AGATHEOS – European Journal for Philosophy of Religion
Vol 1 No 2, 2024 pp. 54–75.
ISSN: 2004-9331
DOI: 10.69574/aejpr.v1i2.22894

"MEMBERS OF ONE ANOTHER": TOWARDS A KIERKEGAARDIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: Søren Kierkegaard's theology, notorious for its emphasis on the single individual and her relationship to God, has sometimes given the impression that one should downplay the importance of the corporate body of the Church. Because of his salient emphasis on the individual and her faith, one could be forgiven for thinking Kierkegaard has nothing to teach us about ecclesiology. We disagree. Drawing on the social ontology of Philip Pettit, we argue that because Kierkegaard's rejection of collectivism has more to do with his affirmation of the individual and their actions before God, holism provides for the possibility of a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology. Such an ecclesiology, we argue, could stress the importance of the single individual before God while giving an account of how the individual's actions are brought into the body of the Church. Where many ecclesiologies fail to provide a robust account of individual action within the corporate body, a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology can do just that.

KEYWORDS: Søren Kierkegaard, ecclesiology, social ontology, individual and corporate action, collectivism, individualism, holism, atomism

Introduction

This paper seeks to offer a 'Kierkegaardian' ecclesiology. This is not to say that we defend Søren Kierkegaard's ecclesiology (if there is such a thing), but that we defend an ecclesiology which is in keeping with Kierkegaard's theological commitments,

especially his emphasis on the single individual before God. For despite Kierkegaard's immense contribution to theology, his lack of ecclesiology is worrying. Because of his salient emphasis on the individual and her faith, not to mention the dearth of his robust claims about the nature of the body of Christ, one could be forgiven for thinking that Kierkegaard has no ecclesiology or that a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology is impossible.

Kierkegaard's commitment to individualism is indicative of a wider problem. Many have been critical of the influence of individualism on contemporary theology, claiming that the kind of individualism defended by Kierkegaard and others runs contrary to Pauline notions of the corporate nature of salvation and the Church. But we argue that this is an oversimplification of the matter. Drawing on the social ontology of Phillip Pettit, especially his defence of individualism (contra collectivism) and holism (contra atomism), we argue that Kierkegaard's rejection of collectivism is not the problem for the possibility of a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology. For, according to Pettit, individualism is consistent with realism about social groups, as well as the view that individual actions must be explained in reference to the collective, that is, it is consistent with holism. Because Kierkegaard's rejection of collectivism has more to do with his affirmation of the individual and their actions before God, Pettit's holism provides for the possibility of a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology. Such an ecclesiology, we argue, could stress the importance of the single individual before God while giving an account of how the individual's actions are brought into the body of the Church.

Such an approach to the body of Christ could provide not only a defence of Kierkegaard but, more broadly, promises to offer a way of understanding the relationship between individual actions, intentions, and relationship to God and their wider relationships within the body of Christ. Where many ecclesiologies fail to provide a robust account of individual action within the corporate body, a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology can do just that.

To do this, we begin by laying out Kierkegaard's mapping of the individual and social groupings, which he often refers to simply as "the crowd." In doing so, we make clear what Kierkegaard did and did not say about individuals and their belonging to groups such as the Church. This clarity will allow us to diagnose Kierkegaard's individualism. Because, we argue, Kierkegaard's particular brand of individualism is primarily concerned with rejecting collectivism, there remains a possibility of belonging to a corporate body of Christ in a way that does not compromise the significance of the individual before God. We demonstrate this in conversation with Pettit's social ontology, in which he distinguishes between the vertical issue of individualism versus collectivism and the horizontal issue of holism versus atomism. By distinguishing between these socio-ontological issues, we identify atomism, not individualism, as the barrier to ecclesiology in individualist social ontologies. We thus propose a Kierkegaardian model of the body of Christ which is both individualist and holist, adequately addressing Kierkegaard's concerns with the Church in Denmark while avoiding the concern of anti-ecclesialism. We conclude by outlining some

further benefits of our model and indicating promising avenues for further exploration.

The Crowd and the Individual: Did Kierkegaard Hate the Church?

As anyone who has studied Kierkegaard's writings will know, the words "Kierkegaard" and "ecclesiology" are not natural bedfellows. Throughout his life, up until the moment of his death, Kierkegaard expressed a deep distrust of organised religion. His journals are filled with quips about the inadequacies and hypocrisies of the Lutheran clergy: "in the entire clergy there […] is quite literally not one single honest pastor" (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 269). On his deathbed, Kierkegaard is reported to have refused the offer of holy communion because it would have to be administered by a Lutheran priest, whom he called the "civil servants of the crown" (cf. Kirmmse, 1998, 126).

Kierkegaard's critique of the Church does not stop at attacking established denominations (and their pastors) either; in places, Kierkegaard calls into question the whole notion of the Church. As George Pattison puts it, "in his later writings on the Church, Kierkegaard puts the very idea of a Church as such up for question to the extent that what he effectively asks is, simply, 'does Christianity actually need a Church?'" (Pattison, 2015, p. 203). Kierkegaard's critique of the Church appears to be grounded in his insistence that the primary way in which we respond to God in Christ is as the single individual; "there can be no baptism *en masse* because we cannot be 'reborn *en masse*'", the pseudonym Johannes Climacus writes (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 19). Each individual must stand before God themselves and come to faith for themselves. Thus, as his other pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, puts it, "to apply such a term as 'congregation' (about which people busy themselves so much these days) to this life is really an impatient anticipation of the eternal" (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 22). In contrast to this, Anti-Climacus also states, "Christianly, struggling is always done by single individuals, because spirit is precisely this, that everyone is a single individual before God, that 'fellowship' is a lower category than 'the single individual,' which everyone can and should be" (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 22). These are stark words about the nature of the Church, which appear to be rooted deeply in Kierkegaard's insistence that the individual's relationship to God is primary to any community or congregation.

This emphasis on the individual's response to Christ, and its contrast to the community of the Church, is a pervasive theme of Kierkegaard's writings. In two texts reflecting on the direction of his whole authorship, Kierkegaard considers this theme at length:

> Finally, this movement of the authorship is again decisively marked by reflection or is the movement of reflection. The direct way begins with individuals, a few readers, and the task or the movement is to gather a

> large number, to acquire an abstraction: the public. Here the beginning is made, *maieutically*, with a sensation, and with what belongs to it, the public, which always joins in where something is going on; and the movement was, *maieutically*, to shake off 'the crowd' in order to get hold of 'the single individual,' religiously understood. (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 9)

As he goes on to say, "there is in a religious sense no public but only individuals, because the religious is earnestness, and earnestness is: the single individual; yet every human being, unconditionally every human being, which one indeed is, can be, yes, should be – the single individual" (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 10). We see this notion of the single individual before God developed throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. For instance, in a journal entry he writes that, "'the single individual' is the qualification of the spirit; the collective is the animal qualification which makes life easier, provides a comparative criterion, procures earthly benefits, hides one in the crowd" (Kierkegaard, 1981, 2:2044).

At least in part, we should see that Kierkegaard's radical individualism and ecclesial scepticism are rooted in a culture in which Christian faith and nationalist Lutheran identity are indistinguishable. Johannes Climacus humorously depicts an encounter between a husband and wife in the *Postscript*: "hubby, darling, where did you ever pick up such a notion? How can you not be a Christian? […] Don't you tend to your work in the office as a good civil servant; aren't you a good subject in a Christian nation, in a Lutheran-Christian state? So of course you are a Christian" (Kierkegaard, 1992, pp. 50–51). Here, Kierkegaard takes aim at "the illusion that in such a country all are Christians of sorts" (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 23).

It is this notion, that *of course one is a Christian* if one is Danish, that Kierkegaard has in his sights in his emphasis on the single individual. To be a Christian, Kierkegaard wants his readers to see, is not to belong to a country or a denomination. It requires something much more difficult than this. Reflecting on the significance of imitating Christ, Kierkegaard writes that, "to be a Christian" in his culture, "can be combined easily with being a thief or an adulterer and such an individual […] goes to communion once a year or to church a few times a year" (Kierkegaard, 1990, pp. 188–189). This is a "*wohlfiel* [cheap] edition of what it is to be a Christian" (Kierkegaard, 1990, p. 189). Mockingly, he continues by writing, "perhaps one hears a little about something that perhaps is Christianity; one reads a little, thinks a little about Christianity, experiences a mood once in a while – and then one is a believer and a Christian. Indeed, one is already one in advance; one is born a Christian" (Kierkegaard, 1990, p. 194). It is against this backdrop of nominalism and Christian nationalism that Kierkegaard stresses the need to tear the individual away from the crowd of the church. Kierkegaard's worry, which we will focus more closely on in the next section, is that the cultural or collective identities of his contemporaries take primacy over the individual, leading to a distortion of the Christian gospel as he understands it.

When taken together, Kierkegaard's critique of the established church, his scepticism about the role of the collective for the life of faith, and his repeated emphasis that only the single individual can relate properly to God seem to render a *Kierkegaardian ecclesiology* unthinkable. It seems reasonable to think that given Kierkegaard's rampant individualism, the only role for the church would be an instrumental one – namely, to make Christ known to the individual. This view of the church can indeed be found in the pages of Kierkegaard's writings. Reflecting on the sacrament of Holy Communion Kierkegaard writes:

> at the altar […] it is *his* voice that you must hear. […] At the altar […] no matter how many are gathered there, yes even if everyone is gathered at the altar, there is no crowd at the altar. He himself is personally present, and he knows those who are his own. (Kierkegaard, 1992B, pp. 58–59)

But despite Kierkegaard's overtly individualist stance on many theological issues, this is not the full picture of how Kierkegaard views on human sociality. If we turn our attention not to Kierkegaard's explicit claims about the Church but to his views on human relationships more generally, a different picture begins to emerge. In *Sickness Unto Death,* Kierkegaard (through Anti-Climacus) outlines his vision of what it is to be human:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.
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> In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus, under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.
>
> Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another. […] The human self is such a derived, established relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. (Kierkegaard, 1998, pp. 13–14)

This view of the human self has three key claims: (1) the self is a relation, (2) it is a relation that relates itself to itself, and (3) in relating itself to itself, it relates to another. Let's take each of these in turn.

First, Anti-Climacus tells us that the self is a relation that exists as a synthesis of three opposing qualities: "infinite and finite," "temporal and eternal," and "freedom and necessity." These qualities exist in tension, for Anti-Climacus; as Merold Westphal puts it, "the opposition is not resolved into some kind of harmony […] the two moments remain in tension with each other" (Westphal, 2022, p. 151). The failure to will to exist in this tension is a form of despair; for example, to will to exist only in necessity is to resign oneself to the despair of the fatalist and to fail to grasp that one also exists in freedom (see Kierkegaard, 1998, pp. 37–42). Thus, as Arne Grøn describes, it is important to see that,

> Man is not merely a being between the finite and the infinite, nor is he a simple composite of a finite and an infinite part. He is, instead, an existing being standing out from himself by being between the finite and the infinite. It is in this sense that man is both finite and infinite. Here we see Kierkegaard's redoubling: Man is an intermediate being by himself being an intermediate. While traditionally man is regarded as an intermediate being situated somewhere between the finite and the infinite, Kierkegaard's move is to see man as an intermediate being situated between himself as finite and himself as infinite. He is an intermediate by relating to himself as finite and infinite. (Grøn, 2000, p. 28)

This notion of redoubling helps to see the second aspect of Anti-Climacus' account of the self: the self is a relation that relates itself to itself. For Anti-Climacus, the human self is defined as a relation that is self-reflexive (i.e. it relates itself to itself). In being aware of oneself, a person is both an object and a subject: the "me-self" and the "I-self" (Evans, 2009, p. 47). As Roe Fremstedal describes it, for Anti-Climacus,

> the 'imperfect"' 'actual self' differs from the 'ideal self' […] The former despairs consciously, while the latter overcomes despair actively at every instant. The latter is identified with spirit and represents the self we are supposed to become, something that represents a never-ending task that is highly demanding. It has an unreserved, wholehearted will to be itself before God. […] As such, the ideal self is not self-estranged or unwilling to accept itself. But instead of accepting everything as it is, it hopes and strives for improvement, which reconciles ideals and reality. […] The imperfect self, by contrast, either 'does not want to be the self it is' or it 'desperately wants to be […] a self that he is not (for to will to be the self that he is in truth is the very opposite of despair).' […] A coherent personal

> identity is only possible by actively reconciling freedom and facticity. On the one hand, such an identity prevents incompatible projects and roles. On the other, it avoids that form of selfhood that is fragmented into different projects and roles that are not integrated as parts of a single life. (Fremstedal, 2022, p. 112)

It is important to see here that the self has the freedom to reflect on her actual self in relation to the concept of another self. For example, she can reflect on herself as a good self in relation to her concept of a bad self. This emphasis of self-consciousness and self-reflection gets taken up later into existentialist notions of bad faith and good faith, which stress the importance of living freely and with integrity.

Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, in relating itself to itself, it relates to another. Put simply, the self exists in relation to another. The key to understanding Anti-Climacus' claim here is to note that for a complete understanding of the self, it is important not only to relate properly to oneself as a self-conscious synthesis but also to relate properly to others, and, in particular, to God, in which the self "rests transparently in the power that established it" (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 14). There is considerable discussion in the wider literature on the relation between the other-related aspect of *Sickness Unto Death* and how this connects to the God-relation in Kierkegaard's thought.[1] As C. Stephen Evans explains,

> Ontologically or metaphysically, God is indeed the power that established the self, and God intends the self to become itself by relating to God. However, when God creates humans as selves, he gives them the gift of freedom. […] God does not ontologically release the self; he only releases humans 'as it were.' God created humans, and humans are created by God as creatures who have becoming a self psychologically as their task. Without God's creative, sustaining power, human beings, who are intended to be selves, would not exist at all […] However, psychologically God does release the self and allows the self to define itself by relating itself to various 'others,' various 'powers' that can in some ways serve as a basis for the self's identity. (Evans, 2022, p. 227)

Thus, while Kierkegaard's anthropology in its ideal sense is grounded in the relation to God, Evans continues, this has important implications for thinking about other relatedness more generally. He notes that, "Human identities are always defined by some ideal, and those ideals are given to us through relations to others. It is obviously not the case that humans ground their selves only in God. They root their selves in socially given ideals that often take the form of 'isms.'" (2022, p. 229). When the self is grounded in God, Evans thinks, "one is freed from the temptation to see one's value

[1] See, for example, Hannay (1996), Theunissen (2016), and Evans (2007).

in terms of superiority to any other humans or human group" (2022, p. 229). We might describe it as such: human beings are essentially second-personally related beings. Human selves are always selves in relation to others.

This notion of other relatedness is picked up at length by Kierkegaard in his discussion of neighbour love in *Works of Love.* While we are wary of drawing too close a connection between the two accounts, there are important connections between the account of the self and the discussion of relating to others as neighbour (Evans makes these connections helpfully in 2007, pp. 273–274). Kierkegaard describes the neighbour relation as such:

> The word [neighbor] is obviously derived from 'nearest'; thus the neighbour is the person who is nearer to you than anyone else, yet not in the sense of preferential love, since to love someone who is in the sense of preferential love is nearer than anyone else is self-love. […] The concept of 'neighbor' is actually the redoubling of your own self; 'the neighbor' is what thinkers call 'the other.' That by which the selfishness in self-love is to be tested (Kierkegaard, 1995, p. 21).

For Kierkegaard, a crucial way that we will to exist as a self before God is to love the other selflessly.[2] While there is always a certain amount of selfishness to preferential or romantic love, the Christian command to love concerns one's neighbour, that is, to love *everyone,* regardless of personal preference (Kierkegaard, 1995, p. 44). Thus, for Kierkegaard, "*only when one loves the neighbour, only then is the selfishness in preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved*" (Kierkegaard, 1995, p. 44). Moreover, for Kierkegaard, relating to the other is always grounded in our relationship to God; God is the "middle-term" in all human relationships. As Evans explains, "for Kierkegaard there can be no question about competition between love for God and love of neighbor, for one cannot properly love the neighbor without loving God, and one cannot genuinely love God without also loving the neighbor who is made in God's image" (Evans, 2009, p. 183).[3]

Thus, despite Kierkegaard's cultural and theological concerns with the Church, it is not true to say that he has no space for community in his theology. At the heart of Kierkegaard's vision of anthropology and morality is a view of human beings that are essentially other-related; we cannot fulfil our telos before God without loving our neighbour.

But just because Kierkegaard emphasises the importance of human relationship does not mean he has anything resembling a vision of ecclesiology. To give an account

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[2] Such love involves a kind of *redoubling*; here Kierkegaard is expanding the discussion of 'other relatedness' from *Sickness* to apply not only to relating to God, but also to relating to one's neighbour.
[3] Evans also has an excellent article discussing this in more detail: "who is the other in *Sickness Unto Death*? God and human relations in the constitution of the self." See Evans (2007).

of neighbour love stops far short of defining and defending the nature of the Church. But we are *not* claiming here that the position developed in the remainder of this paper is one Kierkegaard defended, or even would defend. Rather, we argue that there is nothing in Kierkegaard's defence of individualism that precludes a robust account of ecclesiology. What's more, we will argue, his anthropology and his ethics provide the seeds of a vision of relating to one another that can form the foundations of a compelling account of the Church.

Saving Individualism: Re-Diagnosing Kierkegaard's Social Ontology

At the heart of the intuition that Kierkegaard has no room for ecclesiology in his theological worldview is his staunch defence of individualism. As we stated previously, a commitment to individualism has sometimes been seen as problematic for ecclesiology. This worry is summarised well by Tom Greggs in his recent volume on dogmatic ecclesiology:

> within a society in which the individual rules supreme and in which there is atomization of community […] the Protestant propensity towards individualism and the individuals' relation to God has burgeoned like a weed in the garden of the church community. If it is arguable that Protestantism has at times struggled to give due weight and consideration to the nature of the church as a community with salvific purpose, then in a post-Christendom society, marked by a rise in individualism, Protestantism has struggled even to account for the continued existence of its own ecclesial structures. (Greggs, 2019, pp. xxvii–xxviii)

The worry that Greggs (and others) have with an emphasis on individuals and individual salvation is that it leads to a distorted view of theology in which the individual has a misguided sense of their own importance, over and above the community. Douglas Campbell, one progenitor of this critique, disparages ecclesiological and soteriological emphasis on the individual before God as "a trap baited by Western spatial thinking with its mutually exclusive zones, something allied here with the Western conception of the person as a self-contained individual" (Campbell, 2020, p. 50). This Western spatial thinking of the individual as a discernible and self-contained unit, to the lights of Campbell and other critics of individualism, is so dangerous because it undermines the communal orientation of the Christian faith, in general, and scriptural authors, in particular. As Campbell describes the modern individualist interpretation of Paul,

> any insistence on the need for the individual non-Christian to choose to

> believe also turns salvation back into a contract, generating tensions with Paul's broader thinking in a number of directions. In particular, the God of love revealed by Jesus is negated and overlaid by a God of retributive justice. Rationalistic individualism and foundationalism are unleashed, as is supersessionism. So endorsing this position [of modern individualism] – which appeals to uncritical modern liberals – again seems inadvisable. (Campbell, 2020, p. 323)

For Kierkegaard, while the attacks on Christendom and the Danish state church may give the impression of someone entirely opposed to the notion of Christian community, his objection to these forces is primarily rooted in the idea that the Christian faith can only exist if it is both individual and personal. But, as we will argue, one can hold firmly to this thesis, without thinking of the Church only as a means to personal spirituality. To show how, it will be helpful to clarify some of the concepts at play in these discussions. To do so, we will draw from a more recent account of human sociality and its relationship to individual agency found in Philip Pettit's seminal work, *The Common Mind.*

Pettit argues that many people are too quick to reach that conclusion that a defence of individualism entails an isolated, atomistic view of human nature. More specifically, he thinks that many philosophers and sociologists confuse two distinct issues in social ontology:

> *Vertical issue*: "the first issue has to do with whether individual agents are compromised in their agency by aggregate social regularities, whether a knowledge of how these regularities work would undermine our view of those agents as intentional and thinking subjects … the issue […] is vertical in character. It bears on how far individual agents are affected, as it were, from above; in part-whole terms the issue is whether the whole is more than the sum of its parts" (Pettit, 1996, p. 117).

> *Horizontal issue:* "the other issue in social ontology is of a horizontal character rather than a vertical, for it bears on how far individual agents are affected by one another, not affected from above; in part-whole terms it might be represented as the issue of whether the parts are transformed through being jointly belonging to a single whole. The issue is whether individual agents non-causally depend on their social relations with one another for the possession of their distinctive capacities: say, for the possession of the capacity to think" (Pettit, 1996, p. 118).

Pettit claims that many people confuse these two issues and assume that if one answers the vertical issue by saying individuals are never compromised in their agency, then

one must also think (in response to the horizontal issue) that human thought is not supervenient on relationship. In other words, one might think that individualism entails a kind of *atomism.* But Pettit thinks that this is false.

Some further terminology will help illuminate Pettit's reasons for thinking this is the case. As Pettit defines individualism: "individualists deny and collectivists maintain the status ascribed to individual agents in our intentional psychology is compromised by aggregate social regularities" (Pettit, 1996, p. 118). In other words, individualists will deny that "psychologically mysterious forces" play any role in explanations of social forces or powers, that is the claim that, "the status ascribed to individual agents in our intentional psychology is not compromised by aggregate social regularities" (Pettit, 1996, p. 118). If we want to explain, for example, why there is a culture of fear in post-Covid Britain, we don't need to think of "society" as a spirit that transcends individual agents. We can provide a sufficient explanation by referring only to the behaviours, beliefs, and intentions of all the members of the group, "Great Britain." Thus, Pettit argues, the central question is

> whether the intentional subject, as the individualists hold, enjoys the control over herself, the capacity to have thought or done otherwise, which intentional psychology imputes to normal human beings; or whether that autarchy is compromised, as collectivists allege, by the presence of structural regularities of an overriding or outflanking character. (Pettit, 1996, p. 137)

But does individualism entail atomism? As Pettit defines it, "atomists deny and holists maintain that individual agents non-causally depend on their social relations with one another for some of their distinctive capacities" (Pettit, 1996, p. 118).[4] More specifically, the holist claims that,

> Thinking is not the purely private enterprise it seems at least sometimes to be: it never involves a total renunciation of the public forum, a complete seclusion in the cloisters of the inner self. The thinker may withdraw from social life but she will still carry the voice of society within her into her place of retreat. If that voice were absent, if there were no others to whom the individual thinker was answerable, then scrutable human thought would be impossible. (Pettit, 1996, p. 191)

[4] Non-causal, here, does not perhaps reflect current literature on causality. For there are many kinds of causality that might be rightly applied to the sort of effect that agents can have on one another. But these are all partial kinds of causation which would not necessarily undermine the autharchy of the individual agent. For more, see Everhart (2024).

Holism is a thesis Pettit thinks we can hold perfectly consistently with individualism. One need not defend atomism if one is an individualist; one could maintain the autonomy of the individual against a reduction of agency to collectivist social forces without denying the reliance of the individual and their autonomy on social relationships. If one thinks that human thought depends on human relationship, one can still maintain that "the aggregate regularities that characterise social life leave the individual uncompromised in her autarchical status" (Pettit, 1996, p. 173). As Pettit puts it, "the endorsement of holism is entirely consistent with accepting the intentional-psychological picture of human beings" (Pettit, 1996, p. 173). A defence of individualist holism is to claim that human thought depends on relationship, but denies the possibility of communal entities overriding human agency and decision. To put it in Kierkegaardian terms: while we are creatures who are intrinsically related to another, social realities (whether denomination or nation) must not override the significance of the individual's relationship to God. One cannot relate to God apart from their dependence on sociality, but if this sociality replaces or erases the need for the individual's response to God (as Kierkegaard observed in his nominal Danish contemporaries) then we have lost something vital.

This distinction helps us to clarify something important about Kierkegaard's view of human nature and our relationship to God. As I (Cockayne) argue elsewhere, Pettit's distinctions help us to see that we can think that,

> Kierkegaard was right in aiming to draw the individual from the crowd […] but still argue that the human capacity to think is dependent on social relationships. Defending individualism and holism allows the theologian to have their cake and eat it, so to speak. That is, it allows us to affirm the priority and importance of individuals without losing the emphasis on the community. (Cockayne, 2022, p. 16)

Indeed, within Kierkegaard's own thinking we see a clear defence of holism and the necessity of human relationship for our ability to exist as a self. Nowhere did Kierkegaard think that this defence of human relationship undermined his emphasis on the individual and her relationship to God. Kierkegaard's concern, as we saw highlighted in his parodying of the Christians of 19th Century Copenhagen, was that of collectivism, namely, that individual agency is compromised by her belonging to the collective. In pulling apart individualism from atomism we are free to consider the possibility of ecclesiology that upholds Kierkegaard's concern to remove the individual from the crowd.

The Solitary Self: Atomism as the True Barrier to Ecclesiology

In outlining Kierkegaard's individualism and its supposed threat to ecclesiology, it seems reasonable to think that Kierkegaard's primary objections to the Church were cultural, rather than conceptual.[5] Indeed, we have shown that at the heart of Kierkegaard's theology is a commitment to what Pettit calls "holism," the thesis that all human thought depends on relationship. As both Kierkegaard and Pettit show, it is possible to strongly endorse individualism while defending holism. This, to our lights, may assuage the aforementioned concerns about individualism. Instead, we argue in what follows that it is actually *atomism* that threatens ecclesiology.

It will be helpful to expand these definitions before proceeding. First, the horizontal issue, for Pettit is atomism versus holism. He maintains that "atomists deny and holists maintain that individual agents non-causally depend on their social relations with one another for some of their distinctive capacities" (Pettit, 1996, p. 118). This means that an atomist would reject dependence on relationship to others, including dependence on social groupings like the Church, for our agential faculties. If we recall the objection to Kierkegaard's individualism, that the Church is at best instrumental for the faith of the individual and makes no substantial contribution to their relationship with God, it seems that atomism fits the bill more closely than individualism. Atomism, not individualism, undermines the possibility of ecclesiology because it rejects the substantial role of relation to others that belonging to the body of Christ requires.

The key problem of the individualist objection against Kierkegaard seems to be that Kierkegaard's so-called individualism makes the Church superfluous to the Christian life. As David Kelsey puts it,

> the theological argument for this claim [against individualism] seems to be that a relational concept of human being would provide conceptual space and conceptual resources in which to explain in 'personalistic' categories core theological claims about the dynamic intersubjective relational sociality that is the necessary condition of creaturely human life and its flourishing. (Kelsey, 2009, p. 399)

Because what matters, according to this reading of individualism, is the individual in their relationship to God; our relationship to other human persons in the body of Christ is entirely additional to our being related to Christ. Kelsey continues, "it is claimed, an 'individualistic' concept of human being only provides conceptual space and conceptual resources in which to explain these theological anthropological claims in static and impersonal categories in terms of universal, and often hierarchical,

[5] This should not undercut the philosophical or existential weight of Kierkegaard's work, but simply note that his primary opponent was the cultural Christianity of Denmark, not the idea of Christian faith nor of gathering in church to worship.

structures of human beings' status and roles" (Kelsey, 2009, p. 399). Simply put, on such an individualistic view our belonging to the body of Christ cannot contribute anything to the relationship of the individual to Christ without undercutting the significance of the individual in that relationship. Anything we attribute to our belonging to the body of Christ is "taken" from the individual and their role.

But this does not seem to be, at least according to Pettit, a problem for individualism. Individualism, on the contrary, makes no claims about dependence on others for our distinctive capacities. Individualism is a claim about the agential status of group members, not about how that agency or the distinctive capacities associated with it are formed. Atomism, on the other hand, does make claims about our relations to others, including our relationship to social groupings like the Church. If the objection that Kierkegaard cannot have an ecclesiology is that his claims about the individual render belonging and interdependence on others in the body of Christ superfluous (at best) or impossible (at worst), it is likely that what objectors to individualism like Campbell, Kelsey, and Greggs actually have in mind is not individualism but *atomism*.[6] Atomism undercuts the role of a corporate body in contributing to the faith of individuals. Atomism undermines our dependence on others in social grouping like the body of Christ.

It seems, then, at least possible for one to be an individualist like Kierkegaard while not being an atomist and undermining the possibility of ecclesiology. One could be an individualist, asserting that an individual's agency and activity is not reducible to the agency and activity of the body of Christ, while also being a holist, maintaining that such individuals do nevertheless depend non-causally on others in the body for some of their agential capacities in the life of faith. While not exploring ecclesiology specifically, Pettit is one such individualist-holist, a position he elsewhere utilizes to argue for the reality and agency of groups (List & Pettit, 2011, pp. 42–51). This suggests that holism provides a way to save Kierkegaard (and for our purposes, other such individualists) from the objection that he cannot have an ecclesiology in virtue of his individualism. Were we to adopt a theological account of holism, Kierkegaard's individualism might offer some interesting implications for a robust account of the Church.[7]

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[6] Kelsey, too, seems to think that *some* form of individualism – of recognizing the distinctiveness and concreteness of particular agents – is compatible with theological communalism while other forms might be incompatible. Where he does not separate out these unhelpful forms of individualism as something distinct, we here identify it as not individualism, but atomism combined with individualistic impulses. See, Kelsey (2009, pp. 399–401).

[7] One such example of theological holism can be found in Everhart (2022). Everhart's account of holism grounds the unity of the body of Christ in the interpersonal relationships of members with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal social force, but a divine person. The unity brought about by the Spirit's person and work is sufficient to form a unified corporate agent, but is not a form of Hegelian collectivism. See also, Cockayne (2022).

Individualism-holism provides a way forward for Kierkegaard's individualism that can maintain his stance against collectivism. While our argument stops short of showing that Kierkegaard defends Pettit's version of holism, it is our hope that Kierkegaard's salient emphasis on the individual might offer some theological benefits to those accounts of faith and the body of Christ that emphasize the corporate nature of the Church. Individualism-holism provides a conceptual bridge for addressing a primary concern that many such ecclesiologies have with individualists like Kierkegaard and offering a new way of conceiving the relationship between the individual and the crowd. While what follows is not to be confused with the ecclesiology of Kierkegaard himself, it nevertheless bears the marks of his influence, and thus we name it a *Kierkegaardian* ecclesiology.

On such a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology, the agency and actions of individuals within the body are not reducible to the agency and actions of the body. To put this into Pauline terminology, what the hand does is not reducible to what the entire body does; a body made up of only one hand is not much of a body at all (1 Cor 12:4–23). While the body of Christ might intend on a particular day to feed the poor, there might be an individual who is not feeding the poor on that day. Perhaps they have a different job that enables the rest of the body of Christ to care for the poor or perhaps they are not feeling terribly charitable and are resisting the Spirit. Whatever the case may be, it seems important to describe the nature of the Church such that we are able to make sense of both the unity and diversity of the body of Christ. This is important both because of the apostle Paul's emphasis on the diversity of gifting and equipping in the body of Christ and because it just seems obviously true that we cannot accurately describe what an individual Christian is doing by describing only what the Church is doing. If the agency of the Church overrode or undermined the agency of individual members, we would not see such a diversity of giftings by the Holy Spirit, nor would we see individual members of the body of Christ acting in ways that at least appear independent.

Moreover, it is important to see here that a defence of individualism need not commit us to atomism and claim that the agency of the body of Christ offers *no* contribution to the agency and activity of its individual members. Simply because the various parts of the body act in distinctive and independent-appearing ways does not necessarily mean that their actions are completely independent. Begging the Pauline analogy, while one's hand might "act" in ways that are distinct from the "action" of the heart, the hand cannot act without the heart pumping blood into it. The hand also cannot grasp some object without the shoulder and arm moving it into a position to reach said object. Now Paul's analogy starts to break down, principally because persons are agents and individual body parts are not. But insofar as Paul is making the analogy between a human body and the group, the Church, we can illustrate this point adequately: while individual parts might be capable of acting distinctively, the ways

that they do so are contingent and dependent upon the actions of other members. Members depend on one another for their agential capacities in the body of Christ, and indeed they depend in important respects on the agency of the whole body to act in the ways that they do.

By way of illustration, let us consider the formation of the Deaconate in Acts 6. During the early days of the Church, the disciples found that some widows and poor were being overlooked when it came to distributing food. The disciples decided to appoint deacons to oversee such tasks as distributing food to the poor and to widows so that they might be able to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Because the deacons were undertaking this task, the disciples were freed up to focus on other actions, in this case prayer and preaching.

Let us observe some key aspects of this example. First, the disciples depended in a non-causal way on their relationship to the deacons in order to be able to focus on the particular actions of prayer and preaching. If the deacons had not been appointed, the agency of the disciples would have been constrained in some respect, so that they would have had to divide up their time and energy into both the care of the tables and their ministries of prayer and the Word. But because of their relationship with the deacons, in which the deacons could be appointed certain tasks by the disciples, their agency was enabled to make the choice to focus on the ministries of prayer and preaching.

Second, the agency of the disciples in this case depended non-causally upon not only their relationship to the deacons but also on their relationship to the Church as a corporate whole. There are several respects in which this could be considered the case, but let us just outline a few. The disciples would not have needed to attend to this issue if the whole Church were not called by the Spirit to care for the poor and widows. Nor would they have needed to attend to this issue if they were not recognized leaders in the corporate structure of the body of Christ. Even the relationship between the disciples and deacons relied in some sense on the structure of the group. Their agency in this respect depended not only on discreet relations between persons, but on the relations between members and the group.

Third, the disciples and deacons, while dependent on one another and the corporate body of Christ for their agency in these regards, nevertheless acted as distinguishable individuals. Indeed, this can be demonstrated in that the actions and intentions of the disciples are distinguishable from the actions and intentions of the deacons and the actions and intentions of the body as a whole.

In philosophical work on the nature of social groups, we can see a very similar claim being made about the relationship between individuals and groups. Stephanie Collins argues that group intentionality can be demonstrated by its distinguishability from individual actions and intentions that contribute to it; she writes that a group's

> decision is not merely the conjunction of members' decisions. The members' decisions were *to assent to the collective's doing such-and-such.*

> By contrast, the collective's decision was *to do such-and-such.* The collective's decision was determined by the members' decisions, but it is not to be identified with the mere conjunction of them for two reasons. First, it has a different content: the collective's decision is 'the collective will do this'. Second, the collective's decision arose out of two things: the conjunction of member's decisions *plus* the fact that they are all committed to the unanimity rule. (Collins, 2019, p. 169)

By unanimity rule, Collins means the commitment of the group to the particular decision-making process in virtue of which the group behaves like an agent and acts corporately. In the above example, it seems clear that the disciples decision to appoint deacons is distinguishable from the decisions of the deacons to distribute food which is also distinguishable from the body of Christ's corporate decision to care for poor and widows according to the Spirit's leading. Because all involved are committed to the authority of the Spirit and the guiding leadership of the disciples, the actions and intentions of individuals both contribute to the corporate agency of the body of Christ and rely on its unanimity rule in non-causal ways. We may still treat individuals within the body of Christ as individuals even as they depend on one another and the body for their individual agential capacities; their dependence does not undermine their individual agency nor does it reduce individual agency to the agency of the corporate body.

This depiction of the relationship between individual members and the corporate whole has advantages for describing the nature of the Church. For one, we know that there are instances in which, despite what the body of Christ is called to do or even what the body might be doing as a corporate whole, individual members act imperfectly with regard to that corporate calling. Being able to describe two levels of agency, the corporate agency of the body and the individual agencies of its members, allows us to separate the agency of the Church under the lordship of Christ and the agency of its individual members. Thus, we can depict the sometimes sinful agency of human persons being perfected and brought into the corporate agency of the body of Christ without implicating Christ or his lordship over the Church as sinful.

This has been an important point of an ongoing debate about the nature of identity in Christ. Thomas McCall has criticized certain radical apocalyptic interpreters of Paul who argue that, in the body of Christ, the identity of the individual is subsumed into the identity of Christ. In particular, McCall argues that this risks conflating our sometimes sinful agency with the agency of the sinless Christ (McCall, 2020, pp. 15–17). And indeed, if we are to think carefully about the body of Christ as being animated in some sense by the work of the Spirit or standing under the lordship of Christ, it is important that we can distinguish between Christ's perfect lordship, the Holy Spirit's perfect uniting of the body, and our sometimes sinful activity being brought into that corporate agency of the body. As I (Everhart) argue elsewhere, distinguishing between the corporate agency of the body and the individual agency of its members allows us

to portray members of the body of Christ as interdependent and enabled in their agency by actions of others and of the body corporately without conflating what one member does with the activity of others (Everhart, 2022, pp. 40–41). This further allows one to affirm the causal influence of a social grouping like the Church on individual agency while also affirming the causal influence of individual agents on the Church (Everhart, 2022, p. 39). Being able to talk about the agency of the Church while still maintaining the agency and intentionality of individual members provides for a careful examination of the perfected body of Christ composed of individual sinful members. We can therein maintain the sinfulness of fallen human members of the body while simultaneously claiming that Christ perfects those members in their unity with him and one another by the Spirit without compromising divine sinlessness.

A Kierkegaardian ecclesiology which emphasises both individualism and holism can help us to see how the agency of individual members interrelate, as well as relating to the agency of the body of Christ. If the principle concern levelled against Kierkegaardian individualism is that it renders ecclesiology impossible by isolating the individual and their faith before God, our individualist-holist Kierkegaardian ecclesiology can avoid this worry while still maintaining the significance that Kierkegaard places on the individual before God. Such an ecclesiology can make much of the significance of the individual, their gifting, and their actions within the body of Christ while demonstrating how their activity and gifting rely on the body of Christ and other members therein. Let us take once again the example of the deacons in Acts 6. The different giftings of and callings on each member of the body depended in some (non-causal) way on the giftings and callings of others and their acting in accordance with those roles. The deacons rely upon the disciples to be appointed as deacons, just as the disciples depend on the deacons and their work to be freed up for the ministries of prayer and the Word. But it would be untrue to say that either the disciples caused the deacons to do their work, reducing the agency of the deacons to that of the disciples, or to say that the deacons caused the disciples ministries of prayer and preaching, reducing the agency of the disciples to that of the deacons. Their agencies depended on one another and they could not fulfil their particular giftings apart from one another, but this dependence is neither causal nor reductive. They are, to use Pauline language, members of one another, enabling and empowering one another to fulfil their particular agential callings within the body of Christ. Even as individual agents, each member's activity and intentionality belongs to others upon whom they rely, just as members of the body belong to one another in Paul's somatic metaphors.

This offers a rather nuanced picture of the individual and their place within the corporate entity, the Church. Our Kierkegaardian ecclesiology offers an individualism that has no need to compete with corporate claims of unity or communal claims of belonging to others in the body of Christ; we are what we are as individuals *because* we belong to the Church but what we are is not reducible to the Church. Such an ecclesiological proposal of members belonging to one another promises an authenticity and significance to the individual and her faith before God that relies on

the individual being members of other believers in the Pauline sense. Such an individual could exercise the sort of resistance to the nominal Christianity against which Kierkegaard raged while still recognizing the significance and importance of her faith being formed in community with other believers.

Conclusion: Moving Past the Individual and the Crowd

If Kierkegaardian individualism-holism can offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the individual and the Church, more work will need to be done to untangle the knots created by pitting individualism against communalism in theology. The conceptual competition between individualism and communalism may have deeper roots in the western traditions of theology than is apparent at first glance. Indeed, we see similar questions arise in other *loci* of theology, as theologians have proposed communal approaches to soteriology, theological anthropology, reconciliation, atonement, and sin.[8] These approaches critique overly individualist theologies and receive similar critiques from their individualist counterparts. This demonstrates just how deeply rooted assumptions about the relationship between the individual and the crowd are in western theology, hearkening back to the ancient philosophical quandary of "the one and the many." Where so much of theology today is still bound by competitive assumptions about the oneness and many-ness of things, about the individual and the crowd, Kierkegaardian individualism-holism may indicate new ways of approaching these age-old questions. And if such individualism-holism finds its natural home in ecclesiology, then it should not surprise us to find that the nature of the Church can offer new ways of understanding Christ's saving work, human nature, and human sinfulness.

Finally, it also bears mentioning that, while a western theologian like Kierkegaard may call our attention to these deep-rooted assumptions, there are many rich theological traditions from the majority world that are not as indebted to our philosophical assumptions about the oneness and many-ness of things, nor to our assumptions about the relationship between individuals and crowds.[9] These traditions

[8] See for example, Grace (2018); Rutledge (2022, Ch. 4); Everhart (2022); Thurow (2015); Ray (2016).

[9] For example, Maori indigenous theologies often offer a salient emphasis on ecclesiological, non-competitive unity-in-diversity grounded in Trinitarian unity-in-diversity (Ward, 2013, p. 15). Battung, Samita, and Tinker thus argue that indigenous Maori theologies "are necessarily theologies of resistance to ecclesial hegemony" (Battung, Samita, & Tinker, 1998, pp. 108–109). Sung Wook Chung, with similar Trinitarian emphasis, has utilized unique aspects in Korean evangelical approaches to the doctrine of reconciliation, such as the concept of group reconciliation, to unite the vertical (divine-human) and horizontal (human-human) aspects of reconciliation (Chung, 2017, pp. 138–158). Here, too, the individual and their place within the group's restored relationship to God are assumed to not be in competition with one another. Finally, Gustavo Gutierrez's influential, *A Theology of Liberation* is often cited as the origin of the concept of "systemic sin," attributing sinfulness to the agency of institutional groups and organizations. Gutierrez's notion of systemic sin does not attempt to undermine

might thus offer further insights into the relationship between the individual and the crowd across various theological *loci*, not being committed to western assumption of individual-crowd competition.

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individualistic conceptions of sin but makes sense of individual sinfulness within the context of broken and fallen human society (Gutierrez, 2001, p. 205). See also, Wong (2019, p. 251); Darragh (2003, p. 56). See also my defense of systemic sin in Everhart (2023).

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How To Cite This Article
Everhart, D.T & J. Cockayne. (2024). "'Members of one another': Towards a Kierkegaardian Ecclesiology," *AGATHEOS: European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 54–75.