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SECULAR AGAPE: THE LIMITS OF LOVE IN BOTTON AND RORTY

AGAPE SECULAR: LOS LÍMITES DEL AMOR EN BOTTON Y RORTY

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Abstract: The desire for cohesive communities marked by love seems to be latent in the human condition. The revolution brought about by the Judeo-Christian proposal seems to initiate a process in which this desire is realised. The inseparability of love of God from love of neighbour (Luke 10:27) makes agape-love, an inescapable attribute of God, a visible and operative reality. However, outside of the Christian believing community, this dimension and vital force, which brings communities together and unifies them, seems to be diluted. As a result, thinkers such as Alain de Botton and Richard Rorty try to propose secular forms of agape or love, with the aim of achieving the same result as Christian communities. However, as this article will show, these are nothing more than ways of distorting the concept of agape, ultimately resulting in the falsification or mechanisation of communities.

Keywords: Alain de Botton; Richard Rorty; Agape restaurants; Solidarity; Charity.

Resumen: El deseo de comunidades cohesionadas marcadas por el amor parece estar latente en la propia condición humana. La revolución que supuso la propuesta judeocristiana parece iniciar un proceso en el que este deseo se hace realidad. La inseparabilidad del amor a Dios y del amor al prójimo (Lucas 10:27) hace que el amor agape, atributo ineludible de Dios, sea una realidad visible y operativa. Sin embargo, fuera de la comunidad cristiana creyente, esta dimensión y fuerza vital, que cohesiona y unifica a las comunidades, parece diluirse. Por ello, pensadores como Alain de Botton y Richard Rorty intentan proponer formas seculares de agape o del amor, con el objetivo de alcanzar el mismo resultado que las comunidades cristianas. Sin embargo, como mostrará este artículo, no son más que formas de distorsionar el propio concepto de agape, lo que en última instancia se traduce en la falsificación o mecanización de las comunidades.

Palabras clave: Alain de Botton; Richard Rorty; Restaurantes agape; Solidaridad; Caridad.

Introduction

Secularisation has made the desire to bring human beings together in a universal community progressively more difficult. If, on the one hand, there is recognition of the biological nature of mammals, which seems to include a strong social dimension; on the other, the erosion of religions and traditional metaphysics has undermined the idea of the existence of something common to all humans, leading to the apology and exacerbation of difference. Western societies are forgetting the naturally communal dimension of the human being and are moving towards the image of society suggested by Rorty, that of a bazaar. Here, there are multiple groups of people with incommensurable and incompatible values, principles and cultures, who may even hate each other, but who, in the public space, negotiate with a view to satisfying their interests and maintaining the bazaar. Society becomes an agglomeration of individuals who come into contact with each other out of necessity, and instrumentally, in order to guarantee their survival and the fulfilment of their desires, without establishing genuine emotional bonds of recognition and equality. Consequently, any notion of fraternity seems to be nothing more than pure fiction or an archaic wish from an outdated era in which people naively believed in the possibility of building a universal community.

This article analyses the proposals of Alain de Botton and Richard Rorty on the role of love as a congregating force capable of modifying and uniting human beings around a common project. While de Botton reflects directly on the importance of learning from the religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order to take up the concept of *agape* in a secular way, Rorty, although not building his thinking on this concept, is deeply influenced by the Christian tradition of love, seeing in it a revolutionary proposal from the point of view of justice and the construction of an ever broader and more inclusive social *we*. Assuming the past merits of religions, both authors intend to use some of the concepts that they believe they have bequeathed and are still useful, provided they are freed from their religious, metaphysical and supernatural connotations. In short, they propose a secular rethinking of *agape* and the religious impulse as unifying forces capable of leading the multiple and divergent individual *selves* to collaborate in the construction of the communal *we*.

¹ Cf. R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 209.

I will argue that this secularisation, based on Botton's *agape* restaurants and Rorty's transformation of fraternity into solidarity, although interesting, fails to understand the radical foundation of the concept and, by extension, of the other ways of loving. Taken out of its original context, secular *agape* splits the commandment of love in two, eliminating any reference to God. However, defending a love for humanity in a strictly human way clashes with humanity's own inevitable limits and could, in my view, end up being a source of violence and confrontation rather than an aggregating force. It must be borne in mind that, taken out of its original context, *agape*, abstract, disembodied and instrumentalised, may be nothing more than an empty label that warns of the legitimate desire and need for human unity, but without the life-giving power of its original meaning.

1. The Agape Love

The Judeo-Christian tradition created and developed the concept of *agape* from the way it came to understand the very concept of God and of being human. Over time, the commandments to 'love God' (Deut 6:5) and 'love your neighbour' (Lev 19:18b) came to merge into a single reality capable of banishing any possibility of mechanising relationships between human beings and between human beings and God. Thus, 'loving God' and 'loving one's neighbour', as described in Luke 10:27, become inseparable realities, with love for God being the reason, means and justification for love amongst human beings. In the same way, love amongst human beings appears as an expression and manifestation of the relationship of love with God.²

Far from reductive visions of the human being's bond with God, similar to that developed between slaves and their masters, the Judeo-Christian tradition, by assuming that "God [himself] is love" (1Jn 4:8b), unleashes a relational sense of the human being characterised not by submission, but by freedom. By identifying God with love, human beings are capable of loving and cementing their relationships on the basis of this dimension. In this way,

² On the notion of *agape*-love, cf. M. Porcel Moreno and M. Córdoba Salmerón (eds.). *Del Logos al Agapè. En torno al giro teológico de la fenomenología* (Granada: Facultad de Teología de Granada, 2020); M. Porcel Moreno, «Jean-Luc Marion y la teología. La donación como alternativa al ser», *Carthaginensia*, vol. 40, nº. 77 (2024): 87-115; M. Porcel Moreno and I. Angulo Ordorika, «Jesucristo como fenómeno saturado. Un acercamiento fenomenológico al Evangelio de Juan a partir del pensamiento de Jean-Luc Marion», *Perseitas*, nº. 10 (2022): 495-526.

the gratuitousness and fullness that is given to the human being nuances and gives meaning to coexistence, and it is in this relational *agape* that the community *we* is forged – a *we* that does not annul or submit the *self* to the whims of the community. In contrast to Platonic *eros*, marked by absence and the desire to obtain what one does not have – particularly the Good/Beauty; *agape* is characterised by presence, gratuitousness and altruism, in which the only interest is in seeking the good of the other.³

Having received the gift of freedom, each person, when they establish a loving relationship, comes out of themselves, out of their egotism, and gives that same freedom to others. This should not be conceived in abstract terms or from zero-sum relationships. The increase in freedom for some does not imply a decrease in the freedom of others. Freedom offered altruistically to others widens the space and the experiential world, expanding and amplifying their action. It is selfishness, usually under the influence of desire, that diminishes space and promotes discomfort in the presence of others, because when selfishness dominates, the world tends to be reduced to 'my world'. Now, the community is not a strange place in which each individual has to force themselves into, sacrificing a portion of their freedom, as Rousseau and Hobbes thought. On the contrary, the community is the natural place of the human being, in which one is born and in which one finds the space for liberation. It is through communion that identity, dignity and the recognition of the other as such are created. A community built in this way, the community of the children of God, is the goal of the commandment of love.⁴

Precisely because humanity is a gift, the image and likeness of the Creator, all individuals find themselves on a level of equality and common and shared dignity. The relationship of blessing that began in God transposes, crosses over and shapes human identity, making the desire to do good for others not an expression of selfish philanthropy, but a natural consequence of the relationship of love established with God – with the One who *is* love.⁵

³ For Plato, erotic love is the child of poverty and ingenuity, combining the characteristics of a continuous desire for what you don't have, resorting to ruses and ingenious ways of achieving it. Cf. Plato, *The Symposium and the Phaedo* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1980), 203b-e. For a Christian and articulated notion between *eros* and *agape*, cf. Bento XVI, «Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est.*» https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf ben-xvi enc 20051225 deus-caritas-est.html §3-8.

⁴ Cf. R. E. Wagoner, *The meanings of love: An introduction to philosophy of love* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 34-36.

⁵ Cf. I. Angulo Ordorika, «Una fe que ama, un amor que cree. El amor en la primera carta de Juan», *Ciudad de Dios*, vol. 233, nº. 2 (2020): 342-345.

This dynamism inherent in *agape*-love revolutionises the way we think about and live relationships, with secular *agape* proposals being attempts to attain, without God, these relationships where God himself is the source and foundation. In the words of Robert Wagoner,

Christian love is difficult to understand because it involves something more than human relationships. Another factor, God, has to be considered, not just as an addition to the human equation, but as the very basis of human relationships. The love of God not only takes precedence over finding oneself in another, but fundamentally alters both the nature of the self and the other.⁶

What is at stake here is not just an intellectual understanding of *agape* or an abstract knowledge of the relationships generated and enlivened by love. Rather, it is an experiential knowledge of the relationship of love. In this case, there is not only room for intellectual knowledge, but also knowledge marked by affectivity, emotion and the embodiment (*sarx*) of love, expressed in ritual processes that revive, reinforce and renew community ties. This is the only way to understand John's words when he defends the radical notion that "everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God [and that] whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love" (1Jn 4:7b-8).⁷

The difficulty of the Christian proposal of *agape*-love lies precisely in the fact that it is based on the presence of God, which can be, and is, denied by secularist thinking. Abandoning the divine dimension raises the problem of understanding whether it is possible to maintain the unifying force of *agape*-love and promote the building of a community of brothers and sisters in which differences are accepted and respected, maintaining a basic unity capable of promoting genuine peace and harmony.

2. Agape restaurant

Botton, in *Religion for Atheists*, is concerned about the contemporary alienation of human beings, marked by the advent of individualism, loneliness and fear of others. He therefore considers that the lack of a sense of community is one of the main losses of modern society when compared to

⁶ Wagoner, *The meanings of love*, 31.

⁷ Cf. Angulo Ordorika, «Una fe que ama, un amor que cree», 349.

pre-modern society. The disappearance of the sense of community stems, on the one hand, from unavoidable facts such as the exponential growth of the population and, on the other, from the process of secularisation.

The presence of thousands of people, grouped together in ever smaller spaces, makes human beings less welcoming than when they used to spend days without meeting strangers. The continuous presence of unfamiliar people – on the train, at the tax office, in the lift, etc. – not only diminishes one's private 'living space', but the omnipresence of others can be not only a nuisance, but also a threat. Isolation, then, seems to be both a blessing and a curse, as we yearn for personal time and are exasperated by the absence of ties that bind us to others. Secularisation, on the other hand, values the privatisation of religious belief and, as a result, the community values contained therein have tended to disappear from the public space. So, while charity (agape) was an integral part of pre-modern life, where hospitality towards the stranger and the disadvantaged was a natural and inevitable process, nowadays, being approached by a stranger or seeing someone in need is usually perceived as something uncomfortable that you try to get away from as quickly as possible. As a result, the lives of human beings in Western societies have changed their focus, now centred on the self and particularly on professional achievements. Career becomes the top priority. as success there is a criterion for validation and valorisation, both because it guarantees the economic means of survival – and a comfortable life – and also because it satisfies the attention one needs to thrive psychologically.⁸

However, Botton expresses his dissatisfaction with this situation and tries to understand, from an atheistic point of view, what can be recovered from traditional religions in order to renew a sense of community that makes it possible to escape loneliness and individualism. In short, Botton realises the importance of *agape*, which he identifies with generous and sympathetic love for what is fragile and imperfect in ourselves and in others. This feeling of compassion is the element that brings strangers together, promoting their knowledge and integration into a community *we*. It also opens the door to processes of redemption and social revitalisation, since forgiveness makes it possible to repair faults and reconcile the members of a given community.⁹

⁸ Cf. A. de Botton, *Religion for atheists. A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 24-34.

⁹ Forgiveness and apologising are processes that Botton values because they help to overcome guilt and make amends, mitigating the dangers of hatred within communities. He

For Botton, the strength of religions is that they have realised that there are emotions that individuals cannot deal with on their own, and that is why collective rituals on special days give shelter to feelings, even the most pernicious ones, helping to understand how they should be processed and directed. Botton is inspired by four elements of the Catholic Mass, which he wants to recreate in what he calls 'agape restaurants'.

In my opinion, the element of Catholicism that most impresses Botton lies in the composition of the assembly that participates in the Eucharist: "Those in attendance tend not to be uniformly of the same age, race, profession or educational or income level; they are a random sampling of souls united only by their shared commitment to certain values." At Mass, all kinds of strata and distinctions are broken down, leading the participants to enter into the vastness of universal and fraternal love for humanity, emphasising the bonds of unity amongst all human beings and the development of learning to love others as friends and family.

A second element is the setting. Churches are sumptuous spaces in which it is declared that material success does not matter. Their beauty, which surpasses that of palaces, places each participant on an equal footing, elevating them beyond any group or party. In the church, the most fragile – the sick, the weak-minded, the desperate, the elderly, etc. – represent significant aspects of humanity and particularly of ourselves, confronting us with the sin of pride and encouraging us to overcome it. In this sense, this third element is linked to the exhortation to abandon attachments to the earthly condition and to adopt higher values.

The power of the message constitutes, for Botton, one of the greatest 'feats of Christianity', having succeeded, "without the use of any coercion beyond the gentlest of theological arguments, to persuade monarchs and magnates to kneel down and abase themselves before the statue of a carpenter, and to wash the feet of peasants, street sweepers and dispatch drivers." Finally, the fourth element refers to the importance of the liturgical complexity of the missals, which Botton calls the 'instruction book' for the celebration of a Mass, indicating the moments when the faithful should look up, stand up, kneel, sing, pray, etc., in other words, carry out the community rituals.

is thinking in particular of *Yom Kippur* in the Jewish tradition. Cf. Botton, *Religion for atheists*. 67-73.

¹⁰ Botton, *Religion for atheists*, 36-37.

¹¹ Botton, Religion for atheists, 38.

Recalling that the first Eucharistic gatherings, the *agape feasts*, were held at the table, he suggests creating a space that goes beyond what he considers to be the Church's regrettable decision to ban them, taking up the Christian intuition that it is "when we satiate our bodily hunger that we are often readiest to direct our minds to the needs of others." It is from this intuition that Botton proposes the construction of the ideal restaurant, the '*agape* restaurant', whose aim is to turn strangers into friends. Criticising the modern obsession with restaurants – where food and decoration, rather than care and attention for the people you eat with, have become the centre of conversation – Botton wants meals to be opportunities to broaden and deepen affections, because "there are few more effective ways to promote tolerance between suspicious neighbours than to force them to eat supper together." ¹³

The *agape* restaurant must therefore bring together the four elements of the Eucharist as valued by Botton. Have an attractive setting, so as to arouse enthusiasm and immerse the visitor in a collective spirit. Arrange the seating so that groups, ethnicities, families and couples are separated and mixed together. By forcing people to sit with an unknown group, it would lead them towards higher values, because prejudice and conflicts, ethnic, social, religious, etc., feed on abstraction – so the closeness of the meal would foster knowledge of the other and tolerance towards them. Finally, '*agape* books' would be distributed, which would guide diners on how to converse, encouraging, for example, the use of questions that elicit sincere revelations about oneself – 'what are you sorry for?', 'what are you afraid of?' – rather than the usual 'proud' questions – 'what is your profession?', 'what school do your children go to?'

This liturgy, similar to the Eucharist, aims to morally educate and foster charity and compassion towards our fellow human beings. Knowing the other person's fears, faults and weaknesses would allow them to be recognised as an equal, a friend. In this sense, Botton concludes, these restaurants would make it possible to mend the flaws in the modern social fabric, being "a prior step taken to humanize one another in our imaginations, in order that we would then more naturally engage with our communities and, unbidden, cede some of our impulses towards the egoism, racism, aggression, fear

¹² Botton, Religion for atheists, 47.

Botton, *Religion for atheists*, 54.

and guilt which lie at the root of so many of the issues with which traditional politics is concerned."¹⁴

Although Botton's effort to defend the centrality of *agape* in the construction of human communities is commendable, and we can accept that the restaurant he suggests is nothing more than an idealisation, the way he understands *agape*-love and the Catholic Eucharist is still strange. The space, the message, the assembly of the faithful and the missals have developed throughout history in an organic and reflective process in line with knowing and praising God. It was the *telos* aimed at by the community – the praise and living out of the commandment of love, as envisaged in Luke 10:27 – that led to the emergence and development of the elements highlighted. In other words, the means that constitute vital elements in the Catholic Eucharist derive and develop from and through *agape*-love. It is not because they exist that the believing community is enlivened; rather, it is because the community is alive that these elements are functional/operational.

More radically, and we can accept a certain rhetorical tone in Botton's words, the idea of forcing someone to eat with a stranger does not imply that any kind of emotional or moral change will result. Firstly, because nobody believes in something they are forced to do. What is more, the rules of courtesy may prevail and the relationship may consist of a simple exchange of polite expressions without any continuity after the meal. The meal can be nothing more than a mechanical ritual, a performance piece, an artistic spectacle that, once over, does not involve any emotional or intellectual transformation in the lives of those who took part in the meal.

On the other hand, believers enter the church driven by the commandment of love, knowing that they are going to meet their brothers and sisters and not to make friends. Friendship is an extraordinarily important form of love. Aristotle even identified it as the 'social glue', the element that brings the citizens of the *polis* together. However, *philia* is neither a simple concept, with three distinct meanings (utility, pleasure and benevolence); nor is its fullest meaning, that of benevolence – in which we want the same good for the other as for ourselves – universalisable. As Aristotle warns, given the demands of genuine friendship, those who are lucky enough can aspire to have a maximum of two or three friends of this kind, because this implies

¹⁴ Botton, *Religion for atheists*, 63.

dedicating a lot of time, that the person you are friends with has similar virtuosity and that the relationship is reciprocal.¹⁵

Agape has different characteristics. It is the free gift offered by God, his unconditional love for all of humanity, even if they do not welcome it or reject it. Likewise, when human beings offer the gift of agape to one another, they do so freely, with a view to the full good of that person, without expecting anything in return or demanding equality. In the case of agape, 'loving your neighbour as yourself' (Mt 22:39) takes on a Christ-like significance when it is assumed to be a love (even for one's enemies) capable of giving one's life (Jn 13:34). It is not a matter of choice, but of authentically living fraternity. You can choose to act or be with certain friends, but fraternity does not derive from choices, but from a surrender of life: the other is my brother, whether I see him as a friend or an enemy. The love I have for him derives from God's first love offered to both of us and not from any compensation or retribution that may exist from the relationship I establish with the other.

In short, by splitting up the commandment of love, Botton limits it to a voluntarist and human process, a strictly natural process in which accepting the other, recognising their dignity, can involve having to 'force' that acceptance. Even if the 'forcing' is merely rhetorical, the process envisaged by Botton is markedly intellectualist and artificial, running the risk of becoming yet another fad, something that might be nice to do, but which does not involve reasons (intellectual and affective) for its realisation. Conversely, love is a commandment in itself. It is love that becomes a (free) demand for its own fulfilment (Jn 10:18). If the person entering the restaurant is not already imbued with the gift of *agape*, of God's presence in them, they will not be able to take the first step towards the other. Without already being in a relationship of *agape*-love (with God), why would anyone go to a restaurant to eat with strangers and see their brothers and sisters in them?

3. Solidarity instead of fraternity

The centrality of love also appears in Rorty's thinking. This may, *prima facie*, seem to be a strange idea given the markedly pragmatic and utilitarian nature of his thought. However, Rorty is deeply influenced by Christianity,

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1155a-1163b.

particularly the New Testament and the lives of the martyrs. There he finds the exhortation to be morally better and the expression of the hope that one day we will have the will and the capacity to treat "[...] the needs of all human beings with the respect and consideration with which we treat the needs of those closest to us, those whom we love." In this sense, Rorty's philosophical project, specifically in its political dimension, conceives the existence and importance of democracy in the world as an alternative appropriation "[...] of the Christian message that love is the only law."

It does not follow from this that Rorty is talking specifically about *agape*, nor that his aim is to build fraternity. He is not referring to *agape*, because Rorty tends to assume that love, like any human production, does not have an essence, but is a contingent and historical product, taking on specific meanings at different times. ¹⁸ Furthermore, his rejection of metaphysics leads him to anti-authoritarianism, to the idea that there is nothing superhuman to which one should pay reverence or devotion. Taking pure contingency as a premise, he sees that any human activity can only count on the support, inspiration and guidance of individuals or other humans.

In this sense, although he adopts the motto of the French Revolution, he wants to replace fraternity with solidarity in his liberal utopia. Solidarity is more compatible with freedom and equality because, unlike fraternity, it does not imply the existence of a core of characteristics common to all humans (e.g. Reason or the *imago Dei*). For Rorty, when we assume the existence of a human nature, we limit the possibilities of ways of life to a single acceptable one. Any deviation is counter-natural and must be corrected. It is precisely against the dangers of this essentialism that Rorty revolts, seeing, for example, in historical efforts to place women or homosexuals in their 'natural place' an example of violence carried out in the name of something superior or predetermined. This is why he states,

I think that the idea of a society in which everyone loves everyone else equally, or as they love themselves, is an impossible ideal. The ideal of a society in which everyone has enough respect for other people not to presume

¹⁶ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and social hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 202-203.

¹⁷ R. Rorty and G. Vattimo, *The future of religion* (New Yok: Columbia University Press, 2004), 74.

¹⁸ This idea can be illustrated by the way in which love for God has been replaced by love for the truth. Cf. R. Rorty, *Philosophy as cultural politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 73.

that one of their desires is intrinsically evil is a possible ideal. And it is the latter ideal that, through the growth of social democracy and tolerance, we have been gradually achieving in the last two centuries.¹⁹

The advantage of solidarity lies, like love, in its diffuse nature, functioning as an ideal that simultaneously aspires to increase individual freedom and tolerance, as well as creating a fairer, freer and more inclusive society. What that society should be, or what individuals should do, is up to them. There is no prior *telos*, no properly human way of life. This is why love can also be seen as a sign of the aspiration to the Rortyan liberal utopia, because, referring to St Paul, Rorty considers that when he places the commandment of love as the only law, he undermines the need for religious orthodoxy. His insistence "[...] on the primacy of love, and by the gradual realization that a religion of love could not ask everyone to recite the same creed."²⁰

Solidarity, unlike fraternity, is not conceived as something pre-existing, to be achieved by eliminating prejudices and getting on the right path to redemption. On the contrary, solidarity is something that has to be built through the imagination, particularly through the ability to see strangers, them, as suffering beings similar to ourselves. The process of becoming aware of and sensitised by the suffering of strangers takes place through processes of description and redescription, whereby we see them and ourselves as sharing more aspects than we initially thought. Rorty calls those responsible for this process of approaching the other, the true specialists in diversity, 'agents of love'. These include journalists, anthropologists and novelists. Their job is to alert us to the existence of people who are foreign to the community and who are often suffering. They make us interlocutors of our society by describing their apparently irrational and perverse discourses as familiar and coherent, making their behaviour familiar and understandable. Through the sentimental stories they produce (Rorty particularly values the novel), they increase the moral sensitivity of our community and make us willing to fight for these people and even integrate them into our society, making them one of us.

It is Rorty's commitment to solidarity that leads him to imagine a political utopia as the place where freedom and complexity grow endlessly. In

¹⁹ R. Rorty, *An ethics for today. Finding common ground between philosophy and religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 20.

²⁰ R. Rorty, «The decline of redemptive truth and the rise of a literary culture», *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai: Studia Europaea*, vol. 46, n°. 1 (2001): 33.

this social fabric, new and diverse threads are woven into the community tapestry, making it richer, more complex and more inclusive. It is the dream of forging America sung by Walt Whitman and for which Americans should feel a patriotic love.²¹

The problem with Rorty's proposal lies in understanding the place and role played by love, particularly the idea that it is the only law or ideal for connecting individuals who make up societies as complex and diverse as Western societies, around a common project. The difficulty becomes clear when analysing the *firm distinction* in Rortyan thought, the firm distinction between public and private. The public space is the place where deliberations and social choices must be made on the basis of evidence and arguments, with a view to fostering social co-operation. A society in permanent political conversation requires that the beliefs put forward be the subject of debate and communal justification. If this is the case, love, in Rorty's own definition, cannot be included in this dimension.

Following Paul Tillich, particularly in his distinction between beliefs, on the one hand, and faith and love, on the other, Rorty realises that humans do not exhaust their desires in the search for common well-being. They also aspire to happiness and the search for meaning in their personal lives. This is where faith and love fulfil their purpose by offering inspiration and hope in something greater, something worth living and dying for. Love is paradigmatic here. People tend to say that they would not be able to live if it were not for the love they have for their loved ones. However, sometimes it is difficult to express this feeling in a belief, and sometimes it is impossible to explain. Think of a mother's love for her sociopathic son. She will certainly maintain her love for her son, even if this feeling is not understandable or acceptable to others. Love, Rorty warns, contrary to beliefs, does not aspire to produce habits of action; rather, it expresses the impact caused by the presence or absence of certain people in one's life. It is therefore a private matter that is irrelevant to public life and from which one is exempt from the intellectual responsibility of justification. There is something irrational about love and it must therefore be privatised.²²

Rorty criticises the way in which a certain American left does not see or understand the progress that has already been made and, as a result, tends to reject the utopian dream of America. Cf. R. Rorty, *Achieving our country. Leftist thought in twentieth-century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²² Cf. Rorty, *Philosophy and social hope*, 158.

This distinction allows Rorty, in line with secularism, to defend the privatisation of faith, love and the religious impulse. Everyone can find the meaning of their life freely, whether in the search for divine redemptive truth, in literature, in nature, etc., without interference from others, particularly society and the state. There are matters that concern oneself (e.g. questions of love or personal taste), and matters on which all citizens are called to have a say (e.g. the choice of political representatives and social action measures). Therefore, since love involves a dimension of irrationality and non justification, not only is it not subject to the scrutiny of others, but its presence in the public arena can be dangerous.²³

However, despite his signaling of the irrationality of love, Rorty does not refrain from making it present in the public space, either through the agents of love or through the desire for love to be the only law. You may wonder what leads Rorty to simultaneously defend the idea that love should be private, because it does not require justification, and public, because it allows us to welcome diversity and strangers. I think the answer is simple and introduces a limitation and a contradiction in Rorty's thinking. Like Botton, Rorty realises that love, specifically Christian charity or *agape*-love (1 Cor 13), is a powerful force for building communities, groups of individuals capable of accepting each other as they are and collaborating together on the same goals (freedom, peace, well-being, solidarity, etc.). That is why it introduces love into the public space. It does so because it needs something that is the 'social glue', capable of uniting the disparate *selves* that exist in Western societies, in the bazaar made up of individuals with diverse and immeasurable religious beliefs, values and cultures.

In the absence of God, or of a human essence, Rorty has to propose a new *telos*, albeit in anti-essentialist molds, because he needs, for all human beings and regardless of their differences, a purpose around which they can unite and work. Rorty identifies this *telos* with America, the symbol of democracy and the great experiment that aspires to give the greatest possible happiness to the greatest number of individuals. In order for the project to develop, it is necessary to love America, to aspire to the realisation of the redemptive dream that it entails. To this end, he proposes a civic religion – romantic polytheism – the "[...] faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and

On the problems and dangers of the presence of love in politics, cf. M. Shuster, «Rorty and (the politics of) love», *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 40, n°. 1 (2019): 65-78.

hope for, the human community. I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and love 'romance'."²⁴

The literary dimension, the novel, from which Rorty intends to introduce love into the public space, highlights the potential and limitations of his thinking. Rorty correctly understands the importance of a sentimental education, linked to the human emotional capacity to enter into practical relationships of trust, loyalty, compassion and love with others. More than appeals to reason or metaphysics, it is the repeated emotional involvement that will bring the members of a society into relationship with the stranger and the oppressed, increasing the capacity to see in them someone similar, to be protected and integrated into the *we*. For Rorty, the novel gives a voice to the victim and provides vocabularies that stimulate action by raising awareness of the needs of an ever-wider variety of people. The novel amplifies tolerance and compassion, helping to broaden the loyalties of the *we*, including those who were strangers and outsiders to society, the *they*.

I see three difficulties in the Rortyan approach. His literary character adequately comprehends the importance of appealing to an emotional connection with strangers and the oppressed. However, Rorty tends to valorise this affective connection exclusively and to devalue the intellectual dimension. In doing so, he shows, on the one hand, the insufficiency of the strictly intellectualist appeals of the Enlightenment thinkers, who believed that the appeal to reason was enough to recognise dignity in the other²⁵; but, on the other hand, he goes to the opposite extreme, considering affectivity a sufficient condition for the promotion of sensitivity and ethical action. The criticism previously attributed to Botton can also be invoked here. Reading a novel can arouse feelings of solidarity and compassion towards an oppressed or suffering character. However, it does not follow that the reader will translate this feeling into real action. When they put the book down, they can ignore the suffering, even if a situation similar to the one in the novel occurs on their doorstep. Literary sensitivity does not necessarily lead to moral sensitivity.

Secondly, Rorty's strictly naturalised thinking is based on the permanent tension between *us* and *them*, since the identity of some derives from its opposition to that of others. *We* are *us*, because *we* are not *them*. In this sense, any aspiration to universal solidarity is impossible, since this scheme

²⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and social hope*, 160.

²⁵ Cf. R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 167-185.

presupposes, structurally and *a priori*, the condemnation of some human beings – no matter how small – to ostracisation and devaluation. For there to be an *us*, there will always have to be *them*, those who in *our* eyes will always be untouchable, the *quasi* and/or pseudo-humans. It's understandable, then, that Rorty sees fraternity as an impossible ideal.

The Christian notion of fraternity aims to break with this sacrificial logic. If human contingency generates nothing but contingency, limits and sacrifice, Christian fraternity, as a visible expression of *agape*-love, transforms limits into possibility and contingency into transcendence. It is enough to see that Christ's death did not remain a hollow and horrible sacrifice. This was not a submission to the human contingency of Jesus Christ, but a voluntary gift of life, capable of generating new life (Jn 10:18). By concretising *agape*, human existence ceased to be subject to the mark of mortality and entered into the absolute of eternity, turning life into a relational spiral of *agape*-love.

Note that it was not through solidarity that Christ conquered death and redeemed humanity. Rather, charity – *agape*-love – engendered the salvation capable of transfiguring and enlarging the community. This is why charity has the power, identified by Rorty and Botton, to lead the rich and powerful to recognise the dignity and support of the most disadvantaged and strangers, people who at first glance would not be part of their community (cf. Philem 1:15-17), to spend their resources in order to improve the social situation of other human beings.

However, Rorty greatly limits the power that love can exert over the powerful, considering that the feasibility of a 'global co-operative community', promoting a 'culture of human rights', is deeply dependent on the resources and intentions of societies. Resources are scarce, so the redistribution of wealth by rich countries will mean a reduction in the quality of life of the people who live there. Democratic institutions, health and education systems, technologies, etc. are expensive and require huge investments. This is why intentions to support underdeveloped countries can be nothing more than hypocrisy and self-delusion, either because there is no genuine desire to sacrifice the standard of living that has been achieved, or because we fall for the fantasy that we can help more than is economically feasible. Even within rich countries, there are asymmetries that need to be addressed, with a growing gap between the favoured and the disadvantaged.

Rorty claims not to have a solution to these difficulties, but one of his proposals is particularly strange because it assumes the clause that any egalitarian project requires enough money to ensure that after redistribution "[...] the rich will still be able to recognize themselves" that is, as rich and privileged. If this happens, they could find themselves part of the same moral community as the poor. Without this clause, he believes they would have no reason to give up part of their income. If you want to give the poor hope that their children will have a better future, then, according to Rorty, you have to maintain the *status quo*. Rorty's love, then, is profoundly limited and lacks the transformative power of Christian charity, because it reinforces the rigidity of the social structure by keeping everyone in the role and social identity they had before redistribution.²⁷

Is there room for real change in Rorty's proposal, you might ask? The answer has to be negative. The rich will be more concerned with calculating the risks inherent in an excessive economic imbalance to determine whether it will jeopardise their way of life in the future (e.g. by popular uprisings or economic crises), than with loving feelings towards the underprivileged. These feelings seem to have little or no weight in the construction of social cohesion and the formulation of moral behaviour. Rather than a community, the Rortyan bazaar establishes a society of powers, in which the games of interests and forces have greater weight. Solidarity may, in this case, be nothing more than a mask for the will to power.

Conclusion

As Susana Vilas Boas warns, "if, in the Christian religious sphere, charity means giving selflessly and solely for the good of others, today it has been replaced by solidarity as an institutionalised practice." Charity seems to be more concerned with appeasing the conscience or fulfilling moral or civic obligations, rather than claiming to fulfil the common good of proximity and integration of the most fragile and needy. Rorty and Botton do not seem to understand this distinction, turning charity into a markedly mechanised or literary practice.

²⁶ R. Rorty, «Who are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage», *Diogenes*, vol. 44, n°. 173 (1996): 15.

²⁷ It should be noted that Rorty has a very strong link between economics and morality, as he believes that if Western societies are morally better (guaranteeing more freedom and happiness), this is because they are also economically richer.

²⁸ S. Vilas Boas, «¿Regalos para Navidad o la Navidad como regalo? Desafíos pastorales para el mundo contemporáneo», *Sal Terrae*, nº. 111 (2023): 1015.

In the case of Botton, the secularisation of *agape* runs the risk of turning this way of loving into a cultural curiosity, a novelty without content or impact on the world. The decontextualisation of *agape*, the splitting of the commandment into two, takes away its strength and foundation from the divine source that justifies and manifests the fraternity expressed in its second part. Without the love of God, love of neighbour is deprived of the *gravitas* and reasons, both intellectual and affective, for the commandment to be fulfilled.

For Rorty, only contingency and not absoluteness, can emerge from contingency. In fact, one of Rorty's aims is precisely to persuade his readers to abandon the notion of the absolute and happily embrace full and pure contingency. The consequence of this process is a diffuse notion of love that has neither the content nor the strength needed to build a universal community in which all strangers can be included, nor to create a more cohesive community through the equitable distribution of goods (Acts 2:45).

In both authors, we must recognise the effort and merit of trying to appropriate the Christian ideal of love. The problem lies in the fact that the secularisation of the commandment inevitably limits its applicability by restricting it fundamentally to human will and interests. Without the idea of being a child of God – and therefore a brother to others – love of neighbour may not even be understandable to those who hear this part of the commandment. Imagine what a Roman would have said in Jesus' time when he first heard that he was the brother of a barbarian or a slave. The power of the Christian message, particularly in the commandment of love, lies in the vital symbiosis of love of God and love of neighbour. The former gives meaning to love between humans, and this fraternal love is an expression of the loving relationship with God.

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