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# WAS SOCRATES A CHRISTIAN BEFORE CHRIST? KIERKEGAARD AND THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN UNIQUENESS

Michael A. Cantrell

Kierkegaard's belief that Socrates embodied a prefiguration of Christian neighbor love militates against the claim that Kierkegaard believed there was absolutely no intimation of the obligation to love the neighbor in paganism. Kierkegaard also accepted that any awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor must be divinely originated. These beliefs and Kierkegaard's other claims regarding the *daimonion* and Socrates's "becoming a Christian" support the view that Kierkegaard believed Socrates to have been a recipient of special divine revelation. The plausibility of this conclusion and its consistency with Kierkegaard's apostle/genius distinction is explored. Finally, speculative reasons are given as to why God might have chosen to give Socrates the *daimonion*.

The second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr once claimed that those among the ancient Greeks who lived in accordance with reason were, in fact, Christians. Justin points to Socrates by name, going so far as to say that Socrates actually had a partial knowledge of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Justin Martyr is not the only Christian thinker to have made such extraordinary claims about Socrates. In this paper, I consider those claims made by the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. I argue that, although the statement that "Kierkegaard saw Socrates as a Christian before Christ" is probably misleading, it is nonetheless probably not inaccurate.

Parts I and II examine Kierkegaard's claims about the uniqueness of Christianity and discuss reasons for thinking that Kierkegaard saw Socrates as something of an exception to these uniqueness claims. Part III argues that Kierkegaard was committed to the view that Socrates was the recipient of special divine revelation by means of his *daimonion*. Part IV evaluates Kierkegaard's statements about Socrates through the categories of *The Book on Adler*, concluding that, for Kierkegaard, Socrates occupies an unexcluded conceptual middle ground between the "genius" and the "apostle." Part V explores how Socrates could have been the beneficiary of

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Justin Martyr, "First Apology of Justin Martyr," ch. XLVI, and "Second Apology of Justin Martyr," ch. X in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), Vol. 1.



special divine revelation yet still fail to possess any authority on account of that revelation. Part VI hazards a couple of broad speculations as to what Kierkegaard might have believed regarding why God chose to give Socrates the *daimonion*. Finally, part VII concludes the paper, drawing out the implication of Kierkegaard's belief that, regardless of how many times an awareness of the obligation to love might have appeared in human history, it is something that must be *divinely* impressed anytime it appears.

### I. The Challenge of the Uniqueness Claim

In his book *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, C. Stephen Evans develops a divine command theory of moral obligation that is similar in many respects to that defended by Robert M. Adams.<sup>2</sup> Evans maintains that moral obligations are rooted in divine commands that are promulgated to human beings through both special and general revelation. But Evans does not merely develop this view as a plausible philosophical position. Rather, as he maintains, the view he describes is actually *Kierkegaard's* ethical view as well.

I am not concerned in this paper to argue for or against Evans's broad account of Kierkegaard's ethical views. Yet, while I find much that is admirable in Evans's work, I am for the moment interested in a particular interpretive obstacle for Evans's view that arises out of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. Evans argues that Kierkegaard believes that part of the central Christian ethical teaching (i.e., the love commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself") is promulgated through general revelation, with the result that it is universally available. The obstacle is what Evans identifies in his book as Kierkegaard's "uniqueness claim."<sup>3</sup> Evans characterizes the uniqueness claim as follows: Kierkegaard believed that "Christian teachings are not only unique and unknown in paganism, but contain within themselves the 'possibility of offense,' a natural tendency to shock and disturb the person who has not been fully transformed by Christianity."<sup>4</sup> Such a claim poses a problem for Evans's project because if Christian teachings are "unique and unknown in paganism," this cuts against the view that the love commandment is promulgated through general revelation.

To meet this challenge, Evans marshals textual evidence to argue that other views to which Kierkegaard is committed militate against the uniqueness claim. By my count, Evans offers three considerations by which he purports to show that Kierkegaard himself does not (or at least should not) accept the uniqueness claim.<sup>5</sup> First, he argues that it is hard to see

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chaps. 10 and 11.

<sup>3</sup>C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 158–159.

<sup>4</sup>Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 158.

<sup>5</sup>Evans gives several other arguments in this section. However, it is hard to see how these other arguments are intended to establish that the specific obligation to love the neighbor is

how the uniqueness claim “could be reconciled with [Kierkegaard’s] claim that God has placed love ‘within the ground’ of every human person.”<sup>6</sup> As I read the passage<sup>7</sup> to which Evans refers, however, Kierkegaard commits himself only to the conditional claim that *if* a person is ethically or spiritually “built up,” *then* God has implanted love in his or her heart.<sup>8</sup> But suppose that we grant Evans his preferred reading, i.e., that Kierkegaard believes that God has in fact “placed love within the ground” of every person. As it turns out, this still does not get Evans all that he needs. For, to count against the uniqueness claim, he needs to show not simply that *love* is somewhere present without a special revelation, but rather that *an awareness of the obligation to love* is so present.<sup>9</sup> After all, Kierkegaard is quite emphatic that what is striking about Christian love is that it is *commanded*. Not *love* but the “*you shall love*” is the mark of the distinctively Christian teaching.

The same consideration serves to cast doubt on the promise of a second passage to which Evans appeals in support of his interpretation. Evans argues that Kierkegaard “explicitly admits that since Christianity is nothing new in the sense of ‘novelty,’ that there are parallels of a sort between Christian teachings and paganism.”<sup>10</sup> The passage of Kierkegaard’s to which Evans refers is the following: “The commandment [i.e., ‘*You shall love*’] is not something new in an accidental sense, nor a novelty in the sense of something curious, nor something new in a temporal sense. Love had existed also in paganism, but this obligation to love is a change of eternity—and everything has become new.”<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard here clearly acknowledges that love “existed also in paganism,” and this certainly constitutes a parallel of sorts to Christian love; unfortunately, however, this is not a parallel that is useful to Evans’s attempt to argue against the uniqueness claim. Rather, what Evans needs for this purpose is a passage in which Kierkegaard recognizes some pagan individual as possessing an awareness of the *obligation* to love.

The strongest evidence that Evans produces for his view is precisely his observation that Kierkegaard sees Socrates as embodying a prefigurement of Christian love. One of the passages that Evans has in mind is worth quoting at length:

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promulgated through general revelation, as opposed to establishing merely that *some* moral obligations are so promulgated.

<sup>6</sup>Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 159–160.

<sup>7</sup>Kierkegaard writes, “But can one human being implant love in another human being’s heart? No, this is a suprahuman relationship, an inconceivable relationship between human beings; in this sense human love cannot build up. It is God, the Creator, who must implant love in each human being, he who himself is Love.” *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 216.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 216.

<sup>9</sup>More precisely, Evans needs to show that *Kierkegaard* thought this to be the case.

<sup>10</sup>Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 159.

<sup>11</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 25.

[W]hy did that simple wise man of old [i.e., Socrates] . . . compare himself to a “gadfly” at the same time as he called himself a divine gift, and why did he love young people so much? As for the first, was it not because he, as a pagan, . . . had loved people in something higher, that is, because he had had an awakening influence . . . ? As for the latter, was it not because he perceived that young people still had a receptivity for the divine . . . ? Therefore, because he, by means of the eternal and “something divine,” had prevented his love for people from coming to a standstill . . . , that is, because he, by holding himself close to the requirement, had been like a requirement to the people.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Evans’s other arguments, this one does militate against the claim that the obligation to love one’s neighbor was absolutely “unique and unknown in paganism.” For example, Kierkegaard here speaks of Socrates, “as a pagan . . . lov[ing] people in something higher.” Furthermore, Kierkegaard says it was “by means of the eternal and ‘something divine’” that Socrates was moved to love other people in this way. “The eternal” is Kierkegaard’s typical poetic manner of referring to an individual’s God-relationship. Kierkegaard elsewhere speaks of Socrates’s God-relationship as mediated by his *daimonion*,<sup>13</sup> the curious “divine sign” that opposes Socrates whenever he is about to undertake some wrongful (or at least some less-than-ideal) course of action.<sup>14</sup> As for the “something divine,” this is actually a transliteration of the precise language that Socrates himself uses to refer to his *daimonion*. So in this passage Kierkegaard strongly indicates that Socrates’s *daimonion*-mediated God-relationship was the “awakening influence” that moved him to love people and to call himself a “divine gift.”

And that is not all. Contextual facts confirm that Kierkegaard here is making quite an extraordinary claim about Socrates’s awareness of an obligation to love other people. Kierkegaard says that Socrates was capable of such love because he “h[eld] himself close to the requirement.” This is significant because the context of the quotation makes it clear that “the

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<sup>12</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 128–129.

<sup>13</sup>The entry states:

Ah, now I understand it! Socrates’s daemon was always merely dissuading because Socrates’s God-relationship was dialectical. The immediate God-relationship is positive. But the dialectical God-relationship begins in a certain sense with nothing, and God first comes in the next round. If I have no immediacy, then I must always make the first step myself. God does not immediately or directly tell me what I am supposed to do. I do it; according to my best deliberations I regard it as the best, and I present it now to God, humbling myself and my resolution, my plan, my action under God.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, 7 vols., ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978) II:107 (#1373); cf. *Søren Kierkegaard’s Papirer*, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, 20 vols. I–XI.3 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909–1948), IX A 242.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. e.g., Plato, *Apology*, 31c–d; *Phaedrus*, 242b–c. All translations of Plato’s works are those in *Plato’s Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

requirement" is that of "the Law,"<sup>15</sup> that is, "God's Law,"<sup>16</sup> "the Law of love."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in the chapter from which this quotation comes (entitled "Love is the Fulfilling of the Law"), the phrase, "the Law's requirement" (my emphasis) occurs no less than twenty times. It appears, then, that Kierkegaard is attributing to Socrates some awareness of, and obedience to, the obligation to love the neighbor.<sup>18</sup>

Of Evans's three arguments, only the last represents a plausible exception to the uniqueness claim. The next section takes a closer look at Kierkegaard's uniqueness claim itself, to specify in more precise terms how this claim should be understood.

## II. The Complexity of the Uniqueness Claim

Where in *Works of Love* is Kierkegaard's uniqueness claim to be found? As it turns out, there is no one passage in which Kierkegaard articulates such a claim. This is because, as I maintain, what Evans identifies as Kierkegaard's "uniqueness claim" is actually a conjunction of two separate theses, which (following Kierkegaard's language) I shall term the "divine-origination thesis" and the "no-intimation thesis," respectively.

First, the *divine-origination thesis* is linked to Kierkegaard's claim that the obligation to love "did not arise in any human being's heart," an allusion to I Corinthians 2:9. This thesis asserts that one can become aware of the obligation to love the neighbor only through a divine revelation. The following passage is typical:

What courage it takes to say for the first time "You *shall* love," or, more correctly, what divine authority it takes to turn the natural man's conceptions and ideas upside-down with this phrase! There at the boundary where human language halts and courage fails, there revelation breaks forth with divine origination and proclaims what is not difficult to understand in the sense of profundity or human parallels but which did not arise in any human being's heart. It actually is not difficult to understand once it has been expressed; indeed, it wants only to be understood in order to be practiced, but it did not arise in any human being's heart.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Cf., e.g., Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 128–129.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>18</sup>Jacob Howland has observed that, for Kierkegaard, "Socrates's life is graced by an extraordinary integrity of understanding and existing. In him, speech and deed, logos and ergon, are one; his actions are fully in harmony with his grasp of the truth." *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 213. Howland explains that Kierkegaard's pseudonym, "Climacus[,] makes it clear in [*Concluding Unscientific*] *Postscript* that Socrates's philosophical passion is extraordinary. Kierkegaard agrees. In his journals, he indicates that Socrates is unique in being able, without following Christ's example, to live up to his understanding of the truth and thus to actualize the ideal. Others simply lack the condition of genuinely philosophical eros that makes this possible." *Ibid.*, 211–212. See also the epilogue of Howland's book, which examines several of Kierkegaard's intriguing statements about Socrates.

<sup>19</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 24–25.

The divine origination thesis is stated four times in *Works of Love*, and every instance is to be found in chapter II, section A.<sup>20</sup>

Second, the *no-intimation thesis* is the simple claim that there is no intimation of neighbor love (i.e., of the obligation to love the neighbor) in paganism. Following are two of those passages:

One must rather take care to make it very clear that the praise of erotic love and friendship belongs to paganism . . . so that with the sure spirit of conviction we can give to Christianity what is Christianity's, love for the neighbor, of which love no intimation [*Anelse*] is to be found in paganism.<sup>21</sup>

And again,

Christianity has misgivings about erotic love and friendship simply because preferential love in passion or passionate preference is actually another form of self-love. Paganism has never dreamed of this. . . . [P]aganism has never had an inkling [*aldrig har anet*] of self-denial's love for the neighbor, whom one *shall* love.<sup>22</sup>

The Danish noun *Anelse* in the first passage is well-translated into English as "intimation." The semantic range of *Anelse* overlaps that of the English words presentiment, anticipation, suggestion, clue, and hint.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the Danish phrase *aldrig har anet*, meaning "never had a presentiment / clue / hint / (etc.)," is also well captured by the translation of the second passage. Thus, the no-intimation thesis states that there is no intimation of the obligation to love the neighbor in paganism. This thesis occurs three times in *Works of Love*, and every instance is to be found in chapter II, section B.<sup>24</sup>

It turns out that what Evans calls the uniqueness claim is actually the conjunction of the divine-origination thesis and the no-intimation thesis—a fact that is supported by Evans's appeal to instances of both theses to support his way of characterizing the uniqueness claim.<sup>25</sup> The conjunction of these theses reads as follows: one can become aware of the obligation to love the neighbor only through a divine revelation *and* there is no intimation of neighbor love in paganism. Each conjunct makes a claim whose truth-value is logically independent of the other's. Therefore, each conjunct can stand or fall independently of the other. Were one to attempt to discredit the uniqueness claim, it would suffice merely to cast doubt on one of its conjuncts.

With this fact in mind, we should reflect again on the arguments Evans gives in support of his interpretation of Kierkegaard's ethical views. As it

<sup>20</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 24–25, 27, and 42.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 53; the second sentence begins a new paragraph.

<sup>23</sup>See, e.g., the entry for "anelse" in *Dansk-Engelsk Ordbog*, ed. Jens Axelsen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1978).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 44, 53, and 57.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 157.

happens, all the considerations Evans advances against the uniqueness claim are aimed at only one of its conjuncts—the no-intimation thesis.<sup>26</sup> As we noted, Evans’s first two arguments fall short of the mark, but the third provides strong reasons to doubt Kierkegaard’s across-the-board commitment to the no-intimation thesis. Evans’s third argument points to Kierkegaard’s belief that Socrates possessed some awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor—a clear counterexample to the no-intimation thesis.

It is important to note that Kierkegaard’s belief that Socrates possessed some awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor is not contrary to a statement that Kierkegaard later makes to the effect that Socrates lacked *knowledge* of the obligation to love the neighbor. Later in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard discusses Socrates’s language in the *Symposium* about loving one who is ugly.<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard identifies love for an ugly person with commanded neighbor-love, and he states that Socrates knew nothing about the fact that “one **shall** love him” (emphasis in original). Kierkegaard says, “one **shall** love him—that simple wise man knew nothing about this; he did not know that the neighbor existed and that one shall love him. His talk about loving the ugly was just teasing.”<sup>28</sup> Clearly, Kierkegaard states that Socrates did not have knowledge that one is obligated to love the neighbor. Thus, whatever awareness Socrates’s “awakening influence” gave him, that awareness fell short of full-blown knowledge of the obligation to love the neighbor. But it is by no means necessary to possess *knowledge* of that obligation in order to have an awareness that amounts to or even rises above an *intimation* of it. So Kierkegaard’s statement does not conflict with his other remarks to the effect that Socrates possessed some awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor.

In sum, because Kierkegaard believed that Socrates had some awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor, Evans’s argument successfully shows that Kierkegaard did not have an across-the-board commitment to the no-intimation thesis.<sup>29</sup>

### III. Socrates’s Divine Revelation

To take stock of what has been established thus far: on one hand, Kierkegaard’s remarks on Socrates give us reason to doubt his across-the-board

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<sup>26</sup>Of course, Evans sometimes talks as if his first argument is aimed at undermining the divine origination thesis; however, this is a moot point, since the argument fails to provide grounds for doubting either thesis.

<sup>27</sup>See Plato’s *Symposium*, 210b–c. The statement is put into the mouth of Diotima.

<sup>28</sup>The emphasis is in the original. This is my translation of the following passage, which is found at location IX.353 of the Danish text: “Man skal elske ham, dette vidste hiin eenfoldige Vise Intet om, han vidste ikke, at Næsten var til og at man skulde elske ham, det han talte om at elske den Stygge var blot et Drillerie.” In the Princeton edition of *Works of Love*, which is translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, the corresponding passage is on p. 373.

<sup>29</sup>Kierkegaard’s journals contain other interesting comments on Socrates. For example, Kierkegaard wrote, “Outside of Christianity Socrates stands alone—you noble, simple wise man—you were actually a reformer.” *Journals and Papers*, VI: 508 (#6871); cf. *Papirer*, XI.1 A 133.

commitment to the no-intimation thesis. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's commitment to the divine-origination thesis has escaped unscathed. Therefore, we are left with Kierkegaard's commitment to two claims: first, that Socrates possesses some awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor. And, second, that one can come to possess some awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor only through a divine revelation. Now, one might pause to ask whether this is a problem. After all, taking these two claims as premises, one could by *modus ponens* validly conclude that Kierkegaard is logically committed to Socrates's having received a divine revelation.

Given only what has been established thus far, one might argue that *general* revelation is sufficient to account for Socrates's awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor. Perhaps Socrates was unusually receptive to the general revelation that is universally available in creation. If this were the case, then Kierkegaard's commitment to Socrates's having received a divine revelation would amount to nothing more sensational than a commitment to *accessibilism*, a position in Christian soteriological debates. Accessibilists maintain, in part, that those who are without the benefit of special revelation can still gain salvation through a Spirit-enabled response of trust to the general revelation of God in nature, experience, and reason.<sup>30</sup> (Accessibilism is typically contrasted with forms of what is variously called *restrictivism* or *exclusivism*, the view that salvation is available only to those individuals with explicit knowledge of Christian special revelation.) In fact, one might argue, this commitment really amounts to something weaker than the accessibilist position, for no reason has been given to show that Kierkegaard believed that Socrates actually obtained salvation.

This last point would stand securely were it not for a telling remark that Kierkegaard makes in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*. Speaking of Socrates's indirect method of communication, Kierkegaard says, "in this respect I calmly stick to Socrates. True, he was no Christian, that I know, although I also definitely remain convinced that he has become one."<sup>31</sup> While it is hard to know exactly how to interpret this statement, it seems at least to indicate Kierkegaard's "definite . . . convi[ction]" that Socrates achieved salvation at some time subsequent to his physical death. This is naturally interpreted as a belief in postmortem evangelization, the view that a person who was not evangelized before death enjoys an opportunity to respond to the Christian gospel subsequent to his or her death.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>A version of accessibilism is defended in Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>32</sup>While I do not hold a postmortem evangelization view, proponents of that view often cite John 3:18 and 1 Peter 3:18–4:6 in support of their position.

Historically, the early Church Father Clement of Alexandria held a postmortem evangelization view.<sup>33</sup> Other proponents include nineteenth-century author George MacDonald, theologians Donald Bloesch, George Lindbeck, and Gabriel Fackre, and philosopher Stephen T. Davis.<sup>34</sup> If Kierkegaard believed in some sort of postmortem evangelization, then the question of how to characterize his view turns on whether that evangelization is itself supposed to take the form of general or special revelation. If the former, then Kierkegaard would seem to be committed to a sort of straightforward postmortem accessibilism. If the latter, then Kierkegaard's position appears to be that Socrates received a postmortem version of what Terrance L. Tiessen calls "particular but nonuniversally normative revelation,"<sup>35</sup> or as I call it, "nonuniversally-normative special revelation." As Tiessen describes it, this kind of revelation "is 'special' in its particularity or limited address, but it is not 'special' in the sense of being revelation from God intended for everyone, everywhere—that is, it is not universally normative."<sup>36</sup>

Either way, Kierkegaard's "definite . . . convi[ction] that [Socrates] has become [a Christian]" fits naturally at the intersection of Kierkegaard's own unabashed Christian commitment, his superlative admiration for Socrates, and his awareness of Socrates's view that even the unexamined *afterlife* would not be worth living. In the *Apology*, Socrates considers "that there is good hope that death is a blessing" because it is possible that death is "a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place."<sup>37</sup> Socrates reflects:

If . . . anyone arriving in Hades . . . will find those true jurymen who are said to sit in judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and the other demi-gods who have been upright in their own life, would that be a poor kind of change? Again, what would one of you give to keep company with Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die many times if that is true. It would be a wonderful way for me to spend my time whenever I met Palamedes and Ajax, the son of Telamon, and any other of the men of old who died through an unjust conviction, to compare my experiences with theirs. I think it would be pleasant. Most important, I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 6.6.

<sup>34</sup>See Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 20; see also John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001); Stephen T. Davis, "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology* 6 (1990), 176.

<sup>35</sup>Tiessen uses this exact phrase in *Who Can Be Saved?*, 139

<sup>36</sup>Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 120.

<sup>37</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 40c.

<sup>38</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 41a–c.

Kierkegaard naturally would have conceived Christ as among those who, in Socrates's words, were "upright in their own life" and who "died through an unjust conviction." It is fascinating to imagine the possibility that Christ was among those whom Socrates "test[ed] and examin[ed]" to determine "who among them is wise."

Regardless of what we make of Kierkegaard's view of Socrates's post-mortem experience, however, there remains the question regarding the source of Socrates's *premortem* awareness—that is, Socrates's awareness during his lifetime—of the obligation to love the neighbor. Can that awareness be explained as the result of general revelation? Above we saw that Kierkegaard indicates that it was "by means of the eternal and 'something divine'"—that is, by the *daimonion*-mediated God-relationship—that Socrates came to some awareness of the obligation to love.

The *daimonion* has been so embarrassing to some modern scholars that they have attempted to explain it away as nothing more than the voice of conscience. But this simply will not do. For, besides the *daimonion*'s making its appearance in some situations where no moral wrong is about to be committed,<sup>39</sup> Socrates makes clear that it is a quite rare phenomenon, having happened, as he says, "to no one before [him], or to only a very few."<sup>40</sup> By that remark, Socrates was *not* accusing the vast majority of humanity as being without a conscience. Kierkegaard was aware of this fact, having written a section of his dissertation on Socrates's *daimonion* in which he affirmed both its historical reality as well as its externality to Socrates's subjectivity.<sup>41</sup> All of these factors indicate that Kierkegaard's understanding of the *daimonion*'s activity simply cannot be cashed out in terms of general revelation. Rather, it must be understood as a case of nonuniversally-normative special revelation—and this is the position to which it appears that Kierkegaard was committed.<sup>42</sup>

I should hasten to point out that viewing the pagan Socrates as a recipient of nonuniversally-normative special revelation is not so outlandish a position as it might at first appear. After all, Abraham—the father of the three great monotheistic faiths—was himself a pagan when God first appeared to him,<sup>43</sup> as were the Magi, the astrologers from the east who were guided by the star to the location of Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, several more examples from the Bible alone can be given. Other clear examples of pagans who

<sup>39</sup>Cf. e.g., Plato, *Euthydemus*, 272e.

<sup>40</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 496c.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 157–167.

<sup>42</sup>Paul W. Gooch has written an interesting book, *Reflections on Jesus and Socrates: Word and Silence* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1996). Gooch states, "I find in Socrates not Christian faith but a stance toward the god that shares a recognizable architecture with the experience of Christian faith." *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>43</sup>See Genesis 12, Acts 7:2 and, most importantly, Joshua 24:2.

<sup>44</sup>See Matthew 2.

received a special divine revelation include Abimelech, the king of Gerar<sup>45</sup>; Balaam, the pagan prophet<sup>46</sup>; Job<sup>47</sup>; King Neco<sup>48</sup>; and Cornelius, the Roman centurion.<sup>49</sup> Other likely examples include Melchizedek,<sup>50</sup> Pharaoh,<sup>51</sup> King Nebuchadnezzar,<sup>52</sup> King Belshazzar,<sup>53</sup> King Cyrus,<sup>54</sup> and Eliphaz the Temanite.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it is not really so odd or unusual to hold that a pagan was a recipient of special divine revelation. In fact, to all appearances, it seems that a Christian should hold that God is quite willing to give special revelations to pagans when it serves his good pleasure to do so.

#### IV. *Apostle, Genius, or Something Else?*

Readers familiar with Kierkegaard's *Book on Adler* will have a special reason for concern at the primary conclusion of the preceding section. After all, it might be thought that the claim that Kierkegaard was committed to Socrates being the beneficiary of special divine revelation implies that Socrates is to be viewed as an "apostle" in the sense that Kierkegaard gives to this term—a view that Kierkegaard no doubt would have rejected out of hand. But to claim that Socrates was the beneficiary of special divine revelation is by no means to imply that he was an apostle in Kierkegaard's sense.

To see why, it is necessary to get clearer on Kierkegaard's project in *The Book On Adler*. This work is Kierkegaard's response to the confused and shifting claims of Adolph Adler, a pastor on the Danish island of Bornholm. Adler claimed to have received a revelation in which a new doctrine was dictated to him by Jesus Christ—only later to declare that his "revelation" was actually a work of "genius." Kierkegaard's main goal in this book is to rigorously distinguish the category of "apostle" from that of "genius," and thereby to bring crucial dialectical clarity about such matters into the public consciousness. But, as it happened, Kierkegaard never published the book, largely out of concern for Adler and for the effect that the book would have had on him.

In the book, Kierkegaard explains that "[t]he qualification 'genius' lies within the sphere of immanence."<sup>56</sup> That is, the insights or productions of the genius are a consequence of a purely human resourcefulness and

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<sup>45</sup>See Genesis 20.

<sup>46</sup>See Numbers 22–24.

<sup>47</sup>See Job 38.

<sup>48</sup>See II Chronicles 35.

<sup>49</sup>See Acts 10.

<sup>50</sup>See Genesis 14.

<sup>51</sup>See Genesis 41.

<sup>52</sup>See Daniel 4.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>See Ezra 1.

<sup>55</sup>See Job 4.

<sup>56</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 174.

creativity. Furthermore, "the genius," Kierkegaard says, "is *born*."<sup>57</sup> In other words, as a genius, one's achievements are realizations of a potential that has existed within oneself from birth. A genius comes into one's own as a natural consequence of one's life-development. Moreover, a claim that one is a genius is justified by appeal to rational or aesthetic considerations. As such, even one who does not qualify as a genius can resemble the genius to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon one's native endowments or capacities.

The apostle, on the other hand, is "not born."<sup>58</sup> Rather, just as Kierkegaard describes the genius as belonging to the "sphere of immanence," so the apostle is said to belong to the "sphere of transcendence."<sup>59</sup> This means that the apostle's doctrine proceeds from a source that is transcendent of human powers. Even if the apostle's doctrine is comprehensible or independently discoverable by human beings, the manner in which the apostle comes to be in possession of the doctrine is qualitatively different than the way in which one who is a genius "hits upon" one's ideas. Furthermore, in Kierkegaard's description, "the apostle is a man who is called and appointed by God and sent by him on a mission. An apostle does not develop in such a way that he gradually becomes what he is [potentially]. Prior to becoming an apostle, there is no potential possibility; every human being is essentially equally close to becoming that."<sup>60</sup> Contrary to the genius, then, there can be no resemblance of greater or lesser degree to the apostle, for an apostle is not what he is due to his native endowments. Rather, "every human being is essentially equally close to becoming" an apostle by being the subject of an authoritative special revelation.<sup>61</sup>

Given this description, the reader might feel confirmed in his or her suspicion that I am making Socrates into an apostle. After all, as I have argued, the manner in which Socrates comes to awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor is through the activity of the *daimonion*, a transcendent, divine phenomenon whose communication takes the form of special revelation.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, anyone familiar with the Oracle at Delphi's significance to Socrates's philosophical activity will know that Socrates did claim to have been appointed by the god and sent on a religious mission to the people of Athens.<sup>63</sup> So how, then, can one consistently maintain that Socrates is not an apostle?

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 176.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 176.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>More precisely, I have argued that Kierkegaard is committed to the view that this is the case.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Plato, *Apology*, 20e–23b, 28e, and 29d–30a.

The key comes in taking careful note of a particular quality that Kierkegaard ascribes to the apostle. As he writes, “[A]n apostle is what he is by having divine authority. *The divine authority is what is qualitatively decisive.*”<sup>64</sup> This authority, Kierkegaard maintains, is what separates the apostle Paul, for example, from a Plato or a Shakespeare.<sup>65</sup> To wit, whereas the insights or productions of the genius are judged to be true or great by appeal to rational or aesthetic criteria, the apostle’s doctrine is asserted simply on the basis of its divine authority. Indeed, Kierkegaard imagines the apostle to declare, “I make you eternally responsible for your relationship to this doctrine by my having proclaimed it as revealed to me and therefore by having proclaimed it with divine authority.”<sup>66</sup>

It is very hard to envisage such a declaration coming from the mouth of Socrates. As the quintessential philosopher, Socrates characteristically seeks to justify his views by appeal to rational considerations. Indeed, Socrates is never found appealing to the authority of his *daimonion* as if to hold people responsible for a doctrine that it has revealed. Lacking this “*qualitatively decisive*” characteristic, then, Socrates cannot be an apostle.

This does not, of course, mean that we must categorize Socrates as a mere genius. After all, between the genius and the apostle there is not an excluded middle. Just as Kierkegaard would distinguish Socrates from the apostle Paul, so I maintain, he would distinguish Socrates from Plato. And as a matter of fact, Kierkegaard does so quite explicitly. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard describes Socrates as continually departing from Plato. The thesis that all knowing is recollecting, Kierkegaard says,

certainly belongs to both of them, but Socrates continually parts with it because he wants to exist. By holding Socrates to the thesis that all knowing is recollecting, one turns him into a speculative philosopher instead of what he was, an existing thinker who understood existing as the essential. The thesis that all knowing is recollecting belongs to speculative thought, and recollecting is immanence. . . . To emphasize existence . . . is the Socratic, whereas the Platonic is to pursue recollection and immanence.<sup>67</sup>

Plato, then, is concerned with what can be accomplished merely by means of the capacities that lie *immanently* within one’s own self. In contrast, Socrates emphasizes “existence,” which, in Kierkegaard’s distinctive sense, means an ethico-religious striving toward an ideal. Given that it was “by means of the eternal and ‘something divine,’ [that Socrates] prevented his love for people from coming to a standstill,”<sup>68</sup> and his consequent “holding himself close to the requirement”<sup>69</sup> by means of the *daimonion*, it

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<sup>64</sup>Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 177 (emphasis in original).

<sup>65</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>67</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), Vol. I, 206n.

<sup>68</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 128–129.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

is plausible to view Socrates's ethico-religious striving as dependent upon this transcendent source—and hence, to view Socrates as excluded from the category of mere genius.

Labeling Socrates as a mere genius becomes even less plausible once one recognizes that Kierkegaard remarks upon the “analogous likeness” of Socrates's situation to the Christian paradox that goes beyond human speculative powers.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the original concern that I was making Socrates into an apostle is not totally without grounding, for Socrates certainly does resemble the apostle in very important ways, not least of which is his being the beneficiary of special divine revelation. (Although, to be sure, none of these resemblances is of that kind which Kierkegaard explicitly rules out, namely, resemblance in the possession of divine *authority*). So just as we saw that Socrates is not an apostle, neither is he a genius. Rather, lacking the qualitatively decisive properties of each category—divine authority, on one hand, and a purely human resourcefulness, on the other—it seems that we must understand Socrates as constituting a category all his own.

#### V. Revelation Without Authority

Socrates was not an apostle, yet neither was he a mere genius. But how can it be, one might ask, that Socrates was the beneficiary of special divine revelation, yet failed to possess any authority on account of that revelation? To answer this question, it is necessary to inquire into the nature of Socrates's divine sign. Recall the charge that Socrates corrupted the youth of Athens. Upon hearing this charge, Euthyphro points out the connection between it and Socrates's *daimonion*:

[EUTHYPHRO:] Tell me, what does [Meletus] say you do to corrupt the young?

SOCRATES: Strange things, to hear him tell it, for he says that I am a maker of gods, and on the ground that I create new gods while not believing in the old gods, he has indicted me for their sake, as he puts it.

EUTHYPHRO: I understand, Socrates. This is because you say that the divine sign keeps coming to you. So he has written this indictment against you as one who makes innovations in religious matters.<sup>71</sup>

In attributing Socrates's prosecution to his claim to have the *daimonion*, Euthyphro has *not* merely jumped to the wrong conclusion, as he so often does. Rather, Euthyphro's explanation is later confirmed in Socrates's defense against Meletus and his other “later accusers.”<sup>72</sup> There, Socrates says, “I have a divine or spiritual sign which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never

<sup>70</sup>Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 206n.

<sup>71</sup>Plato, *Euthyphro*, 3a–b

<sup>72</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 24b–35d.

encourages me to do anything."<sup>73</sup> Thus, the *daimonion* provides an explanation of why Socrates is being prosecuted.

But just a bit later in the dialogue, Socrates gives a different explanation for his prosecution. He says, "Indeed, Euthyphro, this is the reason why I am a defendant in the case, because I find it hard to accept things like that [i.e., stories of murder, cannibalism, castration, quarrels, battles, etc.] being said about the gods."<sup>74</sup> Here, Socrates's explanation is that he is being prosecuted because he cannot believe in stories of immoral gods (where "immoral" is understood to denote actions relevantly similar to murder, cannibalism, castration, quarrels, battles, etc.). What is the relationship between this explanation and the first explanation? That is, what is the relationship between Socrates's belief in his *daimonion* and Socrates's disbelief in stories of immoral gods? Is one explanatorily more fundamental?

It could be that Socrates's belief in his *daimonion* and his disbelief in stories of immoral gods are separate and unrelated examples of his particular heterodoxy. But exploring the possibility of an explanatory connection yields some intriguing insights. It is hard to see how Socrates's disbelief in stories of immoral gods could be explanatorily prior to his belief in the *daimonion*. But it is not quite as difficult to see how his belief in the *daimonion* could be explanatorily prior to his disbelief in stories of immoral gods.

The case can be made that Socrates's self-avowed life-long<sup>75</sup> and frequent<sup>76</sup> acquaintance with the divine sign was itself the decisive determinant of what were, for his context, his radically progressive moral and religious views. One thing such a case must explain is how Socrates gets from the *daimonion*'s appearances—which are always merely dissuading—to his positive moral and religious notions. Given what has been established above, Socrates receives a revelation when the *daimonion* makes its sign, but the content of each revelation amounts to nothing more than a minutely specific prohibition: Socrates knows, at that specific time and place, that the specific action he is about to perform is the *wrong* thing to do. As one commentator notes, "This leaves a good deal for Socrates to reason about: What about this act-token is wrong, or is it the act-type? What about the current situation makes it wrong? In what does wrongness itself consist? and so on."<sup>77</sup> Furthermore,

[t]he *daimonion* offers Socrates no rules of conduct, no general principles, no moral definitions; its activity seems always to be unexpected and it offers

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<sup>73</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 31d; note that Xenophon also concurs in this regard. See his *Memorabilia*, I.1.12.

<sup>74</sup>Plato, *Euthyphro*, 6a.

<sup>75</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 31d.

<sup>76</sup>Socrates refers to the *daimonion* as his "familiar sign," indicating that its promptings were quite frequent, indeed; cf. e.g., Plato, *Apology*, 40c.

<sup>77</sup>Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "Socrates' Gods and the *Daimonion*," in *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy*, ed. Nicholas D. Smith and Paul B. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 86.

Socrates no explanations of its activity. However slight the information he has received, it is enough to prevent Socrates from taking so much as another step in the undertaking he was considering. Socrates may not know the first thing about why he has been stopped, but he seems completely and unshakably certain that he must not do what he was about to do.<sup>78</sup>

So how does Socrates get from the opposition of the *daimonion* to his radical moral and religious notions, including his awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor? The following considerations provide the essential ingredients of a plausible explanation of the process.

First, Socrates's source of confidence in the rightness of his actions lends support to this understanding of the *daimonion's* role. As Socrates explains in the *Apology*,

At all previous times my familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation, frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong, but now that, as you can see for yourselves, I was faced with what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, or at any time that I was about to say something during my speech. . . . What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right [*agathon*].<sup>79</sup>

As this passage shows, although the *daimonion's* appearances are always specific and prohibitive, Socrates can still find the *daimonion's* non-appearances to be quite instructive, given its extensive history of opposing him when he was about to do something wrong. Here Socrates says that it is impossible that the *daimonion* did not oppose him if his actions were not going to result in something *agathon*—the adjective form of *arête* (virtue, excellence) and the strongest term of approbation in the Greek language.<sup>80</sup> Socrates's inference is that, because his *daimonion* did not appear, he can be assured that his actions will produce a virtuous or excellent result.

Thus, what Socrates takes away from this experience is not just the negative conviction that it is a mistake to believe that death is an evil. Rather, immediately after this passage, this experience gives rise in Socrates's mind to the "good hope"—or perhaps we should say, the "inkling" or "intimation"—"that death is a blessing."<sup>81</sup> This was quite a radical sentiment in Socrates's ancient Athenian context, but Socrates was utterly unashamed to declare it, even if it meant incurring the ridicule of his listeners. Indeed, Socrates was gripped by something stronger than

<sup>78</sup>Brickhouse and Smith, "Socrates' Gods and the *Daimonion*," 86.

<sup>79</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 40a–c.

<sup>80</sup>Arthur W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 156.

<sup>81</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 40c; cf. 41c–d.

the mores of his culture, which fostered the belief that death was an evil and that the most important thing for a dead man was a good reputation among the living.<sup>82</sup> As Arthur Adkins observed in his study of Greek values,

Until Socrates, no one takes a firm stand and says, "let them mock." It cannot be done: if others' opinion is overtly the standard, and if one's beliefs about the nature of life support that standard, it is both logically and psychologically impossible to set one's own views against it. Socrates had his *daimonion*; and needed it.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, because at any time Socrates is able to draw, not just on the *daimonion*'s immediate appearance or non-appearance, but on the totality of his past experiences of it, his reflection on the *daimonion*'s activity is capable of giving rise to affirmative, general, and countercultural views about what actions conduce to virtue and wellbeing.

On Kierkegaard's view, the *daimonion* would have opposed Socrates's actions that were contrary to love for the neighbor, and the *daimonion* would have forbore to appear whenever Socrates took some action that was consistent with love for the neighbor. Through its appearances and non-appearances, Socrates would have acquired an extensive mental collection of particular loving behaviors that the *daimonion* did not oppose. By examining those particular actions in order to discern their shared nature—Socrates's routine philosophical procedure<sup>84</sup>—he would have acquired an awareness that actions of a generally altruistic nature were conducive to virtue and wellbeing, and hence, morally choiceworthy. While not rising to the level of full-blown knowledge, this awareness would have constituted at least an "intimation" or "inkling" of the obligation to love the neighbor. Furthermore, assuming that Socrates's experience of the *daimonion* colored his view of the gods generally, he naturally would have found "it hard to accept [stories of murder, cannibalism, castration, quarrels, battles, etc.] being said about the gods."<sup>85</sup>

Of course, Socrates never could have been sure that he had put his finger on the precise rule or principle behind the *daimonion*'s appearances and non-appearances. Socrates was well aware of this fact, having followed up his statement that "there is good hope that death is a blessing" with statements of uncertainty regarding whether that meant that death is a pleasant dreamless sleep or a pleasant relocation to another place.<sup>86</sup> While Socrates could have gleaned some things from the *daimonion* by recognizing correlations between its occurrences and his intended actions,

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<sup>82</sup>Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 155.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 155–156.

<sup>84</sup>See, e.g., *Euthyphro*, 5d–15c.

<sup>85</sup>Plato, *Euthyphro*, 6a.

<sup>86</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 40c–41c.

he would have faced an interesting version of the problem of induction:<sup>87</sup> even if the *daimonion* had, without exception, allowed Socrates to perform some particular type of action up to some point in his life, he could not have been sure whether *all* actions of that type were permitted, or whether that type of action was permitted, say, merely for individuals under a certain age. Indeed, at any time there would be an endless number of principles consistent with the observed class of the *daimonion's* appearances and non-appearances: perhaps some actions are only allowed to parents, or grandparents, or only in certain specific circumstances, or only immediately following some other particular action, or only on certain days, or only with certain other people, or only while the moon was waxing or waning—there are infinite possibilities.

Socrates never could be confident that any inductive generalization from the *daimonion's* occurrences would have had the backing of divine authority, for he is allowed to know neither the rhyme nor the reason behind its appearances. Although it is doubtful whether Socrates would have understood this problem *as* a “problem of induction,” nevertheless it seems plausible that he would have recognized it as a problem and felt its intuitive force. Therefore, although it is plausible to think of the *daimonion* as providing Socrates with a great deal of critical moral input, nothing that Socrates inductively discerned from the *daimonion's* appearances could have qualified as knowledge, let alone as an authoritative revelation. In conclusion, Socrates can have a divine revelation and still not possess divine authority because no *doctrine* is ever revealed to him. Socrates never claims to have authority because he has no revealed doctrine that *could be* authoritative.

#### VI. Why Might God Have Given Socrates the *Daimonion*?

In this section I shall hazard a couple of broad speculations as to what Kierkegaard might have believed regarding why God chose to give Socrates the *daimonion*. As I argued above, the Christian tradition indicates that God is quite willing to give special divine revelations to pagans when it serves his good pleasure to do so. Consider this: Socrates lived in a religious context where many deities were recognized and venerated. If God wished to make something of himself known to individuals living in such a polytheistic religious context, how might he go about doing so? In order to reveal himself *truly*, he would need to somehow ensure that his revelation was not co-opted into the polytheistic categories of the time. After all, in such a context, a straightforward, propositional revelation would run the risk of being perceived as simply “one more” utterance from the gods, as merely “one more” of the same kind of divine phenomenon with which the Athenians were so familiar.

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<sup>87</sup>This might be better described as a version of the problem of underdetermination. See Pierre Duhem, *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*, trans. Philip Wiener (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

The danger of this kind of mistaken co-option is well-attested by chapter 14 of the New Testament book of Acts, which records an incident wherein the apostles Paul and Barnabas were mistaken for the gods Zeus and Hermes, and in sensational fashion. After the apostles' preaching and miraculous healing of a lame man in the city of Lystra, the people excitedly proclaimed to one another that "the gods have come down to us in the form of men!"<sup>88</sup> and the priest of Zeus even brought oxen and garlands to the city gates in order to make a sacrifice.<sup>89</sup> Such behavior on the part of the people is rendered intelligible by the fact that local mythology told of a prior visit to a city in the ancient kingdom of Phrygia by Zeus and Hermes. According to the legend, the gods were not well-received and, as a consequence, they chose to destroy the city with a flood.<sup>90</sup> The people of Lystra were no doubt greatly motivated to avoid repeating the Phrygians' mistake—hence their piously energetic reception of Paul and Barnabas.

It is in part to avoid the danger of being misunderstood in this way that, when Paul later proclaims the resurrection of Christ to the Athenians in the Areopagus, he goes to such great lengths to stress that the God of which he speaks is the uniquely uncreated Creator of all things—and even then, the book of Acts relates that many Athenians came away believing that Paul had proclaimed to them *two* new deities: "Christ" and "Anastasis"—that is, "Resurrection"—a woman's name in Greek.<sup>91</sup> Accounts such as this demonstrate why, in a polytheistic religious context, God's use of a *daimonion*-like manifestation to communicate truth about Himself, His character, or His will might make very good sense, indeed.

Furthermore, Socrates was more or less the initiator of the grand Hellenistic philosophical tradition that shaped the intellectual climate within which the doctrines of the early Christian church were formed. If a professing Christian is not to reject such central Christian dogmas as the Trinity and the Incarnation, it seems that one must accept the validity of the conceptual categories in which such doctrines were expressed, categories that were themselves forged in the fires of Greek philosophy. Since Christians will readily accept that God was providentially at work preparing the Jews for the proclamation of the Gospel,<sup>92</sup> it is not much of a stretch to hold that God was, in Socrates's *daimonion*, working in the Gentile world to lay the philosophical groundwork for the subsequent

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<sup>88</sup>Acts 14:11.

<sup>89</sup>Acts 14:13.

<sup>90</sup>Cf. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 361–363.

<sup>91</sup>Cf. Acts 17:18 and the commentary on this verse in Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 372–373.

<sup>92</sup>Cf. *Galatians* 4:4–5: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive adoption as sons" (my emphasis).

articulation of Christian doctrine.<sup>93</sup> These possibilities are consistent with Kierkegaard's other views and can be thought of as a natural development or logical extension of the comments that he makes on Socrates.

### VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be misleading—although perhaps not inaccurate—to say that Kierkegaard saw Socrates as a Christian before Christ. After all, Kierkegaard held that Socrates was not a Christian during his lifetime, even while being convinced that he did in fact become one subsequent to his death—and perhaps prior to Christ! Furthermore, Kierkegaard held that Socrates was, during his lifetime, a very special figure with a quite unusual relationship to God. Specifically, Kierkegaard held that by means of his *daimonion* Socrates received nonuniversally-normative special divine revelations—revelations that, though falling short of imparting any authoritative doctrine, nevertheless plausibly provided Socrates with crucially determinative, morally formative guidance that ultimately brought him to some awareness of the obligation to love the neighbor. Moreover, Kierkegaard held that one can come to possess an awareness of this obligation *only* through divine revelation, and, interestingly enough, this claim—what above I have called the divine origination thesis—can itself be understood as a *kind* of uniqueness claim. The most appropriate way of understanding this statement is to construe it, not as identifying *Christianity* as unique, but as the claim that, regardless of how many times an awareness of the obligation to love may have appeared in human history, any such awareness proceeds from a unique *source*. To be sure, the claim is not that the content of Christianity has no parallels in any other religion or wisdom tradition, but rather that the obligation to love is something that must be *divinely* impressed anytime it appears.<sup>94</sup>

*United States District Court for the Eastern District of Arkansas*

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<sup>93</sup>John Mark Reynolds has recently explored related ideas in chapter 10 of *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

<sup>94</sup>I am grateful to C. Stephen Evans for his written comments and to audience members for their comments on a previous version of this paper, which was presented at the December 2008 meeting of the Søren Kierkegaard Society at the eastern APA. I am also grateful for constructive comments I received from Thomas Flint and two anonymous reviewers. Finally, I thank Andrew Nam for reading and discussing a previous draft, Matthew Windsor for help in locating one of Kierkegaard's journal entries, and Sarah Cantrell for various stylistic improvements.