Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for January 2008. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Gloria Albrecht and Peter Meilaender.

To leave your own question or response to Sandra Sullivan Dunbar's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
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A significant part of the ongoing work of feminist Christian theologians and ethicists is the interrogation of assumptions in the Christian tradition through the lens of women’s experiences. In this essay Sandra Dunbar challenges the dualism embedded in the “two-track” schema by which love of particular others and love of distant others are separated, isolated, and theologically prioritized such that agape, as a universal and disinterested regard for all persons, trumps a love that is seen as diminished by self-interested choice. Gene Outka’s (and others’) interpretations of universal and particular loves are tested by the reality of women’s experiences of care-giving, both unpaid and paid.

They are also tested by some basic feminist assumptions, some of which Dunbar articulates and some of which are implicit. Using both the
gospel story of the Good Samaritan and the nature of care-giving work, Dunbar argues that any interpretation of Christian love must pay attention to the actual material well-being of those who are loved, i.e., all humans. The neglect of the basic material conditions of human life (food, shelter, clothing, education, medical care, life sustaining work, recreation, security in illness and old age, and so on – I’m drawing on the list contained in the U.S. Catholic Bishop’s 1986 document, Economic Justice for All) has the effect of marginalizing those who need and those who give dependent care and of reducing the meaning of universal love to a feeling of concern for suffering others.

A more implicit feminist argument employed here is the suspicion with which assumed dualities are examined. Here the theological dualism that separates superior disinterested love from inferior self-interested loves is interrogated by particularity. The reality of unpaid dependent care is often unromantic, unattractive and unchosen: for example, the lack of safe child care that robs a mother of opportunities to work to support the material needs of her family and subjects her and her children to the inadequate and demeaning experience of “welfare.” The reality of paid dependent care too often displays no agape as equal regard: poverty wages, lack of healthcare or pension, plenty of over-time without over-time pay. And, as Dunbar points out, the conditions of each are interconnected. White middle-income mothers and fathers in the U.S. benefit from the dependent care they purchase at poverty level wages from other women whose struggle to meet dependent care responsibilities is far worse. The increasing demand for care-giving services has created a global market for low-wage, exploited women and an increase in families without mothers present. Through these particularities, Dunbar has rightly dismantled the dualisms that undergird the theological two-track schema and she has rightly undone the false public/private dichotomy.

This is not to deny the reality of the tension individuals and individual families feel in U.S. society today between caring for one’s own kith and kin and responding to the serious and seemingly interminable needs of suffering distant others. It is to suggest that this tension is not created by the nature of Christian love, but by the social creation of unequal and unjust vulnerabilities that increasingly threaten most U.S. families. When the well-being of family and the well-being of society are understood as intricately linked, when dependent care is understood as both a personal and a social need, and when love of neighbor is understood as encompassing material well-being as well as political and civil rights, the public nature of (never) private life is exposed.

And it is at this point that the feminist challenge to another traditional dichotomy becomes useful to Dunbar’s argument, although she does not use it here: namely, the relationship between love and justice. The current state of dependent care, both unpaid and paid, cries out for justice. The current state of economic exploitation, growing inequality in income and wealth, the loss of job sectors that provided family...
sustaining wages, the shrinkage in employer-provided health and pension security, cries out for more than procedural justice. Love for distant others must take the form of justice that is attentive to the material wellbeing of all (and each) human(s).

In my view, it will require a turn to positive human rights, to economic rights. Dunbar rightly calls Christians away from an abstract and merely individualist interpretation of Christian love that shrinks in the face of overwhelming social issues. She challenges Christians to understand that the response of love to those near and far is one, and will require corporate political engagement to reshape the character of our community.

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Anonymous
Posted: 08 Jan 2008 18:29    Post subject: Peter C. Meilaender's response to Sandra Sullivan Dunbar

Sandra Sullivan Dunbar raises a number of interesting questions in her essay on agape and special relations, and I am grateful to the Religion and Culture Web Forum for the opportunity to reflect upon and respond to her thoughtful and provocative arguments. In the following remarks, I focus on four specific issues, three of them related to her interpretation and use of the Good Samaritan parable, a fourth raising broader questions about human dependency in a liberal democracy.

(1) Sullivan Dunbar suggests that two striking aspects of the Good Samaritan story should attract our attention: not only the surprising identities of the victim and his rescuer, but also the (by comparison, neglected) “extravagance of the care bestowed by the Good Samaritan on the unfortunate traveler.” If the latter feature of the story is neglected, however, that is presumably because its significance arises from the former. We would not be surprised or challenged by a story about a father’s bestowing extravagant care upon his own son or daughter. It is precisely because the two characters are strangers, presumptive enemies even, that the care bestowed is surprising. This aspect of the story thus inevitably focuses our attention upon the relationship, or lack of one, between the man who needs and the one who provides assistance.

(2) Much the same is true of Sullivan Dunbar’s claim that attention to the parable can correct the “marginalization of material human need” (her emphasis) that has been the “flaw underlying th[e] sharp division between special relations and agape.” It is surely true that the Good Samaritan story directs our attention to the satisfaction of basic human needs. But recognizing this does not fundamentally change the nature of the problems raised by agape. For there is a lot of material human
need in the world, far more than any of us can hope to satisfy. In attempting to do so, we are necessarily forced back into questions of special relationships: Which needs do we satisfy, and whose, and how do we balance the different needs of different persons?

Sullivan Dunbar argues that such a response invokes an inappropriately individualized picture of the response to human need. Of course I cannot satisfy everyone’s needs all by myself. The question, therefore, should not be, How do I meet your needs, but rather, How do we meet them? I comment in (3) below about the jump from the individual to the policy level. Here, however, I note two things:

(a) This move does not change the questions we face. In a world of limited resources--our world--we will still have to balance various needs and decide which to satisfy. Indeed, I suspect this problem becomes even more difficult at the collective level, because of complications in the question of what things count as relevant needs in the first place. For example, the single working mother needs not only child care and health insurance, but also police protection and national defense. (The parable itself reminds us that these latter needs are both important and, alas, very material.) The parable itself provides no guidance in weighing these various needs.

(b) The collective move also misrepresents the force of the parable, much of which arises from the particular nature of the situation: one individual human being confronts another, suffering, face-to-face, and responds. Put in collective terms--assuming that we could figure out how to do this--both the story and our response to it become, I think, quite different. Sullivan Dunbar’s attempt to infer a collective version of agape from the Good Samaritan story is one of the most interesting aspects of her essay. But it requires a different parable. Perhaps the best indication of this is offered by reflecting on the form that collective exercises of agape will almost necessarily take: citizens paying taxes to support professionalized governmental bureaucracies that meet the needs of others whom they themselves never encounter. There is much to be said for such arrangements, but they are a long way from the Good Samaritan. By stretching his example too far, we weaken its force.

(3) Among Sullivan Dunbar’s most striking claims is that agape “is not simply a question of individual ethics; it is a question of Christian social ethics.” I have already alluded to the reasoning behind this claim. Although Sullivan Dunbar does not draw out its implications in great detail, a number of remarks make it clear that she takes it to have consequences for public policy. This conclusion turns, however, on a number of critical assumptions that require spelling out in greater detail. Even if we agreed that agape requires collective, social expression, it is by no means clear what this would mean for public policy. Determining this would require us to answer questions about the purposes of political life, the extent to which obligations of Christian love can and should be taken as a model for politics in a fallen
world, the relation between church and state as social bodies, and the
social and cultural prerequisites for successful political activity. The last
of these is especially relevant if citizens are to be asked to sacrifice for
unknown and distant others (whether fellow citizens or foreigners).

As these considerations indicate, I am doubtful that Sullivan Dunbar's
re-examination of the Good Samaritan story, interesting though I find
it, can either overcome the tensions between agape and special
relations or be translated successfully into social or political structures.
I should add that I am not unduly disturbed by this conclusion. Sinful
creatures should not be surprised to discover that the full demands of
Christian love surpass our temporal abilities, or that attempts to lead a
faithful life remain permeated by ineliminable tensions. We shall one
day enter the City where those tensions are overcome, but we are not
there yet.

(4) I close with a final word about the broader theme of human
dependency in Sullivan Dunbar's essay, though here, too, I can only
gesture towards a very large set of questions. I am highly sympathetic
to her emphasis on human dependency, and the relations to which it
gives rise, as a counterweight to the typical liberal emphasis on
voluntary relations arising from individual choice. Nevertheless, I
believe her essay's treatment of dependency as a social phenomenon
in important ways conceals the full depth of the issues at stake.
Sullivan Dunbar's reflections are motivated by concern over a growing
"crisis of care" in the contemporary world. Various factors contribute to
this crisis, but three that she highlights strike me as especially
pertinent within the liberal West: the burgeoning needs for care of a
growing and longer-lived elderly population; child-care needs in dual-
worker households; and the many, varied needs of single mothers and
their children.

One cannot adequately discuss these aspects of social need, however,
without recognizing that they stem in large part from contemporary
liberalism's emphasis on the value of individual autonomy. The
disappearance of the multigenerational family; the large-scale
movement of women into the workforce; and the increasing frequency
and acceptance of divorce—all contribute to increased individual
autonomy and (the last two in particular) are frequently defended on
precisely that basis. The very march of autonomy now confronts us
with increased neediness and a crisis of care.

There are, of course, many possible responses to this fact. But it is the
elephant hiding ironically and uncomfortably in the room of Sullivan
Dunbar's argument. By all means let us rethink the model of individual,
autonomous consent as the norm for human relationships. But a
genuine critique of autonomy must not only contemplate new
responses to a contemporary crisis of care but also revisit the social
changes that have brought us to this point. Furthermore, a Christian
feminist account will ultimately have to come to grips with the feminist
movement's role as a primary force driving many of these changes. (I
offer this as a political observation, recognizing that there are deep disagreements among feminists about the role of autonomy in moral thought.) Because Sullivan Dunbar's essay does not pursue this question, I am unsure to what extent she would wish to develop such a critique. Her argument helpfully reminds us, however, that as we seek to understand the obligations of Christian love in the contemporary world, we must confront not only the familiar challenges posed by the demand for universal regard, but also less well understood ones posed by the neediness and dependency that characterize special relationships.

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