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Kierkegaard's View of Religious Pluralism in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

Brock Bahler
Duquesne University

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BROCK BAHLER

Brock Bahler is a PhD student at Duquesne University where he also works as an editor at Duquesne University Press. His expertise is primarily continental philosophy and philosophy of religion and he has published articles addressing the work of Levinas, Derrida, and Augustine, respectively. Recently, he presented a paper at the Kierkegaard Society at the APA, entitled, "Kierkegaard's 'Greatness': Human Subjectivity as an Ordinary Impossibility."

Brock Bahler

KIERKEGAARD'S VIEW OF RELIGIOUS
PLURALISM IN *CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC
POSTSCRIPT*

INTRODUCTION

While the issue of religious pluralism, or inclusivism, seems implicit throughout the *Postscript*,¹ perhaps even constantly lingering on the fringes, it is not the central question of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus.² This should make us pause in raising the issue. Before asking whether one can insert any other religion in Climacus's account of subjectivity, or pointing to Climacus's existentialist structure as a metatheory that can be found in any way of being or God-relation,³ it is critical to consider what Climacus himself writes on the subject. Of course, since he suggests that everything he writes "is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked" (*CUP* 619), we should be

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); hereafter cited in text and notes as *CUP*.

2. Out of respect for Kierkegaard's own request to view the pseudonymous authors as the author of each text, I will refer to Johannes Climacus, rather than Kierkegaard, throughout this essay. For more on this matter, see Kierkegaard's "A First and Last Explanation," *CUP* 625–30.

3. As seen, for example in Heidegger's *Being and Time* or Derrida's later and more religious works. For appropriations of Kierkegaard in Heidegger and Derrida, see Roger Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions," *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48–75; John Caputo, "Looking the Impossible in the Eye: Kierkegaard, Derrida, and the Repetition of Religion," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2002): 1–25.

wary of concluding we have arrived at an authoritative account. Indeed, anyone who references the text as an “authority,” according to Climacus, “has *eo ipso* misunderstood it” (618).

Nevertheless, in reading the text, one is constantly tossed between Climacus’s many statements that seem to offer varying views on the issue of pluralism. On the one hand, he bespeaks an openness to multiple faith-practices, stating that “whether Christianity is in the right, I do not decide” (*CUP* 369). He claims to represent a departure from the objective introductions to Christianity which tout the “superiority of Christianity over paganism, Judaism, etc” (383). And he famously asks: “If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God... and prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, then, is there more truth?” (201). At the same time, in other passages Climacus pushes for the uniqueness of Christianity, stating: “Christianity is the *only* historical phenomenon that... has wanted to be the single individual’s point of departure for his eternal consciousness” (15, my emphasis). “Christianity wants to lead the subject to the *ultimate point* of his subjectivity” (57, my emphasis). And finally, “To understand oneself in existence is also *the Christian principle*” (353). In light of these seemingly conflicting statements, I suggest that an ear to Climacus’s account of Socrates—leading to his account of Religiousness *A* and Religiousness *B*—provides a basic hermeneutic for handling the question of religious pluralism in the *Postscript*.

Before arriving at this point, however, I must reemphasize that the question, does this understanding of subjective truth open the door for other religions? is simply not a question Climacus would ask, for it elevates the objective over the subjective or single individual. Climacus is not concerned with the fate of other individuals, but states that he should only focus on himself: “I believe it would be appropriate discourse for a truly religious person if he said:

I do not doubt anyone's salvation; the only one I have fears about is myself" (CUP 389n).⁴ The question of the God-relation is always one's personal "affair" (561), and "the religious person does not allow himself to be disturbed by comparison with others" (582). He "forbids all comparison between individuals" (598), whether it concerns the question of one's adherence to Christianity⁵ or the God-relation of other cultures. While he criticizes the System for reducing China and Persia to a mere paragraph (133, 150–51, 150n, 154)—this reference to the "System" being a specific reference to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, where ancient China and Persia are allotted a few pages in comparison to the heightened emphasis Hegel places on the German philosophy of his day—his response is not to try to do a better job of incorporating other cultures, but rather, to leave the question undecided, and like Socrates, to refrain from speaking about what he does not know.⁶

Second, clearly Climacus's deep interest in the religious, in the passionate God-relation that constitutes true human subjectivity, is situated within the confines of (Danish and Lutheran) Christianity. It is a response to Christendom, which had made being a Christian just as natural as being human⁷—"as a

4. The religious individual is "not at all concerned whether everyone else is regarded as being religious" (CUP 508; cf. 436–37).

5. No doubt, Kierkegaard/Climacus is quite critical of what passes for "Christian" throughout Denmark, but that does not negate the fact that it remains the issue of the single individual: "Of course, to become a [cheap] edition of a Christian in all comfort is much easier, and just as good as the highest—after all, he is baptized, has received a copy of the Bible and a hymnbook as a gift; is he not, then, a Christian...? But that remains the business of the person involved" (CUP 557). This remained Kierkegaard's (attempted) position throughout his career, writing in his late, self-authored work, "But I have attacked no one, saying that he is not a Christian; I have passed judgment on no one." Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 15.

6. The human "must not go to the trouble of switching over to China and Persia... since it knows that the task is not to move from the individual to the race but from the individual through the race (the universal) to reach the individual" (CUP 428; cf. 464). This, according to Climacus, is also the way of Socrates (469). Clearly, Climacus has the Socrates of the *Apology* in mind, who narrates how he goes around from the poets, the craftsmen, and the orators only to find that all of them speak on subjects outside their areas of expertise.

7. At the same time, while Climacus disagrees with those trying "to naturalize Christianity, so

matter of course” (*CUP* 368, 373, 379, 588; cf. 367n)—a plea that those who are ‘Christian’ no longer settle for a “baptized paganism” and truly become a Christian (368; cf. 366). Thus, the *Postscript* only considers two positions—Christianity and paganism—and it is from paganism that Climacus takes Christianity’s “point of departure” (361–62). Here, interestingly enough, in a book heavily focused on *critiquing* Hegel’s System, we find an intriguing affinity between Climacus’s and Hegel’s respective projects.⁸

SOCRATES

Climacus suggests Christianity finds its “point of departure” from paganism through Socrates, whose passionate inwardness serves as a “[quasi-]analogue” to faith, or the absurd (*CUP* 205; cf. 503, 566). Paganism’s pantheism fails on two counts: (1) by annulling human existence through Platonic participation in Being (*ousia*), it leads to a “debauched contempt for individual human beings” (355),⁹ and thus, (2) claims to offer the human a direct relation to God, which is idolatry (243, 245, 246, 599, 600). Socrates, so it seems, is able to rise above

that in the end to be a Christian and to be a human being are identical” (*CUP* 367n), some of his own statements about the relation between Christianity and subjectivity are equally problematic. Climacus writes, “It is really the God-relationship that makes a human being a human being” (244; cf. 353). So then, one is not born a Christian, but is it fair to say that one can only truly become a human being by becoming a Christian, to oppose a naturalized Christianity and yet condone a Christianized natural state as the *only* true natural state? Kierkegaard, no doubt, would admit that the God-relationship can be observed outside of Christianity—Socrates in paganism and Abraham and Job in Judaism serves as some of his chief archetypes throughout his pseudonymous works—but as we shall see later, it still seems he establishes a hierarchy between the Christian God-relation and all others.

8. H. S. Harris comments that Hegel developed his system as an “answer to the problem that troubled him from his schooldays onwards: ‘Why did Christianity triumph over paganism?’” H.S. Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 251.

9. Cf. *CUP* 122, 313. Climacus appears to be referring to Platonic participation when he speaks of “pantheism, the taking of oneself out of existence back into the eternal through recollection, whereby all existence-decisions become only shadow-play compared with what is eternally decided from behind.... The pantheist is eternally reassured backward” (226). Again, this should also be seen as a criticism of Hegel, whose *Phenomenology of Spirit* ends in a sort of pantheism where the history of human consciousness, or Spirit, turns out to be the “biography of God.” Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System*, 81.

these criticisms, representing the “most decisive heterogeneity possible” within paganism (368). Climacus praises the “Socratic secret” that truth involves an inner, subjective “transformation” (38),¹⁰ the “Socratic ignorance” that does not speak directly to God “for fear of talking a lot of nonsense” (202; 90n), and the “Socratic wisdom” that is to know one is an “existing person” (204). “Socrates’ infinite merit is precisely that of being an *existing* thinker” (205; cf. 208), which makes him “in the truth in the highest sense within paganism” (204).

Critical to his praise of Socrates is the scene at the end of Plato’s *Apology* where he fearlessly accepts death in light of his positing the possibility in a positive afterlife, staking everything on the “if there is an immortality” (*CUP* 201). He “dares to die, and with the passion of the infinite” (201). He banks all of his eternal happiness on an “objective uncertainty” (205), a leap, a decision, which is what makes it analogous to faith. Climacus goes so far even to call it the “Socratic paradox,” namely “that the eternal truth [i.e., immortality] was related to an existing person [i.e., Socrates, the finite human]” (207). Yet, Climacus suggests we must “go beyond” Socrates and obtain a “*more inward* expression” of subjective truth (207). But this is not fully explicated until he famously distinguishes between Religiousness A and Religiousness B.

RELIGIOUSNESS A

Both Religiousness A and B “have passed through the ethical” (*CUP* 388), and thus, represent instances of subjectivity, express one’s “relation to an eternal

10. Once again, we must note the tension here between Kierkegaard/Climacus and Hegel, for in Hegel’s account of Socrates, this is precisely why Hegel is *critical* of the ancient sage. For Hegel, Socrates represents “the principle of subjectivity—of the absolute inherent independence of Thought. ... He taught that man has to discover and recognize in himself what is the Right and Good ... Socrates ... posited the Individual as capable of a final moral decision, in contraposition to Country and to customary Morality, and thus made himself an oracle, in the Greek sense. He said that he had a [*daimonion*] within him, which counseled him what to do.... The rise of the inner world of Subjectivity was the rupture with the existing Reality.” As a result, Hegel writes, “Many citizens now seceded from practical and political life, to live in the ideal world,” and Socrates’ questioning of the “Custom Morality” of the state turned out to be the “ruin of the Athenian state.” Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 269–70.

happiness” (559), and serve as examples of a God-relation. However, there are key differences between the two. Religiousness *A* is chiefly described as a kind of God-relation “not conditioned by a something but is the dialectical inward deepening of the relation, consequently conditioned only by the inward deepening” (556). In other words, it entails an awareness of oneself as an existing individual who seeks to “know thyself” through inwardly “reflecting upon existing” as an effort to connect the [finite] self with the infinite (570). Clearly, Climacus has Socrates in mind, and Climacus maintains this “pathos-filled” life is obtainable by anyone, regardless of religious affiliation, who “venture[s] everything upon the ‘if’ of immortality” (429; cf. 278–79; 557), for its basic premise is simply “universal human nature” (559; cf. 584).

This is the religiousness observed in paganism, not to mention certain positions within Christianity. Climacus has in mind here those who reduce the Christian life to spiritual trial or suffering—the Christian ascetic, mystic of the Middle Ages, or monk. They commit to a kind of Christianity saturated with Platonic participation and believe only certain lifestyles and activities are acceptable for a God-relation. This kind of Christianity is thoroughly pagan and is marred by a “split” in thought, a dualism between the sacred and the secular (cf. *CUP* 461, 473–74, 492).¹¹ And while Religiousness *A* is surely better than much of the esthetic and ethical ways of living Climacus observes—especially of Hegelians who forget to exist at all (305–06)—it suffers from simultaneously remaining in the sphere of “immanence” and only having a negative relation to the eternal (560). Without any external polestar, its subjectivity only reflects on itself and its own understanding. Thus, in order to reach the eternal, this turn inward requires a “self-annihilation before God” (572). The individual must set “himself aside in order to find God, since it is the individual himself who is the

11. In other pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard is also quite critical of the monastic movement. See, for example, Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 2003), 123–25; *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 106.

hindrance” (560). In other words, Climacus’s concerns with pantheism remain, as the individual is “cleared out,” and ultimately “sinks” or is “swallowed” by the eternal (560, 561, 573).

RELIGIOUSNESS B

Religiousness *B* also espouses an inwardness and even claims to be the “greatest possible” level of inwardness (*CUP* 572). Here, Climacus speaks of the “knight of hidden inwardness” (499, 500)—a clear reference to Kierkegaard’s earlier pseudonymous works but claiming certain differences. Climacus views the “knight of faith” in *Fear and Trembling* as “only a rash anticipation” of the religiousness set forth in the *Postscript*. He finds problematic that the knight of faith is depicted in a “state of completeness” and that there is a contradiction in that Johannes de Silentio is able to observe the knight of faith, which should be impossible if faith is subjective or inward (500–01n).¹²

The inwardness of Religiousness *B* is not a sheer immanence, but is paradoxically related to “something outside the individual.” This gives the impression of a mere “esthetic relationship,” but in actual fact, it is “the absolute relationship with God.... The paradoxical upbuilding therefore corresponds to the category of God in time as an individual human being” (*CUP* 561). In other words, Religiousness *B*, or the “*paradoxical-religious*” (570, 573), goes beyond both paganism and reason—representing a “break with all thinking” into “the sphere of faith”

12. This one footnote strikes at the very heart at the question in this paper. For, it would be easy if looking at Kierkegaard’s entire pseudonymous corpus to, at the very least, include Judaism as an option for achieving the proper [paradoxical] God-relation, as Abraham and Job are given as chief examples. The implication in this footnote, however, is that just as the knight of faith is an “anticipation’ of the knight of hidden inwardness, Climacus views the external, law-based [though nevertheless still capable of paradox] faith observed in the Old Testament as an anticipation of the inward, subjective faith of the New Testament, or Christianity (a common view of the Old Testament by thinkers as varied as Aquinas and Luther). It would be hard to imagine, however, that Climacus would place Judaism within the same structure as paganism. If Christianity is “the sharpest contrast to paganism” (369), perhaps Judaism is another contrast, but not as extremely juxtaposed to paganism because it is not as paradoxical (perhaps, then, Judaism would be Religiousness *A.2* or Religiousness *B-Beta Version?*).

(579)—precisely because it makes the paradoxical claim to relate to the eternal “*in time*” (570).

Climacus is actually making two claims here. First, there is the obvious reference to the God-man. Here what is paradoxical or “absurd” is the claim that God, who “according to its nature cannot become historical” does indeed come into existence, a “fact” which is precisely the essence of Christianity (*CUP* 385; cf. 326).¹³ Second, in contrast to the pagan’s self-annihilation, Climacus is making the (absurd) claim that one can have a relation with the eternal in time—that one can *be eternal in time* (cf. 573). Rather than annulling individual existence (as in *A*), this paradoxical God-relation “is connected essentially with being a human being, and qualitatively with each human being in particular” (566). Instead of the sheer immanence in paganism, “Christianity indeed paradoxically accentuates existing” and “breaks with immanence and makes existing the absolute contradiction—not within immanence but in opposition to immanence. There is no immanental underlying kinship between the temporal and the eternal, because the eternal itself has entered into time and wants to establish kinship there” (572–73).

Here, then, we see why Climacus views Religiousness *B* as going beyond the religiousness found in Socrates. The existence of the “Greek philosopher... yields passion, but existence accentuated paradoxically yields the maximum of passion” (*CUP* 354). The pagan can lead a “pathos-filled” life and emphasize the importance of being a particular individual, banking everything on the “‘if’ of immortality,” but Religiousness *B* requires more, namely that the individual also “risk his thought, venture to believe against understanding” (429).

13. That Christianity is based on a “fact,” would imply that some level of content *is* important for Climacus’s account of subjective truth. However, one is left fumbling in trying to understand the difference between a “doctrine” and a “fact” in his account.

CONCLUSION

There remain plenty of questions we could ask Climacus: Is Christianity the only religion to boast the importance of a subjective inwardness? Is the God of Christianity the only one concerned with the particular individual? Could it be that other religions are based on an absolute paradox? But Climacus will not give an ear to such questions. He is infinitely, passionately interested in *his* question, *his* life, *his* religiousness, *his* relation to God. We may fault him for not having eyes big enough to consider the religions of the rest of the world; but, perhaps, to ask the question of other religions is to annul the subjective viewpoint.

Climacus's intense focus on the single individual, in contradistinction to the emphasis on the concept, the abstract, and the universal, then, should cause us to question if the appropriation of Kierkegaard's religious views into some kind of meta-theory or structure of religious experience as really just a return to Hegel. Derrida, for example, once claimed that "it is Kierkegaard to whom I have been most faithful."¹⁴ Yet, Derrida's concept of a "religion without religion" as a general structure or "axiom of impossibility" requires a removal of any particularistic or determinant aspects of Kierkegaard's category, "the religious," and thus, would involve a complete removal of any connections it may have with Christianity.¹⁵ For Derrida/Caputo, "God" is conflated with "the impossible," resulting in "the endless translatability and substitutability of these names" and "a wall of undecidability."¹⁶

While such a move may have some linguistic merit—although it seems to result in a bit of a tautology¹⁷—as well as reflecting the contemporary desire for a

14. Qtd. in John Llewelyn, *Margins of Religion: Between Kierkegaard and Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 1.

15. Caputo, "Looking the Impossible in the Eye: Kierkegaard, Derrida, and the Repetition of Religion," 8, 22.

16. *Ibid.*, 21.

17. For example, Caputo states early on in the essay, "We must be driven to the point ... where we see the impossibility that without God we cannot so much as take a walk in the Deer Park" (*Ibid.*,

more inclusive and pluralistic attitude toward religion, it must be acknowledged that such a turn reflects a betrayal of Kierkegaard's understanding of the God-relation and the particularistic nature of the existential condition. Conflating God to an abstract concept like "the impossible," is a Hegelian movement that Kierkegaard (at least here in the *Postscript*) would most certainly criticize, just as much as he would be critical of Hegelian movements which reduce the God-relation to one's duty to love thy neighbor—which is precisely how the *Phenomenology of Spirit* ends, where "Reason's Law is the law of universal Charity"¹⁸—a move which removes any notion of transcendence and limits human activity to the political/ethical realm.¹⁹ Kierkegaard/Climacus would be staunchly opposed to any of the philosophical movements which locate the telos of Christianity in a secular modernity and reduces all the claims of Christianity to the imperative of love for one's neighbor, which reflect not only the position of Derrida/Caputo²⁰ but also Žižek's "Christian atheism"²¹ and Vattimo's secular nihilism.²²

For Climacus, if the single individual has not banked his entire life and eternal happiness on Christianity, if he has not taken the *particular* leap of faith that constitutes Christianity, is it not a bit disingenuous? To hold back and lay

13–14). If we are to agree with him that "the impossible" can be a suitable replacement for the name of "God," the above quotation would be reduced to saying "we see the impossibility that without the impossible we cannot so much as take a walk in the Deer Park," and one of the integral verses to which Kierkegaard often alludes to throughout his corpus would then read "for with the impossible nothing will be impossible" (cf. Luke 1:37).

18. Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System*, 91.

19. Cf. *Fear and Trembling*, 96, where Johannes de Silentio begins his Problema II with this very point.

20. For more on Caputo's position, see Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

21. Cf. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

22. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). We could also add to this list Heidegger's demythologizing of the Christian narrative to an ontological-existential philosophy of Being in *Being and Time*, as well as Alain Badiou's reading of Christian themes through the lens of secular atheism in his book, *St. Paul: The Founder of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

claims to multiple faith-traditions simultaneously would not be to embrace any one paradox, be in subjective relation to the God, exhibit any kind of devotion or pathos, or take any risk—and, “Without risk, no faith” (*CUP* 204)—but, rather, would appear to objectively keep one’s options open, like increasing one’s odds of winning a gamble in a horse race by betting on every horse. In contrast, Climacus concludes: “Religiousness *B* is isolating, separating, is polemical. Only in this condition do I become blessed, and as I absolutely bind myself to it, I thereby exclude everyone else. This is the impetus of particularism in the ordinary pathos” (582).