
Contemporary Journal of Anthropology and Sociology

Agape and Special Relations: Love in the African American Community

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Abstract: This paper examines how African-Americans utilize religion to help make sense of their experiences. Due to religious commitments many of them feel called to learn how to love all of their neighbors equally. Most of them also hold a special regard for their own particular race. Understanding how they negotiate tensions between these two moral commitments helps explain how they contend with and confront racism.

Keywords: Love, Religion, African-Americans, Agape, Special Regard, Christian, Islam, Racism

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Introduction

This paper explores how agape and special relations play a role within the African-American community. Several racial incidents have taken place recently, such as the deadly shootings of young black males by police officers, the mass murder of blacks in a Charleston, South Carolina church, and black women who have died mysteriously in jail cells. At this time it is crucial to examine how African-Americans are using their philosophical and religious resources to cope with these tragedies. Most African-Americans are Christians. Consequently, they have a strong moral commitment to love all people equally, in other words they are called by God to practice agape. On the other hand, African-Americans, Christian and non-Christian, also usually have a deep emotional attachment to their community that leads them to develop a special regard for members of their own particular race. This paper attempts to understand why this racial group exhibits forms of love for all people, including forgiving perpetrators of crimes committed against them. Also, the paper looks at how this racial group can simultaneously embrace an ideology that leads them to advocate for protecting and nurturing their own particular community through social actions, such as the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

This discussion of agape and special relations within the African-American community is divided into various sections. First, a definition is provided for what is meant by agape and special relations and how they are manifest among Christians in general and African-Americans in particular. Then, the paper offers a brief account of some social and historical aspects that distinguish African-American Christianity from European-American Christianity. This section sheds light on how agape and special relations are expressed in particular ways

within the black community. Next, drawing upon the work of Wolterstorff, the paper examines the tensions encountered by Christians as they negotiate the patriotic ties they have to their nation with their practice of agape love. These tensions are compared to similar struggles faced by African-American Christians who negotiate holding particular ties to their own race with a calling to love all of their neighbors equally. Additionally, the paper assesses how the ministries of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X serve as the ideal models of how agape and special relations are practiced within the African-American community. This section also highlights how religions like Christianity and Islam help this racial group make sense of their experiences. The paper concludes by looking at the reasons for why agape and special relations may both be important for African Americans to thrive as a community as they engage with their own members as well as people of other races within the U.S. context.

Historically, African Americans have exhibited love for their own race and for other races and ethnic groups in two main ways: agape and through forming special relations. Agape is universal love for all people. “Agape provides an ethic of universal equal regard, a love of all neighbors, regardless of merit, reciprocity, or specific attributes” (Judish 1998: 17). Special relations, on the other hand, form as people offer love to particular people. People in special relations “demand special consideration; they have preferential status based on their particularity – their own specific attributes, a relation of mutuality, a shared history” (Judish 1998:17). Examining these two forms of love can help us understand the actions and reactions of African Americans when they encounter oppression and tragedies like the recent shootings of young black males in our .

Thus, it is true that “Black Lives Matter” (special relations) to African Americans and it is true that in the African American community “ALL Lives Matter” (agape).

Agape plays a strong role in the lives of most African Americans due to their Christian heritage. Christians believe God mandates them to treat others with agape. Universal love, or agape, is an equal regard for each neighbor. Therefore, agape is not based on the particular actions of the one being loved. Jesus told his disciples the two greatest commandments were to love God and to love their neighbors as they love themselves.

Thou shalt love the Lord as thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Matthew 22:37-40)

African American Christians – like most Christians – believe God loves all humans equally and that they demonstrate faithfulness to God by treating all of their neighbors with equal regard.

Two New Testament passages reinforce God’s mandate for Christians to practice agape with all of their neighbors. First, the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches Christians to “actively help even those who are not members of your community and who have no natural claim on your assistance, for they too are fit recipients of neighbor-love” (Outka 1992: 9). The second passage, found in Matthew 5:43, directs Christians to love their enemies and to pray for those who do not wish them well. Thus, God requires Christians to love and care for all of their neighbors, including their enemies.

Although African American Christians may desire to love all others equally as part of their faith, human limitations may cause them to fall short of this ideal. “In actual life the pervasiveness of feelings of special attachment and devotion, simply natural and

spontaneous, may remain” (Outka1972: 274). Feelings of “special attachment” and “devotion” lead to the formation of special relations. Special relations “includes persons to whom one stands in a special moral relation” and require “special moral obligations and particular considerations” (Outka1972: 268). They incorporate all those for whom one holds a particular love or regard.

There is a sense of a permanence of love associated with agape regardless of any and all actions taken by those who are loved. Agape involves “a persistence of regard despite obstacles, and an unwillingness to break a relation entirely even at the cost of, for example, forgiveness in a situation of injury” (Outka1972: 285). For example, the agape form of love enabled African American victims’ families in Charleston, South Carolina to be able to forgive Dylann Roof and pray for his soul despite his hate crime and the murder of their family members. Contrary to how relations of agape work, special relations may fall apart when harms occur. Bonds between people in special relations can and often do disintegrate for various reasons. There may be no understanding or requirement that one must forgive another when injuries arise. Further, special relations may collapse if a person is perceived or actually does betray those who love him or her.

Special relations contain a factor of vulnerability not necessarily associated with agape. Agape does not require one to be close to those who are loved. One can love others from a distance. Special relations, on the other hand, usually involve a sense of closeness – e.g., geographically or emotionally – between the parties who love each other. Additionally, reciprocity is often an integral part of special relations. “Some sort of mutuality must exist, or at the very least . . . must have existed once” (Judish 1998: 22). While special relations offer the

benefits of receiving and giving authentic, and often intense, personal degrees of love, they also contain an element of vulnerability and risk if the loved one fails to return the love extended.

We can love more complexly in these special relations (in the manner of *eros* and *philia* as well as *agape*). Alas, we can also hate more intensely. The possibility of injustice increases with the closeness of our relations. For such closeness makes us at once more vulnerable and heightens and orders our expectations. In short, our capacity for reciprocal help and harm is deeper and more varied with those closely related to us. (Outka 1992:100)

Parties in special relations remain vulnerable. “We are vulnerable to our special relations in a way we are not to our neighbors. We need those we particularly love” (Judish 1998: 39). Thus, it is usually quite painful when special relations end (e.g., divorce).

For Christians there is an additional element of concern with our special relations. Special relations seem to place Christians in a position that contradicts their commitments to *agape* as they are challenged by the fact that they extend love to particular others (e.g., their parents or children). However, special relations may also teach people how to love others in a general way. “The vulnerability of personal relational love can teach us – or simply bring us – to feel a general love for all people” (Judish 1998: 40). Consequently, Christians may find some hope in knowing that the love they exhibit within their special relations may lead or teach them to reinforce their commitment to love others universally.

A Distinct History and Tradition

When referring to African-American Christians as a group, it is essential to understand what differentiates this group from other Christians. African-American Christianity emerged as a response to “the physical color of its devotees and their

ubiquitous experience of otherness. It was also a response to the transcendental meaning of their blackness” (Evans 1990: 217). African-American Christianity is both distinguished from and related to European-American Christianity. European-Americans introduced a modified version of Christianity to Africans to justify slavery and inculcate slaves to show allegiance to them. To survive most Africans at least maintained the surface appearance of adhering to this altered form of Christianity. However, a deep sense of self-worth and community as well as a strong connection to their traditional forms of spirituality enabled Africans to transform this form of Christianity and worship God authentically.

African-American religion is rooted in a religious sensibility, which is deeper than contemporary manifestations of Christianity, and it is extreme in the persistence of its opposition to oppression. Therefore, black religion has existed within yet outside of the discursive arena of European-American Christianity, preferring to concern itself with the practical dimensions of life, and taking for granted its own theological legitimacy. (Wilmore 1983: 11)

According to Evans, there are three significant features of African-American Christianity. First, it offers a vision of a just and humane social order. The form of Christianity practiced by African-Americans has always “rendered a prophetic critique against a society and the modernist spirit that could justify kidnapping, slavery, exploitation, and racism in the name of religion” (Evans 1990: 218). Additionally, it creates a safe space for African-Americans to create and share stories that offer witness to the humanity historically denied them by slavery, by distorted versions of Christianity thrust upon them by European-Americans, and by various forms of racism. Affirming their humanity as the children of God allows African-Americans to heal and build unity. “The easiest way for the oppressed to defy conceptual definitions that justify their

existence in servitude is to tell stories about another reality where they are accepted as human beings” (Cone 1975: 150). Finally, African-American Christianity cultivates a strong sense of community. Bonds of love and interdependence allow African-Americans (Christian and non-Christians) to survive and thrive in an alienating, racially oppressive society.

African-American Christians practice agape and nurture special relations. As Christians, they respond to God’s call to love all others, including their enemies. Despite contending with blatant and subtle forms of racism, the call to agape encourages black Christians to attempt to reconcile with whites. Agape charges them to look beyond the racial boundaries that dominant groups erect to keep particular groups separated from mainstream society and oppressed. It calls them to “attribute to everyone alike an irreducible worth and dignity, to rule out comparisons at the most basic level, to refuse to defer to the particular social and ethnic groups to which individuals happen to belong.” (Outka, 1972: 269)

Simultaneously, African-American Christians feel a special regard for other African-Americans, Christian and non-Christian, because they share the same history of surviving the multitude of atrocities inflicted upon them during their sojourns in this country. They continue to form special relations as they bond in the midst of the contemporary forms of racism and hate crimes they experience. For example, when one in three young black males is incarcerated in jails or prisons or on parole or probation, African-Americans often come together to figure out ways to help their families and communities overcome the obstacles they encounter.

There are times when special relations within the African-American community disintegrate. In some cases a person may

alienate herself from the community by choice, as has been done by many members of the black middle class who separate themselves from poor and working class blacks. Or, the community may reject a person because they perceive that the person has betrayed them in some way. For example, many African-Americans view Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas as a race traitor, arguing that he does nothing to contribute to the community in a positive way. However, due to God’s command to love with agape, black Christians often feel they cannot sever bonds with people completely. They often feel compelled to pray for people and hope they will return to their community. Due to commitment to God to practice agape, their commitments to people persists even when these persons betray or harm them. They fulfill their duty to continue to recognize the “sacredness of these persons in God’s sight” (Allen 1995: 261). When white Christians participate in acts of hatred or remain silent when racism occurs, black Christians are called to forgive and pray for them. “The church could not endure except as the members repeatedly find themselves enabled through Jesus Christ to forgive and accept one another in the midst of their insufficient faithfulness” (Allen 1995: 292). African-American Christians try to love and include all people as they practice agape. Yet, they are also unapologetic about advocating for their own particular needs and concerns as a community.

Can Christians Be Patriotic?

Agape seems to conflict with patriotism or loyalty to one’s particular nation. Examining this tension may shed more light on similar tensions faced by African-American Christians who struggle with having special allegiances to their particular race. The issue in both cases is whether or not Christians can ethically love particular

groups in which a sense of kinship is shared; kinship to members of one's particular nation or one's particular race or ethnic group.

Citizens often feel a particular allegiance to their nation. This "particular allegiance" rests at the heart of special relations that form due to patriotism.

Patriotism may be defined as

love of country. It consists of feelings of affection and loyalty for one's nation. Patriotism enters the picture when someone loves one nation above all others. (Wolterstorff 1976: 11)

Christians may also feel a special love for their particular nation. "Is it legitimate for any Christian to *love* his nation above all others – in the sense of feeling special affection for and loyalty to it" (Wolterstorff 1976: 11)? A similar question can be asked about whether or not African American Christians can *love* their race above all others – in the sense of feeling special affection for and loyalty to it? These forms of special affection and loyalty appear to contradict agape notions where Christians are called to love and respect all persons with equal regard.

Christians are from birth placed within the context of a nation. "There is no such thing as standing before God and among my fellows as just a Christian. Always one wears the clothing of some nation" (Wolterstorff 1976: 11). Most people become patriotic as they return the love they feel they receive from their country. "The roots of patriotism lie in *loving one's own, feeling at home within some group*" ((Wolterstorff 1976: 12). This feeling leads many Christians to agree with Wolterstorff (1976: 13) when he asserts, "The American nation is my parent in the family of nations. It has nurtured me as no other has. In it I feel at home. I embrace it as my own."

Many African-Americans cannot easily develop such intense feelings of patriotism. Contrary to Wolterstorff, who has the

advantage of being European-American in a system that systematically privileges whites, African-Americans are heavily discriminated against and are not always made to "feel at home" within this nation. The historical experience of slavery and current poverty and racism make it hard for many African-Americans to feel like this country embraces them or that they can embrace it.

This does not mean that there are not patriotic blacks. In fact, some blacks and whites argue that African-Americans have embraced the ideals of this nation, such as equality, more than any other race. However, what it does mean is that African-Americans also return the love they have received to those who have loved and nurtured them the most. For most blacks this love has come not from their nation but from other members of their own race.

African-American Christians may develop a special love for members of their own race. They may *love* their own race, *feeling at home* within their own racial group. They have been nurtured by their racial community in special ways and embrace it as their own. Many people see no problem with this form of patriotism or race loyalty in most cases. It is only when someone takes actions to exclude or harm members of other nations or racial groups – as in the case of Mr. Roof, for example – that it becomes seen as a problem. However, this special regard for nation or for one's racial or ethnic group appears to stand in direct opposition to the universal form of love, or agape, Christians are commanded by God to practice.

However, it is also possible that having special regard for a set of particular people may also help Christians adhere to the ideals of agape and learn to love others with equal regard. Through expressing our love within special relations, Christians work towards building God's kingdom. "Only if we

express our commitment to Christ through distinct cultural form can the rich diversity of human potential be brought into the kingdom” (Wolterstorff 1976: 11).

It is quite possible that the special attachments and responsibilities Christians develop or feel obligated to have towards their nation may be part of their commission from God. “I do bear deeper responsibilities for the health of the American nation than for that of any other. God has placed me here in this country and it is from this spot that I must do my work” (Wolterstorff 1976: 11). This same reasoning may also explain why the majority of African-American Christians feel they have “deeper responsibilities” to their race. Since God “has placed” blacks “here in this country” and historical social context, many African-American Christians feel that their work must be done within the “spot” of the black community.

Significantly, faith may temper Christians’ love for their nation because they have a more fundamental loyalty to the church and to Christ (Wolterstorff 1976). At times, loyalty to God may require them to choose to act against their nation – its laws, its desires, its practices; especially when they are not in conformity with God’s laws. Christians are called to be loyal to a higher authority than their nation; they have to be faithful to God. Wolterstorff (1976: 13) asserts, “For judged by reference to what promotes the coming of God’s Kingdom, the ideals which guide and inspire my nation are tangled mixtures of good and bad. My unqualified allegiance I cannot give.” He cannot give “unqualified allegiance” to his nation; this he reserves only for God.

In a similar way, black Christians do not give “unqualified allegiance” to all members of their race, especially if particular members disregard or disobey God’s commandments. For instance, black-on-black crime, hatred of others (e.g.,

whites), and the self-centered, greed of some members of the black middle class cannot be excused.

Agape and special relations are both practiced by Christian patriots and African-American Christians. Most Christians have a special affection for their nation and most blacks have a special affection for members of their particular race. However, both groups are also called by God to “love all peoples, praying and working for their welfare” (Wolterstorff 1976: 13).

Martin and Malcolm X: Exemplars of Agape and Special Relations

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X stand as the ultimate examples of how agape and special relations operate within the African-American community. Dr. King and Malcolm X had a profound impact on the nature of race relations in the U.S. and the world. They both worked hard to advocate for the black poor. Malcolm X ministered mainly in northern urban areas while Dr. King focused primarily on the plight of the southern black masses. Under their leadership, poor blacks “rose up against their white oppressors and demanded their God-given right to be treated as human beings” (Cone 1997: 309).

Dr. King was a middle-class black Christian who employed methods in his opposition to racism that were initially harshly criticized but over time reluctantly came to be accepted by whites. He challenged white churches that “ignored the problem of racism” and black churches who “passively accepted its consequences” (Cone 1997: 295). He argued racism was the chief moral dilemma in the United States. “One which neither whites nor blacks could ignore and also retain their Christian identity” (Cone 1997: 295). Today, most of the U.S. embraces and reveres King, even celebrating his birthday as a national holiday. His status as a middle-class black, as a Christian, and

as someone who advocated for racial integration, make it less problematic for whites and middle-class blacks to accept him.

Malcolm X, on the other hand, is still vilified by many whites and middle-class Christian blacks as a violent agitator. One reason this view exists is because he vehemently opposed Christianity and embraced different religious traditions – first, the Nation of Islam, and later, orthodox Islam. Another reason he is perceived as dangerous is because he was a member of the urban poor, a former drug dealer, and a former convict. A set of statuses that is still heavily stigmatized and discriminated against by people in our nation. Additionally, his strong nationalist assertions that blacks had the right to stand up for themselves and to focus on their own communities scared many whites and middle-class blacks.

The media often portrays these two gentlemen as diametrically opposed to each other and as enemies. In fact, these men complemented each other as they both worked towards creating a better society and life for African-Americans. Without Malcolm X, black pride would have suffered more. Without Dr. King, white and black Christians would have continued to avoid dealing openly and honestly with racial tensions and hostilities. They exemplify the tensions between agape and special relations within the black community.

For most people Dr. King represents the embodiment of agape. He pressed white and black Christians to advocate for racial equality and full integration, believing that “Christian faith requires that whites treat [blacks] as equals before God” (Cone 1997: 6). Dr. King persuaded many northern white ministers that segregation was a denial of the Gospel. He declared, “Racial segregation is a blatant denial of the unity we have in Christ” (Cone 1997: 73). In his

view, Christians were commissioned to employ the ethos of agape to reconcile whites and blacks.

Malcolm X spoke mainly from a nationalist perspective; even in his later days, as he transformed in thought and deeds, he continued to focus on the need for self-love among blacks. He advocated blacks develop and strengthen their special regard for each other in order to counter racism – the oppression of *black* people by *white* people” (Cone 1997: 10). Malcolm declared that whites had proven their inability to love and treat blacks with equal regard (agape). He felt integration would never work because whites would never treat blacks as equals. “Freedom was not blacks pleading for integration into white society; rather it was separation from white people so that blacks could govern themselves” (Cone 1997: 10). Malcolm argued that developing special relations was the only rational means to liberate blacks.

Both integrationist and nationalist perspectives bear essential elements for blacks to achieve freedom. Nationalists like Malcolm X speak about racial pride and work to elevate the cultural and psychological well-being of blacks burdened with low self-esteem (Cone 1997). While integrationists like Dr. King desire for blacks and whites to live together as equals, they usually do not want complete assimilation. They take actions, such as creating separate black churches, in order to maintain the cultural and spiritual identity of blacks.

Like Malcolm X, African American Christians know “*the experience of being black in a white, racist society*” (Cone 1997: 152). However, Malcolm rejected Christianity because of the violence and humiliation he suffered and witnessed from “good Christian white people.” He saw the contradictions between the Christian love – agape – they talked about and the way they

treated his parents and other blacks. Instead, he opposed racism and Christianity and embraced the philosophy and religion of the Nation of Islam. The Nation helped him to make sense of his personal experiences as a black man in the U.S.

African-American Christians and Christians in general need to understand why urban blacks like Malcolm embrace the Nation of Islam. Cone (1997: 154) identifies two factors that need to be considered. First, the Nation of Islam is “specifically designed to address the spiritual, social, economic, and political needs of the black underclass, particularly those in prisons and urban [areas].” A major challenge facing black churches and all Christians is how to address on a practical level the needs of the urban poor, especially blacks and other minorities. Offering sermons about serving the poor without advocating for social justice or taking measures to improve their lives is not enough. Christians need to practice agape and develop special relations with urban poor minorities to help their lives to improve and society to become more just.

The second factor Cone distinguishes that makes the Nation of Islam appeal to urban blacks is that the way many European-Americans practice Christianity often excludes African-Americans. A distorted form of Christianity buttresses “the particular needs of whites who perceived themselves and their culture as the standard by which all others were to be judged” (Cone 1997: 155). When churches portray God and Jesus as white and the devil and sin as black, as most white and black churches still do, they fail to be authentically Christian and harm black self-esteem. Churches become places where special relations among European-Americans or middle-class blacks, aspiring to be more culturally “white”, develop instead of havens where relations founded in agape can

be formed. It is destructive to the black psyche to define “everything good in this life and the next as *white* and everything bad in this world and the next as *black*” (Cone 1997: 155).

Together Malcolm X and Dr. King represent how agape and special relations need to be fostered within the African-American community. Special relations of trust and love are necessary in order to improve self-esteem and increase solidarity in the black community. Malcolm X’s teachings inspire blacks to think and act with pride. However, he also clearly noted, “To be proud to be black does not mean being against white people, unless whites are against respecting the humanity of blacks” (Cone 1997: 317). To practice agape blacks might first need to be able to love themselves and each other within the context of special relations. Dr. King declared, “We must feel that we count . . . that we belong, that we are persons, that we are the children of the living God.” (Cone 1997: 292)

Agape creates the foundation for African-American Christians to promote harmony among people of all races, cultures, and religions. Dr. King taught, “The achievement of African-American unity must lead us to reach out to people of other cultures, including [and especially] white people” (Cone 1997: 294). In his last days, Malcolm came to agree with him. Prior to his assassination, he converted to traditional Islam. This affected his vision of race relations. Malcolm reflected on an encounter with a white female he had while still a member of the Nation. She asked him about what actions she could take to help blacks. Malcolm dismissed her, stating there was nothing she could do. After his conversion, he expressed regret about this hostility towards her. “He came to believe that whites should work in their communities and blacks in theirs and by ‘working separately, the sincere white

people and the sincere black people actually will be working together” (Cone 1997: 302). Black nationalism cannot be the final objective for African-Americans (Christian or non-Christian). Relations of agape and inclusion fostered by whites and blacks and other humans will allow for racial healing and reconciliation to occur.

Conclusion

When confronted with the realities of the current African-American experience it is still difficult to see how relations of agape will ever be firmly established between the races. Despite “well-documented black success stories . . . blacks remain, in substantial measure, a race apart in America: a race admired, even emulated, yet held at arm’s length” (Cose 1999: 9). Efforts made by blacks to become accepted as equal members of society are often thwarted. This exclusion from society continues to reinforce the need for special relations of care and support within the African-American community.

African-American Christians, following examples by leaders like Dr. King and Malcolm X, can cultivate love within their own particular racial community and across racial and religious lines. Love created within special relations between blacks leads to higher levels of self-esteem and a full appreciation of their humanity. Black pride is the “prerequisite for developing the self-confidence needed to create an alternative to the ghetto and the prison” (Cone 1997: 292). Agape lights the path to the creation of the beloved community that God calls people to help God create. “All races of people . . . are one human family made to live together in freedom” (Cone 1997: 295).

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