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THE KNIGHT OF FAITH

Robert Merrihew Adams

The essay is about the "Preliminary Expectoration" of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. It argues that "the absurd" there refers primarily to the practical paradox that in faith (so it is claimed) one must simultaneously renounce and gladly accept a loved object. In other words it is about a problem of detachment as a feature of religious life. The paper goes on to interpret, and discuss critically, the views expressed in the book about both renunciation (infinite resignation) and the nature of faith.

One of the many attractions of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is its tantalizing talk of "the absurd." "The movement of faith," we are told, "must continually be made by virtue of the absurd" (p. 37).¹ The knight of faith "does not do even the slightest thing except by virtue of the absurd" (p. 40). He also thinks one might do a great thing by virtue of the absurd: "by faith," he tells the resigned lover of the unattainable princess, "by faith you will get her by virtue of the absurd" (p. 50). What is "the absurd" by which all this is done? Is there a power in absurdity, wonderfully brought to light (or barely to the edge of light) by Kierkegaard? Is absurdity actually a ground of belief, contrary to our usual assumptions? And what indeed is absurd—not just strange, improbable, or tragic, but truly absurd—in the story Kierkegaard tells us about Abraham? What is it that Johannes de Silentio, the fictitious "author" of the book, thinks he cannot understand about Abraham?

I offer here a reading of the "Preliminary Expectoration" of *Fear and Trembling*, and some reflections on it, so read. I write, not as a Kierkegaard scholar (I do not know Danish, for example), but only as one who has lived with the book, and thought and taught about it, for many years. And the present paper is about only a part of the book, a "preliminary" part. We shall not get to the famous "teleological suspension of the ethical." Our concern will be with "infinite resignation" and faith as forms of religious life. But I begin with the idea of the absurd.

1. *The Absurd*

What is absurd here? I ask again. The teleological suspension of the ethical will be presented as absurd (p. 56); but that is not the focus of the "Preliminary Expectoration," and the movement of faith, which Abraham makes by



virtue of the absurd (p. 37), is not the movement by which he sacrifices Isaac but the movement by which he gets him back (p. 49). Likewise it is not the resignation or sacrificing of Isaac that Johannes de Silentio finds hardest to understand. Though “the infinite movement of resignation” is difficult, says Johannes, “I can also perceive that it can be done. The next [movement] amazes me, my brain reels, for, after having made the movement of resignation, then by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get one’s desire totally and completely—that is over and beyond human powers, that is a marvel” (p. 47f.). We may therefore be inclined to infer that “the absurd” is to be identified with Abraham’s faith that he will keep Isaac in the end. This interpretation is supported by the statement that “it certainly was absurd that God, who required [the sacrifice] of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement” (p. 35f.).

There is an important objection to this reading, however. For we are assured that “the absurd...is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen” (p. 46). And ‘improbable, unexpected, unforeseen’ seem exactly the terms to describe the chain of events by which Abraham gets to keep Isaac, provided we accept the story’s assumptions about a God who speaks, or sends angels, to Abraham. Perhaps Kierkegaard (or Johannes) supposes that the (real or apparent) inconsistency in God’s commands to Abraham is not merely improbable, but an absolute impossibility, being inconsistent with the essential constancy of the divine nature. Perhaps; but this explanation of the absurdity fails to satisfy, for two reasons. (1) The apparent inconstancy is no more at variance with the background theology presupposed in the book than the initial command to sacrifice Isaac is. It therefore provides insufficient motivation for focusing on the *sparing* of Isaac as specially involving the absurd. (2) The claim of Genesis, that God was “tempting” or testing Abraham, which receives its emphasis in Kierkegaard’s retelling of the story, offers an explanation in which both of the mutually contradictory commands serve a rational function in relation to an underlying unity of divine purpose. If such an explanation is accepted, as it seems to be by our author, God’s rescinding of the command to sacrifice Isaac can hardly be more than improbable and unforeseen.

Of course Abraham, climbing Mount Moriah, does not know that God is only testing him.² Even if there is no inconsistency in what God must actually do if Isaac is to be spared, there may be contradiction in Abraham’s beliefs. And in fact it is not hard to identify mutually contradictory beliefs that Kierkegaard’s Abraham appears to hold. We are told that “he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him” (p. 35). I have not found an explicit statement that he also (and inconsistently) believed that Isaac would really be demanded of him, that he would be deprived of Isaac; but we can hardly understand the story otherwise. Indeed Kierkegaard seems to think it impor-

tant for Abraham to believe to the last possible moment that he is losing Isaac; why else would it be a disaster “if he had happened to spot the ram before drawing the knife” (p. 22)? So there does seem to be a contradiction, and hence a real absurdity, in Abraham’s system (or non-system) of beliefs. But why must it be so? Why is believing this contradiction essential to Abraham’s role as knight of faith, as Kierkegaard (or Johannes) clearly believes it to be?

It should also be noted that it is Abraham’s behavior, perhaps even more than his beliefs, that Johannes finds hard to understand (pp. 34-38). It is “the movements of faith” that Johannes cannot perform (p. 37f.). And this seems to be something that he cannot *do*, much more than something that he cannot believe. “[B]y my behavior,” he says, “I would have spoiled the whole story, for if I had gotten Isaac again, I would have been in an awkward position. What was easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me—once again to be happy with Isaac!” (p. 35).

This seems a strange thing for Johannes to say; yet I believe the main key to his conception of “the absurd” is to be found right at this point. Casting himself in the role of a “knight of infinite resignation” who has given up a princess whom he loves above all else in the world, Johannes declares that he would be unable to receive her back again:

By my own strength I cannot get the least little thing that belongs to finitude, for I continually use my strength in resigning everything. By my own strength I can give up the princess,...but by my own strength I cannot get her back again, for I use all my strength in resigning. On the other hand, by faith, says that marvelous knight, by faith you will get her by virtue of the absurd. But this movement I cannot make (p. 49f.).

Why can’t Johannes, in this imagined situation, make the movement of faith? Because his spiritual power is entirely, and “continually,” employed in the opposite direction, making the movement of resignation. While he is using all his strength to give up the princess, it would be inconsistent to accept her back. That taking back of what one is still giving up with all one’s force of decision is a practical rather than a theoretical contradiction. It is, I take it, “the absurd” by virtue of which the knight of faith says the princess is to be won (and by virtue of which Abraham gets Isaac back with joy). And Johannes cannot do it.

Other statements in the book confirm this reading.

So I can perceive [declares Johannes] that it takes strength and energy and spiritual freedom to make the infinite movement of resignation; I can also perceive that it can be done. The next [movement] amazes me, my brain reels, for, after having made the movement of resignation, then by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get one’s desire totally and completely—that is over and beyond human powers, that is a marvel (p. 47f.).

Here an impossibility is asserted that is absolute in relation to human powers.

And the main obstacle to the satisfaction of one's desires appears to be one's own "movement of resignation"; no external obstacle is mentioned here, at any rate. A similar view of what is astonishing about Abraham is expressed in the statement that

it is great to give up one's desire, but it is greater to hold fast to it after having given it up; it is great to lay hold of the eternal, but it is greater to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up (p. 18).

There is an essential point, however, which is not reflected in the two passages I have just quoted, inasmuch as they speak of getting or holding the temporal *after* giving it up.³ For if one first gives up something and then later takes it back, there is no paradox in this sequence of "movements." Johannes locates "the absurd" more precisely when he declares that he cannot take back the princess because he "continually" uses all his strength in resigning. The absurd enters the picture because the movement of faith does not end the movement of resignation, but must be made simultaneously with it. That this is part of the conception of faith in the book is confirmed by the statement that the knight of faith "has made and at every moment is making the movement of infinity" (p. 40)—by which, in the context, is clearly meant the movement of infinite resignation. Why this must be so, will be explored more fully below; here we may say simply that if Abraham stopped making the movement of resignation in order to make the movement of faith, he would nullify his sacrifice.

We can now explain why Abraham must believe a contradiction. Believing "that God would not demand Isaac of him" is essential to the movement of faith. But believing that he would in fact be deprived of Isaac is seen as important to making the movement of resignation fully real. The contradiction in belief, however, can hardly be more than an *expression* of what is fundamentally "the absurd." It cannot be the essence of it. For after they have sacrificed the ram and descended the mountain, Abraham can hardly have continued to believe that he would be deprived of Isaac; but Kierkegaard surely does not conceive of him as ceasing at that point to make the movement of infinite resignation. That would spoil everything. The practical contradiction in life orientations must therefore continue after the contradiction in beliefs ceases.

If this interpretation is correct, then in these introductory portions of *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard is concerned with a problem that arises as a serious issue about the religious life in more than one tradition. For some sort of *detachment* from "the world," or from finite things, or even (for Buddhism) from everything, is an important goal for many religious traditions. Yet it is difficult to see how a human being can even live without some interests in finite things. The question therefore arises how detachment can be combined with interests in finite things. This, or some similar question, seems to have

been among Kierkegaard's lifelong preoccupations. The answer it receives in *Fear and Trembling* is in terms of the movements of infinite resignation and faith.

2. Infinite Resignation

More than one reason has been given for aspiring to detachment, and more than one motive was at work in Kierkegaard's thought on this point. But the dominant motive in *Fear and Trembling* is that detachment, or "resignation," is seen as important for devotion to God. Attachments to finite things may be seen as incompatible with total devotion to God, and hence idolatrous. The language of 'idolatry' does not play an important part in Kierkegaard's thought, but has been used by many Christian thinkers to express a concern very similar to his. A more Kierkegaardian way of speaking of the issue would note that an orientation of life toward finite objects of interest—objects that one wishes to enjoy, and that are not totally within the control of one's will—is characteristic of the "aesthetic" way of life that he opposes to the ethical and religious ways of life.⁴ If one is to live a religious life, one must "dethrone" the aesthetic, shake oneself free of it, detach oneself from its interests.

The strategy of "infinite resignation" proposed in *Fear and Trembling* differs from many other strategies of detachment (for instance Buddhist strategies) in that it is *not* meant to involve extinction of desire. Kierkegaard emphatically denies that the knight of infinite resignation will "forget" the princess when he gives her up. On the contrary, he keeps his love for her "young" (pp. 43-45, 50). It continues to absorb him, in a way that contributes to his religious life, as we shall see. Resignation is not indifference.⁵

God is the one who demands absolute love. Anyone who in demanding a person's love believes that this love is demonstrated by his becoming indifferent to what he otherwise cherished is not merely an egotist but is also stupid... For example, a man requires his wife to leave her father and mother, but if he considers it a demonstration of her extraordinary love to him that she for his sake became an indifferent and lax daughter etc., then he is far more stupid than the stupid (p. 73).

Indeed the strategy of infinite resignation involves intensification, or at any rate concentration, of desire rather than extinction of desire. The movement of resignation must involve an "interest in which an individual has concentrated the whole of reality." In the case described, "a young lad falls in love with a princess, and this love is the entire substance of his life" (p. 41). This is the first thing that is required of a knight of infinite resignation:

In the first place, the knight will then have the power to concentrate the whole substance of his life and the meaning of actuality into one single desire. If a person lacks this concentration, this focus, his soul is dissipated in multiplicity from the beginning, and then he never manages to make the movement;

he acts as shrewdly in life as the financiers who put their resources into widely diversified investments in order to gain on one if they lose on another—in short, he is not a knight (p. 42f.).

The comment about a soul “dissipated in multiplicity” is significant. Kierkegaard was persistently concerned for the unification of the self through focused willing. Such unification was characteristic, in his view, of the ethical and religious ways of life, as contrasted with the aesthetic life, oriented toward enjoyment, which he sees indeed as dissipated in multiplicity. It is interesting, therefore, that in *Fear and Trembling* the focusing of the self is accomplished, not first in the religious movement of resignation, but in the knight’s concentration of desire in love for the princess, which is not a religious movement, and not clearly ethical rather than aesthetic. Though not itself religious, the concentration of selfhood in the desire for the one finite object is seen as desirable, or even essential, for the religious movement.

This may be explained by the negative character of resignation. The scope and importance of a resignation depend on the scope and importance of the desire that is resigned. If one’s interests in the finite (like the financiers’ investments) are as numerous and as replaceable as the hydra’s heads, then it seems that in cutting them off one by one by separate acts of resignation, one will never reach a comprehensive (or in Kierkegaard’s terms “infinite”) resignation; one will never have resigned them all. On the other hand, a general or generic resignation of them all might seem to Kierkegaard too vague, too indefinite to be trusted, or even to be fully real. If religious devotion is to define itself by resignation, it may therefore be advantageous to religion if desire for the finite presents itself concentrated in one head that can be severed by a single stroke of resignation, so to speak.

What is said about resignation here foreshadows an important point in the dialectic of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, the distinction between “despair over the earthly” and “despair over something earthly.”⁶

When the self in imagination despairs with infinite passion over something in this world, its infinite passion changes this particular thing, this something, into the world *in toto*... The earthly and the temporal as such consist precisely of particular things, and some particular thing may be regarded as the whole. The loss or deprivation of every earthly thing is actually impossible... Consequently, the self infinitely magnifies the actual loss and then despairs over the earthly *in toto*.⁷

Here we have, explicitly articulated, a problem for any strategy of giving up the earthly, a problem that is left implicit in *Fear and Trembling*: the earthly consists of particular things, which cannot all be actually lost (while one lives, at any rate). We find also the same type of solution of the problem as in *Fear and Trembling*: the concentration of one’s whole passion for the earthly on a particular finite object. And, as in *Fear and Trembling*, this concentration

marks “a genuine advance in consciousness of the self.”⁸ In effect, it prepares the way for a transition from an aesthetic to a religious consciousness, if in despair one gives up the earthly as a whole—though the religious consciousness to which one may pass at this point in *The Sickness unto Death* is much less at peace with its relation to the eternal than the “infinite resignation” portrayed by Johannes de Silentio.

In *Fear and Trembling* the movement of resignation, the sacrifice of the finite object of concentrated passion, is seen as constituting devotion to God. “[W]hat I gain in resignation is my eternal consciousness,” declares Johannes, and “my eternal consciousness is my love for God” (p. 48). And in this constitution of religious devotion the persistence of the knight’s love for the princess, transfigured now, plays an essential part. “His love for that princess would become for him the expression of an eternal love, would assume a religious character, would be transfigured into a love of the eternal being” (p. 43). His love for God thus appears to draw some of its substance—presumably its concentration—from his love for the princess. There are undoubtedly autobiographical echoes in this passage. Walter Lowrie quotes Kierkegaard as saying of Regine Olsen, “My engagement to her and the breaking of it is really my relation to God, my engagement to God, if I may dare to say so.”⁹

If we may interpret *Fear and Trembling* in the light of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, this reliance on love for a finite good, and its renunciation, to give substance to a love for God has deep reasons in Kierkegaard’s conception of religiousness, or of the possibilities of human relationship with God. In view of the transcendent otherness of God, there is no possible positive content of a human life that Kierkegaard sees as inherently suited to express the divine.¹⁰ A negative expression seems more possible. “The first genuine expression for the relationship to the absolute *telos* is a total renunciation” of relative ends.¹¹

The strategy of constituting devotion to God through “infinite resignation,” as presented in *Fear and Trembling*, is liable to important objections. The most obvious objections are ethical. Since the finite objects most apt to engage our love are persons, and since “sacrificing” a person is apt to be harmful to the person sacrificed, the strategy seems only too likely to lead to the sort of conflict of the ethical with the religious that forms the agonizing heart of *Fear and Trembling*. Nor can we expect it to be harmless to other persons. If you have concentrated the *whole* meaning of your life in your son, for example, the position of your spouse or your daughter is surely unenviable (though less so than your son’s, if he will be sacrificed).

A less obvious objection may be even more serious, because it questions the religious as well as the ethical acceptability of the strategy of infinite resignation. We may suspect that, contrary to Kierkegaard’s intention, the

outward renunciation of the finite beloved does not abolish but shelters the “knight’s” idolatry of her—shelters it from the vicissitudes and ordinariness of real relationships—so that it can retain exaggerated proportions. It still crowds out interests in other finite things and defines the possibility (or rather impossibility) of happiness for him (p. 50). Religiously, however, the most offensive feature of this pattern is that (as we have seen) the knight’s passion for his “princess” serves to define, by its continuing concentration, the meaning of his life and specifically its religious character as devotion to God. Martin Buber’s comment on Kierkegaard’s similar interpretation of his own sacrifice of his engagement with Regine Olsen is a telling thrust, in my opinion. “God as Regina’s successful rival? Is that still God?” asks Buber.¹² This may be classified as an idolatry that can remain in the organization of the heart even when God is voluntarily preferred to the idol.

3. Faith

It is, of course, not the knight of infinite resignation but the knight of faith who is the hero of *Fear and Trembling*. The portrait of the knight of faith (in the “Preliminary Expectoration,” at any rate) can be seen as one of a number of attempts Kierkegaard made to understand, or imagine, how devotion to God could coexist with pursuit and enjoyment of finite goods, how one can “maintain an absolute relation to the absolute *telos* and at the same time participate like other men in this and that” or “exist in relative ends,” as the *Postscript* puts it. The general formula of the *Postscript* would surely be accepted in *Fear and Trembling* too, that one is to do it “by making the relationship to the absolute *telos* absolute, and the relationship to the relative ends relative.”¹³ But that contributes more to setting the problem than to solving it; it defines the task whose accomplishment Kierkegaard labors to understand.

By the end of his life, to be sure, Kierkegaard seems to have rejected the task, coming to the conclusion that, from a Christian point of view, it is a mistake to try to combine the enjoyment of finite goods with devotion to God. “A witness to the truth,” he declared, “is a man whose life from first to last is unacquainted with everything which is called enjoyment.” Specifically with reference to family relationships, which provide the central cases of enjoyment of the finite for *Fear and Trembling*, he implied in his last writings that marriage and the begetting of children are displeasing to God. In a passage with obvious echoes of *Fear and Trembling* he seems to identify the Christian path with what he had earlier characterized as infinite resignation rather than as faith:

The Christianity of the New Testament would be: in case that man were really able to love in such a way that the girl was the only one he loved and one whom he loved with the whole passion of a soul (yet such men as this are

no longer to be found), then, hating himself and the loved one, to let her go in order to love God.¹⁴

But I shall leave Kierkegaard's later conclusions on one side here, both because our present concern is with *Fear and Trembling* and because its dialectical tensions seem to me more interesting than the unambiguous world-rejection of the *Attack Upon Christendom*.

The ideal that Kierkegaard was trying to understand in *Fear and Trembling* is vividly expressed by the image of a ballet dancer who not only executes the upward leap (the movement of infinity) with artistic perfection, but also returns to earth so gracefully "that instantaneously one seems to stand and walk, to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian" (p. 41). There is also the famous description of a knight of faith as a very ordinary man who "looks just like a tax collector." Here the account of his interest in finite things is very vivid, but (except for the point that he will not be disturbed that his wife has not made him the nice supper he imagined) we are not given enough detail of his inner life to make very real to us the idea that "this man has made and at every moment is making the movement of infinity" and "drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation" (pp. 38-41).

Other images of combining a relative relationship to relative ends with an absolute relationship to the absolute *telos* are offered to us in the *Postscript*, though not under the heading "knight of faith." Two passages may be quoted here:

Let the world give him everything, it is possible that he will see fit to accept it. But he says: "Oh, well," and this "Oh, well" means the absolute respect for the absolute *telos*. If the world takes everything from him, he suffers no doubt; but he says again: "Oh, well"—and this "Oh, well" means the absolute respect for the absolute *telos*. Men do not exist in this fashion when they live immediately in the finite.

An adult may very well whole-heartedly share in the play of children, and may even be responsible for really bringing life into the game; but he does not play as a child. One who understands it as his task to exercise himself in making the absolute distinction sustains just such a relationship to the finite.¹⁵

The "Oh, well" hardly seems serious enough for a morally satisfying appreciation of finite goods, but the analogy of an adult playing a children's game may well express the spirit of what would be, at least in many contexts, a religiously desirable detachment.

The main resolution of the problem offered by *Fear and Trembling*, however, is a strategy that incorporates the devotional strategy of infinite resignation. It is characterized in the book as a two-movement strategy, but in fact it involves three "movements." The first, which Johannes does not explicitly count as a separate movement, either in infinite resignation or in faith, but

which is essential to both, is the concentration of desire on a single finite object. That this applies to the knight of faith, and not just to the knight of infinite resignation, is made explicit: "First and foremost, then, the knight of faith has the passion to concentrate in one single point the whole of the ethical that he violates" (p. 78). And this is not just a preliminary step; the passion must be maintained. "The absolute duty...can never lead the knight of faith to stop loving." In the moment of sacrifice (in which he is making the movements of both resignation and faith) Abraham "must love Isaac with his whole soul" (p. 74).

The second movement, of course, is the movement of infinite resignation, by which the knight gives up, or sacrifices, the beloved. And the third is the movement of faith itself, by which he receives the beloved again. And these movements must be made simultaneously, or at any rate the knight must still be making the movement of resignation when he makes the movement of faith. He not only "has made" but also "at every moment is making the movement of eternity" (p. 40). Since the movement of concentration on the finite object must continue while the movement of resignation is made, the knight of faith must make all three movements at once. But it is making the second and third movements (resignation and faith) at once that constitutes "the absurd"; Johannes thinks the combination of the first two movements is difficult but humanly possible.

Why must the movements of resignation and faith take place simultaneously? Why can't they be sequential? In reading Genesis it is natural to assume that Abraham receives Isaac back only after the movement of sacrificing him is finished. A hint of the answer to this question may be found in the statement that "Faith is therefore no aesthetic emotion, but something far higher, exactly because it presupposes resignation; it is not the immediate inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence."¹⁶ If Abraham's resignation ceased when Isaac's life was spared, he would fall back, in Kierkegaard's view, into an "aesthetic" way of life, one oriented to the enjoyment of finite goods. The resignation must continue because it still is what constitutes the knight of faith's devotion to God.

Another question will detain us longer. Why is the third movement the object of Johannes's extremest admiration? Not everything difficult is admirable, after all. Why is it important for faith to accept the finite back? Of course it is nice to be able to enjoy the finite; but that consideration seems to appeal to an aesthetic point of view. And obviously it is desirable not to kill Isaac; but that consideration seems to appeal to an ethical point of view. What we want to understand here is the *religious* value that *Fear and Trembling* assigns to the third movement by identifying it as the movement of faith.

My answer to this question is somewhat speculative as interpretation of Kierkegaard. In faith, we may suppose, one trusts in God, and that implies that

one consciously, believingly, willingly depends on God for something. In infinite resignation, however, one does not in this way depend on God. For one has resolved to live solely for one's relationship of love to God. And I take it the knight of infinite resignation sees this relationship as constituted sufficiently by his own voluntary resignation (p. 48f.). In relation to what he lives for, therefore, he does not depend on anything outside the control of his own will. Hence the knight of infinite resignation has no occasion for trusting God; and faith, in the sense of trust, plays no essential part in his religion. The knight of faith, on the other hand, does willingly depend on God for something outside the control of his own will. But if he depends thus on God for it, he must surely accept it when given, and must be prepared to accept it.

For Kierkegaard, however, depending on something outside the control of one's own will is a mark of the aesthetic life, and serves to distinguish it from both the ethical life and the sort of religiousness exemplified by the knight of infinite resignation.¹⁷ So faith ends up in the same boat with the aesthetic in this respect; and Kierkegaard is faced with the problem of finding some other way of differentiating faith, as a religious form of life, from the aesthetic.¹⁸ The solution proposed in *Fear and Trembling*, as I have already indicated, is that faith is to incorporate a continuing infinite resignation, and is to be distinguished from the aesthetic by accepting and enjoying the finite only while simultaneously giving it up.

There is another direction in which we might seek a solution. We might wonder whether there are not some distinctively religious, and not aesthetic, goods that are outside the power of our wills and that might be sought, in faith, from the hand of God. The most obvious candidates for this role may be religious experiences. I think it is clear, however, that Kierkegaard regarded an interest in any sort of experience as such, specifically including mystical experience, as essentially aesthetic. In *Either/Or* he argues that because an interest in mystical experience is an interest in something that is in principle complete in a "moment," or at any rate in a short period of time, it lacks the concern for history and continuity that characterizes an ethical interest (and, in the *Postscript*, a religious interest) as understood by Kierkegaard.¹⁹

Might there be some other sort of specifically religious good for which we could depend on God? Perhaps every form of this idea presents difficulties for Kierkegaard, since he insists that explicitly religious features of a human life are no less finite than more obviously mundane goods as objects of interest.²⁰ Explicit religiosity is no protection against idolatry. On the other hand, it may be argued that in the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Postscript* Kierkegaard develops a conception of Christianity in which the believer does depend on God for specifically religious goods that are not within the power of the believer's own will—namely for the enactment of God's love in a historical existence (the incarnation), and for the "condition" without which

one cannot have faith. Kierkegaard might have regarded that as rendering obsolete for Christians the type of faith "for this life" that he had ascribed to Abraham—a type of faith that is no longer featured, at any rate, in the *Fragments* and *Postscript*.

In *Fear and Trembling*, however, an interest in mundane goods is viewed as important for the trusting character of faith in God. I have no quarrel with that view. It is the book's account of the movements of concentration and infinite resignation, not the movement of faith, that seem to me most liable to objection. I have tried elsewhere to give a more adequate account of the nature of religious devotion, in relation to other interests;²¹ and I hope to try again, but not here.²²

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NOTES

1. Parenthetical page references in this essay are to Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, edited and translated (with Kierkegaard's *Repetition*) by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

2. Cf. the scorn expressed (p. 37) for one who "deludes himself into thinking he may be moved to have faith by pondering the outcome of the story."

3. I cannot check this point against the Danish original, but the expression of temporal sequence is the same in the translation of Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 58, 33) and Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 75, 52).

4. Kierkegaard's first and fullest development of his conception of the "aesthetic" way of life is in *Either/Or*, but it plays a part in several of his works, notably in the *Postscript*.

5. Cf. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," III: *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 142:

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life...

I do not mean to assimilate Eliot's conception of detachment to Kierkegaard's idea of resignation.

6. A similar distinction is implied, with a similar relation to the possibility of a transition (or choice) out of the aesthetic life, in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, Part II (edited and translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 194, 208.

7. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, edited and translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 60.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

9. Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 147.

10. I take this to be a theme of the section on "the essential expression" of religiousness in Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 386-468. A related theme is the abstractness of the conception of an eternal happiness (*ibid.*, pp. 351ff., 382).

11. *Postscript*, p. 362.

12. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith and Maurice Friedman (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 57.

13. *Postscript*, pp. 365, 363.

14. *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon Christendom*, translated by Walter Lowrie (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), pp. 7, 220, 223, 163. There is doubtless some anticipation of this viewpoint in the *Postscript* (p. 160f.), where Johannes Climacus raises the question, "whether the ghost of paganism does not still haunt the institution of marriage." Climacus' stance, however, is one of raising "difficulties," rather than outright rejection of marriage.

15. *Postscript*, pp. 368, 370.

16. I quote from Alastair Hannay's translation of *Fear and Trembling*, p. 76. Walter Lowrie's translation (p. 58) agrees in essentials. The Hongs' translation (p. 47) has resignation as "antecedent" rather than presupposed. That may be linguistically correct, for all I know; but it obscures the point that the resignation must continue during the faith, a point for whose presence and importance in the work I have already argued.

17. See *Either/Or* (Part II, pp. 179ff.) and *Postscript* (pp. 121, 494). In this respect (though not in every respect) Religiousness A is the analogue, in the *Postscript*, of infinite resignation in *Fear and Trembling*.

18. The *Postscript* (pp. 494, 498) makes this point about Religiousness B, which is in some ways the analogue there of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. There is a further analogy between the two books in the solution to this problem; for Religiousness B is to be distinguished from the aesthetic by being paradoxically combined with Religiousness A, as faith is to be distinguished from the aesthetic in *Fear and Trembling* by being paradoxically combined with infinite resignation.

19. *Either/Or*, Part II, p. 242f. I believe this argument reflects Kierkegaard's own views. It is associated, in the text, with the criticism that mysticism is too individualistic, which is more plausibly ascribed to Judge William, the fictitious author, than to Kierkegaard.

20. *Postscript*, 359-71; the point is developed in a discussion of monasticism.

21. Robert Merrihew Adams, "The Problem of Total Devotion," in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 169-94

22. I have profited from discussing *Fear and Trembling* with many people over the years. Particular thanks are due here to Van A. Harvey, under whose guidance I first developed some of the ideas contained in the present essay; and to the participants in the NEH summer institute in philosophy of religion at Western Washington University in 1986, for their comments on another version of the material.