

The Spirituality of Love: Kierkegaard on Faith's Transforming Power

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As the quiet lake is fed deep down by the flow of hidden springs, which no eye sees, so a human being's love is grounded, still more deeply, in God's love. If there were no spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither a little lake nor a man's love. As the still waters begin obscurely in the deep spring, so a man's love mysteriously begins in God's love.¹

When I was Truman Madsen's philosophy student back in the early 1960s, debates were not uncommon on campus between teachers of note, usually from BYU or the University of Utah. One of the issues raised in one of these debates—I cannot remember whether the setting was large and public or small and informal—was this: Do we need to love God before we can love our fellowmen, or must we love our fellows first? Or is it even possible to love the one without loving the other? At the time it seemed a significant issue. A few persuasive people in the Latter-day Saint community, like legions in the culture beyond, were bent on secularizing religious doctrine (the term used then was *humanizing*) and argued that our horizontal relationships with others underpin our vertical relationship with God. And, perhaps backed into a position more extreme than they otherwise might have chosen, those who felt uncomfortable with this kind of revisionism found themselves arguing that the God-relation must come first; everything else depended on it. God had commanded both kinds of love, vertical and horizontal; none of the parties to the debate challenged that. But was one of these relationships somehow more basic than the other? More to the point, who should come first in our life—God or others?

On this and a number of other issues, I made little advance until I read Søren Kierkegaard.² This Danish contemporary of Joseph Smith must be considered one of the few bona fide geniuses in the Western philosophical tradition who have lent their intellects without reserve to the service of God and their fellowmen. At least in my way of reading him, he sought in virtually every waking moment of his productive life to make the message of the scriptures and its personal and social implications effective for himself and in the lives of his readers, and, unlike many other religious voices, he never sought to soften his message to make it inoffensive to human reason.

Though he said himself that he held no authority,³ and he did not, the voluminous writings of his short lifetime—he lived to age forty-two and published about twenty-seven books—repeatedly illuminate the scriptures in ways that are, to my mind, harmonious with Joseph Smith's teachings to a remarkable extent and are often helpful for understanding them. And like the words we have from the Prophet himself, Kierkegaard's ideas incisively expose the weaknesses of the philosophical, theological, and psychological tradition he inherited. Many of these ideas, often distorted by having been torn from their religious context, play crucial roles in the work of some of the central figures of twentieth-century thought—Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre being among the most noteworthy.⁴ His position on the question about whether love of God or love of other human beings comes first is one of his numerous psychological teachings that are both firmly rooted in his faith and insufficiently appreciated by the powerful intellects who have drawn on his work for their own purposes.

Kierkegaard's position on love of others and love of God (which for him is tantamount to faith) is rooted in his unusual idea of what it means to be a self. According to this idea, the self is not an entity of any kind but an active relating to others—not a "thing" but an activity. Each individual determines the kind of self he will be, Kierkegaard says, by the way he relates to others. In this paper I first sketch this relational idea of the self and then show how, according to Kierkegaard, the self is deepened when its fundamental relationship is with God, and deepened to the

greatest extent when that relationship is with Christ. After that I demonstrate how this conception of the self leads inevitably to his views about love of fellowmen. We will discover that, for Kierkegaard, faith must be first in our personal priorities; yet he insists that, properly understood, faith and love are equally basic and indeed are one and the same thing.

Much of what I present diverges from how Kierkegaard has been commonly understood. Indeed, widespread acceptance of misconceptions of what he thought about selfhood, faith, and love have, at least until recently, kept the world in ignorance of what I believe to be his most important ideas. I discuss some of these traditional misconceptions and then try to clear them up, partly with insights drawn from recent scholars as eager as I am to rectify past misinterpretations and partly with observations of my own.⁵

This paper assumes no prior familiarity with Kierkegaard on the reader's part. It tries to illuminate the issue at hand by connecting ideas broadly developed in various parts of Kierkegaard's writings, rather than by a close textual analysis that would be accessible only to scholars.

Kierkegaard's Conception of Selfhood

Kierkegaard's most direct and famous formulation of what it means to be a human self opens the brilliant little book, *The Sickness unto Death*.⁶ Though this formulation has proven a frustration to many readers, I shall try to express its basic idea without relying too heavily on Kierkegaard's technical terminology. He says, in effect, that a human being becomes a self just insofar as he becomes reflectively thoughtful about his existence. He calls this reflective thoughtfulness "inwardness." (Some social psychologists call it, or at least part of it, being aware and critical of oneself and, by this means, able to control one's conduct.) We individually achieve this inwardness or self-consciousness by adopting categories for organizing experience and standards for guiding our conduct that are supplied by another or others. We become the selves we are by making others' ways of being our own and regulating our thoughts and actions accordingly.

Thus we are guided by and measure ourselves against the largely unquestioned, sovereign expectations of our society of origin. In Kierkegaard's way of speaking, we are "before" such beings;⁷ we might say we "live before them," or "under their eye." We define ourselves in terms of the criterion of selfhood they have given us and direct ourselves toward ends that we learn from them. Moreover—and this is a crucial point—each of us is a self of greater or lesser depth depending on the nature of the being or beings we take as our criterion; we will be as shallow as cattle, Kierkegaard quips, if we have taken cattle as our criterion of selfhood. "Everything is qualitatively whatever it is measured by."⁸ This means that, though as physical organisms we may stand separate from and exist independently of each other, as selves or spirits we do not. We are none of us complete in ourselves. We are instead relational, mediated beings profoundly connected to those we measure ourselves by.

Kierkegaard introduces this point in *Sickness unto Death* with these words (be warned that many have found this formulation incomprehensible): the self emerges only insofar as it "relates to itself, and in relating to itself relates to something else."⁹ We can capture part of what this means as follows: The self exists in being conscious of itself and achieves this consciousness of self by being conscious of another; prior to attaining this consciousness, one is not yet a self. Thus consciousness of another plays a *constitutive* role in the establishment of the self. For that reason, Kierkegaard calls this other before which the individual lives "the power that established" that individual's self.¹⁰

So which being or beings an individual lives before and takes as his measure makes the most profound difference in the nature of his selfhood. If he lives before society, he inevitably uses the way the crowd or mass of men behaves to justify his own behavior and thus evades responsibility for himself. In Merold Westphal's clarifying formulation, if the power before which he lives is society, then it is not only society's voice to which he responds; it

is also society's voice *with* which he responds.¹¹ The measures of legitimacy and worth by which the others in society aspire, admire, envy, distinguish, judge, and rank themselves become his own measures. Hence, by means of this undeliberated and unnoticed process of adopting the socially prevailing ways of being as his own, Kierkegaard says, he evades responsibility for the person he thereby becomes and effectively assimilates himself into the crowd, the mass of humanity. He pawns himself out to the world, "as exchangeable as a coin of the realm."¹²

Furthermore, because "getting ahead" and distinguishing himself according to the prevailing standards is honored by his people, he is enjoined by them to take command of himself, set his goals, and make something of himself. But again, says Kierkegaard, to the extent that he does this he paradoxically loses hold of himself. In his efforts to preside over his own well-being in self-sufficiency and make something worthwhile of himself, as society teaches him to do, he flees responsibility for himself. He takes himself to be listening to his own voice and asserting his own identity and freedom when in fact he is not speaking for himself as an individual truly responsible for himself. Instead, he is doing and saying the sorts of things that have been given him by birth and by upbringing to do and say. No matter how decisively he tries to take charge of himself, so long as he lives before society, he cannot find a voice of his own in which to declare who and how he shall be.

At some point, perhaps as early as emergence from childhood, a person may make God his establishing power. Living before God uniquely enables him, as an individual, to "come to himself." In this context, the counterpart of the point I made about the identity of the secular person's voice and the voice of society is this: If a person lives before God rather than before society, then the voice *to which* he responds is the voice of God, and the voice *with which* he responds is his own. In one way it is God's voice, to be sure, for by yielding to him the person becomes God's instrument. But at the same time, he also becomes truly himself. For only in this way does he gain his identity as a being free to act independently of concerns about measuring up, fears of others' opinions, and petty likes and dislikes that would drive him if his entire compass of concern were limited to his comparative and competitive relationships with other human beings. In Timothy Jackson's words, "True omnipotence and omnibenevolence [when acknowledged and accepted in faith] generate freedom in creatures, not necessity or servile dependency."¹³ True omnipotence and omnibenevolence offer liberation from the idea that we can and ought to preside autonomously over ourselves. Again, and paradoxically, we act freely only insofar as, before God, we give up trying to be in charge of ourselves—for the alternative, which is resistance to God, amounts to nothing more than self-deceived submission to the silent control of the crowd.

The Condescension of Christ

Ponder for a moment the situation in which the members of society each live before society. Here, each individual seeks to qualify by measures generally accepted by all and passes on to others (most especially his or her children) the measures by which they, too, are to become acceptable. Into this setting of worldly concerns comes the God-man, Jesus Christ. He comes to offer us, who are members of human society, liberation from the deception, inauthenticity, and despair of our worldly ways. Though patently capable of exceeding *any* of us in *any* of the measures by which we assess and rank one another, "He the almighty who can do all things" gives these measures no allegiance whatsoever, but "in love sacrifices all things."¹⁴ He consorts with those whom we have labeled deficient—the diseased, the blue-collared, the uncool, and the uncouth—and in so doing he presents himself as a living reproach to everything from which we have drawn our sense of identity, importance, and legitimacy. He does this not only by what he says, but by how he *is*—"with the silent and veracious eloquence of deeds."¹⁵ He, the loftiest of all, offers himself to us in a manner that we inevitably label the lowliest of all, and this lays bare the emptiness, the impotence, the selfishness, and the blindness of all our strategies to manage and make something of ourselves.¹⁶

How do we react when we encounter this Being who is at once the loftiest and the lowliest of all? In one of two ways, and we decide which. We may respond by accepting and seeking to emulate his example, which means

sacrificing our self-importance and renouncing the sense of ourselves we have obtained from society. Or we may refuse to make this sacrifice and renunciation, in which case his example will strike us as offensive. He will then stand as a reproach to our worldly achievements and status and consolations. In either case, he confronts us as an *occasion* for offense, and we choose whether we will take offense or not.

I have already mentioned one of the reasons so many of us readily find him offensive. We have drawn from the world a false identity and placed our hopes in protecting and promoting it. Christ extends to us an invitation that requires us to leave behind this false identity or role,¹⁷ as if he were at one and the same time calling us near and pushing us away—calling the self we can become by following him, and pushing away the self we are now choosing to be. It is as if Christ were saying (in the words of Virgil, which Kierkegaard quotes in the epigram to *Training in Christianity*), “Away, away, O unhallowed ones.”¹⁸

Besides serving as a reproach to our worldly ways, Christ is an occasion for offense for at least two other reasons. One is that he comes offering us forgiveness for the sins that we, in our self-absorption and competitiveness, have committed against one another and against him.¹⁹ Obviously, to receive this gift of forgiveness, we must acknowledge being in the wrong before him.²⁰ Accepting an offer of liberation from bondage requires recognizing that bondage and forswearing whatever we are doing to keep ourselves in bondage. To paraphrase Paul, when the commandment comes, our naive self-absorption turns into sin (see Romans 7:9)—sin that we must repent of and forsake.

A third reason why he comes among us as an occasion for offense is this: His invitation to walk with him in lowliness asks us to become, with him, a reproach to the pride and selfishness of our fellows and to be willing to suffer their wrath and persecution, just as he has done. Thus it comes about that, humanly speaking, the invitation can feel both like a condemnation from him and a requirement to undergo the condemnation of the world. “The reward for his love is to be hated.”²¹ Though from the divine point of view, what the invitation offers is salvation itself—we discover this if we accept the invitation—most of us find it offensive.

Kierkegaard does not try to hide his amazement at the love expressed in the God-man’s redemptive rescue mission, which an angel speaking to Nephi called “the condescension of God” (1Nephi 11:16). Such love! exclaims Kierkegaard, that subjects itself to rejection and scorn and suffering at the hands of the beloved in order to bring that very beloved a chance for liberation and peace!²² In the period of the later authorship when he produced the works from which I am mainly drawing the ideas of this paper, Kierkegaard meditated often in the Church of Our Lady, which was only five minutes’ walk from where he lived much of that time. In that church Thorvaldsen’s recently installed *Christus* stood before Kierkegaard’s contemplative gaze, with the scars clearly visible in his hands, feet, and side, and with the invitation to “come unto me” (Matthew 11:28) inscribed below.

How Love Springs from Faith

I have outlined Kierkegaard’s reverent studies of Christ’s invitation because it is by response to that invitation that we can become lovers of our neighbor. If we accept the invitation, which means following and emulating him in our own daily walk, we obtain the freedom from self-absorption and develop the depth of soul that love requires. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard takes great pains to explain why this must be so. In “You Shall Love Your *Neighbour*,”²³ one of the discourses in that book, he analyzes the way in which what we humanly call love untouched by faith (whether erotic love or love between friends) is attracted to the qualities of the beloved and is therefore based on our preferences. This makes merely human love self-serving. To see this, imagine that you know a certain individual who possesses characteristics toward which you are drawn; she might, for example, be lively, appreciative, or affectionate, and she might reciprocate your interest in her, which fills deep needs in you. Having the companion you prefer and obtaining fulfillment of your need for what she brings into your life—these are your motivations for what you call your love for her.

For Kierkegaard, such a romantic or friendly relation cannot count as genuine love, partly because of its inevitable inconstancy. It is subject to shifts both in your preferences and in the qualities of the person you believe you love. "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds."²⁴

Human attraction based upon preference cannot count as love for another reason. It fails to relate to the other person as an individual. It relates to her instead as a member of a class, any and all of whose members possess the desired qualities. This makes of her something fungible—replaceable by any other member of the class without loss. Despite the preferential lover's convictions to the contrary, he freely chooses to relate to an abstraction and therefore relates perversely; he masses the so-called beloved together with all others possessing her same qualities, whereas if he loved her he would love her truly for herself alone, as an individual.

In these and other ways, what many ordinarily and erroneously call "love" is based on, or is a consequence of, the qualities of its object, the so-called beloved. By contrast, what truly deserves to be called love is *an expression of the condition of the lover*. Imagine, says Kierkegaard, two artists. One travels the world over to find a human subject worthy of his artistic gifts but has yet to discover a single one not made unworthy of his portrayal by some fault or other. The second, modest about his talent, has yet to find a face so faulty as to make him unable to discern in it something beautiful to be portrayed. "Would this not indicate that precisely this [latter individual] was the artist, one who by bringing a certain something with him found then and there what the much-travelled artist did not find anywhere in the world, perhaps because he did not bring a certain something with him!"²⁵ The fastidiousness that some call love vigilantly picks up on every evidence of what we misguidedly call "lovability" and "unlovability," whereas genuine love directs itself to whoever happens to be nearby (as Kierkegaard points out, neighbor means "near-dweller"),²⁶ loving each individual, one at a time, for himself or herself alone. In this we find the sort of irony Kierkegaard perceived everywhere in human life: We can love a single individual, Kierkegaard says, only insofar as we can love every individual, and we can love every individual only insofar as we can love *any* individual! That love is a quality of the lover means that the lover can, like Christ himself, love whoever happens to live next door, not just a preferred few.

At this point, we want to know what is the "certain something" that the lover possesses and the self-absorbed person lacks? It is faith. A faithful relationship to God endows us with the capacity to relate to others independently of our preferences. If we lack this faith, we are bound to serve ourselves in all our horizontal relationships; they cannot qualify as love simply because *we*, being self-serving, cannot qualify as lovers. The "certain something" that makes a person a lover of her neighbor is made possible by Christ's invitation and made actual by our faithful acceptance of that invitation.

In becoming aware of the invitation, we acquire a new breadth of freedom, and in accepting the invitation—in responding with faith—we exercise that freedom. Further examination of Kierkegaard's conception of the self shows us how this happens. For Kierkegaard, the self is not merely an active relating to others; it is a *free* relating. We determine how we will relate to others. Hence, the way we perceive and relate ourselves to the events, circumstances, and people around us is our act. In Kierkegaard's terminology, we "appropriate" all of these; that is, we impart to them the meaning they will have for us and thus the influence they will have upon us. We choose how they will affect us. Thus *how* we appropriate them—the interpretation or meaning we impart to them—is our individual truth and the only truth with which we can possibly have anything to do;²⁷ we "appropriate in freedom everything that comes to [us]."²⁸ (Kierkegaard calls our individually appropriated truth "subjective," not to diminish it but to highlight our responsibility for it. Indeed, he does not think any such thing as an "objective" truth is possible—that is, a truth that is not the free appropriation and expression of some existing individual.)²⁹ Our experiences of and responses to our neighbor are free appropriations—either self-serving or pure, depending on

whether our primary relation is to God and, if that God is understood to be Christ, depending on whether we are giving ourselves over to emulate him.

Thus he deepens us inwardly by opening up a way of life we could not otherwise even conceive and simultaneously endows us with freedom to accept or reject that way of life. In other words, as our selfhood deepens through encountering him, our possibilities for appropriation expand—including the possibility of perceiving others with love, without regard for ourselves.

Faith and Love Are One

What has been presented thus far might seem to establish decisively that faith is fundamental and love is its derivative. But this does not follow from what we have learned of Kierkegaard's views, and he takes pains to explain why. Even though faith must be primary in our minds and hearts, it cannot be separated from love. When we choose Christ above all others, we simultaneously and by the same act choose to love. It is precisely in the free act of willingly giving up everything necessary in order to love that we find ourselves lifted out of our egoism and opened to the deepest needs of other people. The "certain something" that then flowers in us and makes us capable of loving our neighbor *comes with* our transformation, through faith, from self-absorption and worldliness. Our focus shifts from a preferred few because, reckless now of our own advantage in comparison to others, we no longer base our responses on distinctions among them. Opening upward opens us outward as well; appropriating the invitation in faith changes us into beings who appropriate our opportunities to love others. "Love to God and love to neighbor are like two doors that open simultaneously, so that it is impossible to open one without opening the other, and impossible to shut one without also shutting the other."³⁰ In relation to God, what we are speaking of goes by the name of faith, while in relation to neighbors it goes by the name of love. It is the manner of existing before God in which the person freely chooses to respond to others in love. And love is the manner of existing among others in which the person freely chooses to respond faithfully to Christ. We cannot maintain a merely dyadic relation of faith with God any more than we can maintain a merely dyadic relation of love with our neighbor. "Worldly wisdom thinks that love is a relationship between man and man ... [but it] is a relationship between man-God-man, that is, that God is the middle term."³¹

We now have the answer to the question raised by this paper. In the order of *being*, so to speak, love and faith are one; neither is more basic than the other because they are two manifestations, one vertical and one horizontal, of the same condition of a human soul. But in the order of *human intention*, faith must come first, for all the reasons we surveyed above. Taking an aspirin and thinning my blood are the same act, but I do not know how to thin my blood by trying to do so directly. What I *can* do directly is take the aspirin and thereby thin my blood indirectly. In this same way, emulating Christ and loving my neighbor are the same act. And though I do not know how to "make myself" love my neighbor by trying to do it directly, I can do it indirectly by emulating Christ in faith.

Having Once Received the Invitation, We Can Never Go Back

I have set forth some of Kierkegaard's reasons for saying that, without faith, relationships must be self-serving, and in doing so have drawn upon Kierkegaard's most sustained and concentrated writing on love, *Works of Love*. But the thrust of Kierkegaard's writings on faith show the situation to be much more complicated than he describes it in that book (I confess to being puzzled by this), and I want to say something about this complication in order to strengthen the case for the priority, in our intentions, of faith.

Our faithless relationships with others may not be merely selfish, as *Works of Love* suggests; they may be perverse, corrupt, and sinful. This happens when our relation to God is resistant—when, upon encountering his invitation, we find it offensive and refuse it. If in response to that invitation we do not confess our fault and seek to emulate him, then *whatever* we do instead will express the offense we are taking, even if it mimics with consummate skill the professions of belief and the discipline of true disciples. Our former activities that we may have naively found delightful now take on a certain bizarre utility: we throw ourselves into them mutinously,³² attributing to them an appeal strong enough (as we suppose) to justify or excuse us in rejecting or discounting him. From this point onward, we no longer simply look out for Number One, keep company with those who enjoy the things we enjoy, perform our civic duties, or even champion Christ as the greatest teacher, intellect, or leader.³³ Instead, we now

do these things in order to distract ourselves from the invitation, or to heighten its offensiveness so we can feel justified in marginalizing, deferring, or rejecting it. We value the things of the world according to their usefulness in enabling our flight from Christ. Never in this condition do we find simple delight in these things, as does the person Kierkegaard calls the “Knight of Faith.” The faithless self-worrier is a utilitarian of a particularly dismal and despairing sort, using the gifts of life not to benefit himself or others but to help him evade the task of his existence before God.

In this way the person for whom faith is a possibility—the person to whom the invitation is extended—has left neutral ground, and, therefore, his failure to make emulating Christ his highest priority will color whatever else he does with tinges of defiance.³⁴ He will carry out his service to others as a form of mutiny in order to insist he is doing something more important or urgent than giving himself to God. Thus his concern to vindicate himself will compromise the purity of his intentions; it will express the lack of that “certain something” which makes social acts loving. Only if faith comes first—only if he lets himself be utterly vanquished by Christ—can he escape these perversions of his loving intentions. Not to choose Christ completely once we have encountered him is to choose instead the wretchedness of defiance and endless rationalization, and deep, often unrecognized despair.

How Kierkegaard’s Emphasis on Faith Has Been Often Misunderstood

For most of the century and a half since his death, Kierkegaard has been conventionally and widely portrayed as holding to a decidedly *nonrelational*, or individualistic, theory of the self. Each person, he is supposed to have believed, stands independent of every other, isolated within his appropriated, subjective interpretation of things and free of all outside influences whatsoever. It is easy to see that, for a being so radically autonomous, relationships with others cannot be essential to his selfhood. They will not connect him with others, subject to subject, because such a connection would compromise his independence. Only to God does this *sort* of being relate in a unique sort of relation that mysteriously does not compromise his autonomy. For this supposed individualism, Kierkegaard has been both admired—called the true founder of existentialism, for example—and criticized. He has been criticized because the individualism that has been ascribed to him precludes emotionally rich and committed human relationships. It might allow for a certain austere, bloodless dutifulness, such as Kant’s “good will,” but not for love.

Admittedly, Kierkegaard makes many statements that, when not interpreted in the context of his overall authorship, seem to support or even require this individualistic interpretation. For example, “to subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.”³⁵ Even a number of Kierkegaard’s discussions of faith seem to support the individualistic interpretation. For example, in *Training in Christianity* he says outright that “love of God is hatred of the world.”³⁶ It should not surprise us that many of Kierkegaard’s readers have supposed his ideal of selfhood to be an individual insulated from others by his exclusive relation to God.

But in the last quarter of the twentieth century a new wave of scholars began to reconsider this interpretation and to discover that when the total thrust of Kierkegaard’s work is duly appreciated, a solid basis for a social program and loving relationships emerges after all. Indeed, many of these scholars have recognized what I am emphasizing in this paper, that for Kierkegaard the self is individual, independent, and free only *because of* its essentially relational character—only because it comes into existence by acknowledging, responding to, and learning from God and neighbors.³⁷ Some writers have resisted this interpretive trend, so that Kierkegaard scholarship is currently divided on the issue I am raising in this paper. I will briefly mention a few of the traditional criticisms and, partly with the help of some of the more recent authors, show where I think it goes wrong. My rejoinders will give me a chance to amplify what has already been said about Kierkegaard’s conception of how faith makes love possible.

In what has become perhaps the most widely known attack upon Kierkegaard, Martin Buber insists that Kierkegaard condemns all association with other people. He condemns it, says Buber, because any such association would compromise the relation to God.³⁸ It is true that Kierkegaard says we compromise our relation to God if we mass ourselves together with “the crowd” and its ways and thus evade our responsibility to become whole, self-transparent individuals. Contra Buber, however, Kierkegaard does not mean by this that *all* our relations with others compromise our faith; only when we lose ourselves in this crowd or mass of men does this happen.

What Buber misses in Kierkegaard is inseparable from Kierkegaard’s relational theory of the self and the doctrine of individual freedom it contains. By our free responses, we tie ourselves in one way or another to other people; we either love them or use them to help us flee our existential responsibility. For just this reason, as Stephen Crites has written, “the mass man is a social pathology not inherent in sociality as such.”³⁹ In other words, mass man is others seen through the eyes of one evading his existential responsibility; the pathology is in the individual, not in any assemblage of people. Therefore Buber is wrong to say that the choice Kierkegaard offers us is between either (1) relating to God or (2) relating to the crowd. The choice Kierkegaard lays out is between (1) relating to God in faith and to others individually, as loved neighbors, and (2) relating resistantly to God and evasively to others as a crowd. It is ironic that Buber misreads Kierkegaard so fundamentally, for, as his great book *I and Thou* makes abundantly clear,⁴⁰ Buber himself distinguishes the two ways of being identified by Kierkegaard, only one of which is a relation to God and to others. The nonrelational “I-It” mode is our ego-centered observing of external things, including other living beings, as objects, whereas in the “I-Thou” mode we establish a profound, heedful relation to all other beings. Buber fails to see that Kierkegaard had already drawn a similar distinction and thus had anticipated him by a century.⁴¹

Though it will take us briefly from the subject of faith’s relation to love, it is worth noting that even those earlier commentators who attend explicitly to Kierkegaard’s doctrine of freedom tend to get it wrong. The highly influential Louis Mackey argues that, for Kierkegaard, individual freedom is absolute and cannot be affected in any way by any earthly externals, such as the actions or needs of others. The “matter, content, locus, opportunity, or exigence for action,” according to Mackey, the individual “must generate out of his own freedom.”⁴² But by his doctrine of radical freedom Kierkegaard did not mean that externals, such as the needs of others, cannot affect us; he meant that *we decide*, through our free appropriation, *how* they will affect us. For Kierkegaard, our freedom implies the possibility of being influenced in any of several ways, and at least one of these is sensitive and responsive to others’ situations. Freedom as he conceives it makes it possible for us to be bound more closely to others; it does not, as Mackey thinks, separate us from them.

A variant of Buber’s criticism, articulated by Mark C. Taylor, holds that, for Kierkegaard, being a Christian is a matter of inwardness in relation to God that is so intense and absolute that any social ties would compromise it.⁴³ Like other critics I am citing here, Taylor generates his position by attending to isolated, if plentiful, passages from Kierkegaard, such as, “intercourse with God is, in the deepest sense, absolutely non-social.”⁴⁴ But the thrust of Kierkegaard’s authorship does not support Taylor’s position. For example—and I’ll cite just one of many considerations here—Kierkegaard insists that if the God-relation remains a matter of “hidden inwardness,” isolated from public view, it falls fatally short of true faith. For true faith must be manifest in works, including neighborly works, and these works must spring from a willingness to sacrifice and to suffer whatever might be necessary in order to emulate Christ. Merold Westphal makes this point decisively.⁴⁵ He shows that for Kierkegaard, who addresses these issues primarily in his later writings, we do not enter the realm of genuine faith

in God until we have taken Christ as our prototype and thereby patterned our lives on his. This means making sacrifices and risking persecution, as did the apostles of old, in order to bear witness of the truth and minister to others. In *Training in Christianity*, Kierkegaard writes of people wanting to abolish the dangerous rigor of Christ's invitation to emulate him. They try to abolish it by seeking "falsely to transform the Christian life into hidden inwardness." This keeps the sacrifices strictly private, so that the social advantages of piety might not be lost. "In this way," Kierkegaard continues, "established Christendom becomes a collection of what one might call honorary Christians, in the same sense as one speaks of honorary doctors who get their degree without having to take an examination."⁴⁶ Inwardness is essentially selfish if it does not witness, serve, and sacrifice in order to invite others to come to Christ and thereby risk rejection.

Another influential misunderstanding of Kierkegaard originates in the work of the Marxist Theodor Adorno. In the late 1930s he famously complained about Kierkegaard's insistence that love cannot be based on distinctions among people. If taken seriously, this idea, he said, "actually leaves the world to the devil" by making us blind to the temporal conditions of others and unable to help them improve their lot in this world.⁴⁷ The net effect of this Christian concentration on changing people's inner being results in indifference to their temporal miseries. This is a reactionary doctrine, Adorno says, a "stubborn maintenance of the 'givenness' of the social order [which] is socially conformist and ready to lend its arm to oppression and misanthropy."⁴⁸

To this objection we point again to Kierkegaard's conception of the freedom of the relational self. Jamie Ferreira points out that what Kierkegaard says of those who love—that they themselves have determined how they see others—goes also for all the individuals around them. They too choose how the circumstances affect them. Hence, people who are disadvantaged can be just as resentful, calloused, and self-serving as the advantaged ones and will be stuck in this mode unless they, too, first learn to love.⁴⁹ That is why love requires first of all that we impart to others the best gift, which is to help them become merciful and loving themselves. "[It is said:] 'The poor, the wretched may die—therefore it is very important that help be given.' No, answers the eternal; the most important is that mercifulness be practiced or that help be the help of mercifulness. ... That a man dies is, eternally understood, no misfortune, but that mercifulness has not been practised is."⁵⁰ Love gives others mercy by mercifully teaching them mercy and expecting mercy of them. (Just how this can be done I will describe momentarily.) The message for Adorno is that mercy of this kind prepares them both to help themselves materially and to receive material help in the right sort of way. Writes James Collins perceptively in one of the early books on Kierkegaard in English, "the preparatory work must be done in the soul of the individual, where all decisive battles are fought and permanent foundations laid."⁵¹ Simply dispensing aid to others without putting their deeper welfare first would be subordinating their need to our own interest and making ourselves seem more important than we are. For even if we set no price on the service we offer, we will do so only to ensure that our "generosity" "expresses the value [we] attach to [ourselves]."⁵² Expecting no growth on the part of the recipients, but valuing instead only the gift we are giving, is pure self-indulgence, and, like all indulgence, it tends to provoke the recipients to resentment and supplies them with an excuse for *their* failure to be merciful. Better to render them service that is animated by that "certain something" which, because it is truly merciful and loving, aims to help them also attain that "certain something."⁵³

I recognize that someone assessing Kierkegaard from a worldly perspective will scarcely be able to take such talk as this seriously. But the faithful will find it persuasive. For, having themselves been vanquished by the truth, who is Christ, they have come to regard it as all-important. And this truth includes the realization that the most important thing for their neighbor is for him also to allow himself to be vanquished by that truth.⁵⁴ They attach no

importance to themselves as sources of succor but focus instead on helping the needy one acknowledge his guilt before God and thus join them in being vanquished by the truth. “The lover hides himself” so that “through the help of love the [heretofore] unloving person becomes clearly aware of how irresponsibly he has acted so that he deeply feels his wrong doing.”⁵⁵ To have the truth become the most important thing in one’s own eyes is nothing more nor less than wanting the truth to become the most important thing in one’s neighbor’s eyes and to rejoice, not in oneself, but in the neighbor’s rejoicing and in God, who gives the increase.

So, then, how do we influence another to acknowledge his guilt and succumb to God? How does love, as Kierkegaard conceives it, make any sort of positive difference in the world? How does it bring benefit to people in need? When we emulate Christ, we in effect relay his invitation to the people around us; indeed, as Kierkegaard wants us to remember, the invitation came to us in the first place with “an endorsement designating where it should be forwarded.”⁵⁶ In many instances we extend the invitation—we forward it—without deliberately intending to do so, but simply by walking among our fellows in the way he did: harmlessly and in lowliness of heart. Our ways, like his, invite them to reconsider their ways—not as measured against our ways, but against his. He is their measure. “For the lover humbles himself before the good, whose needy servant he is, and, as he himself admits, in frailty; and the vanquished one humbles himself not before the lover but before the good.”⁵⁷ In witnessing our love for the good, which is Christ, others are introduced to it through us and are thus properly disturbed in their idolatry and complacency.

This brings us to the final traditional criticism we will consider. If our allegiance is wholly to God, then in his service we are sooner or later likely to run roughshod over the legitimate interests of our fellowmen. The example often cited is the one Kierkegaard himself used in his magnificent study of faith, *Fear and Trembling*.⁵⁸ I speak of Abraham, the father of faith, who in obedience to God willingly took all the steps necessary to sacrifice his son. Giving up this son, from whom Abraham believed his most prized promises from God would flow, qualifies Abraham as supremely faithful; without hesitation he yielded what, up to that time, he might well have thought of as his own best interest. But from Isaac’s point of view, this apparently faithful act seems at the very best to be insensitive and at the worst abusive. Says Robert M. Adams laconically, “‘sacrificing’ a person is apt to be harmful to the person sacrificed.”⁵⁹

Does the Abraham example not demonstrate that Kierkegaardian faith and Kierkegaardian love cannot coexist? Was not his willingness to sacrifice his son self-absorbed, calloused, and abusive? From a worldly or ethical point of view, yes. But not from the point of view of faith. For, just as Abraham trusted God in regard to his own promise, so he trusted God in regard to Isaac’s welfare. It misreads this book to grant Abraham a faithful point of view with regard to his own interests and require of him a worldly point of view with regard to Isaac’s.

And besides, what was the alternative? To give Isaac the experience and memory of a father who resisted God in order to preserve his own social propriety and respectability? Instead of teaching Isaac about faithfulness, it would have provided him an example of something else, something misleadingly called faith, which has the convenient utility of being compatible with self-service. Abraham had no choice, in faith, but to act faithfully in the assurance that “for God everything is possible”⁶⁰ for all his household, including himself, and for his posterity after him.⁶¹

Summary

Throughout *Sickness unto Death* are found variations on the principle that we become who we are when finally we are able to rest “transparently” in God.⁶² Woven into the pages of *Training in Christianity* are variations on the principle that we attain this rest by coming to and emulating Christ. Prominent in *Works of*

Love are variations on the principle that the joy of this condition is what we who love want most to share and that we share it best simply by being faithful, since this introduces others in the most inviting way possible to the object of our devotion. And featured in *Training in Christianity, For Self-Examination, and Judge for Yourself!* are variations on the principle that emulating Christ means works on behalf of others, works of witnessing, service, and sacrifice.⁶³ The Knight of Faith does not withdraw into contemplation. Instead, his love of God, which is the “certain something,” shines like the truth in every particular act he does on behalf of his neighbor—shines with an existential or living irresistibility that is not unlike Christ’s invitation and that invites his neighbor to reflect, in the light of that truth, upon himself and his responsibility.

In contemplating this kind of love, I might repeat the language with which I tried to express Kierkegaard’s amazement in contemplating Christ’s love. Such love in us! that we would risk rejection and suffering in order to serve our neighbor, inviting him to consider and be vanquished by the truth that has vanquished us. Nevertheless—or, perhaps, therefore—we accept cheerfully our trials and losses. As Mormon taught and as Joseph Smith wrote when he translated Mormon’s sermon in the synagogue, with faith comes the meekness and lowliness of heart—the freedom from envy, selfishness, pettiness, pride, and anger—that enables our acts of service to be free of hypocrisy (see Moroni 7:43–45).

Any relation to the neighbor that falls short of this recklessness simply cannot accompany a straightforward relation to God, for it misconceives God. It supposes him to be a “respector of persons” willing to collaborate in one’s project of serving oneself above others and calling it love. It makes him discriminatory and judgmental.

“What you do unto men you do unto God,” Kierkegaard writes.⁶⁴ And it shrivels the unloving one into a fastidious judge for whom all others become unloving and unworthy. The passage I just quoted continues: “and therefore what you do unto men God does unto you.”

On the other hand, those who in faith give up their anxious self-management and recklessly turn themselves over to emulating Christ, no matter what the cost, reap the reward of these principles: What they do unto men they do unto God in the very same act; they make him the source of the incomprehensible love that animates them. And, simultaneously, God does likewise unto them; he makes them a source of that love for others. The invitation is the ultimate expression of God’s love for us. The acceptance of the invitation awakens in us the same kind of love.

“Christianly understood, to love human beings is to love God and to love God is to love human beings.”⁶⁵ Though love of God is sought first, it is not achieved first and then followed by love of neighbor; we will look in vain for a process or discipline to carry us from faith to love. Love of God is love of neighbor.

Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 27.

2. Søren Kierkegaard was born 5 May 1813 in Copenhagen, Denmark. He died 11 November 1855 at Frederik’s Hospital, also in Copenhagen.

3. At the end of “On My Work as an Author,” Kierkegaard writes: “Without authority, to call attention to religion, to Christianity, is the category for my whole activity as an author, integrally regarded. That I was ‘without authority’ I have from the first moment asserted clearly and repeated as a stereotyped phrase.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford, 1939), 155.

4. See Roger Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 51–54.

5. Jorgen Bukdahl's *Søren Kierkegaard and the Common Man*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), originally published in 1961, was one of the earlier efforts to present Kierkegaard as deeply preoccupied with the relationship of Christian faith and social relationships, particularly in the everyday lives of common people.

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989).

7. For Kierkegaard's seminal discussion of this matter, see *Sickness unto Death*, 109–15.

8. *Ibid.*, 111.

9. *Ibid.*, 43.

10. *Ibid.*, 44.

11. See Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard," in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Simon Critchley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 131, and "Kierkegaard and Hegel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 108–9.

12. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 64. "One kind of despair allows itself to be, so to speak, cheated of its self by 'the others.' By seeing the multitude of people around it, by being busied with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such a person forgets himself, in a divine sense forgets his own name, dares not believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd" (*ibid.*, 63–64).

13. Timothy Jackson, "Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 238.

14. Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 80.

15. *Ibid.*, 13.

16. *Ibid.*, 105–6.

17. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 95.

18. In *Training in Christianity*, "Away, away, O unhallowed ones" appears in the original Latin, "procul o procul este profani." For the English translation cited here, see the Hong translation of this book, entitled *Practice in Christianity*, trans. and ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 5.

19. The offense occasioned by the forgiveness of sins is treated by Kierkegaard in *Sickness unto Death*, subsection B of section B of part 2, entitled "The Sin of Despairing of the Forgiveness of Sins" (pp.146–58). The broader context of the discussion is given in the whole of section B, "The Continuation of Sin" (pp.138–65). Hannay's translation does not designate subsections.

20. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part II*, trans. and ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 346–54.
21. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 119.
22. See Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 171 (cf. 1Nephi 11:16).
23. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 58–72.
24. Shakespeare, Sonnet 116.
25. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 156–57.
26. *Ibid.*, 37.
27. Cf. *ibid.*, 351: “Christianly understood you have absolutely nothing to do with what others do to you; it does not concern you.”
28. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part II*, 250.
29. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, trans. and ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 166–72.
30. Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, trans. and ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), quoted in Michael J. Matthis, “Kierkegaard and the Problem of the Social Other,” *Philosophy Today* 38 (1994): 419.
31. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 112–13.
32. See Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 86–95.
33. *Ibid.*, 26–39.
34. See Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 111–15.
35. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Vol. 1*, trans. and ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 192.
36. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 218.
37. Good examples of this trend are found in George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans, eds., *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1992); and George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare, eds., *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998). Other examples include Edward F. Mooney's book *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to Sickness unto Death* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Arnold B. Come's volume *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering My Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).
38. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 40–82.

39. Stephen Crites, "The Sickness unto Death: A Social Interpretation," in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*, 150.
40. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1970), and "The Question to the Single One," in *Between Man and Man*.
41. Brian T. Possner develops this point in "Chary about Having to Do with 'The Others': The Possibility of Community in Kierkegaard's Thought," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (1999): 413–27. Kierkegaard's distinction differs from Buber's in this: for Kierkegaard, the "objective" attitude toward others can be replaced with compassion for others by having faith, whereas for Buber that "I-It" attitude is always with us, balancing, competing with, and sometimes undermining the open "I-You" attitude.
42. Louis Mackey, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 15 (1962): 613.
43. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Taylor's critique is fully discussed in Gregory R. Beabout and Brad Frazier, "A Challenge to the 'Solitary Self' Interpretation of Kierkegaard," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17/1 (2000): 76–98.
44. Quoted in Beabout and Frazier, "A Challenge to the 'Solitary Self' Interpretation," 76.
45. Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B," in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*, 110–29.
46. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 246, quoted in *ibid.*, 124.
47. M. Jamie Ferreira, "Other-Worldliness in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*," *Philosophical Investigations* 22/1 (1999): 66.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*, 76–79.
50. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 302; see the essay in which this appears: "Mercifulness, a Work of Love," in *Works of Love*, 292–305.
51. James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), quoted in Anthony Imbrosciano, "Kierkegaard's 'Individual,'" *International Philosophical Quarterly* 33/4 (1993): 446.
52. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 11.
53. Although I have no room to elaborate on it here, I should mention Kierkegaard's conviction that the highest relation between persons, short of the love described in this paper, is what, in respectful reference to Socrates, he calls "maieutic." By this he means the humble service that one person renders by assisting another person to bring forth the best that is in him—just as Socrates "taught" by assisting the "learner" to recognize the understanding he already possessed. See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 10–11. Moreover, Kierkegaard strove to make all his writing maieutic in just this sense and therefore to make it loving according to his own well-wrought conception of love. See Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 5–9. In fact, Kierkegaard's concern that his writing be maieutically

effective can be taken, quite apart from the arguments he offered, as a demonstration of his conviction that the quality of our social relations is a vital correlative of the quality of our soul.

54. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 306–16.

55. *Ibid.*, 314, 312.

56. *Ibid.*, 159.

57. *Ibid.*, 313.

58. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).

59. Robert M. Adams, “The Knight of Faith,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7/4 (1990): 389.

60. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 68.

61. Frequently, the criticism we have just considered has been reinforced by interpretations of Kierkegaard’s own life. His scandalous breaking of his engagement with his beloved Regina has been called a protection of his vocation as a single-minded author in God’s service and held up as a manifestation of his conviction that nothing should be allowed to encroach upon a life of faithful service to God. See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge, 1982), 73–84. See also Robert Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (New York: The Modern Library, 1946), 116. Kierkegaard is charged with sacrificing Regina without regard for her hopes and desires, just as Abraham is charged with being willing to sacrifice Isaac without regard for his welfare.

I cannot adequately respond to this charge here. The considerations, including biographical details and implications of the biographically relevant parables in the “Problem III” section of *Fear and Trembling*, are too complex and subtle to be reviewed in a few paragraphs or even a few pages. So I must content myself with expressing my belief that, when all these considerations are thoroughly reviewed in light of an informed understanding of Kierkegaard’s idea of the self and its freedom and a careful rereading of all he wrote about the break-up, the following conclusion will win out.

Fundamentally, Kierkegaard did not end his engagement with Regina primarily to protect his faith and his authorship from the ravages of the institution of marriage. He did not believe that genuine faith could be compromised by earthly commitments. In fact, he believed the opposite—that faith flourishes in loving relationships and indeed is precisely the means by which such relationships can be loving rather than selfish. He broke with Regina because he doubted that his faith was strong enough to assure her the selfless love that marriage required and that she deserved. While composing *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard writes in a journal entry dated 17 May 1843: “If I had faith, I should have remained with Regina,” quoted in Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 126. Kierkegaard broke with Regina primarily out of concern for her and not primarily out of concern for himself and his calling in life.

Admittedly, other factors played a role in his decision, so I do not claim that he acted with a perfect single-mindedness or even with confidence. In fact, he later regretted his decision. My contention is that the thrust of his intent at the time was not simplistic self-regard but rather concern for the person he loved as much as he was capable of loving.

62. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 44.

63. Westphal cites these works to make this point in “The Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B,” 114. See Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourself!* trans. and ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

64. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 352.

65. *Ibid.*, 351–52.