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Kierkegaard on the concept of authority

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Introduction

> Once upon a time, long ago, this was the way that people understood [faith]: they required of a man who would be a teacher of Christianity that his life too should furnish assurances for what he taught.
> *Attack on Christendom*

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard distinguishes the claims of Christianity from those of the sciences (including both empirical and speculative "sciences") by calling them 'subjective truths' or 'existence communications'.[1] He does not return to this distinction when he takes up the concept of authority in his book on Magister Adler, and yet nearly everything that he says about authority in that work (and in several other works, including *For Self-Examination* and *The Attack on Christendom*) presumes the same idea. Christian claims need to be authoritatively presented and obediently received, because, unlike other claims, they are not factual hypotheses but existence communications.

All of the beliefs that we describe as religious are not the same, of course. Yet those that Kierkegaard has in mind are the most *distinctively* religious, since they are explicitly set aside from others in the way that they are described – as inspired teachings, revelatory claims, dogmatic truths, etc. The distinguishing feature of these claims, according to Kierkegaard, is their essential relation to subjectivity. This means, for one thing, that they are logically immune from objective confirmation, so that they cannot be verified 'by the facts'. For another, it means that they cannot be affirmed without making a self-involving decision to abide by them. Assenting to them, in other words, entails an inward, dispositional response from the believer. This inward response is not simply an aspect of faith, as if it followed from a more basic affirmation of a belief's truth. The conformity of one's person with one's beliefs is what the affirmation of faith claim *means*, and there is no

way to isolate the dispositional aspects of believing from the belief's content as a truth claim. Consequently, affirming the truth of a religious claim and dwelling within it amount to the same thing, and the correlate of this is the outward presentation of the beliefs themselves as authoritative claims. To see why this is so is to understand the nature of faith.

As a result, Kierkegaard's approach to the subject of authority is inextricably tied to larger questions about the distinctive nature of religious claims. Rather than simply assuming that the authoritative representation of such claims refers to the means by which they are to be commended, his remarks on the subject point to deeper differences in the way that these issues are to be understood. Thus for example, he never attempts to show that authoritative appeals are reliable, as if the claims of Christianity might someday be *shown* to be true. As revelations, authoritative claims do not have the kind of content that permits demonstration (they have a paradoxical factor, as Kierkegaard puts it);[2] and so one cannot simply look at the world and see that they are true, nor can one confidently infer their truth from other things that can be immediately seen to be true. Nevertheless, the senselessness of trying to frame these beliefs as the subjects of possible demonstration is precisely what is forgotten when they are interpreted as beliefs which might turn out to be true.

Showing that an uncertain claim turns out to be true, after all, presumes an objective means of confirming it. External standards of one kind or another must be met for the claim to be validated. Yet Kierkegaard never supposes that the truths of faith might, even in principle, be assessed in such a fashion. It is not simply that they cannot be *empirically* verified; thinking that they might be shown to be true on abstract or philosophical grounds represents the same logical error in framing them for judgment. Thus, the authoritative presentation of a religious claim is not the same thing as a knowledgeable spokesperson's assurance that the claim is independently justifiable, since there is no possibility that the claims might be justified in that way. With many claims, of course, we *do* trust the judgment of experts because we lack the knowledge to assess the available evidence for ourselves. But the propositions that we accept on the basis of expert testimony are still subject to *someone's* assessment, and so logically, the issues at stake remain objectively adjudicable. Again, however, this is not the case in matters of faith. In faith, no one is an expert by virtue of learning or skill, and the appeal to religious authorities does not take the place of judgments that the rest of us are unqualified to make.

If such claims could be submitted to a telling means of appraisal, the appeal to authority would serve only as a temporary means of defending uncertain beliefs that in other circumstances might be objectively *known*. Yet matters of faith are *essentially* matters of personal judgment, and the way

in which the appeal to authority figures into their judgment is qualitatively different from the way in which evidence and rational argument figure into the justification of ordinary knowledge claims.

This last point is the logical insight that lies behind Kierkegaard's handling of the concept of authority. If religious claims in general, the revelatory claims in particular, are to be affirmed as truths, they must be personally commended and obediently received, not as objectively adjudicable hypotheses but as existence communications. That is why a *special* sort of authority figures into their defense, and why it is so important for us to see how this kind of authority differs from what we ordinarily take authoritative testimony to be.

I

Since the connection between Kierkegaard's concept of authority and the logic of religious claims is so important, we need to go over his remarks with some care. Suppose that we begin by distinguishing between three different aspects of authority: the authority of one who commends religious claims (the authority of a 'witness to the truth'), the authority of the claims themselves (the authority of a 'revealed teaching'), and the role of authority in judgment (the 'weightiness') of an authoritative appeal). These three aspects of authority are but differing perspectives in which the defense of religious claims might be understood. If one is interested in commending religious ideas, then one will focus on the question of what it takes to be an authoritative witness to dogmatic truths. If one is analyzing the judgments involved, one will focus on the question of what it means to think responsibly about them in an inward fashion. Whichever approach that one takes, however, one cannot avoid the points of logic that characterize the claims themselves. And so both of the last two questions ultimately presume a clear view of the grammar of religiously authoritative claims. That is the key point, and it lies behind everything that Kierkegaard says on the subject.

The authority of a spokesman. As I said, the authority possessed by a spokesperson (a 'genuine witness') to religious truth is not the same thing as the expertise of a specialist in one or another objective field of inquiry. The authority of a genuine witness to religious truth has nothing to do with the fact that he or she is in a position to judge religious claims on the basis of evidence that is not readily available or intelligible to the masses. It is a mistake, therefore, for clergymen to defend religious ideas by saying that these teachings deserve to be believed because of their excellent rationale, their philosophical superiority, their grounding in evidence, etc. To keep judgment on the correct

track, they must simply pass along a message that commands obedience, rather like a messenger who has a letter from a king.[3]

This last analogy is quite suggestive. The content of a message that a royal messenger delivers bears an implicit prefix: 'thou shalt heed this message as a commandment'. This deflects attention from the objective content of the claim, focusing attention instead on the recipient's response to the command. Indeed, it would be impertinent to judge the message as if the king's command were not enough to transform issue into a question of obedience. To reserve the content of the message for one's own judgment would suspend the king's command and make the king himself stand and wait while the issue at stake is submitted to a higher court of appeal.[4]

Yet as long as the claim at issue *admits* the possibility of being evaluated on independent or objective grounds, what alternative is there? Logically, the king *must* stand and wait because the determination of truth cannot be compelled. For can the king oblige me to believe something that I know is false on objective grounds? Surely not. At most he might oblige me to act as if I believed. But he cannot command my *mental* assent to a proposition whose truth or falsity does not rest on my say-so but on objective measures. Where issues of *that* sort are at stake, there can be no higher authority than the grounds on which truth claims are to be logically decided.

Thus, it cannot be stressed too often that the sort of claims that might be authoritatively command are *not* the kind of claims which are in principle objectively adjudicable. Instead of thinking of religious claims as objective hypotheses, then, it makes better sense to think of them as prescriptive injunctions. That way the analogy with the king makes perfect sense: his subjects have the responsibility to obey his commands, and that is the end of the matter. The descriptive content of the king's claims drops out of focus altogether, since it is not the role of prescriptive commands to describe the world but to enjoin behavior.

I think that Kierkegaard would accept the implication that there is something prescriptive about religious claims, inasmuch as their acceptance clearly involves the acceptance of their regulatory role. Certainly, he refuses to concentrate on the descriptive content of religious claims, as if they had a descriptive content that might be distinguished and isolated for objective judgment. This is the theme of his most explicit treatment of religious authority in his book on Magister Adler, known to us as *Authority and Revelation*.[5] There he discusses the case of a clergyman, Adler, who claimed a divine revelation that stood outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity. Kierkegaard thought that Adler betrayed the nature of this claim in seeking support for his views as speculative *proposals* rather than by confidently resting in them as authoritative truths. He should, that is, have *recognized* their authority,

obeying their implications as regulative ideas without trying to refocus them as questions to be determined in the court of public approval. A revelation obviates the need for all of that because the claims at issue – revelatory claims – function regulatively as truths to live by.[6] Only hypotheses need to be made attractive or plausible by objective standards, whereas the attempt at demonstration is otiose if teachings have the authority, and *character*, of a revelation.[7]

Yet when Adler was called before a commission of the Lutheran church to explain his revelations, he did not respond as one who had chosen to live according to his divine call; instead, he asked for time to refine his views and to express them in a more congenial, intellectually acceptable, form.[8] This transformed the character of his claims, since the divine 'thou shalt' that accompanies any revelation dropped out of consideration. To acknowledge their character as revelations, *he should have resided in them, expressing in his person the changed disposition which faithfulness requires*. Then *his own obedient example* would have effectively transmitted the authority by which he was, supposedly, called.

Here there is little if any difference between a revelatory belief and a teaching which must be authoritatively represented by being personally instantiated. Instantiating such beliefs, filling them out with one's life, means giving them the prescriptive force of personally held convictions. That is a way of saying, in effect, "This belief is a matter of principle with me and I live under its guidance. In commending it to you, I am charging you to examine yourselves in its light." Couching one's commitments in that way more nearly captures what it means to say that authoritative or revelatory claims are *faith claims*, since it brings forward the indwelling form of acceptance demanded by the beliefs at issue. For again, when authoritative teachings are at issue, the escape into impersonal means of judgment is logically cut off. Then the would-be believer has no choice but to do something in response: to believe or not, and by believing, to comply with the regulatory or guiding force of revealed doctrines.

Adler's fault was that he committed a category mistake by confusing the faith claims at issue with means of judgment belonging to other assertions. If his claims were indeed revealed doctrines, then they could not, even in principle, be confirmed abstractly or empirically on external grounds. Such teachings can only be sustained as teachings that require decisiveness in their affirmation, obedience to authority in their acceptance, and the inward transformation of selfhood that shows what it means to abide in faith.

That is why Kierkegaard was much more interested in clarifying the conceptual category to which authoritative claims belong than he was in offering a defense of their epistemological foundations. He ignored the standard

assumptions about rationality and good judgment because he realized that there are qualitative differences in what the affirmation of religious truth requires. As authoritative claims, religious assertions belong to another path of judgment, marked by the fact that all who would believe in them must abide by them. That abiding is the distinctive *mode* of religious affirmation, and it is appropriate to the distinctive *kind* of judgments involved.

Inevitably, I have wandered back into the discussion of the logic of authoritative claims here, rather than sticking to the qualifications that religious authorities must exhibit. This cannot be helped, since the logic of the matter explains why the exemplification of religious claims by witnesses to their truth – apostles, saints, wise men, etc. – forms an essential part of faith's defense. Religion without such personal witnessing can scarcely be imagined. Religions need authoritative representatives, not simply for institutional reasons, but to show how one is to comply with the regulative force of religious ideas. Indeed, there are actually two kinds of authority at work in most religions: one kind is attached to the *office* of those who are institutionally appointed to speak of behalf of religion, and the other is attached to the *logic* of the teachings themselves. Kierkegaard's criticism of Adler had everything to do with the fact that those who are institutionally assigned authority do not always speak with the authority required by revelatory claims. As church officials, clergymen like Adler may make an outward show of faithfulness by preaching, posturing, administering the sacraments, and so on. All too frequently, however, they lack the genuine authority of apostolic witnesses, which comes from heartfelt compliance with the regulatory role of religious ideas. By complying with this aspect of belief, faith's representatives would speak authoritatively in the sense demanded by the beliefs involved, for they would then instantiate in themselves the force of these beliefs and beckon others by their example.

Ultimately, of course, all believers must look to the original apostles who first brought faith into the world. Following in their footsteps, subsequent believers must suffer and die to the world, just as the apostles did, bearing the marks of faith in the new form of life that their belief expresses. No metaphysical explanation of the apostles' power to speak the truth is involved here. Apostolic witnesses do not have any special powers of intuition, or for epistemically knowing the mind of God. The kind of knowing which they represent has more to do with the fullness of life than it does with the extent of their factual or metaphysical knowledge. Consequently, their authority is not epistemologically warranted, as if it were expert testimony. Instead, their speaking carries authority because it witnesses beliefs by commending, representing, and posing them anew with the force of their own examples.[9]

In comparing Kierkegaard's conception of authority with other conceptions, then, we can summarize by saying that some people are authorities because they are experts in various specialized areas of judgment. Others are authorities because they have a charismatic appeal and naturally full leadership roles and decision-making positions. Still others are authorities because they have been institutionally selected to occupy such positions. In this latter case, the role of authority figures is usually enhanced by some kind of sanctioning power, which in turned is bolstered by ideological or mythical exaggerations of the office or the office holder. But in any case, most people accept the authority of such leaders because they realize the advantages of having one person make decisions for a group, or because they recognize the expertise of authority figures, or because they are impressed by a leader's charismatic presence. Yet these examples have little or nothing to do with *apostolic* authority. According to Kierkegaard, they represent only *immanent* or *worldly* authority, as they have in common the fact that authority is attached accidentally to individuals rather than being essentially related to the issue that require an authoritative representation.[10]

And so it is with every worldly authority: here there need be no essential tie between authorities and the logic that governs the claims that they commend, just as there is no connection between a messenger and the royal message that he bears. If it should happen that worldly authorities commend beliefs that turn out to be false, their authority is compromised, since most of the matters under their authority obey a logic disconnected to the necessity of being witnessed by their example. That, though, cannot happen with apostolic authority. Here there *is* a connection between authoritative witness and the logic of the existence communications that they exemplify.

The authority of the claims themselves. Because there is this connection between authority and religious claims, Kierkegaard might be read as if his remarks on the subject of authority were really remarks on the logic of the beliefs at issue. Affirming an authoritative or revealed claim entails an alteration in those who believe, a *metabasis in allo geno*, as Kierkegaard called it. And this *metabasis*, being an essential part of the judgment which is proper to such claims, belongs to the logic that defines them. It involves an alteration, not so much in one's outward behavior as in the *way* that one thinks – in self-appraisals, in the weight which one gives to life's difficulties, in one's conception of what is truly important about human existence, etc.[11] In Christianity, the affirmations of faith logically entail living in the trusting confidence that life's anxieties might be quieted by divine grace. But the same point applies to the guiding claims of religion generally: there simply is no such thing as believing in these claims which is not at the same time a

matter of abiding in them. This cannot be said too often. Religious knowing is altogether unlike other ways of knowing because of the extensive personal side of recognizing its truths. Affirming such truths means dwelling in them, living them out in the dispositional heart of one's inwardness, and ideally, of representing them in the changed contours of one's selfhood. Outside of this, there is no such thing as the discovery of religious truth.

As Kierkegaard put it, religious claims are characterized by the way in which they are appropriated. To understand these beliefs, therefore, one needs to know more than what they are about: one needs to understand the dispositional changes that their acceptance entails.[12] We are used to thinking that the content of a belief is simply a matter of knowing what it says descriptively about the world, as if this were independent of any attitudinal changes in those who believe. That makes us think that the truth of such claims depends solely on the accuracy of the factual descriptions that they entail, and further, that we must have some epistemological access to these facts if we are to determine the truth value of the claims involved. Kierkegaard does not deny that these assumptions are true of many truth claims, but he denies that they are true of all. The exceptions are subjective truths whose content cannot be appreciated apart from the changes that turn on their acceptance and on the new 'seeing' that they promise. What such claims say about the world belongs to the *meta-basis* that they entail, so one must understand this regulative, life-changing, aspect of faith in order to grasp what the beliefs are about. To put the point in another way, one must share the context (inwardness) that illumines their meaning by bringing out the force of their regulative intent. Otherwise the issues at stake will not be properly recognized in the way that such claims are submitted to judgment. For again, the understanding that is involved in drawing their content into focus is utterly unlike that which is involved in the recognition of descriptive truths, which have no immediate connection with the form of our thinking or living. This is neither irrationalism nor subjectivism. It is a grammatical attempt to relocate religious claims within an arena of judgment that properly applies to them.

To take one striking example, Kierkegaard says that eternal life is not an objective something whose existence might be impersonally established. Rather, it consists of the way in which it is acquired.[13] What does this mean? If eternal life consists of the way in which it is acquired, then there can be no such thing as deliberating about the truth or falsity of the matter on grounds which are not self-involving. All such attempts make the issue rest on external grounds of judgment rather than on the *mode* (the 'way') of personal appropriation. If, however, eternal life is realized by conforming to its promise, then one must appropriate belief in the way that an authoritative belief requires – that is, by resting in its promise by abiding by its life-changing force. Thus,

from Kierkegaard's point of view, there is nothing at all to be discovered when one goes looking for eternal life in the objective arena. One must look in the context of self-reflection in which truths *for me* are promised, since those are truths of the sort whose affirmation necessarily *changes me*.

All this confirms what I said earlier, that identifying a belief as an authoritative, revealed, or essentially religious truth serves as a means of distinguishing the *type* of belief that it is from other sorts of belief. Here the difference between religious truths and objective truths depends on the regulative force of the religious claims, which is that aspect of their logic through which the relevant changes in one's manner of thinking are brought about. So if religious claims are qualitatively distinct kinds of assertion, we should expect there to be a qualitatively different way of understanding and commending them. And there is – authoritative witnessing.

That is why those who are called to be authoritative witnesses to Christianity (or to any other religion in which there is any truth[14]) must not simply repeat the teachings with which they have been entrusted. To hold forth these teachings without exhibiting the changes that faith requires would be to assume that the truths at issue were matters of fact and to that extent independent of the changes through which they are held fast. A genuine witness to belief draws people toward an obedient reception of religious ideas by vouching for them in the only way that they permit; that is, by making his or her life exhibit the inward changes that belief entails. That is why those who suffer the change of heart that is essential to belief become authoritative witnesses to the truth of a religion.[15]

None of this, of course, guarantees the truthfulness of religious claims. Kierkegaard's analysis is not a backhanded way of arguing for such claims, since inferential grounds for belief can neither be found in inwardness nor in any other arena. To come away with that thought would be a confusion of the most ironic sort, for that kind of objective guarantee is precisely what one cannot have in matters of faith. These claims do not admit confirmation on *any* basis, so that their judgment cannot be turned over to anything other than personal commitment. *Finding* them to be true is not *finding out*; it is the same thing as judging them to be true, mentally, emotionally, and dispositionally.

Few, of course will complain about Kierkegaard's emphasis on the necessity of inward compliance with religious beliefs: that is what faithfulness is. But many will complain that the necessity of maintaining this compliance, prior to the judgment of a belief's truth, leads either to non-cognitivism or to fideism. To avoid these conclusions, it *seems* that we must be able to judge a belief *before* risking our compliance with it. This complaint, though, depends on the same misunderstanding that I have tried to clear up all along. For it assumes that there is a cognitive content of religious claims which might be

isolated for judgment independently of its implications about what it might mean to abide by these claims. On that view, whatever regulative or prescriptive force a religious belief might have as a principle must follow from the separable question of its factual truth. We tend to think, that is, that the behavioral implications of a belief are always grounded in the purely descriptive matter of its accuracy. And so we usually suppose that there are two levels in the logic of any belief: the first having to do with a claim's descriptive content and the second having to do with its behavioral implications. That is how it is, for example, when we say "Since it is wet outside, one would be well advised to put on galoshes before going out." Here the fact that it is wet outside suggests certain cautious responses from those who would brave the weather. Yet the facts about the weather can be known without considering any of the practical implications that follow from them. "Since there is a God, one would be well advised to avoid sinning." Here, too, we tend to think in the same way, as if the fact that there is a God can be established without having to consider the regulative force that is bound up in the claim. Assuming that the question of fact here is distinct from regulative implications makes it look as if authority in Kierkegaard's sense were attached only to the believer's behavior, whereas the underlying question of fact remains amenable to other determinants.

Again, however, Kierkegaard does not accept this assumption, since he refuses to allow the *sense* of portraying religious claims as if their behavioral implications followed from the more basic question of their truth. That is partly what he means when he distinguishes the authoritative claims of Christianity from objective issues: they have no *independent* descriptive content. There is, in other words, no objectively adjudicable matter of fact which is the necessary antecedent of their inward dispositional implications. Responding to these implications – and thus undergoing the *metabasis in allo geno* which faith entails – and judging these beliefs to be true are one and the same.

The role of authority in judgment. The decisiveness of personal appropriation, then, is the logically appropriate correlate to the fact that authoritative religious claims are not objective issues. Therefore Christianity urges only one pathway to faith: one must know the truth by becoming a 'doer of the word'.[16] One becomes a "doer of the word" by duplicating in one's own life the pattern illustrated in the lives of the apostles, who are authoritative examples for all subsequent Christians.[17] This duplication involves dying from one way of life (an aesthetic existence) and living to another (the new life of grace), and it includes the inner changes of self-understanding that accompany this death. This kind of death is essential to faith and to the new life that it brings.[18] And

so those who would believe as the apostles did must learn to suffer this loss, so that their lives show forth the new passions that faith requires.[19]

Interestingly enough, Kierkegaard points to this kind of death in the lives of genuine witnesses as a 'proof' for Christianity, implying that it is an appropriate factor in the judgment of authoritative claims.

> The courage of their [genuine witnesses'] faith makes an impression on the human race, and leads it to the following conclusion: What is thus able to inspire men to sacrifice everything, to venture life and blood, must be truth.

This is the proof which is adduced for Christianity.[20] What is it like to be faced with such witnesses (authorities)? Many observers are moved by the example of such witnesses, not simply because of the drama involved in their dying to the world (and not all are martyrs), but because of the inner resolve that such people exhibit in their beliefs. Genuine witnesses rest *themselves* in their beliefs, and by so doing they become new selves ('new beings'); and it is the impact of this self-confidence that leads others to re-examine themselves in the light of their teachings. For these witnesses appear to have found themselves, and the way that they have done so puts the issue of their faith into the proper context, where the regulative point of their ideas can be understood and appreciated. There is a kind of judgment to be exercised in this context, but Kierkegaard speaks tersely here because he does not want to countenance the epistemological discussion of rational judgment that one might normally expect. Once the issue is properly framed as an inward question of existential understanding, the search for argumentative warrants (evidence, rational grounds, etc.) gives way to reasons of another kind.

The reasoning that applies here resembles that which applies to any life-changing decision fraught with questions of self-understanding. "One must find oneself in one's choices. One needs to be able to live with one's commitments. One has to be honest with oneself, etc., etc." Sometimes a would-be believer is said to know already something that he or she is asked to believe. And this is because accepting these beliefs and finding oneself come to the same thing. Or at least, that is the promise. If this promise is fulfilled, one is led to say, "this teaching leads me home to myself; believing in it and being more settled as a person comes to the same thing." Being serious about such inward self-reflection represents another way of being reasonable about beliefs. The factors that contribute to seriousness here give one sobriety as a person,[21] inner depth, and spiritual maturity.

Thus, for example, if I am worrying over existential questions of self-understanding, it is not only relevant but necessary for me to feel the forcefulness of other people's example. As long as other people's self-

possession and peace of mind are products of the way that they understand themselves, their words will have a certain authority with respect to those ideas. They will have realized their own selfhood in response to the authoritative examples of others, and their example puts would-be believers in the same relationship to them. There is nothing irrational about the judgments framed in this subjective context. We must make judgments relevant to our own self-understanding just as we make them about other matters, and we would be blind without the guidance provided by the witness of those who have done the same. So when inward decisions of faith are needed, the reasons that grow out of this existential reflection make as much sense as reasons of the familiar sort (evidence, factual grounds, etc.) make in cases of objective judgment.

In fact, we could say that there are two kinds of reason here; one which consists of evidence in the usual sense, and the other of which consists of the *weight* of appreciation which is due to the self-transforming aspect of existence communications. Kierkegaard's authoritative claims lack evidence of the first sort because they are not objective claims. They are existence communications which, like governing principles of judgment, must be appreciated in terms of their power to transform one's whole manner of existence, especially the way in which one comes to oneself in self-understanding. Appreciating this power gives one a due sense of the weightiness of existence communications; and yet to appreciate them in this way, one must be moved by the importance of the context in which they apply. And that is why a person who grows more serious in self-reflection becomes more receptive to religious ideas, since that is the context in which religious claims receive their due as transformative judgments.

Seriousness on that score makes all the difference, for example, in appreciating the claim that all are sinful and fall short of the glory of God. This teaching is not so much an objective generalization as it is an expression to be applied to self-understanding, where it changes the perspective in which one assesses one's own worth. Yet to appreciate the weightiness of such a claim, one has to have travelled well down the road of self-examination. For those who lack the sobriety that comes with this, the claim that all people are sinful usually sounds like an unwarranted generalization, since the context which enables its appreciation is lacking. But for those in turmoil over their relationship to themselves, the claim seems more like a deep truth that clarifies their situation.

In sum, whether we call religious assertions subjective truths, existence communications, matters of inward appropriation, or simply faith claims makes relatively little difference as long as the extent of the distinctiveness in

their logic is clear. Religious claims must be witnessed in the lives of believers if their life-transforming consequences are to stand forth and be appreciated. Were it otherwise, one could believe without inhabiting the very forms of self-relatedness that is essential to the beliefs involved. Such believing ill-suits the logic of the issues because it violates the sense that religious judgments have as authoritative claims. One cannot have a religious significant commitment to such claims without undergoing the changes that faith requires.

II

Surely, though, religious claims must say something about the world. What else could it mean to say that religious claims are true, other than to affirm the accuracy of religious depictions of what is in fact the case? Since many intellectuals find it well-nigh impossible to imagine how religious claims can be true at all if they are not true of the world as it actually is, independent of our attitudes toward it, this question is undoubtedly the sticking point in the whole analysis. Those who feel this way – even those who are otherwise sympathetic to Kierkegaard – tend to think that his remarks about subjective judgment, decisiveness, etc., refer only to the *method* by which religious truths might be known. As for the claims themselves, they must be evaluated as descriptions whose accuracy is questionable. The only difference between them and other descriptive truths is the difficulty in coming to know them.

Thus, many read Kierkegaard as if he were simply proposing an inward test for the truth of religious descriptions. The evidence from such a test must remain private, being useful only for those who perform it. Yet the claims themselves remain objective descriptions on this view, and they remain subject in principle to experimental confirmation. Thus, someone who knows God in her heart is seen as being in possession of inner evidence that might convince others if only it could be made public. Unfortunately the inference that she has been able to make in her private world will not pass muster as objective evidence. Yet putting the matter in this way is a mistake. We are held captive by the picture that truth claims represent descriptions of possible facts and that it must be possible to check these representations against the world. Thus, we think that it might be possible somehow to check on religious conjectures through some kind of direct apprehension of the way that things stand, if not now, perhaps in an afterlife, where we will be able to know God as easily as we now perceive natural objects. Now we see in a glass darkly, so to speak, but eventually we shall see face to face (I Cor 13:12).[22] Or maybe religious descriptions might be checked through an examination of evidence, even if this evidence is difficult to gather, as Kierkegaard seems to imply.

I am suggesting that Kierkegaard rejects all of these approaches by denying that religious beliefs communicate descriptive claims. For the logical ideal that applies to every descriptive representation – that its truth might somehow be *shown* – does not apply to religious matters. Seeing, or being shown, the truth of religious claims belongs to a kind of judgment in which the recognition of the truth demands conformity with it; and yet that is not the case with descriptive claims. With descriptive claims, one can recognize the truth without undergoing any sort of existential reorientation. After bringing oneself into conformity with religious claims, however, can a person not describe things, or see them, from the changed standpoint of faith? Yes, of course; we often speak of people seeing new things from the perspective afforded by faith, but the seeing that is usually involved in this is not the kind of seeing that is involved in verifying factual descriptions. It is a discernment of a new order, and so too are the truths that it apprehends.[23]

To lose sight of such logical differences in types of truth – e.g., to accept the view that all truth claims must be factual descriptions that are subject to experiential confirmation – is to lose one's hold on the force of Kierkegaard's remarks. Thus, for example, Frederick Sontag in his introduction to *Authority and Revelation* portrays Kierkegaard as eventually withdrawing his insistence that Christianity requires no objective truths. Some Christian claims must refer to what is objectively the case if they are to count as truth claims at all; and that means, as Sontag seems to suggest, that they must lie open in principle to some means of knowing, even it remains an inward means. One of Kierkegaard's own comments seems to bear Sontag out.

> Christianity exists before any Christian exists, it must exist in order that one may become a Christian, it contains the determinant by which one may test whether one has become a Christian, it maintains its objective subsistence apart from all believers, while at the same time it is the inwardness of the believer.[24]

Quite so. Yet when Kierkegaard says that Christianity "maintains its objective subsistence apart from all believers," he is not implying that Christian claims are objective in the sense of being adjudicable as descriptive claims – that is, on the basis of information about the world which is given to us independently of our attitude in accepting it. What he is saying is only that these claims have a content that is appropriate to truth claims, not that they are descriptive truth claims to be tested in the manner of objective judgments of fact. Sontag might not have meant to imply that Kierkegaard thought that they could be; but to prevent misunderstanding on this point, it needs to be said that the sense in which religious beliefs have an objective determinant is a purely formal sense. Religious truths, one might say, belong to the general family of truths, none

of which is subjectively created by belief. Thinking that a religious claim is true does not make it true. That is all that Kierkegaard meant by "having an objective determinant" in this context. This says nothing about the means by which such objective truths might be known; and thus, while it is true that religious truths hold whether or not one believes in them, it is equally true that these beliefs cannot properly be tested – in any way – as objective descriptions. Revealed doctrines will never *turn out to be true or false* in the way that descriptions do, not because our means of verifying them are inadequate to the difficulties of investigating them, but because they do not have the *sense* of testable claims to begin with.

The crucial point is that Kierkegaard's remarks about objectivity in this passage do not suggest that there might be a means of knowing something that the apostles, *faut de mieux*, were forced to represent with the authority of their personal examples. The correct view is that there are two senses of the word 'objective' operating here. In one sense, the truth of religion is said to be objective if the truth involved does not exist merely in the mind of the beholder, like the truth of a subjective preferences (what is the most beautiful color, what is the most appealing drink, etc.), but exists prior to being recognized. In this sense, as Kierkegaard rightly observes, Christianity proposes objective truths. How else could believers grow into it, how could it force them to admit things that they would rather ignore, how could it serve as a measure of self-understanding, etc? Having this kind of objectivity, in other words, Christianity contains a "determinant by which one may test whether one has become a Christian." To affirm this kind of objectivity, however, is not to say that a religious truth is objectively adjudicable in the sense that we can rest its truth on independent, non-subjective, or evidential grounds of inference.

A claim which is objective in the sense of being allowed to rest on factors which are outside personal judgment is also objective in the former sense, since the 'facts' provide an external means of determining its truth value. The reverse, however, need not be the case. Propositions that have objective determinants need not be subject to any verifying tests. Most of these propositions involve a personal dimension in their judgment, a weighing and measuring which is not objective at all. That is why we call them 'matters of faith'; objective testing is inappropriate to their sense.

Ethical judgments, for example, involve questions of truth in a sense, and yet like religious beliefs, their judgment is typically quite unlike that which is involved in empirical confirmation. They too require the kind of appreciation that accrues through inward compliance with their regulative implications. Yet we still treat our ethical beliefs as truths. To commend them to others we say that their truth is objective because we want people to conform themselves

to principles which are already given and not called into being by anyone's whim or preference. Moreover, we know that ethical insight increases as one grows in one's understanding of ethical truth or ethical wisdom. Yet we cannot *show* the substance of this wisdom in the same way that we can show that various descriptive truths obtain. People must already share an ethical sense to see what we would like them to see. So we have to sharpen their moral sensibilities, to deepen their appreciation, to increase their ability to think particular issues within the same empathetic compass, etc. That is what it means for them to realize ethical truths.

In short, we have to command ethical truths in much the same way that we teach moral principles to our children. With children, we do not attempt to show that our beliefs are grounded in external or non-moral evidence; we try to exemplify the power that moral reasons have in our own thinking, so that they will appreciate the weightiness of our convictions. Even if our children were intellectually prepared for moral arguments, we would first have to teach them not only what moral principles to apply in their thinking, but more importantly, what it means to live according to these principles. At this basic level we have no choice: if we are to be morally persuasive, we must illustrate moral principles in the example of our own practice. The point, after all, is to guide others into the realization of ethical truths, where they inhabit a moral outlook by conforming themselves to it. For that purpose, we *must* witness our convictions in our own practice, hoping that the steadiness of our example will in due course have an edifying effect on the children we love.

This moral analogy is particularly apt since Kierkegaard put ethical and religious judgments into the same logical category. They are both existence communications and their affirmation requires an existential realization; in the terms I have been using, they are truths to live by, or principles with a regulative aspect to their sense. But in any case, ethics turns on the same sort of persuasion that applies in religion: the appeal to authority, the testimony of personal examples, the necessity of coming to see what it would mean to conform one's thinking to the principles at stake, the absurdity of coming to an ethical decision without making a change in one's evaluative attitudes, etc. All this is needed because getting someone to believe requires that person to inhabit the beliefs at issue.

Truths of a kind still hang in the balance, then, when ethical or religious principles are at stake; but we have to remind ourselves of how different these truths are. We need to recall how easily we speak of ethical truths, and how natural the allied concepts of moral insight, wisdom, and perception seem. The seeing involved in this sort of insight or perception is neither arbitrary nor obvious because it entails a *metabasis in allo geno*. Unlike the recogni-

tion of positive facts, one must learn to live in moral ways to appreciate this discernment.

The same can be said of the different order to which religious truths belong. Christianly understood, as Kierkegaard says, "the truth consists not in knowing the truth but in being the truth."[25] He says this about truth because of the transformed life to which the affirmation of religious claims leads. Since the necessity of this transformation is absolutely essential to belief, the concept of truth is reunderstood as a relation between a believer and a form of life rather than a relation between a descriptive proposition and a given state of affairs. Beliefs are still involved since truth claims are the keys to these transformations and to the new order of seeing and understanding that goes with them. The truths that they state, though, belong to this changed order.

So we need to be discriminating, then, when we speak of religious judgments of truth. Kierkegaard described religious beliefs as authoritative claims because they require subjective self-involvement as a condition for religious understanding and because they command obedience and inward compliance as the mode of their affirmation. Without these features of their logic, religious questions would lose their religious significance. Kierkegaard's struggle against the "monstrous illusion" that the affirmations of faith might be secured without inward compliance, that they can be appreciated without being subjectively understood, and that they can be commended without the personal authority of genuine witnesses, is but one further illustration of this, the central idea of his authorship.

Notes

1. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941). He describes religious beliefs as subjective truths in a well-known chapter of Part II (pp. 169–224). It is only later in the text, pp. 339f. and 497ff., that he speaks of existence communications.
2. *Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, published with *The Present Age*, trans. by Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 106. Here as elsewhere Kierkegaard uses the word 'revelation' interchangeably with the concept of a religiously authoritative claim.
3. "Just as a man, sent into the town with a letter, has nothing to do with its contents, but has only to deliver it; just as a minister who is sent to a foreign court is not responsible for the content of the message, but only have to convey it correctly: so, too, an Apostle has really only to be faithful in his service, and to carry out his task." *Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, published with *The Present Age*, p. 106.
4. *Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, p. 96.
5. *Authority and Revelation*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
6. *Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, pp. 93–96.
7. *Authority and Revelation*, p. 60.
8. *Authority and Revelation*, ch. III, esp. pp. 74–76.

9. See *The Attack on Christendom*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 271–272.
10. See *Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, pp. 97f. There Kierkegaard stresses the fact that the differences between those who are authorities in the worldly (or immanent) sense and those who lack such authority might eventually disappear, as must be imagined to be the case in heaven. The reason that it does not vanish in the case of apostolic authority, however, is that this kind of authority is essentially tied to the teachings that believers espouse, so that the claims at issue cannot be represented without being authoritatively witnessed.
11. Strictly speaking, the inward aspects of self-reflection are also reflected in one's outward behavior, but subtly so. Thus, people who believe in moral teachings must abide by their prescriptive aspect, and yet to count as moral believers, they need not always outwardly do what their duty requires. But they must inwardly feel guilty about their moral failures. The same is true of religion: one need not engage in outwardly recognized religious practices such as going to church, but to be a believer at all, one must think about oneself in a religious light. See below, section 2.
12. *Training in Christianity*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 201f.
13. *Attack on Christendom*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 100. The short tracts which make up this book are biting criticisms of the idea that one can be an authoritative spokesperson for Christianity – a genuine witness – without exhibiting the changed condition (the *metabsis*) which its teachings entail.
14. Kierkegaard refers in several places to the possibility that there might be truth in other religions. See the *Attack on Christendom*, p. 221.
15. Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasized the role of suffering in referring to one's religious conviction. See for example, *For Self-Examination*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), pp. 42–43, 88–89; *Attack on Christendom*, pp. 271–272. *For Self-Examination* is an extended discourse on biblical authority and the response to the bible as revealed teaching – i.e., as 'God's Word'.
16. James 1:22–27, used as the theme of Kierkegaard's first discourse in *For Self-Examination*.
17. This is why Kierkegaard tells us in *Authority and Revelation* that the acceptance of revealed teachings requires an 'existential realization' (p. 48). The point is the same. Such claims cannot be believed without *eo ipso* undergoing a transformation in one's selfhood, one's disposition, and one's outlook on life.
18. *Authority and Revelation*, pp. 38–40, 117–118; *For Self-Examination*, pp. 96f.
19. *For Self-Examination*, p. 36.
20. Ibid.
21. Sobriety, as a condition of good judgment, is the theme of the first part of Judge for Yourselves, a series of discourses closely related to *For Self-Examination* and now published with it. See above, note 14.
22. Sometimes certain forms of mystical knowing are thought to have this kind of epistemological role in the confirmation of metaphysical uncertainties, as if mystical experience were a form of direct intuition or perception. See, for example, William Alston, 'Is Experience a Ground for Belief', in *Religious Experience and Religious Belief*, ed. by Joseph Runzo and Craig K. Ihara (New York: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 31–51; also 'Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God', in *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1988), pp. 433–448; and more recently, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

23. As one person wisely said, it is 'seeing with the eyes of fire' rather than seeing with 'the eyes of flesh' (Dan. 10:6). I would only add that *what* is seen differs as much as the eyes by which it is seen. From a lecture, 'Eyes of Fire and Eyes of Flesh', by Henry Corbin, reprinted in *Material For Thought*, no. 8, 1988 (published by the Far West Institute), pp. 5–10.
24. Frederick Sontag, in the introduction to *Authority and Revelation*, p. xxviii.
25. *Training and Christianity*, p. 201.

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