

# Spiritual Imagination and Contemporaneity

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

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## Abstract

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



## Introduction

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

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 125.

<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 174.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 133.

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

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 36.

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

### The Context of *Anti-Climacus*’ Critique

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 194.

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 171.

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

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 171.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 33 (emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> Stokes, "See for yourself," 314.

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

<sup>22</sup> Stokes, "See for Yourself," 297.

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

<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 25.

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

<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 63.

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

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

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

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<sup>31</sup> Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion”, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 185.

<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 241.

<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 254.

<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255-6.

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

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 43.

<sup>39</sup> Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 300.

<sup>40</sup> Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 305.

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

### Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life

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

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

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

<sup>43</sup> Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 33.

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

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 59-60

<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 81.

<sup>48</sup> Stokes, "See for Yourself," 297.

<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 203.

existence “upon earth” gives truth a potent existential and temporal quality. We see this position reiterated frequently throughout *Practice in Christianity*: “the truth, if it is there, is a being, a *life*”.<sup>50</sup> These assertions may, at first glance, appear simply as expressions of well-established orthodoxy according to John 14.6.<sup>51</sup> However, Anti-Climacus is keen to expand upon the reality of these assertions, noting: “this means that truth in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition etc, but a life”.<sup>52</sup> If we compare the type of truth which would exist in a sum of statements with that which exists as “life”, a difference in temporal constitution emerges which is important in understanding the relevance of contemporaneity. Relative to lived experience, a “definition” exists in a significantly more limited context of space and time—the assumption would be that in this form a truth is both transferable and explicable, its mode of reception would be most prominently noetic.

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

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

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<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 206.

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

<sup>52</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 205.

<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 204.

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

<sup>55</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 134.

<sup>56</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 206.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 127.

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

<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 95.

<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 135.

<sup>62</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 208-9.

<sup>63</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.



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

### The Contemporaneity Debate

Now that we have established the reasons why true knowledge of Christ (i.e., faith) requires contemporaneity, it will be good to try to discern more of what contemporaneity actually looks like. In order to do so, I will evaluate an apparent disagreement between scholars over whether or not contemporaneity should be deemed a supernatural<sup>69</sup> or a purely imaginative<sup>70</sup> event. The former, belonging to Cockayne, favours a reading which defines contemporaneity according to the actual, spiritual presence of Christ. The latter, belonging to Stokes, prefers to think of contemporaneous presence figuratively, as something invoked through a state of mind. Their debate, however, need not be a case of either/or; Anti-Climacus’ use of poetic narrative and performativity throughout *Practice*, in order to *imaginatively* inspire communion with the *spiritual* reality of Christ, demonstrates the interrelatedness between imagination and the supernatural. The aesthetic use of ambiguity, provocation, and storytelling in the work in question, as well as Kierkegaard’s theological authorship as a whole, shows how creative faculties are crucial in a relationship which nevertheless is with a truly existing divine being. To overlook the imaginative aspects of ‘contemporaneity’, as Cockayne does, or ignore the supernatural reality of a Christ with whom we can become contemporary, as Stokes does, undermines the important collaboration of these elements.

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<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 310.

<sup>66</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 95.

<sup>67</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 49-50.

<sup>68</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> Cockayne, “Imitation and Contemporaneity”, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 304.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>71</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 64.

<sup>74</sup> Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 46.

<sup>75</sup> Cockayne, “Contemporaneity and Communion,” 60.

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

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

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<sup>76</sup> Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 114.

<sup>77</sup> Cockayne, "Contemporaneity and Communion," 59.

<sup>78</sup> Cockayne, "Imitation and Contemporaneity", 10.

<sup>79</sup> Cockayne, "Contemporaneity and Communion," 56.

<sup>80</sup> Cockayne, "Imitation and Contemporaneity", 9.

<sup>81</sup> Cockayne, "Contemporaneity and Communion," 56.

<sup>82</sup> Cockayne, "Contemporaneity and Communion," 46.

<sup>83</sup> e.g., Kierkegaard, *PC*, 181-199.

<sup>84</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 59.

<sup>85</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 45.

<sup>86</sup> Stokes, "See for Yourself," 303.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>87</sup> Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 309.

<sup>88</sup> Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 308.

<sup>89</sup> Stokes, “See for Yourself,” 313.

<sup>90</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 18.

<sup>91</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 5.

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

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

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

### Art and Faith

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

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<sup>92</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 58.

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

<sup>94</sup> Stokes, "See for Yourself," 316-7.

<sup>95</sup> Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, "Existential Kenosis," 709.

<sup>96</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 256.

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

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

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

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<sup>97</sup> Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 82.

<sup>99</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255.

<sup>100</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 252.

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

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

### Ambivalence towards the Aesthetic

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

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

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<sup>102</sup> Gregor, “Thinking Through Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus,” 455.

<sup>103</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 98.

<sup>104</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 51.

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

<sup>106</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 207.

<sup>107</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 63.

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

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

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

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

## Imitation

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

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<sup>108</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 119.

<sup>109</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 151.

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*, 319.

<sup>111</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 190.

<sup>112</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 51.

<sup>113</sup> Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 128.

<sup>114</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255.



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

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

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

<sup>116</sup> Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, “Existential Kenosis,” 716.

<sup>117</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 255.

<sup>118</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 252.

<sup>119</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 9.

<sup>120</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 233.

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

<sup>122</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 191.

<sup>123</sup> Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, “Existential Kenosis,” 714.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>124</sup> Gregor, “Thinking Through Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus,” 452.

<sup>125</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 205.

<sup>126</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 206.

<sup>127</sup> Ramazzotto, “The Ambiguity of Mimesis,” 88.

<sup>128</sup> Gregor, “Thinking Through Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacus,” 452.

<sup>129</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 134 (emphasis added).

<sup>130</sup> Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 56.

## Risk and Decision

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

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

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

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<sup>131</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 96.

<sup>132</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 141.

<sup>133</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 41.

<sup>134</sup> Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*, 182.

<sup>135</sup> Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*, 182.

<sup>136</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 81.

<sup>137</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 16.

<sup>138</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 17.

<sup>139</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 35.

<sup>140</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 318.

## Conclusion

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

## References

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

JP: *Journals and Papers*

TA: *Two Ages*

PF: *Philosophical Fragments*

PC: *Practice in Christianity*

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

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<sup>141</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 156.

<sup>142</sup> Becker-Lindenthal and Guyatt, "Existential Kenosis," 706.

<sup>143</sup> Kierkegaard, *PC*, 102.

<sup>144</sup> Stokes, "See for Yourself," 306.

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