

DIVINE LOVE

**ALSO BY JEFF LEVIN**

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# DIVINE LOVE

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PERSPECTIVES FROM THE  
World's Religious Traditions

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK ▪ VIGEN GUROIAN  
RUBEN L. F. HABITO ▪ WILLIAM K. MAHONY  
JOHN S. MBITI ▪ JACOB NEUSNER  
CLARK H. PINNOCK ▪ DAVID TRACY

Edited by Jeff Levin and Stephen G. Post

Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr



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For Lea, my love (J. L.)

For Sir John Templeton and Samuel H. Miller (S. G. P.)



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## Foreword

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SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

What wondrous harmony and tone does the musician of love possess;  
The spirit of whatever song he creates traces a path to an abode of refuge.  
May the world be never empty of the lamentation of lovers,  
For how melodious and exhilarating a sound it does possess.

HAFIZ (trans. by S. H. Nasr)

[M]a già volgeva il mio disio e'l velle,  
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

(But now was turning my desire and will,  
Even as a wheel that equally is moved,  
The Love which moves the sun and the other stars.)

DANTE, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII (trans. by H. W. Longfellow)

**A**LL HUMAN BEINGS in no matter what time or clime they live or have lived have experienced love either given or received or most likely both. Therefore, one can assert with certitude that love exists and all that exists must have its origin in the Source of all existence. That Source, which is none other than the Divine, is the origin of all love, ultimately love of whatever it might be that one loves, for whatever we love is in its inner reality the love of the Divine, even if this love be experienced

through the myriad of cosmic veils that hide the Divine Face from many a human being. Nor is this love confined to the human state; rather, it flows through the veins of all of cosmic existence. It manifests itself in the love of animals for their offspring, of plants for light, and even in the so-called material world in the attraction of atoms and particles to each other. It is what draws *yin* and *yang* together on all planes of reality. According to a famous sacred dictum of the Prophet of Islam, quoted so often in Sufi texts, God, speaking in the first person, says, "I was a hidden treasure. I *loved* to be known; therefore I created the world so that I would be known." If then the goal of creation is knowledge of God, its cause is Divine Love.

Love is not just a sentiment, although that precious sentiment is also a form of love. But love as such is an ontological reality, as much an ontological reality as the reality of existence itself. It is, therefore, impossible to experience existence, to experience life without experiencing some form of love, the form, extent, and degree depending on the mode of existence of the subject who or that loves. For the human being, who is given the privilege of living on different levels of existence and of having different modes of consciousness, the more he or she *is*, the more intense his or her state of being, and the more pure his or her state of consciousness, the greater the experience by that person of love leading finally to the stage of Divine Love.

Religions are messages from the Divine whose aim is to return us to the Divine; *religat*, from which comes the word "religion," means to bind. Religion is what reestablishes for fallen humanity that binding to the Source. And so Divine Love, which of course includes binding and attraction, cannot but be central to all authentic religions no matter how different their external form might be. There are religions such as Christianity that define the Divine Itself as Love. Others such as Islam envisage the Divine primarily as the One in essence beyond all attributes and yet possessing many attributes of which an essential one is Love or rather what one could call Merciful Love. And then there are other religions such as Buddhism that are nontheistic and yet there appears within them the blinding reality of love in the form of compassion. There is, in fact, no religious universe to which we can turn without finding therein the presence of Divine Love in one form or another.

Now, Divine Love can have two meanings: our love for the Divine and the Love of the Divine for us, us here meaning not only ourselves and our co-religionists, not even only the whole of humanity, but the whole of

creation. These two meanings are, metaphysically speaking, bound to each other and have a causal relationship. It is the Love of the Divine for Itself and for Its creation that allows creatures to have love for the Divine. As human beings, we are the only creatures given the possibility of being aware of this reciprocity and endowed with the freedom even to reject this Love. From the spiritual point of view it can be said that God wants us to love him on the basis of the freedom he has given us, the choice to love or not love him and/or his creation. He does not want us to love him on the basis of coercion and so he has made us all aware of the truth that love based on coercion is not love at all. Furthermore, there is a mysterious reciprocity hidden in this relationship between the human lover and the Divine Beloved. From the human point of view, it appears that we can decide to love or not to love the Divine; but from the inner point of view, no one can love God unless God loves him or her not in the ontological sense of the love of God for his creation which is always there, otherwise the created order would cease to exist, but in a personal and individual sense.

Many traditional accounts of anthropogenesis speak of our preexistence in the Divine Order before our appearance here on earth. To use the language of Sufism, we were in intimacy with the Divine and in the loving embrace of the Beloved before being cast here below. All the love we experience here below is a faint reflection of that primordial Love. And in all human climes there have been those who have sought to go beyond those dim reflections to that original Divine Love whose recovery brings with it also the sense of love for and compassion toward all beings.

The presence of teachings concerning this universal love and compassion in all of our religions has caused many who seek accord between religions today to base themselves solely on a sentimental understanding of love. On that basis they have come to claim that we should simply love each other putting aside all the different sacred forms and doctrines of various religions—which as a matter of fact alone make the realization of Divine Love possible—in order to reach a superficial and sentimental humanism that lacks efficacy and certainly has not succeeded in bringing followers of different religions closer together. What has been needed, therefore, is the exposition in a serious and in-depth manner of the reality of Divine Love within different religions while remaining faithful to the authentic teachings of each tradition and not basing oneself merely on a sentimental and superficial consideration of human nature. The present book is valuable precisely because it seeks to accomplish such a task. We are presented

here with authoritative voices from different religions presenting the reality of Divine Love according to the language, symbols, and doctrines of each religion, voices brought together in harmony and with authenticity in this important collection of essays. We must be grateful to the editors, Jeff Levin and Stephen Post, as well as to the authors of the individual essays for having made the appearance of such a work possible.

Ours is a world in which awareness of the universality of the doctrine of Divine Love and its reality in religious worlds other than our own is a dire necessity. Of course, love is not only to be discussed in conceptual terms and only written about; it is to be experienced. In fact, as that supreme troubadour of love, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, has sung,

Whatever description or explanation I give of love,  
When I reach Love I am ashamed of my exposition.  
Although commentary by the tongue clarifies,  
Love that is tongueless is of greater clarity.  
As the pen was hastening to write,  
When it came to Love it split upon itself.  
In expounding Love, reason becomes mired like an ass in mud,  
It is Love alone that Love and being in love has explained.

*Mathnawī*, Book I (trans. by S. H. Nasr)

But even writing about Divine Love authentically can only be done through love, and the present work is certainly itself the fruit of a labor of love. Let us hope that it will help to lead its readers to the experience of Divine Love itself, to a clear recollection of the experience by us all, in “pre-eternity” and existing still deeply within our being here and now, of the love and embrace of the Beloved. Let us hope that it will help us to attain a state of being wherein we could look at the heavens and experience like Dante “the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.”

Bethesda, Maryland  
September 2009

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**T**HE EDITORS WOULD LIKE to thank all of the chapter authors for the wonderful and groundbreaking works of scholarship that they contributed to this project. We know that for some of these chapters the task was equivalent to constructing an edifice out of bricks that themselves had to be fabricated from scratch. There are rewards, but also great challenges, in pursuing scholarship on a topic that has heretofore been relatively deemphasized in academic theological writing within many religious traditions. This book might even have been a couple of chapters lengthier, but for a few of the potential authors whom we approached, the prospect of composing an essay on this subject from the perspective of their respective faith tradition was simply too daunting; there were almost no sources on which to draw. We are thus deeply grateful to our contributors for not having begged off when we first extended our invitation to them. We are hopeful that the end result is not simply a thoughtful and provocative book on the topic of divine love but also the starting point for future scholarship by other theologians and religious scholars within these and other traditions of faith.

We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to all of the wonderful folks at Templeton Press who have contributed to this project. Our editor, Natalie Lyons Silver, has been a delight to work with and is an author's dream: friendly, knowledgeable, hardworking, detail-oriented, understanding, accessible. Many others at Templeton have been so helpful to us throughout the writing, editing, and publishing processes, and we thank them all.

Besides the Press, the John Templeton Foundation (JTF) itself merits

so much of our appreciation for having the foresight to promote scholarly research and writing on the subjects of altruism and an unlimited love that, for the late Sir John Templeton, described the essence of divinity underlying the best elements of the great world religions. His exalted vision was instrumental in the founding of several academic centers of excellence pertaining to what variously have been termed classical sources of human strength or essential capacities or prosocial behaviors. These faith-grounded virtues are typically said to include forgiveness, spirituality, gratitude, humility, self-control, wisdom, hope, and love.

Among the centers that JTF has helped to establish is the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love (IRUL), as named by Sir John, located first in Cleveland's University Circle and currently in Stony Brook, New York. One of IRUL's key ongoing projects is the Flame of Love, which applies the methods of the social sciences to the study of self-reported experiences of godly love, and to which this book contributes directly at the conceptual level. The two editors of this book play lead roles in IRUL: Stephen Post as president and Jeff Levin as research advisory consultant for public health. The work of this book's contributing authors was also underwritten by IRUL, and thus, ultimately, by JTF. We are therefore doubly blessed by the Templeton family: the Foundation has supported our work and the Press is publishing our results.

Finally, we would like to thank our own families for their support and encouragement as we worked on this project: Lea Steele Levin and Mitsuko, Emma, and Andrew Post. Our prayer is that this book both honors their faith in us and also does justice to all those innumerable saints whose lives have been paragons of selflessness, compassion, and divine love.

DIVINE LOVE



## Introduction

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### *Divine Love in the World's Religious Traditions*

JEFF LEVIN

**I**N THE MIDRASH, A telling anecdote from the life of Asshur illuminates a troubling facet of human nature, as much a source of crisis for our day as for the ancient days of the biblical patriarchs. The book of Genesis states that Asshur, a son of Shem and forerunner of the Assyrian people, lived in Nimrod's wicked land of Bavel until "out of that land [he] went forth."<sup>1</sup> According to the Rabbis, Asshur had heard about idolatrous plans to build a great tower to heaven and "from that scheme Asshur dissociated himself."<sup>2</sup> To his credit, the Midrash notes, "When he saw them come to wage war against the Holy One, blessed be He, he quitted his country."<sup>3</sup>

Asshur went on to make a name for himself in the world. He was an accomplished builder of many cities, Nineveh his crown jewel—an "exceeding great city"<sup>4</sup> with wide avenues and considered a center of civilization. But this worldly success and renown had predictable results. The Rabbis explain: "Yet he [Asshur] did not remain constant [in his righteousness], and when he came and joined them in destroying the Temple God said to him: 'Yesterday a chicken and to-day an egg! Yesterday thou didst soar aloft with religious actions and noble deeds, whilst now thou art shut up like [a chicken in] an egg.' . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Here then is a universal dilemma: while the stated ideals of religious traditions may ennoble us and steer us to acts of courage and benevolence, sometimes this incentive is just not enough. For various reasons, imperfect humans fail to live up to these ideals and fall into sin and decrepitude,

either backsliding from an earlier attempt to match their actions to these ideals, like Asshur, or never managing such an effort at all.

To construct and live a life in accord with the highest of religious principles is a challenge. The pull of the world is a fierce counterweight, for us as much as for ancients such as Asshur. The approbation of opinion leaders, the material rewards of conformity, the safe feelings of fellowship with like-minded others—against this force, religious ideals sometimes fail.

But another force works against living by the highest principles of religion. Our faith traditions themselves may betray us. Alongside lofty ideals, expounded upon repeatedly within sacred texts, is the testimony of history. The manifest reality of religious history is often quite divergent from the whitewashed stories of selfless saints motivated only by truth and goodness that are held up as models for the religious life. Ugly perversions of the noblest religious impulses—into obsessions of hatred, injustice, cruelty, and greed—drive many souls into the intellectual and spiritual prison of fundamentalism, the parched desert of secularism and materialism, or the swamp of ersatz religions derived from misreadings of older wisdom traditions imported from elsewhere.

The challenge to the world's religions is to match the highest principles of their respective sacred writings to the messages that they communicate and to the actions that they sponsor, undertake, and hold up as representative of their traditions. This collective and global challenge is mirrored by a more individual and personal one, shared by every religious believer. Over a century ago, Rabbi Moses Mielziner, a great Talmudic scholar, elucidated this challenge: "The ultimate aim of religion is to ennoble man's inner and outer life, so that he may love and do that only which is right and good. This is a biblical teaching that is emphatically repeated in almost every book of Sacred Scripture."<sup>6</sup>

Religion, ideally, serves to inspire, to elevate, and, most of all, to synchronize human behavior with the most exalted principles revealed by respective world teachers and sacred texts. Only by fulfilling the ubiquitous golden rule in our actions toward others can it be said that we have fully taken such guidance to heart. The noblest and holiest words spoken by the great wisdom traditions must incline our hearts and, in turn, our deeds to holiness. The inner and the outer must become one.

The intrepid reader can find this same teaching, in one form or another, articulated throughout the writings of other sacred traditions: in the Hadith literature and Sufi tales, in the collective writings of the Zen masters, in

# I “If God Did Not Love Me, God Would Not Have Made Me!”

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*Exploring Divine Love in African Religion*

**JOHN S. MBITI**

**I**N THE LARGELY ORAL traditions of African peoples, there are obviously no written views about divine love or other topics. I have also found no extended discussions of this theme by individuals, communities, or academic institutions, other than references to the love of God in Christian circles.

Nevertheless, in their traditional life, people are aware of the divine love, and do say something about it, without necessarily using this terminology. The notion belongs to the wide spectrum of ethical concepts that includes God’s love, mercy, kindness, providence, generosity, creative activity, and saving acts (salvation). We find such views in the vast areas of proverbs, beliefs, ethics, myths, stories, and symbols that every community cherishes. People speak about life in ways that point to their love-based relationship with God. In this oral context, such opinions are community opinions since they cannot be tied to an individual by virtue of his or her writing them down.

In each of Africa’s roughly two thousand languages (plus many more dialects), there are obviously words for love and related concepts, with various usages. Similarly, in every one of these languages and among the peoples who speak them, there is at least one word for God and many ideas about God. Thus, “love” and “God” are common concepts in African life and religiosity. This chapter examines three areas in which the concept of divine love would be concealed in traditional life: proverbs, prayers, and

names of God. As a point of entrance, we consider first the concept of God's relationship to human beings (persons).

A strong feature of traditional African life is its religiosity (or religiousness), which is today commonly called "African religion." It defines the landscape of people's lives at the deep level of their awareness of existence, worldviews, and participation in life. We find religion in various forms in every ethnic community or people (not to use the discarded word "tribe"). Yet, over the vast continent, there exists an assortment of commonalities and similarities of belief, praxis, worldviews, and values, to make it possible to speak of African religion in the singular, allowing for variations in location and time.

## GOD AND THE CREATION OF PERSONS

One of these strong commonalities of African religion is people's acknowledgment of God. We find this religious component in every people and language, constituting a monotheistic view of and belief in God. Everywhere, people confess or acknowledge God to be the Creator and Sustainer of all things. While they have no physical representations of God, people use symbolic language and anthropomorphisms to speak about God. Through such uncomplicated affirmations or anthropomorphic symbols, communities disseminate and perpetuate knowledge about God, which they articulate especially in proverbs, sayings, prayers, and names of God. Proverbs are short and easily memorable. Everybody can use proverbs spontaneously at any occasion as he or she may see fit, but family and ritual elders generally say the prayers for their families and communities.

Besides speaking of the many activities (works) of God, people reflect also about the nature and being of God. In many cases, they use symbols and anthropomorphisms to fathom the mysteries of God. They have also many concepts that describe the ethical nature of God. In this range of concepts we unearth how people speak of God as being kind, loving, good, and just. In relation to people, they perceive and describe God as Parent, Mother, Father, Ruler, Judge, Friend, Savior, Protector, Giver of Children and Rain, Healer, and Preserver. They pray and perform rituals, calling upon God in whom they trust.

All these references to God indicate and illustrate how the belief in God is the anchor of African religiosity. It is a communal value, an integral part of people's heritage and identity. It plays an essential role in explaining the

## 2 “In the Beginning, Love Entered That One”

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*Divine Love from a Perspective Informed by Vedic Hindu Thought*

**WILLIAM K. MAHONY**

**A**MONG THE FIRST THOUGHTS that rose in my mind when the editors asked me to contribute a chapter to this book was that, yes, I would like to do so, for the topic of divine love is certainly, for me, an interesting and even compelling one and I would be happy to offer comments on it informed by my studies of Hinduism. I would also want to say before beginning that it is hard to imagine a wider range of ideas and practices than those associated with what has come to be known as Hinduism, for Hindu religious sensibilities encompass many traditions, practices, and schools of thought.

Among my subsequent thoughts, therefore, was that I probably should focus my comments on a particular thread within Hinduism. Accordingly, I have decided to weave my reflections in this chapter on ideas and practices represented specifically by texts expressing Vedic religious sensibilities. The English adjective “Vedic” is formed from the Sanskrit word *veda*, which means “sacred knowledge.” The word connotes a knowledge gained through seeing: it is originally a visionary knowledge of the holy, and thus insight into the nature and meaning of existence and the way to life in effective harmony with it. Grounded in this sense, the Veda also refers to an extensive religious system based on this sacred knowledge and on a particular complex of songs, rituals, sacred narratives, contemplative investigations, philosophical musings, and normative ethics that express that knowledge. When used in the plural, the term “the Vedas” refers

to the set of sacred literatures and practices that present and hold that knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

I have chosen this strand because Vedic ideas, practices, and intuitions have found expression in India for four thousand years or more and, it could be said, have served as a foundation of sorts for various Hindu perspectives throughout the many centuries since then.<sup>2</sup>

Scholarship is not unanimous in dating the rise of the Veda as an identifiable system of religious thought and expression. General agreement holds that the earlier phases of such sensibilities can be dated to 2000–1100 BCE, with the first singing of sacred songs and hymns in praise of the Vedic deities. A somewhat later period from about 1100 BCE to roughly 800 BCE brought the telling of mythic narratives and delineation of instructions associated with the performance of sacred rituals. A third period from roughly 800 BCE to about 500 BCE offered the presentation of teachings based on the contemplative, mystical apprehension of a divine presence within all beings and on philosophical reflections into the nature of that presence, and a fourth period from 500 BCE onward through the centuries consisted of the systematizing of these various components as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

I realize that my decision to concentrate on the Veda may surprise some people. I suspect that, when asked to think about the theme of divine love in Hinduism, those familiar with the field would tend to think more immediately of the devotional thread of Hinduism—that is to say, *bhakti*—represented by such texts as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*<sup>4</sup> and by numerous theological and philosophical texts stemming from them, as well as the sentiments expressed by worshippers, poet-saints, pilgrims, and devotees aligned with various sectarian *bhakti* traditions.<sup>5</sup>

When there are discussions specifically of Vedic sensibilities, they usually and appropriately turn on such important themes as the description of the many gods and goddesses in the Vedic world, the nature and function of sacrifice, the performance and interpretation of the meaning of sacred public and domestic rituals, and the value and effective function of contemplative meditation.<sup>6</sup> Relative to these important themes, Vedic thought gives less explicit attention to the nature and expression of love. Yet, as we will see, Vedic visionaries, liturgists, and contemplative sages did indeed recognize the power, presence, and importance of what could be called divine love.

“PONDER THIS, WISE PEOPLE: ON WHAT DID  
THE MAKER OF ALL THINGS STAND WHEN HE  
MADE ALL THINGS?”

We can begin our consideration of Vedic thought by saying that, to those Vedic seers who possessed what was regarded as visionary insight, the world and all things in it were in some way to have been brought into being, sustained, and enlivened by otherwise hidden forces they identified as various deities. Vedic poets and singers of sacred songs responded to and invoked those deities with verses of praise, calls for protection, and prayers for forgiveness and grace. An operative word for “deity” here would be the Sanskrit *deva*, which linguists know to be related to the English “divinity” and thus “divine.” There was the god Agni, for example, who brought forth and dwelled within the many forms of fire: the sun, the flame in the domestic hearth, the sacred fire burning on the sacred altar. The mighty Indra protected the world against forces of death. Vedic seers saw the daytime light of the celestial realm as the god Dyaus and addressed the broad earth as the goddess Pṛthivī. Parjanjya fashioned the clouds and lived within the nourishing rain. Vāyu moved as the wind. Puṣān guided cows along their paths. Mitra and Varuṇa looked over the smooth turning of the days, months, and seasons.

At one level, Vedic sensibilities are therefore polytheistic in nature. One Vedic visionary poet sang, for example, of the “thirty and three gods,” while another praised 339 deities who served the god Agni alone.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Vedic seers themselves wondered: How did the gods and goddesses themselves come into being? Who or what created them?

Such questions may have stood behind the musings of the Vedic sages who sang this song of the god Viśvakarman, whose name means “Maker of All Things”:

Where did he stand when he took his position?  
What supported him?  
How was it made?  
From what did the Maker of All Things,  
beholding all things, fashion the earth  
and shape the splendor of the skies? . . .  
From what lumber and from what tree  
were the heavens and the earth carved?

Ponder this, wise people!  
Inquire within your minds:  
on what did he stand when he made all things?<sup>8</sup>

Here we see an instance of a type of question that intrigued the Vedic mind: From what do the gods draw their creative and sustaining power? Is there some preexistent principle or force with which they align their artful work in the universe? These sorts of questions imply others that Vedic sages pondered and expressed in various ways: If there is such an underlying or transcendent Ultimate Reality, what is the relationship within it between the gods and the world? What is the relationship between the gods and one's own existence? Is there something that unites one's existence with the existence of all things?

Vedic sacred songs, paeans, prayers, liturgical texts, and contemplative intuitions variously indicate that the answer to such questions is "yes," and that this universal source and continuing foundation of reality itself is in some ways associated with the power of love.

#### LOVE AS THE DIVINE YEARNING-TO-BE

In the following song from the *Rg Veda* from roughly 1200 BCE we hear the musings of one who has pondered the otherwise incomprehensible fact that existence actually exists. Displaying a sense of wonder and a visionary spirit, the song presents its understanding of this mystery in the form of a creation narrative:

There was neither nonbeing nor being then.  
There was no region of air nor sky beyond it.  
What moved? Where? Under whose protection?  
Was there water, deep and unfathomable?  
There was neither death nor immortality then.  
There was no distinction between night and day.  
By its own inner power that One breathed, windless.  
Beyond it, there was nothing whatsoever. . . .  
Love-yearning entered that One, in the beginning:  
That was the first seed of thought.  
Searching within their hearts with wisdom,  
Sages found the bond of being within nonbeing. . . .

### 3 Divine Love in Classical Judaism

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JACOB NEUSNER

A RELIGION SETS FORTH A system of the social order comprising a worldview, a way of life, and a theory of the social entity that appeals to that worldview in explaining that way of life. By “Judaism,” I mean the religious system that finds in the Torah of Moses its way of life, worldview, and account of itself as the social group that it calls “Israel.” That social group regards itself as the embodiment in the here and now of the Israelites of which the Torah speaks. In classical Judaism attested by Scripture and the rabbinic canon of late antiquity, the Torah or Instruction encompasses two components. One part is contained in writing and known as the written Torah, and the other part is formulated and transmitted in memory and called the oral Torah. The written part of the Torah corresponds to the ancient Israelite Scriptures that Christianity calls “the Old Testament.” Judaism and Christianity accept this written part as a divine revelation given to Moses at Sinai, although they interpreted the texts differently. Judaism on its part saw the legal sections of the oral part of the Torah as a separate revelation to Moses in explanation of the written laws. The narrative portions of the Torah were examined no less closely to express the Torah’s social theory. Discussions of the oral Torah were preserved. The oral part of the Torah is preserved in written form in the documents produced by the ancient rabbis of the first six centuries CE, from the Mishnah, a philosophical law code of 200 CE, through the Talmud of Babylonia, an exposition of the law and narrative of Scripture, and the Mishnah, of 600 CE. When we wish to define God’s love in Judaism, we turn to the classical tradition set forth in the Torah, written and oral.

## 4 Wisdom into Compassion

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*Buddhism in Practice*

RUBEN L. F. HABITO

“DIVINE LOVE” APPEARS TO be a problematic term from a Buddhist viewpoint, considering both components, “divine” and “love.” First, the Buddha’s central teaching is about overcoming the dissatisfactoriness (Pāli: *dukkha*) of the human condition, in understanding and uprooting its causes and thus attaining enlightenment and ultimate liberation. Given this thrust of his basic religious message, the Buddha set aside speculative questions about the origins of the world, about continuance or noncontinuance of existence after death, and so on, as irrelevant to the matter at hand, that is, eliminating *dukkha* and realizing ultimate liberation through the wisdom of enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the question of a Creator God as a divine power who controls human destiny and to whom humans need to submit is a nonissue<sup>2</sup> in the religious worldview of the different forms of Buddhism that developed in history.<sup>3</sup>

Second, words translatable as “love” in Sanskrit (*preman, sneha, kāma, nāga, anurāga, abhilāsa, priya*) appearing in non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist texts refer to a variety of human relations and emotions that easily give way to an attitude of grasping or clinging (that is, to the “object” of one’s “love”). The mind of awakening to be cultivated by Buddhist followers, in contrast, entails an inner freedom to “see things just as they are,” without clinging or attachment. The kind of “love” as referred to by the terms listed above leads to or aggravates dissatisfactoriness and suffering, and is thus considered among the obstructions to be overcome by those in the path of awakening.<sup>4</sup>

With these reservations from a Buddhist standpoint in mind, we first need to clarify our terms in order to proceed. For this we take our cue from Sir John Templeton, who wrote, “Unlimited love was called *agape* by the ancient Greeks to distinguish the divine love from earthly emotions.”<sup>5</sup> What interests us is this *agapeic*, or altruistic, kind of attitude and action—a pure, unlimited, “divine” kind of love that is to be distinguished from “earthly emotions.”<sup>6</sup> Our task in this essay then is to map out and highlight this altruistic kind of attitude and action, and understand its place within the context of the religious praxis and worldview of the adherents of various forms of Buddhism in history and in our contemporary global scene.

The first part of this essay takes a panoramic view of early, Mahāyāna, and Tantric Buddhism, to examine the place of altruistic attitudes leading to concrete action as found within doctrinal, ethical, praxeological, and ritual expressions of this family of religious traditions.<sup>7</sup> The second part considers three contemporary forms of Buddhism with communities of adherents in different parts of the world, highlighting the pivotal place of compassion in their respective forms of religious praxis and worldviews. The concluding section offers reflections on tasks and challenges for Buddhists vis-à-vis their own stated religious ideal, which may have some relevance for adherents of other religious traditions as well.

## ALTRUISTIC ATTITUDES IN EARLY, MAHĀYĀNA, AND TANTRIC BUDDHISM

An intentful reading of Buddhist scriptural texts including Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and other historical sources spanning many centuries provides solid ground for affirming that an altruistic, or *agapeic*, kind of attitude and action occupies a central place in the religious teachings of the Buddha as received and further developed by his followers through the ages. The very fact that there are such teachings at all is said to be due to the Buddha’s resolve out of compassion for all sentient beings to convey what he realized in his experience of Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, fully realizing that the profound liberating truth (*dharmā*) could never be adequately expressed in words.<sup>8</sup>

Scriptural sources reflecting early Buddhist teaching, practice, and worldview emphasize the importance of cultivating lovingkindness (Pāli: *mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) for followers of the Awakened One, both as a condition for arrival at the ultimate state of nirvana (Pāli: *nibbāna*)

## 5 God as Infinite Love

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### *A Roman Catholic Perspective*

DAVID TRACY

#### INFINITE LOVE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: A CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL READING<sup>1</sup>

THE NEW TESTAMENT RENDERS the Invisible God visible for Christians through the words, deeds, and destiny—that is, the passion, cross, and Resurrection—of Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed to be the Christ. Through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit, Christians are led to experience and understand God as Infinite Love. The culmination of that New Testament proclamation is the first letter of John 4:7–8: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”<sup>2</sup>

As we shall see below, this famous Johannine proclamation, “God is love,” gives rise to many diverse Christian theologies, philosophies, and spiritual and mystical ways of life focused on God’s Infinite Love. It is essential, therefore, to understand that 1 John’s “God is love” is not an abstract statement, although many theologies have rightly emerged over the centuries from John’s “God is love.” First John is best read as a commentary on the Gospel of John, the gospel of love. John’s Gospel—the most meditative, at times mystical, the most symbolic and theological of the four Gospels—can itself be read as a meditation in the Wisdom tradition on the life and destiny of the Jesus portrayed less symbolically in the more realistic narrative genres in Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

The Synoptic Gospels, each in a distinct way, portray Jesus' love over and over—especially Jesus' love for the rejected and marginalized of his society. In all three Synoptics the love of Jesus and the love Jesus commands and empowers is love as excess. God's infinite love is excessive. God's infinite love empowers human beings to love excessively not only one's family, one's own people, but everyone, anyone—the neighbor. Nietzsche was entirely correct to insist that the Christian love of neighbor (which he considered both humanly impossible as well as nonaristocratic, i.e., for the weak, not the strong), was *the* transvaluation of all ancient values. As Aristotle, for example, makes clear, friendship (*philia*) with one's equal is the highest form of love (*eros*) for the Greeks. Hence, following the Greeks, Nietzsche's Zarathustra declares (to paraphrase), "I preach the friend not the neighbor."<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, Jesus preaches love of the neighbor.

The understanding that God is love and the resultant double command to love God and neighbor is, of course, already present in the Hebrew Bible itself: implicitly in its basic narratives, God's loving covenant with Israel, and in central passages on the love command in Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, the Song of Songs, and elsewhere. As a Jew, Jesus already knew the ancient command to love God and neighbor.

Jesus, in all three Synoptics, commands and empowers love as excess—the love of every neighbor, at the limit, the love of enemy. By contrast, the Gospel of John is the Wisdom Gospel where divine *Logos* becomes incarnate as Love. Wisdom yields to Love in John because in the life, words, and destiny of the Incarnate One, Jesus the Christ, one finally understands clearly what we all sense inchoately and hesitantly: God is love and thereby we now can become capable through God's grace to be those commanded and empowered to love.

In the Gospel of John, God's love is portrayed principally as relational and reciprocal. This Johannine reading of love as profoundly relational is in no way a lessening of the Synoptic understanding of love as excess. Rather, the love of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One in John, frees one to understand that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."<sup>4</sup> In the Incarnation, John's *Logos* becomes Incarnate Love and, by that means, John implicitly joins the more explicitly excessive—that is, kenotic—language of the great hymn in Paul's Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of  
death—even death on a cross.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to consider, too, how markedly different each Gospel account of the love of Jesus is. In Mark, one finds an often troubled but fiercely loving Jesus as apocalyptic prophet in a strange and unsettling narrative. Mark's Gospel, almost like a postmodern text, is more fragmentary than continuous; it seems to end in fear and deep confusion as the women flee the tomb in what is the first ending: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."<sup>6</sup> Mark's Gospel alone portrays the disciples as seeming to understand Jesus far less than the marginal figures do—the poor and the rejected. Even the demons in Mark's Gospel sense the terrifying uniqueness of the love preached and lived by this disturbing Markan apocalyptic Jesus more than his own disciples. Everything in Mark seems fragmentary, disjointed, paratactic, unnerving. In Mark, Jesus' love is fierce and excessive.

The Gospel register shifts almost completely with the Jesus of the Gospel of Luke. Luke's Jesus is portrayed not as an apocalyptic figure, but as a prophet who acts and speaks with clarity. In Luke, for example, unlike Mark, the disciples of Jesus understand that a new reality has arrived in their midst—the reign of God preached by this Jesus through his words and actions. Luke, more like John than Mark, shows the reign of God as not yet fully here but already begun in the words and deeds of this prophet Jesus. Luke's Jesus speaks and acts with clear speech, like such classical prophets as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. The Lukan Jesus both speaks lucidly and acts with directness. Luke's Jesus shows a sense of purpose that no one can miss. Moreover, in the parables of Luke's Jesus, one finds some of the greatest parables of love, such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. In Luke, God's love for us—like the love of the Father for the prodigal's return—is overwhelming and without limit, that is, infinite. In Luke, the

Good Samaritan (a paradoxical choice for true neighbor-love for an ancient Jew) displays the kind of love for *any* other, any and every neighbor.

Moreover, Luke, unlike Mark, wants and achieves a more continuous, more Greek, and less fragmentary narrative. This does not mean that Luke wrote a sanguine narrative. His Jesus, like the ancient prophets, is clear but deeply unsettling. For example, as a creative narrator, Luke does not hesitate to change even the geography of ancient Palestine for the purposes of his narrative—that is, Jesus must fulfill his destiny by moving steadily and ineluctably to his “fated place,” Jerusalem, no matter the geography involved.

In Luke, moreover, one finds the clearest portrayal of Jesus’ actions for the poor. This will later become what modern Catholics call the “option for the poor.” The International Synod of Bishops, in 1970, insisted that the option for the poor is not an addition to the Christian gospel of love but is at the very heart of the Christian Gospels. This is a modern version of a Lukan emphasis. The modern Catholic is called not just to love interpersonally, but to love by means of changing unjust structures that so damage the poor. Christians are called not simply to “charity” but are called to love by attempting to change unjust social structures and to aid in the development of a more just society. The contemporary Catholic recognition that charity cannot be separated from justice, nor justice from love, is a major modern development of Luke’s option for the poor. Furthermore, in Luke’s Acts, one also discovers that love is also social, communal, and ecclesial, never merely individualistic. In Acts, one finds a radical communal sharing of goods in the ancient Christian community—an almost forgotten tradition of communal love through justice. The new Christian base communities, especially in Latin America and Africa, are renewed attempts at a more communal Christianity, especially like that described in Acts. The call of Vatican II to replace the very hierarchical “perfect society” model for the church and to develop the “people of God” model was encouraging. Certainly, much more needs to be done in terms of reform of Roman Catholic institutional structures (still, in my judgment, too hierarchical, clerical, and reified) to embody a more communal church of loving *koinonia*. This need for institutional reform is especially so when one observes the role of women in the church. Here the contrast between the prominent role of women in the ancient church and today is stunning—and clearly calls for radical reform of present structures.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the social and communal, even institutional,

## 6 Divine and Human Love in Islam

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WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

ISLAM BEGINS with the two-part Shahadah, the “bearing witness” that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger. The second part acknowledges the historical reality of the religion established by the message known as the Qur’an. The first part, called the sentence that “asserts unity”—*tawhīd*—declares the unique, ahistorical reality of the divine Being. In the Islamic perspective, this twin truth—the unity of God, and the specific, historical consequences that follow upon this unity—was taught by all prophets, traditionally said to number 124,000. To each of them God revealed the message, “There is no god but I, so worship Me.”<sup>1</sup> God’s unitary reality is everywhere and always the same, but “worship” or “service” (*ibāda*) varies according to circumstances, for “God never sent a messenger save in the tongue of his people.”<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays, discussions of Islamic teachings typically gloss over the ahistorical foundation of the message and focus instead on sorting out the social and political implications of the second part of the Shahadah. This is to say that both Muslims and outside observers stress the Shariah, the law that came to be established on the basis of the Qur’anic message, and neglect the Haqiqah, the Reality that gave rise to both the universe and prophetic guidance. Law, however, deals with activity and society; it has nothing to say about God Himself or His love for creation.<sup>3</sup> The jurists (*fuqahā’*)—the specialists in the Shariah—have never discussed love in their capacity as jurists; to speak of legislating or adjudicating love is ludicrous. Thus, in order to investigate the role of love in the tradition, we need to look at the writings of theologians, philosophers, Sufis, and poets.<sup>4</sup> It is they who look

at the Haqiqah beyond the Shariah, the Reality that gave rise to the Law. It is they who explain that God's love for human beings animates the universe and guides people to live their lives in conformity with that love.<sup>5</sup>

When we look closely at the universal message of the prophets—"There is no god but I, so worship Me"—we can see that its two clauses correspond to the two parts of the Shahadah. The meaning is simply that all reality derives from the Real; human beings must therefore strive to accord with the Real. Muslim theologians sometimes unpack the implications of this message in terms of God's two "commands" (*amr*), one of which gave rise to the universe and the other to the moral realm. The first is commonly called "the engendering command" (*al-amr al-takwīnī*) and the second "the prescriptive command" (*al-amr al-taklīfī*). The first is addressed to all things and is mentioned in Qur'anic verses like, "His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be!', and it comes to be."<sup>6</sup> Notice here that God is motivated to issue this command by "desire" (*irāda*),<sup>7</sup> which the tradition takes as a synonym for creative love. The engendering command is rooted in *tawhīd*, the basic sense of which can be understood in terms of the divine attributes: "There is no god but God" means that there is no life but God's life, no knowledge but God's knowledge, no truth but God's truth, no reality but God's reality, no love but God's love. All contingent reality—"everything other than God" (a common definition of the universe)—derives from God, who is the source of all, the sustainer of all, and the ultimate goal of all.

As for the prescriptive command, it follows on the authority established by the second part of the Shahadah, "Muhammad is God's messenger." The Qur'an presents this command as various dos and don'ts that provide the basis for worship, law, morality, and spiritual transformation.<sup>8</sup>

The engendering command brings the universe into existence, and it takes everything back to God. This dual movement is commonly called "the Origin and the Return" (*al-mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*), or the descending and ascending "arcs" (*qaws*) of the circle of existence. Likewise the prescriptive command implies two movements: the descent of guidance (*hudā*) from God, and the ascent of souls to God. These movements are expressed mythically in the defining "nights" of Islam's infancy, both of which received the shining of the divine light. During "the Night of Power" (*laylat al-qadr*),<sup>9</sup> God sent Gabriel, the angel of revelation, to deliver the message: "a Book We have sent down to you, so that you may bring forth the people from the darkneses into the light."<sup>10</sup> During "the Night of the Ladder" (*laylat*

*al-mi'rāj*), Gabriel carried the Prophet to Jerusalem: "Glory be to Him who made His servant journey by night from the Holy Mosque [in Mecca] to the Furthest Mosque [in Jerusalem]!"<sup>11</sup> From there Gabriel took him up through the heavenly spheres to "the lote tree of the far boundary,"<sup>12</sup> on the outermost edge of paradise. Then Muhammad parted from the angel, left the created realm, and entered the Eternal Light.<sup>13</sup> On his return, he instituted the basic Islamic ritual, the daily prayers (*ṣalāt*). When asked if others could also climb the ladder to God, he responded, "The daily prayer is the believer's ladder."

Both Sufis and philosophers have taken the night journey as the archetype for the spiritual transformation that is the goal of praxis.<sup>14</sup> Sufism has produced a vast literature on the stages of the journey to God, as well as personal accounts by seekers who climbed the ladder in the Prophet's footsteps (accounts that may well have provided the literary models for Dante's *Divine Comedy*). The ascending steps were invariably explained as human virtues and character traits that need to be actualized if people are to escape from their own shortcomings. This is not to say, however, that the path can be traversed without God's help. The whole point of focusing on prophecy and the prescriptive command has been to show that divine grace provides the only means to reach the goal.

In short, there are two basic ways of looking at God's love. In terms of the engendering command, it is the motive force of both the Origin and the Return. In terms of the prescriptive command, it invites human beings to love God as he loves them.

## THE DIVINE FORM

Muslim theologians speak of God in terms of names and attributes derived from Qur'anic verses or hadiths (sayings of the Prophet). The divine names are said to number ninety-nine, though many more are mentioned in the texts. Numerous commentaries were written on the names, always highlighting the fundamental reality of God and the derivative reality of everything else. The names and attributes are of course anthropomorphic, for human beings can think of God only in terms of themselves. The principle of *tawhīd*, however, reminds us that God alone possesses true Being and its concomitant attributes. People conceive of God in terms of themselves because He conceives of them in terms of Himself. He is anthropomorphic because they are theomorphic. When the Prophet said,

“God created Adam in His form (*ṣūra*),” he was not simply reiterating the biblical statement, but also clarifying the Qur’anic designation of God as the Form-giver (*al-muṣawwir*),<sup>15</sup> who “formed you, and made your forms beautiful.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Arab logicians employed the word *taṣawwur* (derived from the same root) to render the notion of “concept”; its literal meaning is “to give form to something within oneself.” It is God who “conceives of” all things—who “gives form to them in Himself”—before saying “Be!” to them.

The Qur’an describes God as possessing “the Most Beautiful Names” (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) and it calls Him “the Beautiful-doer” (*muḥsin*). It says, “He made beautiful everything that He created.”<sup>17</sup> The Prophet said, “God is beautiful (*jamīl*), and He loves beauty.” The notion that all love is directed at beauty (*jamāl*, *ḥusn*) permeates the tradition. As for man, God “taught him all the names” (Qur’an 2:31) and created him “in the most beautiful stature.”<sup>18</sup> Among all existent things, man alone was created in the form of Him who is named by the Most Beautiful Names. Other creatures were created by the activities of specific names, so they can be “signs” (*āyāt*) of God’s life-giving, His gentleness, His might, His beneficence; only human beings can be signs of the Beautiful per se, embracing all of the Most Beautiful Names without exception. This is why Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209)—a prolific author of Arabic and Persian books that gave love a high profile—tells us that human beauty is differentiated from every other sort of created beauty because it displays the radiance of the divine Essence, whereas other creatures manifest only the activities of God’s attributes.<sup>19</sup>

When the Qur’an says that God created man in the most beautiful stature, it goes on to say that God “sent him down to the lowest of the low.”<sup>20</sup> This can be read as a reference to Adam’s fall, though Muslim scholars have rarely understood the fall as pointing to moral corruption. Rather, it demonstrates both human election and human need. After all, at the very beginning of the Qur’an’s retelling of the myth, God announced to the angels that He would be appointing a vicegerent in the earth.<sup>21</sup> Having created Adam, He placed Adam in paradise. Then, by issuing the command, “Fall down!”<sup>22</sup> He sent His newly appointed vicegerent to the realm for which he was created. Adam’s “sin” was a onetime act of disobedience,<sup>23</sup> quickly forgiven by God, who then made him a prophet to guide his children. Moreover, the Qur’an provides Adam with an excuse for disobeying the divine command not to approach the tree: “He forgot,”<sup>24</sup> which is hardly surprising, for “Man was created weak,”<sup>25</sup> and “There is none strong

## 7 The Humanity of Divine Love

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### *The Divinity of Human Love*

VIGEN GUROIAN

LOVE IS PERSONAL, and that which is personal is communal, Love draws others into its orbit. The model is God who is Trinity. St. Gregory of Nyssa observes that God “is a sort of continuous and indivisible community,”<sup>1</sup> a perfect communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in which love is given freely and completely to the others, and each receives love in the same measure that he gives it. Yet, this love communion is not mere diversity. This communion of love is a perfect unity such that the three are not several gods but one God (*Theos*), one Being (*Ousia*), three divine Persons (*Hypostases*). The Persons do not divide the divine nature (or being) between themselves; rather, each is wholly God. Yet neither are the Persons reducible to an impersonal divine substance. The Father is the *arche*, the origination, of the triune Godhead. It is the Father, writes the twentieth-century Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky, “that distinguishes the hypostases” in an eternal movement of love.<sup>2</sup> Out of the ground of his absolute freedom and infinite love the Father eternally begets the Son and “breaths forth” (processes) the Holy Spirit. In and through his love, the Father communicates the divinity that is the common being of all three Persons. Within the economy of redemption, the Son, who is the very Image of the Father, offers himself back to the Father in an act of self-donative and self-sacrificial love that is for the salvation of the world. The Holy Spirit, who is sent by the Father through the Son into the world, breathes the newness of life into the world. He

brings the gift of God's love and the knowledge of salvation in Christ to the world so that all who love and believe in Christ are sanctified and may become participants in the divine life.<sup>3</sup>

## THE PERSONAL NATURE OF LOVE

Love is freely given or it is not love at all. Love issues from persons, whether these persons are uncreated, as are the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity, or created, as are the multitude of human beings. "Personhood," writes Lossky, "is freedom in relation to nature."<sup>4</sup> Persons enact their own nature. Nature may be *what* they are (e.g., human, angelic, or divine), but the nature does not determine *who* they are. "A personal being," Lossky continues, "is capable of loving someone more than his own nature, more than his own life."<sup>5</sup> Freedom and love are thus the cardinal attributes of personhood. This freedom to enter into loving relationships with others, this personhood, is the image of God in man. Personhood thrives and is perfected through reciprocity and intercourse, more still in and through communion. This deep reciprocity and intercourse of communion is not merely sociality. Human beings together with much of the rest of the animal kingdom exhibit sociality among their own kind. But sociality may be determinate, governed by the animal nature. Sociality need not entail freedom or love, whereas communion does.<sup>6</sup>

Among human beings, love appears to spring from feelings and emotions. Thus, some mistakenly characterize love as irrational. But love transcends feeling and reason. Love is not rationally justified, nor is it just a "natural" affection. At its source, love is a divine reality. Love, as I have stated, is rooted in freedom, in the absolute freedom of God and, next, in the relative freedom of the creature. Love is the subsistence of God, and it is the flowering of the divine image (*imago Dei*) in humankind.

"In perfect love persons do not merely engage in a reciprocal exchange of self," writes Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae. "They also affirm themselves reciprocally and personally and establish themselves in existence through giving and receiving."<sup>7</sup> Love that is at once wholly self-donative and perfectly reciprocal is divine. The love that is communicated between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, however, is not merely shared as between three individuals but binds an indissoluble triunity in which there is no "distance" between the three divine Persons, a perfect

coinherence and interpenetration of personal life as one being. The *telos* of love is union minus extinction of relation, complete intimacy without compromise of integrity.

Love is perfectly efficacious within the Godhead. In other words, within the Godhead, freedom and love and love given and love reciprocated are commensurate. Nor in the mutuality that the Persons share is there pause, interlude of expectation, distance, or diminishment of personal integrity either for lack of reciprocation or reason of self-absorption. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are One and yet “other” to one another. Within the Godhead, love that is virtue and love that is self-gift are one, so that, as I have said, love is the divine subsistence common to the Three. Love is their oneness: their oneness is love.

### *Communion and Human Existence*

In summary, the divine communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the establishment (the instantiation) of love among the divine Persons in perfect freedom. Love presupposes the other in his or her freedom and integrity while it also seeks intercourse and union with the other. Communion is the ideal milieu of personal existence. Rather than reducing multiplicity to uniformity, it is the blossoming of multiplicity within an unreservedly and uninterrupted shared life.

Human existence is similar to divine existence in that it is personal. Yet, even if we discount the divisive and mortal effects of sin, we must take into account that human beings are individuated physically and psychologically. Within human existence, there is a certain order and sequence of freedom and love, love-gifted and love-reciprocated. Love’s movement is modified by a certain expectation and waiting upon reciprocation, which may or may not be forthcoming. Even when communion is joined, it lacks the uninterrupted immediacy of the relation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Love and communion are attendant to finitude within a spatiotemporal world. Among human beings love always is threatened by death. Nonetheless, human beings are capable of giving love without expectation of return, even in the face of the mortality that threatens to shatter communion. Human love and communion approximate divinity, but they also await salvation.

## 8 I Love, Therefore I Am

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### *A Relational and Charismatic Model of Love*

CLARK H. PINNOCK

COMPARED TO LOVE, as we say, there is nothing greater and nothing better. Therefore, it needs to be studied. What does it mean to love? For starters, to love someone requires us to affirm the basic dignity of the other person and to promote the other person's humanity. Love presupposes a concern for the other and wants the other person to flourish. More than sentimentality and mere feelings, love acts intentionally and sympathetically in response to the other. Love promotes well-being. Love is an act of self giving for the empowerment of others. Love is the ideal of the Christian life and character. It is what it means to be "perfect," as God is perfect. Love summarizes the moral law of God. It bonds the human community, and (one could add) it bonds the triune communion, too. Because of God's love for us, Christ died and rose again. It is safe to say that, if a person lacks love, he or she does not know God. The converse is also true. If a person radiates love, we know where it came from.<sup>1</sup>

### NO LIFE WITHOUT LOVE

The philosopher Descartes once said, "I think, therefore I am." *If I find myself thinking*, he reasoned, *I must exist!* A minimalist argument to be sure, but true, I suppose. However, I would much prefer to say, "I love, therefore I am." I say that because (surely) not thought but love stands at the heart of human existence. There is nothing more important in the

whole world. This is why countless books and poems, songs, and letters exist that exalt love on every level imaginable. Contrary to the Beatles, love is not “all you need” and certainly not in the way that they likely understood it. Julian of Norwich got it right: “Our life is founded and rooted in love and without love one cannot live.”<sup>2</sup> The love of God for us and in us and flowing out from us is a very great treasure and is life most abundant.<sup>3</sup> Paul asks why become drunk and stupid when there is divine love to intoxicate and elevate the senses?<sup>4</sup> To know the love of God in the power of the Holy Spirit is a central feature of the gospel and a continuing source of strength in trying circumstances.

The happiness that God makes possible for his higher creatures is the happiness of loving and being loved by God and our fellow creatures. Life does not get much better than that.

It can be an ecstasy of delight comparable only to a romantic love between a man and a woman. Our God-given freedom is something precious, but it is not an end in itself. It exists for the sake of love and makes it possible.<sup>5</sup> Charismatic believers (I find) are more comfortable perhaps than most with such categories. For them, the love of God poured out is much more than a concept. Through the baptism in the Spirit, one can experience the Spirit directly and have a joy that no one can take away. Ideally, it is not exhilaration for its own sake but God’s own refreshing breath blowing through them. *Agape* does not have to be emotional. Certainly not! It can be calm and deliberate. But love can also stir us profoundly and, when it does, do not downplay experience. The hotter the fire, the deeper the love. Let us seek a lively faith in the Spirit, one characterized by intensity. God is not a distant figure, but can be an overwhelming presence.

Through the Spirit, we can know God’s love, and through God’s love we can know God’s very self, who is love. By love God is chiefly known. Paul writes, “We all have knowledge; but knowledge puffs up, while love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge. But anyone who loves God is known by him.”<sup>6</sup>

## LOVE SUPREME AND UNSURPASSED

Love is God’s gift to the world and holds a central place in the gospel of Jesus Christ, our Lord. It is made wonderfully clear in the parable of the Prodigal Son.<sup>7</sup> It is a familiar story. A certain father (we read) had a young son who demanded his inheritance before his father’s death and promptly

squandered it. Having been reduced to poverty and homelessness, the boy reckoned that, if he went home in a suitably penitent spirit, he might secure work as a slave on his father's estate. Mind you, even this was far from certain, given the fact that grabbing the inheritance ahead of time was like wishing his father dead. But it was worth a try, and the boy set out for home.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again! He was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. Because of the love and mercy of God, the ungodly and sinners are free to come home and claim their belovedness. This parable is most eloquent in defining the nature of God's love for humankind.<sup>8</sup>

Paul the Apostle expresses the same kind of thought in spatial terms when he says that God's love is *broad* enough to encompass all mankind, *long* enough to last for eternity, *deep* enough to reach the most degraded person, and *high* enough to raise humankind to glory. In this text,<sup>9</sup> Paul echoes what he had written to the Romans that, whether one goes forward or backward or whether one goes up to the heights or down into the depths, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Paul also spoke of faith, hope, and love (each of them priceless), but singles out love as particularly special—special because, unlike the others, it is not just for "now" but for "eternity." One day faith will become sight and will not be needed, and one day hope will become fulfilment and not be so important as now. But, as for love, it will remain just what love is through the transition to new creation. Prophecies will pass away (Paul says) and tongues will cease and words of knowledge will become superfluous, but love is everlasting. It will always be supremely relevant: "Love never ends."<sup>11</sup>

## GOD'S LOVE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

According to the Old Testament, the love of God was the basis of Israel's election as his people, and she experienced his faithfulness and leading in good times and in bad. In many scriptures, we overhear the Israelites

## Conclusion

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### *Divine Love and Human Dignity*

STEPHEN G. POST

**D**IVINE LOVE is variously conceptualized in the preceding chapters, all of which point to some source of love in this universe that is higher and more reliable than our own. Flawed creatures that we surely are, arrogance and group insularity often distort the power of divine love when we do experience it. We remain earthen vessels, so those who report such experiences can and do go amiss. Very often, however, such experiences and beliefs give rise to consistent and inspiring lives of profound humility and a love of all humanity without exception.<sup>1</sup>

Still, consistent with perennial wisdom, the authors emphasize that in our connectedness with this divine love lies our greatest dignity as human creatures.<sup>2</sup> Such discussion may sound quaint and a tad irrelevant in our busy techno-world, but this is far from true. These days, we are bombarded by offers to “enhance” ourselves as human beings through BOTOX, anabolic steroids, growth hormone to make our children a little taller, and the dubious promises of a fountain of youth—all are for sale but none add to dignity or a deeper happiness.<sup>3</sup> Let us focus our attention not on the external vessel of our bodies, but instead on the capacity for a generous love that already lies within us waiting to be more fully unveiled and actively engaged through the enhancing power of divine love. Without this divine love, we are poor even if we do not know it, for in it rests ultimate hope for a better world, and without it despair is always close at hand.

What kind of love are we talking about? Elizabeth Alexander of Yale

University wrote a poem titled “Praise Song for the Day,” which she read at Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration. One stanza reads:

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,  
 others by *first do no harm or take no more*  
*than you need*. What if the mightiest word is love?<sup>4</sup>

Love is the fundamental emotional dynamic that moves us to “do unto others” in kindness and generosity. It is what makes our lives meaningful. In love, we affirm the value of others as well as of self, and we act creatively; in hatred, we diminish value and act destructively. I do not have in mind “love” in the modern sense that limits it to the nearest and dearest; rather, I am talking about a love of humanity that is typically at the core of our great spiritual and moral-political traditions. It is believed that such love, in infinitely vibrant creativity, underlies the universe.

A bold statement on the power of love in hard times was that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his Christmas Eve address of 1941. He wondered how men and women could rejoice in the spirit of love in a time of such concerted war against radical evil, with “sons and brothers” endangered. He asked, “How can we light our trees? How can we give our gifts? How can we wake and worship with love and with uplifted spirit and heart in a world at war, a world of fighting and suffering and death?” He answered, “Against enemies who preach the principles of hate and practice them, we set our faith in human love and in God’s care for us and all men everywhere.”<sup>5</sup> And it was with this affirmation of universal love, he said, that the sacrifices of sons and brothers could be properly solemnized and honored. FDR learned this from his Episcopal religious upbringing and extended the concept to the throes of conflict with a Nazi regime that preached the brutal elimination of so-called inferiors.

It is easy to lose hope in the power of love but for faith that in the sweeping drama of history God set the universe in motion and wrote the play so that love would be victorious in the final act, despite startling scenes of immense cruelty and hideous violence in which evil fills the stage. Thus, St. Paul linked together faith, hope, and love in 1 Corinthians 13:13. Without faith and hope, love does not hold our hearts in the darkness. Faith declares that despite all the cruel tyrants and wanton abusers of life, godly love has already won the day. Hope sets its sights on a real future in accordance with God’s promises.<sup>6</sup>