

## Chapter 21

### WHO LOVES? WHO IS LOVED? THE PROBLEM OF THE COLLECTIVE PERSONALITY

Johannes Zachhuber

In one of the best-known passages in the New Testament, a Pharisee asks Jesus to name the ‘first’ commandment from God’s Law. Christ’s celebrated answer, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself’ (Lk. 10.27) has been variously interpreted. This much however seems clear: Jesus speaks about the love one individual person shows to another. For the addressee is, obviously, an individual who is expected to perform his actions in the spirit of love. When Jesus subsequently illustrates his words by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, at least in Luke’s account, it seemingly becomes unequivocal that the object of love must also be an individual.

Notwithstanding this, we do not only speak of love as a relationship between two individuals. People love their families and their friends not just individually but also collectively. They love (or say they love) their country, their nation or indeed humanity. Is it not also the case that we conversely feel loved by our family or by our friends in a way that cannot evidently be reduced to a relationship between individuals?

Scholars have drawn our attention to the fact that particularly some of our strongest religious affections are directed towards communities. To Émile Durkheim, the experience of collective effervescence is the very foundation of all religion.<sup>1</sup> The object of this experience, the French sociologist argued, is society itself in its concrete physical togetherness; this is then reified into concepts of transcendent reality. While I am not aware that Durkheim or any of his collaborators attempted an interpretation of the double commandment to love in the context of their theory, it would not be difficult, I believe, to picture what such an interpretation would involve. The love of God would in essence be this very collective experience, and the love of neighbour would be its consequence: the

1. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K. E. Fields (London: Free Press, 1995), pp. 226–7.

other becomes our neighbour, our fellow religionist, insofar as she is included in this shared experience as a part of the collective whole.<sup>2</sup>

Historically and empirically, it would be hard to deny that mechanisms of this kind have played their part in the Christian faith. As a religion, Christianity came to inform and form cultures by aligning its concept of love to the community-building tendencies existing among the nations that adopted the faith. This alignment was the basis of the medieval concept of a *corpus Christianorum* and later underwrote ideas of Christian nations. And yet, in spite of its success, its legitimacy never ceased to be controversial. The fervour of this debate is unsurprising given that the question it raises concerns the fundamental identity of the Christian faith: does its concept of love, however much altered, modified and transformed, stand in continuity with traditional human cultural and religious practice? Is therefore, as Albrecht Ritschl argued in the nineteenth century, its realization novel only insofar as its reach extends to the whole of humanity, but otherwise compatible with traditional community types such as the family?<sup>3</sup> In other words, does Christian love merely develop and deepen natural affections attracting and bonding us to our relations, to friends, to members of the same class or to people with the same educational background and similar interests?<sup>4</sup>

Or does it represent a radical antithesis to those forms of tribal loyalty, as Søren Kierkegaard argued in his controversy with the great theologian of Danish nationalism, Nikolai Grundtvig?<sup>5</sup> Is Christian love subversively directed against our deeply internalized sympathies for our near and dear? Is perhaps the love of neighbour more properly the love for the stranger? In this interpretation, Jesus' command to love turns into a radical critique of all existing social and cultural systems, a revelation of 'things hidden since the foundation of the world' (Mt. 13.35). René Girard, characteristically, chose these words from the Gospel as the motto for his own reading of the Christian narrative as being fundamentally opposed to 'mythical' justifications of the violent 'scapegoat' mechanism that has made human civilization possible.<sup>6</sup>

2. For an analogous interpretation one may, however, compare Ludwig Feuerbach's view of divine love in *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. M. A. Evans (= G. Eliot) (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1855), pp. 85–6.

3. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), pp. 279–82.

4. This is emphatically affirmed by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, qu. 26, art. 7, *Respondeo*: 'Et sic hoc ipsum quod est diligere aliquem, quia consanguineus vel coniunctus est, vel quia concivis, vel propter quodcumque huiusmodi aliud licitum ordinabile in finem charitatis, potest a charitate imperari.' I owe this reference to Lydia Schumacher whose helpful and incisive comments have improved this essay in many other ways too.

5. Cf. Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

6. Cf. René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde: Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1983).

Such a critical interpretation of the Christian command to love takes its cue from the insight that love based on the experience of community inevitably has an exclusive character: we love our friends and not our enemies; we love our family and not any Tom, Dick or Harry; we love the members of our own people and not the foreigner. We may take this line of argument further by asking whether love that is the result of communal experience is *at all* directed at the other person? Do we really love that individual, or do we not rather love *in* her something else? Rather than loving her as what she is, we appear to love her *as* part of the whole to which she belongs and which she represents for us: our family, our circle of friends, our people or our church. It is this whole; therefore, it is the community to which our love is primarily directed. Our 'love' of the individual person is only a derived phenomenon; it is a mere extension of our attachment to the collective within which the individual disappears as the proverbial drop of water in the ocean.

Such doubts about the legitimacy of a love for collectives seem to lead us straight back to our original intuition that the commandment to love is geared towards individuals who are at least potentially unrelated by any bond of family, nationality or religiosity. The Samaritan in Jesus' parable only *makes* the robbed man his neighbour by turning towards him. Initially, he is, as far as we can see, not at all his 'neighbour'. He does not know him but, on the contrary, recognizes him as a member of another tribe. The sole bond that exists between them appears to be constituted by the loving act itself; an act that originates in one individual and is directed towards another.

Such an interpretation of Christian love has been rather popular with many twentieth-century theologians who sought to distinguish it, as *agape*, from all other varieties of love: love is Christian, according to this interpretation, precisely insofar as it turns to the other *as* other without pre-conditions or provisos. It does not depend on the existence of collective structures into which the acting individuals are integrated; on the contrary, it proves its worth by occurring outside of, and often in opposition to, those structures.<sup>7</sup>

An attempt to interpret love as exclusively an event between two individuals, however, has its own considerable difficulties. They become apparent as soon as we ask ourselves why we turn towards the other. The command to love 'our neighbour' obviously refers to a plurality of people, albeit to one particular individual at a time. If, however, its justification lies exclusively in the individual, it is hard to see how the commandment can, at the same time, have universal validity. Less abstractly, does not 'love' towards another person even if (perhaps especially if) that other person is a stranger to us, always presuppose the identification of that individual with something else? Do we not, in order to love our neighbour, see her as something we know? We might, for example, recognize her as a human being – in this sense Immanuel Kant spoke of the *humanity* we must always respect in

7. Cf. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*, trans. P. S. Watson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Cf. the critique by Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love* (London: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 105–34.

the person of the other.<sup>8</sup> For him, it is ultimately this *humanity* that guarantees the dignity (not, of course, love) every empirical and individual person is owed.

Yet if this is so, we seem to be faced with just another variant of the theory according to which the ultimate object of love is not the individual. In its place something else, something more universal is loved which, however, in the present case is an abstract idea rather than a concrete community. We perceive in the other a universal property that marks her out as, for example, a 'neighbour' or a human being, and it is this property, not the individual *per se*, that is the object of love strictly speaking.

We thus seem to be faced with a real dilemma. On the one hand, there are good reasons to reconstruct Christian love as an interaction between individuals and be – at least – sceptical towards its application to collective bodies. Yet the reconstruction of love between individuals seems to necessitate, in various forms and under various guises, the introduction of those very entities be it as communities or societies or as abstract cultural or anthropological universals. It appears that love must always be directed at those universals first in order to be applied subsequently to individual persons.

A construct that has often been used to avoid this dilemma is the collective personality. Put simply, the idea is that a collective unit is thought as represented by one individual. One of the most famous and influential examples is the theory of the monarchy which has found a particularly apt illustration in the book cover of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, 'perhaps the most famous visual image in the history of political philosophy'.<sup>9</sup> The king is here shown with a body made up of the people: he is therefore both one and many, and the political affections directed at the monarch can consequently be both personal and collective.

Not without a reason, however, did Ernst Kantorowicz give to his classical study of this idea, *The King's Two Bodies*, the subtitle *A Study in Medieval Political Theology*.<sup>10</sup> For behind the political use of the collective personality stands undoubtedly the analogous christological idea according to which Jesus Christ's humanity has a universal dimension that extends beyond his historical individuality. Such a theory is suggested by biblical passages that speak of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12.12) but also by the mythical identification of Christ as the 'second Adam' (Rom. 5.12–21 and 1 Cor. 15.22). Equally significant, albeit on a subtler level, is the identification found throughout the New Testament, of Jesus with the suffering servant of Isa. 53 who in his turn appears to have been a personification of the people of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

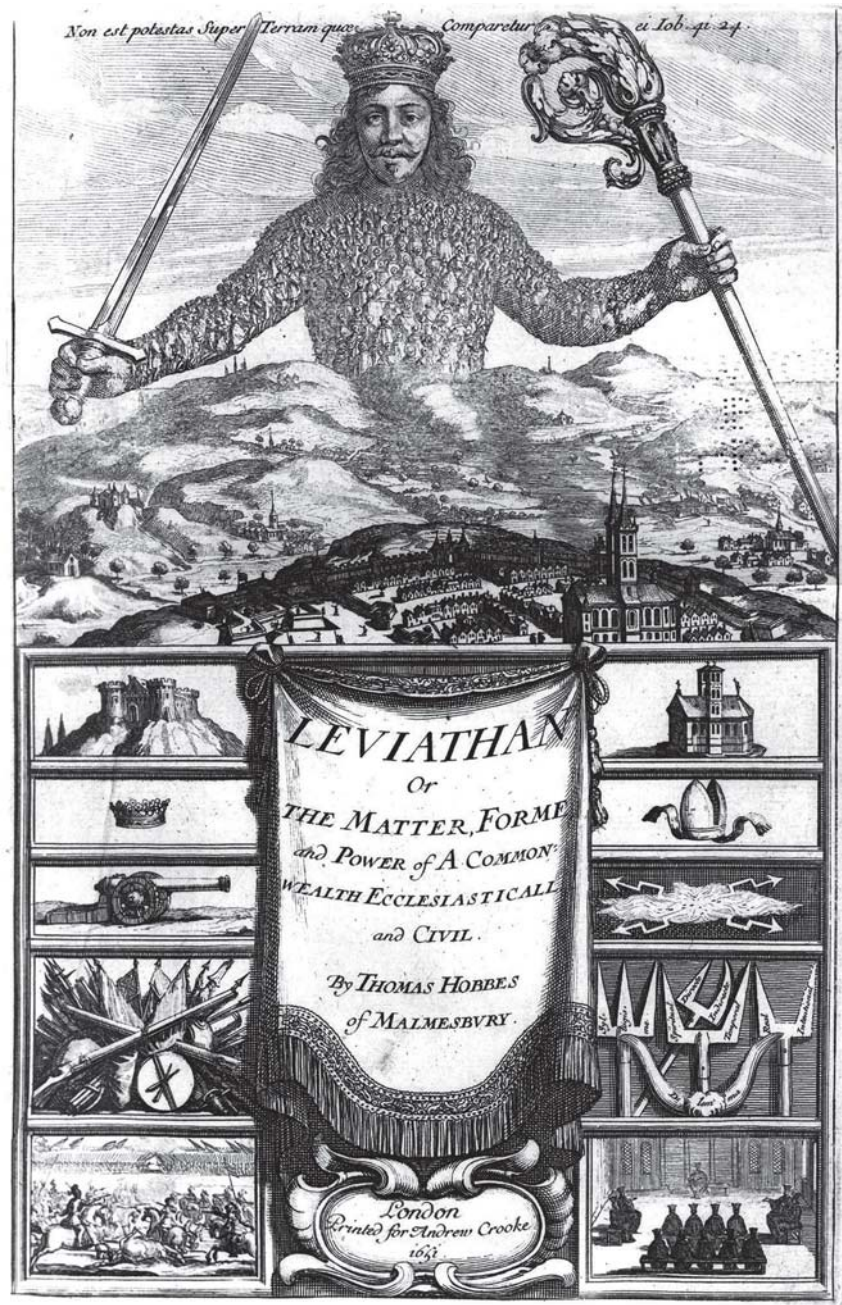
8. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. J. W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 36.

9. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes, vol. 1, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 128–41 (128).

10. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

11. Charles F. D. Moule, *The Origins of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 47–54.

Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan



Frontispiece by Abraham Bosse, with creative input from Hobbes, 1651



To gain an impression of the immense historical and systematic significance this corporate interpretation of Christ's humanity has had, it is still advisable to consult August Dorner's comprehensive history of christology, *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*,<sup>12</sup> whose primary purpose was the reconstruction of the 1800-year long history of this particular element of christological doctrine culminating in his own theory, inspired by Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, of Jesus as the 'central individual' (*Zentralindividuum*) which reveals the whole of humanity in one individual.<sup>13</sup>

Dorner was certainly not blind to the ambiguities, dangers even, that lie in a collective interpretation of Christ's humanity. On the contrary, his historical analysis specifically emphasized the many problems and pitfalls this notion had caused for christology in the course of its history. He keenly perceived, in particular, the tendency to lose sight of Jesus' historical individuality in consequence of the affirmation of his human universality. This awareness should not surprise us. Dorner's own work in its immense erudition was ultimately a response to the christology sketched in the final chapter of David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus*, first published in 1835 and one of the most influential theological (and religious) books of the time.<sup>14</sup> Strauss' characteristically bold and radical solution to the age-old problem stipulated an identification of Christ's humanity and the ever-progressing human race in its entirety; its narration in the gospel, he argued, had merely been the mythical expression of a universal truth in a particular history about a single person.<sup>15</sup> It was for this reason that Dorner, in his turn, went out of his way to stress both parts of the word 'central individual': according to him, the universal dimension of Christ's humanity must not on any account lead to annihilation of his concrete historical individuality.

The relationship between the problem of Christ's humanity and the commandment to love comes into view once we recall that, according to the Gospel, it is Christ himself whom we encounter in our neighbour (Mt. 25.40–45). This line of thought – a christological interpretation of neighbourly love – was pursued in twentieth-century theology especially by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In *Life Together* he formulated that 'a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ'.<sup>16</sup> For Bonhoeffer, this mediating position of the redeemer is necessary in order to neutralize the 'natural' forces of social attraction that connect us with people who come from the same or a similar background, who have interests, hold positions or engage in activities similar to our own. Our neighbour, Bonhoeffer

12. Isaak A. Dorner, *The History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, trans. D. W. Simon (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890–2).

13. Cf. Thomas Koppehl, *Der wissenschaftliche Standpunkt der Theologie Isaak August Dorners* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), pp. 21–134.

14. David F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. G. Eliot, 2 vols (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1860).

15. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 895–97.

16. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. D. W. Bloesch and J. H. Burtress (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 32.

urges, is not a 'friend', someone with whom we are inclined to be together, to whom we are attracted or whose company we *prima facie* enjoy. Therefore, only Jesus Christ himself could constitute the bond that connects us with her.

An analogous argument was already proffered by Bonhoeffer in his first published book, *Sanctorum Communio*, which was at the same time his doctoral dissertation. In this writing, he introduced the term 'collective person' (*Kollektivperson*) to describe the character of the community founded by the Holy Spirit: 'Neither unanimity, uniformity, nor congeniality makes it possible, nor is it to be confused with the unity of mood'.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, Bonhoeffer suggests, the community of the church is characterized by its refusal to abolish or even reduce the multifariousness and the heterogeneity of the individual persons who are its parts: 'the contrasts remain, they even become more acute; in the community all are led to carry their individual viewpoint to the limit, to be really serious about it. ... But – to put it paradoxically – the more powerfully the dissimilarities manifest themselves, the stronger the objective unity'.<sup>18</sup>

While it has to be admitted that in both passages Bonhoeffer's immediate interest concerns the unity of the Christian community, his line of argument nevertheless is of great significance. For it is apparent that Bonhoeffer regarded the collective person that is constituted by Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit (in this the two writings differ) as an alternative beyond the dilemma we encountered at several stages, between purely individualistic and collective-universal interpretations of Christian love. He sharply rejected the 'idealist tradition' which, he alleged, lacked an adequate concept of the human person and for that reason remained forever trapped in the aporetic duality of individuality and universality.

Applied to our own question, Bonhoeffer's thesis can then be reformulated as follows: the concept of the collective person permits the perception of the individual *as* individual because it is precisely in the affirmation of the unlimited multiplicity and diversity of individual persons that Christ's unifying presence can be perceived.

Bonhoeffer's considerations are of particular importance because of the link he established between the idea of love and christology. The Christian understanding of love cannot be articulated without raising at the same time the question (famously asked by Bonhoeffer himself): Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

This link can, however, only furnish us with the solution to our problem if we can make sure that under the guise of christology the very same problems do not recur that have so far plagued our investigation. This can easily happen if we fail to find a way beyond the alternative between a purely individualistic interpretation of Christ's humanity – in which case his connection with our humanity becomes impossible to explain – and a collective interpretation which, whether conceived

17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, trans. J. von Soosten and R. Kraus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 192–208 (192).

18. *Ibid.*

as an abstract universal or a concrete community, directs our attention away from his unique individuality as a historical person.

At this point, it appears that at least the early Bonhoeffer, whom I have so far used, is not as helpful as we would wish. For his emphatic rejection of the 'abstract' universality championed by the Enlightenment and Idealism together with his adoption of the 'collective person' demonstrates that, in spite of his rhetorical affirmation of the person, he, overall at this stage of his career, tended to prioritize the community over the individual. But if the Church, for example, is a collective person, why then should not one actual person represent it in its entirety? This, obviously, is the role of the Petrine office in Roman Catholicism and, more generally, that of the episcopal office in various historical and contemporary forms of the monarchical episcopacy. If there is any good theological (as opposed to practical or pragmatic) reason for rejecting this ecclesiological model, it surely must be the insight that the kind of unity the presence of Christ provides for the Church is *radically* different from the form that is symbolized by the collective person.

One way of describing this difference may be to point to the ambiguous, indeed nearly precarious, character of Christ's presence since his resurrection which is reflected in the experience of the early church, notably in the biblical Easter stories. His presence can therefore only ever be proclaimed by accepting concurrently that he may encounter us in ways and forms that are unexpected, surprising and often not fully understood.

To this corresponds the observation that the perception of the other as our 'neighbour', which precedes the act of neighbourly love, relies not least on the willingness to see the other as *other* and thus essentially as mysterious and never fully known or reducible to clichés and categories. The other can only encounter us as other if we do not reduce her to that which is familiar and already understood. The demand to see Christ in the other is not, therefore, yet another version of the substitution of the 'neighbour' by something else (in this case Jesus Christ) but the insight that a conscious renunciation of our knowledge and our judgments, which inevitably turn the other into a part of ourselves, is a precondition for the true encounter with, and thus also for the love of, the neighbour.

Considered in this way, the love of neighbour admittedly becomes very nearly something impossible: no wonder, we may think, that Jesus called this the 'greatest' commandment. Yet this realization too is wholesome because it helps us to see that Jesus Christ has his role to play on the side of the loving subject as well. Without wishing to give unqualified endorsement to Augustine's oft-maligned exegesis, according to which the Samaritan in Luke 10 *was* Jesus,<sup>19</sup> it is indeed crucial not to detach the practice of neighbourly love from the continuing presence of Jesus in our own world. In fact, it may well be the case that this practice, where it prevails, provides the strongest grounds for this very belief.

Both subject and object of Christian love, then, are individual persons.

19. Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II 19. Cf. Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1961), pp. 1–2.



Attempts to deny or dilute this insight must be resisted; it is perhaps not out of place to recognize at this point the pivotal contribution Werner G. Jeanrond has made to this important task of contemporary theology.<sup>20</sup> In order to explain the possibility of this kind of agency, however, it is advisable for theology to argue christologically. The major challenge for such a christological reconstruction, for which only some first ideas could be developed in my contribution, consists in the need to hold together the dualities of presence and absence, of individuality and universality, of familiarity and unfamiliarity and to explore their unity as well as their tensions.

20. Cf. Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, p. 166.