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# The Double Love Command and the Ethics of Religious Pluralism

ERIC GREGORY

The significant things are the distinctive patterns of story, belief, ritual, and behavior that give “love” and “God” their specific and sometimes contradictory meanings.

—George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*

IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE to tell the history of modern Christian ethics without paying attention to the ways in which the realities of diversity have shaped its concerns. In a theological register, responses to these realities have run the gamut from lamenting an existential threat to celebrating a providential gift. Biblical narratives, from Babel to Pentecost, are marshaled for each approach (cf., e.g., Gen. 11; Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Rev. 7). What cannot be denied is the extent to which recognition of diversity has sponsored and determined much of the intellectual agenda of the discipline known as “Christian ethics.” For example, increased attention to diversity has energized discussions of *moral* pluralism (in terms of seemingly incommensurable values or even the plural nature of the good itself) and *political* pluralism (in terms of social practices and institutional arrangements that accommodate difference).<sup>1</sup> Resurgent debates in Christian ethics about natural law, human rights, or the common good—and related ones about “public reason” or “multiculturalism”—display this concentration on plurality in relation to rival approaches to morality and politics.<sup>2</sup>

Language of equality, alterity, and respect pervade these discussions. Virtues such as fidelity, tolerance, and humility figure prominently. The vigor of these debates, of course, is predicated on different uses and applications of these terms. Some suggest pluralism is a peculiar problem of modernity, a post-Enlightenment anxiety about difference bound up with massive cultural and intellectual change. These changes and the anxieties they promote, we are told, only accelerate with globalization, technological advances, and mass migration.

Strictly speaking, pluralism is but one normative response to facts of plurality. Like the category of religion this side of Luther’s reading of Paul, it may be a decidedly modern way of thinking about and living with diversity. Indeed, genealogists frequently point out that “religion” and “pluralism” arose in tandem in the discursive practices of modernity. They bear the marks not simply of philosophical inquiry or crises of faith but of politics and history as well.

Historically distant cultures and thinkers recognized diversity. But they did not construct or experience its challenge as moderns do. Even if we resist efforts to identify a single essence of religion or modernity, it is clear that many previous generations did not operate with notions of “religious pluralism” as an analytic framework. Others admit this distance, but they argue valuable resources within the historic Christian tradition might be reconstructed in light of our contemporary social experience.<sup>3</sup> So assessments of diversity and pluralism are themselves plural, and often contradictory.<sup>4</sup>

Many academic disciplines and religious communities share these animating dynamics. But they have found particular expression in Christian ethics through ongoing debates about the distinctiveness of Christian ethics and the relation of Christianity to liberal democracy. No doubt issues raised by *religious* pluralism overlap with concerns about *moral* and *political* diversity. They find parallels in the negotiations of intra-religious difference that characterize the diversity of Christian ethics itself, not to mention fraught ecclesial discourse within Christian denominations. Indeed, they are profoundly interrelated. In Christian ethics, for example, appeals to plural traditions and plural narratives abound. Translation and charitable interpretation of conceptual schemes are heralded as ways to deepen theological and ethical commitments. Rational reconstruction of historical figures, texts, and cultures is increasingly the norm in both Protestant and Roman Catholic moral theology. This work—whether it compares Augustine and Kant or Aquinas and Barth—shows how the varieties of Christian ethics *already* reflect difference in Western thought. Moreover, broader approaches in comparative ethics within and across traditions remain high on the agenda.<sup>5</sup> There is a new generation of scholars conversant in both “Christian ethics” and “comparative religious ethics.” As a whole, however, engagement with non-Christian religions has been less prominent in Christian ethics than engagement with secular philosophy, the social sciences, and Protestant–Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue.

Analyses of moral and political pluralism do admit analogies to religious pluralism. They tap into disputes over basic assumptions about human nature, truth, and the very category of “religion.”<sup>6</sup> Christian ethicists regularly examine forms of skepticism and relativism in moral and political arenas. Burdened by a history of Christian conquest, they consider multiple expressions of Christian witness with respect to morality and politics. They lift up lives thought to embody paradigmatic Christian virtue in relation to non-Christian neighbors (often ones that did not benefit from balancing openness with commitment). Relational pairings of universal-particular, insider-outsider, and nearness-distance are dominant themes. At the same time, much of contemporary interreligious dialogue focuses on global ethical issues that touch on concerns with liberation and healing transformation. Ironically, however, explicit focus on religious pluralism as such has not been a dominant subject in Christian ethics. By my lights, inquiry into the implications of the depth and integrity of religious diversity for Christian ethics remains relatively undeveloped. This neglect stands in sharp contrast to analytic philosophy of religion, systematic theology, and religious ethics more generally. Despite important developments in the church and the wider world, Christian ethics has yet to bring its many resources to bear on religious pluralism.

Of course, this claim assumes those resources matter. To frame the approach in these terms risks seduction and conceit, implicating Christian ethics in yet another form of oppositional hegemony, identity politics, and static universalism. It turns religious pluralism into a problem to be solved *by* Christian ethics rather than a shared reality to be engaged *within* Christian ethics. Moreover, why privilege the contribution of Christian ethics, especially if untutored in the necessary linguistic, anthropological, and historical knowledge? Perhaps

religious pluralism is a topic best left to philosophers, theologians, and “religious ethicists”? No doubt Christian ethicists have much to learn from these increasingly sophisticated literatures (as well as their weaknesses). They typically raise the hermeneutical challenge of comparison and tax the analogical imagination in light of religious pluralism more acutely. But it is not uncommon for Christian ethicists to feel stretched by multiple sources between the doctrinal, the historical, the ethnographic, and the practical. In addition to their urgency in a global age that suffers the consequences of mapping “believers” against “unbelievers,” many of the issues raised by religious pluralism are so native to the established concerns of Christian ethics that their neglect seems increasingly odd. At the very least, the resemblances between intra-Christian ethical pluralism and religious pluralism themselves invite comparison.<sup>7</sup>

The present essay does not claim to correct this neglect in any comprehensive way, let alone provide a theology of religious pluralism, a method for comparative theology, or an ethics of discipleship for a multi-faith world. The issues raised by religious diversity within the lived religion of Christian communities have varied pastoral and theoretical dimensions. They also press us in deeply personal ways. Perhaps more than moral or political pluralism, they raise explicitly missiological and soteriological issues absent in most Christian ethics. This absence is instructive, but I here bracket whether it is necessary. Rather, I aim to elevate ways in which one familiar topic—often taken in complicated ways to be a hallmark of Christian ethics—bears on the subject.

The centrality of love in divine revelation is itself notable for approaching religious pluralism from within Christian ethics. It invites welcome comparison of diverse treatments of love (and its analogues) in Christian and non-Christian figures and traditions. Comparison might reveal differences in degree as well as differences in kind, dislocating the familiar analyses of *agape*, *eros*, *caritas*, and *philia*. Such an approach would expand our conceptual repertoire even as it sheds light on existing terms and ways of living a worthwhile life. Christian beliefs and practices could only be enriched by apt comparison. The *methodological* issues raised by comparison with non-Christian traditions strike me as not qualitatively different than existing efforts to compare visions of love within Christian traditions.

But related questions remain internal to Christian ethics. Should love assume priority relative to other virtues in discussions of religious pluralism? How does Christian discourse of love relate to religious diversity? How should Christians love non-Christians with respect to their religious convictions? Do Christians properly love their neighbor by calling them to relationship with the God of the Christian faith? The issues raised by these questions are frustratingly complex and resist easy judgments. There seem no responses that are not misleading or risk sentimentalism. They also trade on neuralgic issues in the history of theology, especially theodicy and election.

My ambition is limited. It is decidedly confessional rather than apologetic, taking my cue from those in the Christian tradition who confess no God *above* the Trinity. I want to signal how some aspects of Christian love relate to religious pluralism in light of an insistence on the priority of divine transcendence of the One who sends and vindicates Jesus. This signaling is an invitation to attend to the relatively unexamined resemblances between issues within Christian ethics and discussions of religious pluralism. The goal is to stimulate both theological and ethical reflection by framing the familiar in a novel context. Making these connections explicit is one way to subject discussions of both Christian love and religious pluralism to critical scrutiny.

Gene Outka is justifiably regarded as the keenest interpreter of Christian agape in modern Christian ethics. I take his theocentric interpretation of Christian love as my guide by identifying two persistent themes from his corpus: equal regard of persons and the interrelatedness of the love commands. Outka's interpretations have a decidedly Protestant lineage and emphasis on God's prevenient grace. They rely on a creedal tradition emerging from the biblical narrative "always respectfully, holding that one should, as far as possible, not only give a faithful account of it but take it with governing seriousness when one assimilates new insights."<sup>8</sup> But they are far from idiosyncratic. They are shaped by engagement with many Christian traditions, especially informed by the ethical and theological legacies of Augustine, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth. No doubt they merit further development. Not every Christian account would assent to them. Nevertheless, Outka's identification of normative links among love of God, self, and neighbor reflects essential commitments for the formation of Christian identity. Loves signal what we most care about. They invite specification for a Christian ethics of religious pluralism. With Outka, then, my inquiry seeks to avoid "vapid amiability where one is wholly content to be part of a directionless exchange of viewpoints."<sup>9</sup>

### **A Modest Proposal**

In contrast to Christian ethics, religious pluralism is a major topic in contemporary philosophy and theology. Philosophical treatments typically focus on the rationality of belief, the nature of truth claims, and epistemic consequences of disagreement. Christian philosophers play a notable role in these debates.<sup>10</sup> Theological treatments typically focus on what might be learned about God from non-Christian religions and the salvific prospects of their adherents. Competing theological judgments often depend on different philosophical orientations.<sup>11</sup>

Most of these discussions trade on the well-worn and pedagogically accessible categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. They display the influence of John Hick, despite various efforts to enrich or challenge their heuristic value.<sup>12</sup> Some Christian ethicists have regarded this paradigm a parochial feature of secular liberalism. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, characteristically worries that "even the attempt to develop such typologies betrays ideological presumptions."<sup>13</sup> John Milbank argues they retain "covert Christianizations."<sup>14</sup> Still, despite suspicions, these categories have proved resilient.

Briefly, pluralism names an approach that finds salvific truth in all religions. There is no one true religion. None have an epistemic advantage. Many religions promote moral and spiritual transformations that are worthy of admiration. Divergence about sacred value appears so historically and culturally conditioned that adherence to one or another religion seems arbitrary. An effort to locate something common or essential to all religions typically underlies this project.

Exclusivism elevates difference as a form of steadfast faithfulness and responsibility to truthfulness, not arrogance. Idolatry is its central concern and ultimate sin. Some unique features of a religion (such as revelation or grace) warrant an epistemic confidence that characterizes other religions in terms of error and rejection. On these terms, what some describe as "multiple religious belonging" would be considered an oxymoron. For example, exclusivism would hold that the relationship between Christian faith in a triune God and other religious confessions is primarily one of discontinuity, not fulfillment or mutual appreciation. God's revelation in Christ is determinative; grace is not mediated through non-Christian

religions. The salvation of non-Christians is typically denied. Affirming and denying beliefs is simply our existential condition that gives rise to plurality itself.

Inclusivism affirms the presence of God in multiple religious practices. But it maintains one revelation as authoritative, even when denied or unacknowledged. Christian inclusivists, for example, might maintain a high Christology (*Christus solus*) with the hope of an open soteriology. They express confidence in God's reconciling work in Christ for the world (2 Cor. 5:19). But they emphasize humility in view of our provisional capacity to know God or the fate of others in the same way that God knows. In passages like Matthew 25, they find biblical witness that honors the religious meaning of lives that do not explicitly confess the lordship of Jesus (often by defining the first love commandment by its fulfillment of the second). This approach finds many supporters in academic theology across the ecumenical spectrum. Yet critics argue this position inherits the problems of both exclusivism and pluralism.

The pluralist approach can seem attractive today given widespread concerns about intolerance and religious violence. A tolerant society, on this view, demands a tolerant theology—where that in turn means regarding each tradition equally right about matters religious. Pluralism is politically salutary and socially necessary. Yet the status of pluralism as a powerful ideal has been subject to increased criticism in both religious studies and theology.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, many find it does not recognize deep differences in religious traditions and thereby perpetuates its own disrespect of diverse religious cultures. It produces an illusion that religions are primarily manageable sets of (inadequate) freestanding propositions rather than comprehensively self-involving forms of life. It domesticates religion by making it a matter of private belief.

However one evaluates the constraints of this typology, each position invokes intellectual and moral virtues worthy of attention. They direct us to important issues. There is virtue in the economy of the paradigm itself. While no position fully persuades, no alternative vocabulary or conceptual innovation has succeeded in overcoming its generativity. But classification is a tricky business. It is always value-laden. Classifiers and their critics often do not make explicit their own normative commitments. I agree with those who find this particular system of classification limiting. It is reductive in too many ways, especially for the purposes of theological or ethical analysis.

To be sure, disciplinary boundaries are porous. Ethics saturates these discussions of religious pluralism. Philosophers dispute the justice and charity of the exclusivist's God. They question the moral compass of those who would worship such a God. Inclusivists work to reconcile the finality of God's self-revelation in Christ, the goods of church membership, and the evident piety of other traditions. Moreover, though in different ways, the influential proposals by John Hick, Karl Rahner, and Paul Knitter found in this literature all make other-regarding love basic to their approach to religious pluralism.<sup>16</sup> These discussions can rehearse a familiar trajectory found especially in the liberal Protestant tradition of "ethicizing" Christian doctrine, particularly through a language of love that subordinates theology to the rational purity of ethical universals available to human experience. The particulars of religious commitments, on these terms, are celebrated as a symbolic vehicle for something else. This is not the route I propose to pursue.

Karl Barth's dialectical approach to "religion" as a creature of grace remains salient.<sup>17</sup> Following Barth, I do not wish to pit dogmatics against ethics. Following Augustine, I do not wish to oppose confession and virtue. Both are interdependent. The coordination of the two love commandments is always "theological" and "ethical."<sup>18</sup> What I want to do is explore ethical dimensions that emerge from two explicitly Christian theological commitments

about otherness. My account is necessarily concise and highly selective. It borrows heavily from Outka's insights regarding love's symmetries and asymmetries. But their application to religious diversity is my own.

### Equal Regard: Love's Symmetry

Gene Outka's *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* did not propose a theory of love. The formal purpose of that work was to contribute "to our understanding of what love has been taken ethically to be, rather than what it must be."<sup>19</sup> Outka details the basic features of the agapist literature since Anders Nygren's own influential paradigms.<sup>20</sup> Like Nygren's text, however, Outka's work resists a clear distinction between the descriptive and the normative. Outka's comparisons, like all acts of comparison, are interpretive. In submitting various strands in the literature to analysis, Outka's framing of the normative content of neighbor love has been profoundly influential. Consider, for example, his opening summary statement: "Agape is a regard for the neighbor which in crucial respects is independent and unalterable. To these features there is a corollary: the regard is for every person qua human existent, to be distinguished from those special traits, actions, etc., which distinguish particular personalities from each other."<sup>21</sup> The centrality and permanence Outka assigns to "equal regard" is not explicitly developed in relation to religious diversity. Most critical discussions have focused on its relation to Kantian "respect for persons" and subsequent debates about individualism, special relationships, self-sacrifice, and the role of emotions in the moral life.<sup>22</sup> But I take Outka's term of art to be a fertile route into love's relation to religious diversity.

The focus here is anthropology. Most fundamentally, the priority of equal regard elevates the priority of persons. Persons are made in the image of God. That is to say, all human persons have irreducible value independent of assessment of their beliefs or actions. Their "worth and dignity" is always enjoined; it is "independent and unalterable."<sup>23</sup> All attempts at domination are ruled out. Religious liberty is defended. Neighbors, like God, are honored in their definite otherness.

This commitment to a person "qua human existent" risks sterile description and abstract platitude. Fears of theological redundancy emerge. But for Outka, positing the essential equality of persons before God is foundational.<sup>24</sup> To conceive of human dignity strictly in relation to God poses familiar difficulties, both metaphysical and political. But it is also phenomenologically rich and morally demanding.

The intrinsic value of all persons does not arise from their own merit, let alone utility for one's own well-being. It is not something to be proven or justified. On Christian terms, value is secured from eternity by God's own identification with humanity. It belongs to those inside and outside the visible church. Refusals of equal regard betray a possessiveness and inordinate self-love that Augustinians term sin. The great damage of sin is manifest in disordered loves. A characteristic form of disordered loving is grasping at the good rather than being in relation to it with others. The darkness of sin is birthed in the radical freedom of love itself: the *mala voluntas* closed to others and to God. In a fallen world, Augustine observes, the perversity of pride inclines us to hate "a fellowship of equality under God" (Augustine, *CD* 19.12). The lustful goal of self-mastery issues a consuming mastery of others that also distorts the self. This is what Kierkegaard diagnoses as the "I intoxicated in the other-I."<sup>25</sup> Love's inward curvature denies a shared origin and even the possibility of a shared destiny. As such, human value is bound to a complex theological scheme that identifies agape as the practical corollary of grace: the bestowal of divine love, which Outka reckons,

is “surely universal.”<sup>26</sup> Any person, including the self and the religious “other,” is rendered as a subject embraced by this divine love.

Equal regard is an analogue of this divine love. It is the love revealed in the compassion of Christ and the compassion of the Good Samaritan. To love God is, at least in part, to love what God loves. This requires the cultivation of virtue and the enabling power of grace. But as Outka notes, neighbor love is “more than a mere means through which we love God.”<sup>27</sup> The neighbor is a discrete recipient of love. Love of neighbor is not a mere repetition of love for God.

Christians, therefore, encounter any person with gratitude, care, and arresting attention that acknowledges their status as a creature beloved of God. Such an outlook is “both attitudinal and intentional in nature, i.e., it includes both a judgment and an undertaking.”<sup>28</sup> As Outka makes clear, this guarantee of equality does not require identical treatment. Equal regard also does not deny particularity or individuality: “one may reject atomistic individualism but not thereby shrug off as historically passé the claim that the individual has irreducible significance.”<sup>29</sup> This significance implies concern for the particularity of individual lives before God. The Christian hope is that God may be enjoyed communally. Its orienting vision is a shared life of the people of God as the body of Christ. But God addresses the self and the other in their concrete singularity. Faithful responses to God arise in our sociality. But they remain distinctly *our* response. To borrow from David Kelsey, personal identities in relation to God are “unsubstitutable.”<sup>30</sup>

Agapic love as “equal regard” resists generalizing abstractions that threaten discussions of religious identity. As Kathryn Tanner puts it, “God’s creative concern for a person finds that person as the particular person he or she is and not simply as a member of some universal society of creatures.”<sup>31</sup> In Outka’s idiom, each person has a “noninterchangeable pilgrimage” on his or her journey to God.<sup>32</sup> It is a journey known only to God in its fullness. Thus, there are limits to the harms and benefits we can do for others.<sup>33</sup> Faith and repentance may be mysterious, but they are not transferable.

Such agency partially resembles—and ultimate derives from participation in—the creative agency of God. God’s own radical and eternal self-giving (*pro nobis*) is not a giving up or loss of divinity (*in se*). This serves as a parable of the human condition. Identity is constituted in relation to others, not an original solitude. Grace comes to us from without. Yet the self is never merely a passive stream. The human person is neither an object of pure reception nor a mere channel of other-regard. Outka affirms a constitutive interdependence in our historical identities, but the self is not “a kind of reed on the intersubjective field.”<sup>34</sup> Divine affirmation of distinctive persons and vocations warrants concern for the self and the other.<sup>35</sup>

Valuing *particular* persons through mutual recognition is honoring to God. Agape, for example, “enjoins one to identify with the neighbor’s point of view, to try imaginatively to see what it is for him to live the life he does, to occupy the position he holds.”<sup>36</sup> This description means the neighbor’s “point of view” also has worth. The neighbor is a fellow creature able to track meaning and value. If Augustine is right, we are all restless until we rest in God. Neighbor love remains open to competing interpretations of divine action. Given the dynamics of sin and evil, disagreement is expected.<sup>37</sup> Conflicts are not merely apparent or verbal. Given serious difficulty with our desires and our intellect, some may be simply endured with forbearance. Some must be opposed without usurping divine judgment. Even the most ecumenical theology can be pushed to the limit of enmity if it is indexed to justice.

But the complexities of religious traditions, unlike individual propositions, resist wholesale rejection. They usually defy general characterization in any meaningful sense. It

takes a lot of work to avoid trivial generalization and get to the point of achieving disagreement. It is hard to imagine the development of Christian theology without sustained engagement with, and education by, various philosophical and religious traditions and their spiritual practitioners. These historical precedents, admittedly partial and imperfect, show that inter-religious dialogue is not simply an occasion for greater understanding and tolerance. These goods should not be underestimated. But most of these developments have been understood in terms of relations of similarity and difference rather than raw assertion of identity. They have been catalysts for a deepening of the faith that seeks understanding through spiritual transformation.

Faith in the action of God means that Christian identity is never fixed by exclusion.<sup>38</sup> Improvisation, argument, and discovery are endemic to the confession of grace and ongoing recognition of the Spirit. Virtues like love are always in motion, participating in a divine love that experienced death and resurrection. Given epistemic fallibility and the inadequacy of language about God, attention persists even when the other's point of view is taken to be erroneous or misguided. In fact, religious "others" can be considered justified in their beliefs even if they are thought to hold false beliefs. One might even regret that certain forms of religious life that we find enchanting are unavailable given human finitude as well as the diminishments wrought by sin.<sup>39</sup> These attitudes can be distinguished from self-doubt, counter-assertion, or minimalist notions of toleration.

Agreement and reconciliation are welcomed when possible. Self-critical apologetics remain necessary for acts of judgment. But agape demands a Christian approach to religious pluralism that is without fear or defensiveness. There is neither epistemic nor affective closure in the search for wisdom. Christian confession of the goodness of the world invites joy and wonder in relation to its diversity. These are the critical labors of non-possessive love that register a Christian desire for truth *and* relationship in a world marked by stubborn violence and ignorance. The Christian does not live by differentiation from the non-Christian, hunting down idolatry and occupying the territory of true faith.

To be sure, religious diversity can be construed theologically as an artifact of human rebellion. Naming idolatry is not the exclusive province of religious exclusivists. Consider, for example, the many contemporary Christian ethicists critical of those who "worship manna." All reality rests in the gracious love of God. But for the Augustinian at least, corrupt knowledge corresponds to a corrupt refusal of this love. Unlike the historicism about religion that opens this essay, this claim about human nature is perennialism on stilts. Such is our lot in this interim of the time between the times. All religions, including Christianity, stand under the judgment of God. Christian humility does not preclude testifying to this prophetic judgment. But the God who justifies the ungodly in their unbelief does not *belong* to Christianity or the church. Diversity has been made a gift to the church through divine providence. In any case, love is for the *actual neighbor* rather than an imagined conception of the good. Just as "sin remains parasitic on a good creation," the fundamental value of persons posited by a divine love is deeper than any human distortion.<sup>40</sup>

As should be clear, my appropriation of Outka's discussion of the justifying reasons of such agape traverses familiar theological controversies. Outka highlights Kierkegaard's religious commitment to equality and Barth's attention to neighbor love partaking in the seriousness of a divine command. These distinguish the *content* of agape in relation to nontheological grounds for equality, including "the intrinsic goodness of communion with God and the correlative treatment of witness."<sup>41</sup> They bear directly on beliefs and practices regarding religious diversity. To these I now turn.

### Following at a Distance: Love's Asymmetry

A persistent feature of Outka's work is the claim that God is the subject of unique veneration. The love of God is "the first and greatest commandment" (Matt. 22:38). God, not social cohesion or civilizational progress, is the highest good. God is not to be measured against other goods. There is nothing beyond the triune God. God is the source of all that is true, good, and beautiful. This wild and complex God knows us better than we know ourselves. Another corollary follows that is prominent in the Augustinian tradition: "fellowship with God is the greatest of all goods, the only source of inexhaustible happiness, the herald of our final destiny."<sup>42</sup> Turning away from this fellowship is Adam's mysterious sin, the primal disruption of friendship with God and others.

Augustine's obsession with the safety of his immutable God funds many critics, especially *within* the Christian tradition. They find the concrete neighbor lost in the intensity of his strenuous mood, not to mention his doctrine of eternal alienation. Authentic encounter with religious others is never risked in his passion for deliverance from the wounds of nature. Disembodied souls remain only as steps in the ascent to the eternal perfection of a God that he cannot lose. All other loves are unstable, swallowed up into (his) God. All forms of secular life must be directly sanctified or abandoned. In fact, given the pervasiveness of sin and self-deception, Augustine often leaves the impression that God is the only good we might safely wish for our neighbor because it is what he most desires. It is the only good without qualification. It is the only good that exists for its own sake.

Alternative stories can be told about Augustine's anxiety.<sup>43</sup> Like Kierkegaard's account of God as the "middle term," to love the neighbor "in God" is meant to protect the neighbor from the self's thieving and possessing tendencies.<sup>44</sup> It is not accidental that Augustine's famous vision at Ostia followed shared conversation. Yet we have serious difficulty in desiring this good in the right way. Dialogical self-awareness is prone to view others merely as potential coreligionists in *our* imagined new life of grace. Even willing others to love God can be an entirely self-enclosed monologue. Augustine practically invents the idea that confession harbors defensive vanity and prideful domination. Our own piety must be subject to relentless criticism as we progressively reshape our existence and redirect our desires in response to grace. For Augustine, ultimately, we must defer genuine happiness (and holiness) to the hope of afterlife. All piety in time is veiled as a work in progress for the *viator*.

This does not mean all love is a semblance, but it is one way to affirm the truth in Luther's dictum that we live *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and sinner. There is no closure this side of the eschaton. Critics of Christian efforts to love their non-Christian neighbor in this world might prefer a dose of otherworldly hyper-Platonism. Augustine was that rare church father who lived a good part of his life as a non-Christian. Despite his many religious conversions and beautiful rhetoric, however, his own example of interreligious dialogue was not a model of charitable engagement or transfigured generosity.

Outka's God-centered ethic does not travel in an excessively monistic direction. Human flourishing consists in the love of God *and* love of neighbor. Temporal goods and virtues have their integrity and intelligibility, albeit in relation to God. This relation is neither inscrutable nor obsessive. We are accountable to various finite goods. They buoy us in the sufferings of creaturely life. The transcendent God revealed in creation, the covenant with Israel, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ are not jealous of *any* temporal love. Fellowship with *this* God need not crowd out recognition of other loves or other goods. Religious cultures, therefore,

are not divided into the kingdoms of good and evil. By my lights, Augustine's own intoxication with God admits as much. Proximate ends are not always only means to an ultimate end. If God's power is fully expressed in an eternal act of self-pouring love, then the highest good is always a common good.

But, alongside latter-day Augustinians like Kierkegaard and Luther, Outka helpfully emphasizes the *sui generis* character of a relation to God. There is a "difference between loving God oneself and commending love for God to others."<sup>45</sup> Divine love always exceeds our reciprocity: "even if you have thrust in as far as possible, the source is always a bit further in."<sup>46</sup> In itself, humanity cannot establish this fellowship. God alone desires this relationship and creates the desire for it within us. God alone is the agent of conversion. The original movement is unilateral. From our side, "to love and glorify God should be equated with nothing else."<sup>47</sup> As the Westminster Catechism famously opens, to "glorify God and to enjoy him forever" is our "chief end." Despite analogies of grace, love for God is finally intelligible when it is radically distinguished from all other loves. This supreme and passionate devotion cannot be transferred to "our neighbors or ourselves on pain of idolatry."<sup>48</sup> The neighbor is not God. Creatures are to be loved as creatures. God is to be loved as God.

Yet love to God is allied inexorably to love for neighbor. They do not exist without each other. Both are *commanded*. The second is *like* the first. In Outka's terminology, they are governed by "mutual irreducibility and mutual inherence."<sup>49</sup> The difficult logic of these loves assumes neither subordination nor (necessary) competition. This nuanced yet definite account of the relationships between love commandments is an important contribution to Christian ethics. What implications follow for religious diversity?

The unity in diversity of the love commands suggests another route into love's relation to religious diversity, particularly in terms of the goodness of the God relation and the character of the church's witness *for* the world. To love what God loves, Outka counsels, "differs from insisting that we are to love others *as* God loves them."<sup>50</sup> We can never substitute for God. This means we can never presume to play God. We can never command belief.

In a fruitful reading of Hans Frei, Outka helpfully focuses on normative questions about the identity of Jesus and its relevance for interactions with others. These "ethical extrapolations" fall under what Outka describes as a motif of the Protestant Reformers: "that of following after rather than imitating."<sup>51</sup> We are not second Christ figures. God may love others into freedom, but we must not. The influence of Barth is notable. To "follow after"—*after* revelation, *after* grace, *after* cross and resurrection—again sets a limit on our activities. They especially limit pretensions of salvific love from the human side. The church, for example, "can only follow Jesus and not reproduce his work."<sup>52</sup> The person and work of Jesus remains unique and distinct. It is the mysterious particularity that guarantees universality. This is the joy, the promise, and the scandal of the Gospel.

To identify Jesus as savior and mediator does not deny he also is a model for Christian ethics. Who God reveals Jesus to be is held in concert with who Jesus reveals God to be. The Christian community finds warrant for a "normative universalism" in the inclusive activity of Jesus, who includes all humanity in his humanity. In faith, it points to the evangelical mission of God in Word and Sacrament. Such testimony is both belated and anticipatory. Looking backward and forward, it involves witness, service, and hope for everyone. Messianic witness includes exhortation and proclamation through the Spirit to God in Christ. But it does not place the religious "other" under the law of our self-interpretations or ontological imaginations. Nourished by the practices of the church as a pilgrim community called by God, such

activity is not a program or achievement. It is a fitting expression of neighbor love taken up by the life of the church as a whole. The church lives by faith that God will make use of the obedience of sinners. It looks to the obedience of the One who was a sacrifice for the “sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2) and “made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). That we belong to this God is our “only comfort in life and death,” as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it. Life in the visible church externally reminds us of this comfort.

Christians, however, are not the guardians of divine grace. Outka elegantly describes this account of Christology and ethics in these terms: “when we release our works from the weight of a final seriousness they cannot bear, we may be able to display a certain lightness in the way we comport ourselves, a lightness that resembles only superficially the frivolous or the complacent.”<sup>53</sup> That is to say, the confident faith of those beloved of God sets them free to love others in freedom. For Barth, the triune God gathers and sends the Christian community to witness to this freedom on a corporate and cosmic scale. This affirmation of the missional nature and purpose of the church is central to any Christian ethics and to any Christian who seeks to follow this triune missionary God.

The neighbor, however, is not simply the patient of Christian love. Love is not a prudential strategy for effective evangelism, however problematically that term has been understood. They too have a mission to the Christian community. In a remarkable exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Karl Barth renders any neighbor as the “representative of the divine compassion.”<sup>54</sup> In Barth’s hands, this most famous story is not moralized by appeal to boundary-breaking universalism or the reduction of love to God to neighbor love. It does not celebrate an “anonymous Christian” imitating a predetermined notion of Christian virtue. But it also does not imagine the Christian in the role of the Good Samaritan to the world, a self-serving temptation in situations of cultural privilege. Rather, the event of mutual encounter is itself a transfiguring sacrament of grace.

The neighbor is *actually* the bearer of the mercy of God in the drama of salvation. In and through wounded humanity, we are opened to the goodness of God in the sacred presence of the neighbor. Here Barth records the many strangers in redemptive history narrated in the canon, outsiders who come from surprising places into the circle of divine election. For Barth, such neighbors are “a visible sign of invisible grace, a proof that I, too, am not left alone in this world, but am borne and directed by God.”<sup>55</sup> Any response to Jesus Christ—revealed as the divine neighbor with humanity—involves a response to God and neighbor. Loving and being loved, in the vulnerable solidarity of this grace, is a proleptic enactment of the kingdom. The church bears witness to the fragile beauty of this reality in its social practices of giving and receiving.

## Conclusion

Religious diversity shapes much of contemporary Christian experience and self-understanding. For many, it is a regrettable feature of life. There is a palpable sense of loss and tragic distortion. This can fund resentment or resignation. Others evaluate it positively as enriching possibilities for transforming their relationship with God, who loves in freedom. Diversity reflects the radical plurality of the divine life itself. A plurality of crowded religious options is part of the joy of creaturely existence. Still others find the life of the Christian pilgrim exists between some mixture of these passions. They express the eschatological tension of living between the “already” and the “not yet.” Whatever perspective is taken, exploration of *ethical* commitments

that follow from Christian confession in relation to this reality of religious diversity is inescapable. It is already changing the landscape of the discipline of Christian ethics. Caught today between so many religious and secular fundamentalisms, Christian ethicists should not allow their attention to other pluralisms to marginalize greater attention to the distinctiveness of this most human form of otherness.

## Notes

1. For a helpful survey of these themes, see John Kelsay, "Plurality, Pluralism, and Comparative Ethics: A Review Essay," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 403–28; Ian Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Michael Kessler, ed., *Political Theology for a Plural Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2. I borrow the language of rivalry from a philosophical work that has exercised significant influence on Christian ethics: Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). For the theological criticism of MacIntyre's notion of rivalry, see Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

3. See Oliver O'Donovan, "Reflections on Pluralism," in *The Kuyper Center Review: Politics, Religion, and Sphere Sovereignty*, ed. Gordon Graham (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1–13; and David Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity: Thomas Aquinas and Pagan Virtue* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

4. See Susan Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 1–13.

5. See, for example, William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009); David Clairmont, *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics: On the Person as Classic in Comparative Theological Contexts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Elizabeth M. Bucar, *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic Women and Iranian Shi'i Women* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011); Elizabeth M. Bucar and Aaron Stalnaker, eds., *Religious Ethics in a Time of Globalism: Shaping a Third Wave of Comparative Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and G. Scott Davis, *Believing and Acting: The Pragmatic Turn in Comparative Religion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

6. For an instructive account, see Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

7. On resemblance and the tasks of comparison, see David Decosimo, "Comparison and the Ubiquity of Resemblance," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (March 2010): 226–58. Decosimo's essay helpfully shows ways comparison "is as powerful in what it tends to hide as in what it reveals" (236).

8. Gene Outka, "The Particularist Turn in Theological and Philosophical Ethics," in *Christian Ethics: Problem and Prospects*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 107. For Outka, "God is neither governed nor circumscribed by the tradition. . . . But those in the tradition rely on what we see as God's self-disclosure in this particular history" (108). For a revealing contrast to this approach to the Christian tradition, see Gene Outka, "Remarks on a Theological Program Instructed by Science," *The Thomist* 47, no. 4 (October 1983): 572–91.

9. Gene Outka, "Theocentric Love and the Augustinian Legacy: Honoring Differences and Likenesses between God and Ourselves," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (2002): 98–99.

10. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially 422–57; and Linda Zagzebski, "Self-Trust and the Diversity of Religions," *Philosophic Exchange* 36, no. 1 (2006): 63–75.

11. For two different accounts, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); and Kevin Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

12. On the origins, value, and limitations of the paradigm, see Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and*

*World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). Barnes argues that these categories “remain all too easily at the level of ‘isms’” and “tends to serve the interests of the pluralist agenda only” (8). D’Costa also argues Hick’s pluralism can be read as “a new form of triumphalism and imperialism, albeit of an agnostic type” (10).

13. Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 65. Kathryn Tanner also argues that “pluralist theories of religion are implicated, despite their best intentions, in colonialist forms of discourse,” in “Respect for Other Religions: A Christian Antidote to Colonialist Discourse,” *Modern Theology* 9, no. 1 (January 1993): 1–18. For a critical engagement with the politics of Tanner’s theology in light of religious pluralism, see Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

14. John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue,” in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 282. Milbank also points out that these approaches give little attention to the “idea that religions can be considered as social projects as well as worldviews” (285).

15. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, eds., *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

16. See Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1983); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); and Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and Other Names* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

17. For an excellent overview of Barth’s discussion of religion, see Garret Green, “Introduction: Barth as Theorist of Religion,” in Karl Barth, *On Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1–35. Green shows that Barth does more than attack “religion” as a Christian heresy.

18. On this relationship, see also Edward Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994). Vacek’s account of love explicitly unites moral theology, dogmatics, and spirituality.

19. Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 4.

20. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953). It is noteworthy in this context that Nygren’s classic text, and its generative method of “motif research,” was intended as a contribution to the history of religions and comparative philosophy of religion. I do not here address the fraught history of religious comparison through the lens of love’s relation to justice, especially in terms of Jewish-Christian dialogue. For a recent treatment, see Leora Batnitzky, “Love and Law: Some Thoughts on Judaism and Calvinism,” in *Kuyper Center Review: Revelation and Common Grace*, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 157–72. Batnitzky helpfully avoids Nygren’s distorting contrasts even as she identifies relevant theological and anthropological ones.

21. Outka, *Agape*, 9.

22. See Stephen Pope, “Love in Contemporary Christian Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 167–97.

23. Outka, *Agape*, 13.

24. Outka cites from Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*: “Your neighbor is every man, for on the basis of distinctions he is not your neighbor, nor on the basis of likeness to you as being different from other men. He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God: but this equality absolutely every man has, and he has it absolutely” (*Agape*, 159).

25. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 68.

26. Outka, *Agape*, 212. Many find that only a doctrine of universal salvation can meet the demands of theodicy. See, for example, Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). Outka argues that “all human beings are included in the range of Jesus’ redemptive activity,” in “Universal Love and Impartiality,” in *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Edmund S. Santurri and William Werpehowski (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 8. Outka’s formulation is ambiguous, and he typically expresses an eschatological reserve about God’s ultimate judgment. Of course, the scope of divine love and human freedom with respect to

redemption remain disputed in Christian theology in ways that admit multiple interpretations (i.e., reprobation, purgatory, annihilationism, or universalism). I simply note that Outka's vision of last things appears closer to Barth than to Augustine. For a critical reading of Augustine's effort to hold together his account of grace with human kinship in creation, see John Bowlin, "Hell and the Dilemmas of Intractable Alienation," in *Augustine's City of God: A Critical Guide*, ed. James Wetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 186–204. From different angles, see Keith A. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011); and Brian Brown, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth, eds., *Augustine and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

27. Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," 73.
28. Outka, *Agape*, 131.
29. Gene Outka, review of *Religion and the Individual: A Jewish Perspective*, by Louis Jacobs, *Shofar* (Summer 1994): 109.
30. See David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 357–401.
31. Tanner, "Respect for Other Religions," 14.
32. Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," 64.
33. See Gene Outka, "On Harming Others," *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 381–92.
34. Gene Outka, review of *Character, Vision and Narrative*, by Stanley Hauerwas, *Religious Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (April 1980): 112.
35. See, for example, Outka's discussion of Barth on "obedient willing" and "personal providence" in "Universal Love and Impartiality," 50–53.
36. Outka, *Agape*, 311.
37. In an otherwise critical review of *Prospects for a Common Morality*, Alasdair MacIntyre commended Outka's Augustinian account as a singular effort to explain "some aspects of moral and philosophical disagreement." See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Prospects for a Common Morality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 2 (June 1995): 487.
38. On Christianity and relational identity, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
39. On the reality and danger of "spiritual" regret, see Lee Yearley, "Conflicts among Ideals of Human Flourishing," in *Prospects for a Common Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 233–53. Such recognition is an important part of Charles Taylor's account of modern secularity in which religious faith is taken to be "one human possibility among others." See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 3.
40. Gene Outka, "Augustinianism and Common Morality," in *Prospects for a Common Morality*, 142.
41. Outka, *Agape*, 206.
42. Outka, "Augustinianism and Common Morality," 126.
43. See Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
44. For Kierkegaard, "the love-relationship is a triangular relationship of the lover, the beloved, love—but love is God. Therefore to love another person means to help him to love God and to be loved means to be helped" (*Works of Love*, 124; see also 70 and 87).
45. Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," 65.
46. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 26.
47. Outka, "Theocentric Love and the Augustinian Legacy," 99–100.
48. *Ibid.*, 101.
49. Outka, "Self and Other in a Theological Framework," in *A Just and True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 141.
50. Outka, "Theocentric Love and the Augustinian Legacy," 102.
51. Gene Outka, "Following at a Distance: Ethics and Identity in Jesus," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1987), 150.

52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 155.
54. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 1.2, 416.
55. Ibid., 436.