Semănătorul (The Sower)

The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research

Volume 2, Number 2.

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel University of Oradea, and International Contributors, March 2022.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

Christian notions of love and theology in the context of the dialectics between individualism and collectivism

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the current dialectics between collectivism and individualism, more precisely, of the tension between, on the one hand, the claim of the preeminence of theology, in exchange for sacrificing individual freedoms, as in the case of collectivism, and on the other hand, the claim of prevalence individual liberties, at the cost of "elasticizing" theology and implicitly relaxing the ecclesial unity, as in the case of individualism, there is a critical perspective that theology would hinder individual freedom by positioning itself as a Berlin Wall between individuals that it insensibly separates them from each other. Against this dialectical background, love is valued at the expense of theology. The reason is that the former unites individuals, connecting them to each other, while theologies irrevocably separate them and restrict their freedom of thought while also endangering their personal well-being. In this article we aim to argue that love in general is inalienable from rationality and discernment, skills that are specifically theological, and Christian theology is inseparable from love, which is its original source and inspiration. Therefore, the adoption of love presupposes the adoption of discernment, and the acceptance of Christian theology implies, at the same time, the acceptance of love that animates theology.

KEYWORDS: love, individualism, collectivism, enemy, theology.

DEFINING THE ISSUE

Robert N. Bellah, in the religious section of the book *Habits of the Heart*, brings to the fore, along with other congregations of an American city, the Christian community pastored by Larry Backett. This congregation, according to the author of the book, is characterized by a family spirit, it is united around a normative set of theological theses such as the divinity of Christ, His exemplary morality, the immutability of God, the intrinsic value of the human being, the love of neighbor, etc. All those who are part of this community find themselves under the theological umbrella of dogmas, but those who do not agree with the

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entire dogmatic content are outside the umbrella and constitute the "wider society".[2] This is a religious collectivistic decoupage of the American society at the end of the twentieth century. A closed cultural reminiscence like an island surrounded by water. Collectivism, says Harry Triniadis, "may be initially defined as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives."[3]

However, since the seventeenth century, in Massachusetts, USA, there has been an individualistic trend. And this is because the individual's religious experience is a precondition for his acceptance into the community.[4] In other words, authentic religiosity is notified through individual experience. This exposes the germs of a subversive but effective religious individualism, for which, later in the eighteenth century, people like Anne Hutchinson, come to outline their dogmatic quintessence in terms of their own religious experience, different from the canonical institutional doctrinal system.[5] The culture of freedom and individualism has been relentlessly invoked by Central American personalities such as Thomas Jefferson, who has briefly said, "I am a sect myself," and Thomas Paine, who has claimed that "my mind is my church."[6]

Faith, once privatized and profiled according to one's own sensibilities, has also become the criterion for choosing the church to which the individual should belong. Thus, "it was possible for individuals to find the form of religion that best suited their inclinations."[7] Individuals are no longer required to follow the strict and unchanging rules of the united church. Instead, they are in a position to choose the church they want from the generous palette of the nearby religious "market." Churches thus end up by relentlessly entering the bitter competition

[2] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swiddler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American* Life, Updated Edition, California, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 230-231.
[3] Harry C. Trianidis, *Individualism & Collectivism,* New York, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2018, 2.
[4] See Bellah, et. al, *Habits of the Heart*, 233.
[5] See Bellah, et. al, *Habits of the Heart*, 233.
[6] Bellah, et. al, *Habits of the Hart*, 233.
[7] Bellah, et. al, *Habits of the Hart*, 233.

for membership: "religious bodies had to compete in a consumers' market and grew or declined in terms of changing patterns of individual religious taste."[8]

The autonomous individual, free from normative constraints and independent of theological loyalties, becomes the center around which the church pivots and pulses. In these terms, the cultural individualism is established that Trianidis defines as: a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and dis-advantages to associating with others."[9]

In the 21st century, the religious individual is confiscated by the tension between individualism and collectivism, between moral principles that transcend its individuality and immediate personal desires, dependent on his own life circumstances, between community goals and personal goals. If the congregation is to win souls, in the ideological rhythm of individualism, under the auspices of the Great Commandment, it will be obliged, for the sake of including as many as possible under the theological umbrella of its community, to "elasticize" its theology by spreading it so as to cover as many of them as possible, but will pay the price for the theological "thinning" of its beliefs, becoming more and more lax about theological principles and moral beliefs, and more prone to revisiting and amending its beliefs according to its sensibilities, increasingly diverse of the individuals it targets. If, however, the religious community prioritizes its doctrinal and congregational unity over the appetites of individuals, increasingly different from each other, retaining their collectivist aplomb, then it will succeed in preserving its dogmatic content and internal communion, but it will sacrifice the desire for numerical growth, because individuals differing dogmatically from its confession of faith and being perplexed by its doctrinal intransigence, will react by withdrawal and indignation.

The tension between individualism and collectivism is transferred to the mental level in deep dilemmas and painful dissonances. If personal goals will contrast with the theological view of the congregation, as if a young person has a choice between theology that forbids marriage and the lover of his heart that does not share his faith, and the person will be nurtured by the culture of incorrigible

[8] Bellah, et. al, *Habits of the Hart*, 233.
[9] Trianidis, *Individualism & Collectivism,* 2.

individualism, then he will be able to accuse theology of empathic emptiness and will be able to categorize it as a fence or a wall that stands between them. In this respect, theology becomes undesirable and in its place is erected a pedestal for love, simply for the merit of being constituted anywhere and anytime in a bridge between people's hearts. Therefore, love, not theology, is what one is looking for. This perspective expresses an antagonistic polarization between theology and love, a modernist dualism with nihilistic critical reflections, specific to M. Foucault, F. Nietzsche or J. Derrida. The hope of thinning out the doctrine, according to the individualistic paradigm, consists in the possibility of creating a theology in which everyone can find themselves. But is this possible? Stephen Prothero, in his work entitled "God is not One" concludes with conviction and precision that "One of the most common misconceptions about the world's religions is that they plumb the same depths, ask the same questions. They do not."[10] Therefore, this hope has no practical and social basis.

Stanley Hauerwas, in his article, "Love's Not All You Need" rejects the antagonism between theology and love, pointing out that since moral values are based on theological statements, then ethical behavior, in this case love manifested concretely to one another, does not appear out of the blue, but it is due to the theological beliefs that inspire such a conduct. Here are his words: "There can be no ultimate separation between our theological convinctions and our ethical behaviour, because our moral values are not ultimately separable from our religious afirmations."[11] Theology, according to the American theologian, precedes love, and there can be no love without theology, "God does not exist to make love real, but love is real because God exists. God can come to us in love, only because He comes to us as God, the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of our existence. "[12] On the other hand, according to Hauerwas, Christ put on the garments of truth and love, which do not point to the reality of love, but to the person of Christ, so "If we are to be true to the Gospels it seems clear if we are to learn to love, we must first learn to follow Him."[13]

The American theologian suspects that the reason why it is preferred to promote love as the main message of Jesus Christ is the one fueled by the idea that love,

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[10] Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One, The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter*, New York: Harper One, 2010, 24.

[11] Stanley Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," Cross Currents 22, no. 3 (1972): 225–37, 227. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24457602.

[12] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 227.

[13] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 229.

in general moral behavior and the habit of doing good, is "an easy thing that requires no discipline or training."[14] And the direct consequence of adopting the aforementioned antagonism and prioritizing the exposure of love over theology is that of projecting upon Christ an image of a fabricated and superficial love, "a love that does not require the following of him to be morally good. But as we cheapen the Gospel to fit our own illusion about love we also cheapen the richness of our moral lives."[15] The theologian exemplifies the cheapening of moral behavior by evoking an episode from Robert Anderson's "Tea and Sympathy," in which the wife of a headmaster of a prep school has an intimate relationship with "a young man in order to provide him with the manly confidence necessary for him to make a success out of his life. "[16] Although the woman's gesture is intended to be well oriented, its significance will have other values if it is viewed from the perspective of her husband who gives maximum value to marital fidelity. By this example, the American theologian points out that Christians should "resist the temptation to reduce the Gospel to a single formula or summary image for the living moral."[17]

Love cannot be defined in terms of situational individualism which invokes as a criterion of a moral life the individual needs and particular situations of life, but on the contrary "to love one as to be loved means we must refuse to meet the needs of some."[18] Therefore, the ethics fueled by individualism will make the biblical foundation from which it derives superfluous. What is implicit in Hauerwas's writing is that he belongs to the collectivistic camp.

This is evident from Dorothy Sayers' short story "Gaudy Night," in which we are told that a student, disappointed to the point of despair that he had failed an exam, due to a work evaluated by one of the dons at Oxford as non-scholarly, took his own life. As a result, his widow, full of anger, blames the teacher incessantly, invoking the boundless suffering that was caused by the teacher. The answer comes from a culture of the community: "We must be willing, if we are to live morally in this life, to let others suffer for our principles."[19] That is, according to collectivism, people who do not fit into the normative perimeter of the community, regardless of whether it is university or ecclesiastical, will have

[14] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 229.
[15] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 229.
[16] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 231.
[17] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 231-232.
[18] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 231.
[19] Hauerwas, "Love's not all you need," 232.

to bear the consequences of not being included. According to this paradigm, the principle is more important than the person. At least, as is the case described above, the person will sometimes have to bear the consequences of not falling within the principal, moral or doctrinal perimeter. If the wishes of the individual are taken into account, then the doctrine should be "elasticized", but if the unifying value of the doctrine is taken into account, then the individual should be excluded, and exclusivism will be labeled as action without empathy, the doctrine will be disavowed, and union will be claimed under the auspices of love, not theology.

But the question we intend to answer is: does love place itself on the opposite side of theology, should we prefer love over theology because the latter has disappointed us, has created confessional walls, and kept us at a distance from each other?

In the pages below we aim to demonstrate on biblical and theological grounds that, on the one hand, love has theological functions, that when we actually love, we think and discern, and on the other hand theology is an expression of love, that when we follow the Christian theological approach we express love, and not any kind of love, but its highest form, the love that does good to an enemy. So, we cannot say that we must limit ourselves to love because it has nothing to do with theology, it does not divide, it does not exclude and it does not hurt. It is true that love does not hurt, but neither does Christian theology, based correctly on what is most essential to it, because it is animated by love that does good to one's hostile fellow man. Through love, collectivistic practices are driven by care for the one who cannot fit into the dogmatic perimeter, and also through love, individualistic reflexes are tempered by the concern not to produce tensions and imbalances within the community.

LOVE AS THEOLOGY

The thesis of this section is that love is fundamentally characterized by discernment, a specific faculty of theology. The whole argument has the following construction: Since rational discernment is a function of theology, and discernment, as such, is also a fundamental function of love, then love fundamentally has theological functions.

Discernment is a function of theology. Vincent Pelletier, referring to the writings of St. Ignatius in which types of discernment are highlighted, defines theological discernment as "accurate insight that with wisdom and grace allows one to see the truth of things as God sees them. [...] Discernment is to see into

the heart of things."[20] Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman consider that "Discernment is the art of perceiving differences. It is also implicitly more, for perceiving differences is but the first step in a process of inquiry that ultimately leads to judgments of truth, of value, and of action. Is this idea true or false? Is this action right or wrong? Does this idea or action make me a good or moral or a bad and immoral person?"[21]

Whether we approach the notion from a metaphysical point of view, like Pelletier, or from a more epistemological and conventional point of view, as in the case of Lawler and Salzman, theological discernment is the competence to distinguish truth from error, good from evil, good consequences from the evil ones, by relating to God's perspective of seeing things as revealed in the canonical writings.

Love as a human feeling was analyzed from a social perspective by Pitirim A. Sorokin, a Russian who became professor at Harvard. He defines love in the following terms: "*love is the experience that annuls our individual loneliness;* fills the emptiness of our isolation with the richest value; breaks and transcends the narrow walls of our little egos; makes us coparticipants in the highest life of humanity and in the whole cosmos; expands our true individuality to the immeasurable boundaries of the universe [...] *love beautifies our life* [...] *love is goodnes itself*; therefore *it makes our life noble and good* [...] *love experience means freedom at its loftiest*."[22]

He noted the existence of seven aspects of love, seven points of view from which love can be analyzed: religious, ethical, ontological, physical, biological, psychological, and social.[23]

From a psychological point of view, love has, in Sorokin's analysis, five dimensions: intensity, extensity, duration, purity, and adequacy.[24] *The intensity of love* is, for example, "when the same person gives to others at one time 2 per cent of his wealth and at another 90 per cent of it, his second love action will be

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[20] Vincent Pelletier, "Discernment," *The Furrow* 58, no. 1 (2007): 35–42, 40. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27665469.
[21] Michael G. Lawler, and Todd A. Salzman. "Moral Theology and the Will of God — Critical Discernment." *The Furrow* 63, no. 10 (2012): 484–90, 484. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41709060.
[22] Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, *Types, Factors and Tehniques of Moral Transformation*, Radnor, Pensylvania: Templeton Fundation Press, 2002, 11.
[23] See Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 3.
[24] Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 15.

many times more intense than the first."[25] *Extensity of love* is distinguished by the scale or perimeter of the loved ones, which starts from self-love, which has a value of 0, to the love of loved ones, fellows, acquaintances and the whole world or universe.[26] This dimension fits well with the following distinction made by Anders Nygren: "In Judaism love is exclusive and particularistic: it is directed to one's 'neighbour' in the original and more restricted sense of the word, and it is directed to 'neighbours only' ... Christian love, on the other hand, overleaps all such limits; it is universal and all-embrancing."[27] "*The duration of love*, *may range from the shortest possible moment to years or throughout the whole life of an individual or of a group.*"[28] This temporal dimension of love is found in the love of the mother who takes care of her sick child throughout the illness or in that of the person who financially supports his fellow man for many years, etc.[29] *The purity of lov*e, "*ranges from the love motivated by love alone - without the taint of a 'soiling motive' of utility, pleasure, advantage, or profit, down to the "soiled love" where love is but a means to a utili-tarian or hedonistic or other end, where love is only the thinnest trickle in a muddy current of selfish aspirations and purposes.*"[30] *The adequacy of love* consists in the identity between the subjective purpose of love and the objective consequences of its action.[31] When love does not express this identity, two forms of inappropriate inadequacy appear: a) when the objective consequences of the action of love are different, to the point of opposition, from the purpose of love, as for example in the case of a mother who loves her child and wants to bring him up sociable and respectful, but the actions of her love pampered him instead, making him capricious, unpleasant, irresponsible, lazy and dishonest.[32] b) when the actions of a person, which although not animated by love, prove to be a real advantage for one or more people.[33] In the catalogue of the first inadequacy may be included Werner G. Jeanrond's text: "Love has been invoked in order to punish children, to persecute non-believers, heretics, and

[25] Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 16.
[26] See Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 16.
[27] Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*, trans. Philip S. Watson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982 (1930–6), p. 63.
[28] Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 16.
[29] See Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 16-17.
[30] Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 17.
[31] Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 17.
[32] See Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 17.
[33] See Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 17.

revolutionaries, to exclude and even burn women who dared to challenge the patriarchal order in church and society."[34]

Love, under this last aspect, highlighted by Sorokin, is characterized by the discernment to choose between the options of her actions in terms of probable consequences. So, from this point of view, we are talking about a pragmatic discernment of love. But love distinguishes not only among the actions best suited to its purpose, as Sorokin remarks, but also among a wide range of purposes, regarding the loved one from the point of view of his being and the circumstances in which he finds himself.

Therefore, love shows a pragmatic discernment, to which Sorokin expressly refers, but, let us admit, also a discernment that chooses among a considerable diversity of purposes that the person expresses or not, giving way to the actions that serve the better to the noblest and most beneficial of them. Given that Sorokin was limited to the first kind of discernment, we will highlight the latter as well, thus speaking of a teleological discernment, a discernment of significance. According to the latter, love discerns and organizes axiologically, both the purposes that the loved one feels, more or less, and those related to life circumstances. For example, a loving mother leans over her whimpering baby, trying to distinguish among his main needs and trying to meet them on time.

In the following lines we will refer to love in terms of its capacity to discern as evidenced by some New Testament texts, and we will refer in particular to the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the Johannine Epistles.

The Gospels

In the Sermon on the Mount, in the Gospel of Matthew, there is invoked a love distinct from the love of the publican, from a love that shows benevolence and candor only to those who have previously had similar manifestations. The evangelist distinguishes the love that responds symmetrically, with benevolence to benevolence, from asymmetrical love, a love that responds to malicious attitudes expressed through curses, hatred, oppression, and persecution (Matthew 5:44)[35], with attitudes and actions opposed to hatred, with blessings, good deeds, and prayers to God for the well-being of the hostile. This love is not only characterized by a pragmatic and teleological discernment, but especially by a self-referential extensional discernment (we owe this taxonomy to Sorokin who wrote about the "extensity of love" noting the possibility of

[34] Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, London: T & T Clark International, 2010, 26.
[35] All the quotations from the Bible in this paper are taken from English Standard Version.

combining different dimensions of love into one act.[36]), a love interested in the manifestation of divine love, which presents itself differently from that of the publicans, but which is specifically a love of the Father in heaven (Matthew 5:45). A love that widens its borders, encompassing even its enemies inside. The invocation of this love is the core of the theological reform of Jesus Christ and the hallmark of his messianic program. (The same extensive discernment of love is set forth by Luke in chapter 6: 26-36). The evangelist distinguishes especially in verses 33-36 between "the love of sinners" and the love of "sons of the Most High."

Another exposition of the quality of love to discern is that of the text in Matthew 7: 9-10. These verses present, by means of a rhetorical question, the paternal love that denotes a pragmatic discernment: "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?" The love of the father knows how to distinguish between what is good and what is bad. The loving father will not give his son a snake if he asks for a fish, and he will not give him a stone if he asks for a loaf of bread, as he understands the fish and bread are necessary to feed his child.

In the same Sermon on the Mount, the evangelist Matthew emphasizes love in terms of its competence to discern between the objects of love. One is true and the other one is false. Here the extension of love is limited to God, and it does so by precise calculation and correct evaluation, in a word of discernment. God is not the same as Money, and the claims of one are different from the implications of the other, so "for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Matthew 6:24).

In the Gospel of Mark, the dialogue between Jesus Christ and the rich young man is evoked. Out of love (Mark 10:21), Jesus of Nazareth correctly distinguished the young man's intimate need, namely, detachment from goods and attachment to God. And in chapter 12 of the same Gospel, cognitive love is invoked, which also implies discernment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30). The same cognitive love is expressed in Matthew 22:37 and Luke 10:27.

In Luke's Gospel, the love expressed by deeds towards one's neighbor is noted in the Samaritan's narrative. The Samaritan, by the gesture of his love, denotes

[36] See Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love*, 20.

teleological discernment. He notices the need of the physically abused and finds the right means for his care and healing: "He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him." (Luke 10:34). The Samaritan discerns between stranger and neighbor, and he does so out of positive feelings, like that of pity. The Samaritan exemplifies the commandment of love in Leviticus 19:18.

In the Gospel of John, the discernment of love is especially noteworthy in chapter 3:16 where the sending of the Son for the redemption of those who believe in Him is highlighted. This teleological discernment is characterized by the remark of the deepest need that people have, the need for a Savior.

Thus, discernment as a dimension of love is found as self-referential extensional discernment expressly in the case of self-evaluating love pursuing the love of enemies (Matthew 5:44), a pragmatic discernment in the case of paternal love (Matthew 7: 9-10). The merciful Samaritan (Luke 10:34) and God Himself who sends His Son to fulfill the need for human salvation (John 3:16), an extension of critical discernment (Matthew 6:24) in the case of love that extends to God, but that does not include money in the perimeter of its extension.

Love in the Pauline Epistles

"It was Paul above all who established the terminology of love, especially of the noun *agape*, which he uses most frequently, and which becomes virtually a technical term for love in this sense."[37] says James Brennan. From the point of view of the discernment of this feeling, one can notice the adequacy of the consequences of the action of love for its purpose in the following cases: the death of Christ as a divine action with eternal consequences for the benefit of men (Romans 5:8), the love of apostles which distinguishes among the actions most appropriate to the purpose of their love even disposing them for the supreme sacrifice (1 Thess. 2: 8), the love that discerns falsehood and chooses good over evil (Romans 12: 9), the love that distinguishes between doing evil and doing good and chooses the latter (Romans 13:10), love that builds up (1 Cor. 8:1), love that grows in knowledge (Philippians 1:9), love that distinguishes envy, distinguishes praise and pride, and chooses not to act out of envy, self-praise, pride, or hypocrisy (1 Cor. 13: 4, 2 Cor. 6: 6). There is also the aspect of love characterized by extensional discernment in the following

[37] James Brennan, "Charity in the New Testament," *The Furrow* 20, no. 3 (1969): 1–7, 5. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27660071.

situations: love that makes a positive discrimination against the disciplined person of the church (2 Cor. 2: 8), love that distinguishes the model of love in the person of Christ and that acts by virtue of it for the benefit of the Christian community (Eph. 5: 2).

Love in the Johannine epistles

In addition to the apostle Peter, who implicitly presents the cognitive side of love through the act of covering sins (1 Peter 4: 8) or that of avoiding duplication, the apostle John dedicates his writings to *agape* love, love which, as Brennan points out, is the affective cause. of the incarnation and redemption: "Even more clearly than St. Paul John points to love as the motive of the incarnation and redemption ('God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son' (John 3:16)."[38]

And in the Apostle John we have the pragmatic discernment of love, highlighted by the fact that God's actions are adequate to the achievement of the purpose of His love for man. This category includes the act of adoption (1 John 3: 1), the act of giving the life of Christ to sinful people (1 John 3:16), the act of sending His only begotten Son into the world as an atoning sacrifice (1 John 4:9, 4:10). All these actions of love show discernment, foresight, a divine plan carefully crafted so that the consequences of divine action are appropriate to the purpose of his love for man. Other Johannine texts that indicate discernment and calculation are distinguished by the following ideas: love discerns fear and seeks to drive it away (1 John 4:18), love that distinguishes between kinds of moral conduct, commandments, and non-conformity (2 John 1:6).

In concluding this section we can emphasize that there are thirty-three texts in the New Testament that highlight either the pragmatic discernment of love, an adequacy of the consequences of the action of love to its purpose, or a self-referential teleological or extension discernment. This fact confirms that love is not a feeling opposite to rationality, but on the contrary, it is a feeling intimately and inextricably correlated with human or divine thinking, calculation and judgment.

THEOLOGY AS LOVE

In this section we aim to show that Christian theology is fundamentally an act of love, so that we cannot dissociate theological activity from the love that has generated and continues to animate it. The whole argument has the following

[38] Brennan, "Charity in the New Testament," 6.

construction: theology is the propositional and actual expression of a conception of God, God, in the Christian paradigm, is in essence divine love and He manifests this love, therefore Christian theology is the propositional and current expression of love and its manifestation.

Religion, considers H. D. Lewis, "must somehow supply itself with more information about God than that he exists. It claims in fact to know a great deal about him;"[39] And David K. Clark, referring to Christian theology, believes that this "seeks to articulate the *content* of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the *context* of a particular culture."[40] The fact that theology is actually an act of love we will see towards the end of this section. Looking at theology from a historical perspective, as Clark evokes it, we can see that in the patristic period theology simply meant "the doctrine of God."[41] Justin Martyr believed that God was manifested in the New Testament, and that "the NT does in fact fulfill the OT."[42] Both Clement of Alexandria and Origen leaned on the supreme value of knowing God through the Bible, which they viewed as superior, but subsequent to that which comes from philosophy.[43] Tertullian is the first to distinguish between the Christian content and the pagan content of knowledge.[44] Irenaeus lays the groundwork for both "the true apostolic tradition" and the Scriptures.[45] Although Irenaeus confronted the pagan thinking of the Gnostics, "he did not repudiate all pagan language or concepts. Rather, he expressed Christian truth and argument by adapting certain pagan categories to Christian use."[46] Augustine gives faith the first place in the process of knowing God by reserving a secondary role to reason by preserving it by virtue of the tools it possesses, namely, those of knowledge of languages, dialectics, eloquence, the science of numbers, history, and laws.[47] Therefore, the theologian, "after initially accepting basic Christian truth, the Christian theologian moves forward, using

[39] H. D Lewis, "What Is Theology?", *Philosophy* 27, no. 103 (1952): 345–58, 354. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3747902.
[40] David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, Method for Theology, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003, 56-57.
[41] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 57.
[42] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 58.
[43] See Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 59.
[44] See Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 59-60.
[45] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 60.
[46] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 61.
[47] See Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 62.

reason to acquire richer understanding. In this dialectics, faith and reason reinforce each other."[48]

In the Middle Ages, John of Damascus, who lived in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, organized the theological approach in "prolegomena, theology, anthropology and soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology"[49], and Peter Abelard, who lived in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, presupposed a harmonization of patristic theological discourses.[50] For the first time Theology was first considered a science by Alain of Lille in the late 12th century.[51] And Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, gave the highest medieval expression to theology. He emphasized that reason and faith are independent ways of knowing God, although only the latter can guide the human soul to the understanding of deep truths about God such as the Trinity and incarnation.[52] Although theology uses philosophy to demonstrate its fundamental truths, "Christians must not allow philosophy to dominate theology. Theology goes beyond the bounds of philosophy."[53]

Then, also in the 13th century, St. Bonaventure pointed out that "theology requires, not merely intellect, but a living and personal faith that includes appropriate character traits and attitudes. Like science, knowledge of God is a gift of God."[54] William of Ockham, a theologian of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, says Clark, prepared the ground for the appearance of the Protestant Reformation. He believed that "theology should address the spiritual needs of Christians. Ockham doubted the possibility of proving God philosophically. [...] he stressed in his theology the absolute power and freedom of God and in his spirituality a simple faith and a dependence on the Scriptures."[55]

In the theology of the Reformation, we have the case of M. Luther, who considers, Clark points out, that "Theology is about the gospel: God's call to sinners to experience forgiveness by grace through faith. Salvation is God's work entirely."[56] The same soteriological perspective upon theology is found

[48] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 62.
[49] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 64.
[50] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 65.
[51] See Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 65.
[52] See Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 66.
[53] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 67.
[54] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 68.
[55] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 69.
[56] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 70.

with Calvin too. For him, knowledge of God is naturally implanted by God "in the minds of all persons."[57]

Unlike the Reformers, Clark observes that Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of nineteenth-century liberal theology, "theology's function is to analyze religious experience."[58] Therefore, the perimeter of divine revelation extends from that of letter to that of experience.

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth refused to conceive that theology is based on any philosophical or scientific presupposition. He also rejected the idea of a systematic theology, and reconnected theology with Scripture, considered to be the Word of God, freeing it from the tribute paid to religious experience.[59] Since Christian truth is not revealed outside the specific circumstances of human life, this led Fr. Tillich to defend the thesis that theology cannot support the separation between revelation and human situation.[60] Tillich tried, Clark points out, a synthesis "between revelation as God's work and theology as a human activity."[61] Theology must include both the knowledge of God and the human experience that derives from it. In other words, theology expresses the knowledge of God by becoming the very medium through which the message is actualized. The very transposition of theology into writing must be derived from an unwavering motivation for the manifestation of the person and character of God. As Lewis, points out the theologian, "above all he has himself to live a profoundly religious life."[62] Therefore, theology is not only a written transposition of God's character, but also an exposition by the very theological approach of what is most essential to the divine being. As we will see below, this is love.

The synthesis of knowledge and experience remained a concern and a challenge at the same time for all contemporary theologies, from the liberal and narrative to the evangelical ones. However, which will prevail, revelation or human experience? The tension from the competition between the two made theology suffer from cultural pressure, because, as Clark pointed out, "culture shapes theology."[63] And this is especially true of individualistic thinking in which the community tends to "elasticize" theology so as not to upset anyone. This is also

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[57] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 72.
[58] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 77.
[59] See Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 77-78.
[60] See Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 79.
[61] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 80.
[62] Lewis, "What is Theology?" 358.
[63] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 80.

evident in evangelical theology: "From an evangelical perspective, the risk is that culture will take the dominant position over Scripture."[64]

What follows from the above brief description are the following two things: 1. Theology is both a propositional transposition about God and His work of human salvation, as well as an exposition of the character of the divine being, and 2. Theology, under the influence of culture, can undergo changes in accent or subtleties. In this section we aim to note the emphasis on love that theology seems to have lost, an emphasis that needs to be fully recovered.

According to the Christian narrative, God is, in His essence, love: "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4: 8, ESV). In other words, the entire Old Testament scripture is reduced to two commands: 1. To love God and 2. To love your fellow man (Matthew 22:37, 22:39, Mark 12: 30,31; Luke 10:27). These demands are echoed in two Old Testament texts: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5), and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18).

Jesus Christ expresses the most radical form of love by extending the perimeter of love so that it encompasses even enemies. In the well-known Sermon on the Mount, Christ addresses the new *Agape* command, saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" In this paragraph, Jesus Christ formulates a kind of love that transcends the love of the Gentiles, that is, love characterized by symmetrical love, love that responds evenly, that offers love to the love that it receives. Jesus requires that man give way to divine love, namely asymmetrical and super-generous love, the love that seeks to do good to the one who does harm to him, the love of which man is not capable unless he is animated by Christ's divine spirit.

This new love evoked by Christ, which is the essence of His teaching, was received as such by the Apostle Paul. On the basis of this love he builds an ethic in accordance with which he claims to the church in Rome the following:

[64] Clark, *The Know and Love God*, 80.

"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all [...] To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17, 20-21). Unlike the Christian ethics, taken over and promoted by the apostles, the Jewish ethic was and is different.

The Jewish theologian Meir I. Soloveichick, in his article, issued in February 2003, "The Virtue of Hate", contrasts Jewish ethics — which he unequivocally defends — with Christian ethics saying that for the Jews "hate can be virtuous when one is dealing with the frightfully wicked. Rather than forgive, we can wish ill; rather than hope for repentance, we can instead hope that our enemies experience the wrath of God."[65] And this justification of hatred of the enemy is based, says the Jewish theologian, on the fact that God Himself shows a deep contempt for this category of people: "Jews hate the wicked because they believe that God despises the wicked as well."[66] Of course, this ethical perspective differs from that expressed in the words of Christ when he was on the cross. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). It is not the same thing that occurs at Yom Kippur, when toward the end of the holiday, Jewish worshippers turn to God, referring to those they have deliberately wronged, saying, "Father, do not forgive them, for they know well what they do."[67]

Through the command of love that does good to the enemy, Jesus Christ revolutionized humanity by elevating it above gregarious behavior driven by the reflection of mutual and symmetrical love that, as easy as it is, is incapable of surmounting conflict. And conflicts are not few regardless of the community space or the historical circumstances. Or the very emphasis on what is more essential to Christianity, that is, on love that does good to the enemy, has been lost in the great religious events from the First Church Council to the Protestant Reformation and postmodern Christian missionary movements. What would the Protestant Reformation have looked like if the slogan 'Sola Charitas' had been added to the other slogans?

Therefore, if theology is the propositional and updated expression of God, and since God is the promoter of divine, elevated love, of that love which does good

[65] Meir I. Soloveichick, "The Virtue of Hate," First Things, 2003, accessed: 02.25.2022, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/02/the-virtue-of-hate.
[66] Soloveichick, "The Virtue of Hate."
[67] Soloveichick,"The Virtue of Hate."

to the hostile, then theology is the propositional and current expression of this love. This thesis is defended by the theologians of the first centuries.

The early theology of the church preserved the emphasis on love, which also includes enemies. The counsel of Christians by Ignatius is included in this catalogue. Here are his words: "Where they are in error, be steadfast in the faith; in face of their fury, be gentle. Be not eager to retaliate upon them. Let pure forbearance prove us their brethren. Let us endeavour to be imitators of Lord, striving who can suffer the greater wrong, who can be defrauded, who be set at naught, that not weed of the Devil be found in you."[68] Clement of Rome has the same admonitions that he addresses, presenting the reason why the practice of love and kindness is fully justified: "But let us be kind to one another. According to the compassion and sweetness of him that made us. For it is written: «the merciful shall inherit the earth, and they that are without evil shall be left upon it; but the transgressors shall perish from off the face of it."[69] Athenagoras notes the love of Christians, who, though uneducated, most of them differ in their ethical conduct from those who are educated but untrained in the principle of the love of Christ: "[...] For who of those that reduce syllogisms, and clear up ambiguities, and explain etymologies, [...] who of them have so purged their souls as, instead of hating their enemies, to love them; and, instead of speaking ill of those who have reviled them (to abstain from which is of itself an evidence of no mean forbearance), to bless them; and to pray for those who plot against their lives? [...] But among us you will find uneducated persons, and artisans, and old women, who, if they are unable in words to prove the benefit arising from their persuasion of its truth: they do not rehearse speeches, but exhibit good works; when struck, they do not strike again; when robbed, they do not go to law, they give to those that ask of them, and love their neighbors as themselves."[70] Tertullian points out that "it is not permitted to do evil even when it is deserved."[71] And Augustine brings to the fore the source of the enemy's love by invoking faith and prayer: "I know, I have known by experience, that

[68] J. H. Srawley, ed., "The Epistle of St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch", vol. I., Second Edition Revised (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1910), 50.
[69] William, Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, trans. and ed., "The Genuine Epistles of the Apostolical Fathers, St. Barnabas, St. Clement, St. Ignatius, St. Polycarp, The Shepherd of Hermes and the Martyrdoms of St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp, Written by Those Who Were Present at Their Sufferings" (New York: 1810), 154.
[70] Marcus Dods, George Reith and B.P. Pratten, trans., "The Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras" vol. II., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), 387.
[71] C. Dodgson, trans., "A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, Anterior to the Division of the East and West, Tertullian" vol I, Apologetic and Practical Treatises, (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), 335.

there are Christian men who do love their enemies. If it seems to you impossible, ye will not do it. Believe then first that it can be done, and pray that the will of God may be done in you."[72]

Finally, we would like to point out that theology, through its pedagogical act, speaks of love, and that Christian theology, at its very dawn, was elaborated and written out of love for the church. Theology is animated by the very essence of God's character, of love. The Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to the Colossians, mentions his sufferings that accompany his endeavor to complete the revelation of God's salvation: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, to make the word of God fully known [...] For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Colossians 1:24, 25, 29). It follows from this text that the effort of the Apostle Paul to make available to the church the Revelation of Salvation, the fundamental theology, was made for the sake of the Christian community. The theological approach, therefore, is animated by love. In addition to the Epistle to the Colossians, the Apostle wrote other theological writings from prison. These are Ephesians (Ephesians 3:1), Philippians (Phil. 1:12-14) and Philemon (1:9). They are the living testimony that theology is a result of love, not just an expression of it. And the theological approach as an expression of love is shaped by the theology of the incarnation compressed by the Evangelist John in the text that evokes the fact that out of love the Word (the only Son of God, see John 3:16) was given through the incarnation and lived among men proving grace. and enunciating the truth about God: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14).

CONCLUSION

From the introductory section on defining the problem, we noticed that against the background of the dialectics between collectivism and individualism, the exclusive appeal to love can be claimed, on the grounds that it is simply not dogmatic. The resort of the call to love derives from the dilemma that the dialectics mentioned highlight. Namely, if priority is given to the individual, then the community must extend its doctrine so that it covers the full range of ideas expressed by the individuals concerned. Or if priority is given to the community and the doctrine that makes possible its internal unity, then individuals who do not fully and loyally conform to its specific values must be

[72] ***, Sermons on Selected Lessons of The New Testament by S. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Vol. I, S. Matthew, S. Mark, s. Luke (Oxford: John Henry Parker, MDCCCXLIV/1844), 77, See also p. 80.

left out of its dogmatic and social perimeter. Therefore, what is more desirable, the valorization of the individual by sacrificing the unity of the collective or the valorization of the community and the doctrine that strengthens it by sacrificing the individual together with his specific idiosyncrasies? Or should this dilemma be viewed from a different perspective? Contemporary religious expressive individualism, as we have seen, denounces the aggressive rigidity of religious collectivism by accusing the theological centrality of collectivist circles of insensitivity, exclusivism, and lack of elementary humanity. The perspective pursued in this article is that divine love and Christian theology are intrinsically connected.

The thesis here is that love and theology are in a synergistic relationship. We cannot speak of love without speaking of its theological discernment, and we cannot embrace theology without embracing the love that animates theology and formulates its approach. When we love, in fact, we theologize, and when it does theology, we let ourselves, willingly or unwillingly, be animated by the love that inspires Christian theology. Therefore, in the two sections of this article, we have tried to show that the perception of love as separate from theology is unfounded for two reasons. First of all, love, as presented in the New Testament, is not a feeling devoid of cognitive functions and value judgments; on the contrary, it is capable of discernment and rationality. Therefore, the claim of founding society or religious assembly on love as pure feeling is not justified, because there is no genuine love without discernment and judgment. The moment a person is animated by genuine love, that person is immediately consumed by the desire to fulfill the highest good for the loved one to the detriment of a lower or mediocre good. So, the one who loves, discerns and selects.

Secondly, Christian theology is not the cause of the separation among people, of the creation of "Berlin walls" between fellow human beings, since, on the one hand, it is entirely animated by the divine love it expresses, propositionally and open, a love that made possible the encounter between man and God and the unity between man and his fellow man, even if man is sometimes willing to wear the unnatural armor of hostility, enmity, and aggression. Christian theology is the carrier of love that does good to one's fellow man, finding for its endeavor unlimited resources and sufficient real motivations in God who took flesh.

Where there is divine love, there is also theology, and when Christian theology is expressed, then love is manifested expressively. The degree of

problematization of the dialectics between collectivism and individualism is profoundly alleviated by the fact that both actors involved in this dialectic, the individual and the community, are both direct providers of love, where it exists, of course, and its immediate beneficiaries. Collectivist practices will be carried out in such a way as to ensure that individuals who cannot fit into the dogmatic perimeter of the community and its conservationist decisions, will benefit from sincere care, true empathy, real sensitivity to their position and needs, both by adapting the discourse, the clear expression of the objective pursued as well as, above all, the availability of dialogue and the search for consensus on practical and human issues. Subsequently, collectivism will have the quality of offering love. But it can also be its beneficiary, if the exponents of individualism are animated by divine love. Because in relation to the community driven by collectivism, the individual will temper their actions if they prove to be generators of internal tensions and convulsions. Representatives of individualism, being aware of both its social value and the cognitive and axiological nature of love, will avoid genuine love, creating subversive and unconstructive actions. Instead, they will pursue their participation in dialogue, and at the same time the adaptation of their discourse, envisaging its correct reception and respect for the values managed and expressed by the collectivist community. Love, therefore, will help people to live together. In other words, the actions of the actors of the two social paradigms are closely guided by the principle of the adequacy of love, since divine love is theological, and Christian theology is inevitably animated by love.

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