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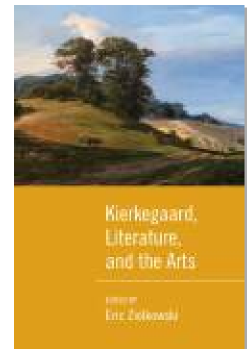

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Kierkegaard's Concept of Inherited Sin

A Cinematic Illustration

Ronald M. Green

The doctrine of hereditary sin is not one of the more fashionable Christian teachings today. Modern people find it hard to believe that we can inherit sin and guilt from our ancestors all the way back to Adam and Eve, the parents of the human race. They find it even harder to believe that such sin can be transmitted from our forebears to us through sexual intercourse, as some classical Christian theologians have held.

Nevertheless, aspects of a doctrine of hereditary sin were strongly defended in the nineteenth century by Søren Kierkegaard. In what follows I want to do two things. First, I want to offer a brief overview of Kierkegaard's position. This is developed in several of his writings, notably in sections of his early work *Either/Or* (1843) and his subsequent book *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844). Second, I want to provide a very modern illustration, and defense, of some of Kierkegaard's key points. I will do this by looking closely at scenes from the 2010 Academy Award nominee for best foreign language film, *Incendies*, by the Quebec director Denis Villeneuve.[1] *Incendies* (Fires) is based on an extraordinary play of the same title by the Lebanese playwright Wajdi Mouawad,[2] but Villeneuve's film version is a work of art in its own right.

Here I must issue a spoiler alert. *Incendies* is a surprising, shocking film. As I discuss scenes from the film, I am going to give away some of these surprises, so if you wish to see the film in its entirety, please stop reading now and return after viewing the film.

Let me begin by summarizing the main ideas conveyed by the penetrating analyses of hereditary sin and guilt by several of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms.[3]

First, there is the idea that none of us is born without a deep relationship to our past. Although we are free to choose our paths in life, we do not do so in a vacuum. We are "situated freedoms," unavoidably shaped by the deeds of those who went before us: our parents, other family members, our communities, even the whole human race. As Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, puts it, "Each individual begins in an historical nexus" (*SKS* 4:376 / *CA* 73).[4] Vanessa Rumble is thus right when she says of Kierkegaard, "The 'father of existentialism,' while

affirming the importance of the individual's decisions, not only dismissed the notion of a *liberum arbitrium* but also displayed an overweening interest in those aspects of personality and milieu which may prove fateful for the individual."[5] Drawing on an observation by Gregor Malantschuk, Rumble adds, "The task facing humans is not to withdraw themselves from the historically determined conditions of heredity or environment but somehow to accept those conditions in freedom and thus bring them under the domain of human responsibility."[6]

This understanding is more intensively expressed in *Either/Or* by Judge William, one of the work's leading figures, who urges his protégé, an aesthetically inclined young man, to abandon his drifting, moody existence and "choose himself." But even as the judge calls the young man to exercise his freedom to define a life course, he reminds him that he is not absolutely free to become the person he would like to be. Each of us inherits from our forebears many things that define us and condition our choice. Let me quote the judge as he describes someone choosing himself:

> Now he discovers that the self he chooses has a boundless multiplicity within itself inasmuch as it has a history, a history in which he acknowledges identity with himself. This history is of a different kind, for in this history he stands in relation to other individuals in the race and to the whole race, and this history contains painful things, and yet he is the person he is only through this history. That is why it takes courage to choose oneself, for at the same time as he seems to be isolating himself most radically he is most radically sinking himself into the root by which he is bound up with the whole. (*SKS* 3:207 / *EO* 2:216)

For the judge, this painful element in the choice of oneself as a situated being stems from the fact that we are in some ways implicated in and responsible for the deeds of our parents and ancestors. We benefit from their courage and their achievements, but we also enjoy the fruits of their misdeeds and wrongful acts. We cannot ignore the misdeeds of those before us because those misdeeds, as well as their positive accomplishments, have made us what we are. Thus, we must become aware of their misdeeds and be prepared to accept some measure of responsibility for them. Using religious terminology, Judge William makes this point as he continues to describe the process by which a person chooses himself:

> When the passion of freedom is aroused in him . . . he chooses himself and struggles for this possession as for his salvation, and it is his salvation. He can give up nothing of all this, not the most painful, not the hardest, and yet the expression for this struggle, for this acquiring, is—repentance. He repents himself back into himself, back into

> the family, back into the race, until he finds himself in God. Only on this condition can he choose himself. . . .
>
> And even though it was the father's guilt that was passed on to the son by inheritance, he repents of this, too, for only in this way can he choose himself, choose himself absolutely. (*SKS* 3:207–8 / *EO* 2:216–17)

What Judge William is trying to say here about participating in our parents' and forebears' guilt and repenting for their sins is given even more focused attention in a long essay in the first part of *Either/Or*, an essay ostensibly written by another one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors, the aesthete "A." This essay is entitled "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama" (*SKS* 2:137–62 / *EO* 1:137–64).

The essay focuses largely on Sophocles's drama *Antigone*. To the heroine of that drama, whom he terms the "Greek" Antigone, "A" juxtaposes a heroine shaped by Christian culture. He calls this second heroine the "modern" Antigone. The Greek Antigone is a tragic figure. She belongs to an ill-fated lineage, being the fruit of the union of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta, whom Oedipus has wed after killing his father. Because of Antigone's ancestors' deeds and her own choices, she is fated to sorrow and suffer. In "A's" words, the Greek Antigone suffers partly as a result of her father's guilt, but for her this guilt is an "external fact." She is not personally involved with it. It is, as "A" interjects in Latin, "quod non volvit in pectore [something she does not turn over in her heart]" (*SKS* 2:159 / *EO* 1:160).

"But for our [modern] Antigone," the essay writer continues, "it is different." Oedipus is dead, but "even when he was alive, Antigone knew this [family] secret but did not have the courage to confide in her father. By her father's death, she is deprived of the only means of being liberated from her secret" (*SKS* 2:159 / *EO* 1:161). The essayist continues, "She loves her father with all her soul, and this love draws her out of herself into her father's guilt. As the fruit of such a love, she feels alien to humankind. She feels her guilt the more she loves her father; only with him can she find rest; as equally guilty, they would sorrow with each other" (*SKS* 2:161 / *EO* 1:161). Some Kierkegaard scholars may see here shadows of Kierkegaard's own relation to the sexual transgressions of his father. But we need not go into Kierkegaard's biography to appreciate his essayist's point: parents and children are connected, through guilt and blame. Emotionally and morally charged silences permeate their relationships.

None of this means that we are fated or determined in our life choices by our familial inheritances. Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms avoid any deterministic interpretation of the classic Christian idea of inherited sin, and he rejects the idea that we are predestined to sin (*SKS* 4:332 / *CA* 62). Adam and Eve's free choice of sin may be the prototype of all sinning, "the first sin" (*SKS* 4:297–306 / *CA* 25–34), but each of us

participates in the sinfulness of our forebears only by freely replicating their choices.

Kierkegaard's third and final point about hereditary sin is that it is intimately connected with our nature as sexual beings. Sexuality evidences our tense positioning between embodiment and finite creatureliness on the one hand, and our transcendent spiritual possibilities on the other. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis tells us that sexuality and procreation express the tension between the finite and transcendent aspects of our natures, between the "physical" and "psychical" components of our being. The challenge of "spirit" is to unite these, but this challenge is a source of anxiety, and anxiety furnishes the opportunity for sin. "Anxiety," says Vigilius Haufniensis, "is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself" (*SKS* 4:331 / *CA* 61).

Vigilius Haufniensis is clear that sensuousness and sexuality per se are not sinful: "Sensuousness is not sinfulness but an unexplained riddle that causes anxiety" (*SKS* 4:335 / *CA* 65). While he says that conception and childbirth are moments "furthest away" from spirit, Kierkegaard is not repeating the centuries-old Christian disparagement of sex. His point instead is that human physical existence, which sexuality epitomizes, creates the existential tension that, with anxiety as its first expression, provides the ground for the free but wrongful choices that are sin.

Drawing on and developing Kierkegaard's insights, we can see that sexuality is a realm where anxiety can easily become sinfulness through the use of other persons, where love can lie close to cruelty, where gender roles can become an excuse for domination or self-abandonment, and where our most private and intimate acts express themselves concretely in the creation of another human being. No wonder, then, that hereditary sin as the sin of family lines most readily evidences itself in connection with our sexual and gendered lives.

I have launched a barrage of difficult and challenging ideas. I could continue developing each of them, but I want to devote the remainder of this discussion to intensively illustrating their meaning by exploring their presence in the film *Incendies*.

I should note that it is entirely fitting that a film be used to illustrate Kierkegaard's ideas. Kierkegaard was a pioneer in the use of fictional materials, including operas, plays, and novels, for the development of philosophical and theological ideas. The first part of *Either/Or* offers four extended essays dealing with fictional or theatrical pieces: "The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical Erotic," which focuses on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*; "The First Love," a treatment of Scribe's play of the same name; "Silhouettes," which deals with several different fictional pieces, including Goethe's *Faust*; and our present concern, "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama." At a deeper level, many of Kierkegaard's writings, from "The Seducer's Diary" in *Either/Or* to the lengthy *Stages on Life's Way*, have

a deliberate fictional or theatrical quality, while other works, such as *Repetition*, actively muse about the meaning of theater for human existence.[7] Kierkegaard was a thinker for whom fiction was often a medium for dense philosophical and religious reflection. Indeed, this is one of the more distinguishing features of his authorship that he handed on to later existentialist writers such as Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus. If Kierkegaard were alive today, there is no doubt in my mind that he would be entranced with contemporary cinema and that *Incendies*, if he viewed it, would be among the creative works that would draw his interest.

Before turning to *Incendies*, let me briefly recapitulate the three major points that Kierkegaard's writings make about hereditary sin. One is the idea that we are situated freedoms. Though we are always free to shape our own destiny, in choosing ourselves we are inevitably influenced by our past and by the choices of those who went before us. Second, we participate in and are responsible for the deeds and misdeeds of our forebears. In choosing ourselves, therefore, we must acknowledge and repent for the wrongs they have done. Third and finally, our moral and psychological ties to our parents and forebears are unavoidably intertwined with sexuality. Although sexuality is not itself sinful, it is a domain that expresses the deep tensions in our physical and psychical nature. Our forebears' life choices were intensively expressed in their sexual conduct and their gendered self-understandings. We are the result of that conduct and those self-understandings, which we are prone to replicate in our own sexual choices and gendered behaviors.

Now, *Incendies*.

The film begins with four central characters. The first is Nawal Marwan, an aging woman who is an immigrant to Montreal from an unnamed Middle Eastern nation (based on Lebanon) and who has worked as a secretary in a notary's office. The next two are her two adult children, the twins Jeanne and Simon. Finally there is the notary Jean Lebel, Nawal's employer and family friend. In French-speaking cultures like Quebec, notaries are almost the equivalent of lawyers.[8]

As the film begins, Nawal visits a public swimming pool with Jeanne. When Jeanne emerges from the pool, she finds her mother seated in a chair, catatonic. Nawal's apparent stroke soon leads to her death, but before dying she manages to dictate a will to her employer and friend, Jean Lebel.

Lebel summons Jeanne and Simon to his office to read them their mother's will. The will begins with Nawal's request that she be buried naked, face down, with no prayers and no name on the stone marking her grave. "No epitaph," she says, "for those who don't keep their promises." The will continues with her further requests.

Lebel hands the twins two sealed envelopes. He explains that one is to be delivered to their father, whom the twins up to then believed had died long ago in their mother's home country. The second is to be delivered to their brother. They never knew that they had another sibling.

From its start, the film keeps shifting between the present-day world of Nawal's two children as they try to fulfill their mother's strange requests and the events of Nawal's youth in the tumultuous civil war in her home country during the 1970s.

After Lebel reads the conditions of Nawal's will to the twins, an angry Simon stalks out, declaring, "I'll bury my mother normally. For once in her life she'll have acted normally. End of discussion." As Jeanne regards her mother's youthful photo in an old passport that was among her papers, Lebel tells her, "I know it's very unusual. But your mother wasn't crazy, Jeanne."

Outside in the street Simon continues fulminating. He quips, "We're a big family now. She ever mention a dog? Big families always have a dog. Do we have to find it now, too?" His mother, he says, is "fucking crazy," and he wants nothing to do with her request. He will talk to Lebel about burying her normally. "You feel guilty about everything," he tells Jeanne. "I don't feel guilty." Jeanne shouts back, "Do you realize what we just heard?" Simon replies, "She's gone, Christ! It's over. Peace at last." Angrily kicking the side of his pickup truck, he shouts, "I feel so fucking peaceful." Throughout the film, unless pressed, Simon repeatedly resists cooperating with his sister in this quest.

The film now shifts back in time to the unnamed Middle Eastern country in late 1969 and to a rocky, tree-marked hillside beneath a small Christian village. A young Nawal runs to meet her lover, a Muslim (perhaps Palestinian) refugee, named Wahab, but their meeting is abruptly interrupted by two of Nawal's brothers. One shoots Wahab dead and is about to shoot Nawal for "staining" the family honor by being with a Muslim, when their grandmother's voice interrupts from the village to save Nawal's life.

Back in the house Nawal reveals to her grandmother that she is pregnant. The grandmother wails that Nawal has cast the family into "blackness." She asks Nawal to promise that after the child is born, she will leave the village and get an education in order to escape their condition of misery.

Months later, Nawal delivers the child. She watches as her grandmother tattoos three small spots, one on top of the other, on the boy's heel. Just before the child is taken away from her to an orphanage, Nawal holds him and says, "I will find you again one day, I promise you, my love."

Nawal leaves for studies in Daresh (a fictional city in the north of the country), where she has an uncle who runs a progressive newspaper.

The film shifts back to today. Jeanne travels to Daresh, carrying a photo from Nawal's university years. Writing on the wall behind Nawal in the photo permits an older professor to identify it as taken at Kfar Ryat, a prison "in the south."

The scene shifts back again to the events of what we can presume to be the Lebanese civil war that raged for fifteen years beginning in the mid-1970s. We see Nawal as a university student. At the start of a bloody conflict between right-wing Christian Nationalist militias and Muslim refugees in the

south, the militias shut down the university. Although Nawal is a Christian, she opposes the war.

Nawal is now desperate to find her son. She journeys south, negotiating roadblocks, hitchhiking, and proceeding on foot to the orphanage of Kfar Khout, where her son had been sent, but she finds it burned to the ground, the children gone, perhaps taken to a Muslim refugee camp farther south. Concealing the cross she wears on a necklace and donning a shawl to cover her head like a Muslim woman, Nawal boards a southbound bus. The scene that follows gives the film its name.

Boarding the bus, Nawal seats herself across from a young mother who is holding her child in her lap. Nawal falls asleep, only to be awakened when the bus is stopped by a contingent of Christian militia. When the driver tries to persuade them to let the bus continue he is shot dead and a volley of bullets riddles the bus, killing many of the passengers. Amid the bodies, Nawal and the young Muslim woman and her child cower on the floor. When a militiaman climbs to the top of the bus and begins pouring gasoline through the ceiling hatches, a terrified Nawal crawls to the door, holds out her cross and cries, "I'm Christian, I'm Christian." A militiaman signals her to come out. Looking back, she sees the Muslim mother and her child at the bus door. She turns, and after an instant in which the two women exchange a glance, she takes the child from the woman's arms. But the child won't cooperate. As Nawal runs from the bus, the child wriggles in her arms and, looking backward, screams "Mama, Mama." A militiaman wrenches the child from Nawal, and as the child runs back to the bus she is felled by a single bullet. Another volley aimed at the bus causes it to burst into flames. The scene closes when the militiamen drive away, and a stunned Nawal, on her hands and knees, stares at the conflagration.

We shift back to the present. Jeanne locates her mother's childhood village. Meeting with female relatives to explain her visit, she identifies herself as the daughter of Nawal Marwan and is abruptly told that she is not welcome there.

Back amid the civil war, Nawal continues her search for her son. Traveling south to the Muslim refugee camp, she finds nothing but devastation and pools of blood. Traumatized by the vicious behavior of the Christian militias she has witnessed, she offers her assistance to a Muslim warlord, Chamseddine, explaining to one of his aides that she has abandoned her previous pacifist position and wants to teach her enemy, the Christian Nationalists, what life has taught her. She adds that she has "nothing to lose."

At Chamseddine's behest, Nawal gains access to the family of the leader of the Christian Nationalist movement by serving as a French tutor for his children. Concealing a gun in her briefcase, she assassinates him. Brutally dragged off to the Kfar Ryat prison, she undergoes fifteen years of torture at the hands of her coreligionists.

Back in the present, Jeanne, with her mother's photo in hand, travels to Kfar Ryat. No one at the prison recognizes the woman in the photo, but

Jeanne is directed to an elderly custodian in a hillside grade school not far away. She shows him the picture, but he remains silent. When she tells him that the woman in the picture is her mother, he speaks: "She is 'La femme qui chante' [the Woman Who Sings], 'Number 72.' "

The custodian explains that he had watched this woman for thirteen of her fifteen years in prison. He says that they did everything to break her, but she looked them straight in the eye and "never bent." Finally, they sent in Abou Tarek, a specialist in torture. He repeatedly tortured and raped her. Nawal became pregnant by him, and after giving birth she was released. The janitor says that the midwife who delivered Nawal now lives in Daresh. Jeanne phones Simon in Montreal, insisting that he join her now in the search for their brother, this child of rape, and Simon reluctantly agrees. Lebel joins him.

Along with Lebel and a local notary friend who serves as translator, the twins visit the hospital where the midwife lies gravely ill. She speaks in Arabic, only part of which is translated. The scene is one of the more remarkable ones in the film. The midwife is awakened. A nurse introduces them as coming from Canada and as the children of Nawal Marwan. The midwife pulls herself up in the bed, excitedly gestures to the twins to come to her, and repeatedly calls out to them, "Sarwan, Janaan, Alhamdulillah [Thank God]!" Not comprehending, Simon says, "Madame, we're looking for the child she had in jail, can you help us?" The midwife continues her excited talking as the nurse translates. "She worked in Kfar Ryat prison. She assisted the Woman Who Sings during her delivery. She safeguarded the babies, and returned them to her on her release." The scene ends with the midwife once again reaching out to Jeanne and Simon, crying "Sarwan! Janaan!" as the nurse, with the camera on the stunned faces of Simon and Jeanne, adds, "Nawal Marwan had twins."

Simon and Jeanne have learned that they are the offspring of torture and rape and that their father is the torturer Abou Tarek. But they still don't know who their brother is and what has become of him. At Label's urging they continue their search. The Lebanese notary has found records indicating that a child was born to Nawal in May 1970 and was taken to the orphanage of Kfar Khout, which was burned down by the Muslim warlord Chamseddine. The child was given the name Nihad of May. The notary believes that Chamseddine may know what happened to the boy. In scenes from those years, we learn that Nihad was raised by the warlord's men and during the war became a pitiless sniper, often killing other children.

Because the world to the south is so patriarchal, it is now up to Simon to take the lead. He must travel to a Muslim refugee camp in search of his brother. He is finally taken, blindfolded, to a meeting with the aged warlord Chamseddine.

The warlord confirms that he had spared Nihad and the other Christian children when, after a revenge attack on the Christian foes, he burned down the orphanage of Kfar Khout. He had raised Nihad to be a fighter in their

cause, and Nihad became a "fou de guerre," crazed with war. Above all, Nihad wanted to find his mother, at one point offering to become a martyr in the hope that his mother would see his picture on walls across the country. Chamseddine refused this request. When "the enemy" invaded the country, Nihad was captured, but only after killing seven of the foes. He was turned once again and sent to the Kfar Ryat prison—as a torturer. Simon asks, "With my father?" "No," Chamseddine replies, "he didn't work with Abou Tarek, your father." As the camera moves from the face-to-face exchange of the two men to scan a dark and twisted forest scene, Chamseddine's voice-over explanation continues. "When he became a torturer, your brother changed names. He became Abou Tarek. Nihad of May is Abou Tarek." Chamseddine concludes by saying that Abou Tarek eventually moved to Canada, where he is living under the name of Nihad Harmanni.

Put yourself for a moment in the shoes of either Jeanne or Simon. They have learned that they are not only the fruit of rape and torture, but of incest. Like Antigone, they are the offspring of a union between their mother and her own son.[9]

We return to the public swimming pool in Montreal prior to Nawal's stroke. We see Nawal swimming to the edge of the pool. A man's heel looms before her. On it is a tattoo with three rising dots, the same tattoo inscribed on the heel of her infant child. Climbing out of the pool, she approaches the man she knows is her son. He is Abou Tarek, her torturer. This identification—or, as Aristotle might say regarding Greek tragedy, this recognition (*anagnorisis*)—causes the stroke and Nawal's death, with which the film began.

So here we have the very "modern tragedy" of which Kierkegaard speaks. The twins issue from a primal deed of incest and violence. This misdeed hangs like a dark cloud over their present. But unlike the Greek Antigone, who merely suffers her fate and sorrows over it, the twins, like Kierkegaard's "modern Antigone," must regard themselves as culpably involved, as somehow tragically complicit in this dreadful family history.

Consider. The twins know that they bear within them—in their blood and DNA—traits of their torturer father. Here we see a literal sharing of family characteristics that can be a source of profound psychological discomfort and anxiety. To what extent, for example, are Simon's truculence, his anger at his mother, and his resistance to respecting her will a continuation of the misogynistic brutality of his biological father? Although neither Simon nor Jeanne can be blamed for their inherited characteristics, these characteristics are a source of psychological unease—the anxiety of which Kierkegaard speaks—and they become a source of guilt if they are allowed to shape an individual's choices.

And then there are the behaviors and choices for which the twins must clearly feel both responsibility and guilt. To what extent is their ignorance about their mother's past a wrongful ignorance? Did they ever ask her about her past? Were they even interested? All their lives, the twins relied on and

took for granted their mother's love, without imagining, without even thinking to suspect the agony that their very presence in the world may have caused her. And now Nawal is dead, beyond any solace they might offer her, beyond any plea they might make for understanding or forgiveness. As is true in the case of Kierkegaard's modern Antigone, culpable silence permeates this family drama. Compared to the Greek Antigone, the twins' sorrow is less, but their pain is greater. It is a pain sharpened by their own willed involvement and by a family history that looks back to an unpremeditated incestuous act and a willed history of torture and rape.

Incendies, of course, depicts an extreme situation. But in some ways, it also depicts the universal human condition. Its background is the Christian-Muslim violence of Lebanon's civil war and the Middle East in general, where groups of ethnically similar people—literally brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers—have tortured, raped, and slaughtered one another for generations. Abou Tarek's crime, and Nawal's experience, are our human experience. We must all ask to what extent, by accepting, affirming, and sexually reproducing our identities within warring families, ethnicities, and communities, we are complicit in the crimes of our ancestors. This, I think, is one of Kierkegaard's basic points in his exploration of hereditary sin.

But it is not Kierkegaard's final point. Kierkegaard does not believe that sin is the last word on our human condition. That last word is love: our love for one another and God's love for us despite our sinfulness. In a journal entry of February 16, 1839, Kierkegaard writes, "Fear and trembling . . . is [*sic*] not the *primus motor* [the prime mover or primary driving force] in the Chr. [Christian] life." That primary force, he says, is love (*SKS* 18:14, EE:25 / *KJN* 2:9).

This, too, is the message of *Incendies*. I want to direct attention to the very end of the film. The twins have located their father-brother, Nihad Harmanni, in Montreal, where he is working at a menial job. They approach him on the street outside his apartment and hand him an envelope containing both letters.

Harmanni retreats into the hall of the building and opens the first letter. It begins, "I'm shaking as I write. I recognized you. You didn't recognize me. It's magnificent, a miracle. I am your number 72." The letter continues, "Our children will deliver this. You won't recognize them for they are beautiful, but they know who you are." Harmanni runs out to the street, but the twins are gone. Returning to the hallway he continues reading. "Through them, I want to tell you that you are still alive. Soon you'll turn silent . . . I know. For all are silent before the truth. Signed, Whore 72."

Harmanni retreats to the privacy of his apartment. Hands shaking, he opens the second letter:

> I speak to the son, not to the torturer. Whatever happens, I'll always love you, I promised you that when you were born, my son. Whatever happens, I'll always love you. I looked for you all my life. I found

> you. You couldn't recognize me. You've a tattoo on your right heel. I saw it. I recognized you. You are beautiful. I wrap you in tenderness, my love. Take solace, for nothing means more than being together. You were born of love. So your brother and sister were born of love, too. Nothing means more than being together. Your mother, Nawal Marwan, Prisoner No. 72.

The scene now shifts to Lebel's office, where the notary informs the twins of their mother's wish now that "the silence will be broken, a promise kept," that a stone be placed on her grave and on it her name engraved in the sun. He hands the twins a letter addressed to them: "My loves, where does your story begin? At your birth? If so, it begins in horror. At the birth of your father? Then it begins in a great love story. But I say your story begins with a promise to break the chain of anger. Thanks to you, today I have finally kept it. The chain is broken. Finally I can take the time to cradle you, to gently sing a lullaby to console you. Nothing means more than being together. I love you. Your mother, Nawal."

As the final music of the film sounds, we see a graveyard and Nawal's stone. Standing before it, head bowed, is Harmanni/Abou Tarek.

"Nothing means more than being together."

This remark that weaves throughout the film is Nawal's reply to the brutal fratricide that scarred her life and the lives of those before her for countless generations. She tells her children, "Your story begins with a promise to break the chain of anger." That chain is broken by a mother's love.

I think Kierkegaard understood this. For him, as for this film, hereditary sin is only the first part of the human story. The full story includes and is concluded by God's love, the overarching and unconditional love of which a mother's love is an expression.

It may seem odd to bring Kierkegaard's religious sensibility into connection with the themes of *Incendies*, because on the surface *Incendies* does not seem to be a religious film at all. The primary role religion plays in the narrative is as a source of hatred and division. However, one moment in the film suggests something else. As Nawal takes her seat in the bus in the scene leading to the conflagration that gives the movie its name, she looks across the aisle to the mother and to the child whose life she ultimately fails to save. The Muslim woman wears a diaphanous headscarf. Cradling the child against her bosom, the image is that of a traditional portrait of the Madonna. The film thus signals the religious importance of maternal love. It is precisely here that we find the unconditional and unwavering love that Christian faith always attributed to God, to God's son, and to Mary, the mother of God. Remarkably, the Maronite (Lebanese) Christian Church to which Nawal presumably belongs has always claimed a special devotion to Mary, who is also the patron saint of Lebanon.[10] Thus, religiously understood, maternal love permeates *Incendies*. It can even be said that Nawal Marwan is the modern

suffering Madonna of her own Christian tradition. (In tragic counterpoint, a Christian militiaman who sprays the bus with gunfire and sets it alight is shown to bear a small iconic portrait of Mary on the stock of his gun.)[11]

Of course, Kierkegaard as a Lutheran had little interest in the importance of Marian devotion, and, as a nineteenth-century male, he also had as little regard for the religious or spiritual significance of women and women's experience. In a journal entry, he explicitly rejects maternal love as a suitable expression of selfless Christian love. "Maternal love," he states, "is simply self-love raised to a higher power, and thus the animals also have it." At the same time, however, he adds that maternal love has qualities that render it a "beautiful metaphor" for divine love (*SKS* 22:192, NB12:92, n.d. 1849 / *KJN* 6:192). In *Works of Love*, he comments on the "strength" of maternal love and its willingness to "endure all things" for the beloved child (*SKS* 9:213 / *WL* 221).

Understanding maternal love not as Christian love per se, which for Kierkegaard always exhibits selflessness, but as a "figure" or metaphor for God's love allows us to value a mother's intense and unconditional bonding with her child at birth, as is the case for Nawal. Certainly, Nawal's love for her child is the force that breaks the cycle of hatred and violence. Thus, close attention to *Incendies* may help us update and sharpen Kierkegaard's own accounts of hereditary sin. If sexuality and procreation can be an important medium for perpetuating and accentuating human sin, they also provide us unique insights into the possibility of overcoming sin through unconditional love.

Kierkegaard's writings and this remarkable film are explorations of the ways in which, as embodied, familial, and sexual beings, we alienate and mutilate one another across generations. However, both the film and Kierkegaard's writings also point to the spiritual resources and insights that we must call on to break the chain of human anger and mutual destruction. Above all, they point to the understanding that we are not foes but members of one family; not hostile strangers, but brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers.

Notes

1. Released in 2011 by Sony Pictures Classics. Directed by Denis Villeneuve and starring Lubna Azabal and Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin, with supporting roles by Maxim Gaudette and Rémy Girard.

2. Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies: Le Sang des Promesses* (Quebec: Babel Leméac, 2009). For a discussion of some of the differences in the film version of *Incendies*, see Mary Jean Green, "Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*: From Word to Film," *Quebec Studies* 54 (Fall 2012): 103–10.

3. The term Kierkegaard uses is *Arvesynd*, which is best translated as "hereditary sin."

4. For a discussion of the role that historical context and "distorted social structures," what he calls "objectified anxiety," play in enabling each individual's free choice of sinful deeds, see Gregory R. Beaubout, "Does Anxiety Explain Hereditary Sin?," *Faith and Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (1994): 117–24.

5. Vanessa Rumble, "The Oracle's Ambiguity: Freedom and Original Sin in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*," *Soundings* 75, no. 4 (1992): 605–25, quote at 606.

6. Ibid., 621.

7. See George Pattison, "The Magic of Theater: Drama and Existence in Kierkegaard's *Repetition* and Hesse's *Steppenwolf*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: "Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition,"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993), 359–77. (On the important bearing of the theater on Kierkegaard's writings, see also the essays by George Pattison and Martijn Boven in the present volume.—Ed.)

8. The importance of the notary in the film version of *Incendies* is signaled by Green in her "Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*," 107–9.

9. The parallel to Sophocles's play is noted by Lisa Kennedy, "Movie Review: Daughter Uncovers Her Immigrant Mother's Complicated Past in 'Incendies,'" *Denver Post*, May 12, 2011, http://www.denverpost.com/movies/ci_18050704#ixzz2FtkJ74HX.

10. Margaret Ghosn, "Saints in the Maronite Tradition," Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Parish, http://www.olol.org.au/cypc/17-about-us/tradition/29-saints-in-the-maronite-tradition.

11. I am indebted to my student Benjamin H. Jenkins for his keen observation of this detail.