

## **Love, Eros, and the Divine**

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When I was a boy, listening to my liberal Christian minister preach, I learned three words in Greek. Maybe you did too. Often they went untranslated; we just assumed that everyone knew the meaning of these three words. They were “Philo”, “Eros”, and “Agape.” All three words are used in the New Testament and all three are usually translated into English using just one word: love. Just as Eskimos have hundreds of words for snow, and some Asian languages have multiple words for rice, the ancient Greeks had at least three words for love. They were a philosophical lot, so they liked to parse their abstract ideas into finer and finer categories.

“Philo” means brotherly love. It is the love between friends and compatriots. In Spanish there is a word “campaneros” which means something like this. You see Philo as a root in philosophy—the love of knowledge—and Philadelphia—the City of Brotherly Love. “Eros” is romantic love. This is the love that songs are written about. As you might guess, Eros is the root of words like “erotic.” Eros is the love

experienced by lovers for each other. Finally Agape, might be something like compassion. It is the love for strangers, compassion and empathy for another's suffering. This is the kind of Love that Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount. Buddhists would call this loving-kindness.

As Christianity made the idea of love the center of its message, some began to wonder, just which one of the three kinds of love are we talking about. This is why my home church would often leave it untranslated, so that "agape" was a regular part of our lexicon—we didn't have to explain it. A friend of mine recently told me about his interest in Orthodox Christianity. He is not Orthodox himself, but had always been fascinated with their icons and their onion-bulbed shaped churches. In the course of his studies he discovered a fascinating difference between most Protestant groups and the Christian Orthodox. When Orthodox Christians are writing about the love of God or more specifically God's love for them, they use "Eros" for the word love. Protestants would probably think of God's love as more a brotherly or sisterly sort of things, implying "Philo." But the Orthodox believe God's love is more personal, more specific than that. It is an intimate connection to the divine that they are trying to convey by using the Greek word Eros.

Odd, perhaps, to think of love for God in terms of the love between romantic partners. But it is not the only example. Hinduism is probably

the most famous for this. The God Krishna, who is an avatar or manifestation of the God Vishnu, has a series of stories written about him as a child. When he was a teenager Krishna was a cowherder— itself a metaphor since cows are sacred symbols of the universe in Hinduism. Anyway, Krishna herds cows as do many of his neighbors. There are teenage girls in the village who all fall in love with the young Krishna. They are called the Gopis, and they all want his attention, and frankly, his affection. But Krishna is a bit of a trickster—he likes to play games with the Gopis, these young ladies who are in love with him. So they do things like dance in a circle, and as they hold hands and move to the music each one of the Gopis has the experience of holding Krishna’s hand. It feels to her as if she is holding the hand of God himself. She may even see Krishna’s face in the girl next to her. But just when she wants to draw closer, he is revealed as a dream, an illusion. Hindus call this “Lila”—that all of creation is the illusory play of the Gods.

I know you may be wondering, is this the same Krishna as the Hare Krishnas who dress sort of funny and try to convert people to their religion. Yes it is the same God and they use pretty much the same texts. But it is all in the interpretation. Hare Krishnas, like fundamentalists in all traditions, take a text that is rich in symbolism and metaphor, and believe it to be literally true. This is particularly tragic in Hinduism because so many of their texts are intentionally written

symbolically. What this story of Krishna and the Gopis is trying to do is describe the relationship between humanity and the divine. God is Krishna, and all of us are the Gopis. What these stories are trying to say is that for people who believe in God or something like it, God is like a playful lover—we might feel love or affection for God but can never see the true face of our beloved. There is the intimacy of love, Eros, but a distancing too because God is never full present before us like other objects of our experience are. God is tantalizingly close and yet so far away.

So often these days in and in our culture specifically, far away is the most common experience. It is so hard to make a real and meaningful connection with another human being in this world. Loneliness is so prevalent in our culture as to be unremarkable. The myth of the rugged individualist is alive and well in our collective discourse; especially when it comes to purchasing guns. The American spirit of adventure once inspired people in other parts of the world to brave the ocean to travel here. Another generation of Americans, with that same spirit of adventure, set off into the unknown wilderness of this great land to seek their fortune or just to live life away from the confines of a stifling social order. Yet now it seems that individualism has degenerated into selfishness and narcissism. Some blame our Capitalist system, as the leaders of the Occupy Movement did a year and a half ago. But even Adam Smith, who described Capitalism in his book the

Wealth of Nations, had an understanding of the common good for everyone. His was not a Tea Party stance.

I think social media has, ironically, exacerbated our collective loneliness. We live in a time in which “friend” is more often used as a verb rather than a noun. As in “to friend” someone on Facebook. Interesting choice in words the Facebook people made there. I suspect having a button on your website with the word “Philos” on it would be a little esoteric! And besides, my experience with Facebook is that “friend” is often too strong a word. Celebrities “friend” people so that you can find out the latest goings on; often for publicity purposes. I have found it to be a great way to maintain distant friendships that I might not otherwise have any communication. But social media is not a good friend creator.

Like anything, social media can be used for good or for ill. I will confess that I regularly use Facebook and Twitter, as well as some other things less frequently, so I am not preaching out against those other people over there. What I fear with social media is that it might be a temptation to confuse the virtual world with the real one. It might be easy to imagine that a friend on Facebook is as good as a friend in real life. Indeed, Facebook friends might be better. If you have a disagreement with them, you can always, “unfriend” them and it is over. Real people have to be dealt with regardless of their flaws. And so we can create a kind of cocoon of information where we only pay attention

to the shows that we like or the news channels that we agree with, and we can shut out all that other stuff that may push us out of our comfort zones and require us to grow.

But deep down all of us hunger for a real connection to another real human being. Sting, or to be more correct, the Police had a song in the 80s called Message in a Bottle. The final verse went like this: “Walked out this morning don't believe what I saw. A hundred billion bottles washed up on the shore. Seems I'm not alone at being alone. A hundred billion castaways looking for a home.” That, my friends, is THE spiritual problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. How do you create a real connection among those hundred billion castaways searching for a home?

I think the answer lies in Eros. Now don't misunderstand me—I am not advocating for the free-love days of the Sixties. It might have been free love back then, but it was also free from boundaries and a lot of people got hurt as a result. No, I am not talking about a return to the erotic, but rather a turn toward Eros. I think the Orthodox Christians were on to something when they talked about God's love for humanity in terms of Eros. If you think of the three words for love as being on a continuum: agape, philo, eros. You go from love in a broad sense, to love to a friend, to a very intimate, very personal kind of love—Eros. It is deep. It is specific to each person. And it is what we crave—some connection that is real, meaningful, and means the world to us. It may

be you find that connection with God or some other symbol of the Holy. Hindus find it in the form of a teenage God flirting with cowherding maidens. Sure OK. I kind of dig the poetry in that. But it is probably not for everyone.

Meg Barnhouse found it at the wedding she did in the rain. I love her extended metaphor of water as love. How there was something inside of her that had been dammed up that broke loose when she witnessed the tremendous love the bride and groom had for one another. Then during the ceremony the rain comes down, almost like a baptism for this new life that is being forged in the ceremony. All it takes sometimes are moments like that. So that by the end of the wedding, soul, love, and water are all mixed in together. Love has become a window to experiencing the Holy. Not an impersonal sort of love that is wide but not deep. No this is love as we all hope to experience it—warm, nurturing and transcendent.

Speaking of Facebook, an old friend Bob separated from this wife this past year. I, and many others, had the awkward experience of witnessing the end of this marriage via Facebook, since I am Facebook friends with both him and his wife. It is a very peculiar thing when two people you have known for so long break up. It is particularly strange when you don't see them every day, but instead piece together cryptic comments and photos on Facebook. It was the first time for me of being Facebook friends, and friends in real life, with two people who divorced.

They would make these comments that seemed to be about the other, so that what probably should have been a marital fight got aired out in front of their family and friends. After a while, my friend Bob started posting picture of himself with his new girlfriend, and his soon-to-be-ex kept posting Bible verses.

By buddy Bob got married right out of high school because he had gotten his sweetheart pregnant. We were all kind of worried about Bob at the time, because he was kind of a freewheeling, devil may care sort of fellow. But he committed to his wife and their kids at that young age. He got a job and supported his family. It seemed like they were perpetually pregnant. By the time it was all said and done, Bob and his wife Catherine had four kids.

Bob was really the first person I knew that was my age and married. I had heard on and off that there were rough patches in their marriage. This was pre-social media and I was either in grad school or in Nebraska at the time. There were small children in the house, and so they made it work for as long as they could. Those little kids are now teenagers, and the oldest is about to leave for college. When they both discovered that they were both having affairs, they made the wise decision to end the relationship. It obviously had not been working for some time.

I discovered this because I finally talked to the guy instead of trying to interpret his esoteric Facebook posts. I was pretty disappointed in him, and her, and how it all played out. But I have to admit that hearing the sound in his voice, and the energy with which he talks about this new relationship, it is clear that it has breathed new life into him. When a relationship ends it can be bitter. Eros is personal, the most personal kind of love there is, and its demise is equally personal.

Once I got past my judgmental mind, I was able to hear the new life that has been reborn in my friend Bob. Eros, love, is life-giving. I don't mean of the physical sort, although it is that obviously. No I am talking about how love can transform us, turn our world upside down. For Bob, a life that had seemed hallow was now reinvigorated. Ironically Eros is about making room for another person by making ourselves vulnerable. It is the opposite of narcissism. It opens us up to the kind of hurt that my friends Bob and Catherine are experiencing right now. There is a risk involved in forming meaningful bonds of attachment with another person. There is no risk involved in loneliness, in having only virtual relationships you can sever at the click of a button. But those relationships sacrifice depth for the sake of convenience. Love opens us up to new possibilities. That transforming power is as close to experiencing the divine as most of us will probably achieve. No wonder the Hindus liked the metaphor so much!

Just before I got married, a wise friend of mine told me, “Lust is what you feel. Love is what you do.” Love is tangible—it is a spiritual practice. It is to put the concern of another in front of your own. That is love no matter which Greek word you want to use. We are all designed by God, by evolution, by karma to seek out ways to forge connections to other people. If it isn’t the meaning of life, it is one of the primary ways we understand ourselves in the world. It may or may not be that the universe *itself* has this drive to form connections, but it is certainly true of human beings. We are built to love, to be connected with each other so that the best parts of ourselves may shine forth. For when they do, that is the divine made real before us. May it ever be so. Amen Blessed Be.