

KIERKEGAARD AND THE BEAUTY OF THE CROSS

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Abstract: *Paradoxically, Kierkegaard regarded the crucifixion as potentially being an occasion for joy. For Kierkegaard this joy suggested something more than the traditional conviction that the crucifixion was instrumentally related to the forgiveness of sins and the consequent relief from guilt (although he affirms that). Given the centrality of his incarnational realism, at a more basic level he saw the cross as the manifestation of the extent of God's desire to be in communion with human individuals, and therefore as the culmination of the lowliness of the incarnation. Because self-oriented humans cannot abide the prospect of radically other-regarding love, Christ inevitably provoked lethal hostility. Nevertheless, Christ accepted this persecution and suffering as the price that had to be paid for divine fellowship with humanity. The beauty of this costly divine self-giving can exult the human heart and inspire emulation.*

In the popular imagination Kierkegaard is often remembered as the epitome of gloom. A widely-read introduction to Kierkegaard from the mid-twentieth century propagated this characterization by dubbing him "the melancholy Dane."¹ Even serious theologians and philosophers have sometimes shared this view. Karl Barth famously lamented that Kierkegaard, who was a "school" through which every serious theologian must pass, was sadly deficient in Christian joy.² Hans Frei remarked that Kierkegaard was a depressed Pelagian who regarded the cultivation

¹ See H. V. Martin, *The Melancholy Dane* (London: Epworth Press, 1950).

² Karl Barth, "Dank und Referenz," *Evangelische Theologie*, vol. 23, 1963, 337-42.

of anxiety and despair as meritorious acts.³ Even more severely, Theodor Adorno critiqued Kierkegaard for being a joyless negator of life who dissolved the real world into a somber solipsistic interiority.⁴

So it may seem wildly counterintuitive to propose that at the core of Kierkegaard's theology is a conviction that individuals can experience exquisite and expansive joy.⁵ Even more surprising may be the suggestion that for Kierkegaard the crucifixion of Jesus can elicit a response of spiritual exultation. To justify this claim we must examine Kierkegaard's numerous reflections on the significance of the cross, especially his evocations of its hidden and paradoxical beauty. "Beauty" in this context does not refer to Kierkegaard's category of the "aesthetic," which he usually associated with the pleasures of contemplating harmonious or intriguing objects, and with the pursuit of interesting or self-gratifying experiences. Rather, here "beauty" is used more broadly to suggest a phenomenon that elicits yearning, rapt fascination, and delight in the sheer existence of the adored object.

First, it must be admitted that Kierkegaard often emphasizes the stark horror of the crucifixion. Frequently he uses the story of Jesus' execution to stir up in the reader a devastating sense of guilt, unworthiness, and contrition. Meditation upon the cross should provoke a despairing dissatisfaction with the shape and direction of one's own moral and spiritual life. This goal of afflicting the individual with painful self-knowledge is often overt in Kierkegaard's many calls to become aware of Christ's contemporaneity with the reader.⁶ The crucifixion is not a past event to be treated with curiosity or aesthetic admiration, nor is it a theological puzzle to be solved. Rather, Kierkegaard exhorts the reader to view the cross as a mirror that exposes the depths of her own depravity.⁷ Often he encourages the individual to

³ Conversation with the author, February, 1980.

⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933), 34-36.

⁵ For a similar argument, see Carl Hughes, *Kierkegaard and the Staging of Desire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 174-9.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 55-89.

visualize herself as a member of the crowd that clamored for Jesus' execution, or at least as one of the multitude who lacked the courage to protest it, and therefore as being personally responsible for his death.⁸ The cross exposes the grim reality that each one of us is the sort of person who would have colluded in Jesus' execution. In these contexts Kierkegaard is careful to accentuate the repellant ugliness of the crucifixion before he gestures toward its attractive beauty.

The cross functions to repel the individual and terrify her conscience in yet another way. Whenever Kierkegaard asserts that we are called to follow after Christ our Prototype, he then reminds the reader that this path that we are to follow is the path of extravagant love, which is necessarily the way of the cross. We are required to suffer ostracism, persecution, and misunderstanding, just as Christ did on the cross. This prospect is so daunting that it can crush the individual under the weight of abject fear, which then engenders further remorse and guilt. Kierkegaard stressed this theme relentlessly because he feared that the message of salvation by grace in contemporary Lutheranism had become an excuse for indolence. Given the spiritual complacency of the Danish church, Kierkegaard recommended that the Epistle of James should be "drawn forward," so that the intimidating requirement of following Jesus on the narrow path of suffering would be accentuated.⁹ James' injunction to perform works of love should lead to the candid admission that one's own self does not come close to approximating this ideal. Again, this call to a deflating form of self-knowledge does not sound much like an invitation to joy.

In these contexts Kierkegaard, like other devout Lutherans, uses the cross negatively in order to prepare the individual to experience gratitude for the forgiveness of sins accomplished through the crucifixion.¹⁰ Here the crucifixion itself does not seem like an occasion for joy, but rather appears to be a necessary preliminary to the real joy, which is gratitude for the forgiveness of sins and the possibility of reconciliation with God. The cross, which can help the sinner to

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 64.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 24.

¹⁰ Craig Hinkson, "Luther and Kierkegaard: Theologians of the Cross," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 1 (2001): 27-45.

cultivate a disposition of repentance, is a means to the end of atonement; it is the atonement itself that is joyful. The anguish of Good Friday is only instrumentally related to the joy of Easter morning, as that joy's necessary precondition.

Admittedly Kierkegaard himself often does talk this way, using traditional sacrificial language to describe Christ's work on the cross. He agrees with the main trajectory of the Western Christian doctrinal tradition that the purpose of the crucifixion was that Jesus must suffer and die in order to remove the guilt of lost sinners.¹¹ But Kierkegaard showed little interest in developing a "theory of the atonement" to explain how the death of an innocent person could bring about the exoneration of the guilty parties. He did not attempt to grasp the mechanics of God's reconciliation with humanity, as had Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. He shows little interest in explaining how Jesus' death satisfied God's honor, changed the legal situation of humanity *vis à vis* God, or paid a debt owed to God. For Kierkegaard the real mystery is not the cognitive puzzle about how the substitution of Jesus for sinners worked metaphysically. Rather, for Kierkegaard Jesus' suffering and pain in securing the forgiveness of sins should be the central focus. It is this demonstration of suffering love, not the rationale for it, which has the power to stir the heart.

For Kierkegaard the cross does not just afflict and condemn, and then offer the possibility of forgiveness. Rather, in itself the cross can be an occasion for joy. He exhibits this joy in his style of writing, as he waxes lyrical about the beauty of the crucifixion. He also makes this theme of the attractiveness of the cross basic to the logic of his thought about the Christian life. His understanding of the mysterious enticements of the cross cannot be appreciated without considering the role of the crucifixion in his authorship as a whole.

In general, Kierkegaard's work is oriented toward the prospect of a joy that the world can neither give nor take away.¹² He exclaims that "Christian consolation

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 10.

¹² Christopher Nelson, "The Joy of It," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Christian Discourses and The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. by Robert Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 161-85. See also John Lippitt, "Kierkegaard's Virtues?" in *Kierkegaard's God and the Good Life*, ed. by Stephen Minister, J. Aaron Simmons, and Michael Strawser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 95-113.

is joy” because this joy predates suffering and is not a response to earthly suffering or a compensation for it.¹³ Eternity’s joy, which is linked to love and is described as the “highest,” far outweighs earthly joy. Similarly, in a communion discourse Kierkegaard exhorts his readers to “rejoice (what infinite joy of love!) in his (God’s) love.”¹⁴ One of his series of discourses on the lilies and the birds ends with an exuberant call to learn joy from these unlikely instructors.¹⁵ In diverse contexts he enthuses about the blessedness of reconciliation,¹⁶ and characterizes the Christian life as an intimation of eternal joy.¹⁷ Paradoxically, the cross serves as a focal point and stimulus for this joy. In order to understand how a ghastly atrocity could be an occasion for joy, Kierkegaard’s remarks about the crucifixion must be situated in the context of his more general statements about God’s purpose in becoming incarnate.

In his different voices Kierkegaard implies that the goal of the Incarnation was not just the accomplishment of the forgiveness of sins and humanity’s reconciliation with God, but was even more basically the enactment of God’s desire for fellowship with humanity. This is most clear in the pseudonym Climacus’ parable of the king who sought to be united with a peasant maiden.¹⁸ The impediment to the union was the egregious difference in their social stations, which led the king to fear that the maiden would never be able to understand his love for her. Climacus writes, “Likewise the king could have appeared before the lowly maiden in all his splendor, could have let the sun of his glory rise over her hut, shine on the spot where he appeared to her, and let her forget herself in adoring admiration. This perhaps would have satisfied the girl, but it could not satisfy the king, for he did not want his own glorification but the girl’s, and his sorrow would have been grievous

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 64.

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 284.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 39.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 268; *For Self-Examination*, 15.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 44.

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 26-32.

because she would not understand him...."¹⁹ The maiden would simply have been dazed by a display of royal power and magnificence. Climacus concludes that the union could only be achieved by the descent of the king rather than by the ascent of the maiden. The king must divest himself of royal glory and share her life as a peasant in order to make mutual comprehension, genuine reciprocity, and trust possible. Climacus insists that this divestment must not be a sham; the monarch must really leave behind his royal prerogatives and not merely hide his magnificence under a beggar's cloak. Climacus explains, "For this is the boundlessness of love, that in earnestness and truth and not in jest it wills to be the equal of the beloved, and it is the omnipotence of resolving love to be capable of that which neither the king nor Socrates was capable, which is why their assumed characters were still a kind of deceit."²⁰

It is significant that the parable is drawn from the domain of romance and foregrounds the theme of interpersonal union. The presenting problem is not the possible sinfulness of the maiden, and certainly not that of the king. Instead, the focus is on the impediment to mutuality, the glaring disparity in their stations in life. The ultimate goal of the action is not the forgiveness of a guilty party, but is rather the reciprocity and solidarity of both parties. The desired interpersonal relationality necessarily involves an understanding of the partner's motivations, passions, and character.

The story transparently serves as a parable of the Incarnation. Just as Kierkegaard's tale is the narrative of a king who became a peasant, so also Christianity is the story of the God who became a human. Climacus implies that solidarity with humanity, and not just the atonement for sin, is the main purpose of the Incarnation. This divine decision is even more remarkable than the king's desire for union with the maiden. Unlike the king, God does not need to correct an antecedent lack. God's compassion and desire for mutuality are utterly gratuitous.

In many contexts Kierkegaard repeats this concentration on God's desire for relationality in his own voice, often in the communion discourses. He suggests that

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 32.

the sheer presence of Christ with the believer is the primary blessing that Christianity offers. He asserts that human beings have an often unrecognized and unacknowledged yearning for fellowship with God.²¹ The presence of this longing for fellowship is not something which the individual gives to oneself, but is a gift of God. Kierkegaard accentuates this theme of fellowship by praising the joy of being known by Jesus in the intimate way that a shepherd knows his sheep by name.²² For Kierkegaard the “only joyful thought” is that the individual is loved by God and in a right relationship with God.²³ Similarly, he declares that the only unconditional joy is daring to believe that “God cares for you.”²⁴

Kierkegaard’s focus on Jesus as the God who came to earth is evident in his identification of Jesus’ personhood with God the Son. He does not hesitate to apply the language of divinity to Jesus, describing him as “he who was lord of Creation.”²⁵ Similarly he writes that Christ always knew that he was the incarnation of love.²⁶ By so saying, Kierkegaard was following the “two natures in one person” formula of the Council of Chalcedon. “Person” in this context suggested an entity’s principle of self-subsistence, while “nature” suggested the characteristics that are common to a species and determine its classification. The Lutheran confessional documents emphasized the point that the eternal Logos is the personal core of Jesus to which the divine and human attributes, the “natures,” must be ascribed. This was articulated in the doctrine of “*anhypostasia*,” which asserted that although Jesus possessed human nature, he did not possess a human person. Reflecting this tradition, Kierkegaard refers to Jesus simply as “God.” Because of this identification,

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 251, 64. See Pia Søltoft, “Erotic Wisdom: On God, Passion, Faith, and Falling in Love,” in *Kierkegaard’s God and the Good Life*, ed. by Stephen Minister, J. Aaron Simmons, and Michael Strawser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 31-45.

²² Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 273.

²³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 274.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 43.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 224.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 198.

the Incarnation must be seen as the enactment in time of God's essential self-giving.

This ascription of human attributes to the divine person generates severe conceptual problems. Assuming that the attributes of humanity include finite limitations, even the capacity to suffer, how could these liabilities be attributed to a divine person who is metaphysically perfect? If the divine and human were truly united, how could Jesus experience anything that was authentically human? This problem inspired Lutheran theologians to elaborate the theme of *kenosis*, the second person of the Trinity's voluntary divestment or suspension of divine potencies, suggested by Philippians 2.²⁷ To clarify this, they drew a sharp distinction between Christ's state of humiliation during the Incarnation, and his state of exaltation before and after the Incarnation. In spite of this doctrinal consensus, Lutherans did disagree about the question of whether Christ, while retaining the possession of the divine metaphysical perfections in his state of humiliation, refrained from their use, or only concealed their use. This seemingly arcane conceptual puzzle had divided the schools of Tübingen and Giessen in the seventeenth century, and had been revived by Gottfried Thomasius during Kierkegaard's life-time.

Kierkegaard was aware of this Christological speculation from the lectures by H. N. Clausen that he encountered during his student days.²⁸ Like Clausen, he found the metaphysical theories advanced to explain *kenosis* to be unintelligible and to distract from the more serious business of living the Christian life. But Kierkegaard fully embraced Lutheranism's historic focus on Christ's state of humiliation and the conviction that Christians during their earthly lives know Christ primarily through his humiliation, not his exaltation. Like many of his Lutheran predecessors he often quoted or paraphrased Philippians 2, writing "He who was equal with God took the form of a lowly servant."²⁹ His Pietist roots reinforced his

²⁷ For a thorough account, see David Law, *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, ed. Niels Cappelørn et. al., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), vol. 3, 37-39.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 224.

resistance to metaphysical speculation about the doctrine of *kenosis* while concentrating on its edifying purposes.³⁰ Kierkegaard exhorts, “Have faith that Christ is God — then call upon him, pray to him, and the rest will work itself out for you.”³¹ Instead of embroiling himself in the controversy between Tübingen and Giessen, Kierkegaard preferred to simply assert that God the Son is so powerful that he could bind himself to his incognito, the form of a servant.³² God can do this without ceasing to be God, without abdicating divinity. Here Kierkegaard’s edifying focus fell on the “earnestness” of God the Son’s self-imposed and genuine participation in human life. Paradoxically, this abasement is an expression of the omnipotence of divine love, for renouncing omnipotence is itself an act of omnipotence.

The theme of *kenosis* enabled Kierkegaard, like other Lutherans, to assert that ostensibly negative human experiences, including suffering, could be ascribed to the divine person. The state of humiliation allowed Christ to participate in and therefore to empathize with all the tribulations and agonies of the human condition. Therefore the pain of Jesus can be described as the pain of God, a theme not uncommon in the Lutheran “theology of the cross.” Intensifying this tradition, Kierkegaard even proposes that it is God who through the God-man says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”³³

For Kierkegaard, God’s willingness to submit to the conditions of finitude is the ultimate paradox. The real paradox here is not the ostensible speculative puzzle concerning the confluence of the infinite and the finite, but is rather the claim that God would divest God’s own self of power and glory in order to be in fellowship with humanity. The concept of God’s *kenosis* is so outlandish and counter-intuitive that it could not naturally arise in any human being’s heart. According to Kierkegaard, no one could have anticipated that God, instead of wanting to be adored as a cosmic potentate, would instead seek fellowship with lowly human beings. In fact, the

³⁰ Christopher Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism, and Holiness* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 66-73.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, 4, 329.

³² Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 132.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, 5, 348.

divine *kenosis* and drive toward mutuality is so unexpected and unthinkable that it could only be revealed. As Climacus observes, "(For) if the god gave no indication, how could it occur to a man that the blessed god could need him?"³⁴

The shock of the Incarnation, disorienting as it is, involves much more than the condescension of the omnipotent God and God's participation in the limitations of finitude in general. The dissonance is exacerbated by the kenotic pattern of the specific human life in which the Incarnation was enacted. The truly amazing (and potentially offensive) thing was not just that God became human, but that God did so as a lowly and abased human being. In several places in his authorship Kierkegaard retells the story of Jesus in such a way that the various forms of Christ's lowliness are emphasized.³⁵ For example, Jesus was born in poverty, in an obscure province of the Roman Empire. He refused to pursue worldly power, and thereby incited the wrath of the mob that longed for a politically triumphant messiah.³⁶ He was ostracized by his own family and rejected by his own village. His closest followers repeatedly failed to understand the nature of his message and mission. Furthermore, he experienced physical deprivation, hunger, and torture.

Kierkegaard highlights the fact that Christ's most severe form of suffering was due to his faithfulness to his "incognito." Because true solidarity with humanity required that Christ's divine power and glory be concealed in the form of lowliness, just as the king's majesty had been concealed, his divinity was in no way obvious. The personhood of God enacted in the life of Christ could not be immediately perceived by his contemporaries or deduced from such empirical evidence as the performance of miracles.³⁷ Because of this incognito, Christ could not directly manifest his love in a way that his followers could comprehend; he could not use his omnipotence to heal all their woes and rectify all their injustices. Consequently the claim that God was in Christ could be denied and rejected, even by eye-witnesses. Christ's most severe pain was his recognition that his efforts to be in

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 36.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 85-144.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 176-8.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 27.

fellowship with humanity might backfire by causing offense and becoming a stumbling block to many. But out of love God accepted the risk of being misunderstood and having the divine desire for fellowship frustrated.³⁸ The magnitude of divine self-abnegation is evidenced by the fact that God makes God's own self vulnerable to disappointment and rejection.

God's assumption of lowliness contradicts all ordinary expectations about how a *metaphysically* perfect God should act. The humble life of Jesus is an offense to all natural concepts of transcendent power operating by sheer force. Kierkegaard critically observes that this common view of divine potency is actually rooted in the human lust for power.³⁹ Ordinary understandings of God's nature are a projection of what human beings would like to be. The alleged metaphysical perfections of God are actually qualities that people covet for themselves.⁴⁰ Because people are vulnerable and weak, they imagine a god who is free of their liabilities and chooses to assure their prosperity and felicity through an exercise of might. Because of this, the prospect of divine lowliness is an intolerable offense, for a lowly and abased God cannot guarantee earthly health, felicity, and power.

It is in the context of the offensiveness of the divine lowliness and the divine incognito that the crucifixion of Jesus must be interpreted. The crucifixion was the apogee of humanity's habitual hostility to divine *kenosis*. The pseudonym Anti-Climacus summarizes Jesus' life by writing, "...continual mistreatment finally ends in death."⁴¹ In his own voice Kierkegaard laments that Jesus' abasement culminates in the horror of crucifixion.⁴² Consequently, the cross can serve as a symbol of Christ's entire life. To emphasize this Kierkegaard cautions that Jesus should not be imagined as the indulgent and undemanding companion of popular piety. The sentimentalized and domesticated Jesus, epitomized by the infant with the holy

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 63-4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 60-2.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 174-82.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 168.

⁴² Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 277.

family, should not be the focus of worship.⁴³ Moreover, aesthetic admiration of Jesus' glory must be avoided.⁴⁴ Rather, Jesus should first and foremost be remembered as the crucified one, rejected and murdered by the very species that he was trying to help.

Kierkegaard explains that the hostility of humanity toward Jesus turns lethal because human beings cannot tolerate the spectacle of self-giving love. It is bad enough that Jesus embraced lowliness and eschewed comfort, security, and power, but it is even worse that he did so in order to love others with no thought for his own well-being. Kierkegaard mourns that the apostles "had the dreadful experience that love is not loved, that it is hated, that it is mocked, that it is spat upon, that it is crucified in this world..."⁴⁵ In relating the story of Jesus' persecution, Anti-Climacus states, "And he, the abased one, he was love..."⁴⁶ He elaborates by telling a story of a child who was shown a picture of the crucifixion and then told that the executed man was the most loving individual who ever lived.⁴⁷ He continues, "Tell the child that he (the crucified man) was love, that he came to the world out of love, took upon himself the form of a lowly servant, lived for only one thing — to love and to help people..."⁴⁸ In an ethical-religious essay, another pseudonymous author narrates a similar story of a child and a picture of the Crucified One,⁴⁹ and then clarifies that "He was crucified precisely because he was love, or to develop it further, because he refused to be self-loving."⁵⁰ Christ willed the Incarnation in order to enact God's love for human beings even though he knew that it would put him on the cross.⁵¹ Out of love Christ announced that he was the enactment of

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 55.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 121.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 84.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 170-1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 174-5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 60.

God's self-abasing nature and voluntarily accepted the inevitable consequence of being killed by a virulently hostile humanity. The ascription of such extreme other-regarding and self-sacrificial love to God clashes with humanity's drive for self-aggrandizement and self-protection. The exposure that the selfless ways of God and the self-interested ways of the world are incompatible incites outraged humanity to eliminate Jesus, the source of this unsolicited and unwanted truth. For Kierkegaard this complicity in the execution of Jesus should not be restricted to some group of uniquely evil malefactors. Again and again he exhorts the individual to see herself as being present at the crucifixion as a willing accomplice.⁵²

But the cross does much more than expose human selfishness and thereby cause humanity to be offended. Even more importantly the story of the crucifixion has a mysterious attractive power. *Anti-Climacus* makes this explicit, for after narrating the story of the crucifixion he directly asks the reader "Is this sight not able to move you?"⁵³ A few pages later he observes, "This is how it moved the apostles, who knew nothing and wanted to know nothing but Christ and him crucified — can it not so move you also?"⁵⁴ The spectacle of God's suffering love on the cross reveals the extent to which God was willing to go in order to be in fellowship with humanity. This vision of God's love is so dramatic that it has the power to move the human heart to love God in return. Kierkegaard writes that Christ "performs love's miracle, so that — without doing anything — by suffering he moves everyone who has a heart."⁵⁵ *Anti-Climacus* adds that Christ's radical act of love rivals the manifestation of divine beneficence evident in the act of creation.⁵⁶ The crucifixion, horrific as it was, should nevertheless evoke amazement, gratitude, and joy.

According to Kierkegaard the story of the crucifixion does not just evoke emotions in the way that an inert aesthetic object like a painting might; rather, the

⁵² See, for example, Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 278.

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 171.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 280.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 176.

narrative actively draws the individual to Christ. The experience of joy is not a self-generated response to a passive portrayal of the crucifixion. Rather, Kierkegaard stresses the agency of the Crucified One that precedes every human response, actively reaching out to the individual. It is the prior compelling power of the depiction of Christ on the cross that initiates and sustains the attraction. For Kierkegaard, it is crucial to recognize that it is Christ in his abasement, not in his loftiness, who has the ability to issue the invitation to come to Him and rest.⁵⁷ The cross is associated with the open and welcoming arms of Jesus, for it is the Crucified One who has the power to draw the individual. Appropriately, Kierkegaard's final discourse in a series for Friday communion services concludes with Christ the abased one stretching out His arms at the Eucharistic table.⁵⁸

The paradoxically attractive power of the cross is a function of the beauty of self-sacrificial love. Christ's refusal to seek anything for Himself and to empty Himself for the sake of others is sublime, for those who have eyes to see. The human heart, if it does not succumb to offense, can thrill at the spectacle of God's voluntary submission to suffering and death in order to enact God's solidarity and love. The cross was the climax of the kenotic purpose of God to sacrifice everything in order to be in communion with a humanity that had an allergic reaction to selfless love. The sufferings and death of Christ manifest the glorious and enthralling extent of God's commitment to be in fellowship with humanity, no matter what the cost. As Kierkegaard's tales of the boy who was shown a picture of the crucifixion suggest, it is the sheer attractive power of the vision of a self-emptying love so intense that it would embrace suffering and death that draws the heart.

These considerations reframe Kierkegaard's treatment of the theme of the incognito. The divine glory is not just hidden in Christ's lowliness, as if the loftiness and the lowliness were genuine opposites. Rather, the opposition is only apparent, for the divine glory precisely is the beauty of self-giving love willing to assume the form of lowliness. The life of Christ reaching its climax in the cross is the true glory of divine love. Kierkegaard writes, "But just as the essentially Christian always

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 265.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

places opposites together, so the glory is not directly known as glory but, just the reverse, is known by inferiority, debasement — the cross that belongs to everything that is essentially Christian is here also.”⁵⁹ Revelation through concealment is a function of the fact that exaltation occurs precisely through abasement. The cross shows that the sublimity of divine love can only be manifested as lowliness and suffering.⁶⁰ Put starkly, the exaltation of Christ is his abasement; the two states are not strictly sequentially related.

Attraction to the sheer beauty of Christ’s self-giving spawns many related types of joy and solace, all of which Kierkegaard frequently describes. For example, he devotes considerable attention to the multiple ways that the woes that a follower of Christ encounters can be reframed so that they become pathways to joy, rather than mere tragedies. The suffering Christ can function as a comforter to those in anguish because on the cross he shared the pain which they experience.⁶¹ The empathy of the suffering Christ gives hope to all those who are heavy laden.⁶² Particularly in *Upbuilding Discourses on Various Occasions* Kierkegaard comforts struggling Christians who are daunted by the prospect of persecution by enabling them to find a sense of blessedness even in the midst of tribulation. Encountering opposition and persecution can assure the questioning pilgrim that that she is indeed on the right path, for that path is the way of the cross.⁶³ Even when the follower of Christ is afflicted with misunderstanding, ostracism, and alienation, that follower can be consoled. The suffering disciple knows that God’s desire is to enable humanity to mature toward the bliss of loving selflessly, even though that nurture is painful. Furthermore, human sagacity’s inability to discern the purpose of suffering, and the doubts about God’s goodness that tragedy provokes, can be reconceived as the joyful darkness in which prudential considerations vanish. It is more joyful to assume that God is loving, even in the midst of apparent afflictions, than to search for a theodicy to exculpate God from accusations of negligence or malevolence.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 161.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 234-9.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 266.

⁶² Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 185-6.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 226-7.

Moreover, suffering educates the individual to let go of preferential self-will, for this renunciation of ego-centrism is an essential component of true joy.⁶⁴ In all of these instances suffering is transmuted into joy by seeing it as being potentially Christomorphic and cruciform.

Kierkegaard elaborates another kind of joy in the cross by reframing traditional Lutheran doctrines of the atonement and the theme of the relief that the crucifixion provides for the anguished conscience.⁶⁵ On the cross Jesus' forgiveness of his enemies was a revelation of the depth of God's mercy, showing that even the crowd that crucified Jesus was not beyond the scope of God's compassion.⁶⁶ Kierkegaard's communion discourses exult in the incomprehensible compassion exhibited in the forgiveness of sins and the stunning magnitude of mercy. Kierkegaard insists that the individual's sense of reconciliation is due to the attractive power of the cross, for we cannot do anything to become receptive to the offer of forgiveness. Kierkegaard writes, "If at the Communion table you want to be capable of the least little thing yourself, even merely to step forward yourself, you confuse everything, you prevent the reconciliation, make the satisfaction impossible."⁶⁷ We cannot even repent properly by our own powers; our contrition is elicited by the spectacle of the cross. Our response to Christ's atoning work should simply be to rejoice and be silent. Unlike many Lutheran theologians, Kierkegaard was more interested in the beauty of forgiveness and reconciliation than in the escape from divine punishment and the logistics of atonement.

Furthermore, the spectacle of the crucifixion has a joyfully transformative impact on the individual's mode of relating to her neighbors. Christ functions for Kierkegaard not only as the Redeemer but also as the Prototype, as the revelation of humanity as God intended it to be.⁶⁸ From his Pietist roots Kierkegaard absorbed

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses on Various Occasions*, 335.

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 158-9.

⁶⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 338.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 298-99.

⁶⁸ See Sylvia Walsh *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 51-112.

an intense appreciation for the theme of the *imitatio Christi*.⁶⁹ This “following after” Christ is the pursuit of the kenotic pattern of self-giving love and its necessary embrace of lowliness and probable hostility. The story of Jesus, including the crucifixion, reveals not only the *kenosis* of the divine nature, but also the *kenosis* that should typify human lives. The human life of Jesus exhibits a self-emptying pattern that has its source in the abasement of God the Son, and then should be replicated in the lives of Jesus’ followers. The hidden font of love, “however quiet in its concealment,” is a “gushing spring” that flows into the disciple’s visible works of love for the neighbor.⁷⁰ Because this self-giving love is the “highest,”⁷¹ Kierkegaard rhapsodizes about the eternal joy of “redoubling” (although in quite imperfect ways) Christ’s self-giving that culminates in the crucifixion.

This following after Christ the Prototype is not just an intentional emulation accomplished by the individual’s will power. Neither is the life of love an instance of obedience to a heteronymous and burdensome commandment (although the command to love the neighbor does help stabilize the will and thereby nurtures love).⁷² Following after the Prototype is an elicited response, not a purely external norm. Here, too, the beauty of the crucifixion plays a determinative role. Kierkegaard’s assumption is that an individual tends to become like that which she loves. Consequently, if a person loves the love exhibited in Christ’s ultimate self-giving, that enthusiasm for love will manifest itself in the individual’s attitudes, passions, and behavior. This is evident in Kierkegaard’s narrations of the story of the young boy who was shown a picture of the most loving person who had ever lived and who was then killed by those he was attempting to love. Eventually the boy finds the picture of Christ on the cross to be so enticing that he wants to become like the man in the picture; in fact, he “want(s) to become the picture.”⁷³

⁶⁹ See Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness*, 66-73.

⁷⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 9.

⁷¹ See Michael Strawser, “Love Is the Highest,” in *Kierkegaard’s God and the Good Life*, 16-30.

⁷² See Robert C. Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory,” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward Mooney (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 72-92.

⁷³ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 55.

(In contexts like this Kierkegaard is quick to add that Jesus' work as the Redeemer of humanity from sin cannot be emulated; the follower of Christ must avoid messianic delusions.) The imitation of Christ is fueled by falling in love with the sublimity of Christ's unrestricted self-giving, most evident on the cross.

Even here the beauty of the cross is hidden, for the realization that following Jesus necessarily entails the possibility of persecution can trigger repulsion rather than attraction.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, even this initial trepidation can be transmuted into the joy of discipleship. The prospect of suffering love is so attractive that it can inspire a yearning to accept persecution and to be sacrificed as Christ was, as happened with the boy in Kierkegaard's story. For Kierkegaard this is not masochistic delight in suffering for its own sake. Rather, the willingness to accept suffering is a by-product of the self-forgetful joy of loving the neighbor in spite of the neighbor's hostility.

To conclude, Kierkegaard's many reflections on the cross suggest that humiliation and exaltation are not purely sequential in the life of Christ, and they are not purely sequential in the follower's cruciform life. The follower of Christ should not be motivated by the anticipation of future glory, as if exaltation chronologically follows a period of lowliness which is entirely left behind. If the individual's pious expectations were focused on a future glory devoid of self-emptying, then the beauty of self-giving love, experienced in the present, would be obscured. Exaltation would then be nothing but a selfish reward for an obedient life or a compensation for earthly misery. Against this view, Kierkegaard insists that the follower's exaltation and joy is not a contingent benefit or a reward. Rather, it is the natural fruit of the individual's delight in the sublimity of divine self-emptying, a delight that generates identification with Christ's love and a desire to emulate it. Consequently, eternal blessedness will be the perfection of the self-giving that should characterize temporal existence. Joy is the organic consequence of a life of love that entails suffering, a life inspired by the kenotic pattern revealed most vividly by Jesus on the cross. If offense is avoided, God's extreme self-giving for the sake of mutuality can awaken a delight in the beauty of love, for God has implanted

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 105- 21.

a taste for radically other-regarding love in the human heart. The cross can elicit joy because individuals can develop an *eros* for *agape*.