. None of these scholarly matters, for which Climacus elsewhere admits his respect<sup>19</sup>, need constitute a threat to faith. Of particular interest here, however, is Climacus' confidence that the existence of *some* witnesses and, above all, the existence of Christ is secure against the ravages of scholarly endeavour. We should assume, I think, that by the existence of Christ, Climacus refers, not merely to a man who was called by that name, but to a man whose life followed a pattern largely resembling the account which is given of it in the gospels. His confidence to the contrary notwithstanding, we have here an indication that Climacus would regard the falsification of such historical knowledge as a threat to faith. Although Climacus himself clearly thinks that such falsification is very unlikely indeed it is at least a conceptual possibility and ought to lead us, as many commentators have done, to reconsider whether the argument of *Philosophical Fragments* with its apparent indifference to historical detail can really be sustained.

Again it is a matter of being clear about what the purpose of the *Fragments* is. From the opening paragraphs we learned that Climacus is simply attempting to set out an alternative to the Socratic approach to learning the Truth. In essence, the alternative requires firstly, that the Truth is external to us and must therefore be introduced to us in some way, secondly, that we are bereft of the condition for obtaining the Truth, and thirdly, that because of the combination of our lacking the condition and the Truth's externality, the Truth cannot be the product of our own deliberations be they speculative, poetic or historico-critical. Climacus, as we know, considers that the only viable alternative to the Socratic is that both the Truth and the condition for understanding the Truth must be introduced to us by God. This situation he regards as matching the epistemological logic of Christianity. If Climacus is right about this then it follows, as we have seen, that historical testimony may provide the occasion but does not provide the condition for learning the Truth. This does not mean that historical truths are irrelevant to faith, only that pursuit of them will not yield faith. This is all that Climacus is trying to say. That the falsification of certain historical beliefs might nevertheless undermine faith does not imply that faith must after all be built upon a foundation which we supply ourselves.

#### **4. A positive estimation of historical scholarship**

Although it is not germane to the logic of faith which is set out in *Philosophical Fragments* I propose in this final section, in order to try and counter some of the bad press Climacus and his creator have received on

this matter, to indicate the value for faith which Climacus and indeed Kierkegaard himself, do place on historical inquiry. It is a matter of regret, I think, that in emphasising, as Kierkegaard certainly does, that the content of faith is beyond the confines of scientific and scholarly knowledge, sympathetic commentators have sometimes given the impression that historical inquiry is therefore to be entirely disregarded. Gregor Malantschuk, for example, writes, ‘that no historical-critical scientific view of the New Testament can ever have any decisive meaning for Christian faith’<sup>20</sup> That it cannot have *decisive* meaning indicates that no historical-critical scientific view can provide the condition of faith. We should not, however, jump to the conclusion that historical-critical scientific scholarship cannot, therefore, be pressed into the service of a faith which has been established on other grounds.

In the first place, the value of any religious interest in history is contingent upon there being a historical point of departure for faith. This, of course, is the thesis which the thought experiment advances and despite the semblance of neutrality, is the thesis which Climacus himself prefers. Climacus thus distinguishes himself from those who consider that the truth of faith is independent of particular historical events. Indeed, according to the Climackean view, faith is explicitly concerned with the particular presence of God in time. History is affirmed as the locus of revelation, the medium of God’s address to humankind, not, however, in general but in the special instance of his appearance in the form of a servant. Let us consider then four theses which elucidate the possibility of a positive role for historical scholarship in respect of faith.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.1 *The witness of contemporaries*

How does the concern with history find positive expression in the Climackean account of faith? First and foremost Climacus attaches positive value to the testimony of contemporaries<sup>22</sup> insofar as hearing that testimony may become the occasion through which later disciples may receive the condition.

By means of the contemporary’s report (the occasion), the person who comes later believes by virtue of the condition he himself receives from the god.<sup>23</sup>

Because Christianity is not reducible to some general teaching but is essentially related to the appearance of ‘the god’ in time it follows, as Evans has pointed out, that some true historical beliefs about Jesus are a constitutive component of faith. Kierkegaard himself says of the order in which one arrives at faith, ‘In the first place, each man must have some knowledge about Christ’.<sup>24</sup> The denial of this reliance upon historical knowledge marks

a return to idealism and the reduction of Jesus of Nazareth to a mere cipher for some theological agenda imposed upon him from elsewhere.

It is true that knowledge of Christ is most often transmitted through apostolic testimony and does not have the (perhaps illusory) status of 'objective' historical fact. The form of apostolic testimony: 'I believe . . .' indicates that the content is 'only for faith'.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the testimony does concern an historical event: 'the god has appeared among us'. Far from dismissing the historical as irrelevant it is the identification of a particular historical event as the vehicle of divine revelation to which every individual must give or withhold assent. Certainly, it is God and not the historian who enables assent but it is assent to a fact of history which is required. Accordingly, Climacus considers that the trustworthiness of the contemporary witness with respect to the historical is a matter of legitimate concern.<sup>26</sup> Climacus is well aware that his acknowledgment of the importance of a trustworthy witness is likely to spark a new round of historical deliberation which will again become an excuse to avoid the decision of faith but he does not for that reason desist from affirming that trustworthy historical reference is an essential constituent of authentic apostolic testimony. The hearer must trust that the contemporary's confession of faith refers, not merely to some imaginative construction, but to the concrete particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>27</sup> It will be the modest function of historical scholarship therefore, to investigate the reliability of apostolic reference to historical facts. Two examples will serve to illustrate the function that Climacus may have in mind.

Although theological criteria were undoubtedly of prime importance in the early church's canonisation of the New Testament texts, historical questions about the reliability of such testimonies were also important. J.N.D Kelly comments, 'Unless a book could be shown to come from the pen of an apostle, or at least to have the authority of an apostle behind it, it was peremptorily rejected, however edifying or popular with the faithful it might be'.<sup>28</sup> Clearly the identification of such books is a task of historical investigation which serves Christian faith, not, of course, by guaranteeing faith to their readers, but by distinguishing authentic apostolic witness from testimonies whose historical reference to Jesus is of dubious value. Such distinctions assist the Christian Church in its missionary task, understood to be the faithful proclamation of what God has done for us in Christ.

A second example concerns a much more recent testimony to the religious significance of Jesus of Nazareth. In 1992 Barbara Thiering published a book in which she claims that Jesus did not die on the cross as is reported of him in the gospels but merely fainted, was later revived and went on to get married, fathered a family and eventually divorced.<sup>29</sup> Thiering proposes that her reconstruction of the life of Jesus requires a radical revision of traditional Christian faith but it is surely clear that her proposals are, at least

initially, candidates for historical rather than theological investigation. Faith is served in this process insofar as historical research is able to confirm or deny that Thiering's 'witness' is trustworthy. Again, because the church seeks to provide the occasion for faith by faithful proclamation of 'the god's' appearance in time, the verdict of the historians upon Thiering's work will undoubtedly help the church to decide whether faithful proclamation is aided or hindered by her proposals.

Such examples as I have discussed here seem to offer a plausible interpretation of Climacus' concern for trustworthy apostolic testimony. We must certainly bear in mind, however, that the church's missionary task, to which I have referred, always waits upon the intervention of the Holy Spirit through whom the condition of faith is bestowed. Historical knowledge can never itself become the condition of faith. Nevertheless a first thesis offering positive appraisal of the relationship between historical scholarship and faith is possible: *Insofar as the church, through faithful proclamation of what God has done for us in Christ, seeks to provide occasion for faith, historical scholarship may assist in the identification of trustworthy witnesses.*

#### 4.2 *Recognising the paradox*<sup>30</sup>

The infinite passion of faith to which Climacus so often refers, is the means by which the person of faith passes through the possibility of offense. In encountering the paradoxical claim that God has come among us in the form of a servant, the individual inquirer arrives quite literally at his or her wit's end and cannot any longer depend on the resources of intellect. But Climacus indicates that these same resources may nevertheless serve the purpose of confirming that the claim of faith does involve a genuine paradox. Such confirmation may well be arrived at speculatively, but historical inquiry may also play a role if, after extensive inquiry, the historian concludes that no amount of historical data can prove or disprove the claim of faith. Historical inquiry, therefore, brings the learner to the limit of its own competence and confirms that the appearance of 'the god' in time 'is not a situation which reflection itself is competent to handle'.<sup>31</sup> The operation of historical-critical understanding, at least if it understands itself aright, thus confirms that a decision regarding 'the god' in time can only be a matter of faith. This is admittedly a humble role for historical inquiry but not until those of us who place great store by historical inquiry have learned a little humility, will the ground be cleared for faith. Thus a second thesis: *Honest historical inquiry may confirm that a decision regarding the identity of Jesus Christ is beyond its own competence and is therefore to be regarded as a matter of faith.*

### 4.3 *The provision of signs*

A third positive estimation of historical knowledge by Climacus concerns the provision of signs. Although faith is utterly dependent on the grace of God it is not a bolt from the blue. In his discussion of the contemporary follower in chapter four of *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus suggests that certain aspects of the life of 'the god' alerted his contemporaries to the need for a decision in respect of him. Climacus himself is particularly impressed by 'the god's' lack of concern about material advantage, but his compassion, the wisdom of his teaching, his healing ministry might also attract attention and lead people to wonder whether his background as a carpenter's son from Nazareth does not sufficiently account for the authority which they now witness. Following the author of John's gospel, these things might be called 'signs' which, although not proving Jesus' divinity, nevertheless confront witnesses of whatever generation with the question, 'Who do you say that I am?' It is perfectly in order, therefore, for the tools of historical research to be applied to the life of Jesus in order to illuminate this question-begging character of his life. I can see no reason why Climacus should oppose such investigation, indeed, as we have seen, his own position might well encourage it – so long as historians do not set themselves the illegitimate task of answering the question so posed. When Simon confessed that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus replied, 'flesh and blood has not revealed this to you' (Matthew 16:17). We cannot proceed with historical investigation on the assumption that flesh and blood might somehow reveal it to us now. Nonetheless, a third thesis is possible: *Historical scholarship may illuminate the degree to which the life of Jesus is provocative of a decision; either to take offense or to believe.*

### 4.4 *Jesus as prototype*

The examples given above which indicate a more positive estimation of historical testimony both pertain to the transition from unbelief to faith, which, of course, is Climacus' special province. The fourth and final area in which history is viewed positively concerns the disciple's relation to Jesus as prototype. It is thus the concern of those who are already disciples and appears, accordingly, in the work of Anti-Climacus and of Kierkegaard himself.

In *Philosophical Fragments* 'the god' is portrayed principally as redeemer. The gulf of sin which separates men and women from God is not overcome by the offering of some new teaching but by an ontological transformation of the individual which God alone may accomplish. Frequently in his Journals Kierkegaard pays tribute to the renewal of this insight in Lutheranism but equally he laments, indeed rages against, the cheapening of this grace in Christendom. He writes, for example,

... it will be easy to show that the official proclamation of Christianity conceals *the part* about how infinitely great the requirement is for being a Christian (the requirement to imitate [*følge efter*] Christ, to forsake the world, to die to the world, and, which follows, to have to suffer for this teaching ...) <sup>32</sup>

Clearly the requirement to imitate requires a body of reliable historical knowledge concerning the character of Jesus' life. Thus, for example, the efforts of scholars in discovering the social conditions which prevailed in Palestine during Jesus' life might well illuminate the radical alternatives which he pioneered and give insight into the pattern of life which is now required of those who would be his followers. Or again, the knowledge yielded by historical inquiry into the religious traditions of his day will undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of Jesus' call for a more radical faithfulness to the command of God. Kierkegaard is no more likely to dismiss the fruits of such inquiry than he was to ignore the religious conditions of his own day. He would insist, however, upon two provisos. The first, as has often been repeated, is that we should not imagine that access to the facts of Jesus' biography or to the conditions in which he lived are constitutive of the condition of faith. If Climacus and Kierkegaard himself sometimes express the view that historical inquiry can be harmful to faith <sup>33</sup> it is only because the present age, extending to our time too, labours under the illusion that intellectual prowess gives exclusive access to the truth.

A second proviso which Kierkegaard would no doubt insist upon is that if historical inquiry is to be pressed into the service of faith it must shed its scepticism. As we have noted above, the latest generation of disciples must learn to trust the testimony of those who have gone before. This need not be a blind trust, but neither must it insist upon absolute certainty. One suspects, judging both by Climacus' impatience with the objective inquiry into Christianity and by the extensive use Kierkegaard himself makes of the New Testament record, that both authors regard historico-critical scepticism as simply a means of avoiding the challenge of Jesus' radical claim upon those who would be his disciples. An obedient historical inquiry, on the other hand, will very likely sharpen that challenge all the more. A fourth and final thesis, therefore, might be: *Historical scholarship may serve to illuminate the pattern of Jesus' radical alternative to the prevailing conditions of human culture.*

## Conclusion

Just as this paper began with a reminder that historical scholarship can never give rise to faith, so it is appropriate to conclude with the same caution. If, as I have tried to show, a positive estimation of the relationship

between faith and historical scholarship is nevertheless commensurate with Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian faith, it will not be by virtue of a compromise of this fundamental truth. Historical scholarship can neither authenticate the claims of faith nor contribute the condition by which faith becomes possible. A faithful pursuit of historical inquiry, however, can be the means by which people of Christian faith better understand the God who, in the form of a servant, is participant in human history.

## Notes

1. Gordon E. Michalson, 'Lessing, Kierkegaard, and the 'Ugly Ditch': A Reexamination' in *The Journal of Religion* 59 (1979) 324–334, p. 334. Michalson repeats the sentiment in 'Theology, Historical Knowledge, and the Contingency–Necessity Distinction' in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983) 87–98, p. 97.
2. That a more positive view is attributable to Kierkegaard has been argued by a small minority of scholars, notably, Hayo Gerdes, *Das Christusbild Sören Kierkegaards* (Düsseldorf-Cologne: Eugen Dietrichs, 1960); N.H.Söe. 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox' in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, eds. Johnson and Thulstrup (New York: Harper, 1962) 207–227; Vernard Eller. 'Faith, Fact and Foolishness: Kierkegaard and the New Quest' in *Journal of Religion* 48 (1965) 54–68 and Richard Campbell, 'Lessing's Problem and Kierkegaard's Answer' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966), 35–54.
3. See *Philosophical Fragments* (hereafter *Fragments*) edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 109.
4. There has been some variance of opinion in recent literature about whether Climacus does indeed offer a negative answer to the third of the questions which appear on the title page of *Philosophical Fragments*: 'Can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?' In opposition to the majority of scholars Louis Pojman thinks that Climacus gives an affirmative answer to the question. See Louis P. Pojman, 'Kierkegaard on Faith and History' in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982) 57–68. Apart from the indications to the contrary in *Philosophical Fragments* Pojman's position seems to be falsified by his own subsequent recognition that in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Climacus mounts a sustained attack on the notion that historical inquiry might provide the basis for faith (*Ibid.*, p. 60ff).
5. *Fragments*, p. 59.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
8. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 153.
9. The allegation of an unsatisfactory relationship between faith and historical scholarship is prevalent among critics who are hostile to Kierkegaard. There would seem to be some value however, in concentrating upon the same concern expressed by a commentator who is sympathetic to the Kierkegaardian project and who has demonstrated his profound understanding of Kierkegaard's work. Stephen Evans is certainly in that position. Treatments of the matter can be found in several of Evans' publications but I shall concentrate on the discussion he gives in *Passionate Reason*, p. 152ff.

10. There are some theologians who consider that historical detail can establish the veracity of theological confessions about Jesus but this is a position which is deeply problematic. Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Jesus – God and Man* (London: SCM, 1968) is a leading contemporary advocate of such a view but it has been shown by Colin Gunton, among others, that Pannenberg's position is open to serious objections. See Colin Gunton, *Yesterday and Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) p. 18ff.
11. Although, in deference to a trinitarian doctrine of God one might prefer to express the divinity of Jesus in some other way than the simple attribution, 'Jesus is God', this theological reservation makes no difference to Evans' argument here.
12. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
13. Both positions have, of course, been advanced by scholars although only the second has ever been taken seriously. Many scholars argue that because very few of the reported sayings of Jesus can certainly be attributed to him a radical revision of the character of Christian faith is required.
14. As Evans himself observes (*Ibid.*, p. 152).
15. *Fragments*, p. 104.
16. See *Fragments*, p. 43.
17. Note the irony here. The desire to falsify Christian faith is typically driven by a passionate commitment no less than the passion of faith itself. The neutral observer is rare indeed.
18. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (hereafter *Postscript*), edited and translated by Howard. V. Hong and Edna. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Vol. 1, p. 30.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
20. Gregor Malantschuk, *The Controversial Kierkegaard*, translated by Howard. V. Hong and Edna. H. Hong (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1980), p. 69.
21. In his discussion of faith and history in *Kierkegaard's 'Fragments' and 'Postscript'* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1983), Stephen Evans also offers a positive estimation of the relationship between the two. It seems to me, however, too strong to suggest, as Evans does, that faith may, in some respects, be *built* on historical evidence (pp. 256 ff). Faith may well be *nurtured* by historical scholarship but Climacus insists that it is *built* on the foundation of God's bestowal of the condition.
22. Climacus here uses the term, 'contemporary' to refer to those who were historical contemporaries of Jesus Christ rather than in the special sense developed in chapters four and five of *Philosophical Fragments* in which all people of faith are contemporary with Jesus Christ.
23. *Fragments*, p. 104.
24. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, (hereafter *Journals*), edited and translated by Howard.V Hong and Edna. H. Hong, (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press), Vol. 1, entry 318 (VIII<sup>1</sup> A 565).
25. *Fragments*, p. 102.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
27. It is important to note that trustworthiness is not equal to infallibility or inerrancy. Faith is critically contingent upon the gift of God not upon the reproduction of the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. In this regard it is quite astonishing that many of those who mock the fundamentalist doctrine of infallible scripture wish to rest the whole of their version of Christian faith upon the minimal body of certain historical knowledge about Jesus. The ironical implication of their own procedure is that only that which is infallible can be trusted.

28. J.N.D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Fifth edition (London: Adam & Charles Black 1977), p. 60.
29. Barbara Thiering, *Jesus the Man* (London: Doubleday, 1992).
30. An extensive discussion of the following role for historical research is given by Vernard Eller, op cit. (1965).
31. Eller, op cit., p. 59.
32. *Journals*, Vol. 2, entry 1497 (XI<sup>2</sup> A 284 1853–54).
33. e.g., *Postscript*, p. 30.

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