



Original Research Article

KIERKEGAARD AND KING: HOW DOES AGAPIC LOVE CONFRONT THE DANGERS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

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Abstract

- i. Purpose of the Study: At the intersection of theology, sociology, and philosophy rests the question: How does *agapic* love confront the dangers of Christian nationalism? While Søren Kierkegaard and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. seem to be unlikely conversation partners, they do share a profound intellectual commitment to *agape* and its prophetic voice against Christian nationalism across time and space. This essay juxtaposes Kierkegaard and King's understanding of Christian love, as they appropriate it to their own respective contexts, 19th century Denmark and 20th century United States.
- ii. Methodology: This project uses largely a historical approach to research, focusing on theology, sociology, hermeneutics, and philosophy.
- iii. Main Findings: Kierkegaard's deep critique of Christendom leaves him doubtful about *agape's* capacity to transform a nationalistic state on this side of heaven. King, on the other hand, is much more idealistic in his belief that a Christian state can and should always be able to appeal to its moral ground, even if that ground has become unsteady due to nationalistic fanaticism.
- iv. Applications of this study: This project offers a unique perspective furthering interdisciplinary conversations around theology, politics, and race that will enhance not only the academy, but religious institutions as well.
- v. Novelty of this Study: The new contribution offered here is a nuanced conversation on the place of the Church and the work of love within historically defined systems of power.

Keywords: Agape, Christian Nationalism, Christendom, Dignity, Beloved Community

One of the common temptations facing the Christian Church throughout history is the threat of nationalism. Regardless of its context, Christianity has always toed the line between cultural relevance and eschatological anticipation. Infusing orthodox Christian thought into culture, which makes it more accessible to its constituents, is critical to the Church's growth; however, this practice goes awry when power becomes a motivating factor. Christian nationalism can be defined as the propensity for certain groups of Christians to prioritize the authority of their nation state over and against their theological commitments. It is a blind and uncritical loyalty to the nation state, regardless of its moral and social failures. This essay will first discuss two cultures that historically prioritized national influence over Christian charity: 19th century Denmark and 20th century United States. Second, we will expound on two respective authors, Søren Kierkegaard and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who

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brought these criticisms to light. While Kierkegaard and King differ on several issues, they share a resounding conviction that the only source strong enough to loosen the bounds of Christian nationalism is *agape*. Finally, we will explore the nuances of agapic love in Kierkegaard and King through these seven frameworks: (a) the nature of love (b) the ingenuity of love, (c) the eyes of love, (d) the cost of love, (e) the faith of love, (f) the hope of love, and (g) the community of love.

The Historical Dangers of Christian Nationalism

The form of Christian nationalism in Kierkegaard's home country of Denmark emanated primarily through cultural and intellectual elitism. Following the developments of the Enlightenment came the acceptance of German Idealism in Western Europe. Between Immanuel Kant's *Religion Within the Bounds of Mere Reason* and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, much of Europe was ready to deem humankind's intellectual capacity as limitless. Kant and Hegel maintained the Christian assumptions of their forbearers; however, they mediated their philosophical systems through theological language. One common example of this is the Hegelian synthesis, which perceives of history as has having a thesis, a combative antithesis, and a culminating synthesis. The thesis represents one common historical event that is met with great force by an antithesis; the tension between these two events produces a synthesis, or a hybrid of sorts. Once the synthesis is reached, it becomes the new thesis until another level of human progress is achieved. Kierkegaard scholar Paul Holmer describes this train of thought as "the moving stair that human history is supposed to be."² This system becomes so imbedded in European and particularly Danish thought that much of the intelligentsia prioritizes this ideology over and against their theological commitments. The primary reason for this is what the Hegelian dialectic symbolizes: upward mobility. Even though Denmark is nominally Christian in the early 19th century, Dr. Amy Hall describes the cultural and religious zeitgeist in this way: "God becomes a guarantor of propriety and property, and Christianity a matter of decorum... God becomes an acquaintance you might consider visiting... [while] navigating the 'moving stair.'"³ It is in light of these philosophical and cultural customs that Kierkegaard comes to the foreground.

Known to many as the Father of Existentialism, Kierkegaard is perhaps most recognized for his contention that Hegel's system disregards and devalues the role of the individual in society. While this is central to Kierkegaardian thought, it does not do justice to the scope of his theological projects, most notably Christian *agape*. Additionally, Kierkegaard's ideas have historically has been difficult to pin down because of the use of numerous pseudonyms in his writings. For this reason, we will predominantly stick to texts written in Kierkegaard's own hand, most notably his text *Works of Love* and his journals. One common criticism of his own Danish constituents is their failure to comprehend the inherent difference between Christianity and Christendom. The former is the historic, orthodox religion of the Christian Church, whereas the latter is the former's corruption within the established order. Kierkegaard describes Christendom as a "disguise" that "plays the game of Christian persecution... in the security of worldliness."⁴ Christendom lays claim to Christian tradition, yet it consistently sacrifices its ethical commitments on the altars of establishment, power, and authority. The challenge of Kierkegaard's day is "introducing Christianity into Christendom"⁵ throughout Denmark, where everyone believes that they are Christians. However, this is a difficult task, especially considering that his readers believe they are well on their way up the latter of human progress. It would seem foolish in their eyes to go backwards and reconsider the very essence of their faith. This would only slow them down in their climb towards social and cultural prestige. Thus, Kierkegaard's great task is admonishing his readers to return to the heart of Christian spirituality: love.

Much like Kierkegaard's own nation, the land of Dr. King frequently confuses patriotism with nationalism. While Denmark's nationalism is marked by intellectual and cultural renown, the United

² Paul L. Holmer, *On Kierkegaard and Truth*, ed. David J. Gouwens and Lee C. Barrett III (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 26.

³ Amy L. Hall, "Love: A Holy Caprice," in *T&T Clark Companion to the Theology of Kierkegaard*, ed. Aaron P. Edwards and David J. Gouwens (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2020), 418.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2nd ed., 1999), vol. 1, 380.

⁵Ibid., 401.

States prides itself in economic prosperity and militaristic security. These two areas are rooted in the heart of American democracy: freedom. While this is an admirable central virtue for a democratic nation, many Americans often conflate their country's democratic virtues with its Judeo-Christian ones. This is due in large part to the rich, yet tarnished nature of the United States's religious heritage. Many of America's first immigrants were Christian, yet several of its founding fathers professed a pseudo-Christian deism that inspired the nation's first documents. Consequently, the nation is left with a vague hybrid between pseudo-theocracy and democracy that still divides many Americans today. The most glaring injustice in the history of the United States is its perpetual disregard for African American and other indigenous people's lives. Many of the slave owners prior to Reconstruction were professing Christians. This disheartening reality makes it all the more amazing how strong the faith of the black church is historically. Whether it was the abuse of chattel slavery, the failed attempts of reconstruction, or the embarrassment of segregation; the black church remained faithful and embodied Christian love in a nominally Christian nation. Unlike their white neighbors, who perpetually "step back from their theological commitments, this community "steps into the Bible" for its strength.⁶ The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's led by Dr. King among others, exposes the hypocrisy of America's claim to Christian nationalism and reimagines what a community grounded in agapic love might look like.

Dr. King is most celebrated for his social activism; however, as with Kierkegaard, few take careful consideration of his theological commitment to agapic love. King repeatedly appeals to this fundamental Christian principle, which the white majority ostensibly also holds closely. If in fact America is a Christian nation, as many of King's contemporaries claim it to be, then why, he asks are economic exploitation and militaristic advances given priority over social justice in health care, education, and housing? He takes a head-on approach to the political and economic questions of his day. Regarding the Vietnam War, he argues, "A nation... that spends more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."⁷ In addition, regarding the wealth disparities that unfettered capitalism inherently produces, he writes, "No one should be forced to live in poverty while others live in luxury."⁸ Thus, King's crusade is to recapture the soul of America, and he believes challenging the nature of Americans' theological and political commitments is crucial to that end. Ultimately, however, the goal for King is not a deconstruction of American values, but rather a vision of beloved community. Of course, this community is only possible if American's theological fidelity to agape precedes their political affiliations and false notions of security. We will now take to task the nature of agapic love in Kierkegaard and King, and how it can be distinguished from love's other forms.

(A) *The Nature of Love*

Before exploring how agapic love can fundamentally cleanse the white-washed sepulcher that is Christian nationalism, we must explore what makes agape distinct from other forms of love. Both Kierkegaard and King distinguish agape from the other two forms of love defined in the Greek language: *philia* and *eros*. While *philia* describes the kind of love apparent in a friendship, *eros* is distinct in that it articulates the romantic feelings that two lovers feel towards one another. Kierkegaard and King agree that agape is unconditional and universal; however, King nuances agapic language by understanding it as communal and fluid.

Kierkegaard argues that the mark of agape is that it does not show preference like *eros* or *philia*. He writes, "The object of both erotic love and of friendship has preference's name, 'the beloved,' 'the friend,' who is loved in contrast to the whole world."⁹ Erotic love is the most preferential and exclusive because it exists solely between two individuals. Thus, the beloved is loved in spite of the rest of the world. Their beloved-ness exists fundamentally in the fact that they are the

⁶ Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 200.

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr, "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 241.

⁸ Martin Luther King Jr, *Why We Can't Wait*, quoted in "Prisons of the Forgotten," in *To Shape a New World* (Harvard: Cambridge, 2018), 195.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 19.

object of erotic love. Similarly, a friend is a chosen “in contrast to all others.”¹⁰ *Philia* is rooted in shared interests, passions, and comradeship. Thus, the friend must meet the qualifications that exist in their counterpart’s preferences, whether these are conscious or not. Even if interests diverge between friends, they must at least share enjoyment of one another’s company, otherwise they are not “friends” in the literal sense of the word; this too is based fundamentally on preference. *Eros* and *philia* are instinctual and often occur without much exerted effort or intentionality. Kierkegaard defends that both *eros* and *philia* correspond to one’s “feelings, drives, inclinations, passions, and the powers of immediacy.”¹¹ Therefore, the preferential quality of *eros* and *philia*, although inherent to their being, is paradoxically the very reason for their limitations.

Agape in Kierkegaardian terms relates to “obligation”¹² in contrast to the preferential treatment of *eros* and *philia*. This is a counterintuitive thought because obligation does not often produce the most authentic expressions of love. However, in Kierkegaard’s estimation, *agape* is not the same as the kind of obligation a child feels to a parent or a worker to their supervisor; rather “this obligation to love is a change of eternity.”¹³ Kierkegaard here is referring to the Pauline statement that “in Christ... old things are passed away and the new is here.”¹⁴ Thus, Kierkegaard’s obligatory *agape* is not grounded in duty for duty sake; on the contrary, the Christian obligation to love finds its foundation in Christ’s ontological transformation of the created order. It is a living *into* a new kind of reality; not living in spite of the current reality. In this vein, Kierkegaardian *agape* is positive and active, not negative and passive; for if the latter were true, *agape* would function like the Hebraic law because “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”¹⁵ Thus, *agape* begins with self-denial, but self-denial is not the end. *Agapic* self-denial exists for the neighbor, who Kierkegaard argues means both “all people” and “one person”¹⁶ at the same time. How can this be? The neighbor is all people because *agapic* love beckons the individual towards the prospect of loving anyone who exists. While it is impossible to love every existing person, it is imperative to at least love one person as if they could be anyone, anywhere. The universality of love is demonstrated in the particular even though the subjective limitations of the lover constrain them from loving every existing person. In this way, the individual fulfills *agape*’s quality by choosing to love one person, regardless of the former’s preference.

While Kierkegaard understands *agape* in non-preferential and obligatory terms, Dr. King views *agape* as fundamentally *communal* in nature. He writes, “*Agape* is a willingness to go to any length to restore community.”¹⁷ Of course *agape* is also an individual practice: Individuals make up communities, and if individuals do not embody *agape*, then the community’s *agapic* aspirations are futile. However, Kingian *agape* is rooted in his understanding of human dignity, which derives from the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei*. King explains, “Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.”¹⁸ Thus, every person, regardless of their social status, financial earnings, or educational prowess; every human being possesses inherent human dignity because we all reflect God’s image. Consequently, *agape* becomes a universal practice that refuses to discriminate based on external factors but chooses to highlight the internal quality of innate worth in every person. Once more King professes, “*Agape* means understanding, redeeming good will for all men.”¹⁹ Thus, King agrees with Kierkegaard that *agape* has an “all people” quality to it.

The universal imperative of *agape* is drastically different from King’s understanding of *eros* and *philia*. King explains *eros*, which in Platonic philosophy meant a “yearning of the soul for the

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ Ibid., 25

¹² Ibid., 25.

¹³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:6.

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 21.

¹⁷ Martin Luther King Jr, “An Experiment in Love,” in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 20.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King Jr, “The Ethical Demands for Integration,” in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 119.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King Jr, “An Experiment in Love,” 19. While King repeatedly uses masculine pronouns in his discussion of humanity, it should be noted that he is referring to every human being and just speaking through a more patriarchal tradition. He is in no way making a statement that men have a higher ontological status than women.

realm of the divine,” has now come to describe “aesthetic or romantic love.”²⁰ Philia, on the other hand possesses an inherently “reciprocal” nature.²¹ He also describes philia as “intimate affectionateness between friends.”²² In King’s estimation, agape is drastically different from both of these Greek ideas because it is innately unconditional. It is not predicated on reciprocity of interest or aesthetic longing; it is and will continue to be fluid. Eros and philia can stop and start at the blink of an eye; however, agape is better understanding in a verbal context. It always acts, always strengthens, always builds up because that is intrinsic to its nature. This is not at odds with Kierkegaard’s belief in agape as obligation, but it is more nuanced. Agape is a dynamic love shared in community between persons, and it is the obligatory aspect that keeps its movement going; otherwise, communities would be tempted to stop loving when it becomes inconvenient or difficult. Agape does not permit such thoughts because conditional love, regardless of its specificity, is contrary to the spirit of unity essential to Kingian agape.

Now we must explore the question: How does agape’s nature combat the evils of Christian nationalism? Simply put, it cuts right through any notion of elitism or privilege. Both Kierkegaard and King agree that agape is neither preferential nor necessarily reciprocal, and these are often marks of countries that embody Christian nationalism. The cultural and academic elitism of Kierkegaard’s Denmark boasts the intellectual ability of the individual; not the individual’s capacity to love his or her neighbor. In addition, an elitist society like his shows preference to citizens who have more promise, thus, neglecting the members who do not fit the cultural mold. Similarly, 20th century United States gives more attention to military prowess and capitalistic gains than the wellbeing of its citizens. In addition, failing to acknowledge the *Imago Dei* that exists in all of its citizens. Both countries are built upon on progress first, and agape second (if they have time). This is a dangerous precedent to set because love becomes a tool we use on the path of success; rather than the end in itself. However, as King reminds his readers, agapic love cannot stop and start because it is fluid. Once it becomes conditional, it ceases to be agape. Next, we will explore agape’s creative side, and how its ingenuity can transform nations like Denmark and America.

(B) The Ingenuity of Love

King is famous for articulating love’s creative power, and how it dismantles and confounds the forces of darkness. King explains agape’s ingenuity in his discussion on loving one’s enemies. This is a distinctive quality to agape, and it requires three steps. First, it requires the individual to “develop and maintain the capacity to forgive.”²³ This is no easy feat, especially considering the most natural response to receiving pain is to administer it right back. Second, loving one’s enemies means understanding that “the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor never quite expresses all that he is.”²⁴ This may in fact be the most important step because in practicing it, the one who is hurt both acknowledges the validity of their pain but also is able to recognize the inherent dignity of their enemy. The final step involved in loving one’s neighbor is that the one who is hurt “must not seek to defeat or humiliate the enemy but to win his friendship and understanding.”²⁵ Where the second step is the most important, the third one is the hardest. It is one thing to forgive someone, and it is another to see them as more than their heinous act; however, to actually try to win the friendship of the enemy seems almost impossible. This is the heart of the creative power of agapic love. It diffuses the hatred of the enemy by unconditionally pursuing their friendship. It is dangerous and perplexing, but more than anything, it is creative because it does not respond as one would expect. To return hatred for hatred, although in some circumstances seems reasonable, is lazy and simple. The more perfected, nuanced, and beautiful way is to forgive because in forgiving one can actually change the person who wronged them.

Where King views love’s ingenuity in its creative power, Kierkegaard displays love’s infinite indebted quality and its capacity to conceal wrongs. Kierkegaard continues to use the language of debt and obligation, but not in the sense that one might think. He writes, “Love is perhaps most correctly described as an infinite debt; when a person is gripped by love, he feels that this is like being in an

²⁰ Martin Luther King Jr, “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 9.

²³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

infinite debt.”²⁶ Here lies the paradox of agape: It makes the individual feel infinitely indebted to his or her neighbor, but this expression is not a burden; it is a gift. The infinite quality of debt is what sets agape apart from other forms of love. Phila and eros can be calculated by varying degrees, but “to calculate with an infinite quality is impossible because to calculate is to make finite.”²⁷ Thus, agape’s infiniteness deconstructs all calculation, thereby making the debt something that the individual *gets* to do; rather than something they *must* do. The ingenuity of love’s infinite quality is that the very connotation of debt changes, and so does the disposition of the debtor.

Kierkegaardian love is ingenious not only because of its infinite quality, but also because it recognizes the power within concealing a multitude of sins. He describes the natural proclivity of the human heart this way: “Every human being has a great inclination to see his neighbor’s faults and perhaps an even greater one to want to tell them.”²⁸ Therefore, agape once again is working against the grain of human predispositions; this is why its ingenuity is essential. Sin is a perpetual process: evil begets more evil. However, when agape steps in, it breaks this cycle and offers a new path. He writes, “Love hides a multitude of sins because love prevents the sin from coming into existence, smothers it at birth.”²⁹ Once again, this is a paradoxical proposition because concealment is generally understood in negative terms. Although, since sin’s inherent quality is exponential, it makes sense to cover it before it spreads beyond repair. Similar to King’s discussion on love of enemies, Kierkegaardian love, in concealing the wrongs of others, disarms judgement’s stern gaze and breaks the cycle of hate before it even starts.

How does love’s ingenuity combat the contours of Christian nationalism? First, it challenges the structures that this kind of system is built on. As already hinted, Christian nationalism is quite an oxymoron because Christianity does not find solace in the power structures of this world. The very nature of nationalism is fundamentally divisive and lazy. For example, King’s America views other nations as threats first and potential partners second. The notion of loving its rivals is construed as foolish and overly idealistic. However, as King has demonstrated, using the creative power of love to diffuse the tension between enemies is essential to the Christian religion. Therefore, in King’s context, one’s nationalism apparently precedes their Judeo-Christian faith. Similarly, in 19th century Denmark, infinite debt is not seen as a gift, but a burden weighing one down on their way to social and intellectual fulfillment. Remaining in service to one’s neighbor is an impediment, rather than an opportunity. Consequently, in a world where competition reigns supreme, the notion of intentionally choosing to conceal another’s faults seems unwise. If someone else fails to climb the cultural or intellectual ladder, it only means more room for you at the top. In fact, if everyone’s wrongs were hidden, then the ladder itself would be superfluous because comparison would fundamentally cease to exist. Thus, we can see clearly that the ingenuity of agapic love drastically alters the way of life in countries that lay claim to the banner of Christian nationalism. Love’s creativity lies in its ability to disarm the powers of injustice, not in its partnership with them.

(C) The Eyes of Love

In order for love to take a creative form, the one who chooses to love must be able to see with the eyes of love. Agapic vision is another common theme in both Kierkegaardian and Kingian expositions of love. While King’s approach focuses on the inherent dignity of every person as an image-bearer of God, Kierkegaard opts to demonstrate how agape means loving people in their particularities. Both types of vision are essential to overcoming the ostensibly blind disposition of Christian nationalism.

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 176.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.



Figure 1, “I am a Man”³⁰

At the heart of King’s theology of agapic vision is the dignity of persons. As discussed earlier, the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* is foundational to King’s firm belief in the universal dignity of humankind. However, in order for human beings to be treated with dignity, they must first be seen as image bearers of God. Otherwise, it becomes more convenient to reduce individuals or groups of people to more trivial qualities. While discussing the white majority in America, King argues that it is not their theology that is necessarily faulty; it is their inability to see. He writes, “This is not a nation of venal people. It is a land of individuals whose... eyes are blinded by the tragic myth that Negroes endure abuse without pain or complaint.”³¹ Thus, there is an ignorance behind the history of racial injustice in America. King does not say this in order to absolve white supremacists but to point out that agape requires the hard work of choosing to see. Once again, he explains, “Slavery in America was perpetuated not merely by human badness but also by human blindness.”³² There is perhaps no better example of this than in the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968. Sanitation workers peacefully protested their low wages by holding up signs that read “I am a man” (see fig. 1). Fundamentally, their appeal to the Memphis public eye is to see them as human beings because if they are seen as image bearers than they must be treated like image bearers. King describes this spirit of self-worth in African American life: “The new Negro has emerged with a new determination to achieve freedom and human dignity whatever the cost may be.”³³ This feeling of “sombodiness” is rooted in the theological foundation of the *Imago Dei*, thus, creating resolve within the black community to compel their white neighbors to see them.

While King’s agapic vision is grounded in an appeal to the universal quality of human dignity, Kierkegaard actually demonstrates the theological imperative to love individuals on account of their particularities. Like King, Kierkegaard starts with the eyes of love, and he describes it as “our duty to love the people we see.”³⁴ Once again Kierkegaard mediates his conception of agape through the language of obligation and duty. Concerning this approach, he writes, “When this is the duty, the task is not to find the lovable object, but the task is to find the once given or chosen object—lovable, and to be able to continue to find him lovable no matter how he is changed.”³⁵ Thus, Kierkegaardian

³⁰ Walter P. Reuther Digital Library, Wayne State University. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://digital.library.wayne.edu/404>

³¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Testament of Hope,” in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 327.

³² Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, 37.

³³ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Case Against Tokenism,” in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 108.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 159.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

agapic vision entails loving the individual, regardless of what changes about them. Now, he even takes this a step further by arguing that Christian love involves loving the other *in accordance with* their individuality. He writes,

“The emphasis is not on loving the perfections one sees in a person, but the emphasis is on loving the person one sees, whether one sees perfections or imperfections in this person, yes, however, distressingly this person has changed, inasmuch as he has not ceased to be the same person.”³⁶

This is a unique position, especially from a theological perspective. Historically, the Church has taken more of a Kingian approach by focusing on universal quality of dignity in personhood. However, there is certainly merit in Kierkegaard’s approach. It not only gives people permission to be individuals, but it also compels them to see others as unique. When particularities are seen and celebrated, the kingdom of God begins to embody the diversity described in the book of Revelation.³⁷ Thus, the eyes of love according to Kierkegaard are about seeing individuals, regardless of their particularities or shortcomings, and loving them anyway.

The agapic vision of Kierkegaard and King are both essential to overcoming the visionless nature of Christian nationalism. Kierkegaard’s position forces nations like Denmark that give priority to its elite to reconsider how it sees people. One word that Kierkegaard repeatedly uses to describe his generation is “sagacious,” but not in a positive light. He writes, “The sagacious person thinks, foolishly, that one wastes one’s love by loving imperfect, weak people... loving the unseen—that is truly to waste [love].”³⁸ However, this posture of calculating love rather than enacting it is not really a mark of agape at all. As we have mentioned, agape is about seeing the other; in Kierkegaard’s estimation, it is about seeing things like poverty, lack of education, or lack of cultural prestige. He argues that it is important to see these things, not for the purpose of looking down on those who embody them; but for the fundamental quality of recognizing the unique beauty that every individual possesses. While Kierkegaard’s Denmark is marred with the sludge of cultural and intellectual classism, he believes that the only way to clear one’s gaze is by choosing to see the dignity and diversity inherent in everyone’s individuality.

Although Kierkegaard’s agapic vision of individuality could certainly speak to the homogenous nature of American economic and militaristic elitism, King’s appeal to the universal quality of human dignity is also quite appropriate. The question of human dignity is obviously central to the Civil Rights Movement as many white Americans are able to justify the evils of segregation if they simply refuse to see the common humanity of their black neighbors. However, as King points out in his later years, this national sin of dehumanization goes beyond black and white:

Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men—for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? What then can I say to the ‘Viet-cong’ or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life?³⁹

Thus, King’s theological commitments to the *Imago Dei* and the sacrificial death of Christ force him to see all people as reflections of God’s glory. These commitments, applied to Vietnam and the economy, create more enemies of King for the simple fact that his constituents refuse to see. They refuse to see the dignity of the communist, the dignity of the Vietnamese, and the dignity of the those disenfranchised locally. This willful blindness is a key cog in the malicious machine that is Christian nationalism. Only a profound theological gaze on each other’s dignity can save us from these cycles of ignorance and dehumanization.

³⁶ Ibid., 173.

³⁷ See Revelation 7:9.

³⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 163.

³⁹ Martin Luther King Jr, “A Time to Break Silence,” 234.

(D) The Cost of Love

As just mentioned, choosing to see in love often has its consequences because Christian seeing disrupts the automated blindness of a society. Thus, there is a cost to love; both King and Kierkegaard affirm this. For King, the cost involves racialized threats, bombings, and ultimately his life. While Kierkegaard's social involvement does not come close to King's, the very nature of his pseudonymous authorship demonstrates a recognition that he is writing against the status quo. Now we will tackle the cost of love amidst Christian nationalism. Where Kierkegaard and King diverge is that the former argues that the cost of suffering is the end; whereas the latter suggests that is a necessary step on the road to beloved community.

King begins his discussion on the cost of agapic love by situating it in terms of majority and minority opinion. He argues that one of the great mistakes of the American Church is that is "has often served to crystalize, conserve, and even bless the patterns of majority opinion"⁴⁰ rather than calling them out. He believes that Christians are called to be "transformed nonconformists"⁴¹ in their respective cultures. This does not bode well in any context historically, but especially in a democratic nation where the country, for better or for worse, is consistently driven by the opinion of the majority. Thus, the first cost of Kingian love is to surrender one's claim to public acceptance. For most American Christians, who so easily divide their private faith from the public arena, this is easily avoided. However, King challenges this public vs. private dichotomy, and in so doing, deepens love's cost.

The second cost of Kingian love is willful and creative suffering. This is accomplished through the practice of nonviolent resistance. He describes it in this way: "[Nonviolent resistance] is a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love, in the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflictor of it."⁴² In this paradox of willfully receiving suffering, the resisters "stir the conscience"⁴³ of the enemy by expressing the unwarranted nature of their affliction. This is evident in Birmingham during the larger economic boycott, when the whole nation watches local police hose and set dogs on peaceful protestors. Up until this moment, the majority of Americans are still rather ambivalent about the black freedom struggle; however, it is their creative and willful suffering that sparks legislative change. Thus, for King, agapic suffering is an important creative step on the road to integration.

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, argues that suffering itself is the road of the Christian life. While this initially sounds quite morbid, an acceptance of this road unleashes greater reservoirs of joy as the road represents solidarity with Christ. Too often Christians that buy in to the lies of Christian nationalism are caught by surprise when hardship comes. Kierkegaard explains, "When hardship is the road, then the fact that there is hardship on the road cannot possibly mean that he has made a mistake; on the contrary, this is the sign that he is on the right road."⁴⁴ For Kierkegaard, the cost of love is not a trivial or supplementary aspect of agapic love; it is actually the *telos* of its work. In fact, he will go as far as to say, "Hardship is my helper" because "it is a sign to me that I have good references."⁴⁵ Suffering identifies one with Christ because he promised that any who would choose to follow him would have their own respective cross. Thus, suffering paradoxically is a form of encouragement because anyone who walks the road without having given up something is on a different road. In a sense, Kierkegaard lives out his theology of suffering to the very end. His candid criticisms of Danish religious life make him quite a loner. For this reason, scholar Alastair Hannay refers to him as a "mischievous martyr."⁴⁶ He does not suffer the physical abuse that the early apostles or Dr. King bear, but he is well acquainted with King's first cost of love: Refusing to be resigned to popular opinion. Thus, although Kierkegaard's insistence on the road of suffering is helpful to

⁴⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Martin Luther King Jr, "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 26.

⁴³ Martin Luther King Jr, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 39.

⁴⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 297.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 302.

⁴⁶ Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 387-419.

destabilizing Christian nationalism, ultimately Dr. King's second quality of love's cost is more robust because it transforms suffering's negative quality into something amazingly constructive.

Both Kierkegaard and King have made clear that love has a cost, especially when it is working against corrupt power structures that lay claim to Christian heritage. Dr. King's insistence on nonviolent resistance as a creative form of suffering is both theologically sound and shockingly pragmatic. Many of the strides African Americans made in the 50's and 60's are due in large part to the effective practice of nonviolent resistance. Not only does this bring about legislative reform in America, but it also exposes the hypocrisy of Christian nationalism. Americans are forced to reckon with evils committed by a nation that insists that Judeo-Christian principles are its foundation. Similarly, in Denmark Kierkegaard discloses the comfortability often associated with mixing cultural elitism and religious pietism. The easiest way to debunk this warped synthesis is to make suffering paramount to Christian living. His repeated effort to describe Christianity as hardship is strong enough to weed out any form of elitism that has corrupted the Church. It is important to note that although Kierkegaard's insistence on suffering is quite extreme, it may have been the exact message that his readers needed most. Context is crucial when examining any figure, but especially with Kierkegaard and King who, are determined to pay the cost of love for exposing Christian nationalism's agapic shortcomings.

(E) The Faith of Love

In order for agape's cost of suffering to be transformed into a more powerful force for good, profound faith is imperative. For Kierkegaard, faith involves seeing what is not necessarily visible at the present moment. It requires redemptive vision. This is often difficult to live out because as Kierkegaard explains, "Experience will teach that it is most sagacious not to believe everything—but love believes all things."⁴⁷ It sounds like Kierkegaard is portraying love as this lofty and irrational idea that humans must affirm despite the cold realities of their past. However, he is clear that faith does not exist in contrast to reason; rather, faith is given its ground to stand on through reason. The real enemy is mistrust, not reason. He writes, "No, knowledge does not defile a person; it is mistrust that defiles a person's knowledge, just as love purifies it."⁴⁸ Mistrust looks at knowledge that is gained through subjective experience and chooses to believe that the world and all of its possibilities are fundamentally evil. Faith, on the other hand, perceives of experience, even terrible experience, as containing the possibility for redemption. In this way, it takes faith to believe in agapic love; not because it is an absurd prospect but because of its redemptive potentiality.

While the first objection to Kierkegaardian love is that it is irrational, a second common criticism is that it is naïve and easily deceived. Kierkegaard addresses this as well by offering a scenario of a lover and a deceiver. The deceiver believes that he has beaten the lover at her own game by not reciprocating her love; however, the lover transcends the deceiver by loving him anyway. He writes,

By not loving in return, the deceiver has presumably tricked the one who loves—but the one who truly loves regards demanding reciprocal love simply as a defilement, a degradation, and regards loving without the reward of reciprocal love as the highest blessedness.⁴⁹

Thus, deception is perplexed by agape because in not returning the lover's warmth, the deceiver paradoxically gives the lover exactly what she wanted. It takes faith to transform the naïveté of unconditional love into the strength of redemptive vision. Otherwise, the lover is discouraged by the deceiver's lack of reciprocity. The faith of love in Kierkegaard's estimation is a powerful thing because it renegotiates and ultimately undermines the very norms of the social power structures that too often permeate human experience.

King is similar to Kierkegaard in that he views faith as an essential way to transform the suffering of love into a powerful force for good. Their main difference is more of a linguistic one; King sees agape as a *creative* way of transforming individuals and communities whereas Kierkegaard

⁴⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 226.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

appeals to more spiritual and philosophical verbiage. King does, however, continue with Kierkegaard in the language of redemption. He writes, “Unearned suffering is redemptive... Suffering, the nonviolent resister realizes, has tremendous educational and transformative possibilities.”⁵⁰ The creative force behind love’s cost of suffering is faith because of its capacity to transform pain into promise. Like Kierkegaard, King does not view faith as a foolish endeavor. He explains,

A positive religious faith does not offer an illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering... Rather, it instills us with the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitable come, and assures us that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned.⁵¹

Thus, faith does not shy away from the pain of this world, but resoundingly affirms and transforms it. The belief in the presence and goodness of God even through suffering becomes the catalyst for King’s faith in nonviolent resistance. Nonviolent resistance synthesizes the historical ambivalence between fearful reticence and sheer righteous anger within the African American experience. This practice is the perfect synthesis of the justifiably militant spirit of the black community and their often fearful acquiescence towards social change. Furthermore, through nonviolent protest, both those experiencing pain and those administering it are changed. The former are given a platform to express their dignity and experience catharsis, whereas the latter are forced to reckon with agape’s disarming quality. According to King, this is the way of the future; and while faith is ultimately a choice, it is growing increasingly imperative in this nuclear age that we inhabit. He writes, “In our day of space vehicles and guided ballistic missiles, the choice is either nonviolence or nonexistence.”⁵² Thus, choosing to believe in the power of agape is both the great challenge of the modern age, but also its only choice.

One common theme found in King and Kierkegaard’s expositions on the faith of love is that redemptive vision does not rely on social, political, or economic power to achieve its end. Like Christ, who “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped... rather, made himself nothing,”⁵³ so does agapic love not look to worldly power structures for support. As mentioned, this requires a deep sense of faith that is able to see beyond the always visible struggle for power found in Christian nationalism. Nations like King’s America and Kierkegaard’s Denmark consider faith as a last resort. Their first lines of defensive are economic stability, military might, and social prestige, respectively. When these positions of power fail them, then maybe they will consider believing with agapic faith. This is yet another reason why Christianity is inherently distinct from a nationalistic worldview. Redemptive vision does not allow one to find solace in the power structures of the social order; rather, it looks beyond these forces to the transformative potential of love within individuals and communities. This love does not take by force like Christian nationalists do, but it saturates the conscience of the recalcitrant elite with the humble yet powerful proposition that somehow unearned suffering is redemptive.

(F) The Hope of Love

While faith is the ability to see the cost of love as creative and redemptive, hope is the conviction that perpetual faith will produce a brighter tomorrow. We will explore King’s vision of hope in his two most famous speeches “I Have a Dream” and “I See the Promised Land.” Then, with Kierkegaard, we will tackle hope’s antithesis: shame, and how shame misappropriates the vision of hope. Finally, we will ask the question whether or not Kingian and Kierkegaardian hope is naïve considering the utilitarian nature of Christian nationalism.

Dr. King’s most famous speech “I Have a Dream,” given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial conveys his agapic hope for America. The specific dream he is illustrating is that “one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”⁵⁴ Thus, King’s theological conviction is inextricably tied to the American dream, which prioritizes freedom. However, the question must be asked: How is King

⁵⁰ Martin Luther King Jr, “An Experiment in Love,” 18.

⁵¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, 127-128.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵³ Philippians 2:6-7.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther King Jr, “I Have a Dream,” in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 219.

so optimistic about America's future having inherited over 200 years of little progress in the realm of racial injustice? Clanton Dawson argues that Kingian hope can be distinguished from "wishful thinking" because it is grounded in tangible expressions of hope's fulfillment.⁵⁵ Dawson points out that King witnesses three historic victories in the black freedom struggle: The Supreme Court ruling of *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education* in 1954, the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Each of these events validate King's hope, and just as with faith, demonstrate that hope is not a fool's errand. Consequently, each of these strives toward freedom is achieved through the democratic liberty of peaceful protest. King's insistence on American freedom is tied to his eschatological picture of beloved community. The anaphora of "let freedom ring"⁵⁶ is used in order to provide a pathway by which all Americans, regardless of race, can walk down the boulevards of integration and into a more realized ontology of social justice.

It is this reality that King depicts more specifically with Biblical imagery in his "I See the Promised Land" speech. King compares the suffering and hardships of the African American community with that of the Israelites in the book of Exodus. Although the struggle has been tumultuous for King and his black constituents, they can hold on to the promise given by God to Israel that they will one day reach the promised land of Canaan. Historically, the African American church has found solidarity with the Israelites and the Exodus narrative. There is a shared weight of injustice that both groups find themselves crushed under, and a shared faith that the God of Israel is a God of liberation, who delivers his people from systems of oppression. Likewise, King sees himself in a Moses-archetypal role as he proclaims,

[God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.⁵⁷

Just as Moses does not get to see the fruits of his labor by leading his people through to Canaan, so is King not awarded the privilege of witnessing America become the beloved community that he believed it could be. However, it is his hope in this future reality that makes the work of love worth it. While the United States today is still far from the image that King painted in his lifetime, the prospect of hope still remains, and it is this tangible hope that fuels the deconstruction of American nationalism through the soft yet steady disposition of agapic love.

While King serves as the visionary for agape's hope, Kierkegaard is its defender. He first qualifies it by arguing that Christianity's first hope is "in eternity."⁵⁸ This forces the Christian to see the world in light of eternity and instills in her a naturally hopeful disposition. This is because eternity transcends the temporal. Consequently, it creates an obligation to see "the possibility of the good for the other person."⁵⁹ This is no flippant optimism; rather, it is a concrete commitment to the future redemptive possibilities in every person. Kierkegaard submits that the primary threat to agapic hope is shame. Shame so easily manipulates and discourages by convincing the subject that hope naturally produces disillusionment. However, this position is predicated on the assumption that hope exists primarily for the sake of the thing or person one is hoping *for*. In other words, the one who gives way to shame only sees hope as a medium by which something else can be attained. It is purely utilitarian. Kierkegaard responds, "In eternity everyone will be compelled to understand that it is not the outcome that determines the honor or the shame, but the expectancy in itself."⁶⁰ Thus, the purpose of hope is not to serve one's own end, but rather to instill in each of us a disposition of hopefulness. Shame misunderstands hope and in so doing, fails in hoping before it even starts. Hope informs agapic love because it begs the question: What are the redemptive future possibilities in the person who stands before me? In hope's infinite array of redeeming visions, it encourages the unconditional nature of agape to know no bounds in how it loves.

⁵⁵ Clanton C. W. Dawson Jr., "The Concept of Hope in the Thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.," in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Robert E. Birt (Plymouth: UK, 2012), 342.

⁵⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," 220.

⁵⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 286.

⁵⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 250.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

The hope of love is boundless, but for the Christian nationalist, hope is predicated on the strength of their nation or their own level of prestige. Kierkegaard is correct in arguing that hope for a certain thing is really no hope at all. It is closer to the “wishful thinking” that Dawson discusses. True hope sees beyond the false measures of economic success and cultural status. True hope, like Dr. King’s hope, perceives of a reality far beyond the one currently inhabited. It is grounded in the promise that God is a deliverer; not that the country is so great that it will make it through whatever trial is currently on its doorstep. This speaks directly to Hegel’s “moving stair” of history because there is nothing intrinsic to history that should make one hopeful. In the same vein, King argues, “time is neutral morally speaking,”⁶¹ it is what we do with time that counts. Whether it is the American delusion of hope found in military might and capitalistic success, or Denmark’s philosophical mistake of attributing too much moral ontology to time, both approaches fundamentally misunderstand hope, and thus misunderstand love. Hope is not bound by the qualifications a person or a culture puts on it; and neither is love. They both transcend time, power, and our own subjectivity. Perhaps the primary reason why Christendom has lost sight of love’s agapic quality is that it has first forgotten how to hope. Kierkegaard and King remind their contemporaries that “hope that is seen is no hope at all,”⁶² and that true hope sees with the eyes of redemptive potentiality.

(G) *The Community of Love*

For Kierkegaard and King, hope is inextricably tied to an eschatological vision of a community of love. Kierkegaard explains that love is not a static ideal that individuals attempt to embody; rather, it is a dynamic force that builds and binds individuals together. He writes,

“One would think, and probably most often does, that love between human beings is a relationship between two. That is indeed true, but untrue, inasmuch as this relationship is also a relationship among three. First there is the one who loves, next the one or the ones who are the object; but love itself is present as the third.”⁶³

Thus, in a sense, agape has its own ontological state. It naturally abides, which means that it is inherently increasing in the quantity and quality of its scope. The individuals who partake in this expansion, the lover and the beloved, are by no means pawns in agape’s scheme. They are participants in the infinite dance to agape’s rhythm. Thus, community is essential to agape’s nature because love grows, and for it to exist in a vacuum would contradict its very essence. Furthermore, the language of “falling out” or “breaking” is not in Christianity’s vocabulary because this kind of speech presupposes that agape is something that can cease to abide.⁶⁴ However, the community of love is always abiding because it finds its strength in agape’s unconditional quality. Thus, this community is not some ethereal prospect dreamed up by some religious fanatics; rather, it is a group of people committed to the power and presence of love that never ceases to abide.

With Kierkegaard, King sees agape as a binding force that exists between individuals and communities. He famously states, “All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”⁶⁵ Thus, whatever perverts or distorts love in one place, threatens love everywhere because of its universal quality. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”⁶⁶ It is in light of agape’s universal and ontological capacities that King believes beloved community is possible. He describes beloved community as “a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men” that “lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation.”⁶⁷ This is the community that King envisages in his “I Have a Dream” speech: The dream that “sons of former slave-owners” and “sons of former slaves... will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”⁶⁸ Thus, for King as it is with Kierkegaard, redemptive potentiality through vision

⁶¹ Martin Luther King Jr, “The Other America,” <https://sakai.duke.edu/access/content/group/00c8037b-3768-4b5a-b020-3b925fdc575d/Week%209%20-%20Session%20Materials/Martin%20Luther%20King%20Jr.-%20Stanford%20University%20-%20Two%20Americas%20-%20201967.mp4>

⁶² Romans 8:24.

⁶³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 301.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther King Jr, “The Ethical Demands for Integration,” 122.

⁶⁶ Martin Luther King Jr, “Letter From Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 291.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther King Jr, *Where Do We Go From Here?* in *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 632.

⁶⁸ Martin Luther King Jr, “I Have a Dream,” 219.

casting is fundamentally linked to love's capacity to abide. The beloved community grows as individuals express forgiveness towards one another in love. Once this cycle stops, not only does the growth of beloved community stop, but so does the fire of agapic love that keeps this community alive and warm.

The community of love as depicted in both Kierkegaard and King is essentially distinctive from any notion of community that Christian nationalism presents. As mentioned earlier, beloved community affirms the inherent dignity of all persons. However, this conviction is often left by the wayside in systems of power, regardless of their religious affiliations. Historically, Christendom is more famous for not celebrating the equality of all persons that stems from the *Imago Dei* than embodying the call towards agapic beloved community. Speaking in frustration regarding this inconsistency, Kierkegaard writes, "It is very moving to preach on Sundays about Christ's associating with sinners and tax-collectors—but on Mondays it is a crime to speak with an ordinary man, with a servant girl."⁶⁹ He is criticizing the desire of his Danish constituents to hear Christ's words, yet refuse to live them out. King makes a similar accusation of America: "All we say to America is, 'Be true to what you said on paper... Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech... the freedom of the press... the greatness of America is the right to protest for right.'"⁷⁰ Thus, Kierkegaard's Denmark and King's America both lay claim to the Christian values of liberty, dignity, and community; yet when the rubber meets the road, they table these convictions for more pressing matters like prosperity, security, and prestige. Now, in Kingian fashion, it is important to not only deconstruct the inconsistencies of Christian nationalism, but equally vital to rebuild such nations on the strength of agape. Beloved community requires forgiveness and a full embrace of love's capacity to abide. This means loving the Christian nationalist as well; otherwise, the Church is no different from the power structures that too often corrupt it. In closing, we will ask whether or not it is possible to rebuild Christendom upon the foundation of agapic love? Kierkegaard and King offer differing answers to this question; in exploring those, we will examine the historical influence of their respective answers.

Can Christian Nationalism Feasibly Reclaim Agape?

Kierkegaard's hope in his writing is to reinsert Christianity into Christendom; while, this is his ultimate goal, he is quite skeptical of it becoming a reality. The reason is that the desire for power is a universal human quality, and once it is attained, it is not given up so kindly. Holmer describes the zeitgeist of Kierkegaard's time as desiring "to fathom the regularities of the world plan and know one's place in it."⁷¹ In contrarian fashion, Kierkegaard responds to this mode of thought: "'What is human and what is Christian are one and the same' has now become the slogan. It is the absolutely correct expression of the fact that Christianity has been abolished."⁷² Thus, for Kierkegaard, there is a distinct gap between the forces of this world and the authority of God's eternal kingdom. Belonging to God's kingdom most often involves surrendering one's desire to know the "regularities of the world" and one's place in it. The Christian life is more accurately marked by perpetual perplexities and cyclical surrender; not absolute knowledge or cultural prestige. Thus, in Kierkegaard's eyes, Christendom is fundamentally distinct from Christianity. Whether this means Christendom is irredeemable is hard to say, but it does mean that Kierkegaard sees the Church operating on the fringes of society, rather than its imperial epicenter. This is not to say that his land of Denmark was and is without hope; it is to say that agape confounds the powers of this world through subtle and creative ways: Much like the early Church's destruction of the Roman Empire. It did not happen overnight, nor did it take place by the sword; but it occurred through a commitment to agapic love by a group of diverse and unassuming Christ followers.

While King is equally as critical as Kierkegaard about the forces of Christian nationalism, he does believe that agape can emerge victorious even within this kind of corrupt system. King is acutely aware of America's religious heritage, and how deeply embedded it is within the culture, legislature, and principles of his land. Nichole Phillips points out that King's "I Have a Dream" speech is "a

⁶⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2nd ed., 1999), vol. 3, 1011.

⁷⁰ Martin Luther King Jr, "I See the Promised Land," 282.

⁷¹ Paul L. Holmer, *On Kierkegaard and Truth*, 25.

⁷² Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2nd ed., 1999), vol. 1, 380.

dialectic... in need of a synthesis”⁷³ between the American Dream and the Church’s vision of beloved community. The fundamental difference between Kierkegaard and King is that while the former believes these ideas are irreconcilable, the latter sees room for a kind of synthesis. This is not to say that King is settling for a lesser form of American nationalism; on the contrary, he still believes in a “revolution of values.”⁷⁴ This revolution is a rededication to the agapic love in the Church and in every infrastructure of American society. While Kierkegaard sees such a task as a fool’s errand, King envisions possibility. Whether King’s commitment to American principles is simply a tool in his rhetorical arsenal, we may never know. However, what is clear is that King believes Christianity can be inserted back into Christendom, at least in the United States.

In closing, the question is not if agape is victorious over the powers of this world. The real question is *how* does agape conquer Christian nationalism? For King, it can happen from within, and for Kierkegaard, it occurs from without. Regardless, at the end of all things, love has the final say. This is critical for all Christians in all contexts to remember, but particularly those who have fallen prey to systems of power. Achieving and retaining power are profound temptations, even for the Church. If this essay wishes to achieve anything, it is *first* to demonstrate that the Church is not above this temptation, and *second* to remind its readers that only agapic love has the capacity to transform Christendom’s ivory towers of pretension into Christianity’s humble, yet potent open arms of charity.

⁷³ Nichole R. Phillips, A “Spirituality of Improvisation,” in *Revives My Soul Again* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 2018), 194.

⁷⁴ Martin Luther King Jr, “A Time to Break Silence,” 240.

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