

Christian love in inter-religious perspectives

**Author:**Kobus Kruger¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of New Testament, University of the Free State, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Kobus Kruger,
jskruger@mysticism.co.za**Dates:**

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The article approaches the phenomenon of love from a theoretical perspective in which the interconnectedness of religions is constitutive of every religion, including Christianity, in its relative singularity. It explores a historical context in which Christianity with its unique message of love does not stand alone among the religions of the world, and a theoretical context that could account for that historical context, without abandoning or diluting the Christian vision, but enriching it, adding depth to the notion 'Christianity' in its most essential sense. The argument is developed by first introducing seven religious perspectives on love. This is followed by metaphysical-mystical reflections in which the concept 'Infinitude' features. The argument proceeds concentrically outwards, starting from Christianity as centre, seen as one magnificent dewdrop reflecting an infinite net of interdependence.

Introduction

In Christian mysticism the Holy One is Love and the process of human sanctification is growth in love. This article will view the Christian vision of love, as exemplified in St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), in a perspective in which the interconnectedness of religions is not a tentative add-on, but a point of departure, constitutive of Christianity and its notion of love. It will explore a historical context in which Christianity with its unique message of love does not stand alone among the religions of the world, and a theoretical context that could account for that historical context, without abandoning or diluting the Christian vision, but enriching it, adding depth to the notion 'Christianity' in its most essential sense. This perspective is partly inspired by the fact that the Second Bi-annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality (20–24 May 2015) took place in Africa, cradle of humanity as one whole, and by a sense that the mystic urge includes a longing for all-inclusive comprehensiveness.

First, six views of love in what are sometimes called philosophical religions, and comparable views in ancient San religion, are presented. Then follow some theoretical reflections, centring in the notion of 'Infinitude', by which is not meant largeness without end, but the lack of defining, definitive characteristics. The argument will proceed concentrically outwards, starting from Christianity as centre, seen as one magnificent dewdrop reflecting an infinite net of interdependence.

Comparing religions, philosophies and metaphysical-mystical systems from various cultural contexts, historical origins and epochs and relating them structurally, requires caution. Seeking to integrate them in one differentiated whole is daunting. Below, these religions will be interpreted both 'intentionally' and 'tentionally'. By 'intention' is meant conscious, deliberate directedness of mind, and by 'tention' drift of mind in a certain direction, perhaps unconsciously, unintendedly. 'Intention' is understood to be explicit; 'tention' could be hiddenly implicit. Needless to say, by 'tentional' something vastly different from 'tentionous' is meant: a tentionous interpretation forces itself on a religious tradition; a tentional interpretation would want to interpret a religion from within its own deepest assumptions, which is not to deny that a tentional reading is more than mere reconstruction and contains an element of transformative creativity.

Historical context

St Bernard of Clairvaux

In all of Christian history there is no loftier spokesperson for love (*dilectio, caritas, amor*) than St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) (cf. Bernard of Clairvaux 1987, 1994; Dreyer 2007; Evans 2000; Leclercq [1966]1976; McGinn 1994; Pranger 1994; Sommerfeldt 1991; Stiegman 2001) a truly experiential theologian, a mystic, in the great sense of the word.

Bernard's celebration of union between God in Christ and the individual in the Church was expressed particularly in his 86 *Sermones super cantica canticorum*. First comes carnal love, then rational love, then spiritual love; second the love of the slave, then the love of the hireling, then the

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love of the son (Sommerfeldt 1991:110). Spiritual love is a going out of oneself (*ecstasis, excessus*), a being raised (*raptus*) above the ordinary capabilities of one's faculties, one's soul being entered and taken possession of by God in a union of love. He utilises the standard map of the soul's progress through ascetical purification, virtuous illumination and loving union; alternatively called contrition, devotion and piety; or confession (*confessio*), devotion (*devotio*) and contemplation (*contemplatio*) – the third being the highest and properly mystical stage. In the analogy of the *Song of Songs* these three stages are described as the kiss of the feet (penitence), the kiss of the hands (active virtue) and the kiss of the mouth (the personal encounter with the Beloved).

Additionally, he distinguishes four steps in the growth of love on the human side: love of self for the sake of self; love of God for the sake of self; love of God for the sake of God; and love of self for the sake of God (McGinn 1994:183), which is quintessential Christian sentiment, yet in the mysticisms of other religious orientations similar roadmaps, comparable stages of mystical development, have been developed in other doctrinal settings.

Adhering to the traditional teachings in the Western Church concerning the Trinity and Christology, Bernard describes God¹ as not only Eternity, but also Infinite Love. God is also Power and Wisdom; all four integrated as the length, breadth, height and depth of God. God, the holy origin of all things, is Love. Love is not a quality of or an accident in God, but the divine substance itself (Sommerfeldt 1991:101), which is Bernard's central theological motif. The presence of God is a dynamic movement, not a flat, unchanging condition²: as the soul advances God becomes more and more actually and effectively present (*sermon* 74). God's love and lovableness is before us in the form of Christ, attracting our human love. Bernard does not shy away from a heavy emphasis on precisely the body of Christ and, tied to that, from anthropomorphic language about God. His notion of infinity denotes the ineffable immeasurability of God and his qualities, including love, in a *kataphatic* sense, not in the *apophatic* sense as associated with Neoplatonically inspired mysticism, which was not in vogue at the time (Evans 2000:103). God is the Being of all things (*esse omnium*), present yet incomprehensible.³

In Bernard's view of the presence and the infinity of God, a certain tension remains. God can never quite be found. Love is a dynamic principle, ambivalent, hovering between fulfilment and postponement⁴ in a non-final balance between divine presence and divine infinity. To anticipate the second part of the article, the notion of Infinitude put forward there

1. In his *On consideration*. Book V.XIII.27–31, transl. Leclercq ([1966]1976:152).

2. Although not changed or affected by what is outside himself, God can be moved from within by his own love (McGinn 1994:194).

3. He is their cause, not the stuff of their being (*factor causale, non materiale*: Bernard certainly had no pantheistic inclinations) (cf. Stiegman 2001:133).

4. The 'sense of mystery remains and is intensified by the suggestion of the simultaneous overwhelming presence, as well as absence, of the beloved' (Pranger 1994:142).

'embraces' and 'retains' (to borrow the abbot's terms) his Medieval Christian model of God as infinite Love, but wishes to suspend his understanding of infinite love in the wider ambit of Infinitude emerging from empty, Absolute Horizon.

His affirmation of the body of Christ tends towards an affirmation of the body and Cosmos and is admired, although it does not arise on an absolute horizon, fascinatingly beyond all. And in the end, in tune with his time, he probably saw no intrinsic worth in the fleeting world and no value or beauty in sexuality (Dreyer 2007:126; Stiegman 2001:135). Nevertheless, did his writing unintentionally but shyly tendentially open the door to a true celebration of Cosmic life?⁵ At both ends of the spectrum (empty Origin and concrete Cosmos) this article would want to place different emphases than the great Christian mystic had done: Origin would be emptied more and Cosmos would be affirmed more. Appreciate the object of love in its precious reality and its absolute contingency. The poignant ambivalence of Cosmic beings' emerging from Absoluteness constitutes their beauty, the loveliness of earthly love.

In some respects Bernard was ahead of his time, in others he was a child of his time. He should not anachronistically be blamed for what, from our present historical situation, might appear to be problematic. Nevertheless, this mystic saint's instigation in 1146 of the Second Crusade appears remarkable.⁶ He saw Muslims as sinners, having turned down the opportunity of hearing the Gospel and being converted, and therefore as enemies deserving of religiously inspired military violence in a holy war. The mystic of love's active involvement in the power politics of Church and State in his day reflects the unique historical conditions of the time. To him the Crusade was an opportunity for demonstrating one's love for God. A metaphysical mysticism of love for today would command a different course of social and inter-religious interaction.

The mystical-intellectual programme of Bernard must be appreciated highly. However, a nostalgic returning to what he stood for is not possible. An emotional focus on an attachment to one system of meaning such as – for example – Christianity (as was the case with Bernard) is understandable and laudable, but a theoretical position espousing Christian (or any other form of) exclusivity is to be overcome. A loving mother or father of one can also be a loving paediatrician of many; seeking to save all. Bernard lived in a different epoch and must be understood and appreciated over this vast distance in time, circumstance and mentality. This article proposes an open, inclusive metaphysical mysticism, positively accommodating all of humankind's religious projects as so many searches for ultimate meaning, all oriented towards the same north pole.

5. He avoided the extreme dualism of spirit v body, flesh and matter, as Gnostic Catharism, flourishing at the time, taught. He assumed not an absolute break, but a measure of continuity between flesh and spirit.

6. Even taking into account the vast chasm in time and cultural conditions between now and then, his take on Islam was typical of the Christian sentiments of the time. His role was largely determined by his very intimate ties with the powerful institution of the Church, in the hierarchy of which he held no prominent position, yet over which he wielded great influence.

Hasdai Crescas

From the adjacent room of the great house of spirit (Judaism) comparable, similar and related (not identical) sounds can be heard. Medieval Jewish scholar Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410, 1411)⁷ was not a metaphysical mystic, a sophia-phile, in the sense intended in this article.⁸ Although he could have been influenced by Kabbalah, he did not write with a mystical intent, as his main book, a philosophical treatise under the title *Or Adonai* ('The light of the Lord', completed in 1410), demonstrates.

He writes a great deal about infinity, but does not use the relevant Kabbalistic term *Ein-Sof* in this respect, and immediately connects Love to God as positively revealed and known.⁹ He accepts the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, not in the sense of emergence from Absoluteness, understood as devoid of being, but in the sense of creation stemming from God alone as its eternal Ground, which is his traditional kataphatic Jewish faith. Crescas places a high premium on the Will of God: the world is not a natural necessity, but it is a divine necessity – the outcome of Divine Will. Divine Love is the highest attribute of Divine Will.

Will and love are essentially parts of the eternal and unchanging nature of God. Not Thought but Goodness is the central feature and primary content of his God idea, organising the various attributes of God into a whole. God is centrally a volitional, emotional being, blissful and joyous.¹⁰ Compared to that, the beliefs in immortality and retribution, the coming of the Messiah and the eternity of the *Torah*, penitence and the power of prayer, though true, are of secondary importance – for Love seeks no reward and desires nothing in return.

Crescas was the leader of a religious minority persecuted in a time fraught by unbelievable social tensions in Spain. His

7. Barcelona-born Crescas was an outstanding teacher of Jewish law (*halakha*) in Christian Spain, but during his life and after his death he remained in the shadow cast by the other Spanish-Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), whom he criticised trenchantly. The fact that Crescas did not win many adherents and did not become the source of an enduring school in Jewish thought may be attributed to the untimely nature of his thought: at a time when Aristotelianism was the not only fashionable but also dominant paradigm, Crescas explored another one, a novel and original one, intended to oust Aristotelianism. It was too early to have much effect. He also strove to re-establish the traditional doctrines of Judaism, preserving Jewish identity and loyalty at a time of severe crisis. His central concern was the defence of Jewish orthodoxy against the double threat of intellectualist Aristotelianism (particularly in the garb of theistic Aristotelianism as championed by Maimonides) and Christian theology. Considering the common philosophical culture prevailing in Europe and particularly Spain at the time, the fact that Crescas could have been influenced by figures such as the thirteenth-century Muslim Al-Farabi and the Christian theologians Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus should cause no surprise. As far as his own influence is concerned, Crescas could, according to some, have foreshadowed the thinking of Giordano Bruno and Baruch Spinoza.

8. Striving to combine rational argument in the general European philosophical tradition with *halakic* studies and apologetics in his religious tradition, he was a philosopher-cum-theologian in a strict disciplinary sense. However, combination is not the same as integration and transcendence, and could still imply a certain disengagement of the two, and that was the case with Crescas.

9. The focus of his interest in infinity was Aristotelian physics, in the context of his refutation of naturalism as a threat to orthodoxy. Accepting infinity as real and defined as unfinalisable magnitude, Crescas refuted Aristotle and argued for the infinity of empty space as the receptacle of all things, and the infinity of time and number, as well as of causality. In the Medieval context, entertaining the possibility of an infinite universe was a novelty and a great achievement. In his application of the notion of infinity to causality Crescas did away with Aristotle's argument for the existence of a terminus (called 'Prime Mover' by the Greek) in the chain of causation, intended to end what would otherwise amount to a futile infinite regress, which is a significant theological offshoot of his anti-Aristotelianism.

10. Crescas' emotional-voluntaristic emphasis distinguishes him from Maimonides, who awarded priority to reason. He severely criticised Maimonides' formulation of the basic tenets of Judaism. Among the non-negotiables (*pinnot*) of Judaism, Crescas includes the Love of God. Maimonides did not have it among his list of non-negotiable dogmas.

own son was killed in that context. That situation would not have stimulated *apophatic* thinking – it was a time to take a strong defensive–offensive stance. Yet, in passing, let us not forget a Christian mystic from the same epoch, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), with his ideal concerning a true peace of religions (*De pace fidei*).¹¹ Ours is a time inviting the mystically inclined as never before to be aware of a wider horizon, transgressing the boundaries of all historical religions, yet embracing all of them. The tendency towards Absolute Horizon accommodates traditional loyalties, but is not reducible to the latter. The intuition of absolute ultimacy, transcending every cultural and religious form, can be found both inside and outside the various existing religious camps, although not as majority view. In this article the emphasis falls on some structural similarities cutting across religious divisions – yet without sacrificing an appreciation of the uniqueness and value of each of these religious organisms, growing from various cultural soils over time.

Jalaluddin Rumi

How can one, starting from St Bernard, not be drawn into the ambit of Muslim Sufi thought, producing its finest flower in the mystical love poetry of the Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273)?¹² In Rumi's vision the world leaps out every moment from the 'nothingness' of 'adam, and Love is not merely an epiphenomenal foam on the world, but a structural element in its very nature.¹³ His was indeed a religion of love:

*Twere better that the spirit which wears not true love as a garment
Had not been: its being is but shame.*

*Be drunken in love, for love is all that exists.*¹⁴ Nicholson ([1898] 2003:51)

Like Bernard he breathed in the atmosphere of a mystical tradition, in his case based on the Qur'an and its reception. Like Bernard, he knew the earthly love stories of his own Medieval culture, and they fed into his mystical poetry, describing the pain of separation and longing and the joy of union. Yet, different from Bernard's, Rumi's mystical love was religiously inclusive; he was a friend of Christians and Jews and at his burial they took part in the funeral prayers in their own religious idioms. He understood that the various

11. Written after the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims in 1453.

12. Cf. Nicholson ([1989]2003); Schimmel (1978) 1980, 1992, 2003; Bausani 2004; S Sri Padmanabhan, The poetic mysticism of Jalal al-Din Rumi: an inquiry; in: Chaghatai (ed.). Mawlana Rumi..., pp. 461–480; Reynold A Nicholson, Jalal Al-din-Rumi; in Chaghatai (ed.), Mawlana Rumi, pp. 481–483.

13. Rumi knew the thinking of Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) well. Taking their common Sufi sentiments into account, they were different mystical types: Ibn Arabi's was essentially a mysticism of Thought; Rumi's, a mysticism of Love. A great metaphysical mystic in the sense of this article Rumi was, but his mysticism was less integrated with theosophical reflection than was the case in Ibn Arabi (and, to mention another great Muslim theosophist, Suhrawardi). Ibn Arabi was overwhelmingly a theosofist; Rumi, overwhelmingly a theophile, which is not to say that love (*Arabic hubb*) was not a prominent theme in Ibn Arabi's thinking. On the contrary, he wrote a great deal and most profoundly about it. To him God's love has a most significant corollary: God's being known. All things come from God and wish to return to Him. God's love to be known is the creative force that brings all things into existence and occasions their desire to know and love Him. The world is God's self-disclosure, so that to love the world is to love God. To Ibn Arabi love has divine roots: it sprouts from the deepest roots of Ultimate Reality, in Ibn Arabi's terminology, from *wujud* (non-manifest Being). On the divine roots of love according to Ibn Arabi (cf. Chittick 2005:35–51).

14. To Rumi (1996:182), discursive reason is, compared to love which flies to heaven, a donkey carrying books, and a stick in the darkness for the blind compared to a candle for those who can see beauty: *Love resides not in learning/not in knowledge/not in pages and pamphlets/Wherever the debates of men may lead/that is not the lover's path (Rumi, Swallowing the sun, 115).*

religions long for the same inexpressible essence that the religion of love knows no difference between sects. The transcendence of God, the Infinite, is the basis for his tolerance of all religions. In his own way Rumi interpreted all religions tendentially – all aim at the Infinite. Love is rooted in the eternal Kindness of God, originates in God, is co-eternal with Him and is His foremost quality (Schimmel [1978]1980:341).

About God he spoke in exuberant *kataphatic* poetry, veiling the blinding brightness of God, like stained glass pieces protecting from yet also revealing the sun (Schimmel [1978]1980:336). He did not withdraw into *apophatic* silence and could not contain the flood of *kataphatic* love-intoxicated words gushing over his lips. Rumi approximates Absolute Horizon more strongly than was the case in Bernard. To the Persian poet God is utterly transcendent, virtually to the point of non-existence from a human point of view, beyond personalism.¹⁵ Yet his metaphysical mysticism, brushing the limits of what is possible in Islamic orthodoxy, does not transgress the boundaries between God and human being set in the basic tenets of the Qur'an. This article would emphasise the emptiness of Absoluteness more strongly than the Persian poet allows, eventually petering out at Absolute Horizon beyond which no greener grass can be observed or postulated.

The essence of Rumi's poetry was his burning love for God as Creator (*khaliq*) and Ocean of Love, ever continuing His work of creation *ex nihilo* ('adam): the mine from which He produces everything. God is the Living, the Everlasting, and Kindness and Mercy, the spark not only of His Power and Wisdom but also of His Love, can be discovered in everything. Love, like Being and Beauty and Goodness belongs essentially to God and is manifested in a thousand mirrors in the phenomenal world. Divine Love is a positive Cosmic force in the world, without which the world would be frozen. The sun, the earth and mountains are lovers, and everything in the world loves something. Love shuns extreme asceticism; like Bernard, Rumi sees human love between woman and man as a symbol of the love between God and the believer, but more than Bernard he appreciates it in its own right as good and divinely inspired. The world, though merely a mirror, is affirmed as positively beautiful.

Rāmānuja

Outside the circle of Near-Eastern-born theism lies Indian thought, represented in the person of Rāmānuja (1017–1137), older contemporary of Bernard, and the greatest exponent of Hindu *bhakti* and Hindu theism (cf. Kesarcodi-Watson 1992; Lott 1976; Overzee 1992, Van Buitenen 1953; Veliath 1993).

15. But God remains an eternal noumenon, the Ground of Being, of all Creation, an inconceivable superabundance, closer to Neoplatonism and Vedanta than to Taoism and Buddhism. Probably his God is indeed 'inexpressible reality', the 'non-dual reality', 'the Absolute One without attributes', 'strikingly close to the monism of the Upanishads, of Sankara's *Advaita* and of Plotinus' Sublime'. See Padmanabhan (469, 478). According to the renowned Rumi scholar R A Nicholson, Rumi was 'a pantheist in the sense that he identifies all real being with God and regards the world of phenomena as a mere image of the divine ideas reflected from the darkness of non-being: the universe in itself is nothing, and God alone really exists' (Nicholson 481).

In Rāmānuja's *Visistadvaita* ('qualified non-dualism')¹⁶ the Supreme, Brahman, is the only, all-encompassing reality.¹⁷ He taught a realism as far as the existence of the world is concerned, yet at the same time saw the world as non-different from Brahman.¹⁸ At the religious level Rāmānuja worshipped Vishnu as the Supreme God, flanked by his consort, the goddess Lakshmi. At that level Vishnu (a name for Brahman, the Supreme Reality) is worshipped as a Personal God. Theologically his system was a devotional theism, in which God as responding to human devotion and entering into deep personal relationships with humans is the ultimate basis for a morality of love in everyday life.

Brahman has unfathomable, unlimited qualities: He is not only perfectly blissful, but also all-knowing, all-powerful, all-embracing, endowed with limitless, maximum mercy, affection, generosity, friendliness, sweetness, compassion, boundless love for his devotees, and grace (*prasāda*). In his infinity He is not only 'a subject enjoying bliss' in 'immeasurable magnitude', but also the 'cause of bliss' in the world (Veliath 1993:67), and He can be experienced and enjoyed in loving meditative devotion (*bhakti*) and bliss, which is the central focus of Rāmānuja's teaching, which amounts to a variant of *kataphatic* mysticism.

Vishnu is the origin of the world (the Creator), sustains the world (the Preserver) and eventually reabsorbs the world (the Destroyer). This process is driven by the Will of Brahman. During the stage of extinction of the world (*pralaya*) distinctions do not exist and the supreme principle (Brahman) has not yet re-evolved. Therefore, Brahman can at that stage be called 'Non-being' (*Asat*) and 'Undeveloped' (*Avyākṛita*), but only in the sense that He is not connected to names and forms. However, subtle existence is never denied (Veliath 1993:53). Brahman evolves and assumes various forms out of love, for the benefit of the world and purely as sport or recreation (Veliath 1993:55).

The sincerity of Rāmānuja's passionate love for God cannot be doubted. Yet, following a more radical emptying in the Indian Buddhist tradition, this article would see Infinitude as absorbing anthropomorphic mental pictures of gods in a spaciousness relativising them to the point of disappearance, and it would see Infinitude as appearing from and disappearing

16. The easiest first move to locate Rāmānuja is to contrast him with his fellow Vedantins, Sankara (788–820) on the one hand and Madhva (thirteenth/fourteenth century) on the other hand. Sankara's monistic system, known as *Advaita* ('not-dual', 'not-different') *Vedanta* taught that the individual, the world and the Absolute (Brahman) are 'not-two', but one. At the other end of the Vedantic spectrum Madhva's monotheistic system (perhaps influenced by Christianity or Islam) taught that the individual and the Supreme are different; it is hence known as *Dvaita* ('dual', 'different') *Vedanta*.

17. Nevertheless, Brahman has qualities, attributes, modes, forms, distinctions, various manifestations, which was his main difference from Sankara's monism, which inevitably ended up in ascribing illusory (*māyā*) status to the world, the result of ignorance, false imposition (*avidyā*).

18. The following quotations from Rāmānuja's commentary on the *Gītā* contains the essence and gives the flavour of his thinking: 'God, the Supreme Person, is modified by all existing beings and things which modify him by constituting the body of which He is the *ātman* ... God is said to be the quintessence of all entities. All these entities with their peculiar individuality and characteristics have originated from God, are *shesas* ('dependents') of God and depend on God inasmuch as they constitute his body, and God himself is modified by all these entities of which he is the *ātman* ... God himself, however, does not depend on them ...' (II.1.3.8–11). Translation of J van Buitenen (1953:101).

on the edge of inaccessible Horizon. Rāmānuja does not have an intention towards Absoluteness, dropping away below Person and Being. From the point of view of this article, theistic personalism occurs in the space of contourless Infinity, yet anthropomorphised in various ways ('Person' and so on) by human beings with their mystical yearning for transcendence.

Taking all necessary methodological provisos into account, Rāmānuja's mysticism of Love may be said to be kindred in spirit and structure to what is found in Judaism-Christianity-Islam.

Avatamsaka Sutra

Most exemplary of the drift of this article is the Buddhist Mahāyāna sutra, *Avatamsaka Sutra* ('Flower ornament scripture'),¹⁹ presupposing the original teaching of the Buddha concerning the radical impermanence (*anicca*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*) of all things, and their inter-relatedness and conditionality (*paccaya*). The anonymous authors of that text present Cosmos as seen through the enlightened eyes of a Buddha or advanced *bodhisattva*.

The last book (*Gandavyūha Sutra* XXXIX.1135–1518) in this huge volume describes the pilgrimage of a young man, Sudhana, towards enlightenment, sent on his way by the *bodhisattva* Manjushri, metaphoric personification of Wisdom. En route Sudhana encounters the *bodhisattva* Maitreya (XXXIX.1452–1502) and is invited to enter Maitreya's Tower. Maitreya (meaning 'the Compassionate/Loving One') is a metaphoric personification of Compassion. At the request of Sudhana (XXXIX.1489 ff), Maitreya snaps his fingers, the doors open and Sudhana may enter the Tower, metaphor for Infinity as intended in this article. It is as vast as all of space, as measureless as the sky, adorned with incalculable beauty and glory such as chambers of jewels, jewel lotuses, jewelled promenades, jewel stairways, radiant gems. Inside the tower are hundreds of thousands of other towers, similarly arrayed, each infinitely vast, each distinct, all reflected in each single object of beauty and glory in every one of the multitude of tower, each gem reflecting the entirety of all the towers with all their objects of beauty. It is a truly

19. The *Avatamsaka Sutra*, dating from around the first–second centuries CE, originated somewhere in the Indian cultural sphere (India, Central Asia) and was composed in Sanskrit by an unknown number of anonymous minds from an unknown number of heterogeneous original sources. In the Indian culture of the time some Buddhist texts were published under the names of their authors: these were works of scholarship and were known as *sastras* ('treatises'); other texts (*sutras*) emerged without identifying their authors, but were attributed to the Buddha, which did not entail a claim that it had been literally proclaimed by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, or a theory of verbal inspiration by a celestial Buddha, but signified that the teaching corresponded to the central teaching of the Buddha. In that doctrinal setting the anonymity of authorship would not have been an embarrassment, signifying loss of intellectual property and prestige, but the expression of the very teaching of non-self. Introducing and translating this text into English was the achievement of Thomas Cleary (1993). The references in this article refer to the relevant book in the Sutra and the page number of Cleary's translation. Infinite Love as understood in this article finds no direct equivalent in the *jhāna* system of early Buddhism as such. There are levels of meditative absorption in Infinity of Space and Infinity of Consciousness, but not of Infinite Love. However, there is a close approximation in the Sublime Abodes (the *Brahma-vihāra*), as set out in the *Tevijja Sutta* (the thirteenth *sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*). The four sublime virtues (benevolence, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity) are extended universally, pervading all four quarters of the globe, above, below, all round, in all directions, everywhere, the whole universe, not omitting anything, not passing anything by. The Buddha declares such meditation to be the path to companionship with the god Brahmā. The practice of the four Abodes of universal cosmic love is but one step removed from experiencing 'Brahmā' (shorthand for what humanity has called 'gods' or 'God').

inconceivable realm, flooding Sudhana with joy and bliss, clearing his mind of all limiting conceptual thought. The book continues to pile up staggering, concept-transcending visions of beauty. Realising that the phenomenal world is completely suffused with this dimension, beings on the path towards enlightenment and Buddhahood are filled with love.²⁰

The voidness or emptiness which is the essence of things, the lack of inherent nature in all things, the principle of interdependence and inter-relation of all things are the groundless ground of compassion, allowing Book XXV to speak of 'vows' directed at the saving of all sentient beings:

I should be a hostel for all sentient beings, to let them escape from all painful things. I should be a protector for all sentient beings, to let them all be liberated from all afflictions. I should be a refuge for all sentient beings, to free them from all fears. (XXV.533)

The difficulty faced by a text such as this Sutra is that it inevitably oscillates between the impossibility of saying anything (given the nature of its central orientation) and the necessity to say something (given its commitment to exist compassionately in the world, including its need to speak and its commitment to communicate with people).²¹

Mencius

Moving further outwards, we hear the voice of Mencius (c 370–c 290 BCE)²² in China, and outside the reach of historical scholarship as far as possible links of influencing with cultures and religions to the west are concerned. Mencius continued the humanism of Confucius (c 550–c 480 BCE), but added an element of mysticism to it. While not rejecting the traditional Chinese feudal system, he nevertheless built a large measure of human heartedness (*jen*) into that social model. What had been non-excluded possibility in Confucius became positive teaching with a strong mystical component in Mencius. He taught that 'no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings of others' (Lau 1970).

His moral philosophy of altruism (*shu*) and commiseration (*ts'e yin*) had a transcendent, metaphysical root: Heaven. Human heartedness has been given by Heaven. And this metaphysical root has a mystical dimension. Originally, the human individual is one with the spirit of the universe and may recover 'the lost mind', the 'child-like mind', the original nature. Mencius not only believed 'that a man can attain oneness with the universe', but also had 'absolute faith in the

20. They 'are tireless in guiding and perfecting all beings, because they are aware all is selfless; they never cease taking care of all beings, because they embody universal love and compassion' (XXXIX.1500–1501).

21. In the sixth century this problem would lead to a split within one of the two main branches of Mahāyāna: the Mādhamika school (founded by Nāgārjuna roughly in the same period that gave rise to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*). Whereas the Prasāngika sub-school uncompromisingly rejected every conceptual position, the Svātantrika sub-school allowed for adopting a position in the ongoing debate about truth, with the proviso that its relativity be written large in its programme. It would appear that the *Avatamsaka* was closer to the second strategy. Moreover, the Svātantrika epistemology took up a middle position between Mādhamika and the second main branch of Mahāyāna: the Yogācāra school, which boldly developed a grand speculative metaphysical mysticism of an idealist variety.

22. Also called Meng K'o, Meng Tzu, and Mengzi (cf. Fung; Wing-Tsit Chan (1963:49); Lau (1970)).

moral purpose of the universe' (Lau 1970:45–46). He imagined a metaphysical mysticism centred in Love.

San religion

Step into the world of the aboriginal South Africans, the San, direct descendants of the earliest manifestations of human life on the earth, and occurring far outside the geographical and temporal span of what has been looked at so far. Theories understanding preliterate religions from the normative perspective of any particular belief system are here suspended.

San religion, the clear traces of which are to be found in rock art and evidence of deliberate burials dating back to at least 10 000 years ago, no doubt continuous with older art of about 25 000 years ago, and, stretching back to the beginnings of the emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens* in Africa, reminds of the earliest layers of religion.²³ If 'religion' is understood (as is the case in this article) as the attempt found in all cultures since the beginning of humankind to orientate themselves comprehensively in the world, in the widest horizon possible, the similarities between the sophisticated designs looked at on previous pages and this ancient religion outweighs the differences. The San represent a mode of thought much older than the substantialised dualities of Western Asian monotheisms (to which Christianity belong) as well as the philosophical monisms of India and the West: a mode of thought without an 'original', divinely inspired text, and without any claim to absolute truth – but equally impressive. It too is transparent to and reflects an original light glowing through this fragmented world. In their own unique way the San in myth and ritual gave expression to the pan-human need to come to terms with the conditionalistic coherence of all things (the root of love), all adding up to a meaningful world, in the ultimate embracing context of an unreachable, uncrossable Horizon on the outer edge of all.

An ideal-typical reconstruction of their religion as it manifested in historical times brings to light a mythological belief (not evolved under Christian influence) in a creator deity (variously named, including N!adima, N!eri and Gu/e). He is the source of power, although rather remote. The San people also believed in a second, lesser, cunning and erratic trickster deity (/Kaggen, //Gauwa). Humans are not hierarchically favoured above other forms of life. San people and all people are related, and all forms of life are dynamically interrelated in a multicausal matrix of interdependence, in ever-widening concentric circles, which, I submit, may count as a definition of love. This definition finds expression in the 'sympathetic bond' (Biesele 1975:160) between hunter and the hunted in its throes of death.

Anticipating the second part of this article, I wish not to deny the epochal differences between then and now, but to transcend any division between their supposedly 'primitive mentality' and the supposed superiority of the literate

23. Relevant literature includes Biesele (1975), Silberbauer (1981), Barnard (1992) and Krüger (1995).

religions over the last two and a half millennia. San religion from old Africa is a challenging dialogue partner, making a unique contribution to the kind of outlook underlying this article.

Theoretical context

Positing an identity of the various notions of Love presented above would be a serious mistake, yet it must be acknowledged that together they form a family photograph with uncanny resemblances connecting them. Of course, historically speaking, they are ultimately all connected, all manifestations – some older than others, some more closely grouped in time than others – of one pan-human historical context since the beginning of humankind, of which the San are the reminders.

What sort of metaphysical–mystical imagining, what sort of theory, could provide a background, not only to understand present reality as it is, but to promote a morality of love towards all beings? A morality that would not succumb to the law of claw (however smoothly covered in silk gloves) and tooth (however pretty the words flowing across it may be), let alone reinforce it by elevating selfishness to the basic law of nature? By 'imagining' here is not meant the invention of arbitrary tales, but listening to the dream arising from the depths of the human spirit, the envisioning of a kindness–understanding, kindness–promoting frame of mind. Such imagining is at odds with the imaginings of social determinism and biological reductionism of much of present-day science across disciplines. Can a notion such as the one put forward here be proven? No. It can neither be verified nor falsified 'scientifically' by an appeal to the 'facts'. But it can be known by its fruits.

So let us imagine Absolute Horizon as the absolute end of the road, not a mere boundary on the other side of which a different reality or more of the same reality can be postulated *per analogiam*, based on previously obtained knowledge of that other reality. 'Analogy' is here understood to mean that both compared entities ('my love' and 'a red, red rose') have to be known to make any sense; 'Absolute Horizon' is understood to mean the outer limit altogether of mental perception and experience, beyond which nothing can be assumed or postulated. As the Horizon where all ontology and epistemology simply peter out, it may also be evoked by the term Emptiness. Here categories such as 'on the other side of', which may be 'wholly different' or 'somehow continuous', lose all relevance and do not apply. This Horizon lies further than apophatic certainty of a Being or Person, assumed or known by other means, such as religious tradition; further than an already content-filled *fides* seeking *intellectum*.

Somehow, on this side of that terminal Horizon where all disappears, Infinitude (including Infinite Love) is intuited to arise, not restricted to human existence, but permeating Cosmos. By 'Infinitude' is not meant endless extension, but non-substantial, non-fixed potential

mediating between Cosmos and ultimate Horizon, and thus Origin of all. Love connotes the sympathetic interrelationships of all things in the large context of Cosmos as an organic, living whole, the parts of which are dependent on the whole and on all the other parts, affected by all, sensitive to all. Love is the urge to co-be well and the volitions and sentiments motivating and enabling the interactive ability to achieve that.

To return to where this article started, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) in his *Divina Commedia* not only elevates St Bernard to his final guide at the threshold of Paradise (*Paradiso* XXXI – XXXIII), but also builds his entire *Commedia* around Love. In the central *canto* of his entire edifice of 100 *cantos* (*Purgatorio* XVII) (Esolen 2003:453), he lets Virgil explain that neither Creator nor a single creature has ever existed without love, either natural, instinctual love or intellectual, volitional love, however perverted such love may in fact be. Love is the axis of his poem, of his world. From the perspective of this article, this is greatly admired. The world cannot be understood adequately unless it is understood as in principle, *ab Origine* on the ultimate Horizon (further than Dante could see in his time), permeated by Love.

And so matter and life are to be loved. Of course love is not the overall factual truth of life; life as known in the human world is mostly selfish and greedy and dominated by conflict and hatred, with a few strands of cooperation and harmony sparsely woven into that fabric. Yet in human beings there is an, as it were, ingrained categorical imperative to love. The fact that it is mostly overridden by urges to exist at the cost of others does not nullify the priority of love. Love comes first and last, hatred and greed in between. Loving reciprocity follows from the very nature of things. Bursting open as Infinitude becomes Cosmos, spreading its seeds, Infinite Love incurs the inevitability of dissonance, friction, conflict - in short, what humans term 'evil'.

Such a dimension of Infinitude, Infinite Love, between concrete, manifest Cosmos and wholly withdrawn Horizon, is imagined to be the source of humanity's mysticisms, religions and arts with their rich mythologies. But the appreciative acknowledgement of this dimension does not imply an uncritical endorsement of the hardening of magnificent 'fiction' with their gods and other personages, into quasi-'fact'.

Infinitude, becoming Cosmos, is the dimension experienced in, for example, the mythologised mysticisms of the Abrahamic theisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These religions introduced the dimension of God as Love into the human religious discourse. The dimension of God as Love was their greatest gift to the world. But look behind the profound myths; sense the empty depth behind those faces in the clouds, prior to lover and beloved, subject and object. This article acknowledges the dimension of Infinite Love as a primordial structural dimension of the world and

as arising from a Horizon inaccessible to human thought and experience. The entire gamut of emotions and volitions felt by humans derives from Infinite Love and tends towards the experience and expression of love in thoughts, words and actions. The notion of Infinite Love provides a transcendental root for a morality centring in love for all living beings. Fun and laughter, weeping and lamenting, wrath and forgiveness, happiness and anguish, anxiety and confidence, sympathy and callousness, cruelty and mercy - they all arise from and long to return to this Love. Even anger and hatred parasitise on it as perversions and can only be appeased by love. Every cosmic being is essentially attuned to existing in harmony with the other cosmic beings in the largest totality.

Psychology and other sciences speak about the empirically accessible origins and manifestations of the inner life in all its many shades. Metaphysical mysticism suggests a more remote origin of emotions and volitions, which is also the direction in which emotions and volitions are inclined by nature. And it suggests an ethos. Emotions and volitions in humans and other beings are not the chance outcomes of blind contingency in an indifferent process of evolution since a blind big bang. Yes, they did arise in a process of cosmic unfolding, but that process itself has Love as a central aspect, which has been part of the Cosmic process since its beginning, with roots in Infinitude, arising on this side of Horizon. Look awestruck at the stars and you see into the secret of Love. Touch a stone with respect and you feel the secret of Love under your fingers. Caress a living being with love and you give sensible form to Infinite Love.

Some, seeking to transcend the greed and hatred in human existence, have sought and found relief and salvation at the edge, where Cosmos emerges from and merges with Infinitude. Theirs has been the mysticism of love. It is *bhakti-yoga*; it is following the command to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. Kataphatic Divine personalism is transcended in apophatic Divine substantialism, and apophatic substantialism is ultimately transcended in Absoluteness.

This article does not espouse conventional theism and does not endorse atheism, neither in the form of rabid antitheism nor in the form of disinterested atheism. It is a meta-theism, sympathetic towards the mental pictures of gods read into the tumbling clouds in the sky of Infinitude by human beings since an early stage in their emergence as a species. Humans attach names and characteristics to nameless, featureless Infinitude between Cosmos and Horizon: not necessary, but probably unavoidable and understandable, and as such not wrong. Not at all, but every one of such configurations should be seen as relative to all the others, and relative to Absolute Horizon. A merging of the horizons touched on above, largely still considered irreconcilably different, is feasible and necessary - and tendentially in line with the life and message of the Man from Nazareth.

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