Introduction — Struggling with God: Towards a Kierkegaardian Theology of Spiritual Trial

For I tell thee truly, that I had rather be so nowhere bodily, wrestling with that blind nought, than to be so great a lord that I might when I would be everywhere bodily, merrily playing with all this ought as a lord with his own.

(The Cloud of Unknowing)

There are few passages that can access the depths of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* which the strange story of Jacob’s struggle evokes (Genesis 32:24-31).¹ In his solitude, Jacob is assailed by a strange figure with whom he struggles throughout the night. As dawn approaches, the stranger, unable to prevail over Jacob, asks to be released. Jacob refuses to let go without a blessing. The stranger asks for his name and responds to Jacob’s disclosure with the declaring that “Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Yisra’el, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Jacob’s name, which had previously revealed his flaw,² is replaced with a new name which is a “name divinely understood” (SUD, 32). The stranger bestows this gift of a new name — one sanctified by

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¹ As Valentine Cunningham writes: “Here is the Unheimlich, the uncanny, at its most disturbing: a night-time struggle for supremacy at a river-crossing, between a tribal patriarch and an unknown assailant whose identity remains crucially shady. Is he angel, good or bad, God Himself? Certainly this is a weird opponent, a ghostly antagonist who seems to have started out in narratives about ancient demon guardians of river crossings. . . . This text haunts precisely because of its imprecision.” ‘It is no Sin to Limp’, *Journal of Literature and Theology*, 6 (4), December 1992, 303-309, 304.

² ‘Jacob’ is a name which may be etymologically related to ‘deception’ or ‘supplanter’, particularly in reference to the deceptive way in which Jacob gain the blessing intended for his brother Esau from their father Isaac (Genesis 27:36). However, Allen suggests that “The name Jacob has as its probable meaning ‘May he protect’ or in its fullest form. Jacob-el, ‘may God protect’”. Allen P. Ross, ‘Jacob at the Jabbok, Israel at Peniel’, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 137 (1980), 338-354, 353n33. On the significance of names and naming in this passage see further Herbert Marks, ‘Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 114 (1) Spring, 1995, 21-42, 35-42.
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its unison with the name of God (El). In asking Jacob for this name, the stranger ask him to reveal himself; only to confer upon him the blessing of a, Yisra’el (‘struggling with God’), which identifies him as one who has struggled with men and with God, and prevailed.¹ When Jacob responds in his own desire to know the name of his assailant; to which the stranger replies “Why is it that you ask my name?” (Genesis 32:29). There is no answer from Jacob recorded to this question but he is immediately blessed by the nameless stranger. Despite this enigmatic exchange, Jacob appears to make a mysterious inference from the encounter. Jacob consecrates the sacred ground of his struggle as Penin’el (the Face of God), “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”² To see God means death (“shall no man see me, and live” Exodus 33:21). Moses’ desire to behold the glory (kavod) of God is refused, though he is permitted to see “my back parts; but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:23). Despite Jacob’s words that he had beheld God face to face and been preserved, it is left in some ambiguity as to whether Jacob struggles with God, with a man, with an angel (Hosea 12:4), or with one of the Angels of the Presence or Face of God (mal’akim panayim), a heavenly counterpart who renders his name to Jacob — after all, to see God is to die, even though Moses himself earlier speaks “face to face” with God, as with a friend (Exodus 33:11), and later that his own face shone fearfully radiant from speaking with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29-30).³

¹ In this sense, while to see God is to die, one should also be paradoxically mindful of “the etymology of the word ‘Israel’ as ‘one who sees God’.” Elliot Wolfson, Through a Speculum That Shines (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 50. However, “Israel” might not be read as “he has striven with God”, but rather as “El will rule (or strive)”, or the proclamation “Let El rule” — a reading supported by the notion that the theophoric element (El) generally functions as the subject rather than the object of any personal name to which it is joined. Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50 (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmands Publishing Company, 1995), 334. Another plausible interpretation is ‘El struggles [for you]’; though Marks argues that “The story of the wrestling undermines this pious fiction, replacing the divine warrior, guardian of Israel, with the dangerous adversary: ‘El strives [against you]” (Marks, ‘Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology’, 40).

² Ross contends that the meaning is not that Jacob has seen God “and yet” has been delivered but that seeing the Face of God is itself an answer to a prayer of deliverance (Ross, ‘Jacob at the Jabbok, Israel at Peniel’, 349).

³ On the ambiguity over the identity of Jacob’s assailant in the text of Genesis 32:25ff and its relation to Jacob’s meeting with the angels of God (Mahanayim) at the beginning of chapter 32 see Tzemah Yoreh, ‘Jacob’s Struggle’, Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 117. Bd., S., 95-97. Yoreh argues for a subsequent Yahwist redaction which separates these once united texts “in attempt to produce ambiguity with regard to the identity of Jacob’s mysterious
Through Luther’s exegesis of Jacob’s struggle, the question of the Face of God becomes masked by notions of the Hester Panim (hiding of the Face; the hidden face of God), and a struggle between the deus absconditus (hidden God) and the deus revelatus (revealed God): that is to say, Jacob’s struggle becomes a cypher for the struggle to recognise the love of God in the face of God’s apparent wrath. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther discerns that the struggler is “the Lord of glory, God Himself, or God’s Son, who was to become incarnate and who appeared and spoke to the fathers” (LW 6, 130). Insofar as Luther generally affirms the deus revelatus in Christ, the identification of the stranger with “God’s Son” here seems to also affirm Christ in terms of the deus absconditus, or the hidden face of God with which Jacob struggles and which is ultimately also revealed in its hiddenness to him. An identification of the stranger with the Logos, as the archetypal idea and mediator, was suggested by Philo (c.30 BCE - c.50 CE) in his consideration of Jacob’s change of name in De mutatione nominum, and affirmed as the pre-incarnate Christ by Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215), as the Logos, the teacher, who anointed Jacob against evil — the Face of God being interpreted as the Word of God by whom God is made manifest and known (Paedagogus 1.7.57).

Although the revival of Clement’s works post-dated Luther, the latter makes a comparable reading of the Face of God as the knowledge of God revealed through the Word of God in Christ. Yet while Luther, like Clement, discerns a pedagogical element in Jacob’s struggle, he also accentuates the dark ambiguity of revelation. Jacob struggles with “God Himself [Deum ipsum]” and also with the deus absconditus, since — hidden under the opposite (absconditus sub contrario) — God appears in the darkness of night as “otherwise” than the God of grace wrestling partner” (97). Some later targumic and rabbinic accounts render the stranger as the angel Sariel/Uriel, who is also referred to in places as Phanu’el, the Angel of the Presence or Divine Face, perhaps suggesting a derivation from the place name Peni’el (Genesis 32:30). See further Andrei A. Orlov, ‘The Face as the Heavenly Counterpart of the Visionary in the Slavonic Ladder of Jacob’, Craig A. Evans (ed.), Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture: Volume 2: Later Versions and Traditions (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 59-76, 72-74.

2 On the influence of Philo on Clement see, for example, J.C.M. Van Winden, ‘Quotations from Philo in Clement of Alexandria’s “Protrepticus”’, Vigiliae Christianae, 32 (3), September, 1978, 208-213.
3 Luther notes that Peni’el means the “face of God”, and interprets that “face of God’ is nothing else but knowledge of God. Nobody knows God except through faith in his word” (LW 52, 129-130).
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(LW 6, 132). In this sense Luther echoes what Otto affirms as the “non-rational” element of the numinous which is irreducible to the insights of speculative philosophy. Furthermore, Otto discerns a prophetic parallel between the *mysterium tremendum* of Jacob’s struggle and Christ’s struggle in Gethsemane, insofar as both are engaged “with the God of ‘Wrath’ and ‘Fury’, with the *numen*, which yet is itself ‘My Father’”.\(^1\) Following a Lutheran hermeneutic, the pre-incarnate son who struggled with Jacob now struggles with the wrath of God — a struggle between the *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*, which is only resolved through a submission to the divine will: reflected in this present work as *Anfechtung* (spiritual trial) dissolved through *Gelassenheit* (releasement).

While its central image is agonistic, Genesis 32 depicts a struggle with God that ultimately frees Jacob from the fear and violence of the struggle between brothers. Struggling with God enables him to behold the face of God in the other (“I have seen your face, as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me” Genesis 33:10).\(^2\) While Jacob refuses to let go of his assialent — only releasing him upon receiving his blessing — the struggle provides a kenotic, even cathartic release from fear. Through the struggle, Jacob is reconciled to the other, to a deeper sense of self, and to a God whose face is presence-in-absence. While the onto-theological veracity of the identity of the stranger remains elusive, *aletheia* is ‘unconcealed’ through meditation (*meditatio* — one of Luther’s three pillars of theology, along with *oratio* and, the prime concern of this study, *tentatio*).\(^3\) What is struggled with is the hermeneutical question: “How does the given biblical text give itself to me to understand it — so that I am understood?”\(^4\)

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1. The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational, trans. John H. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 85. The 1929 edition of *Das Heilige* contains an extensive citation from F.W. Robertson. Ten Sermons, III; Jacobs wrestling, point II; The revelation of Mystery: “There is a sense in which darkness has more of God than light has. He dwells in thick darkness. . . . When day breaks and distinctness comes, the Divine has evaporated from the soul like morning dew. . . . Yes, in solitary, silent, vague darkness, the Awful One is near. . . . That night, in that strange scene He impressed on Jacob’s soul a religious awe, which he was hereafter to develop.” *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2004), 213.


An unremitting concern with the “mirror of the Word” (JP 4:3902) motivates Kierkegaard’s call for “a transition to the subjective” (FSE, 63), such as that which David was grasped by in the prophetic reflection of Nathan “thou art the man” (2 Samuel 12:7).

As mirror, as text, icon, and even idol, Jacob’s struggle remains one of our most evocative and ambivalent images, inspiring a pathos which has endured from antiquity and continued to inspire modern and postmodern interpretations.¹ A potent example of the re-imagining of this image in visual art is Jacob Epstein’s (1880-1959) sculpture Jacob and the Angel (1941). The statue does not depict Jacob struggling as such, but rather a Jacob who has struggled and who now hangs drained and weary in the embrace of the angel. This is not Jacob conquering God; nor is it the angel asking to be released. The angel holds a depleted Jacob up; Jacob does not have the angel in his grasp. Whereas the biblical account shows Jacob as resilient and undefeated, refusing to let go, forcing his opponent to ask for mercy, Epstein shows Jacob as wilting, yet upheld by the angel who is undiminished. Jacob is exhausted by the struggle, he can go no further. Yet he is supported by the very one who appears as his opponent. From one perspective, Epstein’s sculpture might constitute a visual and tactile work of midrash — albeit a commentary which contradicts as well as embellishes the original text. From another perspective, however, it might be a presumptuous work of idolatry (Exodus 20:4). At once translucent and condensed, the two figures are formed from the same vivid alabaster rock. They are of one matter, even of one flesh. Catherine Garrett discusses Epstein’s sculpture in terms of its potential for revealing meaning in the context of suffering and healing. She describes a vision of intimate ecstatic surrender: “Jacob, slumped with exhaustion, has given in to his opponent. They are so close that a single crack of light separates them. The statue represents the moment before Jacob begs the Angel for a blessing. It is a kind of ecstasy: clasped bodies, skin on skin.” It is a work hewn from the raw matter of the artist himself, a dense and tangible manifestation of Jacob. “It is the reflection of his whole being on the mystery of pain and the peace that comes when we finally experience and accept a reality we have long resisted.”²


² Catherine Garrett, ‘Making Sense of Healing: Meaning and Spirituality
The emphasis here is on acceptance, resignation, *Gelassenheit* perhaps, rather than *Anfechtung*. The struggle has passed and now Jacob, vanquished, is held by grace in the angel’s embrace. Such empowerment might also remind us of Jesus at Gethsemane where, in the dark night of sorrow, he too is strengthened by the appearance of an angel (Luke 22:43). It might be said that the strength of the angel enables Jacob to remain in the struggle. From this image one might infer that it is not that God desires to struggle with us, but that God desires us to struggle with God. The one who struggles has only to not let go — though in truth it is the angel who does not let go. In truth, it is God who conquers ‘God’ in us. In this there are traces of the spirit of Kierkegaard’s ‘Upbuilding Discourse’, ‘One Who Prays Aright Struggles in Prayer and is Victorious — in that God is Victorious’ (1844).

**A Life and Death Struggle**

The Jews believed that to see God was death; the pagans that to see God was punished by madness — it was punished, and yet it was the supreme grace and blessedness. This is what it means to have an immediate relationship to God — it is *eo ipso* to be sacrificed; as I have often said, it means to be hit by a sunstroke of the unconditioned — the greatest possible human suffering and a superhuman blessedness. (JP 4:4479)

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When Kierkegaard asserts that the relationship between God and humanity can be construed as “suffering, anguish, a death struggle” (JP 4:4725) he does not offer Christianity as its immediate cure. On the contrary, Christianity itself asserts that “there is a life and death battle between God and man; God hates man just as man hates God” (JP 4:4711). This agonistic vision reaches its crescendo in the final year of Kierkegaard’s life with the lightning flash of ‘The Moment’ and its unsettling reminder that “God is indeed a human being’s most appalling enemy, your mortal enemy, he wants you to die, die unto the world; he hates specifically that in which you naturally have your life, to which you cling with all your zest for life” (LW, 177). Yet, as this work will explore, the enmity that spiritual trial and temptation bears witness to is the primal enmity between spirit (Ånd) and spiritlessness (Åndløshed) — a struggle elicited by the dawning realisation that “Spirit is restlessness” and that, as an expression of Spirit, “Christianity is the most profound restlessness of existence — so it is in the New Testament” (JP 4:4361). In contrast to the sensate principles of flesh and blood, which flee from the thought of their own non-being, “spirit is to will to die, to die to the world” (JP 4:4354). As the burning realisation that “Spirit is fire” (JP 4:4355), spiritual trial evokes the liminal point of contact between Spirit and spiritlessness — a burning difference between the nascent self and the Absolute, which, as both its limit and its destiny, seems to threaten its reduction to ashes while also promising its sanctification and transubstantiation into the fire of Spirit. The parlance of spiritual trial strives to speak about this transfiguration of the self as a passing through the flames, as a struggle with God and with the self, in which the restlessness of the self finds rest, grounded transparently in God (SUD, 82).

Yet, as will be explored throughout this work, spiritual trial’s process of ‘dying to’ is not, for Kierkegaard, the annihilation of personal identity within the divine ground or the melting away of all individuality “in the divine ocean” (JP 4:3887). It is the realisation of the deep call of the self to become spirit, to become an I, enabled to love God, freely, from out of its own self: “To be spirit is to be I. God desires to have Is, for God desires to be loved” (JP 4:4350). As such, despite the appearance of spiritual trial’s more numinous moments of being overshadowed and overwhelmed by the Holy Absolute, the process also reveals a sense that God’s omnipotence withdraws, out of love, in order to create the space for something other than God to become itself, thereby expressing divine omnipotence in the ability “to create the most fragile

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of all things — a being independent of that very omnipotence” (JP 2:1251). Such kenotic creation expresses the divine desire that this self will realise itself as Spirit, as I, as freedom, and return to God in love — though with the inexorable possibility that the self may decide to desire itself, “the unfathomable grief of [divine] love” (SUD, 126). While it can be said that all love begins, secretly, in the dark hidden spring of God’s love (WL, 9-10), it is also said that the human being is not merely a conduit for the divine flow and return of love. One forms one’s own heart in the process (WL, 12), out of which one offers a love that is uniquely one’s own and out of which one endeavours to help others to love God.1 The omnipotence of divine love is manifest as love “even at the last instant by letting him be something for it” (CD, 133).

Something intimately related to this may also be said of Spirit. While Spirit may be God-breathed and, as such, a divine spark, an echo of the image of God hidden deep within the human being, Spirit is the love of God which also constitutes the awakening and realisation of the individual self. As a transfigured self, Spirit returns to God, as love, but in personalised form, as a free and desiring self, as Spirit, as passing through the fires of Spirit and spiritual trial, but not devoured by them. In this sense, the self as Spirit resembles the image of God but remains other than God in the freedom of love’s reciprocity.

The notion that existence is beset or even driven by struggle does not belong to Kierkegaard alone. His locating of the heart of struggle between God and humanity, Spirit and spiritlessness, is, in part, an attempt to re-awaken a soporific modern Christendom to the shadow-side of the “infinite qualitative difference” between the human and the divine. God may have created human beings free, ex nihilo; but what we make of our freedom, its uses and abuses, is laid our coram deo. As such, it should not be forgotten that human beings are also comprised of Spirit and the eternal, and that the image of God is constantly at risk of (self-)abasement. We forget that not only is God’s absence out there beyond the world, it is also an absence deep within insofar as God, the Holy Other, is also the hidden ground of being, deeper and closer to me than I am to myself.

Yet it is also speculative philosophy’s and theology’s transgression of the “infinite qualitative difference” that troubled Kierkegaard. Within the Hegelian systematising of his contemporaries both the individual and radical alterity of God were in danger of dissolution.

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1 In this Hampson aptly discerns a “self-integrity, accountability, and responsibility to ourselves”, which affirms the self as more than a “(mere) channel between God and neighbour” and thereby empowered rather than simply made nothing by love. Daphne Hampson, *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207, 252.
For Kierkegaard, history, particularly the history of Christendom, has failed to reveal the dialectical unfolding of Spirit (Geist) in the world. On the contrary, such a vision serves to obfuscate the agonistic tension between Spirit and spiritlessness that Christianity initially awakened. While a Hegelian view of dialectical sublation or Aufhebung affirms a dynamic process of struggle inherent to the world, the meta-narrative of Spirit’s progressive unfolding in the world seems deluded and self-aggrandising. On the inter-subjective level, Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic (Lordship and Bondage — Herrschaft und Knechtschaft) provides an insightful account of the life and death struggle (den Kampf auf Leben und Tod) for recognition in which “each seeks the death of the other.”¹ Yet there are potential traces of this struggle in the relation between self and God as explored by Kierkegaard and others.²

The recognition that struggle determines the shape of the world is given epoch-defining expression in Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species (1859).³ Darwin wrote of a “war of nature” formalised via the “general law” of natural selection: “multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die.” It was above all the entropy and suffering generated by a world seemingly at war with itself which provided the deepest wound to theological visions of the goodness and providence of creation.⁴ Darwin’s exposure of the darker side of nature contributed to Freud’s belief that alongside the instinct to grow and preserve life there also existed “another contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and bring them back to their primaeval, organic state.”⁵ Therefore Freud proposed to explain “the phenomena of life”

1 Phenomenology of Spirit, B, IV, 187, p.113.
3 Hampson suggests that though Kierkegaard did not live to see this work published, related discussions were already part of Kierkegaard’s intellectual context in the 1840s (Kierkegaard, 131-132).
4 As Philip Kitcher observes in the light of Darwin, “we easily might take life as it has been generated on our planet as the handiwork of a bungling, or a chillingly indifferent, god.” Living With Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 126.
according to the “concurrent or mutually opposing action” of the life-instinct, Eros, and its counterpart, the instinct of death, or death-drive, Thanatos.¹ The destructive energy of Thanatos, Freud suggested, needed to be directed outwards so as not to become self-destructive, with Eros helping to direct the energy of Thanatos towards external objects.² From this insight Freud concludes:

And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species. And it is this battle of the giants that our nurse-maids try to appease with their lullaby about Heaven.³

From this perspective of Eros and Thanatos, temptation might be described as the enticement of Eros by objects, which, while life-affirming in one sense, ultimately bring death. This ambivalence evokes the anxiety of temptation: the erotic desire for that which brings death. Throwing myself into the embrace of the flesh may seem like a surrender to the unquenchable life-drive of Eros, but in doing so I fall towards death. Yet this fall towards death, to destruction and non-being, is itself tempting. It tempts Thanatos in all its desires, drives, and instincts towards dissolution. What is more, in these terms, spiritual trial itself, in all its self-mortifying passio, might itself be described as an expression of Thanatos, the death-drive internalised and directed against the self — a form of automachia, which subsists under the guise of a higher form of Eros, a love for God that can only be realised via a death to self. Yet at the same time the mortification of the self, in its ascesis, might signify an attempt to apply the death-drive to the excesses of lower forms of Eros, which, by surrendering to fleshly and worldly temptations, threatens to destroy the self or cast the soul into eternal death. In this sense, Thanatos as self-mortifying ascesis seeks to rescue the self from the hedonistic excesses of Eros, which itself threatens to overflow itself into Thanatos. Such is seen in the pathology of addiction. What began as the pursuit of pleasure or escape becomes bereft and imprisoning. Though it may have origins in some sensual semblance of Eros, addiction becomes an expression of the death-drive and a manifestation of demonic despair (Cf. SUD, 108).

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid. 311: Freud’s notion of the death-drive is itself informed by Arthur Schopenhauer’s The World as Will and Representation (1818).
³ Ibid. 314.
In the struggles of spiritual trial the individual must remain mindful of the possibility that the impulse to become nothing before God may express a pathological desire for insatiable self-mortification. Kierkegaard even warns against such excesses, against the desire to be too much Spirit and against the risk of being burned to ashes in Spirit’s fire. Temperance is required, both for the sake of one’s sanity and humanity. Only God is purely Spirit. Yet in becoming nothing before God the self in spiritual trial renounces its drive for self-will, it resigns the apotheosis of despair. Spiritual trial’s death-to-self might therefore be described as a sublimation of the death-drive, directing negative and destructive, perhaps even apophatic and agonistic, energy against that which occludes its relationship with the divine. Spiritual trial thereby comes to affirm life on a higher level, affirming a higher form of Eros, which passes through a sublimating process of positive disintegration.\(^1\) In willing to die-to temptation (Eros) and despair (Thanatos), the struggling self before God aspires to its calling to rest transparently in God. Yet Kierkegaard is also wary of a ‘mystical’ desire to become as nothing, to be annihilated, swallowed up in the abyss of God, which may also express an attempt to sublimate Thanatos.\(^2\) Kierkegaard’s vision of spiritual trial, by contrast, also consists in the self becoming itself, as Spirit, as the image of God, but in a realisation of subjectivity that is freed to love God from a heart of its own. It contains a quantum of individuality, a secret of interiority, which is its own and can be claimed by no one else. It is the secret of suffering belonging to the restless self that struggles with God in the longing to rest transparently in God.

**Struggling with God**

While spiritual trial may involve one in struggles against ‘the world’, ‘the flesh’, and ‘the devil’, its ultimate meaning is as a struggle with God — albeit a struggle that takes place in the battleground of the self’s relation to the Absolute. ‘Struggling with God’ is an ambiguous even polyvalent motif. At once it may be presumptuous, agonistic, erotic, hubristic, kenotic, and even blasphemous. One may struggle against God, or struggle with God against the world, the devil, and the flesh — even against oneself. What is more, through a theology of spiritual trial I suggest a form of struggle that can be drawn out from

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Luther and Kierkegaard: a struggle that is both with God and against ‘God’, a struggle against the appearance of the God of darkness which refuses to let go of the God of love. This is, in Lutheran terms, the struggle against the deus absconditus, which struggles to lay hold of the deus revelatus. Yet it should be stated that such a struggle is not a struggle with the inner being of God-in-Godself (deus nudus) but a struggle with the appearance and the revelation of God. In this sense, the struggle is also a struggle against oneself: a struggle with one’s fears and desires, with the idols of the mind. The struggle is therefore agonistic and apophatic: it seeks to free the self from its own delusions and attachments to its own God-images. It struggles with the otherness of God and the limit of the Absolute. And yet this undoing is integral to the self’s becoming Spirit, the image of God, grounded transparently and transfigured in God.

Whether from the perspective of agonistic apophaticism or demonic defiance, atheism can itself express forms of struggling with God, or perhaps more aptly with ‘God’ or the ‘God-image’. It is in this sense that Tillich suggests an affinity between the deicidal response of Nietzsche’s ‘Ugliest Man’ (Hässlichste Mensch) to the omniscient and omnivorous gaze of God and the Anfechtung of Luther.1 According to the account of Nietzsche’s ‘Ugliest Man’, God sees every dirty recess of his ugliness. His gaze intrudes and devours, knowing no mercy or satiety of his appetite to know and to see. “This most curious, overobtrusive, overpitying one had to die. He always saw me: on such a witness I wanted to have revenge or not live myself.”2 The gaze is shameless in its unremitting exposure of the shame of its object. Thus the gaze of God, even in its pity, also reflects upon the Ugliest Man himself, becoming a mirror in which his ugliness cannot escape consciousness of itself. In retaliation against this consciousness of himself as an object for a seemingly Absolute Subject the Ugliest Man murders God. In his ressentiment he cannot bear that such a witness live. Of course, the question of deicide already suggests a potential metaphysical contradiction. If God were truly this Absolute Subject then no object, no matter how resentful and demonically enraged, would be able to overthrow God. Nietzsche’s Ugliest Man could therefore be understood as performing an act of automachia: he overthrows the super-ego in his murder of God — “the hypostasis of a delirious bad conscience, magnified by the metaphysical dimension into a constant

As shall be explored further in this work, spiritual trial can also confront the self with its own psychogenic projections of ‘God’. In doing so, the Absolute limit holds a mirror up to the self — an autophany rather than a theophany — before which the self cannot bear to stand. Yet the struggle of spiritual trial is also to overcome such dysmorphic images, to resist the temptation to flee or to despair but to press on, in spite of one’s self, clinging to the God of love.

It is through his own struggles with the meaning of his Anfechtung that Luther reaches a breakthrough. The gates of paradise at which he had hammered for so long were opened by grace. He fled from ‘God’ to God in the realisation that he himself was the source of his experience of the fear and wrath of God. Yet while Tillich discerns the same desire to flee from God in both Luther and Nietzsche, it is also evident that each understands the place of the individual coram Deo quite divergently. As shall be elaborated further in this work, Luther and Kierkegaard envisage a struggle with God that also invokes God in the struggle against the self (along with the idols of ‘God’, which it has constructed). While Luther and Kierkegaard seek to overcome both ‘self’ and ‘God’ through God, Nietzsche, by contrast, desires to overcome God and humanity by aspiring to the evolutionary horizon of the Overman (Übermensch). In some revealing comments on Darwin’s theory of evolution, Nietzsche asserts “Anti-Darwin” that contrary to Darwinian observations about “the will to life” it is actually the “will to non entity”, which Nietzsche sees prevailing all around him. It is precisely Christianity itself that bears responsibility for interfering in the evolutionary will for the survival of the strongest.

By upholding the weak and the disempowered and by fashioning virtue in the form of self-negation, Christianity, in Nietzsche’s view, dissolves the struggle and enmity that Nietzsche reifies with the motto: “What does not kill me makes me stronger.” Struggle, opposition and enmity serve to ennoble humanity. “We adopt the same attitude towards the ‘enemy within’”, Nietzsche observes, “there too we have spiritualized enmity, there too we have grasped its value. One is fruitful only at the cost of being rich in contradictions; one remains young only on condition the soul does not relax, does not long for peace.” To maintain the self in perpetual struggle against itself may mean a divided self, but it may also mean a self capable of attaining greatness by virtue of the struggle itself. As such, Nietzsche suggests,

“One has renounced *grand* life when one renounces war.” As J. Keith Hyde aptly observes, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra “advocated the Jacobian art of creative combat: ‘I wrestled long and was a wrestler, so that I might one day have my hands free for blessing.’” At the same time, Hyde observes, Nietzsche also “warned of the dangers of self-dissolution from constant conflict: ‘He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster.’”

Struggling with God becomes the ideal of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s *anti-theism* who, appropriating the iconography of Genesis 32, declares that it is human destiny to struggle like Jacob, until death. Resonant with Nietzschean self-assertion, even self-aggrandisement, Proudhon attacks theistic accounts of divine providence in the name of human freedom, dignity, and autonomy. His invocation of Jacob’s struggle is almost demonic, even Prometheus, in its appropriation. Unlike the normative tradition of Christian readings, Proudhon invokes an eternal death struggle against the theistic view of God, in terms perhaps reminiscent of a Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic. Proudhon thus joins the ranks of *misotheists* who struggle against God, or against ideas of God, from a position of hatred, defiance, despair, humanism, or demonic self-apotheosis. In this company one might find Marquis de Sade’s embrace of sin, perversity and temptation as a way of raging against God, Baudelaire’s demonic curses against the divine, Albert Camus’ moral death sentence on

1 *Twilight of the Idols*, 54. The contrasts between Nietzsche’s vision of the will-to-power and Kierkegaard’s own kenotic view and critique of power are well elucidated in J. Keith Hyde, *Concepts of Power in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).


4 See further the erudite discussion of Proudhon in Bernard Schweizer, *Misotheism: The Untold Story of Hating God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40-47. Schweizer refers to Proudhon’s 1846 *Philosophie de la misère* as the “earliest and possibly the most radical and shocking manifestation” of a “politically inspired misotheism” (40) and Proudhon himself as “a titan of misotheism” (46). Schweizer notes that while Proudon “still held a vestigial belief” in “a personal God” he vehemently opposed “any divine object of worship” (*Misotheism*, 50), equally so if this object, or idol, be a humanist idea of Man himself.
God, and even Elie Wiesel’s agonistic protest against divine apathy.¹ As far as temptation is concerned, what better way to struggle against God than to embrace all sins, as each one is a wound to the divine heart, each fall into temptation is a nail in the cross for which the pleasure alone is all mine? From such a stance of struggling against God, might the misotheist wish to invert the Kierkegaardian priority of higher spiritual trial over lower temptation? Perhaps temptation is higher insofar as it entails a life-affirming reclamation of the flesh, an attempt to become coherent with one’s own nature? Perhaps spiritual trial constitutes abasement in the form of self-subjection to a jealous and Narcissistic numinous Overlord? Might one be best to flee spiritual trial and press on into temptation? These are temptations that will return to haunt us when considering ‘the demonic’ as the shadow-side of spiritual trial.

A further vision of struggling with God, which is in part inspired by Darwin and Nietzsche, along with Bergson and Whitehead, is found in the writings of Nikos Kazantzakis. In Kazantzakis’ novels, plays, and spiritual writings, themes of rebellion, temptation, the spirit and the flesh are invoked with visceral pathos and all in service to the notion of struggle: namely the struggle to transubstantiate matter into spirit. For Kazantzakis, “theösis takes the form of a struggle, in which substance is transformed into spirit; and indeed, metousiôsis, transubstantiation, is our ‘highest obligation.’”² In his theological manifesto, The Saviors of God (Salvatores Dei), Kazantzakis outlines his vision of the struggle for a form of theosis in which both the human and the divine are united: “Behind all appearances, I divine a struggling essence. I want to merge with it.”³ Yet the divine stranger is a voice deep within Kazantzakis who calls out for help, for salvation, desiring to be liberated from every fragment of matter in a violent struggle for transubstantiation. “The essence of our God is STRUGGLE”.⁴ God is a whirlwind, a consuming fire, “God laughs, wails, kills, sets us on fire, and then leaves us in the

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¹ On Weisel and the Holocaust viewed in this light see Schweizer, Misotheism, 149-172.
² Pamela J. Francis, ‘Reading Kazantzakis through Gregory of Nyssa: Some Common Anthropological Themes’, Darren J.N. Middleton (ed.), Scandalizing Jesus: Kazantzakis’s The Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On, (New York/London: Continuum, 2005), 65. However, as Francis also elucidates, Kazantzakis departs from the more Orthodox tradition of Gregory of Nyssa: “In Gregory’s anthropology, theösis is the realization of the image of God within us. In Kazantzakis’s Bergsonian understanding of the transubstantiation of matter into spirit, we ‘save’ God” (64).
⁴ Ibid. 92.
middle of the way, charred embers.” Yet in struggling with this savage vagabond God humanity is not always overwhelmed: “My God is not Almighty. . . . He is defeated incessantly, but rises again, full of blood and earth, to throw himself into battle once more.” God evolves along with the world and humanity. God is savage and cruel, striving through blood and earth; and yet as God stumbles and struggles, God is in need of human compassion. Human and divine salvation is co-dependent: “God is imperiled. . . . He cannot be saved unless we save him with our own struggles; nor can we be saved unless he is saved.” We save God by our struggles, sacred and profane, “by creating, and by transmuting matter into spirit”.

The eternal struggle between the spirit and the flesh and the tension yet salvific inter-dependence of the human and the divine are dramatised further in Kazantzakis’s most infamous novel, The Last Temptation (1955). Kazantzakis’ Jesus is hunted by God, haunted by a mysterium horrendum, which seems intent on both his destruction and his divinization. Christ’s temptation expresses the tense duality inherent to all humanity between the ‘lower’ temptations of the flesh (sexual passion, violence, sedition, intoxication, greed, marriage) and the ‘higher’ trials of the spirit (sacrifice, martyrdom, divine vocation). This struggle reaches its crescendo in ‘the last temptation’, which is itself shaped and determined by the very struggle to identify and distinguish between God and the devil, the higher and the lower (Anfechtung and temptation). Kazantzakis imagines a struggle with God that faces the darkness of a savage deity who is neither all-holy nor all-powerful, a God who struggles for God’s life and for our salvific compassion. While his theology and Christology would have been fundamentally incompatible with Luther and Kierkegaard, he nonetheless provides a passionate illustration of how the struggles, which Lutheran tradition comes to understand in terms of temptation (Gn. Versuchung / Dn. Fristelse) and spiritual trial (Gn. Anfechtung / Dn. Anfægtelse), may be seen as two sides of the same coin.

1 Ibid. 94.
2 Ibid. 103.
3 Ibid. 105.
4 Ibid. 106.
When he awoke he lifted his face towards the east and saw the sun, a terrible blast-furnace, rising above the sand. That is God’s face, he reflected, putting his palm over his eyes so that he would not be dazzled. ‘Lord,’ he whispered, ‘... I possess no weapon but love. With that I have come to do battle. Help me!’

The ‘Heroism’ of Struggle

Within all evocations or imaginings of spiritual struggle there are potential temptations for heroism, hubris, narcissism, even a veiled form of self-apotheosis. After all, what is more sublime and self-aggrandising than struggling with God? Kazantzakis writes in his spiritual autobiography that “Each man acquires the stature of the enemy with whom he wrestles. It pleased me, even if it meant my destruction, to wrestle with God”. Such struggle is the substance of poetic memorial, as Johannes de silentio writes:

Everyone shall be remembered, but everyone was great wholly in proportion to the magnitude of that with which he struggled. For he who struggled with the world became great by conquering the world, and he who struggled with himself became great by conquering himself, but he who struggled with God became the greatest of all. Thus did they struggle in the world, man against man, one against thousands, but he who struggled with God was the greatest of all. (FT, 16)

Anti-Climacus himself speaks of the rare “Christian heroism” of venturing “wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific human being, alone before God” (SUD, 5). Yet Kierkegaard is also wary of the humility of spiritual struggle, that there is no roll of honour for such essentially secret struggles, that one should not desire to be more Spirit than God has ordained. In the Lutheran vein, the struggle with God is not a titanic struggle between the heroic solitary individual and God-in-Godself (deus nudus) but rather a struggle with the appearance, or even masks, of God. As such, the struggle is made possible by a prior divine kenosis in which God gives of Godself in a form that can be struggled with, which itself reflects the God-image of the self. In this sense, Luther’s struggles with a wrathful God are transfigured by the realisation that God is not angry with him, but that he is angry with God. In psychogenic terms, the appearance of the wrath of God is due in part


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to a projection of the self’s own wrath against itself, even against God. The *Anfechtung* is the struggle against this vision of God in which the victory is granted by clinging to the God of love. ‘God’ is overcome by God. Spiritual trial reminds the struggler of their humility (*humus* — earth): the creature-consciousness of oneself who is but dust and ashes and yet stands before God (Genesis 18:27).1

The notion of spiritual struggle attains its apotheosis in the temptations and trials of Christ. This Christological tension between a seductive lower human, or fleshly, and higher divine, or spiritual, will is assumed and interiorised in Paul, such that it becomes central to the narrative of the divided ‘I’ which is elaborated through Augustine and Luther. While Jesus was tempted, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15), the tempted follower of Christ is undermined by an indwelling of sin: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me” (Romans 7:19-20).2 The desire of Spirit to mortify this enemy within, as well as to withdraw from, or die to, the enemy without — the forces of ‘the world’ and the devil that elicit the temptation to sin — is expressed through *ascesis*: “the spiritual combat”, which, according to Rimbaud, is “harder than men’s battles”.3

Kierkegaard harbours a characteristically Lutheran suspicion towards the self-mortifying practices of individual ascetics and its formalisation in the monastic community. Yet he also suspects that while monastic withdrawal from the world may suggest a self-mortifying desire for self-apotheosis, the consciousness of enmity between Spirit and spiritlessness that the monastery expresses is a vital truth, which modern Christendom is in danger of forgetting. It is in the forgotten pages of old devotional writings that Kierkegaard discovers the category of spiritual trial — a discovery which exposes a lacuna in contemporary Christianity.

The contours of Kierkegaard’s rehabilitation of spiritual trial are defined to a significant extent by the demographic of devotional texts he is exposed to. As will be discussed further below, this focus is predominantly oriented around *Die Deutsche Mystik* tradition, and the

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1 Otto describes this ‘creature feeling’ [*Kreaturgefühl*] as “the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures”. *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

2 “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would” (Galatians 5:17). See further *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God*, 16-17. Biblical references are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

Lutheran and Pietistic sources that it helped to form. However, before concentrating this exploration of Anfechtung/Anfægtelse, honourable mention should be made of some other notable analogues and antecedents from the wider tradition of Christian spiritual literature. While Anfechtung has been assimilated into Lutheran theology, the roots of the term in Roman Catholic theology remains relatively neglected. As I suggest above, the various strains of reflection on spiritual struggle throughout Christian tradition share a common genealogy in the passion of Christ and the trials and tribulations of Paul and the early Christians. Reflections from various traditions centre around such common themes as dying to self and world, resignation, detachment, trust in God, the edification of suffering — all traceable to the sufferings of Jesus and the tribulations of the early church.

One of the most influential and widely translated works of Catholic spirituality (and one to which Kierkegaard does not seem to refer) is Lorenzo Scupoli’s (c. 1530-1610) The Spiritual Combat (Il combattimento spirituale). The first known edition dates from Venice in 1589 and the book is soon translated widely in the seventeenth century, including a German edition (Der Geistliche Kampf; the ‘combat’ (combattimento) is not rendered in German as Anfechtung). The struggle described by Scupoli is essentially a struggle against the self — that which Nietzsche may have regarded as a spiritualized enmity toward the enemy within. While Alexandre-Louis Leloir’s (1843-84) painting Jacob Wrestling with the Angel (1865) adorns the recent English translation (2010), in the context of Scupoli’s work this image most appositely suggests an allegory for the self’s struggle with itself. Scupoli himself makes no reference to the struggle of Genesis 32 and the sense one gets from the work is that any notion of struggling with God would be presumptuous, perhaps even blasphemous. And yet it might be said that the soul does struggle with God insofar as it struggles on the side of God, on the side of the Divine Will against the lower self-will and against the kingdom of the devil — and in this the spiritual combat shares a kinship with spiritual trial.

Scupoli’s work encourages its reader to become as nothing, to resign one’s own will completely to the Will of God. Such resignation, even perfection, demands that one does violence to oneself by attacking all evil desires and passions. “Doubtless this is the hardest of all struggles”, this struggle against the self, “because by fighting against ourselves, we are, at the same time, attacked by ourselves, and on that account the victory obtained in such a conflict will be of all others the most glorious and most dear to God”.¹ By waging war against the enemy within, one aspires not simply to sheer self-negation but to a “virtuous

¹ The Spiritual Combat, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910), Chapter I, 7.
self-distrust, which is based on genuine humility and experiential self-knowledge”.1 In this sense, the spiritual combat does not aspire to destroy the self but to come to a higher self-knowledge — albeit a knowledge of oneself, which, in all humility, has learnt not to trust the self alone. The aim of this spiritual combat is not therefore a mere death of the self, but, as Kierkegaard himself would concur, it aspires to “purity of heart . . . namely, the putting off the old man, and the putting on the new”.2 Yet this is not called a spiritual combat without reason. One possesses a “reasonable will” that stands between the higher “Divine Will which is above it, and the lower will of the flesh which is below it”. This reasonable will is constantly “assailed by one of the other; each seeking to attract it, to bring it into subjection, and to rule it”.3 The struggle of the reasonable will is to will according to the higher Divine Will: an inalienable capacity, which God has given the will the freedom and power to attain to, despite the flesh, the world, and the devil conspiring together in assaults against it.4 Trusting in God and in the freedom of the will against vicious forces, one is therefore called upon to “fight valiantly, and never to throw down your arms, nor flee, however many wounds you may have sustained”.5

As one acts contrary to one’s own lower will and in accordance with the higher Divine Will, one discovers the path on which the habit of virtue may be acquired. In fact, the more one’s virtuous acts are “contrary to the natural will, the more quickly will they produce the good habit in the soul”.6 God prepares a cup of trials and temptations from which one must drink, as in accordance with the Divine Will. All crosses, tribulations, sorrows, and afflictions are ultimately from God who wills that the soul should suffer “both for our quicker growth in holiness, and for other wise reasons unknown to us”.7 This love and service of God is not possible apart from “a holy hatred of oneself”.8 Through this holy hatred, the will is conformed more readily to the Divine Will, which desires “that your nothingness may be swallowed up in the depth of My infinity, and transformed into it. Thus will you be fully blest and happy in Me, and I completely contented in you.”9

As is characteristic of the literature of spiritual struggle, one must devote oneself to Christ in the moment of tribulation, bearing one’s

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1 Ibid. Chapter II, 11.
2 Ibid. Chapter X, 29.
3 Ibid. Chapter XII, 35.
4 Ibid. Chapter XIV, 45.
5 Ibid. Chapter XV, 50.
6 Ibid. Chapter XXXV, 122.
7 Ibid. Chapter XXXVIII, 130.
8 Ibid. Chapter LII, 168.
9 Ibid. Chapter LV, 187.
cross with him and saying, with all one’s heart “Thy will be done.” True devotion, as Scupoli understands it, means the will to “follow Christ with the cross on your shoulder, by whatever way He invites and calls us to Himself, to desire God for God, and at times to leave God for God”.¹ This final notion speaks to a feeling of absence, even forsakenness, from which Christ himself was not spared. In such moments of banishment or abandonment, one must not give in to the temptation to despair. Rather one must discern such aridity as a grace bestowed upon one by God, who allows some “to be assailed by these spirits of temptation, to bring them back to their knowledge of themselves, and in order that, by feeling their need of Him, they may draw near to Him”.²

Such desolate moments are also accorded a privileged place in Scupoli’s ‘Of Interior Peace or The Path to Paradise’. In this considerably shorter work, Scupoli again urges his readers to “except often to feel disturbed” since “from the emotions of your heart, a cloud of dust will sometimes arise”.³ This desolation is, Scupoli again asserts, permitted by God for the greater good of one’s soul. One must therefore “Remember that this is the war in which the Saints have carried off crowns of great merit”.⁴ In this struggle, one is to conform one’s will to the Divine Will, as Christ said at Gethsemane, “with a will free and detached” and “with deep humility”, “Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done.”⁵ Temptations such as these are sent by God for the good of the soul to hinder the pride that inhibits true spiritual progress. In this respect, Scupoli reminds us of the Apostle Paul who, having been caught up in the third heaven where he was witness to divine secrets, “was visited with a troublesome temptation” to remind him of his weakness. Through this thorn in the flesh, Paul remains humble before his divine revelation so that he should not fall into the temptation of presumption.⁶ Such divine temptations enable us to better know ourselves, even in the bitterest abyss of apparent God-forsakenness. The inexperienced soul may be tempted to attribute such trials to the devil or to one’s own imperfection. But in truth (and here Scupoli accords with Luther and Kierkegaard) such temptation comes “from the Hand of God”.⁷ While one may imagine that one is forsaken by God, the truth is that such tribulations are a divine blessing. Those who do not recognise this take “Tokens of love” as “signs of hatred,

¹ Ibid. Chapter LIX, 199.
² Ibid. Chapter LIX, 200.
³ Scupoli, ‘Of Interior Peace or The Path to Paradise’, Chapter X, Ibid. 290.
⁴ Ibid. 291.
⁵ Ibid. 291.
⁶ Ibid. 298-99.
⁷ Ibid. 301.
and imagine that these Divine favours and caresses are blows which come from an enraged heart, and believe that all they do is lost and worthless, and that this loss is irremediable’. At this moment, the inexperienced soul may imagine that God struggles against them and that they suffer blows of holy rage. Since it appears that God fights against them they may be tempted to fall into the belief that they are forsaken by God. Yet such wounds are truly caresses of Divine love, and are to be accepted evidence of God’s care for the purity of the soul.

This recognition that some temptations come from God for a holy purpose and for the good of the soul is, as will be explored in greater detail, an insight shared by the literature on spiritual trial. Yet Scupoli’s Roman Catholic emphasis upon the capacity of the will to freely will the good and to cultivate virtue is not entirely affirmed within Lutheran theology of Anfechtung. Kierkegaard ultimately regards spiritual trial as belonging to the religious rather than the ethical sphere — and yet, as will be examined further, he does also affirm the freedom of the will and the ethico-religious development of the self as Spirit, capable of loving God and the other from out of its own redeemed heart. However, such considerations are not confined to questions of Catholic-Reformed convergence and divergence. Scupoli’s The Spiritual Combat (1589) was itself translated into Greek by the Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (1749-1809) and subsequently reformulated into Russian by the Russian Orthodox saint Theophan Zatvornik (Theophanes the Recluse, 1815-94) as The Unseen Warfare, which had an immense impact upon modern Eastern Orthodoxy. Both ascetic saints were important to the revival of contemplative prayer (Hesychasm) and the dissemination of its principle text the Philokalia (‘love of the beautiful’ — an anthology of monumental spiritual writings spanning the fourth to the fifteenth centuries).

The notion of Podvig or spiritual struggle spoken of in the Russian

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1 Ibid. 301.
2 In this vein, Daphne Hampson makes the pertinent suggestion that Kierkegaard comes closest to reconciling Catholic and Lutheran theologies, Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Further exploration of Kierkegaard’s understanding of sanctification would be a helpful development in this direction.
3 English translation: The Unseen Warfare, as edited by Nicodemus of the holy mountain and revised by Theophan the Recluse (New York: Crestwood, 2000).
4 For an excellent treatment of the Philokalia from the perspective of contemporary psychology and mental well-being see Christopher Cook, The Philokalia and The Inner Life: On Passions and Prayer (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011).
Orthodox Philokalia tradition finds a powerful echo in Sergii Bulgakov’s (1871-1944) essay ‘Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle’ (1909). Bulgakov appeals to podvizhnichestvo, translated here as spiritual struggle. As Rowan Williams describes, the podvig means the “exploit” of “the saintly ascetic” who “is engaged in the cultivation of a style of personal existence within the limits of the created order”. As such, the podvig “entails humility — not self-abasement, but the willingness to learn, connected with the recognition that the world’s ills have roots in each individual self, with its passions and tumults”. In Bulgakov, this does not “a passive or world-renouncing ascesis” but actually “a culture of sober and conscientious activism, in which all agents examine their actions and responsibilities in the light of the ideal of obedience to God, transferring to ‘secular’ life the attitude of the monk to the duties of the monastic life”. In this sense, Williams observes, Bulgakov “unites certain themes from classical Eastern Christian spirituality with something of the bourgeois Protestant ethic”.

While Bulgakov esteems the Christian hero as a “spiritual athlete [podvizhnik]”, his account of podvizhnichestvo speaks of a Christian heroism which can be understood as a polar contrast to the “heroism of self-apotheosis”, which characterises the self-perception of the Russian intelligentsia. Beneath Divine Providence and Will, the Christian hero “must humble himself in the podvig of faith”, while authentic humility — “the interior and visible conflict with self, self-will, and self-deification” — remains alien to the intelligentsia. As such:

The podvizhnik looks at the limited and distorted world of human sin and suffering, especially as it exists in his own self, with the purified eyes of the spirit, and in so doing brings to light new imperfections; the sense of distance from the ideal is intensified.

1 In Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology, Rowan Williams (ed.) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 69-112.
2 Williams’ ‘Introduction’ to ‘Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle’, Sergii Bulgakov, 65-66. Williams thus notes Bulgakov’s praise for the ‘Protestant ethic’ according to which “Protestantism is seen as the ground of the development of civic responsibility and political liberties, as well as as economic advance; Bulgakov had read his Weber conscientiously” (63). Intriguingly, Bulgakov discusses Tauler and Boehme in Sergius Bulgakov, Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), Tauler: 146-148; Boheme: 148-149, 170-180. However, there is no explicit mention of Anfechtung in this text.
3 Bulgakov, ‘Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle’, Sergii Bulgakov, 93.
4 Ibid. 82.
5 Ibid. 93.
6 Ibid. 97.
7 Ibid. 95.
This “humility before God and ‘walking in the sight of God’ (as this is expounded in the consistent testimony of ecclesial and patristic literature)”¹ is ostensibly commensurate with the Lutheran notion of spiritual trial, as is the sense of intensified distance from the ideal — or what Kierkegaard named as the infinite qualitative difference between the human and the divine. It is a radical sense of sin which is known to the podviznik yet remains tragically alien to the heroic intelligentsia.² Not reducible to the confines of the monastery, “The Christian struggle is a matter of unremitting self-control, war with the sinful and lower levels of one’s ego, ascesis of spirit”,³ also manifest in external action in the world. The Christian Saint is the one whose will is, through “ascetic effort [podvig] . . . wholly permeated by the will of God”: the image for which permutation is the God-man who comes “not to do his own will, but the will of his Father”.⁴

Contemporary to Bulgakov, the Spanish religious philosopher and writer Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) regarded himself in the line of Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard in his sense of faith as a spiritual struggle beset by tragedy. In The Tragic Sense of Life (Del sentimiento trágico de la vida, 1912), Unamuno suggests that suffering is itself only surpassed in its anguish by the feeling of “being incapable of suffering and of tears”.⁵ This feeling of absence is, of course, itself a form of suffering — albeit a suffering that is never able to realise itself, unable to become conscious of itself. Its suffering is expressed as the numbness of being wounded without feeling any pain. It is the dread of nothingness, of non-being. The feeling of suffering, by contrast, affirms our existence according to Unamuno:

Suffering tells us that we exist; suffering tells us that those whom we love exist; suffering tells us that the world in which we live exists; and suffering tells us that God exists and suffers; but it is the suffering of anguish, the suffering of surviving and being eternal. Anguish discovers God to us and makes us love Him.

To believe in God is to love Him, and to love Him is to feel Him suffering, to pity Him.⁶

¹ Ibid. 95.
² Ibid. 95-96.
³ Ibid. 98.
⁴ Ibid. 100.
⁵ Cf. Luther’s assertion that the worst Anfechtung is the absence of Anfechtung (Nulla tentatio — omnis tentatio) (LW 44, 47); “Keine Anfechtung haben ist die schwerste Anfechtung” (WA 3, 420).
Suffering is understood by Unamuno, in terms reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s assertion of the tension between Spirit and spiritlessness, as the “the barrier which unconsciousness, matter, sets up against consciousness, spirit; it is the resistance to will, the limit which the visible universe imposes upon God; it is the wall that consciousness runs up against when it seeks to extend itself at the expense of unconsciousness; it is the resistance which unconsciousness opposes to its penetration by consciousness.”¹ This notion of resistance is further resonant with Kierkegaard’s understanding of spiritual trial as a limit that the unknown opposes to the one who would know. However, Unamuno conceives of this struggle in terms of an opposition between the consciousness of spirit and the unconsciousness of matter — whereas, for Kierkegaard, the opposition can be understood as a struggle between the consciousness of Spirit and the unconsciousness of spiritlessness: matter itself is not necessarily opposed to Spirit, especially insofar as the task of Spirit in selfhood is synthesis the psychical and the physical (CA, 43).² In terms that perhaps resound more with Kazantzakis (who had interviewed Unamuno in Spain in 1936) than with Kierkegaard, Unamuno affirms that the work of the love of God “is to endeavour to liberate God from brute matter, to endeavour to give consciousness to everything, to spiritualize of universalize everything”.³ In a vision which is furthermore suggestive of Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Unamuno sees this process as symbolized in the eucharist: “The Word has been imprisoned in a piece of material bread . . . in order that, after being buried in our body, it may come to life again in our spirit.”⁴

In *The Agony of Christianity* (*La Agonía del cristianismo*, 1931) Unamuno speaks more explicitly of the *Agonía* (άγωνία) as the struggle, *la moral de*

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1 Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 212.
3 *Tragic Sense of Life*, 214.
4 *Tragic Sense of Life*, 214. On further comparison between Unamuno and Teilhard de Chardin see Armand F. Baker, ‘The God of Unamuno’, *Hispania*, 74 (4), December 1991, 824-833, 827-831. Teilhard de Chardin invokes the image of Jacob in ‘The Mass of the World’: “like the quietist I allow myself with delight to be cradled in the divine fantasy: but that the same time I know that the divine will, will only be revealed to me at each moment if I exert myself to the utmost: I shall only touch God in the world of matter, when, like Jacob, I have been vanquished by him.” *Hymn of the Universe* (London: William Collins & Co., 1970), 26.
Struggling with God

_**batalla**, the death struggle against absolute death. Unamuno opens with the words of St Teresa of Jesus: “I die because I do not die”,¹ to which one might compare Kierkegaard’s motto, gleaned from Hamann “*Periissem, nisi periissem* [‘I would have perished, had I not perished’]” (JP 6:6154).² Both affirm a tension between *Eros* and *Thanatos* of sorts, between spiritual life and spiritual death, resolved through the struggle to ‘die to’ through which one is delivered from true death to the fullness of life.³ “Agony, then, is a struggle”, Unamuno asserts, with the Kierkegaardian reminder that “Christ came to bring us agony: struggle and not peace.”⁴ This agony is also central to the passion of Christ himself, even providing a dark devotional focus for worship: “the Christ worshipped on the cross is the agonizing Christ, the One who cries out: *Consummatum est!* And it is this Christ, the Christ of ‘My god, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46), that agonic believers worship”,⁵ though the agonists struggle for faith in and through doubt itself — a doubt which in turn vitalises faith. “A faith that does not doubt is a dead faith.”⁶


² Kierkegaard avows that this “still is and will be my life motto. This is why I have been able to endure what long since would have killed someone else who was not dead.” While Kierkegaard’s adoption of this motto probably derives from J.G. Hamann’s letter to Johann Gotthelf Linder, 2 May 1764, the original Latin aphorism most likely dates from the Middle Ages. See additionally JP 5:5673. Frater Taciturnus also employs this as the motto for ‘Guilty?/Not Guilty?’, SLW, 194.

³ Unamuno affirms that there is not a “struggle for life” as such, “but this struggle for life is ‘life’ itself, and is at the same time the ‘struggle.’” _The Agony of Christianity_, 7.

⁴ _Ibid_. 9. As well as appealing to Jesus, Unamuno also applies the image of Genesis 32 to the tragic and agonistic life of the Roman Catholic theologian Père Hyacinthe Loyson (1827-1912): “Like Jacob, he wrestled alone with the angel of the Lord, from sundown until the breaking of the day, and calling out to him, ‘Tell me . . . thy name!’” (98).

⁵ _The Agony of Christianity_, 10.

⁶ _Ibid_. 10. In this assertion we may attain a glimpse of why it may be suggested that Unamuno is something of a peculiarly Spanish Lutheran. See José Luis L. Arunguren, ‘Sobre el talante religioso de Miguel de Unamuno’, _Arbor_, XI, 1948, 485-503. However, Culpepper notes that while Unamuno read some Luther he did not resonate with the depths of Luther’s sense of sin and in this sense at least “he remained more [Roman] Catholic than Protestant”. R. Alan Culpepper, _Eternity as a Sunrise: the Life of Hugo H. Culpepper_ (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002), 228.
Yet it should also be added that faith that is lost within the abyss of despair is no longer able to recognise itself as faith. It has fallen into oblivion. No valorisation of the iconography of the agony of doubt can bring it back to life. In this sense, any idolatry of struggle must remain mindful and wary of the truly nihilistic horror of despair — mindful that struggle itself does not become the normative dialectical via negativa for ‘authentic’ faith. If one truly believes that struggle is the mark of the inward God-relationship then struggle need not be sought out or ventured in any heroic sense. It will arise as the Absolute limit of the Absolute itself. In this one prays with all humility, lead us not into temptation (Matthew 6:13).

Such emphasis upon the agonistic aspects of Christianity are no doubt vulnerable to the charge that Christian faith valorises, even fetishises suffering. As such, insofar as theology emphasises such Kierkegaardian motifs as the infinite qualitative abyss between the human and the divine, the enmity between Spirit and spiritlessness, the consciousness of sin, the fallenness into anxiety and despair of the human condition, it surely fuels suspicions that the Christian message is one of tragedy played out in the melancholy longing for an eschatological redemption by an absent God. Yet, while there are important insights in such a critique, the theology of spiritual struggle seeks to speak about that which many would rather not speak about: the darker aspect of life’s anxious and lonely moments when the divine seems impossibly remote from, even antagonistic towards, the vicissitudes of human experience. The various theologies of spiritual struggle are at their best, even their most humanity-affirming, in their desire to broach this silence. And yet such theologies are at their worst, or most dangerous, when they attempt to formulate a normative and prescriptive via dolorosa along which faith must stumble on, through the mortifying dark night, after which the light of God dawns at its brightest. No theology of spiritual struggle should be asserted that in any sense excludes or denigrates those who do not or cannot achieve this via. Any theology of spiritual struggle must, as any theology must, be wary of idolatry — even an idolatry of the cross, even the temptation to form an idol of the passio Christi, the worship of the suffering Christ, which falls towards a morbid Christolary.¹ Such theology should speak to those

¹ I adapt this term from Mary Daly’s Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon, 1985). I later suggest that the doubt, offense, and ineffability of the incarnation and the suffering of Christ may provoke a spiritual trial which deconstructs all attempts to create an idol of the passio Christi. In this respect I appeal to Simone Weil’s notion that affliction (malheur), even that of Christ, often appears as beneath compassion rather than inviting devotion.
whose lives are already acquainted with this darkness — to break the silence, and remind us all that no one is finally alone. It should be wary of seeking to cultivate such desolation even when it promises a dialectic of consolation.

Love’s Struggle with the Darkness of God: Silence, Protest, and Prayer

The question of desolation without consolation gives rise to a form of struggling with God that is not cultivated in the crucible of self-mortifying asceticism. This struggle is a struggle with the absence or the darkness of God in the face of sickness and atrocity. The one who struggles with the hidden face of God (hester panim) does not so much worship the agonising Christ as speaks with the crucified and with the psalmist, or even remain silent with them, in the cry of God-forsakenness. In this cry of ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34) there is the voice of protest, perhaps even a ‘Promethean’ form of prayer, which struggles with God, or with the absence, or darkness, of God.

As an image invoked in response to the Shoah, struggling with God symbolises protest against evil and suffering even if such protest be directed against One who is, paradoxically, also the focus of all longing for the Good. Struggle is therefore an (imperfect) expression of our freedom before God; the freedom to struggle with God and yet not be annihilated. As an image, which emerges in the silence of the night, Jacob’s struggle with God is powerfully assumed as the motif for the modern struggle with the holocaust in Eliezer Schweid’s Wrestling Until Day-Break: Searching for Meaning in the Thinking on the Holocaust and Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg edited volume, Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust. Schweid’s invocation of

3 Wrestling Until Day-Break: Searching for Meaning in the Thinking on the Holocaust (Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, 1994) and Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust, Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). In a 1938 commentary on Genesis 32:25 (“And there wrestled a man with him”), Elhanan Wasserman suggests that while Jacob is the Pillar of the Torah, the man who opposes
struggling until dawn (Genesis 32:26), may also educe an allusion to Elie Wiesel’s account of the concentration camps, Night — in which all things come to an end; though to be followed by the second and third works of Wiesel’s trilogy, Dawn and Day. In Wiesel’s night, all meanings are reduced to an abyss. “Just as readers committed suicide in the nineteenth century, writers did in ours”, Wiesel reflects, “They felt impotent. They realized that once you have penetrated the Kingdom of Night, you have reached the end.” The night is essentially impenetrable, abyssal. Within it writers realise, in their guilt and inadequacy, that they have essentially said nothing. Hence, for Wiesel, “what is called the literature of the Holocaust does not exist, cannot exist. It is a contradiction in terms, as is the philosophy, the theology, the psychology of the Holocaust. Auschwitz negates all systems, opposes all doctrines.” The Holocaust is something in which, as the poet Edmond Jabés also expresses, language encounters its limit and its dismay. Though it may be possible still to speak of ‘God’ in this desert of writing, ‘God’ has become yet another word for a confrontation with absence. As Jabés declares, “What I mean by God in my work is something we come up against, an abyss, a void, something against which we are powerless.”

Rubenstein, in After Auschwitz, halts at the abyss in silence before the “Holy Nothingness” (das Heilige Nichts) declaring that “The infinite God is not a thing; the infinite God is no-thing”. God as das Heilige Nichts thus conveys something of what Arthur A. Cohen subsequently identifies as the tremendum present in the experience of the Holocaust (The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. 405
In evoking the Ottonian notion of the *tremendum* in the Holocaust, Cohen concedes, “I have promised only to cross the abyss. I have not promised to explain it. I would not dare.”¹ In similar vein, Rubenstein himself admits that he still cannot reconcile himself to loving this holy abyssal God: “I cannot. I am aware of His holiness. I am struck with wonder and terror before His Nothingness, but I cannot love him. I am afrighted before Him. Perhaps, in the end, all I have is silence.”² Rubenstein does not struggle and prevail over a vanquished God; “Unlike Altizer”, he confesses, “I cannot rejoice in the death of God. If I am a death-of-God theologian, it is with a cry of agony.”³

Yet the night of silence is also broken by cries of protest, even by prayers. For Blumenthal, protest against God, protest in thought and also in prayer, in liturgy, in teaching, is legitimate, even right such that the one who protests feels able to stand face to face God with God on the day of judgement. But such protest is itself a struggle that some cannot follow. To those Blumenthal ascribes a “heretical denial. See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil — especially with God.”⁴ Yet both Blumenthal and Wiesel demonstrate an openness to the possibility of dystheism: the notion that God may not be perfectly good, even the possibility that God may be, at least capable of, evil. This possibility, this fear, may also be latent in the cry of ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’.

Such a possibility also haunts the theology of spiritual trial: Luther struggles with it in his own *Anfechtungen*, which in turn informs his reflections on the struggles of Jacob and Abraham. In his reflections upon *Anfechtung* Luther speaks of a struggle against a God who appears as “otherwise”, which is also a struggle with God, on the side of God as love (LW 6, 125-132). The same is evident in the *akedah* in which Abraham is confronted by the appearance of God as “an enemy and a tyrant” (LW 4, 94). Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (1843) also

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² *Ibid*. 264 (This is a recount of a conversation with a Polish Roman Catholic Theologian).
³ *After Auschwitz*, 264. Rubenstein earlier declares, “I believe that radical theology errs in its assertion that God is dead. Such an assertion exceeds human knowledge. . . . It is more precise to assert that we live in the time of the death of God than to declare ‘God is dead.’ The death of God is a cultural fact. We shall never know whether it is more than that” (250). Original emphasis.
acknowledges this fear, though it enshrouds and refracts it within a meditation on silence. Ultimately for Luther and Kierkegaard the struggle for the God of love in the face of the darkness of God is the most harrowing form of spiritual trial. In such spiritual trial, as if confronted by the Face of God as *mysterium horrendum*, one must struggle against the darkness by grasping for life itself on to the God of love. The struggle with God-forsakenness — which encompasses both abandonment by the love of God as well as confrontation with the darkness of God — is named by Kierkegaard as “the last spiritual trial [*Anfægtelse*]” (JP 4:4699). Elsewhere Kierkegaard calls the God-forsaken cry “freedom’s ultimate spiritual trial [*Anfægtelse*]” (JP 4:4611), the ultimate expression of Christ’s voluntary suffering, the free submission to the most unthinkable desolation of God.

The cry of God-forsakenness, as expressed by the psalmist and invoked by Jesus on the cross, shows prayer at its most agnostic and agonistic. Yet the doubt and despair, which this cry evokes, also testifies to a broken-hearted love. Love struggles with the darkness of God because love hopes for the theophany of the God of love.

The temptation of spiritual trial is the temptation to despair (*tentatio desperationis*), the temptation believe that God is none other than the God of despair. Yet the higher ‘temptation’ — which ‘tempts’ Spirit to awakening — is the divine call of love itself, of Spirit, the presence of love already announcing itself as the *desire for God*. The love for God is itself evidence of the love of God, insofar as all love begins in the secret hidden spring of divine love (WL, 9-10). As a loving

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1 Luther speaks of God-forsakenness (*deserto gratiae*) as “the last and most serious temptation to unbelief” (LW 6, 131). Rupp identifies God-forsakenness as the final of six waves of attack in Luther’s notion of *Anfechtung*: The first wave is the experience of nakedness and shame before creation. The second wave is condemnation by all creation. The third wave is condemnation by the words of scripture. The fourth wave is the Gospel itself adding to the terror of the Law. The fifth wave constitutes the soul turning from Christ. Finally, the soul is tempted to believe it is God-forsaken, predestined to damnation (*tentatio de praedestinatione*). Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 238-239.

2 In a manner resonant with Luther and Kierkegaard, Boulton reads the lament of God-forsakenness as a “Yes to impossibility”, which “works against the tyranny of possibility, which is to say, works against the despair that attends the apparent exhaustion of possible remedies to crisis”. Matthew Boulton, ‘Forsaking God: a Theological Argument for Christian Lamentation’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 55 (1), 2002, 58-78, 75-76. Consistent with the theology of spiritual trial, Boulton interprets this liturgical lament in terms of “forsaking God by clinging to God’s promise over and against God” (58). I discuss this further in relation to Kierkegaard in ‘My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?’ Between Consolation & Desolation’.

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Struggling with God

struggle with the darkness of God, spiritual trial is the struggle to realise the love of God as the God of love. In this sense, the way of spiritual trial is also the way of prayer — even the prayer that cries in protest against God, or is silent in its unknowing or despair.

Invoking the image of Jacob’s struggle with God, Juan de los Angeles (1536-1609), following Jerome, describes prayer in terms of a “loving struggle between God and the soul” wherein one “really and truly prevails over God, and [. . . ] conquers God”¹. The spiritual essence of the struggle of prayer is ultimately love, though a wounded love, which even in the abyss of divine darkness still longs for the love of God. “Only to love is it given to struggle with God, and God in his love wants nothing more than to be loved in return.”² Similarly for Kierkegaard, God desires to be loved out of freedom and the heart of selfhood, transfigured as Spirit (JP 4:4350) — though becoming Spirit elicits the spiritual struggle with spiritlessness. While Kierkegaard’s works describe many forms of struggling with God — whether in the defiance and offence of unbelief or presumption (CD, 69-70) in the struggle of “despair of the forgiveness of sins” (SUD, 114) — it is ultimately through the loving struggle of prayer that one truly struggles with God.³ It is through prayer, as the two hands of love and despair grasped together in faith, that one engages in the struggle with God. In temptation and spiritual trial, this struggle also transpires as a struggle against the self.⁴ Spiritual trial thereby

¹ Juan de los Angeles, The Loving Struggle Between God and the Soul, trans. Eladia Gómez-Posthill (London: The Saint Austin Press, 2001), 17. He also asserts the ostensible paradox that “God himself, the omnipotent, the impassible God is wounded in his heart by the gentle, blushing, loving gaze of the soul” (28-29). I discuss Juan de los Angeles’ appeal to the motif of Jacob’s struggle in Kierkegaard and the Self Before God, 100 and 104. Juan de los Angeles’ reflections bear the mark of influence from the Flemish mystic John of Ruysbroeck (1294-1381) and the Rhineland mystic Johannes Tauler (c.1300-1361), among others. On his relationship with German mysticism see José Miguel López Cuétara, ‘El misticismo alemán en la obra de Fr. Juan de los Ángeles’, Verdad y vida, 64 (247), 2006, 577-612.
² The Loving Struggle Between God and the Soul, 17.
³ One must not lose sight of how, “for all his warfare imagery and warnings against bypassing the possibility of offense, [Kierkegaard] also describes the struggle of faith in terms of falling in love. Such love must be taught, and even commanded”. Jason Mahn, Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 168. See further WL, 17-43.
⁴ “So the struggle goes; the struggler contends with God in prayer, or he struggles with himself and in his prayer calls on God for help against himself” (EUD, 397). As Pattison describes: “In this strife, this holy war [for self-mastery], then, the self must wrestle itself to a standstill and, in doing
speaks of the struggle to transfigure the self as Spirit, as the image of God, which loves God from a heart of freedom, and which comes to recognise the love of God as the inexorable presence of God—a divine spark which, though its light may become overshadowed by the abyss of absence, contains a fire that can never be finally extinguished.

Outline

Consideration of the themes and figures referred to in this introduction suggests that a more comprehensive comparative account of the broader theme of spiritual struggle would be a significant and compelling venture. Immediately I am tempted to attend to affinities between *Anfechtung* and the *desolatio* of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila,¹ which in turn inspires comparison so, discover its actual inability to be itself... For in this annihilation [of the self] we learn that, since we cannot bring about the unification of the self by our own efforts, the achievement of authentic selfhood depends utterly and solely on divine grace. The annihilation of the individual is his transfiguration in God.” George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 169. Kierkegaard also writes that: “This is how God fights... God in heaven fights by shifting the attack to the side of the attacker. When impatience, like a rebel, wants to attack God, the consciousness of guilt attacks the rebel; that is, the attacker ends up fighting with himself. God’s omnipotence and holiness do not mean that he can be victorious over everyone, that he is the strongest, for this is still a comparison; but it means, and this bars any comparison, that no one can manage to fight with him” (UDVS, 286).

with Simone Weil’s unsettling notion of ‘affliction’ (malheur).\(^1\) However, the focus of this present work must be mostly confined to Kierkegaard, his sources, and inheritors.

The possibility of solidarity in the midst of the solitude of suffering is key to chapter one’s examination of the secrecy and silence which surround the category of spiritual trial. As well as attending to the possibility of consolation in the face of ineffable struggle, I also identify how particular problems with translating the word Anfægetelse may have contributed to its under-representation in much of Kierkegaard scholarship. Furthermore, this chapter introduces Kierkegaard’s discovery of the category within forgotten old devotional literature, a recovery which is examined in greater depth in chapter two. In particular, the treatments of Anfechtung in Johannes Tauler and the Theologia Deutsch are elaborated, alongside Kierkegaard’s relation to mystical theology and the pietistic tradition.

Chapter three focusses more intensively on Luther’s theology of Anfechtung, examining how the struggle with the darkness of God relates to the dark nights of melancholy and the temptation of despair. This genealogy of Anfechtung culminates in chapter four with a study of two of Kierkegaard’s other key sources for his view of spiritual trial: Johann Arndt and Jacob Boehme. In the light of these treatments of Anfechtung in German mystical, Lutheran, and Pietistic theology, chapters five and six turn to a reconstruction and exegesis of Kierkegaard’s own reflections on temptation and spiritual trial. Here the continuities and innovations of Kierkegaard’s thinking are elucidated within the context of his wider authorship. A Kierkegaardian theology of spiritual trial is elicited further in chapter seven’s more constructive account of Spirit and desire, restlessness and rest, in relation to the dialectic between struggle (Anfechtung) and releasement (Gelassenheit). The eighth and final chapter further develops a theological account of temptation and spiritual trial, drawing upon Kierkegaard and his sources while also engaging with subsequent thinkers. Ultimately I suggest that while the via between struggle (Anfechtung) and releasement (Gelassenheit) can be symbolised by Christ’s prayer at Gethsemane — “nevertheless, not my will but your will be done” — a theology of spiritual trial might also affirm the task of theology itself as an expression of love’s protest and struggle with the darkness of God.

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\(^1\) See, for example, Simone Weil, ‘The Love of God and Affliction’, Waiting for God, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), 67-82. Weil describes Affliction as concentrating the “infinite distance separating God from the creature . . . into one point to pierce the soul in its center” (81). A study of spiritual struggle could also be expanded further to encompass considerations of inner jihad in Islam as well as notions of agonistic spiritual interiority and practice in other religious traditions.