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# Kierkegaard on indiscriminate love

Knut Alfsvåg

The axle around which Kierkegaard's thought revolves is the difference between the infinite and the finite, and the commandment to love all humans indiscriminately is the manifestation of the infinite within the area of the finite. The realization of this commandment will not let inequality disappear; finitude can never be conceived as the realization of the infinite and undifferentiated. The goal of absolute human equality will therefore never be realized within the realm of the finite and political. However, one must keep an open space for it as the area from which the values of the political are calibrated and evaluated. If the goal is considered realizable, politics will be reduced to secularized versions of theocracy; if lost, politics will be reduced to entertainment. The task of the church in relation to the political is to maintain the significance of this principle.

## *Introduction*

In today's globalized world, Christianity has an ambiguous position. It is closely associated with the Western world, thus providing the ideological backdrop for Western domination and colonialization. This is still referred to in a positive way by leaders and writers who want to strengthen the Christian identity of the West against what is seen as the onslaught of Islam and secular pluralism. On the other hand, Christianity may seem a dubious ally in the struggle for a restoration of society's ideological homogeneity. The Bible tells us that all humans without exception are created in the image of God, and in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus attacks the preference for sameness by setting indiscriminate love of one's neighbour as the undisputable moral norm, thus subverting the very idea of the difference between "us" and "them". However, despite this emphasis on human equality, there is no doubt that as presented in the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles aimed

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at creating a group of believers with an identity. This raises the puzzling question of how this identity is to be maintained when friend and foe are on the same level before God. Is it possible to maintain a group identity without defining its borders in relation to what is different?

In this paper, I will let Søren Kierkegaard be our guide in investigating this problem. In his works up to and including *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* published in February 1846, he explored the implications of being an individual before God. From then on, he broadened the perspective to include the social and political implications of his understanding of individuality and subjectivity. His broadening of interest in this respect is related to the fact that Denmark in the second half of the 1840s experienced a time of political upheaval, the outcome of which was that its nominally absolute monarchy was replaced by a democratic constitution.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard was thus confronted with the problem of the significance of a Christian identity at a time when the political authority was transferred from the Christian king to the unspecified group of people whom Kierkegaard called the crowd, and his reflections in this regard still deserve our interest.<sup>2</sup>

The first work which Kierkegaard devoted to social issues, and the only one which is mainly devoted to this topic, is *A Literary Review* (*En literair Anmeldelse*), published in March 1846, one month after *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and therefore my investigation also starts here.<sup>3</sup> To add depth to the analysis, I will also pay attention to *Works of Love* (*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*), published in September 1847, which is arguably Kierkegaard's main attempt at describing life as a Christian,<sup>4</sup> and to a shorter work Kierkegaard wrote in July 1848<sup>5</sup> after it had become clear that the democratizing forces had gained the upper hand, but not published until after his death. These works were written with Kierkegaard's name on the title page; there is no pseudonymity here.

## Two Ages

In 1845, the Danish author Thomasine Gyllembourg published a novel called *Two Ages* (*To Tidsaldre*).<sup>6</sup> The two ages are the time of the Revolution and that of the novel's writing, the 1840s. The book is thus a thinly veiled defence of the passionate enthusiasm of the author's youth. There are exceptions, but in general, the 1840s are portrayed as a time characterized by entertainment without commitment. Kierkegaard found the work interesting and wrote a book-length review essay, where he

agrees with the author in preferring the attitude of the revolutionaries for that of their more laid-back contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> The time of the revolution is essentially passionate, interested in nothing but its own idea (59–60),<sup>8</sup> whereas the contemporaries are only interested in discussions and deliberations without decisions. Kierkegaard describes this attitude as “Reflexion” and calls it a quagmire (“en Hængesæk”, 61); it may produce a lot of splash and noise, but nothing substantial. Despite possible technical progress, the age of reflection has no idea where to go and for which purpose its advanced contraptions should be used. The rapidity of communication is thus in an inverse ratio to the slowness created by the age’s degree of confusion.<sup>9</sup> The impression of activity is mere surface; the common interest is to keep time at bay, so that nothing significant ever happens (67).<sup>10</sup>

In Kierkegaard’s view, the reason for this lack of action is ultimately theological. The age is ensnared in reflection because nobody has become an individual in the only way possible: By being confronted by God and thus by the responsibility of eternity.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the responsibility of the individual is replaced by the comfort of company. One always looks to the others for approval, and the entire age is reduced to a committee (76).<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, even the age of the Revolution had its problems. But it respected the essential difference between good and evil and therefore recognized the significance of making up one’s mind in relation to this difference (64) – the age of the Revolution knew the seriousness of decision. The age of reflexion, however, confuses the categories and postpones the decision, always preferring to remain in ambiguity (75).<sup>13</sup> Revolutionary individuality opened the possibility of cooperation among individuals who shared the experience of the ultimate decision, whereas the actions of the age where everybody looks for the approval of the others will never move beyond ambiguous half-steps (77). It is an attitude that is paraded as prudence; in reality, however, it is nothing but intellectual and spiritual laziness.<sup>14</sup> The preference for half-heartedness even affects the relationship between the sexes, where unbridled passion is replaced by playful hints of transgression, each of which can be said to be innocent (76). On a more philosophical level, the same tendency can be seen among the Hegelians, who tended to blur all differences through their logic of mediation.<sup>15</sup>

The outcome of the entrapment of reflection and ambiguity is the levelling (“Nivellering”, 80) of everybody to a kind of mathematical equality where nobody is allowed to stand out (81). The means for achieving this is envy (“Misundelse”), and nobody will ever reach

individuality without breaking free from the prison of envy (78).<sup>16</sup> This prison is in Kierkegaard's view maintained by the press, which in the age of reflection is given the task of reducing its readers to what Kierkegaard calls the public ("Publikum"). The means of achieving this goal is to reduce any tendency in the direction of individuality to entertainment.<sup>17</sup> If anything appears that may endanger the indolence of the public, it is chased by the dog (=the press), which makes fun of it until the public is bored and seek other attractions (90).<sup>18</sup> The birth of individuality through confrontation with the responsibility of eternity will under these circumstances never occur.

Kierkegaard thus defends the passion of the Revolution by comparing it to the leap of faith.<sup>19</sup> Absolutism may in Kierkegaard's view have its advantages. It is modest in its anthropological assumptions, the difference between ideal and reality thus being less conspicuous, and its church system may be more resistant to the *vox populi, vox dei*-temptation.<sup>20</sup> However, Kierkegaard does not seem to think of this as an age and an attitude that can be restored. Now it is time to embrace the age of democracy with its particular pitfalls and challenges.<sup>21</sup> That is the reason he takes the liberals of his own time to task for having exchanged the gold standard of the Revolution, the principle of human equality, for the indifference of the quagmire, where anything is acceptable as long as nobody takes it seriously. Kierkegaard thus seems to think that a working democracy presupposes individuals taking their social responsibility seriously to the extent of letting it be informed by their engagement with the eternal One. It thus seems that Kierkegaard may accept democracy, but not secular liberalism. When the power of deciding is shared by everybody, the seriousness of deciding tends to disappear. Nobody will then care for ultimate outcomes; what counts is to be entertained.<sup>22</sup> The only way out of the quagmire that Kierkegaard can see is to resist the mathematization of equality by means of individuals who have experienced the responsibility of eternity. Hence Kierkegaard's insistence, so significant through his struggle with the established church through the final months of his life, but visible already in this work,<sup>23</sup> that the church should resist the deterioration of decision-making to ambiguity and remain as the area in society where the clarion call of eternity is heard and heeded.

Kierkegaard thus criticizes his contemporaries for having lost the seriousness of absolutely significant decision-making. His standard in developing this diagnosis is the individual who finds him- or herself confronted by eternity, which for Kierkegaard is the unchangeable standard of the ethical and political. What Kierkegaard aims at in this work,

is thus to explore the social significance of a theological world view. The implication is an emphasis on human equality – we are all on the same level before God – combined with the insistence that the understanding of equality is dependent on guidance from those who actually have committed themselves to the obligation of eternity and thus to the standard of equality. We are not equal in the sense that we are copies of each other – this is what Kierkegaard criticizes as mathematical equality. On the contrary, true equality is for its realization dependent on individuals whose lives are determined by an appreciation of an eternal responsibility.

It is a view of society that could be described as an elitist democracy. We are all equal, but it is a kind of equality that for its materialization is dependent on the guidance from those who have made the eternal decision, the implication of which is that they find themselves determined by the principle of human equality. We may consider this a Christianized version of Plato's idea of a state governed by the philosophically competent. However, Kierkegaard does not even play with the idea of giving those who have made the eternal decision formal political power. He rather seems to think of them in terms of the leaven in the flour (cf. Matt 13:33).

There is a role to play for the press in this idealized Kierkegaardian democracy. But in his experience, it is not up to the task, in reality being reduced to nothing but a means for propagating sameness without depth. The church, however, has a politically significant role to play; the particular view of human equality Kierkegaard is exploring, will never be realized without the church transmitting the challenge of eternity with fidelity. However, the mere accumulation of the traditions of Christendom is too easily transformed into just another defence for thoughtless uniformity.<sup>24</sup> Christianity only makes sense if it is allowed to perform the feat for which it was originally conceived: To manifest the challenge on the Eternal One within the context of everyday existence. This is the only possibility Kierkegaard can see for saving bourgeois Christendom from the tedious repetition of envious sameness.

In this way, Kierkegaard emphasizes the social significance of the eternal decision. However, in this work he does not explore the virtues of a life formed by the decision in any detail. To get a more precise understanding of the movement from the leap of faith to the life of faith, we will look at *Works of Love*, which was published one and a half years later. Here Kierkegaard investigates how the decision of eternity makes itself manifest through the love of one's neighbour.

## Works of Love

In the 1840s, atheists were few and far between. Still, Kierkegaard finds it necessary to introduce his investigation of Christian love by rejecting atheism. If one adheres to a material world view, he writes, love is the first thing that disappears (13).<sup>25</sup> This is a deception for which there is no recompense either in time or eternity (14). The origin of love is God's presence in the world (17),<sup>26</sup> and for that reason, it can only be seen in faith (16), i.e. the attitude that trusts divine love as the world's ultimate reality.<sup>27</sup> Love is thus a reality for which no human being is responsible. Still, it comes in the shape of an obligation to love God unconditionally (27),<sup>28</sup> and from this foundation to love one's neighbour and oneself (28).<sup>29</sup> The obligation to love God absolutely and one's neighbour as oneself is thus for Kierkegaard the only possible outcome of the eternal decision.<sup>30</sup> The love of one's neighbour and of oneself are closely related in the sense that the reduplication of the self in the neighbour is the test whether one's attitude to oneself is true love or merely egoism (29).<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard emphasizes that as an eternal obligation, love is not subject to change (36–50).<sup>32</sup> From this he draws the implication that the commandment to love one's neighbour implies the extinction of the selfishness of preferential love. Christianity will thus not model its understanding of love from erotic or friendly relationships,<sup>33</sup> as this would introduce temporality and changeability in a way that is incompatible with the eternity and unchangeability of love. The commandment is therefore to love all humans unconditionally and indiscriminately. In the same way as erotic love moves in the direction of the beloved, Christian love moves in the direction of everybody.<sup>34</sup> This should not be understood as a rejection of either friendship or bodily desire (59), but as a commandment to structure even preferential relationships according to the love that is directed to one's neighbour (69).<sup>35</sup> Devotion ("Hengivenhed") easily deteriorates to being directed toward a copy of oneself ("det andet Jeg"), whereas the eternal indifference of the commandment targets the otherness of the other in a way that implies a rejection of one's self ("Selvfornegtelsen", 60–61).<sup>36</sup> Falling in love or finding a friend is thus not to realize the Christian commandment of loving one's neighbour (64). On the contrary, the commandment is equal to the immensity of an infinite requirement (95).<sup>37</sup>

The precondition for realizing the commandment is to love God above everything else; only then will preferential love be replaced by the love

of eternal equality.<sup>38</sup> This commandment will create offence (“Forargelse”) in the natural human being.<sup>39</sup> One should therefore not consider Christianity as the fulfilment of the best humans can produce (“det Høieste”, 65); it is beyond the reasonably realizable. Kierkegaard thus again emphasizes the necessity of liberating Christianity from the expectations of the public.

Loving the neighbour indiscriminately implies loving the enemy – it is to love everybody blindly in the same way as the lover loves the beloved (74–75). Difference does not disappear, but it becomes unimportant; being duped by human difference through, e.g. differentiating between friend and enemy, is a sign that one works from the perspective of temporality (77–78). Kierkegaard distinguishes between Christian equality (“Ligelighed”), which rises above temporal difference, and worldly sameness (“Lighed”), which considers temporal difference as irreducible (78–79).<sup>40</sup> The task of Christianity is to avoid being contaminated by the world (cf. Jam 1:27). This is not realized by considering oneself superior in relation to others (80), but only by accepting the divine doctrine of absolute equality. This is how Kierkegaard in this book emphasizes the significance of the eternal responsibility. They who love in a worldly way will always consider the Christian commandment an exaggeration and therefore demand the reduction of the commandment to the level of the doable, but that is to misunderstand it. The eternal command of loving everybody indiscriminately cannot be reduced without being transformed to the level of mere self-love (130).

One is thus confronted by the problem that the commandment of loving indiscriminately can only be realized by accepting its unrealizability.<sup>41</sup> To be moved by eternal love is therefore to find oneself in infinite debt; one will never realize the ideal (176). However, according to *Works of Love*, this is not a problem. Love is not interested in self-evaluation.<sup>42</sup> The loving person is always on the move towards the target of one’s love and will never pause to gauge the level of one’s achievement. Completely absorbed by the task of realizing the commandment, one is not paying attention to what is still left of the task, though always aware that one will never have realized the commandment in a way that sets one apart from one’s neighbour. Infinite love does not know of comparisons (182–183).<sup>43</sup>

Both *A Literary Review* and *Works of Love* emphasize the ethical significance of the challenge of the eternal. But in a way not found in the former work, *Works of Love* underlines that the challenge of the eternal will always manifest itself as the obligation to love one’s neighbour. Kierkegaard is deeply suspicious of letting one’s realization of the



commandment to love one's neighbour be shaped by culturally conditioned phenomena like the relationship one has with a one's spouse or friend. The true revolutionary will never be satisfied with the realization of the ideal as it is found among his or her contemporaries, but will always press beyond for the true manifestation of eternity in the context of the temporal.

Kierkegaard is aware that in a pluralist society, not everybody will see this in the same way. He emphasizes that with atheism, true love disappears. However, this does not tempt him in the direction of a social ban on atheism. The only acceptable weapon is to love even atheists indiscriminately. To love is to believe everything without ever being deceived and to hope everything without ever being ashamed (227–262; cf. 1 Cor 13:7). When one moves according to the commandment to love one's neighbour, one moves within the framework of eternity. There is thus no temporal event either in oneself or in the target of one's love that can derail the movement of love; it will always look for the possibilities, and with eternity as its frame of reference, it will never lose faith in the eventual realization of these possibilities. From the perspective of eternity, there is always hope.<sup>44</sup> Love is thus never served by a distrusting perception; this is the perspective of disbelief (229).<sup>45</sup>

This understanding of love is founded on the principle of seeing the relationship with another human being as a relationship with God (370). This is an approach that is grounded in the gospel of unconditional grace, in which the severity of the eternal is included (371): We should love as God loves. There is thus a kind of eternal reduplication in one's relationship to others; in loving them unconditionally, one instantiates the unconditionality of the love one has received from God.<sup>46</sup> When one forgives one's neighbour, one is forgiven by God.<sup>47</sup> The precondition for this to occur as intended, is that there is absolutely no idea of merit (372). As you do to others, God will do to you.<sup>48</sup> Kierkegaard can proclaim this as a definition of divinity: God is the principle of equal for equal; God is the reproduction of your own attitude with the amplification of eternity.<sup>49</sup>

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard in this way is considerably more precise in explaining the virtues and attitudes of a life informed by the eternal decision than he was in *A Literary Review*. However, he is still uninterested in exploring how people who have made the decision can be understood as a possible social influence. The loving person has no interest beyond being a pipeline for eternal love. The social implications of this manifestation of eternity within the context of the social is beyond the interest of the author of both *A Literary Review* and *Works of Love*.

This can be seen as a defence of social conservatism,<sup>50</sup> but there may also be other reasons for not discussing this topic in *Works of Love*.

But even while neglecting social context to the best of his ability, Kierkegaard as an author is still socially situated. He thus cannot avoid the problem of how he, in his insistence on absolute human equality before God, can criticize his contemporaries for not understanding this principle, the implication of which is that he as an exception from the principle of absolute human equality understand its implications. This is a problem Kierkegaard was well aware of; whether he succeeded in solving it, is another question.<sup>51</sup> His move in the direction of a solution is to present the reality of love as infinite both in its being made manifest by God and in its obligation for humans. There is nothing humans can do to clarify and instantiate infinite love beyond what has already been accomplished through the divine works of incarnation and reconciliation. Infinite love is divine both in origin and execution. Both the idea of merit and the idea of comparing one's own success in realizing the commandment of love with that of others thus appear meaningless. There are only two interesting points of orientation left: One's neighbour, and the task of approaching him or her from within the framework of infinite love which believes everything without ever being deceived and hopes everything without ever being ashamed. In doing this, the loving person will never let him- or herself be derailed by the inevitable discovery of discriminating attitudes in the target of one's love. Allowing oneself to be influenced by the level of lovability in one's neighbour, one will inevitably find one's love being reduced to the level of meritorious self-gratification. For this reason, Kierkegaard does not tire in emphasizing that eternal love for its realization is never dependent on culturally conditioned differences either positively or negatively.

However, it is still dependent on the gospel story being retold for the purpose of God's own realization of the works of love being made manifest among humans. The church thus differs from other social institutions by having the task of keeping this story alive as its defining purpose. What, then, if they who are offended by Christian love to the extent that they insist on reducing it to the level of the doable, gain the upper hand to the effect that the challenge of the commandment disappears entirely?<sup>52</sup> Then there is nothing that can be done beyond proclaiming one's faith in the victory of infinite love even under such circumstances. After all, the main story of the Bible is the story of love that proved itself to be infinite precisely by not being touched by its own demise. The truth of the story will therefore never be affected by

its suppression, any more than Christ was affected by being killed and laid in his grave.

### *The appendix*

During the spring of 1848, the democratizing forces gained the upper hand in Copenhagen.<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard, who at this time was working on *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*, was deeply interested in the implications of this development and discussed it in two notes which he appended to the manuscript of *The Point of View*. Critical of the lack of individual responsibility that follows from the rule of the majority,<sup>54</sup> he in these notes still tries to develop a foundation for democracy by limiting its purpose. In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard emphasizes that he has always written for the benefit of the single reader (“hiin Enkelte”, 22).<sup>55</sup> In the appendix, he expands this in the direction of the political by emphasizing that the crowd (“Mængden”) is untruth (86).<sup>56</sup> Christ, who was the truth, was only interested in individuals. He did not create a political party and he did not govern by ballot. His relationship with the crowd ended by the crowd crucifying him (89).

Introducing the idea of eternal truth in politics is therefore a category error (90); politics does not work with the eternal, but with the temporal. If this limit is maintained, Kierkegaard accepts rule by the majority and thus the significance of the crowd; he will not be counted among the opponents of democracy. However, the crowd becomes the untruth when considered as the criterion for truth in ethical-religious matters, which for Kierkegaard is related to the absolute and eternal.<sup>57</sup> For Kierkegaard, truth always has to do with one's relationship to God, and human equality is founded on the commandment to love one's neighbour indiscriminately. Enforcing this principle on the crowd by means of the power of the majority is counterproductive; when defended through the rule of the majority, the principle itself is reduced to untruth (91).

Kierkegaard thus seems to be defending a strict division between the spiritual and the political. As a good Lutheran, he finds the two realms to have different objectives which are to be realized with entirely different means. Hence, the emphasis on the eternal obligation within the spiritual realm, and the acceptance of government by the majority within the political.

Still, Kierkegaard does not accept the total secularization of the political. Religion is politically relevant as the manifestation of the ideal even for the political realm. Religion represents what politicians have thought

in their happiest moments; it is the eternal representation of the most beautiful dream of the political.<sup>58</sup> This dream is the ideal of human equality (“Menneske-Lighed”, 83).<sup>59</sup> However, this ideal can never be realized within the realm of the political.<sup>60</sup> The reason is that the realm of the political is the temporal, and the essence of temporality is difference.<sup>61</sup> For Kierkegaard, it is obvious that one will never be able to realize the ideal of equality within the medium of difference.<sup>62</sup> Self-sufficient worldliness is both inconsistent and dangerous (84). The difference between ideal and reality will never disappear. Still, the presence of this ideal within the context of the temporal is of utmost importance.<sup>63</sup> To maintain the awareness of both the ideal and its unrealizability is the task of the church; hence Kierkegaard’s disappointment when it did not.

We may then summarize Kierkegaard’s understanding of the relation between the eternal and the temporal in the appendices to *The Point of View* in the following way: The obligation of indiscriminate love is relevant both for the eternal and the temporal realms, but in different ways. Within the spiritual realm, it obliges the individual through the eternal decision. Within the political realm, it sets the goal of politics through the appreciation of its unrealizability. If the principle of human equality is not accepted as the goal of politics, the doors are opened for the arbitrariness of the tyrant. If it is considered realizable even within the area of the political, the difference between the eternal and the temporal disappears, and the doors are opened for secularized versions of theocracy. Both Nazism and Communism are arguably later examples of what Kierkegaard here is hinting at.<sup>64</sup>

Kierkegaard is less critical of his own time here than he was in *A Literary Review*. Democracy has come to stay, and it does not make sense to shoot it down. If the crowd desires to be entrusted with the responsibility of the temporal, there is no use denying it the pleasure. There are, however, certain limits that must be accepted. The authority of the crowd should be strictly limited to the temporal. In relation to the ultimate questions, i.e. questions related to the challenge of eternity in the shape of one’s neighbour, the responsibility is to be left with the individual. Even the politician must therefore pay attention to the vision of eternity as the utopian dream of unlimited human fellowship. The politician must be aware, though, that the tools for realizing this goal are not to be found in politicians’ toolboxes. On the contrary, the vision of absolute human equality should guide the politician indirectly by reminding him<sup>65</sup> that his responsibility in this respect is to create a space where the call for the responsibility of the eternal may be heard.<sup>66</sup> As an

individual, he should even listen to the call for his own sake. It would be a grave error, though, to enforce this principle on society by means of majority rule.

Kierkegaard speaks as a true liberal, whose defence for democracy is founded on the integrity of the individual.<sup>67</sup> This entails the principle of human equality, but not the equality of world views. Kierkegaard's insistence on the necessity of paying attention to the incarnation-based story of the presence of the infinite in the realm of the temporal is as strong as ever. To act as judge of differing world views is, however, not the task of the politician. His and her task in this respect is limited to preserving the area where the call can be proclaimed.

### *The eternal significance of equality*

In Kierkegaard's view, there will always be difference and alterity within the temporal. Finite phenomena differ by definition; undifferentiated equality belongs solely to the realm of the infinite.

It is of ultimate importance for Kierkegaard, and one of the dominating emphases through his entire authorship, that this difference between the infinite and the finite be strictly upheld.<sup>68</sup> The abolition of this difference as the ultimate point of orientation is a recipe for disaster.<sup>69</sup> Variation within the realm of the finite is thus not something that should be eradicated; on the contrary, it should be appreciated. The tool for achieving this is to see difference as transparent for the possibility of the eternal appearing. Before the Eternal One, difference loses its importance without disappearing.<sup>70</sup> Having experienced the encounter with the Eternal One, one will therefore respect the principle of irreducible human equality within a context of difference belonging to finitude and temporality.

This attitude is expressed through the commandment of loving God absolutely and one's neighbour as oneself. The encounter with the Eternal One sets the love of one's neighbour as the ultimate guideline for all human relationships.<sup>71</sup> The appreciation of difference is thus evaluated with a specific yardstick, which is that of the double commandment of indiscriminate love as taught and practiced by the Incarnated One.<sup>72</sup> The standard for the evaluation of difference is thus undisputedly Christian. This is, however, not an example of others being arbitrarily evaluated by the norms of one's own choice. The yardstick Kierkegaard refers to only makes sense as the manifestation of an eternal, and thus context-independent, standard. Hence the significance of indiscriminate love, which differs from all other attitudes, including preferential love,

in not being reactive and thus dependent on the context within which it appears.

The standard of the double commandment is as irreducible as the eternity within which it is anchored, and it will only remain as long as it is considered as such.<sup>73</sup> As a norm for the finite and temporal, it thus sets a standard that will never be realized. To compare one's progress with the norm does not make sense; one knows in advance that one falls short of the ideal. The important thing is thus not self-evaluation, but to be on the move towards one's neighbour with works of love.

The awareness of the norm's unrealizability is also a precondition for its appropriate political implication. While being aware that the goal of absolute human equality will never be realized within the realm of the finite and political, one must keep an open space for it as the area from which the values of the political are calibrated and evaluated. Even the political should thus see itself in the mirror of the unrealizable commandment. If not, democracy will all too easily be reduced to entertainment as demanded by the dictatorship of the crowd, the outcome of which is the contempt of otherness as described in *A Literary Review*.

The maintenance of the realm of the manifestation of the eternal is for Kierkegaard the task of the church. Entrusted with the message of the Incarnated One and his message of unconditional love and grace, the church is superbly equipped for the task. There is always a danger, though, that the church becomes devoured from within by the preferences of the crowd. In a democracy that intends to govern even the church by the rule of the majority, this danger becomes acute.<sup>74</sup> As he made quite clear during the last year of his life, this is a church that Kierkegaard has no interest in defending.

The outcome of having the implications of the encounter with the Eternal One being determined by the rule of the majority is that the obligation of eternal love is reduced to the level of what is found to be acceptable by the crowd. The unconditional respect for human dignity will then disappear, and what appears to be outside the limits of the playful sameness that the crowd finds acceptable, will not be tolerated.

In experiencing the transition from absolutism to democracy, Kierkegaard thus defines the task of Christianity as that of maintaining the unrealizable goal of human equality as the point of view from which human difference appears meaningful. Without the relativizing influence of eternity as the standard before which all human endeavours are evaluated, manifestations of difference will arbitrarily be accepted as ultimate norms, and the appreciation of equality in difference will

deteriorate into the unquestioned acceptance of sameness. The integrity of the political realm is thus dependent on the double commandment of love being kept alive as a social force through individual decisions. The work of the church as the instrument through which the manifestation of the eternal obligation is kept alive is thus a necessary condition for the protection of the integrity of the political.

### *Conclusions*

How is Christian identity to be maintained when this identity consists in the declaration of unqualified human equality, thus subverting the difference between sameness and alterity as far as Christians are concerned? Kierkegaard's answer to this question is founded on his appreciation of the necessary relationship between the individual accepting one's eternal responsibility before God, and the outcome of this decision being the acceptance of the obligation to love one's neighbour indiscriminately. The identity of the group of believers thus consists in maintaining a space where the call of the eternal One is heard and adhered to, the outcome of which is a life of love made manifest in all one's relationships. The precondition for this to work as intended is both that the story of the incarnated One is maintained as the story through which the call of the eternal One is made manifest, and that the story is not trivialized as a confirmation of the superiority of the majority ("the crowd").

The obligation of indiscriminate love does not set specific goals and targets within the area of the social and the political. Still, the ideal of human equality is politically relevant as a principle that should inform even political and social decisions. Kierkegaard thus found that the destiny of the fledgling democracy he saw developing before his eyes was dependent on whether it would let its citizens live and work from the integrity they might achieve as individuals before God. While being aware that there was no turning back to the Christian state he saw disappearing before his eyes, he is still emphasizing the social significance of religion as the foundation of a functioning democracy. Kierkegaard's theologically founded view of the political is thus clearly at variance with the Enlightenment ideal of a secularized public space as anticipated by Hobbes and Locke. In the contemporary context, Kierkegaard's approach remains highly controversial; it is, however, not unanimously rejected as obsolete in the way one tended to do a generation or two ago.<sup>75</sup>

Kierkegaard was aware that even the revolutionary attitude may turn violent and intolerant – the question of how to evaluate the regime of Robespierre is explicitly discussed in Gyllembourg’s novel – but he did not pay much attention to this danger. In addition, he was clearly aware that his political philosophy presupposes the rejection of atheism and materialism. We are now aware that atheism may deteriorate into violent forms of dictatorship, something that probably would not have surprised Kierkegaard. His main objective was, however, to discuss how we should maintain respect for the difference of the neighbour within the context of a democracy.

For this purpose, Kierkegaard is particularly interested in evaluating religious traditions as the area where the all-important manifestation of eternity is supposed to occur. The experience of encountering the eternal One is the instant within which indiscriminate love of one’s neighbour is born. Kierkegaard became increasingly critical of his own tradition, which he defined as that of bourgeois Christendom, for maintaining a space for this encounter; hence his rejection of it during the last months of his life. But he would not let go of his insistence on finding the manifestation of the eternal One in the respect for human equality. It was, after all, founded on the hope that is never put to shame.

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### *Notes*

1. The standard work on Kierkegaard’s relation to social and political issues in his later works is still Kirmmse, *Golden Age Denmark*.
2. Ryan, *Kierkegaard’s Indirect Politics* emphasizes Kierkegaard’s significance for 20th century political thought.
3. Kierkegaard, *Skrifter*, hereafter referred to as SKS with volume and page number, vol. 8, 7–106. The work is sometimes also referred to as *Two Ages*; for an English translation, see Kierkegaard, *Writings*, vol. 14. That this book signifies a shift in Kierkegaard’s work is emphasized by Plekon, “Kierkegaard’s Two Ages,” 20–1.



4. SKS 9,7–378.
5. ‘*The Individual One*’: Two ‘Notes’ Concerning My Work As an Author (‘*Den Enkeltte*’: *Tvende ‘Noter’ betræffende min Forfatter-Virksomhed*), SKS 16,77–106. This was intended as an appendix to *The Point of View of My Work As an Author*.
6. Gyllembourg, *To Tidsaldre*. Amazon has published an e-book edition of the original version.
7. According to Battersby, “The Phantom,” 32, Kierkegaard “provides a counter-example to a dominant trend, insofar as he is taking the writings of a woman seriously, and is privileging a female perspective”.
8. Numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers in SKS 8.
9. “Befordrings-Væsenets Hurtighed og Communicationens Hastværk staaer i omvendt Forhold til Raadvildhedens Seendrægtighed” (61). One can only speculate on what Kierkegaard would have said to the age of internet and space-rockets.
10. This is intended as an indirect critique of Johan Ludvig Heiberg, Thomasine Gyllembourg’s son and the leading Hegelian in Denmark; so Battersby, “The Phantom,” 34.
11. “Og hvoraf kan dette [Reflexions Trældom] komme, uden deraf, at den religieuse Individualitets Udsondring for Gud i Evighedens Ansvar forbigaaes” (82). For Kierkegaard, this is a consequence of “the ingrained sinfulness of the human condition;” so Stan, “A Reconsideration,” 359.
12. According to Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Sociology,” 146, this implies a collective self-deification that Kierkegaard views as idolatrous, and ultimately as diabolical.
13. This respect for the seriousness of decision sets Kierkegaard apart from postmodern thinkers like Derrida and Caputo, who are fascinated by his unrelenting critique of tradition and establishment. On this difference, see Walsh, “Kierkegaard and Postmodernism”.
14. So Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Sociology,” 152.
15. Kirmmse, *Golden Age Denmark*, 268. According to Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, 225–6, Kierkegaard reserves the sublation of the principle of contradiction for the relation between the eternal and the temporal. Sublating it within the temporal, as Hegel does, secularizes the paradox.
16. By means of envy, what appears as respect for equality is nothing but the insistence that “each be just like the others”; so Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Sociology,” 150.
17. Mass society leaves the distinction between good and evil outside its worldview, preferring instead to speak of the boring and the interesting; so Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Sociology,” 144.
18. “Kierkegaard describes modernity with uncanny brilliance—and with prophetic accuracy insofar as a ‘media age,’ the ‘internet age’ and the age of ‘tweeting’ is concerned;” so Battersby, “The Phantom,” 27. As an interesting attempt at reading *A Literary Review* as a critique even of our time, see Tyson, *Kierkegaard’s Theological Sociology*.
19. In my view, this is overlooked when one considers *A Literary Review* as remaining within the conservative mainstream of the Golden Age; so, e. g., Plekon, “Kierkegaard’s Two Ages,” 45. Even Plekon, however, is aware of the anti-elitism of Kierkegaard’s social thought; see 49.
20. On Kierkegaard’s social and political conservatism, see Nordentoft, *Hvad siger Brandmajoren?*, 70–93.
21. As emphasized by Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard*, 106, Kierkegaard’s analysis explodes his conservatism from within. Nordentoft dates the shift to the last years of Kierkegaard’s life; in my view, however, it is clearly anticipated already in *A Literary Review*. One may

- also doubt whether Nordentoft pays sufficient attention to the explicitly theological foundation of the shift.
22. Liberalism thus falls victim to the irony of culminating “in the disappearance of the very individual who is exalted in its theory and practice;” so Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, 68.
  23. On the relation between *A Literary Review* and what was to follow, see Plekon, “Kierkegaard’s Two Ages,” 51–2.
  24. There is thus a certain parallel between Kierkegaard’s critique of established religion and that found in another of Hegel’s students, Karl Marx. On this parallel, see Forrester, “Attack on Christendom” and Marsh, “Marx and Kierkegaard”.
  25. Numbers in parenthesis in this part refer to the page numbers in SKS 9. For an English translation, see Kierkegaard, *Writings*, vol. 16.
  26. For Kierkegaard, the ethical obligation is grounded in divine presence, not, as for Kant, in reason. On this difference, see further Martens, “You Shall Love,” 72.
  27. On the ontological implications of Kierkegaard’s understanding of love, see Come, “Kierkegaard’s Ontology of Love”.
  28. On the biblical foundation of Kierkegaard’s understanding of love, see Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 125.
  29. The love of God, neighbour and oneself are the three mysteries that constitute “the ultimate dynamic that permeates and qualifies everything that ‘is’”; so Come, “Kierkegaard’s Ontology of Love,” 91. This “love is unconditional, even when reduplicated within the finitude and fallibility of the human being” (108).
  30. According to Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, 123, Kierkegaard’s “writings in this second period [after 1846] are devoted to a rediscovery of the other as neighbour in and through the discovery of one’s own self.”
  31. On the significance of the idea of reduplication in *Works of Love*, see Burgess, “Kierkegaard’s Concept of Redoubling”.
  32. According to Quinn, “Kierkegaard’s Christian Ethics”, “Christian love of neighbour is invulnerable to alterations in its object” (355). On this topic, see also Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 147–51.
  33. “Christendommen har stødt Elskov og Venskab fra Thronen, Driftens og Tilbøielighedens Kjerlighed, Forkjerligheden, for da at sætte Aandens Kjerlighed isteden, den til ‘Næsten’” (51). Kierkegaard is, however, not alone in his critique of preferential relationships; see Ferreira, “Love,” 336.
  34. “Den christelige Kjerlighed lærer at elske alle Mennesker, ubetinget alle. Ligesaa ubetinget og stærk som Elskov strammer i Retning af, at der kun er een eneste Elsket, lige saa ubetinget og stærk som Elskov strammer den christelige Kjerlighed i modsat Retning” (56).
  35. “Det er Gud, der skal lære hver Enkelt, hvorledes han skal elske” (“God will teach each one how to love,” 116). For this reason, “Christian equality does not look at all like earthly likeness”; so Martens, “You Shall Love,” 65.
  36. “‘Næsten’ er Evighedens Mærke – paa ethvert Menneske” (‘Neighbour’ is the sign of eternity on every single human; 94).
  37. As emphasized by Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, 235, *eros* and *philia* are not replaced, but transformed by *agape*.
  38. “Kjerlighed til Næsten er derfor den evige Ligelighed i at elske” (64).
  39. On the offending character of *Works of Love*, see Hall, *The Treachery of Love*, 12–16.
  40. Kirmmse, *Golden Age Denmark*, 324, and Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, 235, comments on the play on words between “Ligelighed” (equality) and “Lighed” (sameness).
  41. This is also emphasized in Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, 232–3.

42. "Saasnart Kjerligheden dvæler ved sig selv, er den ude af sit Element" (182). According to Barrett, "The Neighbour's Well-Being," 144, this refutes the critique by Martin Buber, Theodor Adorno and others that Kierkegaard is only interested in love as a cosmic interiority. For an updated overview of this debate with what seems to me as a consistent conclusion, see Millay, "Concrete and Otherworldly".
43. On Kierkegaard's rejection of comparison, see further Stan, "A Reconsideration," 353.
44. So also Martens, "You Shall Love," 76. For a discussion of how love remains in eternity without ever being able to forcefully remove the possibility of offence, see Come, "Kierkegaard's Ontology of Love," 112–19. According to Come, Kierkegaard succeeds in maintaining the unchangeability of eternal hope without letting it deteriorate into the flatness of a doctrine of *apokatastasis*.
45. Mistrust is an existential conclusion that does not follow from the fact that the person does not appear to be trustworthy; so Rudd, "Believing All Things," 122. This implies a subversion of the hermeneutics of suspicion as taught by Marx, Freud and Nietzsche (125). The practical application is that one should be strict with oneself and generous with others (135).
46. Karl Barth therefore errs when criticizing *Works of Love* for being weak in its understanding of God's own love. For a rejection of Barth's critique, see Martens, "You Shall Love," 77.
47. "Din Tilgivelse til en Anden er Din egen Tilgivelse" (373). The opposite is equally true: To accuse another before God, is to accuse oneself. Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, 243–6, discusses this as something strange and peculiar in Kierkegaard's thought, but it is lifted straight from the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matt 6:12 ESV). The significance of forgiveness, and thus of soteriology, for Kierkegaard's understanding of love, is emphasized by Stan, "A Reconsideration," 363.
48. This is the true realization of the relationship between self-love and love of the other.
49. "Thi Gud er egentligen selv dette rene Lige for Lige, den rene Gjengivelse av hvorledes Du selv er ... han gjentager det med Uendelighedens Forøgelse" (377). On this aspect of *Works of Love*, see further Andic, "Love's Redoubling".
50. So, e.g., in Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, 236.
51. On Kierkegaard's struggle with the problem of how to criticize one's readers without considering oneself superior to them see Hall, *The Treachery of Love*, 46–7.
52. In Kierkegaard's view, this is what happened when professor Martensen included the late bishop Mynster among the true witnesses (see, e.g., Garff, *SAK*, 629); hence Kierkegaard' struggle against the State Church in the last year of his life.
53. Kirmmse, *Golden Age Denmark*, 64–8.
54. Nordentoft, *Hvad siger Brand-majoren?*, 99–112.
55. Page numbers here refer to SK 16. The English translation is found in Kierkegaard, *Writings*, vol. 22.
56. For a succinct summary of Kierkegaard's perceptive exploration of the dangers of the crowd, see Stan, "A Reconsideration," 360–1.
57. "I Forhold til alle timelige, jordiske, verdslige Formaal kan Mængde have sin Gyldighed, endog sin Gyldighed som det Afgjørende, det er som Instantsen. Men om Sligt taler jeg jo ikke, saa lidet som jeg befatter mig dermed. Jeg taler om det Ethiske, det Ethisk-Religieuse, om 'Sandheden', og om at ethisk-religieust betragtet er Mængden Usandheden, naar den skal gjælde som Instantsen for hvad 'Sandhed' er" (86). Kierkegaard is here moving within the context of an Augustinian-Lutheran doctrine of the two regiments.

58. "Det Religieuse er den forklarede Gjengivelse af, hvad en Politiker, forsaavidt han virkelig elsker det at være Menneske og elsker Menneskene, i sit lykkeligste Øieblik har tænkt ... det religiøse [er] Evighedsens forklarede Gjengivelse af Politikens skjønneste Drøm" (83).
59. Here is another play on words: "Menneske" (human) + "Lighed" (equality) = "Menneskelighed", which is the Danish word for "humanity".
60. According to Barrett, "The Neighbour's Well-Being," 153, this debunking of "the pretensions of political ideologies" is an important aspect even of the deliberations in *Works of Love*.
61. According to Nicoletti, "Politics and Religion," 186, the relation between religion and politics parallels that between faith and reason. There is nothing inherently wrong with either reason or politics as long as their ambitions for finding ultimate solutions are kept at bay. The attempt at realizing equality within the realm of the political thus represents "the sacralization of politics" (187).
62. By overlooking this reticence, one makes Kierkegaard into an early representative of liberation theology. In spite of its many interesting observations, Pérez-Álvarez, *A Vexing Gadfly*, in my view goes too far in this direction.
63. As emphasized by Millay, "Concrete and Otherworldly," 37–8, in this insistence on the love of one's neighbour as the point of orientation even for social ethics, Kierkegaard maintains a position that is close to that of Augustine. A similar point of view is defended in Barrett, *Eros and Self-emptying*.
64. See Bellingher, "Toward a Kierkegaardian Understanding".
65. In Kierkegaard's time, politics was a male responsibility. Universal suffrage for women was introduced in Denmark in 1915.
66. Kierkegaard thus "emphasizes the importance of the single individual for the world, not just for religious life;" so Nicoletti, "Politics and Religion," 190.
67. "Kierkegaard himself is supposedly a conservative, bourgeois, isolated egotist supporting the monarchy and bemoaning the rise of democracy, and yet his writings offer a radical reappraisal of the individual that emerges as subversive, critical and dangerous;" so Ryan, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics*, 27.
68. Come, "Kierkegaard's Ontology of Love," 93.
69. This is the essence of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel; see Hühn and Schwab, "Kierkegaard and German Idealism," 85. Hence the parallels between Kierkegaard's and Marx's critique of bourgeois Christendom; see note 22.
70. Cf. Gal 3:28, the point of which is not that differences disappear, but that they appear in a new light.
71. "Redoubling God's love is both that which makes a person truly human and the highest human task; it is both an ontological and an ethical matter;" so Burgess, "Kierkegaard's Concept of Redoubling," 43.
72. On the significance of Christ for Kierkegaard's understanding of love, see Martens, "You Shall Love," 72–3, and Stan, "A Reconsideration," 363–5. When being reduced to the arbitrary instantiation of an unspecified "Messianism", the radicality of the commandment disappears; see Alfsvåg, "The Commandment of Love".
73. This is emphasized in Martens, "You Shall Love," 75.
74. "When the criterion of success—of quantitative results, of power—is applied to religion, its essence becomes empty and worldly;" so Nicoletti, "Politics and Religion," 185. On this aspect of Kierkegaard's thought, see further Stan, "A Reconsideration," 354–5.
75. According to Tyson, *Kierkegaard's Theological Sociology*, 5–6, works like Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been*, John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and Peter Berger's

*Desecularization of the World* can be seen as signs that we are on our way to reintegrating a Kierkegaardian understanding of society.

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