

Denying Objectivity to Arrive at Christianity: An Analysis of the *Postscript*

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SØREN Kierkegaard focused much of his religious writings on two questions: What does it mean to be a Christian? And how do I become one? Fashioning himself after Socrates, a teacher whom he revered for helping people to discover the truth for themselves, Kierkegaard preferred anonymity over fame. He accordingly wrote the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* from the viewpoint of a fictional person named Johannes Climacus, an “ordinary” thirty-year-old man who was “born and bred” in Copenhagen (15). The *Postscript*, Kierkegaard’s final attempt to anonymously redirect his contemporaries, explores the distinction between objective and subjective truth. A culminating theme in the work is whether one can build an eternal happiness on historical knowledge. By historical knowledge, Climacus¹ refers to concrete facts that we can know through objective study. He unleashes an arsenal of arguments to prove that faith in Jesus Christ is utterly incongruent with objectivity. His various arguments reveal a central belief that though objective truth is valuable in many spheres, it inherently clashes with faith because it denies faith of the passion necessary to pursue salvation. Two of Climacus’s most compelling arguments are the passion-venture argument and the inspiration argument.² This paper sets forth the structure of these

¹ Given the divergent views of Kierkegaard’s many pseudonyms, I attribute the ideas and concepts forwarded within the *Postscript* to Climacus rather than to Kierkegaard himself.

² I take the names and outlines of these arguments from Professor David L. Paulsen of the BYU Philosophy Department.

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arguments and discusses how both attempts at objectivity not only fail to arrive at Christianity, but actually inhibit potential Christians from developing true Christian faith.

The passion-venture argument is powerful because it attacks the essence of the objective route to faith. Climacus charges that objective inquiry strips away the passion necessary for faith. The passion-venture argument is as follows:

(1) Authentic Christian faith is directly proportional to the passion of the believer.

(2) But a believer's passion is directly related to his objective uncertainty.

(3) The aim of objective inquiry is to decrease objective uncertainty.

(C) Objective inquiry and authentic Christian faith are incommensurable.

To properly treat the first premise, authentic Christian faith should be distinguished from its lesser forms. Climacus laments that most Europeans assume Christianity "as given" (50). He calls this "faith taken in vain," since such self-identified Christians only assume the Christian title because all of their friends are alleged Christians or because they are citizens of a purportedly Christian nation (31). To be sure, this brand of Christianity, a product of mere association, falls far short of authentic faith. Those who only emptily call themselves Christian—perhaps because of societal norms—lack inwardness and passion. They do not make any great sacrifice for faith, nor are they willing to compromise their comfortable lifestyle in any way that society does not demand. Their faith is limited by indifference, and their lukewarm form of Christianity lacks the power to move mountains or to make these Christians into apostles.

Climacus says authentic Christian faith requires "infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness" (29). Whereas vain believers are crippled by a lack of passion, authentic believers have sufficient passion to commit themselves to the pursuit of an eternal happiness. He argues that this pursuit requires immense passion precisely because it is a paradox to most

people (205). The more passion believers have, the greater will be their faith and their propensity to imitate Christ and pursue his happiness. That is, as stated in the first premise of the passion-venture argument, passion breeds authentic Christian faith.

Having established that passion is prerequisite for authentic faith, we now ask how prospective Christians can acquire sufficient passion. Climacus insists that people cannot develop adequate passion through study. He believes that faith can never be the result of “straightforward scholarly deliberation” or any other direct means (29). On the contrary, Climacus asserts, “Christianity is spirit; spirit is inwardness; inwardness is subjectivity; subjectivity is essentially passion, and at its maximum an infinite, personally interested passion for one’s eternal happiness” (33). This formula highlights the role of subjectivity in developing proper passion.

But why must passion must be grounded in subjectivity? Climacus says it is because “all essential decision is rooted in subjectivity” (33). For Climacus, the essential decision refers to ethico-religious truth that leads to salvation. He believes that would-be Christians must follow the essential truth at every turn. This pursuit requires something greater than the axioms and rules of calculation which govern worldly decision. Because essential decision is rooted in subjectivity, the faithful need personal experience and an individual God-relationship in order to continue toward their celestial goal. The passion which flows from such subjectivity motivates Christians toward salvation when objectivity fails. Climacus is not arguing that subjectivity saves men and women. Nevertheless, he contends that “an eternal happiness is a question only for the impassioned, infinitely interested subjectivity” (32). That is, while subjectivity is not sufficient for salvation, Climacus deems it necessary.

Objectivity is the antithesis of subjectivity. Rather than draw strength in its believer-specific significance, objective inquiry requires external validity through experiments and proofs. The final premise in the passion-venture argument reminds us that the mission of objective inquiry is to remove all uncertainty and leave the investigator with a system of truths that can be universally confirmed. If people are interested in applying objective inquiry to their faith, they must first forget what they know through subjectivity and then seek to reestablish the truth of their beliefs through replicable proofs and external experimentation.

Climacus concludes that this is exactly the problem: objective inquiry and authentic Christian faith are incommensurable because the former seeks to eliminate the objective uncertainty that is necessary for the latter. Applying objective inquiry deprives faith of its passion and sets faith equal to a mathematical equation or any other objective statement that speaks nothing to the essential decision of salvation. Climacus considers believers who try to eliminate all uncertainty from their system of beliefs to be sadly comic (211).

But can a limited amount of objective inquiry at least provide a foundation for faith? Climacus does not think so. He says that as soon as matters of faith are treated objectively, they lose passion and infinite interest (31). Climacus further argues, “The more objective the observer becomes, the less he builds an eternal happiness, that is, his eternal happiness, on his relation to his observation, because an eternal happiness is a question only for the impassioned, infinitely interested subjectivity” (32). In sum, the passion-venture argument says that objective inquiry dooms authentic Christian faith because it chases out the uncertainty necessary for faith-building passion.

This argument is very compelling. As a Christian missionary I was charged to relay to strangers the doctrines I hold as truths. The missionary program, as modeled after scripture, emphasizes objective uncertainty. Various scriptural passages that shape the missionary teaching method, like those found in the Book of Mormon (Moroni 10:5) and in the Bible (John 14:26) promise that the Holy Ghost will reveal the truth of all things to every diligent seeker. Far from an objective inquiry, which aims to eliminate all subjectivity, we invited those who would hear us to engage in a profoundly subjective inquiry—a process that required them to evaluate our message personally and then to pray to God to know its truthfulness. We later returned to ask them what responses they received. Those who plunged into the subjective, reading scripture and praying daily, bridled their objective uncertainty in a way that fostered faith-building passion. They exhibited authentic Christian faith in their actions and continue to manifest their commitment to Christianity. Contrastingly, others we visited were obsessed with the objective uncertainties before them. They engaged us in long discussions in order to increase their objective certainty. Climacus would call this exercise futile because he says that there is no

objective truth in Christianity (224). I also found that trying to transfer my understanding of a doctrine to these people never generated any passion in them. Passion comes from within and cannot be inserted into another's life. The dispassionate people I met refused to embrace objective uncertainty; as a result, they did not reach authentic Christian faith.

A clever opponent of this argument might counter that removing some of the objective uncertainty surrounding Christianity would make it an easier sell. Imagine that we could confirm every word of the gospels, pinpoint the locations of every scene hallmark to Christianity, trace the succession of Christ's power from His day until ours, and so forth. Would such certainty cultivate greater faith? It does not seem likely. If this increased objective certainty made any contribution to Christianity, it would only add to the throngs of vain believers. Climacus seems to agree. He argues that "it becomes more difficult year by year" to become a Christian because it has now "become so easy" (215). Nevertheless, a full comprehension of the dialogue does not guarantee its truthfulness. That is, even if we could confirm all of the objective truths that frame Christianity, the source of faith would still be the remaining objective uncertainty. People would not derive faith from these objective truths, but from their subjective understanding of the incarnation, sacrifice, and mercy of God—those things which can never be established objectively.

We now move to a second argument against an objective route to faith. Bearing significant resemblance to the passion-venture argument, the inspiration argument also reveals a conflict between that which can be known objectively, historicity, and that which can only be known subjectively, inspiration. The argument is as follows:

- (1) Authentic Christian faith requires acceptance of the inspiration of the scriptures.
- (2) Inspiration cannot be determined by objective historical inquiry.
- (3) Hence authentic Christian faith cannot be based upon objective historical inquiry.

Christianity does not make sense to rational people because it has at its core the paradox that God entered time and became a mortal (217).

By our understanding, this is absurd, but this paradox is laid out in the scriptures. The same scriptures also give us the words of God and several models for how to live as Christians. Without these inspired aids, people would be left to their own devices. Thankfully though, this is not the case. God prepared a way to knowledge through the scriptures. By studying the inspired words of God, readers can begin to form an understanding of the Christian paradox and their relationship to God. Inspired scriptures are necessary then to inform and direct authentic Christian faith. They provide a foundation on which Christians can build their eternal happiness.

The second premise in the inspiration argument calls into question the scope of historical inquiry. Climacus says that historical inquiry naturally turns to the holy scriptures to determine what Christianity is and is not (23). To secure this inquiry, it becomes necessary to ensure that the holy scriptures, understood in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as the Bible alone, are indeed inspired. What a daunting task for historical inquiry: to prove the divinity of some sixty-six volumes! Many would use critical theology to establish the Bible's inspiration, but Climacus worries about this method. He likens critical theology to a philologist that dedicates his life to the publication of a book by Cicero. If the man were to exercise every academic caution and employ all of the most advanced techniques in hermeneutics, the book would be true to the author, but it would contribute nothing to the eternal happiness of humankind (25–26). Climacus worries that critical theology similarly assumes too much—that sufficiently trained scholars can produce a document upon which all people should attempt to build their eternal happiness. He points to Luther's rejection of the Epistle of James as one of many contradictions that should discourage us from adopting any particular scholar's conclusions about the inspiration of the scriptures.

Since scholars often disagree about which portions of the Bible are inspired, Climacus suggests that we imagine that “there has been a successful demonstration of whatever any theological scholar in his happiest moment could ever have wished to demonstrate about the Bible” (28). This imagined study concludes that every letter of every word in all of the books is inspired and that there are no contradictions anywhere in the collection. He asks if this finding would bring the nonbeliever any closer to authentic Christian faith. Climacus determines that it would not. Nor would such a confirmation increase the faith of the believer (29). In an additional

thought experiment he asks us to imagine that the Bible is completely defrauded. He concludes that neither the believer nor the nonbeliever would be affected (30).

Through his discussion of the philologist and the two thought experiments regarding the Bible, Climacus establishes that objective historical inquiry cannot judge the inspiration of the scriptures. Studies of religious texts that purport to determine inspiration really only gauge historical accuracy and consistency with other records because there is no external measure of divinity. Objective historical inquiry might reduce texts to comparable components, but this is not yet helpful. Similar to Climacus, we can suppose that after dissecting the Book of Mormon we find that it has many similarities to the Bible, that records from the same period tell the same stories, and that all historic references are accurate. What does this tell us about the inspiration of Mormonism? Such a study establishes historical consistency, but it falls short of inspiration. Similarities do not necessarily derive from the same source, and historical consistency does not discount coincidence. Like Climacus, we find this experiment ineffective because historical objectivity is insufficient for inspiration.

We conclude with Climacus that authentic Christian faith cannot be based upon objective historical inquiry because the process cannot confirm the inspiration of the holy scriptures. It seems that at the most basic level, historical inquiry lacks the tools necessary to determine divinity. At best, such inquiry only produces approximation, a weak foundation for an eternal happiness (30). Scholarly attempts to correct biblical history or to retranslate and reorganize biblical texts tend to be very bold in contradicting one another and arrogant in declaring their revised versions to be the proper document on which one is to build an eternal happiness. Such squabbling demonstrates why there can be no confidence in objective historical inquiry. If believers base their faith on objectivity, they will miss the inspiration of the scriptures and will therefore forfeit any understanding of Christianity and its paradox, which Climacus believes can only come from the holy scriptures.

Climacus makes a strong argument that objective historical inquiry can never make absolute determinations about inspiration. Given the frequent contradiction in historical inquiry, it seems the method often arrives only at best guesses. Like Climacus, certainly we would find it reckless to build our eternal happiness on approximations. The essential decision

must be more subjective (32). The two hypothetical scenarios that he drew during his discussion of scripture embrace this subjectivity. The moral is that our acceptance or rejection of scripture is independent of objective certainty. To be sure, it is convenient when historical inquiry confirms religious belief. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints love to find chiasmus in the Book of Mormon and artifacts of ancient civilizations in Central America. Even still, Latter-day Saints tend not to worry when scholars call Book of Mormon geography into doubt or when scientists question the lineage of Native Americans. Faith in scripture persists despite objectivity because faith is inward and passionate. This idea is consistent with Climacus, who said, “Objectively there is no truth; an objective knowledge about the truth or the truths of Christianity is precisely untruth” (224).

Critics might contend that the first premise of the inspiration argument is simply not true. They could reason that an omnipotent God does not need written scripture to instruct His children: He could teach people individually instead. Such an argument would raise issues about the character and workings of God, two issues that would open lengthy lines of debate. Instead of challenging these theological points, we should permit that God may not need a written canon to relay His will. We can still show that this criticism of the first premise fails to discredit the inspiration argument because we can easily extend the umbrella of scripture to include personal revelation. This adjustment seems consistent with Doctrine and Covenants 68:4, which says, “Whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Spirit shall be scripture.” When we allow personal and continuing revelation from God to contribute to holy scripture, we actually strengthen the inspiration argument because there is no conceivable way to establish the authenticity of personal revelation through an objective historical inquiry. How can one objectively examine personal experience with God? The conclusion is the same: authentic Christian faith cannot be based upon objective historical inquiry.

In his development and employment of the passion-venture and inspiration arguments, Climacus logically demonstrates that objectivity is not only irrelevant, but an actual barrier to true Christianity. If people are to truly seek after Jesus Christ and pursue His eternal happiness, they

must first learn to love subjectivity—to reach out for that which they can only know on a personal level. Personal revelation must overrule external validity. Only through such subjectivity can believers have authentic faith and only through this quality of faith in Christ can they be saved. Perhaps the most valuable lesson from this first portion of the *Postscript* is that one cannot become a Christian through a route that the world finds attractive. Just the opposite, to become a Christian is to dedicate oneself absolutely to the subjective truths that the world naively calls madness.

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