

THE WHOLENESS OF LOVE

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Some years ago, I was approached by the editor of the Encyclopedia of Global Justice (Springer, 2011) to write a number of short articles on a variety of topics. I agreed to several and they were met enthusiastically and are found in that encyclopedia. However, my submission on "Charity" was turned down cold. I am pretty sure I know why. This essay is an exploration of what I believe stood behind that rejection. Reading on, one will see that I am not writing as a personal matter, but rather, tapping into a deeply philosophical/theoretical and practical question. It has become a commonplace in liberal societies to declare that doing the right and the good in social contexts is a matter of "justice, not charity." Charity, on such an understanding, is a personal, private, and perhaps religiously motivated act. Justice is, of course, social (political, economic, legal) by definition. Charity, in this view, is optional. Justice is obligatory. This is the common view. My unpublished essay complexified that view, as I intend to complexify it here.

"Charity" is an English translation of the Latin, *caritas*, or "love." My argument below stands

on the premise that we ought to hear "love" when we hear "charity," that we should remain faithful to the etymology, particularly, the origin, of the word. Of course, words often (always?) change meaning over time, but I am unaware of a definition of "charity" that has displaced "love." The concept of charity/*caritas* has a decidedly Christian history. Here I offer a short theological primer. I will argue that the theological understanding I am about to summarize can work well for all of us, whether we fully appreciate the theology or not. One need not identify as a religious believer of any kind to embrace (at least much of) the meaning and value of charity/love I offer below.

In the Christian tradition, *caritas* is employed to reference the New Testament concept of *agape*, an unlimited, self-sacrificing love. The ancient Greeks used three different words for love. To simplify: *storge* as familial love; *phileia* as "brotherly" love, love between friends; and *eros* as an emotional and passionate and/or romantic or erotic love. The Christians added a fourth: *agape*, a word seldom used outside of Christian literature. This deep and abiding love comes to us from God as a gift, and is, in

fact an expression of God's presence and power. The claim that "God is love (agape)" (1 John 4.16) is irreducible and generative. Nothing more basic or essential can be said about God, and as made in God's "image," i.e., made to image God, human love of this agapeic kind is our highest good. Immediately upon being told that God is love, John tells his audience, "Whoever would say they love God, yet does not love one's brother or sister, is a liar" (1 John 4.20-21). This love is the greatest theological virtue, and the fountainhead of all other virtues. All other virtues, in their own way, reflect, embody or manifest love. For example, patience cannot be patience if it violates love.

And justice cannot be justice if it violates love. This sentence will rile certain readers. For many, love and justice need to be in conflict to have coherence. For example, they would say that justice sometimes leads us to deliver punishment, whereas love and mercy can lead us to leniency and forgiveness instead of punishment. Although many Christians, engaged in folk theology, get it wrong, the ecumenical ("catholic") Christian tradition itself, understands justice as a force and practice of love. Recently, it seems, Christian philosopher Cornel West has become famous to many who would not otherwise know his work, by way of his frequent claim that "justice is what love looks like in public." West is right, yet his claim is 2000 years old. The conception of love as a social,

spiritual, political, and economic force held sway throughout Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages. As in respect to so many other historical transformations, modernity marks the turn in the philosophical and ethical conceptualization of love.

To contemporary, liberal, and secular sensibilities, love is often understood as an individual and personal emotion or commitment quite different from the rational, collective, and for many, universal foundations of justice. Distributive justice, in particular is typically seen as a matter of (Kantian) duty, rather than love; and as noted above, punitive justice is seen as a necessity that should not give into love, or to love's closely related virtues of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. As a signification that love is often seen as personal kindness, humanitarian organizations are often called "charities." While one is thought to be generous to give of one's wealth to such "charities," it is thought that such giving is not morally obligatory. That is, whereas justice is demanded, love is supererogatory, a kindness apart from duty that is good to do but not immoral not to do.

In contrast, because God is most basically seen as Love itself (the theology of the Trinity), because God entered human history as an expression of Love (the theology of incarnation), because God sacrificed Godself on the cross as an expression of Love (the

theology of the cross, soteriology, Philippians 2.1-8), and because God demands such radical love from those who would be God's disciples (the theology of the church, ecclesiology)—love is seen as the central concept of Christian morality. This morality emanates from Christian ontology and theology proper. Of course, and crucially, Christian theology and faith have never claimed that love is a possession of the church. Love is a fact of our humanity just insofar as it is a fact at all (natural theology).

Noting that love belongs to humanity as such, it is clear that love is an important concept in the world's religions. That is, all religious traditions embrace, elaborate, and explicate teaching about love as essential to humanity as it is meant to be lived. I cannot speak deeply and technically to the understanding of love in faith traditions aside from Christianity (nor is there space to do so in this short essay). But noting the universal importance and character of love, we are brought back to its relationship to morality itself and justice more specifically.

One asset of the Christian understanding of love as the clearest and deepest, most essential manifestation of Love itself and the most basic and essential virtue for human beings, is that it takes and makes love the driving force of morality, the irreducible power meant to animate and inform all we do, including our politics, economics, and

other social forms, structures, and practices. Jesus' call for us to "love our enemies" (Matthew 5.38-44) can only make sense in this structural systemic, and ontological sense. If love is understood only as a personal, sentimental, psychological force, then its power in social, let alone transnational and global affairs is limited to a kind of aggregation: how many individuals do one thing or another, as a consequence of their private values, feelings, and commitments. If the charitable actions of many individuals add up in aggregation to a certain kind of political or economic change that is judged to be more than just the state of affairs that existed before, we might say that love led, indirectly or coincidentally, to justice (if we could know that such a process occurred, which is doubtful, to say the least). If, on the other hand, love and justice are understood to be intrinsically related, justice understood to be an order or force of love, then we have reason to move beyond the roping together and circulation of personal sentiment to fuel our collective expectations, actions, politics, and practices. It is important to move beyond the aggregation I have just called "roping together and circulation" because there is no concrete materiality, no real power, no structure, planning, precision, or prediction available to us in the faint hope that the personal and emotive proclivities we call "love" may somehow amount to a social and political force. I briefly note, however, that both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.,

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theorized love in profound and sophisticated ways whereby love was embodied with institutional, political, and economic architecture. Gandhi's use of satyagraha and King's use of his formulation of "the beloved community" did much of this work. This is to say that for both, love was foundational and essential in their respective constructive peace programs.

So let us now move from justice to peace. Such a transition is deeply and intuitively understood by peace and conflict scholars, theorists, peacebuilders, and peace educators. We know the incompleteness of negative peace and the necessity of positive peace. We know the shallow conception of direct violence as the only form of violence, and the need to theorize and analyze cultural and structural (indirect) violence as well. We know how important justice is to resilient and sustainable peace. Yet we know that justice and peace are not synonyms. That peace and reconciliation cannot be totally dependent on justice, because in many cases, justice is not entirely attainable, its fullness will always be elusive. Yet in cases where justice cannot be fully met—indeed, far from it—we can find peace and reconciliation under construction nonetheless. Northern Ireland is a good example.

Just as love is necessarily connected to (perhaps at the heart of) all other virtues, including justice, so too is it at the heart of

peace and reconciliation. Building peace—real peace—is very tough work often requiring decades or generations. Love as personal emotion and devotion is not up to the task, however vaguely and mystically aggregated and circulated. Achieving justice is difficult. Building peace is more so. Justice is what love looks like in public. Peace is what love looks like in public, too.

Whatever the philosophical niceties, and the worry of those who exclaim that we need justice, not charity, it is probably the case at the concrete and practical level, that those doing the works of justice, peace, and love, hold an intuitive sense that these virtues are less separable than modern and contemporary theories insist. While it is unclear that justice, peace, and love can be separated conceptually in a tidy way, such separation is even more unlikely in respect to individuals' moral psychologies. It is important to recover and resuscitate the historical intimacy between love and justice and peace. It is doubtful that the modern and contemporary distinction so common to us has been more helpful than damaging. There is an integrity, if not unity of the virtues that we must call upon and fall upon, if we are to do the demanding work of justice and peace (as seen in the Aristotelian and Christian traditions). Love is the glue that holds the virtues together. For some, it is believed to be the force and energy that holds the universe together. If we have a powerful and social

conception of love, we will be more equipped to do the justice and peacebuilding the world so desperately needs.



Birmingham Children's March
Birmingham, Alabama, 1963



Artwork by Leah Parsons Cook