

# *Sacrificial Agape*

## SACRIFICIAL AGAPE AND GROUP SELECTION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

*by J. Jeffrey Tillman*

*Abstract.* Human altruistic behavior has received a great deal of scientific attention over the past forty years. Altruistic-like behaviors found among insects and animals have illumined certain human behaviors, and the revival of interest in group selection has focused attention on how sacrificial altruism, although not adaptive for individuals, can be adaptive for groups. Curiously, at the same time that sociobiology has placed greater emphasis on the value of sacrificial altruism, Protestant ethics in America has moved away from it. While Roman Catholic ethics has a longstanding tradition emphasizing an ordering of love, placing love of self second only to love for God, Protestant ethics in America has adopted a similar stance only recently, replacing a strong sacrificial ethic with one focusing on mutual regard for self and others. If sociobiology is correct about the significance of sacrificial altruistic behaviors for the survival of communities, this shift away from sacrificial agape by American Christianity may cut the community off from important resources for the development of a global ethic crucial for the survival of that faith community and humankind itself.

*Keywords:* agape; altruism; Christian love; evolutionary ethics; group selection; Protestant ethics; sacrifice; sociobiology

---

Human altruism remains a curious phenomenon. In spite of Western egoistic economics, politics, and religion, altruism persists as an ideal and a practice in the West. During the last thirty years, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology have suggested that human altruism can be explained just as it can in nature, as a type of individual survival strategy. A resurgence

J. Jeffrey Tillman is Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Wayland Baptist University, Wichita Falls, Texas. His address is 4423 Old Windthorst Rd., Wichita Falls, TX 76310.

[*Zygon*, vol. 43, no. 3 (September 2008)]

© 2008 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

of interest in group selection has offered new perspectives on the survival benefits of altruism, and these provide interesting platforms from which to consider a recent decline of support among American Protestants for one form of Christian altruism, sacrificial agape.

#### SOCIOBIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Altruism in a genetic sense has to do with the behaviors of individual organisms that are genetically influenced and that place the survival of other organisms ahead of their own survival. Parents of most birds and mammals will place themselves in danger in order to protect their young. Given the relative helplessness of these organisms at birth, the caring behavior of at least one parent furthers the survival of the genes for that behavior. Biologists brand this behavior *kinship altruism* to emphasize that it is directed only toward genetic relations (Hamilton 1964).

*Reciprocal altruism* refers to the helping behaviors of some higher mammals such as bats, apes, and elephants. These animals assist others even when they are genetically unrelated, ostensibly because they receive similar treatment from the parties they assist (Trivers 1971). Vampire bats are a graphic example. The evening meal for a vampire bat is a feast-or-famine affair. Even highly skilled hunters find a meal only about one out of three nights. Survival is therefore always uncertain, because a bat can starve in only a few days. However, a bat that finds a meal has the ability to ingest much more blood than it needs. When it returns to the roost, it can share its bounty with chosen associates who have been less fortunate. Observations indicate that bats are very adept—an adeptness probably due to their relatively large brain size—at remembering who has shared with them in the past. Although the sharing puts the successful hunter at a small risk, it raises the likelihood that the recipient will survive another night. Moreover, it enhances the donor's chance of survival in that the recipient will likely serve as a donor to it in the future (Wilkerson 1990, 76, 81).

These two categories may not account for all animal behaviors, however. Research on the protective habits of guppies illustrates another pattern. When a school of guppies in the wild becomes aware of a potential threat, select individuals within the school proceed toward the threat to ascertain its danger. If they survive the approach, they report back to the school the results of their foray. The responsibility of being a scout is not apportioned evenly in a school. Some guppies are never scouts, and others are frequently. The mortality rate for guppies who act as scouts is much higher than the mortality rate for a non-scout within the school, but the willingness of some members to be scouts increases the survival rate of the whole school (Dugatkin 1999, 145).

These sociobiological findings raise some important issues. First, there is the question of how continuous natural systems are with human systems. Some scientists make the leap from the discussion of natural systems

of insects, lower mammals, and primates to the discussion of humans in a rather fluid manner. This is apparent in the widespread application of the term *altruism* to animals, a term whose usage generally connotes behavior intended to seek the benefit of others. Some scientists find no problem in the leap because they avoid appeals to motivation in their definitions of altruism and look only at the behavior of animal or human organisms (Dawkins 1989, 4). Some biologists speak of animals as having intentions, sometimes admitting that their references are metaphorical. And, although interesting work is going on to investigate whether animals have something like human consciousness, emotion, and motivation (Griffin and Speck 2004), we must remember that altruistic patterns in animals are best scientifically described as hard-wired behaviors. Referring to animals as altruists seems odd, then, because they lack a critical component of a traditional definition of human altruism: an intention to do good for another (Tesser 1995, 342).

There are significant similarities between humans and other creatures in nature. Many humans are still quaking from the discovery of the large percentage of human genes held in common not just with chimpanzees, about 98 percent, but even with fruit flies, 61 percent (Gibbons 1998; Rubin et al. 2000). In fact human rationality itself may be best described not as a stark distinguishing characteristic but as a position on one end of a continuum. If rationality is allowed to include not only the ability to manipulate symbols but also any process that reacts to the environment that involves weighing alternative choices in terms of past experience, many organisms at many levels of complexity present some aspect of that profile (Midgley 1978, 259).

However, intentional abilities appear more fully developed among humans than any other creature, and this has import for evolutionary models. In evolutionary terms, human intelligence makes possible adaptation by intellectual selection. This is different from natural selection, according to which genetic mutations arise by chance, not intention, and successful mutations survive because they happen to make an organism more successful. Intellectual selection operates on the basis of memory of past events and decisions and the visualization of different possible futures. Adaptive behavior does not have to wait for centuries of mutation. The human brain, within some limits, can do so instantaneously (Dennett 1995, 375, 381).

Even when a high level of intentionality is included, the nature of those intentions is at issue. Kinship and reciprocal altruism have at times been called false altruisms because, although the behavior is for the good of another organism, the actor is receiving some benefit as well. In the case of kinship altruism, the actor is protecting his or her genetic identity as represented in the survival of offspring. In reciprocal altruism, the actor is hoping for some gain in the future. Even extraordinary acts of beneficence may be rooted in desires on the part of the actor to gain a future benefit (Irons 2001, 296).

As such, the categories of kinship and reciprocal altruism provide incomplete descriptions. They have difficulty explaining the abundant examples of human behavior that follow the pattern of selflessness for others (Gintis et al. 2003, 154; Fehr and Rockenbach 2003, 137). They also tend to exclude an ingredient that many find essential: self-sacrifice for another without regard for reward or the effect on oneself (Monroe 1994, 862–63). Robert Trivers, an important framer of reciprocal altruism theory, cautions: “Models that attempt to explain altruistic behavior in terms of natural selection are models designed to take altruism out of altruism” (Trivers 1971, 35).

A second important issue that the sociobiological categories raise is the question of the role of individuals. Most contemporary scientific descriptions of altruism are cast in terms of the fitness of the genes of individuals. If these genes prove to be part of a successful individual package of survival, that organism passes its genes along to offspring who perhaps flourish. This wholly individual focus is curious because of the abundant examples in nature that lend themselves to descriptions as group adaptations. Part of the answer as to why group selection is rarely applied is a historical one. The use of group selection by Social Darwinism led to its disrepute when the claims of Social Darwinism for the inheritance of acquired characteristics were disproven by Mendelian genetics. Darwinism itself became suspect as a model to describe human societies in the early twentieth century, and a rift between the natural and social sciences resulted (Dawson 1999, 4). In the early 1960s, V. C. Wynne-Edwards (1986) attempted to revive group selection in his work on population size, but the refutation of his conclusions and his approach by George C. Williams (1966) left a negative mark that has lasted up to the present (Field 1998). The rise of rational choice theory, which focuses on individual dimensions and severely downplays social components, and its application to all kinds of scientific and human studies have further intensified individualistic emphases (Zafirovski 2003, 60; Bell 1995, 826).

Currently, attention is again being directed toward group selection by means of a hybrid view called *multilevel selection*. It recognizes the relevance of both individual and group selection, with a specific category of *between-group selection* addressing the maximization of fitness of a particular group in reference to other groups (Wilson and Sober 1994; Wilson 1997, s122–s123; Field 1998). Multilevel selection does not maintain that groups are the arena for development of all adaptive traits, only for those that assist the fitness of a group relative to other groups competing with them for resources (McAndrew 2002, 80).

In regard to altruism, group selection offers a vital vantage point. The standard account of altruism according to individual selection is that a group of altruists will be quickly overrun by egoists as soon as it is infiltrated by one egoist (Dawkins 1989, 8), and this scenario does seem to

hold for groups isolated from one another (McAndrew 2002, 80–81). However, in cases where there is competition between groups for resources, mathematical models as well as certain observations suggest that the presence of altruists within a group enhances the group's survival (Gintis et al. 2003, 154). The guppy scout is a useful example. The willingness, in a guppy sense, of a guppy to take the risk of inspecting a possible threat serves the survival of the whole group of guppies while it jeopardizes that guppy's ability to pass along its genetic heritage. A school of guppies with a constant reserve of willing scouts, however, will survive better than a school with few or no willing scouts (Dugatkin 1999, 149).

#### MEMES FOR COOPERATION

In nonhuman communities, the preservation of behavior patterns from generation to generation generally is accomplished by genetic transmission. Among humans, most behaviors are transmitted by the modeling and teaching of specific cultural behavior patterns. Some sociobiologists call these units of cultural inheritance *memes*, a name both phonetically and semantically related to *gene*. Memes operate according to essentially the same principles of selection as genes, and a group whose members are deeply committed to the foundational memes of the community is more likely to survive than a community only slightly committed to its communal memes because its within-group similarities are enhanced while its differences from other groups are enlarged (Blackmore 1999, 198–99).

Mememes for sacrificial cooperation are components vital to the success of any community. Without individuals willing to contribute to the goals of the group, the community dies. Of particular danger to a community are noncooperators or free-riders, those who enjoy all the benefits of association with the group but avoid the costs of cooperation.

Two types of countermeasures for free-riders are important. First, the community must work diligently to internalize the meme for sacrifice within its members through rituals, teaching, and modeling with the purpose of making the practice second nature (Gintis 2003a, 407–8; Field 1998). When successfully inculcated, these habits can drive individuals to great personal sacrifice, such as the marine private who in one motion sees the live grenade tossed into his foxhole and leaps to cover it, saving the other members of his squad. Or, it can result in behaviors so automatic that they are practiced beyond the original community, such as the woman who leaves a tip for a waiter in a foreign country she never expects to visit again.

Second, those who fail to cooperate are identified and then removed or reintegrated (Mealey, Daood, and Krage 1996; Dawson 1999, 15). This can be accomplished by punishment, which itself has altruistic dimensions. Punishment requires a willing punisher who expends energy and resources for which he or she will likely never be repaid but which will benefit the group as a whole if the noncooperator leaves the group or is

reintegrated into it (Fehr and Gächter 2002, 137). In times of crisis, cooperation within a community is crucial. At such times cooperation rooted in relationships of reciprocity will become severely unstable because the future of the group itself is uncertain. If there is a relatively small contingent of devoted altruists who punish noncooperators at some cost to themselves, whether or not it individually helps them in the long run, the group's chances for survival are tremendously improved (Gintis 2003b, 163).

The integrity of a group also can be maintained by means of costly signaling. As applied to individuals, costly signaling theory maintains that individuals may behave in ways that bring hardship upon themselves as a means of communicating information about themselves. The costly behavior signals to others that the individual must have access to large resources and therefore is an attractive mate or leader or is unattractive as prey. A famous example of the latter is the practice of stotting among gazelles. When a gazelle sights a predator, it may display classic warning signals, stamping its feet and showing the white of its tail. In addition to these, some particularly vigorous gazelles will leap high vertically into the air. This is curious behavior in the face of an obvious threat, when immediate flight away from the predator would make more sense. Stotting appears to serve as a signal to the predator that the gazelle is too fit and speedy to be captured and that the predator is better off pursuing other prey (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997, 6–7).

When viewed from the standpoint of the group, costly signaling acts as a means of removing free-riders. By making extravagant and personally costly ceremonies or behaviors compulsory to membership, only the truly devout will remain in the fellowship. Those who have a superficial connection to the community or wish to enjoy the benefits of membership without the obligations will be unwilling to undertake these practices and will separate themselves from the community (McAndrew 2002, 81). Because the required behavior is public, fewer altruistic punishers are needed to monitor the group membership, and those individuals' efforts can be channeled toward more direct group goals (Irons 2001, 298; Sosis 2000, 72).

Religious commitments are perhaps the most powerful expressions of human commitment and are made up of ceremonies and rituals that place extensive demands upon members. Members constantly scrutinize one another to assess the depth of one another's commitments, and the result is a more cohesive and stronger group (Irons 2001, 293). "Hard to fake" signs of commitment are the most valuable because they communicate an inherent loyalty to the tenets of the community that a neophyte or a free-rider would find extremely difficult to mimic (Irons 2001, 298).

#### SACRIFICIAL AGAPE AS A CHRISTIAN MEME

In sociobiological terms, Christianity is a community that replicates the memes found in the Christian canon (Pyper 1998, 77). The survival of

these memes depends on how faithfully the community is replicated along the established pattern and how well it persuades members in each generation to adopt and advance its beliefs. The Bible contains various strategies by which the survival of the community is achieved (Pyper 1998, 83), but the reality of any particular Christian meme is the combination of its presence in canonical texts and the communal interpretation of those texts.

This is particularly true for the meme for Christian altruism. Altruism has a long history as a memetic tradition within Christianity under the category of Christian love, or, more specifically, the Greek term *agape*. The Christian canon contains all the forms of altruism commonly discussed in sociobiology. Strictures for protection of kin are strong, but so are relations of reciprocity—"However you want people to treat you, so treat them" (Matthew 7:12 NAS), "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39 NAS), and these with the pervading expectation that care for others will yield rewards in heaven. There also are teachings that promote behavior involving self-sacrifice: "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44 NAS), "[Forgive others] seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22 NAS), and "when we are reviled, we bless, when we are persecuted, we endure, when we are slandered, we try to conciliate" (1 Corinthians 4:12–13 NAS).

Christian ethicists have interpreted Christian love variously. A variety of studies seek to distinguish *agape* from other Greek or Latin categories such as *eros*, *philia*, or *caritas*, and declare one or another of them as primary. One finds writers distinguishing between what they call a strong version of *agape*, which calls for self-sacrifice as a norm, and a weak version, which interprets sacrifice as an extraordinary and unusual exercise beyond the norm (Hallett 1989). This variety has posed a challenge for Christian interpretation, and competing interpretations of love have existed since the outset of the religion.

Against this tradition of diversity, a very strong impetus for standardization has been prominent in Roman Catholicism since the Middle Ages. A description of Christian love by Augustine was interpreted as setting forth an order of love whereby the Christian is called to love first God, then oneself, and then the neighbor. This ordering came to be sanctioned as the Roman Catholic standard for Christian love with love of self taking second place only to love for God (Pope 1991, 262; Hallett 1989, 63–66). Some contemporary Catholic writers such as Stephen J. Pope find the biological categories of kinship and reciprocal altruism consistent with this traditional ordering of love, whereby, all other things being equal, one ought to give kin and close friends greater attention than others (Pope 1991, 286).

Although a major portion of Protestantism, along with the mystical and ascetic quarters of Roman Catholicism, traditionally has emphasized love as self-sacrifice over against self-regard (Hallett 1989, 72), a change appears to have occurred, particularly in the intellectual circles of American Protestantism. Gradually, self-sacrifice as found in the ethic of Søren Kierkegaard,

Anders Nygren, Reinhold Niebuhr, or Paul Ramsey has become less influential, and American Protestants are putting larger emphasis on a mutuality of love or on self-regard as primary.

This theological shift arguably is the product of a larger political and intellectual trend in America. Historically, Protestantism in America consisted of localized community structures in which both the religious and social needs of the community often would demand the self-denial of individuals (Shain 1994, xvi). This tradition remained strong in its opposition to a nationalist individualism framed without reference to localized communities until the middle of the twentieth century, when the older patterns were rejected because of their narrow and intolerant social practices (Shain 1994, 324; Bellah et al. 1985, 83). The Civil Rights Movement as well as landmark Supreme Court cases not only portrayed the widening reach of radical individualism but also effectively institutionalized it (Galston 1986, 813).

These political changes paralleled changes in views of personal interactions. Relationships came to be seen as mechanisms for meeting individual needs, and marriage partners found it ever more difficult to give reasons for marital commitments outside of their own individual pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment. Notions of cost and suffering seemed alien to what was truly valuable (Bellah et al. 1985, 109–10). Social science theory moved in the same direction, rejecting sacrifice as defective and self-defeating and locating the therapeutic in personal affirmation (Bahr and Bahr 2001).

Protestant thinkers accepted these conclusions and interpreted Christian love accordingly. Don Browning, for example, has argued that modern psychotherapies have performed a helpful service for Christianity in identifying the hate of self as a persistent human problem and recommending self-love as the avenue that leads to the love of others (Browning 1987, 140–42). Furthermore, he suggests that correlations between a sense of obligation for kinfolk and care for wider communities may mean that historic Christian emphases on self-sacrifice stifle the application of Christian care to wider circles (Browning 1992, 423). And, a preoccupation with self-sacrifice has been used over the centuries to justify the subjugation of and injustice toward women and many disadvantaged groups (Browning 1992, 426; Andolsen 1981, 74; Walstedt 1977, 162–65; Post 1990, 64–66).

Perhaps most influential in this Protestant transition has been the work of Gene Outka. He specifically distinguishes altruism from agape. Altruism he defines as a normative concern for the well-being of others without a corresponding concern for one's own well-being (Outka 1996, 35). Agape he portrays as a mutuality that balances regard for self and others. Under agape, a Christian works unilaterally to establish relationships earmarked by intimate understanding and unity. Although agape does not gauge its movements by the receipt of a reciprocal response, it desires such a re-

sponse from the other, even if such a response is not forthcoming (Outka 1992, 8, 37). This view of love, Outka maintains, best conforms to how God loves human beings. In that God loves all persons and finds each valuable, it makes no sense for God to demand that individuals demean themselves below the value that God places on them (Outka 1992, 2–3; 1996, 38). One ought not overemphasize one's own desires to the detriment of others, but one also ought not degrade one's own value by looking only to the interests of others. Altruism fails this requirement because it demands that greater weight be given to the well-being of the neighbor than to the well-being of the self. In consequence, Christians do not have a strict obligation to perform self-sacrificial acts. Sacrificial love is supererogatory and at the discretion of the individual (Outka 1992, 13, 80).

To a growing number of contemporary Christian minds, sacrificial agape appears unrealistic. Stephen G. Post, for example, is expressly "skeptical of those who would detach love from some degree of self-fulfillment. . . . Some degree of reciprocity sustains the generous self-giving of love, and for this reason self-fulfillment has its place in Christian ethics" (Post 1990, 10). Browning contends that a picture of continual giving without reciprocation is a very unpleasant picture, one that we would not desire for our friends and one discordant with the ideal kingdom of God (Browning 1987, 148; see also Vacek 1994, 184–85). There are voices of caution about the dangers involved in this shift (Grant 1996, 5), but they are relatively quiet. Many Christian thinkers now find sacrificial agape to require such irrational behavior that they wonder why texts in the Christian canon would advocate it in the first place.

Individual selection theories would suggest that sacrificial agape first appeared as part of a matrix of virtues to instill communal confidence in individuals who display those virtues (Dawkins 1989, 193). Their actions were imitated, and the meme for sacrificial agape thereby became canonized and institutionalized. The change away from sacrificial agape is explained by a change in what instills confidence among Christians. Christians now seek to emulate not those who sacrifice themselves for others but those who seek the good of others as a way of promoting their own individual good. As such, sacrificial agape has become a memetic hitchhiker. In genetic terms, a hitchhiker is a gene that perhaps had some purpose in the past but now does nothing to enhance the survival of the organism and yet is replicated and passed to offspring along with the genes that do contribute to survival. In memetic terms, a hitchhiker is a cultural trait or variation that may be destructive to individuals or perhaps even to the community but is connected to other cultural traits or traditions and is preserved along with the traits and traditions that further survival (Dawson 1999, 15). Such cultural selection can carry on apart from natural selection. Cultures can contain an interlaced web of behaviors that depend for their existence not on exigencies arising from survival but on the presence

of other cultural traits. Quite radical and destructive behaviors can persist within a group if they are supported by a strong enough network of social expectations (Dawson 1999, 15). According to this viewpoint, although Christian sacrificial love remains among the canonical memes of Christianity, it has no productive contribution to survival and could perhaps be destructive.

Group selection suggests another possibility. Sacrificial agape could be part of an ancient strategy of costly signaling. In order to identify and remove free-riders who might enjoy the benefits of cooperation in Christianity without believing in its tenets or contributing to its mission, sacrificial love is enjoined of all members as a belief and as a practice. As such, it is a critical component of the health and survival of the religion, and its exclusion should be viewed with trepidation because any religion that separates itself from its costly signaling rituals runs the risk of becoming unable to sustain the within-group cooperation necessary to maintain its identity and not lose members to competing communities.

Disagreement persists as to whether or not demographic data substantiate this last conclusion. Virtually all mainline Protestant denominations in America have been losing members for more than thirty years while most evangelical denominations are gaining in numbers. Dean Kelley in his book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* argued that mainline denominations were in decline because of their relaxing traditional standards of belief and morality and that the growth of conservative churches resulted from the retention of strict requirements for belief and practice (Kelley 1972, 78–81). Kelley's argument has been supported by several writers (Iannaccone 1994; Weston 1997) but rejected by others who argue a lack of data and methodological precision (Marwell 1996) or point to empirical research indicating that evangelical groups are relaxing their boundaries also (Tamney and Johnson 1998, 218–19).

*Faith Communities in the United States Today* is one of the most exhaustive and recent surveys of Christian congregations in the United States. The research involved more than 14,000 religious congregations and collected data regarding the role of strictness in the life of successful congregations. The study found that the financial and numerical health of a congregation was related to the strictness of the congregation's expectations on members. In fact, the more strict the expectations, the fewer the episodes of internal conflict a congregation experienced (Dudley and Roozen 2001, 22, 23, 28, 62).

Yet, church strictness may not capture the nature of the demands connected with sacrificial agape or the hurdles it faces. Members of even strict churches may feel more sacrificial obligation for fellow members than for those outside their congregation or the religion as a whole. They may even feel more inclination to sacrifice themselves for their nation-state than for their faith community. Such an observation suggests that the communal

ideas historically connected with sacrificial agape have been replaced by the more individualistic idea of group solidarity, with individuals participating in and sacrificing themselves for groups in order to gain reciprocal benefits (Todorov 1996, 82).

#### THE SCOPE OF SACRIFICIAL AGAPE

These considerations drive one back to look at the elemental nature of Christian altruism. Perhaps Christian altruism ought never be discussed in terms of sacrifice because those who are true practitioners of Christianity are glad to perform acts of kindness for others and see their acts not as denial but fulfillment. Of course, every voluntary human act can be said to be an act in search of some kind of fulfillment, whether that fulfillment is construed as pursuing physical pleasure, avoiding punishment, following pure duty, or achieving inner peace. Further descriptions are needed to distinguish purely selfish acts from fundamentally altruistic acts. Sacrifice frequently has functioned as that crucial description in Christianity, qualifying the action by noting that the primary intention guiding the action is the good of another and emphasizing this by identifying serious personal costs to the actor.

There also are theological reasons to be suspicious of self-fulfillment as a guiding principle. To remove sacrifice from the ethical dictionary of Christianity seems out of pace with important sacred texts of the religion. The beatitudes portray a curious juxtaposition of fulfillment and denial: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . those who mourn . . . those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matthew 5:3–6 NAS). Moreover, the Passion picture of Jesus Christ is one of willing sacrifice by a person who understands the significance of his act for redemption but yet struggles and suffers in the face of it. The conclusion is that even God suffers and practices self-denial, and so should those who are followers of God.

But how can such sacrifice be practical? If every Christian seeks out denial for the sake of other Christians, every Christian will seek to give, and none will consent to receive (Vacek 1994, 184). Or, perhaps those nearest the sacrificing Christian will be the ones who most suffer. If the Christian is compelled for reasons of faith to be away from home feeding the hungry, or visiting the sick, or sacrificing his or her life for another, how is this responsible in light of that person's obligations to family, friends, and even, according to rational choice economics, the economy itself? The oddness of these questions is that they presume that the methods of rational prioritizing traditionally used to determine when it is defensible to give one's own needs priority over a stranger's or a neighbor's or a family member's cannot be applied when sacrifice is the guiding category. Given the limited human resources represented by any Christian, that person must be careful in the exercise of these resources. If one seeks to sacrifice, one must recognize the costs connected with this sacrifice and determine whether or

not the theological goods connected with this act appear to be worth it. In some cases, a Christian can find compelling reasons of faith for sacrificing obligations to family, self, nation, or profession. This would appear to be the suggestion of the statement "If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26 NAS).

Such a statement seems odd in a society so undergirt by a pervasive individualism. It suggests that the crucial values of the faith community lie beyond the level of the individual and the nuclear family. Group selection theory is helpful at this point because it reminds Christians that self-giving and denial are critical for the health and preservation of any group, particularly a religious community such as Christianity. Yet, group selection holds its own problems of scale. The scope of observation and experiment connected with it is confined to localized groups and species, not whole species or global systems. In Christianity, the believer and his or her community are called upon to be ready to perform sacrificial acts as Christ did, acts with cosmic significance for the whole human race.

Preserving this cosmic scope has been no small problem for Christianity, and Christian ethicists concerned by the growing dominance of national and particular identities over the transcendent identity advocated by the New Testament have suggested that Christianity needs to make its community of interest more extensive than a particular community or a particular nation-state. As already seen, Outka is interested in agape as a universal category, and even the Mennonite John Howard Yoder finds in "the commonality of humankind" a platform to overcome territorialism (Yoder 1992, 21). Unfortunately, while the ethic that results is rationally high-minded, particularly in terms of Enlightenment sensibilities (Grant 1996, 11), it may not look distinctively Christian. Many have followed self-sacrifice on the basis of rational principlism without specific religious commitments. Many of those who put themselves at risk to rescue Jews from the Nazis did so not out of religious motivation but out of a sense that as human beings Jews deserved to be rescued (Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990). If this kind of ethic can be achieved without Christianity, why is Christianity needed, and why should the meme of sacrificial agape be preserved?

This points to a deeper theme within the memetic base of the New Testament. Where the New Testament advocates sacrificial agape, it does so not out of a sense that the value of human beings is rationally described or discerned but from a theological commitment that all human beings are creatures of God and that God is working for their good through an eschatological community, the church. Jürgen Moltmann has described this community as the locus for the transforming powers of God begun in the resurrection of Christ and extending to the culmination of the end of the age. As prophetic of the already present and yet approaching new age, the

church suffers in the inadequacies of the present as part of the divine forces transforming the cosmos (Moltmann 1967, 334–35). The survival of individuals or of one particular faith community is not the focus. The focus of sacrificial agape is the furthering of the work of God, a work that poses a demand on the Christian and the Christian community more primary than any other demand (Hauerwas 1992, 166).

#### THE FUTURE OF SACRIFICIAL AGAPE

Looking to science to solve or even clarify normative religious questions can involve problems. Although science is sometimes purported to deal just with “facts” and be value-free, it can just as likely be characterized as theory-dependent, prone to bias, and politically influenced (McMullin 2000, 550). The tension between theorists subscribing to individual selection and those who subscribe to group selection is symptomatic of how scientific practitioners can essentially agree on an established methodology but on the basis of different theoretical commitments gather different data sets and derive very different conclusions. This is difficult to accept for some Christian intellectuals because science has so often served as an arbiter for religious questions, usually under the assumption that science discovers the rational patterns that God instilled in the universe and that are consistent with revelation. Of course, this is no longer an assumption inherent to scientific methodology or to all Christian theology.

Science does continue to have large intellectual influence on Christianity, as demonstrated by how many Christian attitudes toward sacrificial agape can be divided along the lines of individual versus group selection. Those whose thinking aligns with individual-selection theories would explain the development and decline of sacrificial agape on the basis of psychological attractiveness. This perspective entails theological commitments emphasizing the individual before God rather than the community before God and promoting the adaptation of received traditions to fit the contemporary individual and cultural ideals of health and happiness.

Those who view Christianity from a perspective consistent with group selection would contend that Christian communities remain strong in comparison to other groups as they impose costly demands on their members. Emphasizing the community before God over the individual before God, Christianity in this mold attempts to preserve the vision of a radical eschatological community as found in its canon and places sacrificial agape at the center of its identity.

Advancing either of these as the normative Christian approach in America is difficult. The theological edifices of each are connected with radically different commitments and separate normative claims that thwart unbiased comparison. Moreover, each poses difficulties to contemporary minds. Contemporary individualism has produced ways of life that attack

longstanding communal foundations for human identity and that many Christians find neither socially nor individually healthy. And yet, many Christians are hesitant to return to anything like traditional American Protestant communalism because of its association with intolerance and discrimination (Bellah et al. 1985, 144).

These concerns are more pressing now than they were fifty years ago. *Globalization* is the term used to describe the growing interconnectedness of environment, economics, and information. It also is used as a normative prescription. Many economic theorists, for example, claim that the globalization of markets results in a stability that will solve the world's economic, health, and security problems and should be encouraged. Not surprisingly, this theory is built on a self-interested individualism that maintains that a worldwide community of individual consumers can be established on the basis of individuals' recognition that their own best interests are served by transcending national barriers to cooperate in grand ventures. The success of efforts underway is contested as is the health of the whole conception, but the conception remains a center point for formative discussions across intellectual disciplines (Saul 2004; Singer 2002). Christian thinkers have recognized the applicability of the conversation for institutional and ethical concerns and have spent considerable effort attempting to translate the term into Christian discussions, but many of these efforts duplicate a flaw of the globalization strategies they react to: They presume that a notion of shared goods critical to global community derives from relatively isolated individuals assessing the attractiveness of those goods (Cahill 2002, 343).

Group selection theories are currently unable to match the scope of the quandaries facing human beings today, but their research provides some direction. They potentially affirm Jared Diamond's assertion that just as many civilizations in human history collapsed because of, among other reasons, the narrow, short-term, and apparently selfish interests of decision makers, contemporary civilization too could collapse with even more devastating effects because it is global (Diamond 2003). As intellectuals scamper to confront these expansive difficulties, and Christian thinkers as part of that throng adopt very similar individualistic strategies, critical elements of a Christian theological stance toward the world lie essentially undeveloped and untouched. A reassessment of group selection theories can well lead Christians, particularly contemporary American Christians, to reconsider sacrificial agape as the platform by which a global Christian ethic can be articulated and practiced.

#### NOTE

A version of this paper was presented at the Southwest Regional Meeting of the Association for the Scientific Study of Religion, 2004.

## REFERENCES

- Andelson, Barbara Hilkert. 1981. "Agape in Feminist Ethics." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9:69–83.
- Bahr, Howard M., and Kathleen S. Bahr. 2001. "Families and Self-Sacrifice: Alternative Models and Meanings for Family Theory." *Social Forces* 79:1231–59.
- Bell, Duran. 1995. "On the Nature of Sharing: Beyond the Range of Methodological Individualism." *Current Anthropology* 36:826–30.
- Bellah, Robert N., et al. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- Blackmore, Susan. 1999. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Browning, Don S. 1987. *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- . 1992. "Altruism and Christian Love." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 27:421–36.
- Cahill, Lisa Sowle. 2002. "Toward Global Ethics." *Theological Studies* 63:324–44.
- Dawkins, Richard. 1989. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Dawson, Doyne. 1999. "Evolutionary Theory and Group Selection: The Question of Warfare." *History and Theory* 38 (4): 79–91.
- Dennett, Daniel Clement. 1995. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Diamond, Jared. 2003. "The Last Americans." *Harper's Magazine* 306 (June): 43–53.
- Dudley, Carl S., and David A. Roozen. 2001. *Faith Communities in the United States Today: A Report on Religion*. Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary. <http://fact.hartsem.edu/MeetNgbrs1.pdf>.
- Dugatkin, Lee. 1999. *Cheating Monkeys and Citizen Bees: The Nature of Cooperation in Animals and Humans*. New York: Free Press.
- Fehr, Ernst, and Bettina Rockenback. 2003. "Detrimental Effects of Sanctions on Human Altruism." *Nature* 422:137–40.
- Fehr, Ernst, and Simon Gächter. 2002. "Altruistic Punishment in Humans." *Nature* 415:137–40.
- Field, Scott A. 1998. "Human Altruism: Group Selection Should Not Be Ignored." *Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems* 21:125–32.
- Galston, William A. 1986. "Public Morality and Religion in the Liberal State." *Political Studies* 19:807–25.
- Gibbons, Ann. 1998. "Which of Our Genes Make Us Human?" *Science* 181:1432–34.
- Gintis, Herbert. 2003a. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Altruism: Gene-culture, Coevolution, and the Internalization of Norms." *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 220:407–18.
- . 2003b. "Solving the Puzzle of Prosociality." *Rationality and Society* 15:155–88.
- Gintis, Herbert, Samuel Bowles, Robert Boyd, and Ernst Fehr. 2003. "Explaining Altruistic Behavior in Humans." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24:153–72.
- Grant, Colin. 1996. "The Love of God: Agape." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (Spring): 3–21.
- Griffin, Donald R., and Gayle B. Speck. 2004. "New Evidence of Animal Consciousness." *Animal Cognition* 7:5–19.
- Hallett, Garth. 1989. *Christian Neighbor Love: An Assessment of Six Rival Versions*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press.
- Hamilton, William D. 1964. "The Genetical Theory of Social Behavior." *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7:1–52.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. 1992. *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. 1994. "Why Strict Churches Are Strong." *American Journal of Sociology* 99:1180–1211.
- Irons, William. 2001. "Religion as a Hard-to-fake Sign of Commitment." In *Evolution and the Capacity for Commitment*, ed. Randolph M. Nesse, 292–309. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kelley, Dean M. 1972. *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Marwell, Gerald. 1996. "We Still Don't Know if Strict Churches Are Strong, Much Less Why: Comment on Iannaccone." *American Journal of Sociology* 101:1097–1108.
- McAndrew, Francis T. 2002. "New Evolutionary Perspectives on Altruism: Multilevel-selection and Costly-signaling Theories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 2:80–82.

- McMullin, Ernan. 2000. "Values in Science." In *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science*, ed. W. H. Newton-Smith, 550–60. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Mealey, Linda, Christopher Daoood, and Michael Krage. 1996. "Enhanced Memory for Faces of Cheaters." *Ethology and Sociobiology* 17:119–28.
- Midgley, Mary. 1978. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. 1967. *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Monroe, Kirsten Renwick. 1994. "A Fat Lady in a Corset: Altruism and Social Theory." *American Journal of Political Science* 38:861–93.
- Monroe, Kirsten R., Michael C. Barton, and Ute Klingemann. 1990. "Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe." *Ethics* 101:103–22.
- Outka, Gene. 1992. "Universal Love and Impartiality." In *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski, 6–91. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press.
- . 1996. "Theocentric Agape and the Self: An Asymmetrical Affirmation in Response to Colin Grant's Either/Or." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (Spring): 34–41.
- Pope, Stephen J. 1991. "The Order of Love and Recent Catholic Ethics: A Constructive Proposal." *Theological Studies* 52:255–88.
- Post, Stephen G. 1990. *A Theory of Agape: On the Meaning of Christian Love*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press.
- Pyper, Hugh S. 1998. "The Selfish Text: The Bible and Memetics." In *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, 70–90. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Rubin, G. M., et al. 2000. "Comparative Genomics of the Eukaryotes." *Science* 287:2204–15.
- Saul, John Ralston. 2004. "The Collapse of Globalism and the Rebirth of Nationalism." *Harper's Magazine* 308 (March): 33–43.
- Shain, Barry. 1994. *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Singer, Peter. 2002. *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.
- Sosis, Richard. 2000. "Religion and Intragroup Cooperation: Preliminary Results of a Comparative Analysis of Utopian Communities." *Cross-cultural Research* 34:70–87.
- Tamney, Joseph B., and Stephen D. Johnson. 1998. "The Popularity of Strict Churches." *Review of Religious Research* 39:209–24.
- Tesser, Abraham. 1995. *Advanced Social Psychology*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1996. *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*. Trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Trivers, Robert L. 1971. "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism." *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46:35–57.
- Vacek, Edward Collin. 1994. "Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics." Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press.
- Walstedt, Joyce Jennings. 1977. "The Altruistic Other Orientation: An Exploration of Female Powerlessness." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2:162–76.
- Weston, Beau. 1997. "The Religion Market." *Kentucky Humanities* #1:2–6.
- Wilkerson, Gerald S. 1990. "Food Sharing in Vampire Bats." *Scientific American* 262:76–82.
- Williams, George C. 1966. *Adaptation and Natural Selection; A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Wilson, David Sloan. 1997. "Altruism and Organism: Disentangling the Themes of Multi-level Selection Theory." *The American Naturalist* 150:s122–s133.
- Wilson, David Sloan, and Elliott Sober. 1994. "Reintroducing Group Selection to the Human Behavioral Sciences." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 17:585–654.
- Wynne-Edwards, V. C. 1986. *Evolution through Group Selection*. Boston: Blackwell Scientific Publications.
- Yoder, John Howard. 1992. *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*. Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald.
- Zafirovski, Milan. 2003. "The Rational Choice Approach to Human Studies: A Reexamination." *Human Studies* 26:41–66.
- Zahavi, Amotz, and Avishag Zahavi. 1997. *The Handicap Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.