

# What Love Can Mean within the Christian Tradition

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## Abstract

Divine love [*agape*] is hard to describe as it surpasses everything and risks to be totally 'humanized'. "Though Jesus is the 'human face of God' it remains that 'no-one has ever seen God' [John 1.18]. Love for the neighbour [*charitas*] can easily be misunderstood by a history that has used the concept to victimize needy people even more.

Loving as an action and answer is demonstrated by the 'dual command of love' in the Sermon on the Mount as well as in the commandments of Torah. It is ultimately practiced in loving the enemy. This double face of love is emphasized in the Gospel according to John and the epistle of James [1.23-35]. John reminds us that love is acting lovingly according to the commandments, as signs of God's love: like the brother and the neighbour are checks of divine as well as human love, the act of loving is guided in a concrete situation. Another aspect of "the command to love" is the God given capacity to reconcile. For Christian believers the ultimate manifestation of God's love is Jesus Christ becoming man. The confession 'God and man' is not a duality but unifies the nearness and distance of God moving towards mankind. It is both the cognitive and the sensitive aspect of personal faith. Self-emptying (*kenosis*) in Christian spirituality can only be based on the faith that God has become close to

us, though in mysterious ways. It is never a self-denial but difficult to achieve within a faith community of an achieving culture.

In saying love is divine as well as human one says that love is not an ideal or a principal but concrete, as the consciousness of being loved also means being capacitated to love as a response, which is not a conclusion but only an affirmation.

### **A tentative movement around possible pitfalls**

Within the Christian way of life there has often been a certain reluctance to express oneself on the theme “the Love of God” [*agape*]. To speak about God in an anthropomorphic way is considered suspect; this may be even more true for Protestants than for those within the (Roman-)Catholic faith tradition. For many Christians the reluctance wrongfully appropriating the Divine has deep roots. The same reluctance concerns “charity” [*caritas*] – in the sense of neighbourly love – which may be tainted by (colonial) history, secular as well as religious. It is reminiscent of certain ways of converting linked with social advantages/privileges: a complex story of Jews, Christian and Muslims experiencing co-existence and their respective tendency of attempting to dominate. Moreover we realize that “speaking *about*” should be avoided as much as possible; it can turn into speaking to justify oneself against the other who has no chance to reply. Within any faith community to speak *with* each other instead is an important exercise. The stories of the Hebrew Bible show us how failing to respond to the love of God is constantly discussed within the faith community. It is a failing which can easily be disguised.

The Latin term *caritas* notably refers to the “works of love/charity”. It was one of the disputes between Rome and the Reformation (16<sup>th</sup> cent.), the latter criticizing “works” understood as “means to deserve the love of God”, instead of a response to it. Love that is condition can also be compromised... Both concepts – the love of God and the love of the neighbour – are inseparable components of the so-called **dual command of love that** appears in the Sermon on the Mount [*Matt.5.43-45*]. It

radicalizes this love for the neighbour - as commanded in the Torah [*Lev. 19.17-18*] – towards a command to love the enemy too:

you have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’. And I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.[*Mat./NRSV*]

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord. [*Lev./JPS*]

Joining these two commands is crucial in order to avoid repeating past mistakes. I suppose that is why it was emphasized in the “*Common Word*” [October 2007] that it is a precious gift from the Muslims that they speak to Christians as well as with each other in the manner that the text suggests.

However: as believers in a secular society, to state that we are not capable of saying anything (anymore) about God’s love would be immoral: a fundamental failure to witness. For if we had not experienced His love in an impossible way what would there be to tell about faith? Our words fail and change regularly, so what does Scripture have to say? How much is written on the themes of “love” and “to love”? The Gospel uses the noun [*agape*] remarkably less than the verb [*agapaoo*]. John the evangelist who is described as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (5x) exceeds all others in the use of this verb. In this Gospel “to love” is a matter of reciprocity and as such it is a command:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love [*John 15.9*]

John points to an important but often forgotten link between abiding in love and keeping the commands [*entole/mitzvot*]. To consider love to be an action does not reduce it but rather justifies the reality of love. Love transcends morality but allows morality to be connected with it. The commands considered to be “rules of the game” are about living together. This verse suggests that we ought to recognize each other as brothers and sisters:

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. [1 John 5.2]

It is the evangelist who most radically connects our love of God and His commands to our love of each other:

whoever says, “I have come to know him” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. [1 Ep. John 2.4-5a] & Those who say “I love God” and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen [1 John 4.20; comp. also: Jac. 2.8]

God’s commands can be considered to be signs of His Love, inviting us to give of ourselves. One common misunderstanding which ought to be cleared up is the idea that Christian evangelical love fundamentally differs from the love spoken of in the Hebrew Bible. The presumption thereof is that the one unique God revealed Himself “in Christ” in a fundamentally and definitively different way than he does today. But this kind of revelatory positivism leads too far. We cannot read and explain the gospel according to John this way as he speaks about “the world”:

for God so loved the world that he gave [*didoomi*] his only Son... [John 3.16a]

In this verse inclusion [*the world/kosmos/ha olam*] is connected with exclusion [his only Son]. This immediately raises the question of how the world and the Son relate to each other and where the role of the faith community (in our case the Church), in all her plurality, lies.

The Torah texts that are referred to in these Gospel texts use the word *achav* [Deut.6.5/11.1/30.6] for the English verb “to love”. Concerning the way God loves, he loves the peoples [*af chovev amim*/ Dt. 33.3]. Here too, God is described as one who finds himself caught in the tension between inclusion (the peoples) and exclusion (all his saints). This raises the question of whether the Hebrew *achav* and the Greek *agapao* are equivalent terms. The verb *achav* refers to love between men as well as the love for G'd/Adonaj, but it also includes many qualities of God that show His love for man: justice [*tsedaqah*], solidarity [*chesed*] etc. But God does not demonstrate all of His qualities. For the time being I find that as a believer – in my case as a Christian – I can only experience the love of God through His love in action (“with us” = Emmanuel): the Gospel implies that **presence and action** belong to each other. However, this raises the question of whether our love for our enemies and God’s love for the godless are exclusively Christian “faith commands”.

### “Charity is our Household divinity”

This is the motto of one of the denominations of Thomas-Christians in South-India. Evidently Eastern Christians have developed within a different theological and philosophical context than Western European Christians have. Therefore another connection between God’s love and the space within it appears: the divine character of love as experienced within the proper household, without reducing it into a micro-society. It brings to mind the Psalm:

how good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell  
together [*Ps. 133.1*]

It also brings to mind the connection mentioned earlier between love and action:

and this is his commandment: that we should believe in the Name of his son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” [1 *John* 3.23] & “by this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments [1 *John* 5.2]

For a Christian confessing the One God, as expressed in the Sjemah [*Deut.*6.5] this includes the oneness of Christ in the Holy Spirit. For myself “oneness” is not a philosophical hypothesis: if love inevitably expresses itself through action and thought in terms of oneness, it does not run the risk of becoming rigid. As previously stated, commandments and the joy that they incite belong together. The Gospel (according to Matthew) speaks of this connection in a very radical way in the ninth and last Beatitude:

blessed are you when people revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way the persecuted they prophets who were before you [Matthew 5.11-12]

According to Mark the evangelist “when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy” [Mk 4.16] and for Luke, the “*evangelist of joy*”, joy is central in the announcements of the births (of John the Baptist and Jesus) [Lk 1.14&44]: the joy of God is a prelude to the joy of men. We also read of this in the *Prologue of the Rule of S. Benedict* 48-49:

do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.

This way of following – repeated thrice – reminds us of most of the Wisdom literature e.g. *Ecclesiasticus* and Genesis:

“She (Wisdom) seems very harsh to the undisciplined; fools cannot remain with her” ... “for at last you will find the rest she gives, and she will be changed into joy for you” [*Eccles.* 6.20&28]

“The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth [Hebr.= *lech lecha*] from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you” [Gen. 12.1]

These are texts which consider the element of risk in “going your own way” and the confidence [*pistis*] in love [*charis*] that it presupposes. The consequences of going your way are undivided: you cannot have it both ways, like love itself is undivided. Love excludes fear, as John states:

“there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because He first loved us” [1 John 4.18-19].

Like the commandments imply joy, so love excludes fear. Here John points out once more the link between love and truth [*Hebr. Emet/ Gr. Aletheia*]. Truth, not seen as an abstract ideal but as a concrete fact, is close to fidelity in the sense that it is reliable. And so the evangelist gives us a perfect “model of knowledge”: the capacity of self-examination as well as the willingness to be examined by a brother/sister in the face of God.

Likewise the motto of the Thomas-Christians encompasses true worship. According to the Sermon on the Mount brotherly love necessitates reconciliation with one’s brother within any type of (Christian church) service: human reconciliation is an attribute of divine worship:

so when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift [Matthew 5.23-24]

The command of “being one among brethren” can already be found in the Early Prophets [2. Kings 23.19ff] wherein during the reign of king Josiah the south and the north of Palestine (Juda/Israel) are commanded to find a mutual place of sacrifice in order to be able to worship “in truth”. In the Gospel this theme returns in the story of the Samaritan woman who has to confess her former relationships before she can gain the awareness that worshipping the One God does not imply that there is only one form of “Household divinity”:

Jesus said to her: “woman believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem [John 4.21]

Perhaps Western Christian communities can learn from the Eastern faith communities to cope with god-given boundaries in our ways of thinking and learn what we cannot say about God (and the love of God): to discover anew the positivity of the so-called “negative tradition” that dares to wonder about the question of how his love acts for-us and with-us. It could help to distance ourselves from the persistent misunderstanding of God’s commands as legislations rather than helping hands that reach out to us. Even so from the derision of faith to suppose that God’s acting love is a solution for all difficulties we experience. The German theologian Bonhoeffer used the term *Lueckenbuesser* (= stop-gap) [2] for this kind of intellectual approach. I do not believe that it is our task to prove the existence of God – He will take care of himself – nor do I believe that we can claim the love of God as exclusively Christian.



## Not speaking ABOUT love ... but then how?

If we, as believers, risk overcharging ourselves in speaking *about* God in our witnessing, how then is witnessing possible? This is a pertinent question for all three Monotheistic religions that are dependent on the (event of) the Word, so we cannot reduce that Word to a gesture (*geste*). **Knowledge/knowing and life/living** also belong together in transferring faith traditions. John the evangelist makes it clear that incarnation and the Word (*dabar/logos*) are one and the same. To speak as a biblical action is to take a risk. The **nearness and distance** (of God's presence as well as his action among us) may be difficult to put into words – especially because it is not static. Those who are near to us can be more difficult to describe than those at a distance. Physical and vocal expression are interdependent and both important because they communicate different ways. Thus the following verses which speak of nearness can also be understood to speak of distance:

We (Allah) are nearer to him (man) than (his) jugular vein [Sura Qaf 50:16]

O Lord you have examined and know me ... You discern my thoughts from afar [Ps. 139.1-2]

your Father knows what you need before you ask him [Matthew 6.8]

thus I would not exist, my God, I would be absolutely nothing, if You were not within me [Augustine, Confessiones I,ii.2-iv.2]

You loved me from the beginning [Soeren Kierkegaard; cit. in Songbook NL/215]

In all those statements the subject has to make a leap: I am my body like I am my spirit and I cannot separate from myself “with my own hands”. Moreover, it is risky to speak of nearness and distance because they

cannot be anticipated – we can only speak of them in retrospect because the (subjective) experience of nearness and distance can set me on the wrong foot, and so on the wrong way. Nearness and distance are like love herself: she overcomes us and cannot be manipulated. The movement comes to meet us and we can at most play ourselves in to it, by cooperating (or resisting). Only mystic poets can verbalize it. Like George Herbert says in his poem “*Love bade me welcome*”:

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, Who made  
the eyes but I? [4]

One can only verbalize what has been given if one has responded to the gift: handing oneself over [Gr. *Paradidomi*] to what has been given. Unfortunately the modern interpretation of “what is given” is “that which cannot be changed and which must be (but) accepted”. The interpretation that response and word belong to each other is one-sided: one cannot refer to the response without mentioning the original (calling) word. It is important to speak in context, but it is more important to speak continually. Jesus himself affirms this wholeness of word-fidelity to all generations by repeatedly saying in his Sermon on the Mount:

you have heard that it was said to those of ancient  
times... and I say to you ... [Matthew 5.21ff]

Sharing what moves us deeply is vulnerable. Sometimes clarity is painful within (mutual) love that dares to confront unclarity, like “in a dim mirror”. Unclarity about motives and convictions must be dealt with immediately with patience and persistence. An example: during a preview of a Christian short film [5] on the complex theme of the rite of sacrificing (everything happens around the celebration of sacrifice / *Id al-Hadha*) in our modern society, I spoke with the chairman of one of the many local mosques. He tried to assure me that the idea of sacrifice is far more rooted in the heart of Muslims than in Christians. I tried to defend myself by saying that the Christian concept of *kenosis* (self-emptying) is important for the self-surrendering of the Christian

believer. I also mentioned martyrdom (some Christians consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer a martyr in Nazi-German context). But to have such a discussion is useless: we were talking *about* each other while we are standing closely together. The presumption that one's own perceptions and observations go deeper and further than other's looks like a moral judgment without self-questioning. This is a statement which cannot be contradicted - let alone corrected - within a culture in which speech is becoming more and more devalued. In such cases feelings of guilt rarely help in clarifying and communicating, and neither does the need to be compensated if one does not get enough recognition. Then it is crucial to have stamina out of sincere love for others. But how do you keep persevering? What can be the marking points to detect misunderstanding? Vanstone uses a triple approach to expose forms of love which are not sincere: recognizing, not ignoring one's own limitations (= mark of limitation); not underrating those limitations and continuously having oneself examined by others (= mark of control); and being able to let go of one's expectations and interpretations (= mark of detachment) [6].

Such divine action with which He gives/surrenders himself through love in this act of *kenosis* can be found in a unique way in the **Christ-hymn** of the Letter to the Philippians [2.6-11]. It evokes the theme of the Suffering Servant from the prophet Isaiah 52-53 in which He stands in solidarity with those who suffer : the dynamism of self-emptying [Hebr. *Natzal*] is to be elevated in humiliation and humiliated in elevation. This paradoxical experience of (self-)giving can be experienced but hardly expressed: it is about calling and responding. This is probably an experience in which the difference between highness and lowliness is not important anymore. Only God himself can take the initiative to come to meet us; we cannot anticipate or condition that movement in any way. Love and faith are turning points which may seem to exclude knowledge, but divine self-giving always includes self-consciousness in retrospect. John the evangelist shows us the continuous dialectics between recognizing the unknown and the consciousness of being known:

no one has ever seen God..” [John 1.18&6.46] “The world cannot receive the spirit of truth because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you and he will be in you [John 14.17]

Here the believer reaches the limits of self-consciousness but should not fall into utter denial. The best argument for temporal abstinence (moratorium) of reflection and conclusion is not only of the absence of the brethren in many discussions, but also the absence of people of different beliefs. Love herself makes us careful not to speak *about* the other in his/her absence. One of the deadliest movements that disappointed love can make is to explain the failing of the other in self-invented and self-justifying terms. However, this does not mean that forms of failing love cannot lead the way to perfect love. Vanstone gives a revealing and startling example:

Our human awareness of the misuse of the word ‘love’ and of its usurpation by that which is not authentic love is remarkable. A deprived child, who apparently has never known the authenticity of love, will yet recognize its falsity. With love it is not as it is with food – that those who are hungry will be satisfied with anything. On the contrary, those who are deprived of love are the most demanding and discriminating of what they will receive. A child hungry for love is most quick to detect and reject condescension, bribery or manipulation when it masquerades as love, and requires fullest assurance of the authenticity of that which is offered to him. Though he has never tasted authentic love, he knows already the taste of what he needs [Love’s endeavor; pp. 39-40].

The necessity developing a careful procedure through which believers can create space to exercise this mutual awareness is unmistakable in our high-achieving society. But this procedure will have to develop naturally from an experience of co-existence rather than as an academic exercise in reflection (though the latter will be helpful as well). The recognition that

experience and communication have different layers (of interpretation) will be crucial. Speaking about convictions is different than speaking factually. Participating in each other's worship services as invited guests and developing a sensitivity for our differences is a precious opportunity offered to us by our respective faith traditions, but we must be invited by members of faith communities.

As previously mentioned, John makes it clear in his first epistle that:

those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen[4.20b].

This evangelical interpretation of the double-command of love – commands us again to reach out to meet those of different beliefs. In her article on epistemology, and faith experience Grace Jantzen speaks about the necessity of questioning each other. On this topic, she speaks about *trans-subjectivity* and the need for faith communities to continually embody the expressions of God's love among brethren/sisters. Also if experience proves that within long-lasting communities they do not question each other enough:

The reciprocal questioning and deepening of understanding which then contributes to the process of self-integration and wholeness, including deeper sensitivity to the needs and suffering of others, can develop in a quality of life lived in conscious relationship to a compassionate God. Seen in this way, it makes sense of the relationship between specific experiences and the experienced quality of life and indeed makes that life a continual testing of those experiences – and they of it. [7].

Stronger yet, the writings of Soeren Kierkegaard show how an individual believer who lives more or less marginalized in his own society –

intentionally or not – can be deeply sensitive to the way people mutually question each other and themselves. [8]

## Healing love by doing justice

Our history influences us: we are charged as well as gifted. The last century holds impressive examples of co-existence and of people developing methods to learn about each other's faith traditions: traditions in which scriptures are seen not as alien bodies but as narratives referring to the lost and **forgotten brothers and sisters**. In the interbellum e.g. Jewish scholars like Leo Baeck and Abraham Heschel began as hidden examples of the supposition of the presence of the "next of living" or neighbour [*re'a/plesios*] in a figurative or strict sense. The method of comparing Bible-texts to each other [*Lernen*] and the German translation of Buber-Rosenzweig have shown Christians from the west that a different way of reading is not necessarily a threat to the authority of Scriptures. Protestant theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Roman Catholic theologians around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council (1964-'67) have opened our eyes to a secular world which is not necessarily doomed:

for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...

[John 3.16]

These methods of scriptural interpretation do not only involve dealing with texts but also dealing with each others' differences: working to do justice to the text is working to do justice to each other. That is why these methods can be strengthened and deepened with protocols used for confrontation/encounter between victims and offenders of crime. These are meetings in which morality is not relativized but related and thus given space for a solidarity shift. Partiality cannot be avoided, but fixated partiality is lethal. I share the common experience of finding the narrative structure of the (Gospel) parables to be a perfect aid in changing visions. Doing justice to sometimes strict rules of particular **traditions of interpretation** and the dynamics of a partial approach do not necessarily exclude each other. Especially if they happen within the

perspective of the love of “God with us” [=Emmanuel] or the dual command of the love of God and the love of the neighbour. Hierarchy and partiality can co-operate in a safe space. Christians of all eras have found themselves caught in the tension between the survival of a given faith community and the (salvation) history of God with the whole world: exclusion includes inclusion and vice versa. The specific and inclusive love of God is needed to give counterweight to the reduction of that love in a dualistic society which thinks in terms of north-south, poor-rich, believers-unbelievers. God exposes everyone to the energetic field in which we find ourselves as believers.

Finally I owe the reader a personal note. This note is for the editors as well who asked me as a (Protestant) Christian to write something about love as understood within the Christian tradition. It is an understanding that cannot be described simply with terms like *agape* [Greek], *caritas* [Latin], *chesed* [Hebrew], *loving-kindness* [English] or *diakonia* [Reformed tradition]. I would fail if I were to finish with a description of (those) concepts; even more so if my reader were not familiar with another faith tradition. For most Christian believers the common confession that “God has revealed Himself in Christ” means that we have come to know God “from hearsay” according to Scriptures. Jesus’ loyalty to the Torah as the core of his Jewish faith tradition appeals to me because this kind of living and giving the Commandments surpasses morality. The Law is the gift of God’s presence among men and men among each other. It does not mean that God (or Christ) is the personification of the Law. Without those commandments we are not able to “follow God” and discern His will. To speak of “God willing” is to confess that his will points me in directions that I do not understand. God does not explain to me beforehand how good and evil will manifest themselves in my actions when I follow his directions. I long to see God in this life with my very eyes, but that is outside of my ability. The longing to be kept in sight however and to be taken care of [*paqad* is the activity of a shepherd] is not. I can also find out – by falling and getting up – what God’s particular will is “for me”. This contains an element of choice and of experience.

Forty years after being born in Jakarta I flew back home (though according to my Javanese teacher I am – as a Westerner – not allowed to use the term “coming back” because Indonesia will never become my *bharat* [homeland]). As a child of two different cultures that are sometimes intertwined, I have wrestled at times with inclusive and exclusive thinking and believing. But during that early morning flight, high above that “combat area without end” of the Hindu Kush, next to my sleeping fellow traveler, I was thinking *about* God (or perhaps he made me think of him), the living God of my life, who at times feels high above and far away, even lost, in the blurring of nearness and distance. I was in the middle of my life, searching for my life’s direction or maybe looking back to the earlier period of life that I loved. Though there was indeed no way back, it became suddenly clear to me:

*if You will, I can*” – my answers to the love of God are limited by my capability, but in so far as I am capable I will gladly respond and enable Him : “*so I am willing, You will be able.*”

We are not asked for what we cannot understand, but what we can do has to be fulfilled as God himself is involved. That last element comes from Abraham Heschel [9]:

the divine reaction to human conduct does not operate automatically. Man’s deeds do not necessitate but only occasion divine pathos. Man is not the immediate but merely the incidental cause of pathos in God, the occasion or *causa occasionalis*, which freely calls forth a pathetic state in God. There is only a nexus of contingency between human and divine attitudes, between human character and divine pathos.

To be able to enable God by loving him is the greatest gift a believer can imagine. It has nothing to do with hybris/arrogance or making God dependent on men. On the contrary, it is about confessing that this is



the way God wants to be “with us” and that he will wait until we can recognize each other as believers.

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