

## CHAPTER 1

# Eros and Agape – a Critique of Anders Nygren

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**Abstract:** Nygren's book *Eros och Agape* was first published in Sweden in 1930/36. It was then published in English translation in 1953 under the title *Agape and Eros*. The author's idea was to describe the development of the Christian concept of love through the centuries. Nygren argued that *eros* is the term for Platonic, self-centred love that strives for union with the divine realities, while *agape*, denoting the Christian concept of love, is the free, *divine* movement towards human beings. *Agape* is unselfish and is not motivated by any value in the recipient. This distinction drawn by Nygren has been so influential that it has been taken for granted in a lot of Christian contexts worldwide, even if one does not associate it with the name Nygren. In this paper his methodology and the distinction he draws are criticised. He finds in *eros* and *agape* two so-called "fundamental motifs" that, as he sees it, unfortunately merge in Christian tradition and thereby obscure the original Christian understanding of love that emerges in its purest form in St Paul and later in Luther. There are a lot of problems in Nygren's book. He argues, for instance, that Christianity emerges from Judaism as a completely new religion, and separates the Old and the New Testament as if they had nothing in common. *Agape* as the divine gift to human beings excludes all human activity since God has freely and graciously chosen human persons as his slaves. In the present paper it is argued that Nygren's methodology is unsound and that his conclusions are not even in agreement with the New Testament.

**Keywords:** *eros*, *agape*, fundamental motif, egocentric religion, theocentric religion

## Introduction

This paper contains a presentation and critical discussion of Anders Nygren's attempt to identify the genuine Christian concept of love as

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*agape*. It is well known that the New Testament says “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and that Christ says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Christ, according to Matthew, adds (22:38–40): “This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Love, it is commonly held, is a basic concept in Christianity. One may ask, however, how this basic concept should be understood. When one talks about love in a Christian context the terms *eros* and *agape* almost certainly turn up sooner or later. The way these terms are often understood seldom goes back to first hand familiarity with ancient sources. Rather, the formative force behind modern conceptions is a famous book written in the 1930s by the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren. Nygren distinguishes between two completely different concepts of love, and he uses the Greek terms *eros* and *agape* to separate them. For him, the first term denotes the non-Christian concept of love, while the second term denotes the Christian concept. As we shall see below, the two concepts have almost nothing to do with one another. *Eros* is the creature’s striving towards “the intelligible realm” while *agape* is the divine love freely offered from above. Even if several scholars have criticised Nygren’s results, his basic vision seems to live on among many modern Christians, especially in the Protestant churches.<sup>1</sup>

## Eros and Agape

Anders Nygren (1890–1978) published his two-volume study *Den kristna kärlekstanken genom tiderna: Eros och Agape* (*The Christian Idea of Love through the Ages: Eros and Agape*) in 1930 (first part) and 1936 (second part). The first full translation into English in one volume was made by Philip Watson and published in 1953 under the title *Agape and Eros*.<sup>2</sup> (A first partial English translation was, however, made in the 1930s). The

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1 For recent studies on the notion of love that engage critically with Nygren, see Jeanrond (2010), Lindberg (2008) and May (2011).

2 All references below are to this 1953 edition.

book has been translated into several languages.<sup>3</sup> Nygren's work has been extremely influential. It seems that the distinction he posits between *eros* and *agape* has been received in many circles almost as a dogmatic truth, and the impression, for instance from a Norwegian point of view, is that the distinction is generally taken for granted. This can, for instance, be seen in an anthology published by Tore Frost and Egil A. Wyller in 1974, *Den platonske kjærlighetstanke gjennom tidene (The Platonic Conception of Love through the Ages)*, where it is stated that *agape* is the Christian concept of love (Frost & Wyller, 1974, p. 52). This is a belief held by people who have never heard of Anders Nygren. One even gets the impression that his views have established this ascendancy almost globally. However, not all Christian churches and traditions are particularly happy with Nygren's results and their influence. This goes without saying, I suppose, if we consider the fact that according to Nygren the Christian concept of love, or *agape*, is best understood by St Paul and Martin Luther.

The purpose of the present paper is to present and criticise Nygren's approach and some of his results. First we shall have a look at his *method* and the way he describes *eros* and *agape*, then we shall try to make some critical remarks. It is, as a matter of fact, not particularly difficult to identify Nygren's results. However, his method involves a number of features that might beguile and ensnare the reader and it is important to shed some light on this before we look any further.

## Methodology

Nygren's approach is from the point of view of what he calls "motif research". The idea is to recover central motifs of Christian theology and investigate them historically. We could, however, ask how Nygren identifies such a motif. It is probably a reasonable guess that for Nygren a central Christian motif is picked from basic ideas of *reformation theology*. Nygren's subject is the idea of *love*. How does he approach this topic? One does not have to read so very much in the first part of the book to see Nygren's approach quite clearly. At an early stage he states that *agape* is

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3 It was published in German in 1930 (first part) and 1937 (second part).

“the transvaluation of all ancient values” (Nygren, 1953, p. 30). He stresses again and again the claim he wants to argue as if – for him at least – it is already a truth beyond any doubt that *agape* and *eros* originally had nothing to do with one another: “There cannot actually be any doubt that Eros and Agape belong originally to two entirely separate spiritual worlds, between which no direct communication is possible” (Nygren, 1953, p. 31). If we do not see this, the reason is probably, according to Nygren, that we have been conditioned by one of two influences (Nygren, 1953, pp. 31–32). On the one hand, there is a more than thousand-year-old tradition that tells us that *eros* and *agape* should be connected with one another – he has the Christian tradition in mind. On the other hand, there is the problem of language. *Eros* and *agape* are Greek words that we translate with one modern term such as *love* (or *Liebe* in German or *kjærlighet* in Norwegian etc.), leading us to believe that behind them both there is one and the same basic reality. One may come to think of them as forms of the basic phenomenon of love, or as two expressions of one and the same basic power. Nygren, however, strongly denies that they originally had anything whatsoever to do with one another.

We must ask then: how on earth could they be compared to one another? Why should we ever think this an option? Why make a research project about concepts that have nothing to do with one another? Nygren states that for one thing, even if it may look strange, they have been brought together in Christian history. He recognizes that this is, in itself, enough for making a comparison. However, if we are going to take his characterization of the two concepts seriously, that they have nothing at all in common, then it seems rather strange methodologically to make such a comparison.

Nygren says that *eros* and *agape* can be confronted in one of three different ways (Nygren, 1953, pp. 32–34). (1) We can focus on the distinction from a linguistic point of view. It can hardly be a coincidence that the New Testament uses the term *agape* and avoids the term *eros*, and we must ask why. However, Nygren remarks quite reasonably that what matters is not the general philological sense of the terms, but “the special content which creative minds have filled them with”. (2) This brings us to the second option: maybe we should work with two independent

historical conceptions? However, since these two concepts lack a connection with one another there will be no common point of comparison. “Platonic Eros and Pauline Agape have, so to speak, no common denominator; they are not answers to the same question” (Nygren, 1953, p. 33). (3) Nygren’s third option brings him to the position from which he may make his comparison: *eros* and *agape* can be set up against one another as *different general attitudes to life* (Nygren, 1953, p. 34). They may therefore be treated as “fundamental motifs”.

Before we try to understand what he means with a *fundamental motif*, we should ask why the second option should be avoided. One might think that a normal approach to the historical investigation of a certain concept would be to investigate the literary contexts in which the relevant terminology occurs. I would suggest that one should make comparisons to identify similarities and differences, and from such a study try to identify a common conceptual content. Of course, if one claims that there are ideas at work here that have nothing to do with one another, one would expect this procedure to reveal nothing significant. However, in spite of what Nygren claims, there is reason to question his premise that these ideas are completely separate.

## Fundamental Motif

What, then, is a fundamental motif? Nygren draws a comparison with art and says that a fundamental motif is “that which makes a work of art into a unified whole, determines its structure, and gives it its specific nature” (Nygren, 1953, p. 42). Drawing on this, he offers a definition:

A fundamental motif is that which forms the answer given by some particular outlook to a general question of such a fundamental nature that it can be described in a categorical sense as a fundamental question.

We probably need to unpack this rather dense statement before we proceed. There are general questions of a *basic* kind that could be asked, let us say, concerning our existence. Such questions are “fundamental questions”. Certain religious outlooks on human existence will provide answers to such questions. These answers put forward a fundamental

motif that provides a grasp of the “essence” of the particular religious outlook.

It would be helpful at this stage to have an example of such a “fundamental question”. Nygren provides one, even if not explicitly put in the linguistic form of a question. He talks of “the religious question, the question of the Eternal or man’s fellowship with God” (Nygren, 1953, p. 45). How should we interpret him here? Maybe his question could be formulated in the following way: how should we understand the *nature* of the human being’s fellowship with God? The fundamental motif is brought in as an answer to such a question.

At this point Nygren says that the sense of the question obviously varies according to whether “the centre of gravity in the religious relationship is placed in man’s ego or in the Divine: in the former case we get an egocentric, in the latter a theocentric religion”. Then he claims that “It is in Christianity that we first find egocentric religion essentially superseded by theocentric religion”. Christianity will provide the theocentric answer to the question “What is God?” with the Johannine formula: God is *agape*.

As the argument develops, we find that Nygren in fact brings no less than *three* “fundamental motifs” into the discussion: the *eros*-motif, the legalistic motif, and the *agape*-motif. So if we ask about what God is or about the nature of the human being’s relationship with God, the three motifs will provide different answers. We can gather together some of the main features of the two fundamental motifs of *eros* and *agape* as Nygren conceives them:<sup>4</sup>

*Eros* is acquisitive desire and longing. It is man’s way to God. It is man’s own effort and assumes that his salvation is his own work. *Eros* is egoistic love, a form of self-assertion. It seeks to gain its life as a kind of divine and immortalized life.

It is man’s love and it is motivated by the worth or quality of its object.

*Agape*, on the other hand, is sacrificial giving. It comes from God and is God’s way to man. *Agape* is divine grace and is totally unselfish love. It is God’s love. *Agape* is not motivated by any value or quality its object might have. It rather creates value.

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4 See the summary in Nygren, 1953, p. 210.

The characteristics of *eros* can be assembled by a selective reading of two of Plato's dialogues, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. When it comes to the legalistic motif, which is seen as basic for Old Testament religion, Nygren applies it mainly in a negative way, to put *agape* into relief. He stresses that even if Jesus moved within the forms of Old Testament piety, Christianity emerges from Judaism as a *completely new religion* (Nygren, 1953, pp. 67–68). He quotes the Gospel of Mark: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners,” says Jesus (Mark 2:17); and with these words He turns the entire scale of Jewish values upside down”. Nygren presents the basic motif of the Old Testament or the Jewish religion in the following way (Nygren, 1953, p. 71): “God’s love is shown, be it noted, to them that fear Him; it is shown to the righteous, not to the sinner.” As a matter of fact, even if Nygren says Christ “moved within the forms of Old Testament piety”, he describes Jewish religion in a way that tears apart the Old and New Testament as if they had *nothing* in common.<sup>5</sup> The New Testament *agape* motif, he maintains, is so radically new that it should be distinguished from all other conceptions of fellowship with God. However, there is reason to doubt whether Nygren’s conception of Old Testament religion is adequate. We return to this below.

## Unmotivated Love

One of the most striking points Nygren makes is related to the *unmotivated* character of divine *agape*.<sup>6</sup> *Agape* is completely groundless in the sense that there is absolutely no merit or value in man that may motivate it. The man that is loved by God has no value in himself, and the whole idea that there is some kind of “infinite value of the human soul” is not at all central to Christianity. From the side of man, there is no way that leads to God. Man can only be the receptacle of divine *agape*, and in his love for his neighbour or his love for God he is simply a tube through which what is distinctly divine may flow. This love contains nothing that is human (Nygren, 1953, p. 94): “It excludes man’s spontaneity, inasmuch

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5 See Nygren, 1953, pp. 67–75.

6 To what follows, see Nygren, 1953, pp. 75–81.

as it is God's Agape that has 'chosen' him and made him a slave of God, so that he cannot be said to have anything he can call his own in relation to God." This is not all; our love towards God, when God lets it flow through us from his own initiative, does not seek to gain anything: "It most certainly does not seek to gain anything other than God. But neither does it seek to gain even God Himself or His love" – since in that case it would probably have been contaminated by some kind of *eros* that is striving towards God. God gives his love freely, and Nygren says there is nothing for man to gain by loving God (Nygren, 1953, p. 94). Let us now turn to some critical remarks on Nygren's project.

## Critical Remarks

In this section four broad areas where a critical voice seems valid will be presented. First, one might like to ask about the methodological character of Nygren's "fundamental motifs". How are they arrived at, and what are they? Nygren says that the collection of a vast mass of material from different religions will be of no use for comparison if a particular belief or a certain practice is not interpreted in connection with the basic idea of a particular religion. How, then, do we get hold of this idea? Nygren stresses that we cannot get hold of it from an analysis of particular religious data which may be arranged in different patterns so we cannot be sure of having understood any of them, since we lack the *principle* that connects them (Nygren, 1953, p. 36). The search for such a connecting link is, according to Nygren, no less a matter of *empirical* research than is the investigation of disconnected religious phenomena. However, since the connecting principle is not to be found among the comparative elements themselves, one gets the impression that it originates with some kind of *intuition* (Nygren, 1953, p. 37). Nygren admits that this is the case, but emphasizes that even so "the gains of intuition must be subjected to scientific analysis and verification". One may wonder what can be deduced from these rather vague remarks.

It seems that Nygren's fundamental motifs have a certain similarity with Kantian *a priori* conceptions.<sup>7</sup> If this is correct, it would at least

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7 This seems to be indicated by Wigen, 1974, p. 59 as well.



shed light on how the motifs themselves function as measuring sticks for the evaluation of the material. In any case, the New Testament data for the *agape* motif are obviously measured against some kind of ideal type that is not empirically gathered from the material itself. So the *a priori* conception of *agape*, which is gained through some kind of philosophical intuition, makes it possible to classify the New Testament material in accordance with the extent to which it succeeds in establishing the fundamental Christian idea of love. Nygren identifies certain important differences between the synoptic gospels, the Pauline writings, and the Johannine literature. One might ask, if we do not buy the intuition-methodology, from where could Nygren have got his fundamental motif? It is probably not an unreasonable guess that he found it in some of the basic ideas of the Lutheran reformation, the *sola fide* and the *sola gratia*. Nygren puts great emphasis on his claim that his research is strictly scientific and involves no value-judgements (Nygren, 1953, pp. 38–40). However, there are reasons to doubt that this is really the case.

Secondly, the dramatic emptying of man – and by implication creatures in general – of value, seems to indicate a lack of any positive appreciation of the created world as such. Further, there is no interest in creatures other than human beings. The words of Genesis 1, “And God saw that it was good”, have no place in Nygren’s doctrine. There is a complete lack of any sense of the doctrine of creation. Christianity, with its message of salvation, somehow just pops up at a certain stage of history without any precedent. If the God of the Old Testament is still to be conceived of as the God of the New Testament, it also looks as if this God suddenly changed his mind and dropped the legalistic project in favour of the project of *agape*. One of the most striking differences between the conception of the Scriptures in certain patristic authors and the conception found in Nygren is the fact that for thinkers like Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor the Scriptures should be understood from the point of view of an overall or covering “hypothesis”: it is the *same* divine agent that works both in creation and salvation. There is but one divine economy and one divine providence. A succinct expression of this is when Maximus says that “Always and in all God’s Logos and God wills to effect the mystery of

His own embodiment”.<sup>8</sup> The Logos is present in the act of creation, in the world order, and as the agent of salvation.<sup>9</sup> The Symbol of faith (the Creed) gives the ancient expression of such an “hypothesis”: creation, salvation, and the economy of the church are interconnected because they are based in the Trinity itself. In Nygren’s perspective, the Old Testament loses its religious value as it witnesses to a completely legalistic motif: “What Judaism affirmed, Christianity must deny” (Nygren, 1953, pp. 65, 68). Christian fellowship with God is different in kind from that of Judaism; therefore Christianity, in spite of its historical connection with Judaism, and in spite of any other bonds and affinities between them, is a fundamentally different thing from Judaism. Nygren quotes Psalm 1 (Nygren, 1953, p. 69):

Blessed is the man that does not walk in the council of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

According to Nygren, the God of the Old Testament draws a decisive distinction between the righteous and the sinner, and God’s love is shown to the former, not to the latter (Nygren, 1953, p. 71). However, this is not the only impression the Old Testament leaves. What about the God of the prophet Isaiah (1:18), when he says: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” Of course, Nygren can point to the next verse, that talks of willingness and obedience. But even so, it seems as if forgiveness of sins is offered to the person who obediently “reasons” with the Lord. The sinner is in fact offered forgiveness if he repents. When Jesus says, “I came not to call the righteous,

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8 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7, 1084c-d.

9 Cf. Maximus, *Ambiguum* 7 and 41.

but sinners”, does he with these words turn “the entire scale of Jewish values upside down” (Nygren, 1953, p. 68)? The validity of Nygren’s approach should simply be questioned. Nygren’s own project could itself obviously be considered as being unprecedented and completely new in the history of religion. But is it then of any value for Christianity?

Thirdly, there is something rather disturbing about Nygren’s Christology. Christ is obviously a manifestation of the love of God, but Christianity seems to be more of a revelation of the motif of love than of the Incarnation of the Son of God.<sup>10</sup> What exactly does the relation between the Father and Jesus amount to? One could, of course, say that the New Testament is not all that clear of the question of Christology. Movements like Arianism and Anomeanism in the 4<sup>th</sup> century can be understood as interpretations of a far from clear New Testament text.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, one could challenge the value of Nygren’s investigations for the historically existing Christian church, since the scientific isolation of the New Testament text from the natural context of the historical church may result in quite arbitrary conclusions, also from a scholarly point of view. Further, if Nygren’s *agape* originates in his appreciation of certain central elements of the Lutheran reformation, one might wonder why this particular piece of dogmatic theology can be turned into a “fundamental motif” in ancient Christianity, while a clearer grasp of Christology is not. How could one, in the context of Christianity, separate *agape* from Christ, Christ from Christology, and Christology from the divine Economy of creation and salvation?

Fourthly, Nygren’s reading of the New Testament leaves something to be desired. He claims that human love should be patterned on divine love, but in the synoptic gospels God’s love for human beings is explained by analogy with human love: the love of a man for his hungry son (Matthew 7:9–11), the love of a shepherd for a single lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7), the love of a father for a wayward child (Luke 15:11–32).<sup>12</sup> In the letter to the Philippians, St Paul takes into consideration both God’s work within man

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. for example Nygren, 1953, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> One could say that both of these heresies denied a consubstantial Trinity. Jesus is not God by essence, but is a second entity after the Father and created by him.

<sup>12</sup> I have taken this from Streiker, 1964, p. 335.

and man's cooperation with God: "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6) and "work at your own salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12). Equally important, however, is the fact that Paul, in more than one context, speaks of how participation in the divine Spirit is fulfilled in the development of virtues in the believer. The most perspicuous example is from Galatians 5:22–23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law." It would seem quite strange to argue that these "fruit[s] of the Spirit" have nothing to do with any spiritual development or maturity of the believer, but are quite independent of him and external to his being. In the theological scheme of Nygren, however, human beings are reduced to valueless tubes of divine love. The creature cannot contribute anything and it is indeed a miracle that one can receive grace at all if there is nothing in the creature that can establish a point of connection with God. One has to read the New Testament with rather thick, coloured glasses to avoid seeing that God does not approach human zombies, but rather calls the being that is made in the image of God back to himself.

## Conclusion

There is a further reason why Nygren's interpretation of the Scriptures and his whole project should be considered completely out of date – its *anthropocentric* character. Of course, anyone who has some acquaintance with his book knows that he brands *eros* as being anthropocentric while *agape* is theocentric. That may be so, but in reality Nygren's description has two poles, namely God and man. The rest of creation does not come into consideration. Like man, creation is, in this description, probably completely without any value in itself; indeed, it is surely valueless to an even larger degree than man. This point of view is obviously out of step with what we read in several places in the Scriptures where the created world is appreciated both because God made it and because of the divine purpose of *transforming* it, a motif that is well known from patristic thought. It should be quite clear that today one should rid oneself of this kind of purely God-man centred theology, and take seriously the

Scriptural passages that speak of the natural world, its creation by God, his ownership of it, and how he works its transformation.

It is reasonable to claim that there is a Christian concept of love. However, it cannot be identified with the concept worked out by Nygren in his famous book. The way to an understanding of the Christian idea of love should go through the ancient Christian sources, and for those who consider Christian *tradition* a basic feature of the church, these sources are not limited to the Old and New Testament writings.<sup>13</sup>

Nygren seems to tear two worlds apart, the ancient “Greek” (and Jewish) and the Christian, claiming that *eros* and *agape* have nothing in common. However, it might occur to a reader that the two phenomena are compared for the simple reason that they in fact are conceived, even by Nygren, as *two aspects of one and the same thing*: love. These two aspects make sense if they identify features of one and the same thing. If Nygren’s *agape* resembles his description of it, to call it by the name of love is counterintuitive.

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13 Since the Holy Scriptures of the primitive church were the Old Testament writings, the latter should be considered a Christian text as well as a Jewish one.

