Prompt 3: Many feminist theologians propose to complicate traditional Christian accounts of sin in order to do greater justice to women’s experience. Consider Barbara Andolsen’s criticism of traditional accounts of sin. Are you persuaded by her arguments? Are there any ways left to describe sin generally, i.e., which can encompass both pride and sloth?

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REL/CHV 261

1 May 2014

Agape: The Path to Personal Growth or Subordination?

In my eyes, the meaning and purpose of our lives is to grow to love unconditionally. In a religious context, this means to reach agape, the highest type of love defined in the Bible. This selfless love is modeled by Jesus and his self-immolation upon the Cross. In parallel, self-love, or love motivated by personal gain, is traditionally seen as negative to the point of sin. Theologians recognize that selfless love isn’t possible due to human flaw; in fact, Reinhold Niebuhr refers to the inevitability of self-love in humans as “the root of human evil” (Andolsen, 70). Barbara Andolsen, in her article “Agape in Feminist Ethics”, dismisses these more traditional interpretations of agape and self-love, arguing alongside feminists that these views are too narrow. Claiming that feminine sacrifice leads to subordination and detriment in self-development in women, Andolsen pushes for a definition of agape that emphasizes mutuality and equality between two individuals. While arguments towards mutuality do evolve a more attainable type of love for humans, mutuality also highlights a potentially more sinful dependency on receiving from others. Furthermore, these feminists seem to disregard and blur the distinction between self-sacrifice and being meek or submissive.

Feminists argue that women have taken to self-sacrifice much more seriously than men, to the point where it leads to their self-degradation (75). Because women have historically been confined to the household and taken the role of caring for the household, the ethic of self-giving is more natural to their lifestyles. When women act out of self-sacrifice, they allegedly push down their virtues of honesty, courage, and self-assertion as well (76). This is especially unacceptable when the act of self-sacrifice is for the benefit of a man, who does not honor the same virtues of selfless love.

Andolsen provides views from feminists such as Margaret Farley, who are seeking to redefine agape as mutuality and equality between sexes (77). She argues that theologians have fallaciously defined agape as a one-way relationship, where one person is completely active and the other is completely inactive. Instead, real human love requires receptivity, and this connection that is fostered symbolizes respect, trust, and fidelity rather than submissiveness versus superiority (77). Mutuality highlights human dignity. This type of love can apply to both the private and public sphere of life and even bring the two spheres together, which unconditional selfless love can never achieve. This advantage demonstrates modern evolution toward balancing the morals of personal development and professional motives. Ultimately, however, Andolsen believes that in the Christian context, it is impossible to reform the standing moral attitude to incorporate women on a completely equal and mutual level with men (79).

In a practical sense, these arguments for mutuality can be very persuasive. Is it really possible for love to be completely independent of others’ actions? If unconditional love is not attainable in public life, then how do we compensate for the inevitable “sin” of self promotion? Mutuality accounts for this self gain through a sort of exchange, and thus this narrows the scope of how committing the sin of pride can be defined. Being able to recognize your own worth in the eyes of others is not pride, but rather a crucial step in pushing each other to be more and achieve more for life. Love can be seen as an act of growing, sharing, and learning together.

However, a large flaw I saw in the feminists’ arguments for mutuality surrounds the idea of dependency upon love from others (78). From this approach, there is a certain expectation held for those we love in order for us to fully realize the goodness and beauty in others. Is it fair for us to expect acts of love from others who are out of our control and shouldn’t act submissively to our expectations? The fact that mutuality is based on the acts of others lends to the possibility that our ability to love is fully out of our control. In fact, it is this type of expectation of others, I believe, that is inclined to pride. In order to feel love, we demand from others because we think we deserve what they have to give. Furthermore, once we attain that balance of giving and receiving, a baseline is set and we expect to receive even more. Instead of being a sustainable and long-term personal journey, love can transform into greed and personal satisfaction through pushing actions of others, which is more purposefully sinful than inevitably sinful. Does the fact that our ability to love resides in faith in others to reciprocate make us more spiritually and morally conscious? Or does it cause us to become even more detrimental to ourselves than the idea of self sacrifice? I believe it is borderline hypocritical to denounce self-sacrificial love as limiting , but then declare that we can only love if that love is returned by others who are out of control.

Andolsen refers to many feminists who believe the traditional overemphasis on self-sacrifice has led to a pattern of submissiveness and limitation particularly for females, because of their biological inclination towards nurturing others, specifically men (75). She cites Valerie Goldstein, who believes a separate sin of sloth is committed when women neglect their own development through acts of self-sacrifice (74). I find this feminist argument that women are at a disadvantage because they are more nurturing counterintuitive. Shouldn’t women take this natural inclination as a strength and not as a path to subordination? Why does an act of self-sacrifice have to represent a degradation of the woman’s individual being? Even if it is impossible to be fully selfless in action, I think Andolsen brushes over the fact that not only is self-sacrifice for a woman’s family extremely respectable, but it is also a choice, even in the 1980’s when her criticism was written. What Andolsen calls self-sacrifice for a woman can be instead seen as a commitment to using the woman’s own knowledge and abilities to share the best experience with her loved ones. Even outside of the context of the family sphere, selfless acts require higher levels of courage and perseverance. How can it be considered a sin to work to help those you love, which in turn also gives you personal experience and room for growth? It is not a violation of God’s will, and women do not drop who they are and lose themselves as individuals. Rather, it s a brave moral choice to push yourself individually for the greater good of not only the people who you love, but also as an impact on your community or society. . This in no way hinders the ability to, as Andolsen suggests, act responsibly (76). If a father decides to self-sacrifice for his children or his wife, than is this seen as submissive or honorable?

Not only does the biological difference between men and women play a huge difference in our roles in today’s society, but there is also an immovable historical precedence of male dominance. Because of this, I do agree with Andolsen that unfortunately men and women as equals can never be fully incorporated in the Christian doctrine (80). Yes, in the Bible, love is demonstrated though father and son, man and people. No, it is not likely that this love will be considered as between the Mother and Father in biblical context. However, does this prevent us from believing that women are not capable of achieving the same selfless unconditional love as men? The roles of men and women in society are constantly evolving, and self-sacrifice for women does not have to mean taking care of her household and restricting herself to meaningless tasks. Christian doctrines lay the foundation, but that does not mean they can’t evolve in the context of modern society.

In her feminist critique regarding how agape is interpreted by theologians and feminists, Barbara Adolsen presents an alternative mutualistic type of love. She claims that self-sacrifice tends toward sin, sloth, for women, as their natural inclination toward nurture causes them to disregard their individual needs to try to please others, in particular men. I disagree with Adolsen that selfless love is degrading for women and instead believe making self-sacrificing choices causes women to gain and experience greater virtues such as courage. Furthermore, mutualistic love cannot be a more equal alternative when it creates an expectation and dependency that can be even more purposefully sinful in pride. Despite this, I think she brings up a crucial point regarding the nature of selfless love. Selfless love is impossible to fully achieve; it is one of humanity’s greatest flaws. However, I believe this encompasses the idea of faith in God, or a higher power. Self-sacrifice and unconditional love isn’t realistic, rather idealistic. It gives you a goal to constantly be working for, providing you the opportunity to increasingly experience life through the perspective of humanity, rather than through a narrowed and limited individual view.

**This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.**

References:  
Andolsen, Barabara. “Agape in Feminist Ethics” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, p. 69-83. 1981.