

FOUR LOVES

By Gabriel Moran

Perhaps no religion gives such a prominent place to love as does Christianity. Jewish religion summed up the law in one of the best known passages in the Bible: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Dt 6:5). Jesus’ addition of a second commandment – “and you should love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39) sums up the law. There has always been a dispute about who my neighbor is. Jewish religion assumes a love for one’s people as the only realistic way to speak of love. Jesus answered the question of who is my neighbor with a parable, the point of which seems to be that the term neighbor refers to any individual whom we see is in need and whom we can help.

A stringent demand of Jesus, one that is ridiculed by many non-Christians, is that his followers should “love your enemies.” (Mt 5:44). Jewish commentators object to Jesus’ claim that “you have heard it was said ‘you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” is not true of Jewish law. But it is simply impossible to love everyone, most obviously someone who hates you. Jewish commentators who are friendly to Christianity point out that the text would be clearer if it were more accurately translated as “love to your enemies.” Jesus is not demanding that his followers have a feeling called love but rather that they should “do good to those who hate you,” a process that might de-hostilize the person who is at present an enemy.

But what does “love of God” mean? The word love is regularly used of both a relation to another human being and also to other living and nonliving objects. Someone who says “I love my new home” or “I love my dog” might be suspected of having a distorted view of love. But who knows? Loving one’s dog might be the best one can manage at a particular time in life. It is preferable at least to those whom Chesterton says think that they love God because they don’t love anyone else. The phrase “love of God” may refer to “God” as subject or as object, that is, it can mean either a love that humans direct to God or else a love that God directs to humans. The Christian perspective is that the love that humans express is a response to the love that God bestows on all creatures.

Christianity introduced here a new idea of love that is expressed by the word *agape*. It is love that is given unselfishly, a love that looks for no rewards or returns. Such a love is attributed to God. Jesus’ followers are encouraged to imitate this benevolence. The word *altruism* was coined in the 19th century for this kind of action that is directed to a good not for oneself but for another. It is a love that is praised but at the same time is dismissed as either a delusion or hidden selfishness. It is a term that should never have been coined.

A selfish act is said to be based on “self-interest”; so the alternative is thought to be selfless activity. But a human act is the act of a self. A self would not act if he or she were not interested, a word that mean “to be between.” The alternative to a selfish act is one that finds what is between us, that is, common interests. This kind of act is not the same as what is called “reciprocal altruism” which really explains (and dismisses) altruism as a deal between two selfish people. Common interests can sometimes be found between two people but its ultimate basis is community, the sharing of interest in a common humanity.

For analyzing four kinds of love, I turn to a writer whose work includes a sense of common humanity, religious mysticism, and understanding of love. I comment on four passages from the novelist George Eliot.

1. “The effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so bad for you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who have lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Eliot is here describing Dorothy in the novel *Middlemarch*. The word love does not appear in the passage but that is perhaps necessary for the kind of love that Christianity calls *agape*, a love that gives with little awareness of what is achieved and without praise from the public. I suspect that in using the word *diffusive* Eliot was well aware of the saying at the center of medieval ethics: *Omne bonum diffusivum sui est*. “The good is that which is diffusive of itself.” The good overflows itself and affects everyone in its orbit. The good that sustains the world is mainly composed of “unhistoric acts” done by people who lived faithful lives that were hidden and are now forgotten. What do such people accomplish? Eliot, as she often does, uses the double negative that is typical of religious mysticism: “things are not so bad for you and me as they might have been.”

This meaning of the good saves religious mysticism from its inherent danger of a withdrawal from the world and all “attachments” done for the sake of the mystic’s own contentment. The mark of great mystics has paradoxically been their involvement with the politics of their time from Meister Eckhart’s denunciation of the rich in the 14th century Rhineland to Thomas Merton’s leading an anti-war movement in the 1960s. The love gathered in contemplation overflows to others with effects impossible to measure.

2. “A friend is someone to whom you can pour out the contents of your heart, chaff and wheat together, knowing that gentle hands will take and sift it, saving what is worth saving, and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away.”

Eliot is describing here the love of friendship which practically every human being experiences. Aristotle wrote that no one would wish to live without friends. There are many kinds of friendship but Eliot gets to a central element in saying that a friend is someone you can trust with what you might be ashamed of. With a gentle motion a friend makes it possible for you to accept both what you feel is praiseworthy and what you feel is bad about yourself.

3. “I like not only to be loved but to also be told that I am loved. I am not sure you are of the same mind. But the realm of silence is large enough beyond the grave. This is the world of light and speech, and I shall take my leave to tell you that you are very dear.”

Eliot describes in this letter to her friend Georgiana Burne-Jones a love that is exemplified between parent and child or between siblings, close relatives, or special friends. Recently, the words “I love you” have taken on a ridiculously totemic meaning the mere utterance of which signals commitment to a sexual partner. Eliot would protest this narrowing of the phrase’s meaning. She wanted to hear the words. It is true that saying “I love you” to an audience of

hundreds of people hollows out any meaning of the words, but the phrase need not be restricted to one person. Eliot recognizes and accepts that the person she speaks to might not share her feelings about “I love you.” But that does not stop her from “taking leave” to tell that person “you are very dear.”

4. “What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined for life, to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, and to be with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of their last parting.”

This passage from Eliot’s *Adam Bede* describes the greatest thing that two human souls can experience. It is what every marriage proclaims has been found. Of course, more than half of those marriages today do not endure “to the moment of the last parting.” That does not stop people from believing that they are “joined for life.” It might be that marriage is not a failed institution so much as the fact that many people marry too early when they have not taken the time to reflect on the realistic chances that the love will continue when the excitement of sexual passion dims as it inevitably must.

Human beings can make a mistake with the first marriage and deserve a second chance. The second time might be done with more insight and can be true and lasting love. But after three or four tries one has to suspect that the person will never learn that “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds/Or bends with the remover to remove. Oh, no! it is an ever-fixed mark/That looks on tempests and is never shaken.” (Shakespeare).

Marriage has dramatically changed in recent times. It was once a contract between families in which a man acquired a woman to produce his children and carry on the family name. The twentieth century changed the meaning of marriage. There was still the need for children, although fewer than in the previous centuries. Women who had the power to do so no longer accepted being a man’s property although they might still look for a mutual love with a man. A sensible proposal in the 1920s advocated two kinds of marriage: the traditional marriage with children and a new phenomenon, the companionate marriage. The legal proposal never went through but the reality was already there.

Even the Roman Catholic Church recognized in 1930 that marriage had acquired another purpose than procreation. By accepting love between the partners as a purpose of marriage the church put itself into an indefensible position because it continued to oppose the human race’s sensible efforts to control births. The evolution of marriage made marriage between homosexual partners a logical result. Although some people see this development as destructive of marriage, the willingness and even strong desire of gay and lesbian people to marry probably strengthens an institution that could use help.