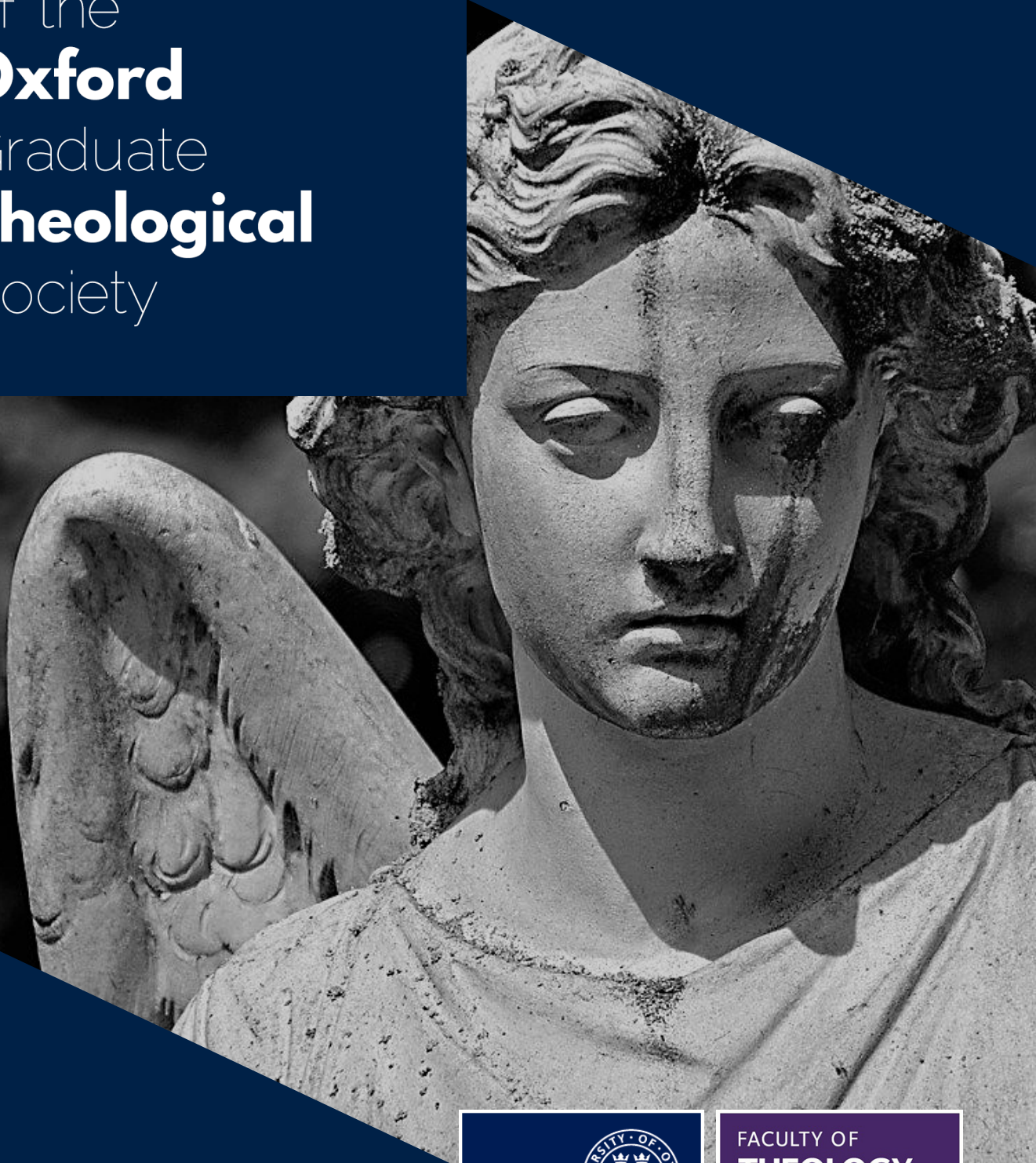


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**Theology,
Religion & Crisis**



UNIVERSITY OF
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FACULTY OF
**THEOLOGY
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RELIGION**

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The Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society (JOGTS) is a peer-reviewed journal which publishes scholarly articles in the field of theology and religion.

Each issue divides contributions into two categories: i) those which respond to the special theme of that issue, invited in each edition's Call for Papers; ii) those which come under the general scope of the journal. As an affiliate of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, the scope of the journal is defined by the breadth of research undertaken by fellows and postgraduate students of the faculty. As such, articles address questions pertinent to the critical study of theology and religion from a variety of disciplines and methodologies, including (but not limited to): biblical studies, religious ethics, historical and systematic theology, ecclesiastical history, philosophical theology, science and religion, and the study of religion—including sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches. The journal also publishes critical book reviews, media reviews, and featured articles.

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Editorial Introduction

Tim Middleton

Lincoln College, University of Oxford

tim.middleton@theology.ox.ac.uk

Welcome to this second edition of the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* (JOGTS).

There was always a slight risk that JOGTS could fall foul of difficult-second-album syndrome, but I am absolutely delighted to say that the very opposite has been the case. At the start of the academic year, no fewer than thirty-six of the new graduate students at the Faculty of Theology and Religion here in Oxford applied to join our Editorial Board. It is their commitment and enthusiasm that has really helped the journal to flourish. This year, JOGTS received many more submissions—of both articles and reviews—than last. And it is particularly exciting that we are now attracting authors and peer-reviewers from across the UK, as well as internationally. We also hosted our first live events, established our social media presence, and acquired an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN). At the same time, articles from our first issue have been gaining hundreds of downloads.

Back in autumn 2020, the Editorial Board decided on “Theology, Religion and Crisis” as the theme for this issue. From the distress of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic fallout of national lockdowns to the urgent cry of Black Lives Matter and the mounting seriousness of ecological collapse, we wanted to ask how theologians and scholars of religion have felt called to respond to the notion of crisis, both practically and conceptually. We were also aware that religions and religious institutions might be, or have been, in moments of crisis themselves. Over the course of the year, however, whilst engaging in our events and reflecting on our submitted articles, I have become increasingly aware of the dangers of the word “crisis”: of the states of exception that are legitimised by its invocation, as well as the persistent crises that go unnoticed if they do not touch those in positions of privilege. Yet, both realisations make it all the more important, I think, that theologians and scholars of religion participate in these discussions.



We are fortunate to be able to include two featured contributions in this issue that address the theme of crisis. First, Christopher Key Chapple, Doshi Professor of Indic and Comparative Theology at Loyola Marymount University, offers an introductory reflection on “The Role of Religions in Times of Ecological Crisis” and describes how his own practice of Patañjala Yoga can encourage simpler living. Meanwhile, in a special interview for JOGTS, Alan Macfarlane, Emeritus Professor of Anthropological Science and a Life Fellow of King's College Cambridge, unpacks his experience of the crisis of modernity.

Two of our published articles, as well as all of our book reviews, also address this issue's theme. Melissa Barciela Mandala proposes that Paul's political theology in Romans 13:1-7 be re-read through a cosmological lens, thus providing hope to Christian communities in times of crisis. Elizabeth Campbell addresses the crisis of the Anthropocene, arguing that the advent of this new geological age has revolutionised the treatment of discarded, “waste” objects in neo-Pagan witchcraft. And our reviews cover six works that treat a variety of crises through assorted theological lenses: historical, exegetical, devotional, and liberation theological.

This time round, our section of “General Articles” has a distinctly Kierkegaardian flavour. Daniel Bennett employs Kierkegaard's thought for an analysis of the impact of social media use on the self, and especially the self before God. Whilst Mimi Nicholson engages Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus in a discussion of how human artistry can faithfully imitate Christ by being simultaneously imaginative and spiritual. This edition is rounded out by Jackson Reinhardt's article, which proposes that the apparently prosperous audience of the letter of 1 Timothy should serve as a further reason to reject its Pauline authorship.

None of this would have been possible without the help and support of many groups and individuals. First and foremost, I am personally immensely grateful to all the members of the Editorial Board listed above, who have given freely of their time to attend meetings, propose ideas, organise events, publicise our work, review and copy-edit articles, and produce this publication. Our new Advisory Board of senior scholars have also been unstinting in showing their support for this venture, and we are very thankful for their encouragement—especially the faculty's Graduate Studies Coordinator, Dr Sarah Apetrei. We are much obliged to the Oxford Faculty of Theology and Religion, and its generous alumni, who have continued to provide financial backing for our endeavours. And we are grateful once again to the *Journal of Theological Studies* for providing us with books for review.

Over the course of the year, we have also been working in parallel on a special issue of JOGTS, publishing proceedings from the postgraduate conference of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics. I am indebted to James Hooks, our guest editor, for his tireless hard work on this initiative. Do look out for this publication.

Finally, I am very pleased to say that Natasha Chawla will be taking over as Editor of JOGTS for the 2021-2022 academic year. I wish her and the rest of the Editorial Board every success as the journal continues to grow.

Guest Introduction

The Role of Religions in Times of Ecological Crisis

Christopher Key Chapple

Loyola Marymount University

cchapple@lmu.edu

This issue of the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* is engaged with the theme of crisis. By way of introduction, I would like to offer some brief observations on the climate crisis from the perspective of comparative theology, both in terms of theory and practice, from the perspective of engaged scholarship.

My awareness of environmental difficulty stems from childhood: seeing strip-mining in Ohio; noting the burning of the Cuyahoga River between Akron and Cleveland; realising the near proximity of Love Canal to my family; and reading about the warming of the earth due to the greenhouse effect, as well as the deleterious presence of lead in the human body, and pesticides and herbicides in the food chain. Simultaneously, my childhood was marked by nature immersion: learning to swim in Lake Ontario (before the detection of dangerous coliform levels); wandering the fields and forests, and swimming in the ponds and lakes of western New York—first in the fruit belt of Orleans County, and then in the Genesee Valley. Afterschool outdoor reveries were supported throughout my teens with formal daily zazen practice and weekly silence with the Religious Society of Friends. Eventually, I trained in Patañjala Yoga, studying and practicing under the guidance of Gurāṇi Añjali Inti, originally from Calcutta, India. The Yoga system integrates ethics and awareness. It promotes an integration between issues of concern and human action.

The quality of human life has become imperilled by greed-fuelled technology, hard and soft. Our hard technology requires massive extraction of mineral resources from the earth. It has created thousands of artificial chemicals, designed to enhance human comfort. We now can stay warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and move about with abandon. However, we have learned that



Christopher Key Chapple, "Guest Introduction: The Role of Religions in Times of Ecological Crisis," *JOGTS* 2.1 (2021), pp. 6-8

our heating and cooling and transportation modalities, to the extent that they rely upon fossil fuels, are literally choking the very humans who designed them. Our soft technology has flooded the mind, eyes and ears with images that often stray far from reality. Overwhelmed with the terror of detective shows, the allure of salacious images, and the destabilising proliferation of misinformation, many humans have lost their centre, falling into anxiety, stress, and depression. Feelings of fear and insecurity now pervade the life-state of many, particularly the young.

To be aware of these perilous situations is paramount. We must acknowledge the harms caused by our technologies. Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and J. R. R. Tolkien all called out the dangers of fast transport. Gandhi took the critique further, calling for the overthrow of all colonialism, not only mercantile, but also emotional and psychic.

Conscientization, a term coined by Paolo Freire, can and must lead to grass roots organising. As we learn the ills of racism, intolerance, hatred, and unbridled consumerism, we must act. Gandhi critiqued colonial power structures. Rather than remaining subservient to British economic policies, Gandhi called for boycotts and strikes that, over the period of several decades, brought about freedom for India and Pakistan. Though the political and historical details can be instructive and must not be ignored, the singular, core tool implemented by Gandhi can inform contemporary needs: a call for *svarāj* or self-power. Indian cotton, shipped from India, provided the raw material for the fabrics manufactured in England that were then exported back to India. Salt mined with British technology was sold to the Indian people, heavily taxed. Gandhi organised a daily spinning campaign so Indians could create their own cloth, and salt marches to the ocean where they produced their own salt. An excellent translation of the term *svarāj* is “sovereign”, capturing the sound and sense of the original Sanskrit term. More specific than the terms “freedom” and “liberation”, this word returns power to the people. We must become freed from the shackles of technologies and media that cause bondage and harm.

How then might religions help reverse the current problems plaguing the outer and inner environment? The prophetic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) have a long history of speaking truth to power, grappling with injustice, and moving toward a common good, often through legal mechanisms. The Paris Accords set forth parameters through which remedies may be found for the climate crisis. *Laudato Si'* and other religious documents provide an ethical framework which can help inspire the implementation of these goals. Similarly, the contemplative practices of Yoga and meditation can serve as base for taking corrective action in the realm of food, consumer choices, and legislative activism.

The Yoga training of Gurāṇi Añjali placed keen attention on environmental issues, calling out the difficulties of pollution, as seen in the refrain of one of her songs: “The Earth Is Burning!”. The practice of Yoga employs the cultivation of opposites (*pratipakṣa-bhāvana*) as corrective action. As students of Yoga, we were urged to interrogate our complicity in needless consumer activity and

to strategise alternatives. We developed an alternative economy of sorts, including the creation of a restaurant (Santosha Vegetarian Dining), an art gallery, and a bookstore. The training itself included building a new relationship with the elements through the sixth limb of Yoga: concentration (*dhārāṇā*). We directed our attention—twenty minutes in the morning, and again at night—first to earth for a month, then to water, fire, air, and space in sequence, for a total of five months. Life changing connections and insights emerged, including the knowledge that our bodies cannot be separated from the food and water and heat and breath that nourish and sustain us. We must protect this sacred space, inner and outer.

In many ways, the environmental problems that confront humanity require a return to simple appreciation of the rhythm of life itself. Mental and emotional health are essential for humans to thrive and flourish. Religions throughout history and across cultures have offered advice and guidance for overcoming difficulty and trouble. Religious communities provide a gateway into a sense of meaning, integrating the human narrative with the story of the earth. Religious communities can also influence policy and legislation. The Forum on Religion and Ecology convened a series of conferences at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions in the late 1990s, drawing more than 600 scholars from more than a dozen of the world's faith traditions, exploring avenues through which the voice of religions may contribute to the ecological conversation. This work remains vital, continuing at all levels and in all traditions around the globe. As seen in the work of the Forum, we can learn a great deal from scriptural texts and religious traditions. A quote attributed to Gandhi perhaps summarises it best: "Live simply so that others may simply live."

Revisiting Romans 13:1-7 in Times of Crisis

Reading Through a Cosmological Lens

Melissa J. Barciela Mandala

University of St Andrews

mb454@st-andrews.ac.uk

Abstract

This article revisits Romans 13:1-7 through the lens of cosmology and demonstrates how Paul's political theology wields two key cosmological themes—order and justice—to establish the sovereignty of God above political rulers. Paul's argument has a fundamentally cosmological dimension insofar as it reframes the socio-political cosmos and reimagines how believers are to live within it. To make this point, the article first calls for an expansion of the term 'cosmology' in modern biblical scholarship. This term not only refers to the natural world, but also to social relationships and how they are variously ordered in the world. To do this, the article presents evidence from Paul's context to validate the expansion of the term cosmology to social realities and political relations. The context demonstrates that the cosmos and political rulers were fundamentally intertwined in various ancient worldviews. Second, it offers a re-reading of Romans 13:1-7, demonstrating that the cosmological themes of order and justice reframe the believer's relationship to ruling authorities. This reading both encourages peaceful submission and offers confidence that God is sovereign over the ruling authorities. Third, the article contends that such a cosmological reading provides hope to the modern Christian community in the midst of crisis.



Introduction

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul admonishes the Roman community of believers to “submit to” and “honor” the ruling authorities that have been set in place by God “for your good” (13:4). This exhortation has sparked discussion and debate on the relationship between the divine, governing authorities, and the citizens, or inhabitants, that continues into modern times. In recent years, Romans 13:1-7 has been interpreted through a wide array of lenses, including postcolonial, literary, missiological, liberationist, imperial, and anti-imperial interpretive frameworks.¹ This text has also been wielded, over the course of history, as a sword of oppression and control. Some claim it was Paul’s reaction to the Roman community’s over-realized eschatology as applied to politics, where the arrival of the kingdom of God through the gospel allows for a dismissal of Roman authorities and law.² Others assert that it was an attempt to restrain disorder or anarchy in the community.³ Suggested motives for submission include that the governing authorities are authorized by God, thus one ought to obey them to avoid the judgment of God. Others make a more general claim that God desires order.⁴ It has also become a key passage in the debate over a potential counter-imperial theme in Paul. Yet, it seems that none of the proposed readings consider the passage as a cosmological argument or recognize the cosmological aspects of Paul’s political theology, that is to say, Paul’s vision for order and justice within the cosmos as a whole. So, is a cosmological framework helpful for thinking about Romans 13:1-7? If so, what is the function of cosmology in Romans 13:1-7?

This article argues that Romans 13:1-7 does indeed fit within a cosmological landscape in Pauline thought. When read through this lens, the key cosmological themes of order and justice legitimize the sovereignty of God and offer a framework for ancient believers to endure the reign of human rulers. This reading also offers a message of hope in God’s sovereignty, thereby helping the modern

¹ Neil Elliott, “Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 184–204; S.U. Lim, “A Double-Voiced Reading of Romans 13:1–7 in Light of the Imperial Cult,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2015): 1–10; Tarcisius Mukuka, “Reading/Hearing Romans 13:1-7 Under an African Tree: Towards a Lection Postcolonica Contexta Africana,” *Neotestamentica* 46, no. 1 (2012): 105–38; Ishanesu S. Gusha, “Exegesis of Romans 13:1–7 and Its Appropriation to the New Dispensation of the Second Republic of Zimbabwe,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020); Philip H. Towner, “Romans 13:1-7 and Paul’s Missiological Perspective: A Call to Political Quietism or Transformation?,” in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Sven Soderlund, Gordon D. Fee, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 149–69.

² Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (London: SCM Press, 1952), 427.

³ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 354–59; N.T. Wright, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Acts - First Corinthians*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 718-719.

⁴ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 201–3.

interpreter in times of crisis. First, I examine the cosmological framework and how Paul's context invites interpreters to identify this background. Next, I explore the cosmological contours of Romans 13:1-7 and how such a reading may assist contemporary believers in times of crisis.

Widening the Lens of Cosmology

In the modern context, the term 'cosmology,' from the Greek word κόσμος, or 'world,' refers to creation language and created beings.⁵ It is interested in the stars, the sea, and even matters as obscure as how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.⁶ Some scholars have claimed that limiting 'cosmology' to *only* this natural sense is a post-Enlightenment development, and one which limits 'cosmology' to an overly scientific explanation of the physical universe. For this reason, it is more helpful to think of cosmology as all structures of the universe, including community and culture.⁷ With reference to Paul, Joel White makes this point:

The modern understanding of cosmology as a sort of 'anatomy and physiology' of the universe reflects the naturalistic paradigm of the post-Enlightenment West. From the perspective of the ancient world, however, questions concerning the structure and workings of the cosmos cannot be separated from questions concerning origin, and within an early Jewish world view, the question of the purpose of the cosmos must be considered paramount.⁸

This line of thought calls for an important shift in biblical scholarship to a more comprehensive understanding of cosmology and its appearance in Pauline texts. The cosmological lens in this piece stretches beyond explicit creation language to creation's ordering and function, including culture, community, and the socio-political sphere.⁹

⁵ David Wason Hollar Jr. and Richard R. Erickson, "Cosmology," in *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Science*, 2020, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=ers&AN=88314216&site=eds-live>.

⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.52.

⁷ For a similar account, see Richard J. Clifford, "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible," *Orientalia: Nova Series*, 53, no. 2 (1984): 185–86; M. R. Wright, *Cosmology in Antiquity*, Sciences of Antiquity (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–10; T. J. Lang, "Cosmology and Eschatology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Pauline Studies*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson and R. Barry Matlock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

⁸ Joel White, "Paul's Cosmology: The Witness of Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians," in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, ed. Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean M. McDonough, Library of New Testament Studies 355 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 90.

⁹ For one instance of this in the early church, see the comparison of the cosmos above to the cosmos that is social reality below in 1 Clem. 20:1-12.

Cosmology and Kingship in Paul's Context

Extending cosmology beyond explicit creation language into the sphere of sociological ordering invites one to consider how cosmology might be present in texts that may not immediately seem cosmological. Romans 13:1-7 is one such example. Reading Romans 13:1-7 through a cosmological lens suggests that the key motive for submission is the sovereignty of God, who sits above ruling authorities. This is demonstrated through the themes of order and justice. Before addressing this text, it is helpful to explore the relationship between kingship, or figures of governing authority, and cosmology in Paul's Greco-Roman context, including, of course, his Jewish context.

Cosmology and Kingship in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible

Creation, order, and kingship are an inseparable triad in the cosmological fabric of the Hebrew Bible and its Ancient Near Eastern context. Nearly every Ancient Near Eastern cosmology places political rule at the center of how the cosmos is organized and how it moves along correctly. For instance, a Neo-Babylonian text of the creation of man in a myth in the *Atrahasis* tradition speaks of the king being created by a deity and assigned different divine attributes by the gods of the pantheon.¹⁰ John van Seters notes that the "bestowal of physical endowments at birth and the regalia at the coronation have both been combined and then placed mythologically back into the time of creation itself as a way of expressing the inception of kingship."¹¹ The author presents the king as a sort of primordial first creation.¹²

Another instance of kingship in the fabric of Ancient Near Eastern cosmology is in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*.¹³ Marduk is enthroned as the king of both humans and gods.¹⁴ Richard Clifford highlights that the fifty names given to Marduk function to "glorify Marduk as the sustainer of order and life on earth as well as in heaven"; Marduk is the organizing center of society.¹⁵ To this point, Clifford contends that ancient peoples recorded cosmologies to explain the organization and structure of society at large, not merely limited to the exploration of creation.¹⁶ Further, the Ugaritic Baal Cycle (CTA 4) evidences a similar trend, where the king is set above both humans and gods, sovereignly ordering the cosmos. CTA 4 tells of a palace being built for Baal where a

¹⁰ Werner R. Mayer, "Ein Mythos von Der Erschaffung Des Menschen Und Des Königs," *Orientalia: Nova Series*, 56, no. 1 (1987): 55–68.

¹¹ John van Seters, "The Creation of Man and the Creation of the King," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, no. 101 (1989): 338.

¹² van Seters, "Creation of Man," 337.

¹³ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 233–277.

¹⁴ The myth reads: "Elevated far above them [the gods], he was superior in every way." See Dalley, 235.

¹⁵ Clifford, "Cosmogonies," 185.

¹⁶ Clifford, "Cosmogonies," 187.

banquet for the gods is hosted. Baal orders himself above these gods, clearly asserting “I am the only one who rules over the gods, who fattens gods and men, who satiates the hordes of the earth.”¹⁷

The divine ordering of gods, humans, and kings is also central to cosmological speculation in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁸ Three exemplary texts that display the connection between kingship and cosmology are Psalm 89, Ezekiel 28, and Daniel 7. Psalm 89 presents God as the sovereign creator, who created the north and the south, keeps chaos at bay, and “crushed Rahab” (Ps. 89:6-13).¹⁹ The Davidic king is then tethered to this *Chaoskampf* (the combat versus chaos motif in Ancient Near Eastern literature): “I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers” (Ps. 89:25).²⁰ Water imagery is a classic motif for chaos in primordial creation myths. By using this language, the author positions the king as an agent of order who participates in restraining chaos, similar to other Ancient Near Eastern texts.²¹

Yet, the Davidic king is not the only royal figure to participate in cosmology. Ezekiel 28:1-19 presents a prophecy against the King of Tyre which describes his original establishment. The text describes him in terms similar to those of ancient Mesopotamian royal myth, claiming that he was “the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty” (Ez. 28:12) before corrupting both with hubris.²² Further, the king is situated within a cosmological context: “you were in Eden, the garden of god” (Ez. 28:13). Similar to Adam and Eve, he was driven from his sacred dwelling upon his rebellion (Ez. 28:16).²³ It is significant to note that the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern texts share the motif of situating the king at the start of creation.

Yet, even when Israel does not have a king, the biblical writers find ways to weave kingship into cosmology because they still believed that certain royal activities were a fundamental part of cosmological speculation. For instance, the figure in Daniel 7 with royal associations is an angelic figure called “the Son of Man”, disassociated from David, but not from responsibilities that are

¹⁷ Dennis Pardee, “The Ba’lu Myth,” in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1, *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 263.

¹⁸ Clifford, “Cosmogonies,” 201; Carly L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 15-32.

¹⁹ All citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

²⁰ For a more detailed exploration of this motif, see Hermann Gunkel and Heinrich Zimmern, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12*, Repr. [der Ausg.] Göttingen 1895 (Breinigsville: Nabu Press, 2011).

²¹ Carly L. Crouch, “Made in the Image of God: The Creation of Adm, the Commissioning of the King and the Chaoskampf of YHWH,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 16, no. 1 (2016): 19.

²² van Seters, “The Creation of Man and the Creation of the King,” 337–38.

²³ van Seters argues Ez. 28 is dependent on the aforementioned myth. Mayer, “Ein Mythos von Der Erschaffung Des Menschen Und Des Königs”.

fundamentally royal in nature (Dan. 7:14).²⁴ This data demonstrates that kingship was a key pillar of cosmological speculation not only with reference to the Davidic king (Psalm 89), but also into a time when there was no king at all (Daniel 7).²⁵ Political structures and kingship were intertwined with the structure of the universe.

Cosmology and Governing Authority in Roman Imperial Ideology

The tie between cosmology and governing authorities is also present in Paul's context of Greco-Roman imperial ideology, and it is to this that we now turn. The close association within imperial ideology between the emperor and the divine finds its origins with Augustus.²⁶ When Rome was renewed under Augustus, the emperor was intimately tied to the gods.²⁷ Augustus was viewed as the one who saves the world from cosmic disarray, suffering, and the destruction of creation. The descriptions of Nero, the last representative of Rome's Julio-Claudian dynasty founded by Augustus, and his divinity exemplify this point. Beyond his political position, Nero held religious power, assuming the title *pontifex maximus*: the head of religious life in Rome. He was endowed with the title *Augustus*, meaning "the revered one," further connecting him to the gods and emphasizing his road to deification.²⁸ Some scholars also find evidence for this connection with the divine in the practice of imperial cult worship, where Nero and the imperial household were worshipped as divine figures.²⁹ Coin inscriptions, sacrifices, incense offered on behalf of the

²⁴ Gregory Goswell, "Where Is David in the Book of Daniel?," *Restoration Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2014): 209–21; John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*, 1st ed, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 191–195.

²⁵ See John Day and Oxford Old Testament Seminar, eds., *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2013); Shirley Lucass, *The Concept of the Messiah in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

²⁶ Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997); David Nystrom, "We Have No King but Caesar: Roman Imperial Ideology and the Imperial Cult," in *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 30–36; David Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994); Karl Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22–24; Barbara Levick, *Augustus: Image and Substance* (London: Routledge, 2010), 288–318.

²⁷ Cicero, *Rep.* 1.12.

²⁸ Darja Šterbenc Erker, "Religion," in *A Companion to the Neronian Age*, ed. Emma Buckley and Martin T. Dinter, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 119.

²⁹ For more on imperial cult see, S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Horsley, *Paul and Empire*; Jeffrey Brodd and Jonathan L. Reed, eds., *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult*, Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series, v. 5 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011); N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 69–78. For a counter-

emperor and to the emperor's *Genius* at public festivals such as *comitia consularia* (the consular assembly), *comitia pontificalia* (the pontifical assembly), and *tribunicia potestas* (the festival of first taking on tribunicial power), and the invocation of the *Genius* when making oaths (Seneca, *Letters*, 1.12), all point to the emperor's close association with the divine.³⁰ The emperor was even viewed as a "cosmic benefactor" according to James R. Harrison.³¹ Thus, within the world of imperial ideology—and the presence, albeit faint, of the imperial cult—the emperor Nero is clearly associated with the realm of the gods and even at times considered to be himself divine.

Yet, there is not just an association between the emperor and the divine, but also a strong connection between the divine emperor and the cosmos. In the case of Nero, cosmological language surrounds descriptions of his role and function. Seneca writes instructions to Nero in *De Clementia* 1.1-4:

and finally to commune with oneself thus: 'Have I of all mortals found favour with Heaven and been chosen to serve on earth as vicar of the gods? I am the arbiter of life and death for the nations; it rests in my power what each man's lot and state shall be; by my lips Fortune proclaims what gift she would bestow on each human being; from my utterance peoples and cities gather reasons for rejoicing; without my favour and grace no part of the wide world can prosper; [...] Today, if the immortal gods should require a reckoning from me, I am ready to give full tale of the human race.'³²

Nero clearly acts here on behalf of the gods and participates in the divine act of ordering the cosmos. He controls life and death, pronounces Fortune's wishes, and possesses control over decisions for man, of which he will give an account.

Further, in the parodic poem *Apocolocyntosis*, often attributed to Seneca, Nero is described with cosmic imagery. This poem opens with Fate Clotho ending the thread of Claudius' life and spinning that of his successor Nero. Apollo acts as the god of prophecy, approving the Fates (Lachesis, Atropos, and Clotho) as they tell of Nero's coming reign:

'Fates, take nothing away' said Phoebus, 'let that one, who resembles me in looks and beauty, and no less in song and voice, surpass the duration of human life. He will provide for the weary people years of prosperity, and will break the silence imposed on the laws. Like the Morning Star rising and scattering the stars in flight, or like the Evening Star which rises with the stars' return, like the

argument, see Colin Miller, "The Imperial Cult in the Pauline Cities of Asia Minor and Greece," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010): 314–32.

³⁰ Šterbenc Erker, "Religion," 119–120.

³¹ James R. Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 273 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 125–27.

³² Seneca the Younger, *Moral Essays: Volume I: De Providentia. De Constantia. De Ira. De Clementia.*, trans. John W. Basore, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928).

bright Sun which looks at the world and spurs on his first chariots from the starting gates, as soon as rosy Dawn has got rid of the shadows and leads in the day: such a Caesar is present, such a Nero Rome will now behold. His bright face blazes with gentle radiance, his neck graceful under the flowing hair.' (4.20-32)³³

The Roman emperor Nero was clearly seen as the divine one who maintains political and religious order on behalf of the gods, thus ensuring the proper function of the cosmos. This evidence from the Ancient Near Eastern context, Hebrew Bible, and Roman imperial ideology traces a common thread of cosmological thought and demonstrates that ruling authorities were deeply embedded in the cosmological context of Paul's Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds.

Reading Romans 13:1-7 Through a Cosmological Lens

The evidence suggests that there is a fundamentally cosmological nature to much ancient political speculation. Thus, in turning to Romans 13:1-7, it would be only natural to inquire *if* and, if so, *how* this cosmological context influenced Paul's thought. Yet the first cosmological threads appear in the historical and literary contexts of the passage.

The Cosmological Scene of Romans 13:1-7

Cosmological writings often arose against the background of tumultuous scenes of historical crisis and unrest.³⁴ Both biblical and non-biblical texts evidence this context. Kevin Mellish highlights how cosmological writings tell the social and political story of a people and its situation in history.³⁵ For instance, in Isaiah 40-55 the people are in exile, without a temple or a king, and the prophet uses cosmological imagery to establish the legitimacy of the Lord and to bring a message of hope that Israel will be restored (Isa. 40:12-31; 41:4-6, 17-20; 42:5; 43:24-28; 44:7-12; 45:18).³⁶ The Lord and, at times, the appointed king are presented as the ones who are able to order chaos (Isa. 45:28). Cosmological narratives often re-establish God's legitimacy and bring a message of hope in times of disorder or crisis. Turning to Romans 13:1-7, the historical setting is appropriate for a cosmological text. Paul writes sometime in the 50s, around the crisis of the Edict of Claudius, which saw some Jews and Jesus followers, such as Priscilla and Aquilla, expelled from Rome and

³³ Seneca the Younger, "Apocolocyntosis," trans. Gareth Schmeling (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

³⁴ The exilic background of Ps. 74, Ps. 89, Gen. 1, and Isa. 40-55 evidence this. Dan. 7 is written amidst the Hasmonean crisis.

³⁵ Kevin Mellish, "Creation as Social and Political Order in Ancient Thought and the Hebrew Bible," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 157-79.

³⁶ Cf. Isa. 40:12, 15, 21-31; 41:5-6, 8-10, 17-20; 42:5-7; 43:1-21; 44:6, 23-28; 45:4-13, 18-19; 46:3-4, 8-11; 48:12-13; 49:1, 5, 13; 50:2-3; 51:1-3, 9-16; 54:16-17; 55:9-13.

later readmitted to the city (Acts 18:2). The Jewish-Christian community is in a diasporic state.³⁷ It is likely that Paul writes during socio-political unrest. This is the sort of setting in which one would expect cosmological themes and messaging to arise.

Further, the literary context of Romans 13:1-7 also invites a cosmological reading. In recent interpretations of the text, scholarship has highlighted cosmology at work in the letter to the Romans at large. From the letter's creation imagery (1:20, 8:27-29), reading sin as a cosmic power (5-7), interest in the cosmological self, Christ as the new Adam (5:12-20), and the cosmic powers in general (8:27-29), it has long been argued that Paul's words in Romans are set on a cosmological stage.³⁸ Of particular interest to the literary context of Romans 13:1-7 is the doxology in 11:33-36, which seems to pave the way for the following chapters. Romans 12:1-15:13 is commonly bracketed as a section on practices of Christian living.³⁹ Yet, little is said about its connection to the doxology of 11:33-36. Richard Longenecker notes that οὐν (therefore) in 12:1 is able to "reach back", and claims it connects with all that has been written about love, grace, and mercy in the middle of the letter, mainly in 5:1-8:39.⁴⁰ Leon Morris explicitly encourages readers not to tie 12:1-15:13 too closely to 11:33-36, but rather to the entire argument of Romans 1-11.⁴¹ This point is valid, yet it seems to underestimate the value and function of the doxology. While οὐν (12:1) points backward, it is also the case that it points forward, and "creates close continuity with what precedes."⁴² Thus, it appears Romans 11:33-36 stands as a hinge between Romans 1-11 and 12-15; it closes the argument of chapters 1-11 and opens chapters 12-15 with an image of God as

³⁷ N.T. Wright, "Romans," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Acts - First Corinthians*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 718-19; Neil Elliott, "Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 185.

³⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Neither Height nor Depth: Discerning the Cosmology of Romans," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 3 (2011): 265-78; White, "Paul's Cosmology: The Witness of Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians"; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ed., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed, The Anchor Bible, v. 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 637; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 744.

⁴⁰ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 645-46. For a similar view, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, ed. Bruce M Metzger, David Allen Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 38B, Word Biblical Commentary (San Francisco: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2014), 708.

⁴¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 432.

⁴² For more on this particle in light of discourse analysis, see Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 43-48.

all-knowing and all-powerful.⁴³ Longenecker writes: “Paul’s doxology of 11:33-36 closes with the declaration that everything that was created and exists has its *origin* in God, has its *support* from God, and has as its *goal, end, and purpose*, to praise God.”⁴⁴ This declaration of God’s power then sets the tone for chapters 12-15.

In addition, Romans 11:34 contains an allusion to God as the cosmological king in order to establish God’s power in this doxology. In verse 34, Paul alludes to Isaiah 40:13: “For who has known the mind of the Lord?” This verse is exalting YHWH as the one who delivered the Jewish people from exile.⁴⁵ The context of Isaiah 40:13 is heavily cosmological and highlights the sovereignty of God. It describes God as the one who measures the waters and the heavens (Is. 40:12), weighs the mountains (Is. 40:12), “sits above the circle of the earth” and “stretches out the heavens like a curtain” (Is. 40:22), calls forth the stars (Is. 40:26), and created all things (Is. 40:26). Kingship language then unsurprisingly appears in Isaiah 40:23-25, where the prophet declares that He is one “who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.” In the midst of these descriptions of God as sovereign over the cosmos in Isaiah 40, we find Paul’s scriptural referent: “Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him?” (Is. 40:13). This is an instance of metalepsis, where the allusion evokes both Isaiah 40:13 and its context.⁴⁶ The resulting echo creates a new layer of significance and meaning, namely the designation of this powerful God as the God of the cosmos.⁴⁷

Richard B. Hays puts forward seven criteria to identify metalepsis, which this example meets: availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history of interpretation, and satisfaction.⁴⁸ The Septuagint text of Isaiah that Paul draws from was available to him and his readers; it is an explicit citation which also occurs in 1 Cor. 2:16, where the knowledge of God is elevated above that of the world; the allusion to God as cosmological ruler demonstrates thematic coherence with and strengthens the doxology; it is historically plausible that Paul would have alluded to the cosmos; other interpreters have recognized this citation (though not its cosmological aspects); and the proposed reading makes sense in context, providing further reason to glorify

⁴³ Craig S. Keener notes that chapters 9-11 establish the sovereignty of God. See Craig S. Keener, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), 153–54.

⁴⁴ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 640.

⁴⁵ Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 635.

⁴⁶ Richard B. Hays derives this term ‘metalepsis’ from John Hollander. See John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After*, Quantum Books (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 133-149.

⁴⁷ Hays writes that such an allusive echo “functions to suggest to the reader that text B should be understood in light of a broad interplay with text A, encompassing aspects of A beyond those explicitly echoed.” See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 20.

⁴⁸ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 29–31.

God.⁴⁹ It is with God as the all-powerful, implicit cosmological ruler in mind that readers then move into the exhortatory portion of the letter.

Romans 13:1-7 Revisited

There are two key cosmological themes at work in Romans 13:1-7: order and justice. These two themes are interwoven to affirm God's sovereignty and provide hope to the early Christian community. This reading does not suggest that Paul's message primarily served a counter-imperial agenda, aiming to directly challenge or compete with the Roman empire.⁵⁰ Nor does it propose a positive view of empire.⁵¹ Rather, it offers a framework for believers to endure imperial reign in the current age by elevating God's sovereignty. With respect to the theme of order, Paul describes the cosmological order of God and the human rulers in verses 1-2:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority *except by God* (εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ) and the authorities that exist have been *instituted by God* (αἱ δὲ οὕσαι ὑπὸ θεοῦ τεταγμέναι εἰσίν). Therefore, whoever resists the authority is resisting *the authority God has appointed* (τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ διαταγῇ) and the ones resisting will bring judgment on themselves.⁵²

As evidenced above, it is clear that the divine ordering of the cosmos is not limited to its physical elements, but also entails its function; it includes the place and role of governing authorities.⁵³ Paul clearly orders the authorities beneath God, as being established by God (13:1-2).⁵⁴ Michael Bird highlights that in these seven verses, God (θεός) is referenced six times, elevating his authority over earthly rulers.⁵⁵ Many interpreters see the theme of the subordination of human rulers beneath God and the theme of order at work in the text, crediting it to Hellenistic ideas of citizen

⁴⁹ For more on metalepsis and Paul's use of Isaiah in Romans, see Richard B. Hays, " 'Who Has Believed Our Message?' Paul's Reading of Isaiah," *SBL Seminar Papers*, no. 37 Part 1 (1998): 205–225.

⁵⁰ For counter-imperial readings of Paul and this passage, see Wright, *Paul*, 69–78; Elliott, "Romans 13:1–7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda," 184–204; Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 114–225. Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 146–147. For a compelling response to this view, see John M. G. Barclay, "Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 363–88.

⁵¹ Bruno Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Democracy and Kingship in Paul's Thought* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003).

⁵² This is my own translation and emphasis.

⁵³ The general scholarly consensus is that Paul is referring to the Roman governing authorities in this text, though he does not explicitly name them.

⁵⁴ John Barclay claims two rulers with the same rank may indicate that one is "supreme" while the other is "subordinate" without suggesting a subversive tone. See Barclay, "Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," 378.

⁵⁵ Michael F. Bird, "'One Who Will Arise to Rule Over the Nations': Paul's Letter to the Romans and the Roman Empire," in *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 159.

and state or Jewish wisdom literature, but the cosmological context of this motif is often overlooked.⁵⁶ The assertion that YHWH had authority over Roman powers reorders the common Roman conception of governing authorities in the cosmological order.⁵⁷ As was demonstrated above, Roman emperors and authorities were traditionally viewed as figures either directly beneath the pantheon or themselves divine, endowed with power from the gods. There was even the possibility of the ruler being equal to the gods. Here, there is no such option.⁵⁸ The God who appears in Romans, who created the heavens and the earth, who faces the powers of sin and death, is above these rulers. Of course, the rulers themselves were not the implied audience, but these verses communicate to the community of believers that despite their supposed sources of power, God stands above them.⁵⁹ Thus, these verses challenge the standard Greco-Roman cosmological narrative by relocating the divine association of these authorities to the God of Israel, whom they do not worship, and further demoting them by placing them beneath God's reign.⁶⁰

Additionally, the "one in authority" is also called God's "servant" or "minister" (διάκονός) (13:4), another subordinating movement. Beverly Gaventa highlights that just a few chapters earlier, a specific ruler arrives on the scene—Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17).⁶¹ Gaventa argues that the rulers of Romans 13 are put in their subordinate place, similar to the way Pharaoh was, and that they are used by God, whether they realize it or not, for God's purposes and "good".⁶² As Justin Hardin

⁵⁶ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 204; Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 359; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Short Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 170. James D. G. Dunn suggests a context of Jewish wisdom literature for the view that rulers obtain their power from God. See Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 770. Rather than grounding the theme in the ordering of creation in Genesis or Hellenistic ideals of the state and citizen, one finds strongest support for this theme in the early Jewish and the ancient Greco-Roman cosmological vision.

⁵⁷ See Wright, *Paul*, 78. Wright recognizes this severe demotion of the earthly rulers. He claims that its function is to confront the Roman empire. This reading suggests its primary function was not to directly challenge the empire, but to encourage believers. If Paul does challenge empire, it is a secondary by-product.

⁵⁸ Paul J. Achtemeier notes this relativizing yet does not recognize the essential divine aspect of Greco-Roman rulers. He writes: "Governments that claim for themselves divine prerogatives are hence no longer the kind of governments of which Paul speaks in this chapter." Achtemeier, *Romans*, 205.

⁵⁹ For a similar idea, see Jewett, *Romans*, 170.

⁶⁰ The cosmological backdrop of this text rejects the suggestion that Paul is validating these authorities. For this view, see Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 36. Additionally, for mention of God as the ultimate cosmic authority, see Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 280.

⁶¹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Reading Romans 13 with Simone Weil: Toward a More Generous Hermeneutic," *Journal for Biblical Literature* 136, no. 1 (November 2016): 14–16.

⁶² Gaventa, 16. See also Achtemeier, *Romans*, 204.

quips, rulers are mere “pawns”.⁶³ Thus, naming the rulers as God’s servants gives the hearers of the letter reason to obey these rulers in the present and simultaneously demotes the rulers to instruments. This use of foreign rulers by God as instruments of God’s ordering purposes is also seen in the Hebrew Bible. Pharaoh is used for God’s glory and purposes, Jeremiah’s servant language regards the Babylonian king as an agent of destruction (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10), and King Cyrus is a messianic figure that God anoints for God’s purposes (Is. 45), to name a few exemplary instances. These instruments were, as all kingly rulers were historically, subject to God’s judgment and will ultimately give account for their rule. In sum, one sees the clear cosmological theme of order in this text as the authorities are ordered beneath the power of the God of Israel. This theme of order characterizes the rulers as instruments of God for God’s purposes, known or unbeknownst to them. This cosmological motif strengthens the evidence for seeing subordination in this passage and offers the grid upon which the subordination takes place.

Above all, this divine ordering declares the sovereignty of God. The affirmation of a deity’s sovereignty vis-à-vis a cosmological trope is a common pattern in antiquity, dating back to various Ancient Near Eastern cosmologies from the 3rd millennium BCE.⁶⁴ In subjugating the rulers beneath the reign of God, Paul seems to be playing on this motif. He is highlighting, and perhaps legitimizing, the sovereignty of God before the church in Rome. In calling for obedience to the ruling authorities, he is conversely beckoning a greater trust in the sovereign God who stands over them. God is the one who determines right and wrong (13:3) and the one ultimately responsible for the punishment or reward of all people both now (13:4) and in the future (13:11-14). The governing authorities are simply moving the historical narrative along in this “present time” (13:11) because the eschatological “day is almost here” (13:12). God is in control over history and sets the ultimate moral standard and parameters (13:10). God is presented in this text as the one who sits sovereign over the design of the world and its function, despite the success or failure of human rulers.

This assertion of God’s sovereignty would have been an affront to the perceived sovereignty of Nero. For instance, in *On the Civil War* Lucan describes the chief end of Nero’s divine path, a time after his *apotheosis*, his glorification, and his *katasterismos*, when he becomes a constellation.⁶⁵ He writes:

⁶³ Justin K. Hardin, “Paul’s Neronian Nod (Rom 13:1-7): The Achilles’ Heel for a Counter-Imperial Apostle?,” *Unpublished Version of a Paper Presented at the Evangelical Theological Society*. San Diego, CA., November 2019, 9.

⁶⁴ Debra Ballentine discusses this within the context of the conflict topos. See Debra Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22–42.

⁶⁵ The tone is unclear here i.e., whether Lucan is being sarcastic. But he nonetheless expresses a view held by his contemporaries.

When your watch on earth is over and you seek the stars at last, the celestial palace you prefer will welcome you, and the sky will be glad. Whether you choose to wield Jove's sceptre, or to mount the fiery chariot of Phoebus and circle earth with your moving flame—earth unterrified by the transference of the sun; every god will give place to you, and Nature will leave it to you to determine what deity you wish to be, and where to establish your universal throne.⁶⁶

Lucan clearly envisions a future time when Nero will be sovereign over the world and all deities. A few lines later, he writes “to me you are divine already,” locating this power in the present.⁶⁷ Such were the ideas around Nero's power and the derivative power of his governing authorities. Paul rewrites the narrative for the early community of believers, claiming that God is the author of the world's story.

The second cosmological theme that bolsters God's sovereignty over rulers in this text is the ruler's role in upholding justice. The idea that the king is the one who maintains divine order through justice is a key piece of cosmological speculation in the Hebrew Bible. In Israelite cosmology, the king is viewed as the defender of the established order, continuing the fight against chaos, which Carly Crouch notes has primeval roots.⁶⁸ Peter Berger connects social disorder to these ancient ideas of cosmological chaos. He writes: “Just as religious legitimation interprets the order of society in terms of an all-embracing sacred order of the universe, so it relates the disorder that is the antithesis of all socially constructed *nomos* to that yawning abyss of chaos that is the oldest antagonist of the sacred.”⁶⁹ The king, as the cosmological defender of order, is responsible for bringing justice. Psalm 72 also demonstrates this belief about the ruling authority or king, situated around creation language (Ps. 72:3, 5-6, 8). Further, the divine warrior-king motif of the Ancient Near East, the one charged to bring order out of chaos, formed the foundation for Hellenistic emperor cult beliefs.⁷⁰ For example, it was written of Augustus: “It would be right for us to consider him equal to the Beginning (*arche*) of all things [...] for when everything was falling [into disorder] and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave to the whole world a new aspect.”⁷¹

Thus, when the governing authorities in Romans 13 execute justice by bearing the sword and bringing wrath on wrongdoers (13:4), Paul seems to be playing on the trope of rulers bringing order out of chaos in this present evil age.⁷² It is also important to note that the ruler is called an

⁶⁶ Lucan, *On the Civil War*, 1.45-53.

⁶⁷ Lucan, 1.63.

⁶⁸ Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East*, 28–30.

⁶⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 40.

⁷⁰ For more on this view, see Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 14.

⁷¹ Wilhelm Dittenberger, *Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae: Supplementum Sylloges Inscriptionum Graecarum*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1905), no. 458, 50.

⁷² Wright, “Romans,” 718.

“avenger of wrath” (ἔκδικος εἰς ὀργήν), often translated instead as “agent” or “servant” (13:4).⁷³ The only other time Paul uses the word ἔκδικος is in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 with reference to God punishing those who take advantage of brothers and sisters in the faith. It is interesting that only God and the kingly figure of Romans 13 are called ἔκδικος in Pauline literature, seeming to join forces to fight disorder, just as YHWH partnered with the king in certain Hebrew Bible texts (e.g., Pss. 18; 89; et al.). Thus, the governing authorities are called servants “for your good” (13:4).⁷⁴

Yet, these Roman rulers clearly do not worship the God of Israel, recognize Jesus as Lord, or always do what is “good”. With respect to the times that they *do* successfully do what is good and fulfill this role to exercise justice, it is as servants of God.⁷⁵ When the ruling authorities manage to keep chaos or injustice at bay, whether their wrath refers to divine wrath or earthly wrath, “earthly punishment carries out God’s judgment,” as Ernst Käsemann writes.⁷⁶ This appears to be the case whether or not they recognize their place in God’s grand narrative. Yet, what if the rulers do *not* do “good”, which was quite frequent under the tyrannical reign of Roman emperors? Frederick Bruce says, “Paul does not deal with this question here.”⁷⁷ Though Paul may not explicitly deal with this question, the cosmological aspect of this passage reminds believers that God stands sovereign above these rulers. Note that this passage is followed by a call to love (13:8-10), beginning with the subversive phrase: “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another” (Μηδενὶ μηδὲν ὀφείλετε εἰ μὴ τὸ ἀλλήλους ἀγαπᾶν).⁷⁸ After establishing that God is sovereign and in control, Paul elevates submission to God’s command to love as primary in light of the coming time of eschatological judgment (13:11-14). Surely the rulers are not exempt from this judgement and will, too, be accountable for any failure to love or clothe themselves in Jesus Christ (13:14).⁷⁹

Paul then ends the passage with an exhortation to submit to the authorities by paying taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants (13:5-7).⁸⁰ The early community of believers is called to obey

⁷³ “Agent”: NIV (2011); “Servant”: NLT, CEB, NASB, NLT, NRSV; “Avenger”: ASV, ESV, NET.

⁷⁴ For an alternative reading of the “good” as referring to benefaction, see Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 26–38. For a broader reading of the “good” as Christian service to the community, see Ben Witherington and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 313–14.

⁷⁵ For more on this reading, see Gaventa, “Reading Romans 13 with Simone Weil,” 16.

⁷⁶ Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Mifflintown: Sigler Press, 1996), 358. For support of the reading of this as divine judgment, see Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 762–63.

⁷⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 234.

⁷⁸ This is my own translation.

⁷⁹ For a similar view, see Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 770–71. God’s judgment is also described as the ultimate judgment in Romans 12:19.

⁸⁰ It is possible this reference to taxes was due to extremely high taxes in the Roman empire at the time of writing. For this view, see Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 200–201; Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 766.

on the basis of the revealed cosmological ordering, where the ruling authorities are subordinate to the sovereign God, charged to bring justice, and ultimately accountable for any failure to do so. Believers are invited to participate in maintaining order and keeping chaos at bay through obedience, especially to the highest command—to love. Paul says they ought to do so for the sake of “conscience” (συνείδησιν) (13:5). C. E. B. Cranfield claimed this refers to “the secret of the relation in which it [the state] stands to God and to Christ”; ultimately, the God of Israel and the crucified Messiah stand sovereign.⁸¹

Reading Romans 13:1-7 with a cosmological lens is not about re-reading Paul’s politics as a cosmology, but rather an acknowledgement that all political speculation is fundamentally cosmological. The challenge is to recognize the basic cosmological nature of Paul’s political theology. In this reading, one finds on Paul’s cosmological stage the sovereign God of Israel with Roman governing authorities subject beneath God. These authorities are charged with carrying out God’s divine justice and keeping the forces of chaos and injustice at bay. These rulers are relegated beneath the sovereign God’s unraveling of human history, as God pushes back chaos and invites the renewal of creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, mentioned elsewhere in Romans (Rom. 1:1-6, 5:10, 6:5-7, 8:10-11, 8:18-25, et. al). As in other cosmologies, Paul’s message is simple: God is sovereign and just. Knowing the location of these rulers within the Jewish cosmological landscape, believers are called to submit, to honor, and to pay all debts. They are called to do this by a man who intimately knew the failures and oppression of the Roman government. Yet rather than inciting a coup or instigating violent riots, Paul’s words reassure and encourage these Roman believers. As they submit to these authorities, Paul encourages them to trust in God’s sovereignty to use these figures in God’s grand scheme of bringing about an ordered and just world, the same way God used Pharaoh to eventually bring the Israelites out from slavery in Egypt.

Implications for Times of Crisis

In seeking Paul’s image of the cosmos in Romans 13:1-7, one finds that the meaning of this text can be seen in a new light; this text is grounds for neither a call for blind submission, nor an excuse for obstinate oppression.⁸² These verses have been wielded for great harm over the course of history, right up to the modern time, during social and political crises. The interpreter should be extremely cautious in reading the entirety of Paul’s politics from these seven verses or being coerced by another into submission vis-à-vis their reading of this text. This is not Paul’s prescriptive mandate for all situations at all times; Paul’s point in writing this section was not to propose a

⁸¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans, a Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 324.

⁸² T. J. Lang, “Cosmology and Eschatology,” 2.

universal, timeless, political theology nor to say all that could be said.⁸³ As Ernst Käsemann wrote with respect to Romans 13:1-7: “The basis of what he [Paul] demands is reduced to a minimum, while exegesis usually seeks to take from it a maximum.”⁸⁴ Perhaps it was Paul’s attempt to keep the community from rebellion against Rome or a means of keeping their focus on the mission to Spain.⁸⁵ At least one thing is clear in this reading—the cosmological scene offers a message of hope during times of crisis: that God is indeed sovereign over history and moving it towards order and justice. These rulers, whether saints or tyrants, whether they fulfill their role in the trope to keep chaos at bay and exact justice or not, are cosmological pawns at best and God will exact God’s justice (cf. Ez. 28).⁸⁶ In the face of unrest, this hope is central to Paul’s political thought and continues to encourage believers in the midst of modern crises. Whether the modern crisis is political in nature or not, the message of hope remains: God is sovereign over all types of chaos. It is in this truth that believers may find the resolve to carry on in the face of disorder.

This article set out to examine whether Romans 13:1-7 may be read through a cosmological lens and, if so, to assess how cosmology functions in the text. It explored Paul’s Greco-Roman context and the cosmological scene in Romans at large, and argued that Romans 13:1-7 can and should be read through this lens. Further, it argued that the cosmological themes of order and justice in this text serve to highlight God’s sovereignty and offer hope, especially in times of crisis. This research opens avenues for further inquiry regarding the expansion of the definition of cosmology outside of creation language in Paul, how Romans 13:8-14 fits into this cosmological interpretation, and how the cosmological trope also shapes community identity in this passage. Scholarship has only just begun its ventures into the Pauline cosmos.

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⁸³ Matthew G. Neufeld, “Submission to Governing Authorities: A Study of Romans 13:1-7,” *Biblical Interpretation* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 90.

⁸⁴ Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 354.

⁸⁵ Jewett, *Romans*, 170–71.

⁸⁶ Another interesting comparison, beyond the scope of this study, may be made between Romans 13 and Revelation. See Jirí Mrázek, “Die Beziehung von Kirche Und Staat Im Neuen Testament,” *Communio Viatorum* 2 (2014): 197–210; James Leo Jr. Garrett, “Dialectic of Romans 13:1-7 and Revelation 13,” *Journal of Church and State* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 5–20; Johannes Koch-Mehrin, “Die Stellung Des Christen Zum Staat Nach Röm 13 Und Apok 13,” *Evangelische Theologie* 7, no. 11–12 (June 1948): 378–401.

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Sacred Spaces and the Use of Abject Objects in Contemporary Witchcraft After the Rise of the Anthropocene

Elizabeth Campbell

Selwyn College, University of Cambridge

erc76@cantab.ac.uk

Abstract

Since the turn of the century, the concept of a human geological age has become widespread. The rise of ‘the Anthropocene’ in the popular cultural consciousness has manifested itself in artworks, music, and casual conversation. This case-study of one ecofeminist witch writing in the 1980s—Starhawk; and two witches working in urban areas in the 2020s—Sabrina Scott and Alice Tarbuck—illustrates the way that, in this subculture of non-Wiccan, neo-Pagan witchcraft, the impact of the concept of the Anthropocene has been revealed in changing habits in spellcraft and choice of sacred space.

Starhawk’s spellcraft focusses on natural objects and spaces and recommends the removal of trash from the ecosystem. Conversely, rather than eschewing artificial and discarded objects (so-called “abject objects”) the witchcraft of recent years, particularly that of Sabrina Scott and Alice Tarbuck, shows a radical embrace of trash, pollution, and abjection in both spellcraft and sacred spaces. This is illustrative of Anthropocene environmental thinking—that we cannot erase the human effect on the ecosystem and must therefore work alongside our waste. The Anthropocene consciousness expressed by contemporary witches includes belief in a flat ontology, inter-species conversation, and vital materiality. This case study may be illustrative of a more general trend in



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which Anthropocene consciousness influences practical changes in spiritual practice, a hypothesis which I believe bears further investigation.

Introduction

Witchcraft in the Anthropocene has no choice but to recognise and work with that which is man-made. The defining feature of the Anthropocene era is that we have now reached the point where human action is the main contributor to the ecological state of our Earth. Not only is the climate human-made at this point, but many of the 'natural' objects which fill our ecosystem are in fact saturated with human influence. The seas are filled with micro-plastics,¹ as are the mountains,² and our own bodies.³ Beneath many a field or hillock is landfill or midden. Broken glass partially makes up the sand on the beach, and the landscape is irrevocably changed by thousands of years of human interference.⁴

I wish to argue that the modern, Pagan witches of the West have found it necessary to include abject objects in their craft. Sacred spaces, whether a copse of trees, a city park under a full moon, or a quiet corner of the bedroom of a third-floor flat, must widen in scope to include abject objects—those artificial objects which are discarded, unloved and unwanted. A simple definition of an 'abject object' is an object which is human-made but has fulfilled its purpose and has been discarded. For example, abject objects could include a plastic bottle, a pizza box or microplastics in the water system. Borrowing from anthropologist Mary Douglas's conception of pollution, an abject object necessarily entails the property of 'being out of place' or being found 'where it should not be.'⁵ For example, a drink can in a fridge would not be abject, for the object is in its place. Whereas the same can, once emptied and thrown onto a verge beside a motorway, is clearly abject. It does not belong in the place where it is found. In that regard, the abject object is described by philosopher Julia Kristeva in kind: "it is not then an absence of health or cleanliness which makes something abject, but that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order; that which does not respect limits."⁶

¹ X. Peng et al., "Microplastics Contaminate the Deepest Part of the World's Ocean," *Geochemical Perspectives Letters* 9 (2018): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.7185/geochemlet.1829>.

² Melanie Bergmann et al., "White and Wonderful? Microplastics Prevail in Snow from the Alps to the Arctic," *Science Advances* 5, no. 8 (August 2019): eaax1157, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aax1157>.

³ Kieran D. Cox et al., "Human Consumption of Microplastics," *Environmental Science & Technology* 53, no. 12 (June 2019): 7068–74, <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.9b01517>.

⁴ Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "The Stratigraphical Signature of the Anthropocene in England and Its Wider Context," *The Geology of England* 129, no. 3 (June 2018): 482–91, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pgeola.2017.06.004>.

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," *Oxford Literary Review* 5, no. 1 (1982): 125–49.

Certainly, these abject objects still have power over us. Humanity has scarred the Earth with trash and pollution. But to respond by eschewing such abject objects will no longer suffice; these objects are as much a part of magical reality as the trees or the moon. Sabrina Scott, in *Witchbody*, tells us that, clearly, any magical ontology which forgets the artificial in favour of the organic cuts itself off from the fullness of the “flesh of the world.”⁷

In this essay I will compare the use of objects and sacred spaces in the works of three self-identified witches: Starhawk’s *Dreaming the Dark*, written in the 1980s; Sabrina Scott’s *Witchbody* from 2019; and Alice Tarbuck’s *A Spell in the Wild* from 2020. I propose that there is a distinct difference between the practices of Starhawk’s earlier witchcraft, which took place before the rise of the concept of the Anthropocene, and Scott and Tarbuck’s Anthropocene-conscious witchcraft. This is manifest in the way that Scott and Tarbuck are much more comfortable with the use of abject objects and working in human-made spaces, whereas Starhawk focusses much more on the ‘natural’ and tries to practice her witchcraft in environments which are unspoilt by human activity. The reason for this is the prevalence of the concept of the Anthropocene in post-2000, English-speaking culture, which has altered our concept of what it means for an ecosystem to be unspoilt, and this concept of the Anthropocene has therefore also changed witchcraft practices since 2000, leading to a greater acceptance and use of abject objects.

Witchcraft

The history of witchcraft is lengthy, and as varied as the cultures in which it is practised or experienced. Therefore, I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview here. Instead, I will concentrate on witchcraft in the English-speaking West, beginning with the emergence of Gardnerian witchcraft. Gerald Gardner is the most well-known name in the rebirth of pagan religious practice in the twentieth century West. He claimed that he was initiated into a coven in the New Forest in 1939, which he claimed “had kept alive the pre-Christian fertility religion described by Margaret Murray in her *Witch Cult in Western Europe*.”⁸ Though the historical accuracy of his claims, and the historicity of the rituals found in early spell books, is disputed—it cannot be denied that Gardner “spawned the development of a vibrant new pagan religion that would, over the next few decades, generate numerous variants and pathways under the umbrella of ‘witchcraft’.”⁹

⁷ Sabrina Scott, *Witchbody* (Canada: Weiser, 2019). [*Witchbody* is a graphic work, and as such does not have page numbers]

⁸ Owen Davies, “Return of the Old Gods,” in *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 111.

⁹ Davies, “Return of the Old Gods,” 113.

Gardnerian witchcraft is seen by many as a rebirth of the “Old Religion,” which is alleged to be the pagan or occultist practice of ancient Britons. The attempt to reinstate the “Old Religion” stems from a desire to reclaim indigenous practices from before the Christianisation of the British Isles.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Gardnerian witchcraft, though claiming to be an authentic representation of the “Old Religion,” indubitably contains many new spiritual practices.¹¹

Though many witches follow some form of religious witchcraft, whether this is Wicca or some other neo-Pagan belief system; this is by no means ubiquitous. Wicca is a loosely defined religion, typically encompassing a duo- or polytheistic pantheon, centred around the triple Goddess and the horned God.¹² Many Wiccans abide by the moral system encapsulated in the statement “An ye harm none, do what ye will,” known as the Wiccan Rede.¹³ In the US, the Gardnerian strand of Wiccan belief is known as British Traditional Wicca, though this term is not widely used in the UK. Most Wiccans undergo some form of initiation ritual or ceremony, through which the witch becomes a member of a coven. Initiatory witchcraft has declined in popularity in recent years, which may be due to the dispersed community of witches online, and potentially due to changing societal attitudes to religious gatekeeping and institutions.¹⁴

The self-identified witches whose works feature in this essay (Starhawk, Scott and Tarback) would not consider themselves to be Wiccan, nor followers of any other religious form of witchcraft. They are, however, representative of a growing part of the living history and identity of witchcraft which is discussed in this essay.

The ecofeminist turn, which was established in the 1960s, and for many witches is embodied in the work of Starhawk, centred modern witchcraft around the Earth and nature, and espoused a mutual relationship between those who wield magic and the Earth. Sociologist Shai Feraro ascribes the love of rurality in witchcraft circles to the influence of British Romanticism on the occult through the work of Gardner.¹⁵ A different source for a similar idea is found in the work of scientist and futurist James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis which also influenced the ecological turn in mid-twentieth century witchcraft, combining environmentalism with dedication to an Earth-

¹⁰ Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2016), 2.

¹¹ Doyle White, 2.

¹² James R. Lewis, *Witchcraft Today: An Encyclopedia of Wiccan and Neopagan Traditions* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1999), 123, 146.

¹³ Gail Wood, “The Old Religion: Websites on Wicca: A Quarterly of Women’s Studies Resources,” *Feminist Collections* 20, no. 2 (January 1999): 15.

¹⁴ R.A. Jones and K. Klostermann, “Wicca,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, 2016, 2, <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss322>.

¹⁵ Shai Feraro, “A Song of Wood and Water: The Ecofeminist Turn in 1970s-1980s British Paganism,” in *Radical Change in Minority Religions*, ed. Beth Singler and Eileen Barker, (Abingdon: Routledge, Forthcoming).

goddess in neo-Pagan thought¹⁶ and a “respect for the environment as a spiritual entity.”¹⁷ Though Lovelock himself was not involved in witchcraft or neo-Pagan religion, his ideas proliferated through these sub-cultures.

However, there is evidence to suggest that there has been a noticeable shift in self-defined witches, from initiatory Wiccan traditions to a more eclectic conception of witchcraft during the early twenty-first century.¹⁸ Starhawk, Scott and Tarbuck all have loose definitions of what constitutes witchcraft, and a wide definition of what magic is. For Starhawk, magic is “the art of changing consciousness at will.”¹⁹ For Scott, magic is “a way of being with, it is collaboration and building relationships with non-humans to connect and get stuff done”²⁰ and “a movement toward shifting knowingness about what bodies are and can do.”²¹ There is a shift between Starhawk’s magic and Scott’s magic: a transfer from consciousness to embodiment, a move that enables non-thinking beings to be included as participants in the magic. Starhawk would reject any mind/body duality, and yet, I find nothing in her writing which indicates that she believes in the magical participation of bodies without minds, though she writes frequently about the participation of minds without bodies. For Tarbuck, witchcraft is inherently linked to the environment in which the witch works. She emphasises the seasonal cycle, foraging in one’s local area, and casting spells using found objects.²²

One may conclude that there is little which can link these writers together, that all Starhawk, Scott and Tarbuck have in common is the self-claimed identity of “witch.” However, the link between these contemporary witches is their environmentalism. The thing which divides them is their understanding of how a witch must practice their environmentalism. This divide, I will argue, is due to the rise of the Anthropocene in English-speaking, Western cultural contexts.

The Anthropocene

Starhawk and her fellow witches in the 1980s would not have used the word “Anthropocene” to describe their own epoch, though, by almost all definitions, they were living in it. First formally appearing in print in 2000²³—though the idea had been present for some years before this—the

¹⁶ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Davies, “Return of the Old Gods,” 119.

¹⁸ Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloï, *The New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 47.

¹⁹ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman Limited, 1982), 13.

²⁰ Scott, *Witchbody*.

²¹ Scott, *Witchbody*.

²² Alice Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild: A Year (and Six Centuries) of Magic* (London: Two Roads, 2020).

²³ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000).

Anthropocene is a name for the geologic epoch which follows the Holocene.²⁴ It is disputed when the Anthropocene began, but it is well established that at some point, perhaps between the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s and the first atomic warfare in 1945, human activity began to have a global and irreversible impact on the Earth's climate and ecosystems. The Anthropocene is, put more poetically, "a period in time where the earth can no longer forget our deeds."²⁵

According to Colin Waters and co-authors, "any formal recognition of an Anthropocene epoch in the geological time scale hinges on whether humans have changed the Earth system sufficiently to produce a stratigraphic signature in sediments and ice that is distinct from that of the Holocene epoch."²⁶ Waters concludes that there are anthropogenic markers in the stratigraphic record including aluminium, plastics and concrete which coincide with global spikes in fossil fuel combustion. The Anthropocene is therefore defined as beginning where geological analysis of the Earth shows evidence of human activity; the "concept thus includes, but also transcends, the idea of anthropogenic climate change."²⁷ It is undeniable that human activity is driving climate change, and for the past fifty years the rate of change has been accelerating.²⁸ However, worldwide carbon usage is drastically unequal. Most carbon emissions come from the global north, and the industrial revolution was driven by a tiny section of society in the West.²⁹ Some critiques of the concept of the Anthropocene are driven by this fact. Scott Gilbert says that a major problem with the Anthropocene "is its global pretensions. We should not talk about Earth as a globe, because it is not a unified space."³⁰

The Anthropocene expresses a reckoning with our human power and human fragility. By turning to magic, the witches of the twenty-first century have attempted to reconcile the fact that we have both the power to create a new climate, and the inability to save ourselves from it. As Tarbuck writes, "Witchcraft starts happening when our bodies come right up to the edge of their

²⁴ The Holocene is defined as the most recent, warm geological epoch beginning with the Holocene glacial retreat, 11,700 years ago. N. Roberts, "Holocene Epoch," in *Encyclopedia of World Climatology*, ed. J.E. Oliver, *Encyclopedia of Earth Sciences Series* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3266-8>.

²⁵ Hannah Malcolm, *Words for a Dying World* (London: SCM Press, 2020), xxx.

²⁶ Colin N. Waters et al., "The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene," *Science* 351, no. 6269 (January 2016): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aad2622>.

²⁷ Noel Castree, "The Anthropocene: A Primer for Geographers," *Geography* 100, no. 2 (July 2015): 66–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00167487.2015.12093958>.

²⁸ Mark Maslin, "Evidence for Climate Change," *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 45.

²⁹ Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no.1 (Jan 2014): 62.

³⁰ Donna Haraway et al., "Anthropologists Are Talking—About the Anthropocene," *Ethnos*, 81 no. 3 (Nov 2016): 540, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838>.

sensory and linguistic abilities and life keeps going anyway.”³¹ The inescapability of the climate crisis—and the anthropogenic ecosystems in which humans live—is also reflected in the way rituals are conducted. Therefore, I propose that the acceptance of the era of the Anthropocene is one of the major drivers of the change in witchcraft, both in practice and self-conception, between the 1980s and today—as represented in the work of Starhawk relative to Scott and Tarbuck.

Magic, Sacred Spaces, and Abject Objects

Metaphysics

In the Anthropocene, that which one may consider ‘nature’ is not all ‘natural’, for the ‘natural’ objects and spaces which we have encountered have near universally been affected by human activity.

The earlier worldview of Starhawk emphasises living beings over non-living beings. She writes: “Deep ecology challenges our anthropocentric view of the world and speaks for the inherent value of all *living* beings.”³² However, Starhawk also sees interconnectivity with reality as the medicine for our destruction of the environment. She names our malady “*estrangement* because its essence is that we do not see ourselves as part of the world.”³³ And yet, despite this commitment to interconnectedness, Starhawk’s *things* are almost always “natural” and the artificial is eschewed from the vision she paints of an immanent world. For example, she writes: “this cluster of *things*: a naked woman, a snake, a tree, an apple.”³⁴ And again, in *The Spiral Dance* she speaks of love of the Goddess being found in “love of trees, of stones, of sky and clouds of scented blossoms, and thundering waves.”³⁵ She continues in her litany, and yet never mentions any artificial objects; there is no trace of the Anthropocene in this list. This is due to an ontology in which Starhawk prioritises the living and the natural above the artificial and the lifeless. She writes: “All living beings are worthy of respect.”³⁶ Whereas a contemporary, Anthropocene-conscious witch would be more likely to say that all beings (i.e., living and unliving, natural and artificial, sacred and abject) are worthy of respect.

Sabrina Scott, by contrast, embraces the unnatural and the urban within the circle of magical objects. Scott writes:

³¹ Alice Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild: A Year (and Six Centuries) of Magic* (London: Two Roads, 2020), 5.

³² Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, xvi.

³³ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 6; emphasis added.

³⁴ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 26.

³⁵ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (New York: HarperOne, 1979), 39.

³⁶ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 6.

Magic can act as a trans-species pedagogy where ontology is inscribed and reinscribed through the repeated co-performance of magical acts. Anthropocentric hierarchies of being are disrupted through an inherent noticing and recruitment of materiality's inherent ability to act.³⁷

There are three fundamental beliefs underlying this statement. First, Scott writes about the power of magic and magical thinking as a vehicle for re-learning our relationship, as human beings, with the rest of reality. This 'magic as pedagogy' belief is not a religious creed, but a way of living and paying attention that Scott believes will transform humanity's relationship with 'nature' (here meaning all that is, both artificial and organic), and will enable us to act in ways that do not harm the Earth on which, with which, and through which we live.

Second, Scott shows a belief in 'thing-power' or vital materiality, such as that espoused by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*.³⁸ Bennett's work forms part of the recent movement known as New Materialism, a philosophical framework which attempts to "highlight the interactive flux of materiality and the entanglement of humanity within the material rather than as separated from it."³⁹ Matter is therefore neither inert nor passive, formed by some external force, but it is self-organising and vital.⁴⁰ Scott writes: "we must account for the fallen, the dead, the changed, the unnoticed, the ugly and embrace them in our environmentalism. They aren't leaving. They are here and they shape us, and they are us. We become each other."⁴¹ We are not the only actors on the world stage, we are acted upon by so-called *objects*, including abject objects. We must also recognise the subjective power of these objects, that is, recognising the power of these objects to act as subjects in our interactions. Bennett gives an example of this collaboration of self-organising, vital matter: "The sentences of this book also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants: from 'my' memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the air or particulates in the room, to name only a few of the participants."⁴² This participation is even true of those abject objects which we would rather dispose of in landfill as if they did not exist, or ignore altogether.

Third, Scott advocates for a flat ontology—that is, a conceptual framework in which all things possess the same degree of 'being-ness.' Flat ontology, derived from Manuel DeLanda's *Intensive Science & Virtual Philosophy*, was popularised in philosopher Graham Harman's framework of

³⁷ Scott, *Witchbody*.

³⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

³⁹ Eric Trozzo, "Review of John Reader (2017). *Theology and New Materialism: Spaces of Faithful Dissent*," *Postdigital Science and Education* 3, no. 2 (April 2021): 614–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00159-8>.

⁴⁰ John Reader, *Theology and New Materialism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5.

⁴¹ Scott, *Witchbody*.

⁴² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 23.

Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). Whereas the prevailing view of reality is that only living beings have the ability to be a subject in a relationship, flat ontologies ascribe subjectivity to all objects, and consider all subjective beings to also be objects. In other words, everything can be as much a *subject* as any human or living being and anthropocentrism is not just incorrect, but actively harmful. This is imperative, for Scott, because “[b]eing selective about whose bodies we take seriously impedes ecologically sound environmental education.”⁴³

If one directly compares Starhawk’s litanies with the litany of Scott in *Witchbody* the difference is clear: for Scott, the living and unliving are given equal standing, the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’ mingle together. As she elucidates: “We shouldn’t only pay heed to manicured candy-coated lawns but also waste, garbage, forest, marina, skyscraper, landfill, prosthesis, everything in between.”⁴⁴ The Anthropocene witch cannot draw neat lines between natural and artificial, because that distinction is no longer possible. Everything natural is now artificial too.

On the other hand, perhaps all three witches in this essay are experiencing a nostalgia for an experience which never existed. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour argues that there is no nature/society distinction.⁴⁵ This Anthropocene-consciousness is not a recent invention, but a return to recognition that “the Earth has now taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged actor.”⁴⁶

The way that Scott has engaged with the subjectivity of all objects is an advantageous safeguard against what Latour calls “dreams of mastery.”⁴⁷ In the same way, the explosion of the Anthropocene in our collective consciousness leads to a greater awareness of both our tendency towards anthropocentrism, and our tendency towards organo-centrism (i.e., favouring living beings over lifeless things). This mindset also lends itself to designating some objects as ‘natural’ and others as alien, artificial, abject, or intruding.

How does one distinguish between natural and abject? Timothy Morton, a philosopher exploring the intersection of object-oriented ontology and ecology, does not believe that such a delineation is easy, and perhaps it is not even possible. He writes, “as I reach for the iPhone charger plugged into the dashboard, I reach into evolution, into the extended phenotype that doesn’t stop at the edge of my skin but continues into all the spaces my humanness has colonized.”⁴⁸ For Morton, objects are not merely themselves, they are perforated by other beings. Whether those beings

⁴³ Scott, *Witchbody*.

⁴⁴ Scott, *Witchbody*.

⁴⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester, 1992).

⁴⁶ Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History*, 45.1 (2014): 3.

⁴⁷ Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” 5.

⁴⁸ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 27.

are living or unliving, artificial or natural, it does not matter—they are all part of you, and you are a part of them. Morton writes in the foreword to Scott's *Witchbody*, "I'm open ended. Your tweet is open. The dove is open. Everything is full of gaps and holes and everything is perforated which is why we can love things and shape worlds [...] It's all weirdly open, it's all full of portals."⁴⁹ Rather than seeing beings as self-contained, objects as self-sufficient, instead Morton (and following him, Scott) propose that all beings and objects are constituted within and by one another, as a woven tapestry of being, or like a cloud system, as that single entity will at various time produce individuals that rise and fall from the system.

Yet, even in this flat ontological landscape, we cannot help ourselves anthropomorphising. It may be that we simply cannot avoid humanising those things with which we interact, and we are in turn perceived by the objects which interact with us. Jane Bennett writes in *Vibrant Matter*: "Maybe it's worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman 'environment'."⁵⁰ Anthropomorphism is not an inherent problem, provided one recognises that one is also "morphised" by the other objects which one encounters. As Latour puts it "[one has] to deal with all sorts of contradictory "morphisms," because they try to explore the shape of those unknown actants."⁵¹ In other words, when you gaze into the iPhone, the iPhone also gazes into you. This is a result of the flat ontology described above. Since, on this view, all objects are also capable of subjectivity, person and iPhone are both subjective actors in any relationship. Within the context of witchcraft, it means that the notion of a witch *using* inanimate objects to cast spells is incorrect. Instead, the witch must see spellcasting materials as co-wielders of magic.

Scott's radically flat ontology is also clearly present in the worldview of Alice Tarbuck, another urban witch working in the 2020s. She writes:

There is now a persuasive argument that animism is not a belief about the world—rather it is a way of perceiving the world, a way of existing within it [...] Everything is not just alive, but equal [...] Fighting for a better climate then becomes not a distant or intellectual process—instead, it is a way of advocating for the world that is as much myself as I am, that I am as much a part of as a spider.⁵²

This quotation illustrates the core tenets of Scott's flat ontology, namely that everything is "alive," "equal" and "as much myself as I am"—as Morton describes above, all existence is interwoven and constituted of the other; the taxonomy of alive or inanimate, object or being is useless because

⁴⁹ Timothy Morton, "Foreword," in *Witchbody* (Canada: Weiser, 2019), iii.

⁵⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120.

⁵¹ Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," 12.

⁵² Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild*, 203-4.

everything is included in the other. Therefore, Donna Haraway's concept of a cyborg may be useful in describing any entity, but most useful for describing a witch. A witch, then, is more akin to a 'cyborg': "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."⁵³ Abject objects are also creatures of social reality and fiction; it is our cultural narratives which make them abject, and our cultural narratives also have the power to make these objects sacred.

Even if trash may never be seen as fully sacred, it is worth the risk to include it in spellcraft. If the flat ontology proposed above, particularly as it is utilised by Scott, is to be taken seriously, then the subjectivity of all objects, desirable and abject, must be respected. This means that the magical properties of trash are real and valuable—to fail to recognise this means missing an entire dimension of the magical landscape set before a witch. Therefore, in the attempts made by Morton, Scott and Tarbuck to achieve symbiosis with the world outside—as it is, not as we would wish it to be—witches are encouraged to include abject objects in their spellcasting and sacred spaces. In the Anthropocene mindset, there is no alternative. The abject objects are not merely intruders to be cleared away; they are a part of our bodies and our air and cannot be ignored anymore.

Objects

For Mary Douglas, "reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death."⁵⁴ For a witch, whose spellcraft works with all these things, why should there be a limit drawn on which objects are sacred? Which are beings and which are abject objects?

In the past, human-made objects were often eschewed from sacred spaces, unless specifically created for the purposes of ritual. From Starhawk's books of the late twentieth century one can extrapolate that the appearance of a discarded plastic bottle on an altar would seem incongruous to a witch of the second half of the twentieth century. In *Dreaming the Dark*, Starhawk describes picking litter with a friend of hers.

"I know we can't clean it all up" [Mary] said, "But I believe in picking up the garbage that you find in your path."

⁵³ Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 6.

⁵⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, 6.

The beer can principle, as I think of it, has served as an ethical guideline that allows me to keep my sanity in a society filled with exploitation, pollution and destruction.⁵⁵

Here, Starhawk sees the beer cans as intruders, alien to the natural landscape and objects which must be cleared away to rid sacred nature of these agents of “exploitation, pollution and destruction”.⁵⁶

Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* is a primer for political and ecological witches, written in 1979, purporting to be “A rebirth of the ancient religion of the great goddess.”⁵⁷ *The Spiral Dance* was described by a reviewer as “a broad philosophy of harmony with nature, of human concord, sexual liberation, creativity, and healthy pleasure, as expressed and celebrated in freewheeling worship of the universe,”⁵⁸ and indeed, Starhawk intends for *The Spiral Dance* to be more than a textbook for burgeoning witches. *The Spiral Dance* also outlines a philosophy of natural witchcraft which gives respect and worship to the Earth goddess through environmentalism. For politically engaged witches of the 1980s, Starhawk's body of work provided a corpus of philosophical, political, and environmental thought that drove the witchcraft movement, along with second wave feminism, into a distinctly ecotheological and political direction.

Yet, throughout the book, there are notably very few mentions of human-made objects which have not been specifically created for ritual use. As Starhawk writes: “Tools can be charged—imbued with psychic energy—and consecrated within a group ritual, during an initiation or individually.”⁵⁹ The exceptions include items such as children's toys—objects which are beloved, or at least ‘useful.’ Incidental items, or abject objects, are notably absent when compared with Scott's description of magical items. For example, in the illustrations of Scott's *Witchbody*, a pizza is drawn alongside candles on an altar, trash swirls around the witch as she ritually bathes, and mobile phones fill her dreams, alongside herbs and incense.

Scott writes: “There is magic and wisdom in our tables and chairs, in our computer cables, in our organic soy lattes and recycled post-consumer cups. It is in the trees, too; in the fish in our algae-filled lakes, polluted with beer cans and chemical runoff.”⁶⁰ All items—whether precious to Scott, or items that she would rather not live alongside—are included in the magical environment that she describes. The description of objects in witchcraft may be described by some as a kind of “commodity fetishism” which is defined as the “view that the value of a commodity is intrinsic and

⁵⁵ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 33.

⁵⁶ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 33.

⁵⁷ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, title page.

⁵⁸ “The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess by Starhawk,” *Kirkus Reviews*, 1979, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/a/starhawk-3/the-spiral-dance-a-rebirth-of-the-ancient-relig/>.

⁵⁹ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 95.

⁶⁰ Scott, *Witchbody*.

the corresponding failure to appreciate the investment of labour that went into its production.”⁶¹ Birgit Meyer addresses this idea in her work *Commodities and the Power of Prayer: Pentecostalist Attitudes Towards Consumption in Contemporary Ghana*.⁶² However, in my opinion, there is a tension between the capitalist society which Scott inhabits, which views objects as commodities and her professed flat ontology, which would consider those objects to be fellow beings.⁶³

It is also instructive to compare Starhawk’s magical items with Alice Tarbuck’s notes on spellcasting. Tarbuck writes: “Magic does not, and witchcraft does not, rely on material objects. We bring things into relation with ourselves to help us practise effectively but those things can be, well, almost anything. Empty pizza boxes, our child’s crayons whatever we have to hand”.⁶⁴ Though Starhawk may agree that witches are, at heart, pragmatists, Tarbuck’s depiction of trash as co-creatrix of magical spells could not be more different to Starhawk’s depiction of the same litter as exploitative and polluting.

This spell work with abject objects is clearest in Tarbuck’s *Ecological Spell*, which calls for “nine things you have found in the place you are in, or the local area. They don’t have to be plants—scraps of paper bags, stones, moss, gaudy bits of rubbish.”⁶⁵ Not only do the abject objects make it into the spell work, but their integral place in the local ecosystem is also verbalised: “The bright red of the litter helps this place to flourish.”⁶⁶

Furthermore, in an interview for the *Magic and Ecology* series, Scott asserts that the artificial parts of her own body, namely cosmetic fillers, are co-creators of magic.⁶⁷ The abject objects (here the acids and plastics of the dermal fillers) have become part of the self, and thus play a part in the witchcraft. The abject object has not only become a part of witchcraft, but the abject object has become a witch.

The rise of Anthropocene-awareness in the English-speaking, Western cultural context (i.e., Starhawk, Scott and Tarbuck are all witches in urban, Western settings) has driven the embrace of object-oriented ontologies in witch worldviews—especially the acceptance of artificial, abject objects into spellcasting and ritual activities. This dramatic change, allowing abject objects to become sacred through spellwork, is driven by the Anthropocene becoming such an important

⁶¹ “Commodity Fetishism,” *Oxford Reference*; Accessed 16 September 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810104638104>.

⁶² Birgit Meyer, “Commodities and the Power of Prayer. Pentecostalist Attitudes Towards Consumption in Contemporary Ghana,” ed. P. Geschiere and B. Meyer, *Development and Change* 29, no. 4 (1998): 751–76.

⁶³ An in-depth analysis of this tension lies beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶⁴ Scott, *Witchbody*.

⁶⁵ Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild*, 287.

⁶⁶ Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild*, 288.

⁶⁷ Sabrina Scott and Lillith Dorsey, *Magic and Ecology: WITCHBODIES*, interview by Alice Tarbuck, 29 January 2021, <http://www.crash.cam.ac.uk/events/29535>.

cultural touchstone. The metaphysical worldview which underlies Scott and Tarbuck's work cannot escape anthropocentrism without flattening the ontology to such a degree that a discarded coke can is as 'real' a being as a human.⁶⁸ The onset of the Anthropocene has alerted our culture to the reality that artificiality is now the defining feature of our ecosystem. Therefore, witchcraft has had to account for the fact that the microplastics will not leave our bloodstream, and the carbon will not leave our atmosphere. And so, witches must widen their magical sphere to make these abject beings sacred, in order that humans may interact with the Earth in a healthy way, neither rejecting any object-being, nor denying the catastrophe that the Anthropocene invokes.

Sacred Spaces

Witchcraft is a practice which is strongly linked to place. The most well-known examples of this are the druidic rituals which take place at Glastonbury and Stonehenge each year during the solstice, and the popular image of witches' covens meeting in a forest clearing at midnight.

As the Anthropocene takes hold, 'unspoilt nature' is becoming ever harder to find—if, indeed, it was ever possible in the first place. The stone circle may be adjacent to a car park, and the town's boundaries encroach on the forest more and more, as suburban housing estates are built. It is more common for witches to live in cities than in rural cottages—and this was even so in Starhawk's time. However, there is certainly a shift in the way that Starhawk speaks about sacred space, when compared with the sacred spaces described by Scott and Tarbuck.

Again, Starhawk's focus is squarely on the natural when she assesses a place as 'sacred'; she writes: "At a time when every major ecosystem on the planet is under assault, calling nature sacred is a radical act because it threatens the overriding value of profit that allows us to despoil the basic life support systems of the earth."⁶⁹ She continues: "The heart of my connection to the Goddess [is] what I notice when I step outside my door: that oak leaves fall to the ground, decay and make fertile soil."⁷⁰

Scott, on the other hand, is critical of the idea that unspoilt nature is the ideal when choosing a sacred space. She writes: "Feeling affection for pollution or garbage or industrial sites in the same

⁶⁸ A flattened ontology is necessary to escape anthropocentrism according to Scott, Tarbuck, and Morton. However, this is not a universal perspective; there are many environmental philosophers who find a middle ground between harmful anthropocentrism and a completely flat ontology.

⁶⁹ Starhawk, "Religion from Nature, Not Archaeology: Starhawk Responds to the Atlantic Monthly," 2001, <https://www.starhawk.org/Goddess-Pagan/Religion%20From%20Nature%20Not%20Archaeology%20Starhawk%20Responds%20to%20the%20Atlantic%20Monthly.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Starhawk, "Religion from Nature, Not Archaeology: Starhawk Responds to the Atlantic Monthly".

way we love a meadow may seem unachievable. We can't keep trying to find organic bodies untouched by our humanness. We can't run along elsewhere once a body seems 'too impure'."⁷¹

Both Scott and Tarbuck deny that there is any place which can be designated 'pure' and assert that to look for purity is to detach oneself from reality and therefore from real magic. Tarbuck writes: "we cannot work with the world as we wish it to be. We cannot do magic only when the air is clear, only on the tops of remote hills, only with the purest herbs. We must instead work in the world; do our magic among pizza boxes and microplastics. We must welcome the world in as it is, valuing every strange, broken scrap of it."⁷²

Scott also expresses a close relationship with her own urban contexts and writes about how the infiltration of the organic ecosystem by artificial objects is not a hinderance to witchcraft, but that these non-organic bodies, whether they are plastic bottles, tarmac pavements, or tooth floss, are indispensable in our interaction with reality as it is, as opposed to reality as we feel it should be.

Scott writes: "Lands are not sequestered and romanticized pristine pockets. For the witch, nature is everywhere. Lands coated in concrete, penetrated by steel rods' skin is metal, wood, Styrofoam. Glass, grass, flower, fur."⁷³ For Scott, pretending that there is no Anthropocene cannot return us to a halcyon epoch before humanity marred the Earth irrevocably. The only response a true environmentalist can make is to invite the non-natural into the magical sphere. Paradoxically, by inviting the Anthropocene into the sacred space, we can heal the rupture which has happened between humankind and the Earth; "If witches are to help resist and find alternatives to our current environmental catastrophe then perhaps it is best to begin to tune our bodies back into the world."⁷⁴

Furthermore, for Scott, "ultimately the power of sacred sites is reciprocal. The place has power but equally so does our attention towards it."⁷⁵ When witches turn their attention towards the abject spaces and abject objects, be they building sites, landfills, and car parks, or stone circles, meadows, and forests, they gain the power to respond to the presence of magic in the Anthropocene.

In essence, to be a witch in the Anthropocene is to relinquish the idea that purity is linked to sacredness. Not only are all objects permeated with one another and permeated with Anthropocene markers, but all places are also permeated with human activity and human destruction. Yet they are still magical. As Scott writes: "Magic can happen in a forest with cedar

⁷¹ Scott, *Witchbody*.

⁷² Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild*, 74.

⁷³ Scott, *Witchbody*.

⁷⁴ Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild*, 159.

⁷⁵ Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild*, 283.

and pinecones and candles, or it can happen in a shoebox apartment downtown with some toilet paper and floss.”⁷⁶

The ecosystem in which witches work can no longer be designated either ‘natural’ or ‘artificial’ as all ecosystems are now affected by human activity. All sacred spaces must include human-made elements because there is no other space available in which to practice magic. From the deepest ocean to the highest point of Mount Everest, the witch will not be able to find an untouched space to cast a spell. Therefore, this knowledge of the Anthropocene has forced the hand of environmentally-minded witches: they must now find the magic in these artificial ecosystems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have shown that Sabrina Scott and Alice Tarbuck, who are practicing witchcraft after the proliferation of the concept of the Anthropocene in the 21st century, emphasise the need to embrace abject objects in one’s spells, and to practice magic in all environments, both ‘natural’ and human-made. This is especially clear when Scott’s and Tarbuck’s writings are compared with those of Starhawk, who, writing in the 1980s at the height of the ecofeminist turn in witchcraft, emphasised, to a much greater degree, the need to connect with ‘nature’ as opposed to that which is human-made.

The cultural consciousness of the Anthropocene has forced English-speaking Western cultures to grapple with the ubiquity of human effects on the environment, from the climate to the water systems, to our own bodies. This has in turn been reflected in the changing practices and beliefs of self-identified witches who also consider themselves environmentalists. Though Scott and Tarbuck both engage philosophically with New Materialism and flat ontologies, the wider neo-Pagan community is also having to reckon with the proliferation of the concept of the Anthropocene throughout the western cultural consciousness.⁷⁷ In other words, with the growing awareness of anthropogenic geologic change, any Earth- or nature-based religion or magical practice must reckon with the reality that human activity is inextricably bound up with that Earth.

For Scott and Tarbuck, the embrace of abject objects in witchcraft reflects a belief in a flattened ontology, that welcoming non-living and unwanted objects into the same level of ‘beingness’ as living creatures is a path to living in a truly eco-friendly way. For a witch, this means working magic

⁷⁶ Scott, *Witchbody*.

⁷⁷ Whilst several contemporary practicing witches, especially Scott and Tarbuck, are engaging with Anthropocene spellcasting in an active way, the entire neo-Pagan community is having to reckon with the Anthropocene, the climate crisis, and other current issues regarding the way they practice magic. This is undertaken in a passive way in some communities, influenced by the cultural conversations about ethics in spiritual practices. Many are also actively aware of the need to address anthropocentrism in Paganism.

with the abject objects, in urban sacred spaces in order to be in relationship with the objects, thereby granting them the same care as those 'natural' objects which are more traditionally associated with eco-witchcraft.

In future research, further thought may be given to a class analysis of living amongst abject objects.⁷⁸ For those living in poverty, there is little choice about one's space being populated with abject objects and trash. Wealthy people appear to have more choice to seek out 'purified' spaces, free of trash and human activity. Nevertheless, even those whose living conditions are more desirable find that human activity has infiltrated even the purest space. The Anthropocene has not affected all of humanity equally, but it has affected everyone to some degree. Still, the disparity between witches in terms of economic power is a problem which may be central to the exploration of the relationships between Anthropocene objects and witchcraft.

This essay has focussed exclusively on contemporary Pagan witches. However, I propose that the argument could be broadened out to reference much wider human concepts of natural and technological change, addressing what it means to be human in the Anthropocene and what relationships are possible between different strata of 'beings'. I suggest that further case studies on the effect of the Anthropocene on various sub-cultures—including transhumanists, science fiction followers, and techno-futurists—would be valuable.

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⁷⁸ Whilst Scott and Tarbuck do not directly address issues of class and privilege in the books referenced here, they discuss such issues on their social media timelines, showing that they have an awareness, at least, of the intersection of privilege and witchcraft. Nevertheless, the resources to deal with these issues are not found in their more widely published material.

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Magic and Modernity

An Interview on Theology, Religion and Crisis

Alan Macfarlane

King's College, University of Cambridge

am12@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

The following is a combination of excerpts transcribed from two events—an interview and a live Q&A—hosted by the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* (JOGTS) with Professor Alan Macfarlane in March 2021. We discussed the theme of “Theology, Religion and Crisis” in reference to his autobiographical work *Magic and Modernity*. A recording of the original interview is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J66FcEnz7Qs>.

Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society (JOGTS): We're delighted to be talking today to Professor Alan Macfarlane on the theme of crisis and in connection with his forthcoming autobiographical work *Magic and Modernity*. Alan is a historian and anthropologist, Emeritus professor of Anthropological Science and a life fellow of King's College Cambridge. Thank you very much indeed for joining us, Alan. Do you want to start us off by giving us your short introduction to this theme of crisis?

Professor Alan Macfarlane (AM): Thank you very much for the introduction and thank you all for inviting me. It's a great pleasure to be back in Oxford, even if virtually and on this wet March day. I thought that the most useful thing, perhaps, would be to explain how crisis or crises are perennial, that your crises that you are facing are no different from the crises that I faced about 50 years ago when I was at Oxford. I thought that what I'd start with doing is just to outline a few of the crises which I had exactly at your age when I was doing my DPhil at Oxford in the 1960s. And the



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message at the end, which I'll give you at the beginning, too, is that, if anything, the crises are less bad now than they were when I was at Oxford, and also that there are perfectly good and easy solutions to most of them if we just thought for a moment.

So, what were my crises? Well, the first and the deepest was, I think, an existential crisis in my relation to religion, because I'd been influenced by Christianity quite strongly as a child growing up. As a child, I also inhabited a world which I now look back on as enchanted, a world where things were connected with each other; nature and culture and different parts of my life, and I could go off into imaginary worlds with animals, and so on. So—those of you who know Wordsworth—my life was very like Wordsworth's because, in fact, I lived in the valley where Wordsworth grew up for fifteen years. And so, I grew up enchanted. But, gradually, and particularly at Oxford in my third year as an undergraduate, I felt that reason and rationality meant that I could no longer hold my life together in that way. My life was becoming separated and fragmented. Later, I discovered this was the great problem of later 19th century sociology. It's the problem that Marx faced with alienation, Durkheim faced with *anomie* and, above all, my hero Max Weber faced with the idea that we have a terrible choice: we can either have enchantment and magic and an integrated life, or we can have a rational, wealthy, modern, scientific existence, but we can't have both. And he talked about the famous iron cage in which we end up, which is very similar to Wordsworth's idea of alienation. So, I went through that, and I've now found a solution to this problem, at last, but it's been the theme of my life's work and it's the theme of the autobiography that you've just mentioned.

That was one main problem. A second one was that—having been brought up as a Christian but born in India, with the influence of my mother who was increasingly a Buddhist—I came to question monotheism. I felt: how was it possible that God would have designed a world in which there was only one truth? So, first of all, I questioned Christianity as a monotheistic creed, as explaining everything. Then, later, of course, the other monotheisms—Islam and Judaism. And I asked my Christian friends, “What happens to the Chinese who've never heard of Christ?”, and they said, “Well, they're damned”. And I couldn't accept this. This was a problem for me personally then, but it's one of the big existential problems, I think, now in the world—which is that the dominance of the West, and hence of Christianity and the monotheistic creeds, is giving way to a more polytheistic world where the influence of India and China and Japan, and so on, is much more powerful. And so, the question really is: “How are monotheisms and polytheisms going to live side by side?”. That was the second problem.

The third set of problems was about pain, because I couldn't reconcile the God that I'd been taught was omnipotent and created the universe with the levels of suffering that I saw around me. I read books by C. S. Lewis on the problem of pain and so on, but I just couldn't find a solution to that, and there was a lot of pain around at that time. There was the Cuban Missile Crisis and

the possibility that the whole world would be annihilated. My own area in Assam had just been invaded by the Chinese at the end of 1962. The Vietnam War was just starting in 1964. And so, war was everywhere. Famine also: there were serious famines. The greatest famine of the 20th century was just ending when I was in my third year—that is the Great Leap Forward of Chairman Mao. We didn't know about it, but forty-million people had just died. But there was also a famine in Bangladesh, and so on. The world was filled with famine and, of course, a lot of disease: so that was another problem.

Another problem was ecological. Many people think that the ecological movement and the worries about destruction of the natural environment is a recent awareness. But in fact, at that time, in the mid-sixties, we were very concerned about that and particularly about the population problem. There were books coming out called *The Population Bomb* and there was a lot of work by people like Paul Ehrlich on the relations between humans and nature. So, we were really worried about population problems.

Now, the reaction to all these sorts of problems—the disintegration of meaning and all the rest of it, which I think is a problem that you're facing too—was fundamentalism. The way to eliminate contradiction and separation and loss of meaning is to reduce everything to some basic, structuring fundamental which will then explain everything and give everything a sense and a meaning, and you can get this fundamentalism in all sorts of forms. You can get it in economic fundamentalism, of a free-trade kind, or you can get it in religious fundamentalism, of the left or the right of various monotheistic and other religions, but the form of fundamentalism we particularly faced at that time was political fundamentalism. Even I was surprised when I was looking this up today: fascism was alive and well in southern Europe for some ten years after I was at Oxford. It was only in 1974 that Spain threw off the fascist yoke, and Greece and the colonels were just coming up, soon coming into power. Southern Europe was still fascist, and the fascist overwhelming of Europe was only a very recent memory. But, of course, the main worry was left-wing fundamentalism. We didn't know much about China and Chairman Mao, and we possibly would have been more worried if we had known more. But there was certainly the Soviet Union which was a great existential threat to us all.

So, we were worried about all sorts of crises. This is the nature of human beings. They live in the present mainly and they think that whatever they're facing is unprecedented, but perhaps the last thing I can end on is that having lived for nearly 80 years and looking back 50 years over my life and reading my letters and diaries and writing my autobiography, I can see that these things fluctuate and that the present crises are certainly no worse than they were. There are lots of statistics to show that war as a killer of human beings is far less of a disaster at the moment (as a proportion of human population) than it was in the sixties. Famine: we keep saying it's nearly gone, but it's certainly not as much of a problem as it was at the end of the 1960s. Disease, we have an

amazing control of. It may seem strange to say this in the middle of COVID, but, on the whole, the number of infants that die and the longevity of life is entirely different. When I was at Oxford most people would expect to die, on average, by their late seventies or eighties and now it's their late nineties. So, for many of the problems, and even with the ecological problems (at last we are coming to grips with these), there are many signs that we will find a solution to them. It won't be what we predict, and it'll be surprising, but I'm optimistic about that.

So, I think the problems are no worse and are largely soluble. The one that's interested me most in my autobiography is this first one—the problem of how we can live with both sides of the coin: both efficiency, rationality, wealth and so on, and also not lose a sense of identity and a sense of meaning in our lives and a sense of enchantment and magic. And it's taken me 80 years, nearly, to find out the solution to that.

JOGTS: Thank you. Just picking up on some of what you said, we are going to be asking questions about those solutions later, as we're very much interested in that. But our first question is: how do you actually define crisis?

AM: I suppose the obvious thing is that it's an extreme tipping point. It's like chaos theory. It's a moment when things come to a head. You take things as a normal tendency and trend and then suddenly they go off in another direction which is unpredictable. That's one of the main features of it—that most of our lives we can predict what's going to be happening tomorrow or the day after, but when there's a perturbation—it can be physical, it can be mental, it could be anything. I suppose it's the suddenness and the unpredictability and also the feeling that you've lost control and that you don't know what the solution is. If you bring all those things together, then you get a crisis.

JOGTS: Something that comes out in your autobiography is this connection between your own personal crisis of disenchantment and a kind of societal process of disenchantment. We were wondering if you could say a little bit more about what that connection is, between the personal and the societal?

AM: Well, it's been a theme of a lot of my work. Many academics think that you can understand ideas in a disembodied way, that if you look at the development of a great thinker you can write a biography of someone just as a biography of a kind-of brain. I've increasingly felt this is nonsense, even for people who look very rationalist like Descartes. If you read the *Discourse on the Method*, you'll see he said, "This is a history of my mind"; but he said he was going to say, "This is a history of my life". Basically, we are animals. We receive information and we process information through the whole of our body. So, our life and our work cannot be separated at all. It's normally very difficult to actually investigate this because most people who write their autobiographies are doing it through memory. Therefore, they just remember the ideas. But because I can reconstruct my

life—because I didn't throw anything much away from the age of fifteen or sixteen—my volumes are filled with what I was eating, where I was going, who I was interacting with, letters to my friends, and so on. So, I can see the coalescence. Later, in the account of enchantment, it's quite clear that if I hadn't gone to Nepal and found another, enchanted, magical world and then gone on to Japan and then China, my experience would've been completely different.

In a way it's central to anthropology. As you probably know, the method of anthropology is called participant observation, and I've recently come to realise that this is the method of human beings. From the moment you're born, how do you learn about the world? You learn about it through participant observation and that participation is not largely, even, through language or conscious, rational thought. It's through physical absorption and experiences. You both experience heat and cold and love and hate but you also think about them at the same time. So, we are all born anthropologists, and it's the interaction between these kinds of experience that I find interesting. So, very small chance things—a person you meet, or a certain place you go to—affect all that you are. And so, there are many things I can't really understand. There were many things probably going on in Oxford at that time which were influencing me indirectly and my trajectory. But I can see now how much my experiences as an undergraduate and postgraduate, and then going to these countries, shaped me.

JOGTS: You've talked a lot about moving from a magical and enchanted world to a more rational but less meaningful world. Do you think that, in this disenchanted world that you describe, it's an individual's duty to formulate their own reference of meaning, especially now that there's a breakdown of traditional religious beliefs? Or do you envision there being a need for new traditions to be formed?

AM: Well, it's not just a need. We are constantly forming new traditions. There's a lot of literature and anthropology about the invention of tradition. We have to live within traditions. We are animals that need our social and imaginative lives, and we are constantly renewing them because the old ones become stale, or we no longer accept them. So, every day that we wake up we invent new traditions and ideas. And that is very important. In relation to the first part, I think self-awareness is essential. I was always struck by the idea of John Stuart Mill about how we can understand our lives. He said that the sources of knowledge about life and about the middle level tendencies or structures which affect our lives are learnt from two main sources. One is from history, from looking at what happened in the past, which doesn't repeat itself, but you see patterns of certain kinds. And the other is from self-awareness and interrogating yourself. And that's clearly what Descartes was doing, and what most philosophers do. So, there are various ways of speeding this up or making it more efficient. For example, keeping a diary. Any kind of externalisation of your self—writing, I've found, is one of the ways, and other people have other art forms—but if you can stand back from yourself, externalise who you are and what your

problems are, that often makes them explicit. Because (and this is another theme of my work), as soon as you understand the problem, either historically or in your own life, then you can usually think of a way out of it. The problem is the confusion or the muddle which you are in before you've actually located it. And this is why understanding modernity and understanding that there's this tension between different parts of our lives—between the economic, political, religious, intellectual—is so important. That tension and separation is what I find modernity to mean. Now, as soon as you realise that everyone faces this, and that you're not the only one who feels this, and that it is actually built into the structure of modern societies, as soon as you understand that it is inevitable and you can see it for what it is, then you can start to address it and maybe get round it and realise there are perfectly good solutions to this. But as long as you don't understand it, and you don't understand yourself, you'll be stuck. One of my favourite poets is Alexander Pope and one of my favourite parts of Pope is the *Essay on Man*: "Know then thyself; presume not God to scan. The proper study of mankind, is man."

JOGTS: Thank you, Alan. Our next question is about the nature of disenchantment and whether you think that disenchantment is itself a form of crisis? We're particularly thinking here about those narratives which suggest that indigenous cultures live more peacefully and in greater harmony with each other and the environment.

AM: Well, if it's a crisis, it doesn't quite fit into my definition because it's perennial. I mean, not perennial, but certainly tens of years, hundreds of years. The location of the crisis in Europe, as I say, is the second half of the 19th century. Sociology—modern sociology and social science—grew up out of that particular crisis: the loss of religious faith and integration. So, it's not a single event crisis. But when a separation of this kind occurs in a traditional society which has held things together (nature and culture and all these things) it does and can form a serious crisis. A lot of the anthropological literature on Millenarianism, books like *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (by Peter Worsley) and Kenelm Burridge's work and all those books have shown that if you go to, say, some Melanesian society, and you bring in western capitalism, money values, all the things that split us apart (all the tools of civilisation are separating tools, like writing, or money, or cities, or division of labour), if you bring those in, what you usually get is a reaction where you demand a solution by expelling the thing or saying, "Let's bring it all together". I mean, it's a pretty obvious fact that the populist movements that swept the world in the last few years like Donald Trump, or Brexit, or Bolsonaro, and so on, are partly a reaction to this crisis. In other words, they indicate a loss of meaning and a sense that things are getting out of hand and your identity is being threatened. There's also a lot of work on, for example, missionising in South America which shows that the growth of fundamentalist Christian churches, and also in Africa, was partly a reaction to this kind of splitting apart. And so, I think there is a relationship between them.

What interests me, though, is how some cultures managed to overcome it. And these were lessons I learned, for example, from Japan. Japan, on which I wrote a book, is a wonderful example of a big civilisation which was faced, in the later 19th century, by Western power and domination, Western markets, Western everything. And it appeared to somehow absorb it. It absorbed the bits it wanted but kept out the bits it didn't want. My thesis in the book is that basically Japan is still an ancient, shamanic civilisation, under the surface. It holds up a mirror which shows it to be modern and the rest of it inside is entirely different. Now, I think that to a certain extent, China (I thought Japan was just an exception) is doing the same sort of thing. It looks very modern, and it looks as if it's absorbing everything in the West, but it's also retaining its inner core. So, it's quite possible to do that, and I think parts of Europe do the same thing. But this is alright for a big civilisation like China or Japan. If you're a small tribe in New Guinea and suddenly you're hit by missionaries, by markets, by outside political systems, you can become very disoriented.

JOGTS: To move on a bit, in your book, you give a very interesting account of prayer. For example, you write that: "To say a 'Hail Mary', 'Om Mane Padme Om' or 'God is Great', changes the world and brings us into closer touch with something beyond space and time". We were wondering, what do you think about prayer as a way of kindling enchantment and a way of transforming our perception of the world?

AM: You've read my book more recently than I have. I had forgotten about that. I mean, anthropologists and linguists believe that words—elocution and the actual sound of words—have power. In other words, they are a form of magic, which is defined as a sequence, a repetitive sequence, of symbols which affect the world. Now, whether it works, as believers would have, by putting you in touch with some other reality or whether it affects us just psychologically, because you believe, that I don't know. But anyone knows you just need two words. My favourite ones are "let's pretend" with my granddaughters. When they were younger, they would say, or I'd say, "Let's pretend we're tigers". And we were tigers. And prayer can be a device. You just say this, and then (well, to the outsider—Protestants, for example, hated it and called it mumbo jumbo, and so on; but, for a Catholic or a believer) it actually has the force and power to move you out of one dimension into another dimension. It unlocks another dimension. So, it can be very powerful. But one of my disappointments and one of the reasons, I suppose, I ended up without remaining a formal Christian, was that the prayer never seemed to be echoed in any way. I went through a very evangelical period. I was a member of *OICCU*, which you'll know is the *Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union*. I was told that I could say prayers and I would feel that there was something there, that I was speaking to something. But I never really felt that. I just felt I was asking or saying things and so it wasn't very effective. But, of course, all of us pray all the time. I mean, you'll find, I'm sure, Richard Dawkins and others on a dark night, when suddenly something spooky happens, or their car is about to crash, throw a prayer up to heaven. It's a normal reaction to all sorts of stresses.

JOGTS: You mentioned earlier that you'd—after many, many years—found a solution as to how this generation might build a world where reason and heart exist together. How do you envisage this?

AM: Well, this is the surprise of writing the first volume of my autobiography in the early months of COVID. Because, by externalising the problem, by giving an account of my life's work (a lot of my work is around the theme of disenchantment), I took myself through from childhood and through the growing up, and the Wordsworthian thing, to Oxford and beyond, and showed how it was quite normal and absolutely obvious that I would separate my lives and I would lose my faith. And, if I had remained a historian, probably that's where I would be now. But this was changed by going to other cultures and getting the shock of finding worlds where magic and enchantment still exists, and the head and the heart are united, and things have a meaning—this was my first shock when visiting Nepal and then Japan and then China. But the surprise in the book was that having gone through this mentally, in that few weeks of writing, I then came back and looked around my own world and it was just like all the fairy stories. I'll give you just a very personal example. My beloved granddaughter, Lily, when she went into a big wardrobe in my room in King's College which belonged to John Maynard Keynes. She went in and I said, "This is Narnia" and she said, "Oh, yes, it's very cold in here. I can see the White Witch", and so on. And then she hopped out and she just looked round, and she said, "The whole world's changed".

Now, *Alice in Wonderland*, all these different children's stories and a lot of poetry, Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, and much poetry and literature, is about how when we experience entry into another dimension, you come back, and your world is different. And so, when I came back, in the book and in my mind, and looked around me and started to examine my life, if I looked at my life over twenty-four hours—or if you looked at your lives—how much of it is lived in a cold, rational iron cage of separations and divisions? Hardly any of it. Nearly all of it (analysing things like play and games, art and literature, love, even drink, and so on), if you look at what you do and how you are affected by what you do, let alone the eight hours you're dreaming, these are not rational at all. Again, I saw this with Lily. I was reading to her when she was about four or five, and the moment I said, "It was a cold night on the mountain", her eyes sort of looked up. I filmed it and I could see. She was away. She was in that mountain. Now, when you read a novel, when you watch a film, when you play a game, when you watch a game, when you have a conversation with someone you like and play mental games, you are not in the cold, rational world. Human beings are mostly imaginative creators of alternative realities. And, therefore, instead of worrying, I offer this, another line of poetry I like from Shelley: "Many a green isle needs must be, In the deep wide sea of misery". And I thought of the kind of enchantment which all of us fill our lives with as green islands, or oases, as I sometimes describe it, in a desert. If we didn't have all these things, being rational and common sense, and separating, and thinking about money, and thinking about the next chapter of our PhD thesis, or whatever it is, that would be intolerable. We escape all the

time into daydreams or a game of this-or-that. And so, we haven't lost this, we can combine the two. And that's the final chapter of my autobiography, it's how it solves the problem which Max Weber took forward and then Ernest Gellner, my teacher (he's a philosopher and an anthropologist). We can be both: rational, tolerant, liberal, and fairly efficient, but also live a very rich imaginative life.

Audience (AUD): The climate crisis pervades the framework of modernity that you've written about; the division of the religious, economic, social, and political aspects of our lives. This crisis affects and is affected by all of these, and it also affects people regardless of nationality, gender, or ethnicity, and it often affects the most vulnerable members of society and, of course, future generations—people that we will never even meet. What do you think of some of the theological or religious issues this crisis may have stemmed from, and what do you see as some of the solutions?

AM: Well, as you say, it tends to affect—like all disasters—the poor, and the weak, and people in marginal countries more than others, as I've seen in my work in Nepal and elsewhere. Just two thoughts on it. One is that we need to change our whole attitude about the opposition between humans and nature. In other words: I was brought up with the Old Testament view that man has dominion over nature and that nature is just there to serve him or her, basically. Whereas as soon as you actually feel part of nature and feel some empathy and sympathy with it, then you are more likely to treat it in a more respectful and reasonable way. Although, as I said, I think there's been terrible ecological and other destruction in places like China. They have a view of nature as not separate from human beings; in many ways they regard nature as their responsibility, and they are part of it. But that requires a big shift, particularly in Christianity and some of the Western religions which have this domination view and is built up by science.

As regards what we can do about it: basically, if you try and solve problems at the level at which they are created you will never solve them. If we just think, “Well, let's just have a few more solar panels or let's have a little more of this, plant some trees or something”, which they're doing now, that's tinkering at the edge of it. We actually need absolutely huge and fundamental shifts. I mean, everyone knows that if you spent ten percent of what the world spends on weapons now—ten percent—you would solve almost all the ecological and other problems; the problems of water shortages, for example, and deforestation. Many of these things, with thought and care—not only the billions of dollars that would be available for this sort of activity, but also the people who are spending huge amounts of energy, and skill, and science, and technology on learning how to kill other people—could be devoted to improving our planet.

AUD: I just wanted to go back to when you were talking about your granddaughter and your mention of Narnia and Keats. Obviously, a fantastical work with Christian undertones and a

Romantic work with classical undertones. I was wondering, in terms of enchantment, is it different from Romanticism? And if so, how?

AM: That's a very nice question. They overlap. There's a Venn overlap because the great period for enchanted literature, in my life, was the Romantic movement, but it's overlapping because that was a particularly rich time. You're talking about 1770-1830, or whatever it is, in England, and other periods on the continent, and it clearly was related to disenchantment—that is, industrialism and science and the feeling that the meaning of the world was being drained away. And so, it was particularly rich then and I was affected by it. A lot of my work is around this theme because I was brought up in the same place where William Wordsworth went to school, and so his great work on enchantments and disenchantment, *The Prelude*, was written around the fields and houses which I knew as a boy. He was my hero—and Keats and Shelley and the rest of them too.

I'll just tell you the story from my book [*Magic and Modernity*], the first volume, which is that I thought I was growing up to be like Wordsworth, fading into the light of common day, and losing the mystery, and bars of the prison house growing around me, and all the Wordsworthian stuff. This went on through university, and I thought, "I've lost it all". I read children's stories, I read C. S. Lewis as an undergraduate at Oxford to try and preserve this enchanted world, but, in the end, it escaped me, and I thought, "I've lost it". Then, I went to the Himalayas and I re-found it, and I went to Japan and found it even more, and then I went to China and found it even more. So, I discovered that three-quarters of the world lives within enchanted universes. I came back to my own world, and I looked around, and I suddenly realised—and this is the same as coming out of Lily's cupboard and Narnia—I looked around, and I saw that enchantment was all around me. It's just a matter of the definition, if you redefine religion in the sort of way that Durkheim does: that the sacredness is things set apart, or out of ordinary time and space, or with different rules. If you apply a slightly broader definition, it means that the cold, calculating rules that you have to abide by in normal logic and normal economics and normal politics, and all those sorts of things—those are for a time suspended. When you suspend them—and my book takes firstly "play", all sorts of play—the moment you start playing a game of football, you're in enchantment. *Homo Ludens*, as Huizinga put it. We are playful creatures and all that is enchanted because it has its own rules. I've played these games with Lily, my granddaughter. Then, we stop and have a meal, and we are no longer in that enchanted world. So, I watched and filmed my granddaughters growing up in enchantment and I have written a very long autobiography of my own life, in many volumes, about enchantment and growing out of it. So, that's in play.

In painting, when you look at a Constable or a Goya or a Leonardo, you enter another dimension, another world. Above all when you listen to music. You just have to learn to listen to two or three notes of your favourite music—of classical, of pop, or jazz, or whatever—and human beings are taken into a new world. This is why Plato was against all the arts: because he said they lead us

into unreality and deception. But, in fact, that is what keeps us and makes us human. Then I go into a chapter of all the other things: love, friendship, a glass of wine, whatever it is. A single individual is in an enchanted world for something like three-quarters, or more, of their time—from the moment they turn on the radio and listen to some music, or they pick up a newspaper and they travel to another part of the world—their mind is somewhere outside this confining “here and now”. So, most people, most of the time, live in parallel realities.

AUD: That reminds me of—I can’t remember if it was Lewis or Tolkien—something they said about when you’re a child you read fairy stories, and if you’re lucky when you’re old enough, you’ll read fairy stories again. And your journey seems to remind me of that. I was wondering how this enchanted world and this more kind of “civil” world of, “I’ve got to pay my taxes, I’ve got to get on this train”, could live together. Do you think there could ever be (what I imagine the medieval world was) a coalescence between the civil and the enchanted, where there isn’t as clear a distinction between them, or do you think industrialisation and technology have forever sundered the two?

AM: Well, on the first point: that we as children read children’s stories, but if we’re lucky as adults we also read children’s stories—that is obviously what we should do. You can never too often read children’s stories. They always have a new meaning and richness to them and I’m just about to start Kipling again. He is one of my favourites. It reminds me of Einstein. It’s not quite the same, but it’s one of my favourite quotes. He said that: “The reason why I solved this large problem of relativity, is not because I’m any cleverer than anyone else, I’m just the same as everyone else. It’s because when I was a child I asked these questions that a child asks about space, and time, and why, and so on, and so on. And everyone said, ‘Oh, well, stop asking those questions. When you grow up you can ask those questions, you might have a chance of answering them then.’” But he didn’t stop asking them and when he grew up, he went on asking the child-like question of “why, why, why” and this led him to his amazing work.

I think there is this thesis of my former DPhil supervisor Keith Thomas, who wrote a very good book called *Man and the Natural World*, based on the Trevelyan lectures, in which he argued that industrialisation and the Romantic movement, in fact, was a move—a shift—a break which you can’t go back over. In other words: you’ve lost innocence. It’s industrialism plus science. And this was the supposed tragedy of the 19th century, that we can’t go back to enchantment because we live in an industrial world and a scientific world. I sort of half accepted this, although, in fact, I find the break much earlier than Keith, and I’ve written about this in one of my books. So, I find the tension between science and an enchanted world going back into the medieval period. But I now don’t see them in opposition. Science gives you answers to certain things, but it doesn’t give you answers to any of the “why” questions. It’s good on the “how” questions, and some of the great scientists I’ve interviewed are also theologians and give very good answers on that. And I don’t see

any reason at all why you shouldn't accept and respect good science, but also accept that it doesn't give you the answers to all the possible questions, and it may never do so.

AUD: I am interested in relating your ideas to the work of people like Jason Josephson-Storm in his book *The Myth of Disenchantment*, or Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*. You talked earlier about China and Japan, where you suggested that modernity is just a veneer and that, underneath, these societies have always been enchanted. Do you think the same is possibly true of Western societies as well? That the disenchantment, the Weberian iron cage, was something of a myth, and we've always retained this enchanted sense?

AM: I think you're using myth in the common sense. In other words, as meaning “untrue”, which anthropologists certainly baulk at. A myth is something which is useful for society because it explains how things are, and how they should be, and their history. So, it's a myth in the usual, functional sense: that if you are trying to create something, or understand your world, you create these stories about yourself, and the story of disenchantment is a story which for quite good reasons people have told. Then other people question them. And Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* is an example of that, and it's a very useful debunking. I do rather tease Bruno because my view is that the French have never been modern, because basically they're Catholic and familial and state-oriented and they've never made the proper separations, which is the problem that France constantly faces because that is all still embedded. I'm in a good heritage because Tocqueville says the same thing: that the French Revolution never succeeded in making us modern. So, the French are certainly not modern.

And the English are like the Japanese. We present a reasonable front to the world. We'd like to believe this, and it's probably necessary. It's very similar to a device in law. If any of you know about how English common law works, it's based on the concept of the “reasonable man”. It's based on the idea that if you're judging a case, and if you are interrogating witnesses, you have to assume that they are reasonable. You apply this judgment of the “reasonable man” to economics—*homo economicus* is someone who makes constant calculations about the costs and benefits of transactions. Now, we all know that economics is based on nonsense—that people are not economically rational most of the time. And that individuals in their private behaviour, and so on, are often not reasonable. But it's a fiction which serves all sorts of useful purposes because it gives you a sort of rule of behaviour in a certain aspect of your lives. And so, I think the idea is that in normal transactions we have to be reasonable. If we don't do that we will end up in a mess. On the other hand, if that's all we do we'll end up in another kind of psychological and miserable mess.

JOGTS: So, to finish: what would be some advice you would give to all of us in trying to turn perceived crises into hope?

AM: Well, I tried to do this throughout. Basically, here I am, at the end of nearly eighty years and the crises that I faced when I was your age are less severe than they were then. But also, they go on and there's always a new one. And if there's no crisis, you invent one. So, perhaps have a sheet of paper by your side and when a new crisis comes along, write it down, and then underneath say "what crisis?", okay?!

JOGTS: That's brilliant, Professor Macfarlane, thank you. This has given us a whole new perspective on some of the larger issues we are facing today and a more hopeful and perhaps more useful way to look at what we describe as a "crisis". This has been a wonderfully insightful interview, and it's been a great privilege for The Journal of the Oxford Graduate Society.

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Kierkegaard for the Information Age

Analysing the Impact of Social Media on the Self and Selfhood

Daniel Bennett

Ripon College Cuddesdon, University of Oxford

dancurate@gmail.com

Abstract

The adoption of social media technologies as a ubiquitous means of self-expression in the twenty-first century has precipitated a multi-disciplinary academic discussion over whether the use of these technologies has a “positive” or “negative” impact on the individual self. The discipline of theology has also engaged in this discussion, asking critical questions about the impact of social media use on the self before God. Despite significantly predating twenty-first century technology, I argue that Søren Kierkegaard’s work exploring the impact of communication activities on philosophical and theological questions of self and selfhood contributes to this discussion. Drawing primarily on Kierkegaard’s texts, *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and *Two Ages* (1846), I engage Kierkegaard’s work in an interdisciplinary conversation in order to offer a Kierkegaardian analysis of the impact of social media use on the self and selfhood. Therefore, the article aims to contribute to a broader theological debate concerning the “positive” or “negative” effects of social media use on the self.

Introduction

The emergence of social media technologies—such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube—has facilitated the widespread adoption of digitally mediated personal profiles and



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communication tools.¹ The rise of the “selfie”—a photo taken by an individual of oneself and often uploaded to a social media account—is emblematic of a broader turn whereby individual selves routinely represent themselves to others using social media accounts.² These particular forms of digital media communication provide the self with new ways to mediate itself to itself, itself to others, and itself to God. Given Søren Kierkegaard’s “proto-interdisciplinary” interest in the impact of communication activities on philosophical and theological questions of self and selfhood, the premise of this article is that Kierkegaard’s work has something valuable to contribute to similar conceptual questions in the twenty-first century. The aim of this article, therefore, is to ask: what does a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media contribute to a discussion of the impact of these forms of digital media on the self and selfhood?

Within the academic disciplines of media, communication, and psychology, there is already a well-established body of literature that has sought to understand whether “mass self-communication,”³ or “self-representation in social media,”⁴ has a positive or negative impact on individuals and society. The question of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood is evident both in enthusiasm for new opportunities of “authentic” self-expression,⁵ and also in concerns over the self’s commodification through “self-branding,”⁶ or the use of “in/authentic” social media identities for commercial or political ends.⁷ Mirroring these debates, academic work within the Christian theological tradition has begun to address similar critical questions concerning the impact of social media on the “dynamic of personal identity formation” and the self before God.⁸ Angela Williams Gorrell’s research, for example, found that church-goers themselves believed that social media facilitated spiritual growth, nurturing “Christian formation”, facilitating prayer, community growth, and mission.⁹ Sceptics such as Kathryn Davelaar, however, argue that the “practices created”

¹ In 2020, DataReportal estimate that 3.8 billion people use social media; Simon Kemp, “Digital 2020 Report,” DataReportal, 30 January 2020, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-global-digital-overview>.

² Jill Walker Rettberg, “Self-Representation in Social Media,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, eds., Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell, (London: Sage, 2017).

³ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

⁴ Rettberg, “Self-Representation in Social Media”.

⁵ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, “Being ‘really real’ on YouTube: Authenticity, Community and Brand Culture in Social Media Entertainment,” *Media International Australia* 164, no. 1, (2017): 71–81.

⁶ Jennifer M. Whitmer, “You are Your Brand: Self-branding and the Marketization of Self,” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 3, (2019).

⁷ Gunn Enli “‘Trust Me, I Am Authentic!’: Authenticity Illusions in Social Media Politics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, eds. Axel Bruns, Gunn Enli, Eli Skogerbo, Anders Olof Larsson, and Christian Christensen, (London: Routledge, 2016), 121–136.

⁸ Ron Cole-Turner, “Commodification and Transfiguration: Socially Mediated Identity in Technology and Theology”, *HTS Theological Studies* 75, no. 1, (2019): 1–11.

⁹ Angela Williams Gorrell, “Social Media, Churches, and Christian formation” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016), 199.

around digital media communications inhibit the “present attentiveness” required for a relationship with God,¹⁰ while Michael Xiarhos suggests that mobile technology and “social media specifically” is a potentially “dangerous distraction” from spiritual goals.¹¹

In this article, I offer a Kierkegaardian analysis of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood—informed by an interdisciplinary approach—to obtain insights that are relevant to these broader theological questions and the wider academic study of social media. In suggesting that Kierkegaard’s works contribute to a “theological” discussion of the question of selfhood and social media, “theology” and the “theological” are understood broadly in this article as pertaining to any discussion of God. These terms are not, therefore, only conceived narrowly in the sense of “Theology” as an academic discipline. Peter Vardy notes that Kierkegaard would have rejected systemising disciplines such as academic Philosophy and Theology, which “objectify knowledge”.¹² As C. Stephen Evans argues, however, in the context of the question of whether Kierkegaard is a philosopher, this categorisation presupposes a certain post-Enlightenment understanding of the nature of scholarly work pertaining to “philosophy” and “theology”.¹³ It is also notable that, despite the Christian (rather than “Theological”) emphasis of works such as *Sickness unto Death*, the terminology of the “theological” is not alien to it—significantly, in this context, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, describes the self before God as “theological”.¹⁴

In order to avoid an anachronistic analysis of Kierkegaard’s work, I follow Patrick Stokes’ approach to Kierkegaard’s work methodologically by first providing “an exegesis and interpretation” of Kierkegaard in his own context, before turning to the “application of Kierkegaardian concepts” to a contemporary twenty-first century question.¹⁵ In the first half of the article, I offer an account of the self and selfhood in Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death* (1849).¹⁶ This text represents the “consummation of [Kierkegaard’s] ‘anthropological contemplation’ ”,¹⁷ summarising much of Kierkegaard’s thinking on selfhood in relation to anxiety and despair. Kierkegaard also regarded *Sickness unto Death* as presenting the Christian “demands of ideality” to “their maximum”,¹⁸

¹⁰ Kathryn Ann Davelaar, “Embodied Attention: Learning from the Wisdom of the Desert and Saint Augustine”, (PhD diss., Duke University, 2014), iv.

¹¹ Michael G. Xiarhos, “The Connected Pilgrim: The Potential for Transformation in the Social Media Age”, (PhD diss., Salve Regina University, 2016), iv.

¹² Peter Vardy, *The SPCK Introduction to Kierkegaard* (London: SPCK, 2008), xi.

¹³ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* [SUD], trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), XI 191.

¹⁵ Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 20.

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* [SUD], trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Hong & Hong, “Historical Introduction”, SUD, 6.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, cited in Hong & Hong, “Historical Introduction”, SUD, 11.

publishing the work under a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus,¹⁹ because he did not believe he could live according to the ideal that the work described.²⁰ The account I offer will not be exhaustive; rather, the aim here is to demonstrate that Kierkegaard's two aspects of despair in *Sickness unto Death*—namely the aspect of the syntheses of infinitude/finitude and necessity/possibility, and the aspect of self-consciousness—form a useful basis for discussing the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. The discussion of *Sickness unto Death* is supplemented by an analysis of *Two Ages* (1846),²¹ where Kierkegaard develops more specific insights into how particular forms of media and communication might affect the journey of selfhood.

The second half of the article begins by questioning previous work that has relatively straightforwardly extended Kierkegaard's criticisms of the "press" to the internet and the information age. These conceptual observations represent an important starting point for a subsequent analysis of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. Here, I will argue that Kierkegaard's insightful dialectical and paradoxical understanding of selfhood assists an analysis of the apparently paradoxical impacts of social media on the self and selfhood. Focusing on the perspective of the social media user,²² I will show how participation in social media might contribute to Kierkegaardian despair in finitude/necessity and/or infinitude/possibility. I will also discuss the impact of social media use on the self and selfhood in relation to the Kierkegaardian aspect of self-consciousness. At the same time, a nuanced approach to Kierkegaard and communication suggests that participation in social media as a means of self-representation and interpersonal communication is not necessarily precluded from Kierkegaard's religious sphere. Social media technologies can be used for the sort of "inward" reflection, "essential speaking", and formation of "real commitments" necessary for the Kierkegaardian journey of selfhood. Given the "objective" possibility for social media use both to inhibit and encourage the development of the self before God, I will conclude that, in Kierkegaardian terms, it is ultimately a "subjective" task for the self—as "a single individual"—to ascertain the impact of social media use on its own self and other selves.

¹⁹ I will largely avoid discussion of how far Kierkegaard aligns with Anti-Climacus (or any other pseudonym), as I am less interested in what "Kierkegaard himself" ("essentially" or otherwise) might think, and more concerned with how the ideas in his texts can constructively engage with the question of social media and selfhood. It is also worth noting that Kierkegaard's decision to author a number of his works pseudonymously, and so conceal or reveal his "self" through a "profile", speaks to discussions over the extent to which social media profiles reflect the user's "self".

²⁰ Hong & Hong, "Historical Introduction", *SUD*, 11.

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). [TA].

²² The self might well be affected by the economic, political, social, and technological structures of social media technologies without participating in social media itself, but these wide-ranging impacts lie beyond the scope of this article.

The Self and Selfhood in *Sickness unto Death*

What is the Self?

To understand the impact of social media on the self and selfhood, we must consider what a “self” is and what “selfhood” looks like in Kierkegaard’s work. Although psychology, media and communication literature often discuss whether individuals are representing their “hidden”, “actual”, “ideal”,²³ or “authentic”²⁴ selves using social media technologies, they far more rarely discuss what “the self” who uses social media technologies actually is. Much twenty-first century academic work in media and communications concerning the self, regards anything pertaining to the theological as beyond its epistemological or disciplinary remit, whereas for Kierkegaard “the facts of selfhood are always theological”²⁵—in the sense that the self is understood in relation to God. Given Kierkegaard’s attention to the concept of “the self”, his work offers some valuable conceptual insights in this regard, even if only to highlight the significantly differing epistemological assumptions underlying conceptions of self and selfhood in media and communications research.

At the beginning of *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard outlines a definition of the self as “spirit”—one is not a “self” by mere virtue of being a human being. A human being is a dialectical “synthesis”, a relation between the “infinite and the finite”, the “temporal and the eternal”, and between “freedom and necessity”.²⁶ The human being only becomes a self, however, if this “relation relates itself to itself”.²⁷ The self is therefore spirit for Kierkegaard because it is a relation: it is not merely a substance or entity, but it is rather a dynamic relationality which subjectively participates in a process of existing. Kierkegaard had anticipated the role of relational reflexivity in selfhood in his earlier work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where his pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, emphasises the importance of the “reflection of inwardness”,²⁸ or “double reflection”.²⁹ Self-consciousness also facilitates reflection on the process of becoming a self—human beings are able to relate to past selves, look forward to future selves, and reflect on what an ideal self ought to be.³⁰

²³ Gwendolyn Seidman, “Self-presentation and belonging on Facebook”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 54, (2013): 402-407.

²⁴ Cunningham and Craig, “Being ‘really real’ on YouTube”, 71-81.

²⁵ Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 14.

²⁶ *SUD*, XI 127. (Where Roman numerals are used in citations, they refer to the volumes of Søren Kierkegaard *Samlede Værker*.)

²⁷ *SUD*, XI 127.

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript [CUP]* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 197.

²⁹ *CUP*, 73.

³⁰ Evans, *Kierkegaard*, 48.

For Kierkegaard, however, a self is not merely a “relation that relates itself to itself”, it is also a relation that “in relating itself to itself relates to *another*”.³¹ C. Stephen Evans notes that when one considers the broad context of *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard must understand the process of becoming a self to be influenced by other human beings, as in outlining the nature of despair, Kierkegaard suggests that we can will to be other human selves that we are not.³² Nevertheless, what Kierkegaard principally has in mind in his definition of the self in Part I A is his contention that, metaphysically, the relating self is dependent on an “Other” relation—namely its relation to God. Kierkegaard thus rejects the possibility that the self establishes itself metaphysically or ontologically outside of its establishment by God in the act of creation.

A self’s relationship to God is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s paradoxical understanding of the self. On the one hand, the human being is given infinite freedom to be any number of possible selves as a gift—an “infinite concession” to humanity as part of God’s creation.³³ God thus “releases” the self “from his hand”.³⁴ The very *possibility* of being a self is “an excellence”, as it is the location of human freedom. “The self is freedom”.³⁵ As such, it represents humanity’s superiority over the animal and indicates that the human being has a self which is spirit. On the other hand, the *actuality* of this freedom is despair over the self. It is thus also a “ruination”.³⁶ The result of this possibility/actuality paradox is that, in exercising one’s God-given freedom to be a self, despair is inevitable, and one’s true or authentic self is only found in relation to God, who retains an eternal “claim” on the self.³⁷

The Goal of Selfhood: Becoming a (True) Self

A recurring theme in contemporary media, communications and psychology literature is a concern as to whether participation in social media encourages or inhibits representations of an “authentic” or “genuine” self. Often, research relies on self-defined understandings of authenticity: does a social media user believe that they are representing their “authentic self”?³⁸ Studies are also concerned

³¹ SUD, XI 127.

³² Evans, *Kierkegaard*, 48-49.

³³ SUD, XI 135.

³⁴ SUD, XI 129.

³⁵ SUD, XI 142.

³⁶ SUD, XI 129.

³⁷ SUD, XI 135.

³⁸ Katie Warfield, “Digital Subjectivities and Selfies,” *International Journal of the Image* 6, no. 2, (2015): 1-16. For some social media users, “authentic” images “capture the mundane because the banality of everyday life is deemed more “authentic”. This is far from the goal of “authentic” selfhood for Kierkegaard.

with goals of selfhood—the aim for an “ideal self”³⁹—but, again, the emphasis here is on a self-reported ideal, rather than on identifying a “true” and universal understanding of ideal selfhood and its self-representation. In stark contrast, Kierkegaard outlines a clear conceptualisation of what becoming a “true” or “authentic” self entails in *Sickness unto Death*. He also suggests that many people are actually ignorant of the ideal goal of selfhood, despite their self-reported assertions.⁴⁰

For Kierkegaard, then, selfhood is not the “presupposition of one’s (self-defined) existence”, but is instead—as Merold Westphal observes—a “goal”.⁴¹ The human person does not exist in “the mode of ‘being’, but in the mode of ‘becoming’”.⁴² The task of the self is “to become itself, which can only be done in relationship to God”.⁴³ In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard appears to concentrate negatively on the ways in which a person might “lose” their self, either because they have no consciousness of their “self” as spirit, or because they have “lost” their self, as a consequence of despair over their self. Ostensibly, Kierkegaard devotes less time positively outlining how one becomes a self. I would argue, however, that *Sickness unto Death* must be understood in its own dialectical spirit. For Kierkegaard, the goal of authentic selfhood can only be understood in relation to an intensifying despair over the self and, paradoxically, is only obtained by travelling through this despair.

Following Alastair Hannay,⁴⁴ Geoff Dargan highlights that Kierkegaard’s journey towards the “goal” of becoming a self can be mapped onto Kierkegaard’s three stages of existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.⁴⁵ In an aesthetic stage of existence, the human being is concerned only with the “immediate” and has not developed any sense of being engaged in a project of selfhood. In an ethical stage of existence, the human being has begun a process of self-reflection by which it has taken responsibility for its relation to others in the world. In the highest, religious stage of existence, a reflecting self has also become conscious of its tremendous relation to its creator God. This reflecting self “before God” has, therefore, become aware of its own sin, and “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself” it “rests transparently on the power which has

³⁹ Neill Watson and Randolph H. Watts Jr., “The Predictive Strength of Personal Constructs Versus Conventional Constructs: Self-Image Disparity and Neuroticism,” *Journal of Personality* 69, no. 1, (2001): 121-45.

⁴⁰ *SUD*, XI 135.

⁴¹ Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996), ix.

⁴² Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 107.

⁴³ *SUD*, XI 143.

⁴⁴ See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 159.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Dargan, ‘The Possible Self’, (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2016), 6.

established it”.⁴⁶ Kierkegaard thus articulates an ideal of selfhood—when all despair is completely rooted out—that is only possible when the self finds rest in God.⁴⁷

Although Kierkegaard references these stages of existence in *Sickness unto Death*, and it is worth bearing them in mind as the discussion proceeds, his text actually considers selfhood from the perspective of two aspects. First, Kierkegaard considers selfhood from the perspective of the synthesis of the human being—particularly the syntheses of the infinite and the finite, and of necessity and possibility. Second, Kierkegaard considers selfhood from the aspect of self-consciousness. I shall now consider these two aspects in more detail as they will form the basis of an understanding of selfhood for a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media in the second half of the article.

The Self under the First Aspect: (A) The Synthesis of Finitude/Infinitude

As I have already noted, Kierkegaard regards the human being as a synthesis of the finite and the infinite. The finite in Kierkegaard’s thought refers to the limited, the temporal, and the earthly—that which corresponds to the affairs of the world. The infinite concerns the unlimited, the eternal, and the divine—that which belongs to God. We might also understand this synthesis as reflecting the tension in Christian thought between the idea that human beings are created finitely in the world by God, and the notion that, by virtue of being created in the image of God, they have a relationship with the infinite. The authentic self for Kierkegaard is thus a “synthesis of infinitude and finitude”.⁴⁸ Becoming a self therefore requires “an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitising of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitising process”. In other words, the goal of selfhood is neither to “become infinite”, nor “finite”, but to become a “concrete” “synthesis” of both. Inauthentic selfhood, or more accurately in Kierkegaardian terms a loss of selfhood, occurs when attention to either the infinitude of God or the finitude of one’s own worldly existence is lacking. Any such “misrelation” in the synthesis causes the self to despair.⁴⁹

If the self lacks finitude, then Kierkegaard suggests it is caught in the despair of the fantastic and the unlimited. The imagination is drawn to the infinite as fantastic and thus the person increasingly departs from who they are as a created finite self in the world. As a consequence the self becomes increasingly abstract: “The self [...] leads a fantasised existence in abstract infinitising or in abstract

⁴⁶ *SUD*, XI 128.

⁴⁷ *SUD*, XI 128.

⁴⁸ *SUD*, XI 143.

⁴⁹ *SUD*, XI 128. The possibility of a “misrelation” is echoed in twentieth century self-concept theory where disparities in perceptions of the “real” (finite) and “ideal” (infinite) self are associated with depression and neuroticism. See Watson and Watts, “Predictive Strength”, 121-45.

isolation, continually lacking its self, from which it only moves further and further away”.⁵⁰ Kierkegaard argues that this self might appear to be occupied with “temporal matters”—might “marry”, “have children”, “be honoured and esteemed”—but this merely obscures the fact that the self understands its self abstractly, and lives a life rooted in fantasy. In a deeper sense, then, such a person “lacks a self”.⁵¹

If the self lacks infinitude, then Kierkegaard argues that it despairs in reductionism and narrowness. The self is thus “completely finitised”, entirely concerned with the intellectual, the aesthetic and the “indifferent”. Indeed, Kierkegaard regards the “secular mentality” as the erroneous “attribution of infinite worth” to the “finite” triviality of everyday life, the “indifferent”.⁵² Kierkegaard describes this loss of self as a loss of personal individuality, as a personal failure to be the “single individual” that God has created a person to be. In such circumstances, the self “forgets himself”, “forgets his name divinely understood” and becomes “a number”, “just one more repetition”, a “copy”, a “mass man”.⁵³

Kierkegaard argues that the loss of self in this manner is caused by fear of others. Social or peer pressure is exercised on the self by “hordes” of others, all “absorbed in secular matters” and thus the self allows “itself to be tricked out of itself by ‘the others’ ”.⁵⁴ The self does not have the confidence or belief to hazard being its self, and thus it becomes like a “smooth stone”—not seeking to stand out from the crowd, nor “venturing” to be a single individual.⁵⁵ Implicitly referencing Matthew 16, then, Kierkegaard suggests that, although such people might go along “superbly in business and social life”, “gaining the whole world”, they ultimately lose themselves by suppressing their authentic self.⁵⁶ The implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that authentic selfhood requires the self to be sufficiently brave and courageous to be its God-given self in the face of the pressure of social conformity found in the world.

The Self under the First Aspect: (B) The Synthesis of Possibility/Necessity

The second synthesis of “personhood” that Kierkegaard discusses is that of possibility and necessity.⁵⁷ The category of possibility is closely related to that of infinitude, and necessity to that of finitude. If a self lacks necessity, then it despairs in possibility. The self is so overwhelmed by the

⁵⁰ SUD, XI 145.

⁵¹ SUD, XI 146.

⁵² SUD, XI 146.

⁵³ SUD, XI 147.

⁵⁴ SUD, XI 146.

⁵⁵ SUD, XI 147.

⁵⁶ SUD, XI 147.

⁵⁷ SUD, XI 153.

vast array of possibilities that the self might become as a free gift of God, that it loses its awareness of its being as a “necessary” self—a “very definite something”—that has been created by God.⁵⁸ The self thus loses sight of the “limitations” of its finitude, the characteristic features of oneself that limit the extent to which one could be any self that one chooses. The self thus either desires and craves to be a person that it is not, or “becomes a victim of anxiety”.⁵⁹ In light of *The Concept of Anxiety*, the latter could be understood here as the “anxious possibility of being able” to be any possible self⁶⁰—the “dizzying” freedom that God bestows on humanity in creation.

If the self lacks possibility, however, it is in despair because everything has become necessary or everything has become trivial. A “fatalist” or “determinist” self either has no concept of God or has a concept of God in which there is no possibility. As such, there is no possibility for the self to become itself in relation to God as there is no possibility in God. A “philistine-bourgeois mentality” also lacks possibility because everything has become trivial. Such a self lives within “a trivial compendium of experiences” based on how things probably go and what usually happens.⁶¹ Here, possibility is controlled by the probable, leaving no space for the possibility of God. The self suffocates itself because its becoming is limited by the necessary.

Kierkegaard suggests, therefore, that authentic selfhood is the necessary self believing that for God “everything is possible”.⁶² Indeed, “true” or authentic selfhood appears to recognise its necessary limitations and understands that a despairing fall (into sin) is inevitable. It is faith in the God of all possibility, however, that assures salvation: “the believer sees and understands his downfall [...] but he believes [...] that for God everything is possible”.⁶³ Thus an authentic self is a synthesis of the necessary and the possible.

In the syntheses of finitude/infinity and possibility/necessity, then, Kierkegaard develops a paradoxical and nuanced understanding of the self that can be compared and contrasted with contemporary academic discussions around social media. Kierkegaard’s concern with the “finite” reflects the critique that social media encourages constant engagement with the everyday and the banal, limiting reflection on that which is (eternally) significant. His concern with the “infinite” parallels discussions of the technological abstraction of individuals by social media platforms. He also describes features of social comparison that resonate with discussions around new processes of peer pressure and social conformity facilitated by social media technologies. Finally, the synthesis of necessity/possibility speaks to the apparent paradox of identity in the digitally mediated world,

⁵⁸ SUD, XI 149.

⁵⁹ SUD, XI 149-50.

⁶⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, [COA] trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 44.

⁶¹ SUD, XI 153.

⁶² SUD, XI 182.

⁶³ SUD, XI 151.

whereby individuals can both create and access infinite representations of the self, and yet also find themselves tied to a necessary identity. I will develop these strands in the second half of the article, but, first, I will consider Kierkegaard's understanding of the self in relation to the second aspect: self-consciousness.

The Self under the Second Aspect: Self-Consciousness

Having discussed selfhood in relation to the syntheses of humanity, Kierkegaard turns to consider how selfhood is dependent on the degree of one's self-consciousness. Kierkegaard argues that the more self-conscious one is, the more one is in despair. Paradoxically, however, the more self-consciousness one has, the closer one will be to the goal of authentic selfhood. Indeed, to become an authentic self, Kierkegaard believes that despair cannot be avoided; it must be journeyed through in the right way.

Ignorance of Being in Despair

At the lowest level of Kierkegaardian selfhood lies "despair that is ignorant of being in despair".⁶⁴ In this state, the self is so "dominated by the sensate", the "pleasant and unpleasant", that the self has no concept of being "spirit"—in other words, it has no concept of its existing in relation to God.⁶⁵ This form of selfhood is "the most common in the world".⁶⁶ A self that is a level higher towards its goal will be aware that there is "something eternal" within it.⁶⁷ This can lead to two forms of despair—the first is the "despair not to will to be oneself" or "weakness",⁶⁸ the second is the "despair to will to be oneself" or "defiance".⁶⁹

The Self in Despair in Weakness

The self that does not will to be its self in weakness is either tied up in the "immediacy" of everyday life or is hidden behind "inclosing reserve".⁷⁰ The "immediate" individual is only concerned (aesthetically) with the other so far as it desires, craves, and enjoys the other. Again, it is a self preoccupied with the pleasant and unpleasant, with good luck and bad luck. This self is fragile. Such

⁶⁴ SUD, XI 155.

⁶⁵ SUD, XI 155.

⁶⁶ SUD, XI 157.

⁶⁷ SUD, XI 158.

⁶⁸ SUD, XI 158, 165.

⁶⁹ SUD, XI 178.

⁷⁰ SUD, XI 175.

a self experiences something in the world which makes it unhappy and thus it despairs because its immediate self is dealt a “crushing blow”.⁷¹ As a consequence, this immediate self despairs because it no longer wills to be itself, or even worse, wishes it were somebody else. The “immediate” self, then, actually has “no self”. It does not know itself, because it has no deeper internality. It is entirely defined by its own externalities and the external world—it is completely finitised, “quite literally” defined by the “clothes” that a person wears.⁷² Thus, the person of immediacy is “unable to hold anything back”, and rejects “solitude” in favour of engagement in “the constant sociality” of modern life.⁷³

The person of “inclosing reserve”, on the other hand, recognises that it is weakness to despair over the earthly and to afford infinite worth to that which is finite. This self understands, therefore, that its “hours have something to do with the eternal”,⁷⁴ and is concerned with relating itself to itself. Nevertheless, such a self never goes beyond that, and it despairs over its weakness. Kierkegaard suggests that the despair of such a self is ultimately pride. The self of inclosing reserve that does not experience an upheaval which puts it onto the path of faith will, therefore, either continue in this form of despair, or seek to be a self that it is not, becoming a “restless spirit” that wants to return back to “immediacy”.⁷⁵

The Self in Despair in Defiance

The self that despairs over its weakness and wills not to be itself can experience an intensification of despair. If this occurs, then the self can despair over willing to be its self. This is despair in defiance. Again, Kierkegaard believes an increase in one’s level of self-consciousness is required in order to despair in this manner. This self is conscious of despair as an act which comes directly from itself, and not from the external misfortune of life’s circumstances. This self is conscious of the possibility of the infinite self and wills to be this abstract possible self without maintaining the relationship with the finite, necessary self. Indeed, the implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that this form of despair is an example of despair over a lack of finitude and a lack of necessity. Such a self defiantly wants to be the self that it wants to be. It thus wants to be a god-like “master of itself”, “to create itself”, “to determine” the nature of its concrete self. Critically, this self actually severs any relation to God—the “power that has established it[s] [self]”.⁷⁶ It is therefore a self that

⁷¹ *SUD*, XI 164.

⁷² *SUD*, XI 165.

⁷³ *SUD*, XI 176.

⁷⁴ *SUD*, XI 176.

⁷⁵ *SUD*, XI 177.

⁷⁶ *SUD*, XI 179.

is not capable of losing its (false or inauthentic) self in order to win its (true or authentic) self.⁷⁷ It is ultimately “no self” because it has “nothing eternally steadfast”.⁷⁸ A self in defiance is a self that wants to “go it alone” and not to seek help from others. Most critically, it is a self that does not want to “hope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible”.⁷⁹

The Self “Before God”

The final intensifications of despair occur when the self becomes aware of its “theological self”—it is thus conscious of existing “before God” and not merely before other human beings.⁸⁰ A “true”, “authentic” theological self has God as its “criterion”.⁸¹ More particularly, as Joel Rasmussen highlights, the theological self must be “in Christ” for only then “is it true that God is man’s goal and criterion or the criterion and the goal”.⁸² Whereas the “pagan” and “natural man” only have the human self as their criterion, a higher self is aware of its relation to God.⁸³ The self is thus capable of ever-greater selfhood as it continues to relate itself to God: “the greater the conception of God, the more self there is; the more self, the greater the conception of God”.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, such a high level of self-consciousness means that the self becomes aware that in being in despair, it is also in sin before God and before Christ. This is thus also the greatest intensification of despair for a self, because the “more self, the more intense the sin”.⁸⁵ Such intense despair, however, also appears necessary to reach authentic Kierkegaardian selfhood. For, in such a state of despair, it is finally possible for the self to make a “leap”—a genuine “passionate” commitment to faith in Christ. Paradoxically, this leap appears to involve losing one’s (false) self or selves in order to win one’s (true or authentic) self, through “the aid of the eternal”.⁸⁶ This is a leap of faith, therefore, from despair over one’s false selves to belief in the (humanly) impossible, but divinely (possible) forgiveness of sins for the true relating self. It is a leap only made possible because, absurdly, “God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer and die also for the sake

⁷⁷ SUD, XI 179.

⁷⁸ SUD, XI 180.

⁷⁹ SUD, XI 182.

⁸⁰ SUD, XI 191.

⁸¹ SUD, XI 192.

⁸² SUD, XI 193; Joel Rasmussen *Between Irony and Witness: Kierkegaard's Poetics of Faith, Hope, and Love*, (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 129.

⁸³ SUD, XI 193.

⁸⁴ SUD, XI 193.

⁸⁵ SUD, XI 224.

⁸⁶ SUD, XI 179.

of this self”⁸⁷—and thus Christ provides the self with the ideal human life of faith to imitate.⁸⁸ The opposite of despairing sin, therefore, is faith. And such faith roots out all despair from the self. Faith lived out in the imitation of Christ is authentic true selfhood for Kierkegaard: a self that “in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God”.⁸⁹

Kierkegaard’s second aspect—self-consciousness—is valuable, then, in two critical respects for an analysis of social media. First, it further develops understandings of the self which resonate with the self within a social media environment, such as concerns over the “constant sociality” of everyday life, and the self caught in the concerns of the “immediate”. Second, it offers a theological understanding of selfhood in relation to self-consciousness that substantially differs from non-theological approaches. Again, these threads will be analysed in the second half of the article.

The Impact of Communication and Media on Selfhood in *Two Ages*

Having established a solid foundation for Kierkegaard’s journey of selfhood in *Sickness unto Death* according to the two aspects of the syntheses and self-consciousness, I will now outline Kierkegaard’s understanding of the impact of media and communication on this journey as developed in his work *Two Ages*. Written in 1846, *Two Ages* is a piece of social criticism masquerading as a literary review of Thomasine Gyllembourg’s novel of the same name.⁹⁰ A discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique of media and communication in this text provides valuable material for a Kierkegaardian analysis of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood.

In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard critiques the contribution of the communicative practices of his day to what he calls “leveling”.⁹¹ For Kierkegaard, leveling is a process whereby by the “single individual” or the self is divested of individuality and becomes an abstraction that makes individuals part of an anonymous “public”. Although leveling is not explicitly discussed in *Sickness unto Death*, it is closely related to the Kierkegaardian self that is in despair because it lacks infinitude. As we have seen, a self that lacks infinitude loses its individuality—it “forgets himself”, “forgets his name divinely understood” and becomes “a number”, “just one more repetition”, a “copy”, a “mass man”.⁹² It does so because it is caught up in finitude—it fears comparison with others and judges its self-worth in relation to the “socially-accepted criteria of comparative worth”.⁹³ Ultimately, Kierkegaard

⁸⁷ *SUD*, XI 223.

⁸⁸ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 129.

⁸⁹ *SUD*, XI 194.

⁹⁰ Andrew F. Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue: The Communication of Capability,” *Communication Theory* 18, no. 1 (2008), 73.

⁹¹ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 73.

⁹² *SUD*, XI 147.

⁹³ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 73.

suggests in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* that it is possible for a “heaped-up pile of comparisons” to overwhelm a person.⁹⁴

In such circumstances, “envy” becomes a “negatively unifying principle” in society.⁹⁵ A self looks to others’ material and social capital, and desires what others have, striving to be like other selves. The self does not, therefore, have its attention on the inward relation of itself to itself as a basis for other relationships: “inwardness is lacking”.⁹⁶ As a consequence, selves participate in a process by which they do not (relate themselves to themselves) and thus do not “relate to each other”,⁹⁷ but rather “carefully watch each other”, becoming “rivals in a game”.⁹⁸ This undermines the true relation between individual selves—all that remains is a relational “state of abstract non-cessation”.⁹⁹ In other words, the self remains in a tensive, watchful, and envious relation with others, not in a true relation of individuality with others. The implication of this state of affairs is that selves are “leveled”: they are imprisoned in an endless (false) reflection of themselves, because they are reflecting in relation to others on the immediate and finite externalities of everyday life, and not reflecting “inwardly” on themselves and their relation to God. Selves thus lose their individual selves, and instead despairingly will to be selves that are acceptable to a socially conformed mass. Critically, for Kierkegaard, such a self is thus restrained from taking the decisive acts of individual selfhood that are necessary for the life of faith.

Kierkegaard argues that leveling is a feature of modernity itself—an “abstract power” that subordinates the particularity of individuals.¹⁰⁰ Selves thus risk becoming abstractions or representations. They cease to be individual selves and become numbers, copies, types or representations of ideologies—anonymous figures in the crowd.¹⁰¹ Although leveling had already been a tendency in modernity, Kierkegaard believes that the invention of the concept of the “public” was necessary for “leveling really to take place”.¹⁰² Kierkegaard regards the public as a “monstrous abstraction”—an “all-encompassing something that is nothing”.¹⁰³ It is a crowd that does not essentially exist. The “public” has appeared in modernity, Kierkegaard argues, because of a lack of communal life that was previously characteristic of antiquity. It has become necessary, therefore, to invent a “phantom” whereby “unsubstantial individuals” who are never united in any

⁹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* trans. Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 189.

⁹⁵ TA, VIII 76.

⁹⁶ TA, VIII 74.

⁹⁷ TA, VIII 74.

⁹⁸ TA, VIII 74.

⁹⁹ TA, VIII 75.

¹⁰⁰ TA, VIII 79.

¹⁰¹ SUD, XI 147.

¹⁰² TA, VIII 84.

¹⁰³ TA, VIII 84.

situation or organisation are “claimed to be a whole”.¹⁰⁴ In this phantom whole, all “the relative concretions of individuality” are annihilated.¹⁰⁵ We might think of the “public” in the terms of Kierkegaard’s selves in despair—the public becomes thought of as a self, but it is an abstract, fantastic, infinitely possible self that lacks any finitude or necessity and is thus no self at all. Critically, the single individual self is thus lost in an amorphous public; it becomes an anonymous entity.

Kierkegaard argues that the press plays a key role in the development of the anonymous public—a thought that is echoed in much later academic work. For example, in his influential work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson contends that national newspaper reading was largely responsible for the “community in anonymity” that is the “hallmark of modern nations”.¹⁰⁶ Kierkegaard was critical of the way in which these two anonymous abstractions—the press and the public—interact with one another to contribute to the process of leveling. Perhaps reflecting his own experience of public vilification at the hands of the Danish satirical political magazine *Corsair*,¹⁰⁷ the individual self is thus not primarily leveled by other individuals, but by groups of individuals who become an abstract “public”. Public leveling is aided by the press—“a third party”—which performs the leveling on its behalf. In this regard, the public both participates in leveling through the means of the press and divests itself of responsibility because it can blame the press for the leveling.¹⁰⁸ In turn, “the press” itself is an abstraction that also escapes individual responsibility for its actions. Communication by the press is thus “anonymous, impersonal and public”.¹⁰⁹ By providing a steady flow of news and in creating public opinion, Kierkegaard suggests that individuals are drawn away from the inwardness required for selfhood and encouraged to despair in selves overly concerned by externalities. These are the conditions for the “immediacy” identified in *Sickness unto Death* which characterises a self that lacks infinitude.

In a world of immediacy, self-reflection and the development of self-consciousness are replaced by “chatter”.¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard states that “chatter” is a consequence of “the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking”. Those who speak “essentially” are those who are able to remain silent. Silence is inwardness—it is necessary for “inner satisfaction”, “quiet contentment” and the “religiously sensitive” development of the self. It is also necessary for

¹⁰⁴ TA, VIII 85.

¹⁰⁵ TA, VIII 86.

¹⁰⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 34-6.

¹⁰⁷ Hong & Hong, “Historical Introduction,” TA, x.

¹⁰⁸ TA, VIII 88.

¹⁰⁹ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 74.

¹¹⁰ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 74.

“cultured conversation”.¹¹¹ In this regard, to speak (*at tale*) essentially is contrasted with chatter (*at snakke*).¹¹²

Chatter begins when selves are “oriented towards externalities and to each other” and consists of talk “about anything and everything and continues incessantly”.¹¹³ This appears to foreshadow Kierkegaard’s description of the immediate self in *Sickness unto Death*, a self who despairs in weakness, rejecting “solitude” in favour of engagement in “the constant sociality” of modern life.¹¹⁴ Chatter also erodes what Kierkegaard regards as the “distinction between what is private and what is public”.¹¹⁵ It is “private-public garrulousness”, for the “public is public opinion that is interested in what is utterly private”.¹¹⁶ Perhaps the implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that a (true) self paradoxically speaks out of silence, whereas the (false) self endlessly chatters about private matters in public.

In *Two Ages*, then, Kierkegaard develops several terms and concepts that are also relevant to an analysis of social media. The “press” remains an important part of the new media system itself, using, engaging, and interacting with content posted on social media sites. The concept of the “public” also remains highly relevant and could be extended to the way in which “public opinion” is now also formed through reference to trending hashtags on social media sites. Kierkegaard’s concept of “leveling” as a consequence of envious “watching” of others echoes concerns over the potential for social media technologies to facilitate negative processes of social comparison. Kierkegaard also alludes to the collapse of private and public contexts, which is often discussed in social media research,¹¹⁷ particularly in work that builds on sociologist Erving Goffman’s pre-internet conceptual work in this area.¹¹⁸

In the first half of this article, then, I have identified an array of Kierkegaardian conceptual ideas in *Sickness unto Death* and *Two Ages* that are relevant to the potential impact of media communications on the self and selfhood. We are now able to undertake a Kierkegaardian analysis of the potential impact of social media on the self and selfhood.

¹¹¹ TA, VIII 92.

¹¹² TA, VIII 91, fn 69.

¹¹³ TA, VIII 91.

¹¹⁴ SUD, XI 176.

¹¹⁵ TA, VIII 93.

¹¹⁶ TA, VIII 93.

¹¹⁷ Danah Boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics” in *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi, (London: Routledge, 2010), 39-58.

¹¹⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, (London: Penguin, 1990).

A Kierkegaardian Analysis of the Impact of Social Media on the Self and Selfhood

In the second half of this article, I will begin by considering social media as a technology for representing the self, suggesting that previous attempts to extend Kierkegaard's thinking around the press to the internet have been complicated by social media technologies. From this starting point, I will analyse the impact of social media on the self and selfhood by recourse to Kierkegaard's two aspects of despair—namely the syntheses of finitude/infinity and necessity/possibility, and the aspect of self-consciousness. I will demonstrate that a nuanced Kierkegaardian analysis of social media provides insights into both potentially “negative” and “positive” impacts upon the self and selfhood. I will argue that Kierkegaard's paradoxical and dialectical approach to the self is a valuable tool for exploring some of the seemingly paradoxical effects of social media. This will highlight that perhaps the paradoxical self impacts upon social media use as much as it is affected by it. I will demonstrate that aspects of social media use clearly resonate with Kierkegaard's understanding of despair in finitude/necessity. Paradoxically, I will also suggest that research into anxiety and social media might be informed by Kierkegaard's concept of despair in infinity/possibility. At the same time, by acknowledging Kierkegaard's own use of a mediated technology—the book—for self-representation, and attention to his regard for “essential speaking”, I will argue that social media technologies can be used as a means by which the self strives to become an “authentic” or “true” self in Kierkegaardian terms.

Social Media as a Technology for Mediating the Self

Previous technology literature at the turn of the twenty-first century argued that Kierkegaard would have been highly sceptical that the internet could contribute to the development of authentic selfhood. The work of Hubert Dreyfus, professor of philosophy at the University of California, was a significant influence in this regard. In an article in 1999, which formed the basis for a book chapter in *On the Internet* in 2001, Dreyfus argues categorically that Kierkegaard would have “hated the Internet”.¹¹⁹ For Dreyfus, Kierkegaard would have seen in the internet the “hi-tech synthesis” of the “worst features of the newspaper and the coffee house”.¹²⁰ Dreyfus claims that the internet promotes the “nihilistic” aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence over the religious sphere. In this domain, selves can “discuss any topic endlessly without consequences” on “web sites full of anonymous information from all over the world”.¹²¹ The self on the internet despairs in “immediacy” simply by visiting “boring” or “interesting”¹²² sites where nothing is “too trivial to

¹¹⁹ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, (1999), 96.

¹²⁰ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 102.

¹²¹ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 105.

¹²² Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 108.

be included”,¹²³ or despairs in the possibility of “a risk-free simulated world”,¹²⁴ whereby firm commitments or responsibility for actions are not required. The implication of Dreyfus’ argument is that the self is caught in Kierkegaard’s “fantastic”, becoming the illusory infinitised self of “imagined commitments” and “stimulating images”, leading to “a simulated life”.¹²⁵ Ultimately, for Dreyfus, the “simulated” world of the internet exists separately to the “real world”.¹²⁶

Dreyfus’ work also influenced Brian Prosser and Andrew Ward’s approach to Kierkegaard and selfhood. For Prosser and Ward, Kierkegaard’s “pessimistic view” of technologically mediated communication lies in his belief that the “real life” contexts of “embodied interaction create a particular interaction that is essential to communication”.¹²⁷ As they saw it, the subsequent problem with the internet from a Kierkegaardian perspective is that it “disembodies and dislocates” information.¹²⁸ Extending their critique to social media, it is evident that the self is—at least potentially—disembodied and dislocated by these technologies which, in their view, would threaten the development of the authentic self. As Kierkegaard saw “all communication” by “the press” as “impersonal” and as abolishing “personality”,¹²⁹ so Prosser and Ward suggest that the internet might lead to the “fracturing of the self”¹³⁰ into impersonality.

As we shall see, aspects of Dreyfus’, and Prosser and Ward’s Kierkegaardian critique of internet technology still resonate twenty years later, but the emergence of social media has complicated a straightforward extension of Kierkegaard’s thinking on the “press” to the internet. For contrary to the “impersonal” communication technology of the “press”, social media technologies have created spaces for “personal” and “interpersonal” communication. The increasingly impersonal trajectory of modern communications that Dreyfus, Ward and Prosser all highlight—and with which Kierkegaard was undoubtedly concerned—appears to have been fundamentally disrupted by social media technologies. In theory, at least, social media re-individualises media representation against the grain of the de-individualising development of modern public technological communications. Of course, the press, as part of the mass media, still operates in this new communications ecology and, critically, still retains considerable power in the media system. The problem of de-individualisation whereby individuals are subsumed into “crowds” and “publics” remains, even as

¹²³ Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 79.

¹²⁴ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 96.

¹²⁵ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 109.

¹²⁶ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 109.

¹²⁷ Brian T. Prosser and Andrew Ward, “Kierkegaard and the Internet: Existential Reflections on Education and

Community,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 2, no. 3 (2000): 174.

¹²⁸ Prosser and Ward, “Kierkegaard and the Internet,” 171.

¹²⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers* trans. Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, Gregor Malantschuk and Howard A. Johnson, Vol. 2, (Princeton University Press, 1978), F-K, #2152.

¹³⁰ Prosser and Ward, “Kierkegaard and the Internet,” 174.

technology has allowed for greater individual media representation. Nevertheless, we ought to question whether it follows that an era of “mass self-communication”¹³¹ automatically leads to the same Kierkegaardian “mass man” of an era of mass media.

A Kierkegaardian analysis which considers his own communication activities alongside his views on the “press” also suggests that social media might be a means used by individual selves to relate themselves to themselves, themselves to others, and themselves to God. Indeed, as much as Kierkegaard criticises the press, he also placed considerable value on the self communicating itself through a mediated technology. For what Dreyfus, and Prosser and Ward substantially overlook—almost ironically—is Kierkegaard’s own decision to communicate through the written book. It seems strange to claim that Kierkegaard would have regarded “true” communication of the self as entirely dependent on “embodiment” and a particular (physical) “locality”, when he actually devoted much of his life to communicating his thoughts on selfhood through a technology—the book—that similarly disembodies and dislocates information.

The substance of the critique in the articles by Dreyfus, and Prosser and Ward is also built upon an implicit dichotomy between the internet and “real life” or the “real world” that has been questioned more recently. Michael Xiarhos notes that, in the Western world, (internet-connected) “technology is endemic and inescapable”,¹³² while Beth Coleman highlights that there is “no longer a distinction between ‘real life’ and ‘online life’”—“it has all morphed into one continuous understanding of what is real”.¹³³ In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it has become apparent that participation in social media technologies often represents a significant personal commitment. Individual selves who participate in social media can expect very personal consequences from their publishing activities, ranging from overwhelming encouragement and support, being catapulted unexpectedly into the public eye, being subjected to fierce mocking and critique, losing their job, being taken to court, and even facing death threats. Personal social media accounts are often mediated extensions of individual selves and cannot be understood merely as a “simulated”, “risk-free” diversion from “real life”. Social media technologies are “real life” means by which a self records, communicates, documents, represents and reflects oneself for a variety of purposes and ends. They also enable a self to interact interpersonally with others. Indeed, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media technologies have become primary forms of communication for millions of individuals. All of which arguably suggests that there might be merit in reconsidering Kierkegaard’s work in relation to social media and selfhood.

¹³¹ Castells, *Communication Power*, 4.

¹³² Xiarhos, “Connected Pilgrim,” 70.

¹³³ Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011), 85.

Social Media Considered in Relation to the First Aspect: The Syntheses of Finitude/Infinitude and Possibility/Necessity

Before we delve more deeply into a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media, we must acknowledge that there is a difference between “the self” and any media representation of the self. There is an insurmountable gap between (in)authentic selfhood and the representation of (in)authentic selfhood on social media. This is because, in Kierkegaardian terms, the self is a subjective entity that is only known (or not known) to itself and by God.¹³⁴ It is impossible for us to objectively state, therefore, what (in)authentic selfhood might look like from the perspective of a media representation of the self. This dilemma is found in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*—externally Kierkegaard’s ideal “knight of faith” is “outwardly indistinguishable from the proverbial man in the street”.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the implication of Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages* is that (media) self-representations are related to the self, and that beyond reflection on our own selves, these self-representations are all we can ultimately use to judge questions of selfhood more generally. I shall now consider the impact of social media on self and selfhood by reference to Kierkegaard’s first aspect of despair in *Sickness unto Death*—namely the syntheses of infinitude/finitude and possibility/necessity.

Kierkegaard closely relates despair to his concept of anxiety—the dizzying possibility of being able. Although Kierkegaard probably would have understood much modern day medically defined “anxiety”—“a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe”¹³⁶—as a form of “despair”, psychologists tend to study anxiety rather than “despair”. What is interesting, here, is that psychological science is exploring a possible correlation between anxiety and social media use. This remains an emerging debate in the literature: “little is known about the relationship between social media use and anxiety”.¹³⁷ While studies by Kross, Hampton, Muench and their colleagues suggest that social media use is not associated with worry, perceived stress, or fears of social evaluation, studies by Vannucci, Campisi, Morin-Major, Schou Andreassen, and their colleagues have shown a positive correlation between the use of social media and anxiety or stress.¹³⁸

Here, I will take a closer look at the Vannucci et al. study. This research shows a positive correlation between higher daily social media use and anxiety in 18 to 22-year-old US adults.¹³⁹ Vannucci et

¹³⁴ CUP, 192, 197.

¹³⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 20.

¹³⁶ “Generalised Anxiety Disorder”, NHS, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/>, last reviewed 19 December 2018.

¹³⁷ Anna Vannucci, Kaitlin M. Flannery, and Christine McCauley Ohannessian, “Social media use and anxiety in emerging adults,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 207, (2017): 164.

¹³⁸ See Vannucci et al., “Social media use”.

¹³⁹ See Vannucci et al., “Social media use”.

al. offer a range of possible reasons for this finding. First, they suggest that social media use might induce psychological stress responses as a consequence of being bombarded with information, negative feedback, bullying from peers, becoming aware of stressful events, etc. Second, they suggest that social media use might trigger negative social comparisons. Third, they suggest that the correlation might be explained by anxious individuals turning to social media in search of validation of self-worth, or as a means of escaping the fear of social evaluation and rejection in physical face-to-face social settings.

These hypotheses resonate with several Kierkegaardian themes. In particular, they suggest that perhaps anxiety—although in Kierkegaardian terms it would be called despair—is a consequence of a lack of infinitude and a lack of possibility. Considering Vannucci's findings, it appears that social media might facilitate a process of Kierkegaardian envy whereby individuals do not “relate to each other” but rather “carefully watch each other”, becoming “rivals in a game” of self-worth. Perhaps, at best, it is an anxiety-inducing “game” of social comparison whereby the self that lacks the infinite becomes caught up in the immediacy of finite. The self thus becomes preoccupied and anxious about “trivial” and “indifferent” matters posted on others' social media accounts, attributing infinite worth to the finite “triviality of everyday life”. This “immediate” self perhaps also feels pressure to re-create itself in the “finite” by discarding its externalities—constantly updating and amending its social media self-representation—without any concern for an “infinite” relation with God.

These observations appear to echo contemporary concerns with what is regarded as inauthentic “self-branding” in online culture,¹⁴⁰ whereby the self needs to be constantly “on trend”, and continually aware of how its self is presented in social media spaces as a “brand” in relation to other selves, in order to “go along superbly in business and social life”.¹⁴¹ Are selves being “tricked out” of themselves by “the others” because social media spaces make it harder to hazard being oneself? At worst, it seems that the social media “game” of social comparison can descend into more serious “leveling”, whereby individuals are negatively censured or bullied for willing to be themselves. The potential for a re-individualisation of self-representation that social media facilitates is potentially undermined, therefore, by a new de-individualising “leveling” process of social comparison, whereby individuals do not necessarily “venture” to be a self and thus become despairing Kierkegaardian “smooth stones”.¹⁴²

I would suggest, however, that an engagement with Kierkegaard's work alerts us to an additional hypothesis: perhaps psychologists could also more explicitly explore the question of whether social media use is correlated with anxiety because individuals despair over a lack of finitude and a lack of necessity. As we have seen, a self that lacks finitude is caught in the despair of the unlimited and

¹⁴⁰ Turner-Cole, “Commodification”, 4.

¹⁴¹ *SUD* XI, 147.

¹⁴² *SUD* XI, 147.

fantastic, while a self that lacks necessity is overwhelmed by possibility. Pre-modernity, it is possible that belief in a God-given identity was stronger than in the information age—particularly in parts of the world that have become more secularised. In the information age, the existentialist turn to the notion of creating oneself—without any reference to a grounding necessary identity—informs the self that it can be whoever it wants to be. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser argue that in the “networked age” identity as a concept “tends to be much more fluid”—a “sixteen-year-old has many more choices available to her when it comes to making modifications of her identity” (even) than in the industrial age.

Moreover, in pre-modernity, examples of possible selves were often limited by family, friends, and restricted work contacts. Previous research has shown that physical social networks on average number 125.¹⁴³ Social media use as part of a global communication network in the information age ultimately exposes people to a perhaps dizzying number of possible selves. In 2008, the average Facebook user had 217 network members.¹⁴⁴ By following people on social media and engaging in modern life’s “constant sociality”, individuals are exposed to a potentially infinite number of possible self-representations.

Critically, however, research seems to suggest that it is not sheer numbers in a social network that might be most significant here; it is the extent to which any network is grounded in Kierkegaardian “necessity” or rather reflects Kierkegaard’s “abstract” “possibility”. A study by Hui-Tzu Chou and Nicholas Edge demonstrates that if people have more Facebook friends, they are less likely to say (perhaps enviously) that others have a better life.¹⁴⁵ They hypothesise that this is because they have met more people in person; to become a Facebook “friend” people usually have met beforehand. In Kierkegaardian terms, these friendships are grounded in necessity. If, however, people have more Facebook friends “that are not personally known” to them—“friends” that are more likely to be abstract possibilities—then they are more likely to say (perhaps enviously) that others have a better life. Kierkegaard’s despair that lacks finitude might, therefore, be more prevalent in circumstances where people use social media accounts to follow others who they do not significantly know beyond their media (self-)representations. Moreover, if it is the case that other social media users post content that presents an “idealised self”¹⁴⁶ or a carefully managed

¹⁴³ Russell A. Hill and Robin IM Dunbar, “Social Network Size in Humans,” *Human Nature* 14, no. 1, (2003): 53-72.

¹⁴⁴ Chou, Hui-Tzu Grace, and Nicholas Edge, “‘They are Happier and Having Better Lives than I am’: The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others’ Lives,” *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*, 15, no. 2, (2012): 118.

¹⁴⁵ Chou and Edge, 117-121.

¹⁴⁶ Nicole Ellison, Rebecca Heino and Jennifer Gibbs, “Managing Impressions Online: Self-presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment,” *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 11, no. 2, (2006): 415-441. Of course, the presentation of an “idealised self” is unsurprising in the particular context of online dating, but this tendency is evident in other social contexts as well. See Hogan below.

“exhibition” of oneself,¹⁴⁷ is the temptation not to will oneself to be greater? Would the self rather be a self that it is not, given the array of alternative ideal selves that are being presented to the self in social media spaces?

Answering these questions in the affirmative would have to demonstrate social media’s specific role. After all, it is significant that Vannucci et al.’s study explored what they described as “emerging adults”—the 18 to 22-year-old bracket—precisely because it represents “a high-risk period of an anxiety disorder”.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps increased social media use is a consequence of anxiety over one’s identity at this critical moment of self-development. Kierkegaard’s work reminds us that anxiety and despair over oneself are not new phenomena. An awareness, however, that (additional) anxiety might be caused by the dizzying possibilities that social media offers to the self highlights a potentially fascinating area of future research: namely, whether there is a negative correlation between anxiety and individuals who have a concept of, or believe in, a necessary self-identity, such as the idea of being created in the image of God. Finally, Kierkegaard’s work also challenges presumptions of anxiety as straightforwardly “negative” in psychological research: for in Kierkegaard’s understanding “anxiety is freedom’s possibility” in humanity, and thus learning to be “anxious in the right way” is a necessary feature of the journey of selfhood.¹⁴⁹

Social Media Considered in Relation to the Second Aspect: Self-Consciousness

In the previous section, I primarily considered social media in relation to Kierkegaard’s concept of selfhood from the aspect of the syntheses of infinitude/finitude and possibility/necessity. In this section, I will turn to consider Kierkegaard’s second aspect: self-consciousness. An interesting starting point here is whether Kierkegaard’s critique of the “constant sociality” of modern life means that many people are in ignorance of the self being “spirit”—the lowest level of Kierkegaardian selfhood in *Sickness unto Death*.

It is clear that technological connectivity is completely reversing humanity’s predicament regarding communication. Prior to a globally interconnected communications environment, communication was often difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. Indeed, prior to the twenty-first century, humanity has expended considerable time and energy attempting to overcome these communication difficulties. Although challenges remain, social media technologies facilitate an extraordinary level of global self-representation and interpersonal communication. For all the benefits of these developments, we might, however, view social media technologies as facilitating

¹⁴⁷ Bernie Hogan, “The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30, no. 6, (2010): 377-386.

¹⁴⁸ Vannucci et al., 164.

¹⁴⁹ COA, 155.

a particularly extraordinary extension of Kierkegaard's "chatter", whereby people talk "incessantly" about "anything and everything".¹⁵⁰

In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard's critique of the "age of publicity, the age of miscellaneous announcements: nothing happens but still there is instant publicity" might be a more fitting description of some aspects of twenty-first century communicative culture than that of his own time.¹⁵¹ The instantly gratifying nature of social media feedback in terms of likes, shares, favourites, retweets, etc. encourages a new form of Kierkegaardian "constant sociality".¹⁵² The extraordinary "immediacy" of twenty-first century communication—whereby social media technologies both facilitate instant global publication and thus contribute to a culture of keeping up with what is most current—is certainly not what Kierkegaard understood by his own concept of "immediacy". The "immediacy" of social media technologies nevertheless facilitates the publication of constant streams of Kierkegaardian "immediacy", the triviality of everyday life. In this regard, matters that ought to remain private—because they are trivially insignificant in Kierkegaard's view—are continually and incessantly aired in the public domain. In the identification of "chatter" with this form of "private-public garrulousness"—whereby the "distinction between what is private and what is public is eroded"—Kierkegaard's work foreshadows concern over social media's tendency to collapse "private" and "public" contexts.¹⁵³ Perhaps, the Kierkegaardian critique here is that social media potentially encourages the making public of overly insignificant "private" matters which blinds the self to that which is (eternally) significant.

Critics have also argued that, although social media technologies facilitate self-representation and interpersonal communication, the economic interest of companies who provide these communication tools fundamentally impacts their design.¹⁵⁴ The *telos* of these communication spaces as far as social media companies are concerned is not particularly focussed on the development of Kierkegaardian self-consciousness. Rather, as far as the goal is the facilitation of self-representation and interpersonal communication, it is, at least, also the monetisation of these social media activities through data collection for the purposes of advertising.¹⁵⁵ Social media technologies are, therefore, specifically paradoxically designed to both consume an individual's time and attention, while periodically distracting the individual so that the individual can visit the websites of the social media company's commercial partners and purchase their products.¹⁵⁶ Taken

¹⁵⁰ TA, VIII 91.

¹⁵¹ TA, VIII 66.

¹⁵² Xiarhos, "Connected Pilgrim," 92.

¹⁵³ Hogan, "Presentation of Self," 383; Danah Boyd, "Why youth (heart) social network sites," in *Youth, Identity and Digital Media*, ed. David Buckingham, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 2007-16.

¹⁵⁴ James Williams, *Stand out of our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 28.

¹⁵⁵ Turner-Cole, "Commodification," 2.

¹⁵⁶ Williams, *Stand out of our Light*.

together, one might see these features of social media technologies as facilitating a state of self that is in Kierkegaardian terms “dominated by the sensate”,¹⁵⁷ a self that is in despair, because it is not aware that it is in despair.

Developing Self-Consciousness through “Silence” and “Essential Speaking”

To develop one’s self-consciousness beyond this base level, the implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that “silence” and “solitude” are important. Potentially, the challenge for those who are becoming selves in the twenty-first century is to find ways to cultivate silent solitude away from the communicative noise with which lives are often consumed. This observation appears to align Kierkegaard’s work with sceptics of social media such as Xiarhos, who suggests that a “state of complete separation” is necessary for authentic selfhood, and Davelaar, who argues that digital media communications inhibit the “present attentiveness” required for a relationship with God.¹⁵⁸

As we have seen in *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard argues that silence is “inwardness”. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, informs us that “inwardness” is also closely related to “subjectivity”, to “spirit” and to “Christianity” itself.¹⁵⁹ “The most passionate inwardness” is “the highest truth there is for an existing person”.¹⁶⁰ It is inwardness that is thus essential for faith and for the self’s critical Kierkegaardian goal of relating itself to itself, and grasping its relation to God. Indeed, in Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*, a self that wants to be truly educated by possibility/anxiety into faith is best placed in “the middle of the Jutland heath, where no event takes place or where the greatest event is a grouse flying up noisily”.¹⁶¹ Reidar Thomte highlights that after a visit to the heath in 1840, Kierkegaard wrote in his journal that:

here [on the heath] everything lies naked and unveiled before God, and here is no place for a lot of distractions, those many odd nooks and corners where the consciousness can hide [...] Here consciousness must come to definite and precise conclusions about itself. Here on the heath one must truly say: ‘Whither shall I flee from thy presence?’¹⁶²

It seems that on the Jutland heath, Kierkegaard found a place where the conscious self was alone before God. It is in such places that Kierkegaard suggests that the self can become aware of “something eternal” within it—required for the second stage of increasing self-consciousness in

¹⁵⁷ *SUD*, XI 155.

¹⁵⁸ Davelaar, “Embodied Attention,” iv.

¹⁵⁹ *CUP*, 33.

¹⁶⁰ *CUP*, 203.

¹⁶¹ *COA*, 159.

¹⁶² See Reidar Thomte, “Notes to Pages 157-62,” *The Concept of Anxiety*, citing JP III, 2830; Pap. III A 78.

Sickness unto Death—and perhaps aware of its relation to God as a “theological self”, which has Christ as its criterion, a deeper third stage of self-consciousness.

Xiarhos’ concern, in the context of pilgrimage, is that social media is a “dangerous distraction” that undermines the silence and solitude of spaces that are required for the development of authentic self-consciousness.¹⁶³ Similarly, citing Rowan Williams, who argues in *Where God Happens* that a self is “a unique kind of echo of God”, Davelaar argues that in order to “hear this echo we need to silence ourselves long enough to hear, and still ourselves to see”.¹⁶⁴ Davelaar wonders, therefore, whether in the future “those who know nothing aside from being highly networked” will be drawn to “times of silence and stillness”.¹⁶⁵ But perhaps we are already seeing the development of these practices. It appears that we are beginning to learn to regulate our communicative availability, whether that is through Facebook fasts, turning off notifications from social media apps, or turning off mobile phones in certain contexts. Paradoxically, internet-connected mobile apps such as Headspace and Calm claim to be able to assist in facilitating silence and solitude through guided meditations and mindfulness.

As much as Kierkegaard’s work appears to buttress the position of these sceptics, it nevertheless also offers two very significant caveats. The first is that we ought to be wary of the generalisations about social media use that we have already made in the process of the above critique. The very real risk here is that we “level” the individuals who use social media, effectively rendering them a single Kierkegaardian “public” based on the social media self-representational activities of only *some* individuals. If we return once more to the book analogy as a medium of self-expression, it would be ludicrous to define Kierkegaard’s own work as merely reflecting immediate, trivial, and finite concerns on the basis that a lot of books are fictional novels about everyday life. So too is it impossible to generalise about how individuals express themselves on social media.

The second related caveat is that a Kierkegaardian analysis suggests that there could be a role for “essential speaking” using social media technologies. As we have already seen, Kierkegaard was not averse to communication, nor to self-representation *per se*. Moreover, Rasmussen highlights that a significant concept in Kierkegaard’s later work is that of “witness to the truth”.¹⁶⁶ Rasmussen emphasises that “witnessing” can refer to both “testimony as narrative” and “testimony as act”—words as well as action. He argues, therefore, that Kierkegaard understands his own “poetic productions” as “narrative testimony to the Christian ideal”.¹⁶⁷ As such, Kierkegaard regarded his communication activities as both necessary and important, not only in themselves as speaking to

¹⁶³ Xiarhos, “Connected Pilgrim,” iv.

¹⁶⁴ Davelaar, “Embodied Attention,” 60.

¹⁶⁵ Davelaar, “Embodied Attention,” 61.

¹⁶⁶ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 154-5.

¹⁶⁷ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 155.

the truth, but also as a means by which he could continue “striving” in his actions to become a self before God.¹⁶⁸ Although Kierkegaard acknowledged that his actions never lived up to his narrative of the ideal, he claimed the communication of such an ideal influenced his actions. Moreover, Kierkegaard also believed that his communication activities benefited the journeys of other selves beyond himself. His communication activities were important because they might “influence another to strive more”.¹⁶⁹

We might also argue, therefore, that communication through social media technologies could contribute to the Kierkegaardian journey of selfhood, if they are used for the purposes of “essential speaking” and what Kierkegaard would regard as “witnessing to the truth” of the Christian ideal, particularly if participation encourages a life lived in the imitation of Christ. There are hints of the use of social media for self-development in a related manner in media scholar Rettberg’s claims that blogging and writing about one’s life on social media platforms is a “means of becoming more sure of oneself and more aware of one’s preferences and opinions”.¹⁷⁰ Viviane Serfaty’s 2004 study, meanwhile, links blogging to the practice of diary keeping by the English Puritans who used this form of self-expression as a means of “religious self-discipline”, by which they recounted a “spiritual journey towards personal salvation”.¹⁷¹ Similarly, although people undoubtedly kept diaries relating to all sorts of matters, both diarising (Kierkegaard’s own journals being an obvious case in point) and social media self-expression are not necessarily excluded from Kierkegaard’s religious sphere of self-reflection.

Social Media and a Commitment to the Self-Conscious Life of Faith

Silence and inwardness in Kierkegaard’s thought, however, are not the end of the journey of selfhood, but rather a pre-requisite to a clear decision and commitment to the life of faith—a life whereby the self “rests transparently in God”.¹⁷² As we have seen, Kierkegaard’s “leap” into the passionate commitment of faith is dependent on the self’s awareness of its self as a theological self, a self before God in Christ. At this final level of self-consciousness, a self becomes intensely aware of its sin before God, and thus realises that it must die to its (false) self or selves in order to will to be its (true) self. Such a leap is only made possible through “eternal aid,” the Christian understanding that Jesus Christ died for the sake of the sins of the individual self.¹⁷³ We might ask,

¹⁶⁸ See Rasmussen citing Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 6.6528; Papirer, X2 A 184 (n.d., 1849).

¹⁶⁹ See Rasmussen citing Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 6.6528; Papirer, X2 A 184 (n.d., 1849).

¹⁷⁰ Rettberg, “Self-Representation in Social Media,” 11.

¹⁷¹ Viviane Serfaty, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs*, (Amsterdam Monographs in American Studies, 2004), 5.

¹⁷² SUD, XI 194

¹⁷³ SUD, XI 223.

then, whether ultimately participation in social media can be said to encourage this Kierkegaardian leap.

Writing before the emergence of many social media technologies, Dreyfus argued that Kierkegaard's primary concern with "the public" is not the merging of the individual with a group, but rather that the single individual who belongs to a "public" does not make "a real commitment".¹⁷⁴ *Two Ages* contains a sustained critique of endless reflection that avoids making *passionate* commitments.¹⁷⁵ Dreyfus' subsequent contention is that the internet also overwhelmingly discourages real commitments, and that it more usually facilitates shallow aesthetic "virtual commitments" that impinge on the goal of selfhood. The individual self who uses the internet is seduced by the ease of making choices, leading to the "inevitable breakdown of serious choice",¹⁷⁶ and an inability to make the "serious commitments" of the ethical sphere.¹⁷⁷ Dreyfus is even more sceptical of the internet's capacity to encourage the "unconditional commitments" required for Kierkegaard's goal of selfhood within the religious sphere. He argues that a decision that defines the very life of a self—such as a commitment to a lifelong partner or to God—is highly unlikely. Ultimately, Dreyfus simply extends Kierkegaard's criticism of the press to the internet: "Kierkegaard is right", Dreyfus proclaims, "the press and the Internet are the ultimate enemy of the unconditional commitment which is the basis of Christianity".¹⁷⁸ Only a Kierkegaardian leap into a religious sphere—a sphere which in Dreyfus' thinking exists entirely outside of the internet—can "save us" from the leveling of the self at the hands of mediated communication technologies.¹⁷⁹

Before I explore some of the difficulties with these conclusions, it is worth considering whether elements of Dreyfus' critique hold in an era of social media. A particularly interesting question here is whether participation in social media potentially inhibits a Kierkegaardian commitment to a process of dying to (false) inauthentic selves in order to leap into (true) authentic selfhood. (Kierkegaard argues that the real sickness of despair is an "inability to die".¹⁸⁰) As I have already discussed, one possible avenue for future psychological research is the possibility that selves "despair"—or experience anxiety—because of the self-possibilities of social media representations. At the same time, the paradox of these technologies is that they can also reinforce a particular, (potentially false), self-(representation).¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 101.

¹⁷⁵ *TA*, VIII 66.

¹⁷⁶ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 106.

¹⁷⁷ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 105.

¹⁷⁸ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 109.

¹⁷⁹ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 109.

¹⁸⁰ *SUD*, XI 131.

¹⁸¹ Palfrey and Gasser, *Born Digital*, 25, 37.

The increasingly default position for many young people growing up today is to have “a public” social media profile.¹⁸² Obviously teenagers operated in public life in the past, but arguably they are far “more public” as a consequence of their social media activity in the twenty-first century. Potentially, it is the case that it is easier to die to the more “private” false selves of the past, than it is to the more “public” false selves of the information age. Such a contention might be underpinned in several ways. First, it is possible to create an identity and sense of self that is subsequently reinforced by social media feedback by others, encouraging the false self to continue to represent this self to the world. From a Kierkegaardian perspective perhaps the risk is that social media feedback contributes to a process by which the self in defiance wills to be a self that is formed by others and not by reflection on itself as it relates to God. Second, the data collected by social media companies is used to push information and sell products to the false self that is presented, potentially reinforcing this false self. The self risks becoming narrower, despairing for a lack of (the infinite) possibility (of God) as it increasingly inhabits its own finite “filter bubble”.¹⁸³ Third, the false self leaves digital traces that are not always easy to eradicate, a problem that is evident in the introduction of the European Union’s concept of the “right to be forgotten” as a human right. This law appears to recognise that in Kierkegaardian terms it is hard to die to a false self if others are either contributing their own social media representations of this false self outside of the individual’s control, or constantly resurrecting archived or long-forgotten social media posts and activity of this false self. Is it the case that even greater leaps of faith will be required by twenty-first century selves than Kierkegaard imagined in the nineteenth century?

Dreyfus’ portrayal of the internet as the “ultimate enemy” of “unconditional commitments”, however, seems problematic in an age of social media. Dreyfus suggests, for example, that it is “highly unlikely” that anybody would meet in a chat room and fall in love, and yet twenty years on, many individual selves have made lifelong commitments to people they have met online. The widespread use of personal social media profiles by individuals that are clearly self-representations intimately connected to a sense of self—rather than anonymous or pseudonymous participations in the pre-social media internet space—mean online communications have acquired a greater sense of personal commitment. Indeed, the reason why malicious “leveling” in the social media world—online bullying and abuse etc.—is so harmful is precisely because the self is personally invested in these self-representations and committed to positions and choices that have been made. Moreover, the ability of groups to easily communicate and coordinate through social media has also allowed people to find solidarity with others to strengthen their own—and others’—commitments to social and political causes. The use of hashtags—such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter—can be regarded as a means by which individuals can “speak essentially” as part of a re-individualised “public” to bring about social, political, and theological change. Finally, I have

¹⁸² Palfrey and Gasser, *Born Digital*, 11.

¹⁸³ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

also argued throughout this article that an understanding of the internet as precluded from Kierkegaard's religious sphere is no longer tenable. This was already evident in the widespread use of social media technologies both by churches and adherents to the Christian faith,¹⁸⁴ but it seems particularly obvious in 2020 when many of the communicative activities of Christian worship, fellowship, and, indeed, the journey of Christian selfhood, have been conducted using social media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion: The Kierkegaardian Impact of Social Media on the Self and Selfhood

It seems highly likely that social media technologies will continue to become increasingly ubiquitous means of self-representation and interpersonal communication in the twenty-first century. We are still in a period of relative infancy in grappling with the implications of these new forms of digital media technology for and on our lives, and answers to the question of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood will undoubtedly continue to evolve. Although answers will be informed by recourse to a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches, I have contended in this article that a theological perspective can contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discussion. Specifically, I have argued that a Kierkegaardian understanding of the self in *Sickness unto Death* as a series of paradoxical and dialectical syntheses, and of selfhood as a "goal" dependent on developing self-consciousness, offer useful conceptual ideas and frameworks for analysing the impact of social media on the self in the twenty-first century. The value of these ideas and frameworks is strengthened by Kierkegaard's "proto-interdisciplinary" reflection in *Two Ages* on the impact of the mediated technologies of his day on the self and selfhood.

In undertaking a subsequent Kierkegaardian analysis of social media, I have sought to develop a nuanced approach to the question of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. On the one hand, I have suggested that social media could facilitate Kierkegaardian despair in finitude and necessity, contributing to a process whereby individual selves are caught in the "immediate" triviality of everyday life, and by which they are "leveled" through processes of envious social comparison and targeted advertising. I have contended that the "constant sociality" and digitally mediated "chatter" of twenty-first century life might undermine the silence, solitude and "inwardness" required for a self to relate itself to itself and relate itself to God. Finally, I have questioned whether social media might inhibit the self from a Kierkegaardian leap into faith on the basis that social media technologies have the potential to reinforce "false" selves that must be lost in order to gain one's "true" self.

At the same time, I have departed from earlier work on Kierkegaard and the internet which regarded the digitally mediated online environment as existing outside of Kierkegaard's religious

¹⁸⁴ Davelaar, "Embodied Attention," 62.

sphere. I have highlighted that Kierkegaard communicated through a mediated technology—the written book—as a means of self-expression and that social media representations are now as heterogeneous as self-representations in books. I have argued that social media representations can entail considerable personal commitments to choices and decisions, with far-reaching consequences for individual selves, because social media is part of “real life” and not separate from it. Social media self-representations can be regarded as genuine extensions of the self. Finally, I have suggested that in representing itself on social media, the individual self might participate in Kierkegaard’s religious sphere, that it might “speak essentially” and articulate a Christian ideal, and that it might consequently strive to become a self before God and influence others to “strive more”.

There are undoubtedly significant challenges in the application of these insights to the disciplines of media, communications and psychology which are underpinned by different epistemological foundations and assumptions. I have argued, however, that a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media can make a contribution to an ongoing interdisciplinary conversation over whether social media has a “negative” or “positive” impact on the self and selfhood, even if only to highlight these epistemological differences. Such a Kierkegaardian analysis certainly does not settle the debate over the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. Perhaps the fact that it does not do so, however, reminds us that the question can only ultimately be answered “subjectively” in Kierkegaardian terms.¹⁸⁵ Attempting to answer the question is an important “objective” task for theology and other disciplines, but it is perhaps, more significantly, a “subjective” task for the self. It requires the self to reflect—as a single individual, as a self that relates itself to itself, as a self before God—on what the impact of social media is on its own self and on other selves.

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¹⁸⁵ CUP, 17.

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“God, who giveth us richly”

Wealth, Authorship, and Audience in 1 Timothy 6

Jackson Reinhardt

Vanderbilt Divinity School

jackson.t.reinhardt@vanderbilt.edu

Abstract

While prior biblical scholarship has firmly rejected the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus), rarely has analysis focused on socio-economic context. I argue that examining the economic conditions and theology of 1 Timothy provides additional reasons to reject the letter’s authenticity. While Paul’s audience was primarily impoverished urbanites, the author of 1 Timothy (i.e., the Pastor) was writing to a prosperous congregation who needed instruction on the proper handling of their wealth. Paul’s theology of wealth, in turn, reflects the context of his audience: he supported inter-ecclesial programs of mutual interdependence and a rejection of the prevailing modes of economic exploitation that existed in first-century Palestine. The Pastor does not promote any similar alternative economy among believers. He contends that wealthy believers should be charitable so as to build up a heavenly treasure and secure posthumous favor.

Introduction¹

Since the genesis of modern critical biblical scholarship in the eighteenth century, the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus) have been relegated to the demarcation of pseudepigraphal literature—they are letters whose authorship has been falsely attributed to the apostle Paul of

¹ All biblical quotations are from New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.



Tarsus.² The majority of contemporary New Testament scholars dispute authentic Pauline authorship of the Pastorals on a variety of stylistic, theological, and thematic grounds, which includes everything from a noticeably distinct syntax to frequent usage of philosophical idioms.³ In the realm of ideological criticism, the Pastorals represent a drastically different sociopolitical outlook than the genuine epistles of Paul or even the Deutero-Pauline tradition. Marcus Borg and John D. Crossan designate the author of the Pastorals as being a “Reactionary Paul,” one who “is not simply developing Paul’s message, but *countering* it at important points.”⁴ The Pastor, the scholarly moniker for the pseudonymous author, deradicalizes the Pauline tradition via severely limiting female participation within the assembly and explicitly embracing the moral legitimacy of Roman chattel slavery.

However, the materialist claims of the Pastorals—specifically in 1 Timothy—have rarely, *if ever*, been discussed when evaluating Pauline authorship,⁵ even though they arguably demonstrate a similar reactionary mutation. In this paper, I wish to provide further evidential support within this debate: I contend that the discourse on the proper use of wealth in 1 Timothy 6 provides a materialist argument for rejecting Pauline authorship of the epistle for two reasons.⁶ First, the audience of the letter is significantly more prosperous than any of the congregants of Paul’s assemblies. While members of the Pauline communities were almost entirely composed of impoverished urbanites, the Pastor’s audience is one of significant means. Second, the Pastor’s theology of wealth is materialistically accommodating. To Paul, there was an overriding emphasis within his theology on caring for the poor, via the Jerusalem collection,⁷ which entailed an implicit

² Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 95. Ehrman depicts Schleiermacher as the first theologian to publicly argue against Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy, specifically. Cf. Hermann Patsch, “The Fear of Deutero-Paulinism: The Reception of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s ‘Critical Open Letter’ Concerning 1 Timothy,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 6, no. 1 (1999), 3-31.

³ For a full discussion on the arguments and counterarguments concerning the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals, see Mark Harding, *What are They Saying about the Pastoral Epistles?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 9-27 and Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 49-85.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church’s Conservative Icon* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 15; emphasis mine.

⁵ Many have argued that the claims on wealth in 1 Timothy are wholly congruent with teachings of the genuine Paul and thus implicitly provide support for Pauline authorship of the Pastorals. See Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 149.

⁶ The brevity of this paper prohibits a broader investigation of the entire Pastoral corpus; however, 1 Timothy features the only sustained discourse on wealth among the three texts.

⁷ The Jerusalem collection or ‘the collection for the saints’ (1 Cor. 16:1), was “the relief fund that [Paul] organized among the largely Gentile churches of his mission in Macedonia, Achaia, and Galatia for the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem. David J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem in Its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1.

rejection of the vertical model of Roman imperial economic exploitation that emphasized patronage and benefaction. The Pastor, in contrast, makes no mention of the collection or the assembly-wide support for the materially desperate across the new Jesus-movement communities. Rather, the author of 1 Timothy prioritizes the salvific benefits that the rich can accrue via unspecified charity.

The Assemblies of Paul and the Pastor

While many scholars in the twentieth century depicted the congregations of Paul as possessing a materially diverse body (this position being the so-called "New Consensus"⁸), recent scholarship has demonstrated quite the opposite. Steven J. Friesen's research on the economic context of the Corinthian correspondence elucidates several key findings to reject any presence of the ultra-wealthy within the assembly. First, Paul's letters "provide no evidence for any assembly participation from members of the super-wealthy."⁹ Friesen defines the ancient Greco-Roman ultra-wealthy as those belonging to the imperial elite (the royal dynasty and senators), the regional and/or provincial elite (high-ranking military officers, equestrians, etc.), and the municipal elites (the decurial class, wealthy men and women without an official position, etc.).¹⁰ In the typical city where Paul would minister, these three classes on the poverty scale (labeled PS1-PS3 in Friesen's study) would compose a mere 2.8 percent of the population.¹¹ In the first century CE, "the overwhelming majority of the populations [living] under Roman imperialism lived near subsistence levels," with subsistence usually defined as "the resources needed to procure enough calories in food to maintain the human body."¹² Estimates put those living below subsistence compromising over a quarter of the population (28 percent), with those sustaining just enough subsistence for life amounting to about 40 percent.¹³ (Friesen denotes these bottom two categories as PS7 and PS6.) There is no indication that anyone within the Pauline assemblies possessed a relatively high amount of financial power and prestige. The supposedly wealthy individuals named by Paul in his correspondence are, in fact, members of the middling class within the Roman empire. Figures such as Erastus (Rom 16:23), Philemon (Phlm 4-22), and Stephanus and his household (1 Cor 16: 15-17) were far from having the official or financial strength to be in PS1-3, as was argued by New

⁸ For a brief overview of the New Consensus, see Steven J. Friesen, "The Blessings of Hegemony: Poverty, Paul's Assemblies, and the Class Interests of the Professoriate," in *The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times*, ed. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, and Jonathan A. Draper (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 117-128.

⁹ Steven J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26.3 (2004): 348

¹⁰ Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," 341.

¹¹ Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," 343.

¹² Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," 343.

¹³ Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," 347.

Consensus scholars. These figures, among others, were primarily at near stable subsistence levels (PS5). Only two figures in Paul's genuine letters could be classified as having surplus resources (PS4): Gaius (Rom 16:23) and Chloe (1 Cor 1:11), yet there is debate over whether the latter individual was a congregant.¹⁴ Members of PS5 were merchants, manual laborers, wage-earners, traders, shop-keepers, those lacking in any of the regal-provincial-municipal splendor associated with groups higher up on the poverty scale.¹⁵ Thus, the most wealthy members of the typical Pauline assembly were economically closer to bare subsistence than elite comfort.¹⁶

Paul indicates in several locations within his correspondence that his audience was almost exclusively impoverished: they were either right below or just at the level of necessary subsistence. The references to the Jerusalem collection in 1-2 Corinthians and Galatians “make no provisions for large gifts,” and instead “all in the group are asked to set aside on Sundays *whatever they can spare*.”¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 8 provides even greater detail to the assembly participants' impoverishment as Paul notes that his audience should give “whatever [they] can afford; never mind what is beyond [their] needs” (8:12-13) to help the church in Macedonia, which is crippled by “*extreme poverty*” (8:2; emphasis mine). Such a policy might be beneficial to the Corinthians in the long run, Paul argues, for “one day they may have something to spare that will supply your own need” (8:14) in case future “*extreme poverty*” strikes the Corinthians. Friesen argues that these references, particularly in 2 Corinthians, suggests that the majority of Corinthian saints belong to PS6, “that is, the urban poor who faced the prospect of sliding [into] economic crisis” at any given time.¹⁸ Across the Pauline communities, there is a shared economic experience of subsistence-level poverty, potentially alleviated by the congregational collection network centered around Jerusalem.¹⁹ Donations are not simple alms from the ultra-wealthy to the destitute—such calls are

¹⁴ Steven J. Friesen, “Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty” in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 30.

¹⁵ For a full treatment of economically locating each individual Paul mentions, see Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus,” 351-358.

¹⁶ Friesen, “Injustice of God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” 28-30.

¹⁷ Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus,” 351; emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus,” 351.

¹⁹ While my argument so far has primarily relied on the analysis of Friesen, over the past two decades there has been a growing body of research that indicates that the members of the Pauline assemblies lived in subsistence-level poverty (although there are differing methodological and definitional understandings of what poverty means amongst these studies). See Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty, and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 97-152 and Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, 220-258. Also, see Robert Moses, “Discerning the Body of Christ: Paul, Poverty and the Powers,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40, no. 4 (2018), 473–493. In the article, Moses examines how Paul's theology of “the powers” presupposes an audience that was, by and large, economically powerless. He writes: “Paul's explicit connection between poverty and the powers [...] suggests that he [...] viewed being weak [...] or powerless [...] as a major characteristic of poverty” (476). Prevalent in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, terms (and conceptual synonyms) of weakness and powerlessness are utilized to denote both himself (1

absent in the authentic Pauline corpus—but rather, as Friesen concludes, gifts from “many moderately poor saints in order to provide for brothers and sisters who were desperately poor.”²⁰

While there are difficulties in ascertaining the precise audience and background of 1 Timothy, enough information and inferences can be drawn to depict a markedly distinct socio-political and economic context. According to the work’s introduction, Paul is writing to his compatriot Timothy that he must “stay at Ephesus” in order to counter the false teachings plaguing the Jesus-movement communities there (1 Tim 1). Yet, the text is not for merely one person, but an addressed community as given in the final verse: “Grace be with you [all]” (1 Tim 6:21; cf. 2 Tim 4:22, Titus 3:15). As with the other letters in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline tradition, this epistle was to be read directly to the assembly (cf. 1 Tim 4:13). Similar, to an extent, with Philemon, the content of 1 Timothy is addressing the concrete problems and social locations of the particular audience, while utilizing a literary conceit of being written to one person. Further, there is good reason to accept the Pastor’s audience resides in Ephesus (if the identity of the recipients as Ephesian is not a fictional device), home to an oft-mentioned Jesus-movement community (cf. Eph 1-6, Rev 2, Acts 19).²¹ In fact, the bustling first/second-century CE Ephesian economy only further clarifies why the context of 1 Timothy is so materially distinct from that of Paul’s assemblies.²² Reggie Kidd finds three points of divergence between the communities of Paul and the Pastor, the latter being (1) “socially ascendant,” (2) “culturally accommodative,” and (3) “unheroically conservative, or static in enthusiasm.”²³ Thus, the audience of 1 Timothy consists of a deradicalized congregation,

Cor 2:3; 4:10; 9:22) and his audience (1 Cor 1:26-7). Thus, even in Paul’s theological rhetoric, if Moses’ argument is accepted, there is overt evidence of a Corinthian community bound in poverty.

²⁰ Friesen, “Injustice of God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” 28.

²¹ As per I. Howard Marshall, who does not subscribe to Pauline authorship: “It is most reasonable to associate the letters with the leaders of congregations in the two areas mentioned in the PE [Pastoral Epistles], Crete and Ephesus/Asia Minor [...]. It can be taken for granted that the sort of problems that Paul encountered continued after he ceased to be active in the area, and it is not at all surprising that the kind of doctrinal aberration found in Corinth crossed the Aegean Sea to Ephesus [...].” *The Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1999), 85. Similarly, Luke Timothy Johnson also makes a more implicit case for the Ephesian destination of 1 Timothy: “the mis-en-scene for 1 Timothy is plausible, if not probative. It matches perfectly the assignments given to delegates, and it reflects as well the busy traffic among Macedonia, Corinth, and Ephesus that is revealed in our other sources.” *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 35A (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 137.

²² Ancient authors attest to the great wealth in Ephesus. The second-century CE Egyptian orator Athenaeus mentions the luxury of the city and its residents on numerous occasions in his multi-volume *Deipnosophistae*. See Gary C. Hoag, *Wealth in Ancient Ephesus and the First Letter to Timothy: Fresh Insights from Ephesiaca by Xenophon of Ephesus* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 194-226.

²³ Reggie M. Kidd, *Wealth and Beneficence in the Pastoral Epistles: A Bourgeois Form of Early Christianity?*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 122 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 9-25, quoted in Hoag, *Wealth in Ancient Ephesus and the First Letter to Timothy: Fresh Insights from Ephesiaca by Xenophon of Ephesus*, 5. Emphasis in the original.

accommodating, if not supporting, the broader cultural, political, and economic features of Roman imperialism. They belong to an institutionalized church (e.g., the discussion on the proper role of elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 4 and Titus 2), one utilizing the language, customs, and standards of the broader Greco-Roman society.

Yet, this contextual disjuncture between Paul and the Pastor is made clearer by the material make-up of the Ephesian audience in 1 Timothy 6: there is a sizable contingent of ultra-wealthy congregants who are to be exhorted on the proper use of their finances. The Pastor uses the term πλουσίοις (*plousiois*), typically translated as “the rich.”²⁴ Gary Hoag explains the phrase as those who have “an abundance of earthly possessions that exceeds normal experience.”²⁵ Such terminology, therefore, indicates that the wealthy among the audience goes beyond mere moderate subsistence but wealth that allows for the rich “not need[ing] to work for a living, as they possess material resources” from inheritance and/or the labor of others.²⁶ Simply put, the word choice of the Pastor reveals an extraordinarily affluent audience.

The Pastor’s message to the rich further reflects this detail. In 6:17-19, the Pastor calls out “those who in the present age are rich” and warns them to not look down on others and not set their hope on money. The rich are instructed to “do good, and be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share.” If they do this, “they can save up a good capital sum for the future [i.e., eternal life].” There is no discussion concerning the poor, in and out of the assembly, in the entire epistle, in stark contrast to 2 Corinthians or Galatians. While the Pastor refers to the care of widows (i.e., via economic sponsorship) in 1 Tim. 5:3-16, it seems their presence is intentionally negligible as the author limits the scope of this care by placing a variety of limitations on what kind of widow is allowed to be sponsored. The presence of the Jerusalem collection, or any cross-ecclesial financial network, is absent.²⁷ Slaves are mentioned in 1 Tim. 6:1-2, but they are not directly addressed by the author such as in Colossians, Ephesians, or Philemon. Timothy is instructed to promote slave obedience to masters rather than the quasi-egalitarian message of mutual affection between the master and slave within the Household Codes of the Deutero-Paulines (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-25).²⁸ Yet, while Justin Meggitt notes that “many poor people owned

²⁴ W. Hall Harris III, Michael W. Holmes, and Rick Brannan, eds., *The Lexham English Bible: English-Greek Reverse Interlinear Testament (With Strong's Greek-English Glossary)* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 1062.

²⁵ Hoag, *Wealth in Ancient Ephesus and the First Letter to Timothy: Fresh Insights from Ephesiaca by Xenophon of Ephesus*, 197.

²⁶ Hoag, *Wealth in Ancient Ephesus and the First Letter to Timothy: Fresh Insights from Ephesiaca by Xenophon of Ephesus*, 197.

²⁷ This, of course, is an argument from silence. Yet, it would seem odd for Paul to place the burden of the collection on poorer Corinthians rather than evidently rich Ephesians.

²⁸ See Borg and Cross, *First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*, 53-58.

slaves in the ancient world, and that a mere reference [...] is not a good indication of wealth,"²⁹ it would be strange if the author were *only* referring to poor slave-owners. With the exhortation to the rich following shortly after the message to the slaves, it seems reasonable to presume that these servants belonged to the assembly's wealthy faction.

While one can develop a general picture of the Pastor's audience, there is very little personal detail in the above description. Aside from Timothy, the Pastor mentions only a few names, some of whom are only referenced within the Pastoral corpus.³⁰ In light of this, we cannot cross-reference mentions between letters or even extra-biblical material, as has been done with the Erastus inscription in Corinth.³¹ Yet, even in this compact discussion on wealth, the Pastor has revealed a crucial aspect of his audience: they were, unlike the members of Paul's assembly, very wealthy. He writes, in 1 Timothy 2:8, that women are to "dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes." Indeed, their wealth was so great that the Pastor took it upon himself to spend the last section of the epistle addressing their attitudes towards and behavior with money. I do not find it spurious to presume many of these Ephesians possessed moderate, or even abundant, surplus resources (PS4 and PS3). The Pastor, unlike Paul in 2 Corinthians, does not mention that their almsgiving would stretch their resources nor that it would make them any less wealthy! These individuals had to have possessed enough capital that the Pastor's suggestion would not cause them serious economic harm. Thus, while Friesen was only able to surely locate one member of a Pauline congregation around PS4, it is not doubtful that the audience of 1 Timothy had *several*. If there was not an audience with disposable wealth, I find there would be little reason for the Pastor to include a sustained exhortation as it would be contextually irrelevant.

The Theology of Wealth— Paul and Pastor

While Paul's theology of wealth is not immediately clear in his epistles, it is nonetheless a present and vital aspect of his public ministry. However, many scholars, past and present, have extrapolated from Paul's unsystematic treatment of wealth as evidence that he did not necessarily care about the poor, the right usage of money, general socioeconomic inequality, etc. To some, Paul's belief in an imminent eschaton colored his entire perception of the destitute. Leslie Hoppe writes, "the apostle's belief that Christ's return was near made dealing with socioeconomic problems at any

²⁹ Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul Poverty, and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 129-132, quoted in Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," 353.

³⁰ For example, figures like Hymenaeus (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17), and Eubulus and Pudens (2 Tim 4:21), etc.

³¹ Friesen, however, is quite skeptical of the connection between Paul's Erastus and the one mentioned in the inscription. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," 354.

great length unnecessary.”³² These views, however, possess two problems. First, while Paul did believe in the coming return of Christ in his lifetime, the apostle desired “to establish communities that resembled the eschatological age [...] [as much] as possible.”³³ As Bruce Longenecker notes, “Paul was seeking to do precisely this [...] not least in regard to the unity of the Jew and gentile in Christ. So why should the concern for the poor be any different?”³⁴ Second, there was an overriding concern for the care of the poor via economic assistance between assemblies, even if not explicitly pronounced. Paul commands his audience in Galatians 6:9-10 that they must “not grow weary in doing what is right [...] whenever we have an opportunity [from God], let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” This dictation, as Longenecker states, is “an ethical task of the Christian community [...] [they must be] supporting those in need with material aid—the need within the communities of Jesus-followers [...] but not exclusively so.”³⁵ When Paul states that the assembly “must do good to all,” this terminology is specifically related to the giving of money.³⁶ The end of the theological discourse in the profound epistle to the Galatians is a practical admonition: “to care for others, among whom the economically insecure [...] would have taken pride of place.”³⁷ For Paul, the concluding praxis of his theology is *doing good for others*.

This praxis, however, goes beyond mere personal generosity and extends into the economic relationship between assemblies, as well as the ideological interaction of Pauline communities within broader Greco-Roman society. The Jerusalem collection, as Friesen writes, was “a dramatic initiative by Paul,” one which hoped to not only provide material assistance to congregations and build stronger ecclesial ties with the Jewish faction in Jerusalem but more importantly represents a counter-economy in which goods would flow generously and freely between assemblies.³⁸ Friesen notes that “Paul’s gospel called for a network of horizontal sharing among Mediterranean assemblies” which is perfectly explicated in 2 Corinthians 8:13-14, in which the apostle states that there should be a “fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.” Paul calls for a mutual economic interdependence between assemblies so that there is both a support system to help the impoverished in those communities and a means to lessen any potential financial inequality which might exasperate network ties. This “horizontal sharing” is in contrast to the economy of

³² L. J. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 158.

³³ Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, 138.

³⁴ Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, 138.

³⁵ Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, 141-42.

³⁶ N. T. Wright notes that the phrase was “in regular use in Paul’s word, referring to financial contributions in civic and community life.” *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (London: SPCK, 2002), 79, quoted in Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, 142.

³⁷ Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, 142.

³⁸ Friesen, “Injustice of God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” 28.

Roman imperialism, which Friesen characterizes as "an exploitative vertical flow of resources."³⁹ Instead, the Jerusalem collection "entailed the renunciation of the ideals of patronage, where large occasional benefactions would come from a patron whose wealth was built on the daily exploitation of the masses."⁴⁰ This collection was funded by the poor *for* the poor; it was not regulated or officiated by the ultra-wealthy representatives of the empire. Thus, Paul's theology of good works is inherently tied to his broad socio-economic vision of assemblies liberating themselves from the exploitative modes of production and distribution within the empire.

As previously noted, the Pastor does not discuss the collection, the extremely poor, or economic interdependence between assemblies. Instead, the author focuses on how the rich within his audience are to properly utilize their financial resources. The Pastor's theology of money, however, is not simplistic. He states that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils" and rhetorically maligns the false teachers in the congregation for pursuing money in detriment to their faith (1 Tim 6:10). Yet, while greed *qua* mortal vice is condemned, possessing an abundance of wealth is not intrinsically problematic. In fact, wealth is a gift from God, who "out of his riches, give us all we need for our happiness" (1 Tim 6:18). The Pastor believes that the rich enjoying their wealth is a legitimate enterprise, as God has provided it to them for their "happiness." This is not enjoyment that is "self-indulgent, but is [a] rational, deliberate conduct."⁴¹ The rich are not supposed to be hedonists, yet the Pastor makes no indication that pleasurable use of resources *ipso facto* is immoral. Thus, the rich in Ephesus must thank God for all of their riches and the enjoyment wrought but realize that they are "[not] to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches" (1 Tim 6:17). In order to avoid the denial of the faith via greed or self-indulgence, the Pastor recommends that the rich "[be] generous, and ready to share [...] storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." (1 Tim 6:18-19). If the rich are charitable, they can secure a place in God's favor during the final judgment. For the Pastor, the rich have within their bank accounts a pathway towards salvation.

The Pastor's theology of wealth is a subtle capitulation to the exploitative economics of Roman imperialism. The text does not call for justice or any sort of inter-ecclesial community of sharing, hospitality, and mutual economic assistance. Instead, charity is reduced to a personal decision of supplying the poor (though this is an assumption, as the Pastor does not direct the rich on whom they should financially assist), which in turn helps the wealthy secure posthumous, heavenly favor with God. The Pastor does not specify how much should be given to charity. He does not recommend a complete denial of worldly goods, as Jesus did (Matt 19:21), nor does he even

³⁹ Friesen, "Injustice of God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," 28.

⁴⁰ Friesen, "Injustice of God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," 28.

⁴¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, "Godliness, Self-Sufficiency, Greed, and the Enjoyment of Wealth: 1 Timothy 6:3-19 Part II," *Novum Testamentum* 53 (2011): 86.

provide a rough estimate of giving like Paul (“whatever [they] can afford”). It is reasonable to read 1 Timothy 6 and conclude that wealthy people need not give much of anything as long as they purposefully demonstrate the act of charity to someone in potential need. This position reads similarly to the second-century CE *Shepherd of Hermas*,⁴² written roughly around the same time as the Pastorals. Much like the Shepherd, 1 Timothy offers a “plutocratic perspective” in which “poverty and wealth are not simply recognized as facts of social life; they are justified as crucial components of the life of the assembly.”⁴³ The poor/needful are *soteriologically necessary*, for if there were no impoverished citizens, how could the rich dispense with their finances so as to be obedient to God? The Pastor does not question the potential injustice of the ultra-wealthy or the systems that breed such economic inequality. Instead, he provides a pathway for the rich to stay faithful members of the assembly, while also holding on to a large majority of their wealth. The Pastor allows the rich to have their cake and eat it!

What is implicitly embraced, however, is the vertical economy mimicked within the assembly. The rich have become ecclesial patrons who dispense with their exploitative gain towards the poor within the assembly. There is no longer a generous sharing, but a calculated decision of who gets what and when. If the strict decision-making of qualifying who is truly a “deserving” widow in 1 Timothy 5 is any indication of the kind of discriminatory behavior the Pastor and his audience engage in when determining those deserving of financial support, it is not unreasonable to infer the same attitude existed towards the poor.⁴⁴ It is quite possible that the rich of the Ephesian assembly expected the same kind of praise and honor from those whom they had financially supported as existed within the patronage system of the Roman economy.⁴⁵ The Pastor has thus legitimized a theology of wealth that empowers the ultra-rich and the general economic system they are enmeshed within.

Additionally, John M. G. Barclay indicates that the economic implications of the Pastor’s ecclesiology are in opposition to the Pauline inter-ecclesial horizontal distribution. To the Pastor, the church itself was not the primary means for financial support for either congregations or the dispersed,

⁴² Herm. Sim. 2:10 (51.10): “Happy are those who have possessions and understand that their riches have come from the Lord; for the one who understands this will also be able to perform a good ministry.” Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 315.

⁴³ Friesen, “Injustice of God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” 34.

⁴⁴ Barclay remarks on this strictness: “the age limit [of 60 to be considered a legitimate widow] is striking: on average life expectancy, not many women lived to that age, and of those who did, not many would live much longer. The rule therefore severely limits those who could be supported [...]” John M. G. Barclay, “Household Networks and Early Christian Economics: A Fresh Study of 1 Timothy 5.3-16,” *New Testament Studies* 66 (2020), 278.

⁴⁵ On the nature of patronage relations in Ancient Rome, see Richard Garnsey and Richard Salley, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 131-146, 173-183.

emerging assemblies. Rather, the author "conceives of the church as a network of Christian households connected by mutual economic support."⁴⁶ It is the family, first and foremost, that should help one another before they go to the assembly for assistance. The Pastor speaks strongly to those who do not help their own: "whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8). The "radical Christian alternative,"⁴⁷ as per Barclay, of substitute, fictive families and egalitarian, socioeconomic arrangements have no place in 1 Timothy for the "church is composed of [...] households [...] [it] does not supplant them."⁴⁸ Barclay's insights thus demonstrate another key aspect to charity in the Pastor's theology: the assembly *should not* be the first location to search for aid. Its charitable function (2 Cor 8:14) has been severely hindered, whilst the poor, weak, and needy are to look first to their families. The Pastor is silent on what one should do in the case of a hostile, non-Christian family (especially for one who does not meet the qualifications of a widow).

Gary Hoag contends that the Pastor's teachings on wealth are actually *consistent* with the genuine Pauline tradition.⁴⁹ Hoag finds three major similarities between 1 Timothy 6 and major sections of the Pauline corpus which deal with wealth (2 Cor 8-9, Gal 6, Rom 12): "[First] the wealthy must voluntarily share with a view towards equality. [Second] they must exhibit good deeds [...] as distributors of God's generous provision. Lastly, the generous lifestyle demonstrates obedience of the [wealthy]".⁵⁰ While this argument appears valid if one reads 1 Timothy and the authentic epistles of Paul rather superficially, it lacks persuasiveness in light of the contextual differences discussed above. The audience of Paul in Galatia and Corinth *were not wealthy*. They were overwhelmingly poor and even the supposedly rich congregants were barely above general subsistence. In fact, 2 Corinthians does not explicitly mention wealthy individuals in the same sense as 1 Timothy— Paul is speaking to those who have evidently limited resources (8:12-13). Further,

⁴⁶ Barclay, "Household Networks and Early Christian Economics," 268.

⁴⁷ Barclay, "Household Networks and Early Christian Economics," 275.

⁴⁸ Barclay, "Household Networks and Early Christian Economics," 275.

⁴⁹ Craig L. Blomberg also argues this, yet with an emphasis on the supposedly Pauline tendency against broader Greco-Roman society. He writes: "Paul may not issue any of Jesus' wide-ranging or radical calls to abandon everything, although we have already argued that none of those calls was intended to be normative for all believers in the first place. But he does insist that Hellenistic Christians be equally counter-cultural in rejecting the systems of patronage and reciprocity so endemic in their culture. And he calls all believers to act as generous benefactors regardless of their net worth and with no thought of any material reward in this life. Should they fall into acute need, they should be able to count on their fellow believers to minister to them, even as they are expected to give from their surplus at the moment. In short, Paul commands generosity simply because it honors God; the only guaranteed reward awaits in the life to come. Paul as much as Jesus recognizes the danger of mammon as an idol and its potentially damning effects. Christ must be served rather than money." *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 212.

⁵⁰ Hoag, *Wealth in Ancient Ephesus and the First Letter to Timothy: Fresh Insights from Ephesiaca by Xenophon of Ephesus*, 224.

while Paul does speak of equality (or “fair balance”) between congregations, the Pastor makes no similar claims. There is no statement in favor of congregational egalitarianism, and it appears from the text that there will always be rich within the assemblies whose best path of salvation is charitable donations. Hoag fallaciously reasons that because Paul and the Pastor both implore the same action (e.g., generosity), then they speak to essentially the same audience.

Conclusion

The discourse to the wealthy in 1 Timothy 6 has provided two reasons for rejecting Pauline authorship of the epistle. First, there is a drastically different economic context between the assemblies of Paul and the audience of the Pastor in Ephesus. While the former’s congregants were very poor and lived around subsistence level, the latter spoke to a contingency of ultra-wealthy individuals who most likely did not work, owned many slaves, and represented the economic elite of their city. Secondly, the theology of wealth between Paul and the Pastor is noticeably different. To Paul, the practical outworking of his theology were egalitarian communities that mirrored the coming eschatological reality: money was to be generously given amongst assemblies, and amongst all outside peoples also, in order to establish an alternative, horizontal economy of mutual interdependence among churches and believers. While the Pastor instructs the rich to provide generously, they do so in their own self-interest: to secure eternal life. The Pastor’s arguments do not lead to the same radical economic implication of Paul and instead appear to embrace the vertical, exploitative nature of the Roman imperial economy: the means by which the wealthy accrue their resources is not questioned and the relationship between rich and poor appears to mirror the Roman patronage. It is wholly unlikely that somehow Paul changed his views (not to speak of the other theological and textual problems) in the few short years between his Corinthian correspondence and the Pastorals. The great dissimilarity between the context and claims of the undisputed Pauline epistles and 1 Timothy is so great that, as with theology and style, it is clear that the texts belong to distinct traditions in the early history of the Jesus movement.

As we continue to flesh out the distinctions in theology and context between various portions of the New Testament, materialist readings must continually be at the forefront of our analysis. Paul calls on his listeners to “remember the poor” (Gal 2:10) and that normative command, I believe, should continue to inform Christian economic practices today. If we as biblical scholars do not speak to the various ways in which New Testament writers, such as the Pastor, marginalize the poor and provide ideological-theological justification to the wealthy, we are performing a disservice to the impoverished in our own time. By elucidating the radicality of Paul and the reactionary character of the Pastor, biblical scholars can hopefully work towards constructing nuanced, emancipatory theologies of wealth that denounce exploitative economic practices and lift up the

global destitute. The longer that scholars continue to shoehorn the Pastor within a Pauline theology of wealth (as Longenecker and Hoag do) the longer the liberative message of Paul is distorted into supporting structures and systems of economic oppression.

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Spiritual Imagination and Contemporaneity

Re-interpreting Anti-Climacus' Polemic in *Practice in Christianity*

Mimi Nicholson

St Stephen's House, University of Oxford

mimi.faith@icloud.com

Abstract

What does Anti-Climacus mean when he tells us to become contemporary with Christ? *Practice in Christianity*, written pseudonymously under the name Anti-Climacus late in Kierkegaard's career, embeds his strange concept of "contemporaneity" in a provocative literary artwork which exhorts readers to imitate Christ, whilst discouraging them from the production of Christian art. This "riddle" (as he goes on to describe it) offers compelling insight into an ever-present concern of theological aesthetics: the role of the imagination and of human creativity in Christian faith. Specifically, in the case of *Practice*, we are forced to confront the question of what function art or creativity can have in our "becoming contemporary" with Christ, and how their neglect may hinder such an endeavour. In the pursuit of this enquiry, this paper will evaluate two (supposedly) opposing readings of the theme of "contemporaneity", namely the "imaginative" and "spiritual". I will argue for the necessity of *both*, as opposed to one or the other, of these readings as useful in illuminating the heart of Anti-Climacus' notion of contemporaneity, which is, I argue, to focus on awakening and engaging the existential disposition of a believer in a way that can transform the empirical status of his or her surroundings. Thus, I will analyse how Anti-Climacus' own literary artistry functions to encourage readers to engage imaginatively in the spiritual reality of Christ. Crucially though, these reformulations and adjustments in perspective only matter to Anti-Climacus if they culminate in choosing to devote our temporal selves to the eternal God in *imitatio Christi*, thereby providing teleological direction for an otherwise uncharted or stupefying artistic wilderness.



Mimi Nicholson, "Spiritual Imagination and Contemporaneity: Re-interpreting Anti-Climacus' Polemic in *Practice in Christianity*," *JOGTS* 2.1 (2021), pp. 115–136

Introduction

The pseudonymous author of *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus, is described in Kierkegaard's journals as "a Christian on an extraordinary level."¹ Considering this praiseworthy title, it is troubling to artists and art lovers to find in No. III of the work a seemingly extreme scepticism towards "Christian art," which he terms "a new paganism."² However, the work also includes an extended discussion of what is called a "sign of contradiction": something which "draws attention to itself" and then reveals "a contradiction in its composition."³ The reader cannot help but notice that the poetic style of this literary artwork seems an unusual place to include a polemic against artistic production. Of further interest is that Anti-Climacus uses the title of "sign of contradiction" also to refer to Christ (the God-man), a contradiction which he describes as the "great[est] possible."⁴ The symmetry in his choice of presentation in *Practice* and his understanding of Christ makes for interesting analysis, especially in regard to the fact that that this work's aim is to train Christians away from "apathetic habitual"⁵ acceptance into realising the "dialectical knot" that is Christ. In order to have "anything to do" with Christian truth, Anti-Climacus asserts, we "will have to untie the knot [ourselves]".⁶ The tool that I will suggest Anti-Climacus offers for this task—both explicitly and implicitly, in the work's formal composition—is *contemporaneity*. I will explore this way of being in time from both an imaginative and a spiritual perspective, contrasting—but ultimately synthesising—the viewpoints of scholars such as Patrick Stokes and Joshua Cockayne who seem to present these two readings as mutually exclusive. The potential reconciliation of these divergent views can be found in a reading which Joel Rasmussen develops extensively, namely that: "God's initiative in Christ is paradigmatic for Kierkegaard's many explorations of the possibility or impossibility of human fulfilment through artistic creativity".⁷ I propose, then, that through the artwork that is *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard uses Anti-Climacus to present a sort of twofold contemporaneity, acting initially as a way of subjective awakening which ultimately directs us towards the creative task of imitation of Christ.

It is important to note from the outset the task to which Kierkegaard is devoted, namely: "to introduce Christianity into Christendom".⁸ In this work particularly, Kierkegaard uses Anti-Climacus in order to stage a polemic against impersonal ways of knowing, especially in relation to

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers (JP)*, Vol. VI edited and translated by Hong, Howard V. & Hong, Edna H, assisted by Malantschuk, Gregory. Index by Hong, Nathaniel J. and Barker, Charles. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 6431.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity (PC)*, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, Vol. XX edited and translated by Hong, Howard V. & Hong, Edna H. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 254.

³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 125.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 125.

⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 174.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 133.

⁷ Joel D.S Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness: Kierkegaard's Poetics of Faith, Hope, and Love*. (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 4.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 36.

Christianity. Although in previous works there is a marked emphasis on “inwardness”⁹ and Kierkegaard’s notorious “moment of decision”,¹⁰ his later works tend to focus more emphatically on *imitation*. Marie Thulstrup describes this as “a remedy for the age’s complacent reliance upon salvation as a sheer gift of Christ”.¹¹ In the context of this focal shift away from *inwardness* we find “the most extended discussion both of imitation as well as of contemporaneity”, and I would agree with Cockayne that this is “no accident”: “the two are clearly connected”.¹² Understanding the importance of the notion is not, however, reliant on thematic analysis; Anti-Climacus makes it strikingly obvious. For him, “contemporaneity” is not only “the condition of faith” but, “more sharply defined, it is faith”.¹³ Thus, this paper will demonstrate how it is that contemporaneity can act as a corrective from a Christian faith in which one “shed[s] a few tears in the course of the conversation”¹⁴ to one which can “bear to see this sight in actuality”—the only state, according to Anti-Climacus, in which you can be called “essentially Christian”.¹⁵

The Context of Anti-Climacus’ Critique

The elusive nature of such a task as to “become contemporary with [Christ]”¹⁶ demands close attention. To begin, it will be useful to see what ways of knowing Anti-Climacus presents in contradistinction to contemporaneity. This will help us to form a better image of the notion, and hopefully to vindicate Kierkegaard with respect to the charge that he “provides no account of how such atemporal ‘contemporaneity’ with historical events is actually possible”.¹⁷ Anti-Climacus plainly tells us: “do not think observationally about him, but think first and foremost about yourself so that in your thought you become contemporary with him”.¹⁸ Whilst “observational distance” will make an appearance in later discussions of art, I would like to start by assessing Anti-Climacus’ concern with the distance of historical or speculative knowledge. Anti-Climacus sees this type of knowing as antithetical to his Christian project, claiming that: “history can indeed richly

⁹ For example, Johannes de Silentio’s emphasis on Abraham’s solitude and silence in *Fear and Trembling* and the extended discussion of the inward ‘infinite passion’ (CUP: 426) in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

¹⁰ Anthony Rudd, “Kierkegaard on Patience and the Temporality of the Self: The Virtues of a Being in Time,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 36 (2008): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2008.00357.x>.

¹¹ Thulstrup, Marie M. Thulstrup, “Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Imitation,” *A Kierkegaard Critique: An International Selection of Essays Interpreting Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard A. Johnson And Niels Thulstrup, (New York: Harper, 1962), 269.

¹² Joshua Cockayne, “Imitation and Contemporaneity: Kierkegaard and the Imitation of Christ,” *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 58, (2017): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12786>

¹³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 194.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 65.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 171.

¹⁷ Patrick Stokes, “‘See For Your Self’: Contemporaneity, Autopsy and Presence in Kierkegaard’s Moral-Religious Psychology,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 18(2) (2010): 297.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 171.

communicate knowledge, but *knowledge annihilates Jesus Christ*".¹⁹ However, we should be wary of construing this as suggesting a "historically unconditioned understanding".²⁰ It is not the elimination of the historical facts of Jesus' existence that will take us closer to contemporaneity, it is that "whatever historical knowledge the person has must become more than historical knowledge".²¹ This type of experience has usefully been described as "meaningfully co-present".²² This is a reading that most scholars agree on; what Anti-Climacus is positing is that "mutual awareness between persons" need not be restricted to "concurrence in spatio-temporal location".²³

However, Anti-Climacus goes further than offering contemporaneity as an alternative, he envisions it as the *only* proper way of relating to Christ:

...one cannot *know* anything at all about *Christ*; he is the paradox, the object of faith, exists only for faith. But all historical communication is the communication of *knowledge*; consequently one can come to know nothing about Christ from history.²⁴

This is a pertinent claim for Anti-Climacus because he believes that 19th century Denmark has distorted Christ from the one "who abased himself and took the form of a servant"²⁵ by "clothing him in the glittering trappings of results"²⁶ and "fabulously deck[ing] him out in the human glory of the historical results".²⁷ Through this glorification the truth-content of Christ's existence has been compromised. The victorious and normative acceptance of Christ in Christendom has had the effect of making the words that Jesus said "become untrue", by making him "essentially different from what he was when he said them".²⁸ Moreover, his warnings against historical and speculative knowledge of Christ also have a firm Christological grounding in the belief that the God-man is a "paradox".²⁹ The paradoxical co-existence of the "infinite chasmic difference between God and man"³⁰ in the person of Jesus cannot be mediated logically, and to believe otherwise is foolish and proud. This strict dissuasion against knowing Christ brings to the fore a wider question regarding our means of relating to Him. If we can know nothing of Christ from history, how then can we

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 33 (emphasis added).

²⁰ Stokes, "See for yourself," 314.

²¹ C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 113.

²² Stokes, "See for Yourself," 297.

²³ Joshua Cockayne, "Contemporaneity and Communion: Kierkegaard on the Personal Presence of Christ," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol.25(1) (2017): 57.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 25.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 24.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 31.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 35.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 25.

²⁹ Anti-Climacus is the dialectical supplement to Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments*, who develops a fuller, although ostensibly less 'faithful', description of this phenomenon. In *PF* Christ is never referred to by name but repeatedly referred to as the 'absolute paradox'. (e.g., 37)

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 63.

know Him? A useful starting point is expressed nicely by Cockayne. He claims: “in contrast to a relationship of historicity”, contemporaneity “is about the believer’s relating [to] God (or Christ) as a subject to be engaged with and not a fact to be understood”.³¹

In addition to his criticism of historical and speculative knowledge—the type of engagement that could perhaps be characterised as philosophical or academic—Anti-Climacus is also critical of a certain type of aesthetic relation. He calls this: “merely looking, and with false passion”.³² It is this sort of admiration, as distinct from “imitation”,³³ that constitutes “a pagan relation to Christianity”³⁴ and underpins Anti-Climacus’ criticism of Christian art. In order to emphasise the absurdity of relating to as profound a truth as Christ in this way, Anti-Climacus satirises the approach of art criticism in observing a portrayal of Christ: “[discerning] whether it is a success, whether it is a masterpiece, whether the play of colours is right, and the shadows, where the blood looks like that, whether the suffering expression is artistically true”.³⁵ Such an apathetic response to Christ’s passion as to be interested in whether or not “the suffering expression is artistically true” is emblematic of the target of Anti-Climacus’ condemnation. To be interested in “truth” in such a representational—almost vapid—way, whilst leaving the question of the *actual* truth of Christ unaddressed, typifies the problematic nature of admiration. One could see this as a sort of objective relating, in that it neither takes into account the *real* subject of Christ and nor does it take the viewer’s subjective relation to Him into account. Whilst this discussion in *Practice* refers to a physical image, Hjördis Becker-Lindenthal and Ruby Guyatt have pointed out that this sort of relation is also applicable to “mental misrepresentations”.³⁶ This is important because, for Anti-Climacus, Christ “can only be believed”.³⁷ Therefore, it is possible, as others have noted, that a “historical contemporary of Christ might still lack faith”.³⁸ Stokes’ observations are useful in expanding why this is the case. Since Jesus had “no objectively discernible traits of divinity”, there is no “epistemic advantage” to historical contemporaneity.³⁹ Thus, the “misrepresentation” can happen in pictorial, mental or even physical encounters; contemporaneity is a condition which necessarily extends beyond the spatio-temporal.

These examples demonstrate how Anti-Climacus finds fault in “his era’s dominant mode of spiritless, shallow religious conviction” in which Christ is “kept at a distance”.⁴⁰ Whilst we have

³¹ Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion”, 47.

³² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 185.

³³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 241.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 254.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255-6.

³⁶ Hjördis Becker-Lindenthal and Ruby Guyatt, “Kierkegaard On Existential Kenosis and the Power of the Image: *Fear and Trembling* and *Practice in Christianity*,” *Modern Theology*, Vol.35 (2019): 706-727, 708-9, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12477>.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 26.

³⁸ Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 43.

³⁹ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 300.

⁴⁰ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 305.

observed that, for Anti-Climacus, actual shared time does not necessarily constitute being contemporaneous, it does require a certain mode of being in time. As Nicola Ramazzotto, and others such as Mark Taylor,⁴¹ have contended, in Kierkegaard's works it is "the explicit absence of time that characterizes the life of the aesthete".⁴² By absence of time, Ramazzotto is referring to the type of entrapment in *ideality*, which Rasmussen argues to be present also in the aesthete A of *Either/Or*—that which exists in "a [poetic] moment in time rounded off in an imaginative eternity" which remains an "abstraction from the continuity of actual life".⁴³ This is problematic because it prevents the discovery of true selfhood, allowing us to "jump from possibility to possibility, pretending to be something that we really are not".⁴⁴ Anti-Climacus contrasts this observational distance with the "actuality of daily life",⁴⁵ a distinction which informs his attack on Christian art. This distinction is important because of the following formulation: "But this is the difference between poetry and actuality: contemporaneity".⁴⁶ Contemporaneity is thus the necessary condition for existing in a way that is meaningfully real. As well as this, it is a way to exist that makes Christ, too, meaningfully real. As Anti-Climacus explains: "speculation takes away from the God-man the qualifications of temporality, contemporaneity, and actuality".⁴⁷ It should have now become evident that there are certain "structures of cognition and imagination" which are destructive of a proper relation to Christ and His truth.⁴⁸ Later, I will attend to the question of how art, imitation and contemporaneity may act as antidotes for these structures, but for now it will be useful to examine why it is in the first place that Christ's truth warrants such subjective engagement.

Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life

Anti-Climacus' presentation of Christ is crucial to understanding how he thinks we should relate to Him. For the purposes of this essay, two key elements are essential: (i) that Christ's life was truth and (ii) that he was the sign of contradiction. The following quotation encapsulates the form that Anti-Climacus presumes the truth of Christ to hold: "Christ's life upon earth, every moment of this life, was truth".⁴⁹ Locating "truth" in "every moment" of Christ's bodily and subjective

⁴¹ See Mark Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and Self*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), e.g., 5, 49, 146, 182, 283, 319, 324.

⁴² Nicola Ramazzotto, "The Ambiguity of Mimesis: Kierkegaard Between Aesthetic Fantasy and Religious Imitation," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, Vol. 25, issue 1, (2020): 93-4, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kierke-2020-0005>.

⁴³ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 33.

⁴⁴ Brian Gregor, (2009) "Thinking Through Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus: Art, Imagination and Imitation," *Heythrop Journal*, Vol.50 (2009): 450, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2008.00409.x>.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 59-60

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 63.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 81.

⁴⁸ Stokes, "See for Yourself," 297.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 203.

existence “upon earth” gives truth a potent existential and temporal quality. We see this position reiterated frequently throughout *Practice in Christianity*: “the truth, if it is there, is a being, a *life*”.⁵⁰ These assertions may, at first glance, appear simply as expressions of well-established orthodoxy according to John 14.6.⁵¹ However, Anti-Climacus is keen to expand upon the reality of these assertions, noting: “this means that truth in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition etc, but a *life*”.⁵² If we compare the type of truth which would exist in a sum of statements with that which exists as “*life*”, a difference in temporal constitution emerges which is important in understanding the relevance of contemporaneity. Relative to lived experience, a “definition” exists in a significantly more limited context of space and time—the assumption would be that in this form a truth is both transferable and explicable, its mode of reception would be most prominently noetic.

To discern truth as *life*—something which extends beyond articulation—on the other hand, is a much more complicated task; it demands more of the receiver. Of course, Anti-Climacus goes on to situate this point amongst his over-arching polemic against theologians. Christ is one “who therefore every moment by his life demonstrates more powerfully what truth is than all the most prolix lectures of the sharpest thinkers”.⁵³ Again, this description of “powerfully” demonstrated truth in “every moment” of His life highlights the extent to which the Incarnation introduces a radical intervention into our ordinary conceptions of knowledge. Anti-Climacus acknowledges how profoundly the gospel’s proclamation that “the Word became flesh” (John 1.14)⁵⁴ challenges the foundation of our understanding of communication, opening up a dynamic texture to what truth is. As Anti-Climacus bemoans: “our age actually knows no other kind of communication than that mediocre method of didacticizing. What it means to exist has been completely forgotten”.⁵⁵ Here we see the fundamental tension between existence and “didacticizing”—they are incompatible, or at least not complementary, as far as Anti-Climacus is concerned. Thus, he explicitly states: “the view that truth is cognition” is “a monstrous mistake”.⁵⁶

This harsh critique of written communication about Christ may seem at odds with the fact that *Practice in Christianity*, the harbinger of this opinion, is itself a written work. However, it is not so much the medium of literature that offends Anti-Climacus, but the quality of directness. This view is informed by the work’s particular Christology, one that defines Christ as “the sign of contradiction”, which—we are told—means that “direct communication is an impossibility for the God-man”. Anti-Climacus then goes on to elucidate: “to be a sign is already a term based on

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 206.

⁵¹ John 14.6 (RSV) Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.’

⁵² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 205.

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 204.

⁵⁴ John 1.14 (RSV) And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 134.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 206.

reflection, to say nothing of being a sign of contradiction”.⁵⁷ Thus the important quality here is “reflection”. However, it cannot be ignored that elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s corpus, he displays scepticism towards reflection, for example in *Two Ages* where he remarks sardonically: “Just as an oldster supportively puts his hand on the small of his back and leans on a cane, so also abnormal common sense uses reflection in advance as a crutch and comes to its own aid afterwards with reinterpreted reflection”.⁵⁸ However, on closer inspection, this type of reflection is characterised as temporally distant, a tool used “in advance” or “afterwards” in a way that negates the present moment. Therefore, it represents something quite opposed to the type of contemporaneous reflection offered in *Practice*. In this context, Anti-Climacus uses it as an antidote to direct communication, “speculation”⁵⁹ and apathy. Again, with the target of dogmatic and systematic theologians in mind, Anti-Climacus critiques the “enormous folios [that] have been written that develop the demonstrations of the truth of Christianity”⁶⁰ precisely because “they maintain that Christ has given us a direct answer to a direct question”.⁶¹ These folios and proofs cancel out the subjective probing that Anti-Climacus is so keen to advocate.

In order to demonstrate the difference between transcribable, speculative truth and the truth of Christ as a “life” with which we can become contemporary, Anti-Climacus presents us with an analogy:

Someone laboriously works his way into an obscure period of history... After spending twenty years, he finally succeeds in bringing the historical truth to light and makes it entirely incontrovertible. This yield is a boon to his successor; the way is considerably shortened; the successor perhaps needs scarcely three months to become completely conversant with the true coherence of this obscured period... not so where truth is being, is *the way*. Here, since the truth is not different from the way but is precisely the way, no essential shortening can possibly take place in the relation between the predecessor and successor... Christ was the truth, was the way, or was the way in the sense that the truth is the way.⁶²

This parable is illuminating in regard to the deducible meaning of the biblical statement that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life”. Not only does it formulate a distinction between academic pursuits and methods and religious ones, but it also provides an excellent example of just how particular in kind truth is when it is denoted as synonymous with life. Importantly, a temporal element is reaffirmed in relation to the truth, in that it has to be received in what Anti-Climacus elsewhere describes as the: “surroundings of actuality”.⁶³ “No essential shortening” can take place in regard to this truth; it cannot be abstracted from reality into linguistic form, cannot be converted

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 127.

⁵⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages (TA)*, *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, Vol. XIV edited and translated by Hong, Howard V. & Hong, Edna H. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 68.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 81.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 95.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 135.

⁶² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 208-9.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

into “an ordinary syllogism”.⁶⁴ Stokes’ description of experiences which “lack the experiential detail of real events”⁶⁵ captures this phenomenon well. The magnitude of religious truth offered by Christ refuses to be “just as certain as $2 + 2 = 4$ and as easy as putting one’s foot in one’s sock”.⁶⁶ It is “altogether impossible to calculate him [Christ]”.⁶⁷ Compared to a breakthrough in academic research which can then be extracted from the life and process of the discoverer to be digested readily in an ongoing body of knowledge, the truth of Christ is contingent, relational and requires presence. When truth is the way and the life, the knower or learner’s lived experience, beyond mere cognitive assent, becomes essential. Here we see a familiar pattern emerging between *ideality* and *actuality*. The difference between them is a crucial theme in Kierkegaard’s authorship and this analogy typifies that. Anti-Climacus speaks in the spirit of this concern, again making the antipathy between personhood and abstraction clear, when he laments: “But in our day everything is made abstract and everything personal is abolished”.⁶⁸

The Contemporaneity Debate

Now that we have established the reasons why true knowledge of Christ (i.e., faith) requires contemporaneity, it will be good to try to discern more of what contemporaneity actually looks like. In order to do so, I will evaluate an apparent disagreement between scholars over whether or not contemporaneity should be deemed a supernatural⁶⁹ or a purely imaginative⁷⁰ event. The former, belonging to Cockayne, favours a reading which defines contemporaneity according to the actual, spiritual presence of Christ. The latter, belonging to Stokes, prefers to think of contemporaneous presence figuratively, as something invoked through a state of mind. Their debate, however, need not be a case of either/or; Anti-Climacus’ use of poetic narrative and performativity throughout *Practice*, in order to *imaginatively* inspire communion with the *spiritual* reality of Christ, demonstrates the interrelatedness between imagination and the supernatural. The aesthetic use of ambiguity, provocation, and storytelling in the work in question, as well as Kierkegaard’s theological authorship as a whole, shows how creative faculties are crucial in a relationship which nevertheless is with a truly existing divine being. To overlook the imaginative aspects of ‘contemporaneity’, as Cockayne does, or ignore the supernatural reality of a Christ with whom we can become contemporary, as Stokes does, undermines the important collaboration of these elements.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 30.

⁶⁵ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 310.

⁶⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 95.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 49-50.

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 123.

⁶⁹ Cockayne, “Imitation and Contemporaneity”, 9.

⁷⁰ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 304.

It is a demanding statement to claim that “a believer must be just as contemporary with Christ’s presence as his contemporaries were”, and further that this “is the condition” of, or in fact even is “faith”.⁷¹ Whilst Stokes maintains that Kierkegaard uses the term contemporaneity elsewhere in his work to apply to experiences beyond that of Christ,⁷² the following statement is quite explicit that to become actually contemporaneous is a relationship reserved for Christ:

Only the contemporary is actuality for me. That with which you are living simultaneously is actuality –for you. Thus every human being is able to become contemporary only with the time in which he is living –and then with one more, with Christ’s life upon earth, for Christ’s life upon earth, the sacred history, stands alone by itself, outside history.⁷³

This presentation of Christ in “sacred history”, a place “outside history”, certainly confers a supernatural/spiritual quality onto the notion and realisability of contemporaneity and, in that respect, I do not exclude this reading which, as we shall see, is strongly endorsed by Cockayne. Nevertheless, I concur with Stokes that there is another, implicit function of contemporaneity at play within *Practice*, and indeed throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship; that of imaginative contemporaneity. Thus, whilst I contend that the telos and fulfilment of contemporaneity must be relationship with Christ (as will become evident in later discussions of Anti-Climacus’ interest in imitation), I do not deny that a positively reflective contemporaneity, or relationship to time, is a crucial element in this journey. Indeed, to ignore this would jeopardize the significant artistic proportion of Kierkegaard’s project. Instead, the two readings will act as valid, interdependent insights into the fascinating methods of Kierkegaard’s theological artistry, to which I find the concept of contemporaneity to be a fitting testament.

In Cockayne’s “spiritual” argument he quite clearly states that: “the best way of interpreting the references to contemporaneity in Kierkegaard’s works is by describing the experience of being contemporary with Christ in mystical or supernatural terms”.⁷⁴ This viewpoint is compelling, especially in reference to the evidence discussed above; such descriptions of Christ as an extra-temporal being do make it appear as though He would be the only one capable of actually enacting a contemporaneous experience. This is because, as Cockayne claims: “the historical distance between Christ’s life on earth and a modern-day believer is bridged by the person of Christ who is both a historical person but also a living person, for Kierkegaard”.⁷⁵ Such a view is propagated by figures such as C. Stephen Evans who offers a similarly religious image of Kierkegaard’s contemporaneity (although specifically in a discussion of *Philosophical Fragments*), in which he describes the awareness of Jesus’ presence as a pre-requisite to the experience. The supernatural/spiritual argument is propounded according to Evans’ description that “being known

⁷¹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

⁷² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

⁷³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 64.

⁷⁴ Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 46.

⁷⁵ Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 60.

by the god”⁷⁶ is necessary in any contemporaneous encounter and Cockayne’s view that “intersubjective experience of one another”⁷⁷ is the way that a believer and Christ become contemporaries. Anti-Climacus’ assertion that “Christ’s life upon earth” is the only extra event with which we can become contemporary, along with the similarities with his viewpoint and that expressed in the *Christian Discourses* resembling the “Lutheran doctrine of true presence”,⁷⁸ make for convincing evidence that there is a supernatural and distinctly religious element to the idea of contemporaneity. This viewpoint, Cockayne maintains, “looks starkly different” from “imaginative”.⁷⁹ Therefore, he ultimately rejects placing emphasis on the imaginative aspect of contemporaneity: “what Stokes misses”, Cockayne argues, is that “Christ is not a historical person whom we need to imagine, but rather, a living person who is supernaturally present to his believers through his presence”.⁸⁰

However, I propose that Cockayne’s designation of some events as “entirely imaginative”⁸¹ and others as pre-eminently “supernatural”⁸² fails to fully account for the ambiguity and complexity of experience. Anti-Climacus seems both tacitly and expressly to encourage the use of imagination in faith (for example in his numerous expositions aimed to draw the reader out of complacent recognition of the Christ-story).⁸³ Although I am not in full agreement with Stokes that contemporaneity concludes at the level of imagination, I see his depiction of contemporaneity as a crucial element to the theme which I will address later in this essay—imitation. Cockayne himself points out that “the reason that a historical contemporary might fail to be genuinely contemporary is that even in seeing the historical Christ it is possible to fixate only on the historical”.⁸⁴ In doing so, he appreciates that there is something beyond the content of the experience which contributes to being present within it and therefore emphasises the need for Christians to see “Christ as one who has a claim on his life”.⁸⁵ However, whilst this subjective engagement in some respects accounts for the difference in response to Christ, Stokes’ focus on imaginative participation is a vital addition to our conception of contemporaneity and its applicability to events both with which we are historically contemporary and those with which we are not. The key to the success of his argument is the premise that “what is essential to the experience is not contained on the level of representational content, but [is] the meaning that suffuses that content for the believer”.⁸⁶

⁷⁶ Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 114.

⁷⁷ Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 59.

⁷⁸ Cockayne, “Imitation and Contemporaneity”, 10.

⁷⁹ Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 56.

⁸⁰ Cockayne, “Imitation and Contemporaneity”, 9.

⁸¹ Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 56.

⁸² Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 46.

⁸³ e.g., Kierkegaard, *PC*, 181-199.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 59.

⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 45.

⁸⁶ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 303.

In order to articulate this argument, Stokes offers a phrase which is particularly useful in unpacking the notion of contemporaneity. He writes: “we can pick out the conceptual space the contemporaneity-conferring element occupies, as Anti-Climacus does when he refers to contemporaneity as ‘the difference between poetry and actuality’ (PC: 63).”⁸⁷ The idea of “conceptual space” existing between “poetry” and “actuality” is a brilliant way of describing the fact that contemporaneity requires productive action on behalf of the subject, as well as highlighting the danger of imagination in falling into “poetry”. The fact that contemporaneity can bring us from “poetry” to “actuality” does make it look as though Anti-Climacus understands the term as the imaginative potential required in meaningfully altering experience. To expand this viewpoint, Stokes describes the “experience of imaginative distance” as “engagement with an object whereby some non-representational element of cognition is missing, an element that would be present in direct sensory experience of the same object”. He continues: “there is some element to direct experience that can be either present or absent in imaginative representations, and this element makes an important, categorical difference to the nature of experiences overall”.⁸⁸ The vague terminology of “some element” can be accounted for in reference to the fact that the type of experience described is ultimately ineffable. Nonetheless, it is an experience that we have presumably all felt in reading gripping literature or being told terrible news about someone dear to us; despite our absence, we are made somehow present with the experience. Thus, Stokes explains that these scenarios are felt as “implicating, involving or obligating us in the here-and-now”, hence the idea of contemporaneity and shared timeframes. These experiences “[claim] us in exactly the same way as events with which we are temporally and spatially co-located”.⁸⁹

This analysis seems to be in harmony with Anti-Climacus’ writing. One especially recalls moments in *Practice in Christianity* where his literary devices work to try to implicate the reader:

Come here also you, you whose residence has been assigned among the graves, you who in the eyes of society are regarded as dead but are not missed, are not lamented—not buried, yet dead...⁹⁰

In this part, Anti-Climacus is poetically extending Jesus’ invitation in Matthew 11.28, the focus of *No. I* of the work: “COME HERE, ALL YOU WHO LABOR AND ARE BURDENED, AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST”.⁹¹ The direct address of Jesus’ call (and Anti-Climacus’ extensions of it) brings the author and readers into a shared temporality and awakens his readers into responsiveness. We see this intention realised through other means, too, for example in the following:

Ah, in a quiet moment when one does not see him, most people will perhaps even be touched by the idea of such a thing, but as soon as they see him in this company and this procession, him who

⁸⁷ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 309.

⁸⁸ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 308.

⁸⁹ Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 313.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 18.

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 5.

could have been somebody great in the world, see him sailing along in the fine company of a bricklayer on his right and an apprentice brush-maker on his left, what then?⁹²

This is a fitting example of Kierkegaard's perceived difference between *ideality* and *actuality*. In inserting laborers (presumably people prone to belittlement) from his contextual setting in Copenhagen, Anti-Climacus is prompting what in Stokes' analysis is described as an involvement or obligation. Hermann Deuser usefully makes the link between literary artistry and contemporaneity clear in describing such passages in *Practice* as: "the textual narrative's ability to 'make present'".⁹³ It seems to me sensible, then, to accept imaginative contemporaneity as a reading of Anti-Climacus, considering it is a device we encounter readily in his own work.

Therefore, I suggest an integration of Cockayne's more explicitly theological reading of the supernatural presence of Christ in contemporaneity (the "spiritual" reading) and Stokes' psychological emphasis on a more metaphorical presence (the "imaginative" reading). In collaboration they illuminate the heart of Anti-Climacus' notion of contemporaneity: to focus on awakening and engaging the existential disposition of a believer in a way that can transform the empirical status of his or her surroundings. Having established the value of contemporaneity as a form of spiritual imagination, we are better equipped to tackle Anti-Climacus' polemical "riddle" regarding Christian art.

Art and Faith

With this reconciliation in mind, I will now turn to the theme of *imitation*—the telos of spiritual and imaginative contemporaneity. Even in Stokes' propagation of imaginative potential, he is aware of Anti-Climacus' scepticism: "Kierkegaard continually enjoins us not to allow imagination to take us out of the world altogether, and so on the level of direct action, the real is to be emphasized over the imaginary".⁹⁴ We then have to ask ourselves what the limits are of imagination in contemporaneity and at what point the participant requires the supernatural. This theme has been taken up recently by Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, who have written to highlight how *Practice in Christianity* sees the "impact of images...—narrative as much as pictorial" as playing "a crucial role in the process of developing faith".⁹⁵ Along with the testament of this secondary literature, Anti-Climacus' embeds a statement amongst his critique of Christian art which points us away from taking his polemic at face value. He remarks: "this is not a proposal to assail the artist or any particular work of art, by no means; no, it is a riddle I feel obliged to submit".⁹⁶

⁹² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 58.

⁹³ Hermann Deuser, "Religious Dialectics and Christology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 392.

⁹⁴ Stokes, "See for Yourself," 316-7.

⁹⁵ Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, "Existential Kenosis," 709.

⁹⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 256.

This precarious position of creativity in *Practice in Christianity* can perhaps be solved Christologically. Rasmussen's development in *Between Irony and Witness* of the idea of Christ as "paradigmatic" of the value and limitations of "artistic creativity" provides a useful heuristic for this conundrum.⁹⁷ He writes:

In Christ, God "fulfils" the poetic production of creation by becoming a part of it in the sense that human poets cannot. Kierkegaard had Climacus say the same thing when he penned, "The god poetized himself in the likeness of a human being." It is this qualification that elucidates why Kierkegaard views God not simply like the "impersonal" ironist who hovers above, behind, or beyond creation, but paradoxically, as the "personal" God of the Christian story as well, living as an actor within God's poem.⁹⁸

Two important themes emerge in this extract. The first is that the Incarnation in itself can be seen as poetic activity, and this can certainly be glimpsed in the aesthetic beauty of the gospel narrative, which artists have, over centuries, been compelled to represent. More primally, though, it is an act of creation, a fact sometimes easily ignored amongst a tendency to detach human creative activity from that of the Lord. Interestingly, despite equating an artist's paintbrushes to Judas' "thirty pieces of silver",⁹⁹ Anti-Climacus himself is willing to use the art of literature and indirect communication as a way of instigating reflection in the reader and, as mentioned earlier, he sees the God-man as adhering to this form. However, there is an additional, striking element in Rasmussen's account—that is, the description of Christ as: "living as an actor within God's poem." Whilst he has presented this amongst a discussion of creativity, this description resonates with Cockayne's insistence on intersubjective experience with a living God. In a way, Rasmussen's account provides us a way of unfettering the very notion of art from fixed forms in viewing living agency as a form of poetics legitimised by God, and, as such, we can view Anti-Climacus' description of Christian art as "extreme paganism" not so much as a blanket ban on the use of creative expression in the religious, but as a poetic tool to emphasise the vast difference between imitation and admiration, between "being, or at least striving to be, what one admires—and being personally detached".¹⁰⁰ Indeed, admiration is even sublated into Anti-Climacus' description of imitation here, as the admired becomes the object of our striving. With this in mind, the dichotomy between ideality and actuality is problematised and we begin to see some redemption between the themes of imagination and spirituality. This may perhaps be why figures such as Peder Jothen, Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt can contend that: "art, according to Kierkegaard, is neither good nor bad in itself, but rather only with respect to the extent to which it either facilitates or hinders human becoming".¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 4.

⁹⁸ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 82.

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255.

¹⁰⁰ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 252.

¹⁰¹ Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, "Existential Kenosis," 722. For more on Kierkegaard's relationship to art see George Pattison, "Art in an Age of Reflection," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 76-100.

Thus, we see that the paradox of Christ, the God-man, extends into this duality also; Jesus is both God the poet and the “poetized” Word. His very existence legitimises our use of creative or interpretive faculties as an act of worship and devotion. Contemporaneity—both spiritual and imaginative—ensures that these expressions are properly directed towards relationship with Christ.

Ambivalence towards the Aesthetic

Having determined a place for art within Kierkegaard’s project, we can now move on to assess what dangers he perceives in the polarities of over-emphasis on the aesthetic and lack thereof. What I have called here “ambivalence towards the aesthetic” describes the “detached, objective posture”¹⁰² correlating to direct communication. Direct communication has meant that, “to the point of nausea in the mendacity of Christendom”, Christianity has been a religion accepted with an inappropriate effortlessness.¹⁰³ Before turning to the danger of an overly aestheticised existence, therefore, it will be useful to look at its opposite. This is a stance which Anti-Climacus mocks. Adopting the voice of a careful deliberator, he says: “And in any case a miracle is something very uncertain, whereas what is certain is certain”.¹⁰⁴ This satire is interesting in comparison to Johannes Climacus’ conception of truth in the famous phrase: “*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person*”.¹⁰⁵ The fact that Anti-Climacus’ character is trading off the glory of a miracle for the safety of certainty shows the extent to which Climacus’ assertion resonates. The effects that this has on Christianity in particular are made absolutely clear: “Christianity has been regarded as truth in the way of results instead of being truth in the sense of *the way*”.¹⁰⁶ These examples combined depict an evidence-oriented, calculating character—a prudent mode of being in the world which isolates us from the possibility of God’s transcendence. The relationship that this has to the theme of contemporaneity is expressed in this important passage:

In relation to the absolute, there is only one time, the present; for the person who is not contemporary with the absolute, it does not exist at all. And since Christ is the absolute it is easy to see that in relation to him there is only one situation, the situation of contemporaneity... for who he is is revealed only to faith.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Gregor, “Thinking Through Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus,” 455.

¹⁰³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 98.

¹⁰⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 51.

¹⁰⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments (CUP)*, *Kierkegaard’s Writings, Vol. XII* edited and translated by Hong, Howard V. & Hong, Edna H. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 203.

¹⁰⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 207.

¹⁰⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 63.

Not only, then, is historical communication of Christ inadequate, there is explicitly “only one time” for relating to him—“the present”. This idea of presence seems far removed from the cautious, measured approach detailed above.

However, another important element is introduced. Presence is the only timeframe in which we become open to the possibility of relating to “the absolute”. The introduction of this term brings with it an important opposition: relativity. The contrast is made explicit by Anti-Climacus: “The relative is, namely, to designate within temporality a time for reward for work; the absolute is solely to choose eternity”.¹⁰⁸ With the introduction of this polarity, Anti-Climacus characterises the former attitude as that in which one is “busily occupied with what does indeed make a noise at the moment but has no echo in eternity”.¹⁰⁹ Living in this state, a person fails to realise that Christianity involves the awareness that: “one is *eternally* what he becomes through his decisions in time”.¹¹⁰ In Anti-Climacus’ own words:

The earnestness of life is not all this pressure of finitude and busyness with livelihood, job, office, and creation, but the earnestness of life is to *will* to be, to *will* to express the perfection (ideality) in the dailiness of actuality, to *will* it, so that one does not to one’s own ruin once and for all busily abandon it or conceitedly take it in vain as a dream...¹¹¹

In shifting from relativity—determined by a ‘sagacious’ concern for proof and certainty—to absolute relation to God in contemporaneity, a Christian moves from a mundane acceptance of “finitude” into an earnest willing.¹¹² This willing is towards ideality, a term which we have seen is contentious unless placed under the rubric of God’s will (a theme I will turn to shortly). This meaningful co-presence with time and with God stands in contrast to “busily” abandoning the fullness of the world or taking it “in vain as a dream”. It strikes a balance between observational distance and imaginative presence. As Rasmussen has noted, “it takes imagination to abstract from one’s historical actuality (one’s ‘finitude’ and ‘necessity’) and to recognize in oneself something eternal (one’s ‘infinitude’ and ‘possibility’)”.¹¹³ Imaginative realisation of, and consequent commitment to, this eternity allows us to begin to garner an attitude of discipleship.

Imitation

Now that the problems concerned with lacking an engaged and imaginative relation to the world have been laid out, we can turn to the corresponding danger of relying too much on imagined realities, what Anti-Climacus calls “artistic indifference”.¹¹⁴ This danger is described by Becker-

¹⁰⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 119.

¹⁰⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 151.

¹¹⁰ Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*, 319.

¹¹¹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 190.

¹¹² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 51.

¹¹³ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 128.

¹¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255.

Lindenthal as that of someone: “losing herself to a multitude of imagined possibilities without committing herself to the actualisation of one possibility”.¹¹⁵ Working collaboratively with Guyatt, the two develop a notion of “existential kenosis”, by which they mean a “‘self-transcendence’ on many levels” in a way that involves willing to have our “social, political and cultural imaginary” transformed by God.¹¹⁶ The crucial element of this schema, one that is developed by a variety of scholars, is that this self is crafted by Christ in God. One of Anti-Climacus’ criticisms about the idea of a Christian painter is that he may proceed “without having it occur to him whether Christ would wish to be painted”.¹¹⁷ This person falls into the negative category of admirer because, in following their own will complacently, they “make no sacrifices” and “renounce nothing”, in short: this person “will not transform his life, will not be what is admired”.¹¹⁸ With recourse to the idea of “existential kenosis”, however, we see how there is a way in which our artistic imaginations, so long as they entail carrying us into humble contemporaneity with Christ, can avoid committing the sins which Anti-Climacus associates with those who are *only* concerned with forming outward artistic representations of Christ, without attending to transforming our own, inward, representation of Christ. That is not to say, however, that external representations can have no positive role in this process. The difference is that whatever discoveries we make in our artistic endeavours—literary, painterly, theatrical—must directly implicate ourselves in our relation to Christ, must help us to “transform” our lives to be more like Christ’s.

This is reliant on the spiritual reading of contemporaneity, as well as the imaginary. It is important that Christ’s “presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past”¹¹⁹ and that in this presence the Lord is able to “wake us up” and “rescue us” from being admirers and not imitators.¹²⁰ Through the imagination the self steadily appropriates “the ideal self that has been established by God”.¹²¹ This imitation is relational, combining human creative potential and the grace of God. Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt’s analysis of the child fascinated by the figure of Christ in *No. III of Practice* being helped “out into suffering” by “Governance”¹²² highlights Anti-Climacus’ interest in the fruitful collision of the supernatural and the imaginative, in which “human imagination cooperates with the Divine”.¹²³ The fundamental difference between vicarious and flippant forms of aesthetic evolution which are the object of Anti-Climacus’ attack on “Christian art”, is that the positive, Christian type—which he endorses tacitly through his methods—is grounded in *imitatio*

¹¹⁵ Hjordis Becker-Lindenthal, “Kierkegaard on Imagination: Possibility, Hope and the Imitation of Christ,” *History of European Ideas* (2020): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2020.1799558>.

¹¹⁶ Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, “Existential Kenosis,” 716.

¹¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255.

¹¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 252.

¹¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

¹²⁰ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 233.

¹²¹ Wojciech Kaftanski, “The Socratic Dimension of Kierkegaard’s Imitation,” *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 58 (2017): 606.

¹²² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 191.

¹²³ Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, “Existential Kenosis,” 714.

Christi. Brian Gregor puts this nicely: “These are not possibilities that a purely active self dreams up and projects onto the world; rather, these possibilities are engendered by Christ’s transformation of reality, and are given through the imagination”.¹²⁴ Thus, whilst not denying an active agency to the living Lord, contemporaneity functions as an aesthetically formative mode of imitation of Christ.

This harks back to the strange form of knowledge introduced by Christ—the Word as flesh; the way, truth, and life—detailed earlier in this paper. While avidly dissuading against historical, speculative, or observational forms of knowledge, it might have appeared as though Anti-Climacus was leaving rather little by way of coming to know Christ. However, with the introduction of this theme of imitation, we are offered a route in:

...no, the being of truth is the redoubling of truth within yourselves, within me, within him, that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth approximately in the striving for it... just as the truth was in Christ a *life*, for he was the truth.¹²⁵

To be acquainted with Christ, therefore, resides in the “redoubling of truth within [yourself]” and “approximately striving for it”. The living aspect of truth that the Incarnation offers in the form of a person can only be appropriated existentially; “when it becomes a life in me” through *imitatio Christi*.¹²⁶ Descriptions by figures such as Ramazzotto, who describes this truth as “a performative experience that changes the entire existential sphere of the learner”,¹²⁷ and Gregor, who writes of the “the subjective appropriation of atonement” as a task for Christians to complete by striving “actively [to] re-present” Jesus,¹²⁸ have drawn attention to the imitative consequences of Anti-Climacus’ radical claim on the existential nature of Christian truth. Since the truth of Christ cannot be abstracted satisfactorily in the form of a pattern, syllogism, or doctrine, it is only by sharing our time with Christ in choosing to relate to him inter-subjectively that we can approach the task of imitation. The personal, contemporaneous presence of this type of knowledge is so important to Anti-Climacus that he even describes it as: “to exist *in* what one understands”.¹²⁹ Importantly, this involves a posture of humility and submission, what Rasmussen describes eloquently as letting oneself “be poetically composed”. The existential willingness to becoming contemporary with the Absolute in actuality, in the fullness of His truth, opens us up to a creative and intelligent power far beyond our hubristic conceptions of human competence, “and in this respect a simple Christian lives far more poetically than many a brilliant intellectual”.¹³⁰

¹²⁴ Gregor, “Thinking Through Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus,” 452.

¹²⁵ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 205.

¹²⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 206.

¹²⁷ Ramazzotto, “The Ambiguity of Mimesis,” 88.

¹²⁸ Gregor, “Thinking Through Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus,” 452.

¹²⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 134 (emphasis added).

¹³⁰ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 56.

Risk and Decision

With this in mind, there is another subsidiary element to contemporaneity that it would be improper to leave out. This is the dichotomy which Anti-Climacus sets up between faith and offence, calling the reader to the requirement of decision: “believe or he will be offended”.¹³¹ In positing offence as the opposite of faith, Anti-Climacus hopes to accentuate the gravity of faith. It is easier to notice the emotional connotations associated with offence than perhaps it is when “faith” can be a position adopted nominally or apathetically. For Anti-Climacus: “faith is a choice”.¹³² The relationship between this and contemporaneity is expounded most fully in the following:

It is a very awkward matter to have to assume in connection with a contemporary that he actually does do signs and wonders—when we have him at a distance, when the outcome of his life encourages one in delusions, then it is easy to delude oneself into thinking that one believes it.¹³³

This “awkward matter” is felt most strongly in contemporaneity, in: “[t]he present, the moment of decision in which freedom can be exercised [which] decisively differentiates the past and the future”.¹³⁴ According to Taylor’s monograph on the relationship between self and time in Kierkegaard’s works, “to be faced with the either-or of decision” is what it means for Kierkegaard “to be in time”.¹³⁵ On this reading, it becomes apparent why contemporaneity (the same time) becomes an important characteristic for choosing faith in a meaningful way. Anti-Climacus describes the “possibility of offense” as like “standing at the crossroad”.¹³⁶ Elsewhere this crossroad is described as “where eternal and temporal suffering placed its cross, and calls”¹³⁷ and “where death distinguishes death from life”.¹³⁸ Becoming contemporary with Christ can therefore be construed as summoning this crossroad, an activity that is likely to require imaginative effort in order to realise this spiritual moment of “vitality and energy”.¹³⁹ The way in which these two “contemporaneities” cooperate in *Practice in Christianity* is summarised succinctly by Taylor: “Both Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works and the life of Christ, though in different ways, call for a decision”.¹⁴⁰

¹³¹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 96.

¹³² Kierkegaard, *PC*, 141.

¹³³ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 41.

¹³⁴ Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*, 182.

¹³⁵ Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*, 182.

¹³⁶ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 81.

¹³⁷ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 16.

¹³⁸ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 17.

¹³⁹ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 35.

¹⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *PC*, 318.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard's *Anti-Climacus* coaches us into an atmosphere of receptivity and alertness, bringing us into contemporaneity with his work in order to point us towards fascination and contemporaneity with Christ. He shifts time-frames in his writing, addressing me directly as a reader almost two centuries later: "My listener, you to whom my discourse is addressed! Today he is indeed with you as if he were closer to the earth".¹⁴¹ In doing so, it is not only that he "identifies" contemporaneity as essential to faith and imitation, he also "narratively induces this in his reader".¹⁴² There seems to be a dual function of this approach, one that he notes himself explicitly: "One becomes a Christian only in the situation of contemporaneity with Christ, in this situation of contemporaneity everyone will also become aware".¹⁴³ Statements like this show how it is that "awareness", i.e. ways of relating artistically/reflectively to the world, are inextricably linked to ways of relating to Christ in faith. These relations disrupt time in resistance to inertia and speculative, theoretical, or aesthetic hubris. *Anti-Climacus' Practice in Christianity* moves us away from certainty, results, and knowledge *about* Christ into the commitment of becoming contemporary *with* him. Imaginative reconstruction is manifestly important to Kierkegaard/*Anti-Climacus*. Artworks (including *Practice in Christianity*) have the vital potential to enable what Stokes aptly describes as "transfiguring [something] not in its content, but in its relation to the contemplator".¹⁴⁴ Stokes uses this phrase as a description of reception, but we can easily see how it could also be applied to artistic production—an endeavour concerned with creative composition. Crucially though, these reformulations and adjustments in perspective only matter to *Anti-Climacus* if they culminate in choosing to devote our temporal selves to the eternal God in *imitatio Christi*.

References

I use the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* abbreviations to refer to Kierkegaard's works throughout:

JP: *Journals and Papers*

TA: *Two Ages*

PF: *Philosophical Fragments*

PC: *Practice in Christianity*

CUP: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments', Vol. I*

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¹⁴¹ Kierkegaard, PC, 156.

¹⁴² Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, "Existential Kenosis," 706.

¹⁴³ Kierkegaard, PC, 102.

¹⁴⁴ Stokes, "See for Yourself," 306.

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Review of Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Maikki Aakko

Wycliffe Hall, University of Oxford

maikki.aakko@theology.ox.ac.uk

In *The Year of Our Lord 1943*, Alan Jacobs brings together a diverse group of thinkers in order to explore their response to the crisis of the Second World War. The quintet Jacobs chooses as his focus—W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, Jacques Maritain, and Simone Weil—spreads across the Atlantic Ocean but also across various literary forms and cultural milieus. These are not thinkers that are perhaps usually considered together as a group, but, despite their many differences, Jacobs presents a compelling argument for their treatment together as representatives of “Christian humanism”. Jacobs argues that during the war years all five writers were, mostly independently of each other, concerned with similar problems and found surprisingly similar answers to them—they saw the economic and political crisis of war as a symptom of a deeper, spiritual crisis; they were in support of Christian democracy but feared that its foundations were being undermined by secularism and the rise of technocratic societies, which the war had accelerated; they thought that the solution to the moral and spiritual crisis of the West lay largely in educational and cultural reform or—as Jacobs calls it—“Christian humanism”.

While the longest chapter of the book focuses on what Jacobs’s quintet was working on in 1943, he begins by providing an extensive background through the first five thematic chapters. We discover that, during the early years of the war and those preceding it, all five thinkers were starting to formulate their questions about the spiritual, and indeed metaphysical, foundations of Western democracies as they were facing their greatest existential threat yet in the form of totalitarian ideologies. Here, similar themes begin to emerge in the writings of these thinkers. It had been the mistake of liberalism to think of democracy as self-sustaining: what was needed was a renewed public interest in asking the necessary fundamental questions about human nature and the values upon which Western democracies were built.



Liberal instrumentalism, that willingness to defer ultimate questions as the price to be paid for getting along with one another, had left the democratic West unable to generate the energetic commitment necessary to resist the military and moral drive of societies that had clear answers to *Quid sit homo?* (34)

Eliot, Auden, Lewis, Weil, and Maritain all came to believe that the renewal of Christian faith and learning was at the centre of answering this question. Thus, all came to think carefully “about the relationship between Christianity and the Western democratic social order, and especially about whether Christianity was uniquely suited to the moral underpinning of that order” (xvi). Consequently, Christian cultural and educational restoration became a central theme for the five writers. However, they shared the conviction that “this restoration will not be accomplished only, or even primarily, through theology as such, but also more effectively through philosophy, literature, and the arts” (50), that is, through a humanistic approach. Thus, although Maritain was the only one that found some kind of direct appeal in the concept of humanism as such, the approach of all these thinkers could be characterized as a form of Christian humanism because they all perceived Christian understanding of humanity and humanistic learning to be vital in the formation of the ethical foundations of democracy: “The proper response to the Nazis therefore required not just fighting them but also re-emphasizing the *imago Dei*, for otherwise the Nazis’ opponents could become all too much like them” (46).

Thus, in the chapters “Demons” and “Force” Jacobs argues that mere Nazi ideology as such was not the only concern of his quintet: they were all in one way or another also critics of what they understood to be the illegitimate power of technocracy in all areas of society—a development which the war had accelerated and which they saw as antithetical to truly humanistic values. While the chapter “Demons” focuses mostly on Auden and Lewis, when it comes to “Force” the focus is understandably mostly on Weil. Jacobs, however, is again able to find creative and fascinating connections between Weil and the others: Weil’s concerns over the power of the “collective” and the oppressive potential of all religious and political institutions are echoed in the way other members of Jacobs’s quintet saw the powers of science, technology, and bureaucracy threatening the truly human way of living and learning. It is with Weil, however, that these concerns find their most powerful and distinct expression. Here, Jacobs is also able to draw more on the differences between some members of his group, especially those between Maritain and Weil, in regard to the differing attitudes of the two towards anti- or nonreligious humanism. Weil thus emerges as the necessary critical voice amongst the five thinkers, checking some of the more domineering tendencies of their thought.

After the thematic chapters, Jacobs finally leads us to the climax of his narrative. In 1943 the tide of the war was turning, and the Allied victory began to seem inevitable. This new situation turned the attention of Jacobs’s five thinkers towards the future, post-war societies that would emerge. Their chief concern could be characterized through Niebuhr’s favourite phrase: they feared that the Allies would “win the war but lose the peace” unless the Allies addressed the deeper spiritual crisis underlying the crisis of war. In other words, they worried that the Allied victory would be

merely a victory of one force over another, rather than a manifestation of the superiority of democracy as a value-system over fascist totalitarianism. Thus, all five thinkers began—in their own voices and formats—to formulate a vision of Christian humanistic learning that draws from wells deeper than those of the emerging technocracy, an education that focuses on the holistic development of the person and aims towards spiritual and moral goals higher than merely producing new parts for the machine of the modern state.

Despite these great visions and hopes, Jacobs ends his book with a somewhat pessimistic tone: he offers an honest assessment of the weaknesses of the proposals of these five thinkers and the minimal if not non-existent impact most of them had on the actual formation of post-war societies. According to Jacobs, his thinkers were, in the end, too late in generating their reflections: “They came perhaps a century too late, after the reign of technocracy had become so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts” (206). It is thus “no wonder that after having spent the years of the war narrating, dramatizing, and arguing for a richly humane model of personal and cultural formation, they all—save Weil, lying in her grave in Kent—turned to other matters” (206). Despite this, Jacobs thinks there is much that we can learn from these thinkers.

Moving creatively through associations and similarities from one thinker and theme to another, Jacobs finds unexpected connections and new clarity through comparison. His freely flowing narrative is structured mostly chronologically—although at times the chronology is broken deliberately in order to further illuminate a particular issue—and, despite the plurality of his thinkers and the complexity of their ideas, he builds his argument confidently, manifesting an impressive command of his craft in so doing. However, the narrative method Jacobs employs, while mostly being perfectly suited for the purposes of his argument and employed with impressive skill, may occasionally obscure important and fascinating differences between Jacobs’s quintet and make the connections between various thinkers sometimes feel forced. Jacobs’s exclusive focus on the threat of fascist totalitarianism might also disappoint those readers who would have hoped to learn more about the way these thinkers interpreted the uneasy alliance between the Communist Soviet Union and Western democracies. Reflection on those questions might have also been helpful in illuminating some features of Jacobs’s main argument about the importance of Christian humane learning in building societies built, not on force, but on values. These, however, are in the end minor issues that should not obscure the achievement of Jacobs’s fascinating and important book which offers a rich resource for anyone who wishes to think seriously about the way in which Christians can engage their societies in the face of the current crises they encounter.

Review of Eleanor McLaughlin, *Unconscious Christianity in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Late Theology: Encounters with the Unknown Christ* (London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020).

Gemma Birt

Ripon College Cuddesdon

gemma.birt@ripon.ox.ac.uk

What does it mean to be considered, or to consider oneself a Christian? Does someone have to identify as Christian or even engage consciously with Jesus Christ in order to consider themselves, or be considered, a Christian?

Eleanor McLaughlin sets out how Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the final years of his life, started to consider and explore the outlines of the proposition that a person could be a Christian without consciously engaging with Jesus Christ. McLaughlin's careful, methodical, and contextual examination of the sparse textual evidence is commendable and provides some thought provoking suggestions on the ambit of Bonhoeffer's thinking on this theological question.

The book is structured in two parts and contains a comprehensive and helpful introduction in which the author sets out the structure of her book and the main arguments as well as providing an overview of how unconscious Christianity is to be distinguished from Karl Rahner's concept of the Anonymous Christian. In Part I of the book, McLaughlin begins by situating Bonhoeffer's thinking on this topic within the important context of his membership of the *Bürgertum*, i.e., that group of German society who saw themselves as willing to build community and provide responsible leadership of their community. McLaughlin then outlines the four instances in his texts in which Bonhoeffer mentions unconscious Christianity and which provide the basis and substance for her working definition and discussion.



First, he mentions it in the margins of the manuscript to his essay “Ultimate and Penultimate Things” in his work *Ethics*.¹ McLaughlin argues that his scribble of “unbewußtes Christentum” in the margins of the manuscript of this essay is in fact a description of the people that he is describing in that essay. These, for Bonhoeffer, are people who “would no longer dare to call themselves Christians” but who should, because of who they are and what they do, “be claimed for Jesus Christ” (65).

Second, he mentions it in his fictional work, *Novel*, in which the young characters discuss their own parents and reflect that, whilst they do not go to church and would not be described as Christians “in the customary sense”, they are more like Christians because “without knowing it and certainly without talking about it, in truth they still base their lives on Christianity, an unconscious Christianity” (68). McLaughlin’s treatment of Bonhoeffer’s fictional work as theological is also here important as it underpins her argument that it is a significant resource for understanding his theological ideas.

Third, he mentions it in a letter to his good friend Eberhard Bethge and, fourthly, in some notes he made before writing an outline for a new book. In his letter to Bethge, it is the way in which Bonhoeffer presents unconscious Christianity as a theological theme that broadens its significance beyond the fictional theological discussion in *Novel*. Regarding the mention of unconscious Christianity in the book outline, McLaughlin argues that Bonhoeffer links his idea of unconscious Christianity to the actions performed by those called righteous by Jesus in Matthew 25.

In relation to each of these instances, McLaughlin takes care to outline and emphasise the importance of noting the different contexts in which these texts were written, thereby emphasising the importance of situating the written evidence of his thinking on unconscious Christianity within the extraordinarily difficult circumstances in which the texts were created. Apart from the reference in *Ethics*, all other references were made during his time in Tegel Prison, shortly before his murder by the Nazis. Her careful analysis also enables her to point out the somewhat fluid outlines and potential internal inconsistencies of Bonhoeffer’s thinking on the topic of unconscious Christianity.

Despite the problems and apparent tensions in the evidence on Bonhoeffer’s thinking on unconscious Christianity, McLaughlin concludes Part I of her book with her own working definition of Bonhoeffer’s theory of unconscious Christianity. She proposes, taking all the evidence together, that for Bonhoeffer:

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Volume 6*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott, German edition ed. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green, English edition ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 146-70 (see fn. 111).

Unconscious Christianity refers to the whole body of good people who have encountered Christ without being aware of it and do not self identify as Christians. In addition they may fulfil any of these six criteria (1) to have faith without knowing it, (2) to be selfless and participate in Jesus's being-for others, (3) to not seek to be other than what they are, (4) to value the penultimate, (5) to perform acts of faith without reflecting on them, (6) to be a member of the *Bürgertum* (95).

Working definitions are often assumed to demarcate the parameters of a concept and sometimes take on a life of their own. There is therefore a danger in recognising any working definition without also appreciating and giving sufficient weight to the complexity and richness of the underlying analysis. Whilst McLaughlin emphasises the importance of recognising the apparent contradictions and developing nature of Bonhoeffer's thinking on this topic, it is perhaps only in her use of the words "may fulfil any of these six criteria" in her definition that this fluidity is recognised. Any use of the definition for the purposes of conversation on this topic must therefore also expressly embrace the assumption that Bonhoeffer might have, had he not been murdered by the Nazis in April 1945, developed his thinking on this topic further.

In Part II of her book McLaughlin brings her definition into conversation with other writing and work by Bonhoeffer (such as his seminal work on "World Come of Age"). She engages with the work of other Bonhoeffer scholars such as Eberhardt Bethge and Ferdinand Schlingensiepen. Although her analysis within the context of the work of these other theologians is brief, it is insightful, and they act as valuable counterpoints to her own thinking.

Of particular relevance is the way in which McLaughlin unpacks Bonhoeffer's unconscious Christianity as a means of understanding how his own theology shifted in focus in response to his personal, physical, and imprisoned circumstances (147-54). She argues that, as Bonhoeffer begins to consider that it is possible for humans to engage with Christ unconsciously, he recognises that those whom he would otherwise have considered outside the Church are now part of the Church. In the final years of his life, Bonhoeffer, imprisoned in Tegel Prison, would have been living with the brutal realisation of the failure of German Christians and the church to organise any effective opposition to the Nazi's rule. Supported in prison by people who may not have identified as Christian, and so were officially outside the church, he would have sought to understand how these people fitted into his theological understanding. As McLaughlin states, and which has particular resonance for us as we consider what it means to respond to those in need in times of crisis: "Acts of selfless love and being-for-others, with no references to Christ, are now [for Bonhoeffer] indicators of Christianity and of belonging in the Christian community" (169).

Whilst McLaughlin's proposed definition is carefully caveated, there remains an inherent danger, not least to inter-faith dialogue and relations, in claiming someone is "so good" or has acted so selflessly, that they therefore must be Christian and claimed by the Church. Although she alludes to this potential difficulty, a more in-depth exploration of the dangers of the idea of unconscious

Christianity would be valuable, particularly as a counterweight to her excellent suggestions of the wider practical theological implications of this definition for the church today.

McLaughlin's work provides ample material for further discussion. Whilst she examines unconscious Christianity as a shift within Bonhoeffer's theology, it would be valuable to engage McLaughlin's definition with other areas of Bonhoeffer's theology such as his soteriology and his work on "costly Grace". How can a doctrine of Christianity that on the one hand enfolds and names as "Christian" someone who has not consciously chosen to follow Christ also hold within it an understanding that the Grace of God is costly, "not cheap" because "it calls to discipleship", to "follow *Jesus Christ*", and "costs people their lives"?² Bonhoeffer's doctrine of costly Grace emphasises the personal sacrifices that have to be made in order to receive God's grace and the Christological and reciprocal nature of such sacrifice. Where does the person who does not consciously engage with Christ, who is yet claimed by a loving Christ, fit into Bonhoeffer's views on Salvation and costly Grace?

These questions aside, the important point to remember is that McLaughlin's stated aim in writing this book is not to provide answers around what constitutes unconscious Christianity but to set the stage for such conversations to take place. For scholars of Bonhoeffer, it is her careful and reasoned methodology that is of such value, both in terms of what she contributes to the field but also in how she demonstrates clear, articulate scholarship.

Rowan Williams, in the foreword to the book, praises McLaughlin's work on this new topic as providing "outstandingly clear and persuasive readings of Bonhoeffer's texts" as well as "fresh and valuable insight into Bonhoeffer's poetry and fiction" (ix-x). McLaughlin has indeed achieved what she has set out to do: by providing a coherent and well-reasoned exploration of Bonhoeffer's work on this topic of unconscious Christianity, she invites us to engage once more in the question, more pertinent as we see ever increasing pockets of secularisation in Western society, of "Who is Christ for us today?" (167). McLaughlin reminds and emphasises afresh how valuable Bonhoeffer's relentless pursuit to theologically understand his lived reality is to us today. And this, right down to his marginal scribbles.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Volume 4*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, German edition ed. Martin Kuske and Isle Tödt, English edition ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 43-5.

Review of Paul K. Moser, *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Dallas A. Callaway

Magdalen College, University of Oxford

dallas.callaway@magd.ox.ac.uk

Whether due to Copernican astronomy, Darwinian biology, biblical criticism, or the technocratic biases of humanist, materialistic culture, for many today, the evils besetting humankind hedge one toward agnosticism if not full denial of the God of Christianity and Abrahamic monotheism.¹ Even apart from sociocultural and intellectual currents, a global pandemic, natural disasters, unjust resource distribution, mass genocides, political unrest, economic destabilisation, and untold “quotidian” suffering (e.g., personal loss, illness, and death) commonly dispose to doubting the existence of an omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent deity. Indeed, these instantiations of the problems of evil/suffering often dispose to the spirit of the melancholy Psalmist(s) or the dark, sarcastic wisdom of *Qohelet* at least as much as Job’s indefatigable faith.² That is, of course, when the ineffable pain occasioned by these phenomena does not bypass apostasy altogether but rather underwrite misotheism/dystheism and thus drive the will to decide. Inasmuch as present times reflect any of these phenomena, then, this review reaches back to Paul Moser’s 2013 book, *The Severity of God*, to examine what is a timely read for an age submerged in crisis and clutching for the theological and religious wherewithal with which to stay the pain.

The “severity” to which Moser’s work refers is the provisioning of “...difficulty, discomfort, anxiety, stress, or insecurity...” (3) and Moser undertakes an ambitious investigation into the tenability of holding severity as an integral feature of the character and wisdom of God. Specifically, guided by the question “...not so much whether God exists as what the character and purposes of a God

¹ James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26.

² Pss. 10, 14; Eccl. read without the epilogue (12:9-14); Job 27:3-4.



worthy of worship would be, if God exists” (52), Moser sets as his central thesis that only a severe God would be worthy of worship (i.e., morally perfect) and that such a God, manifesting divine *agapē*, would be robustly transformative in his/her/their commitment to a salvific goal for humans. That is, as Moser contends:

God would intend this world’s rigorous flux [e.g., distress, impermanence, difficulty] to be a remedial school of character formation for humans as they depend on divine noncoercive...[encouragement to achieve the goal of lasting, cooperative life with God]....This divine redemptive school would be a place of rigorous human challenge and struggle, because selfish human ways, being deep-seated and stubborn, do not yield easily to the unselfish ways of divine *agapē* (75).

To this end, Moser presents his argument across five substantive chapters. In Chapter 1, Moser delineates how worthiness of worship requires moral perfection and, while refusing to extinguish human free wills, a morally perfect God would work, however severely, to encourage the volitional transformation and redemption of human agents. In Chapter 2, Moser addresses the ways in which the “flux” of life bears on the existence of God and contends that a severe *agapē* struggle between the wills of humans and that of God (exemplified in earnest willingness to follow Christ in the pathos of Gethsemane), wherein God exclusively provisions divine moral correction, provides the elusive evidence for God’s stabilising existence and changelessness.³ In Chapter 3, Moser highlights the inability of traditional natural theological arguments for the existence of God to accommodate the motives that a God worthy of worship would want in human inquiry/belief regarding God. Absent attention to the conative nature of human inquiry/belief, Moser asserts that the various arguments (e.g., ontological, cosmological, teleological) of natural theology routinely run roughshod over the imperative evidence of God, as argued for in Chapter 2. In Chapter 4, Moser distinguishes between human acts that (a) earn and (b) receive salvation and contends that, *pace* Pelagianism, humans in no way earn their salvation but rather may act by choosing to, amidst the cacophony of the world’s flux, faithfully trust in God and thereby *receive* God’s grace. A God worthy of worship, for Moser, would offer grace, but the reception of such inheres God’s severe expectations (e.g., to actualise veridical enemy-love rather than succumb to Nietzschean *ressentiment*) and thereby entails the rigorous activity of volitional transformation. Finally, in Chapter 5, and given the preceding chapters, Moser offers a rejoinder to philosophical atheism, espousing reconsideration of, if not monotheism, then at least agnosticism on the basis of greater evidential support. That is, a greater evidential basis for monotheism or at least agnosticism relative to atheism after taking into consideration the evidence for God which is disclosed to those willfully participating in what is, for Moser, foundational for Christian philosophy: a severe *agapē* struggle with a God worthy of worship.

³ Matt. 26:39

Overall, Moser offers a largely meticulous argument within the sorely under-researched area of Christian response to the problems of evil/suffering that obviates the liabilities of Leibnizian theodicy, as they are acerbically diagnosed by Voltaire.⁴ In addition, Moser's enterprising presentation of subjectively-disclosed and self-authenticating evidence of God in the context of a Christ-based "Gethsemane union" (174) between human and divine wills is especially commendable for, if not its originality, then its suasive intrepidity.⁵

Despite Moser's typical fastidiousness, however, his book would have benefitted from greater clarity at several junctures. Of note, though he references myriad impediments to uniting human wills with the perfect moral will of God (e.g., selfishness, pride, despair, superficiality), Moser often presents these polysemous phenomena as self-explanatory, which, in begetting undue opacity, impairs the cogency of his argument. To isolate just one example, those familiar with Moser's oeuvre will charitably discern his invocation of "despair" as denoting Kierkegaard's particular conception of spiritual sickness rooted in the latter's philosophical anthropology.⁶ However, those not primed with the Kierkegaardian lexicon may recruit the more familiar English definition to grasp "despair" as a synonym of depression or dysphoric mood state and, in so doing, lapse into a conflation of concepts, which is, at best, erroneous.⁷ As though, to distill an absurd inference, and one surely not intended by Moser, entering into a severe *agapē* struggle with God could be mitigated in any way by psychotropics, psychotherapy, or other human artefact. Had Moser's invocation of "despair" contained clearer delineation of, to use Kierkegaard's idiom, the "infinite qualitative difference" between humanity and God, the work would more unequivocally assert, as Moser putatively wants to have done, that the *agapē* struggle and divine correction is *not* reducible to that which humans may, at least in principle, provide. In this way, the cogency of Moser's argument would have been enhanced such that one could not mistake his argument as subserving an "unyielding despair" (35) or, perhaps worse, eliding with what Moser derides as "cheap theism" (38) in the spirit of, for example, Feuerbach or Lacan/Žižek.⁸

⁴ Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Eph. 3:13. As well, Moser's notion of a Christ-based "Gethsemane union" bears remarkable resemblance to many of Kierkegaard's philosophical treatises and religious discourses e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, "All Things Must Serve Us for Good—When We Love God" in *Christian Discourses/The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 188-201.

⁶ e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁷ Gordon Marino, "Making the Darkness Visible: On the Distinction between Despair and Depression in Kierkegaard's Journals" in *Kierkegaard in the Present Age*. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 99-111.

⁸ As embodied in the *mutatis mutandis* inversions of Feuerbach ("Love is God") and Lacan via Žižek ("if God exists, then everything is permitted"). Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot

Nevertheless, despite these imprecisions, *The Severity of God* contains a wealth of unique and significant insights into establishing a robust religious, and distinctively Christian, epistemology with which to engage the problems of evil/suffering. Insofar as an age of crisis thrusts such problems to the fore, Moser's work is felicitous and essential reading for any student of Christian theology, philosophy of religion, or ethics in such an age.

(Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989), 264; Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 28.

Review of Mari Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Un Sung Kwak

St. John's College, University of Oxford

un.kwak@sjc.ox.ac.uk

In *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, Mari Joerstad aims to elaborate the activity of nonanimal nature throughout the Hebrew Bible. She explores “personalistic nature texts,” which occur when “nonanimal nature performs actions, displays affect, or is addressed in a manner similar to how one addresses a person” (3). Joerstad undertakes her research on the Hebrew Bible with the question: “What do these texts suggest about how ancient Israelites viewed and interacted with the world?” (2). This approach represents both exegetical and ecological research aims. By employing classical tools of biblical studies (e.g., close reading, historical comparison, and linguistic study), she investigates a more holistically grounded understanding of the texts. Then, she draws the reader to “think about how we, in the contemporary world, interact with the world around us and to consider how engaging with the Bible’s active understanding of nonhuman nature might influence our ethics and the scope and nature of contemporary environmental action” (3). So, this study does not set out to discuss current ecological issues or to suggest practical solutions through the lens of the Hebrew Bible but rather to refresh the perspective of how we could understand the texts in the Hebrew Bible to engage in conversation concerning our current ecological issues.

Chapter 2 assigns a theoretical and methodological foundation for understanding texts ecologically. With the work of Cora Diamond, Joerstad argues that the ideas of metaphor and relationality in *new animism* could open a new perspective for understanding personalistic nature texts in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, for biblical scholars who are familiar with the concepts of metaphor and relationality, the question “why *new animism*?” is not answered convincingly.

Chapter 3 delineates the activity of the ground and earth by examining personalistic nature texts in the Torah. Some of the actions attributed to the ground are: participating in the creation of



vegetation; crying out to Cain's murder; swallowing the Egyptians through the Reed Sea; devouring Korah and his company; and watching the behaviour of the Israelites. Significantly, these dynamic actions of the land represent "the relationship between the Israelites and the land into which they are about to enter. The character of the land, its obligations to YHWH, its relation to humans—these themes come to the fore in personalistic nature texts in the Torah" (48).

In Chapter 4, Joerstad examines personalistic nature texts among the Prophetic books in five thematic categories, which she classifies by recurrent images and vocabulary: war, theophany, address, grief, and joy. Nonanimal nature 1) acts like a warrior or helper in war, 2) reacts to YHWH's presence with feelings of fear or reverence, 3) is addressed by YHWH and YHWH's prophets by the literary device of "apostrophe," 4) grieves and mourns desolation and destruction caused by human action, and 5) rejoices through moisture, growth, and fertility in YHWH's deliverance. The emotional life of other-than-human persons shows how nonanimal nature diversely and dynamically relates with YHWH and humans.

Focusing on the Writings (the third part of the Hebrew Bible), Chapter 5 explores the unique features of nonanimal nature that are not discussed in the previous chapters. These include 1) the joyous shouting of nonanimal nature in Psalms, 2) the non-responsive attitude of nonanimal nature towards humans or human behaviour in Job, and 3) the prominent blending of humans, animals, plants, and land in the Song of Songs. These diverse descriptions imply that the action and feelings of nonanimal nature are never patterned and predictable but are vital and dynamic. So:

What Job, the Song, and the Psalter show is that the biblical writers are continually thinking and rethinking the relationship between humans and all that is not human. Their attitudes towards and interactions with nature are not static; it is an ongoing process of getting to know each other (194).

In her concluding chapter, Joerstad delineates the implications of her study by: 1) laying out three fields—theological anthropology, architecture and artefacts as presented in biblical texts, and iconographic exegesis of the archaeological record of ancient Israel—where her study can be applied, 2) putting the work of two modern artists (Patricia Johanson and Jules Renard) into conversation with biblical texts, and 3) discussing how religious communities can address climate change.

By thorough investigation of personalistic nature texts, Joerstad answers the initial task of her monograph. In summary, the ancient Israelites in the Hebrew Bible viewed nonanimal nature as God's creation, with its own purpose and function in life and in relationship with God and humans. Her application of the concept of new animism, which is a relatively new topic in religious studies, is worthy of further engagement. Although a clearer definition of *new animism* is needed, her argument that the idea of relationality in new animism is useful for understanding the relational nature of God, humans, and nonanimal nature in the Hebrew Bible is appreciated.

The most problematic and controversial question appears in her opinion on the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and animism. She states that “the ontologies of animists and the writers of the Hebrew Bible share a family resemblance” (22). Throughout her argument, the vague term “family” does not seem appropriate to describe the relationship she outlines between the Hebrew Bible and the concept of *new animism*. It should be noted that the phenomenological similarities between the concepts as expressed in the Hebrew Bible and in various forms of animism do not guarantee that those similarities are of the same root. In addition, it would be helpful for her readers to be told more explicitly that the structure and the contents of this book follow the tripartite scriptural corpus of the Hebrew Bible. Explaining this choice may reduce confusion for those (less familiar with the shape of the Hebrew corpus) who question why some books (e.g., Joshua) are treated alongside the Prophetic books.

These minor critiques notwithstanding, this book is valuable and recommended to those—academic *and* lay audiences—who want to know how nonanimal nature relates with God and humans in the Hebrew Bible and to bring Hebrew Bible perspectives to bear on dialogue about current ecological issues.

Review of Philip Butler, *Black Transhuman Liberation Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

James A. Lawrence

St. Antony's College, University of Oxford

james.lawrence@sant.ox.ac.uk

There are two crises at the centre of the present monograph. Firstly, the crisis of race. The fact that Philip Butler's work was published in 2020, the year in which the movement for Black Lives galvanised protests and brought culture-wide reckoning with systemic racism, speaks poignantly to the crisis that Black folks (this is Butler's preferred terminology) experience. Secondly, the technological crisis facing humanity. Of course, technology is transforming every aspect of modern life. Transhumanism is a philosophical and technological movement that embraces this transformation by advocating for the development and adoption of technologies that are designed to upgrade humanity by improving health and lifespans, intellectual and physical capacities, and increasing control over the human body, mind, and emotions. These technologies include genetic engineering, information technology, and anticipated future technologies such as machine-phase nanotechnology and general artificial intelligence. Transhumanists, such as the University of Oxford philosophy Professor Nick Bostrom, welcome these changes to humanity and argue that such enhancements signal the dawn of "post-humanity". I suggest that the transhumanist agenda presents a crisis to contemporary society and theology, not in the modern parlance of "a time of intense difficulty", but in the older sense of, "the decisive moment" or "turning point."¹ The innovative move that Butler presents in this monograph is to bring these two crises together in an attempt to use one crisis as the antidote for the other.

Butler is an advocate of transhumanism. From the outset he accepts, firstly, the anthropological claim that all humanity is already and has always been transhuman. This is the claim that, because

¹ *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2016), "Crisis," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>.



humanity has always extended itself through technologies—think of cave dwellers using tools in the creation of fire and art and the development of hunting and cooking tools—humanity has always been more than human (i.e., transhuman). Secondly, Butler accepts transhumanism's eschatological hope that, "barring some global reformation toward agrarian preindustrial minimalism, transhumanism will become the means by which society operates" (2). Butler goes on to say he believes that the "shifting landscape" in which we currently find ourselves "requires a complete acceptance" of technology, "especially theologically" (14). Butler hopes that "a further look into the transhumanist posthuman, through a Black transhuman liberation theology lens, will allow for a move towards the acceptance of directed evolution" (19).

Butler's work is broken into four central chapters with an introduction and conclusion. In chapter one, "Thinking of Black Transhumanism: Non-Humanity, Moving Away from Transhumanism's Roots", Butler reflects on the relationship between non-humanity and Blackness. In dialogue with the post-colonial work of Frantz Fanon, Butler states that Black folks are not, and have never been, *human* because *human* as a concept is part of an epistemically colonial system that rejects Blackness and which Black folks should therefore reject. Accepting this "non-human" positioning of Black folks opens the door for transhumanism. Butler argues that "if Black folks are not human, Black folks are also no longer bound to the theological claims which uphold the sanctity, or need for preservation, of the 'human' form" (20). For Butler, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the concept of humanity found in transhumanism provides a level playing field for black and womanist theologians representing communities whose humanity has already been deconstructed by a colonial and white supremacist society. Because the humanity of Black folks has already been deconstructed by a society that privileges whiteness, transhumanism offers hope for a new kind of humanity, so Butler asserts that "Black folks are already transhumanist" (23). In the second half of this chapter Butler examines the racist shortcomings of transhumanism, noting its eurocentrism and Enlightenment roots that inevitably result in proto-normative white supremacy. Butler notes that "transhumanists admit that transhumanism is built upon Enlightenment humanism's epistemological edifice to support notions of societal progress" (38). This is the same epistemologically colonial system that rendered Black folks as non-human.

Having critiqued both transhumanist and euro-centrist conceptions of humanity, in chapter two, "Foundations of a Black Transhumanism: Blackness as the Biotechnologically Mediated Experience of Black Vitality", Butler reimagines the Black body as technology. To do this he must develop a Black transhumanism that rejects the mind-body dualism which is central to euro-centrist transhumanism. Butler suggests that Black bodies are a technology that acts as a conduit for *vitalist panpsychic animism* which Butler later defines as God, saying, "in the case of the body, vitality gives life to the body and simultaneously the body gives vitality the chance to experience life. [...] African vitality's greatest manifestation of life force is God. [...] [T]here is no gradation of God, or that which is beyond the self" (53).

In chapter three, “The Neurophysiology of Spiritual Experience” Butler offers a biological breakdown of spiritual experience into four “realms”: physiological, psychological, neurological, and somatic. This chapter details scientific and neurological analyses of Black spiritual practices including ancestor veneration, dancing, which “has the potential to decrease activation in the PFC [prefrontal cortex] while increasing activation in the parietal regions” (92), and mimicry, which activates mirror neurons “found in the premotor/supplemental motor area” (96). Butler’s intention in offering an “understanding of the neurophysiological underpinning of spiritual experience” is to empower Black folks to not be “emotionally disrupted with every form of technologically mediated trauma” (102). However, he also repaints the spiritual practices of Black communities as techniques; the implicit assumption of this chapter is that the practices of Black communities are technologies of spirituality.

This leads to chapter four, “Black Transhuman Liberation Theology”, in which Butler provides a sketch of the spiritually augmented possibilities of pairing Black biotechnology and Black spirituality. Butler argues that “technology is the key to Black revolution and liberation” (105), a liberation that is economic and cultural, in line with the broader aims of liberation theology. The question is, can the development of new technology, which currently takes place as the result of capitalist market forces, be the source of that revolution and liberation? Butler concedes that the development of new technology will inevitably lead to greater inequality and worsening economic prospects for Black communities, yet Butler’s solution to this is to encourage Black communities to harness the technological and accept their posthuman future. Ethicists such as Katie Cannon have argued that Black communities often must make choices between “bad” and “worse” rather than the “bad/good” choices available to people in positions of privilege.² Perhaps Butler is advocating that Black folks make a pragmatic choice that, as a white man, this reviewer cannot appreciate. Yet, given his advocacy of transhumanism, Butler does not appear to be presenting the technification of Black folks as a “better than worse” choice but rather as the best choice.

The culmination of the book, chapter five, is titled “Black Transhumanism as Revolt Spirituality” and explores the revolutionary spirituality, the enhanced life, and the shifting power dynamics that result from Black Transhumanism. Butler cautions his readers that “God is not coming to liberate” (140); instead, the revolutionary spirituality that he advocates must come from a blending of Black vitality and technology.

Throughout his monograph, Butler embraces a paradoxical logic. He argues that colonialism has de-humanised Blackness and yet finds the solution to this crisis in transhumanism, which, as he notes, is inherently white and Eurocentric. He decries digitally mediated institutions and e-government, virtual spaces, and “technological advancements packaged in various consumer-based modalities” (5) as some of the numerous vehicles for Black oppression in the modern political

² Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

system that people of colour find themselves in today. And yet, despite his extensive critique of an impending technocracy, Butler continues to advocate for Transhumanism as the hope of Black liberation. One of the hallmarks of Butler's project is a novel combination of a Marxist critique of markets (a critique that is a core component of both Black and Liberation theologies) with transhumanist philosophy, which tends towards the pro-market stance of neo-liberal capitalism. It is the case that transhumanism espouses a revolutionary eschatology, and it would be interesting to see a comparison of the Marxist revolution of Liberation theology with the technological revolution of transhumanism. However, Butler simply splices these two ideas, arguing that it is through combining liberation theology with the immersion of oneself into the technological world that "one can actually embody a constructed theology that subverts technocratic attempts to control the human body and mind" (14-5).

Butler's work may well represent the first book-length attempt at a transhumanist theology that takes a positive approach towards transhumanism. This is in contrast with most of the theological academic writing on the subject which tends to be adversarial towards, or at least in critical dialogue with, transhumanism. It is concerning that Butler's bibliography suggests he has not engaged with the critical contemporary theological work of Ted Peters, Michel S. Burdett, Brent Waters, or Ronald Cole-Turner, the classic historical critique from Jacques Ellul, or even the theological techno-optimism of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

This monograph offers a bold attempt at developing a black transhumanist liberation theology. The work contains much creativity, offering an inter-disciplinary approach to the challenges presented by crises we face as a culture today. It is yet to be seen if the ideas contained can successfully be held together in the configuration that Butler presents.

Review of Craig Koester (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Taman Turbinton

Keble College, University of Oxford

taman.turbinton@keble.ox.ac.uk

Given the shifting trends and recent advancements on the scholarly study of the book of Revelation (a.k.a. John's Apocalypse), the time is ripe for an up-to-date and comprehensive survey that will orient readers to the major currents on this perplexing New Testament (NT) book. The aim of this handbook is to accomplish this task and Craig Koester is a very capable scholar and excellent choice as an editor for this project. He has published a well-received commentary on Revelation in the Anchor Yale Bible series along with several books and articles regarding various topics in Revelation. His team of thirty contributors include seasoned and young NT scholars, classicists, a medievalist, a few modern historians and theologians, and a church musician/scholar. Most of them have also published important scholarly material on Revelation in their respective disciplines. However, it is also pertinent to note that the volume primarily reflects an American vantage point (as nineteen of the thirty-one contributors are either American or affiliated with American universities and institutions).

Koester himself opens the volume with an elucidating general introduction to Revelation and then organizes the remaining contributions into five parts—(1) Literary Features; (2) Social Setting; (3) Theology and Ethics; (4) History of Reception and Influence; and (5) Currents in Interpretation. Mitchell Reddish begins Part 1 with a survey of the scholarly perspectives on Revelation's relationship to the literary genres of "apocalypse," "letter," and "prophecy" and ultimately concludes (rightly in this reviewer's opinion) that it bears the strongest resemblance to an apocalypse. James Resseguie in his article views Revelation's master plot as a story about the quest of the people of God in search of a new promised land, the New Jerusalem. Konrad Huber examines how John uses imagery such as word-pictures, symbols, and metaphors to convey his theological message. He carefully defines each category and does an insightful job of uncovering



Taman Turbinton, "Craig Koester (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*," *JOGTS* 2.1 (2021), pp. 155–159

some of the veiled meanings behind John's imagery. David deSilva argues persuasively that John wrote to persuade his audience to accept certain perspectives, allegiances, and calls to action, and to avoid others using rhetorical features such as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Steve Moyise surveys John's use of the Old Testament. He suggests John may have favored a Hebrew/Aramaic text and demonstrates that the books he most commonly draws from are Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Surprisingly, Moyise does not provide definitions for the terms "allusion," "echo," and "parallel," and sometimes seems to use them interchangeably. David Mathewson's article provides an excellent survey on the contemporary debates concerning John's notorious irregularities or solecisms in his use of the Greek language. He takes a minority (but growing) position amongst contemporary scholars by arguing that the solecisms are not that extensive and most of those that are often suggested have plausible explanations. Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler closes the section by guiding readers through the rich theology and functions of the hymns in Revelation. His article in particular is a very welcome contribution because (unfortunately) Revelation's hymns have not received the same amount of attention as other topics.

Part 2 opens with Warren Carter's careful presentation of a variety of scholarly views spanning the course of several centuries on Revelation's relationship to Roman rule in first-century Asia Minor. Carter concludes, along with the popular scholarly position, that there is a significant lack of evidence for situating Revelation in a setting of Christian persecution and forced participation in the imperial cult under Domitian (contra to Ascough, below, on the latter point). In his estimation, John "is the one experiencing a crisis, and he attempts to create a crisis among his audience" (138, *à la* Adela Yarbro Collins). Mikael Tellbe argues that there was significant conflict between early Christ-believers (Jews and gentiles) and non-Christ believing Jews and gentiles (i.e., those gentiles who lived like Jews). He finds that Revelation redefines the "people of God" in such a way that Christ-believers embody this title and can understand themselves as true Jews and future inhabitants of the New Jerusalem. From the opposite angle, Richard Ascough argues that John pulls together a variety of "pagan religions" (a phrase Ascough thinks should be avoided) and Judeans into one group in order to contrast them with the true people of God and the true vision for worship. (He seems correct about the pagan religions but not entirely about the Judeans.) He also concludes that although participation in the imperial cult was not required, there would have been significant social pressure to do so (which is something the author of Revelation urges his audience to strongly resist). Paul Trebilco closes the section and argues that the author of Revelation did have some knowledge of Pauline, Johannine (i.e., Christianity reflected from the Johannine epistles), and other forms of Christianity, but he was not directly influenced by them. He even suggests (reasonably in my opinion) that Revelation addresses all Christians (including those of the Pauline and Johannine traditions) in western Asia Minor.

Martin Karrer begins Part 3 by examining Revelation's language about God in light of contemporary Jewish, Christian, and Graeco-Roman literary texts, papyri, etc., and concludes John heavily draws

upon Jewish traditions and language while also contrasting God with the foreign pagan gods of his time. Loren Johns argues convincingly that Revelation is not so much about the end of the world as it is about Jesus. In his analysis he shows that, of the NT writings, Revelation uses the richest imagery, metaphors, and symbols for Jesus (the lamb being chief). John Thomas examines the neglected subject of John's pneumatology. Mark Stephens examines the themes of "creation" and "new creation" in ancient Jewish literature and Revelation. He also shows how these themes directly relate to the depiction of the end of the Roman world in Revelation and the arrival of the New Jerusalem. Gregory Stevenson addresses various aspects of evil in Revelation, from the cosmic war of good and evil, to how John encourages his audience to endure evils such as suffering (what Stevenson calls evil without) while battling others that come from within. David Barr addresses a related but more sensitive topic by discussing the various issues and concerns scholars have raised with both (possible) literal and metaphorical depictions of violence. The problems are ultimately left unresolved, but Barr does attempt to help readers understand how John's culture greatly influenced his violent story. Lynn Huber examines Revelation's depictions of Babylon (i.e., Rome) as "whore" and the New Jerusalem as "bride" from the perspective of a "queer lesbian reader" (309). She introduces readers to the use of queer theory on Revelation's city-women imagery and examines literal and metaphorical readings of the texts. Her article also contains figures of several non-color photos of a relief and ancient coins in order to help visually guide readers. Peter Perry closes Part 3 by examining how Revelation was presented to an original audience that considered itself the "people of God" and interprets a variety of terms that are used for this identity.

Juan Hernández Jr.'s opening article in Part 4 surveys Revelation's complex Greek textual history and major scholarly contributions from the *Textus Receptus* to the present *Text und Textwert* series. (Unfortunately, we will be waiting some time for the *Editio Critica Maior*.) Based on the *Text und Textwert* data, he concludes that there are no distinct text forms (including Byzantine) in Revelation. Tobias Nicklas surveys the canonical rejection and acceptance of Revelation in the early church and concludes that it belongs in the NT canon despite some of its pitfalls. Ian Boxall provides a brief introduction to the study of "reception history" and broadly surveys Revelation's reception up until the modern period. Charles Hill surveys the history of interpretation on Revelation more specifically in the early eastern and western churches. Julia Wannenmacher's† article helpfully guides readers through the less familiar medieval interpreters of Revelation. Paul Westermeyer provides a fascinating article that surveys the influence and use of Revelation in music and liturgy during the life of the modern church. (He also detects a few original liturgical elements within Revelation itself, and even those less musically inclined will appreciate and find his contribution informative). Joshua Searle and Kenneth Newport's joint article closes Part 4 by demonstrating that futurist interpretations of Revelation are not just confined to some eccentric

evangelicals and fundamentalist cults, but also had, and still have, an influence on the broader modern culture.

Part 5 closes the handbook with three entries on some less familiar trends (likely both to scholars and beginners alike) because they are relatively new. Susan Hylen discusses feminist interpretations of Revelation and highlights the major scholars and key texts. Thomas Slater shows that Revelation has been one of the most important NT books in different strands of African American theology and scholarship (from Black Liberation Theology advocates to those who lean more conservative). Lastly, Harry Maier offers an article on post-colonial interpretation of Revelation (which he incisively defines).

There are several positive features provided in this handbook. Every article offers an extensive bibliography, some also include additional suggestions for further reading, and a few include chapter endnotes. Only a few articles have no formal conclusion. Some of the authors skillfully interact with scholarly literature in languages other than English (mostly German, and some French and Italian). The volume contains mostly Greek transliterations of ancient texts, but a few Hebrew and Latin transliterations are also provided. These sometimes go untranslated, but the surrounding commentary still should prove helpful to those who have little experience with these languages.

Unfortunately, the handbook suffers from several significant weaknesses and errors. The editor's or publisher's decision not to include an index for biblical citations and other ancient sources significantly hinders scholarly investigation. The only index that is included appears to be a general index of authors and subjects. Sadly, it is very inconsistent. Far too many authors and important subjects that are discussed in various articles are excluded or missing: e.g., Augustine/Augustinian(s) (115, 299, 366, 369, 378, 383–84, 398, 418, 421, 423–24, 426–27, 437, 501; Augustine is incorrectly listed on 407 in the index), the European Union/EU (384, 458–60), Martin Luther (54, 294, 299, 339, 383, 387, 423, 427), Martin Luther King, Jr. (450), Reformed tradition/interpretation (383, 450, 460), and even Donald Trump (460)! The exclusion of an abbreviations list for primary and ancient sources/authors is disappointing, especially given that several contributors use different citation conventions. Also disappointing is the lack of visual art (such as color photos of illuminated manuscripts, frescoes, etc.) given that, of the NT writings, Revelation has had the richest reception history in such areas. (Readers will have to consult Boxall's article and his bibliography for further guidance.) This reviewer was quite surprised that Part 4 did not include an article specifically devoted to the reception of Revelation during and shortly after the Protestant Reformation, given that it was often used in debates about eschatology and the Pope's identity as the antichrist. Part 5 seems underserved with only three contributions, and it is quite disappointing that other currents and cultural studies (e.g., African, Asian, Latin American, etc.) were excluded. There are many typographical errors (including inconsistencies with formatting, references, and punctuation) and several factual errors. Most are minor, but a few are major. To highlight some examples:

misspellings, missing words, etc. (“Sources Chrétienne” (on xx); it is unclear if Karrer’s reference to QShirShabb (on 216) should refer specifically to 4QShirShabb^{a-h} (4Q400–7) or 11QShirShabb (11Q17), if both, perhaps Mas1k should have been included; *transliteration* (on 96, Moyise’s transliterations for Rev 15:3 should read “*alēthinai*” instead of “*alēthina*,” and “*dikaiai*” instead of “*dikaioi*”; Karrer (205) incorrectly transliterates Philo, *Spec.* 1.30 as “*heis esti ho theos*” which should read “*hoti theos heis esti*”); *other factual errors, etc.* (Hernández contains some errors and inconsistencies that could confuse readers. For example, he departs from the standard Gregory-Aland (GA) manuscript symbols in a few places: S 01 (on 344ff.) is normally given the GA symbol **Σ**, and the GA symbol S belongs to 028; Q 046 (on 346ff.) is normally only identified by the GA number, and the GA symbol Q belongs to 026; on the one hand he does not use the standard blackletter font for the papyri P98 and P115 (on 352), but on the other it is provided for **Ⲣ**⁴⁷. Also, Hernández’s claim that “there are no consistent Majority Text readings for the book of Revelation” (353) is not entirely true. The Byzantine text(s) of the Apocalypse do “*diverge* more often than they *converge*,” however, it also holds true that there are essentially two competing types, Av and Q.¹ Fact checking information cited in other books and articles is difficult because he does not provide specific page numbers. Maier (on 503) erroneously connects Revelation to Cotton Mather’s “postmillennial colonialism” and states that he composed his *Magnalia Christi Americana* in 1792 and was the first minister of Boston’s “First Church.” Mather is better described as an “eager millenarian,” was ordained in Boston’s North Church (a.k.a. Second Church), published the *Magnalia* in 1702 (rightly listed in Maier’s bibliography), and died in 1728 (ODNB).

These criticisms and disappointments are included in sincere hopes of helping to improve this otherwise impressive work of scholarship. Scholars and beginners alike from a variety of disciplines will still learn new and important information and become better acquainted with the *Status quaestionis* regarding most subjects. Therefore, this volume should be welcomed to the academic discussion. Given the prestigious nature of the Oxford Handbook series, it will come at a steep price. The volume will certainly populate many academic libraries soon, but one suspects most individual readers will wait until the various errata have been corrected before they shell out money from their own pockets.

¹ So, Maurice Robinson, (in private conversation) and his well-known article, “The Case for Byzantine Priority,” *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 6 (2001): quote in note 92, <http://jbtc.org/v06/Robinson2001.html>; also see his, “Scribal Habits Among Manuscripts of the Apocalypse,” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982); and his latest edition with William Pierpont† of the Byzantine text of Revelation in *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform 2018* (Nürnberg: VTR, 2018), which is also updated according to the data in *Text und Textwert*. (Astonishingly, Hernández does not even mention Robinson’s works.) Darius Müller’s dissertation has yet to be seen.