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Divine eros: a Christian defence of pagan love

Dedicated to Vincent Brümmer, to whom my thought on this topic is heavily indebted.

ABSTRACT

Two contrasting intuitions exist among Christians about the nature of divine love: the intuition that God loves people because of who they are, and the intuition that God loves people in spite of who they are. The former finds its conceptual voice in the idea of divine eros, and the latter in divine agape. In this paper I criticise some Protestant expressions of agape and Catholic attempts to assimilate agape and eros. I then argue in favour of divine eros, challenging the objections that God's love cannot involve need, desire, sexuality and conditionality. Finally, in dialogue with Vincent Brümmer's *The Model of Love*, I pre-empt two objections to the form that my argument for the conditionality of divine love takes.

INTRODUCTION

Christian theology inherited from Judaism the belief that God's relationship with the world is characterised by love. It inherited from Platonism the idea that love is essentially eros, attraction or the desire to be united with the beloved. Eros is the driving force, or, in modern terms, the proto-emotion on which all other emotions are based. The logical conclusion of the amalgamation of the Jewish and Platonic ideas is that God's relationship with the world is rooted in eros. However, this contains problems for Christian theology because of the uncomfortable associations of eros with need, sexuality, and conditionality.

One response to this problem is to exclude eros from God. This response, which is characteristically Protestant, can be found in Søren Kierkegaard, Anders Nygren, and Karl Barth. It has a precedent in the older Augustine, who comes to regard erotic experience as self-deceptive and self-destructive (Tracey 2005: 91 – 92). A second response is to try and combine eros and agape. That response, which is more typically Catholic, is put forward by Pope Benedict XVI, drawing on Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. It also has roots in the younger Augustine's view of *caritas*: a synthesis in which agape transforms but does not eliminate eros (Tracey 2005: 91). In what follows, I will argue that both responses are flawed, and that we should attribute eros alone to God. I will then note that eros entails that need, sexuality and conditionality are elements of divine love, and argue that these attributes are not theologically problematic.

DIVINE AGAPE – NYGREN AND BARTH

The first response holds that divine love is agape alone, and excludes eros from God. According to Nygren, agape and eros are irreconcilable opposites. Agape is self-giving, descending, unconditional, unmerited, freely given, God-given, and value-creating (value is created in the object by the subject's love, rather than existing 'objectively' in them). In contrast, eros is self-motivated, ascending, merit-centred, egocentric, conditional, needy, human, and value-

recognising (value exists objectively in the beloved, and the lover, in loving the beloved, is simply recognising and responding to that value) (Nygren 1939: 165). Agape is Christian love and eros is pagan love. All attributions of eros to God in Christianity (e.g. in the mystics) are projections of human, pagan love on to God.

The anthropological corollary of this is that human eros is a mark of human imperfection, and is prone to becoming sinful. For instance, for Barth, eros is characterised by need and lack, and is particularly susceptible to distortion. An example of such a distortion is homosexuality, which (according to Barth) is the tragic corruption of emotional and physical desire (Barth 1949: 165 – 166). Eros is rightly ordered only by the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit, springing from God's overflowing and super-abundant agape, which graciously allows us to realise the appropriate (heterosexual) ethical expression of our eros. While there is no *necessary* connection between agape and the anti-homosexuality we find in Barth, suspicion of both homosexuals and women found in many Christian expressions of agape are unsurprising. Because agape is gift-love, it requires a recipient who is passive. This plays into conventional expectations of men as active and women as passive, and so both reinforces ideas about what women ought to be like, and leads to reflections on the complementarity of the sexes to the exclusion of same-sex loves.

Barth and Nygren's view is problematic because agape, taken on its own, is deeply damaging. Ultimately agape destroys both the integrity and the freedom of the beloved, since it leaves them perpetually in a position of need and never able to fulfil their need to give in return (see Brümmer 1993: 149 – 181). John MacMurray makes this point when he writes:

If in my relation with you I insist on behaving generously toward you and refuse to accept your generosity in return, I make myself the giver and you the recipient. This is unjust to you. I put you in my debt and refuse to let you repay the debt. In that case I make the relation an unequal one. You are to have continual cause to be grateful to me, but I am not to be grateful to you. This is the worst kind of tyranny, and is shockingly unfair to you. It destroys the mutuality of the personal by destroying the equality which is its negative aspect. To maintain equality of persons in relation is justice; and without it generosity becomes purely sentimental and wholly egocentric. My care for you is only moral if it includes the intention to preserve your freedom as an agent, which is your independence of me. Even if you wish to be dependent on me, it is my business, for your sake, to prevent it (MacMurray 1998: 189 – 190).

In other words, absolute and unqualified agape is not supremely gracious but, rather, supremely egotistical. The idea that God's love is pure agape, which involves that God gives but does not receive in turn, is ultimately deficient because it debilitates rather than edifying or liberating the beloved. In contrast, eros is at least potentially gracious because it both recognises the value of the beloved and responds to the need of the beloved to be needed in return. This is a far cry from the needy, mean and grasping desire eros has been portrayed as by many Christian writers. Therefore the first response, which attributes pure agape to God, should be rejected.

DIVINE AGAPE AND EROS – POPE BENEDICT XVI

The second response, represented by Benedict, affirms eros in combination with agape. The question that confronts us with this response is 'what would an amalgamation of eros and agape look like?'. Given the mutually exclusive way in which Nygren describes agape and eros, it is difficult to see how they might be assimilated. Admittedly, this is partly a semantic question: if one departs from Nygren and does not define agape and eros as starkly antithetical, then they are at least potentially more compatible. Benedict agrees with Nygren in characterising eros as ascending love, and agape as descending (Benedict, 2006, 1.7). However, Benedict argues that

if we create an antithesis between agape and eros, and so separate them entirely, then the Christian conception of love is cut off from the reality of human life. He finds a helpful picture of divine love as exemplifying both agape and eros in the Hebrew prophet Hosea's depiction of God's relationship with Israel. God's intense passion for his people is described in erotic terms, claims Benedict, in hinging on the metaphor of marriage and betrothal. However, it is also agapeistic, since it is both freely-given and forgiving. The latter is shown in God's response to Israel's idolatry. In committing idolatry, Israel has, in figurative terms, committed adultery. In terms of pure justice, God's response should be condemnation, but, instead, God's agapeistic love is demonstrated:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst (Hosea 11:8 – 9).

The problem with Benedict's claim arises when we read the Book of Hosea as a whole and in the context of ancient Israelite society. In this context, what Hosea describes as love does not look at all like eros, not simply on Nygren's caricature of it, but also on more general understandings of it (i.e. as attraction or the desire to be united with the beloved). At first glance it may seem to be eros because it involves heterosexual marriage, which is the paradigmatic form of sexual and therefore erotic love as far as the Catholic Church is concerned. However, far from depicting the personal desire that is essential to eros, Hosea in fact reflects inextricably the contemporary societal masculine hegemony designed to safeguard the husband's honour and lineage. The 'love' described in Hosea is a claim to possess the other. This is not eros because it is not personal – in other words, it is not based on the value of the beloved or rooted in a desire for her. Rather, it is possessive, and concerns the affirmation of Hosea's (and YHWH's) honour.

Therefore, Benedict's attempt to combine eros and agape is not successful. Perhaps because of traditional Christianity's suspicion of sexuality and relationality, the attempt to combine agape and eros results in eros being compromised or eradicated. The second response is unsatisfactory, then, because the way that God's love is depicted once it is combined with agape is very different from the sexual, desiring, personal love characteristic of human eros. In other words, the second response collapses more or less into the first. Underlying both is the same uneasiness about desire, sexuality, relationality and the body. It is therefore unsurprising that both are used oppressively, either because they perpetuate heterocentric or patriarchal norms.

DIVINE EROS: NEED, SEXUALITY AND CONDITIONALITY

I argue that we should prefer divine eros while affirming that eros involves need, sexuality and conditionality, and reject agape altogether. This entails that we have to attribute need, sexuality and conditionality to divine love. I now shall argue that doing so is not problematic, taking each property in turn.

First, need. Desire implies want, need and lack. It implies that the subject is not sufficient in and of herself, and needs someone else to make her 'complete'. Incompletion is at odds with a Platonic view of perfection. A perfect being would be complete, self-sufficient, and have absolute aseity. Therefore, need has generally been precluded of God. However, modern philosophers and theologians have challenged this model of perfection, arguing that it makes God arelational. The idea of 'self-sufficiency' is only one model of perfection, it is argued, and, furthermore, it is a rather limited and unattractive one at that. To be perfect in the sense of self-sufficient is to embody the kinds of approach to relationships criticised in the MacMurray passage quoted above.

Furthermore, to be self-sufficient is not simply debilitating to those around one: it is also to be lacking since the self-sufficient person cannot be genuinely intimate with others. She cannot know another person as a kind of 'other self': as someone who is both significantly different from herself, but with whom she shares the joys and hopes and fears of the other, which she can understand and share by having joys and hopes and fear of her own. It is therefore a condition that is both privileged and deeply impoverished. Brümmer expresses this impoverishment well when he writes that "...the kind of God entailed by this view of divine aseity is not the kind of God who can relate in loving fellowship to persons beyond himself. On the contrary, it would be a narcissistic God who in solitary self-sufficiency eternally contemplates and loves himself" (Brümmer 1993: 237). Ultimately, this ceases to be love and becomes mere beneficence for "it treats the beloved as an object of care rather than a personal partner in fellowship." (Brümmer 1993: 224)

The opposite model of perfection to this involves intimacy and relationality and so also vulnerability and need. A realisation of the limitations of self-sufficiency has led many, if not most, theologians to prefer passibilism (divine emotionality) over and against the traditional doctrine of impassibility. For example, Paul Fiddes has argued that God is vulnerable-in-love: that God chooses to be vulnerable in order to love and relate fully to creation. This model of perfection seems to be more abundant, and less limited, than the one classical theism has to offer. If it is correct, then there is no problem with saying that God's love involves a kind of need. Moreover, that God needs us seems to be entailed in the Christian belief that creation, and people in particular, can be a source of joy for God. If God delights in us, then God must also desire us, and if God desires us it seems God has a (freely chosen) need that we (can) fulfil.

Second, sexuality. Central to the idea of divine sexuality (at least as I am arguing for it) is that having sex is simply one expression of our sexuality. Contrary to the Freudian identification of sexuality with libido, to equate sex with erotic fulfilment is 'to mistake a sign for the thing it signifies' (Halperin, 2005: 53). A happy and fulfilled celibate (whether or not we think such people exist) would not be an asexual person. Equally, one could imagine or (depending how unfortunate we have been) remember sex that is or was not erotically fulfilling. Sexuality is expressed not only in sex, but also in our body language, our conversation, our humour, our relations with those around us (whether or not they are sexual partners), our ways of being in the world. Analogously, we can affirm God's sexuality without having to claim that God has sex, or wants to have sex. While, as corporeal beings, human sexuality is expressed in bodily ways, there seems to me to be no contradiction between saying that a being such as God is both sexual and incorporeal.

This of course raises the question of what sexuality is if it is not, as we tend to think, simply the physical drive for sex. I suggest that sexuality is best defined as (physical and/or mental) attraction towards other beings and towards particular other beings. Of course, this means that sexuality is very close in meaning to my definition of eros as attraction or the desire to be united with the beloved. In fact, it implies that to say that 'a being with eros is also a sexual being' is a tautology. This is consistent with other definitions of eros. For example, Glenn Most points out that the original meaning of eros is 'sexual desire', and not the vaguer and more modern term 'love' which is 'cloven between sensuality and idealization'(Most, 2005, 33). However, as it is the desexualisation of eros when it is combined with agape (which, we have seen in Benedict's case, has the unwelcome consequence of leaving eros non-desiring and impersonal) that I am opposing, the conclusion that an erotic being must also be a sexual being does not worry me.

Third, conditionality. One argument often used in favour of agape as opposed to eros is that eros, as conditional, favours people who embody values that are desirable, virtuous, or

attractive, to people who do not embody these values. Nygren takes as an example of this Aristotle's statement that:

He who lives according to reason is the special object of God's love. For if the gods, as is commonly believed, take thought for our human affairs, we must rationally conclude that they take most pleasure in that which is best and most nearly related to themselves, that is, in our reason, and that they reward those who live according to reason. It is clear that this is most of all the case with the wise man. Therefore it is he who is most loved by God. (cited Nygren 1939: 159)

The question of whether God favours the wise man (in Greek thought, as Nygren characterises it), or the morally good man (in Jewish thought, as Nygren characterises it), is unimportant. Because eros is conditional love that responds to a value in the beloved, it follows that God would favour people who embody a large amount of a particular virtue (whether wisdom or moral goodness) to people who do not. This, Nygren observes, is problematic in terms of Paul's insistence that 'God chose the foolish things of the world' (1 Cor. 1:27). Perhaps even more problematically for Christian theology, it implies that eros is at odds with the Christian belief in God's love for sinners. This is in contrast to agape, which is unconditional and unmerited, and which is, as Nygren describes it, 'essentially the Divine will to forgive' (Nygren, 1939: 158). That God's love is unconditional, therefore, seems to be at the heart of the Gospel.

Against this, it could be pointed out that agapeic love - that is, love that is *unconditional* and creates value in the beloved that does not otherwise exist, is a senseless and arbitrary form of love. This is because there would be no reason for God passionately and self-sacrificingly to love human beings any more than for God passionately and self-sacrificingly to love bookcases or shoes or motor cars. Therefore, there must be some value, quality or characteristic in the beloved on which God's love is based. Responding to Nygren's concerns, it does not follow from the idea that God's love for humanity is rooted in some value that human beings possess that we must therefore conclude that God prefers wise or morally good (or handsome or musical) people to foolish or morally bad (or plain or tone deaf) ones. The value or 'condition' on which God's love is based might simply be some universal quality all humans have, and not less ubiquitous qualities such as wisdom or moral goodness possessed by only some human beings. That there is such a quality might already be suggested in Christian theology by the idea that all people are created in God's image - though what being created in God's image means is a matter of much debate.

Does this view of divine conditionality take into account the extent of God's love, and willingness to forgive, sinful humanity, that is at the heart of the Gospel? I think it can, provided we distinguish unconditional love from unmerited love. Unmerited love means that the lover loves the beloved in excess of what the beloved deserves, and that the lover persists in loving the beloved, even when the beloved acts badly. Much human love is unmerited to some extent, but we would want to say that God's love for us is more unmerited still - there is nothing we could do that would stop God from loving us. Unconditional, as distinct from unmerited, love means that the love is not based on any qualities and characteristics of the beloved, and to assert that there is nothing intrinsically desirable in the beloved that inspired that love. I want to say that we should reject the unconditionality (though not the unmeriteness) of God's love, and that God's love is a response to real qualities and characteristics that we have that are lovable.

Fundamentally, this question about unconditionality is a question about whether God's love responds to a value in the beloved (eros), or whether it creates value in the beloved by loving them (agape). While critical of the impersonal nature of Nygren's characterisation of divine love, Brümmer agrees with Nygren to some extent by arguing that the lover bestows value on the

beloved by looking on the beloved as an irreplaceable individual (Brümmer 1993: 235). Love does this because it means that:

my person, my individual *daimon*, not only matters to me but also to someone else apart from me, and that therefore receives a significance which it is beyond my power to bestow on it myself. Your love bestows value on me which I would not otherwise have. It does not merely recognize a value which I already have apart from this recognition. (Brümmer 1993: 235).

This view has an intuitive plausibility to it because we usually feel far more valuable if and when we know we are loved. However, Brümmer's view seems to go further than simply how we feel, to claim that we are *in fact* more valuable if and when we are loved. This seems to entail the problematic conclusion that the much-wanted and loved child is in fact more valuable than the unwanted and neglected child, rather than that both children are equally valuable, but the much-loved child is more fortunate in having her value recognised by her family. This is a serious problem for a Christian conception of love.

Against this, it could be replied that God loves the unwanted and neglected child just as much as the much-loved child, and so the unwanted child is still valuable even though she is not loved by her family. However, this does not seem to meet the problem, since the much-loved child would still be made even more valuable than the unwanted child by her family's love. Alternatively, it could be answered that God loves the unwanted child *more than* the much-loved child, in order to compensate for the lack of human love in the child's life. However, if God's love is infinite for each and every person then that claim is also extremely problematic. Therefore, we should reject the idea that love bestows any value on the beloved, in favour of the idea that love recognises the beloved's intrinsic loveliness. Love sees the value of the other, but it does not create it. Both the much-loved child and the unwanted child are intrinsically valuable. Both are loved by God, but the unwanted child misses out on something she deserves – to be loved and valued by other human beings.

PRE-EMPTING TWO OBJECTIONS

So far, I have argued that God's love is unmerited but not unconditional, since it is based on real qualities and characteristics of the beloved. I have suggested that this is consistent with the Gospel's affirmation of God's love for those who are usually regarded as unlovable, on the basis that the qualities or characteristics that are the basis of God's love are qualities and characteristics shared by the whole of humanity. I will now pre-empt two possible objections to my argument that arise in conversation with Brümmer's *The Model of Love*. Notably, these are objections to my particular representation of conditional divine love (as based on some quality all humans share), rather than to the conditionality of divine love *per se*.

First, Brümmer argues that we do not love people as instantiations of characteristics, but, rather, as particular people. As he puts it:

Since I do not love you *because* of your characteristics, my love for you does not entail that I should similarly love everybody else who has the same characteristics, nor that I should stop loving you if you should no longer have these characteristics. My love for you is a love for *you* and not for your characteristics apart from you. I could also love you in spite of disapproving of your characteristics. The only thing which my love for you excludes is that I should be indifferent to your characteristics" (Brümmer, 1993: 152).

If Brümmer is correct, it seems that God could not be said to love humanity on the basis of some quality or characteristic shared by all human beings, because then God would love people as instantiations of a particular quality or characteristic, rather than loving the people themselves.

I think that Brümmer is right to highlight the personal nature of love, and the fact that we love people as more than a sum of their parts, or an instantiation of a particular set of characteristics. However, if we took this point to extremes, Brümmer's point would become too essentialist in making a stark distinction between the person themselves, and their characteristics and qualities. If we were to remove from a person all their characteristics and qualities, it is difficult to see what would be left of them – how they would still be in any sense the same person that they were (or even a person at all).

A sharp distinction between the person and their characteristics is subject to the same criticism as 'love the sinner but hate the sin' approaches, which can be psychologically simplistic in wanting to make a clear dividing line between people (on the one hand), and their desires, dispositions, and habits (on the other). We do love the beloved as a person and not as an instantiation of their characteristics – but ultimately there is no decisive boundary between that person and their characteristics. A person who loved a drug addict may say "I don't know where the person I loved is any more" if the desires, dispositions and habits involved in drug addiction have become so overpowering (as often happens) to consistently override or destroy other elements of that person's character. To say that is not to say that the beloved is replaceable. It is not only the beloved's characteristics, but also the way they are expressed and embodied by that person, and the shared experiences in the history of the relationship, that make the beloved unique, and irreplaceable in the eyes of the lover.

A second possible objection to conditional divine love concerns the fact that I have argued that God's love is rooted in some characteristic or quality shared by the whole of humanity, rather than in different qualities and characteristics in different individuals, depending on who we are. Again, this leaves me open to the very serious charge that the divine love I depict does not enable each and every person to be unique and irreplaceable in God's sight. That God's love takes into account and celebrates differences between people is an important theological emphasis. As Brümmer puts it:

God's love is not an equalizing love. It does not treat us as though we were all equal in his sight and therefore able to replace each other in his affection. The whole point about persons is precisely that they are not equal. One is not as good as another. No human being is worth less than another in God's sight. However, this is not because they are all worth the same, but because each one of them is irreplaceable. In this way God's love for us is not impartial but partial in the sense in which 'partiality is a matter of looking to see what the special individuality of the other person really is and attending positively to it. God can have this kind of special love for each of his creatures' (Brümmer 1993: 211 – 212, quoting Oppenheimer 1983: 135).

Brümmer argues that God loves specific things about each person, suggesting that the loveable qualities are not shared by everyone, but are different in each person.

These two – loving qualities or characteristics shared by all people, and loving individual differences - are, I think, not in fact incompatible. A mother may love all her children because they are her children, thus having some quality or characteristic that ensure her love. But she may love very different things *about* her children because they are very different people. In fact, Brümmer uses the parent analogy to point out that the alternative to loving one child more than others is not to love one's children as though they are identical. If people did love their children identically, then one child would be substitutable for another – whereas most people believe that each of their children is irreplaceable (Brümmer 1993: 210). The quality shared by all humans which is the condition of God's love for them may be something as basic as the potentiality for a relationship (which sets them apart from bookcases and motor cars and shoes). That does not prevent God from also loving particular things about each particular person, just

as we love particular things about children, family and friends, which may not be the *basis* of our love for them, but which mean that they are not replaceable or lacking in uniqueness for us.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I began by considering two views of divine love, the first of which construes divine love as pure agape, and the second of which seeks to combine agape and eros. I argued that the first view of love is debilitating of the beloved, and negates the Christian belief in the value of all persons. I argued that the second view fails to provide a plausible account of eros-agape love, and that eros collapses into agape. I claimed that both views reflect Christian suspicion of sexuality and of conditionality, and that both tend to perpetuate oppressive (heterocentric and/or patriarchal) norms. I then argued that eros offers us a more helpful model of divine love, and that need, sexuality and conditionality are compatible with Christian concerns about God's nature and relationality. The implication of this for our view of human nature and, concomitantly, for our ethics, is that human eros, sexuality, and relationality (including the need and value-recognition inherent in human love) are a reflection of divine eros, sexuality, relationality, desire and need. They are not properties that pertain only to created and physical entities, and should therefore not be regarded as inherently inferior.

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KEYWORDS

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