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Kierkegaard's Theories of the Stages of Existence and Subjective Truth as a Model for Further Research into the Phenomenology of Religious Attitudes

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Abstract: There are many religions in the human world, and people manifest their religiousness in many different ways. The main problem this paper addresses concerns the possibility of sorting out this complex world of human religiousness by showing that it can be phenomenologically reduced to a few very basic existential attitudes. These attitudes express the main types of ways in which a human being relates to his or herself and the world, independently of the worldview or religion professed by the individual. I use Kierkegaard's theories of the stages of existence and subjective truth as a model. The theory of the stages of existence provides five basic existential attitudes on the basis of which religious attitudes can develop: spiritlessness, the aesthetic, the ethical, religiousness A, and religiousness B. The theory of subjective truth shows how the concept of truth functions in an ethical and existential sense as the personal truth of an individual engaged in building their religious identity. In turn, I discuss the problem of the relation of Kierkegaard's philosophy to phenomenology, briefly introduce his concept of subjective truth and the stages of existence, and show how existential attitudes can be transformed into religious ones. I also consider the problem of the demonic as the inverted order of this anthropological and existential model. Finally, I argue that the model developed herein may be useful for further research into the phenomenology of religious attitudes.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; stages of existence; subjective truth; religious attitudes; phenomenology



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1. Introduction

This article aims to show how the stages of existence that Kierkegaard presents in the first (aesthetic) phase of his writings can serve as an introductory description of religious attitudes¹. While there is no doubt that religious attitudes can take on a variety of forms in the human world, here, the issue concerns not the religious diversity of the world but the existential attitudes through which people express religious beliefs and manifest their religious affiliations. The thesis advanced in this paper is that this diversification of religious attitudes could in some way be systematized and anthropologically defined when mapped onto the scheme of the stages of existence that Kierkegaard delineated.

What this means is that, despite there being a multitude of religions in the world, the representatives thereof express their religiousness in similar ways—in an anthropological–existential sense—which could be subject to a certain typologization with respect to how said representatives reveal in immanence their relation to transcendence². This manifestation of religiousness in various religions may take on formally similar shapes (in spite of tremendous differences in the content of the manifestation of that which is religious), for it relates to a certain permanent structure of a human's functioning, this structure having first been described coherently according to existential categories by Kierkegaard himself³.

The second aim of the article is to show that such a model can be philosophically useful for further research into the phenomenology of religious attitudes, that is, into the way the depths and meaning of human religiousness manifest themselves in various religious attitudes to varying degrees in all of the former's multifacetedness and richness. The

objective of this article is obviously not to provide a detailed phenomenological description of this diversity but instead to offer a stimulus for further research by identifying the tools in Kierkegaard's thought that could be used for this purpose. Such an introductory demonstration of how the multiplicity of religious attitudes can be reduced to several fundamental existential attitudes appears to lay the foundation for further phenomenological immersion into what human religiousness is as a manifestation in immanence of a person's relation to transcendence.

It should be noted that the theory of the stages of existence, once an essential element for understanding Kierkegaard's existential anthropology⁴, today plays a marginal role in the Kierkegaard literature⁵. It seems a worthwhile endeavor to resurrect this old and mostly forgotten project of Kierkegaard's and to highlight the phenomenological potential hidden in it.

To this end, a brief account will be provided of the discussion on whether Kierkegaard's thought can be—and to what extent—bundled with phenomenological research. Subsequently, the theory of the stages of existence will be outlined, as will Kierkegaard's theory of subjective truth, with attention given to how these two ideas complement one another. The third step will show how potentially religious attitudes can be revealed within these stages, understood as initial existential attitudes. Thus, it will be shown how existential attitudes can transform into religious attitudes, which is a certain extension of Kierkegaard's vision, for whom, as is well known, religious existence was only one (albeit the most important) of the possible stages of existence.

2. Kierkegaard and Phenomenology

The literature on Kierkegaard's relationship to the phenomenological school of thought is extensive. Some scholars in this area point to inspirations in Hegel's thought and to Kierkegaard's creative expansion of the former's theses on the phenomenology of spirit when analyzing how Kierkegaard presents a human being's inner development of consciousness in his own works ([19–22]). Still, others deliberate on how Kierkegaard was an inspiration for 20th-century existential phenomenology, with him delivering the philosophers of the day ready-made categorial tools to further analyze humankind's existential situation in the world ([23–25]). Yet another group of scholars attempts to show how Kierkegaard's works have a close relationship with the theological turn in contemporary French phenomenology ([26–30]). These are not just works on the history of philosophy, as there are also studies juxtaposing Kierkegaard's categorial analyses with the considerations of 20th- and 21st-century phenomenologists ([31,32]).

Such research led to the accrual of a discussion on whether Kierkegaard can be considered a phenomenologist at all, whether in the Hegelian sense or the twentieth-century sense. The most interesting position in this debate seems to be that of George Pattison ([33,34])—as well Claudia Welz's reply to his arguments ([30,35]).

Pattison is critical of any move to perform a simple transposition here, one which, on the basis of Kierkegaard's influence on 20th-century phenomenology, would automatically make him (in the eyes of some) a phenomenologist or a thinker who created some sort of proto-phenomenology. Pattison stresses that Kierkegaard has a peculiar place in the history of phenomenology, namely as the one who constitutes a significant link between two of the main figures in the history of modern phenomenology: Hegel and Heidegger. Kierkegaard here is both the one who critically transforms Hegel's phenomenology and the primary source for Heidegger's subsequent critical transformation of his existentiell/religious problematic. Of paramount importance to Pattison, however, is that, as claimed by Heidegger, although Kierkegaard offers the phenomenological investigator important psychological material, he does not himself treat that material in a phenomenological way but merely as an existentiell question of how one can become a Christian ([34], pp. 190–191). Pattison concludes that, "On this view, Kierkegaard is of value to the project of a fundamental ontology of existence arrived at by means of phenomenology—but only insofar as he is read in a non-Kierkegaardian way" ([34], p. 191). This is because Kierkegaard himself is

not interested in practicing philosophy in some phenomenological way; instead, his role is that of a Christian moralist, one whose main goal is to awaken the consciousness of individuals ([34], pp. 204–205). Kierkegaard, as Pattison understands him, is therefore not a phenomenologist in an essential sense, despite having a distinctive and significant place in the history of phenomenology; nevertheless, he adds that “a full self-accounting on the part of phenomenology would require reckoning with his role” ([34], p. 191).

Welz, in her response to Pattison’s argumentation, agrees that calling Kierkegaard a phenomenologist in the 20th-century sense of the word would constitute an anachronism. At the same time, she notes, however, that although the Danish philosopher was not a phenomenologist in the theoretical sense, it could be said that he practiced phenomenology as a manner or style of thinking ([35], p. 457)—and that he is a phenomenologist at least insofar as he had a sense of the abiding questions of phenomenology ([35], p. 458). Welz believes that Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* can be interpreted as a “phenomenology of love” insofar as phenomenology is defined as a reflective method for describing phenomena ([30], p. 504). She thus comes to the conclusion that, in *Works of Love*, one can discern a certain project, namely, a “semiotic phenomenology of the invisible” ([30], pp. 471, 508–512; [35], pp. 443–444, 456–457)⁶. This would mean that Kierkegaard provides the tools necessary to understand how that which is invisible (the spiritual) manifests itself in experience (in consciousness), thereby becoming the essential object of human self-knowledge (though not in a scientific, Hegelian sense but rather in a practical or individualistic one, closer to contemporary visions of phenomenology) ([30], pp. 482, 487, 502–503, 508; [35], p. 443).

Welz’s account here seems to be a major inspiration since it follows from it that transcendence, as Kierkegaard understands it, despite not being directly phenomenological or appearing in immanence, does in fact affect how the individual interprets their own existence, where this influence can indirectly manifest itself in the personal attitude of the individual ([30], pp. 471, 502–503, 506–507, 509–510). In this sense, it is precisely that which is invisible (transcendence)—as one’s inner experience of the presence of God that alters how a person’s life and world appear to them—which manifests itself in an individual’s existence by means of the emotions and actions, thoughts, and speech through which the attitude of the believer is communicated ([30], pp. 510–511). The aim of this type of phenomenology, it being a kind of ethical project dealing with the existence of the individual, would thus be a reflexive description of the phenomena constituting the existential content of a person’s experience ([30], pp. 471, 482–483, 504–505, 508–509; [35], pp. 442–444).

Welz’s vision could be partially adopted for the needs of the phenomenology of religious attitudes described here, where this phenomenology could find its grounding in Kierkegaard’s theory of the stages of existence. In order to make such a move, however, Welz’s account would need to be expanded. To this end, the assumption would have to be made that a phenomenology of the invisible (that is, of the spiritual) would necessarily concern the broadest possible spectrum of humankind’s relation to transcendence. It could not therefore be limited to Kierkegaard’s figure of the one who loves and to what it stands for (the phenomenon of spirit’s love) (see *Works of Love*) but would have to assume that every relation of a person to transcendence in fact manifests itself in some way, even if transcendence itself does not manifest itself in this relation. Thus, it could be posited that there exists an entire spectrum of religious attitudes within which a person relates to transcendence and that this relation will always be communicated through the actions of a given individual. In this sense, what is more important than whether transcendence actually appears as some absolute truth in what an individual communicates is what appears in their communication, which, in turn, determines what type of religious attitude the individual in question has. In this sense, the individual, in their actions, does not so much reveal transcendence in and of itself as reveal what it is to them and how they relate to it in their existence.

The phenomenology of religious attitudes proposed here will thus occupy itself not with proving the real existence of transcendence (understood in Kierkegaard’s view as

the reality of a living God) but with examining how human beliefs about existence or nonexistence thereof manifest themselves in the world—that is, how humanity’s grand ideas of religion and God interact with human consciousness and produce in it various objects of experience, around which people build their existential and religious identity.

It must be stressed here, according to Pattison’s criticism, that no argument will be made to prove that Kierkegaard in fact created some form of early phenomenology or a proto-phenomenology in the 20th-century sense (as some researchers do) or even to ascribe to him a phenomenological way of thinking (as Welz does). Instead, an argument will be made that Kierkegaard’s analyses can be interpreted through the lens of a certain phenomenology of religious attitudes. Though Kierkegaard himself created no such phenomenology, his analyses could be understood in such a way that they become starting points to examine how one can describe phenomenologically, from an anthropological–existential perspective, how human religious attitudes differentiate and reveal themselves existentially.

3. Kierkegaard’s Theories of the Stages of Existence and Subjective Truth

In the first phase of Kierkegaard’s writings, up to and including *Postscript*, the Danish philosopher creates a certain vision of the inner development of human beings as self-aware existential subjects. Of central importance are the theories of subjective truth and the stages of existence⁷. The former addresses what it generally means to become the subject of one’s existence—a person who chooses a certain form of truth around which one’s self is shaped and one’s existential identity is constructed. The latter introduces a certain order into the variety of human attitudes found in the world, attitudes that reflect the various possible ways one can realize subjective truth in one’s life.

Both these theories arise simultaneously. Kierkegaard makes no clear effort to distinguish one from the other, with the two linked together in his writings. Despite this, it is eminently visible how both function at two different levels of his thought. It could be said that the theory of subjective truth is horizontal since it relates to all human attitudes (stages of existence) and offers an array of categories by means of which one can describe how a human being relates to themselves as an individual endowed with inner freedom. The theory of the stages of existence, on the other hand, is vertical, for it clearly orders human attitudes into a hierarchy, indicating which manners of self-realization are more or less profound in the spiritual sense. In order for this hierarchy to be possible, Kierkegaard must assume a certain order of values that exists independently of specific individuals. It is in relation to this order that it is decided what kind of person one is⁸.

Insofar as the theory of subjective truth is concerned, one assumption is paramount: that a person themselves makes decisions about their existence, that they choose what kind of person they are and how they are to lead their life ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 33–34, 203, 320–321, 323–325). Of course, every person’s life is impacted by certain facts and circumstances over which one can have no control, yet this, for Kierkegaard, is of secondary importance. In his view of subjective truth, it is not external circumstances, independent of one’s particular life, that most matter but the fact that every person may choose—and in fact somehow does choose—that which is to them most important ([39] *EO2*, p. 259; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 338–341, 432–433).

In Kierkegaard’s view, how external reality affects an individual’s existence is decided under the influence of a previously made personal choice about the type of person one wants to be ([39] *EO2*, pp. 164–169, 176–178, 211–225, 247–252; [40] *FT*, p. 69; [38] *CUP1*, p. 134). This means that the decisive factor is always the interiority of the individual—their relation to themselves—and not the external world, in relation to which only the prior inner choice of the individual is reflected ([39] *EO2*, pp. 327–328; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 341, 382). It is irrelevant here whether someone is an aristocrat or a member of the lower class, whether someone is a doctor or a farmer. What matters is the way in which someone becomes who they are—and this, Kierkegaard holds, flows from the decisions every individual makes in the course of their life ([39] *EO2*, pp. 163–164; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 488–489). This means that

every single person develops a certain truth of their own about what it means to be human, a truth for which they are ethically responsible, that being the subjective truth of their existence ([39] *EO2*, pp. 248, 251, 258; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 199, 207, 218, 230, 254, 343).

What determines the kind of person one is can be reduced to two factors: firstly, what a given person defines as the goal of their existence ([39] *EO2*, pp. 251–252, 274–275; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 130–188), and secondly, the degree to which one pursues the realization of this goal ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 72–74, 86, 91–92, 314–317, 325, 349–360). This is thus not about any type of declaration, such as, “I will do whatever it takes to become rich”. It is about whether a given person truly devotes their life to pursuing the existential goal they choose. Of course, these goals may change, but the measurement of one’s existential power lies in whether they are conscious of the goal chosen and whether they truly pursue it.

The problem, however, is that one can be an existentially committed doctor, athlete, or social activist just as well as one can be an existentially committed Nazi or murderer. Thus, commitment alone does not determine the moral quality of an existential subject. The second element mentioned is still necessary, that is, the goal. Kierkegaard is looking for an absolute point of reference against which all human goals could be properly ordered and hierarchized. If the totality of the human world is defined by immanence, then only something that is beyond the world can be a point of reference for it, something from which the world emerged, something which the world is directed by. This is transcendence—somehow present in every human community, usually in the form of religious beliefs—which, for Kierkegaard, sees its highest expression in one’s personal relationship with God, particularly as seen in the model of Jesus Christ, that is, in Christianity ([40] *FT*, pp. 55, 70, 82; [4] *SUD*, pp. 29–30; [41] *PC*, pp. 238–240).

Hence, Kierkegaard’s existential hierarchy of human attitudes is created in relation to the Christian world of spirit. In his view, every immanent and subjective truth is subject to verification in relation to whether and to what extent transcendent and absolute truth is revealed in it ([42] *PF*, pp. 13–22; [41] *PC*, pp. 203–207). The closer the individual is to revealing the absolute truth of transcendence within their subjective immanent truth, the closer they are to the ideal of humanity and thus to existential fulfillment ([2] *UD*, p. 193; [43] *CD*, pp. 74–75; [5] *WA*, pp. 44–45).

It is precisely the tension between the transcendent (the spiritual) and the immanent (the psychophysical) that constitutes the fundamental dialectical tension of Kierkegaard’s thought ([40] *FT*, pp. 69–71; [42] *PF*, pp. 37–48; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 262, 295, 532, 561–586). In relation to this tension, Kierkegaard presents the dynamic of the stages of existence, thereby creating a hierarchy of human existential attitudes—that of subjective truths. For while every person has their own path to walk and the truth of their life is non-repeatable, the actual spiritual mechanism shaping this truth operates the same way for all people ([1] *CA*, pp. 43–44; [4] *SUD*, pp. 13–14). This allows Kierkegaard to distinguish several types—stages—thanks to which it is possible to assign and describe the content that different human life paths exhibit within a framework of certain formally identical categorical schemes, defining the relations the people who make up a given existential type have with each other, the world, and transcendence.

It is worth noting] that the concept of an existential attitude is not equivalent simply to an individual’s worldview but constitutes something more like a holistic stance. Such an attitude has an ethical dimension rather than an intellectual one ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 194–205, 281, 318–343). In this sense, different, even contradictory worldviews can be expressed within a single existential attitude by different individuals, for a worldview here is the content of one’s consciousness, and an existential attitude is the form of this content. This content, the way people express themselves (the visible), here informs the form behind it (the invisible). Thus, the degree to which someone is spiritually developed (form) determines how they reveal the content of their consciousness⁹. These forms of consciousness are precisely what is meant when speaking of stages (attitudes) of existence, these being the means by which Kierkegaard organizes the countless plurality of human subjective truths, reducing them to several primary types.

Although these types can of course be further differentiated, a task Kierkegaard partially completes, for the purposes of this paper, it will suffice to focus on several fundamental types and to profile them¹⁰, making it possible to then show how religious attitudes are superimposed upon existential attitudes¹¹.

Kierkegaard distinguishes three main stages of existence (existence-spheres), offering a description of the inner development of the individual—starting with the stage in which a person remains unaware of their spiritual self (the aesthetic stage), moving on to their spiritual awakening (the ethical stage), and ending with the stage of their spiritual fulfillment (the religious stage) ([44] *SD*, pp. 435, 476–477; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 294–300; 501–502)¹². The religious stage is further divided into religiousness A (pathos-filled religiousness) and religiousness B (paradoxical–dialectical religiousness), where only religiousness B counts as fully authentic in Kierkegaard’s view ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 555–561). Kierkegaard also highlights the attitudes of spiritlessness and the demonic. These attitudes, despite failing to be mentioned with other stages of existence, figure as an essential complement to the entirety of his vision and will be included in the interpretive scheme developed here. In the approach adopted here, an attempt can be made to place spiritlessness below the aesthetic stage ([1] *CA*, pp. 93–96, 157, [4] *SUD*, pp. 41–42, 44–47, 101–102, 104, 116; [44] *SD*, p. 440; [38] *CUP1*, pp. 322–323; [43] *CD*, pp. 66–67). The demonic, on the other hand, can be considered a kind of reversal of the entire ladder of development of human spirituality, where said spirituality takes on the opposite vector—that is, it concerns a subject who builds their identity not in relation to good but to evil¹³.

The scheme developed here will be presented in top-down fashion, meaning from the highest realization of subjective truth in existence to its lowest form, that is, in the following order: religiousness B, religiousness A, ethical existence, aesthetic existence, and spiritlessness. It is worth noting here that, according to Kierkegaard, humankind’s existential attitudes essentially function within two main states: the state of faith, understood as the realization of the truth of transcendence in the immanent life of the individual (religiousness B), and the state of despair, in which the individual to varying degrees is unable to express, through themselves, the truth of transcendence (religiousness A, ethical existence, aesthetic existence, and spiritlessness) ([4] *SUD*, pp. 49, 82). Within this scheme, the demonic must be considered a third state¹⁴, one which does not belong to despair (in which a person continuously finds themselves within reach of existential sense and in some way strives to implement it in their life by relating to the good) but which constitutes a tragic negation of the purpose of human existence (by basing it on evil)¹⁵.

*Religiousness B*¹⁶. This is, for Kierkegaard, the highest possible stage of human existence, one in which the individual experiences in their life the living presence of God (what Kierkegaard calls the second immediacy or the later immediacy—[40] *FT*, p. 82). In other words, one can speak here about the full mediation of the individual’s immanent existence by transcendence, which is transposed into one’s immediate experience of God’s presence and brings to the believer a sense of the fullness of the meaning of humanity¹⁷. A person at this level of spiritual development is someone who realizes the Christian ideal (the ideal of holiness) in the human world—they are someone who truly becomes a Christian, that is, a follower (an imitator) of Christ. A follower of Christ is able to completely subordinate all relative (immanent) goals and all human values (including the value of their own life) to the realization of the absolute goal: to bear witness to God’s revelation in the world. Hence, this is a way of being in which the individual’s immanent subjective truth is combined with absolute transcendent truth, where the former manifests (reveals) the latter in the world. Such a person realizes the ideal of love for one’s neighbor, spreading forgiveness and mercifulness to everyone they meet, where one’s neighbor is understood not as collective humanity but as a particular individual encountered on life’s path regardless of the relation between them in temporal reality. In Kierkegaard’s view, such a person is commonly persecuted by the human world, for they negate its earthly values and expose its hypocrisy ([2] *UD*, pp. 328–331, 338–339; [41] *PC*, pp. 63, 172–173, 196–198; [47] *JFY*, pp. 116–117, 140–141, 169).

*Religiousness A*¹⁸. Religiousness A, separated from religiousness B by an infinite qualitative difference and the paradox of faith, represents the maximum spiritual state that a human being can achieve by themselves. It is everything that a person can be, in a spiritual sense, without having actually experienced true conversion. This type of religiousness is therefore represented by a person who is wholly oriented toward transcendence in their life and who strives to follow its guideposts (such as in the form of revelation) but whose relation to transcendence remains ideal rather than real on account of not having yet experienced the living presence of God. To put it differently, in the existence of such an individual, their life is mediated not by living experience of God (Christ) but by the idea of God, by some imagined picture of God, by some projection of God that may have cultural sources (delving into the existing religious tradition) or be related to a capacity for mystical insight into the world's essence ([38] *CUP 1*, pp. 556, 558–561). As a result, however, such a person tends in some way to use transcendence to change the immanent world, to benefit from transcendence's somehow to serve the value of temporal life, confirming it. Authentic religiousness, however, must cut itself off from immanence and make transcendence the only real content of human existence. Therefore, a kind of secondary mediation of transcendence in immanence occurs in religiousness A, something that distorts in some way the relationship between a human being and God ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 570–574, 578–579). Admittedly, in religiousness A, the individual no longer pursues typically imminent ends characteristic of people at lower levels of the spiritual development ladder (as represented by ethical and aesthetic existence), yet, at the same time, they do not fully die to themselves and the world (though their existence in ideal terms is already oriented toward this end), and for this reason, sin (despair) continues to dominate their existential reality. This individual no longer desires this sin (no longer wills to be themselves) but they are also incapable of fully negating their position in the world, to stop being who they are in the typically human sense.

*The ethical stage*¹⁹. The ethical stage encompasses people who become what they become ([39] *EO2*, pp. 178) thanks to mediation by an immanent element of the world—by something that surpasses the immediacy of their existence and thereby opens up before them an opportunity for their inner development. Most often, this element turns out to be social community, which they decide to serve of their own free will, thereby choosing some determined shape of themselves. Therefore, the ethical person in the first instance is not led in their life by their private desires, and they are able to give up their own prosperity for a higher goal that surpasses their own interest. As a result, this must be a person who acts in accordance with principles that a given community adheres to, who, at the same time, develops said community in some particular way. The ethical person is thus an individual who possesses a kind of generative power in the social sense, a person who pursues some type of common good and attains fulfillment precisely in this good (which is equal to being mediated by it). The common good is understood here very broadly; it can be any kind of value that is of importance to a given community, such as justice, patriotism, helping the needy, education, service, among other things. A person is ethical when, in the area of the values they profess, they are generative, committed, and able to sacrifice their own life comfort to advance that particular value. In principle, any individual will become an ethical person when they carry out some social role and, in doing so, transmit the ideal of this role and the values that it embodies. In practice, what is required here is a certain kind of ethical testimony and selflessness in material and social terms. In contrast, anyone who chooses to use their social capital for their own private purposes and their own success in life will not be an ethical person.

*The aesthetic stage*²⁰. The aesthetic attitude is demonstrated by a person who lives only according to the immediacy of their existence, not going in any way beyond that which inherently defines them (in terms of intelligence, talent, social status, etc.). Such a person simply uses the possibilities given to them according to both their biological nature and y the social conditions which they were born into. They do not create, however, any new possibilities because they do not mediate their existence according to anything

that would require in some way surpassing (negating) these initial existential possibilities and discovering other (higher, spiritual) possibilities for self-realization. Therefore, an aesthete does not make any choice that would allow them to go beyond what they are (for themselves) ([39] *EO2*, pp. 176–180). As a result, this kind of person is guided in life by passion, which develops only themselves. For one to be considered an aesthete in these terms, this person must display commitment to realizing their existential goal. This goal, however, is entirely determined within the immediacy of their existence and thus is egoistic, disconnected from the good of others, and more reminiscent of a life passion one seeks fulfillment in without any regard for the good of others. Furthermore, the fulfillment of this life passion may entail the desire to be liked by others, to be respected by others, or to be deemed worthy of some social position by others. What must be noted, however, is that in order for such an attitude to have an aesthetic dimension in the proper sense, the individual must devote themselves wholeheartedly to the object of their interest and strive for excellence in the relevant domain. There are manifold examples of what this may look like. An aesthete may take the form of an athlete for whom sport will serve as a trampoline to celebrity but for whom sport in and of itself will not constitute value in the context of the common good. They will not seek to develop the value of sport but rather to use its sanctioned value in society to become someone special in the eyes of others, thereby gaining material benefits in the process. On the same grounds, an aesthete can take the form of a university professor, one who is excellent in their field, for whom learning will be of value not in and of itself but insofar as it can help them make a name for themselves and be respected.

Spiritlessness. The concept of spiritlessness is applied by Kierkegaard to individuals who resign from existential self-realization. Such persons live only for what the external world can offer them; they do not engage themselves in any projects and are guided only by their own comfort and life prosperity. This is also why a spiritless person remains imprisoned in the immediacy of their existences. They do not seek any sort of private or personal fulfilment, either in that which surpasses their individual being (an ethical person) or in that which determines their inherent individuality (an aesthetic person). In some sense, they are an animal person, which is only determined by their biological nature in terms of looking for the instinctive satisfaction of the most basic life needs ([49] *KJN9*, pp. 320, 428–430, [50] *KJN10*, pp. 26–27)²¹. Spiritless people make up what Kierkegaard critically calls the crowd or the public ([51] *TA*, pp. 90–95, 100–101; [52] *KJN4*, pp. 126–128; [53] *KJN7*, pp. 37–38; [54] *KJN8*, pp. 424–425; [49] *KJN9*, p. 320; [50] *KJN10*, pp. 26–27), that is, a group consisting of members where each member does not relate individually to himself or herself, where each member does not reflect in any way upon his or her own life. Such people possess no thoughts of their own, no worldview, no views other than those which are imposed upon them by the outside world. For this reason, they are highly susceptible to being manipulated by others. Given that existing for Kierkegaard always implies an active state as a certain kind of involvement in one's own life, it is worth singling out spiritlessness here as a separate stage of existence, indeed the lowest.

The demonic. As previously outlined, in the interpretation offered here, the demonic is demonstrated by a person who consciously chooses to serve evil and who constructs their self around this choice. This conscious effort to serve evil ought to be defined as a conscious negation not only of absolute truth but also of all immanent moral ideals (a negation of the purpose of humanity in all its possible dimensions). According to the expansion of Kierkegaard's vision developed in this paper (see note 13), it seems, as stated earlier, that the demonic should be treated as a reversal of the previously mentioned hierarchical ladder, that is, as a separate state (the third possible state of humankind's existence after faith and despair), and not simply as an attitude that is an offshoot of despair. This would mean that a person could serve evil indiscriminately (spiritlessly), aesthetically, ethically, or even religiously (or at least quasi-religiously). Evil here becomes a spiritual force, something that creates the value of life, something that fascinates, and something that provides existential

power. It becomes that which a person begins to bear witness to (in the form of various attitudes) with his or her being²².

4. The Stages of Existence as a Model for Religious Attitudes

Having described (and expanded upon) Kierkegaard's vision of the stages of existence as initial existential attitudes of a certain kind, this vision can now be used as a model to account for religious attitudes. In doing so, it must be assumed that each of the previously described existential attitudes may become a substrate upon which particular religious attitudes will develop. This does not mean, however, that every particular existential attitude will at the same time be a religious attitude in the case of every subject but that, if some religious attitude manifests itself in a person's life, it will always manifest itself within the stage of existence that the person at that moment occupies and will express itself in a way that is characteristic of said stage of existence.

As a result of the theoretical expansion proposed here, apart from the strictly religious attitudes that Kierkegaard singles out as the highest form of human existence (religiousness A and B), it becomes possible to distinguish still other types of religious attitudes in the existential attitude scheme, religious attitudes which complement the complex picture of human religiousness²³. In total, five initial religious attitudes can be distinguished in a fundamental sense: religiousness B, religiousness A, ethical religiousness, aesthetic religiousness, and spiritless religiousness. Demonic religiousness, on the other hand, can be considered a counterpart for which four attitudes can be distinguished—demonically spiritless religiousness, demonically aesthetic religiousness, demonically ethical religiousness, and a demonic religiousness corresponding to religiousness A. Religiousness B cannot, as a rule, occur in the domain of demonicity²⁴.

*Religiousness A versus religiousness B*²⁵. Proceeding now to undertake a brief description of these distinguished religious attitudes, it will be worthwhile to first establish a clear separation between religiousness A and religiousness B. Religiousness B consists of realizing the attitude of holiness (as embodied by a messiah, prophet, or martyr), that is, the way of being in which immanent subjective truth is combined with absolute truth and becomes its medium in temporality. Religiousness B is, in this sense, fully affirmative as an act of bearing witness to the truth of revelation, of expressing it through oneself in the world²⁶. Religiousness A, in turn, implies a resignation from earthly goals on account of one having recognized the value of absolute truth, though without going so far as to pursue the fulfillment of this truth in one's life. In consequence, religiousness A consists of a desire to withdraw, to atone for the absolute guilt one recognizes in oneself. It is equal to losing one's temporal identity on account of one's idealistic pivot toward transcendence—something Kierkegaard calls the infinite resignation ([40] *FT*, pp. 37–52). As such, religiousness A is a negative religiousness ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 432–433, 455, 461, 472, 524, 532–534, 571), one which may take the form of, for example, eremitism or monasticism in the human world ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 401–419, 461, 472–474, 481, 486, 499, 509)²⁷.

In Kierkegaard's view, a person characterized by religiousness B will never adopt the attitude of an eremite or monk, will never completely withdraw from the world, and will never become a spiritual guide for other people, understood as providing others with spiritual guidelines in life matters. Such a person should possess the gift of spiritually influencing others and converting them, as long as their interiority is of course ready for this²⁸. In contrast, a person characterized by religiousness A is incapable of converting others such that they begin to realize absolute truth, for such a person themselves has no direct access to this truth, with them being—at the most—able to point others in the right direction²⁹. In this sense, religiousness A can also include the religiousness of religious leaders or religious moralists who devote their temporal lives entirely to the guidance of the spiritual community. Such persons represent the highest possible human moral ideal; they are indeed subjects who are able to saturate the immanent value of being human with the transcendent ideal in a unique way but are unable (at least at some given point in their lives) to achieve the attitude of holiness³⁰.

Ethical religiousness. Ethical individuals, as Kierkegaard understands them, are not religious persons in any meaningful sense, for, even if religion constitutes an important element of their life and worldview, it is not what they have chosen as their life goal (religion is not a value with priority over other values)³¹. Ethical people rather inherit religion from their ancestors, considering it an important element of their identity, while at the same time not developing it in any way. They consider it an encountered, ready-made whole, something socio-culturally fixed. Nevertheless, at the same time, if they consider themselves religious, they will fully participate in the religious life of the faith they profess, and their secular worldview will likely be penetrated by religious ideas. It will in some way inspire their social activity, where they will use the authority of religion to highlight the importance of the ideals they profess. Thus, if such people identify with some faith, they will be perceived by others as religious persons, and this religiousness will strengthen their authority in their community.

It should be noted, however, that this type of person will not take advantage of religious ideas to advance their own aims in societal life, such as bolstering their political position or attracting a greater number of supporters to their party. They will not do so because their primary aim is to develop the common good (however it is defined). They therefore cannot consciously act for their own benefit to the detriment of the community, this being precisely what the manipulation of religious values is meant to achieve. The epithet “ethically religious” will in this sense be aptly applied to anyone for whom religion grounds the purpose of human life and enhances one’s sense of a social mission in this world. An ethically religious attitude can also take the form of a kind of messianism, for instance, where the good of the community is equated with religious ideas or where a certain religious mission in this world is assigned to nations (as long as this does not involve harming other nations or harboring hatred for them)³².

Aesthetic religiousness. Religiousness which manifests itself in the aesthetic attitude is even further from the transcendental source of faith, though the light of absolute truth does get through to some degree. It is for this reason that an aesthetic person can also consider themselves a deep believer. Their aesthetic approach to transcendence, however, will be to treat religion as something that is, in a sense, owned—as something that serves their own life purposes, rather than something they put themselves at the service of³³. Such a person can treat religiousness as a means to simply have a goal which will satisfy their existential need for fulfillment, all while they exhibit a superficial religiousness, proving to be a person who finds themselves in their religiousness but finds little else in it. Yet, the palette of aesthetically religious attitudes is broader: it can be considered inclusive of people who make themselves the face of religiousness, people who flaunt it (such as a bigot, but not a hypocrite). The label “religiously aesthetic” can be applied to instances where religion is used to garner some social favor for oneself but only if it entails a belief in the purpose of this religiousness and an existential commitment to the truth recognized in it³⁴.

Spiritless religiousness. Spiritless people likewise can identify religiously, though in their case being religious will entail not a commitment to religiousness but an attitude within which there is a lack of faith in the religion one professes to believe in³⁵. Here, one is religious because it is not right to be irreligious, because not being religious may be harmful. One is religious because it is fashionable, because it is useful in one’s life—with it allowing one to achieve something, to establish oneself in life³⁶. In the case of aesthetic religiousness, using religiousness for one’s own ends was linked to a belief in the value of religiousness itself, to the fact that this religiosity constituted the existential framework of a person’s life. In spiritlessness, religiousness becomes merely a slogan, an empty word devoid of meaning, something that bears no connections to any demands: it only exists to be used³⁷. In an existential sense, religious spiritlessness pretends and is hypocritical, though it is not yet demonic.

Demonic religiousness. Demonic existence takes on a religious form when religion becomes a real source of evil in the world, of human harm, and of misfortune; when, for religious reasons, one morally and physically destroys people; and when religion justifies

violence and becomes a call to eradicate other human beings³⁸. An example of this would be religious extremism, where religion is used as a justification to hate people with a different religion or worldview³⁹. And, here, one can be demonically religious spiritlessly when one is simply an executor of someone's religious will unreflectively, out of fear, out of a desire to create an outlet for one's animal instincts, etc.⁴⁰. Demonic religiousness will acquire an aesthetic dimension when one avows it for the sake of some personal goal, for one's own benefit, the result being that one will believe in religiously justified evil in order to feel superior to others in this world⁴¹. At the ethical level, this type of religiousness will require that a certain social value be built around it, that an inversion be performed of the common good, one that integrates people and somehow becomes normative for them⁴². Demonicity in the context of religiousness A, on the other hand, would mean in this case total dedication to the service of evil to the point of negating all other temporal values; it would entail the construction of a kind of inverted religion—a religion of evil⁴³. Demonic religiousness so understood, of course, will never relate to the value of evil as an overriding one, yet it will use the category of good in such a way that the good becomes inverted, manipulated, and presented such that in reality it will not (ever) serve the spiritual development of people but instead their spiritual downfall and self-destruction.

5. Conclusions

The proposal advanced in this paper—to expand Kierkegaard's theory of the stages of existence as certain initial existential attitudes into a model capable of describing humankind's various religious attitudes—is meant to build a framework for a certain general vision of human religiousness as viewed from an existential–anthropological perspective. This type of vision focuses primarily on the subjective side of human existence, that is, on how a person's religiousness becomes an essential element in the construction of their personal identity and how this religiousness can differentiate itself depending on what initial existential attitude is manifested. Phenomenologically speaking, religiousness here is not understood or examined as a completely separate phenomenon but as a superstructure imposed onto the base of a preconceived existential attitude.

Kierkegaard's deliberations on human religiousness are limited to those of the Old and New Testament. At the same time, however, his thought harbors the strong essentialist assumption that the spiritual sphere (as the moral sphere, not the intellectual one) is determinative of the functioning of human existence. Thus, it seems that the model of religious attitudes proposed herein, as an expansion of the Kierkegaardian vision of the stages of existence, can account for the religious behavior of people from all religious systems. For this to succeed, however, the assumption must be made that, at a certain fundamental existential level, all people are spiritually similar to one another since human spirituality is more built into the structure of human cognition than it is a product of one's historical and cultural circumstances. Therefore, the research perspective delineated here is not related to content-oriented differentiation of the truths of faith (which is obvious and indisputable) but related to how individual people relate to them, constructing their own individual identity in relation to them. There are innumerable religious systems and truths of faith in human reality, but the range of moral attitudes that people adopt toward transcendence in the immanent world can be narrowed down to several fundamental existential types, which, in turn, of course, can be further refined and distinguished.

It should be clear that the model proposed here resembles the phenomenology of Hegel, which constituted a starting point for Kierkegaard and examined from the outside various types of human consciousness and their development, more than it resembled the analysis characteristic of advanced existential phenomenology. Nevertheless, it seems that this model may prove to be a useful tool for further existential–phenomenological research that focuses on people's religious life. It introduces a preliminary order into the complexity of people's religious attitudes and shows how they can be processed in the context of subjective truth and categories that serve to describe the dynamics of human existence. This article does not present how particular religious types can be described in detail using various

phenomenological categories of human existence. This would require an immersion into the religious attitudes presented here, as well as a detailed, phenomenological analysis thereof. Undoubtedly, however, such a research aim would be worthwhile in reference to the thought of Kierkegaard, 20th-century phenomenologists (such as Scheler, Heidegger, Sartre, and Levinas), and the contemporary French phenomenologists responsible for the so-called “theological turn:” Marion, Lacoste, Henry, and Chretien. A proper phenomenological analysis would fill in the model presented with content and insight. This is a task that far exceeds the research scope of this paper, however.

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Notes

- ¹ This primarily relates to Kierkegaard’s various pseudonymous works, such as *Either/Or*—part 1 and 2; *Fear and Trembling*; *Repetition*; *The Concept of Anxiety*; *Philosophical Fragments*; *Stages on Life’s Way*; and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. In order to understand the entirety of Kierkegaard’s concepts, especially insofar as that concern the religious stages of existence, one also needs to reference his religious writings, which include works written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus such as *The Sickness unto Death and Practice in Christianity*, as well as the numerous examples of religious discourse throughout his entire body of work, most notably *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, *Works of Love*, and *Christian Discourses*.
- ² Here, I understand the notion of transcendence as broadly as possible, as a supernatural, spiritual, and invisible reality, which, in accordance with religious beliefs, has an actual impact on the lives and actions of human beings and determines their destiny after death, depending on what existential attitude they represented during their lives. According to different beliefs and concepts, this transcendence will be defined differently contentwise—in Kierkegaard’s view, this most often means the revelation of God in immanence in the guise of man, which obviously narrows down in a significant way this broad, initial definition.
- ³ It is worth noting here that Kierkegaard’s philosophical project has at its core an essence-oriented assumption, namely that every person is spirit ([1] CA, p. 43; [2] UD, p. 193; [3] WL, pp. 209–210, [4] SUD, p. 13) and that people can be equal to one another only in spiritual reality (transcendence), which indeed never occurs in the human world (immanence) ([3] WL, pp. 44, 58, 60, 67–73, 81–89, 100, 140, 342; [5] WA, p. 165).
- ⁴ It is worthwhile to mention works in the literature which have achieved the rank of classics: [6–15].
- ⁵ Of course, new works analyzing particular stages of existence and attempting to find inspiration for new interpretations of various texts and humanities-related phenomena are constantly appearing (See, for example, [16,17]). However, it seems that there is a noticeable lack of works that interpret this Kierkegaardian concept holistically and try to use it to describe the human world in relation to contemporary socio-cultural reality. Eleanor Helms [18] has recently presented an interesting formal analysis of Kierkegaard’s stages of existence as imaginative variations. In her view, the stages of existence phenomenologically aim at cognition in terms of “what sort of categorial framing faith provides” (p. 116). In doing so, she focuses on how the concept of the stages of existence is structured and on which functions it can perform philosophically. It might be said that the concept of the stages of existence, from Helm’s point of view, turns out to be philosophically much more sophisticated and capacious than it appeared for earlier studies on this topic. This, in turn, opens up a way to use this concept in further research as a model for religious attitudes. In this sense, just as Kierkegaard’s concept of the stages of existence provides a categorial framing for the recognition of faith, so too, in the view presented in this article, it is possible to include and read in this categorial framing how religiousness can manifest itself in the world, even though in many human cases it does not meet the conditions of faith in Kierkegaard’s understanding thereof.
- ⁶ This is indeed a more comprehensive project that Welz develops in another place, referencing not only Kierkegaard’s thought but also other contemporary works in existential philosophy and religion ([36,37]).
- ⁷ Of course, Kierkegaard does not call either his stages of existence or his vision of subjective truth “theories”—as theoretical knowledge was of secondary importance to him (hence, his main philosophical work carries the adjective “unscientific”)—and he treated his work primarily in terms of a spiritual wake-up call to his readers (see *The Point of View, Armed Neutrality*). The concept

of theory is therefore interpretively added here to define and section off a certain thematic whole that Kierkegaard develops in his aesthetic works.

8 Kierkegaard does not create this order with the aim of judging other people or their existential attitudes, however, but to ensure that his reader can define their “real” place on the “ideal” scale so that they can understand their own existential attitude and, in this way, enter onto the path of spiritual self-improvement.

9 For example, both a theist and an atheist can express themselves within the same existential attitude. They will believe the opposite content, but their attitude may be the same, insofar as this concerns both the way in which they commit to what they believe is true and the way they reveal this truth in the world. The quality of their existence is marked not by the content of their beliefs but the way they relate to said content—that is, by how it is realized in their life.

10 The literature abounds with excellent studies on Kierkegaard’s stages of existence, and thus repeating them here would make little sense (see the works listed in note 4). What follows will present a very general and static characterization of Kierkegaard’s stages of existence, one which will serve as a model for religious attitudes.

11 This scheme may also serve to describe other human attitudes beyond those related to religion. One may, with certain reservations, use this model to describe various atheistic attitudes. One may also expand the initial description of religious attitudes and consider how this scheme can accommodate the fundamentalist relation to religion (see note 39 for more).

12 Kierkegaard also distinguishes two so-called confinia: firstly, irony, located between the aesthetic stage and the ethical stage, and secondly, humor, located between the ethical stage and the religious stage ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 501–502). For the time being, however, they will be set aside as less important in the scheme presented here. They are significant mainly when attempting to understand the mechanism of switching between particular stages of existence, which is not the focus of this paper.

13 Kierkegaard understands the demonic in his descriptions thereof as a quite common phenomenon in his time, linked to the decline of authentic religiousness ([45] *EO1*, pp. 90–92, 206–207; [40] *FT*, pp. 88, 94–101, 104–107; [1] *CA*, pp. 118–154; [44] *SD*, pp. 135, 230–231, 422, 426–427, 433, 436–437, 451–455, 484; [4] *SUD*, pp. 66–67, 71–74, 108–110). He focuses mainly on psychological observations, determining the features of a demonic personality (inclosing reserve, the sudden, the contentless, and the boring) through which anxiety about the good—as a constitutive quality of the demonic and as that which signifies unfreedom—is revealed ([1] *CA*, pp. 123–124, 135). What are important to the interpretation taken up in this article are those essential marks of the demonic rather than the conceptual range Kierkegaard presents or the psychological descriptions Kierkegaard provides. In this sense, the demonic should be understood more narrowly than Kierkegaard himself does. It signifies a detachment from the good and may arise at different levels of consciousness (within various existential attitudes within the demonic). It results from the deepening dependence of the person on evil (understood as untruth—[1] *CA*, pp. 128, 138) and from the profits that accrue from serving it (which is equal to what Kierkegaard calls the absence of inwardness—[1] *CA*, pp. 137–154). Such an account of the demonic, on the one hand, seems to be in accordance with the spirit of Kierkegaard’s thought, but on the other, one should be aware that it is quite a free and possibly far-fetched extension of his remarks on this topic. Kierkegaard seems to be closest to the account of the demonic presented here when speaking of the extreme form of despair—that is, when speaking of “despair to will to be oneself: defiance” ([4] *SUD*, pp. 71–74). A similar interpretive position with regard to the problem of demonic evil is presented in the book *Kierkegaard’s Analysis of Radical Evil* by David Roberts ([46], pp. 128–152).

14 Kierkegaard himself stresses that the demonic in the psychological sense is the state posited in the qualitative leap ([1] *CA*, pp. 123, 135).

15 One could interpret Kierkegaard’s words such that the demonic is a negation ([1] *CA*, p. 134) and a pneumatic loss of freedom ([1] *CA*, pp. 137–154).

16 Kierkegaard for the first time demarcates and describes religiousness B in *Postscript* ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 555–586), but a similar concept was previously outlined in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses; Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*; the last part of *Either/Or, part 2* entitled “Ultimatum” ([39] *EO2*, pp. 339–354); and in *Fear and Trembling* in the attitude of Abraham and in *Repetition* in the attitude of Job as two proto-Christian prophets. A deeper description of the Christian attitude is given later in *Practice in Christianity* and especially in the various numerous religious discourses which arose after the publication of *Postscript*, when Kierkegaard devoted himself almost entirely to the problem of the various aspects of the existence of Christian religiousness in his work.

17 Kierkegaard borrows the notions of immediacy and mediacy from Hegel, giving them an existential and anthropological meaning. To put the matter very simply, the first of these notions refers to reality and to what is actually given in an individual’s existence. The second one speaks of ideality, through which the individual relates to themselves in their existence, that is, in relation to which they build their self ([42] *JC*, pp. 166–172).

18 This type of religiousness Kierkegaard describes extensively in *Postscript* ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 387–561). A case can also be made that the reflections in the last and largest part of *Stages on Life’s Way* entitled “‘Guilty’/‘Not Guilty’ A Story of Suffering. An Imaginary Psychological Construction by Frater Taciturnus” ([44] *SD*, pp. 185–494) feature a similar way of thinking about religiousness.

19 A classic and detailed description of the ethical sphere is provided by Assessor Wilhelm in his letters to the aesthetic friend, which are included in *Either/Or, part 2*. However, the general problem of ethics as an existential attitude is one of the most important topics of all Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works up to and including *Postscript*.

- 20 The classic example of such aesthetic commitment is here Johannes from “The Seducer’s Diary” ([45] *EO1*, pp. 301–445), but a similar attitude was also presented in a different context by Constantin Constantinus, the pseudonymous author of *Repetition*. However, as in the case of ethics, the place and meaning of the aesthetic vision of life is a very important and thoroughly analyzed theme in the first part of Kierkegaard’s work, which he calls aesthetic productions, as opposed to the religious ones that constitute the second part of his work after 1846 ([48] *PV*, pp. 5–11).
- 21 In this sense, Don Juan (from Mozart’s opera), described by Kierkegaard in the first part of *Either/Or* as an immediate aesthete, should be situated higher in the hierarchy of spiritual development than a spiritless person who does not existentially challenge themselves in any way. In turn, a reflexive aesthete (for example, Johannes the Seducer, the author of “The Seducer’s Diary” from the first part of *Either/Or*) has a higher form of consciousness than an immediate aesthete. The former is able to recognize their existential attitude and critically refer to it, which is rather impossible for an immediate aesthete, who is completely engulfed in their passion, being a kind of slave to it. Reflexivity means for Kierkegaard going beyond one’s immediacy (actuality) because the former is already an intellectual (but still not existential) act of being mediated in ideality (possibility). This, then, opens a person up to doubt and may turn out to be the beginning of an existential change, a negation of the actual attitude ([42] *JC*, pp. 145, 169–170). The problem of the difference between an immediate and reflexive aesthete is discussed in detail by Mark C. Taylor in his book *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* ([15], pp. 127–184).
- 22 Kierkegaard, firstly, describes sin in this way, which he calls, in analogy to faith, “a later immediacy” ([40] *FT*, p. 98) and “a qualification of the spirit” ([4] *SUD*, p. 81). He says, secondly, that in the demonic, just as in faith, an individual is higher than the universal ([40] *FT*, pp. 97–98), and that the demonic person is themselves only in the continuance of sin, only then having an impression of themselves ([4] *SUD*, p. 109). This statement seems to be sufficient to acknowledge that conscious service of evil may build the self of the person, the same as what happens when someone serves the good. Moreover, serving evil yields the possibility of building very spiritually advanced forms of self. Even though Kierkegaard claims that the demonic is the absence of inwardness, this statement should rather be understood as a sort of reverse or improper inwardness as a self that is built on evil not on good. It is worth remembering here that, for Kierkegaard, evil has first of all a spiritual dimension as something that takes place in the relationship between God and a person and has the power to build the individual identity of this person.
- 23 It seems that in Kierkegaard’s view, such an extension is justified, for he repeatedly presents a variety of existential attitudes, the meaning of which is not religious but within which there is some reference to absolute truth (transcendence, God). An example can be found in Judge Wilhelm from the second volume of *Either/Or*, who repeatedly appeals to the divine or absolute, despite expressly trying to convince the reader of the importance of ethical existence rather than religious existence. In this context, Mark Taylor in his book ([15], pp. 224–236) reflects on “ethical religiosity” in reference to Kierkegaard’s works. It is also worth turning one’s attention to the lily of the field and the bird of the air, the protagonists of several upbuilding discourses which constitute models for non-Christian human behavior that in some way still relate to God. In this same context, Kierkegaard invokes the pagan antithesis as a person that is ostensibly religious but who does not detect the inauthenticity of their religious attitude. On many occasions, Kierkegaard also criticizes the aesthetic relation to Christianity, which indicates, in turn, a kind of religiousness in which absolute truth becomes hostage to the private aspirations of people who consider themselves Christians. See also Kierkegaard’s remarks on the aesthetic dialectic in religiousness ([38] *CUP1*, p. 446) and on upbuilding in the various spheres of existence ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 560–561).
- 24 Of course, the initial sense of religiousness, as Kierkegaard understands it, is surpassed while speaking here of the different types of religious attitudes—especially where the content of religion is treated by an individual rather as an object of manipulation in the human world (aesthetic religiousness and especially spiritless religiousness and the different types of demonic religiousness). In Kierkegaard’s view, one can speak about religiousness only when a human being sincerely and in humility relates to God, when one establishes or tries to establish a relationship with God, being guided by their own spiritual concern. Any other reference to God is rather a negation of genuine religiousness, a kind of anti-religious attitude. In the expansion of Kierkegaard’s vision presented here, however, the starting point is that which phenomenologically wants to manifest itself as religiousness and that which appears as religiousness in the human world, regardless of whether there exists in some specific case a real and honest reference to God. In this sense, at least at the declarative level, there can be religious attitudes that in the initial Kierkegaardian sense are anti-religious. People can consider themselves religious or be perceived as religious by others despite the fact that they consciously or unconsciously negate the religious ideal that they refer to.
- 25 It is worth mentioning here another controversial approach to interpreting and expanding Kierkegaard’s vision of religiousness, an approach offered by Merold Westphal ([55–59]), according to whom religiousness B—as presented by Kierkegaard in *Postscript*—is not the highest form of religiousness but an introduction to the authentic religiousness that Kierkegaard introduces in his later religious writings. He proposes calling this last one “religiousness C”. On Westphal’s account, religiousness A and B become the kind of attitudes that can be found in normal life among religious people, so they are vulnerable to being hijacked by socio-political discourse and cannot offer the ultimate guarantee of fulfilling what Kierkegaard calls becoming a Christian ([55]). From the point of view presented in this article, Westphal overinterprets how Kierkegaard presents the authentic Christian attitude in his religious writings in relation to how he describes religiousness B from *Postscript*. This overinterpretation consists of Westphal not appreciating the existential–anthropological power of Kierkegaard’s descriptions in *Postscript*, which in fact define a certain philosophical–theological horizon, outlining the mere contours of authentic religious existence. This form Kierkegaard then fills in content-wise in his religious writings. What this means is that religiousness B, just as it is defined in *Postscript*, is

the same religiousness which he describes in his later religious writings. The difference is that in *Postscript*, religiousness B is presented only as a certain model, a postulate, while, in the later writings, it is shown how the model should be actualized in existence. On account of this, it makes no sense to expand Kierkegaard's proposition with the addition of religiousness C as higher than religiousness B. If one grants, as proposed here, that religiousness can play out at all the stages of existence, then religiousness A and B, in accordance with Kierkegaard's descriptions, are advanced forms of humankind's spiritual development, while less spiritually advanced religious attitudes ought to be shifted to the forms of religiousness that have already been described: spiritlessness, the aesthetic, and the ethical. In this way, one stays true to Kierkegaard's scheme of existential stages, while at the same time enriching it with a broader understanding of human religiousness, which, indeed, seems to be implicit in his work.

- 26 To a significant degree, this interpretation of Kierkegaard's vision of Christianity is presented by Sylvia Walsh in her book *Living Christianly* ([60], pp. 113–114, 117, 119, 120–121, 140–141, 148, 152). See also my article *The Reality of Love: An Affirmative Vision of Christianity Based on Kierkegaard's Interpretation of the Maxim: Love is the Fulfilling of the Law* ([61]), in which I discuss Welz's argument and present a more radical interpretation of Kierkegaard's affirmative vision of Christianity. In the interpretation presented here, religiousness B is a kind of relation of a person to the truth of revelation, which is achieved by very few people in every generation (see [38] *CUP1*, p. 488; [41] *PC*, p. 247). In some sense, it is an ideal to which one can only approximate, never being sure whether it is really achieved ([48] *AN*, pp. 135–137). However, in order to reach the moment at which one starts to approach it at all, one needs to go through the paradox of faith in one's life (see also the category of death to oneself and to the world—[2] *UD*, p. 257; [43] *CD*, pp. 146–147, 171–172; [41] *PC*, p. 252; [47] *FSE*, pp. 74–85; [47] *JFY*, p. 140). This paradox completely turns around the typical human way of thinking and acting in the world ([43] *CD*, pp. 150–151) and turns a highly spiritually developed person into a witness of eternal truth. One can try to picture this qualitative difference by interpreting the attitude of Alyosha from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, comparing his behavior up until Father Zossima's death (religiousness A) with that after leaving the monastery (religiousness B). In this context, the period of Alyosha's life between Father Zossima's death and Alyosha's leaving the monastery describes the moment of his spiritual transformation—his going through the paradox of faith (see "Book VII. Alyosha" in [62]). According to this meaning, the overwhelming majority of people who consider themselves religious and give up everything in their life for their relationship with God—even though their religiousness is authentic in other people's eyes—never go through the verification of the paradox and do not enter the level of religiousness B (never becoming Alyosha after leaving the monastery).
- 27 It should be noted that Kierkegaard was critical of both these attitudes precisely because he believed that one could not become authentically religious (in the B sense) when isolated from other people. Metaphorically, this idea of Kierkegaard's is ideally captured by the fact that Alyosha must leave the monastery to become an authentic religious person (see note 26).
- 28 Kierkegaard devotes most of the discourse in *The Gospel of Sufferings* ([2] *UD*, pp. 213–341), in the second series of *Works of Love* ([3] *WL*, pp. 205–386), and in the third and fourth parts of *Christian Discourses* ([43] *CD*, pp. 161–300) to describing this attitude.
- 29 Most likely, Kierkegaard considered himself such a person, as indicated by the way he presents the purpose of his upbuilding discourses, which are meant to convey the content of Scripture to the reader without presuming any authority. This becomes apparent in the preface to *Two Upbuilding Discourses*—with the preface itself becoming a model for all the discourses thereafter. ([63] *EUD*, p. 5). Generally speaking, the difference between the attitude of religiousness A and religiousness B corresponds to Kierkegaard's distinction between the categories of "upbuilding" (den. *opbyggelig*) and "for upbuilding" (den. *til Opbyggelse*)—see also [38] *CUP1*, pp. 560–561—and to his differentiation between a genius and an apostle ([5] *WA*, pp. 91–108).
- 30 Holiness is understood here as being a truth witness in the sense in which Kierkegaard uses this notion ([48] *PV*, pp. 109, 119–120; [43] *CD*, pp. 226–228; [64] *MM*, pp. 5–6, 10–11) and therefore fully coincides with the interpretation of the attitude of religiousness B developed in this paper (see note 26).
- 31 One could go so far as to wonder whether the figures of the lily in the field or the bird of the air—so often recurring in a number of Kierkegaard's discourses ([2] *UD*, pp. 155–212; [43] *CD*, pp. 3–91; [5] *WA*, pp. 1–45)—capture precisely this kind of ethical religiousness.
- 32 In this sense, in Judaism, when one stresses, first and foremost, that it is the religion of the chosen people—and this element becomes the main object of faith for this person—such a person can then be called an ethically religious person. This does not mean that Judaism is in its essence ethical religiousness, since as with every religion, it can be pursued within all the religious attitudes presented here—it does mean, however, that each of its adherents to whom Judaism is above all the religion of the chosen people represents ethical religiousness.
- 33 See, for example, the four types of double-mindedness that Kierkegaard describes in the first part of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* ([2] *UD*, pp. 36–77).
- 34 In Kierkegaard's vision, members of the triumphant church ([41] *PC*, pp. 207–232) could be described precisely in the categories of aesthetic religiousness—for they are responsible for what Kierkegaard calls shoving or throwing back Christianity into the aesthetic ([38] *CUP1*, pp. 539–540, 562; [5] *WA*, p. 93; [48] *AN*, p. 130). This is also why the attitude of the pastors of the then Lutheran Church is so heavily criticized by Kierkegaard for their tendency to become not servants of God but government officials. In their lives, faith thus turns out to be some life-arranging element, one that organizes the social world around them, rather than the true purpose of their lives ([47] *JFY*, pp. 110–112; [64] *MM*, pp. 95–97, 107, 125–126, 151–153, 159, 197–198, 209–210, 253–258, 321–325). A similar attitude—that of a pastor who takes advantage of religion to maximize his social position instead of

serving to bolster the faith of his parishioners—was depicted in Ingmar Bergman’s *Winter Light*. It is worth noting again (see note 24) that while, through the lens of Kierkegaard himself, this kind of attitude is simply anti-religious or anti-Christian, in the phenomenological sense, it is manifested in the world as a sort of relating to God and thus as some sort of religiousness, even though it falsifies the meaning of the Christian ideal to a significant degree.

35 One could go so far as to claim that this attitude is represented by pagans, with pagans and Christians being depicted by Kierkegaard as occupying opposite existential sides in the first part of *Christian Discourses* titled “The Cares of the Pagans” ([43] CD, pp. 3–91). It must be stressed here that Kierkegaard uses the notion “pagans” pejoratively in this context, speaking of people who take advantage of Christianity to further their own aims, instead of being Christians—and thus they are pagans in Christendom ([43] CD, pp. 11–12; [41] PC, pp. 35–36, 95, 107, 143). At the same time, it is worth stressing that people professing faiths other than Christianity may equally represent all religious attitudes outlined in the scheme developed in this article. When speaking of correspondence with Kierkegaard’s thought, religiousness B would pose the biggest problem since it is reserved by him for Christianity as the paradox of God incarnate. However, it seems that it would be possible to indicate at least some elements of Kierkegaard’s religiousness B in other religious systems (first of all following the example given to people by God, it being a separate question whether some elements of religiousness B also appear in polytheistic religions or only in monotheistic ones). Kierkegaard himself treats Job and Abraham as proto-Christian models of such behaviours.

36 A great example of this is the title character of Molière’s comedy *Tartuffe, or The Impostor*.

37 Kierkegaard seems to portray this attitude in his discourses as small-mindedness ([2] UD, pp. 326–327; [3] WL, pp. 257–258, 263, 270–273), as cowardliness or pride ([63] EUD, pp. 347–375), or simply as hypocrisy ([5] WA, pp. 127–134).

38 And here again (see notes 24 and 34), a phenomenological differentiation should be made between being religious as a spiritually upbuilding value, which is close to the understanding of religiousness developed by Kierkegaard in his writings, and that which manifests itself as religious in the human world. In the Kierkegaardian sense, someone who commits evil and justifies it religiously has, of course, nothing to do with authentic religiousness. In the human world, however, someone who is motivated in their actions by religious reasons always manifests themselves as a religious person (and not only as a person associated with some religion, who falsifies its ideal). This is precisely because their attitude is justified by religious content or because they present themselves as an example of a defender of religious truth.

39 Here, it should be noted that it is possible to acknowledge religious extremism as a kind of religious fundamentalism. At the same time, however, this fundamentalism is a much more complex phenomenon in need of separate explanation. It seems that fundamentalism, as such, is not simply a religious attitude but a certain extreme that occurs within all the attitudes presented, and, as such, it can, in turn, occur in all the religious attitudes described in this paper. Thus, it is possible to be a spiritless, aesthetic, or ethical religious fundamentalist and also a fundamentalist in the context of religiousness A or B. This problem, however, will not be expanded upon here due to a lack of space and must therefore be addressed in a separate paper.

40 An obvious example here is the religious warrior (a terrorist)—a person blinded by religion to such a degree that he or she is unreflectively ready to kill others only because they share a different faith.

41 One can try to classify here all those who use their religious positions to sexually abuse other people or to destroy them psychologically by maltreating and humiliating them.

42 This is now the level of one who creates an entire pseudo-religious movement in order to control the consciousness of others and to derive various benefits from this undertaking, with examples being leaders of religious cults or leaders of terrorist religious groups.

43 The downfall of a person who becomes a true adherent of evil, who becomes its face in the human world, is excellently portrayed by Saruman the White in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. One could also ponder to what extent Nazism or Stalinist communism was marked by this kind of inverted religiousness, exuding evil under the guise of the good. A strong case was made for such a reading of Stalinism by Jacques Maritain in his work *Integral Humanism* ([65]).

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