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# Capturing Gods: The God of Love and the Love of God in Christian and Hindu Tradition

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Boardman Lecture XXXVI. Editor and Foreword by Susan Marks.

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## **Abstract**

Dr. Lipner's comparative discussion of Christian and Hindu thought draws upon his own scholarly explorations of these traditions, while at the same time considering the nature of cross-cultural dialogue. How do religious ideas resonate within their own contexts? Which aspects of these concepts are most likely to invite associations in a new milieu? Responding to such questions, Lipner advocates a focus on "love," agape and bakhti in Christian and Hindu traditions. His analysis carefully enters each tradition before considering shared ground.

## **Disciplines**

Comparative Methodologies and Theories

## **Comments**

Boardman Lecture XXXVI. Editor and Foreword by Susan Marks.

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CAPTURING GODS:  
THE GOD OF LOVE  
AND THE LOVE OF GOD  
IN CHRISTIAN AND  
HINDU TRADITION

**Delivered Before  
The University of Pennsylvania  
March 31, 1998**

**By  
Julius Lipner**

**Edited and Foreword  
by  
Susan Marks**

## FOREWORD

The thirty-sixth Dana Boardman Lecture of Christian Ethics at the University of Pennsylvania was delivered by Julius Lipner. Dr. Lipner's comparative discussion of Christian and Hindu thought draws upon his own scholarly explorations of these traditions, while at the same time considering the nature of cross-cultural dialogue. How do religious ideas resonate within their own contexts? Which aspects of these concepts are most likely to invite associations in a new milieu? Responding to such questions, Lipner advocates a focus on "love," *agape* and *bakhti* in Christian and Hindu traditions. His analysis carefully enters each tradition before considering shared ground.

As University Lecturer in Religious Studies in the faculty of the Divinity School of the University of Cambridge and Director of its Dharam Hinduja Institute of Indic Research, Lipner has long been recognized as an eminent scholar of Hinduism. His book, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Routledge, 1994), is assigned regularly as required reading. His studies of comparative religion, philosophy and ethics reveal the depth and complexity he sees in the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism. His recent *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (Oxford University Press, 1999), published since his Boardman presentation, probes historical aspects of this confluence. For his exegetical, theological and historical knowledge in this fascinating area of study, as well as for his commitment to relevancy, Lipner takes his appropriate place among those who have preceded him as Boardman Lecturers.

I would like to thank Professor Stephen Dunning for his assistance in preparing this publication.

Susan Marks  
University of Pennsylvania

# CAPTURING GODS: THE GOD OF LOVE AND THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRISTIAN AND HINDU TRADITION.<sup>1</sup>

**Julius J. Lipner**

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## A QUESTION OF METHOD

When two different cultures confront each other amid life's complexities, what might one expect in the minds and hearts of those who make the encounter? Puzzlement? Incomprehension? Fear? Wonder? Repulsion? A quickening of interest? A desire to explore, understand, assimilate? To change and be changed? These reactions are all possibilities, and two or more may co-exist. Each of us has probably been in this situation many times in today's multifariously interactive world - at least in the world in which the reader of this essay would live.

To appreciate the issues I wish to raise here, let us first fix our attention on an intercultural encounter that was to be of momentous significance. When Jesus, the Palestinian Jew, declared to Pilate, the Roman governor that fateful morning in the Praetorium (John.18.33f) that he had come into the world to bear witness to the truth, and Pilate answered, "What is truth?," in what language did they converse? Aramaic? Hebrew? Latin? Greek? Did they speak through an interpreter? We do not know. The scholars tell us that Pilate had already been in Palestine for about four years, so he knew something about the culture, and presumably the language, of the people he governed.<sup>2</sup> We also do not know what lay behind Pilate's enigmatic question (*ti estin aletheia* in the Greek text).<sup>3</sup> Could the "truth" of which Jesus spoke be grasped by his foreign listener - still more or less a stranger not only to Jesus' culture, but also to the religious message that Jesus intended to convey? For the purposes of the Gospel text, it seems that Jesus thought that understanding was not beyond Pilate, else he would not have spoken to him as he did.

And what might Pilate have said, I wonder, if Jesus had declared instead that it was to bear witness to the love (*agape* in its anglicised form) of his heavenly Father that he had come into the world? Would this have made a more poignant impact, and significantly changed the course of events?<sup>4</sup> I do not wish to engage in idle speculation. I am trying to point out that we react differently to different words and their contexts, and - their cognitive content apart - the emotional freight of words for "love" seems to differ profoundly from the emotional freight of words for "truth," notwithstanding the philosophical and experiential connections often perceived to exist between these words. The following makes use of a distinction drawn by the comparative religionist, Raimon Panikkar, between "terms" and "words" - the former, emotionless technical tools of the scientific approach, the latter, "historico-cultural crystallizations of human experience," pregnant with possibilities and meanings.<sup>5</sup> Are there not grounds for thinking *prima facie* that words for "love" with their

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was given as the 1998 George Dana Boardman Lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, and another version as the Huntington Lecture at Chapman University, Orange, CA, shortly after. This essay combines and enlarges both lectures. I am grateful to the University of Pennsylvania and to Chapman University for the invitation to lecture, and for agreeing to publication in this combined form.

<sup>2</sup> The occasion would have had a legal context. Note that according to John 19.20ff, the inscription written by Pilate and fixed to the cross of Jesus was in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek.

<sup>3</sup> The problems of translation are fraught with consequence as times and perceptions change. A note of irony emerges in Pilate's response (*satya! satya abar ki?*) in the acclaimed recent Bengali translation of the New Testament, *Marigalbarta* (trans. Sajal Bandyopadhyay and Christian Mignon, sj.; Calcutta: Xavier Publications, 1984) which seems to be absent in the Greek, or indeed in the Sanskrit translation (*pilatah tam aha satyam kim*) of The Bible Society of India and Ceylon (*The New Testament in Sanskrit*, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> The authorial intention of the text, important though it is, is not germane to the point I am raising, which takes the incident described at face value.

<sup>5</sup> See J. Prabhu ed., *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996). The quotation is taken from Panikkar's Response (287).

evocations of human outreach and solidarity would be more effective at communicating across gender and cultural boundaries than the seemingly more abstract words for "truth," "goodness" and so on? Are not barriers of "otherness" more porous when it comes to words of love, pain, joy, sorrow - so experientially direct and humanly evocative - in contrast to apparently more abstract or theoretical expressions? "Love" then seems to be a better starting-point as purveyor of inter-religious and cross-cultural understanding than a number of possible rivals.

This does not mean that cultures have not sought to refine, even stylise, their understanding of love in poetry, art, and music, of course. But these elegances are aesthetically successful only in so far as they do not destroy the living freshness of the experience they seek to convey. Thus "love" seems to speak more directly in contexts of greater human solidarity and transformative response than many other words. This is important to keep in mind during the course of this essay. I am advocating and attempting a *human* dialogue, rather than a cerebral one. Perhaps what has been wrong so far with conventional attempts at inter-religious understanding has been their generally bloodless, abstract character. What is needed more than anything else when trying to build cultural and gender bridges in an age more conscious than ever of various forms of human fragmentation is a new wholistic methodology. I am trying both to implement such a method as well as to contribute to conceptual understanding on my topic. In such discourse not only the literal proposition, but also analogy, narrative, myth, metaphor and other tropes must combine to play their part. The result will be a *cumulative* effect, a wholistic picture that will function at different levels of our awareness - rational, affective, imaginative, evaluative - and induce a form of understanding that will be more comprehensive, engaging and transformative than has generally been the case hitherto. This will be a "comparative" understanding in a more rounded sense of the word. In this essay I can but introduce this method and sketch lines of inquiry, as also give notice of a fuller study in the making.

A chief objective in embarking on this project is to drive a methodological wedge between a certain kind of scientific approach to understanding - an approach that is clinical, one-dimensional, and de-personalised - and the wholistic ("humanistic," if you will) procedure I am adopting. For too long have the methods of the humanities sought to conform to that of the natural and physical sciences, with an enormous loss of self-esteem and understanding of what they should be about in consequence. By trying to ape the "scientific method," and to engage in misguided debates about their own "scientific" credentials for discerning "truth," the humanities have undermined their credibility and appreciation of their proper capacities and goals. Study of the humanities involves systematic study of human subjects from a human point of view; as such, it must devolve an appropriate methodology to achieve its ends.

A crucial feature of this methodology must be to extend as comprehensively as practicable the range of human discourse, and to apply the implications of this extension, that is, its rational, affective, imaginative and empathetic dimensions; only then will the humanities begin to do justice to the labyrinthine complexities of their human subject-matter. This method will be rigorous and precise in its own way (there will be no place for unsubstantiated speculation, just as there is no place for fantasy in the "hard" sciences). It will operate with a paradigm of truth that is based on experience - it will weigh up documentary evidence, strive to discern (and contextualise) the "facts," resort to observation, assess testimony, respect logic, remain open-minded, hold up its conclusions for verification; yet this will be a paradigm that is neither literalist (viz. "truth can only be expressed in literal declarations") nor quantitative (viz. "truth can only be expressed in mathematical statements"). In short, this paradigm of truth will be as authentic in its own sphere as any that might obtain in the sphere of the sciences.

This essay is indeed a case of work in progress, but a start must be made. My purpose is to use *love* as the symbol, vehicle, messenger, of creative understanding between the great traditions of Christianity and Hinduism, with special reference to the way love of God,<sup>6</sup> in both subjective and objective senses of the possessive, has been understood in these faiths, but without in the process doing violence to the integrity of

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<sup>6</sup> "God" is to be understood as a designation for the supreme being with such attributes as benevolence, originitive power, omnipotence, omniscience and so on, rather than as a proper name for some particular deity, though in the course of this essay, the meaning of "God" will take on particular connotations as context demands.

either. In the course of my study, I will strive to be wholistic in a way that will unfold gradually. First, however, we must consider an objection.

There is a view that people live in self-contained worlds of their culture's making, that the language they use and the experiences it conveys enclose them in a self-referencing web of meaning. Therefore, there is no way that people from two such webs may enter into really meaningful dialogue, or at least those from webs that arise out of historically disconnected cultures. The categories of thought of a particular web act virtually as one-way semantic filters with regard to what is perceived beyond the web (or at least webs with historically disparate origins). Thus, speaking religiously, expressions like "creation," "God," and even "salvation," "providence," "incarnation" and "sinfulness" may well be stepping-stones to meaningful dialogue within the Abrahamic faiths (though "incarnation" here might become a meaningful stumbling-block), but they cannot be used as access-points for constructive exchanges between these faiths and the historically disparate non-Abrahamic religions. The conceptual interactions possible between historically correlative linguistic-cultural webs are not possible between thought-worlds that developed quite separately; in the first case there may be a genuine basis for assimilative cognitive exchange, in the second case there cannot be, for - to change the metaphor - the possibilities for cognitive osmosis between disparate linguistic-cultural skins are highly limited.

In the context of Christianity and Hinduism - traditions which grew to maturity without significant historical reference to each other - there is no basis for mutual transformation through constructive dialogue. In seeking to understand the divine love for us and its ramifications for human relationships, the contextual confrontation of words such as *agape* and *karunālanugraha*, *avatāra* and incarnation, "faith" and *bhakti/prapatti*, salvation and *moksa* - not to mention ideas for which there may well be no such apparent counterparts (e.g., "redemption" and "atonement," perhaps, on the Christian side, and *guru* and *prasāda* on the Hindu) - cannot be bridged. One is really talking at cross-purposes in the attempt to do so; any similarity is superficial and deceptive. Contextualisation in each tradition demands that there are more grounds to separate the juxtaposed meanings involved than to unite them. Here dialogue, at best, can lead by way of empathy to mutual understanding, but not to cognitive exchange and assimilation. The distortion that would be the price of decontextualisation would be too high.

This objection overreaches itself, and suffers from a number of defects. Here I can do no more than indicate how it can be overcome, and leave the fuller exposition to a later time. The assumption that linguistic-cultural webs are more or less self-contained structures is defective on both historical and philosophical grounds. Let us start with the philosophical. Ben-Ami Scharfstein, in an article entitled, "The Contextual Fallacy,"<sup>7</sup> has pointed out that any discourse, from ordinary conversation in the home to more precise forms of communication, requires a continuous process of contextualisation and decontextualisation to be viable.

Caution slips easily into hypercaution, which deserves the name because it is sterile. For those interested in comparative thought it is therefore important to recognize that an extreme emphasis on context can be unreasonable and intellectually expensive enough to be considered a fallacy.

A little reflection should persuade us that understanding is often injured if we try to confine it to appreciation of the nuances that make texts or anything else unique. The very perception that discloses uniqueness discloses similarity. If it were not for the perceptual ability to disregard differences, our experiences would never become cumulative, we would never learn from them, because there are inevitable differences in any of the experiences we undergo. The question is not whether the differences exist but what we should make of them, and the answer often lies in the conscious or unconscious decision to make use only of the criteria that fit our need at the time, that is, to intuit or hypothesize or discover the context that

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<sup>7</sup> See G. J. Larson and E. Deutsch eds., *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989).

is most pertinent to our need. (86)

Contextualism is too easy a refuge from analysis. The parochialism it encourages is itself a form of misunderstanding, intellectually little [more than] myopia raised to the status of virtue. The fullest attempt to understand distant thought may be, in effect, both to insert it into and extract it from context. (94)

Thus comparative analysis, even of distant original contexts, if done with alertness and sensitivity, is liable to *create new contexts, relationships and meanings* for the material analysed, and to enrich and expand understanding of *the original contexts involved*. It is the way that new discoveries are made, paradigm-shifts initiated, and perceptions and lifestyles transformed. This is because the (nodal) "words" rather than the "terms" compared are precisely embedded in context in the first place, and hence capable when comparatively re-contextualised of systemically *radiating* semantic change in their original contexts in the understanding of the comparative analyst. It is a way - the only way - of going ahead in a communicationally interactive world. Thus, in this study, we celebrate context, not belittle it. What we do not celebrate is a stultifying contextualism.

There is a further consideration that enlarges the point already made. The words we use in discourse that matters to the living of our lives - especially religious discourse - are pervaded by patterns of speech - metaphor, analogy, narrative, paradox, parable, to name but a few - that are inherently resistant to a process of substitutionary literalism. That is, the meaning they are perceived to convey cannot be reduced to language that is simply literal. Tropes carry what has been described as a "surplus of meaning" that cannot be replaced by language that is literal, without leaving a remainder.<sup>8</sup> In other words they are semantically open-ended. It is this open-endedness, arising from our constitutional open-endedness as human beings to experience different forms of life and to be shaped variously by this experience on the one hand, and to experience vicariously, on the other, by means of what I have called *constructive empathy* - that is, the attested capacity we have to enter *non-intrusively* by a disciplined imagination into perspectives and situations that otherwise would be the terrain of "the other" - that enables dialogic understanding and subsequent cognitive assimilation to take place across such boundaries by the creation of viable comparative contexts.<sup>9</sup> This is why it is necessary to include tropes in the dialogic process. By doing so we are only doing what is natural, and allowing language to function in its proper and fullest capacity.<sup>10</sup>

What I have given so far is a philosophical marker of a larger, more sustained argument justifying informed comparative, even distant comparative, contextualisation, or rather re-contextualisation. Now we move on to empirical considerations in support of our view. One has only to study religious traditions to observe that in the development of their conceptual and experiential histories the principle of open-endedness has been implemented with unfailing regularity. This implementation has taken place not only internally, that is, by means of ongoing controversies about practice, precept and meaning *within* particular communities, but also externally, through debate with groups who hold different, sometimes apparently incompatible, fundamental assumptions and presuppositions. The boundaries of so-called self-referencing and self-authenticating webs of sense and sensibility are regularly transgressed in these encounters.

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<sup>8</sup> In this regard, see Janet M. Soskice's study on metaphor, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985; and my "Samkara on Metaphor with reference to Gita 13.12-18" in *Indian Philosophy of Religion* (ed. R.W. Perrett; Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> I have developed this idea in "Philosophy and World Religions," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject* (ed. Brian Davies; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> This indicates why I find G. Lindbeck's argument in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (SPCK, 1984) deeply problematic. On the one hand, Lindbeck wants doctrine to function mainly, if not purely, as "communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action," (18) on the other, he sees religions as "comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world." (32) But by then giving doctrinal formulation with little or no cognitivist value such a central role in religion, he goes counter to his description of religion as an *interpretive* scheme, for which conceptual content must be crucial. (Its non-cognitivist function hardly justifiable in historical context, one might add). In any case, by according primacy to doctrine in the religious enterprise, Lindbeck undervalues much else (e.g. narrative, myth etc.) which he himself admits is central for a religious shaping of our lives.

Christianity exemplifies this open-endedness. Indeed, Christianity, supposedly a linguistic-cultural web in its own right, is itself the product of the interaction of at least two quite disparate cultural matrices - the Hebraic and the Hellenistic (not to mention others, e.g. the Persian). Yet the Christian tradition has by definition (in terms of the objection) become an integrated system of thought and meaning *per se*. On a variety of subjects crucial to the development of Christian faith - including ideas of God, personhood, creation and providence - protracted debates, not only among Christian philosophers and theologians themselves, but also with those "outside the camp" have continued to the present day. Debates with those who have eschewed basic Christian assumptions in articulating their views include interaction with various kinds of humanists, scientists and atheists. This has led to re-appraisal and re-structuring of Christian self-understanding.<sup>11</sup> All the other major world faiths have developed in similar fashion, and one could point to many instances of productive interaction among them.<sup>12</sup> I do not think there are solid grounds then for defending the self-referencing insularity of different faith traditions.

One final procedural consideration. We are to "compare" Christianity and Hinduism. But who speaks for Christianity, and who for Hinduism? Framed thus, the question is wrongly put. Hinduism and Christianity are not homogeneous, monolithic entities. Under each designation exists a wide plurality of religious options and forms of life, interconnected, no doubt, by overlapping and frequently shared frameworks of meaning, speech and behaviour.<sup>13</sup> No single voice can speak adequately or representatively for each faith. But this is all to the good, for we shall listen attentively to a spectrum of voices from each tradition, the better to appreciate their rich variety and the experiential range of the tradition they invoke. Our only criterion of recognition will be a broad consensus from within each faith that the voice concerned emerges from mainstream or normative strands of that faith. This does not mean, however, that where it seems appropriate we will not also listen to voices that appear to be more marginal. Whether we will be able to detect particular harmonious patterns *within* each tradition as also *between* the two religions of our study will be a matter for personal discovery. The advantage of this method is that, rather than resorting to facile generalisations, we will try to let each voice speak for itself, and attempt to discern for ourselves what it is that each may be saying both within and across boundaries.

## AGAPE

Let us now consider a Christian self-perception rooted in scripture that the God of the Gospel-message is above all a God of love - to use the word of the Greek text, a God of *agape*. Through story and teaching attributed to Jesus himself, and in New Testament commentary on this teaching - central to the subsequent articulation of the faith - it is the *agape* of God that emerges as a, if not *the*, defining divine attribute. I need hardly point out that the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11f.), and statements such as John 3.16 ("For this is how God loved (egapesen) the world . . .");<sup>14</sup> Rom 5.8 ("So it is proof of God's own love for us, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners"); and 1 John 4.8, 16 ("Because God is love (*agape*)") have acted as the basis for identifying the word *agape* with the nature of God's love for the world.<sup>15</sup> But what has *agape* been understood to mean here? The parable of the prodigal son can start us on our inquiry.

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<sup>11</sup> In the article mentioned in note 9 this point is exemplified with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, which received seminal formulation at the Council of Nicaea in 325, on the basis of an already considerable history of development of the ideas of deity, substance, personhood, relation and so forth, integrating, *inter alia*, Hebraic and Hellenistic components. This development continued apace, and in the course of time was, and still is, influenced by "dialogue" with sources not necessarily based on Christian assumptions.

<sup>12</sup> For example, between Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism (consider the origins and growth of Sufi beliefs and practices), Islam and Sikhism, and so on.

<sup>13</sup> I have argued in other writings that "Hindu" is essentially a cultural rather than religious term (see for example, ch. 1 of my *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs And Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994). However, because of the overwhelming and persistent role of religion in the historical development of what "Hindu" means, we are here using "Hindu" as a convenient marker of religious identity.

<sup>14</sup> Biblical quotations are taken from *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

<sup>15</sup> Though the word *agape* does not occur in the Greek text of the parable of the prodigal son, there can be little doubt that the story has functioned as a classic locus for expressing what God's love means for us. See also the quotation in note 17.

The story is well known. The younger of two sons, who is usually understood to represent the frailty of the human condition, the ordinary wrongdoer (or "sinner") as distinct from the elder brother, who stands for the self-righteous orthodox, takes his inheritance from his father and goes off to a distant land where he squanders his wealth. In dire straits, he comes to his senses, and resolves to return repentant to his father, ready to give up any filial rights he may have. All he seeks is his father's protection in return ("I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men.") But the father, who had been looking out for him, saw him "while he was still a long way off" and "ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him." Not only did he reaffirm him as his son, but held a feast in his honour to celebrate his safe return. For as the father said to the elder brother who questioned this welcome, "Your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found." It is the purpose of the story to teach that the father acts as God would whenever a repentant sinner seeks forgiveness, no matter how great his (or her) sinfulness. God does not care only for the so-called righteous.<sup>16</sup>

I pass over the ancient Jewish nuances of this parable. Its more general teaching is clear enough. The divine *agape* or loving-kindness is for all, not least the stricken and outcaste. It is likened to a parental and therefore personal and individual love, and it is anticipative and unmerited.<sup>17</sup> How much is contained, both cognitively and *affectively*, by the image in the words: "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him. . . . He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him." The personal, individual *restorative* warmth ("your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found"), here expressed in parental terms, is an important originative, that is, scriptural, component of divine *agape*, and has often been lost in the traditional philosophical and theological analyses of its meaning.<sup>18</sup> We will have occasion to invoke it when we examine Hindu notions of divine love.

But this understanding of *agape* is still fundamentally incomplete. For in Christian ethics, the divine *agape* is the original criterion (the "primary analogue" to use philosophical jargon) of human love, the standard on which human relationships are to be judged and measured. As such, it is a *prescriptive* love - a moral imperative - and the encompassing context of other forms of love. No kind of loving is morally viable if it violates agapeistic love. According to this standard, the love of *agape* is inherently other-regarding, irrespective of the sex and other personal circumstances of the other, and irrespective of any expectation of return in kind. *Agape* is not predicated on *reciprocity*. This is the nature of God's basic love for us, and this is the love that is to ground all moral human relationships. Gene Outka, in his careful study, describes neighbourly *agape* as follows (one must overlook the sexism of writing in an earlier period):

The principle of equal regard enjoins man not to let his basic attitudes towards others be determined by the disparities in talent and achievement and the inequalities in attractiveness and social rank which differentiates men. He is not, for example, to value his neighbour, in accordance with the value of that neighbour's social position. He is to attempt to get behind social, political and technical titles which are the all-too-evident tokens of inequality. He is not to confuse the differences in instrumental value which various titles doubtless often reflect

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<sup>16</sup> This is to regard the elder brother in the story as self-righteous, a hackneyed interpretation of the character. But it is not necessary to resort to this interpretation for the parable to carry its point. I have always had a sympathy for the brother who stayed by his father's side and did not abandon his home, and find the father's words telling: "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours." (15.31) As we shall note later, there is a significant place for *constancy* in the expression of love.

<sup>17</sup> "Here the reference is quite indubitably universal. . . . The prodigal is the personification of lost sinful man in general, and he is thought of, not only as a prodigal, but also as a son. And if the prodigal is every sinner, then God is the loving Father of all, who seeks all," D. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* [IGM] (Fontana Library; London: Collins, 1973), 59.

<sup>18</sup> Space does not permit more than a comment here on gender-terms used for God. In Christianity these are overwhelmingly masculine, though it is a theological truism that the divine being is sexless. Theologically, therefore, God's love for us prescinds from sexual considerations; psychologically, however, the situation is very different. The situation is analogous with respect to Hinduism which is more heterogeneous than Christianity and which has a major strand (Sakta religion) where the supreme being is depicted as female (the Goddess). In this essay the gender of pronouns referring to the deity will follow the religious conventions of the faiths being considered.

with the irreducible value of the well-being of the holders of these titles. He is enjoined to identify with the neighbor's point of view, to try to imagine what it is for him to live the life he does, to occupy the position he holds.<sup>19</sup>

The last sentence indicates that the practice of *agape* need not be dispassionate in the sense that it lacks affective content, unfortunately a familiar characteristic of its philosophical description. In fact, neighbourly *agape* should be suffused with compassion, based on a cultivated sense of human solidarity with the other. This seems to be indicated repeatedly in the Biblical contexts of its expression. Its divine analogue is almost absurdly intimated in the story of the prodigal son: "absurdly," because according to the classical philosophers and theologians, God - the initiating subject of *agape* in the parable - has no "passions" or affective life like a human subject, and "almost," because it is precisely the function of narrative, as a linguistic vehicle, to make its point by the use of figures of speech - metaphor, allegory, paradox - that in general are intended to carry *extended*, usually convergent, meanings. The purpose of the parable is to illustrate by appealing to the hearer's mind, heart and imagination, the range and extent of God's loving kindness for us, and this it does incomparably (with regard to non-tropic language, that is) by intimating that the divine *agape* is proportionately or analogically (to use another technical expression) as complete and efficacious as the fullest recognisable personal human (parental) love can be.

Here we cannot overlook the real hint of vulnerability in the divine love for us that the Biblical teaching seems to incorporate. This has been suppressed by classical Christian thinkers, in particular, in their development of a conception of a loving, yet apparently adamant, impassible deity. There have been reasons for this, but it has failed to do justice to its Jewish roots. The Bible reveals throughout an inter-active, involved God, deeply concerned for his creation and susceptible to rejection and betrayal by humankind. We cannot develop this point here, but it is a matter of regret that to do so would be to go beyond the traditional view of Christian philosophical-theology in particular, and this is not the purpose of this essay.<sup>20</sup>

Now it may be objected that the story of the prodigal son does demonstrate the quality of God's love for us, but is this sufficient ground for providing the encompassing norm of our love (in terms of *agape*) for each other? Does the fact that God loves us in this way imply that we ought to love one another similarly?<sup>21</sup> This is a crucial question, and it is here that *Christian theology gives the cue to Christian ethics*. Let us start again from scripture, this time from the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37). This too, in the history of Christian self-understanding, is a favoured story for demonstrating the neighbourly *agape*, the selfless other-regarding love that must lie at the basis of all human relationships. Once more, I can only sketch the story. This time some of the ancient Jewish nuances are more pertinent to our inquiry.

Once, during a journey, a Jew was attacked by bandits and left half-dead on the roadside. In turn, a priest and a Levite, both supposedly model representatives of traditional Jewish law or righteous living, passed the victim by without assisting him. But then a Samaritan, a traditional enemy of the Jews, came that way and "was moved with compassion" when he saw the injured man.<sup>22</sup> After carefully tending his wounds, he "lifted him onto his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him." On the following day he paid the innkeeper to continue to care for the man, promising that on his way back he would make good any extra expense that the innkeeper might incur. As Jesus declares, the moral of the story is, "Go, and do the same yourself."

So neighbourly *agape*, in so far as it is *agape*, must not be governed by the personal circumstances of the other, but is a form of active benevolence that does not expect a return in kind. Once again, the

<sup>19</sup> Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 262-3.

<sup>20</sup> For a fine, sustained attempt at this see Keith Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Or to couch this in more philosophical terms: "From a factual statement such as 'God is love' one cannot logically conclude, 'therefore . . . one ought to love one's neighbour'" (Outka, 186; emphasis added). To quote R. M. Hare (*The Language of Morals*, 28), "No imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises which does not contain at least one imperative."

<sup>22</sup> "Was moved with compassion" is how *The New Jerusalem Bible* translates the *kai...esplanchnisthe* of the Greek text here. (10.33) This is the very same construction that appears at a similar point in the story of the prodigal son, but there rendered somewhat inconsistently by "(His father) was moved with pity."

Gospel-passage does not speak of a dispassionate love, rather, it speaks of a love born of solidarity or compassion, and attentive to individual needs. *Agape* is also a *faithful* love, in the sense of being constant over time, regardless of any sense of expressed or felt reciprocity on the part of the recipient. The father looked out for and took back the prodigal son despite the latter's errant ways, and the good Samaritan was prepared to express a practical benevolence not only to a stranger but to someone from a traditionally hostile people who seemed in no fit state to reciprocate, and for as long as it took to bring that particular act of benevolence to its conclusion. The advantage of the method I am trying to inculcate is that it allows tropic patterns of speech to convey the full resonances, semantic and otherwise, of the ideas being expressed and which cannot obviously be conveyed by a bland literalness.

It is noteworthy that the New Testament notion of *agape* does not come out of the blue. It is based on the earlier part of the Bible (the so-called "Old Testament"). One such linking strand is the notion of faithful constancy in the loving subject, exemplified first and foremost by God's constancy to the people of Israel in and through his covenant with them, come what may, but also in recurrent images of faithful love between individuals throughout the Hebrew Bible. It is no accident, I believe, that in some of the noblest expressions of human love in western literature - a literature that certainly up to its late medieval phases, at least, was more or less consciously inspired by Christian principles - it is this characteristic of potentially unrequited constancy that is lauded. Here is an expression of this trait by one of the greatest playwrights of Christendom:

... Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me prov'd,  
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.<sup>23</sup>

This mark of unswerving constancy is also a key note in the exchange of marriage vows during the Christian nuptial ceremony,<sup>24</sup> stressing the relationship of *agape* that undergirds the mutuality of requital in marriage.

But we have still not dealt with the theological reasons for neighbourly *agape* in Christian ethics.<sup>25</sup> These reasons are diverse and we cannot be exhaustive here. Nevertheless, it is important to include (I) the role of scriptural injunction, (II) the example and role of Jesus, and, as a grounding concept, (III) the idea of the *imago Dei* or the "image of God" in the development of Christian thinking. Here it will be possible only to look briefly at each of these points.

(I) The scriptural injunctions concerned are not as straightforward as they might seem. Let us begin with what has been called "the greatest commandment." In St. Matthew's Gospel Jesus says: "You must love (*agapeis*) the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the

<sup>23</sup> William Shakespeare, Sonnet 116.

<sup>24</sup> The well-known formula: "I . . . take thee . . . to my wedded husband/wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, and thereto I plight thee my troth" typifies this commitment.

<sup>25</sup> A context which Outka must admit, though he does so only tangentially, in his mainly philosophical treatment: "Religious beliefs may provide . . . a background of intelligibility for *agape*. They serve to define the total arena within which actions are viewed and assessed. A certain sort of world is seen to lie behind the life of love, a world which will finally not prove indifferent, unsupportive, or hostile to such a life." (185)

greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love (*agape*) your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets too." (22.34-40)<sup>26</sup> Note again how this teaching is legitimated with reference to ancient Jewish tradition and practice ("the whole Law, and the Prophets too,") as also the wholeness of the love enjoined ("with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.") Another important passage is Luke 6.27 in which Jesus teaches: "Love (*agape*) your enemies, do good to those who hate you. . . . Treat others as you would like people to treat you . . . love your enemies and do good to them . . . and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." We are to follow God's example and treat one another in the same loving non-self-interested way in which God treats us, regardless of whether such love is merited or requited. And we cannot forget, of course, that great paean to *agape*, 1 Corinthians: "Love (*agape*) is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage. . . . Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. Love never comes to an end. . . . Make love (*agape*) your aim." (13.4-14.1) In passing, we note again the implied vulnerability of *agape* in human relationships - it is a love that makes allowances, that trusts, hopes, endures - which, it must be said, has had a history of clearer acknowledgement in its treatment by Christian thinkers than is the case of its divine analogue. There is a need for fundamental theologians to provide a better match for the two.

Analytically, however, a problem has arisen in respect of the self-referencing love implied by the injunction to love our neighbour as ourself, to treat others as we would like others to treat us. What is the nature of this self-love, what are its limits and implications? Some thinkers have found a connection here between *agape* and an idea of basic justice, a recognition of equal worth in all human beings (including oneself) in so far as all are human, irrespective of particular talents and accomplishments. Others have interpreted the injunction as implying that *agape* cannot come to fruition unless there is some form of genuine interaction, if not mutuality, between the persons involved. While still others argue that the golden rule implies that *agape* is in essence an other-regarding self-sacrifice, if necessary to the point of giving up one's life.

It is not to our purpose to enter these discussions. I do not think, however, that any notion of what Outka calls "nefarious self-love" has been countenanced in Christian ethics in general in the interpretation of this dictum, still less that condition which he refers to as "psychological egoism." "The single word which best connotes those attitudes and actions characteristic of nefarious self-love," he writes, "is, I think, *acquisitiveness*." (56) "The underlying thesis [of psychological egoism]" Outka continues, "is that acquisitive self-love constitutes de facto the sole spring of behavior, identical for every man. . . . If [human] behavior at times seems ostensibly altruistic, this is only disguised acquisitiveness. . . . At the deepest level, all aims are genetically derived from and may be reductively analysed into one and only one." (60) Christian thinkers have in general eschewed psychological egoism as either an explanation for or basis of altruism.<sup>27</sup> It has been seen to make nonsense of the above biblical injunctions which are taken to imply a core of genuine human ethical freedom, and perhaps more importantly, it would make nonsense of the life and example of Jesus, who, in mainstream Christian thinking, has always been regarded as a fully human, and as such, authentically free, incarnation of God.

(II) Jesus is the paradigm of *agape* in Christian tradition: the paradigm not only of wholehearted love of God and neighbour, but the *paradigm* also (in the sense of "pattern" or "representative") of God's complete love for us. A doctrine of true incarnation has been seen to fulfill these expressions of love. As truly divine and truly human, Jesus, by his life and death, is (a) the fruition of God's *agape* for us, (b) the model of neighbourly love, and (c) the exemplar of our love for God. Jesus is the fruition of God's love for us, for as John's Gospel declares, God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world but so that through him the world might be saved. (3.17) Jesus also exemplifies how we are to love one another: individually, personally, tenderly, enduringly, hopefully,

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<sup>26</sup> See also Mark 12.28-34, and Luke 10.25-28.

<sup>27</sup> If pressed they might well resort to this sort of distinction (in the words of Outka): "It is one thing to say that some [nefarious?] self-love is unavoidable, another that it alone is always determinative. It is one thing to say that the agent is unable to love others without [implicitly?] loving himself, another that loving them is simply a way of [acquisitively?] loving himself." (287)

selflessly. Episodes from the Gospels illustrate all these traits, in particular Jesus' words and deeds at the Passover meal with his disciples before he died (or "Last Supper"). At this meal, in the apparent knowledge of his impending death, he offered himself in a renewable and commemorative way as the food and drink of a universal binding love, "Take . . . and eat . . . this is my body . . . Drink from this . . . for this is my blood . . . poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. . . . Do this in remembrance of me."<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, it is in Jesus' life and death that we see how *agape* is to deal with evil in our lives and in the world. Violence, suffering, disappointment and evil cannot be avoided, but it is in Jesus' death on the Cross and his resurrection from death by the power of God that we have the key to facing and overcoming natural and moral evil without compromising the imperatives of *agape*. *Agape* must be constant and uncompromising, for individuals or groups, even in the face of unremitting suffering or moral evil. In this respect, Christians lay central emphasis on the virtue of whole-hearted forgiveness. It is forgiveness that allows *agape* to achieve its fruit of healing and reconciliation. Forgiveness is the cutting edge of agapeistic love. Through the person and work of Jesus, God's love reconciles the world to himself, and we are enabled to forgive each other from the heart. Further, even after death, through the Spirit of divine love Jesus will be present in the world, reaching out through his followers to draw the whole creation to God. Finally, Jesus shows us how we are to love God: by embracing what is perceived to be his will for us, even to the point of a humiliating and forsaken death.

We have done no more than list some Christian commonplaces, and all these ideas have been nuanced and interpreted in endless variety in the history of Christian theology. Nevertheless, it cannot be gainsaid that the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation in their wider ramifications lie at the heart of the Christian idea of *agape*, and that the articulation of Christian ethics in this respect cannot stand without reference to its theological implications. This *contextuality* of Christian ethics has not been appreciated sufficiently by Christian philosophers. They often write as if the rightness of the Christian idea of neighbourly love is self-evident to careful rational reflection. This, I think, is a delusion. There is no such thing as a free-standing, universal "rational" Christian ethics of love; the plausibility of such an ethics is rooted in its theological context.<sup>29</sup> And this plausibility has been traditionally developed with reference to our next consideration.

(III) The idea of humans as the "image of God"<sup>30</sup> is already expressed in the "Old" Testament, but is developed in the New and then in subsequent Christian reflection.<sup>31</sup> David Cairns distinguishes three senses of this expression in Christian tradition: (A) the sense that all human beings express, in so far as they are human, an important similarity with, or characteristic of, the divine being; (B) the sense that some human beings express a special likeness with God in so far as they enter into a special relationship with Christ who is God's "Son," that is, a unique expression of the divine reality; and (C) the sense that Christ is a unique (and some would say, unrepeatable) expression of the divine likeness in that he is the Incarnation of God.

Note that the first two senses are both universal in some respect: (A) applies to all human beings simply by virtue of the fact that they exist as human beings; (B) applies in reality to some (viz. those who are actually in the special relationship mentioned), but potentially to all in that all human beings are called by God to enter into this relationship. Only (C) is confined to Christ alone. We need not go into the theological controversies surrounding the precise meanings of these three senses (for example (1) whether sense A refers representatively to men (rather than to women) or, in a gender egalitarian way, to "a responsible presence in the world" or "the capacity to reason and will," as being key reflections of the divine reality<sup>32</sup> or (2) in what way each human

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<sup>28</sup> Instructing that this sacrificial act be repeated as the mark of an abiding friendship.

<sup>29</sup> This does not preclude its *nobility* (in terms of a conveyed sense of uplifting rightness) from being appreciated across religio-cultural borders. But this appreciation is preconditioned, I would argue, by a responsive sense of rightness cultivated analogically in the religio-cultural context of the appreciator. We are speaking here of commonalities in differences, and perhaps of convergent resonances amid a distinctive plurality. Teasing out some of these mutualities is the purpose of this essay.

<sup>30</sup> The expression is being used here generically, without reference to further distinctions that have been made in this respect, such as those between "image," "likeness" and "vestige."

<sup>31</sup> Cairns argues that the Old Testament references are important, and have a far-reaching significance. See IGM, ch. 1.

<sup>32</sup> The influential Christian theologian, St Thomas Aquinas (13th century), treats the basic sense in which all human beings are the image of God as that innate capacity to reflect God's Trinitarian mode of being in their mental acts, especially of knowing and willing. See his *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 93.

being is called to enter into special relationship with Christ). Our point is that the Christian idea of the image of God grounds a Christian ethics of neighbourly *agape* in an interesting way, viz. it ultimately bestows a crucial and equal worth and dignity upon each human being such that every human being becomes the object of neighbourly *agape* for every other. For this, the actual universality of sense (A) and the potential universality of sense (B) is sufficient. Further, note that the equal *agape*-grounding worth of which we speak is a *bestowed* worth, bestowed not by some arbitrary human source or choice, but in virtue of the fact that we are the image of God. It is thus a *derived* worth (to be discerned by the appropriate religious and moral guidance). Divine nature is its originative ground, not human nature per se.

This seems to give a paradoxical quality to this understanding of *agape*. On the one hand, there is a largesse, a kind of superabundance to neighbourly *agape* in so far as it takes its cue from God. God has created us in the divine likeness, we derive our agapeistic worth from God and, as such, are an expression of God's unneccessitated, overflowing creative loving act.<sup>33</sup> In the way that God loves us with a fulsome, universal parental love as individual images of himself, notwithstanding our human frailties and aberrations (cf. the parable of the prodigal son), so we must generously love one another - as the parable of the good Samaritan teaches us.<sup>34</sup> There is a generosity to this love which goes beyond the bounds of exactitude that attend most notions of justice.

On the other hand, *agape* is also a kind of *just* love in that it is based on a perception of equal human worth, regardless of individual status, personality or merit. In this sense it is a giving to every individual his or her due in an egalitarian sense on the basis of their being the image of God. Thus there is a moral imperative that characterises neighbourly *agape*. In this sense, because of the kind of beings we are as God's image (in senses A and B), we *ought* to love one another as we love ourselves, and in doing this, whether we realise it or not, we are also loving God, the divine exemplar and source of our being (so 1 John 4.20 can say: "Anyone who says "I love God" and hates his brother, is a liar, since no one who fails to love the brother whom he can see can love God whom he has not seen.")

There is another way in which *agape* seems to be paradoxical. On the one hand, its benevolence is predicated on the equal worth of all humans *qua* human in the manner described above. In this sense it is not attentive to differences of wealth, sex, personality or talent; it is not a love based on the perception of some particular quality of the other or for the sake of personal gain. On the other hand, it is this very even-handedness that allows us to recognise the *uniqueness* of the other *qua* other. In acquisitive or self-regarding love a uniqueness is also perceived in the object loved. Thus one can love some other uniquely for the sake of a particular gratification that only that other seems able to render, but this uniqueness exists only in so far as the object loved is perceived to be a particular source of gratification. It is unique because of what it means to the selfish lover (from the viewpoint of the lover this is a self-referencing distinctiveness), whereas the object of *agape* is appreciated as unique in a non-self-referencing way, in its own right. *Agape* frees the selfless lover to love the other in the other's uniqueness. Thus *agape* is at the same time both egalitarian with respect to the other, and attentive to the unique distinctiveness of the other. This is another way of saying that the practice of *agape* does not favour an attitude of emotionless dispassion; rather it calls for an individual benevolence.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> An act that has been pre-determined and pre-planned from the very beginning, and which came to fruition in due course with the origination of human beings in the process of the world's "evolution" (here scientific explanations of the development of matter and life may well come into play). In other words, God's creative act, according to Christian teaching, both originates the world and continually sustains it in being.

<sup>34</sup> This "fulness" of *agape* has sometimes been taken as the basis for arguing that *agape* has a preferential option or corrective outreach towards the disadvantaged, marginalised or vulnerable members of society.

<sup>35</sup> Acquisitive love can also be said to be paradoxical with regard to uniqueness, but in a different way. One could say that one loves every other equally only in so far as the other can gratify one, yet distinctively, in so far as each other can provide a unique gratification. Panikkar, in distinguishing between the "loving approach" and the "scientific approach," notes this attribute of uniqueness, but without making further distinctions:

"Love . . . entails the discovery of the uniqueness of a thing. A 'scientific' jar is a single specimen among many jars. If it breaks I can replace it by another one. . . . If I love a particular jar, that jar is for me unique. . . . It has something irreplaceable. . . . The loving approach to things is of another kind than the scientific one. Modern

To clarify matters further, let us conclude this part by reference to a distinction made in an important work (written in the 1930s) by the Swedish theologian, Anders Nygren. The title of this work, *Agape and Eros*,<sup>36</sup> points to the distinction we have in mind. In Nygren's way of thinking, there seem to be only two kinds of love: *agape*, taught for the first time consistently in the New Testament and of which the exemplar and source is the love of God for us through the life and death of Jesus as revealed in that text; and *eros*, the type of every other kind of love.<sup>37</sup> *Agape* originates from God; is spontaneous (that is, it is not motivated by any quality of the beloved); seeks the welfare of and bestows an irreducible value on the beloved; initiates and grounds an attitude of neighbourly love; and seeks to draw the beloved into a relationship of fellowship with God and the neighbour. It is a love of unalloyed self-giving.<sup>38</sup> So far so good. In general, these are the accredited attributes of *agape* in the Christian understanding. *Eros*, however, for Nygren, is acquisitive love, what Outka has described as "nefarious" self-love: it originates from human beings; is "ego-centric" (that is, invariably seeks its own advantage); is attentive to *differentiae* of status, talent and worth in its object; and is infected with *hubris* or arrogated self-worth.<sup>39</sup> Though *agape* and *eros* are fundamentally incommensurable and irreconcilable, they are the only two kinds of love possible, and usually co-exist in intimate and sometimes inextricable union (in individuals and in movements of history, e.g. the Christian Church); further, *agape* is the rightful preserve of ideal Christian teaching and living, while *eros* is the domain of every other form of religio-cultural or moral system (including "Old" Testament Judaism).

I believe that it is Nygren's puerile (and indeed, *hubristic*) desire to claim for Christianity the radical *novelty* of teaching and practising *agape*,<sup>40</sup> supported by a (particular form of Evangelical) theology affirming the inherent depravity of human nature - a claim and a theology running throughout his work - that has vitiated his study of love in terms of the mutually exclusive yet exhaustive distinction described above. With respect to the ethics of human relationships (to which he extends the scope of *agape*), he seems not to have considered adequately, for instance, another kind of love that is neither *agape* nor *eros* as understood by him, yet is apparently quite viable, which we may formulate as follows: "I love you with a special love because you are my friend. I love you not only because you are a human being deserving of my benevolence *qua* human, but also because of the pleasure, support, companionship, and example that you give me (and no one else). In this love and because of this love, I am prepared to give up my life for you if necessary." In part, this is clearly a gainful kind of love. Yet it seems counterintuitive to describe it as "ego-centric" or "acquisitive" or "possessive" *tout court* (Nygren's epithets), for let us assume that it is prepared to show all manner of self-restraint and sacrifice in terms of *the very attributes listed for agape in I Corinthians 13* (patience, kindness, not being jealous or boastful or conceited or rude or seeking a predatory advantage, or taking undue offence etc.), at its noblest to the point of death if necessary. It is a love of giving as much as of taking, indeed, perhaps more of giving than of taking. In fact its overall intention may be to give rather than to take, though it survives in so far as it entails a special relationship of reciprocity between two persons (a good example would be a certain kind of married or parental love) in which a particular value is bestowed mutually. Though not egalitarian in contrast to *agape*, it is clearly *agapeistic*. It would also be counter-intuitive (and pleading a special case), I think, to describe it as a *combination of two separate kinds of love: agape and eros* (in Nygren's sense). It is a single love with essentially "agapeistic" and "erotic" features. And it seems that Nygren's thinking can make little good sense of

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science has to exclude love from its approach to things. . . . It needs to abstract individuality. Love has no place in it. It approaches things in an impersonal and quantifiable manner." (271)

<sup>36</sup> First published in Swedish in two Parts in 1932 and 1938-9 respectively. Our references are to *Agape and Eros* [AE] (trans. Philip S. Watson; London: SPCK, 1953). According to Outka (1) "one may justifiably regard [Nygren's] work as the beginning of the modern treatment of the subject" of the ethics of love.

<sup>37</sup> No doubt Nygren is writing primarily in a *religious* context. But in so far as he intends his comments to apply also to the ethics of human relationships, *eros* can be seen to be the type of every other form of love.

<sup>38</sup> AE passim, esp. 75f.

<sup>39</sup> AE, esp. 210.

<sup>40</sup> This emphasis itself tends to violate a primary concern of Christian theologians, viz. to affirm that the coming of Christ and the Christian message (which embody God's love for the world) were not a historical "bolt from the blue," but were the culmination of - and pre-figured in - the "salvation history" of the "Old" Testament.

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Nor, it seems, can his position comfortably accommodate the following kind of love: "I love you not (only) because you are a human being deserving of my benevolence *qua* human (=agape), nor indeed because I seek to gain something by loving you (=eros), but because I simply recognise in you as lovable the virtues of kindness, goodness, and truthfulness." Now strictly speaking this is not what has been called "the love of friendship" (*amor amicitiae*), because one does not necessarily seek (perhaps to gain by) the other's friendship. One may say: I love you because I recognise in you something particular that is lovable, which yet others may not possess, and which I do not seek for personal advantage. Let us call it the "love of virtue" (*amor virtutis*). Nygren's disjunction does not accommodate such love. This is because he has a theological axe to grind, and so has come up with a view that is tendentious, somewhat arbitrary, insufficiently nuanced, generally insensitive, and one may say, somewhat inhuman (since for him *agape* is fundamentally opposed to human nature which is inherently depraved). While Nygren's study is useful in important ways for its articulation of the meaning of *agape*, it is seriously deficient in its understanding of other kinds of love (which he lumps under *eros*), and we may dispense with it and the sense he gives to the latter term.<sup>41</sup>

Let us return instead to key features of (religious) *agape* that run throughout our analysis: its divine origin; its spontaneous character; its egalitarian nature; its quest for fellowship between the divine reality and humans, as also between humans themselves, on the basis of a value transcendentally bestowed, and a note of inherent vulnerability, at least in its biblical expression. I hope to show phenomenologically that in religious Hinduism too such a manner of loving is accorded a crucial role, though interestingly differently nuanced and contextualised. To this task we now turn.

## BHAKTI

Recall again the point made earlier about the diversity that passes for that federated cluster of religions we describe as "Hinduism." Note too that there are numerous strands running through this diversity that are more or less distinctive, localised and popular (what anthropologists sometimes refer to as the "little traditions,") and strands that are more formalised, normative (attested to at least by way of lip-service), self-consciously articulate and hence "orthodox" (the so-called "great tradition.") Hinduism is less homogeneous than Christianity, one chief reason for this being its characteristic and deep-set feature of *orality* (notwithstanding a longstanding tradition of many written texts), which resists the standardisation that an ecclesiastical faith such as Christianity (with its historical stress on the precise and inerrant formulation of doctrine and dogma, and the consequent issuing of anathemas) generates.

The great normative tradition in Hinduism is the Sanskritic tradition,<sup>42</sup> itself varied and in aspects adaptable and even subversive of accredited norms. Because the Sanskritic tradition contains the perhaps most

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<sup>41</sup> Outka devotes a discussion to "Karl Barth on Agape." (ch.7) If Outka's analysis is correct, Barth also regards *agape* as (potentially) universal, but in actuality as "a universal love for Christians," (210) and "erotic" love - in a "positive" sense - as "being-with" the other in humanness and gladness, and also "the particular love" between a man and a woman which encompasses "understanding, self-giving and desire"; *eros* in a negative sense is "a grasping, taking, possessive love." (223-4) The Nygren disjunctive between *agape* and *eros*, based as it is on a particular kind of theology, has cast a long shadow. *Eros*, of course, is a contentious word and has a history of loaded connotations. In a stimulating article, Joseph Runzo also gives *eros* a positive sense, and indeed insists that divine love and "the highest human love" must include a "dimensionality of eros" (see his "Eros and Meaning in Life and Religion" in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (ed. Joseph Runzo and Nancy M Martin; Oxford: Oneworld Press, 1999). Runzo speaks of "seraphic ["burning"] love" as the ideal and of "agape and *eros* as the two poles of seraphic love, two poles in a dynamic tension." While I do not object to attempts to rescue *eros* from negative connotations, any such attempt must first show due sensitivity to the word's troubled history. We shall have occasion to resort to the quality of vulnerability suggested by the sexual connotations of erotic love in the next section of this essay. A more encompassing understanding of agapeistic love than Nygren's is evident from the following statement in a letter by Pope Paul VI to the kidnappers of his friend Aldo Moro in which he pleads for the latter's release: "I have no mandate to speak to you, and I am not bound by any private interest in his regard. But I love him as a member of the great human family, as a friend of student days and - by a very special title - as a brother in faith and as a son of the Church of Christ," Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 703.

<sup>42</sup> "Sanskrit" being generally regarded as the inherited language of high culture, learning, and the religious and social elite.

developed features of systematic and reflexive articulation of Hinduism (viz. most of its full-fledged philosophies and theologies) and as such has positively or negatively exercised a profound and lasting influence on the phenomenon of Hinduism as a whole, we shall draw most, but by no means all, of our material from the Sanskrit tradition; when it seems called for, however, we shall also make use of vernacular or folkloric sources.<sup>43</sup> But inevitably, amid the bewildering plurality of the Hindu religions, there must be some selectivity to the material drawn upon. Perhaps all we can aspire to in this essay is to give, within the comparative matrix of our concerns, a characteristic flavour of Hindu notions of religious love.

Let us begin with reference to the Bhagavadgītā, widely recognised in Sanskrit Hinduism as a seminal text for understandings of the love of God (in both the subjective and objective senses of this expression). The Gītā, as it is usually called - in its received form a text of 18 chapters and 700 verses - can be dated to about the beginning of the Common Era (interestingly, about the time of the New Testament).<sup>44</sup> It is in the form of a dialogue between the warrior-king Krishna, who progressively reveals himself as the supreme person (*purusottama*) of all, the origin, conserving power and End of all being, the Lord of the universe who has descended in human form into the world; and his friend and comrade, the warrior Arjuna. Krishna does most of the speaking, yet, significantly, the dialogue format appears as being the first medium in Sanskrit Hinduism for a sustained expression of divine love. It is a fitting vehicle for a teaching of responsive love between persons, but it is also a characteristically *open-ended* medium. Conversations are notable as much for what is left unsaid or cannot be said as for what is said; their spaces leave room for development of ideas, for spontaneity of thought and expression, for fulfillment in action.<sup>45</sup> They are also suitable points of departure for (more systematic) commentaries. And so it has been with the Gītā: it has been the basis for rich traditions of continuing reflection, theology and practice to the present day.<sup>46</sup> This takes us back to our original idea of using a range of linguistic resources to inform our discussion.

The immediate context of the Gītā is Arjuna's war-chariot, positioned between two great armies about to do battle. Arjuna is the combatant and Krishna the charioteer,<sup>47</sup>. Confused, Arjuna is reluctant to fulfill his duty as a righteous warrior, for the army confronting him includes relatives and others for whom he has high regard. After Arjuna has placed himself in the appropriate role of *receptive* (but not unquestioning) disciple of his teacher, Krishna - thus enabling the "true teaching" to be imparted<sup>48</sup> - Krishna reveals, for the first time in Hinduism, the nature of the divine love and the response it invites.<sup>49</sup> It is a love that in the first instance is a

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<sup>43</sup> For a study of key themes in Hindu religious tradition with reference to Sanskrit and other sources, see my "A Hindu View of Life" in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*.

<sup>44</sup> The Gita has been especially influential in strands which focus on some form, aspect or intimate of Visnu or Krishna as supreme (i.e. in "Vaisnava" religion). The important theistic Svetasvatara Upanisad, which has been dated to about the same period and which seems to have Saiva leanings, is more philosophical in tone and is hardly a devotional text.

<sup>45</sup> The Gita has sometimes been accused of being inconsistent and incoherent (one might lay a similar charge against most major scriptures). But the Gita has been couched in the framework of a conversation, not of a philosophical treatise. In this essay, the Gita will be approached, phenomenologically, as it generally has been in Hindu devotional and theological tradition, viz. as a unitary text.

<sup>46</sup> For a good introduction to the Gita in context, as also to the uses to which it may be and has been put in contemporary times, see the contributions in J. Lipner ed., *The Fruits Of Our Desiring: An Enquiry Into The Ethics Of The Bhagavadgita For Our Times* (Calgary: Bayeux Arts Inc., 1997).

<sup>47</sup> These two battle-positions symbolise respectively the type of the faithful devotee and the supreme being's guiding and saving role in life's spiritual and moral combat (in which we are all perforce engaged).

<sup>48</sup> Gita 2.7: "I ask you, with mind confused concerning righteous action, what is the better (path)? Tell me that surely. I am your disciple; teach me who come devotedly to you": *prcchami tva dharmasammudhacetah; yac chreyah syan, niscitam bruhi tan me; sisyas te'ham, sadhi mam tvam prapannam*. Translations in this essay are by the author, unless stated to the contrary.

<sup>49</sup> The Gita is the first Sanskrit text to give a sustained and explicit theistic treatment of divine concern for the world. The canonical Veda (dated to ca. 1200 BCE in its earliest received form) may well be (and has been) thought to have an inherent theism in interaction with human affairs, but it is a theism that is couched in poetic and obscure terms. H. H. Farmer's claim that "the notion of an avatar [is the notion] of a divine being who merely drops into the human scene in an embodied form from the realm of eternity, unheralded, unprepared for, without roots in anything that has gone before in history," (*Revelation and Religion: Studies in the Theological Interpretation of Religious Types* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1954) 196) may be somewhat premature. It fails to take account of the fact that traditional "Hinduism" is not only not a monolithic phenomenon but also that it is an essentially oral one. In

form of spontaneous benevolence, seeking the welfare of all irrespective of circumstance, and not as a response to any human overture. As such, it exemplifies and grounds an ethic of egalitarian regard and selfless action; yet at the same time it is a personal and compassionate love, seeking the salvation of the beloved and inviting a wholehearted response, but not without serious moral implications.

Krishna is a God who cares for the well-being of all existence, without fear or favour. Not only this, he is the exemplar of this universal benevolence:

Whatever the best does, others will do the same.  
Whatever standard he sets, the world will follow.  
There is nothing that I must do, Arjuna, in the three worlds,  
nothing unattained that I need attain, yet I continue in action. . . .  
If I were not to do my work these worlds would collapse,  
and I would bring about disorder; I would destroy my creatures. (3.21-22, 24)

Unless Krishna acts first, there would be neither the possibility to follow his example nor indeed the example itself. His descent (*avatara*) to earth then is an extension of this initiative. Early in the fourth chapter, Krishna describes the nature and the manner of the teaching he has come to impart in his bid to rescue the world from evil, confusion and disorder:

This unshakeable disciplined way (*iam yogam avyayam*), I had declared to Vivasvat [long ago] . . . it has now been lost over a great period of time. . . . This ancient disciplined way is now told to you by me, for you are devoted (*bhaktah*) to me, you are my friend. It is the highest mystery. . . . Though unborn, of changeless self, and the Lord of beings, yet by having taken up (*adhisthaya*) material nature which is mine (*prakrtim svam*), I now come to be [in human form] by my wonderful power (*atmamayaya*). For whenever there is a decline of right living (*dharma*), Arjuna, and the rise of unrighteousness (*adharmam*), I generate myself [anew]. To save the virtuous and destroy evil-doers, and to establish right living, I come to be age after age. (4.1-8)

Thus, rather than when it seems to be merited, it is when right living (*dharma*) is in decline that Krishna takes action. This is by way of an embodied descent into the world (*avatara*) to renew an ancient teaching. Krishna declares that he descends again and again, though he does not specify the manner of his repeated descents. This has given scope for a doctrine of multiple *avataras* in different forms (human and non-human).

Many have commented on the difference between *Avatara* and Incarnation: that the former is many while the latter is one, that the purpose of the *avatara* is more diffuse than that of the Incarnation, that Incarnation is human while *avatara* may be human and non-human (though the human *avataras* of Rama and Krishna have commanded the greatest devotion); that the doctrine of the Incarnation has played a more integrative role in Christian self-understanding as a whole than its counterpart in Hinduism, and so on. I do not wish to gloss over these suggestive differences.<sup>50</sup> Here my concern is to point out the basic features of *avatara* as it emerges consequentially on the Hindu scene. It is depicted as a saving initiative of the deity and revealed in a context of love ("You are devoted to me, you are my friend.")

Though moral in tone, viz. though it distinguishes robustly, as in Christianity, between righteous and unrighteous, good and evil, it is also implicitly a universal initiative. By it Krishna comes to impart anew an ancient teaching, the "highest mystery," by which he reveals the path of loving union with him as the best way

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the strand of devotional Hinduism represented by the emergence of the Bhagavadgita there may well have been a preceding and developing oral tradition of considerable extent.

<sup>50</sup> See John Brockington, *Hinduism and Christianity* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), esp. ch.2; see also my article, "Avatara and Incarnation?" in *Re-visioning India's Religious Traditions: Essays in honour of Eric Lott* (ed. David C Scott and Israel Selvanayagam; Bangalore: ISPCK, 1996).

of all - and by implication, for all. Krishna is the terminus of all devotional religion, whether one knows it or not; but it is in knowing it - as in Christianity - that such religion attains its perfect end, irrespective of sex or status.

But to you I will declare this most secret knowledge: knowing which you will be freed from evil. . . . I am the father of this world, its mother, sustainer, its very founder (*pitamahah*). . . . Arjuna, even those devotees of other gods (*anyadevatabhakta*) who worship possessed with faith, in fact, worship me, though not in the appointed way. For I am the recipient and Lord of all sacrifices, but because they do not know me in truth, they are reborn . . . . I exist, impartial, in all beings; there is in me neither aversion nor favour. But those who (knowingly) worship me with love (*bhaktya*) abide in me and I in them. . . . For those who have taken refuge in me, though they be of harmful birth - women, traders, even serfs - tread the supreme path. (9.1, 17, 23-24, 29, 32)

Notwithstanding cultural specificities (e.g. reference to particular modes of worship, to rebirth, and to caste and gender prejudices), there is clearly discernible in this excerpt an implied teaching of salvation available for all. Indeed, it may well be said that this salvation is *in terms of* these specificities.<sup>51</sup> Yet this impartial benevolence is withal warm and regenerative: it has been likened felicitously to a fire. Paraphrasing the words of Krishna in 9.29, the great classical theologian, Samkara (8th century CE) says: "I am like a fire. Just as a fire does not banish the cold from those who stand afar, but dispels it from those who come progressively nearer, so do I welcome devotees." In other words, the warmth of a fire exists equally for all, but there are some who come closer to it than others, and still others who choose to live in the cold, outside its pale. And those who, supported by Krishna, knowingly abide in Krishna, are consumed by his love: "My devotee (*bhakta*), having realised this [teaching], attains to my being (*madbhavayopapadyate*). . . . Having realised me in truth, he enters into me at once." (13.18; 18.55) The love of God is a consuming, absorbing love.<sup>52</sup>

Just as Krishna acts as the impartial exemplar of universal benevolence, even to the point of working towards bringing all to their final destiny of abiding in him, so we are instructed (through Arjuna, the type of the faithful devotee or *bhakta*) to act with impartial altruism towards all: "You must work with a view to the welfare of the world. . . . Just as the ignorant act with attachment to action, Arjuna, so the one who knows should desire to act without attachment, for the world's welfare." (3.20b, 25)<sup>53</sup> In chapter 12, entitled "The Yoga of Devotion" (*bhakti yoga*), Krishna declares: "The person<sup>54</sup> is dear to me who is the same to enemy or friend, impartial to respect or disdain, to heat or cold, pleasure or suffering . . . who is contented . . . loving (*bhaktiman*)." (12.18-19)<sup>55</sup> Yet it is not a cold, unfeeling love: "That person is dear to me who does not hate any being, but who is friendly (*maitrah*) and kindly (*karunah*), non-acquisitive (*nirmamah*), non-egoistic (*nirahamkarah*) . . . forbearing, contented . . . restrained (*yatatma*)." (12.13-14) It is an altruism that is

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<sup>51</sup> If even the disadvantaged can walk the highest path, how much more those supposedly best placed to do so - devout Brahmins and noble seers. (see 9.33)

<sup>52</sup> It was the image of the consuming fire that St. Therese of Lisieux chose to express the intensity of a loving relationship with God: "It was in 1895 that I received the grace to understand how much Jesus longs for us to love him and from the bottom of my heart I cried: 'O my divine Master . . . surely your merciful love has need of victims too . . . the hearts on which you long to lavish it turn towards earthly creatures . . . instead of running to your arms to be consumed in the enrapturing furnace of your infinite love. . . . It seems to me that if you found souls offering themselves to your love as holocausts, you would consume them speedily . . . O Jesus . . . consume me in the fire of divine love, your little holocaust.'" See *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Therese of Lisieux* (ed. Mother Agnes of Jesus; trans. Michael Day; London: Burns & Oates, 1957), 106-7.

<sup>53</sup> This is the essential teaching of ch.3: *lokasamgraham evapi sampasyan kartum arhasi . . . saktah karmany avidvamso yatha kurvanti, Bharata, kuryad vidvams tathasaktas cikirsur lokasamgraham*. See also 2.47: "Your entitlement pertains to action, never to the fruits [of action]; let not your motive be for the fruit of action, nor should you be attached to inaction" (*karmany evadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana; ma karmaphalahetur bhur, ma te sango'stv akarmani*).

<sup>54</sup> Or "man" (*narah*) in the sense of representative or type of human beings.

<sup>55</sup> It is not clear who the precise object of *bhaktiman* is intended to be, Krishna or others in general.

"friendly" and "kindly,"<sup>56</sup> a devoted love (*bhakti*) which can be (and has generally been) seen to be founded on the deity's immanent, sustaining presence in all being.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, in addition to the contextual differences indicated already, this fundamental benevolence appears to have a wider explicit scope than the *agape* of Christian tradition. It extends to every being - a familiar idea in the Gita. I do not think that it can be doubted, then, that the Bhagavadgita advocates a fundamental imperative of agapeistic love *in the mode* of Christian *agape*.<sup>58</sup> This primary teaching of *niskama karma*, that is, selfless benevolent action, has had an immense influence in the discussion and practice of Hindu ethics right up to contemporary times. For example, it was the bedrock on which so significant an individual as Gandhi based his life's work.<sup>59</sup> Many similar examples could be given.

The word in its various forms that stands out in the Gītā to express the loving relationship between Krishna and his faithful devotee is *bhakti*<sup>60</sup> In the course of time the *bhakti* tradition developed in a variety of ways and with numerous refinements in Hinduism. A well-known text that can be regarded as having taken stock of this development in succinct fashion at a judicious point in history, and also as having acted as an important basis for consolidating and reinforcing the *bhakti* tradition in its different aspects, is the Narada Bhakti Sutras (NBS). As the name implies, this text is ascribed to the ancient sage Narada; however, it seems to be the work of more than one hand and can be dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is only 84 verses or sutras in length. Though the NBS is Vaishnava in tone (it echoes some of the key expressions and ideas of the Gita), it can conveniently be seen to summarise the love of God in general in Hinduism.

The first four sutras may be translated as follows: (1) "Now, therefore, we shall explain devotion [to God] (*bhakti*). (2) It is of the nature of supreme love (*parapremarupa*) in this world.<sup>61</sup> (3) It is also of the very nature of immortality. (4) Having obtained it, a person becomes perfect, immortal, fulfilled."<sup>62</sup> Note the introduction of the word *prema*. *Prema* is an emotional love, a love that implies whole-hearted commitment; it is a love in which the whole person is caught up. As the highest form of such love (*paraprema*-), the *prema* of the NBS is not carnal, but leads to immortality and fulfillment. It is as if to confirm this that sutras 5 and 7 say: "Having attained it, one doesn't hanker for anything, one doesn't grieve or hate or get excited or keen [as in carnal love]. . . . It is not concupiscent, for it is of the nature of warding off [what's selfish]."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Cf. "Those who have come to know (*panditah*) see the same thing with regard to a learned and virtuous Brahmin or a cow or elephant, or even a dog or the outcaste who eats the dog." (5.18) One of the chief aims of the Gita is to show that the ideal of the impartial regard of the traditional yogi finds its fulfillment in an ethic informed by loving devotion to God.

<sup>57</sup> A theme running through the Gita. So Krishna can say in 7.4-5 that he has two natures (*prakrti*), a lower, "material" nature, and a higher spiritual one (*param jivabhutam*), out of which all things develop. This divine source is the basis of all creaturely value which as such is a bestowed value.

<sup>58</sup> This is why I use the term "agapeistic," but agapeistic is not the same as *agape*.

<sup>59</sup> The following medley of quotations is taken from *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (vol.1; ed. Raghavan Iyer; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). "For me, [the Gita] is a spiritual dictionary. Whenever I am in doubt as to what I should or should not do, I fall back upon it, and so far it has never disappointed me. . . . (97) When, thousands of years ago, the battle of Kurukshetra was fought, the doubts which occurred to Arjuna were answered by Shri Krishna in the Gita; but that battle of Kurukshetra is going on, will go on, for ever within us; the Prince of Yogis, Lord Krishna, the universal *atman* dwelling in the hearts of us all, will always be there to guide Arjuna, the human soul. . . . (21) The Gita teaches that one should cultivate the state of *samatva* [sameness] and explains with every manner of argument the means of doing so, namely *bhakti* accompanied with *jnana* [wisdom], that is, service of every living creature without thought of reward. . . . (84) I want to identify myself with everything that lives. In the language of the Gita I want to live at peace with both friend and foe. Though, therefore, a Mussalman or a Christian or a Hindu may despise me and hate me, I want to love him and serve him even as I would love my wife or son though they hate me." (19) These quotations range from 1924 through 1936 (the latter year about a decade before Gandhi's death).

<sup>60</sup> It is generally derived from the root *bhaj*, which means to share with, to give freely, to enjoy together, to have recourse to, to possess: all components of a composite sense that can connote a form of agapeistic love.

<sup>61</sup> Or: "It is of the nature of supreme love with respect to this One (*asmin*, viz. God among us)."

<sup>62</sup> *Athato bhaktim vyakhyasyamah. sa tv asmin parapremarupa. amrtasvarupa ca. yal labdhva puman siddho bhavati amrto bhavati trpto bhavati.*

<sup>63</sup> *Yat prapya na kimcid vancati na socati na dvesti na ramate notsahi bhavati. (5) sa na kamayamana nirodharupatvat. (7) The disciples of the 16th century saint, Caitanya, distinguished between *prema* and *kama* or concupiscence thus: "*Kama* is the desire for the satisfaction of the self, but *prema* is the desire for the satisfaction of the senses of Krsna. The sole object of *kama* is the pleasure of the self, but *prema* has as its only object the pleasure of Krsna," Lee Siegel, *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian**

It is an unselfish love. "Who crosses, who crosses this deceptive world (*maya*)?" cries the text (su.46), and it answers: "The one who gives up attachment . . . who is non-acquisitive (*nirmamah*) . . . who gives up the fruit of action (*karmaphalam tyajati*). . . . It is such a one, such a one indeed who crosses, and enables the worlds to cross as well." (su.50) So this love has a social dimension; it is not just individualistic. This idea is expanded in subsequent sutras. When one attains this love of God, one need not give up living in the world, one should only give up the fruits of action (su.62). Such single-minded lovers of God sanctify their families and the world, and validate sacred places, good works and the scriptures. Indeed, the ancestors rejoice, the gods dance and this earth gets its protectors. Where they are concerned, there are no distinctions of birth, learning, appearance, family, possessions, livelihood and so on. Their love is evenhanded, selfless, concerned, efficacious and beneficial to all.<sup>64</sup>

The Hindu traditions tend to stress a feature of such benevolence that entails a new perception of the world and of human relationships. As indicated already, ordinary non-agapeistic living becomes more or less deceptive if not delusional (*maya*), with non-salvific consequences. Altruistic love of God and neighbour throws the world into a new light, and brings peace and deep joy. It is a life of total surrender, requiring no external proof; it is a self-validating experience.<sup>65</sup> Lack of space prevents a more extensive discussion of this theme, though it must be noted here that a number of thinkers, both classical and more contemporary, have argued the point on both epistemological and psychological grounds.<sup>66</sup> So, in addition to the two kinds mentioned earlier, from what has just been noted, it seems that another form of paradoxicality emerge in agapeistic love of the deity, viz. seeing the world anew. Its sameness is reconfigured; what was alloyed or unalloyed sorrow before now becomes a source of overriding joy, even though a stratum of pain or sorrow may remain. The devotee can still suffer pain or grief (through sickness or bereavement, for example), but the dominant experience is one of peace and joy.

The purified and purifying nature of *bhakti* or *prema* is the cue for all sorts of metaphors and types of human loving (which ordinarily may well be expected to involve a degree of carnality) to act as symbols of the love of God. It is here that the experience of erotic, sexual love can help us to explore anew the richness of agapeistic love. In fact, a characteristic feature of devotional Hinduism seems to be the use of erotic images of love as pointers for our understanding and expression of the intensity or abandon of the love of God, sometimes almost with startling or reckless freedom (or so it may seem to more prudish western susceptibilities). This is how the medieval Bengali poet Candidasa (ca. 14th century)<sup>67</sup> describes a kind of ardent mutual longing between the soul and God, erotically typified by the love Radha, Krishna's favourite lover, and Krishna have for each other:

Suddenly I am afraid.

At any moment, [Krishna's] love for me may cease.

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*Traditions as Exemplified in the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva* (Oxford University Press, 1978; Oxford India Paperbacks, 1990), 69. Siegel is quoting from E. Dimock, *Place of the Hidden Moon*, which is citing the *Caitanya-Caritamrta, Adi.iv.139f.*

<sup>64</sup> *bhaktah ekantinah . . . pavayanti kulani prthivim ca. tirthikurvanti tirthani, sukarmikurvanti karmani, sacchastrikurvanti sastrani . . . modante pitaro nrtyanti devatah, sanatha ceyam bhur bhavati. nasti tesu jatividyarupakuladhanakriyadibhedah.* Cf. su. 6772.

<sup>65</sup> *pramanantarasyanapeksatvat svayam pramanatvat. santirupat paramanandarupacca. lokahanau cinta na karya; niveditatmalokavedatvat.* Su.59-61.

<sup>66</sup> For example, the great champion of devotional theism, Ramanuja (11th-12th century), contends that a proper understanding of the scriptures teaches that all predication of "naming words" (e.g. "cow." "horse." "tree") reveals that Brahman or the supreme being is their ultimate referent in so far as their immediate referents, viz. the objects themselves, can be viewed as the "body" of Brahman (and therefore wholly dependent on Brahman), and that an experiential realisation of this truth, which entails a life of total loving surrender (*prapatti*) to God, has radical cognitive (including emotional) consequences: "When one is freed from karma in its form of ignorance, this same world [formerly experienced as more or less sorrowful], but now experienced as an expression and attribute of Brahman--with-attributes, becomes nothing but joyful" (*karmarupavidyavimuktasya tad eva jagad vibhutigunavisistabrahmanubhavantargatam sukham eva bhavati*). See the Sribhasya, 1.3.7. See also the author's *The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

<sup>67</sup> The corpus of poetry ascribed to the figure of "Candidasa" doubtless contains the work of more than one individual. It has played a significant part in the development of popular *bhakti* in Bengal.

A building can collapse because of a single flaw –  
who knows in what ways I, who desire to be  
a palace for his pleasure, may be faulty?  
And few are those who can restore  
what once is broken. . . .  
Distracted, I wander  
from place to place, everywhere finding  
only anxiety. Oh, to see  
his smile!

My love,  
whoever brings down the house of our love  
will have murdered a woman!  
Chandidasa says, O Radha, you reflect too much;  
without your love he could not live a moment.<sup>68</sup>

This is a sample of imagery that can be erotic and protracted in describing the love-relationship between the individual and God.<sup>69</sup> Yet this love is also a love of constancy. Its ardour is often said to have lasted through many births, as if it is unbearable to contemplate an alternative to a time when God is the object of wholehearted love. One of the most popular models of this unswerving fidelity to God is the sixteenth-century woman-saint of Rajasthan, Mirabai. As has been pointed out, Mira's popularity is pan-Indian, and the songs attributed to her have a direct, folk-like simplicity.<sup>70</sup> "Life without Hari [Krishna] is no life, friend," she says plaintively,

And though my mother-in-law fights,  
my sister-in-law teases. . . .  
A guard is stationed on a stool outside,  
and a lock is mounted on the door,  
How can I abandon the love I have loved in life after life?<sup>71</sup>

But such images are far from exhaustive of the recognised forms of *bhakti*. In an important verse, the NBS lists eleven accredited forms of *bhakti*

*Bhakti* though really one, is eleven-formed: of the form of attachment to the greatness of the (divine) attributes; of the form of attachment to the (divine) beauty or form; of the form of attachment to the worship (of God); of the form of attachment to (continuous) remembrance (of

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<sup>68</sup> *In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali* (trans. by E. C. Dimock and D. Levertov; New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1967), 49.

<sup>69</sup> A good example of such an extended analogy in Vaisnava tradition is the well-known and highly influential Sanskrit love-poem by Jayadeva, the *Gitagovinda* (12th century). See B. S. Miller, *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gitagovinda* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). See also Siegel. Notwithstanding Siegel's remarks in ch.5, there can be little doubt, as the NBS's view on *prema* indicates, that from the beginning the poem was susceptible to being interpreted both analogously and allegorically, though Siegel is right to point out that the poem's vogue has depended on its power to evoke the appropriate love-sentiment (*rasa*). A full treatment of love symbolism in Hinduism would require some analysis of its tradition of aesthetics (Siegel gives an account in ch.2). Erotic imagery also symbolises love for God in Saivism, see *Speaking of Siva* [SS] (trans. A. K. Ramanujan; Penguin, 1973). The twelfth-century woman-poet, Mahadevi, who from an early age "betrothed herself to Siva and none other (SS, 111) . . . enlists the traditional imagery of pan-Indian secular love-poetry for personal expression ." (113) She describes the intimacy of her love for Siva thus: "He bartered my heart, looted my flesh, claimed as tribute my pleasure, took over all of me. I'm the woman of love for my lord white as jasmine." (125)

<sup>70</sup> "Her songs are sung all the way to the southernmost tip of the sub-continent by people who otherwise have little command of Hindi," J. S. Hawley and M. Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 120.

<sup>71</sup> *Songs of the Saints*, 134.

God); of the form of attachment to (the divine) service; of the form of attachment to the (divine) companionship; of the form of attachment (to God) through parental love; of the form of attachment of the Beloved; of the form of attachment of self-offering; of the form of the attachment of being suffused; of the form of attachment of the deepest separation.<sup>72</sup>

Thus *bhakti* is of the nature of a "sticking to," of attachment (*asakti*). As such it must be a faithful, constant, love, whatever its various modes. Here we cannot go into a more detailed analysis of these modes as listed above, interesting (and intriguing) though they may appear.<sup>73</sup> This list, though fairly comprehensive, is not complete. Though we have not been able to develop a number of important topics on the subject of the love of God (e.g. the extensive and distinctive literature of the love-of-separation, *viraha-bhakti*), in this essay we have been concerned primarily with sketching out the scope and features of *bhakti* in general terms, and hope to return to a more detailed discussion at a later date.

## CONCLUDING STATEMENT

From our study it appears<sup>74</sup> that the love of God is a "captive" love in more than one sense. By becoming available to human thought and experience through the revealed texts of scripture; by the manifestations of Incarnation and *avatara*;<sup>75</sup> and by the subsequent example and teaching of saintly men and women; the transcendent and ineffable One is present in recognisable ways in space and time to the supplicant in a supportive relationship of mutual accessibility. As the devotee progresses in this relationship of mutual giving, she/he feels ever more incapable of living outside it.<sup>76</sup> But the traditions warn against a captivity of complacency. Such an attitude (on the part of the devotee, of course) leads to loss. Recall Radha's anxiety at the possibility of losing Krishna's love in the passage quoted earlier. This is why, especially in Hinduism, the love of God, primarily through its erotic images, has been depicted as an adventurous love, turning new corners, undergoing new trials as it runs its course. This is perhaps the greatest paradox of all: though ancient and recurrent, it restores, refreshes, renews.

It is now time to conclude this disquisition. In it I have tried to indicate, by a method that takes account of idiom that is tropic as well as non-tropic, what the chief features of that love called *agape* in Christian tradition seem to be, including its ethical grounds and implications. I have also suggested that such a manner of loving, though contextualised differently in a number of ways, plays a central role in religious Hinduism.<sup>77</sup> It is regarded as the ideal form of loving, the foundation of uplifting human relationships, particularly those relationships in this tumultuous and unsteady world that make us authentically human.<sup>78</sup> This mode of love

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<sup>72</sup> *Gunamahatmyasakti-rupasakti-pujasakti-smaranasakti-dasyasakti-sakhyasakti-vatsalyasakti-kantasakti-atmanivedanasakti-tanmayatasakti-paramavirahasaktirupa ekadha api ekadasadha bhavati*. Su.82. The Bhagavata Purana (ca.9th cent.), a lengthy (Sanskrit) text of great importance for the understanding and propagation of devotion in Vaisnava circles, lists nine forms of *bhakti* (see 7.5.23 -24), with considerable overlap: viz. *sravanam kirtanam visnoh smaranam padasevanam; arcanam vandanam dasyam sakhyam atmanivedanam - 23. iti pumsarpita visnau bhaktis cen navalaksana; kriyeta bhagavaty addha tan manye'adhitam uttamam - 24.*

<sup>73</sup> Some explanation of each is given in my *Hindus*, 307-321. See note 13.

<sup>74</sup> Not the least in the form of the images of temple worship in Hinduism.

<sup>75</sup> Not least in the form of the images of temple worship in Hinduism.

<sup>76</sup> "Cripple me, father, that I may not go here and there. Blind me, father, that I may not look at this and that, deafen me, father, that I may not hear anything else," yearns another twelfth-century devotee of Siva, Basavanna (SS, 70).

<sup>77</sup> Notwithstanding the Vaisnava slant of this essay.

<sup>78</sup> It is important to note that we have focused on ideal forms of love with regard to God and human ethics, that is, those forms of love that provide the normative matrix for the validation of what have been recognised as "lower/inferior" if no less authentic forms of loving (referred to, in Hinduism, where God is concerned, as the "lower *bhakti*."") This is a needy love, God being supplicated on the basis of human desire and genuine need, and graciously responding on that basis. Such love of God is not improper, though as a self-centred love to some extent, it is inferior to the (predominantly) selfless or decentred, higher *bhakti*. Analogous to the lower

has been striven after and attained in greater degree on a consistent basis by persons commonly regarded as moral and religious exemplars. But to a lesser extent it has been attained by everyone who, directly or indirectly, has been inspired by the higher ethics of loving in the two civilisations we have considered. As such, surely it is deserving of careful study, and, so far as is practicable, of assiduous emulation in its various forms, the better to preserve all that we regard as ennobling in our civilised worlds.

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*bhakti* (which may be more or less self-centred) are various kinds of human love (e.g. the *amor amicitiae* mentioned earlier in the essay).