Liberation and Love: Concepts in Conversation
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I. THE LIBERATION OF LOVE

If Christian ethics and the ideal Christian life have a distinguishing characteristic in the minds of most persons, that characteristic is love, neighbor love, love understood as complete self-giving love. Most Christians understand this love as radically self-sacrificial; Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross becomes the paradigm of loving action: an act seemingly devoid of any concern for the self. This understanding of love draws much of its power from an understanding of human nature widely portrayed in Christian literature and teaching—e.g., it declares that “human nature, though created good, has been corrupted by sin and that the will has turned upon itself in self-love.”1 Sinfulness is equated with self-centeredness, preoccupation with our own concerns and needs. Such self-centeredness is viewed as the source of human conflict and suffering and ultimately as a source of harm to the self as well. Christian love as total disinterested self-sacrifice alters this sinful state and offers a corrective. “The function of self-denial in the Christian life is to negate everything in the self which stands in the way of love. That self-denial is an important aspect of Jesus’ teaching requires no proof.”2 Although historically Christian love has been understood in many nuanced forms,3 the notion of Christian love as self-denying, as totally self-giving has remained at the core of Christian theological thought and ethical reflection and has defined popular conceptions of Christian ethics.

This traditional understanding of Christian love, however, has been severely criticized by many different streams of liberationist thought. These criticisms are significant and have taken many forms. Perhaps the most severe criticism involves the claim that this traditional concept of Christian love has actually been a source of the continued oppression of certain groups of persons and that it offers support for the current power relationships that exist between various classes of persons. The notion of love as radical self-denial has been taught to the oppressed as the ideal for their behavior and has become the social norm for measuring their human worth. As such, the concept of self-giving love perpetuates and validates the existence of a class of servants who exist to meet the needs of society’s dominant groups. Poorly paid blue collar workers and service workers are expected to be satisfied that they have jobs and are perceived as selfish malcontents, threats to the economy, if they organize for higher wages or better working conditions. Women are properly understood as subservient, persons who exist to

2Ibid., 513.
meet the needs of the men in their lives (fathers, husbands, sons, bosses) and must prove their moral worth through their unquestioning self-denial and service. The true Christian woman as self-sacrificing and obedient is perpetuated by the image of women traditionally portrayed by the church. Such images are “an extremely useful means of domesticating women and other oppressed people.” Love conceived as self-sacrifice thus becomes destructive of personhood. As Judith Plaskow writes: “The language of self-sacrifice conflicts with personhood and becomes destructive when it suggests that the struggle to become a centered self, to achieve full independent selfhood, is sinful. In this case, theology is not irrelevant to women’s situation but rather serves to reinforce women’s servitude.” Plaskow demonstrates that the notion of sin as egocentric self-centeredness has, in reality, little relationship to the lives of most women.

Women, of course, are not the only oppressed group to have their selfhood harmed by the Christian notion of love as total self-denial. The slave catechisms pictured ideal Christian slaves as meek and obedient, plac ing the needs and concerns of the master and mistress ahead of their own. The disappearance of slavery has not ended white society’s expectation that the good black person is the quiet, passive negro who waits patiently for white society to bestow some modicum of rights and privileges. In response to the assertive black protests of the 1960s, James Cone correctly observed the hypocrisy of most white Christians: “It is interesting that so many advocates of non-violence as the only Christian response of black persons to white domination are also the most ardent defenders of the right of police to put down black rebellion through violence.” A selectively applied ethic of Christian self-sacrificial love thus becomes a means of continuing the oppression of some and maintaining existing, unjust power relationships.

A second difficulty with this traditional Christian conception of love is that it has been improperly limited in its application. This limiting takes several forms. First, the love ethic, which is presented by Jesus as binding on all his followers, has come to be culturally understood as binding only on those who undertake a formal religious vocation and is understood to govern the workings only of religious Institutions. It is regarded as appropriate, in fact admirable, for persons like Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa to live lives of profound personal self-sacrifice. The limiting of the love ethic is made even more extreme in our culture since the Protestant Reformation led to both a formal and informal endorsement of a two-kingsdoms doctrine that exempts the political, economic, and social realms from the requirements of Christian love. Emphasizing the sinfulness of the social world, responsible persons are to be wise and realistic, skilled at manipulating power relationships to their own advantage. Love is understood as so inappropriate to the workings of the social world that Reinhold Niebuhr can label it an “impossible ideal” and have most of the Christian community accept this designation. For society as a whole, Marie Augusta Neal is right in observing that, “Judging social behavior in a framework of altruism is written off as utopian, as too idealistic for political realization.” The powerful are left free to live their self-interested
lives, rewarded and applauded for their success. In the real world, the world of the power brokers, Christian love has no role. Self-sacrifice is a virtue only for the religious vocations and for the oppressed.

It is abundantly clear that this limited applicability of the love ethic profoundly separates love and justice. The love requirement as it continues to pertain to the rich and powerful no longer requires justice, only acts of charity. In this way, the power of the powerful is further enhanced, and the subordination of the powerless further emphasized. The rich and powerful reach down to help the poor; they give from their abundance, expecting the poor to respond with appropriate gratitude and society to extol their generosity. These charitable, unrequired acts of giving remove the guilt of the powerful for their misuse of their wealth and power and for their complicity in creating the social problems they are now attempting to rectify. Unadmitted by them, and unnoticed by most, such charity, while giving the appearance of social concern, preserves unaltered the very social forms that are the basis for their wealth and power. The oppression of the poor and powerless remains unchanged. Upon closer scrutiny, love as charity may actually further distort existing power relationships by creating an even greater dependence of the powerless upon the powerful. The powerful, defining themselves as self-sufficient givers, first define the problems of the poor and powerless and then create the programs and provide the resources to solve the problems as they have defined them. The little aid which the poor do receive is dependent upon their maintaining a proper attitude toward the givers and the existing social structures. Significant criticism of either can lead to immediate withdrawal of the programs themselves— as witnessed in the drastic cuts to social programs during the Reagan years. In this process, the powerless are further dehumanized. They are merely objects of others’ attention and charity. The traditional image of self-giving love when adopted by the powerful finally removes all vestiges of the transformative, radical love which is present in the New Testament. This distortion of the notion of love is “an image of patronizing love, the love of the strong for the weak, or, conversely, the sniveling gratitude of the weak toward those stronger who grant ‘favors.’”


A final criticism of the traditional Christian love ethic has already been partially articulated. Oddly, this notion of love too easily becomes an abstract concept. Such love gets reduced to abstract principles and concepts, and the neighbor too easily becomes a disembodied entity. We love the neighbor in general, have a warm feeling for humanity, but know nothing about the specific neighbor, the needs or conditions of the actual poor. Our love ethic, as a ethic of self-giving, distances the embodied neighbor from us. We are the givers, they are the takers. We need not talk to them, listen to their analysis of the causes of their problems, or take seriously their proposed solutions. We are not interested in receiving anything from them; after all, what do they have to give? We do not want to meet and engage them as persons, only as objects of our charity. We may easily and properly give from a distance, untouched and unaware of the neighbor’s
actual need or actual humanity.

For liberation theology, then, the traditional Christian conception of love is both inadequate and often harmful. Rather than being a helpful moral requirement, a distorted understanding of love becomes a force for maintaining an unjust social order and may, at times, elevate injustice. Rather than rejecting Christian love as a central moral principle, however, liberationists have been involved in a reconstruction of Christian love which restores the radical, transformative character of love as found in the life and teachings of Jesus and in the best of the Christian tradition.

II. LIBERATING LOVE

The first response by liberation theologians in recovering a transformative notion of Christian love involves the reinterpretation of the dynamics and purposes of love. Love is not properly understood as the self-sacrificial giving of the powerful to the powerless; it is not a predetermined response to an objectified neighbor which gives the dominant party a heightened sense of moral virtuousness and further dehumanizes the powerless. Nor is Christian love properly understood as the complete self-surrender and obedience of the powerless, a passive acceptance of their condition. Rather, neighbor love is properly understood as an act of mutuality, a way of meeting the neighbor as a person, a mutual affirmation of each others’ humanity. As Beverly Harrison recognizes, “Mutual love, I submit, is love in its deepest radicality. It is so radical that many of us have not yet learned to bear it. To experience it, we must be open, we must be capable of giving and receiving.”

When love includes mutuality, the goal of love becomes reconciliation, the establishment of just, caring human relationships between those who are now estranged. Meeting the neighbor’s need is still a function of Christian love, but only as a prerequisite for creating conditions under which authentic reconciliation can occur. This recovered understanding of Christian love radically alters human relationships, especially those between the powerful and the powerless. Self-giving love is now understood as just that, a giving of the self, our person, to another person with the expectation that they will do the same. The giving of things, the providing of services, no longer constitutes the definitive requirement of Christian love. Love has a new face.

10Ibid., 18.

If love is primarily reconciling, a mutuality, a meeting of persons, I can no longer reach out in a paternalistic love which defines the neighbors’ needs and proposes the solutions. I must now allow the neighbors to speak for themselves, to hear the neighbors’ demands and respond appropriately. I become an active partner in a relationship. Love is rescued from its status as an abstract principle and the neighbor is freed from the role of being an object. Here the work of Carol Gilligan is an important reminder, especially to men, that the center of ethics is not fundamentally a debate over right and wrong, who has won and who has lost in the course of moral arbitration, but rather the effects of our actions on our relationships and on persons.11 To be inspired by Christian love is to risk loving the real, particular neighbor. Christian love requires us “to speak for particular human rights, not for universal human rights. To be theologians of liberation is to be engaged in specific battles for justice, to work for social structures that ennoble
rather than destroy possibilities for justice and human dignity.”

In addition to liberating the humanity of the oppressed, the notion of love as mutuality also liberates the humanity of the powerful, the oppressor. They are no longer required to be eternally strong, self-sufficient, always the givers. They are freed to acknowledge their finitude, to display their neediness and uncertainty, to accept from others what they so badly need. The powerful are liberated to enter fuller, richer, more satisfying human relationships. Relationships between the powerful and the powerless are thus radically transformed and the powerful are freed to hear the complaints and insights of the powerless, a process that offers the actual possibility of creating more just and loving social structures within which actual reconciliation may occur. As Marie Augusta Neal shows, this will require a radical restructuring of our power relationships. For the powerful, authentic Christian love requires a “socio-theology of letting go,” a surrendering of our special status and social advantages. This sacrifice, however, is the necessary prelude to the real work of love, creating a society based on mutuality and mutual care. This is the real significance of Jesus’ life of sacrifice: “His sacrifice was for the cause of radical love, to make relationship and sustain it, and above all, to right wrong relationship, which is what we call ‘justice.”’

From the perspective of liberation theology, then, the commitment to Christian love has different requirements for the powerful and powerless. For the powerful, the meeting of the other as a free equal person may indeed require the suppression of an overgrown sense of self-importance and an exaggerated egocentricity. As already noted, however, sin for the powerless, for the oppressed, may involve failure to develop the self fully. Here love for the other, the meeting as equals, may require prolonged attention to self-development and the recovery of repressed aspects of the self and the group’s collective history. Such self-development, however, is rescued from selfish preoccupation by the concern of Christian

love for creating a reconciled world. Dorothee Sölle powerfully portrays this understanding in her poem, “play me a song about rosa, anna and rosa.” She declares:

Leave me alone with your identity crises
stop your introspective strumming on the guitar
play something else

play me a song about anna and the two rosas
play about real people
about women strong and vulnerable
caring for others and independent

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13 Neal, *The Just Demands of the Poor*, esp. ch. IX.

From the perspective of love as reconciliation, then, self-sacrifice and mutuality are not exclusive but rather are united in an ongoing dynamic. The love that reconciles necessarily requires a suppression of our egocentricity, an escape from self-centeredness, a taking of the other’s gifts and needs seriously. If the selfhood, the integrity and value of the other is to be maintained, the other always requires a sacrifice of me, of some aspect of my needs. And yet, self-sacrificing love does not require self-negation nor does it rule out mutuality, self-assertion, and receiving as well as giving. Christine Gudorf presents this idea creatively in her essay, “Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice.” Using parental love as a model, Gudorf reminds us of the dynamics of love which all parents know. The parent’s immediate act of love is often highly self-sacrificial; the parent’s priorities and needs are reorganized to meet the immediate needs of the child. Parenting, of course, also requires parental self-assertion, a maintenance of a positive sense of self, if one is to parent effectively and not end up resenting the child. Ideally, in the process of parenting, both parent and child grow. So, Gudorf concludes that all [love] is directed at mutuality. It could not be any other way, for we find love rewarding. If we love the other, we want her/him to experience that reward to the utmost, and that includes loving us. In a more impersonal sense, we may do a deed for another we do not know well—but in the action is the hope that the deed opens the other to love, if not specifically to us as individuals, then at least to the humanity that includes us.

As they contribute to the process of reconciliation between persons and help create social structures that make such healing a real possibility, liberation movements are part of God’s process of reconciling love.

As should already be apparent, a liberationist view of Christian love necessarily moves beyond the individualistic conceptions of traditional understandings of love. If love includes mutuality, if its goal is the reconciliation of all with all, we—as persons embedded in webs of relationship—cannot ignore the ways in which our individual or corporate actions affect others. Love is no longer simply a matter of acts of charity and acts of giving; it involves fundamental changes in those structures which cause harm and division. As Tissa Balasuriya proclaims:


A social structure is a more or less permanent solidification of relationships. Relationships, in turn, embody values, attitudes, and mentalities. Real changes in social structures must therefore be based on and lead to changes in mentalities of the persons in a society. Similarly, a conversion of minds must lead to transformations in social relationships and structures.
Love and justice merge. Love is freed from a narrow, sentimentalized, individualistic ethic to something broader and more comprehensive. Christian love ceases to be an “impossible ideal” and becomes the very driving force which gives meaning to the demands for, and the work for, a more just world.

We have uncovered, then, through the response of liberation theology, a richer, fuller understanding of agape, of Christian neighbor love. Such love does indeed entail sacrifice. In many parts of the world those committed to human liberation face imprisonment, torture, and even death. In our country and in institutions of higher learning, such commitment is often met with ostracism, ridicule, and professional harassment. In a penultimate sense, such love of the neighbor, of the oppressed, is certainly a self-sacrificial act if measured against our culture’s normal egocentric goals of personal comfort and self-advancement. From a liberationist perspective, however, sacrifice is only part of love’s dynamic. True fulfillment comes in the freeing of persons so that authentic reconciliation can occur, so that we can be freed to share in an authentic mutuality. Liberating love creates small, tentative communities of persons mutually committed to each other and to acting for the eventual reconciliation of all with all. Such reconciliation and mutuality do not come easily or cheaply. Both are based upon the profound, often painful restructuring of our lives and our social structures, restructuring that will vary from society to society, group to group, and person to person. Yet, only such change creates the conditions that make authentic mutuality a possibility.

When Christian love is thus properly understood, the demands of the oppressed for justice are not self-centered or antithetical to the claims of Christian love, but fully consistent with it. It is also apparent that movements which seem to the privileged to be excessively self-preoccupied, such as “Black consciousness movements” or “women’s consciousness-raising groups,” are absolutely necessary for the recovery and enhancement of essential parts of the oppressed people’s humanity and history. These movements provide the necessary base for the development of free, authentic selfhood, a development necessary for meaningful reconciliation between the powerful and the powerless to occur. For, in the words of Major Jones: “To be a liberated person, white or black, is to know one’s self and others; it is to recognize the self as an equal to others. It is to recognize the need for a deep mutual sharing of one another. To be a liberated person is to have and to know an identity of selfhood; it is also to recognize identities in others.”

III. LOVE AND LIBERATION

The various liberation movements have, then, significantly enriched the traditional Christian concept of self-giving love. Thus enriched, this concept must remain at the center of a liberationist ethic. While it is important that our conception

legitimate concerns. In movements of liberation such temptations may be especially strong. Understandably, years of oppression and injustice can lead to narrow conceptions of justice in which retribution comes to predominate. The predictable resentment and necessary anger\(^\text{19}\) which oppressed groups develop toward the oppressor may develop into a structure in which the roles of the oppressed and the oppressor are reversed, but the dynamics of the relationship remain unchanged. With the concept of human sinfulness, Christian liberation movements should be able to escape the liberal and Marxist romanticization of the oppressed. As Desmond Tutu reminds us, speaking of the liberationist claim that God is a God of the poor: “He is a God who sides with those who are oppressed because he is that kind of a God, and not because the oppressed are morally better than their oppressors.”\(^\text{20}\) There is no disinterested proletariat that will usher in a utopian age, a period of perfect social justice and universal salvation. Without a constant reminder of the ultimate goals of liberation, movements for personal and corporate liberation easily degenerate into new forms of selfishness. Self-centered forms of liberation condemn the oppressed to repeat the mistakes of their oppressors and condemn us all to a future not fundamentally different from the present or the past.

At some point in the liberation process, then, all inward-looking liberation movements and all persons involved in such movements must, motivated by love for the other and the self, look outward again and find their meaning in the pursuit of a fundamental reconciliation with all others, a reconciliation based on justice and mutual respect. This is the final intention of Christian neighbor love. From this perspective, concern for the self-development of the oppressed, the creation of conditions under which their humanity can flourish, takes on a new meaning. If the good of all human development is marked by a drive toward mutuality, the act of self-development by the oppressed becomes an act of love for the other as well; it is an act of love even for the enemy, the oppressor, for it creates conditions under which the two can meet as equals, can stand toe to toe and eyeball to eyeball and work out the conditions under which both can live as free, authentic, reconciled persons. Thus Martin Luther King, Jr. was concerned to free the humanity of white persons by confronting them with the dignity and humanity of black people, freeing both to recognize a common humanity. And, as feminists have recognized, an authentic women’s liberation movement ultimately seeks the liberation of both men and women.

It is encouraging and exciting to discover that under the most difficult cir-


cumstances, circumstances that sometimes entail physical and psychological deprivation and even death, the various Christian liberation movements have constantly reaffirmed the importance of Christian love as a motivating force and as a final goal of the liberation movements. This love has been self-sacrificial and self-giving in ways that far exceed the normal expectations of Christians. At one level, as José Míguez Bonino writes, “It is important to notice the importance that this radical motivation of love and the motif of ‘laying down one’s life’ for
the brothers and sisters has played and continues to play in liberation language in Latin America.” And this is true of all the Christian liberation movements. Self-development and personal talents are used, often at great cost to the self, to make possible the liberation of one’s own people. The goal is not personal success but corporate liberation.

In recent years, however, liberation theologians have incorporated concern for their particular community into a more comprehensive understanding of liberation. This movement is profoundly exemplified in the work of James Cone. He writes (about his early views on feminism): “When it was raised by others, I rejected it as a joke or as an intrusion upon the legitimate struggle of black people to eliminate racism. I had assumed that the rise of women’s liberation was a white trick to distract from the injustice being committed by whites against blacks.” Earlier in the book, Cone had made similar comments about his early lack of interest in liberation movements in the TwoThirds World. But now he concludes, evidencing the higher consciousness that informs most liberation theology today:

While I still believe that racism is and must remain the chief focus of my theological and political endeavors, I no longer regard it as the only problem or even the primary contradiction in the world today. Racism is one among many problems, though perhaps the most visible, existing along with sexism, classism, and imperialism. The complexity of the world is such that electing one of these problems to first priority does not serve to eliminate any of them.

This love for the neighbor, the sometimes distant neighbor, this more comprehensive concern for all oppressed peoples, prevents the liberation movements from becoming narrow and self-serving.

Finally, in the Christian liberation movements there is evidence of the highest forms of neighbor love, love for the enemy, the agent of oppression. Running throughout the work of liberation theologians is the expressed desire to ultimately liberate the oppressor as well and make possible a fundamental reconciliation. In the midst of struggle, such a commitment is hard to make, such a goal is difficult to maintain. And yet, as Míguez Bonino reports about the struggle for justice, “If hatred of the enemy is subordinated to love for the brother and sister, then the struggle is made ‘functional,’ and the possibility of affirming the humanity of the enemy during and after the struggle remains open. This is the kind of ethics of liberation which many—Christians and non-Christians—are trying to develop within the project of liberation.” And this, of course, is the most telling mark of Christian love, the final check against our work and love becoming inappropriately self-serving: love for the enemy. The goal of authentic Christian love is mutuality,

23Ibid., 115.
South Africa, where people will matter because they are persons of infinite value, created in the image of God, the liberator God.25

Christian love, then, radical self-giving love, does—and must—remain at the center of a Christian liberationist ethics. Self-sacrificial love, however, is not the same as self-negating love. For liberation theology, love is much richer and fuller than this traditional notion of Christian love as selfless, self-negating love. The love of liberation theology is a demanding love, a justice-requiring love which demands changes of both the oppressed and the oppressor and also of the structural forms that set the terms of their relationship. This love is an active love, a revolutionary love, that demands commitment and exacts a price; it is costly love. Nevertheless, it is a love founded upon a more basic mutuality, a belief in the possibility of the reconciliation of persons, classes, races, and genders. It is committed to the creation of societies in which all can be free, equal, and respected and have the resources necessary for full human development. This love is an idealistic love, a fantastic love grounded in the realities of suffering and hard work—a love made possible by the heartfelt knowledge that God is at work in our world, our lives, and our relationships, demanding such love of us, requiring social change, incarnating such impossible love, and thus making it a human possibility. Liberating love is a celebrating love which grows in power as we experience, in our struggles, new and provisional forms and possibilities of love as mutuality.

25Tutu, Crying in the Wilderness, 89.