

11 Kierkegaard and the Early Church on Christian Knowledge and Its Existential Implications¹

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ALL THE ESSAYS in this volume make clear that both love and faith are essential to Kierkegaard's conception of the good life for a Christian. Only Rick Anthony Furtak dares to argue directly that knowledge is similarly essential. This relative neglect of the role of knowledge in Kierkegaard's thought is explicable, I believe, as consequence of the fact that faith is often considered to be opposed to knowledge. Furtak is correct, however. Kierkegaard's is not a noncognitivist fideism. Faith serves as a means, according to Kierkegaard, through which Christian knowledge is attained, knowledge that is crucial to the good life for a Christian.

Kierkegaard refers frequently, and approvingly, to what he calls "original Christianity"² precisely because of the emphasis he believed it placed on the existential implications of religious knowledge. Kierkegaard's account of Christian knowledge is strikingly similar, in fact, to the positions of two of the earliest church fathers, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria—so similar that it is not unreasonable to assume that the similarity is the result of Kierkegaard's attempt to develop an epistemology that was consistent with the doctrines of the early church. The purpose of this essay is to provide a sketch of Kierkegaard's view that Christian knowledge cannot be separated from a way of life that is itself an expression of Christian truth, and to show the similarity of this view with the views of Irenaeus and Clement.

Knowledge of God

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard refers to human beings as having an "eternal consciousness" that he associates with the love of God (FT, 48).³ It would appear that Kierkegaard believes the idea of God is built into human consciousness. Precisely how this is so is something he doesn't directly address. It may be that it is simply part of the way consciousness is constructed,⁴ or it may be associated with a person's appreciation that his is a finite, or limited, form of rationality.

Kierkegaard asserts in *Philosophical Crumbs* that “one does not *believe* that there is a God, even though one assumes that there is.” He continues, “This is a misuse of language. Socrates did not have faith that there was a God. What he knew [*vidste*] about God he achieved through recollection” (*Crumbs*, 153). This reference to “recollection” recurs in Kierkegaard’s journals, where he observes that both proving that there is a God, and being convinced of this by proofs, are “equally fantastic,”

for just as no one has ever proven it, so has there never been an atheist, even though there certainly have been many who have been unwilling to let what they knew get control of their minds. . . . With respect to the existence [*Tilværelsen*] of God, immortality, etc., in short with respect to all problems of immanence, recollection applies; it exists altogether in everyone only he does not know it. (JP, 3:3606.)

It makes sense that Kierkegaard would have felt no need to defend the view that the idea of God is included in the contents of human consciousness. This view is part of the earliest Christian orthodoxy and was very likely a part of Kierkegaard’s theological studies at the University of Copenhagen. Close examination of the writings of Irenaeus, one of the earliest of the early church fathers, reveals that he also believes that the idea of God is built into human consciousness. God, according to Irenaeus,

confers on all a great mental intuition and perception of His most mighty, yes, almighty greatness. Therefore, though “no one knows the Father except the Son, nor the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son has revealed Him” (cf. Matt. 11:27), yet *all beings* know this fact at least [i.e., that there is a God] because reason, implanted in their minds, moves them, and reveals to them that there is one God, the Lord of all.⁵

Irenaeus appears, actually, to employ a primitive argument from design. He writes, for example, that

[c]reated things, in their great number and diversity, fit beautifully and harmoniously into the creation as a whole. And yet, when viewed individually, they appear discordant and opposed to each other, just as the sound of the lute makes a single harmonious melody out of many and opposite notes by means of the intervals between them. The lover of truth must not be deceived, therefore, by the intervals between the different notes, nor imagine that this note was the work of one artist or another, and that note due to another, nor think that one person fitted the treble, another the bass, and yet another the tenor strings. He must not forget that one and the same Artist was responsible for the wisdom, justice, goodness, and munificence of the whole work. And those who listen to the melody ought to praise and glorify the Artist, and admire the tension of some notes, appreciate that relaxation in others, enjoy the moderation of those between the two extremes. Recalling that some things are

symbols, they will consider what it is that each thing points to and what causes it. But they will never alter the rule, nor stray from the Artist, nor abandon faith in the one God who made all things, nor blaspheme our Creator.⁶

That is, “[c]reation,” according to Irenaeus, “shows its Creator, and what is made suggests its Maker.”⁷ One need only be a “lover of truth,” according to Irenaeus, in order to see this.

To the extent, however, that reason reveals to the individual that there is a God, knowledge that God exists does not require the assistance of the kind of revelation that Christianity is chiefly concerned with. That is, knowledge that there is a God is not specifically Christian. It is tempting to conclude, given Kierkegaard’s skeptical leanings, that there is no specifically Christian knowledge on his view. It’s clear, however, from Kierkegaard’s remarks in his journals that such a conclusion would be mistaken.

Christian Knowledge

Christian knowledge comprises both what philosophers traditionally refer to as “acquaintance knowledge” and “propositional knowledge,” where the former is the source of the latter, just as our acquaintance with the objects of our experience is the source of our propositional knowledge of them. And just as our knowledge of empirical reality dictates to us a certain manner of navigating our way through this reality, so does our knowledge of religious truth, according to Kierkegaard, dictate to us a certain manner of navigating our way through the moral landscape.

Christian knowledge is a subset of what Kierkegaard refers to as “essential knowledge,”⁸ and essential knowledge is “essentially related to existence.” But this does not signify, explains Kierkegaard, “that abstract identity mentioned above between thought and being; nor objectively does it mean that knowledge corresponds to something that is there as its object. It means that knowledge relates to the knower, who is essentially someone existing, and that for this reason all essential knowledge essentially relates to existence and to existing” (*Postscript*, 166).

“*Everything Is New In Christ*,” observes Kierkegaard in his journals. “This will be my position for a speculative Christian epistemology” (JP, 2:2277). Christian knowledge is a product of revelation, and the specific revelation with which Kierkegaard is concerned can be characterized as an encounter with Christ, or as contemporaneity with Christ, as Kierkegaard expresses it in *Philosophical Crumbs*.⁹ “Christ is the truth,” according to Kierkegaard, hence to know Christ is to know the truth (*Crumbs*, 205).

But what does it mean to know Christ? Epistemologists are interested primarily in propositional knowledge. It appears, however, that in every instance

where Kierkegaard refers to “knowledge” of Christ, the Danish expression is either “*Kjendskab*” or some form of the verb “*kjende*,” and these terms refer to acquaintance knowledge rather than propositional knowledge.¹⁰ There is even at least one place where Kierkegaard alters the then-current Danish translation of the New Testament by replacing the expression “know” (*kiende*), in connection with the truth of Christianity, with “experience” (*erfarer*).¹¹ The reference is from his papers, where he quotes John 7:17 as “If anyone’s will is to do my father’s will, he shall experience whether the teaching is from God or on my own authority” (JP, 2:1881).¹² This substitution is important. It provides us with a key to understanding an early journal entry in which Kierkegaard asserts that “[t]he historical anticipation of and also the position in human consciousness¹³ corresponding to the Christian ‘*Credo ut intelligam*’ [I believe in order that I might understand] is the ancient *Nihil est in intellectus quod non antea fuerit in sensu* [There is nothing in the intellect that has not previously been in the senses]” (JP, 2:1098). That is, a person meets Christ, according to Kierkegaard, in the moment of faith. This meeting yields acquaintance “knowledge” of Christ. If there is Christian knowledge in the propositional sense, this acquaintance knowledge of Christ both precedes it and provides the foundation for it. To become acquainted with Christ is an experience that is related to the intellect in a manner analogous to the way *sensory* experience is related to the intellect.

Experience, according to Kierkegaard, belongs to the realm of existence, or actuality. It becomes knowledge, or a candidate for knowledge, only when it is brought into relation to ideality in the intellect. Hence, for Kierkegaard, Christian knowledge, in the propositional sense, is a *consequence* of—rather than, as some have argued, *equivalent* to—Christian experience.¹⁴ “Knowing the truth,” argues Kierkegaard in *Practice in Christianity*, is not equivalent to being the truth, but instead is something that “*follows* of itself from being the truth” (PC, 205, emphasis added).

But what does it mean to be the truth? Christianity posits that people are sinful. Even the believer is still a sinner. To be sinful, explains Kierkegaard in *Crumbs*, is to be essentially outside the truth. To be outside the truth in this way is to be incapable of understanding it, or of becoming properly related to it on one’s own, because if this were possible, then in an important sense, one could not really be said to be outside it. To be essentially outside the truth, according to Kierkegaard, is to need assistance to gain a proper understanding of it, or to be put into the proper relation to it. Such assistance, he argues, can come only from the truth itself.¹⁵

This is the difference between what Kierkegaard refers to as “guilt consciousness”¹⁶ and “sin consciousness.”¹⁷ A person’s understanding of himself as sinful is inseparable from his understanding the truth, in that sin is what separates him

from the truth. If a person is essentially ignorant of the truth, then the truth can be called “the unknown” (*Crumbs*, 111–118) Thus Climacus argues that

the individual, if he is truly to come to know something about the unknown (God), must come to know that it is different from himself, absolutely different. The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (because, as we have seen, this is self-contradictory). If it is to come to know this, it must come to know this through God . . . One needs God simply in order to come to know God is the different, and now comes to know that God is absolutely different from himself. But if God is absolutely different from human beings, this cannot have its basis in what human beings owe to God (for to this extent they are related), but in what they are themselves responsible for, or what they have themselves earned. What then is the difference? What else could it be but sin. (*Crumbs*, 119.)

“Christianity,” asserts Kierkegaard in *The Sickness Unto Death*, “assumes that neither paganism nor the natural man know what sin is; yes, it assumes there must be a revelation from God to reveal what sin is” (*Sickness*, 89).

According to Kierkegaard, a person does not come to know that sin is the difference between himself and God, or himself and the truth, as a result of his own efforts to understand this difference. He comes to know this as a result of having been transformed in a manner that makes such knowledge possible.¹⁸ This transformation can be brought about only by God.¹⁹

A person cannot come to know the truth in the sense of what sin is, or that it is sin that separates him from God, on his own, because if he could, he would essentially possess this knowledge even if he happened, accidentally, to be unaware of it. The truth must come to the sinner. Eternal ethical-religious truth must come to be in time. Kierkegaard refers to this intersection of the temporal and the eternal as a “paradox.”²⁰ But it is not primarily the difficulty of conceiving a synthesis of temporality and eternity that presents an obstacle to the understanding, according to Kierkegaard. Indeed, he defines human beings as such a synthesis.²¹ The difficulty is rather that a person’s own eternal consciousness, or understanding of the truth, is supposed to come to be through his relation to this paradox, which is to say, through his encounter with the god in time. What a person comes to know, through his encounter with the god in time, is not that he must conform his concrete existence to abstract ethical-religious ideality. This is something that he is presumed already to know, to the extent that he is innately conscious that there is a God who is not only the creator of the universe, but also the author of the moral law that he is aware of through the medium of his conscience. What he comes to know, as a result of this encounter, is that he is essentially incapable of doing what he is eternally responsible for doing.

Such knowledge cannot help but be offensive, and the knower naturally rebels against it. It is offensive in that it is self-contradictory to propose that a person

could be eternally responsible for doing something he is essentially incapable of doing. It's an offense to reason, in that it is incoherent; and it's an offense to a person's innate moral sense, in that it is obviously unjust. To the extent that this is the message of the god in time, a person will be unable to get this message into his head, so to speak.²² How then, asks Kierkegaard,

does the learner come to an understanding with this paradox . . . It happens when the understanding and the paradox meet happily in the moment, when the understanding sets itself aside and the paradox gives itself; and this third thing, in which this happens (because it happens neither through the understanding, which is excused, nor through the paradox which offers itself—but *in* something), is the happy passion we will now give a name . . . We will call it: *faith*. (*Crumbs*, 128–129.)

To learn the truth, according to Kierkegaard, is thus to become a believer. A person becomes a believer when, after having surrendered his reason to the paradox, he receives the condition for understanding the truth.²³

One might wonder why Kierkegaard would refer to a person's belief that he is a sinner as a "happy passion." The answer is that sin is only half of what a person is expected to believe as a Christian. Grace is the other half, and grace relieves the impression of guilt, which, according to Kierkegaard, is omnipresent in human consciousness. Hence Kierkegaard argues, "The hope of the life-giving Spirit is against the hope of the understanding" (FSE, 82–83). A person can understand guilt. What he cannot understand without divine assistance is that, in the eyes of the eternal, he is forgiven.²⁴

The forgiveness of sins is thus "the absurd" (JP, 2:1215).²⁵ It is absurd in the sense that, from the perspective of the sinner (i.e., from the human perspective) it seems impossible. "[W]hen the believer has faith," asserts Kierkegaard, however, "the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it. . . . The passion of faith is the only thing capable of mastering the absurd rightly understood" (JP, 1:10). Faith transforms the absurd because faith is an expression of a person's encounter with the infinite. A person understands the forgiveness of sins to the extent that he encounters God's love in the passion of faith, the "love" that, according to Kierkegaard, "hides a multitude of sins" (EUD, 78).

A person who has encountered God's love is thus able to understand both that he is a sinner and that his sins are forgiven. Not only is he able to understand these things; he is able to achieve certainty, in the psychological sense, that this conception of himself and his relation to God corresponds to reality.²⁶ According to Kierkegaard, such an individual is immediately related to the reality of God's love in this encounter.²⁷ Since the reality of God's love is presumably that his sins are forgiven, he can be said to appreciate this forgiveness through an insight into the essence of this love made possible by his immediate relation to it. The reality

of the forgiveness of sins is fundamentally subjective, in that it can be said to be equivalent to the sinner's appreciation that his sins are forgiven, which appreciation he gains through his encounter with God's infinite love. The forgiveness of sins, according to Kierkegaard, is not something that awaits one in eternity. "The forgiveness of sins," he argues, "means to be helped temporally" (JP, 2:1123) in that it represents liberation from the feeling of guilt that is omnipresent in human consciousness.²⁸ To the extent, however, that the knowledge in question is subjective, the truth to which it is related cannot be a property of thought but must be instantiated in the existence of the knower. This truth is the knower's *acceptance* that his sins are forgiven.²⁹

A person's knowledge that his sins are forgiven is contingent on his having faith. As soon as "the enthusiasm of faith" (CA, 27) disappears, argues Kierkegaard, the lower nature, or "cunning prudence," will assert itself by endeavoring to engage the knower in the dialectic of self-deception in order to "escape the knowledge of sin" (CA, 27). That is, a person can know that his sins are forgiven, in the sense that he has a concept of such forgiveness of whose correspondence to reality he is certain, only while he is in the passion of faith, which is to say, only while he is in contact with God's infinite love. The passion of faith cannot be sustained indefinitely, however, but is something at which a person can only repeatedly arrive.³⁰

Faith is what Kierkegaard calls "the risky venture." Before a person has made this venture, he continues, "he can understand it only as madness . . . and when he has taken the risk he is no longer the same [person]" (*Postscript*, 355). It is through this risky venture that a person is "infiniteized" (*Postscript*, 355). That is, one first comes into contact with God's infinite love, or first comes to feel "in kinship with God," in faith (*Sickness*, 120n).

The experience of faith thus provides the foundation for Christian knowledge, just as sensory experience provides the foundation for empirical knowledge. It's tempting to conclude that while Christian knowledge may initially be a result of Christian experience, once it has been attained, it determines, for the knower, appropriate Christian behavior such that, from that point on, Christian experience, in terms of right action, is either indistinguishable from Christian knowledge or follows immediately and unproblematically from it. If this were the case, then knowing the good would be indistinguishable from doing the good. But to know the good, according to Kierkegaard, is not necessarily to do it. This is apparent in the following passage from one of Kierkegaard's religious discourses:

The double-minded person did have a *knowledge of the good* . . . *Alas* contemplation [*Betragtning*] and the moment of contemplation, despite all its clarity, easily conceals an illusion, because its moment has something in common with the counterfeited eternity. There is a foreshortening that is necessary in order

for the contemplation to come about; it must shorten time considerably . . . In this it is something like the work of an artist in drawing a map of a country. The drawing . . . cannot be as large as the country . . . but it also becomes all the easier for the viewer to survey the outlines of that country. And yet if that viewer were suddenly set down in the actuality of that country, where the many, many miles have all their force, he very likely would not be able to recognize the country . . . or as traveler to get his bearings in it. The same thing will also happen to the double-minded person. His knowledge has certainly been an illusion. What was compacted airtight, as it were, in the completeness of contemplation must now be stretched out to its full length. (UDVS, 72)

It's important to appreciate two things here. The person in question is described as having "knowledge of the good." The problem was not an inadequacy in his conception of the good, but instead an inadequacy in his character—that is, he was double-minded. Such an inadequacy in character is not restricted, according to Kierkegaard, to certain people; it is an expression of sin, which is universal. We are all double-minded, according to Kierkegaard, and living as a Christian means striving to purge ourselves of this double-mindedness, or to purify our will.³¹

It's for this reason that Kierkegaard asserts that the life of a Christian only "approaches" the truth. The being of truth, for the Christian, he asserts, "*approaches [tilnærmer]* truth in the striving for it" (PC, 205).³² Only in Christ, according to Kierkegaard, are truth and existence combined in such a way that they are indistinguishable from each other.

Knowledge of the truth of Christianity appears equivalent, according to Kierkegaard, to knowledge that Christianity "is not a doctrine" but instead "a believing and a very particular kind of existing [*Existeren*] corresponding to it" (JP, 2:1880),³³ where this kind of existing is one that takes Christ's life as a model for one's own. But while there is clearly such a thing, according to Kierkegaard, as Christian knowledge in this sense,³⁴ he argues that Christian truth, or the truth of Christianity, when viewed *merely* as knowledge (i.e., as an idea or concept) abstracted from any existential situation, is untruth.³⁵ One can see, asserts Kierkegaard, "what a monstrous mistake it is, almost the greatest possible, to didacticize Christianity, and how altered Christianity has become through this continual didacticizing is seen in this, that now all expressions are formed according to the view that truth is cognition [*Erkjendelsen*], knowledge [*Viden*] (now one speaks continually of comprehending, speculating, observing, etc.), whereas in original Christianity all the expressions were formed according to the view that truth is a [way of] being." (PC, 206.)

Christian knowledge is possible as something that follows from Christian experience, and it is reasonable to assume that it was this knowledge to which Kierkegaard referred when he said he could conceive of a specifically Christian

epistemology, the development of which, he asserted, could be undertaken only after a person had become a Christian.

But what is the content of Christian knowledge? We've already seen that Christian knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, includes the appreciation of the believer that his sins are forgiven. To the extent that this knowledge is indistinguishable from the appreciation that God is love, the latter too may be understood to be known by the believer in the moment of faith. To these two sorts of knowledge we may now add the knowledge that Christianity itself is neither the doctrine that one's sins are forgiven nor the doctrine that God is love, but instead a way of life. That is, Christianity is the process of a person's striving to bring his existence into conformity with ethical-religious ideality, which is characterized by his belief that the activity itself is pleasing to God and that God does not hold against him his failure to establish perfect conformity.

There may be a great deal more that could be placed under the heading of Christian knowledge according to Kierkegaard. Whatever Christian knowledge comprises, however, it cannot include a knowledge that God came into being in the person of Christ, because all knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, is either of the eternal, which excludes the temporal, or of the historical. No knowledge, he explains in *Crumbs*, can have for its object that the eternal came into existence (*Crumbs*, 131).

There is a reference to "knowledge [*Viden*] of Christ" in *The Sickness Unto Death* (*Sickness*, 113), but the context of the reference makes it clear that it is not a reference to knowledge that Christ was God. That is, this knowledge is later referred to as a representation (*Forestilling*), which exists in the knower to a greater or lesser degree. "[T]he more conception [*Forestilling*] of Christ," asserts Kierkegaard, "the more self" (*Sickness*, 113). That is, the more complete the concept is that one has of what ethical-religious ideality would look like if it were expressed in the life of a particular person,³⁶ the more self that one has.

Specifically Christian knowledge, like all other knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, is either knowledge of eternal truth, or it is historical knowledge. It does not include knowledge that the eternal became historical. A person's knowledge, for example, that he is a sinner and that his sins are forgiven is historical knowledge. Sin is not a part of a person's eternally established essence, according to Kierkegaard, but was freely appropriated at some point. To the extent that a person was not always a sinner, his sins cannot for all eternity have been forgiven. Both a person's concept of himself as a sinner and his belief that his sins are forgiven concern historical truths. Knowledge that there is a God, on the other hand, is knowledge of an eternal truth.

Kierkegaard refers in his journals to "knowledge of the paradox" where he argues, in a draft of the *Postscript*, for example, that "Christian knowledge is

not knowledge of the paradox, but knowledge of it in passion and the knowledge of the wise that it can be known only in passion.”³⁷ If we interpret “paradox” to stand for the idea that one’s sins are forgiven, then the meaning of the claim is clear: Knowledge of the paradox is a passionate grasping of the truth that one’s sins are forgiven. If, on the other hand, “paradox” refers to the claim that God became man in the person of Christ, then it would appear that what Kierkegaard means is that “objectively there is no truth, for an objective knowledge of the truth, or truths, of Christianity is precisely untruth. To know a declaration of faith by rote is paganism, because Christianity is inwardness” (*Postscript*, 188).

Christian knowledge proper is not “knowledge” of what has historically been referred to as Christian doctrine, or, more specifically, “knowledge” that the proposition that God became man is part of this doctrine. Christian knowledge proper is a grasp of this doctrine in the sense of “the objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness” (*Postscript*, 171), as well as the wise person’s insight that the only way one can properly relate to this “knowledge” is subjectively, in the passion of faith.

Kierkegaard and Orthodox Epistemology

I began this essay with the assertion that Kierkegaard’s views on the substance of Christian knowledge placed him squarely within the tradition of the early Christian church. Now that we’ve examined Kierkegaard’s views in some detail, it’s time to compare those views with the views of some of the church fathers. It is difficult to determine the extent of Kierkegaard’s familiarity with the views of the church fathers. Some study of their thought, as I observed above, was very likely a part of Kierkegaard’s theological studies at the University of Copenhagen. There are several references to various church fathers, including Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus, in Kierkegaard’s works. There are three references to Clement of Alexandria in Kierkegaard’s works: one in *Repetition* (op. cit., 76), another in an unpublished polemic against Heiberg (SKS 15:66), and a third in Kierkegaard’s journals and papers (SKS 24:259). There is apparently only one reference to Irenaeus in all of Kierkegaard’s works, published and unpublished. It is in his journals and papers (SKS 24:269). The presences of references to these two thinkers, scant though they are, at least serve to show that Kierkegaard was familiar with their thought.

We saw in the first section that Kierkegaard’s view that knowledge of God, or more correctly, the knowledge that there is a God, agreed with the views of Irenaeus on this issue. Such knowledge is not, however, specifically Christian, so we must see now whether what Kierkegaard considers specifically Christian knowledge agrees in substance with the views of the church fathers.

It's possible, according to Kierkegaard, to know the truth, or to recognize Christ as the truth. God, he observes, did not take on human form "to ridicule human beings. His intention cannot thus be to go through the world in such a way that not a single person ever came to know [*vide*] it. He does indeed want something of himself to be understood [*forstaae*]" (*Crumbs*, 126).

The claim that knowledge of God is possible through an encounter with Christ may seem heretical to those who view Christianity as a religion based on faith. This passage from *Crumbs* is strikingly similar, however, to Irenaeus's claim in *Against the Heresies* that "the Lord did not say that the Father and the Son could not be known at all [$\mu\eta$ γινωσκεσθαι] for in that case his coming would have been pointless."³⁸

Irenaeus is specifically concerned here with rejecting the claim of the Gnostic Valentinus that the message of the incarnation was God's inaccessibility to human knowledge. "What the Lord really taught," asserts Irenaeus, "is this: no one can know God unless God teaches him; in other words, without God, God cannot be known [$\alpha\upsilon\epsilon\nu$ Θεου $\mu\eta$ γινωσκεσθαι τον Θεου]. What is more," continues Irenaeus, "it is the Father's will that God be known [$\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron$ δε το γινωσκεσθαι αυτον θλημα ειναι του Πατρος]."³⁹

Man's imperfection, or sin, is, for Irenaeus, the obstacle to his attaining specifically Christian knowledge. "[T]he Word of the Father [i.e., Christ]," asserts Irenaeus, "and the Spirit of God [i.e., faith in Christ], united to the ancient substance of Adam's formation [i.e., man], made man living and perfect capable of knowing the perfect Father."⁴⁰ But sinful man is no longer perfect and hence is incapable of knowing God without the intermediacy of Christ. Thus Irenaeus asserts that "no one can know God unless God *teaches* him."

Can "the truth be taught?" asks Kierkegaard in *Crumbs* (88). His answer, of course, is yes—if God *himself* teaches it. In other words, Kierkegaard's claim in *Crumbs* that union with God is necessary in order for specifically Christian knowledge to be possible echoes exactly Irenaeus's claim in *Against the Heresies* that "no one can know God unless God teaches him."⁴¹

The view that knowledge of God is attained through Christ is also central to the doctrines of Clement of Alexandria. Clement, like Kierkegaard, refers to God as a "teacher."⁴² Both Irenaeus and Clement were concerned with opposing the doctrines of the Gnostics. This does not mean, however, as one might be tempted to suppose, that they rejected the possibility of Christian knowledge.

"The most important aspect of Clement's philosophy," writes Salvatore R. C. Lilla in his book *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, "is represented by the idea of *gnosis*." But he continues, "[T]he idea of *gnosis* is, in Clement's thought, closely connected with that of *pistis* [i.e., faith]."⁴³ Clement was concerned not merely with discrediting the Gnostics, who, in Lilla's words, "sharply distinguished the *pistis* of the common believers from the higher

gnosis which, according to them, was a natural gift bestowed as a privilege to only a very few persons, the πνευματικοί,²⁴⁴ but also with defending Christianity against the accusations of Greek philosophers that it represented an *irrational* faith, a faith that offered no higher knowledge of the truth.

Man's aim, according to Clement, "is to know God, to have knowledge of God (γνῶσις τοῦ Θεοῦ): 'We call upon man'," writes Clement, "who was made for the contemplation of heaven, and is in truth a heavenly plant, to come to knowledge of God (*Protr.* 100.3)."²⁴⁵ The foundation of such knowledge, according to Clement, however, is faith-πιστις. "[T]he two cannot be separated: 'Now neither is knowledge without faith, nor faith without knowledge' (ἡδη δε ουτε η γνῶσις ανευ πιστεως ουθ η πιστις ανευ γνωσεως) (*Stromata.* 5.1.3)."²⁴⁶ Or as Wilhelm Scherer expresses it, "Ihm steht es von vornherein fest, das sich die Ergebnisse des Gnosis nicht von der Regel des Glaubens entfernen können."²⁴⁷

What distinguishes Irenaeus and Clement from the Gnostics is thus not that the latter believed in the possibility of knowledge of God whereas the former did not. What distinguished them was that instead of relegating *gnosis* to a select few, they emphasized that *gnosis*, or Christian knowledge, was possible for *everyone* who had *pistis* (i.e., faith). "The reason," writes Henny Fiskå Hägg in *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, "that knowledge is not in everyone is simply that not all men have faith (*Strom.* 5.1.); but those who seek Him 'after a true search (κατα την ζητησιν την αληθη) . . . shall be filled with the gift that comes from God, that is, true knowledge (της γνωσεως) (*Strom.* 5.12.2)."²⁴⁸

According to Kierkegaard, again, a person meets Christ in the moment of faith. This meeting is what is meant by "knowledge" of Christ, hence *acquaintance* knowledge of Christ precedes genuine *Christian* knowledge in the propositional sense. This position is reflected in the view of Clement of Alexandria that an "august knowledge of the truth" may be built "on the foundation of faith" (*Strom.* V, Chapter 1).⁴⁹ The view that acquaintance with Christ is an experience that is related to the intellect in a manner analogous to the way sensory experience is related to the intellect is not original to Kierkegaard, as one might suppose. It was part of the earliest Christian orthodoxy in that it agrees in substance with Clement's view of the relation between Christian experience and Christian knowledge.

But what does it mean to be acquainted with Christ? God in the person of Christ is, to use Kierkegaard's own expression, "indistinguishable" [*ikke til at skjelne*] from other people (*Crumbs*, 126). He cannot be known immediately,⁵⁰ but he can be "seen" only in the metaphorical sense, which is to say, only with "the eyes of faith" (*Crumbs*, 134).

According to Arkadi Choufrine in *Gnosis, Theophany, and Theosis*, this is also Clement's position.⁵¹ That is, Clement refers to what he calls "the visual faculty of the soul" (*Strom.* V, Chapter 1). It is with this faculty, or, as Clement goes on to explain, with the love that "allies" the faithful through the agency of

“divine love to God in the person of Christ,” that we are able to “see” (*Strom.* V, Chapter 1) that Christ is the truth.

Knowledge of the truth, according to Kierkegaard again, *follows* from being the truth, which is to say that it follows from the belief that God is love, which belief is itself an expression of love, or of gratitude toward God for the revelation that one’s sins are forgiven. This is also Clement’s position, according to Choufrine. “The starting point for *Gnosis*,” Choufrine explains, “is *gnosis*: a direct and sudden experience of redemption, which has been neither felt as needed, nor contemplated as a goal, but is a realization of an absolutely unknown possibility.”⁵²

Knowledge of the truth, for both Clement and Kierkegaard, is a product of faith, or of a faithful life. Hence Hägg argues that for Clement, “a gnostic is a person whose gnosis is demonstrated through his activities: ‘The gnostic . . . being on the one hand not without a knowledge of God (or rather being known by him) and on the other hand showing the effects thereof . . . For works (τα εργα) follow knowledge as the shadow the body’ (*Strom.* 7.82).”⁵³

Knowledge is *distinguished* from the truth itself, or from a way of being. To argue, however, that knowledge is distinguishable from the activity that makes it possible does not mean that it may be separated from this activity. Specifically Christian knowledge, like all of what Kierkegaard refers to as “subjective knowledge,”⁵⁴ is essentially prescriptive. It is impossible to separate it from a certain way of life. The same, again, is true for Clement. According to Hägg, gnosis, for Clement, “may be seen as a twofold thing: it is on the one hand, a subject matter and, on the other, a way or process. . . . [Hence] [t]o have knowledge of God is to be part of a *process*, leading from faith via gnosis to the love of God. Faith and love represent the beginning and the end of this *process*.”⁵⁵ Or as Kierkegaard expresses it, “The being of truth is not the *direct* redoubling of being in relation to thinking, which gives only thought-being . . . [I]t is the redoubling of truth within yourself, within me, within him, so that your life, my life, his life . . . is approximately [*Tilnærmelsesvis*] the being of truth in the striving for it” (PC, 205).

Neither Kierkegaard nor the church fathers were epistemologists. This does not, however, lessen the importance of the role that knowledge plays in their thought. Both religious knowledge in general and Christian knowledge in particular are essential for all these figures for achieving what one could call authentic Christian existence. Kierkegaard never explicitly developed a Christian epistemology, because although knowledge figures prominently in his works, it is not knowledge, even of the Christian sort, that was his primary interest. He argues, for example, that knowledge exists in a “spurious eternity of the imagination,” and hence that the knower develops “double-mindedness” if knowledge is not “slowly and honestly earned by the will’s purity” (UDVS, 74).⁵⁶ Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is essentially oriented toward the will rather than toward knowledge.⁵⁷ It is thus the will, or human psychology, that primarily

interests him. Willing, according to Kierkegaard, is a more basic activity than knowing, and this is part of the reason it is so significant with respect to issues in epistemology.⁵⁸

Kierkegaard is concerned with the difficulties involved in being a Christian, or in trying to live a Christian life. “Just when one has understood the truth best,” he observes, “the old suddenly crops up again. The infinite, the eternal, hence the true, is so alien to the natural man that with him it is as with the dog, which can indeed learn to walk upright for a moment but yet continually wants to walk on all fours” (WL, 244).

There is indeed Christian knowledge according to Kierkegaard, in the sense that it is possible to have an intellectual grasp of the “truths” of Christianity. But possession of this “knowledge” is not sufficient to make a person a Christian. “If the rights of knowledge are to be given their fair due,” he argues in keeping with Clement’s emphasis on “activities,” “we must venture out into life, out upon the ocean, and scream in the hope that God will hear . . . only then does knowledge acquire its *official* registration” (JP, 2:2279). “Here in the world of knowledge,” he observes, “there rests upon the human being a curse (blessing) which bids him eat his bread in the sweat of his brow” (JP, 2:2274).⁵⁹

A “completely human life,” according to Kierkegaard, is not merely one of knowledge, because the medium of knowledge is thought, or ideality, whereas a human being is an *interesse* between thought and being, or between ideality and reality. A completely human life consists of action as well as thought, and to be really complete, the action in question should represent the efforts of the individual to bring the actuality of his existence into conformity with ethical ideality.

To meet Christ, according to Kierkegaard, in the passion of faith, is to come to know that God is love, that love is a living, dynamic force, not a mere fact, and that Christian truth is a way of living rather than a set of propositions. To meet Christ in the moment of faith is to come into contact with the reality of God’s love. The knower is said to be certain that the resultant idea that “God is love” corresponds to reality because he has “the certainty, which can be had only in infinitude” (*Postscript*, 68); that is, “the certainty of faith” (*Postscript*, 48). The difficulty, however, is that faith is not something a person can attain once and for all. The contact established, through faith, with God’s infinite love cannot be indefinitely sustained. This infinitude, according to Kierkegaard, is something in which a person cannot, so long as he exists, rest, but to which he can only repeatedly arrive.⁶⁰

Conclusion

I began this paper with the assertion that knowledge was central to Kierkegaard’s conception of “the good life” for the Christian and that, in this respect, it was essentially in continuity with the thought of some of the earliest of the early

church fathers: Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. There are relatively few references to either Irenaeus or Clement in Kierkegaard's works, so while it is clear that he had at least a passing familiarity with these thinkers, it is impossible to establish with certainty whether Kierkegaard was deliberately attempting to develop an epistemology that was consistent with their thought. There cannot be any question, however, that it is. Both Irenaeus and Clement emphasize not merely that knowledge can come from faith in Christ, but also that this knowledge cannot be separated from a life that can be said to be an expression of Christian truth. This is "the good life" for the Christian: a life that is an expression of Christian truth. Kierkegaard's position on the nature of Christian knowledge and its role in the life of the Christian places him firmly in the tradition of orthodox epistemology.

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Notes

1. I'd like to thank Joseph Gulka of the Advanced Judaic Studies Library at the University of Pennsylvania for his help in locating the relevant passages in the confusing *Sources Chrétiennes* (the references to which in Balthasar's translation of Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies* include volume but not tome numbers). I'd also like to thank my research assistant, Douglas Stafford. Doug's help has been invaluable in many ways. Finally, I would like to thank Brian J. Foley, whose feedback on earlier versions of this essay was enormously helpful and who proofread the present version, as he does all my essays.

2. See, for example, PC, 206.

3. See also Arild Christensen, *Efterskriftens Opgør med Martensen* (the confrontation with Martensen in the *Postscript*), *Kierkegaardiana* 4 (1962): 45–62, 59.

4. See, for example, *Sickness*, 13; *Crumbs*, 153.

5. Irenaeus, *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies, Selected and Introduced by Hans Urs von Balthasar*, trans. John Sayward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 32, emphasis added.

6. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, p. 41.

7. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, p. 33.

8. See, for example, *Postscript*, 166.

9. See *Crumbs*, 138–139 and 167–168.

10. See, for example, EUD, 325–326; and *Crumbs*, 136–137.

11. The Greek is γνῶσεταιω.

12. I have altered the translation here slightly because the Hongs do not take account of the substitution of "erfarer" for "kiende." The Greek term in question is *gnosetai*, which is related to the noun *gnosis*. There is also another passage in Kierkegaard's journals and papers where Kierkegaard translates the Greek expression for "know" in the inscription over the oracle at Delphi, *gnothi seauton*, as "kjende," which supports the view that Kierkegaard considered *gnosis* to be knowledge of the substantive, or acquaintance, sort.

13. I have altered the Hongs' translation of "Bevidsthed" from "knowledge" to "consciousness" because the former is not an acceptable translation of "Bevidsthed" (see *A Danish-English Dictionary*, eds. James Stephen Ferrall and Thorleifr Gudmundson Repp (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1845), *Dansk Ordbog, Anden forøgede og forbedrede Udgave*, ed. Christian Molbech (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1859), and *Dansk-Engelsk Ordbog, Anden reviderede of udvdede udgave*, eds. Hermann Vinterberg and C.A. Bodelsen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1966)).

14. Contra Steven N. Emmanuel, "Kierkegaard on Faith and Knowledge," *Kierkegaardiana* 15 (1991): 136–146, 139.

15. See, for example, *Crumbs*, 92–93.

16. See, for example *Postscript*, 440.

17. See, for example, *Postscript*, 445.

18. See EUD, 303; *Postscript*, 325, 355; and JP, 3:3109.

19. Thus Kierkegaard asserts that "truth is a snare: you cannot get it without being caught yourself; you cannot get the truth by catching it yourself but only by its catching you" (JP, 4:4886).

20. See JP, 3:3085. The references to "paradox" in the pseudonymous works are too numerous to list. Most occur, however, in the *Crumbs* and the *Postscript*.

21. See, for example, *Postscript*, 49, 253.

22. See *Crumbs*, 124.

23. Thus David Wisdo argues that "Kierkegaard's analysis of faith appeals to *non-epistemic* factors; namely Grace and will" ("Kierkegaard on the Limits of Christian Epistemology," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29, no. 2 (1991): 97–112, 100).

24. See *Postscript*, 189.

25. See also *Postscript*, 188.

26. I am thus taking exception to Benjamin Daise's claim that "truth," in the context of the *Crumbs*, "does not have any epistemological significance" ("The Will to Truth in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*," *Philosophy of Religion* 31 (1992): 1–12, 2).

27. See Martin Slotty's observation that, according to Kierkegaard, "Christ is the only past actuality that can continue to be present to anyone whatever" (*Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards* [The epistemology of S. A. Kierkegaard], diss., Friedrich-Alexanders-Universität [1915], p. 70); and also Anton Hügli's observation that "in belief in Christ, the individual has the eternal in time, present in every moment" (*Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens bei Søren Kierkegaard* [Knowledge of subjectivity and the objectivity of knowing in Søren Kierkegaard] [Basel, Switzerland: Editio Academica, 1973], p.223).

28. See JP, 2:2249. Thus Alastair Hannay argues that, according to Kierkegaard, the truth of Christianity is "appropriated in feeling" rather than in thought (*Kierkegaard* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982], p. 173).

29. Thus Hügli argues, "I could no more receive certainty concerning my [true] determination without the free act of belief, than I could receive certainty that I could swim without risking going into the water" (*Erkenntnis*, p. 132).

30. See, for example, *Postscript*, 48, 68–69.

31. This is the theme of Kierkegaard's discourse entitled "Purity of Heart" (UDVS, 5–155).

32. Emphasis added. I have altered the Hongs' translation slightly by replacing their "approximately" with "approaches," because this is a better translation of "Tilnæremer" than is "approximate."

33. See Wisdo, "Kierkegaard on the Limits of Christian Epistemology," p. 97.

34. See JP, 1:653; and Hügli, *Erkenntnis*, p. 169.

35. See PC, 206.

36. That is, Christ's life, according to Kierkegaard, is essentially eternal truth that has come to be in time. It is because Christ's life is essentially eternal truth, however, that everyone can be contemporary with it, according to Kierkegaard (see PC, 64).

37. The wording here is from volume II, page 50 of the Hongs' translation of the *Postscript*. It seems likely that the ambiguity of the reference to "knowledge of the paradox" is the reason Kierkegaard omitted this reference from the final version of the *Postscript*.

38. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, p. 45.

39. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, p. 45.

40. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, p. 57.

41. The similarity in language between certain parts of *Crumbs* and passages from Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies* supports, I believe, the translation of *laeres* at the beginning of chapter 1 in *Crumbs* as "be taught" (see *Crumbs*, 88 and the note to p. 88 on p. 183).

42. See *Strom.* iv 162. 5 (ii. 320. 19–20), v. I. 3 (ii. 326. 10–11), v. I. (ii. 326. 13), vi. 122 I (ii. 493. 6–7), vi. 123. I (ii. 493. 30–31). All direct quotations to the *Stromata* cited here can be found at *New Advent*, available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0210.htm> - accessed March 30, 2017. The original translation from which this online resource is drawn is Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2, trans. William Wilson, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for *New Advent* by Kevin Knight.

43. Salvatore R. C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 119.

44. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 118–119; see also *Strom.* II. 10. 2 (ii. 118. 13–17).

45. Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 151.

46. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 151. All of Hägg's references to the *Stromata* are from: Clemens Alexandrinus, vol. ii: *Stromata I–VI*, ed. Otto Stählin, GCS 15 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906), and Clemens Alexandrinus, vol. iii: *Stromata VII, VIII, Excerpta ex Theodoto, Eclogae propheticae, Quis dives salvetur, Fragmente*, ed. Otto Stählin, GCS 17 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906).

47. Wilhelm Scherer, *Klemens von Alexandrien und seine Erkenntnisprinzipien* (München, 1907), p. 70.

48. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 152.

49. See, *New Advent*, available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0210.htm> - accessed March 30, 2017.

50. See *Crumbs*, 132.

51. See Akadi Choufrine, *Gnosis, Theophany, Theosis: Studies in Clement of Alexandria's Appropriation of His Background* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 113 and 116.

52. Choufrine, *Gnosis, Theophany, Theosis*, p. 36.

53. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 152. It is important to appreciate that "gnostic," in this context, refers to a person who has genuine knowledge of God, not to a member of the heretical sect against which, Irenaeus, for example, polemized.

54. See, for example, *Postscript*, 169.

55. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 151.

56. I have given the page reference here to the Hongs' translation because it is the most readily available. The wording I've used here, however, is from Douglas V. Steere's earlier translation. I've chosen this wording because I believe it is generally superior to the Hongs'. See PH, 117.

57. See JP, 2:1202; JP 4:4953; JP, 6:6966; and Hügli, *Erkenntnis*, p. 161 and p. 210.

58. Knowledge is always the result of willing. A person has to will to know even what he is inherently capable of knowing without assistance. This is true not merely with respect to

scholarly and scientific knowledge, but also with respect to knowledge of immanent metaphysical truths, although it is less apparent with respect to the latter.

59. Compare this with the assertion of Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes *de silentio* in *Fear and Trembling* that "there is a knowledge that presumptuously wants to introduce into the world of spirit the same law of indifference under which the external world sighs. It believes that it is enough to know what is great—no other work is needed. But for this reason it does not get nourishment [*Brød*]; it perishes of hunger while everything changes to Gold" (FT, 27–28).

60. See *Postscript*, 68.