

Grass roots community organizations as a function of *agape*

By KURT JOHNSON, SR.
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The most widely-applied understanding of *agape* is from Christianity's New Testament. The term conveys an understanding of love which contains the characteristic of being virtuous for its own sake and expecting nothing in return. In contrast to *eros*, it does not anticipate primal gratification, and in contrast to *philia*, it is not a warmly fraternal notion which, despite being constructive and positive, contains elements of *quid pro quo*. In its essence, *agape* is sacrificial and pursues the well being of everyone and everything it influences while seeking nothing in return.

In his book, *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism*¹, Dr. Robert Benne, a Lutheran ethicist, provides a neoconservative view of *agape* by promoting the premise that capitalism and free markets reduce the need for compassion because of the virtues involved within the exchange of valued services and commodities. I respectfully but strongly reject that premise (along with neoconservatism's optimistic view of unfettered free markets) and point to the collapse of the economy in 2008 as but one objective example of the theory's failure.

The problem with the theory is not that it won't work, given certain conditions. The problem is that those needed conditions don't exist and in all likelihood will never exist. The predicate conditions involve nothing more than the presence of the major money players in an economy of unfettered markets who are virtuous beyond any examples found in history. While some of those players may be present, there will always be miscreants who try to game the system, thus creating the need for regulatory mechanisms to keep greed and exploitation in check. Clearly, despite the nice theory, market arrangements don't substitute for *agape*.

This pursuit of the understanding of how *agape* is found within institutional processes raises an interesting question, however. Can *agape* be a component within the function of grass roots community

¹ Robert Benne, *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.

organizations? History has shown that community organizations which pursue such virtues as nondiscrimination, social justice, political fairness, human rights and similar values contain and reflect *agape* as understood in its classical definition—unselfish sacrifice and service for the benefit of others with no expectation of a beneficial return for the pursuers of such virtues and values.

The term “community organization” is easy to understand but difficult to define. For that reason, the modifier “grass roots” is important, because it signals the presence of stakeholders who are driven by their own philosophy, perspective of virtues and world view in contrast to agitators or operatives who have an agenda which is inserted from the outside.

Was Adolf Hitler a community organizer? Within a broad definition of the term, he certainly was, but the presence of unstated, ulterior motives compromise the presumed virtue of a community organization concept. And while a community organization such as the Ku Klux Klan might technically comport with the definition, it fails to meet the standard involving the presence of virtues listed above.

It therefore is correct to say that a community organization contains an *agape* component when it reflects such virtues as nondiscrimination, social justice, political fairness, human rights and similar values. It also would be correct to say that “market arrangements” could contain an *agape* component if they contained these same virtues, but unfortunately history and practice have shown that the nature of market arrangements and the money players involved in those arrangements effectively preclude (as a practical matter) any significant presence of *agape*.

Transformational, grass roots, community organization initiatives which reflect these virtues constitute an *agape* component when the individuals who drive such organizations act to change social, political, cultural and other similar dynamics for the improvement of human conditions generally. Saul Alinsky is the poster child for creating the model by which *agape* becomes a function in grass roots, community organization initiatives.

While the actors within a community organization structure might be acting in their own self-interest, the nature of the activity is to engage the public process so that decisions are made based on issue-centered arguments with full transparency. Market arrangements pose a huge risk to including *agape* because the primary component, money, has a more intensive greed element. Community organizations based on the listed virtues have a much greater opportunity to contain the *agape* function.