

Herbert and Elinor Nootbaar Institute on Law, Religion and Ethics
Annual Conference
Love and Law

Proposal

Title: “Why Agape is Not More ‘Christian’ than Eros and Philia”

Abstract: By drawing on various works in Christian theology and moral philosophy, this paper examines the Christian ethicist’s dangerously elevated view of *agape*. As Stephen Post observes, the tendency in Christian circles has been to “identify all family ties with nepotism, all erotic desire with sin, all self-love with unbound egocentrism, or all friendship with mercenary instrumentalism.” The result is nothing more than an impoverished love ethic. In fact, contrary to common perception, the biblical authors do not share our narrow preoccupation with *agape*. Rather, it speaks with a consistent appreciation of *eros* and *philia* as well. And if we look at what many believe to be the ultimate revelation of God – the Christ event – we see that the love expressed here is not *exclusively* agapic in nature. It would be a tragic mistake, then, to view *eros* and *philia* as inferior forms of love. Moreover, I argue that while *agape* rightly prizes benevolence and a person’s regard for another person, its true power lies in its mutuality. In other words, one’s obligations, affections, and faithfulness to another, not to mention the “concrete decencies” we expect from one another, are simply inseparable from the benevolent core of *agape*. As such, it is not only a mistake to privilege *agape* over *eros* and *philia*; it is just as wrong to see *agape* as purely distinct from *eros* and *philia*. The reality is that self-love and other-regarding love *have* to work together. While Christians are right to reject the *excess* of self-love, it is wrong to assume an inherent incompatibility between love of self and love of neighbor. Yes, many Christian ethicists fear that love of self will *exclude* or *minimize* other-regarding love, but such a fear is not well warranted. Rather, I will argue that the real danger lies in pitting self-love *against* the love of the other. As such, accepting certain forms of self-love – even the love of giving and receiving love – neither diminishes nor threatens a relationship’s moral worth.

Short Bio: Roberto Sirvent is Associate Professor of Political and Social Ethics at Hope International University. He is a graduate of Hope International University (BA), Johns Hopkins University (MA), the University of Maryland School of Law (JD), and the London School of Theology (PhD). His teaching and research interests include hermeneutics, the ethical role of narrative, and the relation between law, religion, and civic virtue.