



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN CAMBRIDGE

Søren Kierkegaard and Spirituality: A Dialogue with C. Stephen Evans

Edited by Craig G. Bartholomew and Istine Rodseth Swart

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

Good scholarship attends to the nuances in academic analysis. The Kirby Laing Centre regularly hosts events with some of the best scholars, and in this Series we make available the papers from such events.

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ABOUT THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

The Kirby Laing Centre (KLC) is based in Cambridge, UK. KLC is a research centre focused on public theology. See kirbylaingcentre.co.uk

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LIKE? A RESPONSE TO C. STEPHEN EVANS' KIERKEGAARD
AND SPIRITUALITY*
 Craig G. Bartholomew

PREFACE

As a young scholar I learnt from my friend, Elaine Botha, a prominent South African philosopher, that if I wanted to do scholarship then I needed a grounding in (Christian) philosophy. That was excellent advice and I continue to benefit from it every day. It eventually led to my occupying the H. Evan Runner chair in philosophy at Redeemer University in Canada for over a decade.

In teaching and studying philosophy from a Christian perspective one looks out for major Christians in the history of philosophy. In my experience two stand out: J. G. Hamann and Søren Kierkegaard. Neither's work can easily be published without a Scripture index. Hamann is far less known than Kierkegaard but, in my view, equally important. He influenced Kierkegaard and the extraordinary creativity of the writings of both is notable. Also, neither is as a result an easy philosopher to understand.

Kierkegaard has been read in a variety of ways. Stephen Evans, over a lifetime of outstanding scholarship, has played a major role in the retrieval of Kierkegaard as a seminal Christian thinker. Evans has played a substantial role in my understanding of and excitement about Kierkegaard. I remember well Stephen coming to lecture on Kierkegaard at Redeemer University to some two hundred of Mike Goheen's and my students. It was a feast! If you are new to Kierkegaard, I can think of no better introduction than Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009).

Our vision for KLC is rigorous Christian scholarship practised in community and rooted in deep spirituality. Thus, when Stephen published his book *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, it seemed natural for us to do an event on the book. I am grateful to Stephen, J. Aaron Simmons, and Adrian Coates for participating so graciously and substantially in the rich event.

Our administrative Team has played no small part in producing this publication. Istine Rodseth Swart co-edited the volume, sought out art to fit with the text, and Jarrod Howard-Browne did the design. It is a privilege to work with such a gifted and dedicated Team.

Craig G. Bartholomew

Director, KLC, October 2021

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FINDING THE REAL KIERKEGAARD BEHIND THE MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

C. Stephen Evans

I have now been reading Kierkegaard seriously for over 55 years and writing about him for about 50 years. When I began my career an older philosopher (I think it was Nick Wolterstorff) gave me some wise advice. He told me that since I had a heavy teaching load at a small liberal arts school, I was unlikely to be able to stay at the forefront of hot fields of philosophy such as epistemology, philosophy of language and philosophy of science. Instead I should pick one important figure from the history of philosophy and focus on that philosopher. That historical grounding would give me insights I could then bring to bear on contemporary issues. I picked Kierkegaard, much to the regret of my Yale classmate Karl Ameriks, who told me I should have chosen Kant. But I have never regretted that choice. Kierkegaard has allowed me to do philosophy in the way that I think the Greeks did philosophy: never seeing it only as a technical, professional discipline but as an activity that is closely linked to the task of becoming a wise, authentic person. As Kierkegaard stressed, such a task is one that is never completed in this life. We are always “on the way,” and I certainly am acutely conscious of how far I still have to go in my own journey.

I have always seen Kierkegaard as someone who had a twofold calling. As a Christian thinker he has something important to say both to the world of philosophy and to the Church. Put very briefly, to philosophy he says that our primary task is to “become what we are.” (Interestingly, this phrase can be found in Nietzsche as well as Kierkegaard, though the two thinkers have profoundly different understandings of the selves we are to become.) To be a self is not just to be a substance that is a type of entity in the natural world, but to be a creature that achieves its identity through a process. We have the privilege of playing a role in our own becoming. Philosophical thought must pay attention to this primary task. This is a message that has resonated with many philosophers, including some who do not agree with Kierkegaard that this status is a gift and privilege we enjoy because we were created in the image of God.

This essentially philosophical picture of the self also undergirds Kierkegaard’s message to the Church. That message is essentially a rejection of the ideal of “Christendom,” which identifies Christian existence with some particular

human culture. For Christendom the process of becoming a Christian self is essentially identical to the process by which one is formed and acculturated into a supposedly Christian society. For Kierkegaard, Christendom is a fundamental mistake because authentic Christian existence cannot be derived solely from the development of natural human capacities. No one becomes a Christian solely by receiving the moral formation inherent in being socialized into a particular human culture. To be a Christian one must be born again, and the new self can never be simply identified with the norms and values of any human society. This is the deepest ground for Kierkegaard's antagonism to Hegel and the Hegelian view of history, for Kierkegaard sees Hegel's story of the triumph of Spirit as an esoteric version of Christendom. Both Christendom and Hegel equate the divine with contemporary European culture, while Kierkegaard wants to insist on the transcendence of the divine, which means our cultural norms must always be open to critique.

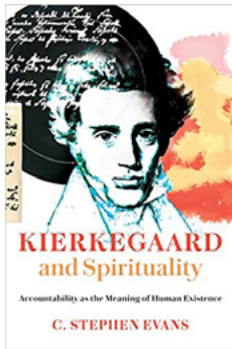


Walter Hayn: *Man Walking a Labyrinth*

Despite the importance and influence of Kierkegaard, there are a number of myths or at least misconceptions of Kierkegaard that are deeply embedded in popular understandings of him. One of the tasks I undertook in my *Kierkegaard and*

Spirituality was to puncture some of these misunderstandings.

One of these myths is the picture of Kierkegaard as the arch-individualist who champions the solitary, isolated individual. To counter this I try to show that Kierkegaard's understanding of spirituality is fundamentally social or relational. It is true that Kierkegaard believes that each human person is assigned the task of becoming the distinctive individual God created that person to be, and that is what it means to exist spiritually. However, it is equally true that Kierkegaard believes that this task can only be carried out in relationship to others. To use the words of *The Sickness Unto Death*, the self is "a relation that relates itself to



itself,” but it can only do this by “relating itself to another.” We do have the task of forming our identities, but we cannot create ourselves of nothing; the ideals by which we define ourselves are always gained from a relation to “the other.” The child gains a sense of what it means to be a self from parents and caregivers. As a young person grows up and is exposed to all the broader ideals that society has to offer, the child’s conception of the self is modified and reforged. The relation to God is important to Kierkegaard because it is only a relation to what is

transcendent that can allow an individual to escape what can be the suffocating influence of one’s culture and society. It is precisely because we are social beings that the relation to God is so vital, for it is only this relation that gives the individual a vantage point that makes it possible to stand up as “the single individual” when everyone else is going down what seems to be the wrong path. It is the God-relation that frees us to become genuine individuals.

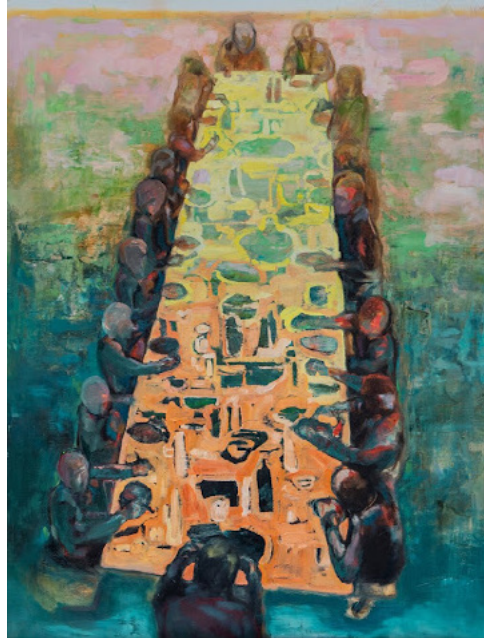
What I call Socratic spirituality in the book helps us see the falsity of another myth about Kierkegaard. One of the most potent shapers of the common view of Kierkegaard is the portrait provided by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays*. Here Camus describes Kierkegaard as one of the first thinkers to encounter and describe “the absurd.” However, as Camus tells the tale, Kierkegaard lacked the manly courage, shown by Sisyphus and presumably by Camus himself, to face the absurd in an unflinching way. Instead, Kierkegaard resorts to “the leap” and embraces faith in God as an antidote to the absurd. This account has given rise to the widespread view that Kierkegaard thought that belief in God was based on an irrational “leap of faith,” often understood as a leap into the dark.

Camus’ account of Kierkegaard is wrong in more ways than one. To begin, it conflates belief in God with Christian belief in Christ. The latter does require a leap, and I will say something about what that means below. However, if we look at Socratic spirituality, as portrayed in Kierkegaard’s *Upbuilding Discourses* and in the pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, it is clear that Kierkegaard does not think that belief in God requires any kind of irrational leap. It requires only moral seriousness and an honest willingness to face seriously the task of becoming an authentic individual. Far from thinking that belief in God requires intellectual suicide, Kierkegaard’s view is one that refuses to take atheism seriously as an intellectual option. The atheist is rather seen as someone who has

either failed to develop his human capacities (his subjectivity) or is repressing the awareness of God he actually has but will not admit. The *Upbuilding Discourses* give us a picture of morally serious human persons who do not worry about the existence of God but worry a great deal about what it means to live in relation to a God. The God they encounter is one who is known immanently, through “recollection.” Kierkegaard chooses his words carefully, and the allusion to Platonic recollection is surely intentional.

In *Kierkegaard and Spirituality* I develop this account of Socratic spirituality at length for several reasons. One is that it shows the falsity of the portrait given by Camus. Another is that it shows that Kierkegaard thinks that there are forms of human existence outside of Christian faith that are morally serious and worthy of respect, which is surely one reason Kierkegaard has always found non-Christian readers who appreciate his thought. Finally, it is also clear that without the serious moral and religious concerns found in Socratic spirituality, human persons cannot even understand Christian faith. Socratic spirituality is not Christianity, but it makes possible the development of the kind of subjectivity that allows a person to see Christian faith as a live possibility.

What about Christian spirituality? As I have already said, Kierkegaard contrasts Christian spirituality with Socratic spirituality. The latter requires only immanent human capacities, though those capacities, known collectively as forms of subjectivity, must be actualized, and this is a strenuous and difficult process. However, Christian faith is something that cannot be achieved by human persons utilizing only their natural powers. It is something God must give to humans, and as a Christian Kierkegaard believes that God has chosen to make this gift possible



Anthony Vasquez: *Everyone Has a Seat at The Table*

through Jesus of Nazareth, understood as the God-man, the “Absolute Paradox,” who makes the forgiveness of sin possible through his life, death and resurrection. As I have tried to show in my earlier work, in calling the incarnation the absolute paradox, Kierkegaard does not mean that it is logically contradictory, but rather that it is something we cannot domesticate through any apologetic arguments. God has protected Christian faith from any attempt to make it something humans could come to know through their own immanent powers by revealing himself to us in a way that human reason cannot understand. The transition to faith is a leap in the sense that it cannot be achieved simply through human reasoning or willing.

If the central claims of Christian faith are above human reason, why does Kierkegaard also describe them sometimes as against reason? The answer lies in human sinfulness, understood as manifesting itself through pride and selfishness. The person who pridefully resists the recognition that he must depend on God for help will be offended by the claim that he must believe something that he could never come to know without a revelation from God. Kierkegaard holds that the paradoxicalness of faith poses the option of faith or offence. Neither passion (and both are forms of passion or subjectivity) is grounded in pure reason, but both reveal the character of the one making the leap.

However, what Kierkegaard’s later writings show is that the primary difficulties in becoming a Christian are not purely intellectual. Sinfulness manifests itself not merely as pride but also as selfishness. The Christian’s spirituality is developed, not merely through a relation to a God known through immanence, but the God known in history. To have faith in Christ is to be willing to become a follower of Christ, who poses a fundamental challenge to the world’s values and suffered crucifixion as a result. I can only be a genuine follower of Christ if I am willing to follow him by living a life of love for the neighbour (which means every person). Such a life requires self-denial. Although Kierkegaard admits



Theo van Hoytema: *Sneeuulandschap*

that Christianity has had positive influences on human culture in such ways as abolishing slavery and no longer seeing women merely as property, he does not think any human society can be identified with the kingdom of God that Jesus came to proclaim. A person who truly seeks to love the neighbour will at best seem eccentric, and at worst seem to be someone who undermines the values of his society. Thus, the true Christian must always be willing to suffer persecution for the sake of Christ, even if that Christian lives in a nominally Christian land. The dangerous rise of Christian nationalism in the US shows, I believe, that this element of Kierkegaard's message is as timely as ever.

Time does not allow me to discuss Kierkegaard's view of spiritlessness and what he calls demonic spirituality. However, I hope I have said enough to show that Kierkegaard thinks spirituality is not an optional or differential part of the human self. Being spiritual is not like being musical or athletic, a quality some possess but some do not. It is endemic to the human self. The only question is what form our spirituality will take.

My parting thought is this: For both Socratic spirituality and Christian spirituality, human existence is meant to be lived "before God," though Socratic spirituality is less clear about the nature of the God we are accountable to. Kierkegaard saw the fact that we are accountable to God as an incredible gift. For the God we are accountable to is a God of love, who wants only our good.

2 THE ACCOUNTABLE IMAGINATION: SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS CO-CREATION WITH CHRIST

Adrian Coates

Stephen Evans' *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence* is an insightful book, which helps us to understand accountability as a gift. All too often we see spirituality and the process of becoming a self as an autonomous act. Thus the corrective, which firmly situates spirituality in the context of relationality, is an important one: "We always 'relate ourselves to ourselves' through our relation to some 'other.' Spirituality goes hand in hand with relationality, and the content and quality of a person's spirituality reflect the content and quality of the relationships that define the self."¹



Zabier Egaña: *Interior of the Church of San Miguel Arcángel*

It is the *holistic* nature of the relationships that define the self that I would like to briefly probe, anchored in the pivotal role that the imagination plays in being human and becoming Christian. Human beings are not merely thinking things, as Evans points out, but we are embodied and affective beings, and it is the totality of who we are that enters into relationships that define the self.² Our passions drive us, and our sensory experience of the world informs our thought life in profound ways, as the emerging field of embodied cognition is showing.³ Evans mentions Kierkegaard's conviction that the decline of faith in modern intellectuals is not due to the rise of scientific knowledge or the

lack of evidence, but impoverished capacities.⁴ Along the lines of C. S. Lewis' description of "Men Without Chests," "The problem is not that our brains are too big, but that our imaginations are puny and shrunken and that our emotional

1. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 30.

2. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 82.

3. For an introduction to the field, see Lawrence Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

4. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 81.

capacities are impoverished. Kierkegaard uses the terms *inwardness* and *subjectivity* more or less interchangeably to refer to those areas of human life that need to be strengthened if we are to regain our ability to live spiritual lives.”⁵ In what follows, I simply want to underscore Evans’ point here, which cannot be emphasized enough, largely because our tendency remains to solve all of life’s problems (including spirituality) through technique and the application of means-ends rationality, all while vastly underestimating how we are shaped by embodied and affective interactions with the “others” in our worlds.

Kierkegaard has an important contribution to make precisely because he grappled with this holistic understanding of spirituality and the vital role that the imagination and passions play in the process of becoming human. So it is somewhat ironic that Hans Urs von Balthasar, a leading figure in the realm of theological aesthetics, would accuse him of driving a wedge between the aesthetic and the ethical-religious.⁶ Balthasar is not alone of course, but such shallow readings of Kierkegaard miss the point that there are both healthy and unhealthy ways of engaging the imagination and passions; Kierkegaard’s rejection of the former is important precisely because he understands the potency of this aspect of being human. When indulged in isolation, the free play of imagination merely produces fantasies that hinder self-development, for example. But harnessing the passions and imagination, when submitted to Christ, can also significantly contribute to the development of the self. This is exactly why Kierkegaard embraced the role of self-proclaimed poet-communicator, using pseudonyms, parables and indirect communication – he sought to provoke a subjective response – and it is also why we need to be careful of trying to distil his work into neat propositional expositions. Kierkegaard’s concern is not a theological treatise, but “the art of living,” and key to the art of living is the imagination.

To some, it may seem strange to talk about the imagination as core to being human and becoming Christian. This is a reflection of how we have limited our discussion of the imagination to children’s games and the fantastical, disconnected from everyday life. But the imagination is a powerful human faculty that allows us to envision that which is not currently present. It means that we can create solutions, design strategies and picture possibilities that do not yet exist.

5. C. Stephen Evans, “Living ‘Before God’: A Kierkegaardian View of Human Spirituality,” in *Psychology and Spiritual Formation in Dialogue: Moral and Spiritual Change in Christian Perspective*, ed. Thomas M. Crisp, Steven L. Porter and Gregg A. Ten Elshof (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 89.

6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Revelation and the Beautiful,” in *Explorations in Theology, Vol. 1: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 95–96.

But perhaps even more significantly, at its best, it is not disconnected from reality but offers a lens, or narrative, through which we make meaning of the actuality within which we find ourselves. It is a way of seeing, creating paradigms within which we make sense of the details of our days. On encountering the same set of sensory stimuli, one person may see an action as racially motivated, another not ... or someone may see an act as patriotism, while another perceives it as toxic nationalism. We “see as” based on the worlds that we imaginatively create (in relationship to others). This is why Kierkegaard describes the imagination as the “capacity for all capacities,” whatever of feeling, knowing and willing we experience are founded in the imagination.⁷

If, at its best, the imagination functions as a bridge between actuality and possibility, at its worst it is severed from reality, enabling the creation of fantastical identities and “worlds.” In Kierkegaard’s context, German Romanticism encouraged “living poetically” – the creation of self through the exploration of infinite



Zak Benjamin: *Toyland*

possibility. The end result, however, is not the discovery or creation of self but the despair of possibility and infinitude. The invented self is simply a hollow façade, lost amidst abstraction, disconnected from actuality. It is the consequence of making the imagination absolute, the aesthetic an end in itself, “aestheticism that negates actuality” as Sylvia Walsh describes it.⁸ Nearly thirty years ago now, Walsh wrote her insightful book, *Living Poetically*, and in the epilogue she suggested that Kierkegaard’s critique of the Romantic creation of self was more relevant than ever. I would suggest that it has only become more relevant since Walsh wrote that. We live in a society where social media facilitates the imaginative generation of invented personas and pseudo-realities. Facebook

7. Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 31.

8. Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 246.

and Instagram identities are too easily disconnected from actuality. But the key point here is, as Evans reminds us, “The self we are becoming is shaped by an ideal self that is a function of a relationship to something outside the self, something that is ‘other.’ No finite human is capable of inventing a self out of nothing.”⁹ The imagination does not create a self in isolation, but in the image of some criterion, whether real or imagined. Algorithms managing our interaction with online media are designed to serve the self, feeding the construction of this pseudo-reality, captivating the passions through visceral encounters on YouTube and sensationalist fake news, for instance. We live in a world of echo chambers and the church is not immune. Contemporary expressions of Christendom are as susceptible to idolatry as ever, whether that be under the guise of nationalism, celebrity or another form. The imagination *will* play a role in the creation of meaning, in self-development, the only question is whether we will acknowledge it as such or not.

All this to say that: the imagination is a God-given gift, which *will* impact our formation as it is shaped and formed by relationships to our idealized other. To become fully human, to become Christian, is to bring all of who we are, including our imaginations, into accountability to Christ. What does this mean? Considering the question briefly through two Kierkegaardian lenses is a helpful starting point: Christ as Pattern and Christ as Redeemer.

Firstly, Christ as Pattern, and true to the spirit of Kierkegaard, I invite you to take a moment to allow your imagination to be provoked by some of the linguistic images that Kierkegaard is working with. The description of Christ as “Prototype” (as Howard and Edna Hong translate it) or Christ as “Pattern” (as Walter Lowrie translates it) comes from Kierkegaard’s use of the Danish word *Forbilledet*, which is etymologically intriguing. Conceptually it is similar to the German equivalent, *Vorbild*, or the Afrikaans, *voorbeeld*. Often translated as “role model,” it literally translates as “before image” or “the image that goes before” which is why Frances Maughan-Brown translates it as “Archi-Image.”¹⁰

Alongside this we can hold another linguistic image or two. As Evans points out, for Kierkegaard, following Christ, or imitating Christ is a literal application of the Danish word *Efterfølger*, which is literally translated as “following after.”¹¹ Becoming Christian is, therefore, the imagination-fuelled process of following after the Archi-Image that goes before. For Kierkegaard, he wants to be very clear

9. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 65.

10. Frances Maughan-Brown, *The Lily’s Tongue: Figure and Authority in Kierkegaard’s Lily Discourses* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020), 112.

11. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 149.

that Christ did not come “to the world in order to give us subjects for erudite research. He came to the world to set the task, in order to leave a footprint [*Fodspor*, related to “spoor”] so that we would learn from him.”¹² Christ, the Archi-Image is not a concept, he is a person, who leaves a footprint, his imprint, his mark, his “spoor” on actuality, and the Christian task is to follow after his spoor.



Walter Hayn: *Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet*

This is not simply a cognitive endeavour; it is a whole-being process. Following spoor conjures up images of trackers, who are highly trained at attuning their whole beings to the signs, drawing on all their senses – sight, smell, touch, hearing, even taste (yes, even taste – apparently it is possible to taste how fresh elephant tracks are!).¹³ “Trackers themselves cannot read everything *in* the sand. Rather, they must be able to read *into* the sand ... Tracking is not strictly empirical, since it also involves the tracker’s imagination.”¹⁴ Our images of reality, our *ways of seeing* the right path to follow, rely on our imagination’s interpretation of the signs amidst our embodied existence in the world.

Yes, it is accurate to say that we should follow after, imitate the pattern of Christ, tracing his pattern with our very lives. But the visceral and tactile language of following after the spoor, the imprint of the Archi-Image, helps us to understand that the Christian life is an embodied one, which demands all of our senses, attuned to the actuality of Christ as he “plays in ten thousand places.” It is a call to allow our imaginations to be captured by the ideal of Christ as he lived, and lives, in actuality. This language is important because Kierkegaard is not raising an intellectual challenge. The task of spiritual formation demands holistic alignment of our whole being, not just intellectual assent, but affective and embodied attunement of our existence to the pattern of Christ in actuality. The accountable imagination is passionately absorbed by the reality of Christ, not for

12. Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 76–77.

13. Louis Liebenberg, *The Art of Tracking: The Origin of Science* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2001), 145.

14. Liebenberg, *The Art of Tracking: The Origin of Science*, v.

the sake of disinterested admiration, but for costly imitation.

We will always fall short, however. While attuning one's imagination to the Pattern of Christ cultivates a passionate longing and aspiration to imitate Christ in our everyday lives, we will always only be co-creators (or perhaps better, "sub-creators," to co-opt a term from J. R. R. Tolkien) with Christ the Redeemer in becoming a self. While Kierkegaard is critical of the role the imagination plays in Romantic poetic living, resulting in the fantastical creation of the self, he affirms a Christian mode of poetic living. Such poetic living joins in the work of the ultimate Poet (in true *poiesis*, we join the ultimate Maker), Christ the paradox, who unites the finite and infinite.

The accountable imagination is a submission of the imagination to the possibilities that *Christ* initiates. There is a fascinating passage in Kierkegaard's Master's Thesis, *The Concept of Irony*, where he alludes to a description of what Christian poetic living looks like:



Paul Klee: *The Lamb*

It is the humble response of "*artistic earnestness*" that comes to the aid of the divine in man ... that mutely and quietly *listens* to the voice of what is distinctive in individuality, detects its movements in order to let it really be available in the individual and to let the whole individuality develop *harmoniously* into a pliable form rounded off in itself" in order to "develop the seeds God himself has placed in man ... Here, in fact, the Christian comes to the aid of God, becomes, so to speak, his co-worker in completing the good work God himself has begun." [Italics added]¹⁵ The "artistic earnestness" of the disciplined imagination is a wholehearted and whole-beinged alignment to the work that Christ the Poet initiates in one's life. This demands careful cognitive, affective and embodied "listening," which results in "harmonious" co-creation of the self, in partnership with the Author of Life himself.

15. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 280.

Two final points in conclusion: Firstly, and of particular relevance to our contemporary world, being poetically composed by Christ is not a flight of fantasy amidst endless possibilities, but the becoming of a self grounded in the givenness of particular material actuality. As Kierkegaard puts it, “An individual who lets himself be poetically composed does have a definite given context into which he has to fit and thus does not become a word without meaning because it is wrenched out of its associations.”¹⁶ Being poetically composed by Christ takes place in actuality, amidst one’s specific and concrete context. But note that it is *not* a limitation of the self to the “despair of finitude,” to being “a copy, a number, a mass man.”¹⁷ Rather it is Christ emboldening the imagination, the discovery of one’s true name, the formation of a unique self, expressed within the concrete and particular.

Secondly, as Evans reminds us, this accountability to Christ is a *good* gift. Accountability is all too often seen as the antithesis of freedom. But this is patently false. Accountability to Christ is the gift of being named, of discovering a vocation, of imagining a possibility, *seeing* ourselves as the fullness that God created each of us to be. It is a good gift celebrated by the joy of co-creating with Christ – the realization of this possibility in actuality.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 283.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 34.

3 SPIRITUAL PANDEMICS AND KIERKEGAARDIAN CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

J. Aaron Simmons

It is strange how events that may be not much more than mundane occurrences hardly worth remembering in the grand scheme of things end up being inspirationally significant to others. On February 16, 1970, Steve Evans watched a movie (a Western film to be specific) and then tried to go to bed. Yet, having just watched so many people die on screen, he was haunted by questions that wouldn't admit of easy answers. Evans recounts that evening as follows:

That night, after the light on the tube dwindled away, I lay back in my bed and stared at the darkened ceiling. I felt the panic of a man in a car out of control, hurtling toward a precipice on a dark night, the steering locked, the brakes useless. Ahead loomed a plunge into an unknown abyss. In view of my death, what is the meaning of life? What meaning can time have? (Evans, 1971, p. 10).

Evans penned this account of the events of that night six years before I was even born. And yet, when I first read his words in 2002, while in my first year at Vanderbilt University's Ph.D. programme in philosophy, I remember vividly feeling like I was listening to someone say exactly what I was feeling regarding my own struggle to make my life significant.



Ferdinand Holder: *The Disillusioned One*

Perhaps we feel more acutely the pressure of meaning making in our youth precisely because we are aware that we have not yet made the decisions that will turn out to have defined our existence. When Evans wrote those words in his book, *Despair, A Moment or a Way of Life: An Existential Quest for Hope*, he was only 22. Incidentally, that is the same age that Søren Kierkegaard was when he wrote his famous journal entry of August 1, 1835 in which he also struggles to figure out what to do with his life such that his life won't end up

being wasted on trivialities. Announcing themes that will end up being crucial to his entire authorship, the young Kierkegaard cries out that what he must find is “a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*” (Kierkegaard 1996, p. 32). Kierkegaard goes on to note that gaining mere objective knowledge would ultimately be meaningless “if it had no deeper meaning for myself and for *my life*” (Kierkegaard 1996, p. 32). He then says that the goal is to lead “a *completely human life* and not just a life of *knowledge*” (Kierkegaard 1996, p. 33). But how to do so? Along with the 22-year-old Evans, the 22-year-old Kierkegaard here expresses his own desire for something more than what can be listed on a resumé. Frustrated with what we might now refer to as the pre-professionalization of higher education, where things have value only if they directly contribute to one’s midcareer income, Kierkegaard shows more existential awareness than the vast majority of contemporary university administrators when he acknowledges that he has to embrace the importance of subjectivity as the key to what matters. The task, he realizes, is to ground himself “on something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I am as it were grown into the divine and cling fast to it even though the whole world falls apart. *This, you see, is what I need, and this is what I strive for*” (Kierkegaard 1996, p. 33).

Having taught 18 to 22-year-old students for nearly 20 years, I admit that I have never had any who wrote like the 22-year-old Søren, or who published books on the finer details of existential philosophy like the 22-year-old Steve, but now at 44, two years older than Kierkegaard was when he died, I admit that I frequently return to the wisdom of these young men to help me navigate what it means to live faithfully where I am. Interestingly, I first read Evans’ book when I was 24. (Thankfully I didn’t realize how young he had been when he wrote it or I might have just given up on my academic career before it even started!) I read, and still read, Evans for the same reason that I read, and still read Kierkegaard: *because we are who we are becoming*. Unless I take myself up here and now on purpose and live into the task of meaning making in light of my vulnerable finitude, then I risk becoming the old man that Henry David Thoreau warns about: a person who comes to the end of his life and only then realizes that he has not yet lived. In my personal case, as a fourth generation pentecostal, the task of “becoming a Christian,” as Kierkegaard puts it, continues to press upon me daily because I can only strive to become a Christian by attempting to live as one here and now.

When I finally met Steve Evans in person many years later, his personal grace and generosity fitted well with the towering figure, “C. Stephen Evans,”

whom I had built up in my own imagination for years. His book, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, continues his long-standing engagement with Kierkegaard and his record of exceptionally clear accounts of why Kierkegaard continues to matter to all people, whether at 22, 44 or 75, who desire to become faithful to the way of Christ, as opposed to simply affirming correct propositions about theism.

Evans' account of Kierkegaardian spirituality is actually deeply consistent with the early struggle of the 22-year-old Steve who was searching for answers to questions that seemed to be overwhelming in the dark of night, when we own up to the aloneness and anxiety that define so much of the human condition. In brief, according to Kierkegaard, what it means to be spiritual (or, better, to exist as "spirit") is to exist such that "a human self is therefore something that one must become" (Evans 2019, p. 7). As Evans explains, "humans, if they are to be spiritual creatures, must be temporal creatures, who become themselves through a process" (Evans 2019, p. 7). This task of becoming means that one's own choices "make a difference" (Evans 2019, p. 7). In line with the frequent tensions displayed in existential awareness, Evans' explanation of Kierkegaard's account is deeply life giving because it means that we are not robots; what we do matters and it matters that we take seriously what we do. However, it is also deeply troubling because if our choices make a difference, then we must face up to the reality that we might choose poorly. Yet, the task remains. We are who we are becoming. So, the question is: *Who am I?*



Imré Amos: *Double Portrait*

For Kierkegaard, there are a variety of ways that we might answer this question as reflective of the ways that we can inhabit our spirituality. The two positive options, in contrast to "spiritlessness," are what Evans terms "Socratic spirituality" and "Christian spirituality." Both options receive significant development in Kierkegaard's authorship and Evans carefully (and convincingly) demonstrates that Socratic spirituality, although important, is not the highest available to an existing individual. Instead, akin to the distinction between natural theology

and revealed theology (see Evans 2019, p. 51), Socratic spirituality speaks to what it means to be “accountable” to something/someone beyond mere worldly horizons of power. As Evans notes, Socratic spirituality is still trying to figure out what it means to live “before God,” but where “God” is not defined in any rigorously determinate sense. Alternatively, Christian spirituality is more specific and speaks to God as historically incarnate in Jesus. Christian spirituality is not just about standing before God, but about what it means to imitate Christ as the paradigm for existence itself.

I think that Evans’ analysis of Kierkegaard’s dual conception of spirituality is incredibly helpful for contemporary Christian living for a variety of reasons, but there is one area that I think is especially significant for where we find ourselves currently: *the importance of embodied humility as key to the Christian practice of neighbour-love.*

Famously, toward the end of his life, Kierkegaard engages in what is referred to as the “Attack on Christendom,” but prior to the explicitly polemical turn in the last years of his life, he had long attempted to advocate the need to restore Christianity to Christendom. I think that Kierkegaard remains right in this assessment, though what counts as “Christendom” will require a bit of tweaking. As Evans explains, for Kierkegaard, Christendom referred to the normative association between one’s social identity and one’s Christian identity. Although that particular conception is fairly rare in our generally secular age (and here I am thinking of Charles Taylor’s notion of secularity), there is an increasing trend toward nationalism as a manifestation of one’s Christianity. I think that such “Christian” nationalism is the contemporary version of what Kierkegaard opposed in his attack on Christendom – and, as Evans has even suggested, it might be best described as a manifestation of what Kierkegaard calls the “demonic.” In America this potentially “demonic” tendency toward a modern-day Christendom has, in recent years, been directly associated with Trumpism, but the specifics are less important than the broad strokes by which it presents Christian identity not as an embrace of Christian suffering, costly grace and the realities of lowliness, but instead as a triumphalist presentation of one’s own social identity as normative for all others.

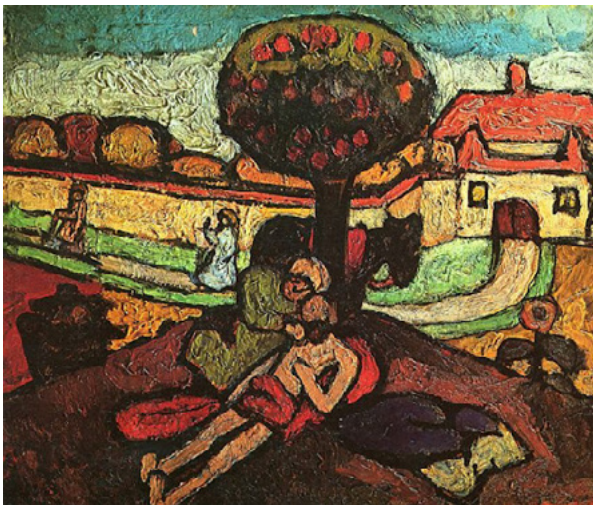
Far from what Kierkegaard means by the striving essential to the church militant (see Evans 2019, p. 112), contemporary Christian nationalism is a narrative focused on religious superiority, rather than spiritual humility. At its most basic, it is a failure to view God as nurturing Love, but instead as authoritative Judge (see Sanders 2020). Yet, as Evans rightly notes, “to give up faith in God’s love is

not merely to break faith with God, but also to break faith with humanity. To doubt that God is love is essentially to give up the belief in the value of human life" (Evans 2019, p. 122). Although the pandemic has certainly been marked by incredible moments of neighbour-love, as millions have sacrificed for others in myriad ways every single day, it has also been all too frequently characterized by a failure of Christian spirituality by far too many who call themselves "Christians." Rather than seeking to walk humbly before God and doing justice for others (see Micah 6:8), too many "Christians" have instead chosen to thump their chests and appeal to religious freedom as an excuse for not wearing masks and following public health guidelines. Rather than seeing the faces of the millions of sick and dying neighbours, they chose to clench their fists in anger about having their lives interrupted. In America, specifically, the data clearly reveals that white Evangelicals are consistently likely to believe in conspiracy theories, resist COVID vaccinations, oppose mask wearing, and generally downplay the seriousness of the pandemic (despite over 600,000 deaths in America alone). Regardless of one's political orientation, this is not data that highlights the humility of what Kierkegaard terms "the single individual." Instead, it presents an egoism that sees others as obstacles who stand in one's way, rather than a broken people who all stand equal before God.

Following Evans' account of Kierkegaard's notion of Christian spirituality, I want to suggest that the actual pandemic has highlighted what I will term a *spiritual pandemic* whereby there is an increasing sickness of the spirit such that one thinks that there is no "relation to another" that matters unless that other is someone who thinks, acts and votes like them. Evans is clear that Christian spirituality is such that "I must seek to develop. . . a character in which I practice self-denial and continually seek to put the well-being of others ahead of my own" (Evans 2019, p. 131). But this spiritual humility and other-oriented love is definitely not reflected by those who would willingly undermine democratic society in the name of their own perceived interests (viz., as displayed in the January 6 insurrection). I think that one of the most prominent realities of this spiritual pandemic is the phenomenon of epistemic isolation such that one only has to interact with others like oneself. As data on group polarization demonstrates, epistemic isolation will almost always lead to a normalization of the most extreme views on offer within the group. White Evangelicals, for example, were far more likely than non-Evangelical Republicans to say that most of their friends were going to vote for Trump. Accordingly, Christendom has returned in the guise of the Christian obviousness of one's own political orientation, and uncritical

allegiance to the power structures of that orientation. Neither Trump nor Biden is God, but it is not clear that they both equally admit of that fact.

Kierkegaard's notion of Christian spirituality continues to press upon us all in a context in which far too many "Christians" fail to strive to become Christian because they think that they are already there. Rather than acknowledging that in relation to God we are always in the wrong, we find far too many who think that because of their relation to God, they are always right. Describing the humility that Christian spirituality invites, Evans rightly suggests that "Kierkegaard does not think that short of eternity any human person can finish the task of dying to self once and for all" (Evans 2019, p. 178). Yet, in a time of a spiritual pandemic, the task of dying to self is seemingly replaced with callous indifference to others. As such, the category of neighbour gets transformed from a logic of radical hospitality (as exemplified by the Good Samaritan), into a logic of narrow restrictive relationality to those who share one's own religion, citizenship and political commitments.



Paula Modersohn-Becker: *Good Samaritan*

If I am right about the spiritual pandemic in which Christendom reemerges due to egoistic nationalism and epistemic insularity, then perhaps there are reasons to be just a bit more sympathetic to Kierkegaard's own intensification of his critique at the end of his life. I think that Evans is right to

say that there are some troubling dynamics therein such that Kierkegaard starts speaking in hyperbolic misanthropic vocabulary, but maybe we can find reasons to forgive such extreme language as we struggle to figure out the right language to describe so many Christians who seem more interested in their own comfort than in the continued realities of systemic racism, their own narrative than in the risks attendant to democratic life, and their own superiority than in the humility

exemplified by a kenotic God. Indeed, my favourite books by Kierkegaard are those written near the end of his life when he was struggling with what it meant to continue to become a Christian while also struggling with how to stand against so much that passed under the name of “Christianity.” Books such as *For Self-Examination*, *Judge for Yourself*, *Practice in Christianity*, and *Without Authority* are all ones to which I have turned frequently as I wrestle with essential existential questions (Who am I?) while also trying to live into the task of Christian spirituality by imitating Christ in my interactions with myself and others.

Kierkegaard was right about the importance of becoming to selfhood. So long as we are alive, we are never finished with the task of existence. Yet, far too often, as we age we forget our 22-year-old selves who can’t sleep after a movie because of the awareness of the weight of reality. Instead, strapped with mortgages, health care premiums, and an ever-present (and often false) sense that if we just work hard enough things will get better, we spend our lives lamenting that we are not who we had hoped we would become. But, all the while, we forget Kierkegaard’s reminder that we must not be done with life before life is done with us.



Ernst Barlach: *The Writing Prophet (Saint John on Patmos)*

I read Evans and Kierkegaard at 24, I am still reading them at 44, and Lord willing, I expect that I will continue to read them at 75. But, to *read* Kierkegaard is not enough. We must allow Kierkegaard to invite us to read ourselves. Or, we might say that Christian *practice* is the goal, not Christian *perfect*! We must continue to return to Evans’ questions: *What is*

the meaning of life? What meaning can time have?

In hope, in humility, with Evans and Kierkegaard, I think that the answer to both questions depends upon our willingness not to think that we, or our chosen political leaders, are the standards of such meaning. As Evans explains, *accountability* is the meaning of human existence because accountability to God and others is not something that admits of temporal finality. Christian spirituality

means that we are never done with the task of becoming Christian. That might sound exhausting, but in the face of spiritual pandemics, it also means that a return to health is also always possible. But, just like the global pandemic that we are still facing, such health will only become a reality when we stop thinking that our situation can be detached from the situation of others (e.g., “American First” philosophy needs a good dash of the Sermon on the Mount), and when we admit that uncertainty is not a cause for distrust (e.g., science, like life, is messy). In humility, may we walk forward together. By the grace of God, may that walk be filled with joy that comes from sharing in each other’s sufferings.

At 22, Steve Evans imagined what it might be like to be old:

Time the jailer drags me relentlessly along, kicking and struggling. His road leads always in one direction—age and death. Just as I now look back on my boyhood, so someday I shall look back on my young manhood, perhaps with regret, perhaps with nostalgia. But someday, the jailer willing, I shall be old without choosing to be old and without possibility of returning to my youth (Evans 1971, p. 10).

Time only moves in one direction, but spiritual becoming does not. We are not guaranteed things will work out the way that we hope. Spiritlessness always threatens. Unless we hearken to Kierkegaard’s warning that our very assumed Christian identity stands as an obstacle to our becoming a Christian, we risk missing God in the eyes of the widow, the orphan and the stranger because we mistakenly believed that God could only appear as a President.

I am glad that the 22-year-old Steve was invested in his own spiritual becoming to such a degree that he recorded the mundane experiences whereby he struggled to figure out who it mattered that we try to become. I can’t speak for others, but I can testify that in 2002 there was a 24-year-old graduate student who very much needed to see that it was ok to wrestle with what too often gets presented as obvious within Christianity. I can also testify that in 2021 there is a 44-year-old professor and sitting president of the Søren Kierkegaard Society (USA) who continues to need the example of Evans as a reader of Kierkegaard in order to remind himself that our decisions continue to matter, hope remains, and spiritual health is possible even when sickness abounds.

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4

THE KNIGHT OF FAITH: JUST WHAT DOES HE OR SHE LOOK LIKE? A RESPONSE TO C. STEPHEN EVANS' KIERKEGAARD AND SPIRITUALITY

Craig G. Bartholomew

I am very grateful to Stephen for doing this event with us. Stephen has played a major role in the retrieval of Kierkegaard as a profound Christian thinker who is surprisingly and extraordinarily relevant to today. I am so glad you chose Kierkegaard as your focus and not Kant!

Within the Evangelical, Protestant tradition many of us have woken up to the need, indeed the necessity, of a deep spirituality that will sustain us through life's journey. As we have sought out deep wells adequate for the vicissitudes of life, understandably we have drunk deeply from the vast tradition of Catholic spirituality. I myself continue to benefit greatly from that tradition. However, one is aware that there are many different species within the Western mystical tradition and, if we are not to abandon our Evangelicalism, which I, for one, have no desire to do, then hard work needs to be done in appropriating the mystical tradition so that Scripture retains its premier place. In the process of sifting the mystical tradition we also need to revisit potential nodes for Christian spirituality within the Protestant tradition, and Evans' book confronts us with the possibility that one such node is Kierkegaard. And what a rich node it turns out to be. In this short paper I will confine myself to six points about why attention to Kierkegaard on spirituality is a fertile node.

1. Because of his Dynamic View of What it Means to be Human

In theology and philosophy debates about what it means to be human often centre around whether the human person is constituted of body and soul, or body, soul and spirit, or – in philosophy – whether a person has a soul. There is value in such debates but at times one feels they may have lost contact with reality.

Kierkegaard helpfully introduces into our understanding of what it means to be human the idea of *becoming*. As Evans notes, "A human self is therefore something that one must become, not something that one is by virtue of being



Photograph by Mary Abma

born or that happens 'as a matter of course.'"¹ Again: "The heart of genuine spirituality, according to Kierkegaard, lies in seeing human existence as a task that is assigned by God to every individual."² A moment's reflection will alert us to how deeply this connects with the reality of our lives. Try and explain yourself to someone, and I doubt

you will use the language of body and soul; instead you will tell your story using narrative to explain how you have *become* who you are.

2. Because of his View that the Core of our Becoming is Relational

Years ago as a young lecturer in South Africa I developed a model of the human person as relational at our core with our being constituted by four major relationships: to God, to our neighbour, to ourselves and to the world. As Evans shows, Kierkegaard articulates a sophisticated view of our relationality, and makes relationality central to being human and to spirituality. When I have spoken about this topic, audiences sometimes wonder if we really do have a relationship with ourselves. There is, of course, biblical precedent for this because we are called to "love ... ourselves," and intriguingly Kierkegaard develops this insight with significant nuance: "So it is literally true that a human self is an activity that 'relates itself to itself.' It projects its actual self, which is a synthesis, toward its future self, the synthesis it wants to become."³

For Kierkegaard, humans are "spirit," and thus just as to be human is to be relational, so also to be human is to be spiritual. "Spirituality goes hand in hand with relationality, and the content and quality of a person's spirituality reflect the content and quality of the relationships that define the self."⁴ This is part of the *givenness* of our humanity, and is thus inescapable. Spirituality is consequently interwoven with our relationality, so that, for example, one cannot be mature spiritually, and dreadful relationally. As "spirit" we have relative autonomy and

1. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Existence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 21.

2. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 7.

3. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 25-6.

4. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 30-1.

are genuinely free agents within our limits, so that while we are all relational and spiritual, *how* we are relational and spiritual is, as it were, up for grabs. In Evans' words there is an ontological and normative aspect to spirituality; in the language of Al Wolters' *Creation Regained*, there is both structure and direction. Ontology and structure are given; norms and direction are things we respond to.

3. Because of his View that Our Primary Relationship is With God

As Evans points out Kierkegaard is not unique in his view of human beings as becoming. In his view of spirit and becoming he may be influenced, for example, by Hegel. Nietzsche also held a view of humans as becoming, as does the most read German philosopher today, Sloterdijk. This is evident in the title of one of Sloterdijk's books, namely *You Must Change Your Life*. What sets Kierkegaard's view of becoming apart is his insistence that the primary relationship through which we become a self is the Christian God who has come to us in Jesus. For Kierkegaard, because of how we have been created, humans always attend to something higher than themselves as a compass for their becoming.

The centrality of God transforms Kierkegaard's and our notion of becoming. If you want a sense of what happens to Kierkegaard's philosophy when God is removed I suggest you read Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*. With God in the foreground, *accountability* or what I like to call *response-ability* becomes the key to Christian spirituality: "For Kierkegaard, therefore, spirituality requires a quality that I call 'accountability,' the virtue that is present when a person is grateful for the task God assigns, and understands that being accountable to God is a gift."⁵ In an age of hyperautonomy the very words "accountability" and "responsibility" sound offensive. However, seen through the lens of our creatureliness and God's holy love they are just what we need to become selves.

4. Because of his Icon of the Knight of Faith

In a delightful book, *From Despair to Faith: The Spirituality of Søren Kierkegaard*, Christopher Barnett argues that Kierkegaard is by no means opposed to art, but uses it to represent faith, and Barnett speaks of Kierkegaard's "icons of faith."⁶ Barnett uses Jean-Luc Marion's definition of the icon: "The icon

5. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 7.

6. Christopher B. Barnett, *From Despair to Faith: The Spirituality of Søren Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

regards us – it *concerns* us, in that it allows the intention of the invisible to occur visibly.”⁷ In two delightful chapters Barnett discusses icons of nature and icons of the Bible.

What I want to suggest is that Kierkegaard also creates his own icons, one of which is the evocative figure of the *knight of faith*. The knight of faith exemplifies the telos of our becoming. Before looking at how Kierkegaard thinks of this knight, we might pause and see what images the expression conjures up in our own minds. De Silentio comments,



Edvard Munch: *The Haymaker*

But if I knew where a knight of faith lived, I would travel on foot to him, for this marvel occupies me absolutely. I would not leave him for a second, I would watch him every minute to see how he made the movements; I would consider myself taken care of for life and would divide my time between watching him and practicing myself, and thus spend all my time in admiring him. As I said before, I have not found anyone like that;

meanwhile, I may very well imagine him. Here he is. The acquaintance is made, I am introduced to him. The instant I first lay eyes on him, I set him apart at once; I jump back, clap my hands, and say half aloud, “Good Lord, is this the man, is this really the one—he looks just like a tax collector!” But this is indeed the one. I move a little closer to him, watch his slightest movement to see if it reveals a bit of heterogeneous optical telegraphy from the infinite, a glance, a facial expression, a gesture, a sadness, a smile that would betray the infinite in its heterogeneity with the finite. No! I examine his figure from top to toe to see if there may not be a crack through which the infinite would peek. No! He is solid all the way through. His stance? It is vigorous, belongs entirely to finitude; no spruced-up burgher walking out to Fresberg on a Sunday afternoon treads the earth more solidly. He belongs entirely to the world; no bourgeois philistine could belong to it more. Nothing is detectable of that distant

7. Barnett, *From Despair to Faith*, 82. Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 19.

and aristocratic nature by which the knight of the infinite is recognized. He finds pleasure in everything, takes part in everything, and every time one sees him participating in something particular, he does it with an assiduousness that marks the worldly man who is attached to such things. He attends to his job. To see him makes one think of him as a pen-pusher who has lost his soul to Italian bookkeeping, so punctilious is he. Sunday is for him a holiday. He goes to church. No heavenly gaze or any sign of the incommensurable betrays him; if one did not know him, it would be impossible to distinguish him from the rest of the crowd, for at most his hearty and powerful singing of the hymns proves that he has good lungs. In the afternoon, he takes a walk to the woods. He enjoys everything he sees, the swarms of people, the new omnibuses, the Sound. Encountering him on Strandveien, one would take him for a mercantile soul enjoying himself. He finds pleasure in this way, for he is not a poet, and I have tried in vain to lure the poetic incommensurability out of him. Toward evening, he goes home, and his gait is as steady as a postman's. On the way, he thinks that his wife surely will have a special hot meal for him when he comes home—for example, roast lamb's head with vegetables. If he meets a kindred soul, he would go on talking all the way to Østerport about this delicacy with a passion befitting a restaurant operator. It so happens that he does not have four shillings to his name, and yet he firmly believes that his wife has this delectable meal waiting for him. If she has, to see him eat would be the envy of the elite and an inspiration to the common man, for his appetite is keener than Esau's.⁸

What is truly remarkable about this description of a knight of faith is that he is fully human. Hans Rookmaker used to ask his students: Why (to what end) does God save us? You should try this with your students! Rookmaker's answer: To make us fully human. Kierkegaard's portrayal of the knight of faith performs this insight iconically; it allows the intention of the invisible (God) to become visible and to reflect back on us. This is truly good news.



Nikos Pirosmanni: *A Fisherman*

8. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983), 38-41.

5. Because of his Attention to the Complex Dynamics of Becoming

Evangelicals have realised that a good marriage does not happen automatically, especially today. Hence we have premarital counselling, marriage weekends, recognise the need for therapy, etc. Alas, we seem to continue to think that a rich relationship with God getting deeper as the years pass happens automatically after conversion. Of course it does not, and we need just as much help with the “mechanics” of spirituality as we do with marriage. This is what makes the mystical tradition so very attractive for it attends in detail to the spiritual journey and draws on centuries of the experience of Christians.

Who would have thought that a book with the following title would exemplify this deeper analysis from a Protestant perspective: *The Sickness Unto Death* by Johannes Climacus, a rigorous and deep analysis of despair as a failure to become the self God intended. One regrets that the longer book Kierkegaard intended to write, *Thoughts That Cure Radically, Christian Healing*, was never completed, but as Evans demonstrates what we do have is a profound excavation of despair in its many different forms from a Christian perspective. In contemporary Christian spirituality this reminds me of Martin Laird's extensive and profoundly practical analysis of depression and spirituality in his trilogy. Indeed, a great project would be to bring Kierkegaard and Laird into dialogue with one another.

6. Because he sees Scripture as Indispensable to Christian Spirituality

In some mysticism God is to be found through the descent into the self. If this means that we encounter God primarily through our hearts rather than our minds then I agree with it. However, a concern of mine is that the Bible gets lost sight of through this descent into the self. This is not a mistake Kierkegaard makes. “For Kierkegaard, the primary means whereby a Christian hears God speak is through Scripture. It is indeed God's word to us.”⁹

Kierkegaard is one of only two philosophers I know of whose work you cannot publish without a Scripture index. We need to attend to Scripture to hear God's address to us today if we are to become our-selves, and this calls for a particular way of attending to the Bible. Kierkegaard is particularly fond of James, and he develops from this letter the metaphor of the Bible as a mirror. “Kierkegaard interprets James as saying that the Bible can function like a mirror, in which

9. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 213.

people can come to see themselves as they really are.”¹⁰ It is insufficient to look at the mirror; we need to look *into* the mirror in order to see ourselves as we truly are. As Kierkegaard’s predecessor Hamann would say, Scripture interprets ourselves to ourselves and helps us to see the world for what it is. We never take leave of the Bible; it remains indispensable to our ongoing journey of becoming. In his *Repetition*, Kierkegaard has an evocative reflection on how “he” reads Job:

If I did not have Job! ... I do not read him as one reads another book, with the eyes, but I lay the book, as it were, on my heart and read it with the eyes of the heart, in a Clairvoyance interpreting the specific points in most diverse ways. ... I take the book to bed at night with me. Every word by him is food and clothing and healing for my wretched soul. ... Have you really read Job? ... Nowhere in the world has the passion of anguish found such expression. ... At night I can have all the lights burning, the whole house illuminated. Then I stand up and read in a loud voice, almost shouting, some passage by him. ... Although I have read the book again and again, each word remains new to me. ... Like an inebriate, I imbibe all the intoxication of passion little by little, until by this prolonged sipping I become almost unconscious in drunkenness.



William Blake: *Job's Evil Dreams* (Detail)

10. Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality*, 213.

