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The commandment of love in Kierkegaard and Caputo

Summary: What is the relation between the gospel of unconditional grace and the commandment of unconditional love, and what are the conditions for realizing the commandment when a Christian world view can no longer be taken for granted? These questions are here explored by means of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* and Caputo's *The Weakness of God*. According to Kierkegaard, the general applicability of the commandment of unconditional love follows from the gospel's story of it being realized in the person of Jesus Christ, thus placing its divine realization within the realm of the humanly possible. There is therefore no contradiction between the gospel of grace and the commandment of love, on the contrary, they mutually presuppose each other. This is even confirmed negatively in the work of Caputo, as his insistence on the indefinability of the source of the call issues in a different understanding of its realization whereby he subverts the radicality of the commandment. Even within a contemporary pluralist context, the commandment of love being heard in its radical unconditionality is therefore dependent on its source being identified as the eternal One as incarnated in the human Jesus Christ.

Zusammenfassung: Was ist die Beziehung zwischen dem Evangelium der bedingungslosen Gnade und dem Gebot der bedingungslosen Liebe, und was sind die Voraussetzungen für die Erfüllung dieses Gebotes, wenn ein christliches Weltverständnis nicht mehr selbstverständlich ist? Diese Fragen werden hier mit Hilfe von Kierkegaards *Die Taten der Liebe* und Caputos *The Weakness of God* erforscht. Nach Kierkegaard folgt die allgemeine Anwendbarkeit des Gebotes der bedingungslosen Liebe aus der neutestamentlichen Erzählung von Jesus Christus, durch den dieses Gebot verwirklicht ist. Die göttliche Erfüllung des Gebotes muss dann auch für Menschen möglich sein. Es besteht daher kein Widerspruch zwischen dem Evangelium der Gnade und dem Gebot der Liebe; im Gegenteil, sie bedingen einander gegenseitig. Dies wird auch negativ in der Arbeit von Caputo bestätigt, da sein Beharren auf der undefinierbarkeit der Quelle des Gebotes zu einem anderen Verständnis seiner Erfüllung leitet, wobei die Radikalität des Gebotes verloren geht. Selbst innerhalb eines modernen pluralistischen Kontext kann deshalb das Gebot der Liebe nur in seiner radikalen

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Unbedingtheit gehört werden, wenn seine Quelle als der Ewige, der in dem Menschen Jesus Christus inkarniert ist, identifiziert wird.

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I The relation between grace and obligation

One of the main characteristics of the Christian gospel is the proclamation that humans are saved by grace. From this follows that the divine law is not considered as a path to salvation; on the contrary, it only reveals the humans' inability to fulfil it (Rom 3:19). At the same time, the New Testament emphasizes love as an obligation for all believers (Matt 22:37-40; John 13:34) to the extent that the heavenly Father is presented not only as the source of love (1 John 3:1), but even as the example to be followed (Matt 5:48). What is the relation between these seemingly contradictory aspects of the Christian message? Is the relation between salvation by grace and the obligation of love a paradoxical contradiction, or is there somehow a logical connection between the two? Are Christians by receiving the gospel of grace provided with a new possibility for realizing the commandment of love, or are grace and love merely paradoxically simultaneous?

On the following pages, I will explore this question by means of two related, though still quite different works. One is Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of love* from 1847, where he explicitly aims at exploring the New Testament doctrine of love as it pertains to Christian believers. In doing so, he must necessarily reflect on this problem, and my first aim is therefore to give an outline of his approach.¹

Kierkegaard wrote, however, from a folk church situation where the truth of the Christian world view more or less was taken for granted; hence his one-sided interest in its application. Within the context of contemporary religious pluralism, however, this is no longer the situation, and we find ourselves confronted by the question whether this has changed the conditions under which the commandment of love can be fulfilled. John Caputo's book *The Weakness of God* from 2006 can be read as an attempt at addressing this challenge. While still considering the obligation to serve one's neighbour as essential and even looking to Kierkegaard as an important inspiration for his own approach, he

¹ In *Works of love* Kierkegaard speaks in his own voice; there is no pseudonymity here.

rejects important presuppositions of Kierkegaard's approach, and indeed of the approach of the majority of theological authorities throughout the history of church. According to Caputo, the very attempt at identifying the divine call to action from within a specific religious tradition acts as a suppression of the radicality of the call, disabling any effort at taking it seriously. The commandment can therefore only be fulfilled to the extent that the quest for the specificity of its source is abandoned. In Caputo's view, the unconditional acceptance of religious pluralism is therefore the condition of the commandment of love to be heard with the radicality with which it is presented in the New Testament.

What are the implications of this demand for openness and undecidability for the understanding of the relation between grace and obligation? Does Caputo in this way open a new possibility for radical obedience even beyond what Kierkegaard aimed at? Or does the attack at the possibility of specifying the source of the call rather imply an attack at the distinctive character of the gospel, thus making even Caputo's approach into a variation of the doctrine of salvation by works? Can we, by comparing the approaches of Kierkegaard and Caputo both in their parallels and their differences, get a better understanding of the relation between grace and obligation as it pertains to the contemporary situation? These are the questions to be explored in what follows.

II Works of Love

Kierkegaard's book consists of two parts, the first subdivided into five sections and the second into ten, each of the latter ones identifying one of the works of love. These subdivisions of the work are structured as expositions of specific passages from the New Testament; what Kierkegaard aims at, is to develop the main characteristics of the biblical understanding of love. Thereby the Bible is interpreted as a Christian book both in the sense that the biblical understanding of love is seen as the Christian understanding,² and in the sense that Christ is considered as the (only) perfect realization of the commandment of love.

Love is something divine. It is founded in God and therefore as hidden as God is.³ Love is therefore not something that can be unambiguously identified

² The significance of apostolic authority for the argument of *Works of Love* is emphasized by C. Stephen EVANS, *Kierkegaard's ethic of love: Divine commands and moral obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 125.

³ On Kierkegaard's appropriation of the idea of divine unknowability, see David R. LAW, *Kierkegaard as negative theologian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

by its external characteristics. Though in this way essentially unknowable to the extent that there is no work that can be proved to be a work of love,⁴ the fruits of love are still recognizable. This is the main point of the first section of part one, which is an exposition of Luke 6:44: “Each tree is known by its own fruit.”⁵

This is further explored by an investigation of the commandment quoted by Christ in Matt 22:39 as the essence of the law: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (section II). The exposition emphasizes the understanding of love as an obligation.⁶ This is closely connected to love’s eternal foundation; only as an eternal obligation, love can be void of change.⁷ The obligation is to love the neighbour, i.e., anyone.⁸ This differs from love as praised by the poets, which is the preferential love of erotic or friendly relationships. In Kierkegaard’s view, Christian love is different, not because it is shy of bodily desire, but because it understands both erotic and friendly relationships as self-love,⁹ founded as they are on likeness between lover and beloved. In such relationships one therefore merely loves the other as another self,¹⁰ whereas in loving the neighbour, i.e.,

4 “Der er ingen Gjerning, ikke een eneste, ikke den bedste, om hvilken vi ubetinget tør sige: den, som gjør dette, han beviser ubetinget derved Kjerlighed.” Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Skrifter* (København: Gad, 1997), vol. 9, p. 20, hereafter quoted with page number only. For an English translation, see Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Works of love*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. HONG (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

5 In quoting the Bible, I follow Revised Standard Version, though some citations may deviate slightly in order to better capture the nuance of Kierkegaard’s Danish translation.

6 For an interesting discussion of Kierkegaard’s view of divine command as the source of moral obligations in relation to some of the alternative sources, see C. Stephen EVANS and Robert C. ROBERTS, *Ethics*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, eds. John LIPPITT and George PATTISON (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 211–229, here: 215–223.

7 “Altsaa, kun naar det er Pligt at elske, kun da er Kjerligheden evig betrygget” (40). This is emphasized by EVANS, *Kierkegaard’s ethic of love*, 147–151. Also according to Pia SØLTOFT, “Kærighed skjuler mange synder”, *Dansk teologisk tidsskrift* 68 (2005), 199–212, here: 203, unchangeability is for Kierkegaard the main characteristic of love.

8 Roe Fremstedal has argued that this emphasis on the universality of the obligation establishes a closeness between Kant and Kierkegaard that is greater than what is usually assumed by most authors (including Kierkegaard himself; see EVANS, *Kierkegaard’s ethic of love*, 127–128). For a summary of Fremstedal’s research, see Thor Arvid DYRERUD and Marius Timmann MJAALAND, *Kierkegaard og Norge* (Oslo: Press, 2013), 135–137.

9 M. Jamie FERREIRA, *Love*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, eds. John LIPPITT and George PATTISON (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 328–343, here: 336, finds parallels to this way of thinking in Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant and Levinas.

10 “. . . thi i den Elskede og Vennen elskes jo ikke Næsten, men det andet Jeg” (63).

in non-preferential love, where the loved ones are seen as equal before God, the self is truly determined as spirit,¹¹ i.e., from its relationship with God.

This will not subvert either the erotic or the friendly relationship, but teach us how to realize the love of the neighbour, i.e., love as informed by the eternal,¹² even in these relationships. This equals the task of the letting the differences between humans remain without being determined by them; to love is to exist unconditionally for the sake of every human being.¹³ This is a message that by those who are not living from their relationship with God is considered as offending, and this is as it should be; to avoid the reaction of offense by what Kierkegaard calls the natural human is to betray the Christian message.¹⁴

Love's eternity is in this way presupposed and repeatedly hinted at; it is the main topic of section III, which investigates love as the fulfilment of the law according to Rom 13:10. The law is undetermined in its limitless demand.¹⁵ This is something the world can never understand; it will therefore necessarily want the law's demand reduced.¹⁶ Love, however, gives what the law demands; love is the fulfilment that gives shape to the limitlessness of the demand.¹⁷

Nobody has been able to fulfill the law in its limitlessness. The only exception is Christ,¹⁸ who by fulfilling the law confirms the unbridgeable difference

11 “. . . kun i Kjerlighed til Næsten er det Selv, som Elsker, reent aandeligt bestemt som Aand” (63).

12 “. . . ‘Næsten’ er Evighedens Mærke – paa ethvert Menneske” (94). For a meaningful discussion of this topic, see FERREIRA, *Love*, here: 337.

13 “At elske Næsten er, forblivende i sin jordiske Forskjellighed, som den er En anviist, væsentligen at ville være ligeligt til for ethvert Menneske ubetinget” (89). Revolutionary change in society is obviously one of the things Kierkegaard is not advocating. He thereby differs absolutely from his contemporary Marx, whose *Communist Manifesto* is written at almost exactly the same time as *Works of Love*.

14 “Den, der i at bestemme det Christelige som det Høieste udelader Forargelsens Mellembestemmelse, han forsynder sig mod det . . . Gjennem Forargelse gaaer Veien til det Christelige” (65).

15 “Ved hver Bestemmelse fordrer Loven Noget, og dog er der ingen Grændse for Bestemmelserne” (110). Even the law is thus in its own way divine and eternal in its limitlessness; law and love are intent on achieving the same thing: “. . . i Kjerligheden er der ingen Strid mellem Loven og Kjerligheden” (110).

16 “. . . mindsk Fordringen, saa ville vi leve et skjønt, et riigt, et betydningsfuldt Liv i Venskab og Glæde” (130).

17 “Kjerlighed er Lovens Fylde, thi Loven er det trods alle sine mange Bestemmelser dog noget Ubestemt, men Kjerlighed er Fylden” (108).

18 “Loven derfor med sin Fordring blev Alles Undergang, fordi de ikke vare hvad den fordrede, og kun ved den lærte Synden at kjende: saa blev Christus Lovens Undergang, fordi han var, hvad den fordrede” (103). Kierkegaard can also express this by saying that the law was Christ's only “Medvider” (companion, 105).

between the God-man and any other human being¹⁹ while at the same time demonstrating the fulfilment of the divine commandment of love in a human person. Realization of the commandment of love is therefore after all possible, but only through one's relationship with God. To love oneself and one's neighbour through God in this way implies, however, a love that will not be understood and therefore in many cases – as with Christ – will elicit hatred as the response from the beloved one.²⁰

Fulfilment of the law is this way seen as a real possibility, but only in and through Christ. This is a key passage in the work, as it shows that Kierkegaard through his emphasis of the coeternity of law and love has appropriated both the Pauline “through the law comes knowledge of sin”²¹ and the Lutheran “lex semper accusat”²² without any of the antinomian implications sometimes associated with this position. The law, though unfulfillable in its limitlessness, is still realized through the incarnational manifestation of eternity in temporality, and this even makes it available for human self-realization through self-denial in way that is profoundly different from the world's rejection of the eternity of the law by reducing it to the level of the humanly achievable. As is arguably the case in Kierkegaard's work in general, the doctrine of the incarnation is even in *Works of Love* the key to its interpretation.²³

To this is added an investigation of the conscience as the meeting place between God and human, quoting 1 Tim 1:5 as “Love is a matter of conscience.” By making interpersonal relationships into relations of conscience, and thus into something that is profoundly affected by one's relationship to God, Chris-

19 “Loven . . . befæster et evigt svælgende Dyb mellem Gud-Mennesket og ethvert andet Menneske” (105).

20 “Men den christelige Kjerligheds Inderlighed er villig, til Løn for sin Kjerlighed at være hadet af den Elskede (Gjenstanden). Dette viser, at denne Inderlighed er et reent Guds-Forhold” (133).

21 Rom 3:20, cf. the quotation above, note 18.

22 E.g., Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV,167 (*Bekendtnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 194). That Kierkegaard basically agrees with Luther except when he explicitly tells us he doesn't is a main point in M. Jamie FERREIRA, *Love's grateful striving: A commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

23 This is well expressed in Lore HÜHN and Philipp SCHWAB, *Kierkegaard and German Idealism*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, eds. John LIPPITT and George PATTISON (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 62–93, here: 87: “. . . God's act of Incarnation in Christ is the hinge on which the new definition of reality turns . . . It is the pattern of this measure that provides the principle informing every line of Kierkegaard's authorship”.

tianity in Kierkegaard's view breathes eternity and divinity into humanity.²⁴ Because love begins from the ground, i.e., from the relationship to God, one must always ask one's conscience first, which means that one in all relationships, and Kierkegaard here explicitly includes marriage, first and foremost relate to the other as the God-given neighbour.²⁵ The first part of the work is then wrapped up with sections on the obligation to love the humans we see (1 John 4,20) and on love as infinite debt (Rom 13:8); the latter emphasis follows quite naturally from love's infinity. The first of these sections is a penetrating analysis of the loving eye, having as its main biblical text is the story in John 21 of Jesus' reestablishment of a loving relationship with Peter after the latter's betrayal.

The first part of the work has in this way done important preparatory work; it has clarified the Christian understanding of the divinity and eternity of love and in this way explored the necessity of a theocentric and incarnational understanding of its manifestation issuing in an emphasis of the necessity of seeing one's neighbour with a loving eye. The title of the book is, however, still an unfulfilled promise, as there is hardly a single work of love identified in the first part of the work. This, then, is the task of the second part,²⁶ which explores the obligation of love in ten different instantiations according to four different degrees of concreteness,²⁷ ending with the very task of what Kierkegaard is doing by writing *Works of Love*, the work of love that consists in praising love.²⁸

The first work of love is to build up (1 Cor 8:1), which it does by building from the ground. The ground is, however, as has already been shown, divine love as the origin of everything. Love can thus only build by presupposing love,

24 “. . . saaledes vil Christendommen indaande det evige Liv, det Guddommelige i Menneskeslægten” (137–138).

25 “Hustruen skal først og fremmest være Dig ‘Næsten’, det, at hun er Dig Din Hustrue, er saa en nærmere Bestemmelse af Eders særlige Forhold til hinanden” (143).

26 Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard's idea of love as mere interiority (see Heido SCHULZ, *Germany and Austria: A Modest Head Start*, in *Kierkegaard's International Reception I: Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon STEWART (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 307–419, here: 362), even if it may contain some truth when related to the first part, therefore hardly does justice to the second. For a critique of Adorno's reading of *Works of Love*, see Grete BØRSAND HEYERDAHL, *Idehistoriske smuler: Essays om litteratur og filosofi, kjærlighet og undertrykkelse* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1979), 70–94, and FERREIRA, *Love's grateful striving*, 67.

27 As emphasized by Egil A. WYLLER, *Søren Kierkegaard 'Kjærlighetens Gjerninger': Henologisk skriftserie 12* (Oslo: Spartacus, 1998), 193, we here have the pattern 1+2+3+4.

28 In this way, *Works of Love* confirms the view that the promotion of Christian virtues is “at the very heart of Kierkegaard's literary project” (EVANS and ROBERTS, *Ethics*, here: 225).

even where it seems to be missing.²⁹ Love therefore believes everything without ever being deceived (the second work), and it hopes everything without ever being shamed (the third work), both of these having as their biblical reference 1 Cor 13:7. Lack of trust is based on what one knows about a person; faith is, however, grounded in eternity, not in knowledge. By judging according to what one knows one therefore in reality reveals nothing but one's own lack of an eternal foundation;³⁰ to judge another is to judge oneself.³¹ The alternative strategy is to put one's hope in the eternal possibility of the good; as focussed on the eternal, it will never be deceived.³² To love is to believe in the good as divine, eternal and unchangeable; to lose this faith is to despair.³³

That divine love is not self-love is repeatedly emphasized through *Works of Love*. It therefore comes as no surprise that the fourth work of love, and the first on the next level of concreteness, is to not seek one's own. The key is through self-denial to totally reject the difference between "mine" and "yours" in order to receive everything in God. This is the realization of the biblical mystery of gaining everything by losing it.³⁴

This is the kind of love that "covers the multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4:8) by not seeing them; by relating to what is not seen, faith believes away what is seen.³⁵ The sixth work of love is to abide (1 Cor 13:13), which it does as resting in the

29 "Den Kjerlige forudsætter bestandigt, at Kjerligheden er tilstede, just derved opbygger han" (219). For a discussion of how this relates to Kierkegaard's otherwise quite critical attitude toward the world, see EVANS, *Kierkegaard's ethic of love*, 164–169.

30 This distinction between love that builds up and knowledge that does not is taken directly from 1 Cor 8.

31 "I samme Minut Du dømmet et andet Menneske, eller bedømmer et andet Menneske, dømmet Du Dig selv; thi det at dømme en Anden er i sidste Grund blot at dømme sig selv, eller selv at blive aabenbar" (234–235). Christ's warning against judgement in Matt 7:1, though not explicitly referred to, is obviously in the background here.

32 "Deraf kommer det, at Den, som haaber, aldrig kan bedrages; thi at haabe er at forvente det Godes Mulighed, men det Godes Mulighed er det Evige" (250).

33 The investigation of despair as lack of faith is the main subject of *The Sickness unto Death*, published a couple of years after *Works of Love*.

34 "Gud er nemlig Alt, og just ved slet intet Mit at have vandt Selvfornegtelsens Kjerlighed Gud og vandt Alt. Thi Den, der taber sin Sjæl, skal vinde den" (267). On Kierkegaard's understanding of the knight of faith who gets everything by abandoning it, see further Lee C. BARRETT, *Eros and Self-emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2013), 276–277.

35 "Som man da ved Troen troer det Usynlige til det Synlige, saaledes troer den Kjerlige ved Tilgivelsen det Synlige bort" (292). As emphasized by Søltøft, "Kærlighed skjuler mange synder," 205, the loving eye makes sin to really disappear, primarily through forgiveness (210).

eternal; the unchanging love of God is what carries reality in its totality.³⁶ By receiving this love, even the human lover abides in this love, as his love towards others abides. A loving relationship is therefore never a relationship between two, love is always there as a third.³⁷ For a loving relationship to end, one must therefore first abandon love, thereby revealing that the love that was, never was true, eternal love in the first place.³⁸ Kierkegaard here seems to walk in the vicinity of the Calvinist idea of *perseverantia finalis* in a way that may be at variance with the otherwise non-rationalist emphasis of his work.³⁹ His point is, however, different from the Calvinist doctrine in that Kierkegaard remains on the interpersonal level by insisting that a breaking up of a relationship demands a kind of consensus between the two that their love is null and void; as long as one of the parts is determined by the love that abides, there can be no proper break-up.⁴⁰

Coming to the four works of love on the most ambitious level of concreteness, the necessary emphasis on contextuality lets Kierkegaard for the first time in this work dispense with explicit biblical references; here he is on his own in applying the biblical principles. The first work on this level is mercy, which by Kierkegaard is contrasted with benevolence, which is the privilege of the rich and mighty. Mercy is always possible, and is therefore a work of love that can be performed even by those who cannot do anything.⁴¹ The second one is the work of love that consists in the reconciliation that conquers the conquered. There are, Kierkegaard argues, two kinds of victory. The first is to conquer evil by goodness, whereby the good one first and foremost fights with himself in order that he may not fight for the good by evil means. The second is the willingness to forgive, whereby one is reconciled with one's opponent. This is never

36 "Kjerlighed bliver. Vi tale da, naar vi tale saaledes, om den Kjerlighed, som bærer hele Tilværelsen, om Guds Kjerlighed" (299).

37 This implies that humans, though always imperfect, still may love perfectly; see Søltøft, "Kærlighed skjuler mange synder," 206. A rejection of this understanding of human love as participation in divine love seems to be the essential element in the famous critique of Kierkegaard in K.E. LØGSTRUP, *Den etiske fordring* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1956). For a rejection of Løgstrup's critique, see FERREIRA, *Love's grateful striving*, 76–83.

38 "Men naar En ophører at være kjerlig, saa har han heller ikke været kjerlig" (301).

39 On Kierkegaard's difference from Calvinism and indeed most other "-isms" concerning the question of the relation between divine and human agency, see BARRETT, *Eros and Self-emptying*, 286.

40 ". . . dersom dog den Kjerlige ikke affalder fra 'Kjerligheden', saa kan han forhindre Bruddet, han kan gjøre dette Under; thi naar han bliver, saa kan Bruddet aldrig rigtigt komme istand" (303).

41 Adorno interpreted this as a confirmation of his critique of Kierkegaardian inwardness. For a refutation of this critique, see FERREIRA, *Love's grateful striving*, 188–199.

easily achieved, as the conquered one in his humiliation tends to avoid the victor. The solution is for the loving one to withdraw in order to make the conquered understand that he is conquered by love, not by another human. The third work on this level is the loving commemoration of a dead one, and the final work of love Kierkegaard considers is the one he now has been engaged in for more than 300 pages, the work of praising love.

The Christian commandment of love is a strict commandment, but it is in Kierkegaard's view possible to make it one's own, to become one with it. The key is to know that one in everything is related to God and that this relationship, determined as it is by faith or lack thereof, is what determines everything else: "It will be done for you as you believe" (Matt 8:13).⁴² If we forgive, we will be forgiven. If we accuse another before God, we will be accused.⁴³ God is the repetition of our own attitude; he is the wrath of our wrath and the mercy of our mercy, only with the difference that he repeats with the augmentation of infinity.⁴⁴ For a modern reader, this may sound unguardedly Feuerbachian,⁴⁵ but what Kierkegaard aims at, is to present the eternal One as the mirror of his readers. What do you see when you see yourself in this mirror? According to *Works of Love*, in the end it all comes down to this.

Is, then, the relation between grace and obligation in Kierkegaard's view a paradoxical or a logical one? It is both, but not in the same way. Grace is a manifestation of the unconditionality of eternity, which, through its incarnation in the human Jesus Christ is given to humans both as a gift and as an obligation. The basic paradoxality of the presence of the eternal within the context of the finite, which is the central subject of both *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is not lifted by being identified as the presence of divine love as is the case in *Works of Love*. It is this paradoxality that informs the understanding of faith as acting on the presence of what cannot be per-

42 "Lad os tænke, at En spurgte Christendommen 'er det nu ogsaa vist, at jeg har Troen?', saa vilde Christendommen svare 'Dig skeer som Du troer' (371). In a nuanced discussion, Claudia WELZ, „Frihed til kærlighed hos Luther og Kierkegaard“, *Dansk teologisk tidsskrift* 72 (2009), 99–121, here: 111–113, maintains that even if Kierkegaard here is quoting Luther, there are subtle differences between them; for Luther, love follows from faith, whereas for Kierkegaard, faith is love.

43 "Din Tilgivelse til en Anden er Din egen Tilgivelse . . . det at anklage et andet Menneske for Gud det er at anklage sig selv" (373).

44 "Thi Gud er . . . den rene Gjengivelse af hvorledes Du selv er. Er der Vrede i Dig, saa er Gud Vrede i Dig; er der Mildhed og Barmhjertighed i Dig, saa er Gud Barmhjertighed i Dig. . . . Alt hvad Du siger til og gjør mod andre Mennesker, det gjentager Gud blot, han gjentager det med Uendelighedens Forøgelse" (377).

45 This problem is discussed in EVANS, *Kierkegaard's ethic of love*, 142–143.

ceived but through faith and which is guarded by the insistence on the necessity of offense. Living in this world in a way that is founded on the reality of the eternal is a paradoxical situation that always provoke those who live differently. But the obligation this entails for the believer is perfectly rational. Having met and been included in the reality of the unconditional as the manifestation of divine love, one cannot but strive for its realization in one's own life.

There is in this way a straight line from the unconditionality of divine love as pertaining to all humans and the unconditionality of the love of the believer as pertaining to exactly the same object. Being saved by unconditional grace, one cannot but live under the obligation of loving in the same way, i.e., equally unconditionally. There is thus no real difference between the doctrine of being saved by grace and the commandment to love one's neighbour; it is the very same thing as perceived from different angles. This can, e.g., be demonstrated from the fact that the reduction of the one necessarily implies the reduction of the other. A transformation of the idea of the unconditionality of grace to a synergist understanding of salvation necessarily reduces the absoluteness of the obligation to the level of the humanly doable, i.e., to moralism,⁴⁶ whereas morality understood as the ability to act to the best of one's capacity reduces salvation to the problem of finding in God a willing and compromising negotiation partner. Either way, one is far removed from the faith in the reality of the eternal the permeates Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*.

What, then, about the realization of this kind of love in a context where is Christian framework can no longer be taken for granted?

III The Weakness of God

In his book⁴⁷ John Caputo explores this question by developing what he calls a theology of the event. This event is related to the name of God, which harbors it, and theology is the hermeneutics of this event (2). The event cannot, however, be captured by language; its names are "endlessly translatable" (3). It is beyond being and transcends time, but not in the sense that it manifests the eternal; rather than in the eternal Caputo is interested in the event as the promise of a future that may or may not be realized (5–6). The use of the name of God is therefore considered as a "destabilizing act that exposes us to whatever

⁴⁶ Cf. note 16 above.

⁴⁷ John D. CAPUTO, *The weakness of God: A theology of the event* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2006), in the following referenced by page numbers in parentheses.

event is transpiring in that name,” and theology is “a way to hear . . . the call that issues from the event harbored in the name of God” (6). For Caputo, the name „God“ does not refer to the unknowable and eternal One, but is what unsettles our preconceived ideas of the present reality. By focussing on the unnameable event in this way, Caputo hopes to avoid the power struggles that inevitably follow the establishment of “a definitive proper name for the event” and the persecution of those who suggest an interpretation of it that differs from the established one (10–11).

There are two parts also of Caputo’s book. The first one investigates what he calls the weakness of God, partly as an exploration of Paul’s “logos of the cross” (chapter two), partly as an exploration of the creation passages of the Bible intent on showing that one may do perfectly well without an idea of *creatio ex nihilo* (chapter three). What is rejected in the story of the cross is not only the Roman power that condemned Jesus, but also the idea of “a God of power who has the power to intervene”. The power of God is “the power of powerlessness, . . . the power to suffer with innocent suffering” (43). Is Jesus really nailed to the cross, or is he only seemingly so? Or is “the powerlessness of that death” (44) something we are not able to stomach?

According to Caputo, there is no atonement; Jesus’ “approach to evil was forgiveness, not paying off a debt due the Father” (44).⁴⁸ This Caputo finds well captured in 1 Cor 1, where Paul (v. 28) argues that God chose the things that are not in order to nullify the things that are (46). Unfortunately, however, Paul did not remain faithful to his own doctrine, but inscribed his praise of God’s weakness in the larger framework of a confession to his power, whereby God’s weakness shows itself to be stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1:25). Indeed, in Rom 13 Paul even commits the grave error of “investing human power with divine authority” (49); there is then nothing to do but to interpret Paul against Paul and keep to the part of 1 Cor 1 where weakness seems to reign uninterrupted.

In his close reading of Gen 1, Caputo suggests an interpretation of the text as God’s work with “co-everlasting but mute companions: a barren earth, lifeless waters and a sweeping wind” (57). In his polemics against the “official story put out by orthodox theology” (59) he this time lets Paul keep his innocence. The apparent reference to *creatio ex nihilo* in Rom 4:17 cannot mean what it seems to say (314), as this doctrine was first invented as an anti-Gnostic strat-

⁴⁸ On Kierkegaard’s approach to the understanding of atonement, see BARRETT, *Eros and Self-emptying*, 317: “Though Kierkegaard can describe Jesus as a ‘satisfaction’ of divine justice, he prefers to explore the ways in which Jesus’ work can change individual lives.”

egy in the second century (80).⁴⁹ In this rejection the idea of creation as commonly maintained by Christian theology, Caputo wants “to come to grips with, nay to affirm, the only world we know” (80) as the frame of reference for thought and work. Accordingly, the relation between God and human is constructed within “the bonds of a mutual agreement” (89).

In the second part of his book, Caputo explores the kingdom of God as the place where this call is heard and heeded to. It is conceived as a kind of exposition of the Lord’s Prayer with a certain emphasis on “Let your kingdom come”. As the most concrete expression of what then takes place, Caputo refers to the event of hospitality. This hospitality is instantiated through a reordering of all order; the first become the last and they who are outside come inside, “it is like a great party that is thrown for everyone, where even the slightly seedy characters who were never invited are then compelled to come in and have a drink.” In this way, the kingdom is conceived as “a community without community, a city without walls, a nation without borders, unconditional hospitality without sovereign power, where the decision procedure for admission is based on a holy undecidability between insider and outsider” (278).

Caputo is thus intent on doing away with the idea of God as the one who grounds the understanding of the world as a structured reality. In this way, he tries to solve the problem of religious pluralism by reinterpreting the relevance of religion on purely immanentist terms. The reality of the eternal is for Caputo not only unknowable, but irrelevant. The identity of the one who issues the call is insignificant in relation to the obligation of following it. In spite of the limits placed on theology and religion in this way, Caputo retains the idea of the significance of the impossible, but interprets it as “a desire to know what we cannot know, or to love what we dare not love” (104).

There is undoubtedly a certain affinity between this approach and Kierkegaard’s. The unexpectedness of the demand is clearly a common element, as is the emphasis on unknowability issuing in a critique of the attempt at identifying God with the objectivity of a fossilized tradition. Caputo is aware of the Kierkegaardian provenance of his thought in this respect, and refers to Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments*, as evidence for the idea that “the passion of faith is directly proportionate to its objective uncertainty” (11).

⁴⁹ In his defence of this position, Caputo is quite one-sidedly dependent on Gerhard MAY, *Creatio ex nihilo: The doctrine of “creation out of nothing” in early Christian thought*, translated by A. S. WORRALL (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), which he calls “the definitive history of the doctrine”. For a critique of May’s work, see Paul COPAN, “Is Creatio Ex Nihilo a Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May’s Proposal”, *Trinity Journal* 17 (1996), 77–93.

Behind Caputo's Kierkegaardian gestures there are, however, some disturbing differences. For Kierkegaard, the paradox of the incarnational manifestation of the eternal within the context of the temporal is what establishes the framework of *Works of Love* and indeed of all his writings. This is something Caputo rejects without even paying attention; his thought world is explicitly limited to "the only world we know" (80).⁵⁰ Within this limit, Caputo indulges in what he calls his "weakness for theology" (1) by playing with religious metaphors without allowing himself to be distracted by the possibility that these metaphors might actually be intended as an attempt at disturbing the all-embracing immanentism he so scrupulously guards. He may understand "God" as what disturbs our preconceived understanding of reality, but only within his own, firmly established limits.

The radicality of Kierkegaard's approach, which grounds the life of the believer in the reality of the eternal, is thus broken.⁵¹ The reality of the impossible, which for Kierkegaard is what *Works of Love* is all about, is in this way reduced to immanent desire, the radicality of the law of love is reduced to an idea of hospitality, and the paradoxical reality of unknowable love made manifest by its fruits is reduced to the possibility of borderless experiences. What by Kierkegaard is intended as a subversion of the everyday experience of preferential love as the guiding metaphor for the exploration of the commandment of loving one's neighbour, is in this way by Caputo replaced by its playful extension. The opposition Caputo expects to his approach he expects from the orthodox hierarchy that finds its power base challenged, while Kierkegaard awaits opposition from the human who finds his lack of faith in the eternal challenged. For this latter opposition, Caputo himself, though blithely unaware of the fact, actually provides a fairly good example. If *The Weakness of God* had been written in 19th

50 This difference between the two is also observed by Caputo in an essay from 2002: "The knight of faith pledges his troth to the paradox of the eternal in time, of the eternal incarnated in the historically determinate man Jesus of Nazareth, which clothes the god in definite historical garb; the affirmation of the impossible in deconstruction, on the other hand, is of a Messiah who can always be determined otherwise, of which the proper name of Jesus would be but one determinate form", quoted from Jeffrey HANSON, "A tale of two doublets: Derrida and Kierkegaard", *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 10 (2010), 54–63, here: 57. For a critical evaluation of this aspect of Caputo's thought, see LARS SANDBECK, "God as immanent transcendence in Mark C. Taylor and John D. Caputo", *Studia theologica* 65 (2011), 18–38.

51 For a critique of attempts at extending this reductionist way of interpreting transcendence to Kierkegaard, see further Sylvia WALSH, "Kierkegaard and postmodernism", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29 (1991), 113–122, and John MILBANK, *The sublime in Kierkegaard*, in *Post-secular philosophy: Between philosophy and theology*, ed. Phillip BLOND (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 131–156.

century Danish and not in modern English, we could well think of it as having been discovered by some of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and published as an example of the religiosity of the aesthetic.⁵²

One can therefore hardly sustain the conclusion that Caputo succeeds in showing the applicability of the commandment of love under a changed set of circumstances; he rather shows that under the circumstances as he perceives them, the commandment of love disappears. If there is no eternity, there is no love as unchangeable and equally demanding for all relationships. If there is no incarnation of this eternity, there is no eternal love as manifest in the context of experienced humanity. If there is no gospel of unconditional love, there is no obligation of unconditional love. Caputo thus clearly confirms the relationship between grace and commandment as established through the reading of *Works of Love*, but only negatively; he shows that if there is no eternity as a manifest and incarnated reality, neither grace nor obligation can be conceived as unconditional and absolutely demanding realities. It is thus hardly a coincidence that his abandoning of the idea of eternity from his theological project leads to the commandment of unconditional love being replaced by parables of hospitality.

Where does, however, this leave us with relation to the problem of the relevance of the Kierkegaardian approach under the changed circumstances we find ourselves today? If Caputo's attempt at recontextualizing it has to be rejected as its de facto subversion, how is the challenge from *Works of Love* to be received by us? If Caputo's attempt at relating to the contemporary pluralist predicament through the rejection of eternity reduces the commandment to the morality of the doable, how is the radicality of the commandment to be maintained?

IV The irreducibility of the gospel of love

It leaves us with the conclusion that as long as the radicality of the commandment of unconditional love is considered as a meaningful theological project, there after all seems to be no way around Kierkegaard's insistence that one cannot do without the paradoxality of the manifestation of the eternal within a specific finite context. Either eternity is present within a specific contextuality or not at all. The message of the eternal One appearing as a concrete human person is certainly counter-intuitive, and all the more so today with all our suspi-

⁵² The critique of Caputo for representing what in Kierkegaard's perspective is the aesthetic, was raised already in 1991 by WALSH, "Kierkegaard and postmodernism"; the situation has not changed much with *The Weakness of God*.

cions against all kinds of so-called timeless truths. It may still be indispensable, though, as its being replaced by other approaches to the question of the manifestation of eternity subverts the very possibility of maintaining the radicality of the commandment of love. This is what is maintained by Kierkegaard, and it is confirmed by the implications of the completely different approach by Caputo.

What is made manifest by the incarnation of the eternal One is unconditional love as directed at every single human being.⁵³ The cross-cultural relevance aimed at by Caputo's insistence on the source of the call being unidentifiable is thus in Kierkegaard's view realized by its being understood as the manifestation of unconditional love, which, precisely as unconditional, is equally relevant in all possible contexts. This commandment is through the proclamation of the gospel both established as equally relevant for all humans and, through one's fellowship with the human Jesus, placed within the realm of the realizable for all believers. As unconditional love, God is the transcultural reality within which the unconditionality of the commandment is both realized and made into a universal obligation. And through the gospel of the incarnation, the realization of the commandment is proclaimed not only as a divine reality, but one that equally pertains to humans.

This does not amount to a message of Christian perfection, and Kierkegaard was for his own part "acutely aware of his failure to embody the Christian ideals in his own life."⁵⁴ But it amounts to an insistence that the gospel's only possibility to be heard as gospel, that is, as the message of the unconditionality of divine love and the equally unconditional character of human obedience rests in its being identified as the message of the concrete human being Jesus Christ. The ability of identifying the Father of Jesus as the source of the call does not disable the possibility of taking it seriously; on the contrary, it establishes the only possibility of adequately receiving it both as unconditional grace and unlimited obligation.

⁵³ Cf. note 13 above.

⁵⁴ So Sylvia WALSH, *Kierkegaard's Theology*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, eds. John LIPPITT and George PATTISON (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 292–308, here: 292.