

# God Is Love: The Centr

David Tracy

It remains a matter of some amazement that Christianity's central metaphor for understanding God is "God is Love." This extraordinary metaphorical insight first occurs, in the history of Christian piety and reflection, in The First Letter of John. Although First John is written in the genre of 'letter,' it also functions, as some scripture scholars now maintain, more like a commentary on the Gospel of John than like a separate letter.

Perhaps we can express the point this way: the Johannine metaphor "God is Love" is the first classic Christian reflection on the meaning of the gospel passion narratives. For the ancient Greeks and Romans it was intelligence rather than love which provided the major clue for the nature of the Divine Reality. That God must be Pure Intelligence seemed clear (recall Aristotle). That God may also be named The Good, including The Good beyond Being (*The Republic*) was true for Plato and many Platonists.

But how could love (agape) be the central clue to the Divine Reality? This would seem absurd to any Greek or Roman — as indeed, it may still seem to any sensitive observer, ancient or modern, of the horrible sides of existence. Only, or so it seems to me — if Christians see that the passion narratives on Jesus Christ are our singular clue to the identity of God do they name the Christian sense of the nature of God as Love. That they understand who God is is only in and through their understanding of the message and the ministry, the passion, cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed to be the Christ.

The great metaphor "God is Love" is a commentary upon and can never be separated from how we know "God is Love" by knowing the identity of Jesus the Christ, the icon of the reality of God's love.

The plain sense of the passion narratives on Jesus is realistic and history-like. The 'plain' sense, in sum, is the Christian community's sense of who this Jesus is — as he is identified as the Christ in and through his actions and in what happens to him through his interactions with others in the passion narratives. **In and through this Jesus the Christ, Christians learn to understand who God is and who they are com-**

**manded and empowered to become.**

Whoever wrote First John did indeed provide the best commentary on the identity of the God disclosed in the message of forgiveness and judgment, the ministry of healing, the suffering of the passion and the vindication of the resurrection of this Jesus confessed to be the Christ: God, as God is manifested as Love in the life and fate of this Jesus the Christ. Christians are those commanded and thereby empowered to become those who live a life of faith working through love and justice.

First John and its great metaphor "God is Love" teaches two truths: the truth of God's identity as that identity is disclosed in the narrative rendering of the identity of this Jesus as the Christ; and the truth of Christians as those commanded to love because God is Love, and thereby does God empower all those who follow the command, the discipleship of Jesus.

Hence the central metaphor of Christianity, "God is Love," finds its fuller meaning only by being interpreted, above all, in terms of its existential grounding in the God identified as God in and through one Jesus Christ identified in the passion narratives. But the interpretation of this great metaphorical truth cannot end there. We fully understand not only Christian classic texts but also classic symbols and metaphors only by also understanding the history of their effects upon later communities and interpreters. We understand "God Is Love" only by also understanding how the great Christian Platonists have always believed, as Jean-Luc Marion recently insists, that God is more than being, God is beyond being, for God and God alone is disclosed in the passion narratives as pure gift, the great King of Glory, Beauty, Goodness — Love. By tracing the history of effects of the metaphor "God is Love" in Christian history, we may begin to understand how Christians will struggle to relate human *eros* (desire, yearning, drive) to divine agape (sheer gift) to the new Augustinian synthesis of *caritas* or charity. Other Christians, however — from Luther to Nygren —, see agape, never *eros*, as the divine gift of the God who is agape.

Still others — like Bonhoeffer — will reinterpret this

# al Christian Metaphor

metaphor "God is Love" by grounding it anew in the suffering, self-sacrificial love of the cross to help us understand how, in Bonhoeffer's words, "only a suffering God can help us now." Christian feminist theologians will justly warn Christians that agape is also primordially 'equal regard,' not self sacrifice — an insight especially necessary to remind us how ever-so-noble an ideal as 'self-sacrifice' can be consciously or unconsciously misused by the powerful. Self-sacrifice may indeed prove an inappropriate ideal for the understanding of love by oppressed and marginalized peoples. **Love should empower all Christians to struggle for the self-affirmation intrinsic to the struggle for justice, i.e., for agape's 'equal regard.'** It is true that justice without love can become merely self-righteous. It is also true that love without justice can become merely sentimental. Agape's love may be expressed in self-sacrifice, but it must be expressed with equal regard for all - as Gene Outka has so pointedly argued.

It is amazing how many Christian understandings of God today — ranging from modern process theologies through revisionary forms of Trinitarian theology, through the post-modern recoveries of the brilliant traditions of negative theology — are finally new ways

to understand our first commentary on the nature of God: "God is love." For what invites these otherwise diverse understandings of God? The understanding that the divine reality is intrinsically relational. And what is love, in its depth, but the deepest relational concept of all? If God is love, then the Divine reality must be intrinsically relational. If God is love, we are commanded and, in hearing the command, properly empowered to become the relational beings we are. In this Jesus the Christ, John finds the identity of God: God is love. In reflecting on the God who is love, later Christians find themselves empowered to enter a relationship of discipleship without fear and without turning back, even for a moment. If one has never been scandalized by this central Christian metaphor, "God is love" — and the ancients were right to be scandalized — one has never understood its radicality nor its oddness. To understand it rightly is the one thing needed by Christians who seek self-understanding by understanding God in and through Jesus the Christ.

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## God's Presence in Each of Us

George F. Regas tells the following story about Desmond Tutu:

"I remember something he said to me as we sat together, just sharing the deep things of the soul. 'George, you know I was raised in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of our church. We would have on the altar a tabernacle in which we would place the consecrated bread and wine--those elements made holy by God. And every time we would come by that tabernacle we would genuflect, we would bow our knee, in respect for God's presence at the altar. You know, I feel, George, like genuflecting every time a white person or black person comes across my path. Bowing before them because they are vessels of the holy and living God.'

"I could hardly imagine that. In that cauldron of violence and bitterness and hatred, Archbishop Desmond Tutu sees in every person the worth they have because they are the children of God. That's why his life shines as a light to the world."



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