



# On Love of Neighbour

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## Abstract

The Christian commandment of love of neighbour “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” might rather easily give rise to what I would like to call, with the necessary reservations, ‘immoderate images’. If we examine the consequences of the commandment, we very soon run into a world of excessive obligations and exaggerated unselfishness which can trouble the imagination and stir up fantasies of desire. The commandment which some would say is irreconcilable with the natural limits of common sense, is nonetheless intriguing to both the imagination and the desire of the human person. Associations can easily be made with the peculiar and sometimes spectacular lives of certain saints, martyrs and impassioned mystics in which the boundaries between perversion, narcissism, selflessness, self-destruction and high moral standing are not always crystal clear. It is perhaps possible that Christianity’s attractiveness is due, in no small measure, to this associative network of tormented images and extreme examples which are easily evoked by the vestiges of our commandment. The fact that some people, when reflecting on the commandment, are almost exclusively inclined to think of extreme, and sometimes sinister, sacrifices does not only speak of the commandment itself but also reveals something about such people and their desires. It is almost as if the commandment, while at first sight running against common sense, at the same time plays along with, and even leans towards, our human desires. We might ask ourselves if it is not a fact that every ethical theory somehow turns around a ‘core’ which, if we relate to it too directly and too literally, can let the theory’s principles run wild. Perhaps the commandment of love of neighbour has taken the place of such a ‘disorienting core’ in

Christianity. Perhaps also there can be no particular ethic which does not somewhere run the risk of leading to excess. If this is the case, however, then the commandment of love of neighbour loses something of its specific expressiveness. Nevertheless, it is my contention that we can argue with good reason that our Christian commandment disorients moral rules and obligations in a very direct, radical and even characteristic way. In order to argue my point, the first part of this essay will be devoted to a discussion of Freud's repudiating and reticent attitude in relation to this commandment. In this regard, I will make an abstraction of the question how the tradition, the church and moral education have taught us to understand the commandment and focus our attention on a structural and grammatical analysis of its formulation. I will argue that Freud's aversion entails the fact that our commandment, in contrast to the incest taboo and the Ten Commandments, as such forbids nothing. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that it forbids nothing that makes it so alarming. In the second part of the essay I will return to the way in which the tradition has taught us to understand this 'opaque commandment'. I will point out that the paradigmatic line of approach concerns 'helping the needy', although the commandment, in the literal sense, speaks only of love. I will also tackle the question of the identity of my neighbour and what it means for someone to become my neighbour. In conclusion I will raise the question whether in fact every kind of charitable activity can be understood from the perspective of 'helping'. The problem which lies at the root of this question, however, is the following: if it is the case that the solid and characteristic core of love of neighbour has to do with the alleviation of needs, then why, in exceptional circumstances, is burying the dead considered an act of charity?

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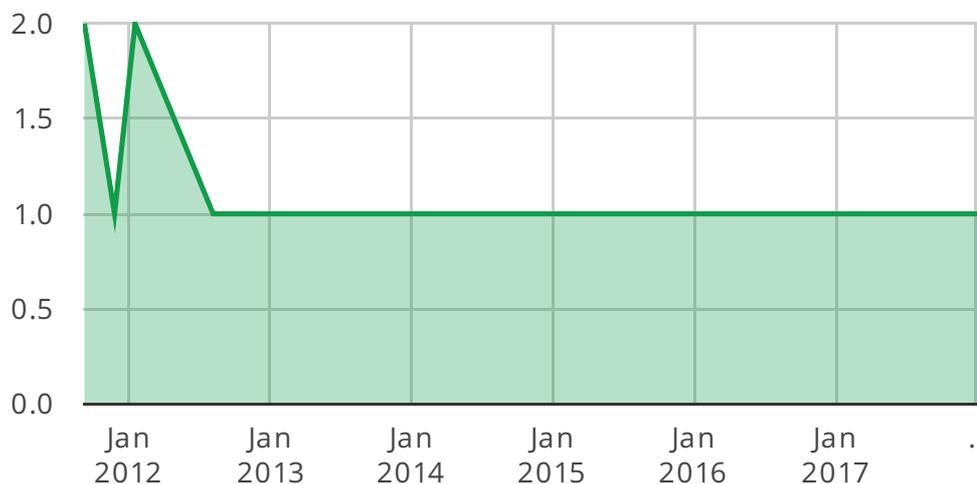
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