

Love – Ancient Perspectives

THE METOCHI SEMINAR

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For Egil A. Wyller

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Preface

This collection of thematically organized original studies presents and discusses perceptions on the notion of love in ancient philosophy and early Christian theology. The notion of love is discussed firstly in two critical readings of Anders Nygren's study *Agape and Eros* (1930–36). Nygren's distinction of *eros*, on the one hand, as an egocentric, human love and *agape*, on the other hand, as Christian, theocentric and divine love, has long been received almost as a dogmatic truth and prevented a more nuanced understanding. The metaphysics and ethics of love are further discussed in relation to Platonic, Neoplatonic, biblical and early Christian – especially Eastern Christian – thinking. Related questions such as “Is all love essentially divine?” and “Is unselfish love possible?” and themes such as love as a unifying force, and ascetical love, are also presented and discussed.

The papers are representative of the interests of the participants of the colloquy and therefore mainly deal with the Eastern Christian tradition, less with the Western. Their common focus is the notion of love. The two readings of Nygren may be seen as an introduction to the following papers, which are examples of how *eros* and *agape* are used in an ancient context. One is concerned with the biblical notion, another discusses the Neoplatonic Proclus's ideas of love, three of them deal with ideas of love in the Eastern Christian thinkers Diadochus of Photiki, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, and the last is concerned with the French mystic Marguerite Porete.

This volume is the result of an international research seminar, The Metochi Seminar, at the University of Agder's study centre in Greece (the Metochi Study Centre), on the island of Lesbos, in May 2015. We, the editors, would like to thank all the contributors, and we would also like to thank the University of Agder for its financial support. This volume is

dedicated to the late professor Egil A. Wyller. His work on the Platonic tradition, especially regarding the notion of love, has been an inspiration along our way.

The editors

Introduction

Andrew Louth

In early summer of 2015, a group of scholars, drawn from a range of disciplines, was gathered together in Metochi, up from the village of Kalloni, on the island of Lesbos, or Mytilene, to address ancient and modern perspectives on love. Apart from the academic questions raised in the papers, the place itself reminded all of those present of the manifold dimensions of love. Lesbos itself recalls the ancient Greek poet, Sappho, whose poems, only surviving in fragments, celebrate human love. It is the island, too, on which Longus set his tale of love, *Daphnis and Chloe*, the first Greek novel. As we travelled down towards Kalloni, we passed the dwelling place of the schoolmistress in Stratis Myrivilis's novel, *The Schoolmistress with the Golden Eyes*, which raises issues of human love from many different angles. While we were at Metochi, refugees from Syria and elsewhere were arriving on the north-eastern shore of Lesbos from Turkey, some of whom we encountered; their arrival inspired heroic endeavours of love from many Lesbians, not least the parish priest in those parts – Papa Stratis – whose efforts to provide practical support, and the constant anxiety caused by this, eventually claimed his own life. Above the place where we met was a monastery – our accommodation being a *metochi(on)*, a dependency, of the monastery, probably intended originally for the monks who worked the agricultural land that stretches out immediately below – which reminded us of other dimensions of love: that of contemplative waiting on God, as well as caring for the natural world. The theme of our conference manifested itself in other ways, too. The Norwegian University of Agder does not want to be regarded as a wealthy invader of the peace of a Greek island, but has taken care that the work in adapting the buildings to a study centre, as well as the food and accommodation provided, respect the simplicity of the life of the Greek

islanders – in this way showing some loving regard for those amongst whom we were spending our time.

The colloquy itself gathered together scholars from different countries and a wide range of disciplines: many came from Norway or Greece, but others came from other European countries, from Ireland to Serbia, indeed the scholar hailing from Ireland came straight from Uganda, where she has made her life for more than twenty years. There were theologians (of various stripes – biblical and patristic scholars, systematic theologians and philosophers of religion), as well as sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and others whose main field of interest lay in political matters. In this volume the historical contributions will be presented.

As was fitting in a colloquy convoked by a Scandinavian foundation, the initial papers concerned the hugely influential, though also controversial, analysis of love, or modes of love, advanced by Anders Nygren in his book translated into English as *Agape and Eros*. For nearly a century now, no theological or philosophical approach to the question of love has been able to escape his influence, even, or sometimes it seems especially, by those most concerned to call his ideas into question. Torstein Theodor Tollefsen and John Kaufman approached his monumental work in a predominantly critical spirit. Their papers were complementary, Tollefsen's being more strictly philosophical in its approach, while Kaufman placed Nygren in the context of what one might call the Nordic theology of the beginning of the last century. They also shared a great deal: both highlight how, for Nygren, Christianity's most faithful exponents were the Apostle Paul and the Reformer, Martin Luther (or, one might say, Martin Luther's interpretation of the Apostle), and they home in on his notion of "fundamental *motif*" as central to his contrast between *eros* and *agape*. Both of them find basic flaws in such *motif*-research, not least in the way in which ways of life are trapped in the Procrustean bed of a fundamental *motif*. Both papers are very rich, and it is difficult to single out specific themes. In Tollefsen's paper it is striking how he sees Nygren as limiting religion in general and Christianity in particular to the relationship between God and the human: the created order is simply a back-drop to the drama of redemption. The whole cosmic dimension of Christianity, characteristic of the patristic

vision, is sidelined by such an approach. Kaufman draws two other figures into his analysis of Nygren: his slightly younger contemporary, Gustaf Aulén, and the great Church Father, Irenaeus. Irenaeus is discussed because Nygren almost approves of him, virtually alone among the Church Fathers; Aulén is discussed because, in a different context, he shared with Nygren a predilection for *motif*-research. Simply drawing these parallels is thought-provoking; Kaufman's treatment of them is deeply illuminating.

Then followed a carefully analytical paper on the biblical language of love by Tor Vegge. Vegge begins by pointing out that *agape* and its cognates are the words most frequently used for love in the Scriptures even though, in the Greek culture in which the early Christians moved, the commonest words for love were *eros* and *philia*, the former of which is never used in the New Testament, the latter but once. This does not, however, lead Vegge into the kind of sharp distinctions that characterize Nygren's work; rather he pursues a careful analysis of various New Testament passages to show how love among believers, Jesus's love for his disciples (as often expressed by the verb *phileo* in Johannine texts), and God's love for humankind interrelate and inform each other. Then Vegge goes back to the Old Testament, not least the Greek Septuagint version, that formed the early Christian's *Scripture* (*graphe*), later Old Testament. There is now detected a different, more social, more political context, for all that the Old Testament texts inform the New Testament ones. We were encouraged to be aware of the various strategies to which the language of love could belong.

The Fathers then made their entrance, with papers on Diadochus of Photiki by Henny Fiskå Hägg, on Gregory of Nyssa by Vladimir Cvetković, and on Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor by Andrew Louth. Hägg explores the notion of love in Diadochus of Photiki, a fifth-century bishop of whom we know very little. Diadochus, she demonstrates, forms a kind of rich epitome of Byzantine ascetic and mystical wisdom. Love is central to his understanding of the Christian life, and it is the human heart that is the organ of love. Along with this emphasis on the heart, the place of experience is underlined. The stress Diadochus lays on the necessity of experience in prayer recalls a remark

by another Byzantine, Gregory Palamas, nearly a millennium later, who remarks early on in the controversy with Barlaam that “it is dangerous to speak *of* God, if one does not know how to speak *to* him”. Another striking feature of Diadochus’s theology of the heart is that he seems to be the very first person to refer to what we now call the Jesus Prayer, for he speaks of recourse to a prayer he called the “Lord Jesus” (in the vocative): either the prayer itself or perhaps the beginning of the prayer. With Cvetković’s paper on Gregory of Nyssa and the notion of “distance” (*diastēma*), we move on to properly philosophical territory. Cvetković explores the different ways in which the fundamental notion of distance functions in different stages of Gregory’s thought. Distance is characteristic of creaturely existence, a function of its finitude and its manifold nature. Yet, within creaturely existence is a longing – a love-longing – to overcome this distance, a distance with both spatial and temporal dimensions. In relation to God, this yearning to overcome distance leads to an understanding of creaturely perfection as consisting in a constant reaching out after God (which Daniélou called, echoing some of Gregory’s language, *épectase*). In Louth’s paper the metaphysical nature of love, stressed by Dionysius the Areopagite, is complemented in St Maximus the Confessor by a strongly practical stress on the accessibility of being able to love, something rooted in the very nature of humanity.

Parallel to this exploration of the Christian patristic heritage, there were papers by experts in the Neoplatonic tradition. Dimitrios A. Vasilakis begins from the conviction of one of the great interpreters of classical philosophy of recent times, Gregory Vlastos, who maintains that Platonic love is necessarily abstract – love for the Form of Beauty – and cannot have as its object any particular person. Vasilakis replies to Vlastos’s contention by appealing to a Platonist of the fifth century, Proclus, who, in his *Commentary on Plato’s First Alcibiades*, developed a notion of interpersonal love in which lovers foster one another’s ascent towards the divine, reflecting in this the divine providential (*pronoetikos*) love of the cosmos. Deirdre Carabine, also a distinguished scholar of Neoplatonism and the continuation of this tradition in the Latin Middle Ages, shows how the apparent abstractness of negative or apophatic theology enhances the experience of love of the divine, taking as her

example the apparently simple and unsophisticated teaching of Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.

What conclusions were we left with at the end of the colloquy? It was remarked by many of those present that love is taken for granted as the basis of Christianity, and beyond that of any adequate understanding of human relationship. On examination, however, both the definition of love and the entailments of love proved to be, if not problematic, at least liable to raise serious questions of meaning and obligation. What does it mean to love? What obligations does the acknowledgment of love give rise to? Is there not a danger in narrowing down the nature of human response and human experience by taking for granted that love is essentially concerned with human relationships? What do we make of the cosmic dimension of love, that was a feature of much pre-modern reflection on love? What of *l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*, in Dante's words?

This volume is dedicated to the great Norwegian philosopher and believer, Egil A. Wyller, who sadly passed away a short time ago. A central notion in his intellectual journey (for one cannot read Wyller for long before realizing that what we are concerned with is not just a matter of learning and knowledge, but of wisdom and, yes, love) is the notion of *henology*: the study of the One, the notion that we begin and end with the One, with union, with unity. As a commanding vision it makes sense of a great deal of the Western philosophical tradition (and I daresay of Eastern traditions, too, but I must speak of what I know, at least a little). The grand vision of henology encounters love at every turn. So it is appropriate that this volume is dedicated to Egil A. Wyller.

The colloquy proved to be a rich intellectual feast, and in publishing this volume, it is hoped that others will be able to share, at least, in the exchange of ideas that took place in those unforgettable early summer days on a Greek island.

CHAPTER 1

Eros and Agape – a Critique of Anders Nygren

Torstein Theodor Tollefsen

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Abstract: Nygren's book *Eros och Agape* was first published in Sweden in 1930/36. It was then published in English translation in 1953 under the title *Agape and Eros*. The author's idea was to describe the development of the Christian concept of love through the centuries. Nygren argued that *eros* is the term for Platonic, self-centred love that strives for union with the divine realities, while *agape*, denoting the Christian concept of love, is the free, *divine* movement towards human beings. *Agape* is unselfish and is not motivated by any value in the recipient. This distinction drawn by Nygren has been so influential that it has been taken for granted in a lot of Christian contexts worldwide, even if one does not associate it with the name Nygren. In this paper his methodology and the distinction he draws are criticised. He finds in *eros* and *agape* two so-called "fundamental motifs" that, as he sees it, unfortunately merge in Christian tradition and thereby obscure the original Christian understanding of love that emerges in its purest form in St Paul and later in Luther. There are a lot of problems in Nygren's book. He argues, for instance, that Christianity emerges from Judaism as a completely new religion, and separates the Old and the New Testament as if they had nothing in common. *Agape* as the divine gift to human beings excludes all human activity since God has freely and graciously chosen human persons as his slaves. In the present paper it is argued that Nygren's methodology is unsound and that his conclusions are not even in agreement with the New Testament.

Keywords: *eros*, *agape*, fundamental motif, egocentric religion, theocentric religion

Introduction

This paper contains a presentation and critical discussion of Anders Nygren's attempt to identify the genuine Christian concept of love as

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agape. It is well known that the New Testament says “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and that Christ says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Christ, according to Matthew, adds (22:38–40): “This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Love, it is commonly held, is a basic concept in Christianity. One may ask, however, how this basic concept should be understood. When one talks about love in a Christian context the terms *eros* and *agape* almost certainly turn up sooner or later. The way these terms are often understood seldom goes back to first hand familiarity with ancient sources. Rather, the formative force behind modern conceptions is a famous book written in the 1930s by the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren. Nygren distinguishes between two completely different concepts of love, and he uses the Greek terms *eros* and *agape* to separate them. For him, the first term denotes the non-Christian concept of love, while the second term denotes the Christian concept. As we shall see below, the two concepts have almost nothing to do with one another. *Eros* is the creature’s striving towards “the intelligible realm” while *agape* is the divine love freely offered from above. Even if several scholars have criticised Nygren’s results, his basic vision seems to live on among many modern Christians, especially in the Protestant churches.¹

Eros and Agape

Anders Nygren (1890–1978) published his two-volume study *Den kristna kärlekstanken genem tiderna: Eros och Agape* (*The Christian Idea of Love through the Ages: Eros and Agape*) in 1930 (first part) and 1936 (second part). The first full translation into English in one volume was made by Philip Watson and published in 1953 under the title *Agape and Eros*.² (A first partial English translation was, however, made in the 1930s). The

1 For recent studies on the notion of love that engage critically with Nygren, see Jeanrond (2010), Lindberg (2008) and May (2011).

2 All references below are to this 1953 edition.

book has been translated into several languages.³ Nygren's work has been extremely influential. It seems that the distinction he posits between *eros* and *agape* has been received in many circles almost as a dogmatic truth, and the impression, for instance from a Norwegian point of view, is that the distinction is generally taken for granted. This can, for instance, be seen in an anthology published by Tore Frost and Egil A. Wyller in 1974, *Den platonske kjærlighetstanke gjennom tidene (The Platonic Conception of Love through the Ages)*, where it is stated that *agape* is the Christian concept of love (Frost & Wyller, 1974, p. 52). This is a belief held by people who have never heard of Anders Nygren. One even gets the impression that his views have established this ascendancy almost globally. However, not all Christian churches and traditions are particularly happy with Nygren's results and their influence. This goes without saying, I suppose, if we consider the fact that according to Nygren the Christian concept of love, or *agape*, is best understood by St Paul and Martin Luther.

The purpose of the present paper is to present and criticise Nygren's approach and some of his results. First we shall have a look at his *method* and the way he describes *eros* and *agape*, then we shall try to make some critical remarks. It is, as a matter of fact, not particularly difficult to identify Nygren's results. However, his method involves a number of features that might beguile and ensnare the reader and it is important to shed some light on this before we look any further.

Methodology

Nygren's approach is from the point of view of what he calls "motif research". The idea is to recover central motifs of Christian theology and investigate them historically. We could, however, ask how Nygren identifies such a motif. It is probably a reasonable guess that for Nygren a central Christian motif is picked from basic ideas of *reformation theology*. Nygren's subject is the idea of *love*. How does he approach this topic? One does not have to read so very much in the first part of the book to see Nygren's approach quite clearly. At an early stage he states that *agape* is

³ It was published in German in 1930 (first part) and 1937 (second part).

“the transvaluation of all ancient values” (Nygren, 1953, p. 30). He stresses again and again the claim he wants to argue as if – for him at least – it is already a truth beyond any doubt that *agape* and *eros* originally had nothing to do with one another: “There cannot actually be any doubt that Eros and Agape belong originally to two entirely separate spiritual worlds, between which no direct communication is possible” (Nygren, 1953, p. 31). If we do not see this, the reason is probably, according to Nygren, that we have been conditioned by one of two influences (Nygren, 1953, pp. 31–32). On the one hand, there is a more than thousand-year-old tradition that tells us that *eros* and *agape* should be connected with one another – he has the Christian tradition in mind. On the other hand, there is the problem of language. *Eros* and *agape* are Greek words that we translate with one modern term such as *love* (or *Liebe* in German or *kjærlighet* in Norwegian etc.), leading us to believe that behind them both there is one and the same basic reality. One may come to think of them as forms of the basic phenomenon of love, or as two expressions of one and the same basic power. Nygren, however, strongly denies that they originally had anything whatsoever to do with one another.

We must ask then: how on earth could they be compared to one another? Why should we ever think this an option? Why make a research project about concepts that have nothing to do with one another? Nygren states that for one thing, even if it may look strange, they have been brought together in Christian history. He recognizes that this is, in itself, enough for making a comparison. However, if we are going to take his characterization of the two concepts seriously, that they have nothing at all in common, then it seems rather strange methodologically to make such a comparison.

Nygren says that *eros* and *agape* can be confronted in one of three different ways (Nygren, 1953, pp. 32–34). (1) We can focus on the distinction from a linguistic point of view. It can hardly be a coincidence that the New Testament uses the term *agape* and avoids the term *eros*, and we must ask why. However, Nygren remarks quite reasonably that what matters is not the general philological sense of the terms, but “the special content which creative minds have filled them with”. (2) This brings us to the second option: maybe we should work with two independent

historical conceptions? However, since these two concepts lack a connection with one another there will be no common point of comparison. “Platonic Eros and Pauline Agape have, so to speak, no common denominator; they are not answers to the same question” (Nygren, 1953, p. 33). (3) Nygren’s third option brings him to the position from which he may make his comparison: *eros* and *agape* can be set up against one another as *different general attitudes to life* (Nygren, 1953, p. 34). They may therefore be treated as “fundamental motifs”.

Before we try to understand what he means with a *fundamental motif*, we should ask why the second option should be avoided. One might think that a normal approach to the historical investigation of a certain concept would be to investigate the literary contexts in which the relevant terminology occurs. I would suggest that one should make comparisons to identify similarities and differences, and from such a study try to identify a common conceptual content. Of course, if one claims that there are ideas at work here that have nothing to do with one another, one would expect this procedure to reveal nothing significant. However, in spite of what Nygren claims, there is reason to question his premise that these ideas are completely separate.

Fundamental Motif

What, then, is a fundamental motif? Nygren draws a comparison with art and says that a fundamental motif is “that which makes a work of art into a unified whole, determines its structure, and gives it its specific nature” (Nygren, 1953, p. 42). Drawing on this, he offers a definition:

A fundamental motif is that which forms the answer given by some particular outlook to a general question of such a fundamental nature that it can be described in a categorical sense as a fundamental question.

We probably need to unpack this rather dense statement before we proceed. There are general questions of a *basic* kind that could be asked, let us say, concerning our existence. Such questions are “fundamental questions”. Certain religious outlooks on human existence will provide answers to such questions. These answers put forward a fundamental

motif that provides a grasp of the “essence” of the particular religious outlook.

It would be helpful at this stage to have an example of such a “fundamental question”. Nygren provides one, even if not explicitly put in the linguistic form of a question. He talks of “the religious question, the question of the Eternal or man’s fellowship with God” (Nygren, 1953, p. 45). How should we interpret him here? Maybe his question could be formulated in the following way: how should we understand the *nature* of the human being’s fellowship with God? The fundamental motif is brought in as an answer to such a question.

At this point Nygren says that the sense of the question obviously varies according to whether “the centre of gravity in the religious relationship is placed in man’s ego or in the Divine: in the former case we get an egocentric, in the latter a theocentric religion”. Then he claims that “It is in Christianity that we first find egocentric religion essentially superseded by theocentric religion”. Christianity will provide the theocentric answer to the question “What is God?” with the Johannine formula: God is *agape*.

As the argument develops, we find that Nygren in fact brings no less than *three* “fundamental motifs” into the discussion: the *eros*-motif, the legalistic motif, and the *agape*-motif. So if we ask about what God is or about the nature of the human being’s relationship with God, the three motifs will provide different answers. We can gather together some of the main features of the two fundamental motifs of *eros* and *agape* as Nygren conceives them:⁴

Eros is acquisitive desire and longing. It is man’s way to God. It is man’s own effort and assumes that his salvation is his own work. *Eros* is egoistic love, a form of self-assertion. It seeks to gain its life as a kind of divine and immortalized life.

It is man’s love and it is motivated by the worth or quality of its object.

Agape, on the other hand, is sacrificial giving. It comes from God and is God’s way to man. *Agape* is divine grace and is totally unselfish love. It is God’s love. *Agape* is not motivated by any value or quality its object might have. It rather creates value.

4 See the summary in Nygren, 1953, p. 210.

The characteristics of *eros* can be assembled by a selective reading of two of Plato's dialogues, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. When it comes to the legalistic motif, which is seen as basic for Old Testament religion, Nygren applies it mainly in a negative way, to put *agape* into relief. He stresses that even if Jesus moved within the forms of Old Testament piety, Christianity emerges from Judaism as a *completely new religion* (Nygren, 1953, pp. 67–68). He quotes the Gospel of Mark: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners,” says Jesus (Mark 2:17); and with these words He turns the entire scale of Jewish values upside down”. Nygren presents the basic motif of the Old Testament or the Jewish religion in the following way (Nygren, 1953, p. 71): “God’s love is shown, be it noted, to them that fear Him; it is shown to the righteous, not to the sinner.” As a matter of fact, even if Nygren says Christ “moved within the forms of Old Testament piety”, he describes Jewish religion in a way that tears apart the Old and New Testament as if they had *nothing* in common.⁵ The New Testament *agape* motif, he maintains, is so radically new that it should be distinguished from all other conceptions of fellowship with God. However, there is reason to doubt whether Nygren’s conception of Old Testament religion is adequate. We return to this below.

Unmotivated Love

One of the most striking points Nygren makes is related to the *unmotivated* character of divine *agape*.⁶ *Agape* is completely groundless in the sense that there is absolutely no merit or value in man that may motivate it. The man that is loved by God has no value in himself, and the whole idea that there is some kind of “infinite value of the human soul” is not at all central to Christianity. From the side of man, there is no way that leads to God. Man can only be the receptacle of divine *agape*, and in his love for his neighbour or his love for God he is simply a tube through which what is distinctly divine may flow. This love contains nothing that is human (Nygren, 1953, p. 94): “It excludes man’s spontaneity, inasmuch

5 See Nygren, 1953, pp. 67–75.

6 To what follows, see Nygren, 1953, pp. 75–81.

as it is God's Agape that has 'chosen' him and made him a slave of God, so that he cannot be said to have anything he can call his own in relation to God." This is not all; our love towards God, when God lets it flow through us from his own initiative, does not seek to gain anything: "It most certainly does not seek to gain anything other than God. But neither does it seek to gain even God Himself or His love" – since in that case it would probably have been contaminated by some kind of *eros* that is striving towards God. God gives his love freely, and Nygren says there is nothing for man to gain by loving God (Nygren, 1953, p. 94). Let us now turn to some critical remarks on Nygren's project.

Critical Remarks

In this section four broad areas where a critical voice seems valid will be presented. First, one might like to ask about the methodological character of Nygren's "fundamental motifs". How are they arrived at, and what are they? Nygren says that the collection of a vast mass of material from different religions will be of no use for comparison if a particular belief or a certain practice is not interpreted in connection with the basic idea of a particular religion. How, then, do we get hold of this idea? Nygren stresses that we cannot get hold of it from an analysis of particular religious data which may be arranged in different patterns so we cannot be sure of having understood any of them, since we lack the *principle* that connects them (Nygren, 1953, p. 36). The search for such a connecting link is, according to Nygren, no less a matter of *empirical* research than is the investigation of disconnected religious phenomena. However, since the connecting principle is not to be found among the comparative elements themselves, one gets the impression that it originates with some kind of *intuition* (Nygren, 1953, p. 37). Nygren admits that this is the case, but emphasizes that even so "the gains of intuition must be subjected to scientific analysis and verification". One may wonder what can be deduced from these rather vague remarks.

It seems that Nygren's fundamental motifs have a certain similarity with Kantian *a priori* conceptions.⁷ If this is correct, it would at least

7 This seems to be indicated by Wigen, 1974, p. 59 as well.

shed light on how the motifs themselves function as measuring sticks for the evaluation of the material. In any case, the New Testament data for the *agape* motif are obviously measured against some kind of ideal type that is not empirically gathered from the material itself. So the *a priori* conception of *agape*, which is gained through some kind of philosophical intuition, makes it possible to classify the New Testament material in accordance with the extent to which it succeeds in establishing the fundamental Christian idea of love. Nygren identifies certain important differences between the synoptic gospels, the Pauline writings, and the Johannine literature. One might ask, if we do not buy the intuition-methodology, from where could Nygren have got his fundamental motif? It is probably not an unreasonable guess that he found it in some of the basic ideas of the Lutheran reformation, the *sola fide* and the *sola gratia*. Nygren puts great emphasis on his claim that his research is strictly scientific and involves no value-judgements (Nygren, 1953, pp. 38–40). However, there are reasons to doubt that this is really the case.

Secondly, the dramatic emptying of man – and by implication creatures in general – of value, seems to indicate a lack of any positive appreciation of the created world as such. Further, there is no interest in creatures other than human beings. The words of Genesis 1, “And God saw that it was good”, have no place in Nygren’s doctrine. There is a complete lack of any sense of the doctrine of creation. Christianity, with its message of salvation, somehow just pops up at a certain stage of history without any precedent. If the God of the Old Testament is still to be conceived of as the God of the New Testament, it also looks as if this God suddenly changed his mind and dropped the legalistic project in favour of the project of *agape*. One of the most striking differences between the conception of the Scriptures in certain patristic authors and the conception found in Nygren is the fact that for thinkers like Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor the Scriptures should be understood from the point of view of an overall or covering “hypothesis”: it is the *same* divine agent that works both in creation and salvation. There is but one divine economy and one divine providence. A succinct expression of this is when Maximus says that “Always and in all God’s Logos and God wills to effect the mystery of

His own embodiment”.⁸ The Logos is present in the act of creation, in the world order, and as the agent of salvation.⁹ The Symbol of faith (the Creed) gives the ancient expression of such an “hypothesis”: creation, salvation, and the economy of the church are interconnected because they are based in the Trinity itself. In Nygren’s perspective, the Old Testament loses its religious value as it witnesses to a completely legalistic motif: “What Judaism affirmed, Christianity must deny” (Nygren, 1953, pp. 65, 68). Christian fellowship with God is different in kind from that of Judaism; therefore Christianity, in spite of its historical connection with Judaism, and in spite of any other bonds and affinities between them, is a fundamentally different thing from Judaism. Nygren quotes Psalm 1 (Nygren, 1953, p. 69):

Blessed is the man that does not walk in the council of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

According to Nygren, the God of the Old Testament draws a decisive distinction between the righteous and the sinner, and God’s love is shown to the former, not to the latter (Nygren, 1953, p. 71). However, this is not the only impression the Old Testament leaves. What about the God of the prophet Isaiah (1:18), when he says: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” Of course, Nygren can point to the next verse, that talks of willingness and obedience. But even so, it seems as if forgiveness of sins is offered to the person who obediently “reasons” with the Lord. The sinner is in fact offered forgiveness if he repents. When Jesus says, “I came not to call the righteous,

8 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7, 1084c-d.

9 Cf. Maximus, *Ambiguum* 7 and 41.

but sinners”, does he with these words turn “the entire scale of Jewish values upside down” (Nygren, 1953, p. 68)? The validity of Nygren’s approach should simply be questioned. Nygren’s own project could itself obviously be considered as being unprecedented and completely new in the history of religion. But is it then of any value for Christianity?

Thirdly, there is something rather disturbing about Nygren’s Christology. Christ is obviously a manifestation of the love of God, but Christianity seems to be more of a revelation of the motif of love than of the Incarnation of the Son of God.¹⁰ What exactly does the relation between the Father and Jesus amount to? One could, of course, say that the New Testament is not all that clear of the question of Christology. Movements like Arianism and Anomeanism in the 4th century can be understood as interpretations of a far from clear New Testament text.¹¹ On the other hand, one could challenge the value of Nygren’s investigations for the historically existing Christian church, since the scientific isolation of the New Testament text from the natural context of the historical church may result in quite arbitrary conclusions, also from a scholarly point of view. Further, if Nygren’s *agape* originates in his appreciation of certain central elements of the Lutheran reformation, one might wonder why this particular piece of dogmatic theology can be turned into a “fundamental motif” in ancient Christianity, while a clearer grasp of Christology is not. How could one, in the context of Christianity, separate *agape* from Christ, Christ from Christology, and Christology from the divine Economy of creation and salvation?

Fourthly, Nygren’s reading of the New Testament leaves something to be desired. He claims that human love should be patterned on divine love, but in the synoptic gospels God’s love for human beings is explained by analogy with human love: the love of a man for his hungry son (Matthew 7:9–11), the love of a shepherd for a single lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7), the love of a father for a wayward child (Luke 15:11–32).¹² In the letter to the Philippians, St Paul takes into consideration both God’s work within man

¹⁰ Cf. for example Nygren, 1953, p. 53.

¹¹ One could say that both of these heresies denied a consubstantial Trinity. Jesus is not God by essence, but is a second entity after the Father and created by him.

¹² I have taken this from Streiker, 1964, p. 335.

and man's cooperation with God: "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6) and "work at your own salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12). Equally important, however, is the fact that Paul, in more than one context, speaks of how participation in the divine Spirit is fulfilled in the development of virtues in the believer. The most perspicuous example is from Galatians 5:22–23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law." It would seem quite strange to argue that these "fruit[s] of the Spirit" have nothing to do with any spiritual development or maturity of the believer, but are quite independent of him and external to his being. In the theological scheme of Nygren, however, human beings are reduced to valueless tubes of divine love. The creature cannot contribute anything and it is indeed a miracle that one can receive grace at all if there is nothing in the creature that can establish a point of connection with God. One has to read the New Testament with rather thick, coloured glasses to avoid seeing that God does not approach human zombies, but rather calls the being that is made in the image of God back to himself.

Conclusion

There is a further reason why Nygren's interpretation of the Scriptures and his whole project should be considered completely out of date – its *anthropocentric* character. Of course, anyone who has some acquaintance with his book knows that he brands *eros* as being anthropocentric while *agape* is theocentric. That may be so, but in reality Nygren's description has two poles, namely God and man. The rest of creation does not come into consideration. Like man, creation is, in this description, probably completely without any value in itself; indeed, it is surely valueless to an even larger degree than man. This point of view is obviously out of step with what we read in several places in the Scriptures where the created world is appreciated both because God made it and because of the divine purpose of *transforming* it, a motif that is well known from patristic thought. It should be quite clear that today one should rid oneself of this kind of purely God-man centred theology, and take seriously the

Scriptural passages that speak of the natural world, its creation by God, his ownership of it, and how he works its transformation.

It is reasonable to claim that there is a Christian concept of love. However, it cannot be identified with the concept worked out by Nygren in his famous book. The way to an understanding of the Christian idea of love should go through the ancient Christian sources, and for those who consider Christian *tradition* a basic feature of the church, these sources are not limited to the Old and New Testament writings.¹³

Nygren seems to tear two worlds apart, the ancient “Greek” (and Jewish) and the Christian, claiming that *eros* and *agape* have nothing in common. However, it might occur to a reader that the two phenomena are compared for the simple reason that they in fact are conceived, even by Nygren, as *two aspects of one and the same thing*: love. These two aspects make sense if they identify features of one and the same thing. If Nygren’s *agape* resembles his description of it, to call it by the name of love is counterintuitive.

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13 Since the Holy Scriptures of the primitive church were the Old Testament writings, the latter should be considered a Christian text as well as a Jewish one.

CHAPTER 2

Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, Irenaeus, and the Essence of Christianity

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Abstract: In Anders Nygren's seminal study of the Christian concept of love, *Eros och Agape*, the second century bishop and theologian Irenaeus of Lyons is given an important role in the development of the "Christian idea of love". In this chapter, I will critically discuss certain aspects of Nygren's and his colleague Gustaf Aulen's treatment of Irenaeus. Nygren and Aulen presuppose that one can delineate "pure" concepts or ideas or motifs in history (such as "Christian love"), they maintain that it makes sense to speak of the "essence" of Christianity as a given, and they find their normative basis in the genius of Luther, against which they can evaluate the genuineness of any given conception of Christianity. This is of course both provincial and anachronistic. A critical reading of Nygren's and Aulen's understanding of Irenaeus and the concept of Christian love raises important questions concerning objectivity, normativity and givenness. I argue in this chapter that there are no stable given "ideas" or "motifs" that can be "identified" or "discovered" or "described" objectively. I believe it is possible, however, to give accounts that will be recognizable and plausible to others who are familiar with the fragmentary sources upon which our accounts are based. At best, we can together construct plausible understandings of a concept such as Christian love, or of a thinker such as Irenaeus, or of something as broad and multifaceted as Christianity – without purporting to have found the true "essence" of the thing we are studying.

Keywords: Irenaeus, Nygren, *eros*, *agape*, love, constructivism, normativity

Introduction

In Anders Nygren's seminal study of the Christian concept of love, *Eros och Agape* (1966), the second century bishop and theologian Irenaeus of

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Lyons is given an important role in the development of the “Christian idea of love”. In the following, I will critically discuss certain aspects of Nygren’s and his colleague Gustaf Aulen’s treatment of Irenaeus. I will argue that Nygren’s and Aulen’s readings of Irenaeus are problematic, not primarily due to their somewhat idiosyncratic understandings of the Christian concept of love, but for reasons related to theory and method. Nygren and Aulen presuppose that one can delineate “pure” concepts or ideas or motifs in history (such as “Christian love”), they maintain that it makes sense to speak of the “essence” of Christianity as a given, and they find their normative basis in the genius of Luther, against which they can evaluate the genuineness of any given conception of Christianity. This is of course both provincial and anachronistic. In the following, through a critical reading of Nygren’s and Aulen’s understanding of Irenaeus and the concept of Christian love, I will discuss issues of objectivity, normativity and givenness in the study of intellectual history.

Motif Research: Aulen and Nygren

When I hear the words “agape and eros”, my thoughts immediately go to the classic work with this title from the 1930s by the Swedish theologian and bishop Anders Nygren.¹ In this book, Nygren purports to give an objective and neutral presentation of the Christian concept of love through the ages.² In Nygren’s study, Irenaeus, the second century bishop and theologian from Lyons, is given an important role in the development of the “Christian idea of love”. I would maintain that Nygren’s classic study of the Christian concept of love, and a critical reading of Nygren, is still relevant in a volume discussing the concept of love.

In the following, I will present a brief critical reading of certain aspects of Nygren’s treatment of Irenaeus. Nygren did not write in a vacuum, however. I will therefore also relate Nygren’s study to the contemporary Swedish theological classic by Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*.³ My

1 Nygren, 1936. English translation Nygren, 1953. Later published in a slightly revised version as Nygren, 1966.

2 Cf. also the discussion of Nygren in Tollefsen in the current volume.

3 Aulen, 1930. English translation Aulen, 1970.

primary focus will be on certain theoretical presuppositions that underlie Nygren's and Aulen's understanding of Irenaeus.

I am aware that I am kicking through wide open (or perhaps even forgotten) doors when I propose a critical reading of Nygren's *Agape and Eros* and Aulen's *Christus Victor*. These are classic texts and have precisely therefore been thoroughly discussed and criticized since their publication over eighty years ago. Both have been immensely influential, at least in Scandinavia, contributing to the formation of several generations of Lutheran ministers, but scholarship has moved on and they are no longer as relevant as they once were. Further, I am also aware that proposing a critical reading of two classic works in a short paper such as this is the very definition of hubris. In his classic work on the origins of the Christian mystical tradition, Andrew Louth pointed out some 40 years ago that "Nygren's own theory is too highly wrought and too detailed to be discussed here" (Louth, 1981, p. 192). Yet I have given myself the task of saying something about not one but two such highly wrought theories in a short format.

Both Nygren and Aulen were concerned with what they called "motif research" – with finding the fundamental motif of the object of study, around which all the other ideas, aspects and motifs revolve.⁴ Both wished to find the fundamental motif of Christianity, and for both this motif turned out to be a fully theocentric conception of salvation – articulated either as Christian love (Nygren) or as the so-called "classic idea of the atonement" (Aulen). Aulen and Nygren seem to be doing what so many others were trying to do in the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries: trying to find the "essence" of Christianity, trying to find out what Christianity is *really* all about.⁵ It was taken for granted that everything has an essence, an essential nature, and the task of the Christian theologian and historian was to explicate this essential or genuine nature. It was presupposed that Christianity really *is* something, prior to all the

4 Cf. Nygren's collection of articles and papers with the title *Philosophy and Motif Research* (Nygren, 1940). The introduction to *Agape and Eros*, consisting of four short parts, also deals with the methodology of motif research. Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 27–60.

5 Cf. the two studies entitled *Das Wesen des Christenthums* ("The Essence of Christianity") published in 1841 (Ludwig Feuerbach) and 1900 (Adolf von Harnack).

change and development we see in history. The content of Christianity is a given, Christianity has a fundamental motif, and this motif can be explicated clearly. Different theologians and historians have of course always had very different understandings of what this essential nature of Christianity in fact is, but it went unquestioned that Christianity, like everything else, did have a true essence. Or to use the terminology of Nygren and Aulen, Christianity has a fundamental motif, and it is the task of the theologian to neutrally and objectively identify and explicate this fundamental motif. My main contention with Nygren and Aulen and the other theologians and historians searching for the essence of Christianity in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century is that I do not think Christianity, or any religion or concept for that matter, has an unchanging or fundamental essence. Everything changes.

Although Nygren and Aulen were quite aware that there is no such thing as “general” or “common” Christianity – there are only *particular* historical forms of Christianity⁶ – they still speak unabashedly about Christianity as having a pure core or essence. Aulen wrote that the task of systematic theology is “to unveil and reveal everything that is essential, to brush aside all non-essential and foreign elements, to remove all unnecessary accretions, and to bring out clearly the very heart of the matter” (Aulen, 1948, p. 5).⁷ And Nygren could speak of “Christianity in a pure form” (Nygren, 1953, p. 241). Speaking in this manner presupposes that one can also speak of “false” or “compromised” Christianity, as the opposite of such genuine or “pure” Christianity. Particular historical forms of Christianity can then be compared against “the real thing”, and many historical forms of Christianity are deemed to fall short of the mark. There is a strange dissonance between Nygren’s explicit aim of simply giving “unbiased” and “non-normative” analyses of historical developments, and the implicit normativity displayed in this language of “essential” or “pure” Christianity. Nygren, for example, claims freedom from value-judgment and states that there is no question of assuming “the superior value of the idea of Agape and making it the criterion

6 Cf. the discussion in Anderson, 2006, p. 54. She refers here to Aulen, 1932, p. 33.

7 Cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 53.

for an unfavourable judgment on the idea of Eros” (Nygren, 1953, p. 38). He claims neutrality and objectivity in his explication of the motifs of *eros and agape*. Yet in designating particular motifs or certain types of Christianity as “essential” or “genuine” or “pure”, as opposed to false or compromised, Nygren is of course making normative, not descriptive, statements. What is the basis of this normativity?

Both Aulen and Nygren were central figures in what is often called the Swedish Luther Renaissance of the first half of the 20th century. They were prominent theologians in the Swedish Lutheran church and were quite convinced that Luther had rediscovered “the unique and central feature of Christianity” (Anderson, 2006, p. 54). As Aulen put it at one point: “Luther’s greatness lies not in bringing forth a new variant of Christianity, but rather in seeing the distinct character of Christianity more sharply than anyone before him.”⁸ For both Nygren and Aulen, Luther’s thought was a high-water mark in the history of theology, and all other periods, both earlier and later, could then be viewed against this standard. And to begin approaching my particular topic, which is Nygren’s understanding of Irenaeus, I can quote a fairly recent study of this Swedish Luther renaissance: “Based on insights from his Luther studies, Aulen divided the history of dogma into distinctive periods, describing the unique essence of Christianity and its struggle against moralism and idealism. Naturally, the period of Luther gained a place of prominence, as did the time of the church fathers, especially Irenaeus” (Anderson, 2006, p. 55). Irenaeus was important for these Swedish Lutheran theologians because to them he in some way seemed close to Luther, and thereby came close to the “unique essence of Christianity”.

Even though Aulen and Nygren were writing about different concepts (atonement on the one hand, love on the other), their overall understandings of these concepts were very similar. Several years before writing his classic on the doctrine of the atonement, Aulen wrote a short book entitled *Kristendomens själ* (“The Soul of Christianity”) and already here he sketches out normative views concerning what Christianity is *really* all about. The book was published in 1922 and must be read in light of the

8 Aulen (1932). Cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 55f.

horrors of World War I, as Aulen asks whether it makes sense to speak of God in this world full of suffering and evil (Aulen, 1922). For Aulen, the God of both liberal protestant theology and classical protestant orthodoxy does not seem to make sense in a world of suffering. Aulen's answer is that the God we are to speak of must be a *conquering* God. Christianity is about the God who conquers sin and death and destruction. Christianity is theocentric and downward oriented; it is about God coming down to humanity rather than humanity seeking God. These views, already articulated in this early book from 1922, are then fleshed out in his historical study of ideas of the atonement, and his historical analyses clearly reflect these normative standpoints. For Aulen, genuine Christianity is seen most clearly in what he calls the "classic" idea of the atonement, which is precisely the story of God conquering the forces of destruction. And for Aulen, this classic idea is most clearly visible in the New Testament, in certain Church Fathers, especially Irenaeus, and in Luther. Other periods in the history of theology departed to a greater or lesser degree from this genuine Christianity.

Nygren's Understanding of "Pure" Christian Love

Similarly, while Nygren was working on his major study of *eros* and *agape*, he wrote a short book entitled *Urkristendom och reformation* ("Earliest Christianity and Reformation") where he depicts the history of Christian thought as a process of synthesis and subsequent reformation (Nygren, 1932). The process is simple: a pure concept is entangled and intertwined with mutually incompatible ideas (synthesis) and is subsequently unentangled again (reformation) (Nygren, 1932, pp. 147–175). Nygren saw this pattern of synthesis and reformation repeated at various levels and in shorter or longer intervals throughout Christian history. When it came to the concept of love, which he calls the "fundamental motif of Christianity", he saw the first 1500 years of Christianity as one long period of synthesis. During these centuries, the Christian concept of love, articulated most clearly by Paul as *agape*, became more and more compromised through entanglement with *eros*, and this entanglement lasted until

Luther challenged the church's position on many matters and "rediscovered" the "pure" Christian understanding of love. The unique, essential nature of Christianity is found in the concept of divine love, *agape*, and this concept is found most purely in Paul (earliest Christianity) and in Luther (reformation). Nygren's juxtaposition of "earliest Christianity and reformation" is clearly visible in his study of Christian love. And in this scheme of synthesis and reformation, Irenaeus was the one theologian between the two giants of Paul and Luther who came closest to getting things right, even though he too fell into the error of synthesizing the genuine Christian concept of love with non-Christian motifs.⁹

As I have already mentioned, for Nygren a particular kind of love was the defining motif of Christianity: divine, unmotivated, generous love, i.e. *agape*. Nygren argues that there is an absolute distinction between *agape* and Hellenistic *eros*. For Nygren, *eros* is selfish love which seeks its own fulfilment, while *agape* is sacrificial love which seeks the good of the other with no thought of self. Much could of course be said about this distinction merely at a psychological level (is it really possible to distinguish so clearly between these types of love?), but what interests me here is that these two concepts are, for Nygren, much larger than the term "love" would suggest. For Nygren, they are the defining characteristics of two distinct types of religion or two different and opposing paths to salvation.¹⁰ The first type is humanity's tendency to strive upward toward the divine; the second is God's merciful love which lowers itself to underserving humanity. These two types of religion correspond perfectly to the two types of love which he describes as *agape* and *eros*. *Eros* represents

9 For a recent broad discussion of a "theology of love" which engages critically with Nygren's conception of *eros* and *agape*, see Jeanron, 2010 (ch. 5 in particular, but Nygren is present throughout). Recent studies on the "history of love" also engage critically with Nygren, although to a far lesser degree than Jeanron's theological engagement. See Lindberg, 2008, ch. 3, 4 and 10, and May, 2011, ch. 6 and briefly in ch. 17. Nygren is discussed in all of these studies both with regard to his "historical" work on the history of love, and with regard to his role as a contemporary theologian. For Nygren, the roles of historian and contemporary theologian are fully intertwined. None of these studies mentions the name Irenaeus, however, although Irenaeus was quite important for Nygren.

10 This can be seen clearly in an article entitled "Tvenne frälsningsvägar" ("Two paths to salvation") which he published in 1932, while he was working on the second volume of his book on *eros* and *agape* (the first volume was published in 1930, the second in 1936). This article can be found in Nygren, 1932, pp. 13–30.

mystical religion where humans strive for union with God, while *agape* represents revealed religion where God makes Godself known to humans and saves them even though they are undeserving. *Eros* religion is ego-centric and upward striving while *agape* religion is theocentric and downward oriented. And for Nygren, it is implied that only pure *agape* religion is genuinely Christian. To caricature Nygren a bit, pure and genuine Christianity is really only found in the two religious geniuses of Paul and Luther – and to greater or lesser degrees in those like Irenaeus who are theologically “close” to Paul and Luther. In contrast, mystical religion, most clearly seen in medieval Catholicism, is a synthesis which mixes pure Christianity with foreign elements.

After giving an extended presentation of these two idealized types of religion/love, Nygren moves on to concrete historical material in the early Church and must immediately expand his typology: there are in fact not two main types of love, but three (although the third isn't a type of love at all, but a type of religion). (Types of religion and types of love are conflated throughout Nygren's book). These three types are *nomos*, *eros* and *agape*. Roughly speaking, these three types correspond to Judaism, Hellenism and Christianity respectively, and all three also correspond to different *types* of Christianity. All three types of religion of course involve love – in all three, adherents are called to love God and neighbor – but they have fundamentally different natures. *Nomos* religion is concerned with the law, with following the divine command, with winning divine approval. In this legalistic type of religion, love is primarily a command, not a gift. In Nygren's view, this is Judaism. In contrast, *eros* religion is concerned with freeing the immortal soul from the material body by striving for union with the immaterial divine. This is Hellenism. And finally, *agape* religion is initiated by God alone for the salvation of the undeserving, in a downward rather than upward motion. There is no room for human action or effort, no room for striving or mystical union with God in *agape* religion. And it is only *agape* religion which is viewed as genuine Christianity.¹¹

¹¹ Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 247–253 for this brief tripartite scheme as presented in the following paragraphs.

Nygren's historical analysis purports to show, however, that Christianity has in fact been combined with both *nomos* and *eros* in various ways through the course of history. Pure or genuine Christianity always maintains the Pauline *agape* motif unadulterated, but most historical types of Christianity have strayed from purity by mixing in foreign motifs. When *agape* combines with *nomos*, it takes a step back toward "old testament religion". For Nygren, this is the religion of the apostolic fathers and apologists, as they regress backward from Paul toward the Old Testament. When *agape* is combined with *eros*, on the other hand, it takes a step sideways into contemporary Hellenistic culture, into so-called Gnosticism. And finally, in Nygren's schematization of the first half of the second century, *agape* is represented by Marcion. According to Nygren, Marcion rejected both the Judaizing religion of the apostolic fathers and the Gnostic striving of the immortal soul toward freedom from matter. Marcion becomes, in Nygren's brief presentation, a reformer who reconfirms the centrality of God's love, seeking and saving those who do not deserve it. Even though the God of Jesus is not the creator of humanity in Marcion's view, he still seeks the salvation of humans. This is true *agape*, seeking to save the undeserving.¹²

Nygren calls this the "first phase" in the development of the Christian concept of love, then he goes on to depict the "second phase" in more detail. In the second phase, this threefold pattern is repeated once again, with new actors. In the second phase, *nomos* is represented by Tertullian, *eros* is represented by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and *agape* is represented by Irenaeus. The picture is muddled, as all three mix the three motifs together in various ways, but they each primarily represent one of these motifs.¹³

As an aside, we can note that Irenaeus is not presented in the correct chronological order. It is important for Nygren to end this section with a discussion of Irenaeus since it is he who comes the closest to representing the *agape* type. He is presented as the culmination of this second phase, even though he is chronologically prior to Tertullian, Clement and

12 Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 254–334 for these three types.

13 Cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 335–412 for this second phase.

Origen. There is something fascinating about such a clear schematization, but of course it is far too simple. Reality is never that simple. Reality is messy.

Nygren's Reading of Irenaeus

What then does Nygren actually say about Irenaeus? Basically, two things: Irenaeus gets it almost right, nearly preserving pure *agape* religion, but even he ends up mixing *eros* into his theology. "Nowhere in the Early Church is the idea of Agape found in so pure a form as in Irenaeus" (Nygren, 1953, p. 409). Both types of love can be related to a quote from Irenaeus: "... the only sure and true Teacher, the Word of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, who because of his immeasurable love [*agape*]¹⁴ became what we are in order to make us what he is" (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer* 5, Preface).¹⁵

For Nygren, the first half of this quote represents the *agape*-motif and the second half represents *eros*. Because of his love for humanity, the Word became human. It is the Incarnation that is the absolutely defining aspect of the *agape* motif.¹⁶ Through his transcendent love, God condescended, coming down to those who did not deserve his love in order to save them. Only this is genuine Christianity. The movement is always downward, never upward. And for Nygren, this is an even better example of the *agape* motif than what we find in Marcion. Marcion speaks of a God who saves those whom God did not create. That is powerful love. But in Irenaeus we read of a God who saves humans who rejected the very God who created them. Nygren sees this as being an even more powerful depiction of *agape* than that found in Marcion. The love of a parent for the child who wants nothing to do with the parent is apparently even more unexpected and generous than the unconditional love of a stranger for a stranger. Nygren summarizes thus:

14 Irenaeus is only preserved fully in a Latin translation, but this passage is also preserved in Greek. The Latin term used here is *dilectio*, the Greek is *agape*.

15 Cited from the English translation in Grant, 1997, p. 164. For the Greek and Latin text, see Rousseau, Doutreleau and Mercier, 1969, pp. 14–15.

16 Cf. Nygren, 1953, p. 402: "The advent of the Logos in the flesh is God's great work of love. In the Incarnation God's Agape manifests itself."

It may be a great thing to show love to those who are complete “strangers”, whom we have no obligation whatever to love. But God’s love is still greater. He loves those who, as his creatures, had an absolute obligation towards Him, yet rebelliously turned away from Him and spurned His will. (Nygren, 1953, p. 399)¹⁷

In attempting to summarize this *agape* motif in Irenaeus, Nygren gives a quite adequate presentation of central aspects of Irenaeus’s theology, focusing on three primary doctrines: 1) God the creator; 2) the Incarnation; and 3) the resurrection of the flesh. I do not find much to criticize in Nygren’s presentation of these central doctrines in Irenaeus. Nygren has clearly read Irenaeus and read him well. And yet the word *love* isn’t actually very prominent in Nygren’s discussion of Irenaeus. I find this odd, given the fact that Irenaeus is so important for Nygren precisely as a representative of true Christian *love*. Nygren wishes to make Irenaeus a primary representative of the *agape* motif, but the number of passages in Irenaeus where love is central is not great. It would be an exaggeration to say that love is the defining element of Irenaeus’s theology. Love of God and neighbor, and God’s love for humanity, are certainly present in Irenaeus’s writings, but they do not leap out as the defining characteristic. As I have already mentioned, much of Nygren’s book does not seem to be about types of love at all, but about types of *religion*, about two opposite paths to salvation. And in this scheme, Irenaeus comes close to the path that Nygren views as true Christianity – and so Nygren makes him a representative of *agape*. For Nygren, the main issue when dealing with Irenaeus is the fact that he and his primary opponents, the Gnostics, represent two diametrically opposed paths to salvation – the ascent of the immortal soul to God, or the descent of God into this world to save undeserving humans. Nygren’s treatment of Irenaeus is only superficially about love. It is much more about salvation and true religion.

The second half of the quotation cited above – “that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself” – then represents for Nygren the *eros*

17 I am skeptical of Nygren’s valuation simply from a psychological perspective: is it really harder to love a rebellious child than it is to love a complete stranger? In any case, Nygren establishes Irenaeus as a representative of true *agape* by this image.

motif that insinuated itself into Irenaeus's pure *agape* religion. "Even his view of Agape, however, is not entirely untouched by alien motifs ... the Eros motif affects the very centre of his thought ..." (Nygren, 1953, p. 409). For Nygren, this *eros* infiltration is simply the Hellenistic idea of deification, which he claims has been adopted by Irenaeus and woven into his *agape* religion. Nygren summarizes this with a phrase that Irenaeus in fact never uses: "God became man in order that man might become God" (Nygren, 1953, p. 410). Irenaeus does say similar things, speaking of humans becoming like God, of communion with God, of participating in God, but to simply equate these expressions with some pre-conceived Hellenistic doctrine of deification is a drastic oversimplification. Because *agape* for Nygren is only ever downward-oriented, he seems unable to relate language of divine likeness, communion, mystical ascent and participation to *agape*, and thus he can find no place for such language in genuine Christianity. He quite simply equates all of this mystical language and upward motion with the *eros* motif and sees it thus as an alien type of religion, foreign to Christianity. Thus, Nygren finds that even in Irenaeus, "strands from Eros and the Agape motifs are woven together" (Nygren, 1953, p. 412).

Critique of Nygren

Like I said earlier, criticizing Nygren's *Agape and Eros* is like kicking through open doors. Nygren has already been criticized extensively and to a certain degree forgotten. His treatment of Irenaeus, and especially his assumption that Irenaeus simply adopts a Hellenistic doctrine of deification, is much too simple. My doctoral dissertation from 2009 looks closely at precisely this issue in Irenaeus, asking whether or not Irenaeus really even talks of deification (Kaufman, 2009). My answer, very briefly, is: no, he does not, not explicitly, but kind of, depending on how you define deification. Or in other words: "it's complicated". For Nygren, on the other hand, things are very simple. Far too simple. I certainly do not agree with Nygren that Irenaeus is superficially mixing alien concepts. In my own reading of Irenaeus, and in most of the secondary literature from the past few decades, the unity and comprehensiveness of Irenaeus's

thought stands out.¹⁸ I do not see Irenaeus taking over a ready-made “Christian concept of love”, *agape*, and mixing it with an alien concept, Hellenistic *eros*. Nor do I see him, or anyone else for that matter, taking a pre-existing “something” that can be called “genuine” Christianity and mixing it with various incompatible types of religion. I would suggest, rather, that this notion does not even make sense.

My criticism of Nygren’s and Aulen’s readings of Irenaeus therefore has more to do with their method than with their particular readings. For in their method, they presuppose several things that I find quite problematic. First, they presuppose that one can delineate “pure” concepts or ideas or motifs in history, and that it makes sense to speak of the “essence” of Christianity as a given, against which particular historical forms of Christianity can be evaluated. They write of “genuine” Christianity as if that is a concept which can be defined objectively. Nygren claims to find two (or three) distinct concepts of love running through history that are mutually alien to each other and that exist apart from and prior to their concrete expression in specific writings in specific contexts. Similarly, Aulen finds three ideas of atonement that are mutually incompatible and that exist “out there”, seemingly floating through space until they are given concrete expression in specific contexts. And in each case, one of these ideas or concepts represents “genuine” Christianity and the others represent foreign influence. Coincidentally, the pure or genuine concept is the one that is closest to Luther. In this scheme, Irenaeus plays a positive role because he is apparently similar to Paul and Luther. I find this entire way of viewing things to be deeply problematic. As a historian, I see no straight lines or pure concepts in history. I see no “givens”, no ideas or concepts or motifs or entities “out there” that aren’t constructed and continually reconstructed in history. I do not think concepts exist apart from their various messy concrete expressions in history. What love is, what atonement is, what Christianity is – these concepts have been continually negotiated and renegotiated throughout history. These are messy, not pure, concepts. An apocryphal Einstein quote says “If you

18 Cf. Wingren, 1959; Minns, 1994; Donovan, 1997; Osborn, 2001; Steenberg, 2008; Kaufman, 2009; Parvis & Foster, 2012; Behr, 2013.

can't explain it simply, you haven't understood it well enough". Nygren's and Aulen's schematizations of history are very simple and very pedagogical – so one might say that they have truly understood things. I've come to appreciate something C. S. Lewis said that points in the opposite direction, however: "Besides being complicated, reality, in my experience, is usually odd. It is not neat, not obvious, not what you expect" (Lewis, 2001, p. 14).¹⁹ If you can explain it simply, it is probably not reality that you are explaining. History is messy, full of ebbs and flows and crooked lines and unpredictable processes of continuity and change. The schematization of history presented by Nygren and Aulen is too simple, in an unhelpful way.

John Behr, one of the foremost Irenaeus scholars at the moment, gave his recent monograph on Irenaeus the subtitle *Identifying Christianity* (Behr, 2013). Rather than seeing Irenaeus as simply transmitting something that was given already in Paul, Behr gives Irenaeus a much more active role in identifying, both for his contemporaries and for posterity, what Christianity is. And for Behr, what Irenaeus identifies is much broader and more comprehensive than any single motif or concept. Irenaeus brings together the great story of creation, redemption and consummation, and he does so by embracing the entire biblical witness, not only Paul. Reducing Irenaeus's thought or the Christianity he identifies to a single motif or one central concept is to distort Irenaeus. Here I completely agree with Behr.

I would go further than Behr, however, using an even more active verb than "identifying". I think I would prefer the term construction: Irenaeus does not only identify, but participates in the construction of, Christianity. Christianity, or Christianity's essence or central motif, isn't something given that he can "find" or "identify", something that exists "out there" prior to Irenaeus. He does not just identify something that is given beforehand, but helps construct it – and theologians and priests and bishops and laypersons have continued constructing and reconstructing

19 I am fully aware of the irony in my quoting Lewis here, for the book I am quoting is nothing less than an attempt at identifying what is central and unchanging in Christianity. I do not believe anything is unchanging.

Christianity ever since.²⁰ In some ecclesiastical traditions, this involves greater change and disruption than in others, but, in the end, no tradition ever stays the same. It is the nature of history that everything changes. My criticism is not that I think Nygren and Aulen identify the wrong things as the essence or central motifs of Christianity, but rather that the very notion of a religion having an unchanging essence or central motif should be abandoned.

My second problem with Nygren and Aulen is the fact that they find their normative basis in the genius of Luther and can then implicitly evaluate the genuineness of any given conception of Christianity based on its proximity to Luther. This is of course both provincial and anachronistic. We can happily criticize their subjective readings and normative evaluations that fly in the face of their claims of objectivity. And yet we should perhaps not think that we can so easily avoid this temptation ourselves, assuming we can do better. We easily become blind to the things that influence our own readings and evaluations, whether they be academic or religious or personal bindings. What I see when I read Irenaeus is different from what the Catholic and Lutheran combatants of the 16th century saw when they read him to find ammunition for their polemics, and it is different from what Nygren and Aulen saw in early 20th century Sweden. After writing a dissertation on Irenaeus, I might think that I know something objective about what Irenaeus thought, but all I really know is what *I* think Irenaeus thought. I have no independent access to the “real” Irenaeus, by which I could judge my own or others readings of Irenaeus. Interpretations are fluid, changing over time. Since the past is in fact gone, all we have are these various interpretations based on our fragmentary sources. We can perhaps laugh at antiquated interpretations, but we must be aware that future interpreters will most likely laugh at our interpretations as well. I do not think it is possible to give an objective and absolute account of the thought of Irenaeus, nor of any theologian or idea or theological concept, nor of Christianity as a whole. I hope it is

20 And this was of course also going on before Irenaeus. See the illuminating discussion in Brakke, 2010 for more reflection on the dynamics involved in the creation of Christianity in the second century. See also Law, 2004 for reflections on the messiness of research and the non-givenness of reality.

possible, however, to give accounts that will be recognizable and plausible to others who are familiar with the fragmentary sources upon which our accounts are based. Together we can construct plausible understandings of a concept such as Christian love, or of a thinker such as Irenaeus, or of something as broad and multifaceted as Christianity, without purporting to have found the true “essence” of the thing we are studying. And so, just as I see Irenaeus participating in the construction of Christianity, I see myself participating in the construction of Irenaeus – in readings of Irenaeus that I, and hopefully others, will find plausible, at least for a time.

Conclusion

Nygren’s and Aulen’s interpretations of the history of theology and theological “motifs” raise important questions concerning objectivity, normativity and givenness, at two levels: both at the level of the object of study itself (in my case, Irenaeus and the formation of Christianity in the late second century), and at the level of what is going on in the contemporary process of research and interpretation. In both cases, I do not see stable given entities that can be “identified” or “discovered” or “described” objectively, be they motifs or concepts or religions or contemporary scholarly interpretations. What I see is active formation and construction, carried out in continual dialogue and interaction with other scholars and other more or less plausible constructions. Thus, research into the history of a religion and a religious concept such as “Christian love” is open-ended – and therefore interesting in ever new ways.

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CHAPTER 3

Relations of Love in Texts Read by Early Christians

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Abstract: Religious texts talk about love. The present paper comments on a few texts read by early Christians. There are several texts in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), and in the New Testament, where the specific Jewish-Christian word *agapē*, translated “love”, occurs. The texts were originally used in contexts where relations between humans followed norms that are not immediately recognizable to us, and words describing relations refer to experiences, emotions and ideas partly foreign to late modern readers. In the Gospel of John love is envisaged in hierarchical relations. God is the supreme. John’s Jesus calls him the Father. Jesus has kept his Father’s commandments, and Jesus passes the commandment to love on to believers, those below him in the hierarchy. In the book of Deuteronomy Jewish and Christian readers could hear that the Lord had “set his heart in love” on their ancestors (Deut 10). The assertion is surrounded by several commandments, expressing what the Lord requires of those involved in the divine love relation. These formulations seem originally to have been couched in the political language of the time. How relevant can these texts be for late modern notions of divine love and human love?

Keywords: love relations, commandment, love of God, political context, social experiences, semantics

Introduction

The texts discussed in this paper belong to the sacred scriptures of Christianity. They are therefore important for later Christian conceptions of love.

Religious texts talk about love. It goes without saying that love is a central topic in Christian and in other religious texts. Love is written about

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endlessly in both philosophical treatises and popular songs. The present essay contains comments on a selection of passages from texts read by early Christians. My interest is in semantics – that is, notions and emotions potentially activated by linguistic signs. The essay singles out the interrelation between meaning and context, points to changes in communication contexts and discusses the implication of those changes for what the textual signs mean.

Perspectives

The present essay discusses historical readings of texts, asking about the notions and emotions of early Christian readers. This brings out the contrasts with our late modern contexts. Concerning these contrasts, there are several important circumstances to consider, a couple of which will be mentioned here. Firstly, the Israelite, early Jewish and early Christian texts were written by men. These texts were authored by, and read with, an androcentric mindset that supposed men to be the stronger sex, to be superior in public affairs and in family businesses, to be better equipped than women to live virtuously, and to be more capable of controlling their desires than women, for women were considered rationally weaker and more easily driven by passions; moreover, this mindset presupposed that communication of literary texts normally took place among men. The specific character of that mindset is foreign to late modern reading contexts, but is highly relevant for the readings of texts about love. Secondly, the texts and the first sympathetic readings – even of the early Christian texts that later became canonical – cannot be supposed to represent authoritative or mainstream early Christianity. The authors were men hoping to impart their wisdom to others. An author like Paul from Tarsus never meant his writings to be sacred texts; they were meant to be part of an educational dialogue with fellow believers. Furthermore, a literary text like the Gospel of John writes itself into a literary tradition, through formulations, allusions, citations and references. The use and understanding of these texts required a certain measure of literacy on behalf of the users. Hence, if we search for an early Christian theology about love, these texts should be heard as voices partaking in an ancient interlocution about god-relations and ethos.

It is a challenge to discuss the meaning of ancient texts about love and in that discussion to take full account of the presuppositions formed in the cultural tradition to which we belong. For my part I cannot claim to know thoroughly how love is dealt with in this tradition. To me it exists as fragments from an education, and in the general language of our culture, not least the Christian culture, which I am strongly influenced by. Love is perhaps the most striking positively-charged word in our culture. When we talk about it, we take care not to destroy it. We would like to amplify it, to spell out its positive values, maybe because we would not know how to live without love. Should such positive amplification seem absent from the present essay, it is the result of an attempt to focus on a critical reading of texts from another age. This can easily produce a somewhat narrowed perspective.

Trying to follow a path in the forest of many texts and interesting perspectives, this paper sees love as a term of *relation*.¹ When talking about loving one's neighbour, it is obvious that relations between humans constitute the "habitat" of this term. When we talk of relations in our religious studies disciplines, it is natural to link the term to areas and themes like social relations, social roles, power in relations, relations that knit groups together and give groups identity, and also to lack of relations, or negatively charged relations, which mark the boundaries between groups. It is also relevant to link relations to values. Morality is about relations and it seems obvious that love is a main principle in the morality reflected in the texts of the early Christians. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, love is also relevant for the God-human relation. Therefore, love is also a theological term. Some of these issues will be touched upon in the following. And one further issue: talk about quality in relations refers, amongst other things, to the experiential or emotional dimension of interpersonal relations.

There are many texts in the Christian Bible that either contain a word for love or deal with topics that we relate to the concept of love. I shall comment on a small selection of texts which have become important in Christian tradition and which seem to refer to the kinds of relations mentioned

1 For "love as relation", see the Bible theological study by Feldmeier and Spieckermann, 2011, pp. 99–102, for an emphasis on relations, where love is an aspect.

above. We start with a text in the Gospel of John, where both the God–human relation and the human–human relation are qualified by love.

A Command to Love in the Gospel of John

Jesus said, [...] ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love (*agapaō*) one another. Just as I have loved (*agapaō*) you, you also should love (*agapaō*) one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love (*agapē*) for one another.² (John 13)

In this saying, two relations are paralleled in terms of the quality love. Firstly, however, some comments on the words used. The words translated “love” here are the Greek verb *agapaō* and the noun *agapē*. Many Christians know, and those who have studied Christian religion have learned, that *agapē* is the prominent word for Christian love. This is elaborated on in other essays in the present volume.³ In classical Greek and in Koiné Greek, *agapē* was a rare word. It had a rather limited use and was not the common Greek word for notions we would translate with “love”. *Eros* and *philia* were the most frequently used Greek words for “love”. *Agapaō* could mean “to be satisfied with something” (Stauffer, 1964, p. 36), to “greet with affection”, to “be fond of”.⁴ The word *eros* is not found in The New Testament, while *philia* is found once (“friendship [*philia*] with the world”, James 4:4). The verb *phileō* occurs just over 20 times. It may mean “like” (“they love [*phileō*] to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues”, Matt 23:6), or “kiss” (“the one I will kiss [*phileō*] is the man”, Mark 14:44), but is also used in contexts similar to those where *agapē* is used: “Whoever loves (*phileō*) father or mother more than me ...” (Matt 10:37); “The Father loves (*phileō*) the Son ...” (John 5:20); “for the Father himself loves (*phileō*) you, because you have loved (*phileō*) me and have believed that I came from God” (John 16:27). In the scene recounted near the end of the gospel, two words occur in a striking

2 The translations of the texts from the Bible are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), 1989.

3 See esp. the essay by Torstein T. Tollefsen in the present publication.

4 Liddel & Scott, 1940 (*A Greek-English Lexicon*).

combination: “Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love (*agapaō*) me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love (*phileō*) you’. [...] He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love (*phileō*) me?’” (John 21:15–17).

In the New Testament, *agapaō/agapē* is the most frequent word for love. “Words from the *agapē* family occur 341 times and are found in every book of the NT”;⁵ I am not suggesting, though, that “love” is thereby conceptualised in an entirely new way, differing clearly from philosophical or other literary notions of love in Greek literature. In the use of *agapē* the NT writers were dependent on the *Septuagint* (LXX), a collection of Greek translations of Hebrew writings. In the 3rd century BC some Jewish scholars initiated a translation of the important Hebrew scriptures into Greek, first of all the Torah, later the Psalms and the Prophets. Probably some time after the birth of Christ, most of the writings we know as “books” in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament were translated. In these translations the Greek word *agapē* became the most prominent word for rendering Hebrew words for love. Thus, the Greek words *agapaō/agapē* entered new contexts and took on new meanings – that is, they experienced new usages. The words obviously then came to refer to notions that in other Greek literature are expressed by *philia* and *erōs*.

We turn to John 13 again. In John 13 the authorial voice renders a commandment. In the literary world of the gospel, it is spoken by the Son of God, and the readers perceive this as a divine commandment.⁶ The ideal reader already believes that the speaker, who gives the new commandment, is the Lord – the dead and then risen and exalted Lord Jesus, “the glorified son of man” (13:31). To give a command presupposes a relation: “I have loved you” – a relation between the Lord Jesus and the believing reader (represented by the listening disciples in the text). This relation is

5 Klassen, 1992. Further Klassen writes: “Acts has only one occurrence of the adjective *agapētos*, but in Luke’s Gospel both noun and verb appear. The *agapē* family is most frequent in some of the shortest books, e.g., 1 John (52x) and Ephesians (22x). It appears in the Pauline writings 96 times (excluding Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles)”.

6 Rudolf Bultmann, 1968, p. 402f. links this saying to the preceding text that recounts that the disciples are left alone because Jesus is going to a place that is off-limits to the disciples. How can the disciples retain the relation to Jesus in this situation of loneliness? This question receives its first answer in the new commandment, v. 34.

linked directly to the other relation, the relation between believers: “that you love one another”. The first relation is a model (paradigm) for the second.

John 13 talks about love between believers. One question concerns the motivation for the commandment for mutual love, and another what the commandment means in terms of mindsets and notions. Motivation is complex, and we might understand something of the motivation communicated in the text if we ask for notions that could have been linked with the sayings. In the present text the link is established through “in the same way as” (Greek *kathōs*): “In the same way as (*kathōs*) I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34). The Lord’s love for the addressees is the example, the pattern to follow.⁷ In other paragraphs the Gospel of John elaborates on the way Jesus has loved the disciples, the believers – for example, later in the text, where the words of the commandment and the relations are developed.⁸ In chapter 15 the Lord teaches:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower [...].⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. [...] ⁹ As the Father has loved (*agapaō*) me, so I have loved (*agapaō*) you; abide in my love (*agapē*). ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love (*agapē*), just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love (*agapē*). ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² This is my commandment, that you love (*agapaō*) one another as I have loved (*agapaō*) you. ¹³ No one has greater love (*agapē*) than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (*filos*). ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants (*doulos*)

7 Charles K. Barrett, 1976, p. 377 comments that “the immediate reference is to the feet-washing (cf. vv 14f.); but since this in its turn points to the death of Christ this last must be regarded as the ultimate standard of the love of Christians (cf. 15:13)”. Rudolf Bultmann interprets the commandment in view of the liberating belief that is open to the future, building on the love of the revealer where it is not primarily the how-to-love that is to be learned, but rather that the love of the revealer is the reason for the mutual love between the believers (Bultmann, 1968, p. 403).

8 Bultmann writes that the discourse 15:1–17 comments on 13:34f., where the motivation for the commandment to love was mentioned only briefly in the *kathōs ēgapēsa hymas*. This is now argued more profoundly. Insofar as the commandment to love is developed as the essential content of the loyal faith, it is made clear that faith and love constitute a unity (Bultmann, 1968, p. 406). A similar point is made by Feldmeier & Spieckermann, 2011, p. 440.

any longer, because the servant (*doulos*) does not know what the master (*kyrios*) is doing; but I have called you friends (*filos*), because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love (*agapaō*) one another.

The highest expression of the love spoken of here is a person who puts his life at the disposal of his friends. This probably refers to the knowledge of the author and the readers that the speaker of those words was in fact crucified. It indicates that the passion of Jesus Christ, his cross and crucifixion, serves as an example for the believers in their relations to their fellow believers. This is commented on in The First Letter of John:

¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love (*agapaō*) one another [...] ¹⁶ We know love (*agapē*) by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love (*agapē*) abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love (*agapaō*), not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 John 3:11–18)

The model is found in Jesus Christ giving his life, and the letter points to how it should be practised.⁹ The motif of the passion of Christ is also used by Paul when he talks about his own sufferings (2 Cor 4:7–15).

John 15 starts with metaphorical speech of the vine and the branches, metaphors that are then applied to the readers/listeners. The branches' belonging on the vine means in plain words to "keep my commandments". In many New Testament texts we find the word "commandment" in the context of love¹⁰ (e.g. Matt 22:36–40; John 13:34; 14:15; 14:21; 15:9–17; Rom 13:9; 1 John 2:7–11; 3:22–24; 4:21; 5:2–3; 2 John 4–6). It occurs

9 Both Bultmann and Barrett read the commandment to love in the Gospel as not primarily concerned with morals: according to Bultmann, it is not the case that Jesus, when he is about to leave, establishes an ethical principle as replacement for his presence, a principle generally relevant for human life. In that case the problem of parting, the problem concerning the relation to the vanished revelator, would not be resolved. The relation would be dissolved. The revelator would not be needed anymore (Bultmann, 1968, p. 403). Barrett: "the love of the disciples for one another is not merely edifying, it reveals the Father and the Son" (Barrett, 1976, p. 377).

10 See Barrett, 1976, p. 377.

throughout and is dominant in the text from John 15. We will return to this conjunction of love and commandment below.

Before we leave the Gospel of John, I would like to add a comment on the language of friendship in John 15. The sentences cited above talk about friendship, but not in terms of equality; it is friendship in terms of sharing knowledge. The disciples, these friends of Christ, are given knowledge of a kind that servants or slaves normally do not get.¹¹ We could suggest a semantics referring to slaves obeying orders without knowing their master's plan, without knowing the reason or purpose. In this context, the addressees should know the reason and the purpose of loving one another. The reader should see the bigger picture within which loving the fellow believer makes sense. But this is still not friendship in terms of equality. The relations envisaged here are hierarchical. God is the highest level. John's Jesus calls him the Father. Jesus said: "I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (v. 10), and Jesus gives his commandments to the believers, the ones below him in the hierarchy.

There is one set of relations encompassed by the word "love" which we might see as egalitarian – among the believers who are being exhorted to love one another. They may be thought of as equal. But the focus is not on equality. The bigger picture is a hierarchy, where God, the Father, is on the top, the Son is below him and the Son again gives his commandments to the groups of adherents, to his group of followers:

¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.
(John 15:6–17)

A key statement, both with regard to passages already commented on and to passages to be commented on below, is "You did not choose me but I chose you". In the texts we have read so far God is the active part in

¹¹ According to Bultmann, the difference emphasised here between the friend and servant is the friend's freedom. The freedom is given to the believer through God's revelation (Bultmann, 1968, p. 334), a freedom that includes knowledge of the truth and everything Jesus has heard from his Father (418). Bultmann comments that the friendship is a mutual relationship, but that there is no equality in it (419).

the relation between God and the humans. God loves humans. God's love for humans is the motivation, and the model for the mutual love between humans (the believers).

Other texts reflect the same pattern. In his Letter to the Galatians Paul writes:

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;¹² only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". (Gal 5:13–14)

The phrase "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" is probably a citation from Leviticus 19:18, which seems to be the point of reference for loving one's neighbour in early Christianity. This is also the phrase cited in the so-called "double law of love" in the synoptic Gospels (e.g., Mark 12:30–31). And in 1 John 4:19 we read: "We love because he first loved us". A successor of Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved [*agapēta*] children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1–2). These are texts talking about love relations similarly to the texts in the Gospel of John.

The semantics of utterances expressing the two relations (God–humans, and humans–humans) may inform one another in ways beyond those suggested in the present essay. In theological reasoning the God relation has priority. This relation is the frame within which the idea of love between humans is developed. Widening the perspective, it is interesting to ask in which forms and in which contexts the one relation can motivate the other. Through reasoning, through experiences, and/or through admonition? These issues can follow us when we look at a couple of other texts.

Relations of Love in Deuteronomy

We turn to texts in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy, with the other books of Moses, the Psalms and the book of Isaiah, were books esteemed by the

¹² The Greek term translated "brothers and sisters" is *adelphoi*.

first Christians as classic and authoritative, and were possibly for a long time generally more important literary texts than early Christian writings such as the Gospel of John. In Deuteronomy we find texts speaking of similar relations to those we have seen so far, and also texts which link the God relation to relations between humans. We read:

¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵ yet the Lord set his heart in love [LXX: *agapaō*] on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. (Deut 10:14–15)

Taking a reader's approach, you could figure yourself as the addressee of this text. So, the Lord has chosen to love you. And the expression could activate experiential connotations in a zone we late modern readers might perceive as romantic love: a boy has noticed one girl, the most beautiful girl in the world. There seems to be only one girl in the world. One day you realise that the most amazing thing has happened. She has chosen you out of all other boys in your neighbourhood, in your town, all other boys in the world, no matter how handsome, intelligent or witty they might be; she has chosen you and you are the happiest person in the world. Your overwhelming feelings and your gratitude flow over, you become friendly and generous. From the text:

¹⁵ yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you [...], out of all the peoples [...] ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10)

Let us now involve the literary context: sentences that make the picture more complex, sentences reflecting a development you perhaps would experience in your relation to this girl. She is still the greatest girl in the world, but she shows herself to be demanding; she is controlling; she shows herself to be a jealous lover. So, what does she require of you?

¹² So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. ¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong

to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. ¹⁶Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. ¹⁷For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. (Deut 10)

Verse 12 answers our question with a list of clear demands beginning “Only to ...”. So, are the demands easy to fulfil then? The line-up of requirements does not at all seem easy. With reference to the passages in John we notice the word “commandments” again. The assurance of God’s love is followed up by a request: “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer” (v. 16). We also notice the words about fear and worship (v. 20).

In the context of the present essay it seems at least important to notice the two relations linked together here: God’s love for humans and the love of human for human. Concerning the character of the second relation, the text does not envisage only love for your brothers and sisters, the children of Israel; for it says: “you shall also love the stranger” (v. 19). This, the love of strangers, has two motivations in the text. Firstly, the God who loves you, also loves the strangers. Here, as in John, God’s love is an example for the love between humans. The text explicates the pattern to be followed: God “is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Deut 10:17–18).

The second motivation invites the readers to identify with their forefathers experiences: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (v. 19). A similar reasoning is found in Leviticus 19: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:34).

The texts read so far have referred to God as the active loving part in the God–human relation. To ask for the alternate direction – human love for God – leads us to another interesting, and well-known, text.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart”

In a reading of Deuteronomy, people listening to the passages on how the Lord chose to love them (ch. 10) have already heard the passages in Deut 6. This central Jewish text was presumably well known in early Judaism and among those who became Christians. This text also talks about commandments that are to be observed “so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey” (6:3). At least according to later readings, the subsequent announcement is the central part of the passage: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (6:4), followed by the commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” (6:5). In Deut 6 there is no mention of loving the stranger and also no talk of love in inter-human relations. The focus is the human–God relation and the text even combines love and heart, which creates a resonance with a modern romantic way of talking about love.

The text further suggests traits in the Lord’s character as lover. The Lord your God is a jealous lover. The Lord is watching you to see that you love only him and no one else, and not only outwards, but in your heart – that is, in your will: “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (v. 5). You shall keep his words in your heart – that is, you shall

recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:7–9)

The words of the person you are supposed to love, your king, your master or superior, shall be in your consciousness day and night,¹³ at home and away, you shall recite them, talk about them, they shall be your identity,

¹³ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann interpret the notion of God’s jealousy in a somewhat different direction, linking it to the side of God’s love that is willing to forgive (Feldmeier & Spieckermann, 2011, pp. 33–134. See also p. 102).

who you are (“bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead”). His words shall be (like) the wedding ring on your finger. There is no place of your own anymore. God is a jealous lover, and his love controls all your thoughts, all your time, all your places. There are no exits, there is no *exodus*, except death. If you break up, if you try to escape, he will hunt you down and “destroy you from the face of the earth” (6:15).

This line of thought may, to our sensibility, refer to violence between previously romantic lovers. In a historical reading these sentences should, however, rather be thought of in political terms: “The jealousy of the biblical god is a political affect, roused by the wrongdoing of a contractual partner rather than the infidelity of a beloved” (Assmann, 2010, p. 38). The notion, then, is more that if you try to run away he will treat you like a deserter. The Exodus myth is explicitly referred to at the end of Deut 6 as the decisive chapter in the relationship between Israel and the Lord God. According to Jan Assmann,¹⁴ within the Jewish and Christian tradition the Exodus myth depicts a transition, where religion

places itself on a strict normative footing (the laws) [...]; it gives itself the form of a “covenant” (*b’rit*), modeled on a political alliance, according to which Israel not only agrees to become the people of god, but god likewise vows to become the god of a people. (Assmann, 2010, p. 112)

And these political relations also concern the heart. According to Assmann, this religious form fosters

a higher degree of consciousness because [...] the distinction between truth and lies [...] cuts through the human heart as well, which for the first time becomes the stage upon which the religious dynamic is played out. It may suffice to recall the Shema prayer, which brings god’s oneness into the closest possible connection with the intensity of inner acceptance. (Assmann, 2010, pp. 112–113)

These comments concern our understanding of the nature of God–human relations and point to an essential feature in Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith.

14 Jan Assmann is Professor of Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg.

Reading in Context

The comments above suggest contexts for notions and emotions possibly activated by text readings. With reference to fields of meaning¹⁵ touched upon above, it seems relevant to refer to Christopher D. Stanley,¹⁶ where he writes about the language of God in prayers in the book of Psalms:

Prayers of this type usually assume that the supernatural realm operates much like the hierarchical societies in which nearly all of the major religions originated. Requests for divine assistance place the worshipper in the physical and emotional posture of a deferential and self-effacing peasant seeking a favor from the local landowner, while expressions of praise and thanksgiving recall the flattery and obeisance that courtiers use when seeking favors from a king.¹⁷

Christopher Stanley points to huge differences in cultural ideas and value judgments and also writes that the challenge in understanding the texts is “to enter imaginatively into the mind-set of people who viewed the world very differently than most of us do today”.¹⁸ We in our late modern western societies are convinced that we will get what we are entitled to from the authorities without having to fall to the ground on our faces before an official, and without having to praise or sing hymns to the municipality. Nonetheless, if we are pious Jews, Christians or Muslims, we use a language in our own hymns and liturgies that originally was at home in a, to us, very foreign context. We sing praises to God, even if we have no idea of the original semantic and experiential context for the metaphorical language of such praises. And when the semantic context is forgotten, what do the words actually mean? This could lead into a broader discussion of

15 The term “field of meaning” is here not used in a very strict sense. It suggests that certain ways of speaking have an affiliation with certain areas of life. We could talk about fields of experience or even semantic fields, although the latter term suggests more delimited areas of language use.

16 Christopher D. Stanley is professor of theology at St. Bonaventure University, New York.

17 Stanley, 2010, p. 394. Stanley writes further: “Both types of prayer presuppose that the supernatural world exercises significant power over human affairs and must be treated with respect if humans are to enjoy happy and successful lives. Both also imply that the inhabitants of the divine realm are not always concerned with or favorably disposed toward humans and must therefore be persuaded, enticed, or cajoled into acting in a way that benefits the worshippers” (p. 394).

18 Stanley, 2010, p. 133. I assume that the question of meaning and context that I try to discuss here may also be related to, for example, the descriptions by Charles Taylor of changes in culture and society linked to the concept of “social imaginary” (Taylor, 2007, pp. 171–176). See also Repstad, 2012, p. 31.

religious language, but it also has some relevance for the language of love in the biblical texts.

There seem to be some experiences from modern life that are relevant for understanding these ancient texts about love, but there are also elements in the texts that are foreign to modern notions. I would like to formulate a couple of principles that are important for my discussion of semantics:

- social experiences are preconditions for the semantics in language about relational love. There are no exceptions for the language about the love of God even if you claim God's love to be of another quality. Social experiences are preconditions for the semantics in the language about divine love
- between cultures there are huge differences in social relations, and in the (bodily) experiences learned from social relations.

This goes for the more romantic or emotionally loaded fields of meaning suggested above, and also for other fields of meaning. For the texts we have been reading, it seems relevant also to consider a *political* sphere, and the political includes *morality* and ethics. We can dwell briefly on the experiential dimensions of these two fields of meaning: a field related to our modern and late modern conceptions of romantic love, and a field related to the political sphere.

1) When it comes to emotionally charged fields of meaning, we could ask how relevant our conceptions of romantic love are for understanding the texts in John and in Deuteronomy. Given that they have some relevance, we speak of notions and experiences related to romantic love and to love declarations. To be loved or to hear a declaration of love, you *feel* like the chosen one, you do not just perceive (or hear) it as thought, as concept. You may hear the words directed to you, a voice moves the air, physical waves reach your ear and move your eardrums. Listening is a physical thing. You hear words directed to you, communicating: "you are the chosen one". Those signs – sounds or written characters – if you grasp them, create cognitive images, but your emotions are also, possibly, moved. The declaration of love may create an immediate response in you,

in your emotions and in your will – in your *heart* if you like. And your body responds without the signs being processed in your thoughts, without mediation through your rational reflections. For Deuteronomy 10, we could even suggest a ritual setting, where the text is recited, a setting also relevant for late modern uses of the texts. A ritual has the potential to amplify the emotional and experiential impact of the text.

2) Now we turn to the second field of meaning, the political sphere. The God in Deut 10 requires the hearer

- to walk in all his ways, to love him,
- to serve “the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”,
- and to keep “the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being” (Deut 10:12–13).

“Serving”, “commandments”, “decrees”, “your own well-being”. This may be read as political language. In that field of meaning God is the Lord, the ruler of the earth and also of the heavens. He is your king, your political ruler. How does this God love you? How does a ruler love his people? And how does a member of the people experience the love of the ruler? It is probably not like falling in love with the charming boy/girl, who then turns out to be a prince/princess, and you live happily ever after. For notions connected with the political field of meanings we could consider the bodily experiences of relating to a superior authority, bodily experiences like the gestures you have to perform in the concrete encounters. We could consider the feelings of fear and but also of hope, *fear* of the power which the authority could exert to harm you, but on the other hand *hope* in the power of that superior – a power that is able to change your situation to the better.

I am talking here about the impact of communicating or perceiving a text, how we, an audience, perceive, and how *concepts* are activated and how *memories* are evoked. Those memories may be of a kind that some like to call bodily memories or bodily experiences.¹⁹ They are immediate,

¹⁹ For an overview of issues related to such “embodied knowledge”, see Ulland, 2012, pp. 95–96.

sensual reactions, not mediated through reason or thought, but memories from gestures, actions, and emotions in relations. In scholarly discussions about the semantics of texts, we may be more used to considering cognitive domains than these experiential dimensions.

Concluding Questions

One issue emerging from the foregoing discussion is the significance of the relations depicted in Deuteronomy and its relevance for the New Testament language about love in the God–human relationship. If the New Testament language has left the Deuteronomistic context, which context has it moved into? For early Christian readers, it was certainly not swallowed up by notions like a modern romantic concept of love between woman and man, and it had certainly not moved into a democratic mindset, where all parts have equal rights and obligations. It seems to have been modified and interpreted through experiences in new social contexts, in groups sharing an identity as worshippers of Christ. The notion of commandment is still explicitly present. The readers of the gospel of John hear the new commandment as given by the crucified and exalted Lord, which gives the perceptions a new twist. This new element is also applied as an example for relations between believers.

A further issue is what relevance the hierarchical concepts envisaged in these texts have for love in human relations, between the believers, towards the neighbour, and towards the enemy – concepts like human rights, human dignity, equality. Are these qualities, highly esteemed in our times, relevant for a historical understanding of early Christian texts about love? My suggestion is that they are indispensable, but subconscious, presuppositions for our readings. They are essential to late modern discourses about the conditions of human relations.

A straightforward late modern reading of texts in Deuteronomy and John may find edifying notions of God's love (*agapē*) as a love that can find a reflection in inter-human relations, but it also leaves several elements unintelligible to, or not tolerable for, our sensibilities or our sense of virtue. I assume that some of these unintelligible elements belong to the experiential dimension commented on above. The original characteristics

of immediate, sensual reactions are gone when the context is gone, and for later readers they might be replaced by other immediate reactions, or appear as white spots or enigmatic signs in the texts. Attempted readings in historical contexts at least go some way to revealing how different contexts shape diverse meanings. It is a challenge for believers that the meanings of their sacred texts change, and this is true of some of the best known and best loved passages in them.

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CHAPTER 4

The Concept of Love in Diadochus of Photiki

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All spiritual contemplation, brothers, should be guided by faith, hope and love, but above all by love (Gnostic Chapters 1).

Abstract: Diadochus was born in the early 5th century and died around 487. He was bishop of Photiki in the Roman province of Epirus, in northern Greece. In this paper I will discuss the concept of love (*agapē*) in his writings. I consider the concept mainly in relation to spiritual progress, the role of the heart, and bodily experience and senses, as well as in relation to contemplation and prayer. Spiritual progress starts with baptism and it is a process from divine image to divine likeness. Diadochus emphasizes the role of the heart as significant in man's relationship with God, where man's love for God is presupposed in God's love for man. The most frequent word used by Diadochus to express love is *agapē*; however he also uses *eros*.

Keywords: progress, image, likeness, heart, experience, *agape*, *eros*

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the concept of love (*agapē*) in the writings of the fifth-century Greek ascetic writer Diadochus of Photiki. The concept occupies a central place in his spiritual theology, designating the movement of love from God to the human being, and vice versa, the human being's love for God. I shall consider the concept mainly in relation to man's spiritual progress, the role of the heart, body and senses, as well as in relation to contemplation and prayer.

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Diadochus of Photiki (ca. 400–ca. 487)

Diadochus lived sometime between 400 and 487 as bishop of Photiki in the Roman province of Epirus,¹ in northern Greece. Although he was the most important ascetical writer of his century, solid data on him is scarce. One reason for this may be that at his time Epirus was rather isolated from the great ecclesiastical centres of East and West, as well as being a fairly small town.

The writings of Diadochus that have survived are a treatise on the spiritual life, *One Hundred Gnostic Chapters*, a sermon on the Ascension, and a work called the *Vision of St Diadochus*, which takes the form of a series of questions and answers.² His main work, *One Hundred Gnostic Chapters*, presents a way to Christian perfection as well as a comprehensive Christian anthropology. It enjoyed great popularity and was very influential in the Greek East, proof of which is the number of manuscripts that have come down (Quasten, 1960, p. 511). It was translated into Latin and was, moreover, printed in the *Philocalia* of Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain.³ He is also quoted or mentioned as an authority by a long series of monastic authors between the sixth and eighteenth century, among others Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) and Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022).

Though very little is known of his life, one may from his writings suggest some aspects. It is evident that his main work, *One Hundred Gnostic Chapters*, was intended primarily for a male audience of monks. He begins it by addressing his audience as “brothers” (*adelfoi*), he refers specifically to the situation of both cenobites (monks living in a community) and solitaries,⁴ and he appeals to the “accustomed rule” (*kanōn*) followed in monasticism.⁵ It has therefore been suggested that Diadochus himself was a monk and even the superior of a religious community,

1 The site of Photiki was found about 1890, in Liboni of Threspotia, four kilometers south-west of Paramythia.

2 I have used the Greek text of des Places (1977), which contains all the surviving works of Diadochus.

3 *Philocalia* is a collection of spiritual texts from the East Orthodox tradition, written between the 4th and 15th centuries.

4 *Gnostic Chapters* 53.

5 *Gnostic Chapters* 100.

before his consecration to the episcopate (Polyzogopoulos, 1984, p. 772; Ware, 1985, p. 558).

The Anthropology of Diadochus: the Human Being as God's Image and Likeness

The Biblical teaching on man's creation according to the image and likeness of God (1 Mos 1:26) has been the central point in the history of Christian anthropology. In fact, however, the terms are not often used in the Bible and the Bible never gives us any kind of clear understanding about human beings as the image or likeness of God. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible, the *Septuagint*, the Greek words *eikōn* (image) and *homoioōsis* (likeness) are used. In patristic literature, however, the distinction between image and likeness is known from the second and third century, in the writings of Clement of Alexandria.

Diadochus, using the *Septuagint* text, makes the same distinction between image and likeness as Clement does. Thus the human being has the "image" from the start – or rather, from the moment of baptism, but the "likeness" still lies in the future and is the result of a process. All human beings are made in God's image, but to be in his likeness is something given only to those who have brought their freedom into subjection to God.⁶

Baptism plays a major role in Diadochus's spirituality; two gifts are given in baptism. In the first place, the sin that was caused by the Fall, making the human being corrupt, is cast out through baptism. It brings about a full and entire cleansing of both soul and body; the baptismal grace is something that is permanent and objective and does not depend upon any subjective attitude on man's part. It is the restoration according to the image of God.⁷ The second gift, which surpasses the first, is restoration according to the likeness of God; this is not given at once, but depends upon our cooperation:

6 *Gnostic Chapters* 4.

7 *Gnostic Chapters* 78; 79.

Through the generation of baptism holy grace obtains two benefits for us, one of which infinitely surpasses the other. It grants us the first immediately ... making evident which is “the image” ... The other part, which is “the likeness”, he hopes to bring about with our cooperation.⁸

More than a doctrine, Diadochus’s theology presents us with a relationship in process, a process that begins at the moment of baptism.

In this process, from divine image to divine likeness, the love for God is the driving force. Diadochus writes: “All of us are made according to the image of God; but only those who through great love have enslaved their own freedom to God are in his likeness”.⁹ Growth in spiritual life is, then, represented by Diadochus as an ascent from the image to the likeness, as a recovery through the acquisition of humanity’s original unity, as well as closeness to God (Hester, 1989, p. 49).¹⁰ The likeness is not, however, an essential likeness between the divine and human nature, because he believes that God is immaterial and did not have a defined shape or form. Only Jesus is the real image of God.¹¹ Diadochus describes the process through a simile: the difference between the image and the likeness resembles the difference between a sketch and a finished portrait. First the artist draws an outline in a single colour; this is the image. Then he/she paints with many colours, so that little by little the painting will resemble the model, “reflecting even the model’s hair faithfully”;¹² this is the likeness. This happens, Diadochus claims, “when the mind begins to taste the goodness of the Holy Spirit with profound sentiments”.¹³ Through the distinction between the two terms, then, Diadochus defines the human being not as a static and perfected being, but as a dynamic person who is in continuous progress.

Thus, the fall did not completely destroy the image of God in the human being, it was only obscured. God’s grace that is given in baptism restores the image, and man’s cooperation is then required for attaining the likeness. It is not an easy thing and it may take a long time to

8 *Gnostic Chapters* 89.

9 *Gnostic Chapters* 4.

10 Hester claims that fundamental to Diadochus’s understanding of the human being is his conviction that man was intended by God to be a unity.

11 *Vision* 12.

12 *Gnostic Chapters* 89.

13 *Gnostic Chapters* 89.

achieve this, through the development of the virtues, and, above all, by surrendering one's will to God. The human person can only realise itself by the renunciation of its own will; only when a person does not belong to himself/herself does he become like God. This happens through love. Diadochus writes: "When we no longer belong to ourselves, then we are similar to him who has reconciled us to himself through love".¹⁴

The return to authentic humanity through arrival at a restored likeness to God is not, however, the end of the spiritual journey. Rather, it is the final preparation for a mystical union with God, a union between God and the human bride. Diadochus describes, it seems, this love-union from his own experience although he writes as if it were something told him by another (Ermatinger, 2010, p. 58):

Someone from among those who love the Lord with unyielding resolve once told me the following: "Because I longed for conscious knowledge of the love of God, he who is Goodness itself granted me it; and ever since I have experienced the action of this sense with full certainty to such a degree that my soul was spurned on with joyful desire and ineffable love so that it quit my body to go with the Lord¹⁵ – to the point of almost losing all awareness of this passing life".¹⁶

Similarly to Paul, as well as to other mystics in the Christian tradition, Diadochus describes his experiences in radical terms. More than simply a description of the tension of wanting to be with the Lord, it is a description of mystical death. He includes the body as a participant in this experience, which points to the eschatological dimension of it; it anticipates what is to come, as he writes: "The joy that is actually produced in the soul and the body is a reliable reminder of incorruptible life".¹⁷

The Role of the Heart

The idea of love is central in all Christian theology. Diadochus builds upon the Christian biblical thinking that man's love for God is presupposed in

¹⁴ *Gnostic Chapters* 4.

¹⁵ See 2 Cor 12:2.

¹⁶ *Gnostic Chapters* 91.

¹⁷ *Gnostic Chapters* 25.

God's love for man – we see an example of this thinking in the First Epistle of John: “We love him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Diadochus echoes this when he writes: “for one comes to live in love for God to the same extent that one receives the love of God”.¹⁸ Man has no love for God if he/she has not already received it from above.

The concept used by Diadochus pertaining to love is primarily *agapē*, which is also the most commonly used word for “love” in the New Testament. A few times, however, he also employs the concept of *erōs*, a word that is more commonly used when one speaks about love and affection between humans.¹⁹ It is a word never used in the New Testament, but frequently found in Plato and the Platonic tradition.²⁰ In Diadochus it is also used to describe man's intense desire, or yearning, for God. *Erōs* for God is the way to purity of heart: “It is a characteristic of a clean soul”, he writes, to have “a ceaseless yearning (*erōs apaustōs*) for the Lord of Glory”.²¹ He also uses it in relation to God's words, when you let yourself “be drawn by the ardent love of God's words” (*to erōti tōn theiōn logiōn*),²² or when you are yearning for the peace of God.²³ Indeed, the person who has experienced this intense love of God in his heart, is wholly transformed, described as a state of holy bliss, or ecstasy: “Once he has transcended (*hōs ekstas*) his self-love through love for God, his heart becomes consumed in the fire of love and clings to God with unyielding desire (*tini pothou*)”.²⁴ For Diadochus the area of this direct sensation of God is within the heart. God's presence makes itself felt “in the sense of the heart” (*en aisthēsei kardias*).²⁵ Here he differs from the church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and from the later ascetical writer Evagrius Pontus (356–399), who emphasized the role of the mind or spiritual intellect (*nous*) in the human being's relationship with the divine. Diadochus speaks far more frequently about the heart

18 *Gnostic Chapters* 14.

19 See Vegge in the present volume, who elaborates on the words used for love.

20 I treat the terms “concept of love” and “idea of love” as synonymous.

21 *Gnostic Chapters* 14.

22 *Gnostic Chapters* 10.

23 *Gnostic Chapters* 74.

24 *Gnostic Chapters* 14.

25 *Gnostic Chapters* 14; 16; 23; 40; 91.

(*kardia*) (Plested, 1996, p. 235).²⁶ It is the heart that is the centre of the human person and the organ of true knowledge. Echoing the Apostle Paul, Diadochus writes: “One who loves God with the sense of his heart ‘is known by him’” [1 Cor 8:3].²⁷ The experience of “being known” produces in some way the ability to know God through love (Madden, 1989, p. 55). Likewise, those who shun the divine light of knowledge are condemned to live with a “darkened and sterile heart”.²⁸ The heart is the source of passionate love for God as well as being the organ that God works on to allow, and contribute to, the person’s progress towards the likeness. The most explicit text on the role of the heart is *Chapters* 14, using both *erōs* and *agapē*, even *pothos* (desire):

The one who loves (*agapōn*) God with the sense of the heart (*en aisthēsei kardias*) “is known by him” [1 Cor 8:3], because inasmuch as one receives the love of God, according to that measure he will dwell in the love of God. And from that moment onward, he comes to find himself immersed in such an ardent longing (*en erōti tini*) for the illumination of the intellect, penetrating even his bones, that he loses all awareness of himself and is completely transformed by the love of God. Such a one is present and absent in this life. He has his body for a dwelling place, but vacates it through love (*agapēs*). He relentlessly moves toward God in his soul. Once he has transcended (*hōs ekstas*) his self-love through love for God, his heart becomes consumed in the fire of love and clings to God with unyielding desire (*tini pothou*). “If we seem out of our senses (*eksestēmen*) it was for God; but if we are being reasonable now, it is for your sake”. [2 Cor 5:13]

This text offers us the many-faceted role of the heart and its almost universal usage in Diadochan vocabulary. In the passage we see that the heart becomes the receptive vessel of the Holy Spirit, “receiving the love of God”. The heart is also the source of longing for illumination of the *nous*, including “even his bones”. The reference to bones is worth noting. Diadochus does not believe that our ultimate goal is to be freed from our bodies: to be human is to have a body, and to be saved is to be saved body

²⁶ Plested argues that the difference between the two should not be exaggerated.

²⁷ *Gnostic Chapters* 14. Cf. 1 Cor 8:3.

²⁸ *Gnostic Chapters* 82.

and soul. This understanding of human integration is also important to bear in mind with regard to the emphasis Diadochus gives to physically praying, both psalms, and the prayer “Lord Jesus”.

Although for many fathers God could not be felt or sensed and for the Greek philosophical tradition the heart played little role on the path to God, for Diadochus this is no problem. “His theology bears within itself a healthy tension between rationality and believing affectivity”, writes Cliff Ermatinger in his fine introduction to his translation of Diadochus’s works (Ermatinger, 2010, p. 23).

God’s Love as an Experience of Heart and Body

Thus, inspired by the spirituality of the Fathers of the Desert, Diadochus presents us with a completely new vocabulary when speaking of spiritual matters. By using terms like experience (*peira*), awareness or perception (*aisthēsis*) and taste (*geusis*), he seems to value the body just as much as the spirit. Each person is composed of body and soul (*psyche*) which are joined at the interface of the heart (*kardia*), pertaining to both of them and experiencing through both of them. Man’s nature is thus a fundamental unity of body and soul, as he puts it: “It is in his composite being (*syngkrasis*) that man finds his true integrity”.²⁹ The soul comprises three parts, of which the intellect (*nous*) is the guiding faculty. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve all human beings are subject to the “Pauline dualism” of soul and body. Only God is good by nature, but man can become good through careful attention to his way of life, and this depends on the extent to which he desires this. As we have seen, presenting the human being as a dynamic person is an important characteristic of Diadochus’s anthropology.

There is then, throughout the *Chapters*, a strong experiential emphasis that is almost absent from the more “intellectualist” Evagrius. “Diadochus’s spirituality is spelt out in terms of feeling and conscious awareness”, writes Kallistos Ware, author and bishop in the Eastern Orthodox Church (Ware, 1985, p. 559). According to Ermatinger, “The spirituality of Diadochus is nothing if not a lived theology” (Ermatinger, 2010, p. 14).

²⁹ *Vision* 29.

Given the experiential emphasis of Diadochus's theology, it is logical that he places the role of "experience" (*peira*) at centre stage. Although a common word in modern spirituality, it was rather uncommon in the first centuries after the New Testament. For Diadochus it meant a sensate awareness (*aisthēsis*) of God and of his love that is felt in the depths of our heart (*eis ta bathē tēs kardias*). Since the human being through baptism is given purification both to the soul and to the body,³⁰ his or her experience of God may be felt in his or her entire person – not only in heart and mind, but in the whole body: "As a result it transmits its own share of joy even to the body, in proportion to its progress, exulting without ceasing in its full confession of love"³¹ Diadochus even claims that having an experience of God is a necessary precondition for discourse about him.³² In other words, if you have not had a concrete experience of God that has touched your physical being in one way or other, you do not have the right to speak about him!

The love of God also brings about a transformation in the Christian, leading them to see the world as God sees it, including how they see other people: "When one begins to perceive the love of God in all its richness, one begins also to love one's neighbour with spiritual perception. This is the love of which all the Scriptures speak."³³ In the first page of his treatise he gives a list of ten definitions, among them faith, hope, purity, freedom from anger, and so on. In the ninth he defines love, *agapē*: "*Agapē* is to grow in friendship to those who insult us". As Ermatinger writes: "For Diadochus love of God leads to the love of the other. When one has experienced God's love, it flows over for love of the other" (Ermatinger, 2010, p. 23).

Spiritual Senses

Diadochus attaches great importance to the cultivation of the spiritual senses, and refers on almost every page to the "awareness" or inner perceptive faculty of the intellect (*aisthēsis noos*), the heart (*aisthēsis kardias*) or soul (*aisthēsis psychēs*); and language normally employed about physical

30 *Gnostic Chapters* 78.

31 *Gnostic Chapters* 25.

32 *Gnostic Chapters* 7.

33 *Gnostic Chapters* 15.

sensations is here transposed to the order of the spirit, or, expressed in another way, a function of bodily sense is used to illustrate something that takes place at a higher level of awareness (Madden, 1989, p. 53).

Among the spiritual senses, he especially emphasizes the one which is perhaps the most intense of all, the sense of taste (*geusis*). He also uses the language of intoxication. The soul becomes “drunk” with love: “the soul, being intoxicated by the love of God, intends to exult in the glory of the Lord with a silent voice”.³⁴ Diadochus, when describing the perception of the love of God with this term (*geusis*), finds perhaps the scriptural counterpart of his own personal experience when he quotes Ps 34:8/33:9: “Taste, it is said, and see that the Lord is good. Through the exercise of love, the mind retains the memory of this taste”.³⁵ The taste is said to be the fruit of love (*agapē*),³⁶ and from taste proceeds seeing, and gives rise to joy. Through love the Lord is known empirically to be good: “If we fervently long for God’s virtue, at the outset of our progress the Holy Spirit lets the soul taste God’s sweetness (*glykytētos*) in all the fullness of the sense”.³⁷ And the person who has tasted that the Lord is good, has an experience and a memory (*mnemē theou*) to bring along in the continuing process towards the likeness they are striving to achieve.

The Prayer of Jesus and Apophatic, Imageless Contemplation

In addition to being known for his emphasis on experience and the role of the heart in relation to the divine, Diadochus is also important for his contribution to the development of the Jesus Prayer. The short command of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians (5:17): “Pray without ceasing” has exercised a decisive influence upon Eastern Orthodox monasticism (Bunge, 2002, p. 105). The idea that prayer is not merely an activity restricted to fixed times of the day, but should be something you do uninterruptedly, was adopted during the fourth century by the

34 *Gnostic Chapters* 8.

35 *Gnostic Chapters* 30. See Madden, 1989, p. 53.

36 *Gnostic Chapters* 1, 14, 23, 40, 50, 95.

37 *Gnostic Chapters* 90.

monastic communities. They started to use short formulas of prayer that were continually repeated, also during practical work.³⁸ Among several short formulas designed for constant repetition, the one most commonly employed over the centuries became the so-called Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me”. The prayer is still integrated in the spiritual life of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The origins of the prayer may, in fact, be found in Diadochus (Ware, 1985, pp. 561ff.; Johnson, 2010, pp. 33–34). Diadochus spoke constantly of the remembrance, or memory, of God (*mnemē theou*) (Goettmann, 2008, p. 19). Central though it was, it remained only a means to a higher goal, which is love (*agapē*). Yet it was a necessary means, a means to heal the split or fragmentation that the Fall produced in man: a division of the will, mind and memory into two inclinations, one towards good and the other towards evil. The memory of God is thus a way of freeing the intellect, or mind, from the multiplicity of thoughts. How, asked Diadochus, can our fragmented memory be reduced to unity? How can our ever-active mind be brought from restlessness to stillness, from multiplicity to wholeness? This is his answer:

When we have sealed off every venue through the memory of God, our mind (*nous*) will demand from us an exercise that satisfies its need for activity. Here we must let out a “Lord Jesus” (*to kyrie Iesou*), as the only perfect way to achieve our goal ... Let the mind contemplate this word alone at all times in its interior treasury so as not to return to the imagination.³⁹

Thus he links the remembrance of God to the name of Jesus. The memory of God is definitely Christocentric, concentrated upon the person of Christ. He insists on one unvarying form of invocation: *kyrie Iesou*, Lord Jesus. This invocation of the name Jesus is never treated as an end in itself, only as a means. The words “Lord Jesus” are given to the mind as a practical exercise and an object for its concentration, so that by focusing on them the mind will not wander, but be directed to a “deep mindfulness of the Lord” (*batheian mnemēn tou theou*).⁴⁰ In the thinking of Diadochus,

38 See Ware, 1985 for an excellent treatment of this theme.

39 *Gnostic Chapters* 59.

40 *Gnostic Chapters* 96. See McGuckin, 1999, p. 89.

consciousness is bound up with the memory of God, which is sustained through the Jesus Prayer (Madden, 1989, p. 55). The mind should be kept free of all fantasy and free of any thoughts about the material world, and should practise the so-called “imageless prayer”.⁴¹ Through habitual use, Diadochus states, the prayer becomes ever more spontaneous and self-acting, “just as a mother might teach her son to say ‘daddy’, repeating along with him until she brings him to say it clearly – even in his sleep ... Thus we will be urged on to the memory and love of God our Father with all our affection”.⁴²

The supreme aim of all contemplation is love: to love God and other human beings. This Diadochus makes clear in the very first sentence in the *Gnostic Chapters*: “All spiritual contemplation, brothers, should be guided by faith, hope and love – but above all by love”.⁴³ The constant meditating on the name, he claims, produces in us a love of God: “... the mind’s perseverance in the memory of that glorious and most desirable name with an ardent heart produces in us a habitual love of his goodness.”⁴⁴

The Jesus Prayer is thus a way of “keeping guard” of the mind and heart. Although it is a prayer in words, it is so short and simple that it enables one to reach out beyond language into the silence of God (Ware, 1987, p. 406). In this the apophatic attitude may be applied not only to theology but also to prayer (Ware, 1987, p. 399). By commending imageless prayer, Diadochus proposed a practical method to the attainment of the overall goal, the love of God.

Designating the prayer imageless, or apophatic, I do not mean that it is empty, bereft of content. Christian meditation and contemplation is never empty; its contents, however, are never an “object”. The Bible and the liturgy are full of words, images and notions of God and they are all used in prayer. But since these words and images do not express the truth about God – since God himself is beyond words and images – the Christian orthodox tradition often urges us to balance the affirmative, cataphatic prayer with the negative, apophatic approach.

41 *Gnostic Chapters* 68.

42 *Gnostic Chapters* 61.

43 *Gnostic Chapters* 1.

44 *Gnostic Chapters* 59.

Conclusion

The concept of love plays a central role in Diadochus's spiritual theology. In the process towards the likeness of God, the love of God (*agapē*) is the driving force. It is through love that humanity is able to renounce its own will and enslave its freedom to God. The love that human beings find in themselves is all given them from God. And the person who has experienced this love in their heart is transformed and may dwell in divine love.

It is noteworthy that Diadochus, probably inspired by the spirituality of the desert fathers, presents us with a vocabulary with a strong experiential emphasis when speaking of spiritual matters, a vocabulary rather uncommon in a tradition that owed so much to Platonic intellectualism. Concepts like experience, heart, senses and taste are, as we have seen, commonly used by Diadochus.

In addition, Diadochus's contribution to the development of the Jesus Prayer is widely acknowledged. The name "Lord Jesus" was for Diadochus a means of strengthening mental focusing and concentration so as to arrive at a contemplation of God that would produce in us a love of the divine, the supreme aim of all.

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A Neo-Platonic Dialogue on the Ethics of Love^{*}

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Abstract: In his classic paper on “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato” Gregory Vlastos denied that according to Plato’s Diotima in the *Symposium* a human individual can ever be the proper object of one’s erotic desire, because what one (should) be enamoured with is the Form of Beauty. For the true Platonic lover, the beauty of an individual is only the starting-point for one to understand that beauty can reside also in more abstract levels. Hence, Vlastos argues that the beloved individual is for his lover only a means to an end, so that the lover recollects and attains to true Beauty, and that this is morally objectionable. The systematic Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus (412–485 AD) had already given an answer to this accusation. I will first present the altruistic side of Eros as an ontological entity in Proclus’s metaphysical system. My guide in this will be Socrates, as well as the Platonic Demiurge from the *Timaeus* and *Republic*’s philosopher-king. It will be shown that, according to Proclus’s interpretation of various Platonic texts, Vlastos was wrong to accuse Plato of the abovementioned “instrumentality” on the erotic field. However, my paper will close with a critical engagement with Proclus too, since I discern that in his view of Platonic love another sort of instrumentality, one which is akin to Stoic ethics, arises. Vlastos was wrong, but we do not need to be wholeheartedly sympathetic to Proclus.

Keywords: affection, disinterested, *eros*, instrumentality, love, providence

* The present contribution draws on sections from my PhD thesis (Vasilakis, 2014), which, in an updated, augmented and revised form has been published as Vasilakis, 2021. It has affinities with papers I read at the first regional Meeting of the International Plato Society (on Plato’s moral psychology: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Oct. 2012), the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy (Athens, August 2013; cf. Vasilakis, 2018) and at the Conference “ARXAI: Proclus Diadochus of Constantinople and his Abrahamic Interpreters” (Istanbul, Dec. 2012), which appeared as Vasilakis, 2017. I am thankful to the organizers of the Metochi-Seminar on Love for their invitation, fruitful discussions and constructive criticism. I also thank the editors (especially Henny Fiskå Hägg) and the proofreader of the volume for making my prose smoother and more easily accessible.

Introduction

As with Plato's whole philosophy,¹ so too with his theories of love, as exposed in his erotic dialogues² and especially the *Symposium*:³ they are full of penetrating problems, suspicious lacunae and enticing stimuli for further explorations on the topic of love (*erōs*). As a response to these challenges, subsequent generations, whether ancient or modern, pagan or Christian, classic or romantic, Western or Eastern, general public or professional scholars, philosophers or artists, have attempted to give their own answers, make up new theories or go into broader syntheses. A famous puzzle, arising in part from an "(in)famous" episode between Socrates (470/469–399 BC) and the young Alcibiades (450–404 BC), narrated in the *Symposium*,⁴ is the following: can what people in everyday life (throughout history) have called "Platonic eros" involve corporeal affection and sexual contact? Other perennial questions connected with this dialogue are the following: what is the relation of all the narrated monologues (e.g. the myths by Aristophanes

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- 1 There are many good book-length introductions to Plato (427–347 BC). The collective volume of Fine, 2008 is indeed fine. The complete works of Plato (even the spurious ones) can be found in Cooper, 1997. From this volume stem the translations of Platonic passages used here, except for those of the *Phaedrus*.
 - 2 The *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. The *Lysis* is an aporetic (i.e. with no definite solution at its end) dialogue on friendship that has many affinities with the *Symposium*. The *Alcibiades I*, whose author is perhaps not Plato (cf. Smith, 2004), was taken by the Neoplatonists, due to its Introduction, as a dialogue on love, among much else, and appropriate to be the starting point of the late Neoplatonic Curriculum. For a background on the Platonic *Alcibiades I* and its readings in Antiquity, see Johnson-Tarrant, 2012.
 - 3 "*Symposium*" is literally a drinking party. In this case, however, its participants decided, at least for the beginning, not to get drunk, but to praise Eros, the god of Love. Hence, we have many speeches, given by: Phaedrus (Socrates's interlocutor in the homonymous Platonic dialogue on eros and rhetoric), Pausanias (the lover of Agathon), Eryximachus (the doctor), Aristophanes (the comic poet), Agathon (the tragic poet; in honour of his win in the dramatic competition in Athens he has organized this party at his home), Diotima (a priestess, whose speech is narrated by Socrates) and (the already drunken) Alcibiades (Socrates's old friend and student, who, however, praises Socrates, not Eros; see Sykoutris, 1949, e.g., pp. 145*–146*). For a guide to this philosophical and literary masterpiece, see Sheffield, 2006, as well as Lesher-Nails-Sheffield, 2006, Horn, 2012, and Destrée-Giannopoulou, 2017.
 - 4 See *Symp.*, 217c4ff. Whether this is fiction or not is difficult to determine and is not the point. For the morality of Doric origin that approved of the erotic relation between a mature male and a young boy in the bloom of his age (when starting to grow a beard) see Dover, 1989, esp. pp. 189–196, and the relevant section from the Introduction to the monumental Modern Greek edition of the *Symposium* by Sykoutris, 1949, pp. 39*–65*.

and Diotima)? Is the core of Plato's view to be found in the teaching of Diotima (which is narrated by Socrates)? Is so-called Platonic love egoistic?⁵ Is it related only to Forms, and especially that of the Beautiful?

In a paper of this length I cannot deal with all of these problems. Instead I will focus on a particular objection raised by a famous Platonic scholar of the 20th century, Gregory Vlastos (1907–1991), who was born in Constantinople but spent most of his life in the USA. In his classic paper on “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato” (Vlastos, 1973),⁶ he denied that, according to Diotima (who for him has views identical to those of Plato), a human individual can ever be the proper object of one's erotic desire, because what one can and should be enamoured with is the Form of Beauty, and not the particular beauty which is the faint image of the Form and only resides in a beautiful individual.⁷ That being Vlastos's framework, I am interested in the following accusation: for the true Platonic lover, i.e., the philosopher, the beauty (first of the body and then of the soul) of an individual is only the starting-point for one to understand that beauty can reside also in many bodies and persons, as well as customs, activities, like legislation, and sciences. In the end of this journey of abstraction one can suddenly grasp the summit,⁸ the Form of Beauty itself, which, by being eternally and objectively beautiful, is responsible for the beauty envisaged in all other things material and immaterial. In this picture, so Vlastos argues, the beloved individual is for his lover only a means to an end,⁹ the mere spring-board for the lover to recollect¹⁰

5 Apart from Vlastos, about whom more later, the idea that Platonic love is egoistic was also promoted by W. J. Verdenius and most notably A. Nygren, 1953: *passim*, and especially pp. 166–181. I will not be discussing Nygren, whose rigid and opposing categorization of Pagan *eros* and Christian *agape* is criticized even by Vlastos himself (cf. Vlastos, 1973, p. 6, n. 13; p. 20, n. 56; p. 30). For a thoughtful criticism of Nygren on the grounds of his methodology, see Tollefsen's and Kaufman's contributions in this volume.

6 This paper generated a host of articles and books by other scholars, in response.

7 For a recent response, see Woolf, 2017, a draft of which had appeared as Woolf, 2009.

8 This is the famous “ladder of love” in the end of Diotima's teaching: *Symp.*, 209e6–212a9, with a synopsis in *Symp.*, 211b9–c10.

9 See esp. *Symp.*, 211b9–c4: “This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and *using them like rising stairs (hosper epanvasmois chromenon)*; from one body to two ...” (my italics).

10 Using the term from the theory of “Recollection” put forward in the *Phaedo*, the *Meno* and, associated with love, in the *Phaedrus*.

and attain to true Beauty, and this is or should be morally objectionable (Vlastos, 1973, p. 32).

The response to this objection that will follow antedates Vlastos by more than a millennium, since it is a Neoplatonic¹¹ one which stems from a (pagan) systematizer of (Neo-)Platonic philosophy, Proclus (412–485 AD), who is called also Platonic Successor, because he had been one of the last Heads of the Platonic Academy in Athens.¹² More specifically, I will be focusing on his *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*.¹³ My turning to him is interesting, because the Neoplatonists have frequently been criticized for giving forced interpretations of Plato. However, can this verdict justify modern Plato commentators not paying attention to Neoplatonic views on central problems of Platonic philosophy, such as the accusation of “moral egoism”? So, in what follows I will first present the altruistic side of Eros as an ontological entity in Proclus’s metaphysical system. Our guide in this will be Socrates, who instantiates the erotic activity of divine Eros in the best possible way. Our understanding of the “what” and “how” of this altruistic side will be deepened by considering the Platonic Demiurge from Plato’s cosmological dialogue *Timaeus*, and the philosopher-king from Plato’s *Republic*. The result will be that, according to Proclus’s interpretation of Platonic texts, Vlastos was wrong to accuse Plato of the abovementioned “instrumentality” in the context of the erotic field. However, my paper will close with a critical engagement with Proclus, too, since I discern that in his view of Platonic love another sort of instrumentality, one which is akin to Stoic ethics, emerges. Vlastos was wrong, but we do not need to be unreservedly sympathetic to Proclus.

11 Neoplatonism is one of the most important traditions in the history of philosophy and culture. Its official founder is Plotinus (204/5–270 AD), while other prominent figures are his pupil and editor Porphyry (ca. 232–304 AD) and Proclus (412–485 AD). (Note the persisting initial “P” in the names of this tradition! “Neo-Platonism” is actually a label attached to this brand of philosophy by scholars on the verge of the 19th century (cf. Dillon-Gerson, 2004, p. xiii). For a succinct introduction to Neoplatonism, see Remes, 2008.

12 For a good introduction to Proclus, see Chlup, 2012.

13 The edition/translation (sometimes modified) I will be using is that of Westerink-O’Neill, 2011 (henceforth: *In Alc.*). In relation to several of my following points, the reader can find relevant articles in Layne-Tarrant, 2014.

Socrates as Eros and Vice Versa

Let us take as our starting point the following characteristic Proclean passage:

[I]t is the property of divine lovers to turn, recall and rally the beloved to himself; since, positively instituting a middle rank between divine beauty and those who have need of their forethought, these persons, inasmuch as they model themselves on the divine love, gather unto and unite with themselves the lives of their loved ones, and lead them up with themselves to intelligible beauty, pouring, as Socrates in the Phaedrus [by Plato: *Phdr.*, 253a6–7] says “into their souls” whatever they “draw” from that source. If, then, the lover is inspired (*katochos*) by love, he would be the sort of person who turns back and recalls noble natures to the good, like love itself. (*In Alc.*, p. 26, line 10 - p. 27, line 3)

As becomes clear from the continuation of the excerpt, the “divine lover” described here is Socrates. What is more, he is said to be possessed by the god of Love, i.e., a higher entity in the ontological realm (fact that explains why in such cases I capitalize the initial of Eros/Love). Further, it is assumed that Socrates patterns himself upon the characteristic activity of that deity, which is to elevate the inferior beings of its rank towards the divine beauty. Consequently, a first conclusion one could draw from this comparison is that that – for Proclus – Socrates’s relationship to Alcibiades constitutes an allegory for the relation between the higher and the lower entities of the ontological realm (Whittaker, 1928, p. 243). By examining aspects of the way Socrates is associated with Alcibiades, we actually witness the way the ontological hierarchy is structured, as reflected in our intra-mundane reality, and vice versa.

But the connection between ethics and metaphysics is deeper than that.¹⁴ Indeed, Proclus holds that Socrates’s relationship to Alcibiades is no mere accidental reflection or “analogical” mirroring of the intelligible world’s hierarchy. He states that Socrates, passing on what his own guardian spirit has conferred on *him*, actually bestows divine providence on the young boy.¹⁵ Consequently, Socrates’s relation to Alcibiades is

¹⁴ See also Terezis 2002, p. 64, p. 66 and Baltzly, 2016, p. 258.

¹⁵ See for instance *In Alc.*, 63,12–67,18 (in conjunction with e.g., 28,18–29,1 and 50,22–52,2).

actually an expression of the divine within our intra-mundane reality. The passage cited above also suggests that there is a specific ontological relation between the divine lover and Eros, since the lover receives bestowals which are ultimately derived from Eros itself.

We will be able to appreciate better what Proclus says about love if we try to locate Eros within the ontological scheme and try to understand its function.¹⁶ Here we may confine ourselves to the following rough sketch:¹⁷ as in the *Symposium* (201e3–203a10, esp. 202b6), Eros is a medium/mediator between the beloved, which is the Beautiful, and those who love it. Love, due to its aspiration, is the first to try to unite itself with Beauty (we may term this “reversive” in the sense of “upwards”/“ascending” love, because the object of desire, Beauty, lies on the top of this metaphysical scheme), and constitutes the bond for the lower entities to arrive at that divine level (this can be termed “providential” qua “downward”/“descending” love, because the recipients of Eros’s activity lie below him in the metaphysical scheme). What Eros actually does is to bestow on the inferior members of its rank its characteristic property, which is erotic aspiration. In that way Proclus combines the two notions of ascending and descending love into one: it is insofar as Eros has an ascending love that enables the inferiors to be elevated, too. And if we insist on asking why Eros ever has this descending attitude at all, then the ultimate answer is that he is providential.¹⁸ In other words, Alcibiades can have reversive-ascending eros for Socrates, and Socrates can have providential-descending eros for Alcibiades, while also having reversive eros for higher entities, like his guardian-spirit (*daimonion*).

Thus, it is an essential feature of the Proclean divine lover, i.e., Socrates, who patterns himself upon the god Eros, to elevate along with himself his beloved towards the intelligible Beauty. The lover’s reversive eros does not seem to be incompatible with his providential love.¹⁹ To the contrary,

16 Martijn, 2010 does the same thing with nature in Proclus’s system, focusing on his *Commentary on the Timaeus*.

17 See *In Alc.*, 30,14–31,2; 50,22–51,6; 52,10–12; 53,4–10; 63,12ff. A more extensive treatment is given in Vasilakis, 2021, esp. pp. 99–102. See also Chlup, 2012, pp. 242–243 and Riggs, 2010, passim.

18 See proposition 120 of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology* for which see the magisterial edition of Dodds, 1963 (henceforth: *Elements*). See also an approach in Butler, 2014, pp. 211–235.

19 Cf. also Terezis, 2002, pp. 56–57.

in so far as the lover has a reversive eros, i.e., in so far as he is directed towards the intelligible realm, where Eros, Beauty and the Good lie, he is also providential towards his beloved. There is no doubt that Proclus follows the path of the *Phaedrus*, where among other things it is stated that

[t]hose who belong to ... each of the ... gods proceed ... in accordance with their god and seek that their boy should be of the same nature, and when they acquire him, imitating the god themselves and persuading and disciplining their beloved they draw him into the way of life and pattern of the god, to the extent that each is able, without showing jealousy or mean ill-will towards their beloved; rather they act as they do because they are trying as much as they can, in every way, to draw him into complete resemblance to themselves and to whichever god they honour.²⁰

Indeed, the divine lover's providential attitude, with respect to both the intelligible and the intra-mundane realm, is a recurrent theme in the *Alcibiades's Commentary*. It is worth giving some further illustrations of it:

[T]he souls that have chosen the life of love are moved by the god who is the “guardian of beautiful youths” to the care of noble natures, and from apparent beauty they are elevated to the divine, taking up with them their darlings, and turning both themselves and their beloved towards beauty itself. This is just what divine love primarily accomplishes in the intelligible world ... “kindling a light” for less perfect souls they [i.e., the souls possessed by love] elevate these also to the divine and dance with them about the one source of all beauty. (*In Alc.*, 33,3–16)²¹

There could hardly be a better expression of the way Proclus views, on the one hand, the combination of upwards and downwards eros, and, on the other, the intimate relation between the intelligible erotic pattern and its worldly instantiations.²² This special and complex relationship is illustrated also by the fact that when “men's souls receive a share of such [i.e., erotic]

20 *Phaedrus*, 253b3–c2; cf. also Armstrong, 1961, p. 108 and p. 117 (while in p. 109 he suggests the conformity of the *Phaedrus* with Diotima's account of “procreation” in the *Symposium*; cf. below, n. 44), and Dillon, 1994, p. 392. The translation of the *Phaedrus* is taken from Rowe, 1988.

21 For the Platonic quotations, see the apparatus of Westerink, 2011 ad loc.

22 Cf. also *In Alc.*, 53,3–10.

inspiration, through intimacy with the god [i.e., Eros], [they] are moved with regard to the beautiful, and descend to the region of coming-to-be for the benefit of less perfect souls and out of forethought for those in need of salvation.”²³ Note again the “self-sufficiency” of the lover.²⁴ It is true that the *Symposium*, and perhaps the *Phaedrus* too, in some passages, give us the impression that the lover needs his beloved, because the latter constitutes the means/instrument for the former to recollect the source of real beauty and, thus, ascend to the intelligible,²⁵ a claim that led modern Platonic scholars to find “egocentric” characteristics in Plato’s account, as has already been mentioned.²⁶ The Neoplatonic scholar, however, definitely rejects such an interpretation: the beloved cannot constitute – at least such a kind of – a means to an end, since the divine lover already has communication with the higher realm.²⁷ It is precisely this bond with the intelligible world that enables the lover to take providential care of his beloved – or any potential beloved – i.e., of a person fitted for that special care,²⁸ and hence elevate, or try to elevate, the latter, too, to the former’s object of desire.

From Eros to the Statesman through the Demiurge

My above analysis can be illustrated and assisted by the examination of analogues to Eros that can be found in the Platonic corpus, granting the strong unitarian Neoplatonic reading of Plato.²⁹ These are the Demiurge

23 *In Alc.*, 32,9–13.

24 Adkins, 1963, e.g. 44–45 and 40 stresses, however, that the Homeric ideal of self-sufficiency survives, obscures and undermines both Plato’s and Aristotle’s treatment of friendship.

25 Either on its own, which is the picture illustrated in the *Symposium*, or along with his beloved, as appears in the *Phaedrus*; cf. also Armstrong, 1964, p. 202.

26 With respect to Proclus’s relation to his Platonic past, Nygren, 1953, p. 574 notes that “the idea of Eros has undergone a very radical transformation”.

27 Proclus is quite explicit about that; cf. *In Alc.*, 43,7–8: “Socrates, as being an inspired lover and elevated to intelligible beauty itself. ...” It is clear from the text that Socrates’s position is independent from his relation to Alcibiades. The same holds for the Stoic sage (although he does not have access to a transcendent realm), whose love is only pedagogical. Cf. Collette-Dučić, 2014, p. 88 and pp. 99–101 and Dillon, 1994, pp. 390–391.

28 We should not forget that, as is repeated many times throughout the Commentary (see *In Alc.*, 29,15; 98,13; 133, 17 and 20; 135,1; 137,2; 138,7; 139,6), Alcibiades is «*axierastos*», i.e., worthy of love.

29 According to the unitarian reading, Plato has a solid body of doctrine, parts of which one can find in the various dialogues. Neoplatonists, as well as many scholars of the 20th century, were

from the *Timaeus* and the philosopher-kings from the *Republic*. We may start with the *Timaeus*, a work on cosmology and philosophy of nature. There the generation of the physical world is depicted as the result of decoration of a pre-existing material by a divine craftsman. This Demiurge envisages the World of Forms and sets to instantiate them upon an indefinite entity who serves as basis, the so-called Receptacle. We should not be surprised if, for Proclus, the relationship of the divine lover with his beloved, both in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus*, is the exact analogue of the Demiurge's relation to the Receptacle. Here, too, the *Timaeus* Demiurge mediates – like Eros – between the most beautiful intelligible living being (the World of Forms) and the Receptacle. We could never think that he is assisted in grasping the former due to the existence of the latter. Contrariwise, it is in so far as he contemplates the intelligible, and is also aware of the “disorderly moving” Receptacle, that he projects the Forms into the latter, in order to set it in order, decorate it and fashion it as the best possible image of the intelligible.³⁰ Now, if one presses the question further, and asks why the contemplation of Forms is not sufficient for the Demiurge, for he goes on to instantiate them in the Receptacle, *Timaeus*'s answer is that the former “was good (*agathos*), and one who is good can never become jealous of anything”,³¹ whereby it is implied that the Receptacle was fitted for the Demiurge's action towards it.

Actually, the analogy between the divine lover and the divine craftsman is made explicit by Proclus himself. Towards the end of the following passage Proclus makes the receptacle speak to the Demiurge, as a beloved would to its lover. Since I count this instance as the most moving and poetical moment of the whole Commentary,³² and because we have the opportunity to see another remarkable instance of the ontological analogy

unitarians (e.g., P. Shorey). An opposite way to read Plato is “developmentalism”. For a history of the Plato-interpretation and other strategies of reading him, see Rasmussen, 2008, pp. 49–110.

30 Hence, we could assume that the Demiurge is confronted with two instances of necessity. See also Adamson, 2011.

31 Plato, *Timaeus*, 29e1–2. Cf. Proclus's Commentary ad loc.: in *Timaeum*, I. 359, 20–365,3 (Diehl), and Dodds, 1963, p. 213, note on prop. 25 of the *Elements*, with parallels in Plotinus, too. See also Baltzly, 2016, p. 271.

32 For another example of Proclus's moving and poetical images (although not mere metaphors), see his fragment from *De sacrificio et magia*, 149, 12–18 (Bidez). I follow Kalligas, 2009, p. 16 and p. 31, n. 1 in deleting the “according to the Greeks” of the title.

between Socrates and the intelligible entities with respect to the issue of goodness and providence, it is worth citing the whole passage:

[T]he young man seems to me to admire above all these two qualities in Socrates, his goodness of will and his power of provision; which qualities indeed are conspicuous in the most primary causes of reality, ... “For god,” he [i.e., Plato] says [in the *Timaeus*, 30a2–3], “having willed all things to be good, according to his³³ power set the world in order”, ... Socrates, therefore, faithfully reproducing these characteristics,³⁴ set an ungrudging will and power over his perfection of inferiors, everywhere present to his beloved and leading him from disorder to order. Now the young man wonders at this, “what on earth is its meaning”³⁵. ... If what “was in discordant and disorderly movement” [with *Timaeus*, 30a4–5] could say something to the creator, it would have uttered these same words: “in truth I wonder at your beneficent will and power that have reached as far as my level, are everywhere present to me and from all sides arrange me in orderly fashion.” This ... similarity with the realities that have filled all things with themselves, he ascribes to Socrates, viz: the leaving of no suitable time or place void of provision for the beloved. (*In Alc.*, 125,2–126,3)³⁶

We may now proceed to the political sphere and specifically to the *Republic*. We can assume that the Receptacle’s above-mentioned grateful speech for its decorator could be reiterated by the “political receptacle”, the body of the *polis*, if all classes were united to express with one mouth their gratitude towards their own decorator, the philosopher-king.³⁷ We can assume this, because in the Commentary Proclus offers us, apart from the already mentioned analogies, many others about the relation of the

33 O’Neill, 2011 translates the «*kata dunamin*» of the Greek text as referring to the Demiurge’s capacity to fashion his subject-matter in keeping with the paradigm. Zeyl’s neutral rendering (in Cooper, 1997, ad loc.): “so far as that was possible”, where it is not obvious whether this is ascribed to the Demiurge or what lies beneath him, is preferable. However, Segonds, 1985, p. 197, n. 5 sees in the background the Proclean triad “will-power (*dunamis*)-providence” (with further references in the literature), and in this sense O’Neill’s rendering might be more appropriate.

34 Hence, we could also suggest that here Socrates is an analogue for divine providence, in so far as he allows us to come to know it.

35 Cf. *Alcibiades I*, 104d2–5; cf. *In Alc.*, 120,10–13.

36 Cf. also *In Alc.*, 134,16–135,1 and Baltzly, 2016, p. 271 and p. 273.

37 Plato himself gives us plenty of evidence, e.g., in Socrates’s introduction to the *Timaeus* and in *Republic*, VI. 506a9–b1 and VII. 540a8–b1, about the intimate relation between the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*, without that implying that there might not also be differences between them.

lover with his beloved and that of the philosopher-statesman with his (beloved) state. Further, Proclus's language, even in these political contexts, clearly echoes the wording used for the demiurgic functions of the *Timaeus*.³⁸

These interconnections allow us to give a Proclean answer to the thorny question of the *Republic*: "why does the philosopher have to become a ruler of the city?" Or, in other words: "why does the philosopher have to return to the cave?"³⁹ Plato (or, rather, Plato's Socrates) has always puzzled the commentators with his response that "we'll be giving just orders to just people",⁴⁰ since in the previous books justice has been defined in the "internal" terms of the orderly relation of the parts of the soul within the individual.⁴¹ Proclus might well have responded that Socrates just did not do justice to his readers by not presenting them with the whole picture;⁴² in fact, it is the goodness in which the philosopher participates which makes him, like the Demiurge, good, "and one who is good can never become jealous of anything".⁴³ As is evident from the passages cited above, there is an organic relation between goodness and providence. The "better" an entity is, i.e., higher in the ontological hierarchy, the more providential it is, i.e., its bestowals reach further down the scale, and hence it has a wider scope. As with the Proclean divine lover, it is in so far as the

38 The following is a characteristic example; *In Alc.*, 95,14–19: "For the lover must begin with knowledge and so end in making provision for the beloved; he is like the statesman, and it is abundantly clear that the latter too starts with consideration and examination, and then in this way arranges (*diakosmei*) the whole constitution, manifesting the conclusions in his works." Cf. also Baltzly, 2016, pp. 271–272.

39 Glaucon puts it succinctly when he asks in *Republic*, VII. 519d8–9: "Then are we to do them [i.e., the philosopher-rulers] an injustice by making them live a worse life when they could live a better one?" For the Neoplatonic answer to this challenge, see also O'Meara, 2003, pp. 73–83, esp. pp. 76–77. O'Meara includes references to Proclus's *Alcibiades* and *Republic* Commentaries.

40 *Republic*, 520e1–2.

41 This difficulty must be more evidence for the circularity of Plato's argumentation, as Williams, 1999, pp. 255–264, e.g., p. 258, has sharply remarked.

42 One could claim that the same holds with respect to Socrates's response to another notoriously thorny question, namely that of Cebes in the initial pages of the *Phaedo*, 61d3–5. My main point is that the true Platonic self, i.e., our intelligent soul's relation to its body, is homologous to the relation of the Demiurge with the Receptacle and the cosmos, of the philosopher-king with the state, and of the lover with his beloved, or, in other words, of the (Neo-Platonic) teacher with his student(s).

43 Cited above, n. 31.

statesman participates in the intelligible that he goes on to set into order⁴⁴ its own “disorderly moving” receptacle. Thus, Proclus is in line with the Platonic *Alcibiades*’s parallel between the relations of lover and beloved, on the one hand, and that of the statesman and the city, on the other. The way the lover educates and fashions his beloved must be the paradigm of the philosopher-politician’s attitude towards the body politic.⁴⁵

And in any case, there is no question about the mature philosopher-king needing the state in order to help him grasp the Forms, just as in the case of Proclus’s divine lover. Now, whether this scheme of universal correspondence between the Demiurge, the philosopher-king and the divine lover⁴⁶ exists in Plato is an open question.⁴⁷ We might also question the ontological elaborations with which Proclus has invested Plato. However, Proclus’s insight gives us a Neoplatonic justification not to view Plato as an “egoist” with respect to erotic matters. If this is so, then Proclus has already given a brave and articulate answer to Plato’s modern critics and the idea of “instrumentality”. Let me add that in this *Commentary* Proclus spends a considerable amount of time attempting to prove that it was not in vain that the *daimonion* let the Silenus try to elevate the son of Cleinias.⁴⁸ Unlike Socrates with Alcibiades, I do not suggest that we should necessarily be persuaded by Proclus. Nonetheless, I hope that the present reflections may at least reveal a reason why it would be fruitful for Platonic scholars,⁴⁹ like Vlastos, and readers in general to consider in their discussions Neoplatonic perspectives, as well.

44 This is also consonant with the view of Diotima, right at the end of the speech, according to which the vision of the Form of Beauty will make the lover generate “true virtue” (so that he also becomes “beloved by the gods”-«*theofiles*»); cf. 212a2–9 and above, n. 20.

45 In this way we see how the *Alcibiades* provides a viable starting point for the transmutation of the existing political system into the ideal state.

46 In both *Symposium*’s and *Phaedrus*’s versions.

47 What is more, I am acutely aware that the primary objective of current scholars, such as M. M. McCabe (see e.g., McCabe, 2008), is not to draw general schemes or doctrines out of the whole Platonic corpus, but rather to engage in lively dialogues with individual works, as Plato himself urges us to do.

48 See *In Alc.*, 85,17–92,2. The son of Cleinias is Alcibiades, while Silenus is an encomiastic (!) description of Socrates that Alcibiades gives in the *Symposium*, 216c5–217a3, esp. 216d7. The problem Proclus faces is that the guardian-spirit could foresee the quite unsuccessful end of this relationship; hence, why did it allow Socrates to associate with Alcibiades?

49 See for instance approaches that in some respects are (unwittingly) akin to Proclus: Kraut, 1973; Kraut, 1992, especially pp. 328–329; Miller, 2007, especially pp. 338–339 and n. 28; Mahoney, 1996.

Some Erotic Disappointments

I want, however, to conclude this presentation of the Neoplatonic exoneration of Plato, regarding the beloved's being instrumental to his lover, with a caveat. I will turn to a questionable aspect of Proclus's ideal lover. This problem springs from certain ontological presuppositions (for instance the Neoplatonic notion of hierarchy) and has foundations in Platonic texts.⁵⁰ For instance, the infamous episode of the *Symposium*, mentioned in my introduction,⁵¹ where Socrates abstained from having any sexual contact with Alcibiades, must have been of paramount importance to Proclus and is in line with other Platonic enunciations, such as that the Form of Beauty, the end of the philosopher-lover's journey, is "pure (*katharon*), unmixed (*ameikton*), not polluted by human flesh".⁵² How does this fit into our discussion?

In the context of the above-mentioned discussion as to why Socrates's guardian spirit allowed him to associate with Alcibiades, although it could foresee that the young man would not finally derive benefit from the Athenian gadfly,⁵³ and having invoked several arguments⁵⁴ and examples,⁵⁵ Proclus concludes his discussion thus: "So Socrates also achieved what was fitting;⁵⁶ for all the actions of the noble man have reference

Even Vlastos, 1973, p. 33, making a contrast with Aristotle's god (the Unmoved Mover), acknowledges the providential attitude of *Timaeus's* Demiurge; still, contra Rist, 1964, pp. 30–31 (and p. 28 with Rist, 1970, pp. 165–166, despite the correct qualification of Vogel, 1981, pp. 65–66 and p. 78, n. 28) and Armstrong, 1961, p. 110, Vlastos does not seem to imagine that this could entail anything (positive or not) regarding Plato's views on inter-personal love.

50 I treat this Platonic legacy of Proclus extensively in ch. 2.1.5. of Vasilakis, 2021, pp. 84–90. There I give ample references not only to Platonic texts, but also Proclean ones (*In Alc.* and the *Elements*). Characteristic, in order to understand what divine "undefiled" and "unmixed" providence is, is prop. 122 of the *Elements*.

51 See above, n. 4.

52 Cf. the whole characterization in *Symp.*, 211e1–3; cf. also *Symp.*, 203a1–2: "Gods do not mix with men."

53 My characterization of Socrates stems from the *Apology*, 30e5.

54 For example, the classic one by which the failure to receive the divine and good bestowals is attributed to the receiver's inability. See Proclus's related simile of the sun and what can share in its light in *In Alc.*, 90,22–91,6 (with O'Neill's n. 213).

55 See another classic example of Laius, father of Oedipus, and the renowned Delphic oracle, in *In Alc.*, 91,10–15, with O'Neill's n. 214.

56 The content of the angle-brackets (except for "also") is supplied in Greek by Westerink; see his apparatus ad loc.

to this:⁵⁷ if he has acted, then, beneficently and in a divine manner, he achieves his end in his activity, even if that in him⁵⁸ which admits of external activity also has not been perfected.”⁵⁹ Although the text is not fully clear, it seems safe to say that it is not for the sake of the recipient that providence (i.e. “external activity”) takes place, but rather the other way round: it is for the sake of its taking place that a (fitting) recipient must be found, since providence is necessarily an intentional activity. This seems to suggest that Socrates might not be so interested in Alcibiades’s perfection for the sake of Alcibiades, but only to the extent that the latter is expedient as a receptacle for Socrates’s external and overflowing activity. In that way, Socrates’s or his divine analogue’s “affection” must be qualified. All the more so, since Alcibiades’s, or his cosmic equivalent’s, failure of perfection does not seem to imply anything about Socrates’s complete status. After all, as I have repeatedly noted, Socrates does not need Alcibiades in order to recollect the intelligible.⁶⁰

My suggestion can be supported by another excerpt, where Proclus comments on a short phrase abstracted from Socrates’s initial exchanges with Alcibiades:⁶¹ “The phrase ‘so I persuade myself’ seems to me to show clearly that the divinely-inspired lover, if he sees the beloved suited for conversion to intellect, helps him, in so far as he is able; but if he finds him small-minded and ignoble and concerned with things below, he [i.e., the lover] turns back to himself and looks towards himself alone, taking refuge in the proverbial ‘I saved myself.’⁶² For the persuasion and self-directed activity are an indication of this

57 For an issue regarding manuscript reading and translation, see O’Neill’s justification in n. 216*.

58 For some difficulties in the Greek here, see Vasilakis, 2021, p. 131, n. 206.

59 *In Alc.*, 91,15–92,1.

60 In other words, Alcibiades assumes the place of a preferred “indifferent” (*adiaforon*) for the Stoic-like sage Socrates. The Neoplatonic sage seems wholeheartedly sympathetic (so to speak, since his own ideal is identified with the Stoic impassivity) to the view expressed in the Stoic archer analogy (see e.g., Cicero, *De Finibus*, III. §22, with n. 12 of Annas, 2001, p. 72, ad loc.): the preferred indifferent forms only a target so that the sage can perform a virtuous action, no matter whether the target is accomplished (e.g., the preservation of his health), the actual target lying within the virtuous activity itself. This is also the gist of Collette-Dučić, 2014, pp. 101–109, (despite p. 94), esp. pp. 103–105.

61 See *Alc. I*, 104e8–105a1.

62 Cf. Archilochus, frgm. 6 (Diehl) with O’Neill’s n. 286 ad loc.

knowledge [i.e., the erotic].”⁶³ From this description it turns out not only that the divine lover is not in need of his beloved, but also that he is not very much troubled about the other person and his/her final perfection either (and an analogous point would hold in the cosmic context).⁶⁴ Of course, we should not put too much weight on the slightly surprising use of the proverbial “I saved myself”, because the lover is in any case, and regardless of the beloved’s fate, already saved. We can exclude the egoistic accusation that the lover has used the beloved for the former’s ascent, and then stopped caring about his “ladder”: the lover did not need the beloved right from the beginning. The beloved’s failure to keep pace with him – or, in the words of the previous citation, the fact that “even if that in him which admits of external activity also has not been perfected” does not seem to have any impact on the tranquility⁶⁵ of the lover’s internal and self-directed activity.

Conclusion

Perhaps, then, the lover was not much interested in being providential for the sake of the beloved, but rather for the activity’s sake, since providence is necessarily an intentional activity. In this case, although the beloved is not a necessary requirement for the divine lover’s self-realization, he is reduced to a means for the manifestation of the lover’s self-realization. Moreover, in our passage the lesser importance of this “instrumentality” is evident in that the divine lover can presumably perfectly well get by alone, too. Thus, even if there were affection between the lover and his beloved (in both cases), this must have surely been disinterested, on the lover’s behalf. Of course, it is natural enough to turn one’s back on someone who does not or cannot follow. Nonetheless, it is a question whether we would like to posit that as an ethical ideal.

63 *In Alc.*, 139,18–140,2. For a full explication of various detailed interpretive issues regarding this passage, see Vasilakis, 2021, p. 132, nn. 211–214.

64 Imagine a very good teacher or lecturer who delivers talks without being interested in whether his audience understands or benefits from him/her. See further another aspect in Vasilakis, 2021, pp. 132–133, n. 218.

65 Cf. the Hellenistic ideal of «*ataraxia*». See also Vasilakis, 2021, p. 132, n. 217, commenting on another view expressed by D. A. Layne.

To recap, in this paper I have presented a dialogue between readers of Plato on an issue touching on the ethics of love. Is Platonic eros, according to Proclus, altruistic (to use modern jargon)? The answer is yes and no: Vlastos accused the Platonic lover of a certain instrumentality as regards the beloved. The Platonic lover needs the beloved, Vlastos maintained, because the former needs to apprehend beautiful particulars (like the beloved) in order to make progress in his / her getting to know the Form of Beauty. We saw how Proclus, painstakingly interpreting a variety of Platonic texts, can acquit Plato from accusations of such an instrumentality. If Eros's function is equivalent to that of Socrates, the Demiurge and the philosopher-king, then only someone who is already wise and perfect can do good to a person who has no knowledge of Forms. Nonetheless, I also showed how a different kind of instrumentality might also arise in Proclus's framework, too. The Proclean lover is perfect with or without a beloved person. This means that the failures of the beloved do not have any serious consequences for the lover; the beloved has a value in so far as he becomes the vehicle for the manifestation of his lover's perfection. Hence, it is up to us to take part in, and give our answers to, this dialogue with Plato and the Neoplatonists, not only on the basis of interpreting texts, but also as a matter of choosing a way of life, i.e., an erotic *modus vivendi*.

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CHAPTER 6

Eros and Distance: Transformation of Desire in St Gregory of Nyssa*

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyze the relation between the notion of love or desire (*eros*) for God, and the notion of distance (*diastema*) between God and the created beings in the works of St Gregory of Nyssa. These two notions are interrelated on different levels, because distance that separates God from the created beings is traversed out of desire for God of the latter. First, the distance as temporal interval will be investigated, which separates the present day from the Second Coming of Christ, which is elaborated by Gregory in his early work *On Virginity*. The focus will then be shifted to the distance between good and evil, that Gregory explicates in the works of his middle period such as *On the making of man*, *Against Eunomius III* and *The Great Catechetical Oration*. Finally, the distance as an inherent characteristic of created nature that never disappears will be analyzed by focusing on Gregory's later works, such as *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, *On perfection* and *The Life of Moses*.

Keywords: Gregory of Nyssa, distance, love, desire, period, perfection

Introduction

The concept of love belongs to those notions which everybody has experienced in his or her life, but to define it is difficult due to its complex character. One of the characteristics of love is the urge of the lover to dwell in the presence of, or to be united with, the loved one. While in the case of

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human relations it is not difficult to be united with loved ones in different ways, the same is not easily attainable if God is the loved one. The present paper aims to investigate how the distance between God and the loving human beings is traversed out of love by St Gregory, the fourth-century bishop of Nyssa in Cappadocia (modern-day Harmandali, Turkey).

Eros rendered as longing, love and desire for God, and *diastema*, understood as distance between God and creation, are two Greek terms that are central to the thought of St Gregory. Even other Greek concepts considered as the most distinctive features of Gregory's theological vocabulary, such as the concept of continual advancement, expressed by the term *epektasis*, can be explained by means of these two terms. Longing for God inspires the created beings to continually advance in traversing distance (*diastema*), which separates them from God. However, these two notions do not appear in Gregory's work in a single form or with fixed meanings. The term *eros*, which has a long history of usage before Gregory in both everyday and philosophical, mostly Platonic, language, occurs in this single form only nine times in Gregory's writings. Other terms with the similar meaning of desire and longing for God, such as *epithymia*, play a more prominent role in Gregory's theological vocabulary. Therefore, in the course of this paper it will be specified which term that refers to longing, desire or love is used by Gregory.

The other term, "distance" (*diastema*), is spread throughout Gregory's work, but with different meanings. The term itself, apart from being used in everyday language, is introduced by Aristotle as *terminus technicus*, with the meaning of spatial distance.¹ The Stoics later extended the meaning of the term to temporal distance or interval, in order to express the continuous nature of time between two world conflagrations (*ekpyrosis*).² Philo was the first author who, by employing the term in the Stoic sense as long temporal interval, argued in favor of the creation of time as temporal distance.³ Later on the term, in this cosmological context,

1 The short history of the meaning of the term is given in Simplicius, *In Aristotelis Categoriae commentarium*, 350, 15f.

2 Joannes Stobaeus, *Anthologium* I, 106,5–106,9; Stobaeus, *Eclogae* I, fragm. 509, 164,15–18.

3 Philo, *De opificio mundi* 26,4; *De aeternitate mundi* 6,4; 52,5–7.

was used by Origen⁴ and Methodius of Olympus,⁵ through whom it came to Gregory (Otis, 1976, pp. 332–336). Another context in which the term is used before Gregory is the Trinitarian context. St Alexander of Alexandria, the immediate predecessor of Athanasius the Great on the Alexandrine diocesan throne, argued against Arius's stance about the Son's beginning by denying any kind of distance between the Father and the Son.⁶ With this exact meaning the term is later used by St Athanasius against Arians,⁷ and by St Basil the Great against Eunomius.⁸ However, apart from the already imbedded meanings, the term acquired some new meanings in Gregory's thought. The term is not only used in a cosmological and Trinitarian context, but is applied in an ontological context too, thus becoming, for Gregory, a chief identifier of creation, and the creaturely feature that never disappears. All these contexts in which the term distance appears are somehow connected with desire, or rather with a certain transformation in desire. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the connection between these two notions in regard to the transformation of creaturely desire into more perfect love for God, throughout various phases of Gregory's work.

The concept of desire will be analyzed a) in the context of *diastema* as temporal interval, which separates the present day from the Second Coming of Christ, then b) in the context of vertical *diastema* as the distance between good and evil, and c) in the context of *diastema* as an inherent characteristic of created nature that never disappears. Second, transformation of desire will be discussed in three different theological contexts: ascetic, ethical and eschatological. Third, the transformation of desire will be examined diachronically, that is, in the context of the works from different periods of Gregory's life, from the earliest to the latest.

The paper consists of three case studies. The first case study deals with the relationship between desire and temporal *distance* in the context of Gregory's early ascetical writing *On virginity*, dating from 371. The second

4 Origen, *De principiis* II 3,2.

5 Methodius, *De resurrectione* II 25,2.

6 Alexander Alexandrinus, *Epistula ad Alexandrum Constantinopolitanum* 23,14.

7 Athanasius Alexandrinus, *De synodis Arimini in Italia et Seleucia in Isauria* 26,9,1.

8 Basilus, *Adversus Eunomium* II 12.

case study is an analysis of the concepts of desire and vertical *distance* in the ethical context of the works from the middle period, such as *On the making of man* (*De hominis opificio*), *Against Eunomius* (*Contra Eunomium*) III and *The Great Catechetical Oration* (*Oratio catechetica magna*), that emerged in the late 70s and early 80s of the fourth century. The third case study refers to the mystical and eschatological context in which desire is associated with *distance*, and is restricted to Gregory's late works *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (*In Canticum canticorum homiliae*), *On perfection* (*De perfectione*) and *The Life of Moses* (*De vita Moysis*), composed between 389 and 394.

On Virginitate (De Virginitate)

In his early work, *On virginity*, Gregory describes virginal life as an introduction to “the philosophical life”⁹ and “a certain art and faculty of the more divine life, teaching those living in the flesh how to be like the incorporeal nature”.¹⁰ During the elaboration of the main features of the virginal life, Gregory draws an ontological difference between the Holy Trinity and the creation. The virginity belongs to the incorruptible Father who passionlessly begets the Son, who, in turn, may be known only through virginity, because His nature, as well as the nature of the Holy Spirit, is pure and incorruptible.¹¹ Here, Gregory refers to a double paradox: on one hand the virginity of the Father is comprehended together with his begetting of the Son; on the other hand, the Son is conceived through virginity.¹² Both cases are paradoxical if they are related to human reality, in which virginity precludes conception, and therefore precludes giving birth. However, the most familiar example of the conception of the Son through virginity is Mary's immaculate conception of Jesus. Mary's conception and begetting of Jesus is modeled on the Father's conception of the Son. As such, the motherhood of Mary is a consequence of her virginity, just as the divine generation of the Son

9 English translation *On Virginity* (pp. 4–75), p. 6.

10 *De Virginitate* (= *DeVirg*), 4,9.

11 *DeVirg* 2,1.

12 *DeVirg* 2,1.

from the Father is the result of divine virginity. The paradox seems to be resolved in this way, but a question arises concerning the nature of virginity. Gregory's understanding of virginity is much broader than the absence of sexual intercourse, to which the usual sense of the word refers. He is very clear, already at the beginning of his treatise, that virginity as a state of blamelessness and holiness leads to divine purity and incorruptibility.¹³ This means that the possession of virtues is necessary for virginity to bear fruits of generation. Nonna Verna Harrison distinguishes between four kinds of generation: "the Father's begetting of the Son in the Trinity; Mary's conception and bearing of Christ as human; ordinary human generation; and the spiritual generation of virtues of Christ and of oneself" (Harrison, 1996, p. 39). The Father's generation of the Son out of virginity serves as model for Mary's virginal generation of Jesus. Thus, in both cases the begetting is the consequence of virginity understood in a broader sense as possessing divine virtues, either by nature, like God the Father, or by participation, like Mary the Mother of God. Ordinary human generation reflects human bodily constitution, in which sexual relationship precedes conception and generation, and thus it excludes virginity in the strict sense of the word. Finally, by imitating both God the Father's and Mary's blameless and pure way of life which bore fruit, one may generate virtues from one's virginity.

For Gregory, virginity, conceived in an ontological sense, represents an essential difference between Creator and creation. The main difference between the divine and human nature is that the divine being lacks desire and passions (*apatheia*),¹⁴ while the human nature is subjected to certain dispositions of the soul, such as desire and passions. The dispositions of the soul may be twofold. Gregory distinguishes between lowly desires or passions, which are dispositions toward the corruptible realm, and lofty desires toward the incorruptible world that can be only achieved through the imitation of the incorporeal powers.¹⁵ Therefore, the virginal or the philosophical life is the way to weaken physical passion and to

13 *De Virg* 1,1

14 *De Virg* 2,1.

15 *De Virg* 4,8–9.

discover the true desire.¹⁶ The true desire, rooted in our nature in the creation, is the desire for heavenly things and for union with God. According to Gregory, the natural movement, as endowed to human nature by the Creator, should be the fulfillment of lofty desires.¹⁷ This movement never stops, even if it does not derive from the lofty desires but from the lowly passions. The human being in his or her original state did not know the passions. They entered into human nature when the desire for God was replaced by the desire for creation. Thus, the human being became subjected to passions and death,¹⁸ because they directed their movement not towards the incorruptible God but towards the ontologically unstable and changeable creation.

According to Gregory, after the transformation of lofty into lowly desires, and by clothing the human nature in “the garments of skin”,¹⁹ the path of human beings toward God became much longer. Gregory claims that the return of human beings to the original state is possible only if they come back to God by choosing the same path from which they fall away from Him. The last stop on this path is marriage as compensation to human beings for experiencing death,²⁰ and as the ability to stay in life by continuing the species. Since marriage is the last stop in the human separation from God, it should be the first stop on the way to Christ.²¹ Therefore, according to Gregory, marriage should be replaced with the virginal life because marriage is a life according to the body that leads to death, while virginity is a life according to the Spirit that saves from death.²² The virginal life is an image of splendor that comes with the future age.²³ According to Gregory, virginity brings the gifts of the Resurrection into this life, while through procreation marriage distances people from the future age. Therefore, Gregory proposes a universal, for some too drastic, solution to replace marriage and procreation with virginal monastic

16 *De Virg Praef.* 1.

17 *De Virg* 6,2.

18 *De Virg* 12,2.

19 *De Virg* 13,1. Cf. also Genesis 3:21.

20 *De Virg* 13,1.

21 *De Virg* 13,1.

22 *De Virg* 13,3.

23 *De Virg* 14,4.

life. For Gregory, marriage is only the postponement of Parousia, while the virginal life transcends time, because it does not introduce distance between the present day and the Second Coming of Christ by procreating new generations:

Having put an end to his carnal life, as far as this is within his power, he awaits the blessed hope and the epiphany of the great God, putting no distance between himself and the presence of God because of the generations in between.²⁴

Gregory actually argues that by abstaining from procreation and by persisting in a state of physical virginity, as well as virginal virtuous life, one abolishes the distance between God and himself. Gregory links directly the desire for God with the distance that separates the present age from the second coming of Christ. The desire for God can be fulfilled only if the temporal distance is shortened or totally abolished. The universal way to abolish this distance and to fulfill the desire is to stop procreating. Mark Hart considers odd Gregory's argument "that virginity overcomes the power of death by preventing mortal bodies from being born" (Hart, 1992, p. 11). Hans Boersma challenged Hart's claim by referring to Gregory's "overall position, linked as it is both to divine incorruptibility and to the incorruptibility that comes to us through the virgin birth of Christ" (Boersma, 2013, p. 124).

The incorruptibility might be seen as the final fruit of virginity, as Boersma aptly proposes, but Gregory here argues on two levels, one that is long-term and another immediate. On the long-term level Gregory's focus is on the Second Coming of Christ and the eschatological realm. Boersma's argument is applicable here, because, by both abstaining from procreating through bodily virginity and generating virtues through virtuous virginity, an appeal is made to Christ to come and to bring the fruits of incorruptibility. The long-term fruit of bodily virginity – abstaining from procreation – is the absence of new generations that might prolong Christ's Second Coming. However, this may look like a provocation for Christ to come earlier than he planned, but if it is accompanied with the generation of virtues then it reveals the meaning of virginity in a broader sense. The virginal life as a combination of the notion

²⁴ *DeVirg* 14,4.

taken in both the strict and the broad sense can have, as a direct result, the coming of Christ and the entering into the uncorrupted life of the heavenly realm. This model would work only at a universal level, which means that it should be practiced by all and in all respects. Probably aware of its improbability, Gregory refers to the immediate plan, which consists of the human imitation of the future life similar to that of angelic powers here and now. This imitation of future life is by means of virginity. Thus, virginity is at the same time human goal, means and self-fulfillment. The virginal life of God is the goal toward which the human beings are directed. Attaining the virginal life of the Holy Trinity is a lofty desire of human beings. Humanity may attain its goal and fulfill its desire only by means of virginity. Only virginity, both bodily and virtuous, can practically abolish the death of present and future generations by eliminating the temporal *distance* that separates the present moment from the Second Coming of Christ. Finally, already experiencing the fruits of the future life through virginity in this life, humanity has already undergone transformation by fulfilling some aspects of the life to come.

Contra Eunomium III, De hominis opificio and Oratio catechetica

A number of Gregory's works produced between the late 370s and the early 380s, such as *On the making of man (De hominis opificio)*, *Against Eunomius (Contra Eunomium)* III and *The Great Catechetical Oratio (Oratio catechetica magna)* deal with the notions of being and non-being, or good and evil.

According to Gregory, movement caused by desire is not simply one of the qualities with which God endowed creation, but it is the essential feature of creation. The doctrine of creation "out of nothing" indicates that God as Creator moved the creation from the state of non-existence into being. Thus, due to this transition (*parados*) from non-being into being the very nature of creation is changeable.²⁵ Since nothing created

25 *De hominis opificio* (=DeHom) 184,43; *Oratio catechetica magna* (=OrCat) 21,7; *Contra Eunomium* 6,79.

has remained the same, it is in constant transition from one state to another. The created beings oscillate between non-being, from which creation came to existence, and the fullness of being that is not reached yet by creation. This means that every created being is able to move within the existing distance either back toward non-being, which is a change for the worse, or toward the fullness of being, which is a change for the better. From an ethical perspective, one may distinguish two kinds of movement. The first kind of movement, according to Gregory, is always toward good, while the other, which is in the opposite direction, is toward something that does not have its hypostasis.²⁶ In order to underline that evil has no ontological foundation, Gregory considers that which is contrary to the good as absence of good (Mosshammer, 1990, pp. 136–167). Thus, for Gregory evil has its existence in non-being.²⁷ Gregory emphasizes that God is neither the creator of evil, nor is evil created together with other things. On the other hand, evil is not an absolute non-being or nothingness, because then it would not exist, but it is relative to being. The vertical distance, unlike horizontal temporal distance, may be thus defined as the distance between good and evil.

The movement of angels and human souls along the vertical distance toward goodness is characterized by constant and continuous motion, because goodness is infinite, and it cannot be reached by any pursuit.²⁸ Gregory argues that these creatures are eternally and constantly moving since their movement never stops.²⁹ The creatures are moved by desire to reach the goal of their movement. The desire is the only cause of movement of the spiritual beings towards goodness.

The main reason for the movement of spiritual beings toward something opposite to the beautiful or to the good is their perception of something opposite to the good as naturally good and beautiful. Therefore, according to Gregory, there is beauty by nature and, as its opposite, an illusory appearance of beauty. The criteria for distinguishing them are

26 *OrCat* 21,23–4.

27 *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione (=DeAn)* 93,20–21.

28 *DeHom* 201,19–24.

29 *DeHom* 201,33–7.

in the mind.³⁰ However, the mind sometimes cannot determine what the right choice would be, and deceived by illusion it chooses to move towards the non-being and evil, perceiving them as goodness.³¹ Gregory compares this human choice with the choice of the dog that abandons real food in order to follow its shadow hoping for a larger meal. In the case of human beings, the reason for moving towards evil is twofold. Primarily this is a deception of the devil as the inventor of evil, and secondarily it is the human acceptance of the deception.³²

The movement toward evil is movement away from God, and unlike the first kind of movement it is limited, because evil as the lack of being is not infinite. There are different scholarly interpretations regarding the limitations of evil. According to some claims, the evil is limited because it is related to the created order (Daniélou, 1970, pp. 186–204; Zemp, 1970, pp. 186–187). Some other scholars, such as Marriette Canévet and Alden Mosshammer, reject this interpretation because it places evil at the same ontological level as creation, a claim that is countered by Gregory (Canévet, 1968, pp. 87–95; Mosshammer, 1990, p. 151). They offer an alternative interpretation of the limitations of evil from a soteriological perspective – that the movement of beings towards evil would ultimately result in reaching non-being. Therefore, divine intervention in the form of the Incarnation and salvation of human nature took place when the limits of evil reached critical proportions. However, Gregory’s denial of evil’s infinity can also be interpreted from the aspect of this movement. Since evil has no ontological foundation, the movement toward evil would actually be movement away from the good. The goal of the movement would not be toward something, but away from something, and it would consist only of the desire to move away from the good. According to Gregory, movement toward something is a matter of free will, and if the will is not directed towards the goal of its motion, but toward the absence of the actual goal, it results in the cessation of movement.³³ Since the being by its nature cannot stop moving, it must continue its

³⁰ *OrCat* 21,32–4.

³¹ *OrCat* 21,33–41.

³² *OrCat* 21,44–50.

³³ *OrCat* 31,12–14.

movement in the opposite direction. Thus, the being that moves toward non-being will continue, at some point, its movement toward being, by regaining this as the goal of its movement:

Now that which is always in motion, if its progress be to good, will never cease moving onwards to what lies before it, by reason of the infinity of the course to be traversed: – for it will not find any limit of its object such that when it has apprehended it, it will at last cease its motion: but if its bias be in the opposite direction, when it has finished the course of wickedness and reached the extreme limit of evil, then that which is ever moving, finding no halting point for its impulse natural to itself (*ek physeōs stasin*) when it has run through the lengths (*diastema*) that can be run in wickedness, of necessity turns its motion towards good: for as evil does not extend to infinity, but is comprehended by necessary limits (*anangáiois pérasi*), it would appear that good once more follows in succession upon the limit (*peras*) of evil; and thus, as we have said, the ever-moving character of our nature comes to run its course at the last once more back towards good, being taught the lesson of prudence by the memory of its former misfortunes, to the end that it may never again be in like case.³⁴

Gregory here argues for the absence of the final goal of aspirations or stasis in evil that makes beings change the direction of their movement from evil to good. However, although beings continue to move toward the same created distance, the real change or transformation happens at the level of desire. The transformation of desire is reflected in the weakening of the very desire, because evil has no ontological foundation and therefore it cannot inspire movement. By exhausting all the possibilities of evil as something unreal, the human being undergoes again the transformation of his desire into the movement towards God as goodness and fullness of being. Since the desire for God is the only real desire able to inspire continuous movement, the desire for anything other than God is therefore limited, and ultimately it is re-transformed into the desire for God. Similarly, the vertical distance between good and evil does not imply traversing the distance between two equal opportunities, but

34 *DeHom* 201,19–36. English translation in Moor and Wilson (Eds.), 1892, p. 70.

rather shortening the distance between achieved level of goodness and the goodness by nature. The evil is just a stop on this ethical distance.

De Vita Moyses, De perfectione and In Canticum Canticorum

In his later writings, such as *De Vita Moyses*, *De perfectione* and *In Canticum Canticorum*, Gregory explored some mystical and eschatological themes. One of the fundamental questions that Gregory deals with is why the soul yearns to know what cannot be known. This question, which at first glance is paradoxical, actually reflects the *quintessence* of Gregory's late view on desire. Gregory's claim that Moses reached that for which he longed by failing to fulfill his desire³⁵ resolves this paradox. This claim should be considered on two levels, on the epistemological and on the moral. The first level deals with divine infinity that renders God unknowable,³⁶ because the divine being cannot be comprehended by mind due to lack of boundaries. Therefore, Moses's desire to know God remains unsatisfied. At the second, moral level, Gregory argues that love towards the one, who is beautiful and good, causes movement toward him. Since the divine being is good by nature,³⁷ God is the goal of every movement towards good. Linking the infinity of God with His goodness by nature resulted in movement toward good that never stops, because the desire of someone who strives for God cannot be fulfilled. This movement is actually a spiritual growth in virtue, or in perfection.³⁸ Since God is the fullness of perfection, this again means that perfection cannot be achieved. Gregory explains further human motivation to persevere on this path that has no end. He describes the mechanism of human desires and aspirations as something closed in the perpetual cycle of cosmological time.³⁹ As soon as the human being satisfies his desire for something by the possession of the objects of his desire, he again begins to yearn for

35 *De Vita Moyses* (= *De Vita Mo*) II, 8.

36 *De Vita Mo* II, 236.

37 *De Vita Mo* Praef. 7 and II, 237. *De An* 93c.

38 *De Vita Mo* Praef. 5.

39 Cf. introduction of Jean Daniélou in Daniélou, 1979, pp. 49–51.

something else and again feels empty until he acquires it.⁴⁰ Thus every desire ceases when it reaches its object, and as the desire reappears, it also disappears.⁴¹ However, if the desire is directed toward something that can never be achieved, then it cannot be satisfied. Thus, desire for the unattainable object never ceases, but on the contrary, it constantly increases. Such desire is not characterized by successive iterations, but it acquires permanence, in which there is no cessation, because it does not attain the object of its desire. This continuity can be seen as a gradual increase in the intensity of desire. Thus, the human being departs from the perpetual cycle of changes and he establishes his unstable nature on the stability of his determination. This stability is attained only on the way towards good, because it has no end, and any tendency that is the opposite to good has its limits and it cannot maintain the stability of desire or movement. Therefore, human desire is defined by divine infinity and divine goodness. By moving towards good, which is God himself, the human soul realizes that God is unattainable because He is infinite, and that its desire to reach the good will never be fulfilled. However, while realizing her inability to reach the good, the human soul recognizes that reaching only a part of good is a significant advancement.⁴² Therefore, according to Gregory, the human being tends to advance along a road whose end he will never reach. By continuous advancement towards good, the human desire to reach an infinite goal is constantly satisfied by the achieved advancement, but it never ceases to strive towards that which lies ahead. Constantly moving towards good, human and other spiritual beings will constantly pursue the goal of their movement, although they cannot reach it. Therefore, Gregory argues that the perfection of human nature consists in its very growth in goodness.⁴³ Gregory does not perceive the changes to which human beings are subjected as negative, but rather as a possibility for further human growth. The change represents a gradual growth in goodness, because the movement “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18) is continuous advancement and a continuous process of coming ever

40 *De Vita Mo* II, 61.

41 *In Ecclesiastem* (= *In Ecc*) 2.

42 *De Vita Mo* Preat. 9.

43 *De Vita Mo* Preat. 10.

nearer to perfection, without reaching the fullness of perfection. Therefore, the perfection consists in continuous human growth in goodness, which is without restrictions.⁴⁴

Perfection is therefore associated with a permanent increase of the desire to achieve goodness. By the soul's ascent to goodness, the desire to attain it constantly grows.⁴⁵ However, Gregory claims paradoxically that the constant movement towards perfection happens by standing still. Gregory draws this identification of movement and stillness from Exodus 33:21, where Moses says: "You must stand on the rock". If it is obvious that the one who ascends does not stand still, nor the one who stands still ascends, how then, Gregory asks, are movement and stillness the same?⁴⁶ The solution to this paradox consists in the fact that the human being ascends towards perfection in proportion to the extent of his steadfastness in goodness. By establishing himself in goodness, the human being actually achieves stability. The steadiness represents continuity of movement towards goodness, in which the movement assumes the character of stillness. Jean Daniélou rightly remarks that this stillness which one may establish in goodness opens the possibility of movement as real advancement, while the constant movement in the physical world does not include advancement, and therefore represents stagnation (Daniélou, 1979, 53).⁴⁷

Gregory describes how a human being who is not established in goodness, and who, in the words of the Apostle Paul, is "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind" (Eph 4:14), unsuccessfully tries to climb in the sand, because even though he takes long steps, his feet slip backwards and down.⁴⁸ This is the answer to the initial question of how it is possible that Moses received that for which he longed by failing to fulfill his desire. By establishing himself in the desire to reach God, he attained stillness, which both satisfied and increased his desire to continue his movement.

44 *DePerf*

45 *DeVitaMo* II, 238.

46 *DeVitaMo* II, 243.

47 Cf. also Daniélou, 1944, p. 282.

48 *DeVitaMo* II, 244.

Gregory's notion about Moses's unfulfilled desire may be the key to solve some difficult passages which puzzle contemporary scholarship, such as the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 15.6.8 (Verghese, 1976, p. 255):

For when at the beginning the created order came into existence by God's power, it was the case for each of these that its start and its full actualization were achieved together without any interval (*adiastátōs*), since for all that were brought from nonexistence to existence their perfection coincided with their beginning. Now the human race is one of the things that were created, and it did not, like the others, go forward to perfection by promotion, but from its first moment of existence it was formed simultaneously with its perfection, for humanity, it says, came to be "after the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26–27). And this is manifestly the highest and most perfect of goods, for what can be found that is nobler than being made like God? In the case of the first creation, then, the final state (*peras*) appeared simultaneously with the beginning, and the race took the starting point of its existence in its perfection; but from the moment it acquired a kinship with death by its inclination toward evil and so ceased to abide in the good, it does not achieve its perfect state again all at once, as at its first creation. Rather does it advance toward the better along a road of sorts, in an orderly fashion, one step after another, and rids itself bit by bit of its susceptibility to that which opposes its fulfillment. For when it was first created, since evil did not exist, there was nothing to prevent the race's perfection from going hand in hand with its birth, but in the process of restoration, lapses of time (*diastēmatike parátasis*) necessarily attend those who are retracing their way toward the original good. Hence our mind, which because of its vice is locked into a passionate attachment to materiality, scrapes away, bit by bit, with the help of a cunning discipline, the wrong that has grown together with it like a tree bark that encloses it.⁴⁹

Here, Gregory argues that in the beginning, when created nature came into existence through the divine power in each of the existents, the beginning was "without distance" linked to the end, i.e., each of the creatures that was brought from non-being into being received – together

49 *In Canticum canticorum (=InCant)* 15,6,8. English translation in Gregory of Nyssa, 2013, p. 487.

with its beginning – its perfection. Gregory offers an example of the human being, which in the beginning, like other spiritual beings, did not have to traverse the road from its beginning to its perfection, because his nature was from the beginning created perfect. Since human nature was created in the image and likeness of God, it is endowed with the highest goodness and perfection. Gregory's argument in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 15.6.8 raises questions because, contrary to his earlier views on the ever existing created distance, he claims that the beginning of the first creation coincided with the end, without any distance between them, and that nature was perfect when it first existed.

However, against the background of our discussion on Moses's unfulfilled desire, I would like to argue that the two positions do not contradict each other. If the end, the goal, of created beings is to be in a state of perfection, then they attain perfection by moving on the way to the fullness of perfection, which they can never attain. Thus, there is no distance between them and their perfection, because their perpetual commitment to goodness brings them perfection. However, this does not mean that there is no distance between beings and God, which exists due to the fact that the divine being can never be reached. By stating that, at the beginning of the creation, its beginning coincided with its end without any *distance* in-between, Gregory points to several issues.

First, God the Creator made all things good and perfect, without introducing between him and creation anything that may separate them. The existence of distance, which separates beings from God, points rather to the divine nature, which is infinite and therefore incomprehensible for creatures, than to divine intention to create obstacles that separate God from creation. Therefore, as soon as the beings are brought into existence they begin to exercise their perfect nature by their movement towards God that is also stillness from the point of perfection.

Second, by referring to the beginning of creation, Gregory points out that the creation did not exist in any other state than the state of perfection. This state of perfection is disturbed by the determination of spiritual beings to move towards something which is not the Creator of their beings and the source of their goodness, on the basis of which they possess perfection. To the natural distance, which represented more an inability to

reach God than an obstacle intentionally established by the Creator, was added an artificial distance created by creatures moving in the opposite direction from goodness. The imperfection as a result of the abuse of freedom began to exist in the originally perfect creatures, and at once their beginning became different from their end. The created nature has fallen from perfection, which characterized the beginning, and it was intended to serve as the end in their way to the Creator. Gregory is explicit in stating that in the first creation there was no hindrance or obstacle impeding the development towards perfection of nature, because evil is not present, while in the second creation distance is attached by necessity to the first goodness.⁵⁰

In his later works, Gregory points out that in addition to the horizontal distance as the period between the present moment and the end of the world, and to the vertical distance as the distance between good and evil, there is a third distance that is intrinsic and that existed before the fall. This distance actually consists in the human impossibility to comprehend the infinite divine nature. The existence of this distance actually guarantees that the longing for God will never stop, because God cannot be reached or grasped. The transformation of desire happens when the goal of desire is redirected from reaching and grasping God to continuous and steadfast growth in Him. Therefore, the perfection is not achieved in reaching and grasping the divine being, because this is impossible, but in the persistence to reach and grasp God.

Conclusion

The desire for God and distance are two important concepts that can be found in various stages of Gregory's work. Throughout his works Gregory explores and defines the notion of desire in connection with distance. Gregory presupposes that desire exists only when the object of desire is out of our immediate reach. This means that we are separated from the fulfillment of our desire either by a special or temporal distance, as it is the case with Gregory's early writings, or by ethical and ontological distance,

⁵⁰ *InCant* 15,6,8.

as he claims in his latter works. In order to fulfill one's desire, one has to reach the object one longs for by traversing the existing distance. Therefore, in his early ascetic treatise *On virginity*, Gregory proposes abstaining from procreation and pursuing the virtuous life of virginity as a means to abolish temporal distance between the present age and Christ's Second Coming and to fulfill the desire for Christ. Gregory argues for the reverse transformation of desire in this early work. The first transformation of desire consists of its redirection from God to corruptible nature. As a result of this transformation the lofty desires become lowly passions. As the reverse process of transforming the lowly into lofty desires, Gregory proposes a virginal life that consists both of abstaining from procreation and of multiplying virtues. The passion to prolong the existence of the human species for the period (*diastema*) until the Second Coming by procreation is replaced by the desire to induce the Christ's Parousia. In *De Virginitate* the virginal life, which abolishes temporal *distance*, is the only solution proposed for the immediate fulfillment of the desire for God.

However, in the writings from the middle period of his career, by facing the concept of divine infinity, Gregory transforms the horizontal temporal distance into vertical distance, as distance between good and evil. The longing for good becomes infinite, because the object of desire is infinite. In this period, Gregory begins to identify the created nature with the distance. Thus, the distance ceases to be something that should be abolished, but it becomes something that secures the permanence of created nature on the basis of its desire to reach goodness. This desire for the fullness of being or good that is embedded in human nature causes the permanent movement toward good. However, when the human being due to deception replaces the movement towards good with the movement away from good, he chooses the path toward evil, as the absence of good. Reaching the end of evil, which due to the lack of any ontological substance is just privation of good, human beings re-establish themselves in the movement toward good. Thus, desire toward evil is transformed in the desire toward good when human beings pass the distance of evil on their movement toward God.

By the end of his life, Gregory again transforms the ethical distance, into an ontological one. Gregory argues that at the beginning of creation

there was no distance that separated created beings from the perfection. He refers here to the artificially added distance to creation as the consequence of the fall. This distance appears as twofold: a temporal distance by which creatures are separated from God, who is at the end of time, and an ethical distance that separates evil from goodness. When human beings fix themselves in the way toward the good, then they experience a third distance. Distance gains its ontological status when human beings realize that God as goodness cannot be achieved. Human beings, thus, may build their perfection only on the steadfastness of their desire for God. Distance itself – as inability to reach and grasp the divine being – ensures that the human desire for God will never stop and that human beings will constantly attain perfection. The transformation of desire consists in redirecting the focus from attaining God as goodness to eternally reaching toward Him.

Even if, at first glance, it seems that Gregory is inconsistent in dealing with desire and distance throughout his works, in my opinion there are no contradictions in his thought because the transformation of both desire and *diastema* happen at different levels of reality, and in different contexts of Christian life. Both *diastema* and desire for God undergo transformation because human and angelic beings pass “from glory to glory” in their continual advancement toward God.

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CHAPTER 7

Love in Dionysius the Areopagite and St Maximus the Confessor

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Abstract: Love (*erōs*, *agapē*) is a fundamental category in the sixth-century Dionysius the Areopagite and the seventh-century Maximus the Confessor, the latter being confessedly dependant on the former, and both formative for the later Byzantine tradition. Both are indebted to earlier thinkers, both pagan thinkers such as Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus, and Christian thinkers such as Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers. Dionysius's teaching on love presents a fundamentally metaphysical account, with cosmic entailments. He assimilates the two Greek words for love, *erōs* and *agapē*, seeing them both as manifestations of beauty and responses to beauty, and using them more or less interchangeably for the ecstatic love of God for the cosmos and the love that underlies the creatures' return to union, to the One. Maximus shares Dionysius's sense of love as metaphysical and cosmic, but his teaching is much more practical, and presents love as something that can be attained by the Christian or monk, though it requires genuine ascetic struggle. He makes more of a distinction between *erōs* and *agapē* than Dionysius, seeing *erōs* as perfecting the soul's desire, while *agapē* perfects the soul's *thumos*, psychic energy. Maximus's understanding of the interrelated psychological makeup of the soul, influenced by Evagrius, though with its own characteristic emphases, also underlies his sense of what is meant by the restoration of the cosmos.

Keywords: love, beauty, soul, cosmos, Platonism

This paper is concerned with two thinkers who were to exercise an enormous influence on Byzantine theology: Dionysius the Areopagite (or, to be precise, the person who wrote under his name) and St Maximus the Confessor. What we find with them, something characteristic of the subsequent Byzantine tradition in general, is an understanding of love broader and deeper than something simply ethical; for both love

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(*erōs* or *agapē*) have aspects or dimensions that are metaphysical and cosmic. Something of this conviction they inherit from their predecessors, both the pagan Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition and the Christian tradition of such theologians as Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers.

Although St Maximus the Confessor acknowledges his debt to the Areopagite on several occasions (and indeed cites him several times in his *Centuries on Love*), when we compare the way in which the two Fathers treat the concept of love, their approach seems very different. Dionysius's treatment is fundamentally metaphysical: his longest discussion of love occurs in chapter 4 of the *Divine Names*, the chapter dedicated to the first of the divine names, that is, the name of the Good. Maximus discusses love in virtually all of his works in one way or another; nevertheless there are two treatises dedicated to love, *agapē*, itself, namely, his second letter, addressed to John the Chamberlain, and his four *Centuries on Love*, dedicated to an otherwise unknown Father Elpidius (most likely a fellow monk), for whom Maximus composed his "Questions and answers" (*erōtapokriseis*), the *Liber Asceticus*. These works are, in one sense, complementary, in that the first was written for a layman, a high-ranking court official, while the latter was written for a fellow monk. What I propose to do in this paper is set out, first, an account of Dionysius's doctrine of love, derived from *Divine Names* 4, and then an account of Maximus's doctrine, based on the works I have mentioned, and then go on to explore what connexions I can see, which may, I hope, show some of the ways in which their very different approaches converge.¹

Divine Names 4 is dedicated to the first of the divine names, the "Good", to be followed in later chapters by discussion of being, life, wisdom, and various other names, concluding with the "Perfect" or the "One". To start with the Good betrays Dionysius's fundamental Platonic affinities: he is well aware of the position the Form of the Good holds in Plato's thought, especially in the *Republic*; the analogy of the sun in *Republic* VI. 507–9 lies behind his initial reflections on the Good. Dionysius soon moves on

¹ For Dionysius's *Divine Names*, I have used the critical edition by Suchla, 1990, though I have given references to the columns in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 3, which are to be found in most editions and translations. For Maximus, *Ep.* 2, see Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 91: 392D–408B; for the *Centuries of Love* (= *CL*), see Ceresa-Gastaldo's (1963) edition.

to add to the notion of the Good, *to agathon*, the notion of the Beautiful, *to kalon*, or Beauty, *to kallos*. These are not to be distinguished, because beauty is the “cause of the harmony and splendour” in everything; it is a ray pouring forth from a hidden source, says Dionysius, echoing an important insight of Plotinus’s, shining on everything beautiful, bestowing on it a radiance from beyond. It is because it calls – *kaloun* – everything to itself that it is called *kallos*, beauty. Beauty is not just something pleasing; it lies at the heart of reality:

For beauty is the cause of harmony, of sympathy, of community. Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing (*erōs*) inside them to have beauty ... The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good, for everything looks to the Beautiful and the Good as the cause of being, and there is nothing in the world without a share of the Beautiful and the Good.
(DN 4:704AB)

It is because of the Good and the Beautiful (I don’t think Dionysius actually uses *kalokagathia*) that everything exists and everything relates one to another. Both the harmony of all things and their mutual sympathy, as well as their individual reality, are due to the Good and the Beautiful: Dionysius speaks of the *koinōniai* of the opposed, the *assummixiai* of the united, the *pronoiai* of the higher, the *allēllouchiai* of like-constituted, the *epistrofai* of the more needy – all of these manifest the rest and repose, protecting and unchanging, that beings have among themselves (704B). Dionysius goes on to speak of the threefold movement – direct, circular, and spiral – that is to be found among both intellects and souls. From these movements, all inspired by the Good and the Beautiful, comes all the variety and harmony of the cosmos. Such movement originates from the desire, and the love, both *erōs* and *agapē*, that all things have for the Good and the Beautiful.

This leads into what appears at first sight to be a digression, but is more than that, about the use of *erōs* and *agapē*. He imagines objectors to his use of *erōs*, because it is not found in the Scriptures. One might wonder why someone writing, most likely, in the early sixth century would see this as a still-live issue, but, of course, Dionysius is pretending to be writing at

the turn of the first century, and is aware of objectors to the use of *erōs* in earlier times. Indeed, in his consciousness of his mask, he almost lets it slip, for it is clear (though only pointed out by István Perczel (1999) fairly recently) that Dionysius bases himself in this section on Origen's discussion of *eros* and *agape* in the preface to his commentary on the Song of Songs. He condenses and misses much of Origen's argumentation, but his argument that *eros* and *agape* have the same meaning – and what matters is the power of what is meant (*hē dynamis tou skopou*) and not simply the words – is Origen's, as well as most of the citations he uses in support of his argument: Proverbs 4:6, 8 (LXX: *erasthēti autēs* – “Love her”, spoken of Wisdom), and Wisdom 8:2 (“I became a lover [*erastēs egenomēn*] of her beauty”), and the citation from the “divine Ignatius” – “my love [*erōs*] has been crucified” (*Rom.* 7:2). Just before introducing that quotation from Ignatius, Dionysius remarks that “it appears to some of our writers on sacred matters [*hierologōn*] that the name *eros* is more divine than that of *agape*” (*DN* 4.12:709B). One would expect Dionysius to be referring to scriptural writers, though his usual word for them is *theologos*, not *hierologos*, and indeed he goes on to quote Ignatius, but there is a writer who seems to say that *eros* is more divine than *agape*: and that is St Gregory of Nyssa. In the first Homily on the Song of Songs (PG 44:772) he argues for *eros* in preference to *agape*, and in the thirteenth homily he says that *agape* stretched to intensity (*epitetamenē*) is *eros* (*Or.* 13:048C).² I am not suggesting that Dionysius would have expected his readers to have picked up the reference – that would have completely blown his pseudonym – but if they thought of Gregory of Nyssa in this context, it would have confirmed the sense that quickly gained ground that Dionysius was a thoroughly Orthodox theologian (and, in the eyes of his readers, a possible source for the notions of love one finds in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa). His teaching on love, *eros*, is summed up a paragraph or two later:

Divine *eros* is ecstatic [a paraphrase of Gregory's *epitetamenē gar agapē ho erōs legetai?*], so that lovers belong not to themselves but to those they love. This is manifest in the providence shown to the weaker by the higher, in the mutual regard for those of equal status, and in the more divine return of the lower

² See Daniélou's discussion in Daniélou (1954), pp. 206–208.

towards the first. Therefore also the divine Paul, possessed by divine *eros* and swept up by its ecstatic power, says with divine voice, “I live, but no longer I, but Christ lives in me”. As a true lover, and beside himself, as he says, in God, he is living not his own life, but that life exceedingly longed for, the life of his beloved. (712A)

And Dionysius goes on to add that

We must dare to add this as being no less true; that the Source of all things Himself, in His wonderful and good love for all things, through the excess of His loving goodness, is carried outside Himself, in His providential care for all that is, so enchanted is He in goodness and love and longing. Removed from His position above all and beyond all, He descends to be in all according to an ecstatic and transcendent power, which is yet inseparable from Himself. (712AB)

And says, furthermore, that

the divine love shows especially its unending nature without beginning like some eternal circle travelling in unerring revolution through the Good, from the Good, in the Good and into the Good, always with the same centre and in accordance with itself eternally proceeding and remaining and being restored to itself. (712D-713A)

This goes well beyond Aristotle’s vision of the unmoved mover, which “moves through being loved” (*kinei de hōs erōmenon: Metaph.* 11:1072b): in ecstatic divine love, God moves through all his creation (note that in this section Dionysius is not thinking about God’s love in the Incarnation, but simply about his cosmic love) (Osborne, 1994, pp. 195 ff.), and all love, uniting and preserving, is a manifestation of God’s own love.

Once we see the cosmic nature of love, as a unifying and preserving power, we can see that Dionysius is talking about love, even when he does not mention the term. *Eros*, for instance, is not used at all in the *Mystical Theology*, still less *agape*, but it is all about ecstatic union, which is what Dionysius means by *eros*. Similarly the notion of hierarchy, defined in the *Celestial Hierarchy* as “a sacred order and knowledge and activity which is being assimilated as much as possible to likeness with God”, is also a manifestation of divine *eros*, as Dionysius expounds it in his *Divine Names*.

A final point, before we move on. Most scholars writing about Dionysius on love (or indeed almost anything) raise, at some point or another, the question: is this Christian or Neoplatonist? It has always seemed to me not a very helpful question, though in attempting to answer it, lots of interesting points have emerged: for example, the notion of *erōs pronoētikos*, God's outgoing love to those lower than him, can easily be found to have a precedent in Proclus, or even in Plato; nevertheless, the notion in Platonists like Proclus has far less scope than in Dionysius, for *eros*, to the Platonists, is just one of the gods, not especially exalted, whereas Dionysius's *eros* is God's love for the cosmos.³ It seems to me, however, that Dionysius would not have understood the contrast being suggested. His pseudonym was adopted because he saw in Christianity a convergence between the classical tradition of Platonism and the biblical tradition; his teaching, especially on love, is soaked in Platonism or Neoplatonism, but he derives it, at critical points, from the Scriptures, interpreted through his Neoplatonic spectacles, as it were. Early on in his presentation of his doctrine of love in *Divine Names* 4, seeing the communication of light to beings that turn towards God as ever the more abundant, for they "loved much" (*hoti ēgapēsen poly*), he quotes exactly (save for changing the verb to the plural form) the Lord's commendation of the harlot who had anointed his feet with myrrh, washed them with her tears, and wiped them with her hair, at the table of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:47); and his example of one who loves ecstatically is none other than Paul the apostle. The ramifications of this have been explored recently at some length by Charles M. Stang (2012).

What about the doctrine of love in St Maximus the Confessor? If we open his *Four Centuries on Love*, we seem to be entering a different world. Although his very first words recall Dionysius – "Love is a good disposition of the soul, according to which one prefers no creature to the knowledge of God" (*CL* I.1) – for there is the same sense that love is a one-centred attention to God, the echo is not very close and the next two chapters begin to sound very different indeed.

3 This is the point of several articles by J. M. Rist. See, e.g., Rist, 1964.

Apatheia gives birth to love; hope in God to *apatheia*; patience and long-suffering to hope; these are the children of all-embracing self-mastery; self-mastery the child of fear of God; and fear comes from faith in the Lord. He who believes in the Lord fears punishment; the one who fears punishment masters his passions; the one who masters his passions endures hardship; the one who endures hardship will have hope in God; hope in God separates one from every earthly inclination; the mind separated from these will have love towards God. (CL I. 2–3)

These two chapters constitute a chiasmus. The first has a sequence: love – *apatheia* – hope – patience and long-suffering – self-mastery (*enkrateia*) – fear of God – faith in God; the second: faith – punishment – mastery of the passions – hardship (or tribulation: *thlipsis*) – hope – separation from earthly inclinations – love. It has not been generally noticed that what we have here in Maximus is based on a few verses in Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Neither Ceresa-Gastaldo nor the translations I have consulted – in the English *Philokalia* (Palmer et al., 1981, p. 53) and Polycarp Sherwood’s (Sherwood, 1955, p. 137, note 248) – make any reference to it. In Romans 5:1–4, we read,

Justified then through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and boast on the basis of hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we take pride in tribulations, knowing that tribulation works patience, and patience testing, and testing hope, and hope is not ashamed, for the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.

Paul’s sequence is faith – tribulations – patience – testing (*dokimē*) – hope – love. What was for Paul a sequence envisaging the experience of Christians under persecution – faith, leading to persecution experienced as tribulation, borne by patience, in a process of testing, the fruit of which is hope, which is rewarded by love poured out in the Holy Spirit – is transposed by Maximus into the progress in ascetic struggle experienced by the monk. This recalls the way in which, with the peace of the Church in the fourth century, the role of the martyr was assumed by the ascetic or monk. A key term, *thlipsis*, changes its meaning from tribulation under persecution to tribulation under temptation, just as *peirasmos*

alters its meaning from persecution that may be beyond our powers (as in the *Our Father*) to temptation in the sense of challenges to a faithful following of Christ: both, of course, understood as the result of the assaults of demons. The ascetic context envisaged by Maximus is underlined by the introduction of a step between hope and love, that of *apatheia*, calm detachment, enabling one to direct one's whole attention to God, and *enkrateia*, self-mastery, preparing the soul to endure temptation/tribulation. It is these two technical terms from the ascetic vocabulary that are going to be expanded upon in the rest of the *Centuries*: the acquisition of *enkrateia* provides the weapon for fighting against the passions, and the final transcendence of the assault of the passions is manifest in *apatheia*.

There is another striking difference between the Apostle and the Confessor: the Confessor's sequence leads to love, which is the daughter of *apatheia*, as Evagrius had affirmed;⁴ the Apostle's sequence leads to openness to, receptivity towards, love, which is the gift of the Spirit. It is not that Maximus is unaware of the gratuitousness of love; rather, I think, that at the beginning of his *Centuries on Love*, he is concerned to present love as something attainable: the ascetic struggle of the monastic life has love as its goal; there is something we can do about reaching it.

That is the first point I want to make about Maximus's teaching on love: that it is practical; it is concerned with what we can do (at all times, of course, in response to God's grace). The suggested contrast between the Apostle and the Confessor is, however, more apparent than real: the Apostle is equally insistent on the practicality of love, while the Confessor, as we shall see, is aware of a dimension to love that is more than just the next step of our ascetic struggle.

It is, however, very difficult, at least on the basis of the *Centuries on Love*, to be at all systematic about the Confessor's teaching. The very genre of the century – a hundred brief chapters, each no more than paragraphs or even sentences – has a practical, rather than a systematic, purpose. A century is to be read slowly and meditatively: each chapter is intended to provide food for thought and reflection; only rarely do we find a sequence of chapters developing a point, though quite often we find a sequence of

4 Prologue to *Praktikos*; cf. *On Prayer*, 84.

chapters iterating in different ways the same point. The century is also intended to meet the needs of people of very different temperaments: if one finds oneself passing over some chapters rather quickly, while other chapters detain one and lead to prolonged self-scrutiny and resolution, then that is deliberate: that is the purpose of a century. It seems to me, then, easiest to draw attention to threads that run throughout the centuries, rather than look for any sustained argument.

First of all, however, it is easy to see how the chiasmus presented in the first century, quoted above, underlies the whole of the set of centuries. The movement from faith to love, via the learning of patience, the acquisition of self-mastery over the passions, leading to freedom from distraction and a kind of detachment – the two sides of *apatheia* – issuing finally in the capacity to love: this movement forms a kind of ground bass. Nonetheless, Maximus is soon reflecting on the final stages of this process. The tenth chapter tells us:

When the intellect, by the *eros* of *agape*, goes out of itself towards God, then it is conscious neither of itself nor of any of the beings whatsoever. For irradiated by the divine and unbounded light, it is unconscious of any of those things that have been brought into being by him, just as the physical eye has no awareness of the stars, when the sun has risen. (CL I. 10)

There are a few points I want to comment on in this passage. First of all, the expression “the *eros* of *agape*”: it is clear that Maximus has inherited the sense of the distinction between *eros* and *agape* that we have discussed earlier. *Eros* is not opposed to *agape*, rather it is a mode of *agape*: an intensified mode, *epitetamenē*, perhaps! Sherwood translates the phrase, “the burning love of its charity for God”. I don’t think “charity” can any longer be used to translate *agape*, as was the case in the older translations; it is too cold a word (“as cold as charity” is a proverbial expression in English). It is a pity as it reduces still further the possibilities of translating the Greek, with its host of words for love. But “burning” seems to me to be about right, and is supported by some other examples in Maximus we shall look at later; only *about* right, however, for the notion of *eros* always, I think, has the sense of something inspired in us, even a kind of madness that takes us beyond ourselves (think of the way in which *eros* is

introduced in the *Phaedrus* as a further type of divine madness, *enthousiasmos*, following on from poetic inspiration).⁵ This is made explicit in the second point I want to mention: the notion of going out of oneself in love, for the word used, *ekdēmē*, has the sense of going into exile, in this case from oneself.⁶ It is another way of speaking about ecstasy. My third point relates to this: the way in which Maximus speaks of the intellect becoming unconscious of everything “brought into being by him” (*panta ta hyp’ avtou gegonota*). Even as the intellect becomes unconscious of the created order, it is aware that it is created by God; the reality of creatures is not diminished or ignored.

This is the point I want to pursue now: the importance of the natural for Maximus. It is, of course, related to his doctrine of the *logoi*, but that notion is not particularly prominent in the *Centuries*, though it is not absent, either. Here it is important for understanding Maximus’s doctrine of the passions. Normally the term passion, *pathos*, is a negative term for, so for instance he says that “a pure soul is one that is freed from the passions and is gladdened continually by divine love” (*CL I.34*). The following chapter, however, defines *pathos*, and defines it precisely: “a blameworthy (*psektion*) passion is a movement of the soul against nature [*para fysin*]” (*CL I.35*). The passions that are blameworthy are unnatural, contrary to nature, but that suggests that there are other passions that are not blameworthy, even natural, and indeed there are. Maximus himself does not develop (not at least in his *Centuries*; I am not sure that he does anywhere) the notion of “natural and unblameworthy passions” [*fysika kai adiablēta pathē*] that we find in his close follower, John of Damascus, when he seeks to understand the passible nature of Christ – his experiencing passions that are not “up to us” (*ef’ hēmin*), such as hunger, thirst, tears, rejection of death, and so on (Kotter, 1973, pp. 162–163) – but he does find occasions to use *pathos* in a positive sense. On one occasion, Maximus discusses the inadequacy of passionless knowledge of divine things (*hē anev pathous tōn theiōn gnōsis*): this is of no use for turning the mind towards God (*CL III. 66*). He goes on to argue that

5 Cf. *Phaedrus*, 243E–245C.

6 See Sherwood’s comment, ACW 21, p. 248, note 7.

as the simple (*psilos*) thought of human things does not force the mind to scorn the divine, so the simple knowledge of matters divine does not persuade to scorning of matters human; for the truth now exists in shadows and figures. Therefore there is needed the blessed passion of holy love [*tou makariou pathous tēs hagiās agapēs*], to bind the intellect to spiritual contemplation and persuade it to prefer the immaterial to the material and the intellectual and divine to what is perceived by the senses. (CL III. 67)

This is the obverse of the notion that he returns to throughout the *Centuries* that it is impassioned attachment to what we perceive through the senses that we need to be freed from; simple awareness is no problem at all, nor, however, is it enough: it could be simply indifference. In the case of knowledge of God and spiritual things mere “objective” knowledge is no good: it is necessary for one to be moved with a blessed passion towards the knowledge of God. In another place, Maximus suggests that in the knowledge of God all three parts of the soul – the intellect and the two irrational parts, the incensive and desiring – are engaged. It is not, as Evagrius sometimes seems to suggest, that the irrational parts are laid to sleep so as not to disturb the intellect in its divine contemplation, rather the irrational parts have a positive role in such contemplation:

For the one whose intellect is continually with God, his desire is increased beyond measure to divine *eros* and his whole incensive part transformed into divine *agape*. For by continual participation in the divine radiance, [the intellect] becomes wholly full of light and the passible part [of the soul], become one with it, turns back, as has been said, to divine *eros* without end and unceasing *agape*, wholly passing over from earthly things to the divine. (CL II.48)

Perhaps we should mention one other aspect of Maximus’s teaching on love in the *Centuries*. The aim of the ascetic life is the passionate love of God: at the opposite pole to this is self-love, *filavtia*. Self-love is the “mother of the passions” (II.8), or the “mother of the vices, which is the love of the body” (II.59); more precisely, “Self-love is an impassioned and irrational love of the body, to which are opposed *agape* and *enkrateia*. To have it is to have all the passions” (III.8). Another set of genealogies is suggested in III.56:

Self-love, as we have said many times, is established as the cause of all the impassioned thoughts. For from this are born the three generic thoughts of the desire: greed, avarice, and vainglory. From greed is born fornication; from avarice, wanting more; from vainglory, pride. All the rest follow on from each of these: anger, grief, bearing grudges, listlessness, envy, backbiting, and the rest. These passions bind the intellect to material things and drag it down to the earth, weighing upon it like a very heavy stone, while by nature it is lighter and sharper than fire.

The place of self-love in Maximus's thought was set out very elegantly by Irénée Hausherr (1952). Not the least of the excellencies of that book is its inclusion of a translation of Maximus's *Ambiguum* 41 towards the end. For *Amb.* 41 is one of the more metaphysical discussions in Maximus; it is the principal source of Maximus's notion of the divisions of nature, to use Eriugena's designation. However, at the heart of *Amb.* 41 Maximus makes it clear that the failure of the human to hold together the divisions of nature is fundamentally a failure to love: the human was meant to move naturally around the unmoved, from whom it owes its being, namely God, but contrary to nature has chosen to move in ignorance around those things that are beneath it, and thus frustrated God's plan for the cosmos by relinquishing its role as a natural bond (*syndesmos*) of the cosmos. God's remedy is one of love: "in a paradoxical way that which is completely unmoved by nature is moved immovably around that which by nature is moved, and God becomes a human being, in order to save lost humanity" (*Amb.* 41:1308D). Christ, God-made-man, is then able to fulfil the human role in the cosmos and, more than that, restore the human to his natural role in the cosmos: the ascetic programme we are familiar with from the *Centuries* is seen to be fundamental to the coherence of the cosmos.

This makes clear – and this is something we can glean from other parts of Maximus's works – that the ascetical has a cosmic role: in this we can see the way in which, behind Maximus's fundamentally ascetic approach to the concept of love, there can be discerned the cosmic approach of that mysterious thinker to whom he owed so much, Dionysius the Areopagite.

There is another place in Maximus where the integrity of the natural can be seen to lie at the heart of his understanding of ascetic struggle, and

therefore at the heart of his doctrine of love. It occurs in one of his last works, his *Dispute with Pyrrhus*, the deposed Patriarch of Constantinople, an articulate supporter of the Christological heresy of monotheletism. At one point in the *Dispute*, Pyrrhus remarks with amazement: “What then? Are the virtues natural?” (Aristotle had denied that the moral virtues are natural: *Eth. Nic.* II.1103a.18–20; natural virtues for Aristotle include qualities like health, wealth, and so on). Maximus replies that they are. Pyrrhus comes back with the objection that if the virtues are natural, why do they not exist equally in those of the same nature? But they do, Maximus replies to the baffled patriarch (at least according to most MSS). How do you account for such inequality amongst ourselves? Pyrrhus retorts. Maximus responds: “Because we do not equally act out what is natural. If everyone acted out what was natural in accordance with their origin, then just as there is one nature manifest in all, so it would be with virtue, and there would be no better or worse.” Pyrrhus objects that “if what is natural to us proceeds not from disciplined training [the Greek is *askēsis*], but from creation, and virtue is natural, why do we acquire the virtues, which are natural, through toil and disciplined struggle?” Maximus responds thus:

Disciplined training and the toils that go with it were devised simply for the purpose of separating from the soul in those who love virtue the deceit that infects it through the senses. It is not as if the virtues have been lately introduced from outside. For they were inserted in us from creation, as has been already said. Once therefore deceit has been completely expelled from us, at that moment, too, the soul manifests the radiance of its natural virtue. He therefore who is not foolish is sensible; and he who is not cowardly or foolhardy is courageous; and he who is not undisciplined is chaste; and he who is not unjust is just. By nature reason is wisdom, discernment is justice, the incensive faculty is courage, and the desiring faculty chastity. Therefore with the removal of what is contrary to nature [*para fysin*] only what is natural [*kata fysin*] is accustomed to be manifest. Just as, if rust is removed, there is manifest the natural gleam and lustre of iron. (Pospelov, 2004, pp. 174–176)

Virtue is natural; the cardinal virtues describe the lineaments of that nature. It is only because of a deceit lodged in the soul that disciplined

training and toil are necessary. I have avoided translating *askēsis* as asceticism, for that seems to me to prejudge immediately issues that need consideration. The word *askēsis* generally means training or exercise, so I have translated it “disciplined training”, but the verb from which it is derived, *askeō*, originally meant to work with raw materials, and I am attracted by the idea that the root meaning of *askēsis*, too, is to work with raw materials, the raw materials of our humanity, and out of it to make something fine. It seems to me to accord with what Maximus meant by *askēsis*, for he saw human kind as created in the image of God with the purpose of attaining the divine likeness. That working with the raw materials of our humanity – even in paradise – would entail uniting our being (*einai*) and our eternal being (*aei einai*), both gifts of God, by means of well-being (*eu einai*), and so bringing into being an eternal well-being (*aei eu einai*) in which the divine image attains the divine likeness. This triad – being – well-being – eternal being – is a fundamental aspect of Maximus’s ontology of the created rational being, and expresses Maximus’s idea that virtue, well-being, unites God’s gifts of being and eternal being, leading to eternal well-being, the eternal life with God for which created rational beings are intended.

Maximus and Dionysius are at one in seeing love as something rooted in nature; it is something that brings out what our human nature fundamentally is – indeed there is the clear suggestion in Dionysius (and in Maximus, if we look deeply enough) that it is love that underlies the structures of being. This means that, whatever differences we may detect between Dionysius and Maximus, what they share is more fundamental. How do they differ, and why? Partly because of their different concerns. Both were probably monks (though this is no more than a plausible guess in the case of Dionysius), but Maximus is always conscious that he is addressing the ascetic struggle to which the monk is committed by his vocation (even when he is writing to a layman, as in his second letter, he is concerned both to extol love and to underline what it entails in practical terms). Dionysius is more concerned to celebrate love as the principle of the coming-into-being and indeed the purpose of the cosmos. There may be another difference between Maximus and Dionysius, though I am not so sure about this: Maximus seems to know the Aristotelian tradition

and makes use of it in a way that we hardly find in Dionysius. This could be the result of some kind of trickle-down effect from the vast work of commentary on Aristotle that reached its climax in the decades before Maximus's lifetime. So, raising a few questions that might find an answer in this gathering, I bring this paper to a close.

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CHAPTER 8

Negative Theology and Love in Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*

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Abstract: In this paper I examine Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* as an illustration of how the two concepts: love and negative theology can be brought together in an unusual spiritual journey. The thesis I develop is that both have the same impetus: a going out of oneself. Love is *extasis* because it is the going out into the heart of an other; *extasis* is the central moment in a negative theology when the soul no longer knows either the self or God but is in the same place as, or is united to, God. Following a brief exposition of negative theology, I explain how Porete portrays the soul become what she truly is by falling out of herself under the impetus of love. When the soul is liberated from will and reason her divine lover can be and love in her. In Porete's falling into the ocean of the Divine, she is made no thing so that her divine lover can be all. Her self-annihilation is the portal to her deification when she is finally changed into God. The continuous hominification of God and divinization of humanity is the eternal process of Love loving Love's self. Porete focuses on the self rather than on purifying God concepts; it is a relentless stripping the self of all that is creaturely to make the soul an empty dwelling place for Love to reside. Thus, Porete's is a radical negative theology: she never "knows" God even when she becomes Love's dwelling place.

Keywords: love, annihilation, self-purification, negative theology, mysticism

Introduction

In this paper I examine the only extant work of the medieval mystic and poet Marguerite Porete (1250–1310): *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated*

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Souls, as an illustration of how the two concepts: love and negative theology – which at first sight appear to have little in common – can be brought together in one, most intriguing spiritual journey, a journey that has its ultimate grounding in the writings of the sixth-century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius. I chose Marguerite Porete as representative of the many women writers in the Middle Ages who were influenced to some degree by Dionysian apophaticism (negative theology which generally says what God is not because we cannot say what God is), which, combined with the love mysticism so deftly brought into the *Mystical Theology* by Thomas Gallus (the French theologian of the School of St Victor, b. 1200), formed an altogether new way of conceiving the love relationship between God and the soul.¹

The fundamental idea I attempt to develop is that both love and negative theology have the same impetus if we understand negative theology as *praxis* (activity), not simply as a word game or an exercise of mental abstraction. Both (if we conceive of the ultimate goal of negative theology as unity with the Divine) entail a going out of oneself. Love is *extasis* (being moved out of oneself), because it is the going out of the self into the heart of another; *extasis* is the central moment in a negative theology when the soul no longer knows either the self or God but is in the same place as, or is united to God. The displacement of self as one's heart empties itself to make room for the other, is paradoxically a filling of the heart, not only with the Other, but also with the self.

I begin with a brief exposition of negative theology. I then turn to a discussion of how Porete begins from the perspective of negative theology in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* and tells a love story with a most unusual ending. Put simply, Porete's *Mirror* is the story of the soul becoming what she truly is by falling out of herself, by annihilating herself under the impetus of love. When the soul is liberated from will and reason, when the soul becomes nothing, she is empty so that her divine lover has space to be and to love in her. She becomes the river that no longer exists when it flows into the sea. In Porete's falling into the ocean of divine love, she is made no thing so that her divine lover can be all. In Porete's understanding,

¹ See Coolman, 2008, pp. 615–632 and McGinn, 1994, pp. 81–96.

self-annihilation is the portal to deification when soul is finally changed into God.

As we are aware, negative theology is a popular discourse in today's philosophical (and theological) circles. In my view, however, much of the contemporary interest in negative theology (such as we find it in the works of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida and more recently Irish academic Richard Kearney) is better described as philosophical apophaticism (Boeve, 2002, pp. 443–459), in that it uses negative theology to assassinate the monster called ontotheology (the theology of being as referred to God). Negative theology as I understand it in this paper is rooted in theological discourse and spiritual *praxis*. Negative theology, like love, cannot only be said: it is done.

I would suggest that in going out of the self to make a home in the heart of a friend, a love, a lover, that very displacement becomes, in a sense, completion. At the deepest level, when my heart resides in the heart of another, when love has displaced me into the heart of my friend, my lover, I am no longer me but “me in my love, my lover”, a different me whom I cannot know because I am no longer “me”. This is an apophatic (as in negative theology) or apohairtic (as in abstraction or taking away from) moment as my self is neither me nor other. Just as in the *extasis* of the apophatic moment, love makes of two candles one light (or from many candles one light), love makes a duet that is different from each of the voices that sings alone, and this may not be fully comprehended by the singer who is part of a duet. As in the Pseudo Dionysius: “... the one who loves is drawn out of himself and centres his being on the object of his love. Love is ecstatic because it is unitive: the lover is united to the beloved ...” (Louth, 1989, p. 94).

Through the idea that love causes self-displacement, the apophatic plunge, the jump, the breakthrough, the annihilation can be understood as a love-inspired moment. While this is explicit in the works of Dionysius, love is not always a prominent feature of negative theology. It is, however, explicit in those mystical writers who took inspiration from the glosses of Thomas Gallus on the *Mystical Theology* of the Pseudo Dionysius. It is also explicit in the writing of one long-neglected spiritual writer whose fiery words unfortunately earned her a fiery end: Marguerite

Porete. In this paper on Porete I will make frequent reference to Meister Eckhart, the German mystical theologian (1260–1328), because I believe he was deeply influenced by *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls*.² As we shall see, in Porete’s writings, the apophatic plunge that is love fuelled involves an absolute relentless going out of oneself until the self can no longer even be found and only God remains.

Negative Theology

I begin by contextualizing the paper with a brief outline of my understanding of negative theology. Unity with the One, the Good, God, is its ultimate aim. By reversing our way of thinking – as the great Neoplatonist Plotinus (204–270) would put it – we simply leave ourselves open to the vision and presence of the Good. A negative theology that is understood from within the context of that great two-fold journey of Christian theology, that is: *katabasis* (going down) and *anabasis* (going up) of *kenosis* (self-emptying) and *theosis* (deification), of God becoming human so that human can become God, is one of the central thematics I keep in mind as I examine Marguerite Porete’s mystical text.

According to the proponents of the *via negativa* (the way of negation), knowledge is an obstacle to be overcome in the path to God because it casts a veil of clouded particularity around the One/Good/God. But the subsequent stripping bare or unveiling (*aperikaluptos* as in Dionysius) paradoxically reveals nothing because the divine is no thing. The unveiling leads to an unknowing knowing, a plunge into God, or simply being in the same place as God. The end of the negative journey is not, therefore, an empty space reached through negative dogmas (Armstrong, 1990, pp. 137–138). This idea is given eloquent expression by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926):

But though my vigil constantly I keep
My God is dark – like woven texture flowing.
A hundred drinking roots, all intertwined;

² Although Eckhart never directly quoted her, Bernard McGinn is convinced that he knew Porete’s *Mirror*; McGinn, 2001, p. 181.

I only know that from His warmth I'm growing.
 More I know not: my roots lie hidden deep
 My branches only are swayed by the wind.³

Turning now to a cosmic perspective, we could say that the no-thing-ness of God becomes some thing when, through creation, through love, God becomes other than God. God can be known then, when other than God or not-God. It is creation as theophany, the alterity of God, that enables the simultaneous knowing and unknowing of the divine. In this dialectical way of understanding the unfolding of God, the oxymorons of the apophatic theologians begin to make some kind of sense: silent music, bright darkness, unknowing knowing. In my view, the going out of God into otherness is more intriguing than the return of all things to their dark, unknowable source.⁴ In creation, a being can say, "I am not God! I am God's otherness". "God *becomes* when all creatures say 'God' – then God comes to be", as Eckhart put it (Walshe, 1981, p. 81). Creation is itself the affirmation that it is not God because it is some thing (other than God). Thus Eckhart suggests that creation creates God (the Eckhartian distinction between God in God's self and God in creatures), just as the annihilation of the soul in Porete allows God to be.

Used as we are to trying to understand divine reality from either the perspective of transcendence or the perspective of immanence, formulations such as unmanifest manifest, invisible visible stretch the mind in both directions simultaneously for the one cannot be understood without the other: God both is all things and is not all things. The idea that God is manifest in creation is true, but the fact that God remains transcendentally unmanifest is also true. And yet, neither is true when understood singly. The "problem" is resolved by coupling both truths in a dialectical formulation that reveals the tension between, and the simultaneous truth of both. The veracity of the statement "God is all things" is constantly undermined by the basic distinction between God and creation, which is a forceful reminder that, as an apophatic understanding demonstrates, a comprehensive account of reality can never be attained. As contemporary

3 Excerpt from "The Book of a Monk's Life".

4 A central thematic in von Balthasar, 1979.

academic Michael Sells puts it: “the authentic subject of discourse slips constantly back beyond each effort to name it or even to deny its nameability” (Sells, 1994, p. 2). The ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena’s central, and indeed most audacious truth, that all things are both eternal and made (*Periphyseon* 646C and 681B), is the ultimate apophatic truth at both the linguistic and the ontological levels.

This is what Eckhart says: “But if God is neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one, what then is He? He is pure nothing: He is neither this nor that. If you think of anything He might be, He is not that. So where will the soul find truth?” Good question. I think the answer could well be in the journey, as was the case with Marguerite Porete. Who knows how to say what it is when discourse comes to a halt under the impetus of *eros* (love in the Dionysian sense of *extasis*). But of course Eckhart has an answer for the soul who asks, “What then shall I do?” “You should wholly sink away from your youth and dissolve into His Hisness, and your ‘yours’ and His ‘His’ become so completely one ‘Mine’ that with Him you understand His Unbecome Isness and His nameless Nothingness” (Walshe, 1981, p. 333). Porete’s conception of the role of the soul is the same, although expressed in different words.

The unity that is the focus of the *via negativa* when taken to its limits can be described from the perspective of a Moses ascending the clouded mountain as in Cappadocian Church Father Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-ca. 395), or as a blinded Dionysian soul throwing itself relentlessly against the ray of the divine darkness, as in the cosmic *adunatio* of Eriugena (the final union or return of all created things to their source: to God), or as a standing naked and empty in the same place as God (Porete and Eckhart). But this is not the end of the otherness of God, but rather, its perpetual celebration. It has been argued that negative theology is the sword that will do away with the particularity of – in the Christian tradition – the Incarnation. It is not, in my view, because it is the eternal celebration of the “isness” of the divine. And yet, in another sense it is this sword because the work has been done, the *logos* (word) returns to *sige* (silence). Similarly, in the *Mirror*, a “Godhead” behind the God we have negated is never exposed. Using negative theology as a knife to cut away idolatry is a necessary part of all theology, but the cutting away does not *reveal*: rather,

it takes us some where, and that “where” is straight into God. Those who let go (achieving breakthrough or becoming annihilated) do not fall into the abyss or remain in the desert of no-thingness: they can, quite wonderfully, be changed into God. As the Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins concludes his poem “The Windhover”: “... blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold vermilion”.

The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls

But just as no two loves are the same (except in that all love is *praxis*), and no two lives are the same, no two spiritual journeys are the same. There can be elements of similarity but there will always be that which accounts for individual difference. So it is with the practitioners of the negative way, not least with Marguerite Porete and her contemporary the Dominican Meister Eckhart (Lichtman, 1994, pp. 65–86). In both cases, words are, at times, strained to their limits as they struggle to express that which is essentially expression-less in that place where you-ness and me-ness disappear.

I have already discussed the self-death of the lover through love that has an apophatic thrust. The remainder of the paper will illustrate this point using Porete's much-neglected work (Wright, 2009, p. 84). Sadly, but perhaps apt given her desire to be annihilated for her divine lover, she was burned to death on charges of heresy on 1 June 1310 in Paris. Her book had previously been burned in 1306 but she appears to have persisted in the dissemination of her ideas, for she was summoned in 1308 before the Inquisitor of Lorraine, excommunicated, and sent to Paris where she was imprisoned for one and a half years. According to accounts of the trial, she kept silence in the face of her inquisitor Guillaume de Paris. Interestingly, in chapter 67 of the *Mirror*, Porete says that she seals her lips and does not speak to those who follow the counsel of reason; unlike some others, she kept her promise and did not recant her supposed heresy.⁵

Little is known of Porete as an historical subject (as is the case with Pseudo Dionysius and the author of the fourteenth-century work, based

5 A good account of her trial can be found in Field, 2012.

on the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius, *The Cloud of Unknowing*), what we do know of this “pseudo woman” – a title given to her by the inquisitors – has been gleaned from the trial documents and the text of her book itself. A surprising number of human hours has been spent on speculations about her life (a task somewhat akin to finding out about Umberto Eco by reading his novels). But we can say that she was obviously an educated woman with deep knowledge of the scriptures and the greats of the Christian spiritual tradition, notably St Paul and the Pseudo-Dionysius.

Her work is an allegory in the courtly love tradition, the main speaker being Dame Amour (Lady Love) who is the voice of God, while God is Loingpres (Far-Near, which is very similar to thirteenth-century Dutch visionary and poet Hadewijch’s *verre bi*); Reason and the Soul are among the other speakers, while Little Holy Church, Holy Church, the Holy Spirit, and Faith also make appearances. The work is written in the vernacular and consists of 139 chapters that are a mixture of verse, lyrical passages, and animated debate between the characters, especially Lady Love and Reason (who is constantly mocked and put down by Lady Love).⁶ The *Mirror* deals specifically with love, and Porete’s weaving through the at times vaguely erotic and the apophatic, as the soul journeys out of itself and into divine love to be one sole being with God has many echoes of the women mystics who were her contemporaries or preceded her (especially Hadewijch of Antwerp and her contemporary German Beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg).⁷

Ever since Italian scholar Romana Guarnieri discovered the Chantilly manuscript of Porete’s *Mirror* in 1946,⁸ a plethora of works has emerged from many and varied disciplines, a testimony to the fact that the *Mirror* can be read through many different lenses. Much, for example, has been written from the feminist and postmodern perspectives.⁹ Additionally, Porete is often held up as a prime example of a woman disciplined and

6 The translation I have used in this chapter is that of Carolyn Behnke, chosen because it has been made from the French Chantilly manuscript rather than previous English manuscripts; the chapter number and page number are given in brackets after each citation.

7 For a good introduction, see Dronke, 1994 and Lerner, 2010.

8 Printed in “Osservatore Romano”, June 16, 1946, p. 3.

9 See Lichtman, 1998.

persecuted for her beliefs, beliefs that went against the patriarchal hegemony of the theology of her time.

Not surprisingly, in Porete's *Mirror* Divine Love (the voice of God) is feminine even though *amour* (love) is masculine in French. Much has been written about this subversion of gender categories. What is interesting in Porete is that master Reason finally gives up the battle in chapters 35–36 and subjects himself to Love. Porete also uses different relational terms: in chapter 121 the Holy Trinity speaks to the soul as daughter, sister, and beloved. She in turn addresses God as father, brother, and beloved (ch. 136). However, we should not be tempted to conclude that hers is an affective, female-centered mysticism; it is not.

And despite her very powerful use of love imagery, the *Mirror* is not bride mysticism nor is it written under the impetus of twelfth-century French Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux's love mysticism; rather, it takes the basic themes of Dionysian negative theology and uses these to weave a new garment, albeit a garment that was transformed by ideas from contemporary theological ideas in circulation among the Beguines (lay religious orders/groups). Put simply, Porete's story in the *Mirror* is the story of the soul becoming what she truly is rather strangely, by falling out of herself under the impetus of love. When the soul is liberated from will and reason, when the soul "... has all and has nothing, knows all and knows nothing, wills all and wills nothing ..." (chs. 7 and 13), the soul is emptied so that her divine Lover has space to be in her.

Annihilated by Love

Standing firmly in the tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius, negative theology forms the foundation of Marguerite Porete's spirituality: "God, of whom no words can be spoken ..." (11,105). The unknowable God motif is fundamental to understanding Porete's spirituality as she carefully develops the notion of the descent into the abyss of her own nothingness: "[such] souls can no longer speak of God, for knowing no longer where God is, they can no longer say who God is" (18,114). "This soul can no longer speak of God for she is stripped naked of all her outward desires, of all her inner feelings and of any spiritual affection ... She desires nothing,

for her will ... is dead” (7,99–100). “For all that can be said, written, or even thought about God, who is beyond all words, is more like lying than any true description” (119, 201).

Broadly speaking, Porete conceives seven stages in the soul’s ascent/descent to/into Love, the final of which is the return to its origins – bodily death, and we cannot say anything about that (chs. 61 and 118). I will not enumerate these stages here except to say that the soul practices the most relentless *aphairesis* (taking away) as she takes her leave of everything, even the virtues (ch. 6 and following; she expands more fully on this idea in ch. 21) – a leave-taking that was ultimately destined to be her downfall. But in her view, freedom from being bound by the virtues is precisely what constitutes a “liberated” soul.¹⁰ And while this taking leave of the virtues was deemed to be her heresy (the antimonian heresy, literally meaning “lawless”: the idea that Christians are exempt from obeying the moral law, of which she refused to recant), to my mind it is not dissimilar from late fourth – early fifth-century Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo’s “Love and do as you will” (Sermon on 1 John 4:4–12) whom Porete herself quotes in chapter 13. Having left the virtues behind, the soul then falls into love, or rather is drawn into love by Love (stage 4). After that, she is annihilated, becomes nothingness (*adnienti*) for Love’s sake.

Most of the *Mirror* is concerned with the fifth stage in which the soul becomes annihilated and God sees God’s self “through her in his divine majesty, so she sees nothing outside of God himself” (118, 200). It is through being loved by God that the soul falls into nothingness because she is not the one doing the loving: only Love loves. In my view, this is the heart of Porete’s apophaticism, a very Dionysian approach in that knowing nothing is the way to the unknowable God. In Porete’s dialectic, “God”, the bountiful outpouring of a manifest Love, belongs to an unmanifest nothingness, which can be reached only by “knowing nothing”, “willing nothing”, and “having space for God”, a motif that is repeated throughout the *Mirror*. I think we see here a very clear echo of Eckhart’s famous *Beati pauperes spiritu* (Blessed are the poor in spirit) sermon.

¹⁰ See Marler, 2013.

A further interesting idea that Porete develops is that of namelessness, this time not in the usual sense of the unknowable, unnameable God, but the namelessness of the soul. "The soul ... has her right name from the nothingness in which she rests ... And if she is unencumbered in all aspects, she loses her name ... And therefore she loses her name in the One in whom she is melted and dissolved through Himself and in Himself" (Wright, 2009, p. 75). As an illustration of this idea, Porete uses the very potent image of a river flowing into the sea. As a river, it has its own name, but when it joins the sea, its name is unnecessary as it becomes part of the sea. So it is with the soul (ch. 82). This rather lovely image, which describes the process of deification, is used on more than one occasion. And in returning to the sea, she "takes nothing other than the name of the One, the Bridegroom, in whom she is perfectly transformed" through love (82, 167). And in taking Love's name, she herself becomes Love.

The intensity of the soul's love, which by its very nature is self-emptying and self-displacement, leads to the utter loss of self. In Porete's falling into God, her *kenosis* echoes the *kenosis* of Divine Love whereby God creates because God is beguiled by goodness, by love, as the Pseudo-Dionysius put it (*Divine Names*, 4, 13, 712a–b). The God who stands outside God's self to create awakens our own ecstatic longing for our source.¹¹ The Plotinian, Dionysian, and Augustinian concept of Love drawing all things to itself is a strong motif in the *Mirror*: "... for Love draws all matter into herself. Love and the Soul become one thing, not two, for that would be discord" (83,167), says Porete. About this soul who has, wants, and knows nothing, simply put: "she comes from love and wants to go back" (15,111).

In this sense Porete's spiritual journey is different from most journeys that depict the rise of the soul from creatureliness to the divine. Porete stands this idea on its head as time and time again she stresses the need for extreme purgation to enter the abyss of nothingness. In the soul becoming annihilated, becoming nothing and other than itself, it can no longer know, for it is fully liberated from all things, even knowledge. Lady Love says: "Such a soul swims in the sea of joy, in the delightful ebb and

11 Here Dionysius uses St Paul as the model lover in his *extasis*: 2 Cor 5:13 and Gal 2:20; see Stang, 2008, p. 547.

flow of the sea of the Godhead. But she does not feel joy since she is one with joy, ... for she dwells in Joy and Joy dwells in her ... for Love has changed this Soul into herself". To which soul responds: "How sweet it is that I am changed into the thing which I love better than myself! I am so changed I have lost my identity by loving ..." (28,121). In such a soul God alone works: "... on my own I can do nothing unless my Beloved does it in me" (36,128), an echo of St Paul in Phil 4:14. In this way, the abyss of nothingness becomes the portal through which the soul is transformed into Love.

This poverty of self, of soul, this annihilation, is paradoxically how the soul gains God by losing God, and in the gaining, in becoming Love, the soul becomes free. The portal of nothingness, then, is the only way to make space for Love to be. The nothingness that the soul becomes means that she is not with herself, she is naked, and has bid farewell to the world – a very similar concept can be found in Eckhart's depiction of *abgescheidenheit* ("detachment" or "letting go"). Love says:

And the best I can say is that if you know perfectly your nothingness, you will do nothing, and this nothingness will give you everything. If you cannot perfectly recognize your nothingness, which is what you really are, you will then have to do something ... If God has transformed you in himself, you must not forget your nothingness. This means that you must not forget who you were when he first created you ... and who you would be if he did not dwell in you. (34,126)

In the *Mirror*, it is through her own destruction, her falling into nothingness, that the soul becomes deified. Since she is dead to the world, "the Trinity will always dwell in her" (42,133). Lady Love says: "This Soul is God by the condition of Love, and I am God by divine nature ... That is why this precious beloved of mine is taught and brought by me, without herself, for she is changed into me ..." (21,117). Porete then simply announces: "... the Trinity has made her its home" (22,117). The Johannine echoes here are obvious (John 14:23). "This soul is completely melted, liquified and absorbed in the high Trinity, joined and united to it, and she has no will other than divine will ..." (68,153).

Love, Nothingness, and Only God

So, despite Porete's use of the language of love, an apophatic moment always is present in the soul's annihilation: "Since she is nothing, nothing matters to her: not herself, not her neighbors, not even God himself. She is so small she cannot be found ... God is so great that he is incomprehensible to her. By this nothingness she has fallen into the certainty of knowing nothing and wanting nothing. This nothingness gives her everything. And it cannot be achieved in any other way" (81,165). God is, says Porete, known, loved and praised "... only by those creatures who cannot know, love, or praise him" (95,177-178). "Thus she has nothing to do with God, anymore than God had to do with her. Why? Because he is, while she is not; and in her nothingness she needs nothing, for it is enough that he is and she is not. Thus she is unburdened of all things, for she is again without being just as it was before she was ... she is what God is ..." (135,224). The image of the soul hidden in God, resting serenely in complete peace: "I am alone in him, myself excluded" (51,139) is a powerful one that demands rigorous purification so that God can *become* in the depths of the soul (here again, Porete draws on St Paul using Colossians 3). That is precisely why this soul "cannot be found" (52,140). "If she has properly fallen, this fall is so deep, the Soul cannot rise from this abyss, and this she mustn't do ..." (118,200).

Listen to Soul: "By God's grace I am what I am. Therefore I am only that, and nothing else, which God is in me. And God is also the same being that he is in me ... Therefore, if I am, I am nothing except what God is. There is nothing but God, so no matter where I go I find nothing except what God is. There is nothing but God, so no matter where I go I find nothing but God ..." (70,154). The performative act of being free from all locates the eternal everywhere and at once, in the same way that multiplicity in Plotinus is conceived as a One-everywhere (*Ennead* V, 3, 15, 20-22). In this way, Porete is following in the same tradition as other medieval women mystics: Mechthild of Magdeburg, thirteenth-century Italian mystic Angela de Foligno, and Hadewijch of Antwerp who stated: "god met god te sine" – to be God with God (and among the men, Eckhart and fourteenth-century Flemish mystic John of Ruysbroeck (Marin, 2010, p. 96). In a most Plotinian fashion Porete stresses the idea that this

love necessarily creates unity: “Love and the Souls become one thing, not two, for that would be discord. But they are one thing, and that is accord” (83,167).

Criticisms of this aspect of her thought zoom in on the idea that God and the soul become one in deification. I am not going to examine the thorny theological issues this idea has engendered throughout the centuries, but I do not find Porete’s spirituality problematic if read in the light of centuries of Patristic thought on the concept of God becoming human so that human could become God, and in the light of St Paul’s “I live, not not I, but Christ lives in me” (Phil 1:23) – in fact, there are very strong Pauline echoes throughout the *Mirror*. It is true that in the *Mirror* soul becomes God, but in so doing, is no longer soul: the “apophatic plunge into God is the expiration of the soul” (Turner, 2008, p. 658). There is no longer God and soul but God alone. Soul is annihilated. God is all.

And while the soul must do the work of becoming empty and naked, it is God who completes the process because the soul can no longer act and no longer needs to work (at becoming virtuous); the soul knows nothing, not even God. Here we can clearly see the subjective and objective poles of apophatic discourse and practice. The soul, the subject, becomes object, and God, the object, becomes subject. In this sense the concept of *theosis* (deification) is an interior rather than an exterior happening whereby God is no longer *telos* (end) but starting point: God continually goes out from God’s self and into the soul. The continuous hominification of God and divinization of humanity is the eternal process of Love loving Love’s self. As the mirror of the soul becomes emptied, only the gazer remains: Love.

Soul rather boldly declares: “God has no other place to put his goodness unless he places it in me . . . For this reason I can say that I am the salvation of all creatures and the glory of God” (117,194–195). Thus, through me going out of me, God becomes; God pours God’s self into me when I become not me. Meister Eckhart goes even further when he says that God can do nothing without me (Walshe, 1981, p. 46). “In all creatures there is something of God, but in the soul God is very God, for she is his resting place. That is why one master says God loves nothing but Himself: all His love is lavished on Himself” (Walshe, 1981, p. 73). This concept has

had many expressions in different traditions but it is, as previously noted, fundamentally Dionysian: that the love by which we love God is not our love but God's love. And this itself creates a unity between creator and created but it does not blur the distinction between the two – God is simply All while the soul is nothing.

Listen to Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabi's *hadith*: "When I [Allah] love my servant ... I become the hearing with which he hears, the seeing with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, the feet with which he walks, the tongue with which he speaks"¹² And in Plotinus: "... seeing and the seen coincide, and the seen is like the seeing and the seeing is like the seen" (*Ennead* V, 3, 8, 16–17), for "there is no longer one thing outside and another outside which is looking in, but the keen sighted has what is seen within" (*Ennead* V, 8, 10, 35–36). Eckhart says: "The eye with which God sees me is the same eye with which I see God. My eye and God's eye are one eye and one vision or seeing and one knowledge and one love" (Théry, 1926, p. 224). And finally Porete: "And she is so taken up into him that she no longer sees him, nor herself; so he sees only God in his divine goodness" (91, 175). And again: "But God, who clarifies this Soul, sees himself through her in his divine majesty so she sees nothing outside of God himself, who is, and from whom all things come" (118, 200). Finally Soul declares:

I've said I will love Him:
I'm lying for I do not,
it is He alone who loves me:
He is and I am naught ...
He is fullness
And I am filled. (122, 208)

In Porete (as also in Eckhart),¹³ the annihilation of the self, the complete falling into God, is understood as a return to the soul's original, primal, "before" state. She becomes what she always was and is in the Godhead. This means that the soul is truly in herself when she is "nowhere

¹² As quoted in Sells, 1994, p. 69.

¹³ In the sermon "Beati Pauperes Spiritu" Eckhart takes this thematic to the extreme: "Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God ..."; Walshe, 1981, p. 271.

in herself, not in God, not in herself, not in her neighbours, but in the annihilation which is the work of Lightening [Loingpres] ...” (59, 146). For the Meister, when the soul becomes virgin, that is, becomes naked and empty (disinterested), there is space for the Word. So, without the soul there would be no Word.¹⁴ And for Eckhart, when the Word is born, the soul knows nothing, has nothing, and wants nothing – very strong echoes of Porete. Both Eckhart and Porete work a similar thematic: for the Dominican, the Word is birthed in the soul when the soul becomes “virgin” – in a sense, the soul becomes the womb for God – becomes wife (this is God’s “motherwork”). For Porete, the annihilated soul becomes an empty shell that is transformed into the residence of Love. In both Porete and Eckhart, deification is accomplished by the outgoing (descent) of God and the descent, not the ascent, of the soul. Thus we can say that God conceals God’s self in being birthed in the soul (a central idea in the thought of twentieth-century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar – the *kenosis* of the incarnation is the very incomprehensibility of God) not only in historical time, but also eternally in the soul.

But this is not the end of the love story. Soul is not left bereft of herself in dark nothingness; paradoxically (and like all the great mystics) there are sudden moments of clarity and light. Although the soul remains annihilated, at times, “Dazzling Far-Near” flashes glory like the brightest of lightening (chs. 58 and 61), but as Porete notes, such flashes are necessarily brief because the soul cannot bear that “... ravishing, overwhelming union which suddenly seized me and joined me to the marrow of Divine Love, where I melted” (80, 164). More than this, she does not say. Her poetic description of the enflamed drunken soul soaring high like an eagle and seeing the sun in its full glory in chapters 22 and 23 are strong echoes of the Pseudo Dionysius, and describe the brief glimpses the soul can have of her divine Lover from a terrestrial perspective.

And the end of this journey is peace. In contrast to many of the practitioners of the apophatic way, Porete’s journey (and indeed Eckhart’s) is not presented as an arduous ascent up the cloud-wreathed mountain, but rather a being still in no-thingness – the very Plotinian notion of waiting

14 See Hollywood, 1995.

quietly and then to be in the same place as the mighty Good (*Ennead* V, 5, 8, 3–5; V, 6, 6, 34–36; VI, 9, 8, 33–45). And although the annihilated soul remains outside of herself, she floats "... in a constant sea of contentment, where she wafts and wanes, drifts and drowns in divine peace, not moving within, not working without" (81, 165). "I rest in complete peace, alone, all and nothing in the courtesy of the unique kindness of God" (51, 139). "Thus the soul has within her the rays of divine knowledge, drawing her out of herself, into a wonderful divine peace ..." (71, 155). "... I cannot be in him unless he places me in him without myself, as it was when he, and not I, made me ..." (111, 191). "Without myself" – the loss of self, the displacement of self becomes the way to love Love and how Love becomes. This is my brief interpretation of how love and negative theology are brought together in *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls*.

Conclusion

When I first read the *Mirror*, I found the language and style rather difficult. When I got used to the style and read the text more closely, I began to see how far-reaching Porete's spirituality really is. Through her radical practice of *aphairesis*, to the extent of self-annihilation, by becoming naked and empty, through falling out of herself, Porete answers the divine call to remove, as in Plotinus, everything that we took on in our journey from the One. In Porete's *Mirror*, the soul purges herself so completely that only God, only Love remains. And what this Love is cannot be said since there is no one to say it.

Negative theology usually practises an *aphairesis* that entails the taking away from God of all that is considered creaturely; in the *Mirror*, we have seen Porete's method focus on the self rather than on God. This reversal allows God to be God by making the soul a fit residence for Love. After that, soul's work is done: she has taken away all creatureliness. In this way, Porete manages to rework the concept of purification in a most radical fashion. But she does not, like many of the practitioners of the *via negativa*, "resolve", as it were, the problem of knowing God through unknowing knowing: right to the end, soul does not and cannot know God because only God is (soul has become no thing). She may see a flash

of Loingpres's glory, but for the most part, she remains still and alone, not knowing anything, even herself, while Love wills, acts, and loves in and through her. In this way God shall be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

Knock,
And He'll open the door
Vanish,
And He'll make you shine like the sun
Fall,
And He'll raise you to the heavens
Become nothing,
And He'll turn you into everything.¹⁵

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15 Jalāl ad-Din Muhammad Rūmī; retrieved at <http://www.rumi.org.uk/poetry/>.

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