The Journey of Etty Hillesum from Eros to Agape

Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer

Perhaps one of the most burning and provocative questions of Christianity concerns the reconciliation of spirit and body. Despite the many changes Vatican II brought to Christian views of theology and morality we can still perceive a not-so-healthy duality between spirit and body, and a celebration of love which devalues the erotic as evil or demonic. The important topic of love, a focus since the beginnings of Christianity in doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral language and practice, remains a challenge to this day.

In this reflection, we will bring the life experience, the deep thoughts and the testimonial writing of the contemporary mystic Etty Hillesum to our theological discussion about the identity of love. Although self-identified as Jewish she was not attached to any religious practice; however, she experienced an uncommonly deep intimacy with the mystery of God. In her writings and in her mystical experience Hillesum also revealed an unusual integration of eros and agape. She was a woman very aware of her sexual being, living it fully. As such, she can enlighten our understanding of this anthropological integration, one of the most urgent matters that Christian Theology and Pastoral Training are called to address in our contemporary world.

This article is written by a roman catholic theologian, who deals in her teaching and research with questions about sexuality, body and love. It is also authored by a woman, a female theologian whose work constantly asks how best to address these subjects while both remaining faithful to her Church and celebrating the gift of being a woman with a feminine body, someone who questions how to integrate her body into her thinking about God and the mystery of believing. The reflection delivered here, then, is situated in my social, cultural and theological context. And it is within that context that I met Etty Hillesum and learned a great deal about myself and my female companions, who, like me struggle to synthesize eros and agape in their minds and in their hearts.

1 Christian Understanding of Love: Eros and Agape

Theologically speaking, at least in Christian West, love as eros has been conceived as a troubling force, connected only to sex, instinctive impulses and

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1 In Christian theology, there are three words to say “love”: eros, philia and agape. The New Testament privileges agape as the Christian way par excellence to be understood as Christian
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The first letter of John in the New Testament states, “God is love.” Another name for love given by the New Testament is *agape*. The equivalent in Latin is *caritas*. The love of God, then, in theological terms, is always *agape* and not *eros*. Eros is connected to lust and all non-ordained passions. Despite this interpretation, it is not unusual to see the word *eros* used to designate mystic fervor, with its ecstasies and raptures. The Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa, during the 11th century, prefers *eros* to *agape* to describe mystical experiences, and defines *eros* as a more intense *agape*.

For theologians like Anders Nygren (1890–1978), *agape* means unconditional love. Nygren analyses the connotations of the two Greek words for love. For him, *eros* is a needs-based and desire-based, egocentric and acquisitive love: in other words, we can love other humans and God with a love of *eros* in which we love them out of self-interest in order to acquire and possess them. It is drawn from Greek Platonic thought. *Agape*, by contrast, is spontaneous, unconditional, theocentric, self-giving, self-sacrificial: in other words, we can love others and God with a love of *agape* in which we reject all self-gain and interest and surrender ourselves to others and love them purely for themselves.

Nygren’s book has a prominent place in the literature on the nature of love. It has implications for psychology (especially of the archetypal school) and philosophy, as well as theology. The distinction between the two types of love is far more than a distinction between the physical and the spiritual. *Agape* is a form of love that comes down from God to humanity, while *eros* moves up from humans toward the divine. *Agape* loves regardless of the value of the loved, in whom it creates value. *Eros* loves its objects only because they are worthy of love.

Nygren’s argument is twofold. In the first place, he argues that *agape* is the only truly Christian kind of love, and that *eros* turns us away from God. Either we love others and God in the manner of *eros*, purely for ourselves, in which case we do not really love them at all; or we love them in the manner of *agape*, for themselves, with a true love, in which case we act against our own self-interest and happiness.

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3 Gregory of Nyssa speaks about love either as erotic or agapic. Cf. his first homily about the Song of Songs, in *PG* 44 (1): 767–784.
4 Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982). About the difference between *eros* and *agape*, the classical reflection has been this one of Andrew Nygren, a protestant Swedish theologian, *Eros and Agape*, first published in Swedish in two parts in 1930 and 1936 and now available in many translations in many languages.