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Not too long before his death in 1968, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked whether he expected to see his loved ones again on the other side of death. Barth responded: “I am afraid not only the loved ones.”¹

For some Christians this may be a shocking perspective: to be eternally confronted with those other people, which they preferred excluded, ignored or forgotten already in this life. But Barth was right, there seems to be no easy way to be saved from those whom we do not like. Moreover, the prospect of facing up to the ones we have tried to ignore, to get rid of, to exclude, to oppress or to forget is a daunting one. It seems that not even eternal life or heaven promises the peace of mind we may have been longing and praying for during the travails of our earthly life.

Is heaven, then, after all such a good thing? Should we go on wishing to go to heaven? Does the beatific vision really represent an exciting object of hope, “in which God opens himself in an inexhaustible way to the elect, will be the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion”?²

What do we Christians mean by salvation? Are we excited by the prospect of salvation? What salvation do we actually await? Are we longing to be saved from terrible people, from the many forms of suffering, and from injuries and disappointments that may have made our lives on earth a sad experience? Do we hope to be saved from illness, limited time, limited space, evil, death, fake news, and ambiguous language? Do we want to be saved *from* something *for* something? Do we expect to be saved alone or with others, and, if the latter, who are these others whose co-presence emerges on the horizon of eternity? Ultimately, are we expecting to be saved *from* this world or *with* this world, *from* this universe or *with* this universe? Does Christian hope for salvation offer a way out of the trappings of this universe or does it signal the completion of God’s creative project with this universe? What does Jesus Christ have to do with human salvation? How is the church involved in this salvific process?

We Christians have often paid lip service to the insight that Christian faith is totally eschatological, that means totally oriented toward the decisive transformation coming to us from God.³ We seem to have little difficulty in *believing in* eschatology, in the ultimate consummation of existence in God, but considerably more difficulty in acknowledging the intimate connection between such a belief and our everyday life.

¹ One version of this often narrated anecdote is cited by Eberhard Busch, “Eine Reformierte Stimme”, *Letter from the Karl Barth-Archives*, 10 December 2002 (Nr. 4), 6-7, here 7.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Dublin: Veritas, 1994, § 1045.

³ See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. (from the 6th ed.) Edwyn C. Hoskyns, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, 314: “If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ. Spirit which does not at every moment point from death to the new life is not the Holy Spirit.”

To be sure, Christian hope and belief in salvation must never be confused with human optimism. Optimism is a belief in the reliability and proper functioning of our own systems. Optimism wants more of the same, embraces a calculable future, and an undisturbed engineering project, whereas hope implies change, transformation and divine correction, coordination and completion of our human projects.⁴

Christians do not believe in ideologies stressing never ending human progress. Rather, Christian hope for salvation concerns the future of individual persons and of the entire community of the living and dead disciples of Christ, i.e. the community of saints, as well as God's created universe(s) and God's people – whether Christian or not.

Moreover, as Pope Francis recently emphasised, the earth is our common home. “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”⁵ Thus, any hope for salvation *from* this world seems misplaced.

Salvation or Reconciliation?

There is a great spectrum of approaches to the relationship between hope and hopes and related concepts of salvation. With regard to salvation, it has been remarked that “few words proper to Christianity's core vocabulary have at present a less defined meaning”.⁶ The spectrum of belief in salvation stretches from individualist beliefs in God or in Christ as “my personal saviour”, on the one hand, to a belief in God's redemptive work in Christ on behalf of the whole of creation, on the other hand. Salvation may refer to what I expect God to do for me, my family, my church and my country in this life, or it may refer to what we expect God to do with parts or with all of humanity in the *eschaton*, that is at the end of time. Tensions, that characterise our conflicting hopes for salvation today, are, not surprisingly, already present in our religious history – including in the biblical writings. In the Hebrew Scriptures God is called upon as saviour both by individual persons and by the people as a whole. The Book of Psalms contains the full spectrum of connotations of this cry for salvation. “While in the gospels the stress is more on the present, something already real for those who believe in Jesus, as time passes the sense of salvation undoubtedly shifts towards the future, the destiny of the faithful after death, and this next-worldly and individualistic dimension came to dominate more and more.”⁷

Adequate preparation of one's personal record meriting salvation became a task increasingly organised by church administrators for faithful Christians. This trend led to the widely shared conviction that outside the church there was no salvation, and it culminated in the High

⁴ In my forthcoming book *Reasons to Hope*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, I offer a more comprehensive discussion of the difference between optimism, hopes, hope, and radical hope.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudatio Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015, 12.

⁶ Adrian Hastings, “Salvation”, in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pyper, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 639-40, here 640. George Newlands and Allen Smith, *Hospitable God: The Transformative Dream*, Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2010, 140, echo this assessment: “Salvation and damnation are enormous themes . . . The more they are studied, the clearer it is that they are *infinitely heterogeneous*.” (Original italics.)

⁷ Hastings, “Salvation”, 640.

Middle Ages when in 1302 Pope Boniface VIII solemnly declared that every human being wishing to attain salvation needs to be subordinated to the Roman Pontiff.⁸ Although the Protestant Reformation challenged any such papal condition for salvation, by and large even the churches of the Reformation have continued to stress an individualistic understanding of salvation.

In spite of recent attempts to widen the perspective on salvation, for example in the different branches of liberation, political, feminist, queer, ecological and other types of emancipatory theology, a deep rooted dualism continues to permeate Christian approaches to salvation. For many Christians, salvation concerns the next life, while this life and this universe ultimately remain only of passing significance and interest. Individualist and bourgeois calculations of personal affirmation and vindication, of administrative approval of one's own particular stamp collection – so to speak – at the entrance port to heaven, these and related approaches have made a mockery of any serious consideration of the divine-human relationship, on the one hand, and of the belief in God's presence in Christ in *this* world, on the other hand. Individualisation, objectification, instrumentalisation and sentimentalisation of Christian belief in salvation have rendered the concept of salvation so problematic that it might perhaps be wise to put it in quarantine for some time and instead concentrate on alternative and potentially more appropriate concepts for God's creative and transformative project, such as, for instance, *reconciliation*.

Salvation seems to presuppose an understanding of human life on earth as fallen, deprived, hopeless, faithless, and ultimately incapable to love. In other words, the need for salvation reflects much of Augustine's theological anthropology and its widespread legacy in Western Christianity.⁹ If one insists on the depravity of humanity and the single-sided character of God's redemptive and forgiving action, one is likely to go for salvation.¹⁰ If, however, one wishes to stress mutuality (not symmetry!) in the relationship between God and human beings, one is more likely to go for reconciliation as the more appropriate eschatological concept. However, reconciliation ought not to be understood as a one-sided achievement. Whatever is offered must also be accepted, including forgiveness, an integral element within reconciliation whether human or divine. "The Lord's Prayer with its suggested mutuality linking divine forgiveness with 'as we forgive those who trespass against us' and the injunction of the Sermon on the Mount, 'first be reconciled to your brother' (Matt. 5: 24) provides a model."¹¹ If salvation has less regard for concrete Christian praxis¹², reconciliation has more.

⁸ "Porro subesse Romano Pontifici omni humanae creaturae declaramus, dicimus, diffinimus omnino esse de necessitate salutis." Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 41st ed., Freiburg: Herder, 2007, 387 (no. 875).

⁹ For a discussion of Augustine's anthropology and resulting theology of love see Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010, 45-65.

¹⁰ Cf. Adrian Hastings, "Reconciliation", in Hastings et al., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, op. cit., 597-8, here 598.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² The term 'praxis' refers to a human action accompanied by critical and self-critical reflection or contemplation.

In the Roman Catholic Church one can observe increasing references to reconciliation in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Hence, the sacrament of penance or confession was renamed the sacrament of reconciliation. It now affirms both trajectories of the Christian praxis of reconciliation: being reconciled with God and being reconciled with the members in the community of saints (the church) now belong together. Moreover, we also need to be reconciled with our environment, our earthly common home. In his encyclical letter *Laudatio Si'*, Pope Francis elaborates on this connection: “Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth.”¹³ Referring to biblical narratives, such as the story of Noah, Francis concludes: “These ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.”¹⁴

Reconciliation, thus, seems to express more adequately what Christian belief in God’s initiative in Jesus Christ implies for our understanding of the ultimate purpose of the created universe. God became human not in order to reject God’s own project of creation, but to bring it back to its proper course and calling and to reconcile it in love with God’s creative initiative. The purpose of incarnation, then, is not to reduce women, men and children to a state of utter dependence and passivity and large-scale contempt for their own lives and environment, but to endow them with hope in God’s future, with faith in God’s presence, and with love for God, for each other, for their emerging selves, and for God’s creation.

Hope, faith and love are not human products, but, in the words of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), “theological virtues” infused by God’s grace.¹⁵ Hope, faith, and love thus are God-given approaches to reality. They are not mere objects of belief, but energetic categories of Christian praxis in this world. They are divine endowments through which we human beings are invited to live our lives in God’s creative and reconciling presence. They are not visions of a divine future, but agencies of a divine-human relationship starting here and now. These three theological virtues, then, are God-given eschatological agents of transformation.

In this regard, the relationship between human time and divine eternity becomes important. Time and eternity are to be distinguished, but not to be separated within the framework of Christian hope. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas tried to capture the theological difference between time and eternity like this: time is the measure of changeable human life, whereas eternity signifies the quality of God and of divine presence.¹⁶ God’s eternity is present in human time, but on God’s terms and not on our human terms. There is, then, the potential for an intimate relationship between eternity and time, but no room for any form of

¹³ Pope Francis, *Laudatio Si'*, 37.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 34: *Charity*, trans. R. J. Batten, OP, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1975, 41 (2a.2æ. 24, 2).

¹⁶ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2: *Existence and Nature of God*, trans. Timothy McDermott, OP, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964, 145-7 (1a. 10, 4).

identification between time and eternity. Human longing for unending time and immortality has nothing to do with God's gracious offer and gift of divine eternity.

The will to explore, shape and further develop this intimate relationship between God's eternity and human time leads us to God's love and the human praxis of love.

The Eschatological Potential of Love

Christian thinkers have often debated the ability of human beings to love. As with salvation, much depends on our anthropological starting point: Are we, like Augustine, convinced of humanity's utter depravation and hence reserve genuine ability to love to God? Or are we, like Thomas Aquinas, convinced that, in spite of the Fall, God has endowed human beings with the potential to become genuine agents of love? How much grace and how much freedom to love have we human beings received from God? Are we prepared to accept these gifts and run with them?

While we still have much to learn from Augustine's expressions of the deep-seated human desire for God¹⁷, we can also benefit from Thomas Aquinas' insistence that we have been created in God's image and are invited to participate in the divinely ordained network of loving relationships – loving God, our fellow human beings, God's creation, and our own emerging selves. Thomas speaks in this regard of our vocation to become *friends* of God. He shares Augustine's theology of desire and Augustine's concentration on God as the centre of all love. However, he does not share Augustine's pessimism as far as *human* love is concerned.

God and our neighbour are those with whom we have friendship. However, in our love for them there is included love for love itself (*dilectio caritatis*), for loving our neighbour and God means that what we love is that we and our neighbour should love God, in other words have love.¹⁸

Love is infused into our souls and it includes a co-orientation to the divine creator of love. Søren Kierkegaard speaks in this regard of God as the “middle term” in all genuine love relationships.¹⁹ And in his famous poem *Canal Bank Walk*, the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh considers the Holy Spirit as a third party in the kiss of a loving couple.²⁰

Whereas Augustine contrasts God's love with human fallenness, Thomas celebrates the God-given human ability to love and thus opens anew the horizon of mutuality (not of symmetry) between divine and human friendship. Within this horizon, a human culture of love can be developed. However, a culture of love is always threatened by forces keen to control, to

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 201 = X, xxvii (38).

¹⁸ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 34, op. cit., 86-7 (2a.2æ. 25, 3; quotation adapted). For a more detailed discussion of Thomas Aquinas' theology of love, see Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, op. cit., 77-83.

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 58.

²⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Peter Kavanagh, Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1987, 294-5

administer and to calculate. Reducing human freedom unavoidably leads to the mutilation of our capacity to love.

Reformation protests against instrumentalising both divine and human love in the Christian church culminating in the sixteenth century have not necessarily led to a wonderful new departure in the Christian culture of love. Although Martin Luther, for instance, stressed both the sovereignty of God and the freedom of the Christian, he re-emphasized at the same time the radical fallenness of human nature and the resulting need for God's saving intervention in Christ.

Rather than concentrating on the development of a culture of love and reconciliation in this world, the Reformation favoured a theology of individual salvation. God's intervention in Christ, more specifically, in the cross of Christ, remained the primary focus of Christian hope for salvation. Although Luther affirmed the human ability, however imperfectly, to love and contemplated the mystical union between the human being and God, he also bears some responsibility for shifting attention from God's gift of love of humanity now to Christian love. Not surprisingly, Luther is among the first theologians to refer expressively to "Christian love".²¹

This shift of language is revealing: here love lost the character of God's universal gift to humankind. Instead, love became subordinated to Christian beliefs and confessions. Christological doctrine provides the matrix for the adequate understanding of love. Love has become a Christian possession. For Luther and for many of his followers, notably for the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren (1890-1978), the aim was no longer to affirm the praxis of love in light of Christian faith; rather it was to distinguish Christian love from other inferior forms of love. The confessional and dogmatic concern for the uniqueness of Christianity thus destroyed the attention to God's great gift of love and to its renewed divine affirmation in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Luther stressed the link between love and salvation in his famous text on *the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, but at the same time subordinated love to faith:

The Word of God comes first; after it follows faith, after faith love. Then love does every good work, for "love does no wrong, but is the fulfilment of the law" (Rom 13:10). However, the human being cannot come into agreement with God or act other than through faith. That means that not the human being through any sort of his works, but God brings about salvation through His promise.²²

In his globally influential work *Agape and Eros* (1930-6), Nygren further enlarged the contrast between the Christian understanding of God's love, identified as *agape*, and other

²¹ Cf. Martin Luther, *Adventspostille. 1525*. In *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10.I.2, Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1925, 1-208, here 68. For a discussion of this particular shift and of Luther's overall approach to love, see Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, 96-103.

²² Martin Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium. 1520*. In *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1888, 497-573, here 516 (my translation).

forms of human love, i.e. Jewish *nomos* and Greek *eros*. The split between the human experience of love and the particular Christian understanding of love is now total:

Even though the “humane” ideals of altruism and the ethic of sympathy may present on the surface certain similarities to Christian neighbourly love, they nevertheless have entirely different spiritual roots, and Christian love has really nothing at all to do with such modern ideas.²³

In spite of criticizing Augustine’s theology of love as an unholy mixture between agape and human desire (*eros*), Nygren remained indebted to central aspects of the Augustinian heritage. Like Augustine and Luther, Nygren approached love from anthropological and theological presuppositions that consider the human being first and foremost in terms of original sin, fallenness, guilt and damnation, i.e. as totally alienated from God. The best that can happen to the human being is to be used by God as a channel of divine love. For Nygren, the human person is not a divinely empowered subject or agent of love in her own right, but a mere instrument of God’s own love.

There is an important difference in approaching love from the experience of original sin, guilt and damnation or from the perspective of God’s good creation and the, of course always ambiguous, human potential for further relational development. Moreover, it does make a difference whether one approaches love from a coordinated view of human and Christian praxis or from a view that stresses the total hiatus between Christian and other human approaches to love. Do we Christians wish to own love or do we wish to share this divine gift with all humankind?

This necessarily brief and sketchy account of two major trajectories of love in Christian thinking might help to illustrate the radical contrast between two influential approaches to the eschatological potential of love in Christian faith. Love in the Augustinian-Lutheran-Nygrenian heritage refers to *God’s saving love*, i.e. God’s intervention into the hopelessly derailed course of human history. In this approach, the future of creation and any possible concern for the shape and renewal of this universe fall out of focus. Images of “God’s New Jerusalem” are not connected with this world. Nevertheless, love, yet only divine love, remains an eschatological force. It is understood here as a saving force from outside for those human beings who acknowledge God’s love as manifest in Jesus Christ. In the cross of Jesus Christ, the saving love of God has broken into the fallen world. Individual justification happens through faith in this love of God. Like Luther, though unlike Nygren, modern theologians have tended to affirm human agency and subjectivity in love, however, at times they have stressed the need to give away this human selfhood in perfect sacrificial love.²⁴

The other approach to love, inspired by the rediscovery of human subjectivity since the High Middle Ages and conceptualised by Thomas Aquinas, also affirms the eschatological

²³ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*, trans. Philip S. Watson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 95.

²⁴ See, for instance, Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 334: “Only love that has undergone death for the other and just thereby lives anew can be sure in itself.” See also the discussion of Karl Barth’s and Eberhard Jüngel’s approaches to love in Jeanron, *A Theology of Love*, 120-134.

potential of love. However, here God's creative and reconciling project provides the matrix out of which love flows as a force of transformation in and of this universe. Among theological contributors to the elaboration of this approach to love are, for example, Paul Tillich (1886-1965), Karl Rahner (1904-84) and Margaret A. Farley (b. 1935).

For these thinkers human desire does not contradict God's love; rather it represents the point of encounter between divine and human love. Here we encounter less suspicion of the human condition and a heightened interest in a realistic assessment of the divine empowerment of human love and the comprehensive network of love relationships to which human beings are called by God, reconciled by Jesus Christ, and inspired and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

Tillich affirms the divine centre of all human love, yet he does not reduce human love to mere copying of divine love. Moreover, he is aware of the need to attend even to the human self in any love relation. Of course, he is critical of egotism and selfishness. However, he knows that in the same way as self-control highlights the dimension of power in love, so justice towards oneself stresses the necessary dimension of justice in love. Facing the dangers associated with an estranged view of the self in love, Tillich can say: "Love reunites; justice preserves what is to be united."²⁵ Thus, in Tillich we find a theology of love that affirms the participation of the human subject in the church as that community of love where God receives, coordinates and transforms all of our works of love within his/her creative and reconciling project.

Love overcomes the separation, creates the into-each-other in which more comes into being than what is contributed by the individual persons. Love is the infinity which is given to the finite. That is why we love in the other whom we love not only the other, but the love which is in the other and which is more than his or our love.²⁶

Karl Rahner emphasises the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God. Like Thomas Aquinas, Rahner sees in human love always already the presence of divine gift and grace. Within the framework of his transcendental approach to theology, Rahner distinguishes between love as a reflected and explicit mode of action, on the one hand, and love as a not yet conceptualised transcendental horizon of action, on the other hand. Thus, I am able to love my neighbour as my neighbour – and not as a mere instantiation of my love of God. Here Rahner affirms the agency and subjectivity both of the one who loves and of the one who is loved. However, the fact *that* I can love my neighbour is already a result of God's gift of love, and thus never separated from God's love.²⁷

²⁵ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 71.

²⁶ "Love is stronger than death", thus the title of Tillich's famous sermon of 1940. "Liebe ist stärker als der Tod", in Paul Tillich, *Impressionen und Reflexionen: Ein Lebensbild in Aufsätzen, Reden und Stellungnahmen. Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XIII, Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1972, 249-52, here 250-1 (my translation). – See also Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, 166-67.

²⁷ Cf. Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God", in Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), 231-49.

Margaret A. Farley insists that love must be just – not only to the beloved but also to the lover herself. “A love will not be true or just if there is an affirmation of the beloved that involves destruction of the one who loves.”²⁸ She does not refer here to a justifiable giving one’s life for the beloved, “but rather to a letting oneself be destroyed as a person because of the way in which one loves another.”²⁹

One approach to love, then, awaits salvation of the individual person from this fallen world, while the other approach awaits the transformation of this universe into the Kingdom of God, reconciled through a network of just and powerful divinely inspired love relationships. If we adopt the second approach, we are committed not only to salvation, but also to God’s overall creative and reconciling project. How can we imagine this project and human participation in it more concretely?

Divine Creation and Transformation

Three popular understandings of God’s coming reign come to mind:

- (1) in terms of an anti-world. Everything present in this world must be negated and overcome before God’s reign can properly unfold. Such a dualistic belief denies the goodness of God’s creation and puts all hope in God’s new creation to come. Here, God’s new Jerusalem has nothing to do with this universe.
- (2) in terms of a pure and original paradise with beautiful landscapes, coastlines, mountains, animals and plants, though without human beings and without the effects of human involvement in this universe. This belief is also dualistic, though in a slightly different way: it acknowledges God’s good creation, yet it assumes that God’s creation of human beings has proved to be a failure. Human beings have added nothing to God’s great project.
- (3) A third group of people include the presence of human beings when imagining God’s coming reign, but in an assumed state of purity. Evolution, technological development and forms of human productivity have no place in such a vision of primordial purity. This image betrays a strong belief in God’s creation, though a weak belief in the ongoing and intimate relationship between God’s plan for and human involvement in this universe.

These and related attitudes to God’s coming reign do not reckon with a God-initiated and graced human creativity and reconciling praxis in this universe. Human beings are not considered as trustworthy partners in God’s realm of love. Rather, whatever they are and do cannot have any lasting value in God’s eyes. These types of eschatological imagination do not adequately reflect the fullness of biblical faith and Christian experience.

In spite of differences and tensions in the various biblical approaches to eschatology, there is a unity of faith in the divine transformation of the individual person, of human community and of the universe as a whole. God’s faithfulness to his creation and creatures is indivisible.

²⁸ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, New York/London: Continuum, 2006, 200.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 200f.

Human persons are created as relational beings, created for love – the love of God, of neighbour, of nature/cosmos/universe and of the emerging human selves. Humanity is not a collection of separate souls or a collective mass of faceless individuals; rather it is a dynamic community of unique persons in an evolving cosmic context. Therefore, the perfection of the individual cannot be imagined outside of the perfection of the others – and the other way round: the consummation of history and of evolution cannot be imagined without the consummation of individual persons.³⁰

The primary Christian approach to otherness and reconciliation is and remains love. The eschatological nature of love does not imply ultimate human power or control over the eschatological process itself. However, it does invite human participation in it. God’s love is not to be funnelled into human beings; rather all women and men are invited to become responsible agents of love in the complex network of loving relationships. This participation is not a denial of grace, but the consequence of grace. Human love, thus, need not be played out against divine grace.

Becoming a full and fulfilled subject with others and with God in and through love is an essential aspect of this eschatological dynamics. However, this insight must result in a critical and self-critical assessment of the structures of evil, sin and distortion that continue to challenge our journeys toward subjectivity, transcendence, community and transformation.

However, this awareness does not put a condition on love in terms of prescribing what needs to be done before one would be able to begin to love. Rather, the Christian praxis of love begins with love itself in order then to review the personal, structural, social, gender, political, economic, cultural etc. context in which love is taking place. Love provides the proper context for the deliberation of human freedom, hatred, conflict, sin, denial and indifference and the related theological issues of judgment, forgiveness, liberation and renewal.

Love, Hope, and the Work of Christ

I consider love to be the proper horizon for reflecting upon hope and faith. Moreover, I wish to argue that love is the appropriate horizon for the Christian understanding of the work of Christ, for reconciliation and for salvation.

The Apostle Paul and other early Christians interpreted the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as an event of cosmic significance: God has opened up a new ontological order. Inspired by a remark of Paul Tillich, we might distinguish three periods of major human concern or of existential anxiety in Christian history with the respective soteriological question:

- (1) *Ontological anxiety* in the patristics era: how can we find cosmic stability of being in view of the power of the devil and of demonic forces?

³⁰ Cf. Franz-Josef Nocke, “Eschatologie”, in Theodor Schneider, ed., *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, vol. 2, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2000, 377-478, here 476-7; and Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 354: “The resurrection of individuals is needed for the sake of the restored life of the community.”

- (2) *Soteriological anxiety* in the medieval era: how can I find a gracious God in view of my own sinfulness and damnation?
- (3) *Spiritual anxiety* in the modern era: how can I find meaning in life?³¹
- (4) *Relational anxiety* in our own late-modern/post-industrialised era: how can I find just and lasting relationships even though I wish to avoid anything that binds and obliges me and thus diminishes my freedom?

Different ages identified different concerns when reviewing the eschatological potential of the Christ event. Thus, a cry for *salvation now* directs us to the shifting concerns for salvation and forces us to rethink our own hope for salvation and its christological foundation in critical and self-critical terms. “What salvation means will largely depend on different perceptions of the problem that needs to be overcome. This may be the fear of death; the burden of sin and guilt; the threat of evil powers, natural and supernatural; a sense of condemnation in the face of divine justice, or of worthlessness arising in oneself or imposed by others; or a sense of meaninglessness.”³²

Moreover, an increased sensitivity toward such shifts in soteriological concerns and approaches redirects our attention to christology. Traditional soteriologies have all stressed the necessity to embrace faith in God’s work of love in Jesus Christ. Hence, Christian believers attempted to relate in faith to God’s work of love. They believed in God’s love and in its decisive intervention in Christ. Salvation, thus, became a matter of right belief. Although the Christian church has never defined or codified one single understanding of salvation, normally soteriological schemes have been established on the level of faith in the first place and not on the level of love.

In *Christus Victor*, Gustaf Aulén set out to defend God’s salvific initiative in Christ against any objective or subjective Latin theory of salvation.³³ Aulén repeatedly stressed God’s love as the source for God’s reconciling work in Christ. But he never considered human responses to this love other than in complete faith and submission to God’s love. A human praxis of love, initiated by God’s work in Christ, did not enter Aulén’s thinking. As with his Lundensian colleague Anders Nygren, Aulén’s aim was to defend both the sovereignty of God and Martin Luther’s view of God’s work in Christ rather than to consider how God may have initiated a form of divine-human project through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moreover, Aulén’s interpretation of the salvific drama of human salvation attempted to rehabilitate an understanding of Christ’s cosmic battle against the powers of evil as it was suggested by Paul, by many of the Church Fathers and by Martin Luther. Aulén’s and Nygren’s default position was human sinfulness and the human incapability to love.

If, however, we turn the table on classical Lundensian theology and approach Christ’s work through the perspective of God’s love, who initiated a process of transformation through the

³¹ See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, [1952] 2000, 57. Tillich discusses only three periods of anxiety; I have added the fourth.

³² Trevor Williams, “Salvation”, in John Bowden, ed., *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, London: Continuum, 2005, 1078-1080, here 1078.

³³ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert, London: SPCK, [1930 Swedish Original] 1965.

gift of love, then the potential of a divine-human praxis of love emerges at the centre of God's creative and reconciling activity. Such an approach neither denies God's sovereignty nor God's initiative, but it creates space for human responses to this divine offer of eternal partnership and friendship. It would also solve the age-old dilemma of spelling out how human beings are expected to connect to Christ's work more concretely: rather than concentrating on the suffering of Christ, on the faithful imitation of Christ's passion, on the emotional devotion of Christ's passion or on an ethical application of the merits of Christ's sacrifice to our lives, as disciples of Christ we could discuss the implications of having been invited, enabled and inspired by God to embark on a life of love with God, with each other, with God's creative and reconciling project and with our own emerging selves. This is not a Pelagian exercise; rather it is God's love that has initiated, accompanied and transformed the Christian praxis of love.

The focus would thus shift from what Christ has achieved once and for all to what Christ here and now wishes to achieve together with us on the strength and energy emerging from his love, faithfulness and ultimate rehabilitation by God in the resurrection. Attending to *Salvation now* would then require more than faithful assent and subsequent ethical application. It would call for the involvement of each and every woman, man and child in God's ongoing project of love in this universe. The drama of salvation would need to move out from the theatre of faith to the centre of the divine-human praxis of love. Salvation would no longer require human applause for what God has done; rather it would urge human involvement in what God is about to do. To be sure, the thought that God has invited us to co-operate in the process of creation and reconciliation represents a *costly grace*, while remaining mere observers of an inner divine drama amounts to nothing more than *cheap grace*.

Finally, the shift from belief in salvation to participation in the ongoing transformative praxis of love could greatly benefit from the energy unleashed by the various emancipatory movements in and beyond Christianity, such as liberation theology, feminist theology, post-colonial theology, gender and queer theology, ecological theology, political theology etc. Strengthened by their respective attention to the gift of life and its care, a re-reading of crucial passages in the gospels that elaborate on God's ultimate vision for his creation and for humanity in it could concentrate our attention afresh on Jesus's proclamation of God's reign in this universe. The stress on the death and resurrection of Christ in the forensic, classic, subjective and other versions of atonement has favoured acts of faith but not necessarily promoted acts of love. Hence, adjusting the priority of love over hope and faith redirects Christian life to the arena and requirements of this universe and leaves the afterlife to God's ultimate fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, the disciples of Jesus Christ, the followers of Mohammad and other religious movements. Inter-hope dialogue may be one of the more exciting results of such a new concentration on the primary gift of love.³⁴

Conclusion

³⁴ For a discussion of inter-hope dialogue in recent theology, see Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006, 15-17.

Love is the horizon in which Christians are invited to imagine God's coming reign and to cultivate their hope. Love is the divine gift that allows us to hope for the consummation of God's promises, not against but for and with the participation of humankind. Moreover, love initiates that network of dynamic relationships between God and human beings which Jesus Christ has confirmed in his ministry, proclamation, death and resurrection. Faith in this creative and reconciling love of God in Christ and in the Holy Spirit expects from God no less than the ultimate transformation and perfection of this universe, of all its relations and of each human person's life into the reconciled community of saints. This love is the basis for Christian hope. This love will remain in God's eternity even when faith and hope finally will have become redundant.

The Christian praxis of love, then, characterises the eschatological vocation of the church in this universe. It responds to God's creative and reconciling initiatives and accepts the responsibility to act on behalf of God's creative and reconciling project. However, the ultimate fulfilment and completion of the praxis of love rests in God's power. The church does not own love, hope and faith, but at best remains a credible community of practitioners in this universe – always in need of God's reconciling and transformative spirit.

If we share the Apostle Paul's excitement about this vision, we need no longer fear the presence of all of those others in "heaven". And we may begin to radiate the joy that our lives are part of God amazing project of creation, reconciliation and eternal transformation.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:12-13).