

## A Speculation on Repetition and Atonement

Abstract: Repetition for Kierkegaard has three distinct yet connected aspects: a repeated event, an existential movement, and an identity-forming process. In this paper, I examine the atonement in light of repetition. I first examine the concept of repetition itself. I then trace the implications of repetition for creation, sin, and the atonement. Throughout the paper, I utilize Kierkegaard's concepts of absurdity and farce. I also draw on the life of Christ and the other writings of the New Testament. Ultimately, I find that repetition provides a unique explanation for the work of God in the world.

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## I. Introduction

The atonement is the heart of Christianity. The whole of Scripture points to or looks back from the atonement, and the works of the great Christian theologians almost invariably address the topic. It is strange, then, that Søren Kierkegaard gave almost no attention to the atonement despite calling himself a primarily Christian author.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard was never interested in direct communication about religious topics, however. He preferred instead to “wound from behind” or “communicate indirectly.”<sup>2</sup> His authorial method involved the development of characters who viewed concepts through varying lenses. Though religious in nature, these characters rarely touched the traditional topics of theology. Nevertheless, the religious themes of Kierkegaard often provide unique resources for understanding Christian theology. Indeed, this is precisely the case with his book *Repetition*.

As a text, *Repetition* has been called the “darling of deconstruction.”<sup>3</sup> Its purpose and meaning being remarkably unclear, it has been interpreted in a number of conflicting ways. Like the majority of Kierkegaard’s philosophical works, it is pseudonymous; its claimed author is “Constantin Constantius.” The topic of the book oscillates between the philosophical concept of repetition, the story of a young man, and the story of its author, and each of these points tangentially relates to the person of Kierkegaard himself and the concurrent events in Kierkegaard’s life. *Repetition* invites readers to interpret it on many levels. In this paper, I will

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard says the point of all his writings is to answer the question of “how to become a Christian. (POV 22)”

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Kierkegaard thought that direct communication was *incapable* of speaking of God: “The subjective religious thinker ... readily perceives that direct communication is a fraud toward God (CP 75).”

<sup>3</sup> (Julin, V)

offer an interpretation of the philosophical concept of repetition as described by Kierkegaard in order to see if it can provide some insight on the atonement.<sup>4</sup>

## II. What is Repetition?

Unsurprisingly, repetition as a concept is difficult to define. Constantin only briefly addresses what it actually is, and a few scattered fragments from Kierkegaard's other writings supplement the idea. A great deal of speculation and interpretation is thus necessary to define the term. I take repetition to have three aspects or modes. The first of these is precisely what we think of when we hear "repetition."<sup>5</sup> Repetition is any event occurring again. There are two aspects of this mode of repetition that are important to note. First, for repetition to occur the event must have occurred before. Second, the repetition of an event need not be a precise repetition. Indeed, a precise repetition is in fact impossible.<sup>6</sup> Consider two events, one of which is a repetition of the other. The second event differs from the first in at least this way: it is a repetition, whereas the first is not. Likewise, details of the event can differ between repetitions. If I seek to repeat an event in which I experienced unparalleled bliss, I may be seeking only a repetition of the bliss, not a repetition of the event itself. Therefore, the details of that event could differ while I enjoy a true repetition.

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<sup>4</sup> "The experimental nature of the work allows for multiple interpretations and multiple ways to engage with the text, and as the reader, in a return to its pages, re-visits the philosophically dense path of *Repetition's* stagecoach, she is free to engage with any one of the many trails that emerge from *Repetition's* general narrative, be it the ontological, psychological, or epistemological. Given the variety of directions one can take within its narrative, no reader of *Repetition* will experience or interpret this work in the same way, and it is important that interpreters of this work preserve the experimental, playful, and poetic layer of this work in order to see the true value" (Julin 100-101).

<sup>5</sup> I refer to this mode as repetition in the "typical sense" throughout the rest of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> "The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new" (R 149).

Repetition is not merely the typical sense of repetition, however. Constantin also sees it as an *existential movement forward*.<sup>7</sup> To understand what such a movement represents, it is important to look at repetition's contrast with the concept of *recollection*. Recollection for Plato was an epistemological method for discovering knowledge. Both truth and the soul were thought to be eternal. Hence, the soul already had access to all truth. A person merely needed to recollect this truth in order to understand it. Constantin claims that repetition is a "recollection forward."<sup>8</sup> Truth cannot be discovered by looking back. Rather, it must be experienced while moving forward in time. For Kierkegaard, the soul is not eternal in the sense that the ancient Greeks thought it was. It therefore has no way to access the eternal truth – unless it *captures it in time*. In other words, we must live truth out, not simply know it propositionally. Repetition in this sense is the choice that we must make. Our existence is constantly confronted with problems. Knowing absolute truth will not solve these problems for us; we must put truth into action and make a decision. Existential repetition occurs in this very decision that we must make. It is our choice to continue existing, to push forward in existence. In doing so, eternal truth is captured in time.<sup>9</sup>

The final, and most important, way we may understand repetition is as a *recovery of identity*.<sup>10</sup> Repetition occurs in the process (or the very moment) where one regains one's lost self. In the story of *Repetition* itself, the young man signs his letters as "Nameless." His identity

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<sup>7</sup> "[W]hen one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence" (R 149). I refer to this mode of repetition as "existential repetition" throughout the rest of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> (R 131)

<sup>9</sup> By "capture," I don't mean to suggest that the entirety of any given truth is totally contained in time by repetition. Quite the opposite; eternal truth is only captured insofar as it can be related to by the existing individual. I'll use the language of capture throughout this paper, but it's important to keep in mind that such capturing is not all-encompassing.

<sup>10</sup> Repetition is a "gaining of self in a movement of self-renewal" (Julin 102). It is "the recovery of nature by and for freedom" (Mackey 75). In repetition, a person "actualizes what he has been all along" (Caputo 30). Throughout the rest of this paper, all non-qualified references to repetition and all mentions of identity are referring to this third mode of repetition.

is lost in his tragedy. Yet when he obtains repetition, he regains his name and identity.<sup>11</sup> This mode of repetition occurs in two ways. The first is passive; when his lover marries someone else, the young man experiences repetition despite failing to make a decision. The passive repetition is achieved by the decision of another. The stronger, more meaningful repetition is an active choice of recovery. Job, for example, loses his identity in the midst of his ordeal with God. All that Job owns and loves has been taken away. But when he makes the decision to accept what has happened to him, he obtains repetition by his decision. Beyond receiving the things that he lost, Job receives back his very self as an individual before God.<sup>12</sup>

To this point, I have been working with the category of repetition as Kierkegaard envisioned it. Yet, as with any topic involving Kierkegaard, repetition is not a fully developed concept. I have so far tried only to make claims that are clearly in line with Kierkegaard's repetition. The rest of this paper will mostly be an informed speculation on how the concept of repetition informs the atonement. Kierkegaard did say "repetition appears as atonement."<sup>13</sup> But he wrote very little else on the topic. For the remainder of this paper, I will expound upon a theory of how repetition interacts with the atonement. By consistently using the categories of repetition defined so far, we shall see that repetition is found all throughout the story of the atonement as told by the Scriptures and by church theology.

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<sup>11</sup> It might seem strange to say "obtains repetition," but this is a phrase I will use throughout the paper. In some ways, repetition is a goal that we must reach.

<sup>12</sup> Caputo's explanation is enlightening: "Kierkegaardian repetition ... is productive. It does not limp along after, trying to reproduce what is already present, but is productive of what it is repeating. The repeating is the producing—of the self. But not absolutely: One does not create *ex nihilo* but always beginning from a situated standpoint one gradually carves out an identity for oneself" (Caputo 30).

<sup>13</sup> (R 320). This quote appears in an early draft of an unpublished letter written in response to criticism of *Repetition*. Although I cannot be totally confident, I believe Kierkegaard would decisively approve of the use of repetition in the atonement as described by this paper.

### III. Creation and Sin

The story begins with creation, which is in itself a repetition. Prior to His creative act, God's mind was filled with the possibilities of creation, and He faced a decision. Two options presented themselves: He could keep the possibilities for creation in His mind as an eternal reflection, or He could make those possibilities real. God chose to actualize them and to move them forward in existence. Thus, creation was an existential repetition for God. Although creation may not be a repetition in the typical sense<sup>14</sup>, the eternal truths within God's mind were captured in a moment in time.

In God's creating, repetition in the third sense occurs as well. God's decision actively established His identity, for God could not remain detached from His creation. He was now fundamentally identified as a Creator, one *in relation to His creation*. God staked His identity in the fate of His creation. And the identity of creation was invested in God, too. Mankind was passively given the identity of creature in relationship with God.<sup>15</sup> By virtue of this identity, mankind constantly experienced repetition.<sup>16</sup> Every day, Adam was decisively with God and had his identity formed in relationship with God. We can imagine that Adam's relationship to God

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<sup>14</sup> It could be, though. Perhaps God creates universes similar to ours all the time.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it is a trivial observation that humans didn't decide to exist. Even so, it is a concept that Kierkegaard deals with often. The young man in *Repetition* asks: "How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust in the ranks? (200)."

<sup>16</sup> "[Repetition] is never so perfect in time as in eternity, which is the true repetition" (R 221). We can assume that prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve were in a state similar to "eternity."

was not static, but rather that it was improving day-by-day.<sup>17</sup> Creation is thus the first repetition, both in the existential sense and the identity sense.<sup>18</sup>

Soon after creation, however, a second repetition occurred: sin. Sin is an attempted and failed repetition. In sin, one tries to claim for oneself a new identity.<sup>19</sup> Adam's identity was good and improving within God, but he attempted to improve it outside of God. He desired for his identity to include the knowledge of good and evil. Adam actively and independently tried to obtain this repetition, but repetition was only possible within God. Ultimately, sin contradicts itself; it is a repetition in which a person attempts to recover his or her identity while having never actually lost that identity. Adam's identity was already within God, and everything outside of God was empty. Instead of recovering his identity, then, he replaced it with *nothingness*.<sup>20</sup> This brought Adam back to a need for repetition, as now he actually needed to recover his identity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> That's not to say that it started out as a flawed relationship and "improved" like the relations between two people considering divorce. Rather, the excellent relationship between God and man became fuller and richer as they related each day.

<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, Constantin explicitly makes this point: "If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence. Either he would have followed the superficial plans of hope or he would have retracted everything and preserved it in recollection. This he did not do. Therefore, the world continues, and it continues because it is a repetition. Repetition—that is actuality and the earnestness of existence" (R 133).

<sup>19</sup> "Now comes the problem of sin, which is the second repetition, for now I must return to myself again" (R 326).

<sup>20</sup> We can see here a parallel with Athanasius' conception of sin as a movement toward non-existence. "For the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their natural and as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again ... evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good" (Athanasius 29-30). For Athanasius, sin is a loss of knowledge of God and therefore a loss of being. With repetition, sin is a loss of identity. But they both are, ultimately, a march toward non-existence.

<sup>21</sup> In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard states: "Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself*" (SD 77). My conception of sin in this paper is, therefore, not foreign to Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard saw sin as either failing to obtain identity or as trying to obtain identity outside of the conception of God.

But Adam could not simply reclaim his identity through repetition. He could only obtain true repetition through his relationship with God, which was in fact his identity. In forsaking this relationship, Adam had no ability to establish a meaningful identity. Even worse, Adam sinned and lost his identity again and again. He marched forward in existence toward increasing non-existence. Without a relation to God, any intimation with the eternal became absurd, and repetition became viciously destructive.

Absurdity is a key concept for Kierkegaard, so we should take a moment here to examine it. In one sense, absurdity is exactly what it seems to be: ideas become absurd when they move outside of the realm of reflection and reason. But Kierkegaard's absurdity is a complex and nuanced topic. For the purposes of this paper, we will only focus on a narrow version of absurdity, one involving God's relation to time and temporal existence. Recall that Kierkegaard rejected the notion of the Greeks that the eternal soul could grasp the eternal truth. This critique lays the underpinnings for absurdity. Humanity exists temporally, so it simply is unable to grasp eternal truth. God actually communicating with humanity is absurdity then, since God *is* the eternal truth. In order for God to relate to humanity, He somehow must thrust His truth into temporality. And when this happens, it often appears outside of the realm of reason.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, connection to God became absurd for humanity after sin. Humanity did enjoy a sort of eternal life before sinning, so grasping God's eternal truth was in fact possible. But with sin, humanity is thrown into a new kind of existence: a historical, temporal existence.<sup>23</sup> With the

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<sup>22</sup> Consider, for example, Kierkegaard's famous use of absurdity in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. God's eternal truth, thrust into temporal existence, is apparently this: Abraham must sacrifice his son. Sacrificing his son is clearly not rational. Furthermore: Isaac is the son of promise, the son through whom God will fulfill his promises. But Abraham follows God by virtue of the absurd; Abraham knows that he will kill his son, yet he continues to believe God's promise that he will be made into a great nation through this very son. By all accounts, this is a contradiction to reason, yet Abraham trusts God with faith.

<sup>23</sup> "Therefore, by coming into existence, he [the individual] becomes a sinner." After coming into this existence, "it is absolutely paradoxical that it [eternal truth] is related to such an existing person (CP 208)." Kierkegaard's ideas



good relationship between humanity and God broken, humanity could not be with God via thought or reason. The concept of God communicating with humanity became impossible. So God, too, was affected by sin. As Adam's relationship with Him was broken, God's identity as Creator was disturbed. His identity was no longer one of relation with creation; it was now one of *wrath* toward creation, a characteristic that He ostensibly lacked before Adam sinned. God then sought to recover His own identity by an existential repetition of the decision of creation. Once again, He had two choices before Him: He could annihilate the sin and sinner, recovering His pre-creational identity, or He could work to re-establish the relationship with the sinner and recover his relational identity. But His very existence was now absurd to the sinner, so such a re-establishment of relationship seemed impossible.

Thus we as sinners were helpless. The infinite qualitative difference between God and man was brought to bear; man was without God. God was a God of identity; we were now humans without identity. Our relation to God was meant to exist by virtue of that identity. Without it, there was seemingly no way to relate to the eternal. God, however, knew of one such way; faith by virtue of the absurd. Repetition could be found again in the paradox, and the chosen paradox of God was the God-man, Jesus Christ.

#### **IV. The Incarnation**

If existential repetition is to be construed as an eternal truth captured in time, then the Incarnation is certainly that repetition.<sup>24</sup> Jesus takes on the identity of both God and man. What

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here seem remarkably difficult. I believe the key to understanding him on this point is recognizing the difference between pre-sin eternal existence and post-sin temporal existence. He is only speaking of the temporal existence in this context.

<sup>24</sup> John 14:6 is of great interest here. Jesus Himself proclaims that He is the "truth."

can be more absurd?<sup>25</sup> The Word – the eternal Reason of God – is “made flesh.”<sup>26</sup> In Christ the eternal is thrust into temporal existence.<sup>27</sup> Yet Christ’s existence is different from the typical human existence, for He is without sin; He retains an identity in relationship with God. Being within God, Christ could therefore still enjoy all kinds of repetition. His existence was not pointed toward non-existence as our sinful existence was, but pointed toward true-existence.

The Incarnation is also a typical repetition in the sense that Jesus is the second (or last) Adam.<sup>28</sup> Where Adam sinned, Christ overcame sin. Where Adam brought death to humanity, Christ brought life.<sup>29</sup> In being made a repetition of Adam, Jesus chose the identity of humanity. What it means to be “human,” then, is defined by Christ Himself. Christ’s decisions were existential decisions for the entirety of humanity. Christ’s atonement in particular is this sort of decision. The choice to atone not only moved humanity forward in existence, but it also re-identified humanity, ultimately reestablishing relationship and repetition with God.

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<sup>25</sup> “What, then, is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being (CP 210).”

<sup>26</sup> John 1:14

<sup>27</sup> This can be the case even if we are to accept the openness of God. The type of existence in which Christ participates is of a different nature than the existence of a temporal God. The sorts of “decisions” made by God are qualitatively different than decisions made by Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:42-49

<sup>29</sup> We might think, then, that repetition draws on the theory of *recapitulation* put forth by Irenaeus in the early church. Jesus “recapitulated Adam’s life, Israel’s life, and the life of every one of us” (McKnight 101). There is an important distinction to be made between recapitulation and repetition, however. Recapitulation fundamentally sees the work of Christ as both an *undoing* and a *redoing*. In recapitulating the life of Adam, Jesus “kill[ed] sin, deprive[d] death of its power” (ibid 102). In other words, recapitulation is partially a movement backward. Repetition, on the other hand, is a movement forward; Christ’s work is just a redoing. Sin and death are destroyed only inasmuch as they are no longer practiced And this is certainly why we see sin and death in both believers and unbelievers today. Had Christ truly “killed sin” it would seem sin would never be practiced. Instead, Christ provided (repeated) a new (old) sort of life which excluded sin and death. In this sense, recapitulation and repetition are actually opposites. But that doesn’t mean they don’t appear or function similarly. Indeed, they do seem to have much common ground.

Before moving on to the crucifixion and resurrection, we should take a moment to examine repetition in Christ's life on earth. We can first look at Christ's exposition on the greatest commandments.<sup>30</sup> Here we see Christ repeat (in the typical sense) the law in a new form. The law itself is overwritten by this new law, even though the new law is simply a condensing of the old. The old law was useless and condemning, but the new law brings life.<sup>31</sup> Christ opens the doors for a new life where one no longer sins, where one's identity is fully restored. Thus He says "sin no more."<sup>32</sup> In Christ's new law, humanity can truly make the existential decision to move past sin.

## **V. The Atonement**

But in what way does the existential repetition beyond sin actually function? I see it functioning through three components: Christ in the garden, Christ on the cross, and Christ resurrected. In the garden, Christ faces the ultimate temptation. His encounter in the Garden of Gethsemane is, in fact, a typical repetition of Adam's own trial in the Garden of Eden. We can see many parallels between the two.<sup>33</sup> As Adam is betrayed by Eve, his wife, so is Christ betrayed by His disciples, His bride.<sup>34</sup> Where the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil tempted Adam, the fruit from the tree of life tempts Jesus. Indeed, when he states "Abba,

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew 22:34-39

<sup>31</sup> Hebrews 7:18-19. Where the law made nothing perfect, the change in law (see Hebrews 7:12) does bring perfection. Of course, we should understand here that the change in law is not merely Christ's words on the greatest commandment, but the entirety of the work of Christ.

<sup>32</sup> John 5:14

<sup>33</sup> Obviously, both occur in a garden, but the connections are deeper.

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps "betrayed" is too strong; Judas certainly betrayed Jesus, but the rest of the disciples seemingly only "let Jesus down." In the same way, though, Eve did not really betray, but she "let Adam down."

Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me,”<sup>35</sup> one cannot help but wonder if Christ will fall to temptation as Adam did. Has He commanded God to give Him life? Has He sinned?<sup>36</sup> We can only breathe a sigh of relief when Christ continues His prayer. Thus is the repetition; where Adam said “Not what You will, but what I will,” Christ states “Yet not what I will, but what You will.” Here is the first overcoming of death through repetition, though absurdly it occurs in an acceptance of death. Christ moves toward non-existence for the first time. He makes the decision to claim His identity, yet that decision is actually to lose it.

Christ is then sacrificed on a cross, and in this sacrifice we see many possible repetitions. The sacrifice is repeated for all sins<sup>37</sup>; all sinners can move forward past sin. The sacrifice is also a repetition of the Old Testament sacrifices. Christ was the eternal truth that those sacrifices pointed to, and the crucifixion is the concretion of that truth. Additionally, the sacrifice of Christ is a repetition of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Yet where Isaac is saved from the sacrifice, Jesus dies. These apparent repetitions, however, are nothing at all; in fact, the cross itself is a *farce*.

What is farce? In theater, a farce is a play that utilizes nonsense and impossibility for comic effect. Within *Repetition*, Constantin gives a prolonged discussion of farce that seems out of place.<sup>38</sup> Yet the concept is critically important to the structure of the book.<sup>39</sup> The events of *Repetition*, ultimately, are farcical; they are so improbable and unbelievable that they become comical. For Kierkegaard, farce plays an important role for repetition; farce is enjoyed as a

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<sup>35</sup> Mark 14:36 ESV

<sup>36</sup> I believe the space following the period at the end of the sentence – “Remove this cup from me.” – is the tensest moment of Scripture. Not even after the crucifixion is the success of Christ’s mission so in doubt.

<sup>37</sup> See Hebrews 10:12. I do not mean that Christ is sacrificed anew for each sin. Rather, the effects of Christ’s sacrifice repeat for every sin.

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the discussion of farce takes up 10 of the 100 pages in the Hong translation of *Repetition*, and in these ten pages the concept of repetition itself is not even mentioned once.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the role of farce in the book itself, see Dalton, *Kierkegaard's Repetition as a Comedy in Two Acts*.

precursor to regaining identity. In his discussion of farce, Constantin states that the one who enjoys farce will enjoy it “if possible, as a nobody.”<sup>40</sup> The humor of farce gives the identity-lacking individual an opportunity to imagine and, through repetition, reclaim their identity.

The crucifixion is thus a farce. It is a farce in that it is ridiculous; the One through whom all things were made is unmade, the source of existence ceases to exist. Nothing could be more unbelievable! Though the death of Christ is certainly a serious matter, in one sense we can laugh at it.<sup>41</sup> How absurd that God should die! In this farcical death, Christ is rendered without identity. Thus we can say that He was “made sin” for us.<sup>42</sup> Just as we in our sinful states had established an identity toward nothingness, so too had Christ been given an identity of nothingness after His death. The question of repetition loomed large for the disciples. Would Christ experience a true repetition? Was such a repetition possible? But for Jesus, repetition was inevitable. Without an identity, He was ready to enjoy the comical elements of His death, and He was ready to reform His identity in three days.

## **VI. The Resurrection**

In the resurrection, the very purpose of the atonement, we see that repetition. Christ recovers His identity. The repetition in the resurrection is both an active and a passive repetition—Christ did make an active decision when He claimed “but what You will,” yet His repetition comes about by the decision of the Father. In true religious repetition, Christ makes the decision to allow the Father to decide His identity, and the Father decides that Christ’s identity

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<sup>40</sup> (R 165)

<sup>41</sup> Of course, we can only retrospectively see the levity of the situation. The disciples clearly were disturbed by the death of Christ, for they had no way to know that the cross would ultimately prove to be a farce.

<sup>42</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

will be as the living, resurrected God. This decision of the Father causes a total repetition within the Godhead; God's identity as Creator is restored to its full sense. The wrath of God against creation becomes unnecessary. God's orientation toward creation morphs into a new relationship which paves the way for humans to repeat God's own creative righteousness.

In the typical sense, too, Christ obtains repetition in the resurrection. It is a repetition of the birth of Christ: Jesus came into the world – began His life - via a miracle, and He comes into the world in the resurrection via a miracle too. The Father sent his Son into the world at Jesus's birth, and He resends His Son into the world at the resurrection. God has once again chosen to incarnate Himself and identify with the world. We find existential repetition here as well. As noted, Christ's existence ceased at His death. At the resurrection, He begins moving forward in existence yet again. The resurrection is Christ's existential movement, and with Him the entirety of creation moves forward. This movement can be seen as the first act of true redemption in the world<sup>43</sup>. When we say "redemption," though, what we truly mean is re-creation. All things were originally created through Christ<sup>44</sup>, and this creation is repeated through redemption. Redemption makes everything new again, and in redemption things repeat in the typical sense as they were before the Fall.

## **VII. Our Participation**

Indeed, we are called to participate in Christ's redemption as well. This is the first way in which we see that our lives as Christians are themselves a repetition. In Christ, we are a "new

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<sup>43</sup> 1 Cor 15:20

<sup>44</sup> Hebrews 1:2; John 1:3

creation”<sup>45</sup>; we have, that is, been re-created. Likewise, our entrance into Christianity is called being “born again.”<sup>46</sup> Salvation, then, is a repetition of our physical birth which moves us into a spiritual life. We repeat the life of intimacy with God that Adam and Eve once had. And in repeating this life of intimacy, we are called to make the decision to allow God to decide for us. Our broken identity is recovered as we allow God to make of our lives a repetition. Unlike Adam and Eve, we ourselves do not need to (every day) make the decision to form our identity as sinless. In redemption, God removes that burden which tore Adam and Eve down. Our identity is now secure through the Godhead.

The life of new identity is one radically different from the old.<sup>47</sup> Relationship to God itself is radically different, for the relationship is both by virtue of the absurd *and* by virtue of identity. In this way, it is impossible for sin to move us effectively into an identity of nothingness again. In any further attempts to establish an identity of nothingness, Christ intervenes and protects our new identity. In the new life, we repeat the life of Christ. Here we can see why Jesus said He is “the way” and “the life”<sup>48</sup> He has established the way we are to follow His life, acts, and teaching. In the same way, Christ is the “author and perfecter of our faith.”<sup>49</sup> What He has done, we repeat in the typical sense. And each of these repetitions further establishes our identity and moves us forward in our (now righteous) existence.

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<sup>45</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>46</sup> John 3:3

<sup>47</sup> I am not sure we could say that our new life in Christ is a repetition of the old life. Our telos is totally and wholly changed. No longer do we exist facing (and moving toward) death. Instead, we face (and move toward) the eternal God. Our new lives are as different from our old lives as repetition is different from recollection.

<sup>48</sup> John 14:6. See footnote 19 for how Jesus is “the truth.”

<sup>49</sup> Hebrews 12:2

The rituals of the new birth are equally repetitions. In baptism, we have the repetition of Christ's baptism where His identity was first received.<sup>50</sup> We too receive our identities in baptism. At baptism, we choose to give our sinful identity to God and we choose to allow God to form our new identity. In the Eucharist we repeat the sacrifice of Christ and the affirmation of the new covenant. Furthermore, we repeat Christ as He first initiated the Eucharist for us. In singing together we repeat the truth of God. In praying together we repeat the fellowship with God first seen in the garden. In martyrdom we repeat the sacrifice of Christ. In the final resurrection we will repeat the resurrection of Christ. As Christ is the repetition of Adam, we as the Church are the repetition of Eve. And in each of these ways we are repeating not only the things themselves but also the acts of all the believers who came before us. Indeed, to be an authentic Christian *just is* repetition. In every act as Christians, we are making the existential choice for repetition. This repetition identifies us and moves us forward – together – in existence.

### VIII. Conclusion

As we can see, it seems the entirety of the Christian narrative and faith is informed by repetition. The atonement is an act of true repetition, and we repeat that repetition as we are identified in God. Through Christ's atoning work, the unity with God that mankind once enjoyed is repeated. What I have laid out here is only a simple overview of the repetition in the atonement. Much more can be said, especially on the death and resurrection.

Like many of Kierkegaard's ideas, we must do a great deal of speculating when it comes to repetition. Yet also like many of Kierkegaard's ideas, it proves to be a rich theological concept. Recognizing the aspect of identity within repetition and within the Christian narrative is especially enlightening. It is clear that in creation mankind's identity is formed and the identity

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<sup>50</sup> Christ receives His identity from God: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:9).



of God is modified. Sin distorts that identity; atonement reclaims it. The idea of identity in Christianity is often overlooked, but it certainly enriches our faith to consider it. In doing so, we can see precisely how invested God is in the world and in us.<sup>51</sup>

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Throughout this paper, the following abbreviations are used for citations of Kierkegaard's works.

R: *Repetition*

CP: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

FT: *Fear and Trembling*

POV: *The Point of View for My Work as An Author*

SD: *The Sickness Unto Death*