

# Writings

## *Some Remarks on Authority and Revelation in Kierkegaard*

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[This essay was written in 1976 and published in *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 57, no. 3, (July 1977), pp. 232-251. It reflects my longstanding concern with the grammar of the concept of revelation in Christian discourse. The influence, or at least my appropriation of what I understood, of Wittgenstein is also evident. Slightly edited herein. Numbers in brackets refer to endnotes. Posted here 8/9/04.]

The background of these remarks is the contemporary scene in philosophy and theology, strewn as it has been in recent years with such epithets as “God is dead,” “the post-Christian age,” “the age of secularization,” “the meaninglessness of religious language,” “the secular meaning of the Gospel.” It is as though profound cultural change and new philosophical discoveries have placed an unbearable burden upon Christian discourse. In the face of such a burden some Christian intellectuals have been engaged in a massive salvage operation of reinterpreting the Christian concepts in such wise as to secure their relevance to the modern, secular mind. And as this salvage operation is being carried out it should not be surprising that the terms of Christian discourse have become, to use an expression of Kierkegaard’s, “volatilized,” that is, unsteady and mercurial.

It is this volatilizing of terms that concerns me, especially as regards Christian talk of revelation. However, rather than directly confronting some of the forms of volatilization in our contemporary situation, I want to investigate some features of Kierkegaard’s discussion of authority and revelation. Kierkegaard considered his literature to be something of a corrective to the disarray and confusion that was plaguing the discourse of Christians in his time. I hope that attention to how Kierkegaard diagnoses and corrects his contemporaries will be of some benefit in understanding some of the present difficulties in Christian talk of revelation.

Kierkegaard was persuaded that Christian discourse had become corrupted in at least two respects. On the one hand, there was the assimilation of the discourse to the framework and categories of philosophical idealism, with the consequent loss of the decisive concepts of Christian faith. Such assimilation had taken place under the guise of rescuing the “real meaning” of Christian faith from the outmoded language in which it had historically risen. On the other hand, there was the practical domestication of Christian discourse that prevailed in the midst of that notorious arrangement called state religion. In such a situation the terms of Christian discourse had become so overtaken by the conventional practices and attitudes of the people that they no longer had the power to convey the distinctive content of Christian faith. Rather than conveying, for example, a word of judgment and grace, a challenge to worldly interests, the terms of Christian discourse had become largely subservient to those interests. People might still utter the words “sin,” “Jesus, Lord and Savior,” and “faith,” but without a sense of sin, of needing a savior, of striving for faith. The folk who in one way or another considered themselves Christian no longer had a Christian understanding, no longer lived within the distinctive concepts of Christian faith: “If it is factual that the language of Christian concepts has become in a volatilized sense the conversational language of the whole of Europe, it follows quite simply that the holiest and most decisive definitions are used again and again without being united with the decisive thought. One hears indeed often enough Christian predicates used by Christian priests where the names of God and of Christ constantly appear and passages of Scripture. . . in discourses which nevertheless as a whole contain pagan views of life without either the priest or the hearers being aware of it.”[1] With such volatilizing of terms by philosophical reinterpretation and by practical domestication, Kierkegaard thought his age needed to be educated anew in the discourse and life of Christian faith.

The case of a contemporary pastor named Adler was the occasion for a sustained investigation by Kierkegaard of the Christian understanding of revelation.[2] Adler had been educated in the reigning Hegelian philosophy and had understood the Christian faith through Hegelian eyes. But in 1842, while serving a pastorate in a small Danish village, Adler experienced what he later described as a revelation from God in which a “new doctrine was communicated to him” (p. 19). He ostensibly gave up his Hegelian theories, even burned some previous work of his on Hegel. But he was judged by his bishop to be deranged and was suspended from the pastorate. Later, after replying in an evasive way to the bishop’s official inquiries about his revelation, he was deposed from the church’s ministry. In the course of about three years he published six books pertaining to his “revelation” experience.

For Kierkegaard, Adler was a protruding example of the fundamental confusions concerning the Christian faith that afflicted his time. While Adler started with a claim to a revelation and a new doctrine, his behavior and his talk gradually seemed to belie the claim. The vivid certainty of a revelation from God gradually gave way to doubt and was finally transformed into a profoundly moving religious experience. The authority of a revelation was slowly exchanged for the authority of a gifted and

insightful religious genius. The new doctrine was strangely elusive with respect to its newness. According to Kierkegaard's diagnosis, Adler had such an "imperfect education in Christian concepts" (p. 167) that he could only confusedly use Christian terms to convey what had happened to him. Adler was too deeply mired in the volatilized religious talk of his day to be able to speak of revelation in a Christian context with clarity and circumspection.

## II.

Notice how Kierkegaard characterizes his perspective and purpose in writing about Adler. He suggests that the careful reader will perceive the respects in which Adler is "used to throw light upon the age and to defend dogmatic concepts" (p. xv). And a theologically inclined reader should be able to obtain "a clarity about certain dogmatic concepts and an ability to use them which otherwise is not easily to be had" (p. xv). Kierkegaard summarily asserts that "the whole book is essentially an ethical investigation of the concept of revelation; about what it means to be called by a revelation; about how he who has had a revelation suffers in our confused age. Or, what comes to the same thing, the whole book is an investigation of the concept of authority, about the confusion involved in the fact that the concept of authority has been entirely forgotten in our confused age" (p. xvi).

"An ethical investigation"? "Defend dogmatic concepts"? What is involved in Kierkegaard's speaking thus? I think he is initially reminding us that human speaking can also be ethically appraised. Lying is an obvious example of a morally reprehensible act of speech. But surely Kierkegaard does not intend to attribute lying, in any straightforward sense, to Adler. Perhaps Kierkegaard is pointing to some features of how we make sense in speaking, how we share a language, and how we are responsible in a variety of ways for what we say. While our speech may not be everywhere bound by rules, it is the case that rules are embedded in our speech. We cannot arbitrarily mean anything we want in what we say. To take a cue from Wittgenstein, say "the table is mahogany" and try to mean "the paper was destroyed." [3] But of course this example does not suggest any ethical considerations, and it should be obvious that not all rules of speech are moral rules or involve moral considerations. Correctness of speech is not always an instance of moral correctness.

But if we briefly consider a concept that has fascinated contemporary philosophy—namely, the concept of promise—we might better understand what Kierkegaard means by an "ethical investigation." When a person says "I promise," then in most cases, or as a rule, we do consider him bound, morally bound, by his promise. The utterance of these words, as a rule, brings the speaker under an obligation. Of course, people do also speak loosely and insincerely and will sometimes use these words even when they have no intention of trying to fulfill the promise. But in such cases we nevertheless hold them responsible for what they say; responsible for the deception involved in saying "I promise" without any intention of actually promising and being bound by the promise. Now in making comments of this sort about the use of "promise" I think we are noting ethical considerations embedded in the concept of promise; this would be an aspect of what Kierkegaard might call an ethical investigation of the concept of promise.

But now suppose that over a period of time many people came to use "I promise" as though they meant "I will if it is convenient." They no longer felt morally bound to keep promises beyond what convenience might allow. Would we not have in this case something like "having forgotten" what it is to promise, or having forgotten the concept of promise? While people still said "I promise" on innumerable occasions, they had forgotten how to promise without regard to convenience. Confronted with a situation such as this, I think we can appreciate the difficulty of undertaking to recover the concept of promise, of trying to reeducate people with regard to the practice of promising without regard to convenience. Likewise we should be able to appreciate Kierkegaard's concern for the forgetfulness and confusion which become evident when folk speak of themselves as Christians and use the terms of Christian discourse, yet now in diminished senses and without awareness of the incongruity between their speaking and living and the Christian faith.

But Kierkegaard's situation was even more complex than this. Not only was there a forgetfulness present in the careless and loose use of Christian terms, but there were also philosophers and theologians about who were offering new interpretations of Christian terms. The analogy to this would be philosophers coming on the scene to declare that the real and abiding essence of the concept of promise is the intention to do if convenient.

In the face of these complex confusions, I think we can understand the sort of considerations an ethical investigation of Christian concepts would involve. On the one hand, the recovery of the distinctive Christian concepts would involve showing their bearing on, their application to, **how** a person lives and showing the contrast with other ways of living. Ethical considerations would become evident in showing, for example, that a person had no right to speak of himself as a Christian, to continue the volatilized use of Christian terms, so long as he lived without regard to the concerns, dispositions, feelings, obligations, and convictions which are essential to Christian faith. Here Kierkegaard is trying to encourage honesty in folk about how they actually stand in relation to the task of becoming a Christian, and honesty of that sort will show itself in what a person says and how he says it.

On the other hand, in the face of the deliberate reinterpretations of Christian terms, Kierkegaard's ethical investigation seems aimed at sharpening the contrast in definition between the proposed reinterpretations and what he regards as the proper and distinctively Christian concepts. Here Kierkegaard is defending dogmatic concepts in the sense that he is attempting to preserve their distinctive meanings and applications. But even further, these two aspects of his investigation will often merge and coalesce around particular questions. For example, Kierkegaard wants to ask how one who has received a revelation ought to act; how does he comport himself in relation to others? Also, what is involved in acknowledging that another person has received a revelation from God? There is a deep confusion, a profound ethical issue, involved in speaking of another as a recipient of revelation and yet living, acting, in a way that seems unmindful of such an acknowledgment.

### III.

Of course, some difficult questions do arise at this point. It seems that a presupposition of Kierkegaard's exercise is that he does know which concepts are the correct dogmatic concepts so essential to authentic Christian discourse. Kierkegaard can identify confusions and mistakes only by reference to some sort of standard. And just here we might ask: How does one determine what the standard is? How can Kierkegaard justify his standard for discriminating between the correct and the confused or mistaken? Could not the so-called volatilization, at least that of some of the deliberate reinterpreters, which Kierkegaard scourges simply be a function of genuine and deep-going disagreements about the content of Christian faith? After all, the history of the church is full of serious doctrinal disagreements. Perhaps the polemical charge of "confusion" is unwarranted to the extent that it suggests thoughtlessness or ineptitude or intention to deceive, when in fact we may have a fundamental disagreement concerning the content of Christian faith. And with these considerations we are brought to the center of the issues concerning the status of doctrines and the nature of doctrinal disputes within the Christian tradition.

The question of the resolution of doctrinal disagreements is indeed complex and difficult, and I suspect doctrinal arguments have an inevitable circular character. But even so, it does seem that doctrinal proposals and arguments are attempts to identify, order, and elucidate the focal concepts and judgments of Christian discourse. And such proposals and arguments have a decidedly ad hominem character; they are attempts to confront those who intend to speak as Christians, to witness to Christian faith, with a variety of normative questions concerning the content and bearing of Christian faith. These normative questions direct our attention to the boundaries of Christian discourse, and it should be obvious for anyone acquainted with the history of the discourse of Christians that such boundary and normative disputes are not rare.

If we are to understand what Kierkegaard is doing in his critique of Adler, we must reckon with his assumption that his readers (and Adler) are familiar in some sense with the dogmatic tradition of the Lutheran church and with the Bible. His strategy is to use that tradition of teaching and the Bible as the sources for the dogmatic concepts he is defending. His comments will have force for particular persons to the extent that they acknowledge some allegiance to that dogmatic tradition and to the Bible. The analogy here with respect to our earlier example of promising would be that the folk have some memory of the practice of promising without regard to convenience; or if memory is insufficient, then they can imagine such a possibility. Obviously for someone who has no interest in becoming a Christian or using Christian discourse, Kierkegaard's comments will have no **force** beyond what curiosity might occasion.

In the light of these comments, it is well to consider a point made by Stanley Cavell in a remarkably supple essay on Kierkegaard's book on Adler.[4] Cavell argues that Kierkegaard's critique of Adler and the age is the type of work which Wittgenstein called "grammatical." And in a rough sense I can agree: Kierkegaard, like Wittgenstein, is attempting to dispel a confusion concerning the meaning and use of particular words and utterances by elucidating how they do make sense in an agreed context. For example, Wittgenstein attempts to meet some philosophical puzzles concerning the status of color-words like "red" by noting features of how we do in ordinary non-technical talk use color-words. Wittgenstein works by elucidating the grammar of our ordinary color-talk. His comments achieve, so to speak, a leverage on our understanding to the extent that they remind us of how we do in fact make sense with color-words. In our ordinary discourse there are deep agreements in what we say and how we talk which are obscured by misleading *a priori* theories that declare how we must speak in order to make sense.

It is very tempting to say that Kierkegaard is in an analogous way making grammatical comments on the Christian concept of revelation. "In the face of the volatilized use of Christian terms and the confusion which has been created, Kierkegaard has attempted to recover the proper Christian concept of revelation and thus to sort out the legitimate from the illegitimate," we might say. But this does suggest that there is in Christian discourse something analogous to ordinary language: a field of talk and practice in which there are deep agreements in what we say and how we talk. Yet the question is whether there is such an analogous field of agreement in Christian discourse, and that is a difficult question to answer. It is difficult just because there is also significant disagreement and division evident in the discourse of those who claim to be Christians. This suggests that we might well have something like competing grammars among the different communities of Christians, even though there might be important overlappings and resemblances among what they say. But considerations of this sort do further suggest that a claim to have presented **the** grammar of the Christian concept of revelation is not just a neutral, descriptive claim: it involves a

normative doctrinal judgment as to what is indeed the correct Christian concept of revelation.

This much, however, is clear about what Kierkegaard is doing in his work on Adler. He is assuming that any Christian discourse worthy of that designation does involve some talk of revelation, some reference to the authority of the Bible, some recognition that Christian faith is not simply identical with paganism. In defending dogmatic concepts Kierkegaard is offering us a set of considerations which he thinks are unavoidable for anyone who thinks seriously about the distinctive character of Christian faith. By stating a few points clearly and crisply he intends to obviate what he regards as some confusions concerning Christian faith. And I think we must admit that his comments will have force—an *ad hominem* force—to the extent that he does elucidate concepts which appear in the speech of many Christians in their ordinary practice of the faith.

#### IV.

In stating the purpose of his investigation of Adler, Kierkegaard indicates the central questions of what it means to be called by a revelation and how he who has had a revelation is related to the race, the universal, and we others to him. He then asserts that these questions “come to the same thing” as “an investigation of the concept of authority.” For Kierkegaard, then, speaking of revelation is intimately connected with such acts as claiming and acknowledging authority. It is well to note that, even though Kierkegaard does question Adler’s claim to have had a revelation, he does not ask whether it makes sense to speak of “being called by a revelation.” Kierkegaard takes for granted that such talk is appropriate and intelligible within the Christian context. His task is to elucidate what is meant in the use of that locution; his task is to explore the sense such an expression does make.

Kierkegaard seems to be working with a basic picture of what divine revelation involves. I think it is obvious that the picture is suggested by innumerable biblical passages. This is the picture of God intentionally revealing something to a particular person (or persons); God is in some way communicating with the person. The individual to whom God has revealed something is placed in a privileged position; it is clearly not a position enjoyed by all persons. It is a special, extraordinary position. And by virtue of this special and privileged position the recipient of a revelation is also placed in a position of authority with respect to other persons. The authority that the recipient has is conferred upon him by God’s revelation; to that extent the authority of the recipient is founded in God’s authority. God puts a person in a privileged and authoritative position by revealing something to him.

According to Kierkegaard, a recipient of God’s revelation is thus placed in a “teleological” movement toward other persons (pp. 105 ff.). He is called by a revelation not for his own benefit but for the benefit of others. The revelation that he has received is to be conveyed to others. “He is on a mission and has to proclaim the doctrine (which he has received) and exercise authority” (p. 118). In relation to others the recipient claims to speak in the name of God, to speak with divine authority. “He who is called by a revelation is called precisely to appeal to his revelation [and] he must precisely exert authority in the strength of the fact that he was called by a revelation” (p. 24).

That there might be something called “general revelation” Kierkegaard does not seem to have considered; in any case it is obvious that he would draw a sharp distinction between such revelation and the special revelation in which God reveals something to a particular person. Such a distinction would be unavoidable because of Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the authority of a recipient of revelation; there would be no positions of authority if revelation were a general or universal phenomenon.

Further, Kierkegaard does not use “revelation” in such wise that it also refers to the rise of faith in an individual. There are such experiences as “religious awakening” (pp. 163 ff.), but these are not strictly revelations of God. It appears that one symptom of Adler’s confusion was that he wanted to use “revelation” to cover a variety of profoundly moving experiences or religious awakenings.

It is also worth noting that Kierkegaard shows no hesitation about thinking of revelation as a definite event in which some definite content is conveyed to the recipient. Being entrusted with a definite message or a definite doctrine is just the sort of consequence which revelation involves. Further, while Kierkegaard does not explicitly speak of the recipient as possessing “knowledge” by virtue of the revelation, he does repeatedly speak of the recipient’s certainty both with regard to his having received a revelation and to the message which has been conveyed. In fact, Kierkegaard seems to regard uncertainty on these points as an indication that one has not received a revelation from God.

Christian faith is itself, according to Kierkegaard, “built on a revelation” and “limited by the definite revelation it has received” (p. 92). That revelation is of course the revelation of God in Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ is the God-man who speaks with divine authority (pp. 114-15). But in connection with the revelation in Jesus Christ, Kierkegaard also emphasizes the concept of apostle. While he does not put it exactly this way, we could say that for Kierkegaard the apostles of Jesus Christ are those who were specially called by the revelation in him to witness to him and to speak of him with divine authority.

In the Christian context to acknowledge someone as an apostle is also to acknowledge that person as one who speaks with divine authority. Kierkegaard is well aware of the obvious fact that terms like “authority,” “revelation,” and “faith” can be used

in ways quite different from the Christian use. For example, “authority” is not limited in meaning and use to the Christian context; so too with “revelation.” There is no conceptual mistake as such in speaking of a politician’s revelation that he will not seek reelection, of a statue being revealed by being uncovered, of a novel as a revealing presentation of the corrupting power of envy. But one needs to beware lest the Christian concept of revelation be simply assimilated to such uses. In order to draw our attention to the peculiar meanings of Christian concepts, Kierkegaard speaks of their “qualitative” distinctiveness (p. 105). This is connected with his development of other concepts: “the new point of departure,” “the eternal, essential qualitative difference between God and man,” “paradox,” and the distinction between “immanence” and “transcendence” (p. 105).

Christian concepts achieve their qualitative distinctiveness by virtue of their application to the paradoxical new point of departure that is the coming of God in Jesus Christ. In spite of the “eternal, essential qualitative difference between God and man”—a difference which stands as a limitation on all human speech about God—God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Such a revelation is a paradoxical new point of departure for human understanding of self and God; it is paradoxical in that there is no higher explanation of how such a revelation is possible. This new point of departure is not to be explained as the inevitable or necessary fruition of the historically previous or natural; it does not fit into the historical unfolding of human events in a calculable or predictable way. In relation to a human understanding which is tied to the previous, the predictable, or the necessary, the new point of departure will effect a collision: it disturbs the understanding and resists attempts to assimilate and digest it in terms of what we already know, believe, and expect. The new point of departure, so to speak, posits itself as a heterogeneous authority; it is the revelation of divine authority. The new point of departure represents a transcendent authority, an authority not reducible to the variety of authorities which properly play a role in the “immanent” understanding of self and world.

## V.

Now Kierkegaard thinks the concept of an apostle, properly explicated, will show forth the special point of these distinctions.[5] Consider the various ways we have of speaking about Paul, especially how we might appraise Paul or commend him. We can appraise him as an agent in the history of the West, and such appraisals are often carried out by historians. Or we might appraise him in terms of intellectual brilliance, or practical and tactical shrewdness, or rhetorical style, or poetic sensitivity. Appraisals of these sorts, however, are within the range of appraisals we might apply to anyone, and there are criteria available to guide our judgments. But is the judgment that Paul is an apostle to be assimilated to the logic of judgments about historical agents, intellectual achievements, practical shrewdness, rhetorical style or poetic sensitivity?

Perhaps such judgments do not properly convey the special and exceptional character of Paul so far as he is an apostle. But we do have a way of appraising people so as to set them apart from the common run of humanity. We will often call a person a “genius” when we wish to ascribe to him some distinctive talent or achievement. A genius is one who ranks highest in the grade of appraisals within some type; being a genius is a matter of having a superiority of some sort. With reference to intellectual capacities a genius is one who has such capacities at the highest level. However, even though we use the term “genius” to register such an exceptional appraisal, we must admit that the judgment pertains to superiority within some type. That is, the judgment involves a quantitative appraisal. Hence, it also makes sense to speak of approximations to the superiority which the genius represents: “he was almost a genius.”

Return now to Paul. What sort of appraisal is involved in acknowledging Paul as an apostle? Is this an acknowledgement that involves judging Paul in terms of historical agency, or in terms of being a genius of some sort? Would it be appropriate to say such things as: “With rare insight Paul discovered the fundamental difference between grace and law, faith and works,” as though this were evidence for his being an apostle? According to Kierkegaard, it is sheer confusion to assimilate Paul’s status as an apostle to his status within the ranks of the historically important, the brilliant, the shrewd, the poetic, etc. The concept of apostle is qualitatively different from these other appraisals, and such matters as those appraisals indicate count neither for nor against Paul’s being an apostle. The concept of apostle pertains to an individual’s being called by God in a revelation, and herein “the divine authority is the qualitatively decisive factor” (p. 107).

For Kierkegaard, then, it is a mistake to defend or explain Paul’s authority as an apostle in terms of these other appraisal concepts, for such appraisals have regard to Paul only in the field of immanent authorities, relative authorities, transitory authorities. Such appraisals, in spite of whatever truth they might indeed express, do not even approximate the acknowledgment that Paul is an apostle called by God and invested with God’s authority.

Consider the logic of this. To acknowledge Paul as an apostle is to acknowledge him as one called by God’s revelation. To be called by revelation means being placed in a privileged and authoritative position in relation to what we might call the “universally” human. The authority of the revelation—the authority that the revelation confers—is a heterogeneous factor in relation to the general situation of human beings. “Being called by a revelation” is a characteristic or a quality that is posited from outside the human situation: it is posited by God (p. 110). Hence this quality is not to be understood as a general possibility that might be realized in the natural development of a human being; it is not a quality which might be explained as a

possible human achievement. It is a paradoxical quality, and that means that it does not fit into the scheme of possibilities that characterize what Kierkegaard calls the “sphere” of immanence (pp. 105, 112).

According to Kierkegaard, the concept of authority that is appropriate to the sphere of immanence is one which pertains to relative or transient conditions. By the sphere of immanence, Kierkegaard has in mind the “relationship between man and man qua man” including “political, social, civic, household, or disciplinary relationships” (p. 111). There are, of course, many authority relationships in human affairs. And while Kierkegaard wants to warn us against construing divine authority in terms of how we establish and recognize the legitimacy of authority in various human situations, he does intend for us to note well how the relationship of authority functions even there.

For example, we are to note that one who exercises authority should not confusingly defend his authority: a judge who wanted to defend his authority as a judge by citing his legal achievements as a lawyer would only appear foolish. He would be confusing his status as a juridical authority for the state with his status as a competent legal attorney. Also, the acknowledgment of the judge’s authority by others, for example, in his courtroom, ought to be quite independent of their regard for his legal achievements or his personal features. Acknowledgment of his authority means obedience and submission, and within the courtroom contempt for his personality is not a legally legitimate excuse for disobedience. I take it that Kierkegaard wants to remind us that even in the sphere of immanence the acknowledgment of authority does in some instances involve obedience and submission to the exercise of that authority.

In speaking of authority relationships as transitory and conditional, I think Kierkegaard is drawing our attention to how authority is legitimized in human relationships. And herein the legitimacy seems to be a function of a complex set of arrangements in human society. These may change, and it would be foolish to suppose that they were unconditional in character. But divine authority seems to be just that authority which is unconditional and is not a function of human arrangements of legitimization. The concept of divine authority is confused if one supposes that it is an authority that can be legitimized by recognizing its role as one of the conditional authority relationships. If it is a mistake to think of the judge’s authority as a function of his legal brilliance, it is, for Kierkegaard, an even worse mistake to think of an apostle’s authority as a function of his genius. While the concept of divine authority does trade on the notions of obedience and submission, it is not a type of authority that can be legitimized by reference to the criteria of the sphere of immanence.

The authority of an apostle, therefore, is the special and paradoxical authority of one who has received a revelation of God. The apostle does not suppose that he can prove that he has had a revelation; he does not advance arguments with the intention of securing himself as an authority. That is, he does not seek to establish his authority by appealing to non-divine authorities. He can only repeat his claim to being called by a revelation.

According to Kierkegaard, it was one of Adler’s mistakes that he wanted both to claim the authority of one who has received a revelation from God and to look for confirmation of his authority and his doctrine by appealing to authorities of the sphere of immanence. Under the initial impact of his experience Adler set out to break with immanence: he burned his Hegelian books and denounced his Hegelian ways. But under the questioning and skeptical eyes of church and world he began to look for legitimization in terms of what folk otherwise know and believe, in relation to immanent authorities. It is as though Adler wanted to make a case for himself; he looked for an inference license, an ergo, which would secure the conclusion: Adler had a revelation and speaks with divine authority. But for Kierkegaard such a conclusion could only be obtained at the expense of confusing the Christian concept of revelation.

## VI.

It is worth pausing now to see if we have adequately grasped Kierkegaard’s points. The distinction between immanent and divine authority is crucial for him, and yet the distinction does raise some questions. Perhaps the following considerations will enable us to become clearer about what Kierkegaard calls “immanent authority.” Let us say that A is a purported authority. Concerning A’s purported authority we can always ask at least two questions: (i) with respect to what is A an authority? and (ii) by virtue of what is A an authority? In asking these questions we are inquiring about the conditions under which the authority exists.

Suppose that we are confronted with a claim by some A to authorize p, wherein p is either a belief or a course of action. It is with respect to p, or the sort of thing p is, that A claims to be an authority. When we ask, “By virtue of what is A an authority?” we are asking about the conditions which legitimize (or back and warrant) A’s authority. For example, if A is a judge in a courtroom, he is an authority on the question of overruling or sustaining ‘objections.’ And the authority of the judge derives from his status as an official of the state.

Of course, questions and disagreements may easily arise concerning someone’s claim to exercise authority. We may disagree as to whether the claim of A is the sort that can be a function of legitimizing conditions. And we might disagree as to whether A

actually meets the conditions for being the sort of authority he claims to be. I think it is the case, however, that authority-claims of various sorts are advanced and acknowledged—explicitly and implicitly—in an enormous range of human relationships. And in many cases there are relatively unproblematic ways of getting clear about both the grounds and the limits of the authority. In that respect we can say that all of these authorities have their relative conditions, and it seems to me that these authorities are what Kierkegaard calls “immanent authorities.”

But Kierkegaard is emphatic in urging us to think of divine authority as quite different from all immanent authority. But in what respects different? I have already suggested that a start in the right direction is to say that, whereas all immanent authorities are conditioned, God’s authority is unconditioned. God does not have his authority by virtue of anything else but himself. We might even say that it is a logical absurdity to question God’s authority, just as it would be logically self-contradictory to assert that God lies. So it would seem that because God is God, he is the supreme authority and whatever he says is worthy of belief.

However, without disagreeing with these points, I think we can see that the dispute in discussions of authority and revelation in Christian discourse is not whether God has supreme authority but whether some particular claim to have the sanction of God’s authority does in fact have that sanction. That is, for every claim to represent what God has authorized we still have the question of whether God did in fact authorize it. There is nothing logically absurd in asserting, for example, that God said “Jesus is my Son.” The hard question here is not whether God is an authority to be acknowledged and believed. Rather, the hard question is whether God did in fact say what he is asserted to have said, and that leads to the further question of what criterion could be used to determine when some claim is indeed a proper claim of divine authority.

It should be obvious, then, that there is a difference between asserting that God said p and justifying that assertion. And without very careful qualification it does not seem appropriate to regard a challenge to the assertion that God said p as a challenge to God’s authority. Put another way, there is a world of difference between the following utterances: (a) What reason is there for believing that God said p? (b) What reason is there for believing p even if God said it? Clearly b, if it does make sense, might be considered a challenge to God’s authority, for it suggests that God’s saying p is not sufficient to authorize believing p. But a is not as such a challenge to God’s authority. At most it could be regarded as a challenge to someone who claimed to speak for God. Hence, the question which disturbs Christian discourse is not whether God is the supreme authority but how to identify those claims which genuinely do have God’s authorization.

The following dilemma thus gets posed even if we do think of God as unconditioned authority in distinction from all conditioned, relative authority. While God’s authority may not be conditioned, it does seem that we cannot claim his authority without providing some criterion for justifying such a claim. But any criterion that we might provide would either be one that is reducible to some relative authority or it would appear to be itself a question-begging appeal to God’s authority. Put another way, we need a usable criterion for identifying what does have God’s authority, and we seem confronted with either deriving the criterion from relative authorities or with justifying the criterion by appeal to God’s authority. The latter alternative looks as though it is saying, “This is what God has authorized, and we know it because He authorized it.”

In the light of these considerations it would seem that Kierkegaard’s basic point is that the Christian concept of revelation is indeed question-begging in a crucial respect. There is no criterion contained in the abstract concept of divine authority that justifies of itself the designation of any particular claim as having the sanction of divine authority. But in the context of Christian faith the decisive point is that some particular persons are acknowledged as being bearers of divine authority. Hence, for Kierkegaard, Jesus and the apostles are the defining instances of divine revelation and divine authority. **There is a necessary circularity here, and this circularity is the logical knot that the concept of revelation posits and conveys.**

Kierkegaard is aware that his account of the Christian concept of revelation flies in the face of a conviction which is not only widespread among his contemporaries but is sometimes expressed in the Christian tradition. I have in mind the conviction that Christianity must somehow be defended as plausible, wherein “plausible” is tied to noncircular argument. As some might put it, circular argument is no argument at all, or is question-begging. Being plausible about the Christian claims of divine authority would seem to require a noncircular way of defending that claim. In the face of just this sort of talk Kierkegaard says “Christianity is implausible” (p. 60). Cavell suggests that this remark is grammatical in character, and that would mean that Kierkegaard is pointing out a fundamental rule concerning the discourse of Christian faith; it is a rule that forbids all attempts to explain and justify the faith in terms other than the authority of the new point of departure which is Jesus Christ and the calling of the apostles.

It should be clear that Kierkegaard’s “defense of dogmatic concepts” is not an attempt to defend Christian concepts against the skepticism of critics. His defense is not an argument for the truth of the judgments which dogmatic concepts can be used to make. Defending such concepts is not an attempt to make them plausible before the court of immanent human understanding. Rather, defense involves clarifying the concepts over against their illegitimate cousins, against the counterfeit substitutes, against the vain and trivializing uses that deflect and obscure the true character and point of Christian faith. We might say that the defense does in a sense represent the kind of understanding that thinks, lives, and speaks in the light of the new point of

departure and within the limits of that point. In this connection dogmatic concepts do not render a higher understanding; instead they are developed as the sentinels whose sole task is to demarcate the distinctive contents of Christian faith.

## VII.

The repeated use of “understanding” and “limits of understanding” may be creating some genuine problems for us that require some careful analysis. I can imagine the following comments: “Hasn’t Kierkegaard tried to delineate the Christian concept of revelation, to make it clear and understandable in order that it might be distinguished from what you have referred to as counterfeit concepts? Hasn’t Kierkegaard provided, therefore, an understanding, and if so, doesn’t that mean he has brought the concept within the limits of understanding? Whatever else Kierkegaard might mean by this odd notion of the limits of understanding, surely you must admit that to the degree that Kierkegaard has been successful in his discussion just so far also has he brought the concept of revelation within the limits of understanding.”

There is something in these comments, and among the difficulties in replying adequately is that which pertains to the varied meanings of the term “understanding.” It is admittedly like Euthyphro’s “piety,” it gets up and walks around on us. And interestingly enough even when we are not discussing “understanding,” it—if I can here use “it”—is what we are typically looking for and disputing about in philosophical discussions. Also, we have at various points in the history of philosophy attempts to draw sharp boundaries around understanding in order to distinguish between the intelligible and the unintelligible. Not the least of those efforts was that of the Logical Positivists.

I do not want here to delve further into a criticism of those efforts, except to say that one of the more fruitful suggestions of Wittgenstein’s has been to warn us away from attempts to draw neat, across-the-board distinctions between the intelligible and the unintelligible. Instead we are to look more carefully at specific examples of how we do understand and what counts for understanding in this or that context. I do think Kierkegaard would have been appreciative of these cautionary remarks. On occasions, however, we can for a particular purpose cast our nets in a rather sweeping fashion, recognizing that not all of the fish we will catch can simply be put in one category.

There are, I think, at least two senses of understanding involved in Kierkegaard’s casting the net labeled “the limit of understanding” and that are meant in such expressions as “collides with the understanding.” The first has to do with understanding so far as that covers the variety of man’s epistemic activities and theories. This is the understanding that philosophers have been most interested in and inclined to regard as the understanding. In a recent book called *Human Understanding*, Stephen Toulmin identifies his inquiry in this way: “The general problem of human understanding is. . . to draw an epistemic self-portrait which is both well-founded and trustworthy.”[6] “The final philosophical goal. . . is. . . to give an adequate account of the intellectual authority of our concepts, in terms of which we can understand the criteria by which they are to be appraised.”[7] Toulmin goes on to say that such an account “must be relevant to the actual practice of rational criticism” and “must be given in terms which are operative in the light of our present knowledge.”[8]

If I have properly grasped Kierkegaard’s discussion of revelation, then it would have to be said that this concept of revelation does not fall within the province of the well-founded intellectual authority of human understanding. To defend the Christian talk of revelation in terms of what we independently know and understand is to abolish the concept of divine authority. We should be rightly surprised to find Toulmin discussing the province of divine authority, unless he was surreptitiously reinterpreting that to mean some well-founded field of human authority. But further, it is not as though a Toulmin-like discussion could come up with a list of concepts that naturally fall beyond the limits of human understanding and that divine revelation and authority are on the list. Rather, Kierkegaard’s point is that at the heart of Christian discourse is the paradoxical revelation in Jesus Christ, and to understand it as paradoxical is to understand that it does not seek certification at the hands of our understanding. There is, of course, a difference between (a) understanding that the concept of revelation involves the paradoxical identification of divine authority and particular persons and utterances and (b) striving to achieve an understanding which, without begging the question, could justify that identification. The latter, clearly, could be achieved only by eliminating the paradox.

The second sense of understanding which involves a collision with the claim of Christian revelation pertains to what we might call the informal, conventional, or ordinary understanding which man has concerning himself and what is valuable in the world. We need not think of this in a theoretical way, though it may receive a theoretical form and argument in the hands of intellectuals. This is the understanding that manifests itself in actual life, in how men live, in how they feel and are disposed toward other people and the world. Kierkegaard argues that Christian faith is bound to collide with this understanding. The claim to divine authority, to unconditional obedience, and the emphasis on a justification of life through grace and faith are bound to collide with the typical ways in which men live and prefer to live.

Given this Kierkegaardian way of construing the dogmatic concept of revelation, does it follow that Christian faith is immune from philosophical criticism? Well, what does “immune” mean here? That such criticism is impossible? That would be a strange conclusion indeed. It certainly does seem possible that there will be severe criticism of Christian discourse, and the

wisest course would be to look at such criticism piece by piece as it is presented. But it should be no surprise to the Christian that his discourse might be charged with being in some crucial respects question-begging or unverifiable. That is the sort of point Kierkegaard is trying to underscore in speaking of revelation and a new point of departure. To the extent that these concepts are both proper for Christian faith and understandable, they do make it evident that the Christian recognizes that a collision with the immanent criteria of understanding is unavoidable. The collision is not something that needs to be covered up or attenuated. This, of course, does not mean that any sort of philosophical criticism would have to be tolerated; much of it may be a function of misunderstanding and to that extent can be cleared up.

### VIII.

There is, however, something profoundly misleading about the discussion thus far. The tendency has been to characterize the concept of revelation in terms of logical considerations. That is, the emphasis has been on contrasting definitions, inspecting implications and inconsistencies; it is a picture of a logical structure of concepts and propositions. But when I suggest that this picture may be misleading I do not mean that I want now to correct the picture by modifying yet another feature of the logical relationships. Rather, I want to suggest that it is misleading because it is too abstract; it makes it look as though we were simply sorting out intellectual confusions. It has been as though there was an unstated qualifier in the background which can now be put like this: "If you want to speak in terms of the Christian concepts, then there should be some gain in becoming more familiar with the logic of that discourse." But perhaps the logic of the discourse has not yet conveyed a way beyond the "if" of "if you want to. . . ." That is, the essay has not come to grips with the task of placing the discourse in a more concrete relation to human interests and dispositions.

Perhaps I can show why the discussion might be misleading by considering this. What has been presented can quite easily be construed as the exploration of a baffling puzzle, a knotty problem. It may look as though it all comes down to this: "Do you or do you not believe the Christian revelation?" or, "Do you or do you not intend to become obedient to God?" There we are, face to face with the central claim of Christian faith. Take your choice: this conceptual scheme or some other. But surely this is misleading, for it makes it look as though we have only our doubts and questions on the one hand and an authoritarian system of belief on the other.

It is one of the enduring merits of Kierkegaard that he was also acutely aware of just how this sort of situation can become profoundly misleading. How Kierkegaard also sorted out the possible misconceptions in this we do not have the space to pursue beyond some brief remarks. Kierkegaard's literature was designed to force our attention on the interests, concerns, and feelings of human subjects, of ourselves. How do these interests, concerns, and feelings hang together in actual life, in the concrete way a person lives? The Christian talk of revelation is not basically addressed to what we might call the interests of knowledge and curiosity. Rather, Christian concepts have their bearing in changing and forming the lives of folk; they have their bearing in relation to an acute awareness of one's own personal life, to how one is disposed to act, judge, and feel. Kierkegaard referred to these features of human life as "existential" matters.

Now consider how Kierkegaard construed the situation in the book by Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The question being considered was how it is possible for a person to base his eternal happiness on an historical point of departure. While the question might receive an abstract or algebraic discussion as in *Philosophical Fragments*, the task in the Postscript is to concentrate on the individual who might genuinely ask such a question. "Genuinely ask such a question?" Yes. It is possible not to ask it genuinely. But to understand how such a question could be a genuine question for an individual subject we need to become clear about what sort of an interest this eternal happiness represents. How must the individual subject be qualified in order for this question about eternal happiness to become a serious question? The assumption, of course, is that not all of us will be found in just a ready position to grasp the point and weight of the question. Not that we need more intellectual training. Rather, Kierkegaard is saying that there must be a requisite development in the individual before this question can be seriously asked. So, too, with the concept of revelation in Christian discourse: the vitality of its use is quite obscured apart from the appropriate interests and passions.

The other side to this is that for Kierkegaard faith involves being schooled in the distinctive Christian concepts, for these concepts themselves should give shape and continuity to the life of an individual. The concept of revelation does confront the individual with an authoritative demand for obedience. And one should not pretend to acknowledge the Christian revelation if one is subjectively indifferent or indecisive at the point of obedience. There really is no acknowledgment of divine revelation if there is not also the deep realization that this revelation is decisive for one's life.

These considerations must be linked with Kierkegaard's judgment that another of the ills of his age is that everything has become an object of reflection. And he thinks such a tendency creates confusion in the sphere of faith. "It is. . . in relation to the spiritual life the most injurious thing when reflection. . . goes amiss and instead of being used to advantage brings the concealed labor of the hidden life out into the open and attacks the fundamental principles themselves" (p. 30). Assuming that Kierkegaard is thinking of revelation and authority as "fundamental principles," we can see that for him reflection brings

confusion in its train when it openly seeks a non-question-begging justification of those principles. Instead of using reflection to intensify and clarify the shape and course of one's spiritual labor, one is caught up in the endless dialectic of whether it really is divine revelation one is confronting. "The appearance of being in suspense always results when one does not rest upon the foundation but the foundation is made dialectical" (p. 30). For folk who are incessantly preoccupied with the attempt to resecure those foundations, Kierkegaard's words may be like salt on a wound.

## IX.

It should be apparent to any student of contemporary theology that the volatilization of Christian concepts remains an ominous problem today. Considering that the concept of revelation is certainly one of the most volatilized concepts, I hope these remarks on Kierkegaard provide some insight into a few of the issues posed in Christian talk of divine revelation. It is a profoundly serious matter to speak of and make claims about divine revelation. And surely Kierkegaard is challenging in his contention that human reflection encounters a logical knot in the Christian concept of divine revelation and that such reflection cannot discursively establish that God is revealed in Jesus Christ and the witness of apostles.

Admittedly many issues remain. We are *inter alia* still confronted with questions concerning the content of revelation, including the question of what in the New Testament is to be explicitly identified as bearing divine authority. Further, considering that our own culture is even more secular than Kierkegaard's Christendom, there is the persisting question of how Christian faith can be articulated so as to lead to a decisive engagement with the actual lives of folk. Kierkegaard's work is important in this regard also, for he held together the concern for the logical integrity of dogmatic concepts and the concern for showing how those concepts relate to and shape the subjective interests and passions of persons. Kierkegaard does not seem to have succumbed either to the temptation to attenuate the dogmatic concepts for the sake of touching the lives of contemporaries or to the temptation of ignoring the concrete lives and sensibilities of folk for the sake of declaring a dogmatically "correct" gospel. Precisely because his work unfolds in the tension between these two temptations, Kierkegaard remains provocative and challenging to Christian theologizing.

## Endnotes

[Since the writing of this essay, in which I use the texts available at that time, a new translation of those texts is now available in Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 24: *The Book on Adler*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998). It is extensively annotated and contains many related passages from Kierkegaard's journals.]

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 166.
2. Except for a short piece on the distinction between a genius and an apostle, Kierkegaard did not publish his extensive reflections on Adler and revelation. He did, however, write three prefaces to his "Book on Adler" and those along with the "Book" have been translated by Walter Lowrie under the title *On Authority and Revelation*. The bulk of my remarks have to do with this book, and further page references to it will be included in parentheses in the text.
3. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), pp. 139 ff.
4. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) (see chap. 6, "Kierkegaard's On Authority and Revelation").
5. The following remarks are based largely on Kierkegaard's discussion of the distinction between a genius and an apostle on pp. 103-18. This discussion was later published by Kierkegaard in 1849 along with another essay in *Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises*, which has been translated by Alexander Dru in S. Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 139-63.
6. Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 3.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
8. *Ibid.*

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