The Fundamental Motif of Christianity

1940

Nygren's Agape and Eros, here reviewed by Goodenough, was a work of great influence in Europe and North America at the time of its publication. Among those in the denominations of "the reformers," as Goodenough calls them, it is still an important study. Two emphases in this review are vintage Goodenough: the defense of the piety of "the pagans" of the Greco-Roman world, and the stress on religion as something personal, not conceptual, at its base.

Personal too is the idea that Jesus himself is the "fundamental motif" of Christianity, rather than any principle, even the principle of agape. The Christology presented by Goodenough here is considerably more orthodox than he himself was thought to be. (See also Eccles 1985:114.)


Christian scholars do nothing more important than when they recurrently ask themselves this question: Is there a basic doctrine of Christianity, a single idea which has been consistently central throughout Christian history, a Grundmotif which, underlying all the variety of Christian experience, gives it unity and distinctiveness?

The problem has been reopened in a most interesting way by Anders Nygren in his work, Agape and Eros, the last volumes of which have
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recently been published. It is an elaborate and learned, but always readable, work which students of Christianity cannot afford to overlook. It comes from a Swedish scholar, representative of a school whose methodology, we are told by P.S. Watson, the translator, in the Preface to the second volume, is "motif-research...an enquiry directed to discover the 'fundamental motif' of any given outlook or system of thought,...that factor in virtue of which a particular outlook or system possesses its own peculiar character as distinct from all others." Such a methodology must appeal to all students of history who are interested in more than the anti-quarianism of curious facts. Its elaboration here shows how the method takes us at once into the heart of problems, but at the same time the book makes all too clear the dangers of the method when it is not used with the greatest caution. The result is an enormously stimulating work, but with accurate statements and inaccurate or overdrawn ones so intermingled as virtually to destroy its historical value for the untrained reader. It is an interesting example of a book which is on the whole quite wrong because its method is not quite right.

I

The thesis of the book is that the basic contribution of Christianity was its conception of Agape. Agape is the unmotivated love of God for unworthy man, which flows out with no trace of self-seeking from God to bring, supremely in the offering of the Son, salvation to man. It is a creative love in that those who receive it do so not because they are worthy: instead they are newly made into creatures worthy of God's love after they have received it and as a result of receiving it. God does not call the "righteous," for they have the false conception that human moral effort has value in God's sight. This idea, later important in Christianity as what Nygren calls the "Nomo motif," was basic in Judaism, he repeatedly declares, and its rejection by early Christianity was a radical departure. When man has received divine Agape, he will shed abroad to other men the same unmotivated love, loving even enemies, not for his own profit or because they evoke love or because of any "divine principle" within them but because it has become his nature to love as it is God's nature to be Agape and to love.

In contrast is the pagan Eros, which is love based upon self-interest, as Agape had been theocentric. Here God is the Absolute, and love is the way from man to God. Eros is not God's love for men but is man's love of God, his passionate desire to achieve the sumnum bonum. It is

1London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938.
sublimated sexual passion, mysticism, the craving to be united with the Beloved, in the very highest of all forms. But it is still self-seeking, desire for benefit to one's self, and implies the attraction of the Object, as well as sufficient divinity in man's own nature so that man can recognize the Object's desirability.

The first volume is devoted to elaborating this contrast, to expounding from every angle the complete mutual exclusiveness of the two, to showing how Christianity is, in the New Testament, simply an elaboration of Agape, with only a few faint traces of Eros in the Johannine writings, and how paganism is just as completely Eros to the exclusion of Agape.

One cannot help feeling that Nygren has driven a good thesis into the ground. His choice of New Testament texts for serious consideration is so limited that they become mere proof texts, and even these he does not treat in the round. And while he goes into psychology, very properly, to recognize sublimated sex in the mystic desire, he nowhere attempts, in spite of his promise, to discuss the nature of Agape in the same analytical way. The "love" of Agape is contrasted with the "love" of Eros in that the latter alone has the element of desire. Now, in taking "desire" in any sense from Agape, Nygren seems to be false to the love of God as it appears in the Gospels and in Paul, and to make the word "love" itself synonymous with mercy or benevolence. I am not a psychologist, but what meaning "love" can have without desire, in however sublimated a form, escapes me completely. Certainly, we are on safe ground when we recognize the yearning desire of God's love in the New Testament. The woman sweeping the floor for the lost coin, the love of the shepherd seeking the lost lamb, the cry, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you!" lose all their power if the desire of God to find and save is taken from them. The New Testament sharply denies that Jerusalem, or man, is worthy of such love: on this we can fully agree with Nygren. But this does not exclude God's desire. Fortunately, most of us know even in the human realm what it means to be loved far beyond any deserts of our own, loved passionately and yearningly. And what is the meaning of John 3:16 if not precisely that the Agape which gave the Son is desirous love, caring infinitely to save man, unworthy as he is, to eternal life?

The Christian attitude to God, in turn, has no "self-seeking" in it, says Nygren, unless it is tainted with Eros. But, except in the scattered passages Nygren uses, that is not the attitude inculcated by Jesus in the Synoptics, by Paul or John. "Seek ye first the kingdom, and all these shall be added," is much more the Grundmotif of the gospel than the passive and selfless motivation Nygren describes. The Beatitudes, "if thou wilt be perfect," the sanctions of the parable of the talents, of the
wise virgins, and of many other parables are, to say the least, quite as suggestive of "self-seeking" as is the mystic's trying to lose himself in union with God. Even the command to love our enemies is not addressed to purely disinterested motives. In Matthew it is immediately followed with the explanation: "For if ye love those who love you what reward have ye?" and Luke says directly: "But love your enemies, and do them good, and lend, never despairing; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the sons of the Most High." That this appeal to sanctions falls below, directly denies, the conception of Agape as Nygren idealizes and isolates it is obvious; but the fact remains that it represents much more predominantly a New Testament teaching and attitude than does Nygren's Agape. In Paul the struggle to attain the Crown has exactly the motivation of the struggle which Nygren, forgetting Paul's struggle, says is distinctive of pagan Eros (p. 138). That is, the Christian who is purely the passive recipient of Agape without "self-seeking" in his desire for God or divine rewards is as rare in the New Testament as in paganism.

Furthermore, Nygren evades the difficulty that there is much in the New Testament which shows that the recipient of Agape is not indiscriminately selected, but must himself, to get the benefit of Agape, be willing to do his part. Nygren frequently quotes the statement that God sends rain upon the just and unjust, to illustrate the unmotivated, the universal, nature of Agape. But in practice the New Testament shows that salvation does not work out that way. God calls not the righteous but the sinner, a verse Nygren often cites, but always in another connection. If God gives rain to both indiscriminately, why does he not also give saving Agape? The only answer is that God can make out of the "sinner" what he cannot out of the "righteous," and this difference can be a matter only of the response which the one gives but the other does not, that is, something inherent in the individual who is saved. The New Testament is full of the necessity of human response to Agape: the mighty works which could not be done in Capernaum; the attitude of Jesus to the Cyrophoenecian woman, to Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree, and to blind Bartimaeus; the refusal of Jerusalem to be nestled; the fact that the father meets the Prodigal Son only when the Prodigal has himself come within sight of home. If the answer to this is predestinarianism, that the power of response is likewise a gift from God to men selected for no merit of their own, a conclusion to which the logic of Agape led Paul and the Reformers, still Agape is selective and not at all the universal thing which Nygren alternately asserts and, by implication, denies.

Nygren does not resort to predestinarianism, and, when he very briefly tries to fit his conception of Agape into the eschatological
sayings in the Synoptics, he abandons all he has been defending in Agape:

Just because Agape consists in complete recklessness of giving, it demands unconditioned self-giving. As a force that creates fellowship it pronounces an annihilating judgment on the self-seeking life, which refuses to let itself be refashioned after the pattern of Agape and spurns offered fellowship. The Coming of Agape decides a man's destiny; the question for him is whether he will yield himself up to be transformed, or will resist, and so encounter Agape only in the form of judgment on his life [I, 75].

Excellent a statement as this is in itself, it belies the character of Agape in the rest of the book. When Agape can be damning judgment, the logic of loving one's enemies as the supreme human manifestation of Agape breaks down completely. Agape, functioning in man, Nygren insists, is to love the enemy with no thought of the enemy's worth, just because Agape is unbroken and uncaused love. But God himself, we see here, gives Agape to all men, but thereby makes the recalcitrant only the more damnable. And Nygren in this passage certainly shows, what he elsewhere emphatically denies, that the man who is saved is not completely worthless, but has a quality which makes him desirable, namely, the power to respond to God's Agape. Again we must choose between predestination, by which God arbitrarily puts this quality into some but not into others, irrespective of their inherent worth, or we must recognize that God is seeking in man an inherent worth, the power of response.

II

Thus, the Agape of God, as Nygren presents it in spite of himself, is a love for all which finds fruition only in the responsive. In such a picture we are getting dangerously near to a sublimated conception of sexual love projected into God himself. That the union of God's love with responsive men results in new birth, and that they in turn must be fruitful, by no means makes the conception less one of projected sexual imagery. If we are tracing Grundmotifs actually to the bottom, we must admit that the Grundmotif of the mystic fertility gods, who offer salvation by fertilizing the suppliant with divine life-force, is quite the same psychologically as this Agape. Recourse to predestinarianism only puts the difficulty off. For if God selects certain ones arbitrarily, without reference to any inherent merit, to give them the responsiveness they inherently lack, still the rest of the pattern follows exactly the same lines. God's creative love is given only to the responsive, though he has first had to make them so, and condemnation, essentially for unresponsiveness, is given to the rest.
One feels driven back to the love of God for Israel in Hosea, where Hosea is commanded to marry an unworthy woman "even as the Lord loveth the children of Israel" (Hos. 3:1): "And I will betroth thee unto me forever" (Hos. 2:19). And surely Christ's love for his bride, the Church, is part of the New Testament doctrine of divine love. Nygren, so far as I remember, nowhere calls Agape an unsexual love as contrasted with the sublimated sex of Eros; but, when he points out the sexual pattern of Eros only, the reader must understand such a contrast to be implicit. Incidentally, Nygren does not point out that Agape is used in the New Testament of ordinary love, even of unworthy love, as well as of ideal love. Not only must husbands have Agape for their wives (Col. 3:19, Eph. 2:4) but the Pharisees are condemned for their Agape of the glory of men (John 12:43), and the unregenerate in general for their Agape of the "world and darkness" (I John 2:15; cf. John 3:19).

When Nygren turns to the pagan world, he discusses only the philosophers. Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus are regarded, on the whole unexceptionably, as showing the contrast between their unmoved absolutes, whether forms or τὸ ἄνεμον, and the Christian God who takes the loving initiative toward man. Much of this contrast is quite sound. Certainly, there is all the difference in the world between the Christian God counting the hairs of our head and the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle. Just as truly the Synoptics have no hint of the Greek notion that the soul of man is inherently divine and must escape the material to be united with God. But when this is made into a contrast between Christianity and paganism in general, the contrast, so far as Grundmotif is concerned, becomes misleading and false. Nygren recognizes that the gift of the mystery religions to Greek philosophy, beginning at least with Plato, was to color the philosophers' abstractions with a desire for appropriation. It was not enough to describe the Absolute: man must somehow himself experience the Absolute. But the mysteries themselves were no more philosophic in the classic sense than Christianity, and their appeal was precisely the yearning love of their deities for man, their suffering which became the way for man to God. The picture of Isis revealing her loving kindness to the degraded ass, in the last book of Apuleius' Metamorphoses, her revelation of the sacraments and how, if the ass complies, she will change him into a being worthy of herself, is one which would have much confused the contrast between Agape and Eros had Nygren considered it.

Thus, when Nygren makes a complete contrast between Christian and pagan motivation, he goes too far. Eros, he says, is a product arising out of man, his love for divine Reality, his desire for it, balanced by his hatred of matter, while early Christian Agape arose in God and was
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imparted to men. Granted that Eros in this sense was a very important element in paganism, it was very early important in Christianity, if Paul is any representative of early Christianity. He too, as has been mentioned, is straining forward for the Crown; he too is wrestling with his lower nature, from which, like the ass's hide of Apuleius, he cannot be freed except by divine intervention; he, with the Spirit, is groaning for redemption with groanings which cannot be uttered; he is buffeting his body, and striving to walk not after the flesh but the Spirit. Paul does not like the word "gnosis," but the culmination of religion is for him as for pagans to "see face to face" the undistorted vision of God which sees not Platonic reflections but Reality. This passion for perfection of religious experience Paul does not call "Eros," but we are again reminded of Watson's words in describing the method of "Motif-research": "Similar or identical forms and expressions may sometimes conceal totally different motifs, while widely different forms and expressions may sometimes represent the same motif." There are, it is obvious to anyone who knows Paul and the Greeks, striking differences between Paul's religious passion and that of the pagans. But the difference is not accurately indicated in Nygren's claim that in paganism a man himself desires religious experience and strives for it, whereas in Christianity God's Agape picks him up, transforms him, and leaves it necessary for the man only to hold to God in faith while he passes on to his fellows the Agape he has received. If this were the contrast, Paul would belong, in spite of occasional passages, rather than with the Greeks; for, much as he feels that he was at the first a brand snatched from the burning by Agape, his life is thereafter one of passionate struggle to crucify the flesh and walk after the spirit.

III

The danger of "Motif-research" has become sufficiently apparent: there is constant peril of oversimplification. The contrast which Nygren has drawn between the Agape of Christianity and the Eros of philosophical mysticism (not paganism in general) is largely true. There is nothing in pagan philosophy, or in paganism, which can be compared with I Corinthians, chapter 13, or John 3:16. And while the Grundmotiv of John 3:16 may be paralleled in the mysteries, one has indeed to go underground to the roots for the similarity, while I Corinthians, chapter 13, remains unique. But when Nygren attempts to make Agape the essential motif of early Christianity and to interpret all early Christianity - its Pauline struggle, its eschatological severity, its final judgment based upon conduct - as elaborations of the Agape Grundmotiv, it is obvious that he has failed. Early Christianity
cannot be subsumed under I Corinthians, chapter 13, or under the Johannine conception that God is Agape. Nygren is really – in the second volume he almost confesses it himself – a "reformer" (pp. 24-27). His conception of the kind of reformation needed grows out of his idea that Christianity began simply with Agape, that as it developed it became complicated with foreign elements, especially those inherent in Eros, until by the Reformation it was brought back to Agape, but only to become later corrupted with Eros again – a natural, almost inevitable, cycle. In such a statement is disclosed the essential weakness of the reformers, who seem, to those who refuse to follow them, to be interested in some one aspect of Christianity to the point of losing the richness of the tradition as a whole for to put all of Christianity – that is, unadulterated Christianity – into the conception of Agape is to simplify beyond Luther and Calvin, certainly beyond the New Testament.

Nygren's oversimplification becomes increasingly apparent in the later volumes. The Apostolic Fathers mingle Agape with Nomos, the legal Grundmotif of Judaism, he says, and here for the first time Nygren recognizes that the Christian is taught to seek a reward, but notices it as a perversion of early Christian Agape. Justin seems to him much closer to Agape, though Nygren by no means proves his point. The Gnostics, of course, he tosses to the dogs of Eros; Marcion was almost a Christian, Nygren judges, certainly so in his rejection of Nomos, but in his rejection of the resurrection of the flesh, creation by God, and the true incarnation Marcion was on Greek, and hence non-Christian, ground. Tertullian was much too nomistic to have done justice to Agape; and Clement and Origen were so far afield that Origen, Nygren thinks, was rightly pronounced a heretic and not Christian at all, for with Origen Agape was entirely replaced by Eros. Irenaeus was much closer to the truth of Agape, the closest of all writers of the early church, but even Irenaeus spoiled it when he said that Christ came down to men that men might rise to God. This is much too close to Eros! In the Christological controversies, Nygren continues, orthodoxy was really defending Agape against Eros, though even Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa grounded their personal religions on Eros motivations. Agape and Eros were finally blended by Augustine, Nygren says, in the great doctrine of caritas: yet caritas is basically man's desire for God and so hellenistic rather than Christian; it is still quest for the Greek sumnum bonum. Augustine's notion of grace, however, was Agape. It was the combination of these two, Nygren tells us, which constituted the medieval synthesis of Agape and Eros. But Nygren sees along with this an even stronger Eros religion given to the Middle Ages by
Dionysius and his successors, for in their writings Eros was supreme in both God and men.

During the whole of the Middle Ages, Eros had been a living reality – but it was imprisoned in the Caritas synthesis. As perhaps the most important element in this synthesis, Eros had largely moulded the interpretation of Christianity without any one realizing what a transformation of Christianity it effected [II, 449].

But the renewed study of Plato, the Neo-Platonists, and Dionysius, in the Renaissance resulted in the rebirth of pure Eros. Nygren finally treats the Reformation very interestingly as a complementary rebirth of Agape.

As the reader goes through these pages, especially those which describe the early centuries of Christianity, he wonders increasingly what could have kept Christianity together if its Grundmotif so rarely came to even approximately adequate recognition. Why were men ready to die for a Christianity which, as Nygren describes it, actually differed so slightly from Hellenism, and why did Christianity not break into a thousand pieces in the hellenistic environment if its Grundmotif was so rarely and weakly appreciated?

The only answer to this question must be that, however interesting Nygren's account of Agape in its historical vicissitudes, Agape could not have been the Christian Grundmotif if that term is to have any intelligible meaning. For I cannot understand a Grundmotif as anything but the basic factor of some entity's existence, and this, Nygren abundantly demonstrates, Agape in Christianity was not. Surely if the Grundmotif of Christianity is to be found, it must appear not in such an attenuated and broken line as Nygren's Agape but in the common element which all who claimed in any way to be Christian shared and emphasized.

IV

If this point of view is taken, it will appear that the Grundmotif of Christianity from the beginning was not any philosophical or theological conception, for on no such conception was Christianity unitedly emphatic. The actual Grundmotif appears to me to be so obvious that I should hesitate to suggest it if it were not almost invariably ignored. If there was a single basic and motivating principle in early Christianity, it was unquestionably the life, death, and confidently accepted resurrection of Jesus, or, in a word, Jesus himself. In the experience of the early associates of Jesus a new dynamic was released, which was Christianity. From the beginning those who shared in this experience used various "old bottles" of ideology to
account for the experience. There were the Judaistic eschatology and legalism and hellenistic frames of the most diverse sorts. The dynamic experience in a specific person burst them all, or, to change the figure, transformed them all into new compounds. And very early, even from the first, different pre-existing types of thought were combined, like nomism with eschatology, along with prophetic conceptions, into a single complex. The Christian Gnostics tried to take Jesus and his dynamic power into Gnosis. And soon the hellenistic-Jewish, later the hellenistic, ideas were used to enrich or supplant earlier explanations. In this process many new ideas, like Agape, were conceived. But while different sorts of Christianity advanced different explanations, the vital and continuous force through every interpretation was not any single idea but the reality of the experience of God through Jesus, the certainty of immortality through Jesus, the conviction that, however the problems of life might be formulated, Jesus' death and resurrection had solved them. Recognizing this, early Christian apologists faced paganism and Judaism with their theory of "preparation." It must not be forgotten that these apologists were confronted not only with a living Judaism but with a still very vital paganism, and that with these before them they asserted not that Christianity had a new ideology but that what of good their neighbors had was fulfilled and realized in the person of Jesus, the actual death and resurrection of the Son of God. Early Christians did not agree upon any single new idea which Christianity seemed to them to contribute to either Judaism or paganism, and for us to try to isolate such an idea, and then to treat it as the Grundmotif of the early faith, is to invite such failure as Nygren seems to me ultimately to reveal. To the early Christians who knew paganism as we can never do, Jesus was a reality, tangible, fresh, eternal, who accomplished the fulfilment, opened the doors which before that men could go through only in their fancies. The constant between all the different forms of early Christianity, let me repeat, and the only one I can see, is Jesus himself. "That which we have seen with our eyes and our hands have handled" was the distinctive message of early Christians to paganism. The vivid reality of their Savior induced a reality of experience beyond the power of myths to reproduce or of philosophy to inspire. Coupled with the sublime ethical teaching of Jesus (itself, Jewish parallels show, a "fulfilment" of Jewish tendencies), the result was an exemplification, not a mere formulation, of the ethics of love – an exemplification in the lives of the followers who had actually "put on Jesus Christ."

The reality of the experience gave Christians not new ideas for myths but a mythopoetic power lacking in paganism. If it is true that paganism can be shown to have foreshadowed the basic motifs of
Christian myths of the union of God and man in a new birth, a saving manifestation of divinity to and in humanity, yet it is also true that paganism produced no myth comparable with the first chapters of Luke for power, directness, and beauty. And in pagan myths of the dying and rising God there appears nothing so moving as the story of the journey to Emmaus or the post-resurrection scenes in the Fourth Gospel. No one in his senses would deny that Christianity, rejected and hated by Jews and pagans alike, was a new religion. But the new Christian message was not new in every respect: it was essentially the declaration, based upon the experience, that the God pagans and Jews worshipped in ignorance had been revealed in the resurrection of Jesus. While the pagans were turning to "principles" only thinly personified, the Christians had the vivid person, Jesus their Savior. And in this person their lives were transformed.

Nygren has not failed – he has brilliantly succeeded – in writing a history of Christian Agape. But he has failed in his attempt to make Agape, at any time, the Grundmotif of Christianity, the criterion of true Christianity. His failure is that of anyone who would isolate some one idea in the Christian complex which seems to him to have survival value, in order to make that one idea the focus of the whole. Indeed, quite apart from the question of survival value, the basic motif of Christianity, in the sense of a basic concept in Christianity, has never been isolated to the general satisfaction of scholars because no one concept has been central throughout the varieties of Christian experience; in the early period this was even more true than in later periods when Christian ideology had become at least officially standardized. If we are to understand early Christianity, we must ultimately do so not as modern philological or philosophical scholars, but as first-century fishermen on the Lake of Galilee who see through the mists the risen Lord. Philology and historical philosophy, our clumsy conveyances to the past, can be of use to us only in so far as they succeed in bringing our souls back to such places of experience, for understanding of other men, from our own or any generation, is achieved not in the mind but in the heart.