

CHAPTER 33

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

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'*EVERYTHING is new in Christ*', wrote Kierkegaard in 1840. 'This will be my position for a speculative Christian epistemology' (Kierkegaard 1967–78, 2:2277). Kierkegaard never wrote the work on Christian epistemology that he had envisioned in 1840. It is tempting to conclude that this was because the mature Kierkegaard, whose first published works began to appear in 1843, had changed his mind about the possibility of Christian knowledge. Careful examination of his works reveals, however, that they are rich with references to such knowledge and the conditions that make it possible. The difficulty with understanding Kierkegaard's views on this issue is that he does not write in the manner traditional to philosophers. He communicates his thoughts most often indirectly, through dramatic characters, in the style of Plato, rather than directly in the style of Kant or Hegel. The purpose of this chapter is thus to lay bare the position on the nature of religious knowledge that appears to lie beneath the surface of Kierkegaard's works and provides the foundation for his views on the nature of Christian existence.

Kierkegaard's primary interest was not epistemology, at least not in the traditional sense. Unfortunately, this has blinded many scholars to the importance epistemology had for him. The prominence of epistemological concerns in Kierkegaard's works was not lost, however, on his contemporaries. Both the Danish theologian Hans Lassen Martensen (Martensen 1849) and the Danish philosopher Rasmus Nielsen (Nielsen 1849) considered at least one kind of knowledge—that is, religious knowledge—to be Kierkegaard's primary concern.

But is 'religious knowledge' different from other types of knowledge? Philosophers tend to be reductionist in that they take the various senses in which we use the expression 'knowledge' and try to produce a single definition that will cover them all. Such definitions inevitably fail to do this, however, with the result that it looks like much of what in ordinary contexts we claim to 'know', we may not in fact know. Kierkegaard, in contrast, is an epistemological pluralist. According to his view, knowledge can take a variety of forms (see Piety 2010). But all knowledge ultimately rests on some kind of faith. Thus the German Kierkegaard scholar Martin Slotty refers to Kierkegaard as an 'epistemologist of belief' (Slotty 1915). Not all faith is the same, however. If the knowledge in

question is objective (e.g. of the scholarly or scientific sort), then the faith on which it is based would be in something like the presuppositions of rational thought, the axioms of arithmetic, the reality of physical substance, or the reliability of the information we receive through our senses. More generally, objective knowledge could be said to rest on a Cartesian-like confidence that though we are often mistaken, our senses and cognitive faculties do not systematically mislead us about the nature of reality.

There is much evidence that Kierkegaard was impressed with the achievements of the sciences of his day, but his primary interest was in religion, not science. Most today still think of Kierkegaard as a sceptic. They are wrong. There is a great deal of religious knowledge according to Kierkegaard, and the foundation of this knowledge is, in fact, firmer than is the foundation of almost all other knowledge, with the exception of that attainable in mathematics.

In order to understand Kierkegaard's position on the nature of religious knowledge, we need first to look at his views on knowledge more generally.

There are two basic, or overarching categories of knowledge, according to Kierkegaard: objective knowledge (*den objective Viden*) and subjective knowledge (*den subjective Viden*) (Kierkegaard 2009a: 169). Knowledge is 'objective' if it is not essentially related to the existence of the knower (e.g. scholarly and scientific knowledge). Knowledge is 'subjective' if it is essentially related to the existence of the knower (e.g. ethical and religious knowledge requires the knower to conform his existence to it).

All knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, is the result of 'reality' (*Realitet*) having been brought into relation to 'ideality' (Kierkegaard 1976–78 1:891). Knowledge of the propositional sort is a representation of reality in the abstract categories of thought, which is unproblematic when the 'reality' in question is itself abstract (e.g. mathematics). It is problematic, however, when the reality in question is concrete (e.g. empirical sciences). Knowledge in the empirical sciences is never better than an 'approximation' (see Kierkegaard 2009a: 32, 35n. 36, 68, and Piety 2010: 71–94). While it makes 'progress' in describing reality in the sense that it presents increasingly adequate descriptions of it, there is no a priori reason to assume it is actually getting closer to the true nature of reality. Religious knowledge, however, is different. It is possible to approach religious truth, and to attain a kind of certainty regarding it that can otherwise be had only in mathematics.

There are numerous references in Kierkegaard's works to 'the Christianity of the New Testament'. Kierkegaard refers, as well, in *Works of Love* to 'original Christianity' (*oprindelig Christendom*; Kierkegaard 1995; SKS 9, 179). These references are clearly to Christianity in the period of the apostles and of the early church. Kierkegaard contrasts this period with the Christianity of his own day, which had strayed so far from what Christianity was originally meant to be that he refers to it pejoratively as 'Christendom' and argues that it is Christian in name only.

What, for Kierkegaard, was this 'original Christianity' really like? Did it affirm that it was possible to know God? I am going to show that it did. In fact, I am going to argue that Kierkegaard's views on the possibility of religious, and even specifically Christian, knowledge mirror almost exactly those of two church fathers, Irenaeus and Clement of

Alexandria. The similarity between Kierkegaard's views and the views of these two ante-Nicene thinkers is, in fact, so strong that I believe it is a result of Kierkegaard's attempt to develop an epistemology that was consistent with the doctrines of the early church, doctrines to which Kierkegaard gained exposure not simply through his readings of the church fathers, but also through his readings of German mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler.

MYSTICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

'It is characteristic of mystics,' writes Edward Scribner Ames, 'to claim for themselves a kind of knowledge or illumination different from ordinary sensuous or reasoned knowledge' (Ames 1915: 250). Mystical knowledge is thus not a product of the sorts of processes that ordinarily lead to knowledge. It does not come from sense perception, from reasoning, or from scientific experiments. Such sources of knowledge typically lead only to provisional conclusions. But the mystic wants absolute conclusions, not provisional ones. The mystic thus 'employs the common processes only in order to deny them, to transcend them' (Ames 1915: 250).

Mystics are not 'troubled by the question of the existence or the reality of God'. The passion of the mystic is, rather, 'to *find* God, to ascend to his presence, to enter into communion with him' (emphasis in original). The craving of the mystic is 'to secure a vital and satisfying relation with the supreme reality'. Yet to the extent that the supreme reality 'is in no way conditioned':

[n]ot only is the goal of his endeavor unintelligible but the method by which he proposes to reach it is non-intellectual. ... [M]ystic illumination cannot be scientifically nor systematically induced. The subject of it receives it passively. After doing his utmost to earn it, or achieve it, the greatest need is that he shall be passive and receptive.

(Ames 1915: 254, 256, 261)

In order to understand how such 'passivity' and 'receptivity' can lead to knowledge, we need to look briefly at what scholars have argued are two different approaches to understanding what it means to know something. The first sees knowledge as a kind of reconstruction or mirror image of reality in the mind of the knower. This view is generally recognized as characteristic of modernity. There is an older view, however, that interprets knowledge as involving substantial contact with reality—a coming together, so to speak, of the knower and the thing known. This view finds expression, for example, in the wax metaphor of the mind from Plato's *Theatetus* where the things known impress themselves upon the mind of the knower (191c–d).

For Plato the ultimate objective of the knower was union with 'the good'. But this idea is not original to Plato. 'The idea of Divine Union as man's true end,' observes Evelyn

Underhill, 'is ... of great antiquity. Its first appearance in the religious consciousness of Europe seems to coincide with the Orphic Mysteries in Greece and Southern Italy in the sixth century B.C.' (Underhill 1911: 28n. 20). What Plato did was to connect the idea of such union with knowledge.

The view that to know something was to have a kind of contact with it was appropriated by Aristotle and spread to such early Christian thinkers as Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus, who were heavily influenced by the works of both Plato and Aristotle. 'The most important aspect of Clement's philosophy', writes Salvatore R. C. Lilla, 'is represented by the idea of *gnosis* [knowledge]' (Lilla 1971: 118). '[T]he idea of *gnosis*', he continues, 'is in Clément's thought, closely connected with that of *pistis* [faith]' (Lilla 1971: 119). Man's aim, according to Clement, 'is to know God, to have knowledge of God (γνώσις 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, in Hägg 2006: 151).

There are two respects, however, in which one can 'know' God. Close examination of the writings of Irenaeus, one of the earliest of the church fathers, reveals that he believes 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. Mt. 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.

(Irenaeus 1990: 32, emphasis added)

That is, '[c]reation', according to Irenaeus, 'shows its Creator, and what is made suggests its Maker' (Irenaeus 1990: 33). One need only be a 'lover of truth', according to Irenaeus, in order to see this.

This innate knowledge that there is a God is not, however, specifically Christian and it is specifically Christian knowledge in which the church fathers are interested. Christianity has always emphasized the primacy of faith relative to knowledge. This does not mean, however, that there was no such thing as specifically Christian knowledge in the early church. Sin, according to the Christian tradition, separates human beings from God, but faith in Christ reunites them. The possibility of specifically Christian knowledge is part of the earliest Christian orthodoxy. The foundation of such knowledge, however, is faith—πίστις. '[T]he two cannot be separated: "Now neither is knowledge without faith, nor faith without knowledge (ἡδη δὲ οὔτε ἡ γνώσις ἄνευ πίστεως οὔθ' ἡ πίστις ἄνευ γνώσεως)"' (Strom. 5.1.3 in Hägg 2006: 151). 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' (It is clear to him from the outset that the products of knowledge cannot be separated from the rule of faith) (Scherer 1907: 70).

But how does faith result in knowledge? Ames correctly claims that 'mystic illumination cannot be scientifically nor systematically induced; that the subject 'receives' it passively, after doing his utmost to earn it, or achieve it' (Ames 1915: 261). Faith is a gift of Grace to those who seek earnestly to attain it. It is the 'condition for understanding the truth' (*Sandheds Betingelsen*) that one who has surrendered his understanding receives from 'the god', and which then 'conditions' (i.e. changes) his understanding of the truth (Kierkegaard 2009b: 92).

KIERKEGAARD ON RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge of God

Kierkegaard, like other thinkers in the mystical tradition, is not 'troubled by the question of the existence or the reality of God' (Ames 1915: 254). He believes, like the church fathers and the German mystics, that the idea of God is somehow built into human consciousness. Arild Christensen argues that Kierkegaard 'emphasizes that God is present in human consciousness' (Christensen 1962: 59), and Kierkegaard refers in *Fear and Trembling* to human beings as having an 'eternal consciousness' that he associates with the love of God (Kierkegaard 1983: 48). It would appear Kierkegaard believes the view that there is a God is simply part of the way consciousness is constructed. It may be associated with a person's appreciation that his is a finite, or limited, form of rationality (meaning that there are things that transcend his understanding), or it may be the expression of a kind of Schleiermachean feeling of absolute dependence.

'Eternally understood', asserts Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Crumbs*, 'one does not believe that there is a God, even though one assumes that there is. This is a misuse of language. Socrates did not have faith that there was a God. What he knew about God he achieved through recollection' (Kierkegaard 2009b: 153, emphasis in original). 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.

(Kierkegaard 1967-78, 3:3606)

It makes sense that Kierkegaard would have felt no need to defend the view that the idea of God is simply part of the contents of human consciousness. This view, as we have seen, is characteristic of the earliest Christian orthodoxy. It is also part of the later Christian mystical tradition. Both Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler hold, in keeping with the

views of the church fathers, that a kind of natural religious knowledge (i.e. knowledge outside of revelation) is possible. Eckhart speaks, for example, of 'the natural light of the rational soul' as conveying knowledge of religious truth (see 'The Book of Divine Consolation', in Eckhart 1994: 58). The reference to 'an inward sight' that bears a striking resemblance to Irenaeus's 'mental intuition', occurs also in *Theologia Deutsch*. This 'inward sight', asserts the anonymous author of *Theologia Deutsch*, is 'able to perceive the one true good'. Tauler himself, also, refers to knowledge of God that 'springeth from within'.

Christian Knowledge

I have argued that, for Kierkegaard, the idea of God, under certain circumstances, amounts to knowledge that there is a God. Such knowledge is a long way, however, from specifically *Christian* knowledge (Piety 2010). Some have argued that there is no specifically Christian knowledge according to Kierkegaard (see e.g. Emmanuel 1991). It is clear, however, from Kierkegaard's journals, that there *is* such knowledge according to him. I have defended this claim in detail and will not attempt to recapitulate that argument here. I will provide only a sketch of the nature of Christian knowledge according to Kierkegaard that will make clear the similarity between Kierkegaard's views and those of the church fathers and of the Christian mystical tradition more generally.

I observed in the previous subsection that while it is characteristic of modernity to view knowledge as a representation of reality, there was an older tradition that viewed knowledge as involving substantial contact with reality. Christian knowledge, for Kierkegaard, has this latter character in that it involves an encounter between the knower and the truth.

All knowledge, for Kierkegaard, is a result of reality having been brought into relation to ideality. There are two ways, however, in which this can be done. Reality can be represented in the abstract, or ideal categories of thought, or ideality can be brought into relation to reality by coming to concrete expression in the life of the knower. The first type of relation is exemplified in scholarly and scientific knowledge, where the knower represents concrete reality in conceptual terms. The second type of relation is exemplified in religious knowledge. Even natural religious knowledge, or the simple knowledge that there is a God, has this character because of the implications it has for the life of the knower. Though I have examined this issue in detail (Piety 2010), I will restrict the focus here to Christian knowledge and the respect in which it, in order to be legitimately called 'knowledge', requires expression in the life of the knower. Such a view is not original to Kierkegaard. Like the views already discussed concerning natural religious knowledge, the view that specifically Christian knowledge is inseparable from its expression in the life of the knower is part of a mystical tradition that reaches back to the very beginnings of the church. Before we can examine the character of this knowledge, however, we need to look at how it is attained.

What Kierkegaard calls ‘contemporaneousness’ (Kierkegaard 2009b: 163) with ‘the god in time’ makes it possible for a person to ‘know’ God in the person of Christ. This ‘contemporaneousness’, which is accessible to both someone who is historically contemporary with Christ, and to someone who comes later, would appear to be equivalent to what Ames identifies as the ‘communion’ with God that the mystic seeks. It is thus possible, according to Kierkegaard, to ‘know’ the truth, or to recognize Christ as the truth, through this ‘contemporaneousness’, or communion. God 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]’ (Kierkegaard 2009b: 126). This passage from *Crumbs* is strikingly similar 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 [μη γινώσκεσθαι] for in that case his coming would have been pointless’ (Irenaeus 1990: 45). Irenaeus is concerned here to reject 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.’ The view that knowledge of God is ‘taught’ by Christ is also central to the doctrines of Clement of Alexandria. Thus, Clement, like Kierkegaard, refers to God as a ‘teacher’ (see, for example Clement 1885: Bk V, Ch. 1). These views of Irenaeus and Clement are reflected in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Crumbs* when he asks whether ‘the truth’ can ‘be taught’ (Kierkegaard 2009b: 88). His answer, of course, is yes—if God *himself* teaches it.

Faith is the means through which Christ ‘teaches’ the truth. The substantive view of epistemology, expressed in the idea that faith can bring the believer into a kind of contact with God in the person of Christ that results in knowledge of God, found its way into the thought of such medieval Christian thinkers as Johannes Scottus Eriugena, and eventually to the German mystics. Meister Eckhart asserts, for example, that ‘[i]n faith alone do we have true knowledge’ (Eckhart 1994: 36). Tauler also refers to ‘the light of faith’ as leading to ‘knowledge of God’ (Tauler 1886: 264).

Despite Eckhart’s view that human beings have a kind of innate religious knowledge, he asserts that ‘[i]f you wish to know God in a divine manner, then your knowing must become a pure unknowing, a forgetting of yourself’ (Eckhart 1994: 224). ‘Where you truly go out of your will and your knowledge’, he asserts, ‘God truly and willingly enters in with his knowledge and shines there with great brilliance’ (Eckhart 1994: 223). That is, you must surrender your understanding to God, according to Eckhart, and then God in turn will bestow on you the gift of faith that leads to ‘divine knowledge’. This faith represents, again, a kind of union with God that leads to true knowledge.

‘[M]an by nature’, observes Tauler, ‘desireth to know [Wissen] all created things, and the distinction that he perceives in them is given to him by his natural knowledge [Wissen]. And to know begets in him great pleasure, and the pleasure driveth him on to know more and more’ (Tauler 1886: 46). ‘[N]atural knowledge [Bekanntnisse]’, according to Tauler, ‘is not to be denied ... for natural knowledge [Bekanntnisse], if he be willing, leadeth a man into knowledge of grace, and knowledge of grace leadeth him to divine knowledge’ (Tauler 1886: 45). This knowledge is a product of Grace and the

ultimate objective of the Christian. It is the end towards which he strives even in his progress through natural knowledge.

Natural knowledge does not of itself produce knowledge of Grace. It merely leads the seeker to the limit of the unaided, or un-illuminated, understanding. Knowledge of Grace is achieved *through* Grace, which is to say, through the gift of faith and the subsequently illuminated understanding that comes to a new knowledge of religious truth. '[T]o man in a state of grace', asserts Tauler:

is given the power of distinguishing the Holy Scriptures, so that he comprehend them in full truth', and that in bearing and reading he should understand them in the best and most profitable way. And this knowledge [Verstentnisse] is by grace and not from nature; for by mere nature you cannot come to true knowledge [Bekentnisse] of the Holy Scriptures. For the Holy Scriptures are from the Holy Ghost, and therefore whoso wisheth to understand them properly he must be enlightened with the grace of the Holy Ghost.

(Tauler 1886: 48)

'We are placed in this life', according to Tauler, 'not only to do the works, but also so that we may know, so that our works may grow out of knowledge, as fruit grows out of the tree. Therefore our work in this life is to gain more knowledge, and so to come nearer to God'. We will see in what follows that Kierkegaard also views Christian knowledge as bringing the knower closer to (*nærmere til*) God.

Propositional knowledge is the primary interest of contemporary epistemologists. 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*' (see, for example, Kierkegaard 1992: 325–6 and Kierkegaard 2009b: 136–7). These terms are more appropriately understood as referring to acquaintance knowledge than to propositional knowledge. 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' (*Erfaring*). 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* [*erfarer*] whether the teaching is from God or on my own authority' (Kierkegaard 1967–78, 2:1881, emphasis added). This substitution provides us with a key to understanding Kierkegaard's assertion that '[t]he historical anticipation of and also the position in human consciousness 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]' (Kierkegaard 1967–78, 2:1098). That is, one must encounter God in the person of Christ, must attain acquaintance knowledge of God first, through this encounter, before one can attain any other sort of knowledge of God.

A person meets Christ, according to Kierkegaard, in the moment of faith. This meeting results in 'knowledge' of Christ. This knowledge is precisely the *gnosis* of the church fathers, the *gnosis* (knowledge) that is based on *pistis* (belief or faith). According to

Kierkegaard, acquaintance knowledge of Christ, attained through this encounter, or communion with Christ, precedes Christian knowledge in the propositional sense, just as for Clement an 'august knowledge of the truth' may be built 'on the foundation of faith' (Clement 1885: Bk V, Ch. 1). To become acquainted with Christ is thus an experience that is related to the intellect in a manner analogous to the way *sense* experience is related to the intellect for both Kierkegaard and Clement.

Experience, according to Kierkegaard, belongs to the realm of existence, or actuality, hence it cannot, in itself, be equivalent to propositional knowledge. Experience becomes knowledge, or a candidate for knowledge, when it is brought into relation to ideality in the intellect. Hence Christian knowledge, in the propositional sense, is a consequence of, rather than equivalent to, Christian experience. 'Knowing the truth', is not equivalent to being the truth, but is something that 'follows of itself from being the truth' (Kierkegaard 1991: 205).

But what does it mean to be acquainted with Christ? God in the person of Christ is 'indistinguishable' (*ikke til at skjelne*) from other people. He cannot be known immediately, but can be 'seen' only in the metaphorical sense, which is to say, only with 'the eyes of faith' (Kierkegaard 2009b: 126, 132, 134). This, according to Choufrine in *Gnosis, Theophany, and Theosis*, is also Clement's position. That is, Clement refers to what he calls 'the visual faculty of the soul' (Clement 1885: Bk V, Ch. 1). It is with this faculty, 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' that Christ is the truth (Choufrine 2002: 113, 116).

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, a belief which is itself an expression of love, or of gratitude towards 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 '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' (Choufrine 2002: 36). 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 (τὰ ἔργα) follow knowledge as the shadow the body"' (Hägg 2006: 152).

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', 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*.

(Hägg 2006: 151, emphasis added)

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 [*Tilnærmelesvis*] the being of truth in the striving for it.

(Kierkegaard 1991: 205, emphasis added)

That is, 'knowledge' of the truth of Christianity cannot be separated from the process of striving to bring that truth to expression in one's own existence.

Christian striving is different, however, from what one could call the 'striving' of scholars and scientists, because even though scholarly and scientific theories progress in the sense that they explain more and more of the phenomena we wish to explain, scholars and scientists have no way of knowing whether their theories are actually getting closer to the true nature of reality. When Kierkegaard refers to scholarly and scientific knowledge as an 'approximation', the word he uses is '*Approximation*'. When, on the other hand, he refers to Christian knowledge as an 'approximation', the term he uses is '*Tilnærmelse*'. '*Tilnærmelse*' is composed of two separate Danish expressions. The first is '*Nærmelse*'. The reader likely recognizes the '*nær*' in '*Nærmelse*' as a cognate of the English 'near'. The second term is the preposition '*til*' which means 'to'. Hence '*Tilnærmelse*' literally means 'to come closer to', or 'to approach'. So like the German mystic Johannes Tauler, Kierkegaard asserts that 'knowing' God and coming 'nearer' to God are inextricably linked.

Scholars and scientists have not seen the truth they are striving to instantiate in their theories, but believers have. The Christian, according to Kierkegaard, 'knows' the truth towards which he strives. He has encountered this truth in the person of Christ. He has experienced 'contemporaneousness', or 'communion' with it. This truth has impressed itself upon him in a manner analogous to the way in which Plato asserts that things known impress themselves on the mind of the knower. The believer has been shaped, reformed, by his encounter with the truth so that now he knows the direction his striving must take and the end towards which it is directed. He knows this through faith.

CONCLUSION

I am not the first person to recognize mystical elements in Kierkegaard's philosophy. The Slovakian scholar Peter Sajda has written three pioneering articles on this topic (see Sajda 2008a, 2008b, and 2009). Martin Luther admired Tauler and the mystical work *Theologia Deutsch*. Many saw mystical emphasis on subjectivity and the authority of inner experience as precursory to the Reformation. Some of Kierkegaard's Lutheran sources, according to Sajda, 'argued that the teachings of the mystics conformed to the [Protestant] *sola fide* principle' (Sajda 2009: 570).

Kierkegaard's exposure to German mysticism was not limited to its transmission through theological works. Medieval German mysticism was popular among German idealist philosophers and was discussed in works Kierkegaard owned and read including Adolf Helfferich's *Die christliche Mystik* (Helfferich 1842) and Hans Lassen Martensen's monograph: *Meister Eckhart, Et Bidrag til at oplyse Middelalderens Mystik* (*Meister Eckhart: A Contribution to the Understanding of Medieval Mysticism*) (Martensen 1840).

Nor was Kierkegaard's exposure to German mysticism primarily indirect, through its influence on the Pietists and German idealists. Kierkegaard owned a number of original works by mystics such as Tauler and Suso. He owned a copy of *Theologia Deutsch* as well as the aforementioned work by Martensen that included much original material from Eckhardt. Kierkegaard's library also included scholarly studies on mysticism that he read and commented upon. There are relatively few references to either Irenaeus or Clement of Alexandria in Kierkegaard's journals so it is difficult to say how broad Kierkegaard's exposure was to their works. The similarities among their views is so striking, however, that I believe they must have been among the thinkers Kierkegaard had in mind when he referred to 'original Christianity' (Kierkegaard 1995).

I have provided a sketch of Kierkegaard's position on the nature of religious, and more specifically Christian, knowledge. Kierkegaard never produced a work on Christian epistemology. This was not because he was ambivalent about the possibility of an epistemology based on faith. Rather, his primary interest as an author was addressing the problem of how *rare* the faith is that would be prerequisite to such knowledge. My goal was thus not to argue that Kierkegaard ought to be thought of primarily as a religious epistemologist, but merely to show that he *has* such an epistemology and that it is entirely consistent with a Christian tradition that goes back through German mysticism all the way to the doctrines of the church fathers.

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