5 Ren as a Fundamental Motif and the Promise and Problem of a Contextual Theology of an Agape-Ren Synthesis: A Dialogue with Anders Nygren

Lo Ping-cheung

On this historic occasion of the first Sino-Nordic theological conference, I want to pay tribute to a great Swedish theologian, Anders Nygren (1890-1977). His book Den kristna kärlekstanken (The Christian Idea of Love) was published in 1930, when he was just 40 years old. The revised, complete English translation, known as Agape and Eros, was published in 1953. The Chinese translation, in two volumes, was published in 1950 and 1952 in Hong Kong. It is long out of print, and fortunately will be reprinted in China soon. This book is a masterpiece and a modern classic, which should continue to be read by theologians of both West and East. I read it for the first time more than twenty years ago, and reread it again and again.

Most English discussions on this book (under the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, Gene Outka, Edward Collins Vacek, etc.) are on the ethics of agape or on the typology of love, which constricts the scope of Nygren’s concern, viz., motif research. This essay will focus on the following topics: (1) motif research in Religious Studies, (2) agape as a distinctive fundamental motif of Christianity, (3) ren as a fundamental motif in Confucianism, and (4) the possibility and difficulty of a contextual theology involving an agape-ren synthesis.

Anders Nygren’s Idea of Motif Research in Religious Studies

Nygren makes himself very clear about the nature of a “fundamental motif” in Agape and Eros. He first briefly describes it as “a general attitude of
mind”1 and “an attitude to life.”2 He then speaks more precisely, “For this purpose the following definition may be given: A fundamental motif is that which forms the answer given by some particular outlook to a question of such a fundamental nature that it can be described in a categorical sense as a fundamental question.”3 Regarding fundamental questions Nygren explains, “Quite early in the history of thought we find the great fundamental questions asked concerning the True, the Beautiful, the Good, and — to crown them all — the Eternal. . . . the problems of Knowledge, of Aesthetics, of Ethics, and of Religion. . . . The fundamental motif is the answer given by some particular type of outlook to one or more of these questions.”4

Motif research as a methodology in religious studies is built upon such an understanding of fundamental motif. Nygren explains:

The most important task of those engaged in the modern scientific study of religion and theological research is to reach an inner understanding of the different forms of religion in the light of their different fundamental motifs. For a long time they have been chiefly occupied in collecting a vast mass of material drawn from different religious sources for the purposes of comparison. . . . In other words, we must try to see what is the basic idea or the driving power of the religion concerned, or what it is that gives it its character as a whole and communicates to all its parts their special content and color. It is the attempt to carry out such a structural analysis, whether in the sphere of religion or elsewhere, that we describe as motif-research.5

In other words, motif research in religious studies attempts to find “the center” of a religious system lest we miss the forest for the trees.6 Nygren

2. Nygren, Agape and Eros, p. 34.
6. “The purpose of the scientific study of religion is not merely to record the actual conceptions, attitudes, and so forth, that they are found in a particular religious milieu, but more especially to find out what is characteristic and typical of them all. That is what motif-research deliberately and consistently seeks to do, and is indeed fully capable of doing. . . . A religion deprived of its fundamental motif would lose all coherence and meaning; and therefore we cannot rightly regard anything as a fundamental motif unless its removal would have such an effect.” Agape and Eros, p. 37.
then proceeds to propose that *agape* is the fundamental motif of Christianity. In his own words,

In the case of two of these great fundamental questions, the ethical and the religious, Christianity has brought a revolutionary change not only with regard to the answers but with regard to the questions themselves. . . . This change, in respect both of questions and answers alike, is essentially bound up with the idea of Agape. . . . We have therefore every right to say that Agape is the centre of Christianity, the Christian fundamental motif *par excellence*, the answer to both the religious and the ethical question.⁷

Furthermore, and even more controversially, Nygren argues in the book that, as fundamental motifs,⁸ the motif of *agape* is antithetical to the motif of *eros*, which stems from Hellenism. His thesis is that “Platonic *eros* and Pauline *agape* have, so to speak, no common denominator; they are not answers to the same question.”⁹ The following summary table on page 210 of his book is well known:¹⁰

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eros</th>
<th>Agape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is acquisitive desire and longing.</td>
<td>is sacrificial giving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is an upward movement.</td>
<td>comes down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is man's way to God.</td>
<td>is God's way to man.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


⁸ In other words, the incompatibility between *agape* and *eros* is on the level of fundamental motif, not on the level of aspects of love. Nygren does not deny that *eros* has a rightful place in a Christian’s life. See the last section of this essay.


¹⁰ “Agape and Eros are contrasted with one another here, not as right and wrong, not as higher and lower, but as Christian and non-Christian fundamental motifs.” *Agape and Eros*, p. 39.
Ren as a Fundamental Motif

Eros is man’s effort: it assumes that man’s salvation is his own work. Agape is God’s grace: salvation is the work of Divine love.

Eros is egocentric love, a form of self-assertion of the highest and noblest kind. Agape is unselfish love, it “seeketh not its own,” it gives itself away.

Eros seeks to gain its life, a life divine, immortalized. Agape lives the life of God, therefore dares to “lose it.”

Eros is the will to get and possess which depends on want and need. Agape is freedom in giving, which depends on wealth and plenty.

Eros is primarily man’s love; God is the object of eros. Even when it is attributed to God, eros is patterned on human love. Agape is primarily God’s love; God is agape. Even when it is attributed to man, agape is patterned on Divine love. Eros is determined by the quality, the beauty and worth, of its object; it is not spontaneous, but “evoked,” “motivated.” Agape is sovereign in relation to its object, and is directed to both “the evil and the good”; it is spontaneous, “overflowing,” “unmotivated.”

Eros recognizes value in its object . . . and loves it. Agape loves — and creates value in its object.

In short, this book is about agape (the Christian motif), eros (the non-Christian and Platonic motif), and their incompatibility with one another as fundamental motifs. The title of the Chinese translation (Views on Love in the History of Christian Thought) does not grasp it well.

Application of Motif Research to Chinese Religious Thought

Since motif research is a method in the scientific study of religion, it can be applied to other religions as well, Chinese religions included. Gunnar Sjöholm (a Swedish missionary in China in the 1930s), in the preface to the Chinese translation of Agape and Eros, applied this method to analyze

thought of Mozi of ancient China, c. 476–c. 390 BCE (which was based on his earlier publication, Den motistiska filosofiens kärlekstanke, pp. 9–29 of the Chinese translation). This method can be applied to Confucianism as well, which is more significant, because Mozi’s school of thought was no longer influential in China after the pre-Qin period, whereas Confucianism still exerts its influence in the mind of many Chinese intellectuals.

One might wonder about the legitimacy of including Confucianism in religious studies. However, to raise the question “Is Confucianism a religion or a philosophy?” can be anachronistic, because the presently used Chinese terms for “religion” (zhongjiao) and “philosophy” (zhexue) did not exist before the twentieth century, and hence there was no distinction between religion and philosophy in premodern China. Similarly, the distinction between faith and reason was nonexistent. However, after the terminology was coined in early twentieth century, there has been an almost unceasing debate on whether Confucianism should be considered a religion or a philosophy. There have been many materials on this debate in Chinese, and the options are:

1. Confucianism per se is a religion;
2. Confucianism per se or as a whole is not a religion in the full sense, but it has a religious dimension, character, import, or sentiment;
3. Confucianism is a religious philosophy;
4. Confucianism is a philosophy, but to a certain extent provides the functional equivalence of a religion;
5. Confucianism is a philosophy, and a philosophy only.

Recently English materials on this topic have also begun to emerge, with a different account of Confucian religiosity or religiousness.\(^{12}\)

Many overseas neo-Confucian thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century argue that though Confucianism *per se* is not an organized religion, Confucian thought has a definite religious dimension or religiosity (option 2 above). This is because an important theme in Confucian thought revolves around the Heaven-human relationship, and Heaven in Confucianism is equivalent to God in theistic religions. In the People’s Republic of China, for a long time Confucianism was regarded as a philosophy (options 4 and 5 above). Some important scholars (Ren Jiuyu, Li Sun, He Guanghu) in the past decade, however, have articulated a vocal minority voice that argues for either option 2 or option 3 above. My own position is option 2 above, for the reason that for most Confucians *Tian* (Heaven) does play a role similar to that of God in theistic religions.

There are many branches of Confucianism. In the neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming period, the two major schools are the School of Cheng-Zhu and the School of Lu-Wang. I submit that *ren* is the fundamental motif in the former, especially in the thought of Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE). Though all Confucians regard *ren* as the supreme virtue and the basis of all moral goodness, many Confucians confine *ren* to ethics. It is Zhu Xi, in particular, who has expanded *ren* to the religious dimension as well. Hence *ren* in Zhu Xi is qualified to be regarded as a fundamental motif, whose role in his thought resembles the role of *agape* in Christian thought as Nygren articulates it.

**Basic Features of the Ren Motif in Confucianism**

The rise of neo-Confucianism since the Northern Song dynasty produced some innovative views on *ren* (generally translated as benevolence or co-humanity in English), and they are all elaborated and synthesized by Zhu

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13. A slightly different version of this section is published in Lo Ping-cheung, "*Agape, Ren, and Altruistic Suicide*," *Ching Feng*, New Series, vol. 2, no. 1-2 (Fall 2001): 89-112.

14. In the older system of transliteration the word is rendered as "*jen*." Some quotations in the rest of this paper use this transliteration; it should be understood as the same as "*ren*."

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Xi. Hence Wing-tsit Chan says, "Historically speaking, Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi] represents the summit of development in the theory of jen [ren]."\(^{15}\)

Like most Confucians before him, Zhu Xi understands ren in the following ways: (1) Ren is both one cardinal virtue among others (ren in the narrow sense) and the leading virtue (ren in the wide sense) that includes the other cardinal virtues; in the wide sense, ren is the supreme moral principle and the sumnum bonum. (2) Ren in the narrow sense leads to love (ai).\(^{16}\) (3) Love should both be inclusive and be practiced with a preferential order, beginning with one's parents and relatives, then extending to other people, and finally to other living things as well.\(^{17}\)

Zhu Xi's neo-Confucian theory of ren has significant innovative elements, and for our purpose, the following features are noteworthy: First, ren is both the "mind" of Heaven and Earth and the "mind" of human beings. In other words, there is a cosmic as well as a human, a metaphysical as well as an ethical dimension to ren. Besides, there is a correspondence between these two dimensions.

The Mind of Heaven and Earth is to produce things. In the production of man and things, they receive the mind of Heaven and Earth as their mind. Therefore, with reference to the character of the mind, although it embraces and penetrates all and leaves nothing to be desired, nevertheless, one word will cover all of it, namely, jen (humanity).\(^{18}\)

Second, in Zhu Xi's time as well as today, the word "ren" is also used to mean the kernel of a fruit, as in "fruit kernel," "peach kernel," "apricot kernel" (almond). Zhu Xi thinks that this linguistic usage of ren is no coincidence, and argues that both the Heavenly ren and the human ren should be understood accordingly. In other words, ren, as kernel, is the seed, the source, the spring, or the full potentiality of life waiting to be unfolded or developed.\(^{19}\)

16. "Ren-ai" is a common Chinese phrase both in ancient times and today.
17. Zhu Xi Xin Xue An (A New Anthology of Master Zhu's Writings), vol. 2, ed. Qian Mu (Taipei: San Min, 1971), p. 52. All subsequent quotations from this anthology are my English translation.
As the mind of Heaven and Earth, ren gives rise to all kinds of biological life and biological flourishing. As the mind of human beings, ren gives rise to moral life and moral flourishing. In his own words:

What mind is this? In Heaven and Earth it is the mind to produce things infinitely. In man it is the mind to love people gently and to benefit things. It includes the four [cardinal] virtues (of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom) and penetrates the Four Beginnings [of cardinal virtues] (of the sense of commiseration, the sense of shame, the sense of deference and compliance, and the sense of right and wrong).

In other words, ren in human nature is "the spring of all virtues and the root of all good deeds."

Third, though he agrees that ren gives rise to love (ai), he denies that ren is to be defined as love. He articulates the relation between ren and love in the following famous dictum: ren is "the character of the mind and the principle/ground of love." Ren and love are closely related without being identical. Ren is the ultimate reality in human nature; hence it is called the "character of the mind" or "essence of the mind." Ren manifests itself in love (hence it is called the "principle/ground of love"). In other words, love is the empirical manifestation (yong) of ren, and ren is the transcendental nature (ti) of love. Ren is love-not-yet-manifested, and love is ren-already-manifested. Analogously, ren to love is like root to shoot, or like sugar to sweetness. Ren is nature (xing), whereas love is sentiment (qing).

Fourth, Zhu Xi repeatedly asserts that an essential manifestation of ren is impartiality (gong). A preference for partiality, or selfishness (shi), is contrary to ren. In his own sayings:

Jen is the principle of love, and impartiality is the principle of jen. Therefore, if there is impartiality, there is jen, and if there is jen, there is love.

Whenever selfish desires can be entirely eliminated and the Principle [of Heaven] freely operates, there is jen.

20. Zhu Xi also compares ren to a seed of grain (Zhu, op. cit., p. 51), and explains ren as "shengsheng," i.e., the generative force of all things that leads to unceasing growth.
23. It is well known that Han Yu of the Tang dynasty defines ren as "universal love," bo ai.
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Impartiality is not equivalent to ren. Impartiality is the elimination of partiality. When partiality is eliminated, there is the outflow of ren.27

Just as clouds covering the sun or the moon block the sunlight or moonlight, to say that the removal of clouds is equivalent to the sun or moon is wrong.28

The eradication of selfish desires is like removing the obstacles that block the flow of water in an irrigation ditch.29

Fifth, if a feature of ren is impartiality, it is only natural that Zhu Xi reiterates what Confucius has already affirmed, viz., ren is considerateness (shu). As he explains,

Jen is the principle originally inherent in man’s mind. With impartiality, there is jen. With partiality, there is no jen. But impartiality as such should not be equated with jen. It must be made man’s substance before it becomes jen. Impartiality, altruism [shu], and love are all descriptions of jen. Impartiality is antecedent to jen; altruism [shu] and love are subsequent. This is so because impartiality makes jen possible, and jen makes love and altruism [shu] possible.30

Last, but not least, Zhu Xi makes it very clear that human ren is to be patterned after Heavenly ren. In his own words again,

Our mind is also the mind of Heaven and Earth. However, the Heavenly mandate is upright, whereas the human mind is evil. The Heavenly mandate is impartial, whereas the human mind is partial. The Heavenly mandate is great, whereas the human mind is small. Hence our mind does not resemble that of Heaven and Earth. The purpose of learning is to eliminate that which does not resemble Heaven and Earth, so that we can resemble Heaven and Earth.31

When the mind is without partiality or selfishness it corresponds to Heaven and Earth; this is ren.32

27. Zhu Xi, "A Treatise on Ren (Jen)," p. 69.
29. Zhu Xi, "A Treatise on Ren (Jen)," p. 66.
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Ren is like the way Heaven and Earth produce a myriad of things. When human beings are without selfishness they will then resemble Heaven and Earth.\textsuperscript{33}

In short, ren in Zhu Xi is more than a moral norm or an ethical ideal. Ren has both a Heavenly and a human dimension. Ren is the key to understand both the nature of Heaven and the nature of human beings. It is a fundamental motif in the sense of Nygren’s. Since Zhu Xi’s school of Confucianism is one of two dominant schools of Confucianism in the last eight hundred years, ren can arguably be said to be a, if not the, fundamental motif of Confucianism.\textsuperscript{34}

Is an Agape-Ren Synthesis Promising or Problematic?

My preliminary understanding of contextual theology is as follows. It is a methodological insistence on the priority of a particular, local, and contemporary context for doing theology. The context can be religious, philosophical, literary, political, economic, social, and ideological. Though many contemporary contextual theologies emphasize the contexts of political and economic oppression, racism, sexism, Eurocentrism, colonialism and post-colonialism, and post-Communism, my concern in this paper is the religious and philosophical contexts of the Chinese people. In particular, it is the context of the Confucian legacy that is my major focus.\textsuperscript{35}

Since both agape and ren are expressions of love, and both are fundamental motifs, it seems obvious to many that a Chinese contextual theology and ethics has to incorporate some kind of an agape-ren synthesis. We often hear views like: “Jesus and Confucius have similar ideas about the Ultimate Reality”; “agape and ren are only two different aspects of the same love, not two different loves.” Hence an agape-ren synthesis seems to look promising.\textsuperscript{36}

However, a major argument in Nygren’s masterpiece is that the synthe-

\textsuperscript{33} Zhu Xi, Zhuzi Xin Xue An, vol. 1, p. 362.
\textsuperscript{34} Put differently, no Confucian scholar would deny that ren is “the center” of Confucianism. It is Zhu Xi, however, who has elaborated ren into part of a comprehensive moral-religious worldview.
\textsuperscript{35} Accordingly, Chinese contextual theologies are bound to be pluralistic.
\textsuperscript{36} In this connection, one should note that Nygren’s name in Chinese transliteration contains the Confucian term “ren.” I do not think this is only a coincidence.
sis of *agape* with *eros* destroys the integrity of the *agape* motif. That is why Nygren is so critical of Augustine's *caritas*, which is a synthesis of *agape* and *eros*; that also explains why he stops his treatment at the Reformation, in which the *caritas* synthesis is broken down and the *agape* motif is renewed. The finding of Nygren raises important theological-methodological issues: Is it ever theologically advisable to seek an *agape*-X synthesis, where X is a fundamental motif of another culture? Can there be such a synthesis without losing one's identity, say, both as a Christian and as a Chinese? What follows here is a brief investigation.

Nygren and subsequent theologians have written and spoken extensively about the nature of *agape*; none of it needs to be repeated here. I have two major theses-in-tension about *agape* to advance, to which I think not much attention has been given. First, there is a correlation between neighbor-love and the imitation of God or of Christ. Christian love for others should imitate God's or Jesus Christ's love for us. This is Thesis One. However, that our love for others should be continuous with God's love for us (through imitation) should not overshadow the fact that there should also be discontinuity between divine love and human love. In some crucial ways, human beings cannot and should not love as God or Jesus Christ loves. There should be contrast or divergence as well as resemblance or correspondence between these two kinds of love. This is Thesis Two.

According to Thesis One, first of all, God's or Jesus Christ's loving action is the measure, yardstick, standard, or norm of our loving action. Such a divine love provides both the content and the justification of Christian love.

Among recent theologians and ethicists Nygren and Allen self-consciously use a divine exemplar model to understand Christian love. For Nygren, the four major features of God's love for us are also the four features of Christian love. For Allen, the six major characteristics of Christian love correspond closely to the six major characteristics of God's covenant love. Ramsey's programmatic statements on Christian love also exhibit a divine


exemplar model. For Niebuhr, it seems that he is willing to use Jesus’ love for us as the model of our love for others in personal morality (“Christ as the norm of human nature defines the final perfection of man in history”). But since he thinks that Jesus’ ethic is only a personal one, not a social one, he does not think that Jesus’ love for us can be the model of social morality. Only indirectly, through justice, is Jesus’ love relevant to our social life. In short, my Thesis One is a consensus among major Christian theologians and ethicists, though in different degrees.

The same, however, cannot be said about Thesis Two. Gene Outka is the only Protestant ethicist of love known to me who is acutely aware of this important issue, and I am indebted to him for this important reminder. By incorporating Hans Frei’s insight, he stresses that there should be both differences and points of correspondence between Jesus and the believer. Christians should only follow their Lord at a distance. A theocentric love should honor both the differences and the likenesses between God and ourselves. This formal principle can be filled with content by studying carefully the New Testament writings on love, which I have done elsewhere.

40. Paul Ramsey, Basic Christian Ethics (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), pp. xii-xiv, xvii, 5, 16-21, 24, 43-44, 102. But in his actual exposition of Christian love it seems that Ramsey does not follow this model faithfully (e.g., for him the hallmark of Christian love is a disinterested concern for others, but he does not elaborate how Jesus’ love for us is also of, and largely, this nature).
44. As for those Christian ethicists who want to render the Christian ethic of love into the moral philosophy of beneficence or respect for persons, given the very nature of their enterprise, they have to exclude Jesus Christ’s love (through an appeal to scriptural authority) from being the exemplar of human love (beneficence, respect) for others.
47. Lo Ping-cheung, Love and Imitation in New Testament and Recent Christian Ethics, pp. 41-16.
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To employ the four-component analysis of *agape* advanced by Outka, the discontinuities between divine and Christian love can be formulated as follows. (1) God bestows worth upon human beings regardless of their merits or demerits, whereas Christians can only affirm and appreciate others’ worth regardless of their merits or demerits (both divine and Christian valuation of others are universal, though). (2) Divine commitment to the well-being of human beings is universal and redemptive, whereas Christian commitment to others’ well-being is inclusive but neither universal nor redemptive. (3) God and Christ can seek communion with human beings universally, whereas Christians’ scope of seeking communion with others is even narrower than that of agent commitment (in virtue of the high demand in communion and of human finitude). (4) An important characteristic of divine sacrificial love is the substitutionary death of the Son, whereas Christian sacrificial love does not require death, still less a substitutionary one, as a necessity.

I have said in the discussion of Thesis One above that Nygren and Allen are the ones who most consciously use a divine exemplar model. In his book *Love and Conflict*, though Allen never explicitly affirms the discontinuity between divine and human love, he is not entirely insensitive to this issue either. Thus the first characteristic of God’s covenant love is “God binds us together as members of a covenant community,” whereas the first characteristic of Christian covenant love is “to see self and others as essentially belonging together in community”; the second characteristic of divine covenant love is “God creates and affirms the worth of each covenant member,” whereas the second characteristic of Christian covenant love is only “to affirm the worth of each covenant member.” But for the sake of a more accurate understanding of Christian covenant love, the discontinuities between divine and Christian love need to be articulated explicitly.


49. We should note that the function of this thesis is only to point out that there are things that God and Christ can do for us that we cannot and should not do for one another, but not to lower the standard of love. Compared with some secular understanding of moral norms, Christian love that is patterned after divine love is still very demanding. There is much less room for supererogation, for example.


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Nygren's case is more complicated, however. He certainly is acutely aware of the discontinuity between God's agape and our agape. His awareness is so keen that he probably has overblown it. He sees such an unbridgeable de facto gulf between divine and human love that he attempts to deny human agency in Christian love. The following statements in the last chapter of his masterpiece are well known, for good or for bad: "The subject of Christian love is not man, but God himself. . . . Divine love employs man as its instrument and organ. . . . He [i.e., the Christian] is merely the tube, the channel, through which God's love flows."

A more sympathetic reading of Nygren needs to go back to his earlier chapter on Paul, in which he explains why he considers a Christian to be an instrument of agape. "When Paul speaks of Agape he always means the Divine love, never a merely human love. The Christian's love for his neighbor is a manifestation of God's Agape, which in this case uses the Christian, the 'spiritual' man, as its instrument. . . . It is not the case that I possess in my religious life the effective basis of my ethical life; were it so, it might look as if I were resting in myself and simply drawing on my own inner resources. Paul's entire religion and ethics are theocentric, and he cannot rest until he has referred everything to God." We can share Nygren's vigilance against Pelagianism in Christian life, but the solution to this problem does not have to be purchased with the high price of human agency. Though divine love is wholly other than human love, divine love is not necessarily also wholly other than Christian love. As mentioned before, a Christian is able to follow the shape of Jesus Christ's love because this very love has shaped his/her love. Jesus Christ in his love is not only the exemplar of Christian love, but also the Savior and the enabler of Christian loving conduct. Hence a theocentric account of Christian life is not incompatible with a double-agency approach of explaining Christian life.

Can we find these two theses-in-tension about love in Zhu Xi? Yes and no. On the one hand, as explained in the earlier section, Zhu Xi deems that human ren-love should be patterned after the ren of Heaven and Earth. This corresponds to the thesis of continuity — a correlation between love and imitation — in the Christian ethics of agape articulated above. However, there is no discussion in Zhu Xi on the possible discontinuity between the human ren and the Heavenly ren. In fact, the overall shape of Zhu Xi's philosophy makes this discontinuity rather unlikely, because, like

other neo-Confucians, Zhu Xi subscribes to the position of the immanent-
ism of Heaven.

"Immanentism" can be understood as "a view of God which stresses his
immanence or indwelling in the world at the expense of his transcen-
dence. . . . The symbol of depth rather than height has been applied to God,
suggesting that he is the inner principle that expresses itself in the world-
process rather than an external power separate and independent from the
world." 56 If we replace the word "God" with the word "Heaven" in the quo-
tation above, I think it will be a fair summary of Zhu Xi's view of Heaven. In
fact, in some typical sayings Zhu Xi remarks, "Heaven is human beings, and
human beings are Heaven. . . . Heaven is human beings writ large, and hu-
man beings are Heaven writ small. . . . Ultimately Heaven and human beings
are but one principle." 57

In short, the idea that the ren of Heaven is in some way wholly other
than the ren of human beings is rather unintelligible to Zhu Xi. Here lies
the crucial difference between the fundamental motif of agape and the fun-
damental motif of ren, viz., Thesis Two is applicable to the former but not
to the latter. The anthropological implications of this difference are enor-
mous. For Zhu Xi, in virtue of "the oneness or identity of Heaven and hu-
man beings," the Heavenly ren and the human ren are in fact one and the
same. Ren is a natural endowment in human nature from Heaven. Ren is
the ultimate reality in human nature; hence it is called the "character of the
mind" or "essence of the mind." Such a ren nature in us is always pure and
uncorrupted; its potential is eternally infinite and its strength inexhaust-
able. Hence the metaphor of the beaming moon and the cloud: evil is only
like a cloud, which is extrinsic to the moon. No matter how wicked and
perverse one is, one's boundless moral goodness remains intact. This firm
belief in one's innate and infinite goodness is certainly antithetical to
Nygren's theocentricism as quoted above, viz., "It is not the case that I pos-
sess in my religious life the effective basis of my ethical life; were it so, it

57. Zhu Xi, "A Treatise on Ren (Jen)," pp. 366, 375. It should be noted that
"immanentism" is not only a characteristic in Confucianism, but also a hallmark in other
Asian religions, as a famous scholar on the Asian religions observes: "[In Asian religions] Immanence of the sacred rather than its transcendence is emphasized. Thus Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism characteristically find the truly transcendent within the human self
might look as if I were resting in myself and simply drawing on my own inner resources."

No one has done a full-scale comparison of the motif of agape in Christianity and the motif of ren in Confucianism in the way Nygren has done for agape and eros. My treatment above is still sketchy, and other treatments are usually confined to the ethical realm.58 My preliminary finding is that though agape and ren might not be as antithetical to one another in as many aspects as agape and eros are (see Nygren’s summary quoted above), ren as a fundamental motif still conflicts with the fundamental motif of agape.

Religious Syncretism and Contextual Theology

From the perspective of Nygren in Agape and Eros, accordingly, the agape-ren synthesis is undesirable. He would disapprove of the view that the ren fundamental motif and the agape fundamental motif are more or less the same. This is confirmed by his interpreters, such as Bernhard Erling, and by his own statement forty years later. Commenting on Nygren’s program of motif research, Erling writes, “Nygren is not suggesting that these motifs either do or should exist in a pure form. He does argue, however, that the agape motif, at least, resists synthesis with the other motifs, and must assert its predominance in a given religious orientation in so far as it encounters elements characteristic of these other motifs.”59 Furthermore, “At the same time this method suggests that the answer to the problem posed by this [religious] pluralism is not an attempted syncretism. Each of these faiths has its own characteristic uniqueness. The significance of the faith decision is that one must choose between them. It is not possible to serve two masters.”60

In his replies to critics and interpreters forty years after the publication of his masterpiece, Nygren the Bishop displays some openness to the idea of synthesis, though still with caution. He writes,

If one wishes a synthesis of Agape and Eros, one may seek to build one. There is nothing that hinders; this has happened many times before. But to maintain for this reason that Paul, in speaking of God’s Agape or of Christ’s Agape, should mean about the same as Plato means with Eros,

only that he develops another aspect or lets the accent fall at a different point — this it would seem is to force the meaning of the texts far beyond what any useful purpose requires. Why is one eager that great men should think in about the same way? Actually they think quite differently — and it is just in this that the richness of the history of humanity consists. . . . [Ulrich von] Wilamowitz-Möllendorf] is correct. He who says that it is love of the same kind, only under a different aspect, is in error.61

In other words, Nygren would certainly agree that the moral norm and virtue of ren, theologically specified, has a legitimate place in a Chinese Christian ethics. In that sense agape and ren are in synthesis. One should not jump to the next step, Nygren would say, and assert that ren is more or less the Chinese name for agape, and the agape motif can best be explained as ren in a Chinese context.

To put it differently, Nygren explains his openness and caution in this way:

There is a difficulty which easily arises when there is discussion of “basic motifs” that one tends to think that the basic motif is the whole and excludes all other elements. No, the basic motif is in this respect not exclusive, but inclusive. It is, to be sure, exclusive over against competing basic motifs, but inclusive with respect to the different elements in the religious life. . . . When “the problem of culture” is brought over to the theological domain, it receives a wholly concrete content. During its almost two-thousand-year history the Christian faith has entered into relationship and interaction with widely differing cultures. This is inescapable and of the greatest significance for both parties. The risk is only that in this way a religious syncretism can creep in, which robs the Christian faith of its meaning and power. . . . It is to set up a defense against this that I have said yes to “cultural synthesis” and no to “religious synthesis,” however difficult it may be to maintain this distinction concretely.62

Nygren’s advice, at age 80, is quite intriguing. From the perspective of Chinese contextual theology one needs to ask, “Can we do a Chinese contextual theology of agape that involves only a cultural synthesis but not a reli-


igious synthesis? What specific place for ren is there in this contextual theology and ethics of agape then?" This is a Nygren legacy that we need to probe further in the future.

On the other hand, some theologians, Chinese and Western, might be shocked by Nygren's insistence against religious synthesis and his exclusiveness against other competing fundamental motifs. Nygren's old-fashioned view is no longer tenable in this age of religious pluralism, they deem. If that is the case, we even need to call into question the value of motif research, which emphasizes the uniqueness of each religion and the structural differences among them.

Whether Nygren's motif research is helpful or not for the construction of Chinese contextual theology of agape is open to dispute. What is indisputable is the value of his program for the prolegomenon of any future Chinese contextual theological work. Hence Sino-Nordic theological dialogue through the Nygrenian bridge should continue.