

Paper Title: The Phenomenon of “Love”: The Significance of its Biblical Account and its Sociobiological Reconstruction

Author: Meisinger, Dr. Hubert

Institutional Affiliation: Protestant Campus Minister, Darmstadt University of Technology; Vice-President of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology (ESSSAT); and Member of the LSI-Group “Science – Human Being – Religion”, Protestant Academy Arnoldshain, Germany

This paper was prepared for “Science and Religion: Global Perspectives”, June 4-8, 2005, in Philadelphia, USA, a program of the Metanexus Institute (www.metanexus.net)

Abstract:

Science has a formative impact in our day. This seems to be true especially with respect to a genetically reductionistic view on human beings where the DNA seems to have as much dignity as the person had in former times. A formative power can be appointed especially towards a special stream of biological behavioral research which is well known as sociobiology.

This paper argues that there are three basic motives in sociobiological research on altruism which are also characteristic for the biblical account of love: (1) *An Awareness of Expanding Inclusiveness* which pertains to the recipient of love or altruistic behavior and the extension of this circle of recipients beyond the most immediate neighbour, (2) an *Awareness of Excessive Demand* that deals with the question of the capability of human beings to meet what seems to be an excessive demand for love or altruism, and (3) a *Threshold Awareness* which concerns the question of whether love or altruism constitutes a step on the way to a “new human being” and a “new world”.

All three motives appear in characteristic ways in both research on altruism in sociobiology and investigations on the love command in the bible.

The biblical account: In Mark, love is intimately related to the coming kingdom of God which has begun in Jesus and which influences human beings that belong to the Christian community (3). Whether human beings are really able to love this way is how Matthew approaches this notion (2). He shows that forgiveness and excessive demand closely belong to each other. Luke stresses the idea that love without any former requirement necessarily has to be addressed to everyone, even to enemies (1).

With respect to sociobiology the following will be discussed: The fundamental problem of sociobiological altruism research is the extension of altruistic behaviour to genetically unrelated fellow human beings. The ability to explain altruistic behaviour toward genetically unrelated individuals is a kind of criterion for altruism models (1). In sociobiological altruism research the models that exist (theory of group-selection, theory of kin-selection, reciprocal altruism) show that, when human beings are viewed exclusively in biological terms, they are overtaxed by the demand to act altruistically beyond the circle of immediate kin (2) A pure biological consideration of human beings is incomplete, only by crossing the border between biological and cultural evolution can altruistic behaviour toward non-kin individuals be explained (3).

It will be argued that those basic motives are a kind of proximate expressions of basic, culturally formative, ultimate powers – at least in our Western-Christian tradition and world. This could also lead to a new attitude of science towards an evolutionary theory of religion in taking its expressions and outcomes even more seriously than it has done so far.

Biography:

Hubert Meisinger, born 1966, studied theology at the Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg and the Zygon Center for Religion and Science, Chicago. In 1989 he had been awarded the Kleines Lutherstipendium. For his thesis on “Love Command and Research on Altruism: An Exegetical Approach towards the Dialogue between Theology and Science” he had been awarded the 1996 ESSSAT Prize for Studies in Science and Theology. He works as campus minister and part time lecturer for science and religion at Darmstadt University of Technology. He received two awards in the Science and Religion Course Programme of CTNS, Berkeley (1999 and 2002). He is ESSSAT Vice-President for Publications, member of the International Society for Science and Religion (ISSR), and a participant at the John Templeton Oxford Seminars on Science and Christianity 2003-2005. He has lectured in the field of science and religion and has published articles and books on that theme, e.g. together with Uwe Gerber “Das Gen als Maß aller Menschen? Menschenbilder im Zeitalter der Gene” (Genes as Measure of Humankind? Perspectives on Human Beings in the Era of Genes), 2004. He is trained as organist and conductor of choirs. He is married to Dorothea and they have three children.

Paper:

I. Introduction

The presentation of the sequences of the Human Genome by Craig Venter in June 2000 and later by the Human Genome Project was an important milestone within a development in which scientific knowledge on a genetic level of human beings and the world they belong to is more and more increasing. As Ted Peters convincingly shows, the DNA seems to have gained a kind of dignity that finds its expression for example in the widely known notion of “playing God”¹. Theologically that can be criticized, and Peters shows that the concept of dignity is a far more relational and eschatological one that should not and cannot be reduced to the genetic level. Nevertheless, the “genes” are all around: Christian Schwarke² for example discusses the emotional character of conflicts about gene-technology. By analysing pictures and metaphors that are characteristic for gene-technology in science and news agencies he reveals the deep cultural and religious levels of that controversy that touches basic beliefs of western, occidental views of human beings and the world. The “culture of genes”³ eliminates borders in our heads. Scientists even claim that genes have the power to explain rather everything, including our behaviour.

A culturally formative power can be appointed especially towards a special stream of behavioral research which is well known as Sociobiology. Axel Heinrich for example

¹ Peters, Dignity.

² Schwarke, Kultur.

³ Schwarke, Kultur, 16.

argues for this culturally formative power of in general naturalistic views and more specific sociobiological ones about human beings. He does so by investigating weekly newspapers in Germany that are mainly addressed to an educated audience⁴. He can convincingly show that this new naturalism converts our human culture basically: the notion of human person is substituted by a gene-reservoir or gene-carrier⁵, the free subject is “nothing but” cybernetics, mind is “nothing but” information with a special hardware, freedom is pure illusion. Even religion is nothing but “Darwin’s cathedral”⁶. What has been shaping our self-understanding for a long time is in danger of becoming atavistic or even lost.

In what follows I will talk about the dialogue between sociobiology and theology with respect to research in New Testament as exemplary for the dialogue between science and theology in general and for its formative power on culture. The main focus will lay upon the love command, culminating in the New Testament in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”. *The* act of altruistic behaviour in the bible which builds the center of every theology. Gerd Theissen would speak of a “motive of agape” or a “motive of representation” – two among other motives that are central for the structure and message of belief in the bible which are rooted at a deeper level than the words and sentences of the bible can express on a surface-level⁷. These motives – according to Theissen – are what shapes the basic structure of the bible and its preaching. They are like a mobile: sometimes one is more in the front whereas another one is more in the background, but this arrangement changes and is not a stable one – though fixed at the same spot, the basic reality, God.

In a time where genetics plays an important role in constructing our view of human beings, these biblical insights gain a natural discussion partner in sociobiology, which entered the “gene-train” early in the 1970ies. Sociobiology is concerned about the genetic basis of (human) behaviour, and Edward O. Wilson, the “founder” of sociobiology, speaks about the “culminating mystery of all biology”⁸ with respect to human altruism which is much higher than one would expect.

Without falling inopportunately into an apology of theology it is rather obvious that theology with its center in the notion of a man dying on the cross for the sake of all humankind cannot ignore a biological investigation that deals with altruistic behaviour from an evolutionary perspective⁹. Thus this paper will be about creating a constructive relationship between New Testament exegesis of the love command and sociobiological investigations on altruism. And it will show that this could also lead to a new attitude of science towards an evolutionary theory of religion in taking its expressions and outcomes even more seriously than it has done so far.

⁴ Heinrich, Soziobiologie.

⁵ Dawkins, Gen, talks about „vehicles“ („Überlebensmaschine“ in the German translation).

⁶ Wilson, Cathedral.

⁷ Theissen, Zeichensprache, 29-34.

⁸ Wilson, Sociobiology, 362. Compare Wilson, Consilience.

⁹ Compare Hefner, Factor, 191.

II. Theology and Sociobiology: Cross-References and the Thesis

Both New Testament exegesis on the love command and research on altruism in sociobiology are addressed towards a phenomenon that is well known as prosocial behaviour – but from different perspectives. Representatives of both Sociobiology and Theology make cross-references towards each other, sometimes consciously and intentionally like E. O. Wilson who talks about Samaritan Altruism¹⁰, sometimes unconsciously like New Testament scholar Ulrich Luz who asks whether the command to love your enemy must be seen as a utopistic vision which is ambivalent since it contradicts basic anthropological and psychological constraints of human beings¹¹.

To clarify this relationship I will argue that there are three basic motives in sociobiological research on altruism which are also characteristic for the biblical account of love¹²:

- (1) *An Awareness of Expanding Inclusiveness* which pertains to the recipient of love or altruistic behavior and the extension of this circle of recipients beyond the most immediate neighbour;
- (2) *an Awareness of Excessive Demand* that deals with the question of the capability of human beings to meet what seems to be an excessive demand for love or altruism;
- (3) *a Threshold Awareness* which concerns the question of whether love or altruism constitutes a step on the way to a “new human being” and a “new world”.

Since all three motives appear in characteristic ways in both research on altruism in sociobiology and investigations on the love command in the bible it will be argued that they are proximate expressions of basic, culturally formative, ultimate powers¹³ – at least in our Western-Christian tradition and world. Thus they point to the possibility of a dialogue between science and theology that is concerned about ultimate, deeper-leveled questions which find their expressions in different proximate phenomenons.

III. The Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels

An investigation of the editorial history of the synoptic gospels shows that Luke especially emphasizes the extension of the love command beyond all bounds. This becomes apparent in the passage of the Great Commandment of love to God and human beings which is immediately followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). In this passage a double invitation can be obtained – to identify with the injured man as well as with the Samaritan – which aims at an extended understanding of the addressee of love and even includes the enemy. This tendency toward extending the perspective already appeared in the programmatic passage Luke 4:16-30, in which two Gentiles, the widow of Sarepta and the Syrian Naaman, are presented in contrast to Jewish groups, and in which it is made clear that the mission

¹⁰ Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 120.

¹¹ Luz, *Matthäus*, 316.

¹² Basically developed in Meisinger, *Liebesgebot*, and Meisinger, *Love*.

¹³ See Chapter 4: Conclusions.

of Jesus is not limited to the Jews. Luke thus emphasizes the Awareness of Expanding Inclusiveness.

In Matthew, the love command (Matthew 22:34-40) receives a strongly demanding character in the context of the question of the law and higher righteousness (Matthew 5:17-20). Jewish and Gentile groups are presented as unable to fulfill the demand of love of neighbour and enemy (5:43-48), although in a final analysis one may suspect that Matthew uses the reproach against Gentiles and especially Jewish groups as a mirror for his own Christian community. Especially the reaction of the young man in Matthew 19:16-22 who went away sorrowful after he had heard what he should do to have eternal life shows that Matthew emphasizes an Awareness of Excessive Demand with respect to the love command¹⁴.

In Mark the love command as shown in the passage of the Great Command of love (Mark 12:28-34) is directly connected with statements of the imminent kingdom of God, which has changed and will change the world and human beings. Here, the love command has to be interpreted from the perspective of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, as a principle of conduct, expressed in the programmatic passage of Mark 1:14-15. The radical turn toward human beings by the eschatologically acting God must find a parallel in an equally radical turn of human beings toward each other and toward God. In his Gospel Mark thus stresses the Threshold Awareness.

To sum up with respect to the biblical view of human beings that touches at least our Western-Christian culture: In Mark, love is intimately related to the coming kingdom of God which has begun in Jesus and which influences human beings that belong to the Christian community. Whether human beings are really able to love this way is how Matthew approaches this notion. He shows that forgiveness and excessive demand closely belong to each other. Lk stresses the idea that love without any former requirement necessarily has to be addressed to everyone, even to enemies.

IV. Altruism and View of Humankind in Sociobiology

Altruism in sociobiology¹⁵ is a concept that excludes intent and thus what one normally would expect from altruistic behaviour on a phenomenological level. It is interested in finding ultimate explanations for proximate phenomena like prosocial behaviour.

The fundamental problem of sociobiological altruism research is the extension of altruistic behaviour to genetically unrelated fellow human beings. The ability to explain altruistic behaviour toward genetically unrelated individuals is a kind of criterion for altruism models. This phenomenon, especially obvious with regard to human beings, of an extension of altruistic behaviour beyond the most immediate neighbour and relative therefore plays an important role in the evaluation of various models that seek to explain altruistic behaviour. It is an expression of the Awareness of Expanding Inclusiveness.

¹⁴ In Matthew, this awareness of excessive demand has to be seen within the context of forgiveness in the Our Father (6:12) and the notion to forgive seventy times seven times (18:21s).

¹⁵ For a detailed introduction into sociobiology see Voland, Soziobiologie. The discussions about sociobiology are subject of e.g. Segerstråle, Defenders.

In sociobiological research on altruism several models exist that try to reduce altruistic conduct solely to a genetic level. But neither the theory of group-selection¹⁶ nor the theory of kin-selection nor reciprocal altruism can explain this behaviour on a genetic basis: Kin-selection is always an alternative to group-selection, but kin-selection is not addressed toward non-kin by definition. Reciprocal altruism takes altruism out of altruism and cannot prove a genetic basis. This shows that, when they are viewed exclusively in biological terms, organisms, particularly human beings, are overtaxed by the demand to act altruistically beyond the circle of immediate kin. Thus we can speak of an awareness of Excessive Demand that shines through that result of my investigation.

Only models that include cultural aspects (e.g. status, reason, religion) are able to meet the criterion of explaining altruistic behaviour toward non-kin individuals. A pure biological consideration of human beings is incomplete, only by crossing the border between biological and cultural evolution can altruistic behaviour toward non-kin individuals be explained¹⁷ – which is a reflection of what I called the Threshold Awareness: reaching out for a new world and a new understanding of homo sapiens who is both part of nature and of culture and whose task, purpose and destiny is to find an equilibrium of the needs of both nature and culture that is viable for her- and himself and for her/his “Mit-Welt”, the nature she/he is part of and at the same time the nature she/he is shaping culturally.

V. Conclusion: Towards an Evolutionary Theory of Religion

So far we have shown that there are three basic motives that can be found characteristically different, but also analogous both in investigations on the love command in the New Testament and in research on altruism in sociobiology. An interpretation of those observations will be the focus of this final chapter, and I will do that in two steps.

First, a relationship can be established in the following way: In the New Testament scriptures, prosocial behaviour beyond the most immediate circle of relations is called for in a *prescientific* way and with the aim of establishing it as a fact, whereas sociobiological altruism research seeks the *scientific* causality of this factually existing behaviour. Neither line of investigation stands in competition with each other, but each can complement the other from its own perspective as different aspects of one and the same kind of behaviour. The main difference is that the biblical way of dealing with the basic motives – Awareness of Expanding Inclusiveness, Awareness of Excessive Demand, Threshold Awareness – is related to God. To experience and interpret life in the light of those biblically interpreted motives leads to a richness of meaning to which our human life is echo and response. A secular approach will understand such basic motives (and the notion of God) as a human design which owes its existence solely to human creativity¹⁸.

¹⁶ Which is not a pure genetic theory of course. For a revival of that theory see Sober/Wilson, Others.

¹⁷ For a short summary of the different possibilities to relate nature and culture, compare Meisinger, Evolution.

¹⁸ Compare Theissen, Zeichensprache, 34.

The astonishing fact that there are indeed analogies in religious consciousness and secular scientific consciousness leads to a second thought: There may be a possibility to gain at least respective understanding – if not even consent – between religion on the one hand and science on the other which crosses the boarder of a naturalistic “nothing-but” reductionism. Since all three motives appear in characteristic ways in both research on altruism in sociobiology and investigations on the love command in the bible I would like to interpret their appearance in those two fields of research and investigation carefully and a bit hypothetically as a kind of proximate expression of basic, culturally formative, ultimate powers¹⁹ – at least in our Western-Christian tradition and world. On the one hand this asks for an evolutionary theory of religion as new heuristic that should be envisaged in the future²⁰. On the basis of such an evolutionary theory of religion on the other hand, a new attitude of science towards religion could arise in taking its expressions and outcomes even more seriously than it has done so far since religion can be shown to have evolutionary adaptational traits²¹ - without being reduced solely to them. Religion and religiosity cannot be ignored ideologically by science, but belong to the basic constitution of human beings - likewise, science cannot be ignored ideologically by religion since is is part of the biocultural make-up of humankind.

Literature

- Barkow, Jerome H./Leda Cosmides/John Tooby (eds.): *The Adapted Mind. Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Dawkins, Richard: *Das egoistische Gen*, Berlin-Heidelberg-New York: XY 1978 (amerik. 1976).
- Gnilka, Joachim: *Das Matthäusevangelium I. und II. Teil*, HThK, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder I: ³1993 II: 1988.
- Hefner, Philip.: *The Human Factor. Evolution, Culture, and Religion, Theology and the Sciences*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Heinrich, Axel: *Soziobiologie als kulturevolutionäres Programm, ratio fidei. Beiträge zur philosophischen Rechenschaft der Theologie Bd. 6*, Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2001.
- Luz, Ulrich: *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. 1. Teilband Mt 1-7, EKK I/1*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, ³1992.
- Meisinger, Hubert: *Liebesgebot und Altruismusforschung. Ein exegetischer Beitrag zum Dialog zwischen Theologie und Naturwissenschaft, Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus Bd. 33*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1996.
- Meisinger, Hubert: *Christian Love and Biological Altruism*, *Zygon. Journal of Religion and Science* 35 (2000) 745-782.

¹⁹ I relate to the ideas developed by Gerd Theissen, *Zeichensprache*, 29-34, and Theissen, *Überzeugungskraft*, 428-431. Theissen was stimulated to this approach by Ritschl, *Wahrheit* (compare Ritschl, *Logik*), who talks about “implicite axioms” as constructs of our human mind being conditional on nature (161).

²⁰ Compare Söling, *Gottesinstinkt*, who says that an evolutionary theory of religion should be added to the already existing theories of evolutionary epistemology, evolutionary ethics and evolutionary esthetics.

²¹ Söling, *Gottesinstinkt*.

- Meisinger, Hubert: Art. Kulturelle *Evolution*, in: Hans-Dieter Betz and others (eds.): Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (RGG⁴). Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft. Bd. 4. I-K, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001, Sp. 1836-1837.
- Peters, Ted: The Human Genome Project and the Future of *Dignity*, in: Uwe Gerber/Hubert Meisinger (eds.): Das Gen als Maß aller Menschen? Menschenbilder im Zeitalter der Gene, Darmstaedter Theologische Beitrage Vol. 10, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang 2004, 255-268.
- Ritschl, Dietrich: Zur *Logik* der Theologie. Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken, München: Kaiser, 1984.
- Ritschl, Dietrich: Die Erfahrung der *Wahrheit*. Die Steuerung des Denkens und Handelns durch implizite Axiome, in: Ritschl, Dietrich: Konzepte. Ökumene, Medizin, Ethik. Gesammelte Aufsätze, München: Kaiser, 1986, 147-166.
- Schwarke, Christoph: Die *Kultur* der Gene. Eine theologische Hermeneutik der Gentechnik, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln: Kohlhammer, 2000.
- Segerstråle, Ullica: *Defenders of the Truth*. The Sociobiology Debate, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Sober, Elliot/David S. Wilson: *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Selfish Behavior*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Söling, Caspar: *Der Gottesinstinkt*. Bausteine für eine Evolutionäre Religionstheorie, Gießen: Giessener Elektronische Bibliothek, 2002 (<http://bibd.uni-giessen.de/ghm/2002/uni/d020116.htm>).
- Theißen, Gerd: *Zeichensprache* des Glaubens. Chancen der Predigt heute, Gütersloh: Kaiser, Gütersloher Verl.-Haus, 1994.
- Voland, Eckart: Grundriss der *Soziobiologie*, Heidelberg-Berlin: Spektrum Akademischer Verlag, 2., vollständig überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage 2000.
- Wilson, David Sloan: Darwin's *Cathedral*. Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Wilson, Edward O.: *Sociobiology*. The New Synthesis, Cambridge (Mass.)-London: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Wilson, Edward O.: *Consilience*. The Unity of Knowledge, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.