

# A Humble Courage

Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* as the Foundation for Karl Barth's  
View of Scripture and Faith

*by James R. Cowles*



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While historical generalizations are notoriously hazardous, we may say that one of the issues that precipitated the Protestant Reformation was the role of mediation in relation to faith. Prior to the Reformation, the believer's salvation was mediated, at least in the minds of the Reformers, by an elaborate hierarchy of priests, bishops, and popes in this world, and a no less elaborate hierarchy of confessors, saints, virgins, and martyrs in the next. The believer's interpretation of Scripture was subject to the same mediation. The consequent Protestant antipathy vis a vis mediation did not cease with the Reformation proper, however. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the mediation of human experience through Hegel's grand synthesis of the dialectic of history as the sweeping, grandiloquently optimistic - and supremely above all, rational - evolution of Spirit in and into the world would find its most eloquent antagonist in Kierkegaard's emphasis on the solitude of the individual human being before God, a relation not comprehensible in the rational terms so central to Hegel's Logic and his Philosophy of History. Almost a century after Kierkegaard, the horror of the First World War and imminence of the Second would be in large measure responsible for Karl Barth assuming the mantle of antagonist of the religious descendant of Hegelian optimism, Protestant liberalism, and, like Kierkegaard and in a manner deeply, if usually tacitly, indebted to him, utilizing a threefold schema in articulating his critique of his former religious ideology and the related cult of progress that, by the time Barth's Epistle to the Romans was first published in 1918, lay discredited in the mud of the Marne. Barth's and Kierkegaard's deployment of this three-tiered schema is far too complex to enter into rigorously and exhaustively in a short paper, but may be at least suggested by examining their respective conceptions, first, of the nature and authority of Scripture, and secondly, of the nature of religious faith. Each level of their common schema corresponds to a modality of the self's relation to God, as conceived by Kierkegaard in his Stages on Life's Way.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, therefore, in order to understand these three modalities of relationship, we must examine with some care Kierkegaard's understanding of the two terms that jointly constitute that relationship: the self and the universal. Kierkegaard explicates his concept of the nature of the human self in a notoriously obfuscatory, but wickedly funny, parody of Hegel.

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation ... that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self. ... If this relation which relates itself to its own self is constituted by another, the relation doubtless is the third term, but this relation (the third term) is in turn a relation relating itself to that which constituted the whole relation.<sup>2</sup>

In this passage, Kierkegaard pays for his parody in the coin of explicatory clarity, but the general sense of the definition seems to be this: the self if not an object, not a thing, but is rather a reflexive relation comprising an incorrigibly dichotomous tension between infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, free and constrained.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the self is not a sui generis, but exists as such a reflexive relation by virtue of having been thus

constituted by God. Of greater immediate relevance for present purposes is that Kierkegaard is also at pains to argue that this dichotomy which constitutes the human self, perhaps more accurately called the human-self-before-God, cannot be resolved into a higher synthesis through the influence of Reason acting in conformity to the classically Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis paradigm.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, Kierkegaard will argue that Reason cannot act as a mediator, a tertium quid in whose presence the opposition inherent in the self can be resolved into a higher synthesis. Rather, the actual human self, the self as it exists in all its naked, existential, concrete particularity, the self not encompassed by the first paragraph of Kierkegaard's parody, is a paradox whose tension may be maintained, but absolutely never - in the strictly technical and purely Hegelian sense - resolved.

Consequently, in some way and in some sense Kierkegaard makes clear in several successive works<sup>5</sup> and which cannot be fully considered here for lack of space, human beings, by virtue of their paradoxical status as selves incorporating something infinite, are related to the Infinite, or what Kierkegaard, in various works, refers to as the "universal." In most of Kierkegaard's works, this universal may be understood in an ethical sense as ethical norms and imperative, e.g., "Thou shalt not kill thy child." To understand the nature of the universal, we have recourse to Kierkegaard's own quite explicit definition. But unlike the definition of "self," the definition of "universal" is fairly clear on its own terms, inasmuch as there is evidently no satirical subtext to complicate Kierkegaard's expository purpose.

The ethical as such is the universal, it applies to everyone, and the same thing is expressed from another point of view by saying that it applies every instant. It reposes immanently in itself, it has nothing outside itself which is its telos, but is itself the telos of everything outside it, and when this has been incorporated by the ethical it can go no further.<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard maintains that the relationship between the self and the universal may assume three forms or modalities, depending upon how the former comports itself with respect to the latter.<sup>7</sup> These modalities are: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Each of these relational modalities is predicated upon a corresponding degree to which the person is conscious of being a self, incorporating something infinite, which exists before God. Kierkegaard, the good Danish Lutheran Christian, is drawing upon the conceptual heritage of the Protestant interpretation of dispensational history in order to counter the philosophical threat of omnivorous mediation, just as his Reformation ancestors used an analogous conceptual framework, though much more explicitly, to counter the equally omnivorous mediation of one's relationship to God that was perceived as a threat posed by the Catholic theology of the sixteenth century. Kierkegaard is no more enamored of having his relationship to God mediated by Hegel than Luther was of having his mediated by the pope, and each uses a similar conceptual arsenal in combating such a tendency.

The nature of all three modalities is evident in the way both Kierkegaard and Barth employ this three-tier schema in dealing with the nature and authority of Scripture. In both *Either/Or* and in *Stages on Life's Way*, and implicitly in *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard asserts that, on the aesthetic level, it is possible to live in such a way as, not necessarily categorically to negate the ethical by denying any

kind of relevance to the categories of good and evil, but rather to devalue these categories in favor of the categories of boring and interesting (or pleasant vs. unpleasant, etc.).

... [O]ne need only consider how ruinous boredom is for humanity, and by properly adjusting the intensity of one's concentration upon this fundamental truth, attain any desire degree of momentum [toward the goal of avoiding boredom]. Should one wish to attain the maximum momentum, even to the point of almost endangering the driving power, one need only say to oneself: Boredom is the root of all evil. ... But since some people believe that the end and aim of life is work, the disjunction, idleness-work is quite correct. I assume that it is the end of every man to enjoy himself, and hence my disjunction [boring-interesting or pleasure-displeasure] is no less correct.<sup>8</sup>

Kierkegaard implies that it is possible to read Scripture in the same way, i.e., as a purely objective - even scientific in the strictly Hegelian sense! - exercise in textual exegesis.

When the Scriptures are viewed as the court of last resort for determining what is and is not Christian doctrine, it becomes necessary to make sure of the Scriptures historically and critically. In this connection there are a number of topics that come up for consideration: the canonicity of the individual books, their authenticity, their integrity, the trustworthiness of their authors ... One sometimes hears uneducated or half educated people, or conceited geniuses speak with contempt of the labor of criticism devoted to ancient writings; one hears them foolishly deride the learned scholar's careful scrutiny of the most insignificant detail ... No, philological scholarship is absolutely within its rights, and the present author yields to none in profound respect for that which science consecrates.<sup>9</sup>

The implication of this and other, similar passages in the Postscript is that one can do such scholarship purely as an exercise and apart from questions of truth or value.

Similarly, Barth does not foreclose the possibility of treating the Bible as an objective textual object whose meaning may be explicated by various techniques of criticism and exegesis, and doing so purely on the level of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic.

The fact that we have to understand and expound the Bible as a human word can now be explained rather more exactly in this way: that we have to listen to what it says to us as a human word. We have to understand it as a human word in the light of what it says. Under the caption of a truly "historical" understanding of the Bible we cannot allow ourselves to commend an understanding which does not correspond to the rule suggested: a hearing in which attention is paid to the biblical expressions but not to what the words signify, in which what is said is not heard or overheard.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted for the sake of providing some important context that Barth is very careful - this is a typically Barthian move with, as we will see later, deep Kierkegaardian

precedents - to distinguish the Bible as revelation and the Bible as the aforementioned "human word" - and to take the latter quite seriously, even to take it seriously on a strictly aesthetic level. Axiological questions - i.e., to anticipate my argument somewhat, specifically ethical questions in Kierkegaard's sense - can only be articulated after we have "listen[ed] to what [Scripture] says to us as a human word."<sup>11</sup> So neither Barth nor Kierkegaard would object to a reading of the Bible which was purely aesthetic, understood in the specifically Kierkegaardian sense as a reading of Scripture which exclusively foregrounded questions of historical provenance, literary genre, figures of speech, redactory issues, and purely semiotic considerations, and bracketed axiological issues of morality, values, and judgement, particularly religious morality, values, and judgement. "The Bible as literature" would be a very limited, perhaps even spiritually and ethically sterile, but nevertheless legitimate, discipline.

Insofar as Barth involves himself in a consideration of the Bible as a human word, he is, of course, in that sense and to that extent still very much within the mainstream of Protestant liberalism that dominated the closing years of the nineteenth and the opening decades of the twentieth centuries. While not strictly dispensing with the transcendent, prewar Protestant liberalism as a movement did, broadly speaking, tend to emphasize the human dimension of religious experience. After all, it was in the years immediately preceding the First World War that the classical quest for the historical - for which read "human" - Jesus so dominated biblical research, culminating in the publication of Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. So the human nature of the biblical text was analogously emphasized through that complex of disciplines collectively known as the "higher criticism." This concern with the human and with human origins had the effect of interposing a layer of mediation between the believer and her faith, and also, still more importantly, of more or less covertly importing into religious discourse a certain optimism that through the dialectic of historical research, both doxa and praxis could ultimately be grounded in truth, in particular, historical truth about Jesus, scientifically ascertained. The ways in which this (to us, by now, so very naive) optimism are deeply related to the century-older Hegelian optimism and its consequent cult of progress are too complex to be adequately addressed here. For now, suffice it to say that, especially in the wake of the First World War and with the Second so imminent, as the latter conflict was when the first edition of *Church Dogmatics* was published in 1933, Barth and others of his generation were driven to question the discursive strategies of Protestant liberalism, and its consequent optimism, just as Kierkegaard questioned the deeply related philosophy of Hegel and its similar optimism almost a century earlier.<sup>12</sup>

But this questioning of the optimistic stance of prewar Protestant liberalism assumes the form of a bifurcation of the nature of Scripture, a bifurcation that acknowledges, on the one hand and in a manner quite consistent with Barth's original Protestant liberal roots, the human character of the discourse into which the letter of Scripture is cast, and on the other the referent of Scripture.

... [W]hen we take the humanity of the Bible quite seriously, we must also take quite definitely the fact that as a human word it does say something specific, that as a human word it points away from itself, that as a word it points toward a fact, an object. In this respect, too, it is a genuine human word.<sup>13</sup>

In structuralist, or at least, in Saussurian, linguistics and in the poststructuralist critique thereof, we would say that the written word of Scripture is the “signifier” which points to a “signified”<sup>14</sup> as “a fact, an object” to which Scripture refers. The question then may be asked as to what the signified is of the signifier of Scripture. The answer to this question is twofold, and hinges on Kierkegaard’s prior distinction, articulated in *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, but most comprehensively in *Stages on Life’s Way*, between the ethical and the religious modalities of relationship to the Absolute. Barth’s account of the signified of the biblical signifier follows a parallel schema.

The ethical dimension of the signified of Scripture consists of the kerygma of the Church, that is to say, a public word proclaimed publicly.

We have reached the final and really critical point in the doctrine of the Word of God, that which is both its starting point and its end: the Word of God as the preaching of the Church. Must the same serious meaning be attributed to this as to the first two aspects, “The Word as God’s revelation” and “The Word as Holy Scripture”? Must this third aspect, the preaching of the Church in the whole sphere of humanity in which it is actualised here and now, be included in the indirect identity between revelation and Scripture?<sup>15</sup>

Since “the preaching of the Church” is articulated “in the whole sphere of humanity in which [that preaching] is actualised here and now,” in considering the signified of Scripture as the kerygmatic witness of the Church, we are in an ethical relation to the Absolute as originally defined by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*.

The ethical as such is the universal, it applies to everyone, and the same thing is expressed from another point of view by saying that it applies every instant. It reposes immanently in itself, it has nothing outside itself which is its telos, but is itself the telos of everything outside it, and when this has been incorporated by the ethical it can go no further. Conceived immediately as physical and psychical, the particular individual is the particular which has its telos in the universal, and its task is to express itself constantly in it, to abolish particularity in order to become the universal.<sup>16</sup>

Here, as elsewhere in his writings, the obscurity of Kierkegaard’s language, at least in translation, approaches that of Hegel’s legendary Teutonic verbosity. But within the limited context of a consideration of Barth’s view of the biblical signified as the Church’s kerygma, the universal would consist of all those propositions, explicitly formulated and publicly stated, through which the Church articulates its traditional creed, e.g., the universal affliction of original sin, the universal need for salvation, the universal efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, etc., etc. In other words, the ethical consists of those principles of behavior, or in this case, those doctrines of Christianity, which are, first of all, susceptible to public and explicit articulation, and which, secondly, are (said to be) universally binding, irrespective of one’s individual circumstances: “the particular individual is the particular which has its telos in the universal” in such a way as “to abolish particularity in order to become the universal.” Being public, being social, the ethical has an explicitly sociological dimension.

Similarly, for Kierkegaard, the ethical is public and social. In fact, and to anticipate the argument slightly, the public and social nature of the ethical is precisely why the ethical must be transcended in order to enter into a specifically religious relation with the Absolute. But whereas Barth's concern with the ethical is specifically biblical and hermeneutic, and derivatively kerygmatic and ecclesiological, at least in both parts of volume one of *Church Dogmatics*, Kierkegaard's concern is more broad, encompassing Barth's concerns as special cases. For Kierkegaard, the ethical consists of that mode of comportment vis a vis the Absolute which is both normative and which is publicly accepted as such: the publicly discussable and empirically discoverable by any inquirer. But because the ethical is the empirically discoverable, Kierkegaard argues, the ethical for that reason is, and can forever be, only an approximation, never a source of certainty. With respect to Scripture in particular, the approximate nature of ethical discourse has a critical consequence.

The first dialectical difficulty with the Bible is that it is an historical document; so that as soon as we make it our standard for the determination of Christian truth, there begins an introductory approximation process, and the subject is involved in a parenthesis whose conclusion is everlastingly prospective. The New Testament is a document out of the past, and is thus historical in the stricter sense. Just this is what serves to beguile the inquirer, tending to prevent him from making the problem subjective, and encouraging him to treat it objectively, in consequence of which it fails altogether to arise.<sup>17</sup>

Now in both the Postscript and in the Philosophical Fragments, the latter being the text of which the former is the postscript, Kierkegaard is at great pains to argue that no finite approximation process - finite in the sense that the investigation cannot be carried on forever, so that at some point after a finite time, the inquirer has to be satisfied with a mere approximation - no such finite approximation can constitute a justification for the infinite passion which one attaches to one's eternal happiness. So even Scripture, conceived under the rubric of a text to be objectively and scientifically interpreted according to the canons of exegesis, cannot serve as a basis for the infinite passion of faith.<sup>18</sup>

It is at this point, however, that we must pause to consider a crucial difference between Kierkegaard and Barth: the issue of the interpretation of Scripture vis a vis the ethical character of the Church's proclamation, and the consequent issue of valid interpretation. This was not a problem that engaged Kierkegaard on a deeply passionate and existentially significant level - which is to say that it was not a problem for Kierkegaard at all. In fact, there seems to be no text in the Kierkegaard canon where he deals with this specifically theoretical issue of the validating criteria for biblical exegesis, and for reasons sociological as well as philosophical. For Kierkegaard, though one of the more radical exponents of Protestant individualism, perhaps even the most radical in the history of Protestantism, was so radical in his emphasis on the individual that this emphasis placed him on the margins of the Protestantism of his day in general, and more specifically on the margins even of Danish Lutheranism, as witness texts like *Armed Neutrality*, *The Attack upon "Christendom"*, and the various anathemas scattered through many of his works against prominent Lutheran ministers of his day. Probably one of the last things Kierkegaard would have wanted would be to become embroiled in the technical arcana of biblical hermeneutics.



But Barth's sociological situation vis a vis the institutional Church was much different. Controversies eventuated by the Epistle to the Romans and Church Dogmatics notwithstanding, Barth was not on the margins of Protestantism, but was very much a part of the established Church. Consequently, in all senses temperamental, ecclesiological, and professional, Barth could not ignore issues of biblical exegesis, as Kierkegaard evidently did, as constituting mere distractions from the centrally urgent issue of faith. Consequently, the moment Barth begins to deal with the second, specifically ethical, level of his three-tier schema, and the moment he begins to do so, not only publicly, but within the institutional context of the Church's kerygmatic witness, he is confronted with the problem of how to interpret Scripture in such a way as to preserve the consistency and coherence this public institutional voice.

Alluding to the status of the biblical text as a signifier which stands outside its signified, Barth says

On the basis and in the light of the word I understand what is said to me. Now understanding is, of course, a return to the word, an inquiry into the word itself: the word with all its linguistic and factual presuppositions; an inquiry in which even as I turn afresh to the word and speaker, I take up a standpoint outside the word and speaker, that is, in that perception of the thing described or intended in the word which is mediated to me by my hearing of the word. ... Why is it that, as a rule, general considerations on the nature of human language do not lead to the propositions indicated? My reply would be: because the hermeneutic principles are not dictated by Holy Scripture, as they are in our case. If we ask ourselves, and as readers of Holy Scripture, we have to ask ourselves, what is meant by hearing and understanding and expounding when we presuppose that that which is described or intended by the word of man is the revelation of God, the answer we have given forces itself upon us. ... That [the Church] derives this hermeneutic principle from the Bible itself, because of the unusual preponderance of what is said in it over the word as such, enforces this principle upon it, does not alter the fact that this principle is necessarily the principle of all hermeneutics, and that therefore the principle of the Church's doctrine of Holy Scripture, that the Bible is the witness of divine revelation, is simply the special form of that universally valid hermeneutic principle.<sup>19</sup>

There is obviously an enormous amount of material to be unpacked in this long citation, the full explication of which would probably require one to write a book about as long as the Church Dogmatics itself. Suffice it to say that Barth attempts to ground the criteria for valid biblical interpretation in the Bible itself, i.e., in some significant sense, the Bible is self-interpreting. The alternative conclusion, of course, would be to follow Derrida over the discursive cliff of postmodernity and into the ocean below, whose roiling waters constitute the jouissance of endless, and endlessly deferred Pynchon-esque, signification. That Barth does not do so, but instead limits the Derridean free play of signification - and the likewise endless process of approximation Kierkegaard alluded to earlier - by arguing that the text is hermeneutically self-referential, marks Barth as still essentially modernist, incipiently postmodernist tendencies notwithstanding.<sup>20</sup> Whereas Kierkegaard, because of his ideologically and sociologically marginal status within

Protestantism in general and within Danish Lutheranism in particular, could afford to ignore issues of objective biblical exegesis, Barth, very much a denizen of and apologist for the institutional Church, cannot afford such a laissez-faire attitude. For the infinitely approximative process that Kierkegaard argued characterizes objective biblical exegesis would leave the Church with no ideological foundation and no coherent proclamatory voice.

At this point, it is worth noting that, despite this difference in their respective concerns and discursive priorities, for both Barth and Kierkegaard the consideration of Scripture from the ethical standpoint of textual exegesis leaves the believer in a mediated relationship both to God and to God's revelation. Christianity still remains a series of doctrines, publicly articulated in the realm of the Kierkegaardian ethical. In other words, we have not touched on the realm of faith, merely of the Faith, with a definite article and a capital initial. Or alternatively stated in Barth's language, we have touched on Scripture as proclamation, not on Scripture as revelation, properly so called. Kierkegaard also presumably parts company with Barth in the following footnote to his arresting assertion that "Christianity is not a doctrine"<sup>21</sup>:

Now if only I might escape the fate of having a facile thinker explain to a reading public how stupid my entire book is, as is more than sufficiently evident from my willingness to be responsible for such an assertion as that Christianity is not a doctrine. Let us try to understand one another. Surely it is one thing for something to be a philosophical doctrine which desires to be intellectually grasped and speculatively understood, and quite another thing to be a doctrine that proposes to be realized in existence. ... Christianity is a doctrine of this [latter] kind. To speculate upon it is a misunderstanding, and the farther one goes in this direction, the greater is the misunderstanding.<sup>22</sup>

Barth, however, as noted previously, as a part of the institutional Church adopts a less radical attitude toward Christianity, considered as the Faith. But this leaves Barth with the problem that Christianity remains subject to the "neo-Hegelian" mediating structures of postwar Protestant liberalism, and its consequent and thoroughly discredited optimistic meliorism. Consequently, given his Protestant commitment to Scripture as revelation, Barth had to incorporate into his approach to the Bible some means whereby the biblical text, or more precisely, God's revelation in the text, could speak to the reader in a fashion independent of the meaning of the text as mediated through such ethical artifacts as creeds, confessions of faith, etc., etc.

Consequently, Barth, following Kierkegaard's schema to the third and final level, the religious properly so called, considers a third level of meaning of Scripture - the second half of his bifurcation of the signified of the biblical signifier - which he calls the level of God's revelation, properly so called.<sup>23</sup> Barth's solution to this dilemma is quite straightforward, at least in a purely formal sense: the signified of the biblical signifier is "the real substance of the Bible," which is revelation.

The fact that [Scripture] can be said and heard does not mean that it is put at the power and disposal of those who say and hear it. What it does mean is that as it is said and heard by them it can make itself said and

heard. It is only by revelation that revelation can be spoken in the Bible and that it can be heard as the real substance of the Bible.<sup>24</sup>

At this level - and, at least in Barth's case, without prejudice to Christianity considered as the Faith - the content of revelation is indeterminate, awaiting the gracious interaction of the written Word with the individual reader.

We have spoken of the forms of the Word of God. Form is obviously always the form of a content. But may we actually speak of a content of the Word of God? Can we answer the searching, popular question, yet frequently found in the mouths of theologians: What then is the Word of God? In the question of the content of the Word of God we find ourselves faced with the same difficulty which will meet us much later in dogmatics, in the question of the nature of God in general. God and His word are not presented to us in the way in which natural and historical entities are presented to us. We can never by retrospect, and so by anticipation, fix what God is or what His Word is: He must always repeat that to us and always repeat it afresh. But there is no human awareness corresponding to this divine utterance. In God's utterance there comes to be a meeting and a communion between His nature and man, but not an absorption of this nature into man's awareness. ... And so we can only ... say what the Word of God is ... it is proclamation, Scripture, and revelation.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, without prejudice to the historical mediating structures of creed and confession that define the Faith, Barth nevertheless asserts the possibility of an unmediated, literally an im-mediate, revelation not comprehended by those structures, but subsisting in "a meeting and a communion between [God's] nature and man."<sup>26</sup>

In *Fear and Trembling*, and more comprehensively in *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard asserts an analogous level of relationship to God, which he calls the religious or the level of faith. It is worth noting as explicitly as possible that this level of relationship to God has little in common, except perhaps fortuitously,<sup>27</sup> with the religious as that term is popularly used in its colloquial, "sociological" sense. For in this colloquial usage, the term "religious" denotes an essentially sociological phenomenon of an aggregate of people assenting to a certain set of propositions contained in a creed, a confession, an explicit or implicit doctrinal statement, etc., etc., on the level of Kierkegaard's ethical. Similarly, what Kierkegaard means by faith must be carefully distinguished from what we mean by the Faith, which is likewise a sociological phenomenon on the level of the ethical, i.e., that collection of creeds, doctrines, and confessions to which a given community adheres. The person of faith stands "in an absolute relation to the absolute" by virtue of a relationship to God which is not mediated by those discursive structures of creed and confession.

For faith is this paradox, that the particular is higher than the universal - yet in such a way, be it observed, that the movement repeats itself, and that consequently the individual, after having been in the universal, now in the particular isolates himself as higher than the universal. ... Faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, is not subordinate but superior - yet in such a way, be it observed, that it is the particular individual who,

after he has been subordinated as the particular to the universal, now through the universal becomes the individual who as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute.<sup>28</sup>

Because the relationship is “absolute,” the relationship is unmediated in the sense that the person may act in a manner not comprehended by whatever creeds, codes of conduct, or canonical norms exist on level of the ethical. In fact, the potential for thus acting is the most conclusively defining characteristic of the religious, that which defines the religious qua religious. Publicly defined ethics, codes of conduct formulated on the level of communal, “sociological” ethical experience, all say “Thou shalt not kill thy child.” Yet Abraham, by virtue of his “absolute relation to the absolute” which transcended these strictures, was nevertheless right to attempt the sacrifice of Isaac. It is in this sense that Barth’s Scripture-as-revelation is likewise unmediated by the creeds and confessions that define the Faith.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Barth’s view of the possibility of fresh revelation from Scripture, unmediated by prior confessions and creeds, in fact, a revelation whose content is in that sense indeterminate, renders the relationship of the believer to the text free of whatever cognitive structures - critical, cultural, sociological, ideological, etc., etc. - have heretofore mediated that relationship. Barth’s three-tiered schema of the biblical text as Scripture (text-as-aesthetic-object), proclamation (text-as-ethical-object), and revelation (text-as-religious-object) facilitates a relationship of the reader to the text that is unmediated by the ideological structures of Protestant liberalism (e.g., the higher criticism, the quest for the historical Jesus, the social Gospel, etc., etc.) in a manner analogous to the way Kierkegaard’s three-tiered schema of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious modalities of relation to the absolute facilitated a relationship of the believer to God unmediated by the direct lineal ancestor of Protestant liberalism, the Hegelian dialectic.

As noted earlier, an important distinction to be borne in mind while reflecting on the specifically religious aspect of text as revelation, properly so called, to the other two modalities, especially that of the ethical, is the distinction between faith-without-an-article and the-Faith-with-a-definite-article. This distinction is also important for both Kierkegaard and for Barth, but in ways whose emphases differ by virtue of their radically differing sociological postures vis a vis the established Church. For Kierkegaard, writing and fulminating from the margins of nineteenth century Protestantism, the latter sense of the term “faith,” i.e., the Faith, is important only in a strictly provisional sense as something to be transcended on the way to faith in the former sense, and Kierkegaard’s estimate of the established Church is still more tenuous. For in the entire Kierkegaard canon, there is vanishingly little - one is sorely tempted to say “nothing” - of a positive or complimentary nature about the established Church, which he saw as altogether slavishly captive to the dominant, and dominantly mediatorial, Hegelian *Zeitgeist*. One thinks in particular of Kierkegaard’s texts *Armed Neutrality* and *The Attack upon “Christendom”* especially in that regard, with due attention to the derisive quotation marks enclosing “Christendom” in the title of the latter. But again, Barth’s position as a mainstream member of the Protestant Church,<sup>30</sup> in a sense at least sociological if not initially ideological, prohibited him from adopting such a thoroughly radical Kierkegaardian stance that saw the institutional Church as separate from, even on the ragged edge of being antithetical to, the Faith. So for Barth, especially in the *Epistle to the Romans*, the Faith is our schoolmaster to bring us to faith in much the same way as “the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ” (Gal. 3:24). In that sense, for Barth as for Kierkegaard, the Faith also exists to be transcended.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps paradoxically, this difference in the relationship also hinges on an essentially epistemological question on which Barth and Kierkegaard likewise agree, and rather fundamentally at that. For Kierkegaard, the question of truth in relation to faith is not an objective question of verifying whether one's beliefs correspond to an external reality. Kierkegaard is antipodally removed from believing that *veritas est adequatio intellectus ad rem* or *veritas est adequatio ad rei intellectum*. For let scientific and objective truth be defined however it will, from a religious standpoint, from the standpoint of faith properly so called, truth is inwardness. Truth is subjectivity.

Whether truth is defined more empirically, as the conformity of thought and being [*adequatio intellectus ad rem*], or more idealistically, as the conformity of being with thought [*adequatio ad rei intellectum*], it is, in either case, important carefully to note what is meant by being. And in formulating the answer to this question it is likewise important to take heed lest the knowing spirit be tricked into losing itself in the indeterminate, so that it fantastically becomes a something that no existing human being ever was or can be ...<sup>32</sup>

That is to say, specifically religious truth is not only<sup>33</sup> to be found - contra Hegel and the young Hegelians - in either *adequatio intellectus ad rem* or in *adequatio ad rei intellectum*, but in the interior disposition of the believer to that which she believes.

To take just a single example from the Kierkegaard canon - their name is "Legion," for they are many - Kierkegaard devotes the entire chapter of the Concluding Unscientific Postscript from which the last citation is taken to arguing for just this thesis.

When subjectivity is the truth, the conceptual determination of the truth must include an expression for the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of the fork in the road where the way swings off; this expression will at the same time serve as an indication of the subjective inwardness. Here is such a definition truth: An objective uncertainty held fast in an approximation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual. At the point where the way swings off (and where this is cannot be specified objectively, since it is a matter of subjectivity), there objective knowledge is placed in abeyance. Thus the subject merely has, objectively, the uncertainty; but it is this which precisely increases the tension of that infinite passion which constitutes his inwardness.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth reflecting on the controlling metaphor Kierkegaard uses - not only in the foregoing citation, but again and again on many occasions throughout the Postscript - of the "way swing[ing] off" and its (sometimes implicit, other times, like the above, explicit) imagery of "the fork in the road." For Kierkegaard, the objective orientation to truth, while provisionally valid within its own discursive universe, is nevertheless utterly incommensurate with that passionate inwardness that constitutes the subjectivity of faith. So, just as when one comes to "the fork in the road," one must make a choice. One cannot go both directions. The relationship between detached objectivity and the passionate subjectivity of faith is a contradiction which, by its very nature, must remain

an undigested surd within the alimentary canal of Hegel's omnivorously synthesizing dialectical beast.<sup>35</sup>

For reasons not merely metaphorical but that are connected with the organic relationship between Hegelianism and Protestant liberalism, Barth adopts a similar attitude toward faith, also. But the schema that leads him to this conclusion is founded on a three-tiered conception, derived from Kierkegaard's Stages on Life's Way and more indirectly from Fear and Trembling, The Sickness unto Death, and Either/Or, that divides human spiritual experience into the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious properly so called.<sup>36</sup> Barth does not devote much consideration to the aesthetic stage of experience, at least in The Epistle to the Romans. But he does very briefly allude to something very like Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage in what might be termed the "pre-Covenantal" period of human history.

Caught up in the struggle for existence - eating, drinking, sleeping, yes, above all sleeping!, marrying, and giving in marriage - men stand midway between life and death. Immersed in the flux of time and history, fleshly, they are not righteous before God.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, oriented toward pure survival in this struggle as they are, and preoccupied with an emphasis on the temporal, human beings naturally value the temporal. But

[w]hat men account righteous and valuable is, as such, flesh, which, is unrighteous and valueless. That which He pronounces righteous, and for which He renders, is not flesh as such, not something we possess nor something which the worlds accounts weighty or important. God alone is the answer to the question; He alone is the helper in the misery which is the consequence of the separation of the Creator from the creature.<sup>38</sup>

Because on this level, human beings are concerned with a specifically moral discourse, that is, with "[w]hat men account righteous and [morally] valuable,"<sup>39</sup> the level of the flesh is, for Barth, also the level of the Kierkegaardian ethical.

Furthermore, on the level of the ethical, asserts Barth, human beings are always subject to the fatal temptation that they possess or can acquire something God would consider of worth purely on human terms. So at this point, Barth registers a thinly veiled critique of Protestant liberalism, which, while not explicitly denying the efficacy of God's grace, nevertheless asserted the moral righteousness of human action, especially in the areas of justice and social meliorism (e.g., the "social Gospel").

The man who boasts that he possesses something which justifies him before God and man, even if that something is his own insecurity and brokenness, still retains confidence in human self-justification. No, the solid ground upon which the law of works stands must be broken up. No work, be it most delicately spiritual, or be it even a work of self-negation, is worthy of serious attention. In fact, our experience is that which we have not experienced; our religion consists in the dissolution of religion; our law is the complete disestablishment of all human experience and knowledge and action and possession. Nothing human which desires to be more than a void and a deprivation, a possibility and a sign-post, more

than the most trivial thing in the midst of the phenomena of this world, survives; nothing which is not, like everything else in this world, dust and ashes - before God.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, religion actually panders to this tendency, and as such, and as a manifestation of the ethical stage of human existence, is also closely analogous to the approximation process described by Kierkegaard. Of religion Barth says

The domination of the law over a man means that men are wholly entangled in the uncertainty which exists within the realm of the possibility of religion. The man of religion changes colour like a film of oil on the top of the water. Every moment inevitably he changes his colour. When he reaches the summit, he falls into the abyss. He is Moses AND Aaron, Paul AND Saul, enthusiast AND obscurantist, prophet AND pharisee, priest AND blatant sacerdotalist. He is at once positive, in that he bears noble witness to the relation which exists between God and man; and negative, in that in him human nature is confronted by the reality of God. ... Religion is always a thing in the midst of other things.<sup>41</sup>

As we will see subsequently, by asserting that religion, being a denizen of the ethical level, "is always a thing in the midst of other things," Barth is laying the groundwork that, later in *The Epistle to the Romans*, will enable him to echo Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel vis a vis the latter's assertion, in his, *Hegel's, Philosophy of History*, first, that religious faith can be subsumed under the rubric of omnivorous mediation through the dialectic of history, and secondly, that Christianity, far from being in any sense special, is only one more stage in the progressive exfoliation of the Spirit in human history.

This sense of the possibility of religion being merely "a thing in the midst of other things," a danger Kierkegaard saw as realized in the Church, especially the Danish Lutheran Church, of his day and a danger Barth evidently saw in Protestant liberalism's emphasis on this-worldly action on behalf of the Kingdom, did not prevent both Kierkegaard and Barth from nevertheless granting institutional religion, on the purely ethical level, a significant role in Christian spirituality. For example, we will have occasion to refer to the following passage in discussing Kierkegaard's conception of faith-as-leap. For now, suffice it to draw attention to the provisional but important role Kierkegaard sees institutional Christianity as playing in the inculcation of faith. For the Faith is related to faith in much the same way for Kierkegaard as for Barth: as a limit to be transcended, but, Barth would add, also as a limit which points the way toward transcendence.

When I am not a Christian and confront the decision of becoming one, Christianity helps me to an acute awareness of the decision, and the distance between us is also a help, just as the preliminary running start helps to make the leap easier. But when it is as if the matter were already decided, when I am a Christian in the sense of being baptized in childhood, there is nothing in the external situation to arouse in me an awareness of the decision, ... namely, that the decision has apparently already been made. In brief, it is easier to become a Christian when I am not a Christian than to become a Christian when I am one.<sup>42</sup>

So the effect of cultural Christianity generally, and that of the practice of child baptism to which Kierkegaard specifically refers in the above citation, is to make Christianity less of a scandal, a danger against which Barth warned in *The Epistle to the Romans*, as we will see below. Religion of the latter type, is mere religion to Kierkegaard, and his vilification of it was of such stridency as to guarantee his already-marginalized status within the established Church of that day.

Such marginalization is not an option for Barth, the establishment churchman - but for reasons theological as well as sociological. For Barth interprets St. Paul's subtle discourse about the Law in *Romans* so as simultaneously to affirm Kierkegaard's analysis of the value of religion and of the danger of mere religion. Consequently, just as there is a bifurcation in Barth's understanding of the biblical text, ethically understood, there is a parallel bifurcation in Barth's understanding of the nature of religion. Mere religion does not, for Barth, exhaust religion per se. For just as the biblical signifier points beyond itself to the indefinite Signified of revelation, so also and in an analogous manner, religion points beyond itself to the paradoxical Signified of faith.

The law is holy. We cannot stand on the definition of religion, or indeed of any human possibility, as though it were merely sin. Religion is the place where every human capacity is enlightened by divine light. Placed outside the region of divinity, religion, nevertheless, represents divinity as its delegate or impress or negative. Moving within the sphere of human activity, religion is without doubt holy, because it points from humanity to divinity; it is without doubt righteous, because it is correlated with the will of God and parallel to it, being indeed the parable of it; and it is without doubt good, for it is that concrete, observable, mediated experience which bears witness to the immediacy which has been lost.<sup>43</sup>

The "nevertheless" in the above citation is a "nevertheless" that Kierkegaard, for whom religion is "merely mere," could never have written. In the first half of the bifurcation, Barth freely asserts that religion lies within the sphere of "every human capacity," i.e., the sphere of those capacities and potentialities possessed by every human being, a sphere whose extent and contents can be surveyed, enumerated, and quantified sociologically: in this sense, acknowledges Barth, religion lies within the sphere of the Kierkegaardian ethical. But - and this completes the analogy with Barth's understanding of the signifier and the indeterminate Signified of the Bible - religion also, and in a also acknowledged by Kierkegaard, points beyond itself. Consequently, religion is important for Barth because it is the mediate image of an im-mediate reality, no more - but also no less.

So it is natural to inquire about the content of this immediate reality to which religion points, just as it is likewise natural to inquire about the content of the Signified to which the biblical text points. Just as the questions are analogous, so are the answers. For just as the ultimate Signified of the biblical signifier is indeterminate as to content,<sup>44</sup> so also, except in a purely formal sense, is the content of the im-mediate reality adumbrated by religion. This reality is faith. Furthermore, the relationship between religion and faith is the relationship, not only of ethical signifier to religious<sup>45</sup> Signified, but also of limit to that-which-is-beyond-the-limit. What Barth says about the nature of religion-as-limit is one of the most crucial passages in the entire text of *The Epistle to the Romans*:



We have now reached the point where we are bound to discuss the effective meaning and significance of that last and noblest human possibility which encounters us at the threshold and meeting-place of two worlds, but which, nevertheless, remains itself on this side of the abyss dividing sinners from those who are under grace. Here, at this turning point, grace and law - religion - the first invisibility and the last visible thing, confront each other. Grace is the freedom of God by which men are seized. Within the sphere of psycho-physical experience this seizure is nothing but vacuum and void and blankness. The seizure, therefore, lies on the other side of the abyss. Though religion and law appear to concern that relationship between men and God with which grace is also concerned, yet in fact they do not do so. Law and religion embrace a definite disposition of men in this world. They hold a concrete position in the world, and are, consequently, things among other things. They stand, therefore, on this side of the abyss, for they are not the presupposition of all things. There is no stepping across the frontier by gradual advance or by laborious ascent, or by any human development whatsoever. The step forward involves on this side collapse and the beginning from the far side of that which is wholly Other. If, therefore, the experience of grace be thought of as the prolongation of already existing religious experience, grace ceases to be grace, and becomes a thing on this side. But grace is that which lies on the other side, and no bridge leads to it. Grace confronts law with a sharp, clearly defined "No! Anything rather than such confusion!" The first divine possibility is contrasted with the last human possibility along the whole frontier of religion. There is no bridge between service in newness of spirit and service in oldness of the letter.<sup>46</sup>

One can hear very strong echoes in this passage of the very text of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, wherein Kierkegaard argued with the same eloquence and passion that religion in the Kierkegaardian sense could not be subsumed under any rubric drawn or inferred dialectically from the realm of the merely ethical, and also echoes of Kierkegaard's argument, repeated in many contexts and in my dialects in the Postscript, that no amount of finite approximate knowledge in the realm of the ethical can suffice to move one closer to faith. Just as the Signified of the biblical signifier can never be mediated through any kind of creed, however meticulously articulated, or any kind of biblical exegesis, however subtle, but exists unmediated by such ethical artifacts, so also faith cannot be mediated by religion. Faith can be no more mediated by religion in Barth's sense than it can be mediated by the ethical in Kierkegaard's sense.

Consequently, as one might begin to suspect, the content of faith is likewise, in the most literal sense, im-mediate.

The Gospel requires - faith. Only for those who believe is it the power of God unto salvation. It can therefore be neither directly communicated nor directly apprehended. Christ hath been appointed to be the Son of God - according to the Spirit (1:4). "Now, Spirit is the denial of direct immediacy. If Christ be very God, He must be unknown, for to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol" (Kierkegaard).<sup>47</sup>

Because faith is unmediated, Barth asserts that faith requires a leap over all intervening mediating structures - not only including religion, but most especially religion.

The truth, in fact, can never be self-evident, because it is a matter neither of historical nor of psychological experience, and because it is neither a cosmic happening within the natural order, nor even the most supreme event of our imaginings. Therefore, it is not accessible to our perception: it can neither be dug out of what is unconsciously within us, nor apprehended by devout contemplation, nor made known by the manipulation of occult psychic powers. These exercises, indeed, render it the more inaccessible. It can neither be taught nor handed down by tradition, nor is it a subject of research. Were it capable of such treatment, it would not be universally significant, it would not be the righteousness of God for the whole world, salvation for all men. Faith is conversion: it is the radically new disposition of the man who stands naked before God and has been wholly impoverished that he may procure the one pearl of great price; it is the attitude of the man who for the sake of Jesus has lost his own soul. ... There is no such thing as mature and assured possession of faith: regarded psychologically, it is always a leap into the darkness of the unknown, a flight into empty air.<sup>48</sup>

The image of faith as a leap is almost certainly borrowed from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in particular, the closing pages of chapter four, "The Problem of the Fragments":

But everyone knows that the most difficult leap, even in the physical realm, is when a man leaps into the air from a standing position and comes down again on the same spot. The leap becomes easier in the degree to which some distance intervenes between the initial position and the place where the leap takes off. And so it is also with respect to the decisive movement in the realm of the spirit. ... When I am not a Christian and confront the decision of becoming one, Christianity helps me to an acute awareness of the decision, and the distance between us is also a help, just as the preliminary running start helps to make the leap easier. ... But if the real difficulty is to become a Christian, this being the absolute decision, the only possible introduction must be a repellent one, thus precisely calling attention to the absolute decision. For if it could, the decision would not be absolute, would not be a qualitative leap, and the individual would be deceived instead of helped.<sup>49</sup>

So the real task of Christianity, for Barth no less than Kierkegaard, is not to make Christianity less scandalous, but, if anything, to make it more so, in order remind the believer of the absolute and unreserved - Kierkegaard would say "infinite" - seriousness of the decision to be a Christian - contra the spirit of the Protestant liberalism from which Barth was emerging among the ruins of the First World War.

Religion must beware lest it tone down in any degree the unconverted man's judgement. Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion. So far from releasing men from guilt and destiny, it brings men under their sway. Religion possesses no solution

ton the problem of life; rather it makes of the problem a wholly insoluble enigma. Religion is neither a thing to be enjoyed nor a thing to be celebrated: it must be worn as a yoke which cannot be removed.

What Barth says about religion is very much in the spirit of Kierkegaard's arresting assertion, in the Postscript, that the purpose of baptism is to make becoming a Christian more difficult (p. 341). Religion is not a finger pointing to the reality of faith, but a spear whose point pierces the side of the believer, impaling her on the awful paradox of an immediate relationship to God.

This relationship, for both Barth and Kierkegaard, can by its inmost intrinsic nature never be encompassed by or articulated in terms of any kind of mediating structure: no creed, no confession, no doctrinal statement, no religious system, can ever comprehend the paradox of faith, and perhaps least of all the mystery of God's grace expressed therein. The same is true of Scripture, which constitutes the written distillation of others' experiences of faith. Scripture may be considered from a purely aesthetic standpoint which foregrounds issues of formal discourse and brackets off questions of moral right and wrong, or it may foreground issues of right and wrong, as those attributes are defined by a community. But even then, the ultimate Signified of the biblical text is no more exhausted than is the experience of Kierkegaard's knight of faith, for both are subject to the dynamic of Divine grace which breaks through all mediating discourse, opening out into a direct and immediate confrontation with God, Kierkegaard's "absolute relation to the absolute." This absolute relation receives its highest expression in faith, which is likewise not subject to mediation. Just as Barth deployed Kierkegaard's three stages to understand the biblical text, and to liberate it from the mediating framework of academic criticism and Protestant liberal meliorism, he also used this three-tiered approach to understand the progression from a purely aesthetic attitude that foregrounds aesthetic categories of survival apart from morality, ethical categories as constituting the social content of religious discourse, and finally, the Divine revelation of faith, which is no more subject to mediation than that of Scripture. This three-tiered schema allowed Kierkegaard to transcend the dialectic of Hegel and to thus open up fresh possibilities for understanding the relationship of humankind and God, and Barth's similar use of this scheme allowed him to accomplish the same thing by liberating theological discourse from the discredited corpus of Protestant liberal optimism, the great-great grandchild of Hegel's dialectic and the first casualty of the great catastrophe of 1917.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this paper, I tried time and again to find a way to explicitly incorporate Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* (hereafter *Stages*) into my argument. Conceptually, this was by no means difficult because the connections are so obvious. But in each such attempt, the text of *Stages* proved too unwieldy to permit such an explicit incorporation. As finally became evident, the problem is that, in *Stages*, Kierkegaard deals with the issue of the three modalities in its highest degree of generality. Consequently, in dealing with the relationship of *Stages* to the two issues at hand - the nature/authority of Scripture and the nature of faith - one spends so much time constructing the general foundation that one runs out of (most of) the allocated twenty pages of space before dealing with how the general argument of *Stages* pertains to those two specific issues. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, the three tiers of Barth's and Kierkegaard's schema are approached, not through *Stages*, which would, strictly speaking, really be the place to start, but more informally through the much more tractable texts of *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*. So suffice it to say that the real foundation for my discussion is contained in Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*, and my recurrence to shorter and less ramified texts is a tactic of pure expediency.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954) 146. As Kierkegaard makes explicit in the next paragraph, "that which constituted the whole relation" is God.

<sup>3</sup> Given the general tenor of the passage, and Kierkegaard's subsequent references in *The Sickness Unto Death* to the self's containing something infinite, we may safely assume that what Kierkegaard is poking fun at in the first paragraph is, not the idea that the self is a paradox of finite-infinite, temporal-eternal, etc., but rather the Hegelian idea that these paradoxes can ever be dialectically synthesized. The former idea, the idea of self-as-paradox, Kierkegaard took with unreserved seriousness; the latter, self-as-dialectical-synthesis, was anathema.

<sup>4</sup> In all fairness to Hegel, it should be noted that all too many expositions of Hegel's dialectic amount to gross oversimplifications: Hegel's dialectic is far, far more subtle and sophisticated than his critics or his exponents usually realize. As well taken as Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel is in very many ways, and as fundamentally sound from a psychological as well as an existential standpoint, Kierkegaard does, not always or even consistently, but on occasion likewise oversimplify Hegel's thought, and thus end up critiquing a "straw man." In fact, in instances which I have been careful to work around in my text, Kierkegaard attacks Hegel-as-"straw man" in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. But this is obviously not the place to elaborate on such a tangential point.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *Stages on Life's Way*, *Either/Or* (q.v.), *Fear and Trembling* (q.v.), in some ways, albeit indirectly and derivatively, even in *The Concept of Dread*.

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: Random House -- Modern Library, 1946) 129. Because I have different marginal notes in the two books, I shall alternate somewhat between the Doubleday edition of Kierkegaard, and the Modern Library edition.

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<sup>7</sup> We may gain some further insight if we think of the Kierkegaardian universal as being analogous to the naively aprioristic conception of the universality of physical law. We say that physical law is universal in the sense that such law holds true irrespective of the remoteness in space or time of the phenomena thereby governed. Therefore, irrespective of time and place, the gravitational attraction between two bodies is directly proportional to their masses, and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. Moreover, the concept of mediation is relevant here, also. Our knowledge of the universe is mediated by physical law in the sense that our experience of phenomena is organized and structured by being "filtered" through such descriptive paradigms as the law of gravitation. Ethical principles, Kierkegaard implies, also evince a similar universality. Irrespective of time or place, and in the absence of mitigating circumstances derived from superordinate principles, it is always evil for a father even seriously to contemplate the slaughter of his child. Therefore, human experience is likewise ethically mediated or "filtered" inasmuch as human conduct is to be judged as good or evil, virtuous or vicious, by reference to normative laws that are no less binding than their physical counterparts. So just as physical law descriptively encompasses natural phenomena, Kierkegaard's ethical universal normatively encompasses moral phenomena. To complete the analogy, we need only add that both sets of principles are, in some significant and non-trivial sense, discoverable by reason. The gravamen of Kierkegaard's dispute with Hegel, as texts such as *Fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Either/Or*, and especially *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* make clear, is that Hegel's grand System attempts to reduce the irreducible subjectivity of human experience to just such objectively determined tokens as are dealt with in physical science.

<sup>8</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* in Bretall 22,25. Regarding what Kierkegaard says about boredom and the aesthete's ceaseless effort to escape therefrom - Johannes the Seducer's "rotation" method as described in *Either/Or* - one can compare this passage usefully with what Pascal says about evasion in the *Pensees*. Both Kierkegaard and Pascal are addressing essentially the same issue: the human tendency to want to escape from the self, or more precisely, from the self-before-God. Nowhere does Kierkegaard assert that purely aesthetic, ethical, or religious types have ever existed (except, arguably, for Abraham as a religious person). But one could make a good case that the late-nineteenth-century post-Romantic English decadents, and even more so their French counterparts (e.g., Baudelaire, Villier de l'Isle-Adam, et al.), were excellent approximations. One only has to read Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* to see this type of eerily - and more than a little frighteningly - morally vacuous personality incarnate in an actual human being.

<sup>9</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 26, 27. At times, Kierkegaard is wickedly satirical and it is possible to read satirical overtones into this quoted passage. But as I believe the context of this passage and subsequent passages in the same vein make clear, whatever satire there is here is directed, not against critical biblical scholarship per se, but against the attempt to ground faith on a scientific-critical reading of the Scriptures, i.e., Kierkegaard's old nemesis, in the *Postscript* as elsewhere, of trying to force a finite and approximate entity to support and to justify an infinite passion.

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark) vol. 1 part 2, 466. The part of the cited text beginning “Under the caption ... “ was added by Barth in the second edition of *Church Dogmatics*. The material before that phrase is from the first edition. The edition of *Church Dogmatics* used in writing this paper included material from both editions, but very usefully distinguished them with different type faces. To simplify writing the paper, I have elected not to follow this practice.

<sup>11</sup> The quoted passage adumbrates what a later generation, specifically the postmodern generation, would term Barth’s biblical semiotics. But this is clearly another area that, like a full-blown consideration of Kierkegaard’s stages, cannot be entered into here for lack of space. Suffice it to say that Barth’s detailed treatment of this question here and elsewhere in both parts of the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* is tantalizingly similar to the theory outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure in his posthumously published *General Course in Linguistics*. Saussure’s *Course* was published in 1913, the year Saussure died, five years before the first edition of *Epistle to the Romans*, and twenty years before the first edition of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*.

<sup>12</sup> The most salient difference between the two, of course, is that Kierkegaard questioned Hegelianism and Hegelian optimism as an individual deeply alienated and altogether marginalized from the prevailing intellectual climate of the day, where the “young Hegelians” would sit in coffee shops for hours on end and discuss the progress of Spirit in history. By contrast, Barth was one of what would become a whole generation of theologians, philosophers, poets and other intellectuals, the so-called “lost generation,” likewise disillusioned, who would constitute an alternative culture that was destined to become the dominant culture of the postwar world. We of the cynical early twenty-first century are hard pressed to imagine the depth of despair that afflicted people like Ezra Pound, to name just one example, when he wrote of World War I in his “anti-epic” poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, including the savage words:

There fought in any case,  
and some believing,  
*pro domo*, in any case ...

Some quick to arm,  
some for adventure,  
some from fear of weakness,  
some from fear of censure,  
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,  
learning later ...  
some in fear, learning love of slaughter;

Died some, *pro patria*,  
non “*dulce*” non “*et decor*” ...  
walked eye-deep in hell  
believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving  
came home, home to a lie,  
home to many deceits,  
home to old lies and new infamy;  
usury age-old and age-thick

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and liars in public places.

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.  
 Young blood and high blood,  
 fair cheeks, and fine bodies;

fortitude as never before

frankness as never before,  
 disillusion as never told in the old days,  
 hysterias, trench confessions,  
 laughter out of dead bellies.

There died a myriad,  
 And of the best, among them,  
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,  
 For a botched civilization,

Charm, smiling at the good mouth,  
 Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,

For two gross of broken statues,  
 For a few thousand battered books.

Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1957) 63, 64. No editor given.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1 part 2, 464.

<sup>14</sup> Again, it would be interesting to pursue the question of a connection here with Saussure's structuralist linguistics.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1 part 2, 743. Note that Barth rather explicitly sees three aspects to his conception of Scripture: the Word as the preaching of the Church, and "the first two aspects" of revelation and Scripture. After reading the entirety of the first two parts of volume one of *Church Dogmatics*, this is the most explicit evidence I have been able to find of Barth's indebtedness to Kierkegaard's stages as the basis for his threefold view of Scripture.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in Bretall, 129. Actually, the entirety of "Problem 1: Is There Such a Thing as a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?" is relevant to understanding this second, public nature of Scripture as Barth conceives it.

<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Admittedly, this is a fairly sweeping statement. But the entirety of book one of the *Postscript* is dedicated to advancing just this argument, to say nothing of the entire text of the *Philosophical Fragments*. Citations like the one previously quoted could be almost endlessly adduced from both texts.

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1 part 2, 465, 466, 468. The section of the citation beginning “Why is it that, as a rule ... “ and ending “forces itself upon us” is a second-edition addendum.

<sup>20</sup> That the Bible, according to Barth, is exegetically self-referential has the effect of transforming Barth’s Bible into a totalizing and self-referential discourse, which, in turn, has the effect of rendering the Bible ultimately contradictory: the text of the Bible becomes vulnerable to Gödel’s Theorem, which was published in 1930, three years before the first edition of *Church Dogmatics*.

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 339.

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 339 footnote.

<sup>23</sup> I say “properly so called” because Barth is not always consistent in his use of the term “revelation,” sometimes denoting the publicly proclamatory (i.e., the ethical in Kierkegaard’s sense) content of Scripture, and sometimes the much more problematic (as will be seen shortly) content of Scripture at the level of Kierkegaard’s religious stage. Incidentally, there is an analogous ambiguity in the *Postscript* regarding Kierkegaard’s use of the term “ethical”: “ethical” as signifying the second stage of public and, as it were sociologically, acceptable behavior, and “ethical” as signifying the moral demands levied upon the rare individual who manages to attain “an absolute relation to the absolute.”

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1 part 2, 469. In this one, relatively short subsection of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* is enough material to keep critics, commentators, and exegetes busy for many professional lifetimes, especially if the critic, commentator, or exegete is well schooled in the theory of postmodernist literary criticism. Barth is on the very cusp of this latter movement, and much of what he says - and much that can be argued against what he says - adumbrates the problematic discourse of much poststructuralist, especially deconstructionist, semiotic theory.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1 part 1, 149. Emphasis added. Note carefully the threefold nature of the biblical text: proclamation, Scripture, and revelation, corresponding respectively to Kierkegaard’s ethical, aesthetic, and religious. A natural question to ask, and a point to which I will recur subsequently, is whether or not faith can conflict with the Faith. Kierkegaard would almost certainly have said yes. In fact, his reading of the akedah story makes this point fairly explicitly. But to avoid dealing with a tangential issue, I bracket off this question in my text.

<sup>26</sup> Obviously, there is are enormous issues here regarding the relationship between the determinate signifier (Word as Scripture on an aesthetic level), the determinate signified (Word as proclamation on an ethical level), and the indeterminate signified (Word as revelation on a religious level). I do not propose to unpack all this in a short paper - or even in a long book - merely, rather, to point out that for Barth, the biblical semeion points to a signifier that is not comprehended in any mediating discursive structure. In that sense, the biblical signifier signifies and indeterminate signified. I do not deny that Barth may mean more than this. I simply assert that he does not mean less.



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Also, I make no attempt here or anywhere else in this paper to revise Barth's blatantly sexist language, which would be a Herculean labor in itself. (Barth was writing in 1933, not 1993.) I simply trust the reader to make the revisions mentally, *mutatis mutandis*.

<sup>27</sup> I say "except fortuitously" in order to allow, as Kierkegaard does in *Fear and Trembling*, for the possibility that the "knight of faith" might very well conform to the same communal/sociological ethical norms as the "knight of infinite resignation." The difference between the two would be that the former would do so from the standpoint of a passionate inwardness seized of the paradox of faith, whereas the latter would do so out of objective conformity to social convention.

<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in Bretall, 130. Emphasis in original.

<sup>29</sup> Of course, what Kierkegaard claims for the ethical over against the religious is even stronger than this: not only may the conduct of the "knight of faith" not be motivated by a concern to conform to the norms of the ethical, but her conduct might even be diametrically contrary to those norms - again, just as Abraham's was. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard implicitly holds out the possibility of both: the ordinary person who pays his bills, goes to church, lives a good and socially acceptable life - but who does so, not because "the rules say so," but from the standpoint of that infinite inward passion that is faith - and an Abraham whose actions are directly contrary to those norms. An interesting question now arises as to whether Barth's conception of the authority of Scripture-as-revelation, whose content is indeterminate, would allow for the possibility that one's conduct motivated by Scripture-as-revelation could contradict communal standards based on Scripture-as-proclamation. In other words, the question is whether Barth's schema allows only for a "knight of faith" of the first type, or of the second, scandalously transgressive, Abrahamic type as well. I am also glossing over here the equally interesting question of the sociological status of Scripture-as-revelation, i.e., whether a whole community could receive Scripture-as-revelation or whether Scripture-as-revelation could, by its very nature, only be received by an individual, an Abraham, who would then be free to act, as an individual, in a manner not sanctioned by the community. At least arguably, the answer to the latter question is "yes" - given the precedent set by Martin Luther 400 years before Barth!

<sup>30</sup> Barth even grants validity to traditional Church language, which further complicates the relationship between faith and the Faith. In *Dogmatics in Outline*, Barth asserts

Therefore, the language of faith, the language in which we as Christians are bound to speak, will inevitably be the language of the Bible, the Hebrew and Greek Bible and the translations of them, and the language of Christian tradition, the language in the forms of the thoughts, concepts, and ideas, in which in the course of centuries the Christian Church has gained and upheld and declared its knowledge. There is a specifically Church language ... To anyone rather too sensitive in his desires and too tender about dealing with his soul - "I believe, but my faith is so deep and inward that I cannot bring myself to utter the words of the Bible, that it is difficult for me to pronounce God's name, let alone the name of Christ or the blood of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit" - to anyone who should speak in this strain, I would say: "Dear friend, you may be a very spiritual man, but see to it that you are deemed worthy to be publicly responsible for

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your faith. And is your alleged shyness not shyness about emerging from your uncommitted private world? Ask yourself!" One thing is certain, that where the Christian Church does not venture to confess in its own language, it usually does not confess at all.

See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*. Trans. G. T. Thomson. (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 31. Emphasis added.

It is precisely in this area of the Christian's public responsibility for faith that Barth and Kierkegaard seem to differ most profoundly. With Kierkegaard, one has a very, very difficult time, arguably an impossible task, reading his texts so as to ascribe any intrinsic importance, anything essentially Christian, to the Church as a social phenomenon. It is difficult to imagine a community of Kierkegaards!

<sup>31</sup> The entire discussion in this paragraph impinges upon another subject we cannot explore because of limitations of space: Kierkegaard's and Barth's respective attitudes of the relationship of the Faith to the Church. Now, to be sure, Kierkegaard, in a passage of the *Postscript* to be quoted shortly, does ascribe value to the Faith as a runway from which the aircraft of faith can take off. But reading of his relentless excoriation of the established, especially Danish, Church of his day in texts like *Armed Neutrality*, *The Attack upon "Christendom"*, and *Training in Christianity* leaves one with the distinct impression that Kierkegaard would like nothing better than to completely divorce the Faith, in this provisional but nevertheless pragmatically valuable sense as an aid to the "leap," from the institutional structure in which the Faith was embedded. The problem, of course, is whether or not such a divorce is possible: is there, could there be, such a thing as the Faith apart from the institutional Church? For Barth, of course, the Church is not the ultimate reality either, but Barth takes a much more conciliatory view of the institutional Church in relation to the Faith. Consequently, Barth and Kierkegaard are in essential agreement about the nature and value of the Faith, but differ in the respective estimates of the institutional "exoskeleton" in which the Faith has historically found itself enmeshed.

<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 169. The quoted section is part of the first paragraph of chapter two of the *Postscript*, which is significantly entitled "Truth is Subjectivity."

<sup>33</sup> I say "specifically religious truth" and "not only" because, as is evident in the remainder of the paragraph, Kierkegaard does not deny that objective truth is a legitimate form of truth, but is rather at pains to argue that truth subjectively defined may not be approached through the mediating norms and canons of objective truth, and will later on in the same chapter argue that attempting to do so is the mortal sin of the Hegelian dialectic.

<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 182. Emphasis in original. Kierkegaard is fond of using the term "infinite" in connection with faith - or at least the late Walter Lowrie, who translated almost all the primary sources I ever use in writing on Kierkegaard, was fond of using this term. I find it useful when reading Kierkegaard, or at least Lowrie's translation of him, to mentally transpose Kierkegaard's references to "infinite passion," "infinite inwardness," and the like into Tillichian language, and so understand, e.g., "infinite passion" as "ultimate concern" and "unqualified seriousness."

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting here that this is the very thesis Kierkegaard argued for with such eloquence, and at such length, in his two-volume work *Either/Or*, and along the way illustrated in the respective characters of Johannes the Seducer and Judge William the incommensurable difference between the aesthetic and the ethical, respectively - the point being that, contra Hegel, not all contradictions can be reconciled. In *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, to say nothing of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard would similarly argue for the irreconcilability of the ethical with the religious.

<sup>36</sup> I am careful to say “properly so called” because, in order to avoid confusion, it is important here to acknowledge a potential terminological problem. When Barth speaks of religion, at least in the seventh chapter (“Freedom”) of *The Epistle to the Romans*, and most especially in the first two sections of that chapter (“The Frontier of Religion” and “The Meaning of Religion”), he means what Kierkegaard means by the aesthetic stage, not the stage of faith. Equating Kierkegaard’s use of the term “religion” with Barth’s usage, at least in that seventh chapter, is an iron-clad guarantee of misunderstanding Barth’s text.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 89. Immediately after this cited passage, Barth does begin to deal with ethical issues. I call this a reference to the aesthetic because, at the very beginning of this passage, Barth refers to the sheer “struggle for existence - eating, drinking, sleeping ... “ prior to any purely ethical reflection.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> I interpolate “morally” here because the context justifies it, especially in light of the immediately prior use of the explicitly ethical term “righteousness.” Barth’s point is that once human beings progress from being concerned merely and exclusively with survival, and in consequence begin to be concerned with moral right and wrong, they are still, for all that, on the level of the “flesh.” So “valuable” in this citation is synonymous with “possessed of moral worth” ethically, not merely valuable to survival on an aesthetic level.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 110. This citation is obviously rich in allusions, not only to Kierkegaard (see body of my text), but also to Luther. Luther, also, had this sense that, even if he engaged in extreme acts of self-abnegation, even if he abased himself, even if he humiliated himself, his self was still the center, and therefore all such actions, however ostensibly self-effacing or -negating, were at base attempts to create something to present to God so as to earn grace and salvation.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 231. Emphasis in original, including all capitals.

<sup>42</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 327. Emphasis in original.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 254. Emphasis in original, except for the words “mediated” and “immediate,” both of which I italicized.

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<sup>44</sup> I say that the content of the Signified of the biblical signifier is indeterminate “as to content” because, from a purely formal standpoint, we can indeed say that the Signified of the biblical text is Divine revelation, properly so called. But the content of this revelation is still indeterminate because - by definition! - unmediated by the vehicles of creed and confession, which exist and have validity purely as ethical artifacts.

<sup>45</sup> In this instance, I am using the term “religious” in its Kierkegaardian sense of the third stage, the stage beyond the aesthetic and the ethical, and not in the Barthian sense of a sociological artifact under the rubric of the Kierkegaardian ethical.

<sup>46</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 240. Emphasis in original.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 38. Emphasis in original. The passage from Kierkegaard that Barth quotes is from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. This is another of those places where terminology can get us into trouble. In its ordinary usage, the word “direct” would connote precisely an immediate relationship. But in this context, it connotes the opposite, i.e., mediation. For the passage from Kierkegaard that Barth quotes in this citation is taken from one of the sections *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* where Kierkegaard argues forcefully that faith, properly so called - faith as an “absolute relation to the absolute” - is incommunicable, and, Kierkegaard says, unlike the objective knowledge of which Hegel and the Hegelians were so enamored, cannot be communicated directly, i.e., by the mediating instrumentality of language and objective discourse. One can learn mathematics, history, etc., “directly” in this sense, but not faith. Therefore, and in this specifically Kierkegaardian sense of “direct” and its cognates, Barth asserts that faith “can ... be neither directly communicated nor directly apprehended.”

<sup>48</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 98. Emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 327, 343.

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