

The New Testament- Book of Love? (Reexamination of a Living Myth)



Ljupka Hristova-Bashevska,
Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion
ljupka.bashevska@gmail.com

To my daughter, Ilina

... The serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books.

Christopher Hitchens

Among the members of Western culture, love, forgiveness, mercy and other ethical categories of the holy book of Christianity still raise warm emotions and great reverence even among those who, more or less, have given up on faith. Therefore, it is clear in advance that a critical approach towards this segment of Christian tradition will face indignation, even open resistance. The resistance is especially tough towards every critical reexamination of this topic in the cultural-political area of those predominantly Christian Balkan countries, which are obsessed

with nationalism. In their political narrative, the “spirituality” of their respective peoples, represented as autochthonous, ancient and long-lasting connection between the cultural and the religious, is the key for ethnic-nationalistic identification. Yet, can the *New Testament* rightly be called “Unsurpassable universal ethical code”, “Book of love”, “Good book”, as it is still being called in numerous texts of Western culture of various domains, including such that aim to be scientific?

The reexamination of the Christian ethical legacy, the free examination of its principles and the indication of its mythically based virtues, behind which ethically disputable points are concealed, is necessary, not only to hinder the well-known historical and present-day tendency of various religious and worldly authorities to misuse its “holiness” and “inviolability” to their own gain, but, above all, in the name of dignity in ethics, understood as a paradigm of the humane.

These are results of a modest attempt in this direction.

First. *The New Testament is not a Book of love, but a Book of faith. What the Testament explicitly stipulates as the highest value – love, is not a category with authentic value and sense, it is a constituent part of the faith, its emotional-volitional component.*

Every careful reader of the New Testament love story could ask themselves the question: how is it that in a holy book, a book which has the meaning of its existence in *faith*, another category – love – has surpassed faith in importance? The explanation hides in a statement given by Paul the Apostle. Namely, wanting to point out that the external testimonies of faith are no longer current, which are very important to the religious traditionalists and opponents to the new Christian movement – the Pharisees, he says: “For as regards Christ Jesus neither circumcision is of any value nor is uncircumcision, but faith operating through love” (Ga 5:6).

We can see the answer to the question asked when we look at this statement through the lens of contemporary theory of religion. According to that theory, in the structure of the category of faith as subjective side of religious life, there are two components. One component is contemplative, meditative, and contains the basic image of the “supernatural”, “otherworldly” being. The same apostle conveyed the sense of that component when, in another place, he picturesquely stated that “Faith is the assured expectation of things hoped for the evident

demonstration of realities though not beheld” (Heb 11:1). The second component of faith is emotional-volitional, that is, it is composed of the personal religious feelings towards the “otherworldly being”. In statement from the New Testament about “faith that acts through love”, we recognize precisely this, *emotional-volitional component*, which the propagator of the new teaching marks as crucial for the faith in Christ, emphasizing especially its *volitional segment*. Namely, this is a faith that “acts”, that carries out deeds; for, “Indeed, as the body without spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:26).

As is generally known, the *New Testament* praises the acts of love. But it is now clear that here they have no sense and value by themselves, but draw them from their function within faith! The corner stone of the *New Testament*, as well as any other holy book, is faith, and the fact that here it “acts through love” is a specific feature of the Christian religion.

Second. *The New Testament has not undertaken a “love revolution”. The pores of the New Testament idea of love as a connection between human and God are already somewhat opened thanks to the Old Testament.*

It is a general opinion that God is understood in completely different ways in the two parts of the *Bible*. He is a powerful being who inspires fundamental fear among humans, and an epitome of love in the *New Testament*. However, some passages from the *Old Testament* undermine the validity of this opinion. This is especially the case with some lyrical praying verses, in which the blessed feeling of surrendering in the hands of God is occasionally taken to erotic exaltation: “Jehovah is my shepherd. I shall lack nothing. In grassy pastures he makes me lie down. By well-watered resting-place he conducts me” (Ps 23: 1-2); “I shall have affection for you, o Jehovah, my strength/...I shall take refuge in him” (Ps 18 1-2) ; “O Jehovah, our Lord, how majestic your name is in all the earth “ (Ps 8:9).

It is of special significance that the *Old Testament* contains that little book called *The Song of Songs*, which is rightfully called the greatest hymn to love of all times. This old Hebrew folk song – copious literary expression of the lyrical feelings and the erotic yearning – in the time of canonization of Christianity received its status of Biblical corpus, thanks to the fact that even earlier the Judean rabbis noticed – and canonized – that it is adequate to present the love

between God and the people of Israel. In fact, the God from the *Old Testament* is also a God who loves, regardless of the fact that his love is exclusive, directed only toward the Judean people – the people “chosen”, “holy” (“Owing to the fact that you have been precious in my eyes... I myself have loved you. / And I shall give men...and national groups in place of your soul” (Isa 43:4). Christianity will be able to favor love as an important mark of its study thanks to the fact that the pre-Christian tradition has already prepared the field for it. In fact, the *Old Testament* also stimulates universalization of the Christian God by envisaging unity of all peoples under the dome of God’s love in messiah’s perspective: “And it must occur in the final part of the days .../many nations will certainly go and say: ‘Come, you people, and let us go up to the mountain of Jehovah... and we will walk in his paths...for out of Zion law will go forth, and the word of Jehovah out of Jerusalem” (Mic 4:1-2).

Third. *The exposing and universalization of the category God’s love by young Christianity, among other things, has a fully “worldly” motivation: the endeavor for expansion, immanent to every new ideological and religious movement.*

The primary target group of the young Christian movement is the Judeans, from whose environment it originates. However, for centuries they have been under the same monotheistic tradition – of the *Old Testament* – on whose basis the new teaching continues. What is it, then, which will attract the first converts? It may be an urge to understand and experience in some *other way* their Only God from the *New Testament*, the creator of the world who commands, punishes and awards. The most fruitful step in this direction would be the rhetoric of the new movement, to draw from the endless range of God’s attributes discussed in the old Judean manuscripts something that is slightly concealed there, yet extremely attractive – love! The temperate, joyful, gospel news will achieve precisely that. It announces: thanks to the immeasurable love of God towards man, the Savior is already among us: “For God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son, in order that everyone exercising faith in him might not be destroyed but have everlasting life” (Joh 3:16).

However, all this is taking place in a large state – the Roman Empire. In order to cross the borders of a small religious group seceded from the established Judean religion, and to enter the

ethnically diverse Roman world, the early Christian religious thought must make not only numerous compromises with a variety of ideas of the philosophical-mystical currents and folk beliefs that simply “simmer” in the Hellenistic environment at the time, but above all must throw away their ethnic-local mark, that is, to throw away the idea of a God for whom “There is neither Jew nor Greek...”(Ga 3:28). Now “But in every nation the man that fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him” (Ac 10:35).

The strategic function of the *New Testament* category of love can also be seen in the tone that the propagators of the new Christian movement use when they talk of love. They lack the lyricism that is so captivating in the prayer verses in the Old Testament, and the volitional moment is emphasized at the expense of the profound internal feelings: Paul the Apostle fiercely says: “for both if we live, we live to Jehovah, and if we die, we die to Jehovah...”(Ro 14:8)!

Fourth. *The ethical value of God’s love toward man, the way it is postulated in the New Testament, is completely annulled, above all, because of its fierceness and calculation.*

As the most convincing evidence for God’s love toward man, the *Testament* offers the information that He gives his only begotten Son “... in order that everyone exercising faith in him might not be destroyed but have everlasting life” (Joh 3:16).

But can we talk about love if that love is conditioned? In fact, this question is not to be raised at all, the position in every epoch and every cultural space has always been unyielding: love is unconditional, it does not secure itself with any ties from the other side, one loves truly “for nothing” in return. That is the reason for the timeless attraction of the legends of the love between Orpheus and Eurydice, Tristan and Iseult, Romeo and Juliet... This also refers to the special kind of love – friendship, which is its purest form, unrelated even to the desires of the corporeal. The legends of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Jonathan and David, Achilles and Patroclus, Ruth and Naomi... express the fascination that has been inspired since ancient times by the exceptional closeness of one human with another, unrelated with any pre-calculated convenience, the acceptance of the Other as the self’s second I.

That is not how the Biblical God loves! His love gift – eternal life – is given under the condition that leads towards benefit for the one who gives (it is obligatory to believe in Him!),

that is, that gift is calculated as an investment in His vanity and love of glory. God shall thereby undertake prompt measures to secure the profitability of his investment. Namely, he announces: “he that does not believe will be condemned” (Mr 16:16). What awaits those who are condemned for the unreturned love? They shall face such hideous things that they “...will seek death but will by no means find it, and they will desire to die but death keeps fleeing from them” (Re 9:6)!

Did anyone mention the word God’s love?

Fifth. *The New Testament is not an original, exclusive ethical code. The basic moral principles of the Old Testament are built into it, and, through them, numerous “wise sayings”, shaped through the centuries-long experience of the Israeli tribes and surrounding nations.*

The summons for love between human and human in the *New Testament* are essentially religious-ethical principles, as any more developed religious system offers. It is known that each such system determines what is, and who is, God, and what the human is in relation to God, and what human behavior he finds acceptable, and which not. Such principles take wider space in the *Old Testament*, but the more careful reader will notice that some of them do not have religious aura at all. This refers to incorporated sayings of the Israeli tribes with moral points, integral part of their spoken philosophy, and as such they testify to the striving of people to determine the acceptable and unacceptable in the behavior of the community even before it is presented to them through “God’s word”. All this together found its place in the *New Testament*, often with almost identical formulations: “...you must love your fellow as yourself – Old Testament (Le 19:18) // “you must love your neighbor as yourself” – New Testament (Mt 22:39); “you must not take vengeance ...” – Old Testament (Ps 19:18) // “Do not avenge yourselves...” – New Testament (Ro 12:19); “...hate what is bad – Old testament (Ps 97:10) // “Do not let yourself be conquered by the evil, but keep conquering the evil with the good” – New Testament (Ro 12:21)... In fact, the *New Testament* speakers themselves overturn the myth of exclusivity of the *New Testament* ethical principles, admitting that in their ethics they rely strongly on the ethics of the *New Testament*: “All things, therefore, that you want men to do to you also must likewise do to them; this, in fact, is what the Law and the Prophets mean”(Mt 7:12).

Sixth. *In the New Testament ethics, the religious has reduced the ethical to an incapacitated addition: “You must love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39) – a commandment second in importance.*

The *New Testament* promotes love, as a primary principle on the human-human relation, throwing it at the same time under God’s feet! Namely, the renowned “you must love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39) is decidedly determined as a commandment second in importance. Right before that, it is stated: “...You must love Jehovah your God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and with your whole mind./ This is the greatest and first commandment” (Mt 22:37-38). However, if this is “*the greatest and first commandment*”, if love toward God requires “*all*” my heart, “*all*” my soul, “*all*” my mind, that means that I should direct all of my love and all of my aspiration toward God, *not toward the other person!* My heart should reject the neighbor, the close one – in fact, the closest one! – so that the love towards them does not put into question my absolute relation to God!

Contrary to the tender New Testament rhetoric of love in the human-human relation, the uncompromising Old Testament motto still holds: “God above everything”. In fact, Jesus demands this determinedly: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own soul, he cannot be my disciple” (Lu 14:26).

Seventh. *Promotion of love only for the likeminded: The slogan “Brothers in faith, observe yourselves in the love of God!”*

In the discussions that, in one way or another, refer to the concept of Christian love in the human-human relations, it is usually defined as being close to the humanitarianism or to solidarity. However, this opinion requires serious correction.

Namely, these notions are based on the idea of equality of people and the imperative for their community, which in its highest degree entails that we aid *everyone (any human being)* as much as we can, either as individuals (who are addressed with the appeal for the

humanitarianism), or as a community (which is addressed with the appeal of solidarity). In any case, these notions necessarily exclude selectiveness, which is a strong mark or *New Testament* love. How can that be when, according to general belief, the *New Testament* introduces the principle of absolute equality of all people? Aren't now all (not only the Judeans) God's children? The thing is that this conviction is wrong. The *New Testament* does not refer to equality of all people as God's children, but to equality of the opportunities to be accepted as a child of God regardless of ethnical background. But it has its price: To accept God's authority, to enter the circle of the pious. Outside that circle, the individual is *an outcast both from God and from his/her close ones*.

For example, am I close to the pious, when I do not belong among those who "believe that he is and that he becomes the rewarder of those earnestly seeking him" (Heb 11:6)? According to the *Script*, it is a sin of the highest rank and is punished by God (Mr 16:16). Therefore, a pious person cannot see in me his or her close one, since the infidel – the greatest enemy of God – must be his greatest enemy as well! Someone may mention here the well-known statement "... Continue to love your enemies ... / that you may prove yourselves sons of your Father who is in the heavens, since he makes his sun rise upon wicked people and good and makes it rain upon righteous people and unrighteous" (Mt 5:44-45). However, as Feuerbach had noted, this is an old religious layer, connected to the understanding of the first God as a being separated from nature and, in any way, it is contradictory to all else that is stated of the relation pious-unbeliever. Thus, Judas the Apostle points to his brothers in faith that those "others" are corporeal people who do not have the spirit of God, so that when they work on their absolution they should take care of themselves with strict hygienic measures, "... while you hate even the inner garment that has been stained by the flesh" (Jude 1:19-23), Peter the Apostle compares them to "...unreasoning animals born naturally to be caught and destroyed ..." (2Pe 2:12), while in the vision of John the Apostle of the events on Judgment Day, the unbelievers, together with the sinners, wizards, murderers and the rest of the world's lowest kind of people, expect, terrified, the moment when they will be thrown "...in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur" (Re 21:8), or pressed "... into the great winepress of the anger of God/... and blood came out of the winepress as high up as the bridles of the horses..." (Re 14:19-20)!

It is strange that they will not be mourned by anyone! On the contrary, their suffering will be “comfort” for the “righteous”, their triumph of the will (2Th 1:7). Gathered in the kingdom of the Their Father, happily with veneration “they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Re 22:4).

A concept of love which, in its way, means someone’s rejection, contempt, selfishness, arrogance and pleasure in observing someone else’s destruction? No, no, thank you!

Eighth. *The negative effects of some New Testament ethical virtues in the life of the “good Christian”: The principle of reconciliation with evil.*

Not defying evil, especially brought to a degree of cult toward suffering (“For if someone, because of conscience toward God bears up under grievous things and suffers unjustly, this is an agreeable thing” – 1Pe 2:19), is not only psychologically unacceptable, but also ethically counterproductive. By not defying evil, I lead the hand of the criminal equipped with a knife toward my own throat, and I lift an evident lack of value to the rank of the acceptable, even desirable. There are innumerable possibilities that the “good Christian” men, women and children would feel the lethal influence of this “ethical” principle on all levels of life: the citizen would accept ruthless governing, the worker – inhuman exploitation, the woman – physical and psychological violence at home. What about the child? The child, who has not developed critical thinking or ability to draw conclusions, raised in the spirit of not defying and indisputable love, according to some contemporary research, not only in case of abuse, but even in case of sexual abuse, creates a reversed image of him/herself, in which from a real victim is turned into a sinful creature: “I am a bad child!”

Ninth. *A total debacle of an unrequited principle: Love toward the enemy*

The ethical values are ideals, their sense is in people striving toward them. Yet, this question is legitimate: in what degree is an ethical message achieved/achievable?

In light of that question, the principle of love toward the enemy (Mt 5:44-45) experiences complete debacle: There are no indications that it will ever anywhere regulate people’s behavior

and mutual relations in the Christian world. However, it is crucial that it was already devaluated in its very beginning as an *ideal*. Namely, the gospels ascribe this principle to Jesus, but on the other hand, whether they like it or not, they reveal that He – the perfect example of Christian moral – did not observe that principle!

Namely, according to the gospel testimonies, Jesus offers his embrace to all those unfortunate ones that he meets in his short life on Earth – deaf and blind, crippled and leprous, mentally disturbed and afflicted by grief after the death of a loved one, but there is no trace anywhere of his love for those who think differently. On the contrary, he cuts off his relation with them uncompromisingly: “He that is not on my side is against me, and he that does not gather with me scatters” (Lu 11:23). He legalizes that gap “between ideas” even in the homes of people: “Do you imagine I came to give peace on the earth? No, indeed I tell you, but rather division./ ... They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against (her) mother, mother-in-law against (her) daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against (her) mother-in-law“ (Lu 12:51-53); he fiercely offends and strongly threatens his religious and political enemies – scribes and Pharisees: “Serpents, offspring of vipers, how are you to flee from the judgment of Gehen`na? (Mt 23:33); with a whip that he knits from cords (which means, with sufficient time to subdue his impulsiveness), he attacks physically the small traders that he encounters in the temple of His Father and breaks their inventory (Joh 2:14); and he literally says he *hates* the members of the competitive religious sect Nicolaitans (Re 2:6)!

Neither do the Church Fathers, those holy people summoned to keep, interpret and spread the leading Christian values, have love or mercy towards those with different opinions. There is no work in their legacy that does not contain, either in the title or the subtitle the word “against”: Origen wrote the apologetic work *Against Celsus*, Eusebius of Caesarea – two books with a common title *Against Marcellus* and another enormous work in 25 books against the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry, Epiphanius of Salamis – *Panarion* or *Against Heresies*...

What can we say about the relation of the church toward its enemies? The most drastic example is the one of the Inquisitions as a specialized institution of the Catholic Church for pursuing heretics. At one moment, it turned into a self-sufficient ruling system, which implemented the most extreme shape of ideological violence in history: in the name of God’s

truth – the Revelation, it condemned those who were in search for the truth of the cosmos, like Giordano Bruno, and sent them to burn at the stake with the famed statement: “Act moderately, without bloodshed!”; it stretched the notions of infidel and heretic so much that they encompassed all those who stood in the way of its interests, and it exiled the numerous known and unknown critics of God’s representatives on Earth, even in the cases when their counter-view is based on loyalty to God and the church, the way they are presented in the gospels. Sometimes, the aim is not to destroy a real ideological contestant: flagellantism, exorcism and witch hunt are means to spread fear, pain and death, just as prevention.

The principle of general love does not break down only in past periods of church or general history. Even in the new age, the church often tries to make up its lost position of autonomous rule based on fear in such a way that it offers support to this or that “worldly” power, even in dark campaigns against humanity.

How many of us receive with certain restraint Paul the Apostle’s words, when, in some occasion when love is celebrated, his famous speech about love is read – “long-suffering and kind”, which “does not become provoked “(1Co 13:4-5)? Or we accept those words with ungrounded confidence because they are stated from the right place, from the “Fortress of Truth” itself, and our throats contract as we are touched by them?

Tenth: *The rare pearl of the New Testament ethics: “Do not let yourself be conquered by the evil, but keep conquering the evil with the good.”*

The above-quoted statement (Ro 12:21) is one of the few New Testament statements connected to love, if not the only, for which it can freely be stated that it is a pure ethical principle. In order to access the good, the *Scripture* this time does not frighten us with God’s punishment nor attracts us with God’s reward, the good is offered as *a value in itself*. At the same time, our attention is rightly turned to the realization that this value means that a person must struggle with him/herself to obtain it.

The old question is opened here: To what degree, without the idea of a god, are people ready to strive for the good? If we accept ethics as a paradigm of the humane, do we have the capacity to rise to the highest point at the moral vertical, and love the other as we love our self?

The findings of modern psychology, starting from Freud, Jung and Adler, offer a very restrained optimism: man by his nature *owns* dark, “underground” impulses that incite him to be selfish and to carry out various forms of aggression toward the others, but as a social being carries *predispositions* for empathy and offering help. In Bauman’s *Liquid Love*, we encounter a call to constantly tempt those predispositions, regardless of all internal and external limits: “You can’t make this world such that the dreams of dignity of human beings as they would ideally want to be can be achieved” – he says. – “But you must try! *And you will try!*” (118)

This attempt for critical reexamination of the myth of Christian love is a result of one such internal call.

References

Hitchens, Christopher (2009) *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve,

New World Translation of the HOLY SCRIPTURES Publishers. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, INC. International Bible Students Association, Brooklyn, New York, U.S.A. The quotes from the Bible are taken from this edition.

Бауман, Зигмунд (2013) *Флуидна љубов*. Скопје: Слово.