CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

EROS AND AGAPE IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN*

In 1948/1949 I lived in Rome as a fellow of Bollingen Foundation. During the spring of ’49, I made a trip to Sicily and visited Catania, where our bus stopped for some time. I went to the university and asked the janitor whether I could see a certain professor Rapisarda, whose book on Arnobius I had reviewed for *Vigiliae Christianae*. It so happened that he was there, standing in the yard, surrounded by his students, ironic, humane, very much like Socrates in the midst of his pupils. Some time later I was invited to lecture at the university and he introduced me. I still remember the powerful eloquence with which he proclaimed the relevance of the study of Christian literature: he foresaw the danger that Christian charity would vanish from our society.

Ever since my attention has been focused on this central theme, wondering what charity could mean, but only recently I came to read Anders Nygren’s famous book *Eros and Agape*. As everybody knows he opposes the two: eros is Greek and egoistic, agape is Christian and altruistic. A synthesis between the two has been endeavoured in Antiquity, both by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Augustine, but these radically different views could not be reconciled. So Luther and the Reformation opted for charity, the Renaissance for eros, and rightly so: never the twain shall meet.

It would seem that the basis for this impressive theory is somewhat shaky, because in the Bible this radical opposition is not to be found. It is true that eros is not attested for the New Testament, but the word “agape” can have virtually the same meaning as “eros”. To prove this thesis I refer to John 15, 12–14:

This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.
Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friends.
Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.

These words are seen in their right perspective if we remember that

the author of the fourth gospel, like every writer of antiquity, had the right to compose discourses which reflected a situation as he saw it. This, of course, does not mean that these orations were created out of nothing. He can very well have amplified an already existing tradition. In this case we can even positively indicate the Saying of Jesus which “John” is varying again and again, not only in his gospel, but also in his first letter.1

Jesus said: Love thy brother as thy soul, guard him as the apple of thine eye.
(Gospel of Thomas, logion 25)

This word of course is not identical with or derived from Mark 12, 30–31 parr., the commandment to love God and neighbour, with which it has hardly one word in common. Its beautiful parallelism, to mention nothing else, shows that it has been transmitted in a Jewish milieu (as opposed to the Gentile origin of the canonical gospels). The author of the Gospel of Thomas must have taken it from his Jewish Christian source. The logion teaches us to sacrifice ourselves on behalf of the members of the brotherhood to which we belong and to have the highest regards for our fellow Christians.

The Church of Christ should be a brotherhood and a sorority, a society of friends. This certainly is charity in the Jewish sense of the word. Then, in John 15:13, Jesus is quoted as having said that the greatest love is to give your life for a friend. This is somewhat astonishing, because, as Bultmann remarks in his commentary, one would expect the greatest love to be love of your enemy. And then it occurs to us that this ideal of death for a friend is a locus communis of erotic literature. So Phaedrus says in the Symposion of Plato, 179 b:

Love will make men dare to die for their beloved—love alone; and women as well as men. Of this, Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, is a monument to all Hellas; for she was willing to lay down her life on behalf of her husband, when no else would, although he had a father and mother; but the tenderness of her love so far exceeded theirs, that she made them seem to be strangers in blood to their own son, and in name only related to him; and so noble did this action of hers appear to the gods, as well as to men, that among the many who have done virtuously she is one of the very few to whom, in admiration of her noble action, they have granted

1 See “Love thy brother”, in: Gnostic Studies II, 169.