Kierkegaard vs. Nietzsche: Discerning the Nature of *True* Christian Faith

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I. Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche were practically contemporaries, both writing in the second half of the nineteenth century. While their vantage points are fundamentally different, their approaches to philosophy and many of their insights are surprisingly aligned. Both wrote as rebellious spirits during their time; they were unwilling to accept the norms of society, and were disillusioned with contemporary Christendom. They both noticed the human spirit diminishing in the modern world and related this to the comfortable religion of the west, which they felt had triggered this "spiritless form of life." They both identified a shallowness they perceived in Christianity; and both sought "something greater and truer." Ultimately, their quests resulted in quite divergent conclusions; while Kierkegaard believed a radical, authentic Christian faith was the only true means for a fulfilling life, Nietzsche held that Christianity was life-negating and should be abolished altogether. Kierkegaard kept faith in Christianity, trusting that there was something much richer and truer than evident in modern Christendom, namely, a doctrine of passion, inwardness, paradox, creativity, and courage; something he intended to recover. For Kierkegaard, the task was to dispose of the multiple misconceptions of Christianity, and restore the truth of Christianity. Nietzsche, on the other hand, never made it past his own surface-level misgivings to see the radical faith that Kierkegaard believed in so firmly. In his persistent polemics against

Christianity, he fails to see beyond the empty, modernized Christianity, which Kierkegaard too saw in the contemporary misrepresentations of Christianity.

In this essay, I will focus on Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, who offers an interested-outsider perspective of Christianity as presented in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, before taking up Kierkegaard's own views of how to live out Christian faith as portrayed in *Works of Love*. I will follow this discussion with a Nietzschean critique of Christianity as life-negating, based primarily on passages from *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Genealogy of Morals*. Then, in dialectical form, I will propose a possible response from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche's critique, and conclude the essay by evaluating whether Kierkegaard is successful in defending his beliefs against Nietzsche. Based on Kierkegaard's ability to withstand Nietzsche's critique, I will argue finally that Kierkegaard successfully defends authentic Christianity.

II. Kierkegaard and Climacus on Christianity

In order to defend the legitimacy of Kierkegaard's view of Christianity, it is important that we acquire a clear understanding of the precise nature of the Christianity that Kierkegaard envisions. In doing this, we must grasp Kierkegaard's understanding of the paradoxical nature of Christianity through the voice of Climacus.[1] We must also

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1 Understanding Kierkegaard's specific views of Christianity is a task in and of itself, not only because his writings are rather difficult to comprehend, but because many of his writings on the nature of Christian faith are written through pseudonymous authorship, particularly that of Johannes Climacus. In his "First and Last Declaration" at the end of the Postscript, Kierkegaard tells us that we are to regard his pseudonymous authors as independent beings with their own distinct views (Fragments and Postscript 6-7). However, as C. Stephen Evans points out in his Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript," "It by no means follows from this that Kierkegaard does not hold some of their views, still less that he rejects their views" (Fragments and Postscript 7). Rather, Kierkegaard chooses to portray these views of Christianity through pseudonymous authors because they allow Kierkegaard various angles from which to assess Christianity. As Evans writes, "As a humorist, Climacus can be knowledgeable about Christianity and interested in Christianity, as well as other religious perspectives. He can, however, maintain the philosophical detachment necessary to look at the issues fairly" (Passionate Reason 12). Thus, by employing pseudonymous authors, such as Climacus in the Fragments and the

distinguish Kierkegaard's ideas of Christianity from his contemporaries' beliefs, as envisioned by some of the modern philosophers of his time as well as the church establishment he refers to derogatively as "Christendom." Finally, we must show how Kierkegaard himself, independently of Climacus, affirms his Christian faith through "works of love."

i. What is the nature of faith for Climacus?

I will begin by examining Climacus' ethical perspective on the meaning of Christian faith; Climacus is uncommitted to Christianity, but is curiously investigating its doctrine. He is able to surpass the contemporary misrepresentations of Christianity (as Kierkegaard would see it) and dissect to its core, unveiling the passion at its center, while simultaneously maintaining an unattached perspective, a perspective that, because of its "objectivity," may be more convincing to the skeptical reader.

Postscript and Anti-Climacus in Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard can present a variety of perspectives, distinct from his own views, though not necessarily different.

Climacus speaks as an outsider of the faith. He seeks to understand specifically how one is to become a Christian. Evans suggests that we should read Climacus' understanding of Christianity as, "If Christianity is true, this is how things are" (Fragments and Postscript 248). Thus, he provides a kind of unbiased view; for Climacus neither exalts nor attacks the believer, but tries to describe the believer's situation as clearly as he can (Fragments and Postscript 248). Yet, one must not forget that his view is basically "detached;" for as Evans points out, a "personal interest in Christianity is not equal to a commitment" (Fragments and Postscript 248). Like Kierkegaard, he represents the same period in which, despite the common assumption "that we are all Christians, many believed that it was impossible for an educated, reflective person to be a Christian in the old-fashioned orthodox" sense (Fragments and Postscript 248). Consequently, Climacus seeks to question this intellectual prejudice and discovers a much more profound faith that is not the simplistic faith such intellectuals resent. Rather, he finds that becoming a Christian requires taking a two-fold leap. First one must cross the "metaphysical ditch," which involves questioning how this "particular historical event purport[s] to be eternally significant for all historical ages" (Fragments and Postscript 248). Then, one must address the epistemological concern of how this merely probable historical knowledge could be a sufficient basis for the life-changing decision to follow Christ (Fragments and Postscript 249).

As Climacus mounts these central questions of truth, Kierkegaard seems to largely be in agreement with him as he demonstrates in his own Works of Love, recognizing the absurdity that the unbeliever sees and the many initial offensive sentiments; but the difference comes when Kierkegaard personally commits to Christianity, and thus, receives a transcendent understanding of the paradox that only the "skilled" person could possess (Fragments and Postscript 280). As Evans reveals,

Whatever Climacus would think, I have a feeling that Kierkegaard would agree with this idea. Kierkegaard says that the believer understands that Christianity is to the unbeliever the absurd and can therefore talk quite calmly about Christianity as the absurd, but "at the same time it naturally follows that for the believer it is not the absurd. (Fragments and Postscript 279)

While Kierkegaard would sympathize with Climacus' findings in his study of Christianity, he would understand that at some point unbelievers are naturally limited by the contradiction of the paradox and can simply not understand the final reconciliation of the paradox that believers find in Christianity.

In his *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus explores Christian faith by first addressing the idea of truth and how someone comes to know truth. He appreciates Socrates' quest for truth, but distinguishes another way of searching for truth, which complements Socrates' in its understanding of the incompetence of human beings; human beings will never know complete truth based on reason alone. Climacus suggests instead, that we can know truth through the absolute paradox, which unites faith with reason. The absolute paradox is quite complex and multi-faceted, but the gist of it is encapsulated in the "absurd" idea that the eternal, transcendent God is in fact knowable in time.[2] As Climacus puts it in his other pseudonymous work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "The paradox is primarily that God, the eternal, has entered time as an individual human being."[3] Christianity upholds the "unbelievable" idea that the omniscient and omnipotent God was once both human and divine in the form of Jesus Christ, that the eternal entered the temporal world.

This is not an easy thing to believe, as it does not make rational sense; for, how could a perfect and supreme God be at the same time a lowly human? This presents an apparent contradiction that is twofold. As Climacus describes, "First, basing one's eternal happiness on the relation to something historical, and then that this historical is constituted contrary to all thinking."[4] Thus, there is a dual ambiguity as one must first accept the insecurities that go along with living one's life around a mere historic event that one did not even witness himself; and moreover, that not only is this an abnormal

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[2] C. Stephen Evans, Kierkegaard's *"Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1983) 224.
[3] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, Vol. I. Ed. and Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) 596.
[4] Ibid., 579.

historical event, it is unlike any other, and rationally incomprehensible. It seems objectively absurd to place all hope, joy, and faith in a historical event—Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Moreover, the concept of the historical belief is equally absurd, as it requires believing that God entered the temporal world as a human. In this way, Christianity cannot be an immanent, familiar doctrine, for it transcends far beyond the limits of objective thought in the absurdity of its core belief that God became man.

The absolute paradox is revealed when reason has reached as far as it possibly can and has run into contradiction trying to find complete truth, for reason alone cannot fathom this heavenly being entering the temporal world. Here, "the paradox could be said to be the fulfillment and not destruction of reason," for the paradox enables one to transcend reason.[5] At this point one must unleash his speculative bearings and enter into an existential relation with God who bridges the gap to complete understanding. Through grace given by God, one can finally grasp the paradox and see its truth, which, from a rational point of view, lies only in the absurd. Climacus writes,

> But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. But the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.[6]

Thus, the paradox adds a new dimension to reason through subjectivity; that is, by directing one's person, applying one's passion, and appending one's experience to reason, which enables transcendence of reason. As one brings passion to this paradox

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[5] Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, 225, 234.
[6] Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Ed. and Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980) 37.

through devoted yearning for God, he opens the door to what "thought itself cannot think." Thus, one overcomes this paradox as he enters into divine relation with God and accepts his help in moving past the objective paradox. One can finally come to understand truth as he allows God to reveal it to him. One must realize that he is incompetent to discover this on his own and must allow God to take over, and trust him to provide understanding.

As Evans reveals, this paradox has four essential functions. First, it "preserves the transcendent character of Christianity" by not allowing accessibility by reason alone, which would put it on a level comparable to paganism.[7] Instead, the paradox realizes the unavoidable human shortcoming in trying to reach the paradox through human faculties alone. He proposes that instead one must rely on something transcendent to reveal the paradox. Thus, in this way, Christianity is also distinct from human reason alone. Evans cites Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* as follows:

> Christianity is not content to be an evolution inside the total determination of human nature, such a proposition is too little to offer to God…The incarnation would in such a case have direct analogies in the incarnations of paganism, while the difference is: incarnation as a human invention and incarnation as stemming from God.[8]

Next, "the paradox ensures the existential character of Christianity."[9] As Evans reveals,

> One can not really assume that the essential eternal truth came into the world because it needed to be explained by a speculator; it goes better to assume that the eternal essential truth has come into the world because men needed it, and the reason why they needed it is certainly not to

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[7] Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, 241.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

> explain it, so that they could have something to do, but in order to exist in it.[10]

It is a form of "existence communication," but this does not mean that it lacks "intellectual content."[11] On the contrary, "the fact that this content is paradoxical in form and that it is the limit or boundary to reason should force the individual to see that the proper relation to assume toward it is not that of detached intellectual contemplation but existential commitment."[12]

Additionally, "the paradox preserves and strengthens human freedom and selfhood."[13] Humans must make a choice to accept the paradox. Thus, it involves subjectivity and cannot be restricted to the objective realm. It involves personal choice, and thus, is not confining or tyrannical. Furthermore, not only is this subjective choice not restrictive, it actually enhances the person that makes the choice as it allies him with the most supreme being, who the person freely chooses to follow, rather than being forced into his rule. As Evans explains, "To make it possible for man freely to choose the truth, the truth came into existence in the form of an individual man. Such an incarnation is necessarily paradoxical…But it makes possible a free response on man's part."[14] By coming into the world as a human, God set the choice before us of whether or not to follow him, not in his glorious and superior force, but in his humility and love manifest in his human character. In doing so he empowered us by giving us our own autonomy of choice; yet, he nevertheless made it clear that only by giving up that autonomy to him, by surrendering our lives to him, could we begin to act like him even minimally. Through

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[10] Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, 241.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 242.

our experience or understanding of him here on Earth, we are enlightened as to the great discrepancy between us and God, and we begin to understand how much we need him, and how wretched we are without him.[15]

Finally, "the paradox guarantees human equality by reducing the intellectual differences among men to insignificance."[16] This "essential human task" is equally achievable by all. It is not limited to the scholarly, but "unintelligible" to all, and thus, equally attainable by all.[17] While added intelligence may enhance the profundity of the meaning behind realizing the paradox, it will in no way provide easier access to it; if anything, it would likely stymie the intelligent believer, while the simple-minded fellow could more quickly realize it. As Climacus writes, "With regard to the absolute, more understanding goes no further than less understanding. On the contrary, they go equally far, the exceptionally gifted person slowly, the simple person swiftly."[18]

More than being able to identify the function of the paradox, Climacus believes that Christians must understand how they can subjectively relate to this paradox, for this subjectivity is truth.[19] For, "Only in subjectivity is there decision, whereas wanting to become objective is untruth. The passion of the infinite, not its content, is the deciding factor, for its content is precisely itself. In this way the subjective "how" and subjectivity are the truth."[20] Hence, Christianity involves a subjective "inwardness," a personal relation to the eternal, which has entered into time through the incarnation. Inwardness requires "resilience" to the objective "what" of Christianity, the concern with the

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[15] Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, 243.
[16] Ibid., 243.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 207.
[19] Ibid., 203.
[20] Ibid.

contradictions of the incarnation; and engagement with the "how" of Christianity, one's personal relation to God, how one existentially lives out their faith.[21] As Climacus explains,

> When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must also contain in itself an expression of the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of that fork in the road, and this expression will at the same time indicate the resilience of the inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: *An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth*, the highest truth there is for an *existing* person. At the point where the road swings off (and where that is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended. Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.[22]

This combination of objective uncertainty matched with fervent desire equates with subjective truth, and thus, comprises a much deeper truth than the one found in "Christendom." A truth that is not amenable to shallow, showy religion. This truth is all encompassing and requires complete conviction and surrender. Hence, one appropriates the truth of Christianity through subjective inwardness, bypassing objective doubt, and venturing out with passionate faith and trust.

Thus, Christian faith, in its complex form is recapitulated by Climacus as "the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest."[23] Believing in this absolute paradox, and taking the leap of faith to realize its reconciliation, is on surface level, a ridiculous and unexplainable decision. However, when the divine reveals the truth of the absolute paradox to an individual, he is finally able to see its truth, rather

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[21] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 202-203.
[22] Ibid., 203.
[23] Ibid., 611.

than its contradiction. The believer can at last accept as legitimate what seems objectively impossible, based on the faith that God bestows. Only through this immense struggle with contradiction can one assume an authentic Christian faith.

ii. Critique of Modern Philosophy

In his *Fragments* and *Postscript*, Climacus repeatedly criticizes the rationalistic systemization of faith he witnesses in surrounding contemporary Christianity, in order to define what he feels Christianity truly is. Noticeably, he begins his critique in the jesting titles of these works, for they are clearly "polemically directed toward the speculative philosophy of Hegel and even more specifically at the Danish followers of Hegel."[24] Hegel claimed to have formalized Christianity so that it was systematic, as a science. Thus, by titling his works "Unscientific," Climacus clearly intends to oppose Hegelian thought. Additionally, Climacus employs the word 'fragments,' which is equally offensive to the Hegelians as a non-scientific, commonplace word.

Climacus is opposed to Hegelianism because he sees it caught in contradiction, for it claims to follow traditional Christianity, but fails to believe in many of the traditional orthodox beliefs, such as the miracles of Jesus and his supremacy over man.[25] Additionally, it tries to systematize Christian faith, which Climacus sees as impossible. For, how can one systemize radical faith? It is not a science! Hegel sees Christianity as one step in an infinite system aimed at attaining truth through speculation, but for Hegel, Christianity is by no means the absolute realization of truth, it is only one step along the way, part of the dialectical system. For Climacus,

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[24] Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, 17.
[25] Ibid., 18-19.

> The paradox must be the historical event that is discontinuous with human experience and expectations. The surprising thing is that Christians have been bothered by the fact that Christianity contradicts immanent speculation and have even tried to alter their faith to make it more palatable—this is the heart of Climacus' polemic against modernism and liberalism in theology.[26]

Climacus speaks to Hegelian philosophy, which has assimilated Christianity as a fact, and thus, taken the great mystery out of the faith based on unexplainable history.[27] It has removed the divine mystery of Christianity to fit it into a system of immanent, speculative truth. Clearly, the Christianity that Climacus advocates could not fall into any system, but it something wholly unique to each person, and something only found in the through subjectivity. Climacus writes, "The difference is simply that science and scholarship want to teach that becoming objective is the way, whereas Christianity teaches that the way is to become subjective, that is, truly to become the subject."[28] According to Climacus, the Hegelians' perversion of Christianity is an utterly incorrect representation of Christian faith, and thus, not true Christianity at all. Moreover, for Climacus, Hegel's speculative Christianity is "subjectively false." It does not involve passionate conviction of objective uncertainty; in fact, it involves no passion at all. Hegel's systemization of Christianity lacks what Climacus sees as the very core of Christianity, the element of overwhelming passion that leads to decision that in turn gives Christianity it's meaning. For, the essence of Christianity for Climacus involves this subjective choice to take a leap of faith.

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[26] Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, 249.
[27] Ibid., 262.
[28] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 131.

iii. Critique of Affluent, Comfortable Christianity

In the *Fragments*, Climacus depicts contrasts two generations of disciples of Christ: "the first [Christ's contemporaries] and latest generations of "secondary disciples" [Christians today or perhaps in Climacus' time]."[29] His story does not oppose those who try to disprove Christianity, for he sees value in their sentiments of offense. By taking offense, these critics are evoking passion, and simultaneously participating in one part of the paradox. For only by taking offense to the unlikelihood of Christianity and the absurdity of believing in it can one have the feelings of deficiency and humility required to be in the position to accept faith, to embrace the divine paradox. Once one recognizes his own human finitude and incapacity to understand the divine paradox, he at the same time is on the brink of paradoxical faith. Thus, this critical offense is valuable, not threatening.

Instead, Climacus contests those that try to "naturalize" faith by making it into something innate, something that one can be born with.[30] Evans writes, "Clearly, Climacus has in mind here the idea that someone born in a Christian land might simply possess faith automatically."[31] This is the general contention of "Christendom," of which Climacus is so adamantly opposed. Evans continues, "The notion that faith might become naturalized in this way is the ultimate in lunacy, according to Climacus, since it amounts to the claim that one can be born with one's second nature."[32] By this, Evans means that Climacus is opposed to this idea of naturalized Christianity because it fails to

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[29] C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's* Philosophical Fragments (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 144.
[30] Ibid., 146.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

involve any radical experience, any divine encounter, any second birth. Climacus says that being born with faith "is just as plausible as being born twenty-four years old."[33] In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus notes too, "Christianity cannot be poured into a child, because it always holds true that every human being grasps only what he has use for, and the child has no decisive use for Christianity."[34] In his book, *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith*, George Pattison cites Kierkegaard's critical view of these affluent Christians as follows:

> Bourgeois religiosity, he declares, is a religion of the lips and not the heart. 'The bourgeois' love of God commences when the vegetative life is in full swing, when the hands are comfortably folded over the stomach, when the head is reclining on a soft, easy chair, and when a drowsy glance is raised toward the ceiling, toward higher things.[35]

Pattison makes it clear that Kierkegaard was undoubtedly disillusioned with the relaxed, comfortable state of Christianity that no longer involved a treacherous leap, or confrontation with the contradiction of the absolute paradox.

The bourgeoisie's so-called "Christianity" had become too easy and accordingly, too empty. Kierkegaard did not accept this as true Christianity; he saw this rather as 'levelling.'

> "Levelling" is a process, which not only levels off the distinctions between ranks and offices within society but also affects man's capacity for authentic subjectivity. Real passionate selfhood, Kierkegaard believes, depends on tensions engendered by dynamic contradictions and oppositions within experience—the sort of tensions, which inspire tragic conflict and make demands on human greatness. In the world produced

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 590.
[35] George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith* (Melksham, Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press, 1997) 17.

> by leveling, however, all the vital contradictions become ironed out and life becomes 'one-dimensional'.[36]

For Kierkegaard, the struggles involved in experiencing and living out Christianity are fundamental. One cannot say he is a Christian if he has not confronted the absolute paradox for himself.

> Kierkegaard fears the advent of the world in which there will be a terrifying surplus of theory over practice, in which more energy will be spent on understanding life than living it, and in which the institutionalized organization of ways of satisfying human needs will drown out the real subjective sense of what is actually needful as life is reduced to a 'shadow existence'.[37]

Again, Climacus distinguishes his idea of true Christianity from the general conception of Christianity, which he feels has become too comfortable, and has lost its radicalness, and thus, its validity. Climacus calls for "Honesty rather than half measures."[38]

iv. How Kierkegaard Affirms Christianity

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard speaks in his own name and existentially affirms the Christian faith that Climacus has only alluded to from an outsider's perspective. He engages in an extensive discussion of what it is to live by faith, and thus, what it is to be employed in works of love, allowing God to work through oneself to manifest love. He shows what it is to affirm true Christian faith, trying to set an example of what it actually is, after having set it apart from the contemporary distortions of it. Kierkegaard states,

> As Christianity's glad proclamation is contained in the doctrine about man's kinship with God, so its task is man's likeness to God. But God is

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[36] Ibid., 18.
[37] Pattison, 18-19.
[38] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 588.

> love; therefore we can resemble God only in loving, just as, according to the apostle's words, we can only "be God's co-workers—in love." [39]

Thus, Kierkegaard believes Christianity is more than a stale belief, as many in Christendom have allowed it to become; rather, it is a conviction that causes one to spring forth into action. He believes that authentic Christian belief could never leave one inactive; it involves an essential doing, which is never a simple task. He writes, "But if your ultimate and highest purpose is to have life made easy and sociable, then never have anything to do with Christianity."[40]

Kierkegaard believes that Christian faith held fast is life transforming. It enables the Christian to do things that he could not or would not do on his own. It involves an inner change in the conscience that manifests itself outwards through love. This love is an overwhelming love in which God empowers one to love all those one sees. It is not a natural instinct for humans, but something made possible through union with God, and accordingly, it is a transformation to the likeness of God as one tries to embody his qualities. In this way, a Christian is called to love all those he sees, for as Kierkegaard informs us, "We men want to look upward in order to look for the perfect object (but the direction is always towards the unseen), but in Christ perfection looked down to earth and loved the person it saw."[41] Just as God loves us, even coated in our stench of sin, we too are called to love others without bias or prejudice, and to do this through God.

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[39] Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 74.
[40] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 127.
[41] Ibid., 170.

In addition, this love, authorized by God, "builds up."[42] It is an empowering force that encourages edification in the name of love. Love is the foundation and the only true vehicle for "up-building." As Kierkegaard insists "All such building up in knowledge, in insight, in expertness, in rectitude, etc., insofar as it does not build up love, is not in the deepest sense up-building."[43] Only in building up in love is one truly achieving "up-building." This kind of love provides a sort of immunity from things that might tear one down, and the strength to flourish.

Most important of all in faith, is the idea of one's personal love for God and relationship thereof, as this directs the love flowing in all other directions. Kierkegaard explains,

> The matter is very simple. Christianity has abandoned the Jewish like-for-like: "An eye for any eye, a tooth for a tooth"; bit it has established the Christian, the eternal's like-for-like in its place. Christianity turns attention completely away from the external, turns it inward, makes your relationship to other human beings into a God-relationship… Christianly understood one has ultimately and essentially to do with God in everything…[44]

Thus, this inwardness with God becomes a part of everything and every relationship. It is an inward passion that reflects into all facets of life, as it is part of one's person. This is the subjective aspect of the God-relationship as it manifests in all parts of life, and is uniquely one's own, as it is a personal relationship with God. Moreover, it is not something limited to one section of one's life; it overflows into all parts of one's being. Thus, this inward passion that is the God-relationship is also essentially one's spirit, as the inwardness reflects outward into all things.

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[42] Ibid., 202.
[43] Ibid., 205.
[44] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 405.

Kierkegaard describes love as a "revolution, the most profound of all but the most blessed."[45] Love is life fulfilling for Kierkegaard as it empowers and overcomes, and most importantly, as it is life's final purpose. Through his model of love, Kierkegaard proclaims what Christianity truly involves in what he believes is its truest sense, differentiating it from all the falsifications that he finds in "Christendom" (as expressed by Climacus in the two prior sections).

III. Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity

Almost Kierkegaard's contemporary, Nietzsche can identify with Kierkegaard's sense of disillusionment with Christendom, as well as with modern philosophy. He describes this shortcoming with religion in *Beyond Good and Evil*, writing, "Has it ever been really noted to what extent a genuinely religious life requires a leisure class, or half-leisure—I mean leisure with a good conscience."[46] Here, he is referring to what he finds to be the "nausea" that has become religion. He follows this describing his contemporaries as follows, "They are not enemies of religious customs when participation in such customs is required in certain cases, by the state, for example, they do what is required, as one does many things—with a patient and modest seriousness and without much curiosity."[47] Nietzsche feels Christianity has become a mere custom or tradition for his contemporaries, but has lost its religious significance and the "why" behind it. However, while Kierkegaard still values Christianity and attempts to tear away the idiosyncrasies of "Christendom" and return to a more authentic Christianity,

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[45] Ibid., 208
[46] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1966) 69.
[47] Ibid., 69-70.

Nietzsche sees it as irredeemable. Simon May presents Nietzsche's argument against Christianity in *Nietzsche's Ethics and his War on Morality*, writing, "[Christianity] engenders weakness, degradation, and despair—and its claim to foster love, light, and life is simply *false*."[48] Nietzsche instead calls for an elimination of Christianity, a sort of cycling out. He calls for an antichrist to save the world from Christians' degradation of it, for a nihilistic denial of all previous beliefs, a new start.

For Nietzsche, Christianity represents a denial of man's "natural instincts, which are directed towards strength."[49] Kellenberger makes this point with a citation from Nietzsche's *Antichrist*:

> Whatever a theologian feels to be true *must* be false: this is almost a criterion of truth. His most basic instinct of self-preservation forbids him to respect reality at any point or even to let it get a word in. Wherever the theologians' instinct extends *value judgments* have been stood on their heads and the concepts of 'true' and 'false' are of necessity reversed: whatever is most harmful to life is called 'true'; whatever elevates it, enhances, affirms, justifies it, and makes it triumphant, is called 'false'.[50]

Nietzsche feels that Christianity's basic regulation, the "ascetic ideal" denies one's natural capacity to be stronger, better, and more powerful, precisely the capacities which Nietzsche most values. He writes,

> The ascetic life treats life as a wrong road…For an ascetic life is a self-contradiction: here rules a *ressentiment* without equal, that of an insatiable instinct and power-will that wants to become master not over something in life but over life itself, over its most profound, powerful, and basic conditions; here an attempt is made to employ force to block up the wells of force; here physiological well-being itself is view askance, and especially the outward expression of this well-being, beauty and joy; while pleasure is felt and *sought* in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance,

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[48] Simon May, *Nietzsche's Ethics and his War on 'Morality'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 39.
[49] J. Kellenberger, *Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: Faith and Eternal Acceptance* (Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997) 61.
[50] Ibid.

> ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice.[51]

Nietzsche cannot fathom what he sees as Christianity's reversal of the valuation of 'good' and 'bad.' As he sees it, it should be good to do those things, which one is naturally compelled to do. Why would one refrain from natural inclinations, continually going against one's instincts? Why should one go against nature? Nietzsche describes this poor state of Christendom, ruled by the ascetic ideal, and calls for a rejection of it, writing,

> We can no longer conceal from ourselves *what* is expressed by all that willing which has taken its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself—all this means—let us dare to grasp it—*a will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life.[52]

Nietzsche disdains this repression of what he feels to be the true self, one's true nature. He wants to obliterate this false impression of good and bad, to start anew with a revaluation.

Nietzsche also proclaims the weakness that Christianity promotes by calling it the "religion of *pity*."[53] He writes, "What is to be feared, what has a more calamitous effect than any other calamity, is that man should inspire not profound fear but profound *nausea*; also not great fear but great *pity*."[54] He believes that this pity, promoted by

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[51] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1967) 118.
[52] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 162-3
[53] Kellenberger, 63-4..
[54] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 122-3.

Christianity, only inspires further weakness in the weak.[55] It comforts the weak in their dismal situations and encourages them to remain there, not aspiring to greater feats. It also debilitates those who feel pity for the weak; causing them to sympathize with the weak, and therefore, not be the strong forces they could otherwise be, independent of the weak, without carrying their burdens. Nietzsche emphasizes this fatal drawback of Christianity, the need to congregate as a community of believers, caring for each other. He writes,

> When one looks for the beginnings of Christianity in the Roman world, one finds associations for mutual aid, associations for the poor, for the sick, for burial, evolved among the lowest strata of society, in which this major remedy for depression, petty pleasure produced by mutual helpfulness, was consciously employed…wherever there are herds, it is the instinct of weakness that has willed the herd and the prudence of the priest that has organized it…the strong are naturally inclined to *separate* as the weak are to *congregate*.[56]

He believes community is a further fault of Christianity rather than a benefit, as a Christian might believe. It does not promote one's own greatness, but concerns itself with the good of other Christians, and thus lessens itself and its capabilities by doing so. He believes the strong should be independent forces, seeking personal fulfillment, not concerned with the weak. He writes, "A human being who strives for something great considers everyone he meets on his way either as a means or as a delay and obstacle."[57] Nietzsche's prototypical man has no need for intimate community with others.

Additionally, Nietzsche equates Christianity with a sort of slave or herd morality, which is comprised essentially of the "violated, oppressed, suffering, [and] unfree."[58]

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[55] Kellenberger, 64.
[56] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 165-6.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 207.

This type includes those that are submissive, yielding to the commands of the ascetic priest, and failing to "ascribe value" to themselves; rather, in weakness, they succumb to their priestly superior. In following the direction of their priest, Christians allow the priest to ascribe value to them personally, and to establish the guidelines of the "good" and the "bad" which they are to mind.[59] Instead of taking it upon himself as the Nietzschean man would do, creating his own values, the obedient Christian submits to the values of the priest and thus, to his prescribed way of life. He surrenders to a slave-like existence where the master priest dictates his existence. Thus, overall it seems that Nietzsche's aversion to Christianity in this case stems from its weariness, its lack of value-creation, its suppression of animal instincts, and its overall vulnerability to slavishness. He cannot accept this faith because he feels it is an unhealthy limitation, one that goes against the essential drive of life.

IV. Kierkegaard's Response

In response to Nietzsche, I expect that Kierkegaard would be somewhat sympathetic to his critique. I think he would understand how the modern world's portrayal of Christianity could lead to Nietzsche's atheism, and I think he could also accept Nietzsche's characterization of Christianity to some extent. However, I think he would insist that Nietzsche threw in the towel too quickly, that he acted rashly, giving in to what Kierkegaard would view as a form of defiance, described by Anti-Climacus in *Sickness Unto Death* as "despair as will to be oneself."[60] In "The Definition of the Self and the

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[59] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 209.
[60] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Ed. and Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985) 67.

Structure of Kierkegaard's Work," John Glenn describes this analysis of despair as a "prophetic critique of the atheistic existentialism of thinkers such as Nietzsche…"[61] Rather than facing the struggle with faith that Kierkegaard no doubt admits it will include, Nietzsche instead gives into despair in which he aims to be the "master" of himself or to "create" himself, "to make his self into the self he wants to be."[62] Nietzsche turns away from Christianity, wishing for its obliteration, desiring instead to create his own values or, as Kierkegaard predicts in this form of despair, wanting "to compose his self by means of being the infinite form," wanting to become his own god.[63]

Through his analysis of despair, Kierkegaard shows the "insufficiency of an unaided self-relation, that the self alone is unable to put its existence aright, that this can be done only through a right relation to God," and thus, without this right relation one is doomed for despair.[64] Glenn explains what exactly Anti-Climacus means by despair in *Sickness Unto Death*:

> *Despair*…is a malady affecting all the dimensions of the self. It is a failure to *will* to be the self one truly is—in other words, a deficient self-relation—which involves also an imbalance among the components of the self as synthesis and a deficient God-relation. The *health* of the self—which he eventually identifies as *faith*—is an affirmation by the self of itself (that is, a positive self-relation), in which the components of the self as synthesis are in right relation, and the self is properly related to its divine foundation. It is a state in which "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."[65]

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[61] Robert L. Perkins, Editor, *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness unto Death* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987) 12.
[62] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 68.
[63] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 68.
[64] Perkins, 12.
[65] Ibid., 5-6.

Thus, despair is without the transient quality we might assume it to have today. It is a sickness at the core of the self that prevents one's full realization of the self, a realization that must transpire before God. Hence, it is on this basis that Kierkegaard would defend Christianity against Nietzsche's contention that it is conducive to slave morality. For clearly Kierkegaard sees Christianity not as a restrictive or slave-like existence, but rather as a liberating and fulfilling way of life, the only way to free oneself from the despair that results without Christianity.

While I think Kierkegaard would immediately sense this form of despair in Nietzsche, I think he could go further than diagnosing Nietzsche's despair in his response to Nietzsche; because for Kierkegaard, Christianity does not involve the aversion to life that Nietzsche criticizes. Rather (as indicated above), for Kierkegaard, Christianity is the completion of life. It is the only thing that can bring true fulfillment. Kierkegaard takes into consideration the rejection of Christianity as life-negating, but reasons beyond it. He writes,

> There is so much talk about being offended by Christianity because it is so dark and gloomy, offended because it is so rigorous, etc., but it would be best of all to explain for once that the real reason that men are offended by Christianity is that it is too high, because its goal is not man's goal, because it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought.[66]

This passage removes the Nietzschean sense of asceticism, weariness, or deprivation from Christianity and emphasizes instead its immense capabilities.

For Kierkegaard, Christianity is not primarily concerned with the burdens of the ascetic ideal or the suppression of one's animal instincts. While ascetic practices may

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[66] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 83.

come as disciplines of faith, and thus, as enhancements of faith, Kierkegaard's focus is rather on the exciting, stimulating, fulfilling part of Christian faith—the absolute paradox. For Kierkegaard, Christianity implies a communion with God, an intimate relationship beyond comparison with any other. It involves not a weakness, but a strength, the greatest possible strength, one attainable only through union with God. As Anti-Climacus explains,

> A self directly before Christ is a self intensified by the inordinate concession from God, intensified by the inordinate accent that falls upon it because God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer, and die also for the sake of this self…the greater the conception of God, the more self; so…the greater conception of Christ the more self. Qualitatively a self is what its criterion is. That Christ is the criterion is the expression, attested by God, for the staggering reality that a self has, for only in Christ is it true that God is man's goal and criterion.[67]

One's union with God provides his greatest power, the power to love and to be involved in a God-relationship. For what could be more potent than union with the ultimate being? Thus, it is on this point that Kierkegaard would censure Nietzsche's contention that Christianity lacks value-creation; because while Nietzsche seeks to be his own value-creator, the values he creates could never be comparable with the godly values that stem from a God-relationship. This unity with God inspires far superior values than those that one could generate on his own. While Nietzsche believes that man's greatest fulfillment is in the fully realized self, Kierkegaard feels Nietzsche is foundering, resisting the ultimate fulfillment, possible only through a God-relation. As Glenn concludes, "only thus, by virtue of relating to God in faith, can the self exist as both finite and infinite, both involved in and transcending the world."[68]

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[67] Ibid., 113-14.
[68] Perkins, 20.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, I think Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors are successful in their defense of Christianity. It is perhaps quite convenient that Kierkegaard "prophetically" considered a character like Nietzsche in developing his philosophy. Nietzsche rests his claim that Christianity is life-negating on the superficialities of the ascetic ideal, which is clearly not a comprehensive assessment of Christianity from Kierkgaard's perspective.

Moreover, May, a Nietzschean scholar, even questions whether the ascetic ideal is "necessarily life-denying."[69] He gives three considerations for why the ascetic ideal might instead be "life-enhancing:"

> First, the Judaeo-Christian conceit that man participates in, and so must try to perfect his 'imitation', or expression, of the divine essence and, moreover, is God's viceroy of nature, may be highly empowering beliefs, inducing men and women to feats of imagination and effort for which they might otherwise lack the courage—or even the conception.[70]

Like Kierkegaard, May recognizes the sustenance that Christianity provides its believers, by endowing them with an ultimate goal for which to strive, in communion with the ultimate being. This divine aspiration could only be seen as life-enhancing, as one is inclined to be godly. Additionally May suggests, "The idea that life 'on earth' is merely a means to approaching the divine can also be interpreted to make life-enhancement, in just Nietzsche's sense, a *duty* to God, a way of honouring and knowing his creation."[71] Hence, Christianity instills value and purpose in life, giving Christians something to strive for as they try to live a godly life. While Nietzsche suggests that Christianity manifests itself only in a slave-like existence, May argues that Christianity instead gives

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[69] May, 94.
[70] Ibid., 95.
[71] Ibid.

meaning to life and value to living life to the fullest. Finally, May offers an "empirical" consideration, writing,

> As a matter of historical fact, the very European civilization that Nietzsche considers to be dedicated to the ascetic ideal and so to a '*will to nothingness*' has been culturally one of the richest in world history—a simple fact with which his account of the calamity and ubiquity of the ascetic idea appears inconsistent.[72]

May offers this pragmatic proof to finalize his argument that the ascetic ideal is not necessarily life-denying. He expands on this, writing, "Nietzsche's avoidance of these basic points is reflected in his assertion that a great life-enhancer, like Raphael, even if he professes Christianity, cannot *really* be a Christian…Thus he claims that 'Raphael said Yes, Raphael *did* Yes; consequently Raphael was no Christian.'"[73]

Clearly, Nietzsche could simply not allow Christianity the honor of responsibility for the richness of being, which he felt people like Raphael possessed. He could not reconcile the ascetic ideal with life-enhancement; he could not reconcile the absolute paradox. In failing to do so, he also failed to give Christianity a fair trial. He fell into a Kierkegaardian form of despair in which he willed to be his own god, which countered any aspirations to know the truth of another god, perhaps the Christian God. He was never able to see the life-enhancing qualities of Christianity that Kierkegaard so embraced.

For Kierkegaard, Christianity involves much more than Nietzsche includes in his critiques, in fact, Kierkegaard would kindly agree with most of Nietzsche's criticisms, but would further specify them as criticisms of what Kierkegaard thinks to be the misrepresentations of Christianity. Moreover, for Kierkegaard, Christianity involves all

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[72] May, 95.
[73] Ibid.

the excitement and passion that Nietzsche sees it as lacking. Kierkegaard would see Nietzsche as essentially giving up on the only thing that could have provided all that he was looking for in his quest for the "life-affirming." It seems the two were looking for quite similar things in their existential quests, but while Kierkegaard was able to unveil the realities of Christian faith in all its passion and strength, Nietzsche never seeped deep enough into the faith to find this for himself. Nietzsche consistently sneered at the counterfeit versions of Christianity that he witnessed in his day, but was unable to uncover the true essence of faith to experience the passion that Kierkegaard found there. It is remarkable that two such comparable philosophers on such similar quests could end up with two such divergent outcomes. Perhaps, Nietzsche surrendered too quickly to despair, pronouncing the death of God and seeking to be his own god, without looking around him long enough to see the staggering presence of God that Kierkegaard so steadfastly professed.

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