

# Thomas Aquinas and *Caritas*: Biblical Theology, Christian Virtue, Prophetic Discourse

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In this essay I probe the views of three modern scholars and the claims they make about the love-command in the Christian tradition. I do so with a view to comparing their perspectives to what Thomas Aquinas says about love (*caritas*). In the first section I try to imagine how Aquinas might respond to Anders Nygren's *Eros och Agape* (1930–1936). I focus on the limitations of Nygren's approach when compared to the many senses in which *agape* is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. I argue that Aquinas's discussion of *caritas* is richer and more faithful to Scripture than Nygren's description of love. The second section considers William Moran's view of love in Deuteronomy. Moran was a biblical scholar who specialized also in Assyriology. I try to show that Moran's understanding of covenantal love relies too much on the model of a diplomatic treaty and how Aquinas's teaching about *caritas* and happiness illuminates the *feeling* of love for God. The third section engages Richard Rorty's critique of religious discourse in the public sphere. Rorty was a liberal philosopher in the analytic tradition, and in his view religious zeal inevitably leads to cruelty and the exclusion of "the other." For this reason, Rorty would exclude all talk of Christian love from public policy debates. With the help of Aquinas's account of love and the common good, however, we might be better able to discern and confront particular forms of cruelty that Rorty himself was content to ignore.

## Nygren's Account of Love *versus* The Septuagint's Use of *Agape*

The Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren published an influential account of Christian love in *Agape and Eros*. Nygren emphasized a sharp break between God's love for human beings and their capacity to



respond to him in love.<sup>1</sup> According to Nygren, *agape* is revealed in the boundless generosity shown by God in sending his Son to redeem humanity. For Nygren, *caritas* as described by Thomas Aquinas gives far too much credit to the human ability to obey God's commands and to the human desire to see God. Nygren finds *caritas* suspect, because on his reading, it closely resembles the Greek conception of *eros*, an acquisitive and egocentric kind of love that is motivated by selfish human needs.

However, the binary opposition that Nygren set up between *agape* and *eros* is overly simplistic.<sup>2</sup> *Agape*-love has many dimensions, contrary to Nygren's portrayal of *agape* as always and everywhere the same, coming down from above. For a strong sign that *agape* is multi-dimensional, let us consider how the Septuagint uses the Greek word *agape* for a wide range of experiences:

For *the conjugal/romantic love* between Isaac and Rebecca (Gen 24:67), and the love Jacob feels for Rachel (Gen 29:18).<sup>3</sup>

For *the love that parents feel toward their children*: Abraham's love for Isaac (Gen 22:2), and Jacob's love for Joseph (Gen 37:3-4).<sup>4</sup>

For *the love that human beings have for God*: "and doing mercy unto thousands, for those who love me and keep my ordinances" (Exod 20:6).<sup>5</sup>

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1. There are two English translations of Anders Nygren's influential work, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1939); Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*, trans. by Philip S. Watson, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); trans. of Anders Nygren, *Den kristna kärlekstanken genom tiderna: Eros och Agape*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1930–1936).

2. Amy Laura Hall, "Complicating the Command: Agape in Scriptural Context," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 19 (1999): 97–113. See also Gary Badcock, "The Concept of Love: Divine and Human," in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 30–46.

3. Jack M. Sasson, "The Servant's Tale: How Rebekah Found a Spouse," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65 (2006): 241–65.

4. Steven A. Rogers, "The Parent-Child Relationship as an Archetype for the Relationship between God and Humanity in Genesis," *Pastoral Psychology* 50 (2002): 377–85.

5. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 65. An electronic version of the NETS is available online: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/>.



For *loving one's neighbor*: “and you shall *love* your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18).<sup>6</sup>

For *the love of family*: When Obed was born to Ruth and Boaz, the women of Bethlehem said to Naomi: “He shall be to you a restorer of life and shall sustain your gray head. For your daughter-in-law, who *loves* you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him” (Ruth 4:15).

For *loving mercy and the good*, as in Amos 5:15, “We have hated evil things and *loved* the good things,” and also in Micah 6:8, “Has it been told to you, O man, what *is* good or what the Lord seeks from you, but to do judgment to *love* mercy, and to be ready to walk with the Lord, your God?”<sup>7</sup>

The witness of the LXX, then, suggests that *agape* may be much more like Aquinas’ account of *caritas* than Nygren is willing to concede. God’s grace is not opposed to human nature.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the infused virtues of faith, hope, and love bring human nature to fulfillment, so that human beings can flourish in friendship with God.

There is a sense in which Christian love and hospitality should be extended to all, but an honest acknowledgement of the limits of my resources shows me that I cannot hope to be the benefactor of *every* person.<sup>9</sup> Aquinas describes *caritas* as an ordered love. Our obligation to love others is not always and everywhere the same. Aquinas speaks of a hierarchy of loves, but his reflections on this hierarchy do not merely follow the pattern of our natural impulses to “love those who love us.” Certain forms of preferential love are a legitimate part of the Christian life.<sup>10</sup> The Christian is called to love God first of all; to love herself; to love and honor her parents, but also

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6. *NETS*, 99.

7. *NETS*, 799. See also Walter Brueggemann, “Walk humbly with your God: Micah 6:8,” *Journal for Preachers* 33, no. 4 (2010): 14–19. Juan I. Alfaro, *Micah: Justice and Loyalty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 68–69.

8. “Moreover, the perfection of a virtue is not contrary to the inclination of nature” (Thomas Aquinas, *De Caritate*, Art. 8, ad. 7). Online: <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/QDdeVirtutibus2.htm#8>.

9. Leo Tolstoy vividly describes how he came to realize his own limits as a benefactor in *What Then Must We Do?* trans. Aylmer Maude (Hartland: Green, 1991), chapter 10.

10. Søren Kierkegaard consistently rejects the possibility of a role for preferential friendships in the Christian life in *Works of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 39. Gene Outka also argues for “equal regard” rather than “special relations” (*Agape: An Ethical Analysis* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972], 7).



to leave them when she marries and to show a preferential love for her husband and their children; to love those who are preeminently holy; to show love to a hungry person and to those who are in prison, even to love the enemy.<sup>11</sup>

Acquinas' interpretation of the order of charity recognizes the importance of different spheres of life and acknowledges the need for different schemes of priority, depending on the immediacy of various needs and the different connections that people share.<sup>12</sup> In certain situations, a person might even be obligated to help a stranger before helping one's own father. The place to begin, however, is with *caritas*, the love we are called to have for God.

### Acquinas: Whether *Caritas* is Friendship?

Acquinas had a gift for asking fruitful questions, questions that illuminate the moral and spiritual landscape, and help us see things that might otherwise remain hidden. His simple question about the nature of *caritas* is like that: Is love for God a form of friendship?<sup>13</sup>

First, Aquinas considers various arguments against the view that *caritas* is a form of friendship. Aristotle says that friends want to be together and enjoy one another's company (*Eth. nic.* 8.5). In Isa 6 and many other passages of Scripture, however, that does not seem to be possible, because God is said to be transcendent, dwelling "far above us." Moreover, according to Aquinas, friendship is characterized by mutuality and reciprocity (cf. *Eth. nic.* 8.5). But in Matt 5:44, Christ teaches us to love our enemies, even though there is little prospect of them returning our good will. It is very important that Christ's followers try to love their enemies, Aquinas says, but that kind of one-sided love is not the kind of friendship-love that he counts as the *most* important.

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11. Jean Porter, "De Ordine Caritatis: Charity, Friendship, and Justice in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*," *The Thomist* 53, no. 2 (1989): 197–213.

12. Stephen Pope. *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love*. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 64.

13. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 23, art. 1. "Whether Caritas is Friendship?" (all translations of the *Summa theologiae* (ST) are taken from New Advent's online edition: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html>).



Acquinas considers a third class of objections based on Aristotle's identification of three foundations of friendship. (1) Friends can bond over some activity or project that interests them both. Team-mates in sports may have that kind of relationship, or two people may discover that they like the same style of music. But these kinds of friendships typically fade away as soon as one person's interests change. (2) People can become friends because they are useful to each other, as often happens in business or in political campaigns. But here, too, instrumental friendships usually run their course after a short time. (3) Aristotle says the highest form of friendship is when both people are seriously committed to the life of moral virtue. Jerome and Paulinus seem to have had that kind of friendship when they exchanged letters with each other about the Scriptures, both of them fearing God and sharing a faith in Christ. Aquinas would certainly not be opposed to this kind of friendship, either, but he wants his students to focus their imaginations on a paradigm for friendship that is even deeper and more meaningful than the friendship between Jerome and Paulinus.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus' saying in John 15:15 most clearly expresses the idea that the love between God and human beings is a form of friendship.<sup>15</sup> In the final hours that Jesus and his disciples had together on earth, just before his arrest and crucifixion, what did he say to them? "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." That is the kind of closeness and mutual love between Jesus and his friends that is at the heart of the Christian life.

## Acquinas: Whether *Caritas* Can Be Lost?

In John 15 Jesus is just about to lay down his life for his friends, and they declare that they are also willing to lay down their lives for him. Peter is the first to say to Jesus, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." Jesus seems to know their limits and their frailty, however, and he says

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14. See a pair of very helpful essays by Joseph Bobik, "Aquinas on *Communicatio*, the Foundation of Friendship and *Caritas*," *Modern Schoolman* 64 (1986):1–18; idem, "Aquinas on Friendship with God," *New Scholasticism* 60 (1986): 257–71.

15. Anthony Keaty, "Thomas's Authority for Identifying Charity as Friendship: Aristotle or John 15?" *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 581–601.



to Peter, “This very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” Indeed, soon after Jesus was arrested, they all forsook him and fled.

That night of terrible fear in which Peter denied that he ever knew Jesus could have been the end of their friendship. The dream they shared of God’s Kingdom, had it not died with Jesus on the cross? Peter seems to have thought so. In John 21 we see Peter returning to his old way of life. He goes back to the Sea of Tiberias, back to his fishing nets. Then something astonishing happens. A stranger comes walking along the shore and calls out to the fishermen as if he knows them. John is the first to recognize that this is not really a stranger, but Jesus. They cook some of the fish on the fire, and share a meal together. Jesus takes Peter aside where they can talk together more privately, and almost immediately their conversation turns into something of a dialogue on love.

While we do not normally “see” the nuanced quality of their dialogue in English, in Greek there is a subtle difference between ἀγαπᾶν (to love selflessly) and φιλεῖν (to love as a brother or as a friend).

15 Ὅτε οὖν ἡρίστησαν λέγει τῷ Σίμωνι Πέτρῳ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων; λέγει αὐτῷ, Ναί, κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι **φιλῶ σε**. λέγει αὐτῷ, Βόσκει τὰ ἄρνια μου. 16 λέγει αὐτῷ πάλιν δεύτερον, Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με; λέγει αὐτῷ, Ναί, κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι **φιλῶ σε**. λέγει αὐτῷ, Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου. 17 λέγει αὐτῷ τὸ τρίτον, Σίμων Ἰωάννου, **φιλεῖς με**; ἐλυπήθη ὁ Πέτρος ὅτι εἶπεν αὐτῷ τὸ τρίτον, Φιλεῖς με; καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Κύριε, πάντα σὺ οἶδας, σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι **φιλῶ σε**. (John 21:15–17)

Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love (ἀγαπᾷς) me?” Peter replies, “Lord, you know that I love (φιλῶ) you.” In modern Biblical scholarship, the use of these two different verbs is commonly taken to be no more than a Johannine preference for linguistic variation.<sup>16</sup> Another reading is possible, however, one that interprets the difference as Jesus calling Peter to a deeper commitment. The

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16. Among those who see “a difference in style only” are Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 2:1102–3; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 394; James Barr, “Words for Love in Biblical Greek,” in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird*, ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 3–18; and Leon Morris’s chapter “Variation—A Feature of the Johannine Style,” in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 293–319.



“friendship love” of John 15 is not to be discarded, but so long as Peter remains only at that level of love for Jesus, he will probably fall short as a disciple. Jesus wants Peter to love him more deeply. He is summoning Peter to respond to him with an *agape* type of love.<sup>17</sup>

If we accept this more traditional interpretation, Peter’s anguish is somewhat more evident, because he knows how miserably he failed Jesus in that crucial moment (John 18). Jesus does not condemn Peter, however. He restores his friend and gives him a task: “If you love me, feed my sheep.” When Aquinas writes about Peter’s failure in John 18, he discusses it under the heading of a question: Whether charity is lost through one mortal sin? Aquinas notes that when Leo the Great comments on Peter’s failure, he takes a gentle approach: “Our Lord saw in Peter not a conquered faith, not an averted love, but constancy shaken. Tears abounded where love never failed, and the words uttered in trepidation were washed away by the fount of charity.”<sup>18</sup> William of Thierry agrees with Leo, “Charity in Peter was not quenched, but cooled” (*De nat. et dig. amoris* 6). Aquinas thinks Peter’s failure was more serious than that, however. Peter did lose *caritas*, he says, but he soon got it back. And after this encounter between Jesus and Peter in John 21, in which their fellowship with each other is restored, it is easier to trust in the words of 1 John 4:18 about perfect love that drives out fear.<sup>19</sup>

## The Background of Covenantal Love in Deuteronomy: Diplomatic Treaty or Family Relationship?

George Mendenhall recognized that a fruitful comparison could be made between treaty agreements in the Ancient Near East and the covenants between God and Israel in the Old Testament. The basic features of the treaty genre include: (1) preamble, (2) historical prologue, (3) stipulations,

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17. Biblical scholars who favor this “spiritual formation” interpretation include David Shepherd, ““Do You Love Me?”: A Narrative-Critical Reappraisal of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in John 21:15–17,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010): 777–92; K. L. McKay, “Style and Significance in the Language of John 21:15–17,” *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1985): 319–33; Ceslas Spicq, *Agapé dans le Nouveau Testament* (3 vols.; Paris: Gabalda, 1958), 3:230–37; and William Hendriksen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970): 494–500.

18. *ST* II-II, Q. 24, art. 12.

19. Scott Bader-Saye, “Thomas Aquinas and the Culture of Fear,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25 (2005): 95–108.



(4) deposition, (5) divine witnesses, (6) curses and blessings.<sup>20</sup> These forms were used to seal alliances between powerful kings and their vassals.

A “covenant” is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance. As indicated by the designation of the two sections of the Christian Bible—Old Testament (= covenant) and New Testament—“covenant” in the Bible is the major metaphor used to describe the relation between God and Israel (the people of God). As such, covenant is the instrument constituting the rule (or kingdom) of God, and therefore it is a valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate the biblical ideal of religious community.<sup>21</sup>

The Shema in Deuteronomy 6 is one of the most recognizable expressions of covenantal love:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.<sup>22</sup> (Deut 6:4–7)

As William Moran studied the love command in Deuteronomy in the light of this vassal-treaty background, it seemed to him that the emotional core of love did not play a substantial role in forming these covenants, and this led Moran to wonder: Does Deuteronomy teach that love for God can be *commanded*?<sup>23</sup> If so, that would mean that it is very different from the emotional feelings of *eros* or romantic love, and different too from the feelings of *philia*, or friendship. Moran answered this important question in the affirmative. Yes, human love for God is commanded in Deuteronomy.

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20. See the survey by Gary Beckman, “Hittite Treaties and the Development of the Cuneiform Treaty Tradition,” in *Die deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerke: Redaktions- und religionsgeschichtliche Perspektiven zur “Deuteronomismus”-Diskussion in Tora und Vorderen Propheten*, ed. Markus Witte et al. (BZAW 365; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006): 279–301.

21. George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1996), 1:1179; cf. George E. Mendenhall “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954): 49–76.

22. From this point on, scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (RSVCE).

23. William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77–87.



Love for God is shown in the act of being loyal to this *one* God. To love God means that we walk in his ways (Deut 10:12) and keep his commandments (Deut 19:9). What covenant partners may *feel* or not feel for each other is of much less importance than what they have promised to do for each other and the deeds they perform in order to fulfill those promises.

In the last decade, however, Moran's political/diplomatic account of covenantal love has been challenged by other scholars, because it seems to rule out the possibility that human beings might have a passionately felt love for God. Jacqueline Lapsley's essay "Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy" is emblematic of this shift.<sup>24</sup> Following the lead of Frank Moore Cross, she observes that the treaty language itself should be understood as an extension of fraternal love and family closeness, which are prior to diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> Lapsley also looks carefully at the tenth chapter of Deuteronomy, where she finds that Israel is allowed an intimate glimpse into God's heart. He *chose* long ago to love Israel's forefathers, and it was he who led Israel out of its bondage in Egypt. Israel is God's "treasured possession," and he calls on them to respond to his love by transforming their *hearts* and turning to him in love (Deut 10:16).

### Acquinas: *Caritas* and the Desire for God

While Moran's interpretation of the love command moved the discussion in the direction of Kantian ethics and the obligations of duty, Lapsley and Cross have helped to make the scholarly discussion of covenantal love more open to *caritas* and the desire for "friendship with God." Now it is in that context that I would like to focus on what Aquinas might contribute to this discussion about love for God as something that fulfills the desires of the human heart.

Acquinas believes that human beings always shape their actions toward some end.<sup>26</sup> We can easily imagine some people pursuing selfish ends even at the expense of other people, but we can also imagine the motives of some

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24. Jacqueline Lapsley, "Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003): 350–69.

25. Frank Moore Cross, "Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel," in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3–21.

26. *ST* I-II, Q. 28, art. 6.



other people who pursue ends that are more just and show more concern for the good of others. So we can ask: What is the best end, the one that transcends all other desires? The best end for human beings cannot be wealth, power, glory, or the pleasures of the body, as all of these are fleeting and can be snatched away from us quickly, as the story of Job teaches us.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the highest good ought to be something that can be shared by all people, otherwise it would be partial in scope and incomplete.<sup>28</sup>

The proper end of human life is to be in right relationship with God, says Aquinas, to love God above all things: “Now it is charity that unites us to God, who is the last end of the human mind, since *he that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him* (1 John 4:16). Therefore the perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity.”<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps a few words are needed at this point to help bring out what Aquinas means by “radical” in this context. One of the maxims of ancient Greek philosophy was “nothing in excess.” Aquinas, too, regards temperance (self-control, moderation) as a very important virtue.<sup>30</sup> Temperance is the virtue that restrains physical pleasures, especially those associated with eating, drinking, and sex. However, temperance also applies to less tangible forms of desire. Consider three of the virtues that are subsidiary to temperance: meekness helps us restrain anger, clemency helps us restrain our desire to punish others for wrongs they have done, and studiousness helps us restrain vain curiosity.<sup>31</sup>

However, in the love command as we find it in Deut 6 and Mark 12:30, love for God is without moderation. Scripture teaches us to love God “with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”<sup>32</sup> Or, as Bernard Lonergan puts it, being in love with God is experienced as love that is unrestricted, without limit, without qualifications, conditions, or reservations.<sup>33</sup>

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27. David Elliot, “The Christian as Homo Viator: A Resource in Aquinas for Overcoming Worldly Sin and Sorrow,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34 (2014): 101–21.

28. *ST* II-II, Q. 58, art. 5.

29. *ST* II-II, Q. 184, art. 1.

30. *ST* II-II, Q. 141, art. 2. See also Shawn Floyd, “Aquinas on Temperance,” *The Modern Schoolman* 77 (1999): 35–48.

31. *ST* II-II, Q. 157, art. 3.

32. *ST* II-II, Q. 27, art. 6.

33. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 104–6.



Here again, a few words of explanation might help us grasp Aquinas's claim that charity/*caritas* is the *form* of all the virtues.<sup>34</sup> When he says that charity is “the *form* of all the virtues” he means that charity is the highest virtue and that all the other virtues find their deepest meaning when they are shaped and guided by charity. “Charity is the mother and root of all the virtues.”<sup>35</sup> It is charity that unites and gives direction to all the other virtues—faith, hope, wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance—helping us in our pilgrimage to fulfillment in God.

While charity is primarily love of God, it also includes love of neighbor.<sup>36</sup> God is to be loved above all else, and all other things are to be loved in relation to God.<sup>37</sup>

For since our neighbor is more visible to us, he is the first lovable object we meet with, because *the soul learns from those things it knows to love what it knows not*, as Gregory says in a homily (*In Evang.* xi). Hence, it can be argued that if any man loves not his neighbor, neither does he love God, not because he is more lovable, but because he is the first thing to demand our love: and God is more lovable by his goodness.<sup>38</sup>

Mercy is a constituent part of *caritas*, since mercy is “man’s compassionate heart for another’s unhappiness.”<sup>39</sup> Mercy begins as a feeling or disposition similar to grief over another person’s suffering. Certainly there are some merciful actions that are beyond the scope of obligation, but a wide range of merciful actions—physical, emotional, and spiritual—do present themselves to us as obligations. A person who consistently refused to show mercy to others could justly be called “hard-hearted.” And what hope would there be for a society that turned its back on merciful practices? <sup>40</sup> Paul says in Gal 5:22 that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are being poured into our

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34. *ST* II-II, Q. 23, art. 8.

35. *ST* I-II, Q. 62, art. 4.

36. Meghan J. Clark, “Love of God and Neighbor: Living Charity in Aquinas’ Ethics,” *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 415–30.

37. *Ibid.*, 419.

38. *ST* II-II, Q. 26, art. 2.

39. *ST* II-II, Q. 30, art. 1.

40. Alex Tuckness and John M. Parrish, *The Decline of Mercy in Public Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).



hearts: love, joy, peace, kindness, and gentleness, and they are not meant to be hoarded there for own private benefit.

## Religious Zeal as Suspect: Richard Rorty

So Aquinas teaches that love for God and neighbor must take root deep in the Christian's heart. When sociologists look at religion, however, they are rather more impressed by the ambiguity of religion. Religion, they say, can be creative and have prosocial effects, or religion can be destructive and have harmful effects on society. We do well to be alert to both possibilities.

For Richard Rorty, however, the destructive effects of religious zeal eclipse any of the good that religion might do. That is the one great lesson that liberal democracies ought to learn from the history of the wars of religion. Early in the sixteenth century, Hernando Cortes brutally slaughtered thousands of Aztecs in Mexico under the banner of the cross.<sup>41</sup> France was devastated by a series of wars in which Protestants and Catholics killed each other on account of their religious differences.<sup>42</sup> In the seventeenth century, England's disastrous civil war was also fueled by competing religious beliefs.<sup>43</sup>

Seeing that religious zeal is responsible for so much of the bloodshed and cruelty that plague the world, says Rorty, we should do whatever we can to eliminate it from our public life. The pragmatic aims of democratic deliberation do not require any kind of religious justification. The overall goal of procedural democracy is to let everyone have their say, and religious zeal is always threatening to usurp that process. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* describes the ironic pluralist as one who recognizes that disagreements about the socially constructed good will probably always persist in public life. An ironic pluralist hopes for a resolution of these conflicts that he can live with, but he understands how important it is to be

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41. Inga Clendinnen, "Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty: Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico," *Representations* 33 (1991): 65–100.

42. For an excellent historical introduction to these conflicts, see Mack Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

43. Charles Prior, "Religion, Political Thought and the English Civil War," *History Compass* 11 (2013): 24–42.



open to the other sides of an argument.<sup>44</sup> That is how progress is achieved in politics. As for religious commitments, if we cannot root them out of our hearts altogether, we ought to at least keep them confined to the sphere of our private lives, with other desires that are merely “preferences.” Let literature and the voice of the “strong poet” replace religious dogma, and let our public life be characterized by a romantic version of polytheism.<sup>45</sup> According to Rorty, it is much better to embrace that kind of openness and diversity than to zealously proclaim the need to obey the Biblical command to “love God with all your heart.”

### **Zeal *versus* Compassion: The Stories of Elijah and Elisha**

We might be surprised, though, to find that many of the same issues raised by Rorty are already being discussed in the Hebrew Scriptures. We catch a glimpse of this ongoing point/counterpoint in the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah burned with heroic zeal for the God of Israel and for the true worship of that one God. Elijah challenged Queen Jezebel’s prophets to a contest on Mount Carmel. Could they call upon *their* gods to send down a fire that would consume the sacrificial bull on their altar?

And it was at noontime, Elijah ridiculed them, and said, “Cry out in a loud voice, for he is a god! Perhaps he is conversing, or pursuing [enemies] or relieving himself, perhaps he is asleep and will awaken!” And they cried in a loud voice, and gashed themselves, according to their custom, with swords and with spears, until blood poured on them. And as noonday passed they prophesied until the time of the [afternoon] offering, but there was no voice, no one answered and no one heeded. (1 Kgs 18:27–29)

Then it was Elijah’s turn.

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44. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 91–95.

45. Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47–21.



And at the going up of the [afternoon] offering, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel, and I am Your servant, that by Your word I have done all of these things. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, and this people will know that You are Lord God, and You will turn back their heart.” And there fell a fire of the Lord, and consumed the burnt-offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and the water that was in the trench it licked up. And all the people saw, and fell on their faces and said, “The Lord, He is The God, The Lord, He is The God.” (1 Kgs 18:36–39)

Whereupon Elijah had all of Jezebel’s prophets put to the sword.<sup>46</sup>

Elisha was the hand-picked successor to Elijah, but his attitude toward people of other religions turned out to be very different from that of his master. Naaman was a great general from Syria, but he suffered from leprosy. None of the doctors could help him, but a little slave girl from Israel suggested that he go to see Elisha in Israel. How often does a great military leader follow the advice of a little girl? But Naaman did go to see Elisha, and Elisha told him to go and wash himself seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kgs 5:1–19). Then he would be cured.

Naaman became angry, because he thought that his suffering was being mocked by the prophet. However, his servants convinced him to do as Elisha said, and he was astonished to find that it worked. Now I know, said Naaman, that Israel’s God is the one true God. But when I return to Syria, the king will require me to go into the House of Rimmon and bow down with him in that temple. What shall I do then?<sup>47</sup> Here is Elisha’s chance to prove his own love for The Lord, to demand that Naaman conform to Israel’s ways, or else suffer the same consequences as Jezebel’s prophets. But what does Elisha say? “Go in peace.” Already in the story of Elisha and Naaman, then, there is an implication that it is possible to love God deeply, without humiliating the one who is different from us; to show compassion and to be faithful to God, without imposing our views on others.

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46. Patricia Berlyn, “Elijah’s Battle for the Soul of Israel,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40 (2012): 52–62.

47. Stuart Lasine, “‘Go in Peace’ or ‘Go to Hell’?: Elisha, Naaman and the Meaning of Monotheism in 2 Kings 5,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 25 (2011): 3–28. See also the chapter devoted to the story of Elisha and Naaman in Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 135–66.



## ***Evangelium Vitae*: From a Culture of Death to a Civilization of Love**

St. Thomas pushes our discussion a step farther, however, when he asks, “Whether fraternal correction is an act of charity?” (*ST* II-II, Q. 33, art. 1). If we saw that a person on a journey was about to take a wrong turn and head down the wrong road, we should call out to him and warn him. Certainly if we did not call out to that misguided person, we would be guilty of not acting in a loving way.

In the case of legalized abortion, I take this to mean that Christians have a responsibility to speak out against a law that allows someone to take the life of an unborn child: Turn back! Do not do this! Rorty’s primary political goal is to avoid cruelty, but he is willing to overlook the cruelty of abortion, which has ended the lives of millions of unborn children in the United States. One reason why it is so easy to do away with unborn children is because they have no voice. According to The United States Supreme Court and those who follow Rorty, the unborn child has no legal standing as a person. In a society guided by utilitarianism and the quest for an advantage over others with whom we compete, an “unwanted child” is regarded as “inconvenient,” a drag on the quest for prosperity. Who will miss these little children if they are “eliminated” quietly, since they contribute nothing “useful” to society?

John Paul II was an advocate—indeed more than an advocate, a prophet—for a Civilization of Love. *Evangelium Vitae*, the Gospel of Life, is his call to leave the culture of death behind. He identifies abortion as the most widespread and dangerous practice of the “culture of death,” one that causes grave harm to the common good. In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II offers a reflection on the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis. Cain is embittered because God prefers the offering of his brother Abel over his own offering. After he leaves the altar, Cain does not take the opportunity to amend his way of life, or to prepare a more worthy offering for the next time he comes to worship. Instead, he nurses resentment in his heart, and when he sees an opportunity to strike, Cain eliminates his rival.

Then God comes to confront Cain and asks him a very simple question: “Where is your brother Abel?” “What?” says Cain. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain’s rude exaggeration says in effect: “People *keep* cattle, sheep, and bees in the way You are suggesting, Lord. I know where my *animals*



are, so I can make use of them, but I do not keep track of *Abel's* whereabouts in that way. So, why are you asking *me?*”<sup>48</sup> But God has not put this question to Cain because He lacks information about the location of Abel's lifeless body. His question is meant to awaken Cain's conscience about his brother, the one that he was obligated to love: “Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!”<sup>49</sup> That is how Cain, the first murderer, comes to symbolize the culture of death.

According to Matt 18:6, it would be better for a person to have a millstone hung around his neck and to be cast into the sea, than to harm one of God's little ones. By Aquinas's account, we can say that Jesus says this because of: (1) his zealous love for God the Father, the same kind of zeal that motivates him to undertake the cleansing of the temple, (2) his love for little children, his desire to protect them from harm, and (3) his love—shown in the form of a warning—for those who might be contemplating actions that will harm others and their very own souls.

### ***Caritas*: Biblical Theology, Christian Virtue, Prophetic Discourse**

Clearly, whoever wants to speak about the Christian vision of love enters into a complex and ongoing discussion. The dialogue is many-layered and if we want to understand it well, we have to take account of many sources. Every question that is raised has received more than one kind of answer. Every answer that is proposed invites further commentary and interpretation.

The field of Biblical Theology suggests that some of the key texts for understanding the nature of *caritas* are the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis, The *Shema* in Deut 6, the prophetic narratives of Elijah and Elisha, Jesus' teaching about love in the Synoptic Gospels, the richly nuanced discussion found in the Johannine traditions, and Paul's letter to the Galatians. My own imagination has been captured by Aquinas's account of *caritas* as a virtue.

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48. Cf. Kenneth Craig, “Questions Outside Eden (Genesis 4:1-16) Yahweh, Cain and Their Rhetorical Interchange,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 86 (1999): 107–28; Paul Riemann, “Am I My Brother's Keeper?” *Interpretation* 24 (1970): 482–91.

49. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, No. 8. Online: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html)



Therefore it is natural for me to regard Nygren's treatment of agape-love as incomplete, as too "vertical" and in need of the "horizontal" corrective provided by Aquinas' account of neighbor-love.

While Mendenhall and Moran see Deut 6 as a formal diplomatic treaty, faithful worshiping communities are much more likely to be moved on a deep emotional level by the words of The Shema. According to Aquinas, this One God fulfills the desires of the human heart, and all our actions find their deepest meaning when they are oriented to God as the final end. While Mendenhall and Moran are not "wrong" about the treaty model, Aquinas gives us an account that this is more grounded in direct human experience and more faithful to the feelings that Christians have in their life-long encounter with scripture.

Richard Rorty's conception of liberal democratic debate presents another kind of challenge to any form of deeply felt *caritas*. His admonition to people of faith is: Leave your faith at home, in the private sphere. Do not let it intrude in the forum of public debate, where all arguments should be "secular" and "free" from religious discourse.

Why do I characterize this conflict between religious commitment and Rorty's restrictions on religious discourse as a "prophetic" encounter? Because the prophet Amos heard a similar argument from Amaziah the priest, when his message about God's love and justice began to annoy the king:

And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread *there*, and prophesy *there*; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." (Amos 7:12–13)

When Jeremiah the prophet delivered his message on the steps of the Temple in Jerusalem, the priests responded in a similar way. He was banned from the Temple precincts and ordered not to come back. In Jer 20:9, however, we get a vivid sense of how hard it was for him to remain quiet:

If I say, "I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,"  
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire  
shut up in my bones,  
and I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot.



At some point, then, it appears to be inevitable: the Christian vision of *caritas* feeds sacred discontent in the public sphere, and provides a strong motive to seek social change where it is needed. In the opening paragraph of *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II says: “The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion. . . . Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel! (1 Cor 9:16).”<sup>50</sup>

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50. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990). Online: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html)