"Love in Religion"

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The question about which we have been asked to reflect is: "What are 'cutting edge' or 'frontier' research areas on the topic of the place of love – divine or human – in religion, as seen from the perspective of my discipline?"

I preface my reflections with several caveats. First, I am a philosopher, though not a philosopher of religion. My research interests are in virtue ethics and moral psychology, with special attention to areas of intersection between philosophy and psychology. Additionally, I am the Director of the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing at the University of Oklahoma, and in that capacity, I am involved in establishing connections with community organizations in the region of the United States known informally as "the buckle of the Bible belt." Thus, I have had some experience "on the ground" with members of faith-based communities, many of them Southern Baptist. Before moving to Oklahoma, I taught for 26 years at Marquette University, a Jesuit institution in Milwaukee, WI, where I earned my Bachelor's and Master's degrees. I received my PhD from The University of Notre Dame, another Catholic institution, though not Jesuit. Most of my reflections on love's place in religion come not from academic study, but from experience with various religious organizations. Recently my experiences have given rise to thoughts about how academic work might help faith-based communities to cope with the world, especially with the social problems we currently encounter. So the ideas I present here will have a practical as well as a theoretical bent.

From this perspective, I want to focus on three potential growth areas for the study of love in religion, where 'love' is broadly construed. The first is the study of religion and flourishing. The second is the study of theological virtue ethics. The third is the ongoing application of empirical social sciences to religious concepts, including that of love. These areas admit of interesting interconnections and overlap.

Flourishing. Flourishing seems to have taken hold of the religious imagination of late. This is shown by a recent book by Miroslav Volf; by recent collections; and by special issues of journals, for example, a special issue of the theological journal of the Christian Community Development Association.[1] As I see it, the notion of religious flourishing clearly incorporates that of love, as it would seem impossible, from just about any religious perspective, to flourish in this life without loving God and one's neighbor.

Questions of what it means to flourish from religious perspectives, and the role of love in flourishing within those frameworks, have a potentially wide range. One might ask what it means to flourish within religions. For example, what does it mean to flourish as a practicing Muslim as opposed to a practicing Christian. To be

even more specific, is flourishing different for Sunnis and Shiites, for Protestant Evangelicals and conservative Roman Catholics? What conception or conceptions of flourishing does the American Prosperity Gospel incorporate, and how are those notions at odds with more traditional conceptions of Christian flourishing, which seem to include sin and redemption, suffering, and self-denial (or at least an openness to the latter three) as part and parcel of what it might mean to flourish as a Christian? Volf's book penetratingly investigates flourishing, religions, and globalism. How can different world religions flourish in an age of global conflict and violence, in which conflict and violence are often grounded in claims based on religion? To what extent is the flourishing of religions and religious believers specifically conceptualized in terms of love of God and neighbor?

Additionally, psychologists have investigated the role of faith in happy lives, and I would expect this interest to continue.[2]

Theological virtue ethics. Aside from the well-known work of Stanley Hauerwas, theological and religious virtue ethics have been pursued in a number of interesting and important books.[3] Work has been and should continue to be done on love as a virtue within religions and within denominations. Linda Zagzebski's work is especially interesting because she develops a motivation-based form of naturalistic virtue ethics, called 'exemplarism,' and adapts that framework to articulate a theologically-based virtue ethics.[4] Exemplarism is, in essence, the view that virtue can be cultivated through admiring an exemplary individual and wanting to be like him or her. This theme has already influenced scholars who have argued that Confucius was an exemplar and are currently exploring religious exemplars, such as saints, Buddhist *bodhisattvas*, Daoist *zhenren*, shamans, gurus, and yogi.[5] In addition, both divine motivation theory (the theological virtue ethics that Zagzebski puts forward), and naturalistic exemplarism suggest the importance of exploring love as a motivation for human persons to be virtuous. If I love God, Christ, or Mohammed, I should seek to imitate them, and thereby develop as a virtuous person. If I love my neighbor, I should thereby be motivated to help her, and if I admire my neighbor for being exemplary in some way, I should be motivated to imitate him. What does religious love, as a motivational force, require believers to do, and what virtues of character or intellect does it require them to have? We encounter intimations of these virtues in stories from the Bible. When Abraham, at God's command, prepared to sacrifice Isaac, God was both testing Isaac and presaging the sacrifice that God himself would make of his only son. Abraham surely displayed love of, obedience to, and trust in God. Other Biblical leaders, such as Moses, were required to have faith and trust in God. Christ, in the Garden of Gethsemane, submitted his will to that of God in accepting the crucifixion. The stories of Abraham, Moses, and Christ provide topics for reflection on the virtues believers should acquire as they accept the will of God in their lives.

In the Christian tradition, God's love is unconditional. God so loved the world that He sent His only son to be sacrificed to save sinful humanity. Christ so loved sinful humanity and God the Father that He accepted the will of God. God's love

seems to have been accompanied by divine virtues. For example, God appeared to and accompanied the Hebrews in various physical guises – a burning bush, pillars of cloud and fire. He was not obedient to the Hebrews, but lovingly responsive to their needs, trusting and hoping in their ability to respond to his presence. When God sent Christ to earth, He created Him as both human and divine so that God's power and love could be showered on suffering humanity. God's love would have been accompanied by the hope in a human response – that not all would turn away from Christ, that the crucifixion and resurrection would result in repentance, atonement, redemption, and salvation. The study of divine motivations and divine virtues is, I believe, important in articulating exemplary motives and virtues for believers to cultivate in themselves.

The Empirical Study of Religious Life. The foregoing remarks lead to my third topic. Believers are called to respond to God's unconditional love. To what extent are humans psychologically and emotionally capable of attaining the higher vision to which they are called? To what extent do religious narratives and traditions shape the nature of that response, and the human capacities required for it? To what extent does divine grace reshape and reform finite and fallible human capacities?

Religious concepts and the meaning of virtue terms, such as 'love,' are embedded within rich and distinctive narratives. The meaning of 'love,' its motivational force, and its requirements are framed differently within different religious traditions. That is, what counts as religious love and how it is expressed differs from context to context – practicing Muslims in Saudi Arabia have different understandings and expressions of love than Southern Baptist Oklahomans in the Bible Belt. It stands to reason that the psychology and sociology of love and other religious concepts would vary accordingly. Of course, this is not a new idea. However, the ongoing study of such ideas as how love is enacted in actual contexts, how it can go awry, and how it can be manipulated and abused, to name a few topics, is of paramount importance in our world today. In particular, the capacity of religious love to motivate positive engagement amongst practitioners of different faiths is vital to countering bigotry, factionalism, conflict, and violence.

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[1] See Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015); Miroslav Volf and Justin Crisp, eds. *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*

[2] See, for example, David G. Myers, "The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People," *American Psychologist* 55: 1 (2000): 56-67).

[3] For example, Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2008); Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.

B. Eerdmans, 2007); Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2014); Kirk J. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth: Developing Virtue Ethics in the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2014) and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[4] Zagzebski (2004).

[5] For Confucius, see Amy Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: The Good Person is That* (New York: Routledge, 2012). For work on exemplars in other religious traditions, see Ian James Kidd (unpublished).