

Religious Hate and Persecution

John 15: 18-25

Geoff Sutton, 31 March 2019

Strengthening identity with love

The author reveals a tightening of the identity bond between Jesus and his disciples as he moved from the abiding-love bond of the vine and branches metaphor (15: 1- 11) to the friendship status in verses 12-17. Jesus upgrades the disciples from servants to friends revealing a closer connection with himself and thereby with his father, who is now “the” father, to whom they may make requests. Jesus closes the section by encouraging them to strengthen this bond by loving each other.

The next section (18-25) presents a contrast, which serves to further strengthen the identity bond between Jesus and his followers. On the one hand they will experience love in their close relationship with him and each other. On the other hand, they will experience hate and persecution because of this close identity with Jesus.

The author’s presentation of love and hate linked to persecution is a classic example of the evidence of these constructs at work in human nature. When threatened by an out-group, we instinctively turn to another group for support and safety. Love binds people in the in-group and aggression (acts of persecution) increases negative attitudes toward the out-group. Unlike the early chapters, in this section of the gospel, there are only two groups—Jesus and the world.

Strengthening identity by hate

Given the context of the identity as a general cause for why the disciples will experience hate and persecution, Jesus explains why the “others” (the world) hates him.

The chain of spiritual causation for the unjustified hatred has proximal and distal causes. The proximal causes are the common Johannine concepts of words and deeds. The words and deeds of Jesus cause a guilty-of-sin status. Perhaps the state exists once it is exposed, which implies they were not guilty when they lived according to the preexisting system. The distal cause is a mysterious prophecy that has to have a type of force—had to be fulfilled (25).

The twin proximal causes of hate and persecution.

I came and spoke the word, which created their state as guilty of sin (22).

I performed works, which created their state as guilty of sin (23).

In addition to the in-group—out-group phenomenon, the defense of projection may be operating as well in the exposure of sin. People naturally resist admitting to what they perceive as anything that mars their view of themselves as morally good persons. We get the impression that being righteous, as interpreted by adherence to the Jewish law codes, was the epitome of the good

person. Both groups, Jesus and “the Jews,” accused the other of sin. From John’s writing, we may say the Jews projected their sin onto Jesus.

Extending identity beyond death.

Jesus will, of course, die. Then what? The disciples will remain connected with him after death by the paraclete, also known as the Spirit of truth, who comes from the father.

Additional Observations

Jesus’ relationship to the disciples has changed from master-servant to friends. They are not brothers in John’s view.

John refers to “the” father rather than “their” father, as if there is a difference in the relationship between Jesus and *his* father and the disciples and *the* father.

John presents Jesus concepts of love and hate as opposite concepts, which is true of current word usage.

A related, and dubious meme, is the mantra “hate the sin and love the sinner.” The meme has no firm basis in either scripture or reality; however, the phrase is used as if to overcome the difficulty of relating kindly to a person who is considered to live in a particularly odious sinful manner.

Jesus distances himself from other Jews in the reference to “their law,” as if his way was different from the way written in the Pentateuch and even the prophets. Perhaps, the us vs. them conflict in John is manifest between the adherents of the late first century church vs. those in the synagogue.

The Spirit is sent is from the Father and Jesus and does not appear to have a sense of personal agency as God.

I suggest that to understand John’s use of concepts like love and hate, we should not look to Greek words or culture to concoct some definition, but we should consider his ostensive definitions. Thus, intratextual meanings based on an analysis of stories and metaphors might offer more insight into the author’s message than an abstract foray into the verbal archeology that lies beneath the translators’ glosses. For example, John pictures love as the strong feeling a father has for an obedient son and as a man who would sacrifice his very life for another. In contrast, John offers examples of hate and its attendant persecution beginning with the Jewish and Roman malevolent treatment of Jesus in chapter 19.

John’s references to concepts like love and hate, which he presents without definitive features, resemble platonic forms as if there is some essence of true love and true hate. I credit J.S. Mill with the notion that “half the conceptual world are Platonists without knowing it...” (editorial note in J. Mill, 1878, p. 237).

The Psychology of Religious Hate

Researchers studying the psychology of hate have focused on the link between the vague concept of hate and the connection between hate and violence. Presumably, religious hate includes negative attitudes toward a group, that is primarily identified by religiosity or spirituality (RS). RS persecution is violence directed at people because they are identified with a particular RS group.

The components of hate are a set of beliefs about another group that identifies them as inferior. The number of beliefs and the degree of degradation increase the level of hate. Two emotional factors activate hate: fear and anger. Emotions are activated when an outgroup is perceived as a threat. Emotions can add two additional factors to hate. First, they can vary the intensity of hate, which can be identified informally as ranging from cool to hot. Second, emotions produce instability, which is uncomfortable and serves to agitate.

People generally distance themselves from threats until a leader declares it is time to fight outgroup members or be destroyed.

Fighting a perceived threat can be verbal, physical, or both.

The development of RS hate is not necessarily linear. The components can interact to build toward a trigger point.

General principles of group dynamics can act as catalysts to the expression of hate.

In-group leaders are revered and outgroup leaders are reviled

Under threat, group leaders demand loyalty, obedience, and respect for group symbols. Successful group leaders thrive during times of threat.

Try to fill in the table with ideas about ways Christians and religious people have considered or responded to their group and other groups. I included a few examples.

Functional Domain	Our Group vs. Their Group
<p>Spiritual What beliefs, scripture texts, or interpretations of scripture lead to group distinctives?</p>	<p>Our God is the one true God. Their gods are false or inferior. Our way is the only way to God. Satan deceives them. Our holy book is God's truth. Satan created their holy book.</p>
<p>Cognition What beliefs & memories do people have about their group vs. the other group?</p>	<p>We are loving people. They are hateful. We treat people with respect. They are inferior humans, animals, feared animals, dirty animals, or unclean substances.</p>
<p>Emotion What do people feel about their group and other groups?</p>	<p>Love our people. Fear outgroup people. Anger toward outgroup people.</p>
<p>Behavior What do people do to strengthen their group and weaken other groups?</p>	<p>Distancing from unbelievers Marrying only believers</p> <p>Attacking outgroup statements</p> <p>Promoting fear of outgroup members Promoting anger toward outgroup members Torturing and killing outgroup members</p>

Text notes

Love: Although John uses different Greek words for love, he may not be making a distinction given his use throughout the gospel. I'll leave it to others who wish to compare the instances of such usage.

Hate and persecution: Related texts include Mt 10: 17-25; 24: 9-10.

Persecution in Jesus name can be found elsewhere as well: Mt 10:22; 24:9; Acts 9:14).

Greek and Translation Notes

I write the transliteration for the Greek rather than the Greek alphabet in the following notes.

The love word in the command section of 12-17 is *agape*, which refers to godly love for his son, the world, other believers, and even enemies ([Mounce](#)).

The love word contrasted with hate in 19 is *phileo*, which includes ideas of affection and a high level of regard ([Mounce](#)).

In verse 18, the word for hate is *miseo*, which includes ideas of ill-will, detest, abhorrence, regard with less affection, love, or esteem ([Mounce](#)). The NIV, NABRE, and ESV translators use hate for *miseo*. The VOICE translators use *despise* instead of *hate* for *miseo*.

In verse 22, the phrase translated as guilty of sin is *echo harmartia* (*echo*, [Mounce](#)). The phrase may also be translated as *having sin* (e.g., NABRE). [Mounce](#) offers several nuances for *harmartia*: wrongdoing, acting contrary to the will or law of God. The meaning includes concepts of error, offence, and guilt.

Reference

Mill, J. (1878). *Analysis of the phenomena of the human mind* (Vol. 1, 2nd ed.). London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer.