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THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR CHRISTIAN FAITH: A CRITIQUE OF A KIERKEGAARDIAN VIEW

C. Stephen Evans

If we assume that Christian faith involves a propositional component whose content is historical, then the question arises as to whether Christian faith must be based on historical evidence, at least in part. One of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, argues in *Philosophical Fragments* that though faith does indeed have such an historical component, it does not depend on evidence, but rather on a first-hand experience of Jesus for which historical records serve only as an occasion. I argue that Climacus' account is coherent, and that on such a view historical evidence is not sufficient for faith for anyone. However, in contrast to Climacus, I argue that evidence might still be valuable and even necessary for some people. The resulting danger that the decision about faith might become a question for scholarship is best met, not by insulating faith from historical scholarship, but by recognizing the ability of faith to supply a context in which the evidence available is sufficient.

While no one would wish to identify Christian faith with propositional belief, traditional Christians hold that Christian faith does involve, include, or presuppose certain propositional beliefs. Among these beliefs some are historical in character. For example, traditional Christians believe that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, buried, and rose again from the dead, and they also hold that these beliefs are central components of their faith.

I have already said that faith cannot simply be identified with these beliefs, or any set of propositional beliefs. Faith is a trusting commitment which transforms a person and leads to eternal life. For the Christian this faith consists in or is made possible by a relationship to an historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, but one could hardly be consciously related to a person about whom one had no beliefs at all. So the traditional view that faith involves historical belief is plausible.

That view, however, raises a number of weighty problems concerning the relationship of faith to history. One of the most important concerns the relation of faith to historical evidence. If faith includes historical beliefs, then it seems plausible that faith would not be reasonable unless it were reasonable to hold the historical beliefs in question. Ordinarily, historical beliefs are held



on the basis of historical evidence of various types. Is it the case, then, that people should only seek to develop and maintain Christian faith if there is sufficient historical evidence to make the historical beliefs that are a component of that faith reasonable?

1. *Faith and History in Philosophical Fragments*

This question is explored at some length by Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous character Søren Kierkegaard created to be the author of *Philosophical Fragments*. (In what follows I shall defer to Kierkegaard's wish to cite the pseudonymous authors when referring to his pseudonymous works.) In this work Climacus presents what he terms a thought-experiment. He first describes what he terms the "Socratic" view of "the Truth," a term which is here close to the religious concept of salvation. On the Socratic view, each person has the Truth within already, and a relationship to the divine can thereby be presupposed in every person. He then asks whether any alternative to such a view can be imagined, and proceeds to "invent," with clear ironical and humorous touches, a view that suspiciously resembles Christianity, according to which the Truth must be brought to the individual by a god who becomes a human being in order to make it possible for the individual to receive the Truth. A relationship to the divine is thus made possible by the god's historical appearance.

I shall assume that Climacus' thought-experiment is presented in order to illuminate the nature of Christian faith, as Climacus himself clearly says at the conclusion of the book, and that the significant features of this experiment are to be taken as features of Christian faith as well. When this assumption is made, Climacus' thoughts on the relationship between faith and historical evidence are quite unusual when compared with most Christian thinkers, and their oddity stems from what appears to be an internal tension.

On the one hand, Climacus wants to maintain there is an essential difference between Christianity and Greek modes of thought, a difference which depends on the historical component of Christianity. Climacus could say with respect to Christianity what Johannes de Silentio says about faith in *Fear and Trembling*: Either Christianity is something essentially different from what Socrates could have come up with, or else Christianity does not exist, "precisely because it has always existed."¹ In such a case, Christianity as a unique phenomenon would not exist because it would simply be a specific version of a generic human religiosity. Climacus locates the essential distinguishing feature of Christianity in the historical entrance of the God into history. A real alternative to Socratic "immanence" (a Kierkegaardian term for any view that regards the Truth as something human beings possess or can attain using only their own unaided natural powers) requires that we deny that the Truth is in us, even in the form of a potentiality for recognizing the Truth.² The

Truth as well as the capacity to recognize the Truth must be brought to us by a God who enters history. So any attempt to replace the Jesus of history with a mythical figure whose real significance lies in the existential meaning of the narrative, or in the content of the teaching must be rejected.³ The objectivity of the historical is required in order to get “the God outside yourself.”⁴

This emphasis on history is, however, coupled with a depreciation of historical knowledge as in any way necessary or sufficient for becoming a disciple. Climacus seems to make historical knowledge virtually irrelevant to faith:

Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, “We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died”—this is more than enough. The contemporary generation would have done what is needful, for this little announcement, this world-historical *nota bene*, is enough to become an occasion for someone who comes later, and the most prolix report can never in all eternity become more for the person who comes later.⁵

The unusual nature of Climacus’ ideas is now clear. More commonly, those who have held that the incarnation was a genuinely historical event in something like the traditional sense, however varied that sense may be, have also held that it was important to have good historical evidence for that event. Those who believe we do not have such evidence, but still wish to affirm a faith in Christ as the divine lord, have tended to reinterpret the incarnation as a symbol whose power does not rest on its objective historicity.

The question I wish to pose is whether the conjunction of the claim that the historical is essential with the claim that historical evidence is unimportant makes sense. If not, the question of which to modify would still be open. Both traditional Christians as well as those more liberal Christians still engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus would argue that what must go is the cavalier dismissal of historical evidence. These groups have been suspicious of Kierkegaard for what they perceive as his irrationalism. Many contemporary theologians, on the other hand, convinced that making faith dependent on historical evidence is a recipe for disaster, would argue that what must go is the assumption that faith must be grounded in factual historical events.

2. Reasons for Making Faith Independent of Historical Evidence

I believe that Climacus has strong reasons for wishing to avoid both of these recommendations. Whether those reasons are ultimately decisive, and indeed whether there is really a coherent alternative to the revisions his critics would urge upon him remains to be determined. There are several reasons why he wishes to avoid making faith dependent on historical evidence. I shall

discuss two of those reasons briefly at this point, postponing a look at the third and final reason until later.

The first reason is that if faith were dependent on historical evidence, it would violate a commitment to a kind of egalitarian principle of justice to which Climacus is committed. Climacus believes that the attainment of the Truth must somehow be equally available to people of every generation. "Would the god allow the power of time to decide whom he would grant his favor, or would it not be worthy of the god to make the reconciliation equally difficult for every human being at every time and in every place..."⁶ If faith were dependent on historical evidence, then it would be very difficult to satisfy this principle, since it would appear that eyewitnesses or those with greater access to the historical records would have an advantage.

Actually, it is not easy to see how this egalitarianism could be satisfied by a faith with historical, propositional content, even if that faith is not based on historical evidence, since it would be difficult for those people who have not even heard of the events to have any beliefs about them, even if they do not need historical evidence to believe them. Perhaps, Climacus can find a way to surmount this problem, however. He might assume that God somehow supplies people with the content of what they must believe, either in this life or after death.⁷ Alternatively, the principle of equality might be restricted to those who have had a fair chance to hear of the historical events in question. Perhaps it is only their salvation that depends on attaining the right kind of historical faith, and those in a different situation are not measured by the same standard. If so, then one can see how the claim that faith does not rest on historical evidence introduces a greater measure of equality within the group of people who have heard the news. In any case, Climacus has other reasons for not allowing faith to depend on historical evidence.

A second reason is what might be called the incommensurability between authentic religious commitment and matters of intellectual evidence. This theme, which is more developed in *Postscript* than in *Fragments*, focuses on the character of Christian faith, which has about it an absoluteness and finality.⁸ A person of faith is someone who is willing to risk her life and stake everything on what she believes. The evidence for an historical event can never be more than probable and tentative, subject to revision in light of new findings. Climacus thinks that if faith were based on evidence, it would necessarily share in this tentativeness. He wants to see faith as a life-transforming passion but does not see how such a passion could be engendered by calculation of evidential probabilities. Hence he does not wish to see faith as something that depends on evidence whose quality necessarily fluctuates as new discoveries are made and further inquiry is carried out.

3. Why Historicity Matters

On the other hand, Climacus wishes to resist giving up the objective historicity of the incarnation because it is the actual historicity of the incarnation that makes possible a revelation that can confront and correct my deep-rooted assumptions about God and myself. If I am indeed sinful, and if those deeply rooted assumptions are wrong, then the possibility of such a revelation is not to be dismissed in a cavalier way. The incarnation makes Christianity what is termed in *Postscript* a religion of “transcendence.” Transcendence is important here not only for its possible value as a corrective and challenge to my individual errors and pride; it also represents the foundation of any genuinely human social order.

The established social order constantly attempts to deify itself; that is the secret of Christendom, which is merely the attempt to employ Christianity to do what human societies always do. To foil this human attempt at self-deification, epitomized in the Hegelian political philosophy, we need a God who is truly transcendent, so that the established order can be seen in its relativity, and the possibility of critical dissent be kept open. Despite Kierkegaard’s own political conservatism, there is a radical element to his social and political thought, an element that is tied to transcendence. Without a transcendent God in time, who speaks to us from “outside” our innate religious consciousness, we humans will manufacture God in our own image, and we will do so to buttress the status quo. Any attempt to substitute for the historical incarnation a “myth” or “story” or “symbol” whose factual truth is unimportant inevitably transforms Christianity into a “Socratic” view that assumes that our religious consciousness does possess the Truth.

Despite these reasons for holding both to the historicity of the incarnation and the irrelevance of historical evidence, Climacus’ view is problematic. Is it possible to believe that Jesus Christ lived and died for me as the Son of God, and be indifferent to critical questions about the factuality of my beliefs? Suppose, to push things to the extreme, that it could be shown that there was no first-hand evidence at all, and that overwhelmingly powerful evidence appeared that the New Testament was concocted in the fourth century. In such a situation would a person not naturally doubt whether Jesus had lived at all, and accordingly doubt whether or not he was indeed divine?

One could at this point retreat to the view that the object of faith is simply that the god has appeared somewhere, sometime. However, the content of faith would in that case seem distressingly vague, a blank canvas that will have little power to jolt and overturn our current Socratic ideas. Does such a vague historical claim really differ much from a Socratic myth? M. J. Ferreira puts the point by noting that genuine historical events have identity conditions if we are meaningfully to refer to them.⁹ If we want to say that

something occurred in history that is the foundation of our faith, but how it occurred can be left to the historians as unimportant, the question arises as to whether what occurred can be completely divorced from how it occurred. Ferreira claims that we need at least some information about an event in order to identify the event. Think, for example, of Moses. Moses is the individual who confronted Pharaoh, led Israel out of Egypt, inscribed the ten commandments, and so on. Some or much of this information may be inaccurate, but if we had no reliable information about Moses whatsoever, then it is hard to see how we could have any true beliefs about Moses, because we could not use the symbol "Moses" to successfully pick out an historical figure. In the same way, it would appear that to speak meaningfully about Jesus as the historical incarnation of God, we need some accurate historical information about Jesus. And if it is important for our information to be historically accurate, how can we avoid a concern for the quality of the historical evidence?

4. Faith as Epistemologically Basic

Climacus' answer to this problem lies in a view of faith which sees faith as epistemologically basic, in something like Alvin Plantinga's sense of the term.¹⁰ A basic belief is one that is not held on the basis of any other beliefs or any evidence that is propositional in character. Basic beliefs are therefore not held on the basis of any inference or argument, though they may have what Plantinga calls a ground in the circumstances or experiences that evoke them. Plantinga holds that some beliefs are *properly* basic; that is, in certain circumstances certain persons may hold these beliefs without violating any intellectual duty or evidencing any epistemic fault or defect. Though this is controversial, I believe that Climacus thinks that Christian faith is not only basic, but properly basic for the believer.

Climacus says that faith is a passion that is the result of a first-hand encounter between the individual and the incarnate God.¹¹ Historical records function as the occasion for this encounter, but what matters is the encounter itself, in which God grants the individual "the condition" of faith. "*By means of the contemporary's report (the occasion), the person who comes later believes by virtue of the condition he himself receives from the god.*"¹² Thus, the encounter is itself the ground of faith, which is therefore not based on evidence in the sense that it is not based on arguments or inferences from any propositions whose probability must be evaluated. No amount of historical evidence is sufficient to guarantee that this encounter will occur or that faith will be its outcome, and no specific amount of historical evidence is necessary in order for the encounter to occur or faith to ensue. Climacus insists that the encounter is one that can as easily lead to offense as to faith.

He supports his claims here with two thought experiments. One can easily

imagine a person who has all the evidence one could want of an historical sort, but who has not thereby been transformed through a meeting with God incarnate.¹³ One can also imagine someone with very slender historical knowledge whose life has nevertheless been transformed by a meeting with God which that scant information made possible.¹⁴ Implicit in all this, I believe, is the Christian conviction of the living Christ. Jesus is no mere dead historical figure, but a living person who can still be experienced by individuals.

So on my reading Climacus' answer to Ferreira is to steadfastly maintain that objectivity in the content of one's beliefs is compatible with subjectivity in the grounds. It is undeniable, I think, that to meaningfully believe in Jesus as God one must have some true historical beliefs about Jesus. But why must those beliefs be based on evidence? Why couldn't the beliefs be themselves produced as part of the outcome of the encounter?

To successfully refer to Jesus of Nazareth, some of my beliefs about Jesus must be true, but it seems possible that a person might believe in the historical record because of her faith in Jesus, rather than having faith in Jesus on the basis of the historical record. Of course if the beliefs are false, then they are false, and the person is mistaken, but that risk is unavoidable, and Climacus does not think one should try to avoid it. Nor does the fact that the belief in question is not based on evidence mean that the belief is arbitrary or groundless, since it is *grounded* in the first-person encounter with Jesus.¹⁵ What is required is that this encounter be an experience of Jesus in which true knowledge is given. The situation is analogous to a case of ordinary sense perception in which I come to believe that there is a flower before me because I directly perceive the flower. In such a case I do not normally regard the existence of the flower as something that I infer or conclude on the basis of evidence.

One objection to Climacus' attempt to rest so much on an experience of Jesus as God is that such an experience necessarily rests on a host of background assumptions. Surely a person cannot simply directly come to perceive Jesus as forgiving them, commanding them to do something, or inviting them to faith in the pages of the gospels unless the gospels are indeed an accurate representation of Jesus, which provide a reliable means for becoming aware of Jesus at work in one's life. In a similar way, ordinary sense perception also depends on the truth of various background assumptions. For example, I could not perceive that there is a flower in front of me if the light was not normal, if my eyesight was not functioning normally and so on. To know that there is a flower in front of me these other things must be true. Similarly, to know that the historical person Jesus, whom I learn about through historical records, is God speaking to me, certain other things must be true as well. So, in both cases, it may be argued, my belief still rests on other evidence, namely the evidence I have for these background beliefs.

This kind of objection rests on a confusion of levels.¹⁶ We should distinguish between *having* a ground for a belief and *knowing* that one has a ground for a belief, between being justified and knowing that one is justified. For my belief that there is a flower before me to be properly grounded, it is necessary that the light be of a certain sort, that my eyesight be functioning normally, and so on, but it is not necessary for me to know these things, or to have evidence that they are so. It is sufficient that they are true. To know *that* my belief is properly grounded I may need to know such things, but that is another matter. In a similar manner, in order to have a properly grounded belief that Jesus is God, it must be the case that Jesus reveals himself in certain ways. But it is not necessary for the individual to know these other things, or have evidence for them, though that may be necessary for the individual to know that her belief is properly grounded.

I conclude that Climacus' position is philosophically defensible, in the sense that there is nothing incoherent in the notion of an historical belief which is grounded in an experience, rather than historical evidence. Whether that is in fact how Christian faith is produced is another matter, of course. To decide that one must decide whether Jesus is indeed God and whether experiences of Jesus of the appropriate sort are possible.

5. *The Relevance of Historical Evidence for Faith*

To revert to the language of the "thought-experiment," Climacus is probably right in saying that the "scrap of paper" with the words "we have believed that the god appeared among us" could be "more than enough" to be an occasion for faith, should God choose to use that scrap of paper as an occasion to reveal himself. And he is clearly right in saying that no amount of evidence will necessarily produce faith in someone. So strong, historical evidence is neither sufficient nor necessary for faith. Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept the further conclusion he seems to draw, namely that evidence is simply irrelevant to faith.

My worry can be expressed as follows: Certainly God could use a scrap of paper to produce faith. Perhaps he often does produce faith in ways that make evidence irrelevant. But is this always or even normally the case? Since my belief in Jesus is a belief with historical content, it cannot be isolated from my other historical beliefs. Unless God produced my belief by over-riding my normal thought-processes, it is hard to see how I could regard massive evidence that Jesus never existed, or never said any of the things attributed to him, as utterly irrelevant to my faith. Even a belief which is "properly basic" and grounded in direct perceptual experience is subject to being overridden by contrary evidence. My perceptual belief that there is a live flower in front of me may be overridden, for example, by strong evidence that the object in question is plastic. Similarly, even though I believe that Jesus has

revealed himself to me, is it not possible that I am mistaken, and is not the liveness of that possibility affected by the quality of the evidence I have for Jesus' historical reality?

I believe that the basic worry Climacus has about admitting the relevance of historical evidence for faith is that he does not want the question of faith to be a scholarly question. He does not want to leave the ordinary person who is deciding whether to be a Christian or not in the clutches of the historical scholars, with their endless debates and never-decided controversies. After all, the individual who must decide whether or not to become a Christian is making a decision about how her life should be lived. She does not have the luxury of waiting for the scholars to reach agreement, which will never happen in any case. I sympathize with Climacus' worry on this point, but I believe that this concern can be met without the drastic claim that historical evidence is irrelevant for faith. The actual situation with regard to historical evidence seems to be this. For orthodox Christians, the historical accounts of Jesus' life are regarded as reasonably accurate at least, plenty sufficient for faith, and the evidence for this conclusion is regarded as adequate. For others, the account is much less accurate, and the evidence accordingly less powerful. In extreme cases, skepticism extends to almost all the details of Jesus' life. However, all parties would agree that in reality there is far more evidence than Climacus' "scrap of paper." How much more is a matter of dispute.

Now why is it that the evidence seems adequate to one party and inadequate to the other? Doubtless each side will have its own preferred explanation. Perhaps skeptics will say that wish fulfillment is at work in the believer. Perhaps believers will follow Climacus and say that their own encounter with Jesus is the deciding factor. What I wish to maintain is that it is possible for the believer to follow Climacus in saying this without claiming that historical evidence is irrelevant. That is, it is possible for a believer to claim that it is significant that we have as much evidence as we have, and even to admit that some people would not find faith to be possible if they did not have evidence of reasonable, even if not decisive quality, while still properly believing that the decision is not in the end one which scholarship can settle. Though the evidence by itself would never be sufficient to produce faith in anyone, it is possible that evidence of a certain type might be necessary for faith for some people, though not everyone, since not everyone will have the reflective bent or cognitive capacities to appreciate the force of various possible problems. Faith in this case does not make evidence unimportant or irrelevant; it makes it possible properly to appreciate and assess the evidence, at least so as to be able to know that one's beliefs have not been vanquished by various "defeaters."

To go back to the level distinction we employed earlier, for some people, those of a certain reflective bent, being justified in believing may be linked

to believing that they are justified. They want to know that they are justified, and if they lack such knowledge, their faith may be troubled by crippling doubts. Or, more modestly and more plausibly, I think, they at least need to rule out the possibility that their beliefs can be shown to be false. They may need this because they have encountered people who claim to be able to show that their beliefs are false. Such a believer who is troubled by doubt might admit the relevance of historical argument, while still holding to the Climacus-inspired view that what is finally decisive in settling the argument is his own first-hand experience of Jesus.

Such a person is not necessarily thrown back into the clutches of the scholars, even though he may not ignore the work of the scholars altogether. To avoid the specter of an unending scholarly inquiry which never leads to commitment either way, he may only need to believe that there is enough evidence to make the truth of his beliefs possible, and it is hard to see how that weak conclusion could be threatened by scholarship. What the believer must hold is that the evidence is good enough for one whose belief has the ground of a first-person encounter, or perhaps even that the evidence is seen in a different light for one who has had such an encounter. In the latter case the encounter could be understood as transforming the individual, giving her the proper perspective from which to view the evidence, or even as giving her the capacities she needs to appreciate its force.¹⁷ It may be important to have evidence, but the evidence does not need to be of the type that would convince any "sane, rational person," but rather be such as to appear adequate to a person of faith. A view such as this one seems to me to make more sense of the way committed believers actually respond to disturbing historical evidence. The usual stance is not dismissal of the evidence as irrelevant, but confidence that the contrary evidence will not be decisive.

6. Evidence for a Paradox: Making the Improbable Probable

Climacus has one further reason for treating historical evidence as insignificant, which might be called the "capital crime" argument. Just as a capital offense "absorbs all lesser crimes," so the paradoxicalness of the incarnation makes minor historical problems insignificant.¹⁸ The idea is that the incarnation, being a paradox, is so improbable as to appear absurd. The viability of belief in such a paradox cannot be affected by petty details of the historical records, such as divergencies and contradictions of various witnesses. Its antecedent probability is so low that it cannot be made meaningfully lower; nor could resolving such problems make the probability meaningfully higher. Climacus goes so far as to argue that to try to make the incarnation probable is to falsify its character. The paradox is by definition the improbable, and one could make it probable only by making it into what it is not.¹⁹

These arguments are strikingly reminiscent of Hume's famous critical at-

tack on miracles. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume argues that it could never be reasonable to believe that a miracle has occurred, because a miracle, which is by definition an exception to the laws of nature, is necessarily as improbable an event as can be imagined, since the laws of nature describe what normally happens and therefore what one can reasonably expect to occur. Even the best and strongest evidence for a miracle imaginable would only serve to balance and could never overcome this strong *a priori* improbability.²⁰

It is worth inquiring, both for Climacus and Hume, what concept of probability and what assumptions about probability seem to underlie the arguments. The term "probability" is used in both objective and subjective senses. Objectively, to say that an event is probable is to say that it is objectively likely to occur. Thus the probability of a certain outcome when cards are dealt or dice are rolled can be calculated with some precision. We often say that an event is probable, however, when we know nothing about the objective probabilities of the matter. In these cases we mean that it seems likely to us that the event will occur. For example, I may think it is probable that I will receive an exceptionally large raise in salary next year, even though I have no statistical data on which to base such a claim. It is simply rooted in my belief that my work will be recognized and rewarded by the proper authorities. Such a claim is more an expression of my expectancies than it is a statement about statistical frequencies in the objective world, and such a probability claim is no stronger than the subjective beliefs on which it is based.

Hume's argument appears at first glance to be rooted in objective probability, since it is the infrequency with which laws of nature are violated which makes a miracle improbable. Critics have pointed out, however, that if this is Hume's argument, then it seems to rest on a shallow understanding of how the probability of historical events is estimated. The probability of an historical event cannot be estimated simply from the frequency with which an event of that type occurs, since history is replete with unique events. A French emperor may invade Russia only once in all human history. In estimating the probability of an event, we rely therefore not only on the frequency of the type of event in question but our total knowledge of the situation, including our knowledge of the intentions and characters of whatever historical agents are involved. To think otherwise is to confuse history with dice-rolling or coin-tossing.

Believers in miracles regard miracles as the work of God, who is regarded as a personal agent. To assess the probability of a miracle, therefore, one must do more than consider how frequently they occur. One must consider whether there is a God, whether he is the sort of being who could be expected to do miracles from time to time, in what circumstances this could be expected to

occur, and so on. If I believe in a personal God, and believe that God has the ability to intervene in nature, and that he is a being who has good reasons to intervene in nature in certain circumstances, then I will estimate the probability of a miracle in those circumstances much more highly than does Hume. Anyone who judges miracles extremely improbable, as does Hume, bases the judgment not merely on objective statistical data, but on a variety of beliefs about other matters. Of course it is possible that Hume or others who judge miracles extremely improbable have objectively powerful evidence that God does not exist, or that God is not the kind of being who performs miracles, but it seems more likely to me that Hume is actually simply expressing his beliefs about these matters, and the judgment of probability made is therefore of the subjective kind. It seems or appears likely to Hume that miracles do not occur, but of course miracles may not appear nearly so improbable to someone else who holds different convictions about God. Anyone who actually believes that a miracle has occurred will of course believe that the objective probability of that miracle is 1.

I believe that the concept of probability that underlies Climacus' argument is also subjective. Climacus says that the believer must firmly hold to the notion that the incarnation is a paradox and is therefore improbable. However, since the believer thinks the incarnation has actually occurred, he cannot believe that the objective probability of the event is low, since the objective probability of an event that has occurred is 1. The meaning must be that the believer understands the event as one that will *appear* improbable to someone who holds certain beliefs. For example, someone such as Hume who believes that miraculous events are in general improbable, will certainly make the same judgment about the idea of a divine incarnation. Anyone who is inclined to think that only events that can be rationally understood can occur, and who also cannot understand how God could become a human being will think the event improbable. Anyone who is inclined to believe that genuinely unselfish love does not exist will find the idea of God suffering on behalf of human beings similarly improbable. All of this implies that the improbability of the incarnation must be seen as relative to the perspective from which it is viewed.

This conclusion corresponds perfectly with Climacus' own contention that the paradoxicalness of the paradox is a function of sin, which creates the "absolute qualitative distance" between God and human beings.²¹ If, however, the improbability of the paradox is a function of the subjective perspective from which it is viewed, why is the idea of viewing the paradox as probable wrong-headed, as Climacus plainly says? Why is it that the perspective of sinful human beings gains a kind of authority here as the defining perspective? Why shouldn't the believer assert that it is probable to *her*?

The answer surely lies in the fact that Christianity assumes that human

beings are in fact sinners. This perspective is in fact the perspective that every human being occupies, at least prior to faith. And since the transition from sin to faith is not, for Climacus, a one-time event, but a transition that must continually be renewed, it remains necessary for the believer to define the content of her faith polemically, as that which necessarily is in opposition to the thinking of sinful human beings. The believer is not offended but the believer is the person who has confronted and continues to confront the possibility of offense. If faith loses its provocative character, and no longer confronts our natural patterns of thinking as a rebuke, it has indeed essentially altered its character. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the incarnation is no longer improbable to the believer, simply because it is for her something that has occurred. It is improbable only in the sense that she knows it appears unlikely or improbable to our sinfully corrupted patterns of thought. The event remains improbable in that it was not something we expected to occur.

Does the subjective improbability of the paradox imply that the quality of the historical evidence is no concern? It might appear so for the unbeliever, since the event will appear to him to be massively improbable. Whether this is so depends on how pervasive the corrupting effects of sin are on the intellect. However, I believe that the claim that evidence is of no value whatsoever to the unbeliever is not strictly implied by the requirements of Climacus' hypothetical version of Christianity. The hypothesis requires that people be construed as sinful enough so that they cannot arrive at the Truth apart from an encounter with God in which they receive the condition. It is not obvious to me that one aspect of this process of giving the condition could not consist in giving the individual evidence that the God-man is indeed God. Of course the individual's sinfulness may give him a strong tendency to dismiss this evidence, because the fact in question appears so improbable to him. But it seems possible that strong evidence might challenge this presumption of improbability. So long as we are careful to insist that the evidence alone could not produce faith in the individual, then this seems compatible with Climacus' view. No reversion to a Socratic view has occurred.

It also seems possible for evidence to have some value to the believer. Climacus' view to the contrary is surely rooted in his claim that the faith which is the result of the first-person encounter with God does not rest on such evidence. If such a faith is sufficient to overturn the subjective improbability of the event, it will surely not be troubled by flaws in the historical record.

This is essentially the same argument we examined in the previous section and is subject to the same reservations that I expressed there. Perhaps it is true that it is the experience of meeting Jesus that is decisive in altering the natural judgment that God would not become a human being. Thus the experience may be the decisive ground of faith, and the inconclusiveness of

scholarly debate may be insignificant to the believer. However, this is compatible with claiming that it is important that there be evidence, at least for some people who are troubled by doubts of a certain kind. The evidence may not be of such a nature as to convince unbelievers, but it may be the kind of evidence that is seen as sufficient when seen through the right eyes.

After all, it is surely possible for someone to doubt whether the experience of Jesus which is the ground of faith is veridical. If we have some reasons to think that Jesus really existed, and really is divine, and has a certain character, and so on, such information could be helpful in resolving such doubts. If I have an experience of someone who appears to be Mother Teresa, I will be much more likely to believe the experience is veridical if I have background information about the reality of Mother Teresa, and about her character, than would be the case if I had never heard of Mother Teresa. Thus the traditional arguments for the reliability of the gospels, and the testimony provided in the gospels for the claim that Jesus is divine, including the miracles, Jesus' own claims to be divine, the profundity of Jesus' teaching, and especially the resurrection, could be of significance to a believer. They are not sufficient to produce faith, and perhaps not strictly necessary, but they may well be part of what one might call the normal process by which faith comes into being, and they may also have value in confirming faith that is present, helping to relieve doubts and allay various objections.

7. Traditional Apologetic Arguments

There is little doubt, I think, that the claims I am making run strongly contrary to the intentions of Climacus, who simply can see no value in traditional apologetics. It is instructive to look at Climacus' treatment of what is traditionally cited as evidence. Climacus admits that the god must make his presence known in the world in some way, though he says that every "accommodation for the sake of comprehensibility" is of no value to the person who does not receive the condition, and is therefore "elicited from him [the god] only under constraint and against his will."²² I do not see why this should be so.

As Climacus himself says, it surely makes no sense to suppose that the god is literally indistinguishable from any other human being, and that there is no sign which points to his divinity. Of course the gospels meet this requirement in the case of Jesus by presenting him as an authoritative teacher, a worker of miracles, and someone who himself claims to be divine. If the god wills to reveal himself, and if this requires some sign or evidence of his divinity, then it is hard to see why the god should grant such signs only "under constraint and against his will." Even if we grant Climacus the claim that such signs will only be of value to people of faith, though I have given reason

to question that claim, it does not follow that the signs are insignificant for those people who do indeed have faith.

Climacus says that miracles cannot help much, as a miracle does not exist immediately, but "is only for faith." It is not clear just what this means. The statement could be read as saying that an event becomes a miracle by my belief that it is. However, this claim is absurd on its face, and in any case directly contradicts a principle Climacus firmly holds, namely that the apprehension of something cannot alter the nature of what is apprehended.²³ If he means that miracles will only be believed by those who have faith, this is possible, though not obvious, but that does not mean that the miracles lack evidential value for those who do possess faith.

Surely Climacus is right when he says that miracles and other evidence do not lead automatically to faith, and that they can indeed lead to offense. If the gospels are accurate, many contemporaries of Jesus observed him perform miracles without becoming disciples, and in fact seem to have been offended by him. However, this does not imply that the miracles are of no value to those people who did possess faith. Certainly, the traditional Christian view is that the "signs" Jesus did are valuable in this way. For example, Peter's first sermon on the day of Pentecost appeals to the "mighty works, signs and wonders" which God had done among the people through Jesus.²⁴ So far as I can tell, Climacus' deviation from this traditional Christian view and complete denigration of historical evidence is unwarranted, even given the basic correctness of his own view of faith and its genesis in the individual.

There is therefore no way to completely insulate Christian faith from the risks of historical criticism. On the other hand, an understanding of the way such historical judgments themselves embody faith-commitments may make it possible for Christians to argue that the historical beliefs that are part of their faith are reasonable enough when viewed in the right context, that context being a faith which is grounded, not in historical evidence, but in a first-hand encounter with Jesus Christ.²⁵

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NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, translated and edited by Howard and Edna Hong, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1983), p. 55.

2. *Philosophical Fragments*, translated and edited by Howard and Edna Hong, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1985), pp. 13-14.

3. See *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 109.

4. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1968), pp. 498 and

507-08, for passages that develop this theme of having God outside of one's religious consciousness.

5. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 104.

6. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 106.

7. Kierkegaard says something like this in *Christian Discourses*, translated by Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1971), pp. 248-49.

8. See, for example, pp. 509-12 in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

9. M. J. Ferreira, "The Faith/History Problem and Kierkegaard's *A Priori* 'Proof,'" *Religious Studies* 23 (1987), pp. 337-45.

10. See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, University of Notre Dame Press (Notre Dame, Indiana: 1983), pp. 46-47, for an account of what it is for a belief to be basic.

11. See *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 103, where Climacus says that "only the person who personally receives the condition from the god...believes."

12. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 104.

13. *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 59-60.

14. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 60.

15. I do not wish to deny here that in a wide enough sense of "evidence" this encounter which I describe as the ground could itself be viewed as evidence. In saying it is not evidence I mean first that it is not a propositional belief which has any logical relations to faith, and secondly that it does not form the basis for any process of inference by which the individual arrives at faith.

16. The following remarks are inspired by some points made with respect to religious experience by William Alston, in an unpublished paper "The Place of Experience in the Grounds of Religious Belief," delivered at a conference on "The Future of God" at Gordon College in May of 1989. I do not wish to claim that Alston would endorse this use of his point.

17. See my "The Epistemological Significance of Transformative Religious Experience," forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*.

18. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 104.

19. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 94n.

20. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett Publishing Company (Indianapolis, Indiana: 1977), pp. 72-90, particularly pp. 76-77.

21. See *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 46-47.

22. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 56.

23. See the discussion of the necessity of the past in the "Interlude," in *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 79-80.

24. See Acts 2:22.

25. The author wishes to thank N.E.H. for a fellowship that made the writing of this paper possible.