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**The Nature of Divine Redemptive Love:  
Kierkegaard on Love**

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If one was to draw up a list of the great Christian thinkers of the past who were best able to contribute to a contemporary theological reflection on love it is very possible that Kierkegaard wouldn't come very high up on it. The general view of Kierkegaard tends to see him as 'the melancholy Dane' and his theology is regarded as emphasizing the dark side of Christianity to an almost unhealthy degree. And, of course, it is true that terms such as guilt, dread, anxiety, melancholy, depression, sorrow, and despair do feature very strongly in his writings. In this regard the title of what has probably become his best-known work, *Fear and Trembling*, sums up what many take to be the essence of Kierkegaardian Christianity. This is a religion more marked by the fear of God than the love of God. Nor is this simply a matter of theology. The story of his life seems also to be marked by a rejection of love in its normal human sense, a rejection focussed in his renunciation of marriage and consequently breaking off his engagement to Regine Olsen. Love in the sense of falling-in-love,

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Romantic or erotic love as we might call it, does feature strongly in many of his writings—but the stories of love that Kierkegaard has to give us are almost invariably stories of unhappy love, of broken engagements, misunderstanding, and mutual recrimination.<sup>2</sup> Or, even worse, they are stories of cruel and abusive love, like the ‘love’ pursued by Don Giovanni or Kierkegaard’s own character Johannes the Seducer. In the main work dedicated to the theme of love, *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard seems to launch an all-out attack on what commentators call ‘preferential love’, that is, the kind of love involving a spontaneous attraction to the other. Against this, Kierkegaard seems to insist that Christian love demands overriding all feelings of personal inclination and subjecting the passion of love to the objectivity of the commandment: the only genuine love, he seems to say, is commanded love—a view that has led some critics, such as Løgstrup and Adorno to picture his as a very inhuman kind of love.<sup>3</sup> In this regard Kierkegaard is often seen as a forerunner of the theory of love propounded by the Swedish theologians Anders Nygren in his *Agape and Eros*, where the Christian agape, or other-regarding love, is contrasted with the merely human love known as eros, or selfish love.<sup>4</sup> But what of the love of God? Doesn’t Kierkegaard speak much about the love of God? Indeed, but even here there seems to be something almost grim, almost inhuman, in what he has to say. Martin Buber complained that Kierkegaard’s idea of what is involved in **living** God excluded loving relations to other human beings.<sup>5</sup> But one could say it is even worse than a matter of simple exclusion. The love of God, as Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasizes, demands hatred to the world and leads the one who loves God into more and more terrible experiences of suffering. This argument is more and more

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<sup>2</sup> See Amy Laura Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See K. E. Løgstrup, *Den etiske fordring* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1991) and T. W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen , Mit einer Beilage* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962)

<sup>4</sup> Anders Nygren, tr. P. S. Watson, *Agape and Eros* (London: SPCK, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, ‘The Question to the Single One’ in *Between Man and Man* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1961), pp. 60-108.

pronounced in the last years and culminates in what would be the very last entry he ever wrote in his journals:

The definition of this life is to be brought to the highest degree of disgust with life. He who is brought to this point and can then hold fast, or he whom God helps to hold fast, that it is God who has brought him to this point – he it is who from the Christian standpoint has passed the examination of life, and is ripe for eternity. Through a crime I came into existence, I came into existence against God's will. The fault, which in one sense is not mine, even if it makes me a criminal in God's eyes, is to give life. The punishment fits the fault: it is to be deprived of all joy of life, to be brought to the supreme degree of disgust with life ... And what pleases [God] even more than the praise of angels is a man, who in the last lap of his this life, when God is transformed as though into sheer cruelty, and with the cruellest imaginable cruelty does everything to deprive him of all joy in life, a man who continues to believe that God is love and that it is from love that God does this. Such a man becomes an angel. And in heaven he can surely praise God'.<sup>6</sup>

If this is what it means to believe that God is love, then most contemporary people would probably say that they don't want to have much to do with it. How can the love of God be compatible with subjecting finite, mortal and vulnerable human beings to such terrible tortures and agonies?

So, even though Kierkegaard may indeed say much about love, isn't Kierkegaardian religion essentially marked more by hatred to the world, hatred to self, and submission to an abusive God-image than what most Christians would think was intended by the twofold commandment to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves?

All of the above, however, is said only by way of what a rather superficial familiarity with Kierkegaard's writings is likely to suggest. It is far from being the whole picture. Of course it is true that Kierkegaardian Christianity is a serious business, that it does involve fear and trembling, repentance, and, as he often puts it, the annihilation of self: but it also involves the affirmation of God as what St James calls the giver of every good and perfect gift in a text that Kierkegaard himself said was his favourite in all of Scripture; similarly it calls upon human beings to live with the simplicity,

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<sup>6</sup> S. Kierkegaard, tr. R. G. Smith, *The Last Years* (London: Collins/ Fontana, 1965), pp. 367-8.

freedom, and joy of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air—and Matthew 6 is another key Kierkegaardian text; and, again and again Kierkegaard insists that the love of God is inseparable from the love of other human beings. So far from it being the case that the love-commandment and the exigency of agape require the suppression of all spontaneous, preferential, and erotic loves that the love-commandment, as interpreted by Kierkegaard, makes no sense unless we presuppose that human beings do naturally have a whole circle of preferential loves involving partners, parents, children and friends.<sup>7</sup> In this perspective, Kierkegaard's repeated focus on stories of unhappy love or the kind of abusive relationships we see in 'The Diary of the Seducer' is not in order to celebrate these but rather to show how vulnerable human beings are to falling into the wrong kinds of love-relationships (or, more precisely pseudo love-relationships) and how damaging these are for our individual and common flourishing. And even though Kierkegaard renounced marriage for himself and left many damning comments about the hypocrisies of bourgeois marriage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many have found corroboration for their own experiences of married life in the writings of Assessor Vilhelm, representative of the ethical point of view in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*, with his insistence on openness, commitment, and a willingness to humble oneself under the trivia of daily life.

In fact, I shall argue here, Kierkegaard may rightly be taken as one of the great explorers and exponents of Christian love in the modern world. This doesn't mean that we are bound to agree with everything he wrote about it. It certainly doesn't mean that everything he wrote about it can be taken at face value and here as everywhere in Kierkegaard we have to make allowances for the various tones of his authorship, ranging from irony through polemics to edification and prayer, so that what is said in the context of polemics has to be set against what is said in the context of edification, and so on. Nevertheless, I think we can conclude that so far from Kierkegaardian religion being first and foremost a matter of fear and trembling it is more essentially a kind of religiosity in which love has the central and decisive place.

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<sup>7</sup> This is the argument of Sharon Krishek in her *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2009).

In an early journal entry from February 1839, long before his main authorship began,<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard wrote ‘Fear and trembling (cf. Phil 2:12) is not the primus motor in the Christian life, for that is love; but it is what the balance is in a clock – it keeps the Christian life ticking’.<sup>9</sup> Given the importance that fear and trembling—both the phrase and the book—has acquired in secondary literature on Kierkegaard this entry merits being underlined three times in red and kept constantly in mind—especially when we are reading what we might call the darker passages of both the published work and the journals. As if to testify that Kierkegaard himself did not forget what he had written in 1839, *Fear and Trembling* itself was published on the same day as two other works. One was another pseudonymous book, *Repetition*, and the other a collection of three up-building discourses, two of which are dedicated to the text of 1 Peter 4:8, ‘Love covers a multitude of sins’.<sup>10</sup> The first of these, which is also the first in the collection as a whole, opens with a veritable hymn to love in which he masterfully weaves a string of subtle allusions to scripture (and, for that matter, to Shakespeare) into a single, sustained celebration of love comparable to Paul’s eulogy of love in 1 Corinthians 13 (to which it also alludes). I shall quote it now at length so that the reader can feel something of the force of this remarkable passage, which deserves to be much more widely known than it is.

What is it that makes a person great, admirable amongst creatures, and well-pleasing in God’s eyes? What is it that makes a person strong, stronger than the whole world or so weak as to be weaker than a child? What is it that makes a person firm, firmer than a cliff or yet so soft as to be softer than wax? It is love. What is older than everything? It is love. What is it that outlives everything? It is

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<sup>8</sup> *Either/Or* was published in 1843. Before that he had published only his master’s thesis (*On the Concept of Irony*), a pamphlet about a novel by H. C. Andersen, and several short newspaper articles.

<sup>9</sup> From N. J. Cappelørn et al. (eds.), *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) entry EE 25, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard would return to this text in the penultimate upbuilding discourses he published in 1851, ‘Two Discourses at the Communion on Friday’ of which he said that it marked the ‘decisive place of rest’ for his entire authorship, namely, at the foot of the altar (S. Kierkegaard, tr. H. V. and E. H. Hong, *Without Authority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 165).

love. What is it that cannot be taken away but itself takes it all? It is love. What is it that cannot be given, but itself gives everything? It is love. What is it that stands fast when everything falters? It is love. What is it that comforts, when other comforts fail? It is love. What is it that remains, when everything is changed? It is love. What is it that abides when what is imperfect is done away with? It is love. What is it that bears witness when prophecy is dumb? It is love. What is it that does not cease when visions come to an end? It is love. What is it that makes everything clear when the dark saying has been spoken? It is love. What is it that bestows a blessing on the excess of the gift? It is love. What is it that gives pith to the angel's speech? It is love. What is it that makes the widow's mite more than enough? It is love. What is it that makes the speech of the simple person wise? It is love. What is it that never alters, even if all things alter? It is love.<sup>11</sup>

Here, then, we have powerful evidence that Kierkegaard had not forgotten what he wrote four years earlier: that love has priority over fear and trembling in the Christian life. As if to make the point even more clearly, the discourses contain a significant discussion of Abraham, who (as is well known) is the main focus of *Fear and Trembling* itself. In *Fear and Trembling* it was God's call to sacrifice Isaac that provided a constant point of reference and Abraham is studied there chiefly with regard to his readiness to submit to God's command whilst also believing that God's promise of progeny would nevertheless still be fulfilled. Here in the discourse on love, however, it is the story of how Abraham prayed to God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as long as there remained a few righteous people living in them. Whereas the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* is taken as exemplifying a heroic and almost superhuman faith that can both sacrifice everything and simultaneously believe everything—a knight of faith, as Kierkegaard puts it—the Abraham

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<sup>11</sup> This and following extracts from the discourses are from the selection George Pattison, ed. and tr., *Kierkegaard's Spiritual Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 227. Further references will be given as KSW in the text. Several of the quotations I shall offer in what follows are sometimes rather longer than is usual in articles of this kind. However, I believe that it is important for us to hear Kierkegaard in his own words in relation to texts that are not as well known as some of his other works and where his views are so often subject to misrepresentation.

who appears in the discourse is an Abraham who, in his own way, exemplifies Peter's conviction that 'love covers a multitude of sins'. This is what Kierkegaard says:

When Abraham spoke privately with the Lord and prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah, didn't he then hide a multitude of sins? Or is the person who says that this prayer actually served as a reminder of a multitude of sins to be praised for their acuity? Such a one might say that Abraham's prayer hastened the judgment, just as his own life was already a judgment which, if it had any power to make a difference, would have made the judgment all the more fearful? But how did Abraham pray? Let us put it in human terms. Wasn't it as if he drew the Lord into his thought processes, bringing the Lord to forget the multitude of sins by counting the number of the righteous, whether there were fifty, forty, thirty, twenty or just ten innocent people? Didn't Abraham then hide a multitude of sins? (KSW PP. 240-1)<sup>12</sup>

If Abraham thus emerges as a kind of prototype of Christian love as well as a 'father of faith', Kierkegaard nevertheless goes on to ask 'Yet who was Abraham in comparison with an apostle [in this case Peter, author of the text under discussion] and what was his free-spiritedness in comparison with an apostle's?' (KSW, P. 241) How could he say more clearly that the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* was far from being the perfect exemplar of what Christian faith is really about? Nevertheless, generations of Kierkegaard commentators have focused almost exclusively on *Fear and Trembling* and few appear even to have read the discourses on love, let alone taken their message as significant for how we interpret the more famous pseudonymous books. Famously, Kierkegaard himself would later say that his pseudonymous books were the works of his left hand and the upbuilding discourses were the works of his right hand—but that the world took with its right hand what he offered with his left and with its left what he offered with its right: in other words, the reading public got the relationship between the two groups of writings entirely

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<sup>12</sup> In a critical discussion of Kierkegaard, Levinas says entirely mistakenly, that Kierkegaard only knew of the Abraham who was prepared to sacrifice Isaac and didn't seem to know about the Abraham who interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah—which simply shows that great philosophers are not always great readers of texts.



back to front and we might add that generations of scholars have followed in their train.<sup>13</sup>

Kierkegaard's practice of publishing these works of his right hand in small collections coinciding with or coming shortly after his pseudonymous works continued from 1843 to 1851. As has been noted, he regarded James 1. 17 ('Every good and perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights in whom is no change or shadow of turning') as his favourite text, and several of them take up this theme. Another large group is constituted by the discourses briefly mentioned above that deal with Christ's injunction to consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air (in fact he writes a total of fifteen discourses on this theme, emphasizing human beings' infinite and absolute dependence on God as creator). A third large group relates precisely to the topic we are now considering: love. In addition to the two discourses in the collection from 1843, discourses emphasizing the theme of love include, of course, *Works of Love* itself, which is composed of a set of discourse-like 'reflections', and a number of the later discourses written specifically for a Friday-morning communion service of a penitential character that Kierkegaard especially liked to attend (and two of these were, in fact, delivered by him in a liturgical context).

*Works of Love* has been amongst the most discussed of Kierkegaard's writings in recent years, and rightly so.<sup>14</sup> I shall come back to it at the end of this article, but I shall not be taking it as my main focus. *Works of Love* is, at its heart, a deeply Christological work (as is witnessed by the prayer with which it opens), but, on its surface, it occupies itself largely with the meaning of love in relationships between human beings. In any case, in order to explore more directly the dynamics of love in the God-relationship that, for the Christian Søren Kierkegaard, are also determinative for relationships between human beings (or, more precisely, an

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<sup>13</sup> For discussion see George Pattison, 'Kierkegaard's Hands' in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Point of View* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), pp. 104-16.

<sup>14</sup> These include Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving. A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also the previously mentioned works by Hall and Krishek.



inseparable dimension of such relationships), I shall move now to the later communion discourses and to one particular theme in them. As has been said, Kierkegaard returns in these to the text of 1 Peter 4:8, but he also gives special prominence to the story of the sinful woman who, according to Luke 7, burst in on a feast being given for Jesus in the house of a Pharisee called Simon, fell at his feet, anointing them, and washing them with her hair. When Jesus is reproached by Simon for allowing himself to be touched by such an unclean person, the passage continues:

And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, Teacher?" "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." (Luke 7:40-48)

This scene—this woman—becomes a central trope in Kierkegaard's exploration of the meaning of love and, in several discourses, there is significant interaction between Jesus's words that 'her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much' and the teaching of 1 Peter 4:8 that 'love covers a multitude of sins'. In fact, she already makes her appearance in the second of the two discourses on 'Love hides a multitude of sins' from 1843, so let us hear how Kierkegaard introduces her into his authorship.

When Jesus was one day sitting at table in the house of a Pharisee, a woman came into the house. A woman would not be invited to such a dinner, this one least of all—for the Pharisees knew that she was a sinner. If nothing else had been able to terrify her and stop her in her tracks, the Pharisees' proud contempt, their silent ill-will, their righteous indignation might well have frightened her off:

‘But she stood behind Jesus at his feet, weeping, and began to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair, to kiss his feet and anoint them with ointment’. There was a moment of anxiety—but what she suffered in solitude, her grief, the accusation in her own breast, was yet more terrifying. It was easy to see, because it was in agreement with what could be seen in the Pharisees’ expressions. And yet she went on and, as she moved against the foe she moved herself to peace—and when she had found rest at Christ’s feet, she lost herself in love’s work. As she wept over it all, she finally forgot what she had been weeping about at the beginning and her tears of repentance turned to tears of adoration. Her many sins were forgiven because she loved much. (KSW, p. 251)

Kierkegaard introduces this story with a reference to a hymn by one of the great Danish hymn-writers of the Pietistic tradition, H. A. Brorson, quoting the line ‘through the darts of sin to the rest of paradise’. The implied image is that of the sinful soul, expelled from Eden, but nevertheless, fighting its way back to the lost paradise of a life with God, undeterred by the arrows fired at it by Satan who is doing his best to prevent this happening. Satan, however, is powerless against those ‘pure spirits’ who contemptuously tread down worldly joys and are ready to forsake these to be ‘kissed, adorned and torn from worldly pleasures’ by God. Kierkegaard sees the accusatory glances of the Pharisees as the Satanic arrows aimed at preventing her from rediscovering the God-relationship she had lost through sin, but, lost in ‘love’s work’, she seems almost not to notice them. He also lays a special emphasis on her tears. In commenting on the story he continues:

There have been those who, having wasted their lives in the service of pleasure, finally lost themselves and scarcely knew themselves any more. This is the devious and dreadful deceit of pleasure—that it brings about self-deception, leaving only a light-minded, transient sense of one’s own existence, presuming to deceive God’s own knowledge of the creature. But this woman was granted the grace of, as it were, weeping herself out of herself and weeping herself into love’s repose—for much is forgiven those who love much. And this is love’s blessed deceit, ‘that the one who is forgiven much, loves much’, as if to need forgiving for much was an expression of love’s perfection. (KSW, p. 251)

The unwillingness of those who are lost ‘in the service of pleasure’ to weep over their sins is precisely what keeps them in the grip of their bad habits and wrong ways of life. Of course, in modern Western

culture, weeping is seen as something characteristically feminine, and Kierkegaard senses that this particular sinner is somehow better-placed to weep herself out of herself and into love's repose than many men. In a later discourse, he will connect this with what he sees as another female trait, the ability to keep silent. Of course, many people see 'weeping' as something noisy and disruptive, but what Kierkegaard emphasizes is how weeping is a form of expression that is without words. In *The Diary of the Seducer*, Johannes the Seducer describes woman as being-for-another, by which, of course, he means that women exist in order to be enjoyed by seducers such as himself.<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard himself seems to take this seriously, but in another sense, namely, that it is precisely because of her disposition to be-for-another that woman is better placed than a man to relate to God in the mode most appropriate to the God-relationship: love. Weeping, silence, and being-for-another, then become the distinctively 'female' attributes that are needed if, starting from where we are, in the midst of 'a multitude of sins', we are to experience and express the love of God. This is how Kierkegaard puts it in an up-building discourse published on its own in 1850 and, again, dedicated to the sinful woman of Luke 7.

That a woman is portrayed as a teacher or as an exemplar of devotion will surprise no one who knows that devotion or godliness is essentially womanly. Even if 'women are to keep silent in the assembly' and in that respect should not teach, keeping silent before God is precisely a characteristic of true godliness and this, then, is what you are to learn from this woman. It is therefore from a woman that you also learn a faith that is humble in relation to the extraordinary, a humble faith that does not unbelievably or doubtfully ask 'Why?' 'What for?' or 'How is it possible?' but humbly believes as Mary did when she said 'Behold, I am the Lord's handmaiden'. She *said* it but, take note, to say it is really to keep silent. It is from a woman that you learn the right way to listen to the Word: from Mary, who, although she 'did not understand what was said to her', nevertheless 'kept all these words in her heart'. She

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<sup>15</sup> See S. Kierkegaard, tr. E. H. and H. V. Hong, *Either/Or I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 430-1. This is note by Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex*, tr. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 175.

didn't begin by demanding to have it explained but silently kept the Word in the right place, for it is in the right place when the Word, the good seed, 'is preserved in a holy and honest heart'. It is from a woman that you learn the quiet, deep, godly sorrow that keeps silent before God: from Mary, for, although it did indeed happen as had been prophesied that a sword pierced her heart, she despaired neither at the prophesy nor at what happened. It is from a woman you learn how to care for the one thing needful: from Mary, Lazarus's sister, who silently sat at Christ's feet with what her heart had chosen, namely, the one thing needful. You can similarly learn from a woman how to sorrow rightly over sin, from the sinful woman, whose sins have long, long since ceased to be and have been forgotten but who is herself eternally unforgettable. How could it be otherwise than that one should learn from a woman in this matter? For in comparison with women, men have many thoughts, although it is questionable whether in this regard it is entirely to their advantage, since they also have many half-thoughts in addition. Men are certainly stronger than the weaker sex, than women, and are better equipped for fending for themselves, but, once again, woman has just one thing: one thing—yes, it is precisely this that is her element: oneness. She has one wish, not many wishes—no, just one wish, but she has committed herself entirely to it. She has one thought, not many thoughts—no, just one thought but, thanks to the power of passion it is prodigiously powerful. She has one sorrow, not many sorrows—no, just one sorrow, but it lies so deep that just this one sorrow is indeed infinitely greater than many; just one sorrow, but one that is also so deeply internalized: sorrow over her sin, for she is a sinful woman. (KSW, pp. 255-6)

Now, of course, Kierkegaard by no means intends to say that men too should not weep, should not be silent, should not focus their entire being on the need to find forgiveness. On the contrary, it is the burden of his religious writings that they should indeed do these things and just as the sinful woman found repose weeping at the feet of the Saviour so too should all of us, men and women, do likewise. In the very specific context of the Friday communion service this meant (to use an expression we have heard Kierkegaard use of his authorship as a whole) coming to rest 'at the foot of the altar', that is ready, open, and prepared to receive Christ in the form of the sacramental bread

and wine. In the discourse from which I have just quoted Kierkegaard in fact goes on to make just this link between the scene depicted by Luke and the sacramental life of the Church. Having over several pages eloquently portrayed her silent humility, sitting at the feet of the Saviour, weeping, and washing his feet with her hair, listening to the men talking about her almost as if she wasn't there, Kierkegaard then adds that we now have a comfort that even she didn't have. Of course, many of us would say how fortunate she was to actually here Jesus himself, in the flesh, speak these words of forgiveness. How much more convincing, we might think, than when they are spoken by a priest or evangelist! But, Kierkegaard asks 'when is it easiest to believe it and when is the comfort greatest: when the lover says 'I will do it' or when he has done it?' (KSW 268) What does he mean? Simply this: that for Christians the ultimate assurance of forgiveness rests in the belief that Christ died for our sins and that it is in his death that our redemption from sin is definitively secured. Unlike the woman, therefore, we have the assurance not only that Christ, in his lifetime, spoke of the forgiveness of sins but that was also prepared to go the whole way and also to die for them. As he continues, 'it is only when he has done it that doubt is impossible, as impossible as can possibly be, and it is only when Christ has been sacrificed as the atoning sacrifice that there is a comfort that makes it impossible to doubt the forgiveness of sins, as impossible as can possibly be, for it is a comfort that is only given those who believe' (KSW, p. 268). Here, Kierkegaard invokes a conventional Christian and perhaps especially Protestant rhetoric of atoning sacrifice, redemption, and faith—but note that the whole situation is set up precisely as a kind of love-scene and it is no coincidence that the analogy he draws in making this point (namely, that we have a comfort she didn't have) is the analogy of lovers' promises.

Kierkegaard himself seems aware that some of the moves he is making here may seem unusual in a Protestant perspective. In a further discourse on Luke 7:47, 'One who is forgiven little loves little', he considers the possible implication that it is in fact how we human beings love that determines whether or not we get forgiveness. His response is as follows:

But doesn't this then mean that the forgiveness of sins is *earned*, if not by works then by love? When it is said that the one who is

forgiven little, loves little, doesn't it mean that it is love that decides whether one's sins are to be forgiven and to what extent? And doesn't that mean that the forgiveness of sins is *earned*? No it does not. Earlier in the same gospel passage (at the end of verse 42), Christ talks about two debtors, of whom one owed a lot, the other a little. Both were forgiven and so, he asks, which of the two ought to love the most? And the answer is, the one to whom much was forgiven. Now, look closely, and see how we have not come into the unhappy regions of merit but how everything remains within love. When you love much, much is forgiven you—and when much is forgiven you, you love much. Look, this is how salvation blessedly recurs in love! First, you love much and much is forgiven you—and, Oh, look how love grows even stronger and how the fact that so much has been forgiven you loves forth love again and you love much because much has been forgiven you! (KSW, p. 287)

Now this might not entirely satisfy an ultra-Augustinian. Clearly, Kierkegaard does not want to regard 'love' as a kind of 'work'. It is not a merit on our part but is interconnected with our sense of gratitude and joy at forgiveness received: yet the ability to receive forgiveness is itself in some sense conditioned or at least strengthened by our willingness to love. The one who is not willing to open his or her heart in love will not be able to receive the forgiveness that is offered. The theme of 'appropriation' runs through Kierkegaard's entire authorship, emphasizing that it is not enough to believe in the 'correct' doctrines but these doctrines must become a reality in the believer's heart and life, they must be lived, subjectively, passionately, existentially, we may say. We must realize that our own lives and our existence itself are at stake in how we respond to the gift that God is offering. Of course, Kierkegaard too insists—and uses the sinful woman of Luke 7 to illustrate—that in relation to God we can do nothing, nothing but sit and weep. Yet that sitting and weeping is, in its way, a kind of preparation, and for human beings caught up in the pride and passion of the world, becoming nothing is not so easy. As in Brorson's hymn, it is a state to which we have to fight our way against fearsome opposition—and images of struggle and warfare also play an important role in many discourses. In short, because it is love we are talking about, what is important is precisely a relationship. Faith is not something we have or something that God gives us. Faith

arises in the context of a God-relationship and, for Kierkegaard, what makes it possible for faith to arise is, simply, love.

If Kierkegaard's emphasis on the necessity of there being love on the part of the human being who is to receive forgiveness might draw suspicious looks from some sections of the Protestant world, he is also somewhat un-Protestant in his emphasis on the sacrament. In a further discourse on 1 Peter 4:8 he makes the following remarkable statement:

This is what is proclaimed at the altar. From the pulpit it is essentially His life that is proclaimed, but at the altar it is His death. He died once for the whole world and for our sins. His death is not repeated, but *this* is repeated: that he also died for you, you who, in his body and blood receive the pledge that he also died for you, there, at the altar, where he gives *himself* to you as a hiding-place. (KSW, p. 296)

The believer who comes to the altar and receives the sacrament of forgiveness receives Christ himself and there, at the foot of the altar, essentially repeats the sinful woman's 'action' in sitting, weeping, and doing nothing but lose herself in hope and confidence in his love. Love, more than faith, is the 'primus motor', that moves us and makes us able to receive forgiveness. This is especially clear in one of the very last discourses, where Kierkegaard takes note of use of the present tense in the saying 'One who is forgiven little, loves little'. He writes:

For [the saying] does not say that those who are forgiven little *loved* little. No, it says, they *love* little. Oh, when justice judges, it makes a reckoning, it draws a conclusion that takes into account all that is past and says, 'He loved little'. In saying that, it declares that the matter is once and for all decided: we two must part and have nothing more in common. The saying, the word of love, says on the contrary that those who are forgiven little, love little. They love little. They *love*—that is to say, that is how it is now, now in this moment. Love says no more than this. Infinite love, how true you are to yourself even in your smallest utterance. They love little now, in this 'Now'. But what is the now, what is the moment? Quickly, quickly, it passes and now, in the next moment, now everything has changed—now they love and, even if it is not yet much, they are trying to love much. Now everything has changed, only not 'Love'. (KSW, pp. 286-7)



The moment in which we begin to love is the moment when forgiveness becomes possible. But what are the implications of this ‘religious’ love for the rest of our lives? Couldn’t everything that we have been reading about the sinful woman sitting silently at the feet of the Saviour be seen as an example of what we heard Buber complain about, namely, that while Kierkegaard may have known, and perhaps known much, about the love of God, his understanding of this involves turning our back on the world and on the complexity and demand of human relationships. I shall in conclusion make two brief points.

The first is that the word of forgiveness, given and received in love, affects the healing and integration of the self. In a famous passage at the beginning of *The Sickness unto Death* (a work written at the same time as the discourses we have been considering in these last pages), Kierkegaard portrays the self not as a kind of compact atom but as a complex of internal relationships that is grounded in what he there calls, ‘the power that posits it’, namely, God.<sup>16</sup> When the self falls away from this God-relationship or ceases to be aware of how it depends on it, it becomes vulnerable to multiple internal fissures and the polarities that define it start to fall apart. Caught in up the process of disintegration it becomes incapable of willing to be a self at all (what Kierkegaard calls the despair of weakness) or else it identifies itself with an isolated element of itself at the expense of its wholeness, e.g., its intellectuality at the expense of its emotional life or vice versa, and refuses to acknowledge its need for re-integration (what Kierkegaard calls the despair of defiance). This is the essence of despair which, as Kierkegaard makes clear, is, simply, the state of sin. Putting it another way, we may say that despair is, ultimately, a matter of self-hatred. But it is this that the love of God—our love for God and knowing ourselves to be loved by God—overcomes. In a searing passage in one of the late discourses, Kierkegaard very unusually addresses himself in the first person not to his readers but to Christ and, in doing so, reveals both the depths of his own self-hatred and yet also his faith in the love of Christ as able to overwhelm him and, so to speak, protect him from himself:

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<sup>16</sup> S. Kierkegaard, tr. H. V. and E. H. Hong, *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 13-4.

And therefore, my Lord and Savior, You, whose love hides a multitude of sins, when I feel my sin and the multitude of my sins as I should and when heaven's righteousness is served only by the wrath that rests upon me and on my life, when there is only one person on earth I hate and despise, one person whom I would fly to the world's end to avoid, and that is myself—then I will not begin so as to begin in vain and in such a way as would only lead either deeper into despair or to madness, but I will flee at once to you, and you will not deny me the hiding-place you have lovingly offered to all. You will tear me from the inquisitorial eye of righteousness and save me from that person and from the memories with which he torments me. You will help me to dare remain in my hiding-place, forgotten by righteousness and by that person I despise, by my becoming a changed, another, a better person. (KSW, p. 297)

Here we are reminded again of the accusing glances that the Pharisees direct at the sinful woman as she makes her way towards Christ. Only what Kierkegaard now makes even clearer than in the first discourse where she makes her appearance is that these accusatory glances essentially originate in our own self-judgement and self-hatred. Therefore the first effect of love is simply what Paul Tillich called the 'courage to accept acceptance' and, on that basis, to find the courage to be who we really are and, as such, to be made ready and capable for the work we have to do in the world.

And what is that work? It is, of course, the work—and works—of love. Here we may note that the very title of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* indicates that love is not just a matter of inward sentiment, but something we have to *do*. Now it is certainly true that throughout that book he lays great emphasis on intention, on doing what we do for the right motive, on doing it in love and for love. But there is also always something to *do*. In order to show how inextricable both sides—intention and doing—really are Kierkegaard retells the story of the Good Samaritan. He asks: What if the Good Samaritan had not had anything with which to bind up the wounds of the man attacked by robbers? What if he had not had an ass on which to place him but had carried him as best he could on his shoulders? What if he had no money and the innkeeper would not take him in? What if the man had died in his hands? 'Would he not then have been as merciful, just as

merciful as that [other] good Samaritan?’<sup>17</sup> Or else, what if there had been two men together who had been attacked and robbed, and whilst one of them could do nothing but lie there and groan, ‘the other forgot or overcame his own suffering in order to speak a mild or friendly word, or ... struggled to where he could get a refreshing drink for the other, or, if both of them had been rendered speechless, one of them nevertheless sighed silently in prayer for the other’<sup>18</sup>—wouldn’t this be an act of mercy? Good intention is necessary if we are to consider an action ‘good’, and is fundamentally more important than securing good outcomes. As it stands the parable of the Good Samaritan has a happy ending but, Kierkegaard suggests, the Samaritan would have been just as praiseworthy if he hadn’t been able to persuade the innkeeper to take him in or if the man has died in his hands. Yet in any case, he will have *done* something. Similarly with the two wounded men. Perhaps all that the one who is motivated by mercy can do is to say a comforting word, but if that really is all he can do, he will nevertheless do it. And in the extreme case that he is physically incapable of doing anything, he will nevertheless pray—but, versus such critics as Løgstrup and Adorno, Kierkegaard only adduces such an extreme case in order to underline the point that there is always something, no matter how little, we can be doing and ought to be doing for our fellow human beings.

In this brief survey of Kierkegaard’s view of love we have inevitably omitted a great deal. I hope nevertheless to have done enough to suggest that we still have much to learn from Kierkegaard in this matter and that he merits being considered one of the great modern contributors to the Christian theology of love.



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<sup>17</sup> S. Kierkegaard, tr. H. V. and E. H. Hong, *Works of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1995), p. 317.

<sup>18</sup> *Works of Love*, p. 324.