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Feminism, Kierkegaard, and the Limits of Self-Sacrifice

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for those who love

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Preface

As a religious scholar concerned with the well-being and flourishing of women, I focus on the ways in which religious beliefs inform and impact actual lives and bodies. Because Christian rhetoric often equates and conflates love with self-sacrifice, and because it engenders both of these values inordinately within women, I pay special attention to these concepts. Suffering and sacrifice are often valorized as inherently redemptive and indicative of the deepest and truest form of love. The major imperative of Christianity is to love God above all else and one's neighbor as oneself (Mt 22:36–40). In the New Testament, Jesus specifies that his followers ought to love each other as he has loved them (Jn 13:34). But what is this mode of loving and how is it manifest in human life? Jesus declares, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13, NRSV). In myriad ways, this statement has been co-opted to justify forms of intrapersonal, social, and structural forms of violence.

For this and other reasons, feminist and womanist theologians strongly critique an ethic of self-sacrificing love. Because beliefs are not confined to books of scripture and the pulpit, but are lived out in real bodies, their arguments that a doctrine of self-sacrifice is not only patriarchal, but actually belies a predilection for death and suffering, demand to be taken seriously. Feminist and womanist theologians make clear that the idea that the truest manifestation of love is found in giving up one's life for others becomes deadly when misappropriated and taken to its logical extreme. Unpacking how the doctrines of vicarious atonement and redemptive suffering relate to human life is crucial for understanding the nature of Christian love and how it is to be lived out on the ground.

Society as a whole, as well as religious institutions and other organizations individually, rely heavily on women's self-sacrifice in order to maintain the status quo. How can the operative understanding of love be reinterpreted – and redeemed – so that it gives life? In order to flesh out the relevant issues, I engage the continental tradition, namely Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. I find Kierkegaard to be an especially constructive and fruitful interlocutor, particularly because he maintains a belief in the efficacy of Christ's atonement and lifts up self-denial's love, yet at the very same time elaborates a profound doctrine of self-love as an indispensable aspect of Christian life that takes priority even over neighbor love. Women can discover and actuate the divine love within themselves and evaluate their own vocations as having equal importance with

any external demands. Their experience evinces that mapping the boundaries between duty to self and duty to others is a life and death matter.

Christian love is exactly what calls for victory over death in all of its varieties – including in its social and cultural forms. From this perspective, the possibility that women can love Christianly in ways that are both transgressive and emancipatory becomes clearer. Moreover, Christian love, when it is rightly understood, ought not to create an attitude of passive complacence toward violence in any of its complex configurations. Calling instead for active social engagement to amend all violent tendencies in human life, Christian love impels humanity not so much to risk death, but to struggle for life and flourishing amid uncertain outcomes. Works of love must seek to ameliorate a world of violence.

Deidre Nicole Green Northfield, Minnesota 2016

Contents

Introduction

1. Kierkegaard and Love

Sylvia Walsh opines that Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* is "perhaps the most reflective of all of Kierkegaard's writings and surely one of the most profound meditations on love ever written."[1] For Kierkegaard, the Christian love that purifies special loves is precisely what protects love from change. Walsh explains that Christian love is distinct from "natural, human, and pagan forms of love by the fact that it is eternal, whereas these other forms of love are essentially transient, perishable, and subject to change even if change does not occur."[2] For this reason, "temporal forms of love are always uncertain and require continual reaffirmation of their existence between lovers."[3] Christian love, by contrast, is "love that has won not merely continuance (*Bestaaen*) without change but continuity (*Bestandighed*) and security through endurance and change."[4] It is demarcated from other loves by the fact that it is an eternal duty; it requires and therefore secures continuity despite outward changes.

The eternal aspect of love also raises the problem of how to meet one's obligations to the neighbor and to special relations when the beloved acts in ways that are unloving and destructive – even violent and abusive. This, in turn, highlights the problem of self-sacrifice, which Kierkegaard deems essential to Christian love. Does Christian love require us to endure destructive forms of love? Is Kierkegaard's thought relevant for considerations about love in a contemporary context or in forming a Christian ethic of love that protects the vulnerable from abuse, exploitation, and violence? It is my contention that Kierkegaard's thought sets limits to self-sacrifice while maintaining its integral role in Christian love. In this book, I demonstrate the usefulness of Kierkegaard's corpus for

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[1] Sylvia Walsh Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Love," *The Nature and Pursuit of Love: The Philosophy of Irving Singer*, ed. David Goicoechea (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), 168. See Sylvia I. Walsh, "Forming the Heart: The Role of Love in Kierkegaard's Thought," *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy & Theology*, ed. Richard H. Bell (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 234–56.

[2] Walsh Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Love," 169.

[3] Walsh Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Love," 169.

[4] Walsh Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Love," 169.

contemporary problems, particularly that of identifying Christian love with self-sacrifice, against which contemporary feminist and womanist scholars warn.

Feminist and womanist scholars argue that engendering an ethic of self-sacrifice in women is dangerous as it justifies violence, valorizes death and suffering, reinforces relationships of domination, and discourages women's becoming as fully-developed and authentic selves. Rather than adopt the radical feminist stance that self-sacrifice has no place in the lives of Christians or argue the inefficacy of Christ's self-sacrifice in the atonement, I seek to establish a framework in which self-sacrifice is both demanded and limited by Christian love. Kierkegaard's views of love and self-sacrifice in both pseudonymous and signed works, especially his 1847 publication *Works of Love*, speak constructively to the problems named by contemporary theologians and ethicists.

2. Definition of Key Terms

In order to more meaningfully discuss the concepts of self-love, redemptive suffering, self-sacrifice, and atonement as employed in this book, I offer working definitions of these terms. *Self-love* is a term that often carries a negative connotation, yet the Judeo-Christian tradition assumes an appropriate self-love in the commandment to love the neighbor. Kierkegaard, with contemporary feminist and womanist theologians, upholds the necessity of this appropriate self-love. One definition of *self-love* is the proper care and esteem for oneself in keeping with the biblical injunction. Within the Christian tradition, it is also recognized that "excessive self-love can be sinful and that discipleship may call for a willingness not to value the self too highly."[5] *Self-sacrifice* can be understood as setting aside one's own objectives, or in the extreme laying down one's own life, in order to benefit others. In Christianity this is epitomized by Christ's atonement. *Atonement* is defined as Christ's death upon the cross, which "effects salvation as the reestablishment of the relationship between God and sinners."[6] Here, Christian reconciliation requires the violent death of Christ, the ultimate example of redemptive suffering.

Redemptive suffering refers to the idea that salvation and freedom from sin only occur through the suffering of one individual, namely Jesus Christ, or the suffering of many. Because I deem the latter conception that the suffering of the many might be redemptive as *idolatrous*, I will later develop a different concept of redemptive suffering. *Suffering* can be defined as bearing injury, pain, or distress. Theologically, it can be understood "in the context of God's redemptive and

[5] Donald M. McKim, "Self-love," *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 254.

[6] McKim, "Atonement," *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 20.

sustaining love and in the overall framework of God's will."[7] Feminists Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn identify a Christian belief in redemptive suffering as extremely dangerous for women: "Christianity has been a primary – in many women's lives *the* primary – force in shaping our acceptance of abuse. The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive." They reason from this that if the "best person who ever lived gave his life for others, then, to be of value we should likewise sacrifice ourselves." The logical outcome of such reasoning, they hold, is the belief that a human individual "suffering for others will save the world."[8] I contend that the writings of Kierkegaard respond to their salient and demanding critique when read in light of the concerns feminists raise.

3. Methodology

In arguing that Kierkegaard's thought can respond meaningfully to contemporary feminist problems, I do not intend to argue that Kierkegaard was a feminist. Kierkegaard, like other nineteenth-century male philosophers and theologians, wrote many problematic things about women. For example, in *Works of Love*, which is one of the works most closely associated with his own view, he writes that in the name of Christianity, "fatuous people have fatuously been busy about making it obvious in a worldly way that the woman should be established in equal rights with the man – Christianity has never required or desired this." Instead, it has done "everything for the woman, provided she Christianly will be satisfied with what is Christian."[9] This is just one passage among many that proves to be problematic for feminist engagements of Kierkegaard. Yet, the fact that he could not (anachronistically) be labeled a feminist does not exclude the possibility of drawing on his thought for answers to feminist problems.

The approach in this book is analogous to that which Lynne Tirrell describes in her use of Nietzsche. Tirrell compares Nietzsche's views to those of Simone de Beauvoir arguing that had Nietzsche been more concerned with the internal consistency of his work, he would have anticipated the work of Beauvoir. Tirrell is clear that she does not intend to argue "the silly thesis that Nietzsche fails us because he was not Beauvoir"; instead, she highlights some key points of comparison between them in order to "illuminate the potential that lies within

[7] McKim, "Suffering," *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 271.

[8] Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 2.

[9] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 138–39.

Nietzsche's work for feminists."[10] In comparing Nietzsche to Beauvoir, Tirrell observes that he is nowhere near to her in developing feminist conceptions, but that Nietzsche's work "anticipated important aspects" of Beauvoir's work.[11] Applying this approach to my book, I qualify that Kierkegaard should *not* be held accountable to make the same arguments as contemporary womanists and feminists, but rather his work holds forth constructive possibilities when read through the lens of their scholarship. Further, not unlike Tirrell's approach to Nietzsche, I apply the constructive aspects of Kierkegaard's thought more consistently than he did.

Tirrell further states that she wants to develop the non-misogynist side of Nietzsche's work. In so doing, she hopes to give Nietzsche's texts "the most sympathetic reading possible." If such a sympathetic reading is plausible, Tirrell surmises, other aspects of Nietzsche's thought may become more accessible to feminist readers.[12] Similarly to Tirrell, my goal is to illuminate aspects of Kierkegaard's works that prove helpful to those grappling with contemporary feminist theological problems. The readings I offer are necessarily dialectical and interdependent. I hold that a positive appropriation of Kierkegaard relies on the consciousness that feminist and womanist thinkers raise, requiring that they be read alongside each other.

4. Feminism and Kierkegaard

While it may seem anachronistic, if not altogether ironic, to use Kierkegaard to respond to contemporary feminist problems, other scholars have attempted to use his thought in similar ways. Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh's anthology entitled, *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), represents a variety of ways to engage feminism and Kierkegaard in both critical and constructive ways. Another useful volume is Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal's anthology entitled, *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). This volume includes a chapter by Wanda Warren Berry, who calls for a

[10] Lynne Tirrell, "Sexual Dualism and Women's Self-Creation: On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Nietzsche for Feminists," *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, eds. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 200.

[11] Tirrell, "Sexual Dualism and Women's Self-Creation," 202.

[12] Tirrell, "Sexual Dualism and Women's Self-Creation," 202.

Kierkegaardian *repetition* that places his works in dialogue with feminism.[13] This repetition involves consciously retaking one's past in a way that includes the exercise of existential freedom and the concretizing of one's temporal experience so that the past is retained but with a new consciousness.[14] Kierkegaard can be not only critically but also constructively engaged in approaching contemporary problems, specifically those identified by feminist and womanist scholarship.

Warren Berry describes Mary Daly's use of patriarchal sources, which Daly refers to as "springboards." Explaining the concept of springboarding in her introduction to Pure Lust, she states that her primary sources are woman-identified experiences and observations and that she uses "patriarchal texts" as secondary sources. One of the various ways in which she uses patriarchal texts is as springboards, while at all times she is "acutely aware" that most of these sources books were written "at the expense of women, whose energies were drained and ideas freely and shamelessly taken over." She writes that in any case, "in using male sources, at no point have I acted in the position of 'disciple' citing an authority."[15] Although Daly distances herself from male sources, Warren Berry identifies Daly's indebtedness to Kierkegaard, advocating a more engaging and direct approach.

Warren Berry contends that Kierkegaard's religious existentialism established the framework employed by feminist and liberation theologies. Warren Berry recognizes Kierkegaard's influence in Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, and maintains that his thought – as it influenced twentieth-century American theology directly and as mediated through the writings of Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and H. Richard Niebuhr – made possible the reception of her work in American culture as it encouraged thinkers to move beyond analytic philosophy and positivism toward an existential appropriation of truth.[16] For these reasons, Warren Berry argues that the new generation of feminist theologians can benefit from a thoroughgoing dialogue with Kierkegaard that uses him as *more* than a springboard.

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[13] Kierkegaard scholar Edward F. Mooney points out that repetition bears a tension between something *constant* (an element to be repeated) and *motion* (something repeated) (Edward F. Mooney, "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back," *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alistair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 285). Describing the concept of "repetition" as an important idea in relation to the way in which an individual lives, Julia Watkin defines "repetition" as the desire to have or do something again. In the ethical sphere, repetition is possible insofar as the individual can choose to live according to an ethical code on a daily basis. This can lead one into an ethical-religious situation as one experiences a deep sense of sin despite earnest striving so that ultimately repetition is linked to the idea of atonement with Christ providing the new start for the individual (Julia Watkin, "Repetition," *The A to Z of Kierkegaard's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD and Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010)).

[14] Wanda Warren Berry, "Kierkegaard and Feminism: Apologetic, Repetition, and Dialogue," *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity,* eds. Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 112.

[15] Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984), 31.

[16] Berry, "Kierkegaard and Feminism," 116–17.

Warren Berry asserts that dialogue with Kierkegaardian philosophy could serve to strengthen feminism's philosophical foundations through "explicit apprehension of the existential truth criterion which many feminist theologians presuppose."[17] In particular, Warren Berry points out that Kierkegaard's signed tome *Works of Love* helpfully grounds notions of human relationality and the intimacy of humanity's relationship to God in the concepts of reduplication and like-for-like.[18] Moreover, while Kierkegaard has been criticized for his individualism as antithetical to feminist solidarity, Warren Berry argues that feminism needs to challenge the individual to emerge from the conventional conformity of mass culture as does Kierkegaard. She holds that his challenge to conformity and convention can be especially fruitful in the lives of women.[19]

Recent publications that engage Kierkegaard's view of love and/or his views of women include Céline Léon, *The Neither/Nor of the Second Sex: Kierkegaard on Women, Sexual Difference and Sexual Relations* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008); Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Amy Laura Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). My book is distinct from these works as none of them address the problem of women's self-sacrifice or the question of forgiveness in Kierkegaard's thought. I argue that while feminist and womanist critiques of self-sacrifice and its relationship to love within Christianity demand to be taken seriously, doing so does not require going so far as negating the efficacy of Christ's self-sacrifice or rejecting its role in human life. To this end, this book looks to the writings of Kierkegaard to offer a commitment to loving self-sacrifice within appropriate bounds in Christian life. One reason his work proves useful is that Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* was written in response to the critique that Christian love was not sufficiently communal in its scope and is an attempt to remedy this; indeed, the dynamic of human and divine love that he theorizes always already invokes the concept of community. Although Kierkegaard's intention justifies a comparison with feminist and womanist thought, it must be noted that his Christology and conception of the self is distinct from the various feminist and womanist scholars with whom I place him in conversation – these disparate Christologies and notions of the self will naturally lead to distinct conclusions, but the comparisons are fruitful despite differences.

[17] Berry, "Kierkegaard and Feminism," 117–18.
[18] Berry, "Kierkegaard and Feminism," 115.
[19] Berry, "Kierkegaard and Feminism," 119.

5. Description of Chapters

Chapter one, "The Problems of Self-Sacrifice," lays out contemporary womanist and feminist theological critiques of self-sacrifice. It highlights four major areas in which an ideal of Christian love as self-sacrifice poses dangers for women and other marginalized persons. These four areas are: first, that the identification of love with self-sacrifice justifies violence, abuse, and a passive response to violence; second, that it denies the body and is indicative of a cultural value of necrophilia that is inherently patriarchal; third, that it targets the oppressed and reinforces patriarchal relations; and fourth, valuing self-sacrifice discourages women from achieving self-realization. It will introduce the reader to Valerie Saiving's 1960 watershed article that identifies disparities between masculine and feminine forms of sin, suggesting that for women, self-sacrifice may be a manifestation of sin rather than an act of Christian faithfulness and virtue.

The remaining four chapters engage various works of Kierkegaard in addressing the theological themes and implications of love and self-sacrifice. Chapter two, "Selflessness as Sin," elaborates the theme of selflessness as sin introduced in chapter one through the work of Saiving and Daly. It more deeply explores the thought of Daly and another major iconoclast who influenced her – the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Both thinkers vehemently critique an ideal of self-sacrifice within human life and both fault Christianity for engendering this ethic within individuals and societies. The chapter then turns to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *The Sickness Unto Death* for a unique view of selflessness as sin.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus identifies masculine and feminine forms of despair, which clearly resonate with – and presage – Saiving's argument. Had twentieth-century theologians who were influenced by Kierkegaard and critiqued by Saiving and feminists who followed her, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, been attentive to these nuances in Kierkegaard's thought, much of the polarization between mainstream theology and feminist critiques of it may have been preempted. Unfortunately, however, Reinhold Niebuhr, as well as Paul Tillich, who was also influenced by Kierkegaard, focused primarily on the ideas of sin set forth in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous book *The Concept of Anxiety*. Alternatively, the views set forth in *The Sickness Unto Death* recur with the issues of feminist theology in constructive ways.

Chapter three, "Love and Trembling," discusses the Akedah – Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac – as a paradigmatic example of self-sacrifice. I explore the Genesis 22 pericope through the lenses of both Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant and Kierkegaard. I examine Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling,* published under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, and the signed work *Christian Discourses*. Kierkegaard offers extended exegesis on the binding of Isaac, echoing the Judeo-Christian tradition in lauding Abraham as the father of faith. Kant, conversely, condemns Abraham's action as outside the bounds