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“A LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH”: RECONSTRUCTING A POLITICS OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

I.

*Constituent power [...] is a deployment of force that defends the historical progression of emancipation and liberation; it is, in short, an act of love.*¹

According to empire theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, one of the defining characteristics of the postmodern Empire is its lack of boundaries: the regulation of global production and exchange of “money, technology, people and goods” does not lie in the control of a particular, sovereign nation-state but constitutes a world-wide and transnational sovereignty.² This new Empire exercises total creative control over bioproduction because it claims for itself a monopoly on biopower, “in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself.”³ Not surprisingly, Empire’s total control over bioproduction takes the form of domination, oppression, and violence. The world-wide reach of Empire’s regulative control over life entails that there is no point or vantage outside of Empire from which to organize and implement resistance; rather, it is within Empire itself that a counter-Empire is constructed, and this through the invention of new forms of democracy by what Hardt and Negri call “the multitude, the living alternative [to Empire] that grows within Empire.”⁴

As the living alternative to and within Empire, the multitude constructs a counter-Empire the realization of which demands the deployment of a counter-power strong enough to challenge and subvert the power Empire wields over all life processes. For Hardt and Negri, this is the power to create “a better, more democratic world” as well as “a new race or, rather, a new humanity” free from the totalizing control of Empire.⁵ The conditions for the creation of this better

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004) 351.

² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Harvard University Press, 2000) xi, xiv.

³ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 24.

⁴ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, xiii.

⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 356.

world and new humanity are the very same biopower and bioproduction that Empire claims for itself; the power that sustains Empire is the very same power deployed by the multitude against Empire. The deployment of a counter-force and construction of a counter-Empire are, they claim, political acts—or, rather, *the* political act—of love. Love, however, is not a political act in its sentimental form as the private affection between individuals; to the contrary, love is a political act precisely when it finds expression in public and material projects of emancipation and liberation.⁶

Surprisingly, as an illustration of the political function and power of love, Hardt and Negri, despite their affiliations with the secular left, turn to Jewish and Christian conceptions of love. As they put it:

Christianity and Judaism, for example, both conceive love as a political act that constructs the multitude. Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous collaborations bring us joy. There is really nothing necessarily metaphysical about the Christian and Judaic love of God: both God's love of humanity and humanity's love of God are expressed and incarnated in the common material project of the multitude. We need to recover today this material and political sense of love, a love as strong as death.⁷

While their aim is not to articulate a theology, despite using the language of both Judaism and Christianity,⁸ there is nevertheless a political theology implicit in this passage. The God assumed here by Hardt and Negri is not the God traditionally espoused in Christian theology, the conception of whom is so deeply informed by metaphysics. This is not a transcendent, impassive, and self-possessed God who is set over and against the creation, whose interaction with the world takes the form of a unilateral and dominating omnipotence.⁹ Rather, this is a God immanent in the world and in the very struggles of the multitude, a God who loves the creation enough to risk involvement in it. This love between God and the multitude is reciprocal and collaborative. Although not explicit in the above passage, one could argue that the joy that results from the political collaborations within the multitude extends to the reciprocal and collaborative

⁶ In their brief references to the political dimension of love as a public act, both in *Empire* and *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri do not address the fact that love between individuals is also political and informed by complex power dynamics. Surely the ubiquitous nature of imperial power has infected interpersonal relationships. An example, which feminism has so rigorously detailed, are the complex power dynamics between men and women. A condition of the multitude's public resistance to Empire must necessarily be the construction of a counter-power exercised against the intimate and private imposition of power within the multitude.

⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 351-352.

⁸ The phrase "a love as strong as death" is taken from the Song of Songs 8:6. "Incarnation," of course, is at the heart of Christianity's traditional interpretation of Jesus Christ.

⁹ Regarding this point, Hardt and Negri are even more explicit: "*Today there is not even the illusion of a transcendent God.*" This is intended to be an observation, not a theological statement. However, as an observation its truth is questionable, or many—philosophers, theologians, and believers—are subject to a mass "illusion." To the contrary, this statement functions better as a theological statement, one which finds considerable support in a growing group of constructive theologians.

love between God and the multitude. This joy is not a by-product of a spiritual affiliation between God and humanity;¹⁰ on the contrary, it is the joy of producing something material, of introducing something new into the world. According to Hardt and Negri, these material products are incarnations. At stake here is not *the* incarnation as a singular and final event, but a continuous series of political incarnations that result from the continuous collaboration between God and humanity. This collaboration is what constitutes and galvanizes the multitude and empowers it in the struggle for liberation. In its theo-political aspect, love is the counter-power to Empire because it is “a love as strong as death.” This is the “biophilic” politics of the multitude as opposed to a “necrophilic” politics of Empire.¹¹

Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, however, seem to have missed this point. For as the United States increasingly, and all the more shamelessly, comes to acknowledge and embrace its imperial status and intentions throughout the world, and as the engines of American Empire rev up to a fevered pitch—most concretely exemplified in the *global war* on terror and in so-called *free trade* agreements—it is becoming alarmingly clear that those engines are fueled by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. To be sure, evangelical and fundamentalist Christians are not the sole advocates and supporters of American expansionism, they are just the loudest and most visible.¹² Perhaps more dangerous are the multinational corporations that quietly and surreptitiously act beyond the ken of public scrutiny and accountability, and as a result wield even more power. But evangelical and fundamentalist forms of Christianity have the distinct privilege of providing what might be the most powerful legitimation of the American Empire. Of course, this is not the first time that Christianity has allied itself with an empire; current American Constantinianism, however, forces us to face the embarrassing fact of Christianity’s history of complicity with Empire. Whether past or present, this complicity signals a failure of love; or, more precisely, a failure of Christian love: agape. If we are to take our cue from

¹⁰ Traditional Christian theologies, no doubt indebted to Platonism, value the spiritual over the material such that the latter is characterized as wicked and, thus, something to be resisted. Practically, this plays itself out in the withdrawal from everything material as a Christian virtue, a disengagement from the material world and its projects. This has at least two consequences: one can become indifferent to the oppression and subjugation of others; or, the material world is to be dominated and domesticated by the spiritual world to which Christians are ambassadors.

¹¹ Although the term “biophilia” was coined by biologist Edward O. Wilson, it has been adopted by many contemporary philosophers and theologians, particularly feminist, as an antidote to what Mary Daly has described as Western, that is, patriarchal, “necrophilia.”

¹² Admittedly, I am painting with a broad brush here. Not all evangelical Christians are supporters of American imperialism. Recently there have emerged groups of evangelical Christians with progressive political agendas, groups that are speaking out against Empire on the very basis of their evangelical beliefs. An example would be Jim Wallace [see for instance his recent publication, *God’s Politics* (San Francisco: HarpersSanFrancisco, 2005).] and *Sojourners* magazine, a forum for progressive evangelical debates surrounding faith, politics, and culture. If the same is true of fundamentalist Christians, they have yet to make their voices heard and their political views clear. Nevertheless, the terms “evangelical” and “fundamentalist” still apply to a large and otherwise homogeneous group so as to be adequately descriptive for the purposes of this paper.

Hardt and Negri and embrace love as a political act, what is required is a deeper meditation on the nature of Christian love and its relation to power.

Christian love, I will argue, is marked by failure in at least two ways. First, there is a failure in the logic of the traditional construal of agape that renders the very idea of love incoherent. Second, if agapeic love provides the ground for Christian action, then there is a practical failure to love that is attested perhaps most visibly in those forms of Christianity that either fail to stand up to or participate in the death-dealing machinations of Empire. These failures result from a confusion concerning the natures of love and power and the relationship between them. Thus, my first task in this paper is to give an account of this confusion and tease out some of its dangerous implications. My second task will be to reconstruct a conception of Christian love that is truly evangelical—that is, a conception that conforms to the teaching of the Gospels—one that can provide the foundation for a coherent and effective Christian ethics and politics. To this end, I will offer an analysis of the Great Commandment, significant because it contains the core of Christ's teaching about love as recorded in the Gospels. The upshot of this reconstruction will be a conception of agapeic love that is indeed powerful, powerful enough to stand up to Empire and transform a broken and violent world.

II.

Love and power are often contrasted in such a way that love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love. Powerless love and loveless power are contrasted.¹³

Paul Tillich articulates the basic dualism that has informed much of Christianity's teaching about love and power. This dualism is based on the implicit claim that love and power are incompatible. To put a finer point on it, love and power are defined in contradistinction to one another—they are mutually exclusive. This view, however, relies on an un-nuanced, and consequently incoherent, view of love and power. On the one hand, such a view fails to allow for any difference within power itself. It is assumed that all power is bad and, by extension, that all violence is bad and to be rejected. According to this view, power is essentially and necessarily unjust. Thus, there is no distinction made, for instance, between a power that dominates and oppresses and a power that liberates and emancipates, or the power of love and the power of hate. But without such distinctions power and violence ultimately get the upper hand, for such a love can only submit to their destructive forces because it is not permitted the resources to resist them. Consequently, and on the other

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1954) 11.

hand, if, as has traditionally been the case, agape is construed as a self-less and sacrificial love, in its most extreme, and therefore most perfect, realization agapeic love has the character of pure expenditure or waste. According to this view, Christian love empties the self to the extent that agency is compromised: in effect, there is no one to purposefully give love, rather, such love becomes an empty, abandoned, and pointless gift. As such, agapeic love does not establish a relationship between individuals; rather, it takes away one of the necessary terms in a relationship: the self. Consequently, the definition of agapeic love implodes, it becomes incoherent and agape ceases to exist as love. As theory, this marks a failure of love.

But as theory, the notion of powerless love is naïve. For even if one aspires to practice a love that resigns power and rejects violence, and if, consequently, such powerless love can do little more than submit to power and violence, then it is no less complicit in Empire because it allows Empire to proceed unchecked. As John Milbank has argued, to remain passive in the face of violence is to witness it as spectacle, which is its own kind of violence. The spectacle of violence, so Milbank claims, is “actually *more violent* than participating in violence—that to be violent *is* actually to survey in a detached, uninvolved fashion a scene of suffering” that is complicit in the “diminution of life” and “de-intensification of being.”¹⁴ At the very least, on the basis of this line of argument one can make the further argument that powerless love—that is, agapeic love as it is traditionally construed—fails to positively and purposefully engage the material as well as the ontological conditions of the life of the other. This has the effect of absolving the lover of all responsibility for the oppression, subjugation, and suffering of the other. As such, the lover is not obligated to physically resist Empire. Furthermore, insofar as agapeic love is perfected, so the tradition asserts, in selflessness and self-sacrifice, the material and ontological conditions of the life of the lover are likewise diminished and de-intensified, in which case love is so weakened as to become practically impossible and irrelevant, and once again cease to be love, for such love permits the degradation of both the lover and the loved one.

This view of love, which I am arguing is not really love at all, opens itself up to exploitation. For if love is separated from power and the two are viewed as incompatible, even if only naively and theoretically, one is permitted to exercise a power without limit. Power need not be defined as the rejection of love, as Tillich suggests; rather, power and love can be conceived as governing two separate spheres of life and action. Thus, one can exercise power and still claim to love because the two are not essentially related. But this does not mean that power does not interact with love. Because love does not have the resources to effectively judge and transform power, power can co-opt and delimit the sphere of love. Power can claim love for itself without being judged by it. Such a move

¹⁴ John Milbank, *Being Reconiled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 28, 31.

finds expression, for instance, in such conservative Christian exhortations to “hate sin but love the sinner.” Rather than conceived as being incompatible, love and hate are relativized to near equivalency, with the power of hate ultimately eclipsing the power of love.

Moreover, historically, the distinction between “sin” and “the sinner” has not been clearly made or rigorously maintained, such that the hatred of “sin” has in fact converted into hatred of “the sinner.” This can be seen, for instance, in Christian evangelism which has almost always proceeded along with the expansion of an Empire, whether the Roman, the British, or more recently the American. The justification for the expansion of Christianity throughout the world has traditionally appealed to love, love for the souls of the “pagans.” But as history has shown, the spread of Christianity has taken the form of domination, exploitation, and war. The material conditions of life are sacrificed to the spiritual life of the soul. This is not, as Hardt and Negri suggest, the introduction of something new into the world, but, rather, the destruction of the very resources that sustain life and human being: in short, it is the destruction of life itself. Such destruction cannot, despite Christian rhetoric, be affiliated with love.

Here a particular Christian rhetoric that tries to balance love and judgment proves to be at odds with itself, that is, the rhetoric of apocalyptic eschatology that prevails in most forms of evangelical and fundamentalist theologies. Such theologies are in stark contrast to the implicit theology found in Hardt and Negri’s political theology of love. In such theologies, a radically transcendent and thoroughly omnipotent God—ostensibly the God who is love (I John 4:8)—will intrude upon the creation in the last days with fire and brimstone to judge the righteous and the wicked. The righteous will be rewarded and the wicked destroyed along with the creation itself. This, it is claimed, is what God’s love requires: the unchecked and dominating exercise of the destructive power of judgment. (So much for loving “the sinner” and hating “the sin.”) The arbiter of divine judgment is Christ himself, the “prince of peace” who will return wielding a sword. The rhetorical paradoxes, indeed apparent contradictions, between love and judgment and peace and violence are not held in tension; rather, traditionally, evangelical and fundamentalist theologies have resolved this tension in favor of judgment and destruction. As a result, this view of divine power can easily be used to legitimize Empire and the expansion of imperial power and influence.¹⁵ Imperial aspirations cloaked in religious, particularly Christian, rhetoric can claim as justification for its excessive and unilateral use of force the omnipotent and unilateral power of God.

¹⁵ It should be noted that the description of heaven in John’s Apocalypse bears a striking resemblance to the physical structures and organization of the Roman Imperium. It could be argued that this description of heaven is meant to express the hope that the Kingdom of God will one day replace the oppressive Roman regime. Unfortunately, it seems that many Christian empires have found in John’s Apocalypse a justification not to replace Empire but continue it in a different guise.

An insight from Hardt and Negri is particularly useful here. As they point out, “[t]here is a strict continuity between the religious thought that accords a power above nature to God and the modern ‘secular’ thought that accords the same power above nature to Man. The transcendence of God is simply transferred to Man.”¹⁶ Although their critique is aimed particularly at “secular humanism” in an effort to sever the continuity between God and “Man,” this continuity seems to be reconstituted in an age characterized as “post-secular” and which has seen the “return of the religious.” For while the transcendental category “Man” may be a thing of the past, as the distinctions between the “secular” and the “religious” break down (or dissolve into or are appropriated by each other), it is becoming apparent that the continuity might just be between God and a particular *man*. It is no stretch to see in George W. Bush just such a man. Taking upon himself, and consequently burdening the country with, the task of spreading God’s “gift” of freedom throughout the world, in the name of an omnipotent God he has justified American preemption, unilateralism, and the use of excessive force. (One might recognize in the rhetoric of “shock and awe” resonances with the apocalyptic language used to characterize the *eschaton*.)¹⁷

III.

[...] the Christian inheritance that ‘returns’ in weak thought is primarily the Christian precept of charity and its rejection of violence.¹⁸

Here we might note that the above dangers that result from the separation of love from power and the separation of power from love—the weakening of love and the consequent unchecked and expansive use of power—find startling approximations in some strands of poststructuralist thought. If poststructuralism has a common agenda, it is a critique of what Heidegger called the “onto-theological constitution of metaphysics.”¹⁹ This critique aims at undermining the transcendental ground that has over-determined and reified the structures of being since the dawn of western metaphysics, a transcendental ground that has been identified as God. Participating in this project, Gianni Vattimo aims to undermine these very rigid onto-theo-logical structures. For Vattimo, the move or drift from modernity to postmodernity, the critical move toward

¹⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 91.

¹⁷ For a thorough and important examination of the relationship between the doctrine of omnipotence, apocalyptic, and Empire, see Catherine Keller’s *God and Power: Counter Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005) and *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). My brief discussion of these issues here is greatly informed by Keller’s work.

¹⁸ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999) 44.

¹⁹ Martine Heidegger, “The Onto-Theo-logical constitution of Metaphysics,” *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969).

poststructuralism,²⁰ is precisely a move of weakening, a drift from strong metaphysical and ontological structures to weaker ones. These weaker structures are, for Vattimo, coincident with, if not the result of, the secularization of Christianity, which is to say that this drift, as stated in the passage quoted above, is the result of a certain universalization of Christianity that is accomplished in the weakening of these strong structures. This, according to Vattimo, is exactly what Christian charity or agape is. Agape as the condition of weak thought is anti-metaphysical and, thus, construed counter to onto-theo-logy.

But with the weakening of the structures of being seems to come the separation or contrasting of love and power, insofar as love conditions this process of weakening. Implied in Vattimo's thought is the idea that love entails the resignation of power, and as a result is opposed to and rejects violence. For Vattimo, violence includes metaphysical as well as physical violence in all its forms. But Vattimo too fails to make any distinctions within the nature of power and violence. He assumes that all power and violence are bad and unjust. Can this weak metaphysics and, therefore, weak love ever be the source of anything but a weak politics? Moreover, it seems that agape, this time on a metaphysical level, has the character of passivity and self-sacrifice.

For Vattimo, the secularization of Christianity, the conclusion of which is the realization of agape that weakens metaphysical and ontological thought, is the result of the complete kenosis of God in Christ, that is, the self-emptying, the pouring out of God into the world. Insofar as this is the model of Christian love, which Vattimo implies, it does little to challenge the traditional construal of Christian love.²¹ Christian love is self-sacrificing and self-emptying to the point of the loss of self and agency: the weakening of love coincides with a weakening of the self. Moreover, if the kenotic movement of God culminates in the death of God on the cross, then Christian love culminates in death, or at least is modeled on, once again, a form of love that acquiesces to violence, particularly imperial violence. On this view, what is the ground of ethics and politics? If postmodernity is the realization of Christianity in its secularized form, then the question becomes more specific: what is the ground of a Christian ethics and politics? From the vantage of this secular theology, the question of ethics and politics is first and foremost a theological question.

²⁰ The terms "postmodernism" and "poststructuralism" cannot be univocally defined. Although there might be a common agenda among contemporary thinkers, regardless of how broadly defined that agenda is, there is much debate over just what postmodernism and poststructuralism mean. In this paper I am assuming a distinction between "cultural" postmodernism, which we might identify, for instance, with Hardt and Negri's analysis of the new age of Empire, and "academic" or "critical" postmodernism, which seeks to deconstruct the very foundations of "cultural" postmodernism. Insofar as the latter is critical of the former, I will designate it as "poststructuralism."

²¹ It is worth noting that Vattimo is not alone in this. Derrida too conceives of agape or charity as sacrificial, particularly insofar as agape/charity is a gift which only can be "given" as pure expenditure, which is to say a giving without reserve—pure sacrifice.

IV.

*Love is the foundation, not the negation, of power.*²²

To this point I have tried to demonstrate that to contrast and separate love and power is to have an un-nuanced understanding of their very natures, as well as make for dangerous politics. Although Vattimo's thinking on this matter does not provide much clarity or depth to the issues at stake here, he does provide an important insight: the question of love and power is, ultimately, an ontological one. Perhaps no thinker has addressed more directly and thoroughly the ontological dimension of this question than Paul Tillich.

Love and power are ontological categories for Tillich; they are as old as being and underivable from anything else. They are what Heidegger would call "primordial."²³ As such, love, power, and being must necessarily be understood in relation to each other. The larger context in which this relationship exists can be sketched as follows. According to Tillich, unity is the originary condition of all that is: unity within the self, unity of the self with others, and unity between the self and God. At present, however, human existence is plagued by estrangement from the self, from others, and from God. Humanity, then, aspires to return to the originary state of unity: this is the true and authentic aim of life. To be clear, this aspiration toward unity is not, for Tillich, the self's desire to be obliterated in a union with the One, or to be subsumed into a totality. On the contrary, unity must not be understood as fusion or totality but as relationality, a term he does not use.²⁴

Essential to life's overcoming of estrangement are love and power as ontological elements of life. In these elements life flourishes, for as Tillich argues, "[I]f life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life. In these two sentences the ontological nature of love is expressed. They say that being is not actual without the love which drives everything that is towards everything else that is. [...] Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated."²⁵ If being is to be more than a speculative and empty concept, it must be actualized in human being. This actualization can only happen through the power of love. But as an ontological category love does not subsume being into itself, for it is from being

²² Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 49.

²³ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962) section 44b.

²⁴ Rather than unity, perhaps "communion" is a better term to describe the originary condition of all that is.

²⁵ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 25.

itself that love derives its power. Without its relationship to being love would be reduced to a weak and powerless love. Because Tillich assigns to the “fundamental description of being as being [...] the concept of power,”²⁶ love is not weak but made powerful by being at the same time that love actualizes this very power in life. In other words, love has power as a component of its very being and power has love as a component of its very being.

The strength of Tillich’s philosophical theology is that it is not naïve, as the traditional construal of love and power has been. This because Tillich has a more nuanced view of power. In addition to the constructive power of love actualized in life, there is the power of non-being that exerts a destructive force against life. At the heart of Tillich’s ontology is a fundamental tension between being and non-being. According to Tillich, non-being has the power to resist the power of being, it is that “by which everything that participates in being is negated.”²⁷ In the striving between being and non-being, non-being aims to overcome being, and being, in its turn, aims to overcome non-being. The stakes here are no doubt high, for this conflict is actualized in the sphere of human being between those forces that seek to negate life and the power of being that affirms and preserves life. In this conflict, the power of love is pitted against the power of non-being. Tillich does not shy away from the difficult questions raised by such a conflict, nor does he look for simple answers. In responding to these difficulties, he breaks with the traditional construals of agape.

In the effort to overcome non-being, power must be united with love and love must be united with power. What unites love and power is what Tillich, following Luther, calls the “strange work of love.”²⁸ The strange work of love aims at destroying what is against love, that is, the power of non-being. Strikingly, the destructive power of agapeic love resorts to “bitterness, killing, and condemnation [...] judging and punishing”²⁹ as its means. The justification of such violent and compulsory methods is to be found in the very nature of love itself. The proper aim of love is the reunion of the separated and estranged; love is justified in using violence and compulsory force, in fact it must use such methods to fulfill its proper aim, as long as it is out to destroy that which is against love. This, however, is not the violent work of Christian imperialism or apocalyptic.

Tillich does see in the “strange work of love” which is animated by the power of being the necessary use of compulsion; it is in fact through compulsion that power actualizes itself. But compulsion must not be understood as domination. The compulsory use of power does not dominate life, to the contrary, insofar as it is combined with the proper aim of love it serves to preserve and defend life.

²⁶ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 35.

²⁷ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 38.

²⁸ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 49.

²⁹ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 49.

This is to say that compulsion is used in the service of reuniting that which is separated and estranged. But once again, Tillich's view of compulsory force is not naïve. He acknowledges that it is possible for compulsory force to be used in non-being's struggle to overcome being and negate life. There is also the danger that love's use of compulsory power to destroy that which is against love can go unchecked and destroy the very life it intends to preserve: this would be an unjust use of power. But when checked by love, that is, when compulsory power is regulated by the proper aim of love, the use of such power is just. Consequently, and contrary to the confused construals of agape, power, and the relationship between the two, love is not essentially submissive and power is not essentially unjust: such views are ontologically unfounded.

V.

*"Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*³⁰

There is nothing terribly theological about Tillich's analysis of love and power as outlined above. The theological dimension, however, is opened up by his famous claim that the "being of God is being-itself."³¹ Implied in this statement is that God is part of the essence of being and being is part of the essence of God. The difficulty with this statement is that it gives no indication of how to distinguish and differentiate God from being. As such, Tillich risks succumbing to a kind of onto-theo-logy where, on the one hand, the unity of the being of beings is defined and determined by the unity of God, and, on the other hand, the "nature" of God is understood in terms of the being of beings which, in effect, reduces God to a being.³² Moreover, if Tillich's ontological analysis of love and power is to provide the ground for a Christian ethics and politics, there is no theological or religious imperative for such an ethics and politics. In fact, his analysis would seem to make such an imperative unnecessary. What Tillich offers is an ontological description of Christian love, but what his description lacks is what makes it uniquely Christian, or at least religious. The onto-theological character of Tillich's analysis succeeds in reducing its theological scope.

³⁰ Mark 12: 29-32, New Revised Standard Version. The Great Commandment is also articulated, albeit in slightly different form, in Matthew 22: 37-39 and Luke 10:27.

³¹ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 235. For a fuller elaboration of Tillich's identification of God with being-itself, see pages 235-249 of the *Systematic Theology*.

³² The danger of reducing God to a being is evident in the very claim that "the being of God is being-itself." If being is the being of beings or entities, then the fact that God has being, which is being-itself, already implies that God is, in some shape or form, a being or entity.

In the remainder of this paper I want to preserve Tillich's insights into the ontological nature of love and power but reformulate them in more theological terms. In doing so I hope to remove from these insights their onto-theo-logical character and ground them, instead, in what might be called a "theo-ontology." In keeping with my larger concerns regarding Christian imperialism, I believe it is important that Christian love be understood in a way that empowers Christians to resist Empire and dis-empowers and judges Christian supporters of Empire. The confrontation with evangelical and fundamentalist legitimizations of Empire requires a return to a more evangelical and fundamental understanding of the exercise of Christian love and power. What is needed is a gospel hermeneutic of love and power, not an apocalyptic one. I have chosen the Great Commandment as my hermeneutical lens.

The Great Commandment originates in the Jewish law, and thus is not, *per se*, uniquely Christian.³³ But the emphasis it is given by Christ in the Gospels puts it at the heart of his teaching as well as at the heart of Christian moral life. However, the Great Commandment must be understood as a religious command before it is understood as a moral or ethical one. This is important because it indicates that Christian ethics is an aspect of religious life and, consequently, is subject to divine and not human rule, which is to say that it is the God-relation that conditions human-relations, not the other way around. This can be seen in the three elements of the Great Commandment and the way they build upon one another: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength; love your neighbor as yourself.

By the oneness of God Christ does not mean the God of metaphysics who in God's oneness is simple, unmovable, and impassive. On the contrary, this a particular God who is "our God," a God who in love has risked coming into relationship with a particular people and through them all people. A God who is love and, therefore, following Tillich, is the power of being. But, contrary to Tillich, as the power of being God is not being-itself. As the power of being, God brought into being a creation with which to come into a loving relationship. The power of being is exercised in the gift of being, in the gift of life, which is the actualization of God's love. Only as distinct from being-itself could God love and be love. That "the Lord our God is "our God," also entails that God has presented Godself to be loved.

It is important here to make a distinction between obedience and love; they are, in fact, at odds with one another. For if one were merely to obey the command to love the "Lord your God" with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, such obedience would signal a failure to conform to the commandment. What is given

³³ Christ's formulation of the Great Commandment is an elaboration of Deuteronomy 6: 4—"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

to God is obedience, when what God wants is love. Love can only be given, it cannot be taken. So just as God's love is freely given, one's love for God likewise can only be freely given, which means that despite the divine command one's love can also be withheld. Moreover, to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength is to love God completely, with the whole of one's being. To return to God in love one's being is not to sacrifice oneself but to fully realize oneself. If being is God's gift to the creation, then in this loving return the gift of being is realized insofar as it is exchanged, this because the gift only becomes gift when it is exchanged. This exchange is not a one time deal, however. God and humanity enter into a circuit of exchange that continues indefinitely.³⁴ There is, then, reciprocity between God and the creation such that humanity participates in God's love and God participates in humanity's love. The upshot of this is that one continuously participates in the power of being through which one's being is sustained, for to give one's love to God is to exercise the power of being. In a reciprocal, loving relationship with God, the gift of life in its irreducible dignity and power is realized. Only in the God-relation are human-relations possible.

Only in the orientation of one's life and being toward God is it possible to love the neighbor as oneself. To love the neighbor as oneself is not to relativize neighbor love to self love. Nor is it an either/or: either love oneself or love the neighbor. To love the power of being that gives and sustains one's life, and makes oneself a self, is to do more than love God: it is to love oneself as well. As Jürgen Moltmann succinctly puts it, "[w]e cannot love other people if we do not love ourselves."³⁵ Self-love, then, is neither narcissistic nor egoistic. It is the result of the God-relation which makes human-relations possible. It is the power of being in the individual that makes neighbor love more than sentimental love. If neighbor love required no more than that one *feel* love for one's neighbor, then neighbor love would be reduced to little more than one's emotional capacity to love. Love of neighbor, like the love of God and love for oneself, is realized in giving one's love to the neighbor. To give one's love is a conscious *act*, one that is commanded. Again, this command can only be answered in and through love, not obedience. As a command, or, more precisely, a religious command, one is responsible to the neighbor just as one is responsible to God. Moreover, insofar as God participates in humanity's love, God necessarily participates in one's love of the neighbor. In short, one cannot love God and refuse to love the neighbor.

The power of love is the power of being, so acts of love must necessarily exercise power. Thus, it is naïve to think that love can operate, can be love, without

³⁴ In this very brief discussion of *agape* as gift, I am relying upon John Milbank's conception of gift as gift exchange rather than Derrida's conception of gift as a unilateral gift. These two very different construals of gift-giving can be found in John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given: Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Rethinking Metaphysics*, eds. L. Gregory Jones and Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995) and Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kaufman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The university of Chicago Press, 1995).

³⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 187.

power; to try to separate love from power is to be confused about the nature of each. But as Tillich has made clear, not all power is positive power. There is the power of non-being that seeks to overcome the power of being, which is, essentially, hostile to love. This power of non-being can be seen in oppression, subjugation, and the exercise of imperial power. But to exercise such power can never be religious, nor can it ever be Christian; it is dishonest to claim it is. The power of non-being contends with God because it destroys the gift of being which is the realization of God's love. It does not affirm and preserve life; to the contrary, it destroys life. It is, in effect, a refusal of love. In keeping with what Tillich, following Luther, calls the "strange work of love," the command to love God, to love the self, and to love the neighbor requires that love exercise the power of being to thwart the powers of non-being. Such use of power will, if necessary, need to resort to violence. But this power must have as its object the powers of non-being. What keeps the violent use of power in check is love, which is to say that the power of God's love that participates in the power of human love, and vice versa, determines the limits of violence. Like the implicit political theology seen in Hardt and Negri, the cooperative love between God and humanity manifests itself in an engagement in the material reality of life.

The violent means resorted to in the name of agapeic love, while they aim to destroy that which is against love, are not primarily destructive but constructive and creative. Love might need to destroy, but only so that in the wake of the destruction of the forces of non-being love might be able to create the material conditions that sustain life. As the actualization of the power of being, love calls into being something new. The destruction of the life-negating powers of Empire is followed with the creation of "a better more democratic world [...] a new race [...] a new humanity." If Empire is "necrophilic," Christian love is essentially "biophilic." There is no other way to characterize Christian love. A love that negates life and the power of being attests to its own failure, both theologically and practically.

Christianity cannot align itself with Empire and preserve its Christian identity. It must separate itself from Empire and join in the forces struggling for emancipation and liberation ...for the love of God.

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