



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Fall 1977 | Vol. III No. 3

LOVE IN CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

John A. Hammes

In the essay that follows, John A. Hammes discusses the concept of love as presented by both humanist and Christian writers. His primary purpose is to show the remarkable richness of love in the Christian sense as compared with the best notions of non-Christian men. Secondly, the author shows what natural man can know about love from his own reason. The presentation culminates in St. Paul's own statement of what the Christian's love must be.



HERE IS PROBABLY NO WORD HEARD SO FREQUENTLY AS THAT OF LOVE. THE term is found in human endeavors ranging from advertising to philosophizing. Seriously speaking, those who have experienced love contend it is the ground of meaning. My purpose here is first to compare the various reflections on love offered by humanist writers in the area of psychology, and then to contrast these observations with Christian love.

HUMANISTIC CONCEPTS OF LOVE

Abraham Maslow defines authentic love as “B-love”, which is “love for Being of another person, unneeding love, unselfish love” involving admiration, wonder and awe. In contrast, there is “D-love”, or “deficiency-love, love need, selfish love”. Viktor Frankl describes love as “living the experience of another person in all his uniqueness and singularity In love the beloved person is comprehended in his very essence, as the unique one singular being that he is; he is comprehended as a Thou, and as such is taken into the self.” Thus, loving is a coming to relationship with another as a spiritual being. Rollo May writes of the paradox of love. “To love means to open ourselves to the negative as well as the positive—to grief, sorrow, and disappointment as well as to joy, fulfillment, and an intensity of consciousness we did not know was possible before.”

Love also carries with it the threat of self-annihilation, for, “when we love, we give up the center of ourselves.” Erich Fromm too emphasizes the giving of oneself in love. He observes, “love is primarily giving, not receiving”. And, “Not he who has much is rich, but he who gives much.” Additionally, authentic love implies care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. From his evolutionary point of view, Fromm sees love as overcoming the estrangement resulting from man's original separation from nature. To practice love successfully is an art requiring the overcoming of one's narcissism, as well as an attitude of faith in the loved one, and the courage to become vulnerable. Fromm correctly observes that any theory of love begins with a theory of man and of human nature.

These writers go on to describe various kinds of love. Frankl speaks of three dimensions of the human person—the somatic, the mental, and the spiritual. Corresponding to these dimensions are three attitudes of love—the sexual, the erotic, and lastly, authentic love. May offers a four-fold classification of love—sex (lust, libido), eros (the

drive to create or procreate), *philia* (friendship, brotherly love), and *agape* or *caritas* (love devoted to the welfare of others). Fromm describes brotherly love, motherly love, erotic love, self-love, and love of God. Fromm is careful to point out, however, that by God he means an entity that man himself has created: "Having spoken of the love of God, I want to make it clear that I myself do not think in terms of a theistic concept, and that to me the concept of God is only a historically conditioned one, in which man has expressed his experience of his higher powers, his longing for truth and for unity at a given historical period."

In their discussion of the deterioration of love in Western society, all of these writers deplore the reduction of love to sex. For example, May speaks of a "new puritanism" that promotes a state of alienation from the body and the use of the body as a machine. He contrasts the old with the new puritanism by observing, "The Victorian person sought to have love without falling into sex; the modern person seeks to have sex without falling into love." May also criticizes the "Playboy" philosophy of sex which reduces woman to the status of an object or accessory. Frankl describes sex without love as a "crippled form of love", and observes, "The really mature person, therefore, will feel sexual desire only when he loves; he will consider a sexual relationship only where sex is the expression of love."

In addition to the perversion of reducing love to sex, these authors point out other abuses of authentic love. For example, as we have seen, Maslow contrasts "B-love" with "D-love", or deficiency love. Deficiency love is selfish, self-gratifying, and a needing love, in the sense of a crippling dependence on the loved person. Fromm treats at length what he considers to be various forms of neurotic love. These include a person's over-attachment to mother or father; a masochistic relation to the loved one; any form of idolatrous love; any substitution of another love as compensation for an appropriate love, e.g., a wife transferring her unrequited need for her husband's love to her children; domineering love; and lastly, any reforming type of love, wherein the loved one cannot be accepted as he or she is but in the eyes of the lover needs improvement as a requisite for a love relationship.

In summary, non-Christian observations on authentic love include a non-narcissistic, other-oriented relationship, a giving of oneself, the non-reduction of love to sex, and the recognition of neurotic abuses of the love

relationship. Finally, these observations are based on a naturalistic philosophy of human nature, apart from any theistic frame of reference. Christian love, however, goes beyond such considerations, and, more importantly, can be validated apart from mere human opinion of what genuine love should be. Let us now examine that perspective.

THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF LOVE

How is the Christian response of love to be different from all the others? First, Christian love is measured with reference to the Divine Love which invites it. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son" (John 3:16). "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9). "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Paul says God emptied himself of Divinity, so to speak, in becoming man, and went further to express his love by dying for us on the cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

The Christian, therefore, is expected to love in the manner in which God has loved him-completely, totally, and unconditionally. It is to be a lifelong commitment, to God and to fellowman, and of such depth as to require death-the death of selfishness and egocentricity. "The way we came to understand love was that he laid down his life for us; we too must lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16). "I give you a new commandment: Love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other. This is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another" (John 13:34-35). As God has emptied himself to become man, the Christian is to empty himself to become God-like. He is to destroy the old man and gain a new flesh, a new spirit (Ez. 11:19; Gal. 5:16-17). He is to be born again (John 3:5). He is to be a temple of God, a bearer of love (1 Cor. 6:19).

Jesus was once asked what one must do to gain eternal life. Jesus replied that one should love God with one's whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind, and second to that, one must love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; and Luke 10:25-28). Thus we can see how the two-fold commandment of love of God and love of neighbor are related. We are to love God in response to his love for us; we are to love our fellow-man because God loves him as well. Jesus thus gives divine sanction to the so-called Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12 and Luke 6:31). Also, we are to love our neighbor to

the depth that Christ loved him, so as to give our lives in service of others.

Christian love paradoxically involves life through death, a mystery which introduces the doctrine of the cross, a “stumbling block to the Jews, and an absurdity to the Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). Jesus said that unless the seed dies, it cannot bring forth fruit (John 12:24). Jesus also stated that he who would save his life would lose it, but he who loses his life for Jesus’ sake will find it (Matt. 16:25 and 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25). This teaching is in marked contrast with the current stress on self-actualization through self-indulgence. The Christian is to die to self, and in this way paradoxically fulfill and actualize himself. This death is necessary in order to eliminate selfishness, ego-centricity and pride, all of which are tendencies of fallen human nature. Through prayer and self-denial, particularly in the service of others, the Christian can reach the pinnacle of human perfection. The reason for Christian love, and the degree of love invited and expected, therefore marks Christian love apart from all other interpretations of love, as advocated by other religions or by atheistic humanism. Furthermore, Christian love embraces not only behavior but also thought. Jesus stated, “You have heard the commandment, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ What I say to you is this: anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts” (Matt. 5:27-28). Again, “What emerges from within a man, that and nothing else is what makes him impure. Wicked designs come from the deep recesses of the heart: acts of fornication, theft, murder, adulterous conduct, greed, maliciousness, deceit, sensuality, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, an obtuse spirit. All these evils come from within and render a man impure” (Mark 7:20-23).

In the same vein, John tells us, “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know eternal life abodes in no murderer’s heart” (1 John 3:15). Thus did Jesus probe the depths of a person’s heart, and pronounce judgement on one’s innermost thoughts in relating them to love and the commandments.

THE CHRISTIAN LOVE OF SELF

Thus far we have spoken of the Christian’s response in loving God and neighbor, and we have seen the uniqueness of Christian love as grounded in the love of God. Non-Christian theorists, e. g. , Fromm, have observed that any theory of love must begin with a theory

of human nature. From a Christian perspective it is also possible to comment on love as related to the regard one should have for human nature, or specifically, the self. Here, also, the Christian love of self is based on a relationship to God. Paul says, “Are you not aware that you are the temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). “Do you not see that your bodies are members of Christ? (1 Cor. 6:15). “But whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun lewd conduct. Every other sin a man commits is outside his body, but the fornicator sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:17-18). These words sharply contradict the contemporary view that there is no moral harm in sexual permissiveness. Paul continues,

“You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within-the spirit you have received from God. You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul reiterates his exhortation in another letter (1 Thess. 4:1-7), in which he stresses God’s call to holiness. Thus the Christian love of self, and others, can be derived directly from the Christian notion of the person-we are temples of God, of the Holy Spirit, ransomed from sin and death by the price of Jesus’ redemptive love. Human dignity, therefore, resides not in what we do, in terms of success, or achievement, or failure, but rather in who we are. The aged, the senile, the psychotic, the retarded-these too are deserving of love because they are temples of God. Even our enemies are deserving of our love (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27-28). As Hume has observed, this latter teaching is unparalleled among the religions of the world.

Such, therefore, is the nature of Christian love. It is compatible with the idealistic qualities advocated by non-Christian writers, such as unselfishness, other-directedness, non-reduction of love to sex, and the avoidance of neurotic tendencies. However, Christian love goes far beyond such qualities. It is rooted in a God-relationship, deriving its authenticity from Divine Revelation rather than from human reflection alone, and communicated to us personally and lovingly in the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Christians, in following His example, have come to realize that, “If I have all the eloquence of men or angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing. If I have the gift of prophecy, understanding all the mysteries there are, and knowing everything, and if I have faith in all its fullness, to move mountains, but without love, then I am nothing at all. If

I give away all I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body to burn it, but am without love, it will do me no good whatever.”

“Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offense, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope,

and to endure whatever comes.”

“Love does not come to an end. But if there are gifts of prophecy, the time will come when they must fail; or the gift of languages, it will not continue forever; and knowledge—for this, too, the time will come when it must fail ... there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13).



FURTHER READING

V.E. Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) E. Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1956)

J.A. Hammes, *Humanistic Psychology: A Christian Interpretation* (N.Y.: Grune and Stratton, 1971)

R.E. Hume, *The World’s Living Religions* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959)

A.H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1962)

R. May, *Love and Will* (N.Y.: Norton, 1969)