

CHAPTER 2

Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, Irenaeus, and the Essence of Christianity

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Abstract: In Anders Nygren's seminal study of the Christian concept of love, *Eros och Agape*, the second century bishop and theologian Irenaeus of Lyons is given an important role in the development of the "Christian idea of love". In this chapter, I will critically discuss certain aspects of Nygren's and his colleague Gustaf Aulen's treatment of Irenaeus. Nygren and Aulen presuppose that one can delineate "pure" concepts or ideas or motifs in history (such as "Christian love"), they maintain that it makes sense to speak of the "essence" of Christianity as a given, and they find their normative basis in the genius of Luther, against which they can evaluate the genuineness of any given conception of Christianity. This is of course both provincial and anachronistic. A critical reading of Nygren's and Aulen's understanding of Irenaeus and the concept of Christian love raises important questions concerning objectivity, normativity and givenness. I argue in this chapter that there are no stable given "ideas" or "motifs" that can be "identified" or "discovered" or "described" objectively. I believe it is possible, however, to give accounts that will be recognizable and plausible to others who are familiar with the fragmentary sources upon which our accounts are based. At best, we can together construct plausible understandings of a concept such as Christian love, or of a thinker such as Irenaeus, or of something as broad and multifaceted as Christianity – without purporting to have found the true "essence" of the thing we are studying.

Keywords: Irenaeus, Nygren, *eros*, *agape*, love, constructivism, normativity

Introduction

In Anders Nygren's seminal study of the Christian concept of love, *Eros och Agape* (1966), the second century bishop and theologian Irenaeus of

Citation of this chapter: Kaufman, J. (2021). Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, Irenaeus, and the essence of Christianity. In K. Grørdum, H. F. Hågg, J. Kaufman & T. T. Tollefsen (Eds.), *Love – ancient perspectives* (Ch. 2, pp. 31–47). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.133.cho2>
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Lyons is given an important role in the development of the “Christian idea of love”. In the following, I will critically discuss certain aspects of Nygren’s and his colleague Gustaf Aulen’s treatment of Irenaeus. I will argue that Nygren’s and Aulen’s readings of Irenaeus are problematic, not primarily due to their somewhat idiosyncratic understandings of the Christian concept of love, but for reasons related to theory and method. Nygren and Aulen presuppose that one can delineate “pure” concepts or ideas or motifs in history (such as “Christian love”), they maintain that it makes sense to speak of the “essence” of Christianity as a given, and they find their normative basis in the genius of Luther, against which they can evaluate the genuineness of any given conception of Christianity. This is of course both provincial and anachronistic. In the following, through a critical reading of Nygren’s and Aulen’s understanding of Irenaeus and the concept of Christian love, I will discuss issues of objectivity, normativity and givenness in the study of intellectual history.

Motif Research: Aulen and Nygren

When I hear the words “agape and eros”, my thoughts immediately go to the classic work with this title from the 1930s by the Swedish theologian and bishop Anders Nygren.¹ In this book, Nygren purports to give an objective and neutral presentation of the Christian concept of love through the ages.² In Nygren’s study, Irenaeus, the second century bishop and theologian from Lyons, is given an important role in the development of the “Christian idea of love”. I would maintain that Nygren’s classic study of the Christian concept of love, and a critical reading of Nygren, is still relevant in a volume discussing the concept of love.

In the following, I will present a brief critical reading of certain aspects of Nygren’s treatment of Irenaeus. Nygren did not write in a vacuum, however. I will therefore also relate Nygren’s study to the contemporary Swedish theological classic by Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*.³ My

1 Nygren, 1936. English translation Nygren, 1953. Later published in a slightly revised version as Nygren, 1966.

2 Cf. also the discussion of Nygren in Tollefsen in the current volume.

3 Aulen, 1930. English translation Aulen, 1970.

primary focus will be on certain theoretical presuppositions that underlie Nygren's and Aulen's understanding of Irenaeus.

I am aware that I am kicking through wide open (or perhaps even forgotten) doors when I propose a critical reading of Nygren's *Agape and Eros* and Aulen's *Christus Victor*. These are classic texts and have precisely therefore been thoroughly discussed and criticized since their publication over eighty years ago. Both have been immensely influential, at least in Scandinavia, contributing to the formation of several generations of Lutheran ministers, but scholarship has moved on and they are no longer as relevant as they once were. Further, I am also aware that proposing a critical reading of two classic works in a short paper such as this is the very definition of hubris. In his classic work on the origins of the Christian mystical tradition, Andrew Louth pointed out some 40 years ago that "Nygren's own theory is too highly wrought and too detailed to be discussed here" (Louth, 1981, p. 192). Yet I have given myself the task of saying something about not one but two such highly wrought theories in a short format.

Both Nygren and Aulen were concerned with what they called "motif research" – with finding the fundamental motif of the object of study, around which all the other ideas, aspects and motifs revolve.⁴ Both wished to find the fundamental motif of Christianity, and for both this motif turned out to be a fully theocentric conception of salvation – articulated either as Christian love (Nygren) or as the so-called "classic idea of the atonement" (Aulen). Aulen and Nygren seem to be doing what so many others were trying to do in the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries: trying to find the "essence" of Christianity, trying to find out what Christianity is *really* all about.⁵ It was taken for granted that everything has an essence, an essential nature, and the task of the Christian theologian and historian was to explicate this essential or genuine nature. It was presupposed that Christianity really *is* something, prior to all the

4 Cf. Nygren's collection of articles and papers with the title *Philosophy and Motif Research* (Nygren, 1940). The introduction to *Agape and Eros*, consisting of four short parts, also deals with the methodology of motif research. Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 27–60.

5 Cf. the two studies entitled *Das Wesen des Christenthums* ("The Essence of Christianity") published in 1841 (Ludwig Feuerbach) and 1900 (Adolf von Harnack).

change and development we see in history. The content of Christianity is a given, Christianity has a fundamental motif, and this motif can be explicated clearly. Different theologians and historians have of course always had very different understandings of what this essential nature of Christianity in fact is, but it went unquestioned that Christianity, like everything else, did have a true essence. Or to use the terminology of Nygren and Aulen, Christianity has a fundamental motif, and it is the task of the theologian to neutrally and objectively identify and explicate this fundamental motif. My main contention with Nygren and Aulen and the other theologians and historians searching for the essence of Christianity in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century is that I do not think Christianity, or any religion or concept for that matter, has an unchanging or fundamental essence. Everything changes.

Although Nygren and Aulen were quite aware that there is no such thing as “general” or “common” Christianity – there are only *particular* historical forms of Christianity⁶ – they still speak unabashedly about Christianity as having a pure core or essence. Aulen wrote that the task of systematic theology is “to unveil and reveal everything that is essential, to brush aside all non-essential and foreign elements, to remove all unnecessary accretions, and to bring out clearly the very heart of the matter” (Aulen, 1948, p. 5).⁷ And Nygren could speak of “Christianity in a pure form” (Nygren, 1953, p. 241). Speaking in this manner presupposes that one can also speak of “false” or “compromised” Christianity, as the opposite of such genuine or “pure” Christianity. Particular historical forms of Christianity can then be compared against “the real thing”, and many historical forms of Christianity are deemed to fall short of the mark. There is a strange dissonance between Nygren’s explicit aim of simply giving “unbiased” and “non-normative” analyses of historical developments, and the implicit normativity displayed in this language of “essential” or “pure” Christianity. Nygren, for example, claims freedom from value-judgment and states that there is no question of assuming “the superior value of the idea of Agape and making it the criterion

6 Cf. the discussion in Anderson, 2006, p. 54. She refers here to Aulen, 1932, p. 33.

7 Cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 53.

for an unfavourable judgment on the idea of Eros” (Nygren, 1953, p. 38). He claims neutrality and objectivity in his explication of the motifs of *eros and agape*. Yet in designating particular motifs or certain types of Christianity as “essential” or “genuine” or “pure”, as opposed to false or compromised, Nygren is of course making normative, not descriptive, statements. What is the basis of this normativity?

Both Aulen and Nygren were central figures in what is often called the Swedish Luther Renaissance of the first half of the 20th century. They were prominent theologians in the Swedish Lutheran church and were quite convinced that Luther had rediscovered “the unique and central feature of Christianity” (Anderson, 2006, p. 54). As Aulen put it at one point: “Luther’s greatness lies not in bringing forth a new variant of Christianity, but rather in seeing the distinct character of Christianity more sharply than anyone before him.”⁸ For both Nygren and Aulen, Luther’s thought was a high-water mark in the history of theology, and all other periods, both earlier and later, could then be viewed against this standard. And to begin approaching my particular topic, which is Nygren’s understanding of Irenaeus, I can quote a fairly recent study of this Swedish Luther renaissance: “Based on insights from his Luther studies, Aulen divided the history of dogma into distinctive periods, describing the unique essence of Christianity and its struggle against moralism and idealism. Naturally, the period of Luther gained a place of prominence, as did the time of the church fathers, especially Irenaeus” (Anderson, 2006, p. 55). Irenaeus was important for these Swedish Lutheran theologians because to them he in some way seemed close to Luther, and thereby came close to the “unique essence of Christianity”.

Even though Aulen and Nygren were writing about different concepts (atonement on the one hand, love on the other), their overall understandings of these concepts were very similar. Several years before writing his classic on the doctrine of the atonement, Aulen wrote a short book entitled *Kristendomens själ* (“The Soul of Christianity”) and already here he sketches out normative views concerning what Christianity is *really* all about. The book was published in 1922 and must be read in light of the

8 Aulen (1932). Cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 55f.

horrors of World War I, as Aulen asks whether it makes sense to speak of God in this world full of suffering and evil (Aulen, 1922). For Aulen, the God of both liberal protestant theology and classical protestant orthodoxy does not seem to make sense in a world of suffering. Aulen's answer is that the God we are to speak of must be a *conquering* God. Christianity is about the God who conquers sin and death and destruction. Christianity is theocentric and downward oriented; it is about God coming down to humanity rather than humanity seeking God. These views, already articulated in this early book from 1922, are then fleshed out in his historical study of ideas of the atonement, and his historical analyses clearly reflect these normative standpoints. For Aulen, genuine Christianity is seen most clearly in what he calls the "classic" idea of the atonement, which is precisely the story of God conquering the forces of destruction. And for Aulen, this classic idea is most clearly visible in the New Testament, in certain Church Fathers, especially Irenaeus, and in Luther. Other periods in the history of theology departed to a greater or lesser degree from this genuine Christianity.

Nygren's Understanding of "Pure" Christian Love

Similarly, while Nygren was working on his major study of *eros* and *agape*, he wrote a short book entitled *Urkristendom och reformation* ("Earliest Christianity and Reformation") where he depicts the history of Christian thought as a process of synthesis and subsequent reformation (Nygren, 1932). The process is simple: a pure concept is entangled and intertwined with mutually incompatible ideas (synthesis) and is subsequently unentangled again (reformation) (Nygren, 1932, pp. 147–175). Nygren saw this pattern of synthesis and reformation repeated at various levels and in shorter or longer intervals throughout Christian history. When it came to the concept of love, which he calls the "fundamental motif of Christianity", he saw the first 1500 years of Christianity as one long period of synthesis. During these centuries, the Christian concept of love, articulated most clearly by Paul as *agape*, became more and more compromised through entanglement with *eros*, and this entanglement lasted until

Luther challenged the church's position on many matters and "rediscovered" the "pure" Christian understanding of love. The unique, essential nature of Christianity is found in the concept of divine love, *agape*, and this concept is found most purely in Paul (earliest Christianity) and in Luther (reformation). Nygren's juxtaposition of "earliest Christianity and reformation" is clearly visible in his study of Christian love. And in this scheme of synthesis and reformation, Irenaeus was the one theologian between the two giants of Paul and Luther who came closest to getting things right, even though he too fell into the error of synthesizing the genuine Christian concept of love with non-Christian motifs.⁹

As I have already mentioned, for Nygren a particular kind of love was the defining motif of Christianity: divine, unmotivated, generous love, i.e. *agape*. Nygren argues that there is an absolute distinction between *agape* and Hellenistic *eros*. For Nygren, *eros* is selfish love which seeks its own fulfilment, while *agape* is sacrificial love which seeks the good of the other with no thought of self. Much could of course be said about this distinction merely at a psychological level (is it really possible to distinguish so clearly between these types of love?), but what interests me here is that these two concepts are, for Nygren, much larger than the term "love" would suggest. For Nygren, they are the defining characteristics of two distinct types of religion or two different and opposing paths to salvation.¹⁰ The first type is humanity's tendency to strive upward toward the divine; the second is God's merciful love which lowers itself to underserving humanity. These two types of religion correspond perfectly to the two types of love which he describes as *agape* and *eros*. *Eros* represents

9 For a recent broad discussion of a "theology of love" which engages critically with Nygren's conception of *eros* and *agape*, see Jeanron, 2010 (ch. 5 in particular, but Nygren is present throughout). Recent studies on the "history of love" also engage critically with Nygren, although to a far lesser degree than Jeanron's theological engagement. See Lindberg, 2008, ch. 3, 4 and 10, and May, 2011, ch. 6 and briefly in ch. 17. Nygren is discussed in all of these studies both with regard to his "historical" work on the history of love, and with regard to his role as a contemporary theologian. For Nygren, the roles of historian and contemporary theologian are fully intertwined. None of these studies mentions the name Irenaeus, however, although Irenaeus was quite important for Nygren.

10 This can be seen clearly in an article entitled "Tvenne frälsningsvägar" ("Two paths to salvation") which he published in 1932, while he was working on the second volume of his book on *eros* and *agape* (the first volume was published in 1930, the second in 1936). This article can be found in Nygren, 1932, pp. 13–30.

mystical religion where humans strive for union with God, while *agape* represents revealed religion where God makes Godself known to humans and saves them even though they are undeserving. *Eros* religion is ego-centric and upward striving while *agape* religion is theocentric and downward oriented. And for Nygren, it is implied that only pure *agape* religion is genuinely Christian. To caricature Nygren a bit, pure and genuine Christianity is really only found in the two religious geniuses of Paul and Luther – and to greater or lesser degrees in those like Irenaeus who are theologically “close” to Paul and Luther. In contrast, mystical religion, most clearly seen in medieval Catholicism, is a synthesis which mixes pure Christianity with foreign elements.

After giving an extended presentation of these two idealized types of religion/love, Nygren moves on to concrete historical material in the early Church and must immediately expand his typology: there are in fact not two main types of love, but three (although the third isn't a type of love at all, but a type of religion). (Types of religion and types of love are conflated throughout Nygren's book). These three types are *nomos*, *eros* and *agape*. Roughly speaking, these three types correspond to Judaism, Hellenism and Christianity respectively, and all three also correspond to different *types* of Christianity. All three types of religion of course involve love – in all three, adherents are called to love God and neighbor – but they have fundamentally different natures. *Nomos* religion is concerned with the law, with following the divine command, with winning divine approval. In this legalistic type of religion, love is primarily a command, not a gift. In Nygren's view, this is Judaism. In contrast, *eros* religion is concerned with freeing the immortal soul from the material body by striving for union with the immaterial divine. This is Hellenism. And finally, *agape* religion is initiated by God alone for the salvation of the undeserving, in a downward rather than upward motion. There is no room for human action or effort, no room for striving or mystical union with God in *agape* religion. And it is only *agape* religion which is viewed as genuine Christianity.¹¹

11 Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 247–253 for this brief tripartite scheme as presented in the following paragraphs.

Nygren's historical analysis purports to show, however, that Christianity has in fact been combined with both *nomos* and *eros* in various ways through the course of history. Pure or genuine Christianity always maintains the Pauline *agape* motif unadulterated, but most historical types of Christianity have strayed from purity by mixing in foreign motifs. When *agape* combines with *nomos*, it takes a step back toward "old testament religion". For Nygren, this is the religion of the apostolic fathers and apologists, as they regress backward from Paul toward the Old Testament. When *agape* is combined with *eros*, on the other hand, it takes a step sideways into contemporary Hellenistic culture, into so-called Gnosticism. And finally, in Nygren's schematization of the first half of the second century, *agape* is represented by Marcion. According to Nygren, Marcion rejected both the Judaizing religion of the apostolic fathers and the Gnostic striving of the immortal soul toward freedom from matter. Marcion becomes, in Nygren's brief presentation, a reformer who reconfirms the centrality of God's love, seeking and saving those who do not deserve it. Even though the God of Jesus is not the creator of humanity in Marcion's view, he still seeks the salvation of humans. This is true *agape*, seeking to save the undeserving.¹²

Nygren calls this the "first phase" in the development of the Christian concept of love, then he goes on to depict the "second phase" in more detail. In the second phase, this threefold pattern is repeated once again, with new actors. In the second phase, *nomos* is represented by Tertullian, *eros* is represented by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and *agape* is represented by Irenaeus. The picture is muddled, as all three mix the three motifs together in various ways, but they each primarily represent one of these motifs.¹³

As an aside, we can note that Irenaeus is not presented in the correct chronological order. It is important for Nygren to end this section with a discussion of Irenaeus since it is he who comes the closest to representing the *agape* type. He is presented as the culmination of this second phase, even though he is chronologically prior to Tertullian, Clement and

12 Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 254–334 for these three types.

13 Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 335–412 for this second phase.

Origen. There is something fascinating about such a clear schematization, but of course it is far too simple. Reality is never that simple. Reality is messy.

Nygren's Reading of Irenaeus

What then does Nygren actually say about Irenaeus? Basically, two things: Irenaeus gets it almost right, nearly preserving pure *agape* religion, but even he ends up mixing *eros* into his theology. "Nowhere in the Early Church is the idea of Agape found in so pure a form as in Irenaeus" (Nygren, 1953, p. 409). Both types of love can be related to a quote from Irenaeus: "... the only sure and true Teacher, the Word of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, who because of his immeasurable love [*agape*]¹⁴ became what we are in order to make us what he is" (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer* 5, Preface).¹⁵

For Nygren, the first half of this quote represents the *agape*-motif and the second half represents *eros*. Because of his love for humanity, the Word became human. It is the Incarnation that is the absolutely defining aspect of the *agape* motif.¹⁶ Through his transcendent love, God condescended, coming down to those who did not deserve his love in order to save them. Only this is genuine Christianity. The movement is always downward, never upward. And for Nygren, this is an even better example of the *agape* motif than what we find in Marcion. Marcion speaks of a God who saves those whom God did not create. That is powerful love. But in Irenaeus we read of a God who saves humans who rejected the very God who created them. Nygren sees this as being an even more powerful depiction of *agape* than that found in Marcion. The love of a parent for the child who wants nothing to do with the parent is apparently even more unexpected and generous than the unconditional love of a stranger for a stranger. Nygren summarizes thus:

14 Irenaeus is only preserved fully in a Latin translation, but this passage is also preserved in Greek. The Latin term used here is *dilectio*, the Greek is *agape*.

15 Cited from the English translation in Grant, 1997, p. 164. For the Greek and Latin text, see Rousseau, Doutreleau and Mercier, 1969, pp. 14–15.

16 Cf. Nygren, 1953, p. 402: "The advent of the Logos in the flesh is God's great work of love. In the Incarnation God's Agape manifests itself."

It may be a great thing to show love to those who are complete “strangers”, whom we have no obligation whatever to love. But God’s love is still greater. He loves those who, as his creatures, had an absolute obligation towards Him, yet rebelliously turned away from Him and spurned His will. (Nygren, 1953, p. 399)¹⁷

In attempting to summarize this *agape* motif in Irenaeus, Nygren gives a quite adequate presentation of central aspects of Irenaeus’s theology, focusing on three primary doctrines: 1) God the creator; 2) the Incarnation; and 3) the resurrection of the flesh. I do not find much to criticize in Nygren’s presentation of these central doctrines in Irenaeus. Nygren has clearly read Irenaeus and read him well. And yet the word *love* isn’t actually very prominent in Nygren’s discussion of Irenaeus. I find this odd, given the fact that Irenaeus is so important for Nygren precisely as a representative of true Christian *love*. Nygren wishes to make Irenaeus a primary representative of the *agape* motif, but the number of passages in Irenaeus where love is central is not great. It would be an exaggeration to say that love is the defining element of Irenaeus’s theology. Love of God and neighbor, and God’s love for humanity, are certainly present in Irenaeus’s writings, but they do not leap out as the defining characteristic. As I have already mentioned, much of Nygren’s book does not seem to be about types of love at all, but about types of *religion*, about two opposite paths to salvation. And in this scheme, Irenaeus comes close to the path that Nygren views as true Christianity – and so Nygren makes him a representative of *agape*. For Nygren, the main issue when dealing with Irenaeus is the fact that he and his primary opponents, the Gnostics, represent two diametrically opposed paths to salvation – the ascent of the immortal soul to God, or the descent of God into this world to save undeserving humans. Nygren’s treatment of Irenaeus is only superficially about love. It is much more about salvation and true religion.

The second half of the quotation cited above – “that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself” – then represents for Nygren the *eros*

17 I am skeptical of Nygren’s valuation simply from a psychological perspective: is it really harder to love a rebellious child than it is to love a complete stranger? In any case, Nygren establishes Irenaeus as a representative of true *agape* by this image.

motif that insinuated itself into Irenaeus's pure *agape* religion. "Even his view of *Agape*, however, is not entirely untouched by alien motifs ... the *Eros* motif affects the very centre of his thought ..." (Nygren, 1953, p. 409). For Nygren, this *eros* infiltration is simply the Hellenistic idea of deification, which he claims has been adopted by Irenaeus and woven into his *agape* religion. Nygren summarizes this with a phrase that Irenaeus in fact never uses: "God became man in order that man might become God" (Nygren, 1953, p. 410). Irenaeus does say similar things, speaking of humans becoming like God, of communion with God, of participating in God, but to simply equate these expressions with some pre-conceived Hellenistic doctrine of deification is a drastic oversimplification. Because *agape* for Nygren is only ever downward-oriented, he seems unable to relate language of divine likeness, communion, mystical ascent and participation to *agape*, and thus he can find no place for such language in genuine Christianity. He quite simply equates all of this mystical language and upward motion with the *eros* motif and sees it thus as an alien type of religion, foreign to Christianity. Thus, Nygren finds that even in Irenaeus, "strands from *Eros* and the *Agape* motifs are woven together" (Nygren, 1953, p. 412).

Critique of Nygren

Like I said earlier, criticizing Nygren's *Agape and Eros* is like kicking through open doors. Nygren has already been criticized extensively and to a certain degree forgotten. His treatment of Irenaeus, and especially his assumption that Irenaeus simply adopts a Hellenistic doctrine of deification, is much too simple. My doctoral dissertation from 2009 looks closely at precisely this issue in Irenaeus, asking whether or not Irenaeus really even talks of deification (Kaufman, 2009). My answer, very briefly, is: no, he does not, not explicitly, but kind of, depending on how you define deification. Or in other words: "it's complicated". For Nygren, on the other hand, things are very simple. Far too simple. I certainly do not agree with Nygren that Irenaeus is superficially mixing alien concepts. In my own reading of Irenaeus, and in most of the secondary literature from the past few decades, the unity and comprehensiveness of Irenaeus's

thought stands out.¹⁸ I do not see Irenaeus taking over a ready-made “Christian concept of love”, *agape*, and mixing it with an alien concept, Hellenistic *eros*. Nor do I see him, or anyone else for that matter, taking a pre-existing “something” that can be called “genuine” Christianity and mixing it with various incompatible types of religion. I would suggest, rather, that this notion does not even make sense.

My criticism of Nygren’s and Aulen’s readings of Irenaeus therefore has more to do with their method than with their particular readings. For in their method, they presuppose several things that I find quite problematic. First, they presuppose that one can delineate “pure” concepts or ideas or motifs in history, and that it makes sense to speak of the “essence” of Christianity as a given, against which particular historical forms of Christianity can be evaluated. They write of “genuine” Christianity as if that is a concept which can be defined objectively. Nygren claims to find two (or three) distinct concepts of love running through history that are mutually alien to each other and that exist apart from and prior to their concrete expression in specific writings in specific contexts. Similarly, Aulen finds three ideas of atonement that are mutually incompatible and that exist “out there”, seemingly floating through space until they are given concrete expression in specific contexts. And in each case, one of these ideas or concepts represents “genuine” Christianity and the others represent foreign influence. Coincidentally, the pure or genuine concept is the one that is closest to Luther. In this scheme, Irenaeus plays a positive role because he is apparently similar to Paul and Luther. I find this entire way of viewing things to be deeply problematic. As a historian, I see no straight lines or pure concepts in history. I see no “givens”, no ideas or concepts or motifs or entities “out there” that aren’t constructed and continually reconstructed in history. I do not think concepts exist apart from their various messy concrete expressions in history. What love is, what atonement is, what Christianity is – these concepts have been continually negotiated and renegotiated throughout history. These are messy, not pure, concepts. An apocryphal Einstein quote says “If you

18 Cf. Wingren, 1959; Minns, 1994; Donovan, 1997; Osborn, 2001; Steenberg, 2008; Kaufman, 2009; Parvis & Foster, 2012; Behr, 2013.

can't explain it simply, you haven't understood it well enough". Nygren's and Aulen's schematizations of history are very simple and very pedagogical – so one might say that they have truly understood things. I've come to appreciate something C. S. Lewis said that points in the opposite direction, however: "Besides being complicated, reality, in my experience, is usually odd. It is not neat, not obvious, not what you expect" (Lewis, 2001, p. 14).¹⁹ If you can explain it simply, it is probably not reality that you are explaining. History is messy, full of ebbs and flows and crooked lines and unpredictable processes of continuity and change. The schematization of history presented by Nygren and Aulen is too simple, in an unhelpful way.

John Behr, one of the foremost Irenaeus scholars at the moment, gave his recent monograph on Irenaeus the subtitle *Identifying Christianity* (Behr, 2013). Rather than seeing Irenaeus as simply transmitting something that was given already in Paul, Behr gives Irenaeus a much more active role in identifying, both for his contemporaries and for posterity, what Christianity is. And for Behr, what Irenaeus identifies is much broader and more comprehensive than any single motif or concept. Irenaeus brings together the great story of creation, redemption and consummation, and he does so by embracing the entire biblical witness, not only Paul. Reducing Irenaeus's thought or the Christianity he identifies to a single motif or one central concept is to distort Irenaeus. Here I completely agree with Behr.

I would go further than Behr, however, using an even more active verb than "identifying". I think I would prefer the term construction: Irenaeus does not only identify, but participates in the construction of, Christianity. Christianity, or Christianity's essence or central motif, isn't something given that he can "find" or "identify", something that exists "out there" prior to Irenaeus. He does not just identify something that is given beforehand, but helps construct it – and theologians and priests and bishops and laypersons have continued constructing and reconstructing

19 I am fully aware of the irony in my quoting Lewis here, for the book I am quoting is nothing less than an attempt at identifying what is central and unchanging in Christianity. I do not believe anything is unchanging.

Christianity ever since.²⁰ In some ecclesiastical traditions, this involves greater change and disruption than in others, but, in the end, no tradition ever stays the same. It is the nature of history that everything changes. My criticism is not that I think Nygren and Aulen identify the wrong things as the essence or central motifs of Christianity, but rather that the very notion of a religion having an unchanging essence or central motif should be abandoned.

My second problem with Nygren and Aulen is the fact that they find their normative basis in the genius of Luther and can then implicitly evaluate the genuineness of any given conception of Christianity based on its proximity to Luther. This is of course both provincial and anachronistic. We can happily criticize their subjective readings and normative evaluations that fly in the face of their claims of objectivity. And yet we should perhaps not think that we can so easily avoid this temptation ourselves, assuming we can do better. We easily become blind to the things that influence our own readings and evaluations, whether they be academic or religious or personal bindings. What I see when I read Irenaeus is different from what the Catholic and Lutheran combatants of the 16th century saw when they read him to find ammunition for their polemics, and it is different from what Nygren and Aulen saw in early 20th century Sweden. After writing a dissertation on Irenaeus, I might think that I know something objective about what Irenaeus thought, but all I really know is what *I* think Irenaeus thought. I have no independent access to the “real” Irenaeus, by which I could judge my own or others readings of Irenaeus. Interpretations are fluid, changing over time. Since the past is in fact gone, all we have are these various interpretations based on our fragmentary sources. We can perhaps laugh at antiquated interpretations, but we must be aware that future interpreters will most likely laugh at our interpretations as well. I do not think it is possible to give an objective and absolute account of the thought of Irenaeus, nor of any theologian or idea or theological concept, nor of Christianity as a whole. I hope it is

20 And this was of course also going on before Irenaeus. See the illuminating discussion in Brakke, 2010 for more reflection on the dynamics involved in the creation of Christianity in the second century. See also Law, 2004 for reflections on the messiness of research and the non-givenness of reality.

possible, however, to give accounts that will be recognizable and plausible to others who are familiar with the fragmentary sources upon which our accounts are based. Together we can construct plausible understandings of a concept such as Christian love, or of a thinker such as Irenaeus, or of something as broad and multifaceted as Christianity, without purporting to have found the true “essence” of the thing we are studying. And so, just as I see Irenaeus participating in the construction of Christianity, I see myself participating in the construction of Irenaeus – in readings of Irenaeus that I, and hopefully others, will find plausible, at least for a time.

Conclusion

Nygren’s and Aulen’s interpretations of the history of theology and theological “motifs” raise important questions concerning objectivity, normativity and givenness, at two levels: both at the level of the object of study itself (in my case, Irenaeus and the formation of Christianity in the late second century), and at the level of what is going on in the contemporary process of research and interpretation. In both cases, I do not see stable given entities that can be “identified” or “discovered” or “described” objectively, be they motifs or concepts or religions or contemporary scholarly interpretations. What I see is active formation and construction, carried out in continual dialogue and interaction with other scholars and other more or less plausible constructions. Thus, research into the history of a religion and a religious concept such as “Christian love” is open-ended – and therefore interesting in ever new ways.

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