



# Kierkegaard and the Staging of Desire: Rhetoric and Performance in a Theology of Eros

*By Carl S. Hughes*

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Theology in the modern era often assumes that the consummate form of theological discourse is objective prose--ignoring or condemning apophatic traditions and the spiritual eros that drives them. For too long, Kierkegaard has been read along these lines as a progenitor of twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy and a stern critic of the erotic in all its forms. In contrast, Hughes argues that Kierkegaard envisions faith fundamentally as a form of infinite, insatiable eros. He depicts the essential purpose of Kierkegaard's writing as to elicit ever-greater spiritual desire, not to provide the satisfactions of doctrine or knowledge.

Hughes's argument revolves around close readings of provocative, disparate, and (in many cases) little-known Kierkegaardian texts. The thread connecting all of these texts is that they each conjure up some sort of performative "stage setting," which they invite readers to enter. By analyzing the theological function of these texts, the book sheds new light on the role of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's authorship, his surprising affinity for liturgy and sacrament, and his overarching effort to conjoin eros for God with this-worldly love.

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#### Review

"Hughes' attention to historical details is impressive. Few scholars have recognized the importance of vaudeville and farce for Kierkegaard, and few have researched the Danish appropriation of these French and German genres in the way that Hughes has done."-Lee C. Barrett, Lancaster Theological Seminary

"This suggestive and insightful book argues that Kierkegaard's authorship can fruitfully be read as 'stagings of Christian desire,' elaborating both the connection between the notion of infinite desire and the notion of theatricality in Kierkegaard's work and the connection between the notion of infinite desire and 'theology.' The author explores the relation between aesthetics (the art, the ritual, the liturgy) and the architecture of the church in Kierkegaard's Communion discourses, but suggests that the theatrical qualities and the relation to infinite desire inform the whole authorship. The book, moreover, has ramifications for more than Christian theology because it reveals a broader notion of what theology can be (as exploration of unsatisfied desire for what can never be represented)." -M. Jamie Ferreira, University of Virginia

"The curtain rises-again and again-in Kierkegaard's writing. Helped by Carl Hughes, readers can now become viewers. They will recognize the overlooked stagecraft; they will appreciate the nuanced performances. Teaching us to read by watching, Hughes is as astute, as witty, as passionate as any great critic. Still his higher art, like Kierkegaard's own, it to show how fully this dramaturgy is theology. The drama here is always an invitation to redemption. "--Mark D. Jordan, Harvard University

"Hughes's book is a readable, insightful, and substantial contribution to the growing body of scholarship on Kierkegaard's discourses. The importance of this book for Kierkegaard scholars is unquestionable; its overture to a more passionate, poetic, and provisional theology welcome; and its sustained attention to the evocative nature of the discourses is admirable, enriching, and instructive."--*Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*

#### About the Author

**Carl S. Hughes** is Assistant Professor of Theology at Texas Lutheran University.

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