**Contemporaneity and Communion:**

**Kierkegaard on the personal presence of Christ**

**Introduction**

Søren Kierkegaard’s claim that religious faith requires being contemporary with Christ is one of the most important, yet difficult to interpret claims in his entire authorship. The concept of contemporaneity (*samtidighed*—literally, ‘at the same time as’) features in both pseudonymous as well as signed texts. Kierkegaard writes about contemporaneity as early as 1843, in his earliest pseudonymous work *Either/Or* (EO1, 399)*,* and as late as 1855 in *The Moment* (TM, 290)one of the last texts to be written. In this latter text, Kierkegaard tells us that this enigmatic concept is the ‘decisive point’ of his life’s work (TM, 290), and he urges his reader to ‘[p]ay sharp attention to the matter of contemporaneity’ (TM, 290). And whilst Kierkegaard’s claims about religious belief as a subjective leap of faith might be more familiar to some readers, it is this condition of being contemporary with Christ which is the defining feature of genuine Christian faith in much of Kierkegaard’s writing.

Despite the prominence of this concept, Kierkegaard never gives a clear explanation of what he means by ‘contemporaneity’. Kierkegaard’s silence on this issue is puzzling. How can an individual existing two millennia after the birth of Christ experience being contemporary with him? This question has not gone unnoticed in Kierkegaard scholarship—some scholars have argued that being contemporary with Christ is a kind of imaginative mode of cognition (Stokes, 2010, 2015). Alternatively, others have maintained that it is a kind of religious or mystical experience in which the individual experiences Christ’s supernatural presence (Evans, 1992). I will argue that the existing interpretations of what Kierkegaard means by ‘becoming contemporary with Christ’ fail to capture fully what Kierkegaard means by this expression, since they ignore the importance of Kierkegaard’s adherence to the Lutheran doctrine of Christ’s true presence in the Eucharist. I propose that an individual is able to become contemporary with Christ by experiencing Christ’s true presence *to* her. This experience is rooted in, but not restricted to, her engagement in the practice of the Eucharist.

Before going on to outline some of Kierkegaard’s discussion of the concept of contemporaneity, it is worth pausing to consider the philosophical relevance of the dialectic. One may think that the concept of ‘being contemporary with Christ’ is of interest only to theologians and has little philosophical interest. Whilst it may be the case that Kierkegaard’s discussion of contemporaneity is almost entirely theological in context (almost, but not entirely. Kierkegaard considers being contemporary with oneself (CD, 274-5), with one’s death (TDIO, 69-102) and Johannes the Seducer discusses being contemporary with a beloved (EO1, 399)), the issues at stake are not.[[1]](#footnote-1) The discussion of being contemporary with Christ in Kierkegaard’s writings puts pressure on just what an intersubjective relation is, and what the criteria for such a relation are: What is it to relate to another person as a contemporary? If being present *to* another person is necessary for being contemporary with them, then what is it to be present *to* another person? And should this kind of presence be thought of in terms of being spatio-temporally present, or can presence between persons occur without them being spatio-temporally concurrent? Our interpretation of how an individual might be contemporary with Christ has implications for all of these questions.

1. **Contemporaneity in Kierkegaard’s works**

Much of what is written about contemporaneity is found in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works, and particularly those written under the pseudonymous authors ‘Johannes Climacus’ and ‘Anti-Climacus’. Given what Kierkegaard himself writes about the independence of these pseudonymous texts from his own writing (CUP, 617-630), we might wonder what sense we can make of the claim that there is a unified concept of contemporaneity at work in Kierkegaard’s writings. Although care is certainly needed in working with pseudonymous texts, Kierkegaard himself refers to the ‘situation of contemporaneity’ in different places in his journals and in reference to both pseudonymous and signed works (see EUD, 480 or TM, 290, for instance). So Kierkegaard himself clearly regards this concept as having some kind of consistency of meaning in his writings. More decisively, as we will go on to see, there is also some consistency in how the concept is used by both Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors. So whilst the texts should be regarded as somehow independent from one another, there is some overlap in how concepts are used. My approach in this paper will be to refer to the pseudonymous authors by name, as Kierkegaard requests (CUP1, 617), and to try to draw some common themes from these different uses of the concept of contemporaneity. The aim is to provide a unified account of contemporaneity in Kierkegaard’s writings and to assess the existing attempts at doing this. I begin by outlining some of the key claims which Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors make about being contemporary with Christ.

**1.1 Historical vs.genuine contemporaneity**

First, it will be important to see how Kierkegaard’s use of ‘contemporaneity’ differs from the more ordinary use of the word to denote the historical simultaneity of persons or events, as in the sentence: ‘We were contemporaries at university’. Whilst Kierkegaard does use the term ‘contemporary’ in this historical sense (see, WA, 62-63 or PF, 55, for instance), the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments,* Johannes Climacus, contrasts being a historical contemporary of Christ with being a *genuine contemporary*. It is the latter, Climacus claims, which is a requirement of having faith. It is possible, he contends, that someone who is a historical contemporary of Christ might still lack faith. According to Climacus, both the first-hand witnesses of Christ’s life on earth and those from later generations must enter into a relation of genuine contemporaneity with Christ (PF, 69). This relation between the individual and Christ, then, is not one of historicity (i.e., one in which the individual has accurate historical beliefs about Christ informed by first-hand experience or subsequent testimony), but rather, one of contemporaneity (i.e., one in which the individual somehow relates personally to Christ). Hence, for Climacus, ‘[t]here is no follower at second-hand. The first and latest generation are essentially alike’ (PF, 104-5). Knowledge of historical testimony will never be sufficient for faith. Instead, there is something revealed or received from God himself which is essential in order to have faith.[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore, one’s historical proximity to Christ has little bearing on coming to faith, and ‘despite his being contemporary, a contemporary can be a noncontemporary’ (PF, 67).

**1.2 Contemporaneity, spiritual perception and presence**

Another important feature of genuine contemporaneity is that there is something perceptual about the kind of experience involved in being contemporary with Christ. Climacus describes being contemporary with Christ as a kind of seeing ‘with the eyes of faith’ (PF, 102), and he depicts the teacher’s revelation as one in which the individual ‘sees the god’ (PF, 65).However, seeing with the *eyes of faith* is clearly not perceptual in a visual sense, since an individual could see the historical Christ and yet lack contemporaneity in the genuine sense of the term. The kind of perception Climacus is interested in is an experience in which the ‘the believer (and only he, after all, is a follower) continually has the *autopsy* of faith [*Troens* Autopsi]; he does not see with the eyes of others and sees only the same as every believer sees—with the eyes of faith’ (PF, 103).As the Hongs point out, ‘*autopsy*’ can be rendered literally as ‘the personal act of seeing’ (PF, 296). One of the ways in which *seeing with the eyes of faith* is different from other perceptual experience is that it is essentially personal. As Anti-Climacus puts it, ‘[t]he qualification that is lacking’ from the historical relation to Christ, ‘—which is the qualification of truth (as inwardness) and of all religiousness is— **for you**’ (PC, 64; emphasis in the original). Seeing God with the eyes of faith is about relating to God as a single individual, a theme which plays a central role throughout Kierkegaard’s works (see, PV 8-11, for the centrality of this claim to the authorship). This involves, as Anti-Climacus tells us, the individual seeing Christ as one who has a claim on his life (PC, 241).

So, in describing contemporaneity in the language of *autopsy,* or personal seeing, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors draw attention to both the personal nature of contemporaneity and also its experiential or perceptual nature. In emphasising that the individual must see for herself, Kierkegaard resists describing faith as a kind of intellectual conclusion drawn from historical and philosophical premises, a conception of faith which only allows the individual to relate to Christ through the historian, theologian and clergyman, something which Climacus later objects to in his discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in the *Postscript* (CUP1, 19-50)*.*

Whilst both the present-day believer and the historical believer can experience Christ as contemporary, the experience of seeing for oneself is occasioned differently in each case. Climacus argues that those who lived at the same time as Christ had Christ’s historical contemporaneity as an occasion for genuine contemporaneity, whereas the present day believer ‘has the occasion in the report of the contemporary generation’ (PF, 104). And so, historical reports make possible genuine contemporaneity for present-day believers, yet not because the individual believes what is written, but rather, because these reports provide an occasion for experiencing Christ in a personally transformative manner. Thus, Climacus states, even if Christ’s historical contemporaries ‘had not left anything behind except these words, “We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died”—this is more than enough’ (PF, 104).

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard explains this experience of seeing Christ as a kind of experience of Christ’s presence. Anti-Climacus begins *Practice in Christianity* by stating that

[i]t is indeed eighteen hundred years since Jesus Christ walked here on earth, but this is certainly not an event just like other events, which once they are over pass into history and then, as the distant past, pass into oblivion. No, his presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past […] But as long as there is a believer, this person […] must be just as contemporary with Christ’s presence as his contemporaries were. This contemporaneity is the condition of faith, and, more sharply defined, it is faith. (PC, 9)

Anti-Climacus tells us that the experience of Christ as contemporary is an experience of Christ’s presence. As with the use of ‘contemporaneity’, Kierkegaard does not fully explain what is meant by the ‘presence’ of Christ, and much of the proceeding discussion hinges on how best to interpret what experiencing Christ’s presence means.

**1.3 Contemporaneity and historical bridging**

The third important feature of Kierkegaard’s discussion of contemporaneity is that being contemporary with Christ is supposed to bridge or negate the historical distance that exists between the individual and Christ’s life on earth. As Patrick Stokes notes, the opposite of presence in Anti-Climacus’s discussion is not *absence*, but rather, historical distance (2015, 54-5). If faith requires a relation of immediacy and contemporaneity which occurs between individuals more than 2000 years apart, then there must be some way of closing this historical distance, which, for Anti-Climacus, is achieved by Christ’s presence on earth, even though he is not physically present on earth as you or I are. This discussion of historical distance becomes an important focus of Anti-Climacus’s discussion of faith in *Practice in Christianity* and is the key for understanding the difference between the admirer who stands at a historical distance from Christ, and the imitator, who seeks to become like Christ, even in his suffering and abasement.

Thus, by experiencing Christ’s presence, the individual is able to negate the historical distance between herself and Christ, to see with the eyes of faith and to become genuinely contemporary with Christ. And although Kierkegaard gives us some vague details about the nature of contemporaneity, the puzzle which remains is one of interpretation. How should we understand what it means to experience Christ’s presence in a quasi-perceptual manner? How does this help to bridge the historical distance? And how can such an experience be made possible with a historical figure? These are the questions which I now turn to address.

**2. Personal presence and contemporaneity**

Since Kierkegaard describes being contemporary with Christ as a kind of perception, and one which involves experiencing Christ’s presence, we might think 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. That is, perhaps being contemporary with Christ is a kind of experience in which a believer sees Christ for herself, in the same way as, for instance, I see my friends and family.

A mystical reading of contemporaneity does fit well with some of Kierkegaard’s wider concerns about the intersubjective nature of religious belief. ‘God is not like something one buys in a shop, or like a piece of property’ (CD, 88), Kierkegaard tells us in the *Christian Discourses*, but rather, as Climacus puts it, ‘God is a subject and hence only for subjectivity in inwardness’ (CUP1, 200). A pervading theme throughout Kierkegaard’s works, is that of relating to God as a subject. As Anti-Climacus writes in *The Sickness Unto Death,* ‘[f]aith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God’ (SUD, 82). Johannes Climacus repeatedly uses the phrase: ‘the God-relationship’ (CUP1, 90, 231, 454-6) to refer to faith. And, hence, we might think, standing in a relation of contemporaneity to Christ, in contrast to a relationship of historicity, is about the believer’s relating God (or Christ) as a subject to be engaged with and not a fact to be understood.

How does a supernatural experience of God’s presence relate to the intersubjective nature of religious faith? Here a broader appreciation of intersubjective relations is helpful. As Eleonore Stump (2010) argues in her discussion of interpersonal knowledge, ‘there are things we come to know from our experience of other persons and […] these things are difficult or impossible to formulate in terms of knowing *that*’ (2010, 53; emphasis in the original). What Stump has in mind here is the kind of knowledge we gain from experiencing other persons, and, in particular, the kind of knowledge we gain from experiences of personal presence in which agents are mutually aware of one another (2010, 108-28). That is, according to Stump, a necessary condition for relating personally to someone is that we experience their presence through a kind of mutual awareness of that person (2010, 127-8). Hence, we might think, in order to stand in an intersubjective relation to Christ as contemporary some kind of experience of personal presence is also necessary.

C. Stephen Evans suggests something similar to this account of personal presence in his commentary on *Philosophical Fragments.* Evans describes the account of faith developed in *Fragments* as ‘the result of a first-person encounter with Christ’ (1992, 115), citing an example from Anthony Bloom, to illustrate his point. Bloom writes that

[w]hile I was reading the beginning of St Mark's Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of the desk there was a presence. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me. This was the real turning point. (1970, xxi)

According to Evans, ‘Bloom would seem to be a genuine contemporary of Christ, while obviously failing to be a historical contemporary in the ordinary sense’ (1992, 115). Although Evans’s suggestion that we read contemporaneity as a kind of mystical experience seems plausible, he does not explain this account in detail here, nor is it extended beyond the Johannes Climacus works. As such, it is not obvious whether what Evans says about being contemporary with Christ fits more broadly with what is written about contemporaneity under Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms, as well as in the signed texts. In fact, the narrowness of Evans’s proposal has led some to be sceptical of whether an experiential account of contemporaneity can provide a unified account of what it is to be contemporary with, or to enjoy co-presence with, another person.[[3]](#footnote-3) Stokes, for instance, argues that

Climacus’ account doesn’t seem to contain any clear indication that the follower’s encounter with Jesus is an experience of this type. This could be a function of the ostensibly hypothetical character of the argument in *Philosophical Fragments*, but evidence from elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s writings suggests that the form of cognition needed to achieve contemporaneity doesn’t belong to such an anomalous register of human experience. (2015, 53)

Whilst Stokes thinks that Evans’s account does highlight the importance of becoming contemporary with a historical fact, he argues that describing this in terms of a mystical experience does not fit Kierkegaard’s wider use of the concept (2015, 53). And thus, although Evans’s model might make some sense of the perceptual nature of contemporaneity in *Fragments,* Stokes points to a number of places where being contemporary with a historical fact will not fit Evans’s model. As I will go on to outline in unpacking Stokes’s own position, in both Kierkegaard’s discussion of Scripture in *For Self-Examination,* as well as his discussion of death in ‘At the Graveside’ (TDIO, 69-102), there are examples of contemporaneity from Kierkegaard’s writings which do not fit this experiential model well.

Considering that Evans’s only real discussion of contemporaneity is in two pages of a commentary on *Philosophical* *Fragments*, it is hardly surprising to find that he does not give a unified conception of Kierkegaard’s use of contemporaneity. Nevertheless, if Stokes is right in thinking that an experiential account of being contemporary with Christ is incoherent, then we must look further afield. Before going on to give a more detailed defence of how contemporaneity with Christ might be understood in experiential terms, I will first consider whether Stokes’s alternative proposal is plausible.

**3. Epistemic contemporaneity[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Stokes, in proposing his alternative reading of contemporaneity, claims that being contemporary with Christ is best understood as a mode of cognition in which the individual’s imaginative capacities enable historical events and facts to be present to her (2010, 314-5). In order to develop this reading of contemporaneity, Stokes contrasts his reading with an experiential reading. He claims that

if we attempt to analyse contemporaneity-with-Christ on a cognitive level, there would seem to be two possible interpretations: one which sees such contemporaneity as possible only with Christ, and one which sees contemporaneity as a cognitive experience at least theoretically possible with other intentional objects as well. In other words, we have a dichotomy between a form of essentially religious experience and a form of experience that can be directed towards a religious object. The question becomes whether contemporaneity with an historical fact is an extramundane experience, or a specific type of experience directed towards an extramundane object. (2010, 303)

According to Stokes, an experiential reading depicts contemporaneity as an ‘extramundane experience’ rather than a specific experience directed towards an extramundane object. Stokes thinks that this reading is too narrow in scope to explain Kierkegaard’s discussion of contemporaneity beyond *Philosophical Fragments*. For instance, Stokes claims that Kierkegaard describes a kind of a co-presence and contemporaneity with one’s own death in his discourse ‘At the Graveside’ (TDIO, 75). Stokes suggests that just as experiencing Christ’s presence bridges a historical distance between the believer’s life and Christ’s life on earth, an experience of our death allows us to experience a kind of contemporaneity with death. He further extends this model to think about the puzzle of how we can make sense of what Kierkegaard says about loving the dead in *Works of Love* (WL, 358). According to Stokes, just as we can be contemporary with our own death, we can be contemporary with those who are now deceased through a kind of imaginative mode of cognition (2011, 262-65).

Another example of contemporaneity which allegedly does not fit an experiential model, and an example which Stokes then goes on to use as a basis for his own account of contemporaneity is Kierkegaard’s account of reading Scripture in *For Self-Examination*. Here Kierkegaard advises those who read Scripture to ‘*remember to say to yourself incessantly: It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking’* (FSE, 35; emphasis in the original). When this is done properly, Kierkegaard claims, ‘it asks me (indeed, it is as if it were God himself asked me): Have you done what you read there?’ (FSE, 31). Stokes goes on to take these passages to be vital for our understanding of contemporaneity. And, as he rightly points out,

Kierkegaard’s detailed discussion in *For Self-Examination* of the appropriate mode of receiving Scripture, explicated through the metaphor of the ‘mirror of the Word’, contains nothing corresponding to the sort of religious experience Bloom describes. (2015, 53)

Stokes’s focus on the ‘as if’ experience in *For Self Examination* forms the basis for his alternative reading of contemporaneity and presence. He argues that the best way of understanding what Kierkegaard means by ‘presence’ is as a certain mode of cognition which allows the believer to become contemporary with the historical Christ *as if* he were really present or really speaking. Stokes claims that ‘certain modes of thought have the power to negate the historical distance between contemplator and contemplated, making them, in some sense, actually present with the object’ (2010, 305). Contemporaneity, on this reading, is ‘an *immediately self-reflexive* mode of vision, that is, one in which we apprehend *our relation* to what is imagined *within* the imaginative experience’ (2010, 314; emphasis in the original). Just as in experiencing the poster in which ‘Lord Kitchener Wants You!’, Stokes claims, ‘you’re alone, face-to-face, with Lord Kitchener, likewise, according to Climacus, the believer at second-hand is nonetheless face-to-face with the incarnation of God’ (2015, 65). This is not to say that the experience is a merely metaphorical experience, Stokes argues, but rather, contemporaneity has ‘the same status, on the phenomenal level, as direct experience’ (2015, 54). According to Stokes, these experiences are possible not only with Christ, but also with the event of my own death, or with those persons who are now deceased.

Does Stokes’s proposal fit what Kierkegaard writes about contemporaneity? The pertinent question to ask at this point in the dialectic is whether Kierkegaard’s concern, in writing about contemporaneity with Christ, is merely a concern with making a historical event or person present to the individual. If this is his concern, then Stokes is correct. However, there is a clear indication that Kierkegaard is interested in not only the individual’s experience of a historical event or historical person, but also their experience of Christ as a living person. As Anti-Climacus tells us, ‘Christ is not merely a historical person’ (PC, 63). Whilst it is true that Stokes’s reading of contemporaneity can be extended further than Evans’s suggested reading, since he allows for the individual to be contemporary with her own death in the same way that one can be contemporary with Christ’s life on earth, it is not a convincing reading of being contemporary with Christ, particularly not once we see this reading in light of Kierkegaard’s theological commitments. In particular, Stokes entirely ignores Kierkegaard’s discussion of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist, something which is explicitly linked to the discussion of presence and contemporaneity in *Practice in Christianity.*In the next section, I outline Kierkegaard’s discussion of the Eucharist before considering the implications of this for our understanding of ‘contemporaneity’.

**4.1 Kierkegaard on Christ’s true presence at the Eucharist**

Surprisingly, perhaps, considering Kierkegaard’s sustained critique of the established Church, he defends a fairly orthodox Lutheran position on the theology of the Eucharist. Kierkegaard would have been familiar with the claims of the Augsburg Confession, the statement of orthodoxy in the Lutheran Church, which Luther himself approved.[[5]](#footnote-5) In Article X of the Augsburg Confession it states that in the sacrament of the Eucharist, ‘the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present’ (Tappert (ed. & trans.), 1959, 34). We can see most clearly what *truly present* means here in reference to two positions Luther rejects in his writings. Luther devotes a considerable amount of time to refuting the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in the Eucharist, that is, the claim that Christ is corporeally present in the Eucharistic elements. Yet, whilst attempting to refute the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, Luther is keen to resist claiming that the Eucharist is merely a symbolic act, in contrast to the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli. Instead, Luther claimed, Christ was *truly* present in the Eucharistic elements. In order to show Christ could be truly present in the elements, without claiming that Christ is corporeally present, Luther responded to the objection that Christ’s body cannot be present both at the right hand of the Father as well as being located in the Eucharistic elements (1527/1961, 56). To show why this objection has no traction against his position, Luther appeals to the Doctrine of Ubiquity, in stating that Christ, being fully God, shares in the divine nature, and in particular, shares the divine attribute of omnipresence. Thus, Luther contends, since God is truly present everywhere, and Christ shares in the divine nature, Christ is truly present everywhere (1527/1961, 64) and it follows from this that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine on the Communion table (this is often called the Doctrine of Consubstantiation). The objection to Luther which is most obvious here, and one which his contemporaries (and he himself) were clearly aware of, is that if Christ is present everywhere inclusive of the Communion table, then there is nothing distinct about the sacrament. However, the distinctiveness of the sacrament, as Luther goes on to argue, is not that Christ is more present at the Communion table than anywhere else, but rather, that at the Communion table Christ is present *to* believers in a certain way. He writes that

it is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present for you. […] [S]ince Christ’s humanity is at the right hand of God, and also is in all and above all things according to the nature of the divine right hand, you will not eat or drink him like the cabbage and soup on your table, unless he wills it. He also now exceeds any grasp, and you will not catch him by groping about even though he is in your bread, unless he binds himself to you and summons you to a particular table by his Words, and he himself gives meaning to the bread for you, by his Word, bidding you to eat him. (1527/1961, 69)

By looking at what Kierkegaard writes about the sacrament of Communion, it is plausible to think that he is affirming a Lutheran position on Christ’s true presence in the sacrament. This account of true presence can help us to understand how Kierkegaard uses the reference to Christ’s presence in his discussion of contemporaneity. For instance, in one of the Communion Discourses,[[6]](#footnote-6) he writes that

[a]t the Communion table the point above all is to hear *his* voice. Certainly a sermon should also bear witness to him, proclaim his word and his teaching, but a sermon is still not *his* voice. At the Communion table, however it is *his* voice you are to hear. […] At the Communion table there is no speaking about him; there he himself is present in person; there is it he who is speaking—if not, then you are not at the Communion table. In the physical sense, one can point to the Communion table and say, “there it is”; but in the spiritual sense, it is actually *there* only if you hear *his* voice *there*. (CD, 271; emphasis in the original)

We see here that Kierkegaard clearly intends to affirm an account of Christ’s true presence in the Eucharist—Christ is actually present at the Communion table only if he is present *to* the individual in some way. Kierkegaard gives some clarity to what Luther means by Christ’s being present *to you*, namely, that Christ is present to you if you hear his voice. And although we do not have an explanation of what it means to hear Christ’s voice here, the implication is that, at least in the practice of the Eucharist, Kierkegaard affirms the importance of religious experience and an engagement with Christ as a living person, rather than as a merely historical one. As he tells us elsewhere, it is this experience of Christ’s presence that enables the believer to become aware of God’s grace and mercy (CD, 294-5, WA, 186-7). George Pattison describes Kierkegaard’s view of Communion by writing that it is through a ‘concrete encounter [...] with the person of Jesus Christ’ that the believer is able to enter into a relationship of love with God (2012, 160).[[7]](#footnote-7) Kierkegaard’s emphasis on grace and the forgiveness of sin is tightly bound to this account of experiencing Christ’s presence and what is written about presence seems to be formulated in fairly orthodox Lutheran terms.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We also see that Kierkegaard describes something like the Doctrine of Ubiquity, the doctrine that Christ, in sharing is the divine nature, is present in all places. Interestingly, however, Kierkegaard describes the life of the Christian as one in which the Communion table is taken from the Church, and into the world:

One can point physically to the Communion table and say, “See, there it is,” but in the spiritual sense the Communion table is *there* only if you are *known there* by him.

*They follow him.* You do not remain and are not to remain at the Communion table […] when you follow him, you do indeed leave the Communion table when you go away from it, but then it is as if the Communion table followed you, for where he is, there is the Communion table—and when you follow him, he accompanies you. What earnestness of eternity, that wherever you go, whatever you do, he still accompanies you […] do not forget that where he is, there is the altar, that his altar is neither on Moriah nor on Gerizim, or any visible *there*, but that it is where he is. If this were not so, then you of course would have to remain at the Communion table, take up residence there, never budge from the spot, but such superstition is not Christianity. (CD, 273-4; emphasis in the original)

It should be noted that here Kierkegaard’s use of ‘as if’ is doing a different job than it is in the case of Scripture. Here Kierkegaard states that when a believer leaves the Church, it is *as if* the Communion table comes with her in the sense that Christ’s presence comes with her *as if* she were still at the altar. The Lutheran claim that Christ is both present *at* the Communion table (in virtue of his omnipresence) and present *to* the individual (in virtue of his engagement with the individual) is extended beyond the practice of Communion, for Kierkegaard. As he describes it elsewhere, Communion ‘is not merely in remembrance of him, not merely a pledge that you have communion with him, but it is the communion, this communion that you must strive to preserve in your daily life by living more and more out of yourself and identifying yourself with him’ (WA, 188).

We have in Kierkegaard’s discussion of Christ’s true presence, then, a way of understanding what it means for Christ to be present to the believer as contemporary. That is, when Anti-Climacus tells us that ‘Christ must be just as present…’ (PC, 23), we can see this as a kind of true presence, which begins at the altar and extends into the everyday life of the believer. Notably, we can also see that the practice of Communion is described as a means of experiencing Christ’s presence in a way that does not fit well with Stokes’s account of contemporaneity and presence. The language used throughout the Communion Discourses is indicative of experiencing the living presence of a person, rather than the kind of experience Kierkegaard describes as possible through reading Scripture or of one’s own death.

We might think, however, that the Communion Discourses cannot provide an adequate model for describing Kierkegaard’s discussion of Christ’s presence elsewhere. That is, we may take these discourses to be relatively obscure and overly theological texts which bear little relation to the pseudonymous texts. This does not fit Kierkegaard’s own discussion of the significance of these discourses, however. Kierkegaard tells us that the authorship ‘that began with *Either/Or* and advanced step by step seeks here its decisive place of rest, at the foot of the altar’ (WA, 165). In *My Work as an Author,* Kierkegaard describes the ‘movement’ of his authorship as

*from* “the poet,” from the esthetic— *from* “the philosopher,” from the speculative—*to* the indication of the most inward qualification of the essentially Christian; **from** the *pseudonymous Either/Or,* **through** *Concluding Postscript,* with *my name as editor*, **to** *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, of which two were delivered in Frue Church. (OMWA, 5-6; emphasis in the original)

So, clearly Kierkegaard regarded these discourses as an important part of his authorship. Furthermore, Kierkegaard’s discussion of Communion is not restricted to the Communion Discourses. In fact, in *Practice in Christianity,* Anti-Climacus makes the connection between Communion and Christ’s presence to the believer.[[9]](#footnote-9) He tells us that, ‘[t]oday he is indeed with you as if he were closer to the earth; he is as if touching the earth; he is present at the altar when you are seeking him; he is present there—but only in order once again from on high to draw you to himself’ (PC, 156). Here Anti-Climacus affirms an account of the Eucharist and presence which is in keeping with the Lutheran tradition. He also reiterates the distinction which is found in Luther between Christ’s omnipresence and Christ’s presence to an individual:

It is now eighteen centuries since he left the earth and ascended on high […] invisible on high, he is also present everywhere, occupied with drawing all to himself […] He uses the most varied things as a way of drawing to himself, but we cannot develop this here, least of all today, when just an unusually brief time is stipulated for the discourse, because the sacred act is primary and the celebration of the Holy Communion is the service. (PC, 155)

Anti-Climacus describes Christ as using *varied ways* of drawing people to himself, inclusive of Communion. Thus, again, we see that although Communion is the focus for the experience of Christ’s being truly present *to* the individual, it is not the only means of being truly present *to* the individual. And, most notably, we see a discussion of true presence in a pseudonymous work in which most of the claims about contemporaneity are made. It would be odd for Anti-Climacus to be referring to Christ’s true presence at Communion (and beyond), but not in his other uses of ‘presence’ earlier in *Practice in Christianity*.

This discussion of true presence and Communion paves the way for a better understanding of Kierkegaard’s claims about contemporaneity. In the next section, I give a clearer account of this model and suggest some reasons why it should be defended.

**4.2 Contemporaneity as true presence**

First, let us return to Stokes’s proposal. How problematic is Stokes’s claim that Kierkegaard’s use of contemporaneity must be extended beyond our contemporaneity with Christ? Kierkegaard never uses the term ‘contemporaneity’ to refer to the experience of God in Scripture, and he does not describe this as an experience of Christ’s presence, even if he does emphasise Scripture’s importance in relating historical events to the single individual. In fact, the kind of experience which occurs when reading Scripture seems to be entirely different in nature to an experience of personal presence, in general. Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of a letter to a lover to describe how we should think about Scripture’s relation to us (FSE, 26-7). Yet our experience of reading a letter from a living person would surely not capture everything that is important to experiencing that person. In reading a particularly vivid love letter, I might even claim that ‘it is as if my lover were present here’, but crucially, it would be unusual to regard this as an example of experiencing my lover’s presence. This is a point which Johannes the Seducer makes vividly in the Seducer's Diary:

It would be of real interest to me if it were possible to reproduce very accurately the conversations I have with Cordelia. But I easily perceive that it is an impossibility, for even if I managed to recollect every single word exchanged between us, it nevertheless is out of the question to reproduce the element of contemporaneity, which actually is the nerve in conversation, the surprise in the outburst, the passionateness, which is the life principle in conversation. (EO1, 399)

What is lacking from mere recollection or imaginative co-presence is this element of contemporaneity, of genuine interaction and exchange between persons. Whilst reading a historical text might help to bridge a distance between individuals by engaging the imagination in a certain way, it is not an experience of personal presence, and it certainly should not be taken as the primary example of being contemporary with Christ in Kierkegaard’s writings. Again, the pertinent question is whether or not Kierkegaard thinks of Christ as a living person or as a merely historical person.

What about Stokes’s discussion of being contemporary with one’s own death in ‘At the Graveside’ and the extension of this account to being contemporary with the deceased in *Works of Love*? Although Kierkegaard describes the importance of being aware of death here, and even uses the language of presence, the brief discussion of one’s death being present to a person looks very different to the kind of presence Kierkegaard attributes to Christ in the Eucharist. The experience of death is entirely imaginative in a way that experiencing Christ’s presence is not—the person does not actually experience the presence of one’s own death, nor does she experience the presence of a dead loved one in engaging in an imaginative recollection of the deceased. Kierkegaard’s description of Christ’s presence at the Communion table looks starkly different from these imaginative cases; we do not experience Christ’s presence at the Communion table unless ‘we hear his voice’ (CD, 271). The cases are not analogous, and it is difficult to see how this discussion can be taken as a basis for our understanding of contemporaneity.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Should we then give up on attempting to give a unified account of what Kierkegaard means by ‘contemporaneity’? I think not. In considering what Kierkegaard says about contemporaneity, it is important to first acknowledge the nature of the thing that we are supposedly contemporary with. Being contemporary with Lord Kitchener’s words, or a character in a well written biography is different from being contemporary with someone in the same room as me. Similarly, being contemporary with the dead is different from being contemporary with the living. What is the difference in these cases? It is a difference in the kind of presence which is available. Even a vivid imaginative experience with a text will lack the ‘life principle of conversation’ (EO1, 399) which an engagement with the presence of the living will allow for. However, the condition of contemporaneity remains the same in both cases of being contemporary with the living and the dead; broadly speaking, both are cases of being *at the same time as,* but the kind of presence available is very different. If contemporaneity were merely an imaginative mode of cognition with some distant historical event, then how would one be contemporary with ‘the time in which he is living’ (PC, 64) as Anti-Climacus writes, or contemporary with a lover through a conversation, as Johannes the Seducer writes (EO1, 399)? Clearly, how we are contemporary with someone or some event, depends on the nature of that person or event, and the kind of presence which is available.

So is an experiential account of contemporaneity a case of what Stokes calls an ‘extramundane experience’ (2010, 303)? Not obviously so. In fact, in taking into consideration what Kierkegaard thinks about Christ’s living presence at the Communion table and beyond, we have an example of being contemporary with a living person, and not a merely historical person. This is where what Kierkegaard writes about contemporaneity with Christ can inform a broader understanding of intersubjective relations. What is it to experience the presence of a living person? Plausibly, this kind of personal presence requires an engagement or interaction between persons. As Stump notes, although we can understand ‘presence’ as describing someone’s presence *in* a location or *at* a time, the kind of presence which it is important to explain in giving an account of personal presence is someone’s presence *to* other person (2013, 63). For example, we might say, ‘She read the paper all through dinner and was never present to any of the rest of us’ (2013, 63). What is lacking in someone’s failing to be present *to* another person is a kind of ‘second-personal psychological connection’ (2013, 64) in which there is a mutual awareness and attention sharing (2013, 69). This kind of presence *to* another person seems fairly close to the kind of contemporaneity with a lover which Johannes the Seducer refers to. What is lacking from the recollection of a conversation is the to and fro of interpersonal experience, ‘the surprise in the outburst, the passionateness’ (EO1, 399), or in Stump’s terms, the possibility of attention-sharing with one another. This kind of presence *to* captures what it is to relate interpersonally to another person much better than a kind of presence *at* or presence *in*. That is, in describing interpersonal relations, we are not interested primarily in whether persons are close to one another in space or time, but rather, whether or not there is any kind of interaction between persons.

However, whilst this understanding of personal presence might explain how lovers can be contemporary with one another, it looks problematic as an explanation of contemporaneity with Christ. Ordinarily mutual awareness and second personal experience occurs by perceiving another person (i.e. by sharing eye contact, touch, mutual object awareness, etc.), but it looks difficult to apply this understanding of presence to a supernatural being who we cannot share eye contact with, and who seemingly occupies no spatio-temporal location. Furthermore, attention-sharing seems to depend on having a shared perceptual apparatus, something which God and human beings do not obviously have. So it is not clear, at least on face value, how our understanding of intersubjective relations in general can help our understanding of being contemporary with Christ.

First, we should note that the criteria for joint attention need not be too restrictive. It is not clear why concurrence in spatio-temporal location is necessary for mutual awareness between persons. As Stump notes, we can experience persons through other mediums and without perceiving them directly, such as through an ‘animated’ email exchange, for instance (2010, 76). And so, an inability to perceive a person directly need not preclude the possibility of personal presence. What is crucial for joint attention is engagement. To see how this might be applied to a person’s experience of God, consider Adam Green’s (2009) discussion of attention-sharing as a model of religious experience. He writes that

we can claim that sound, light, and affect are all mediums that can be manipulated by God in such a way as to reveal the mind of God toward the subject of the experience. The subject hears the sound of a voice reading a psalm that responds to his situation, a manipulation of auditory stimulation that evidences an awareness and concern for the subject by some theistically affiliated entity. He or she then experiences an unnatural light which seems patterned to reinforce the extra-natural nature of the reassuring voice. Then, the subject has the experience as of being loved and then one of peace. […] The preceding pattern of light and audition does not seem epistemically incidental to the experience of being loved. The shared-attention model allows the preceding pattern of sensory imagery to enter into how one experiences whatever qualia were present in the experience such that it is experienced as being loved by God. (2009, 463-464)

Extending Green’s description of sharing attention with God, we can see one way of understanding what it is to experience Christ as present through the Eucharist. The kind of awareness of God which Green describes is an experience in which an individual becomes aware that God is present through reading of a piece of text, by attending to one’s feelings and emotions and by noticing certain features of one’s environment. If Green’s account is plausible, then there is no reason to suppose that one cannot experience Christ through participating in the Eucharist. It is not merely the receiving of the wafer or the wine which allow for this kind of experience;[[11]](#footnote-11)the Eucharist is a sacrament in which an individual engages with liturgy and Scripture, as well as receiving the elements and Green’s account of experiencing God seems applicable here. Of course this need not commit us to thinking that this is Kierkegaard’s view, but rather, it is one model which has potential to explain how an individual might experience the personal presence of a divine invisible agent in the way that Kierkegaard describes.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Secondly, on the issue of whether or not being a supernatural person precludes the possibility of shared attention, there is an obvious response at hand. As I have argued elsewhere (Cockayne, 2015), and as Stump also draws attention to, the Christian tradition has the theological tools to respond to this problem by pointing towards the Incarnation. In becoming human, God allows for the possibility of mutual attention-sharing with human beings since his humanity allows him to share in their perceptual faculties. Although there is not scope here to defend this claim entirely, there seems to be no conceptual reason why an account of contemporaneity as a kind of attention-sharing between persons cannot also apply to being contemporary with Christ.

If Christ is a living person, then being contemporary with Christ is made possible through personal presence, much like any other interpersonal interaction. Whilst it no doubt sounds odd to be present with an invisible divine person, there is nothing extramundane about the nature of this kind of contemporaneity since this is the basis of being contemporary with any other living person. This account also avoids describing contemporaneity as an ‘anomalous register of human experience’ (Stokes, 2015, 53). The way in which living human persons are contemporary with one another (i.e. by an intersubjective experience of one another) is the same as the way in which Christ is contemporary with the believer. Whilst it might be the case that an individual can become contemporary with Christ’s teaching by a kind of imaginative co-presence, to claim that this is a paradigmatic case of being contemporary with Christ is mistaken. It seems obviously true that Kierkegaard is committed to thinking of Christ as a living person and that believers can experience his presence *to* them today.

How well does the position developed in this paper fit with the account of contemporaneity with Christ which was previously outlined? First, if my prior assertion was correct that Kierkegaard is concerned with giving an intersubjective account of faith, rather than a merely historical or objective account, then thinking of contemporaneity as a kind of experience of personal presence seems apt. But what about the key components of contemporaneity which I described? At first glance it might seem difficult, on my account, to distinguish historical contemporaneity from genuine contemporaneity. If we think more carefully about what Johannes Climacus’s point is, then this worry disappears. 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; ‘it is easy for the contemporary learner to become a historical eyewitness’ (PF, 59), Climacus tells us. Such a person comes to know true propositions about Christ, but never enters into an interpersonal relationship with Christ. Faith, in contrast to the historical, one ‘must constantly cling firmly to the teacher’ (PF, 62)—the historical contemporary can fail to engage with Christ’s presence fully, even when she is historically close to him. What is lacking from the historical contemporary is the kind of intersubjective relationship in which Christ is present *to* an individual. The second component is less problematic. Clearly, the account of contemporaneity I have offered explains the nature of presence in Kierkegaard’s writings. Since Kierkegaard writes so much about Christ being present *to* an individual through Communion, the account of presence I offer (of experiencing a mutual awareness of Christ) is much simpler than the kind of imaginative co-presence which Stokes describes.

Thirdly, the account can explain the kind of historical bridging which Kierkegaard thinks that being contemporary with Christ allows for. Strictly speaking, the events of Christ’s life on earth are not present to an individual on my model, but rather, the person who existed at the time of certain historical events is present to an individual. Reading the accounts of Christ’s life in Scripture with an awareness of Christ’s presence must surely change one’s perspective on these events in a way that brings one closer to a distant historical event. An experience of being aware of Christ’s presence whilst jointly attending on the historical event of Christ’s death, for instance, looks very different to reading a text in a merely historical way, especially if one attaches a particular theological and personal significance to the event of Christ’s death (e.g. the forgiveness of one’s sins). On my model of contemporaneity, 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. And so it seems that an interpersonal model of experiencing Christ’s presence can account for what Kierkegaard writes about being contemporary with Christ.

**Conclusion**

As I have argued, the nature of contemporaneity depends on what the agent is contemporary with. To understand what Kierkegaard means by ‘contemporaneity with Christ’, then, we have to first understand what Kierkegaard thinks about Christ. If Christ is a merely historical figure, then, plausibly, being contemporary with Christ is possible through imaginative co-presence, as it is with Lord Kitchener, Plato, and my deceased loved ones. However, if Kierkegaard thinks of Christ as a living person, which I have given good evidence to show he does, then an imaginative account of contemporaneity with Christ is implausible. Being contemporary with Christ is much more like being contemporary with a lover through a conversation than through an imaginative engagement with a historical figure. Whilst it might be philosophically troubling for some to conceive of how personal presence is possible with supernatural agents, this should not preclude us from seeing that this is the most plausible reading of what Kierkegaard means by ‘being contemporary with Christ’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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I use the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* system of abbreviation to refer to the *Kierkegaard’s Writings* series throughout, and refer to the following works:

CD*= Christian Discourses*

CUP1= *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to ‘Philosophical Fragments’*, vol. 1

CUP2= *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to ‘Philosophical Fragments’*, vol. 2

EO1= *Either/Or,* vol. 1

EUD= *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*

FSE/JFY*= For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!*

JP= *Journals and Papers*

OMWA= *On my Work as an Author* (in PV)

PC*= Practice in Christianity*

PF= *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*

PV= *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*

SUD= *The Sickness Unto Death*

TDIO= *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*

TM= *The Moment and Late Writings*

UDVS= *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*

WA= *Without Authority*

WL*= Works of Love*

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1. This is a fact which is demonstrated well by Stokes’s (2015) application of contemporaneity with one’s past to the problem of self-identity in *The Naked Self.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We see the importance of this distinction between historical and genuine contemporaneity repeated in *Practice in Christianity* by the pseudonymous protagonist ‘Anti-Climacus’. ‘A historical Christianity’, Anti-Climacus argues

   is nonsense and un-Christian muddled thinking, because whatever true Christians there are in any generation are contemporary with Christ, have nothing to do with Christians in past generations but everything to do with the contemporary Christ...every generation (of believers) is indeed contemporary. (PC, 64)

   This point is also made in an earlier draft of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (CUP2, 36) as well as in Climacus’s claim that historical enquiry is an inadequate basis for faith (CUP1, 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rather than focusing on the nature of contemporaneous religious experience, Evans has tended to focus on the epistemology of religious belief, by drawing parallels between Johannes Climacus’s epistemology and Alvin Plantinga’s (2000) discussion of properly basic belief in God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stokes himself never uses the label ‘epistemic contemporaneity’ to describe his position, and I borrow this from Westphal’s very brief discussion of contemporaneity (2014, 255), but it fits Stokes’s position well. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although Kierkegaard does discuss the Augsburg Confession in his journals (see JP, 600; JP, 1216; JP, 252; JP, 245; JP, 2898) there is not conclusive evidence that he is supportive of what is written. Nevertheless, as I go on to show, there are good reasons for thinking that Kierkegaard is generally in agreement with the Lutheran position on the Eucharist from what he writes elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kierkegaard wrote seven of these discourses in 1848, three in 1849, and two in 1851. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pattison also notes that Kierkegaard’s discussion of Communion and redemption presents a conventional Lutheran view (2012, 158). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As an anonymous referee helpfully points out, it might be held that Kierkegaard rarely (if ever) emphasises the need for grace in the Christian life. Whilst these examples are rare, they are not the only references to grace in Kierkegaard’s writings. For other discussions of grace in Kierkegaard’s writings, see ONMWA, 16 and FSE, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The discussion of Communion in *Practice in Christianity* ought to be regarded as one of Kierkegaard’s Discourses at Communion, according to Sylvia Walsh (2011, 2). Before attributing this discourse to Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard delivered the first exposition from *Practice in Christianity* No. III at a Friday Communion service, Walsh tells us (2011, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In fact, Anti-Climacus makes it clear that one of the marks of offense is to relate to Christ at an imaginative distance (PC, 100-1). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Indeed, as one anonymous referee has pointed out to me, it is difficult to see how a wafer alone might allow for the kind of experience one might have by exchanging emails with another person, for instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As an anonymous referee asks, ‘Don’t we also have the problem of just being wrong about who we are contemporary with? […] Someone could have logged into that other person's account in order to pose as them and trick you. How do I know it is Christ that I am contemporary with when the wafer gives even less indication?’ It does seem plausible that one could be mistaken about experiencing Christ’s presence in the way described, but this looks disanalogous to the email case—whilst someone can easily log into my email account, it is hard to see how someone could pose as a divine being by manipulating my perception of a certain religious ritual. More likely, is the possibility that an individual is just mistaken in her experience, but it is not obvious that the fallibility of religious experience undermines its possibility of being veridical altogether. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I would like to thank David Efird, James Clarke and Owen Hulatt for their helpful feedback and advice on the many drafts of this paper which have existed. The comments provided by the editor, Michael Beaney, along with two anonymous referees have also been immensely useful. Many thanks go to the members of the St. Benedict Society for the Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology at the University of York for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)