

The Quest for a Holistic Approach to the ‘Other’ in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love

“Love for God and love for neighbor are like two doors that open simultaneously, so that it is impossible to open one without also opening the other, and impossible to shut one without also shutting the other.”¹

When analysing such phenomena as nationalism or xenophobia, the question emerges, “in what way do they contradict the essence of Christianity?” Usually, it is argued that they violate one of the most fundamental pillars of Christianity, namely the imperative of indiscriminating universal love for the neighbour. The discourse, however, often stops there, as it is presupposed that everyone knows who her or his neighbour is, and what Christian love means.

In the following, the reflections of the Danish philosopher Søren KIERKEGAARD on the nature of Christian love and the concept of the neighbour will be presented,² as they can yield inspiration for the mentioned discourse and be of interest to those whose activism has its roots in Christian spirituality.

Preferential and Non-Preferential Love

In 1847 Søren KIERKEGAARD published his most complex treatise on Christian love, entitled *Works of Love*. This book, which Sylvia WALSH described as “one of the most profound meditations on love ever written,”³ was not intended to please the eye of the reader or to

1 HONG Howard V. – HONG Edna H. (eds.), *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*. Bloomington – London, 1967–1978. vol. 3., entry nr. 2434.

2 The present article draws on the material published in my study which appeared in the Slovak philosophical journal *Filozofia*. ŠAJDA Peter, *Náčrt kontrapozície preferenčnej a nepreferenčnej lásky v diele Sorena Kierkegarda*. In *Filozofia* 2007/2. 110–121.

3 WALSH Sylvia I., *Forming the Heart: The Role of Love in Kierkegaard’s Thought*. In BELL Richard H. (ed.), *The Grammar of the Heart*. San Francisco, 1988. 234.

reinforce stereotypes, but rather to present the Christian imperative of love in a most uncompromising way.

Therefore, the author specified at the very beginning of his work that it is addressed to "that single individual",⁴ a reader who will not look for aesthetics, but will "read precariously—in a prayerful and perilous setting",⁵ in order to find courage for future actions.

Contrary to many other Christian thinkers who made attempts at bringing together the concepts of preferential and non-preferential love—*eros* and *agape*—KIERKEGAARD goes ahead and intensifies the tension between the two forms of love.

As the most typical examples of preferential love, he mentions erotic love (*Elskov*) and friendship (*Venskab*). As non-preferential love, he identifies the Christian love of the neighbour (*Kjerlighed*).⁶

For KIERKEGAARD natural love is object-conditioned, whereby the intersection of the lover's preferences with the qualities of the loved object determines in what measure the object is perceived as lovable.

In other words, the lover depends largely on the features of the object and their correspondence to her or his preferences. The object-to-be-loved also has to pass the test of comparison to other potential objects of love and has to prove to be optimally satisfying for the aims and needs of the subject.

This kind of love is steered and controlled by the inclinations of one's own self and thus it cannot be considered ethical behaviour with positive moral value.⁷ The eminent focus on the preferences and antipathies of the subject produces love, which in practice looks for likeness and relatedness in the object of love: the lover looks for herself or himself in *the other*.

Therefore, KIERKEGAARD agrees that, in fact, it is very adequate to refer to the partner or friend as "the *other self*" or "the *other I*",⁸ as the relationship is to a considerable degree based on self-projection.

It is obvious that a pattern of relating based on the concept of *the other* as *alter ego* leads to a selection of a narrow range of lovable objects; thus excluding most people and rendering itself incapable of creating a foundation for universal love and general equality.

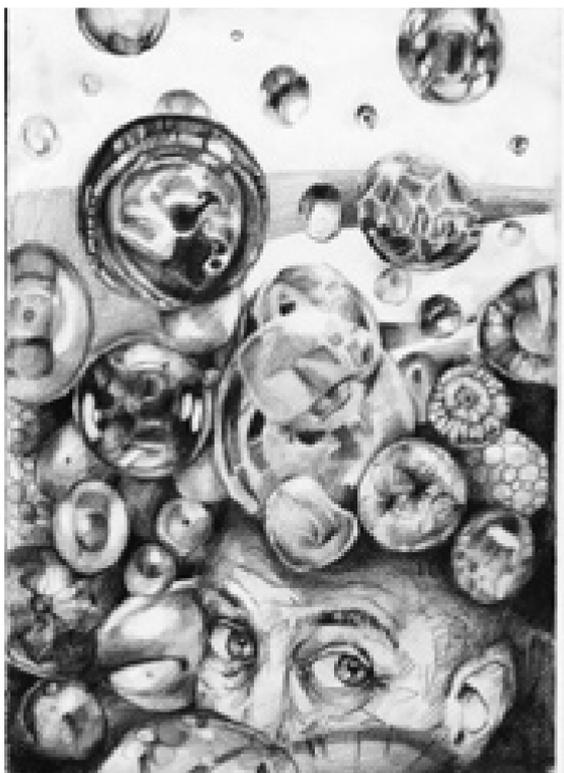
4 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love*. Princeton, 1995. 3.

5 HALL Amy L., *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*. Cambridge, 2002. 24.

6 KIERKEGAARD does not explicitly refer to preferential love as *eros* and non-preferential love as *agape*, but his argumentation is rooted in the differentiation which lies at the basis of this tradition. The Danish terminology he uses corresponds roughly to the Greek distinction between *eros* and *agape*. Cf. PATTISON George, *Representing Love: From Poetry to Martyrdom*. In *Kierkegaardiana* 22. Copenhagen, 2002. 142; TAYLOR Mark C., *Love and Forms of Spirit: Kierkegaard versus Hegel*. In *Kierkegaardiana* 10. Copenhagen, 1977. 111.

7 HANNAY Alastair, *Kierkegaard*. London – New York, 1991. 244ff.

8 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love*. Op. cit. 53.



As a matter of fact, in friendship and erotic love the protagonists love each other on the basis of mutual similarity, which makes them distinct from other people, and therefore it is a type of love that enables loving “by virtue of the similarity that is based on dissimilarity”.⁹

The mode of operation of love based on exclusive inclination differs substantially from the inclusive character of Christian neighbour-love, which prompts KIERKEGAARD to present the co-existence of these two kinds of love in the form of a competition, in which ultimately the latter should condition the former.

Although Christianity has accepted *eros* as its organic constituent, according to KIERKEGAARD, the religion of Jesus Christ cannot be neutral in the question of precedence of preferential and non-preferential love.

He claims that “Christianity has thrust erotic love and friendship from the throne, the love based on drives and inclination, preferential love, in order to place the spirit’s love [*Kjerlighed*] in its stead, love for the neighbor”.¹⁰

9 Ibid. 56.

10 Ibid. 44.

When specifying what he means by neighbour-love, KIERKEGAARD states that it is love based on a divine command, which "has undergone the change of eternity by having become a duty, it has gained enduring continuance."¹¹

The ethics presented by KIERKEGAARD in *Works of Love* focuses primarily on the loving subject and her or his way of perceiving the *other*. This ethics differs fundamentally from the ethics elaborated by the philosopher in the framework of what is known as the *ethical stage*,¹² and Arne GRØN characterises it as the *ethics of vision*¹³ or the *ethics of disposition*.¹⁴

In opposition to the preferential perception of the other, *Works of Love* remove the object of love from the network of natural inclinations and introduce a generally valid prism of the *neighbour*, which serves as the most basic determinant for the perception of another human being. Thus the object of Christian love is defined in clearly different terms than it is in the case of preferential selection pertaining to romantic love and friendship.

The Copenhagen philosopher is aware of the fact that the mode of relating to oneself determines relations to others, and thus maintains that if the Christian element of neighbour-love is absent in relating to the other, it is necessarily lacking also in the relationship to one's own self.

Therefore, when reflecting on the situation of lovers, whose love does not comprise the Christian determination, KIERKEGAARD remarks that as yet "neither one is the spirit's definition of *self*. As yet, neither one has learned to love himself Christianly. In erotic love, the *I* is defined as sensate-psychical-spiritual; the beloved is a sensate-psychical-spiritual specification. In friendship, the *I* is defined as psychical-spiritual; the friend is a psychical-spiritual specification. It is only in love for the neighbor that the self, who loves, is defined as spirit purely spiritually and the neighbor is a purely spiritual specification."¹⁵

When elaborating on the nature of Christian love of the neighbour, it is important to note that unlike preferential love, Christian non-

11 Ibid. 32.

12 KIERKEGAARD's concept of stages comprises three, or more precisely, four basic paradigms of individual existence: aesthetic stage, ethical stage, religious stage A and religious stage B. In addition there are two interstage confines. Irony forms the confine between the aesthetic and the ethical stage, and humour between the ethical and the religious stage.

13 GRØN Arne, „Anden“ etik. In GARFF Joakim – OLESEN Tony Aa. – SØLTOFT Pia (eds.), *Studier i stadier*. Copenhagen, 1998. 84.

14 Ibid. 85.

15 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love*. Op. cit. 56–57.

preferential love is a spiritually conditioned commandment and duty, and thus it is not derivable from a concrete relationship or a concrete object.¹⁶

Christian love is not a direct continuation of *eros*, it is qualitatively different and in a way represents an offence to natural love,¹⁷ since it defines inclination as something secondary to the category of the neighbour, which is injected into every love relationship.

By making the spiritual reality of the neighbour the highest priority in any kind of relations, Christian love clearly erodes structures in which sympathies and antipathies rule the realm of relationships.

On the other hand, it is important to reiterate that Christian love is not aimed at a total devaluation of preferential love, but rather at its permeating and transformation¹⁸ by interposing God between the lovers. As Alastair HANNAY pointed out, “neighbor” is a “dimension added to love and friendship, where they exist, rather than something from which these two must be subtracted.”¹⁹

Impossibility of Comparison in Christian Love

When reflecting on the counterposition of the Christian love of the neighbour and nationalism, it seems worthwhile to reflect on the concepts of equality, similarity and difference as expounded in KIERKEGAARD’s *Works of Love*.

An interesting and useful category in this context is that of the *infinite debt of love*, which the philosopher introduces in order to paralyse all attempts of dosing love according to the measure of the object’s lovableness.

KIERKEGAARD points out that Christian love precludes any form of calculus, exchange, repayment or any other *quid pro quo* in the area of love. With the intention to render impossible the perception of reciprocity as compensation, the philosopher introduces the category of the *infinite debt of love*, which is based on the postulate that the one who loves does not reduce this debt by loving, but rather sinks ever deeper into it.²⁰

The author explains further that an “accounting can take place only where there is a finite relationship, because the relationship of the finite to the finite can be calculated. But one who loves cannot

16 MÜLLER Paul, *Kierkegaard’s “Works of Love”: Christian Ethics and the Maieutic Ideal*. Copenhagen, 1993. 25.

17 WALSH Sylvia, *Living Christianity: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence*. University Park (PA), 2005. 95.

18 FERREIRA M. Jamie, *Love’s Grateful Striving*. New York, 2001. 94.

19 HANNAY Alastair, *Kierkegaard*. Op. cit. 266.

20 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love*. Op. cit. 176–177.

calculate. When the left hand never finds out what the right hand is doing, it is impossible to make an accounting, and likewise when the debt is infinite".²¹

The main antipole to love which is based on infinite debt and does not operate with finite quantities is, according to KIERKEGAARD, *comparison*. Fundamental concepts with which comparison operates are likeness and unlikeness,²² more and less, or finite debt of love; thus contradicting the axiom of the KIERKEGAARDian concept of non-preferential love, which states that love permits no calculus and no accounting.

KIERKEGAARD warns the reader that "comparison's sidelong glance all too easily discovers a whole world of relationships and calculations (...) In comparison, everything is lost, love is made finite, the debt is made something to repay—exactly like any other debt."²³

Thus, comparison leads to the elimination of the equality of objects of love, which was introduced by Christian non-preferential love by means of the category of the *neighbour*. The category of neighbour enabled perception equality of all objects of love—despite their external differences and different levels of inclination on the part of the loving subject.

Comparison operates, however, on an antipodal principle and in opposition to the category of the neighbour which focuses on equality; comparison searches for differences. Since comparative behaviour is steered by what makes people different from each other, it necessarily avails itself of calculation and assessment of differences and thus cannot accept the category of the infinite debt of love, as it neutralises finite proportions. KIERKEGAARD therefore conditions the practice of Christian love by the necessity of retaining infinite debt and eliminating comparison:

"If you wish to maintain love, you must maintain it in the infinitude of the debt. Therefore beware of comparison! (...) Comparison is the most disastrous association that love can enter into; comparison is the most dangerous acquaintance love can make; comparison is the worst of all seductions. No seducer is as readily on hand and no seducer is as omnipresent as comparison is as soon as your sidelong glance beckons—yet no seduced person says in his defense, 'comparison seduced me,' because, indeed, it was he himself who discovered the comparison."²⁴

Similarly to comparison, also non-preferential love is confronted

21 Ibid. 178.

22 Ibid. 182.

23 Ibid. 183.

24 Ibid. 186.

with the reality of differences between objects of love. According to KIERKEGAARD, however, the decision to become a neighbour entails the commitment to see through and transcend differences—to see what lies beyond them.²⁵

If non-preferential love shall realise the equality of all humans, it is necessary that the spiritual sight of the loving subject does not stop at outer differences, but penetrates the very inside of the human, reaching her or his deepest humanity²⁶ which is shared by all people.

In this sense, Christian love is absolutely inclusive²⁷ and its theory of the equality of all humans differs from the theories that are based on the conviction that the first step is to eliminate outer differences.

KIERKEGAARD's concept of equality emphasizes the *practice* of the loving subject and *per consequens*, also her or his duty to *perceive* all neighbours in the same way—"to exist essentially equally for every human being".²⁸

Outer similarity (*Lighed*) is for him secondary to the eternity-based equality of humans (*Ligelighed*),²⁹ which is given by God and which represents the most basic prism of perceiving *the other* in Christian non-preferential love.

Ligelighed is thus a concept aimed at the transformation of the perceptive activity of the loving subject, of her or his vision of the object of love. In case such a transformation of the subject's perception takes place, it necessarily has an effect on the elimination of social inequality too.

From KIERKEGAARD's perspective, inverting this consecution would be wrong and he was critical to social movements that focused solely on the application of outer social cohesion. In this respect, KIERKEGAARD also confronted the pre-Marxist communism,³⁰ which proclaimed the ideal of *Lighed*, but not that of *Ligelighed*.³¹

Since the social activity of a Christian individual is determined by the perception prism of the neighbour, the relationship of equality eliminates all relational superiority and inferiority. In intimate relationships this postulate means that neither of the two parties is

25 SØLTOFT Pia, *Den Nächststen kennen heißt der Nächste werden*. In DALFERTH Ingolf U. (ed.), *Ethik der Liebe: Studien zu Kierkegaards „Taten der Liebe“*. Tübingen, 2002. 95.

26 GRØN Arne, *Kjerlighedens Gjæringer*. In OLESEN Tony Aa. – SØLTOFT Pia (eds.), *Den udødelige: Kierkegaard læst værk for værk*. Copenhagen, 2005. 263.

27 WALSH Sylvia I., *Forming the Heart: The Role of Love in Kierkegaard's Thought*. Op. cit. 236.

28 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love*. Op. cit. 85.

29 Ibid. 58. 72ff.

30 HANNAY Alastair, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*. Cambridge, 2001. 361.

31 HONG Howard V. – HONG Edna H. (eds.), *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Vol. 4, entry nr. 4131.

entitled to dominate, own or use the other, as the partner is in the first place a *neighbour* and as such a *redoubling* (*Fordobletse*)³² of one's own self, ie. equally autonomous self as the self of the loving subject.

In broader social interaction, this approach implies that the individual must be "victorious over his mind"³³ and perceive the poor and socially marginalised in the first place as neighbours, in order to remove from her or his vision the possibility of viewing them as inferior.

The importance of this imperative is illustrated by KIERKEGAARD with the image of a banquet to which one invites the poor and the lowly. The term "banquet" (*Gjestebud*) is, in the opinion of the philosopher, an expression of categorical equality between the host and the guests, and precludes the formation of a relation of superiority and inferiority between the host and the invited ones:

"The one who feeds the poor—but still has not been victorious over his mind in such a way that he calls this meal a banquet—sees the poor and the lowly only as the poor and the lowly. The one who gives the banquet sees the neighbour in the poor and the lowly."³⁴

The feeding of the poor because they are poor is, according to KIERKEGAARD, based on the difference between the host and the guest, and stems from a comparison and outer dissimilarity between the loving subject and the addressee of her or his love. The spiritual glance of such a host concentrates on *it* (poverty, difference) and not on *her or him* (neighbour that is equal with the host),³⁵ whereby the host remains blind to the inner equality (*Ligelighed*) and relatedness with the guest.³⁶

A gift—in this case a banquet—"should not be given in such a way that it is seen as a gift"³⁷ because such a mode of giving still includes a trace of relation-building that presupposes superiority and inferiority between the involved parties. As M. Jamie FERREIRA puts it, such "distinctions do more than particularize – they particularize in ways which disconnect us".³⁸

32 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love*. Op. cit. 21.

33 Ibid. 83.

34 Ibid.

35 Grøn Arne, *Ethics of Vision*. In Dalférth Ingolf U. (ed.), *Ethik der Liebe: Studien zu Kierkegaards „Taten der Liebe“*. Tübingen, 2002. 116.

36 Ibid. 117.

37 FERREIRA M. Jamie, *Love's Grateful Striving*. Op. cit. 159.

38 FERREIRA M. Jamie, *Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard's Works of Love*. In CAPPELØRN Niels J. – DEUSER Hermann (eds.), *Kierkegaard Revisited: Kierkegaard Studies*. Monograph Series 1. Berlin – New York, 1997. 215.

Absence of the *Neighbour* in Nationalism and Non-Preferential Features of Patriotism

It is obvious that on the basis of the above-mentioned principles nationalism can be considered a preferential behaviour *par excellence*. On the other hand, patriotism which cultivates national awareness and national pride without placing them above the dimension of the neighbour can be seen as containing a vital non-preferential element.

Their vision of *the other* is naturally different, as the former places a primary emphasis on *it* (nationality) and the latter sees first *her or him* (neighbour that is equal to oneself) and only then discovers further characteristics.

The differences between nationalism and patriotism in their relation to the neighbour are similar to those that are characteristic of the anti-agapeistic *eros* on one hand, and the spiritualised *eros* that has accepted the universal validity of *agape* on the other. An important element in KIERKEGAARD's critique of the aesthetic paradigm of love is the delimitation of what type of *eros* is the target of the critique.

It can be maintained, on the basis of the works illustrating the defects of aesthetic love, that the object of the philosopher's critique is not *eros* as such, but rather *eros* that refuses the integration of ethical and religious imperatives or even attempts to acquire hegemony and replace ethical and religious love with itself.

It is therefore a kind of *eros* that is clearly anti-ethical, anti-spiritual and anti-agapeistic, and whose perception of the object of love is contradictory to the doctrine presented in his book *Works of Love*.

KIERKEGAARD does not aim his criticism at the immediacy and spontaneity of erotic love;³⁹ he even emphasizes that just like it is impossible to imagine a conflict between the spirit and a stone or a tree, it is equally impossible to imagine a conflict between the spirit and the body.

Such a conflict arises only when there is "a rebellious spirit on the side of flesh, with which the spirit then contends".⁴⁰ The motive of the critique of preferential love is therefore the very fact that it orients itself according to the *ego* of the lover, rejecting spiritual determination of relations which would educate and form both the relations to external objects of love as well as to one's own self.

The commitment to one's own nation or nationality is not necessarily

39 WALSH Sylvia, *Living Christianity: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence*. Op. cit. 96.

40 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love*. Op. cit. 52.

in conflict with Christian non-preferential love—a conflict originates only when the preference becomes controlled by “a rebellious spirit (...) with which the spirit then contends”.

Similarly to erotic love, however, the love for the nation requires further spiritual determination, as it does not contain of its own accord the awareness of the infinite debt of love, the *neighbour* as a universal and primary perception prism of *the other* or the consciousness of the eternity-based equality of all humans (*Ligelighed*).

The incorporation of religious determinants enables the individual, who loves her or his nation, to see beyond the boundaries of her or his preferred object of love. By interposing God between her or him and any other human being, she or he discovers the reality of the deep humanity common to all humans, which is a more fundamental object of love than personal identities.

Christian love also instructs *the patriot* to apply the *ethics of vision*, which shifts her or his focus from what makes people different from each other to what unites them. In this way the neighbour—as a (purely) spiritual specification—is made equal to the compatriot, with whom it would be otherwise impossible to compete, because of the lack of physical and spiritual bonds with the loving subject.

Spiritual determination of interhuman relationships also prevents the individual from basing preferential love for her or his own nation on the dynamics of superiority and inferiority. When approaching a member of another nation, the subject is prompted to call the encounter a “banquet,” thus avoiding even the slightest hint of inequality and power relation.

Just like Christian love is not a direct continuation of *eros*, it is neither a direct continuation of the preferential love of the individual for her or his nation or any other collective. But as in the case of erotic love and friendship, the category of neighbour does not intend to devalue, but rather to permeate and transform nation-love.

Therefore, in line with the point made by Alastair HANNAY that “neighbor” is “a dimension added to love and friendship, where they exist, rather than something from which these two must be subtracted,” it can be maintained that “neighbour” is a category added to the love for one’s nation, where it already exists, with the aim of spiritualising it and making one’s approach to reality Christianly holistic.

Suggested Reading

- BELL Richard H. (ed.), *The Grammar of the Heart*. San Francisco, 1988.
- FERREIRA M. Jamie, *Love's Grateful Striving*. New York, 2001.
- DALFERTH Ingolf U. (ed.), *Ethik der Liebe: Studien zu Kierkegaards „Taten der Liebe“*. Tübingen, 2002.
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