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Romantic Love, Covenantal Love, Kenotic Love

"If creation is seen as the work of love, then no normal man can be indifferent to that response of creation on which depends the triumph or the tragedy of love." (Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense, p. 78)

"Whoever Does Not Love Abides In Death." (1. John 3:14b)

I. The So-Called "Romantic Love" and the Problem of Gaining a Perspective on Love as the Ultimate Nature of Reality¹

The fact that love is a creative power and even has to do with the "ultimate nature of reality" is not easily conveyed to people in the Western industrialized nations at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Human life together - without love: that is certainly unimaginable. There is no way around love for the establishment of relationships and marriage on the basis of the free choice of a partner. Nor can we imagine the living together of a family without love. Yet at the same time theorists of culture and sociologists advise us to reduce exaggerated expectations in love and to historicize them - to date them back to the early 19th century.

The hope that love, along with art, could become a protective agent "against the dominant characteristics of modern society ..., against the economic necessity of work and exploitation, against regulations by the state, against research with its drive towards technology," this hope has turned out to be a failure. The hope was: "The threatened I saves himself/herself by turning to love, he/she regenerates in the family and finds ways of expression in art." Reality, however, is different: "The passion of love becomes the pathology of family life which cannot be dissolved into a chain of proofs of love to be expected and given; and if art represents the world of the bourgeois, then it does so in forms which reach from mild irony to sarcastic parody."²

Thus a strange tension remains of extremely high expectations centered on "love" and a

1 I am grateful for many helpful comments on my contributions to the consultation on "Love as the Ultimate Nature of Reality: Cosmology, Freedom, and the Theology of Kenosis" by its participants, esp. John Polkinghorne, Keith Ward and Ian Barbour.

2 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1997), 987f; cf. N. Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion. Zur Codierung von Intimität*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1982), [Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy, (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986)].

normality of endless disappointments, a tension which provides one of the most important ingredients for entertainment and popular music, from "All you need is love" and "I worship the power of love (*Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe*)" to "Love grows colder when love grows older" and "Love mostly begins with red roses, but what comes then? (*Mit roten Rosen fängt die Liebe meistens an, doch was kommt dann ...*)"

Common sense and literature, but also theology and philosophy have let themselves be captivated by this cultural fixation on "love" **in the mutual emotionally affected communication between two partners** which is often termed "romantic love." Christian theology has all too often not moved beyond this "relation", "mutuality" and "I-Thou-constellation" in its numerous efforts to illustrate and to reflect on "love". The few seminal differentiations which were reached immediately became "classics", such as the differentiation into "eros and agape".³ More recently the intricate relation between self-reference and selflessness has been at the center of thought. The suggestions offered are rather vague or even rhetorical: "In ever so great self-reference still greater selflessness."⁴

It has seldom become clear that along with this concentration on the romantic "love relation" an enormous reduction was made which even omitted the structural wealth of family love relations⁵, not to speak of more complex or even religious conceptions of love. This inability to find orientation is probably one of the main reasons for the difficulties that current Western industrialized nations have in their attempts to privilege an ethos based on the family over against an ethos centered only on partnership, e.g., the many heated and helpless debates about marriage between homosexual partners. Despite the fact that disclosures about "love" were amazingly scarce and poor, the paradigmatic concentration on the affective person-to-person-relation was maintained. The great topic "*Love and the Ultimate Nature of Reality: Cosmology, Freedom, and the Theology of Kenosis*" may be seen as a call to move out of this captivity of thought.

3 Thus the title of the much cited book by Anders Nygren: *Eros und Agape. Gestaltwandlungen der christlichen Liebe*, 2 vol.s (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann 1930 and 1937).

4 Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt. Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*, (Tübingen: Mohr 1977) 430ff.

5 For the fixation on "partnership" and the subject of dominance and subjection, see Karl Barth, *KD III/1*, esp. 347ff; *KD III/4*, esp. 244ff a.o.; Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, (New York: The Free Press 1967) 288ff, offers an instructive opposition in the concentration on the caring love towards the child.

For myself at least I should like to read the subject as a suggestion to regain a deepened understanding of the power of love on the basis of religious sources. I should like to emphasize the fact that such an understanding could be made fruitful in the context of personal and family relations. Thus the aim is not an abstract opposition of love as a social, cultural or even cosmic power to love within the limits of an I-Thou-relationship.⁶

II. Accesses to Love as a Creative Power on the Basis of the Biblical Traditions

If we take the time to compare the numerous statements about love in the biblical traditions we are first struck by the multitude of "relations" which cause them to speak of "love". From the Pentateuch to the Song of Songs numerous references to family and certainly also to person-to-person forms of love are present, some of which come close to the romantic form. More conspicuous, however, as is well known, is the more general love of the neighbour, the love of the stranger, the love of the enemy, and--particularly extensive in the texts of the New Testament letters--the "brotherly" love or rather the fraternal love which thematizes more complex social relationships.

Furthermore, the love of God is dealt with in detail, the love of God's name, of God's word, the love of God's justice, God's instruction, commandments and law. There is strong attention to God's love of God's people, of the world, of the city of Jerusalem, of law and justice, etc. Even if some of these "relations" should be nothing but rhetorical analogies, as perhaps the love of darkness or of injustice⁷ that are occasionally mentioned, a rich supply of forms and contents remains which needs a closer examination.

Apart from the great variety of "love relations" in the biblical traditions it is striking that **for**

⁶ Like many other conceptual and cultural achievements of modernity, romantic love within the boundaries of the I-Though-relationship was a powerful form to support abstract equality and freedom. Sarah Coakley rightly emphasized this in our consultation. Today we see the price that was paid for the disembodied and de-contextualized self of modernity which is the "reference point" of this kind of love. We gradually become aware of the dynamics of the self-secularization and self-banalization of religious communication connected with an empty faith (the mere relation to a transcendent "inner other"), that was compatible with the modern concept of the self. And we also see the lack of binding and nurturing power in the romantic mutuality of two transcendental egos. Most of us lost the trust in speculations which, with the young Hegel and other philosophers, see this kind of love as the ultimate "dialectical unity of unity and difference" of two egos.

⁷ The biblical talk of love should be taken seriously in relations definitely characterized as negative (love "of this world", love of "the respect among people", cf. also the opposition of love of God and of "mammon"), and the relationship of love to instances not directly personal (justice, wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness) should not be ignored.

centuries the love of God is strictly connected to the respect for and "attention to the commandments" or to the "holding fast to God's word".⁸ Correspondingly, "to love God's name" and "to serve God" (Isaiah 56:6) can be connected. Surely the relation between the "love of God" and acting according to God's intention and order becomes particularly clear in Jesus' relation to the Creator and is represented in detail in the Johannine writings (John 14:31). The "Love of God", however, quite obviously also means to take up and pursue God's intentions, God's interests in the good order and the well-being of creation in general .

These interests of God in the good order and the thriving of creation, are best and most perfectly served in the love of neighbours, but also of strangers and even of enemies. **For this very reason the fulfilment of the love of God does mean that this love cannot be grasped as merely in terms of a reciprocal one-to-one relation.** It includes, and even opens up, law-abiding and loving relationships to the world, to fellow human beings, and even to other fellow-creatures, according to God's intentions. The so-called "double commandment of love"⁹ should thus not be regarded as a combination of two different basic relations, but as a strict connection which says something important about the biblical understanding of love in general. If love is globally termed the "fulfilment of the law" (Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14), then the loving relation to God must not be left out of consideration, even in places where it is less clearly detailed than in most of the New Testament traditions.

The love relation to God which is concretized and materialized in the fulfilment of the law or in love of the fellow-creatures, is not a mere "moral motivating power", nor is it a continuous impulse to selflessly outgrow oneself and to outgrow the merely reciprocal and symmetrical love relations: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them." (Luke 6:32; cf. 6:33ff. and Matth. 5:46f.) The Johannine writings present this in detail when they strictly connect love of visible fellow human beings and love of the invisible God (cf. 1. John 4:12.20). God's love between the Father and the Son is a love which does **not** just mean "abstract reciprocity" and in which human beings can only somehow "mystically" gain participation.

Rather, it is a love connected with the making known and the revelation of the Father or His name (John 17:26), or with the revelation of the Son and his making his home among his

8 Ex. 20:6; Deut. 7:9; Luke 11:42; John 14:15.21ff.; John 15:9; 1. John 5:3 and more often.

9 Mark 12:30f; Mt. 22:37-39; Luke 10:27; cf. Dtn. 6:4f.31 and Lev. 19:18.

witnesses (John 14:21ff.). The love God loves with and wants to be loved with is thus revealed to human beings, and God is revealed in this love. In this love, **God makes God's identity and God's power known.** In the same way that the Creator entrusts Jesus Christ with God's power via the love relation with him, in the same way also human beings are to become familiar with God and gain participation in God's power through love.¹⁰

Paul describes this giving of participation in God's power by the figure that God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5).¹¹ At the same time Paul repeatedly describes a process not easily grasped, a process of **growth** in those who let themselves be seized and stamped by God's love and by love for God. **They enter into a relationship to the living God which transforms them.** For in love, they cannot be satisfied with a relationship to God the knowledge of which is distanced and objectivizing. They must try to obtain that knowledge "face to face". "Then I will know fully even as I have been fully known." (1. Cor. 13:12; cf. 1. Cor. 8:1ff.)

At this point the complex love relation to God threatens to collapse into a clueless mystical direct relation in which the meaning of the imperative: "Pursue love!" (1. Cor. 14:1), growing in love (1. Thess. 3:12), increase of knowledge in it (cf. Phil. 1:8.9), and particularly the creative power of love, simply cannot be seen anymore. But the living and loving relationship to the invisible God is no *unio mystica*. It is certainly no romantic love between God and human being in which God and human being exchange their personal emotions on the basis of abstract equality. The living and loving relationship to God, which takes shape in the forms of love among the creatures and grants participation in God's power, sets free a **process of growth.**

The different New Testament traditions describe this process of growth with striking similarity. In love human beings participate in God's identity and truth in a way that God's identity and truth gain shape and reality in themselves, in their bodies and their lives.

- Paul describes this when he says that "Christ's love" actually urges human beings to know:

10 Cf. John 3:25; 14:21ff.; 17:26ff.; 21:15 and more often.

11 Cf. also the talk of love as the most important fruit or gift of the Spirit in the First Letter to the Corinthians. For the figure of the "pouring of the Spirit", see M. Welker, *God the Spirit*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1994) 134ff and 228ff; M. Welker, "And Also Upon the Menservants and the Maidservants in Those Days Will I Pour My Spirit." On Pluralism and the Promise of the Spirit, in *Soundings LXXVIII/1* (1995), pp. 49-67.

God's creative activity invites us in Christ to participate in Christ and to become "a new creation" (2. Cor. 5:14-17).

- The Letter to the Colossians emphasizes that in the **union of love** we "have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is Christ himself in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2f.).

- According to the Letter to the Ephesians, Christ's love which "surpasses all knowledge" is not only known through the rooting in love and is based on it, but also the loving persons receive an ever increasing participation in God's strength and being, "so that you may be filled with the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:11; cf. 17ff.).

III. Covenantal Love and Kenotic Love

If we explore this rich texture and structure of divine love and of love directed to God, the *covenantal form of love* becomes clear. John Polkinghorne, in a response to my paper, differentiated it into "the mandatory aspect, the revelatory aspect and the transforming aspect: 'you will be my people and I will be your God'".¹² The covenantal love bestows a great dignity on human beings. They are dignified to take up and pursue God's intentions in relation to creation, God's interests in the well-being of creation. They are dignified to reveal God's will and God's plans for creation. And they are dignified to work toward the fulfilment of the divine creative, sustaining and transforming agency. No less is expressed in the notion of the **imago Dei**.¹³

The covenantal form of love discloses the **weight of love**, its communicative and its creative powers. On the other hand, it can appear as a challenge and as a burden which makes God's love absolutely inaccessible to human beings. For who could claim that he or she could respond to this calling and take care of God's intentions for God's creation? Who could claim to participate in God's strength and being? And even if we found such (and even found ourselves among them) who would be ready to claim all this on the basis of the covenantal

12 John Polkinghorne in a response to a first draft of this text.

13 Cf. M. Welker, "Creation, the Image of God, and the Mandate of Dominion", in: *Creation and Reality*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1999, 60ff.

love, for the covenantal form would seem to restrict the universality of God's love.¹⁴ Even if we escaped a superficial understanding of God's relation to creation and to human beings framed in terms of romantic love - the notion of covenantal love could come as a threat of turning love into a living law that it would be beyond our capacity to live up to.

The kenotic love of God revealed in Christ and recursively visible in God's creation does not give up the dignifying weight of covenantal love. But it reveals that God turns lovingly to those who in themselves do **not** have any potential to take care of God's intentions for creation, who in themselves do **not** have any potential to reveal the goodness of God in their ministry, and who in themselves do **not** have any potential to help transform the world according to God's will. In kenotic love God unconditionally turns to creatures in order to liberate them out of the depths of confusion, lostness and sin, to win them for the coming reign of God, to enoble them to the experience and the enactment of the love of God, something that they can only experience and enact as a new creation.

In this kenotic love, God gives space for the individuality and depth of God's creatures. They are not measured by a rod stretching beyond their possibilities. Out of their depths God rescues them and re-creates them for the divine purpose.¹⁵ In kenotic love God reveals a burning passion for creatures - not just for their suitability to the divine plan for the world. On the other hand, this interest is not just an erratic longing for an erratic contact with an erratic existence: it is the willingness to meet creatures at their greatest distance from God and even in their attempts to seclude and shield themselves from God, so that they may finally "share in bliss and become vehicles of the truly creative freedom of the divine nature".¹⁶

A passionate interest in the otherness of the other, a passionate interest in letting the other unfold himself/herself in freedom, a passionate interest to pave ways for the unfolding of his/her life, all are characteristic of kenotic love. But at the same time, it is **love** that is directed to the other - not just curiosity. This love does not come without the element that I would now like to term "covenantal promise" and "covenantal challenge". It respects the depth and the mystery and the freedom of the loved one; it even keeps this depth and mystery

14 Keith Ward has poited out this problem to me: Does the covenant in Judaism not set apart the Jewish People? Does the New Covenant not set apart the Church?

15 Cf. Ian Barbour's plea for "reconceptualizing divine power as empowerment rather than overpowering control", *God's Power: A Process View*, in this volume.

16 Keith Ward, *Cosmos and Kenosis*, in this volume. Holmes Rolston, *Kenosis and Nature*, rightly speaks of a "second birth".

and freedom alive and holds it open.¹⁷ But it seeks to win the other for a new life in a new creation. The kenotic love of God seeks a **new** covenantal relationship - without boundaries, without exclusion, but with the divine purpose to win the beloved one for a participation in the divine life and in the divine plans for creation. The life of Christ offers guidance to help us become familiar with these plans. And his unconditional love for the world, which secluded itself from God and turned life-supporting powers against God, time and again wins us over for the loving communion with God in which we become restored to the **imago Dei** and to membership of the new creation.

No other New Testament text describes this intention in greater detail than the First Letter of John. In love, human beings become "children of God." Even if their participation in God's identity waits for further revelation, their belonging to God is certain, because it is based on their love and the fulfilment of Christ's commandment connected with it (cf. 1. John 3). "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1. John 4:7). The first letter of John connects this living in God's love and living as a loving being with a "new life". A person who does not love, however, remains in death. But a person who loves has passed from death to life in the new creation (cf. 1. John 3:14).

This whole process, again, is not a just one-to-one event between God and a beloved creature. Although the uniqueness and depth of the individual creature is of the utmost importance to God, and should be of the utmost importance to the whole creation, the manifestation of love and the transformation of the creation *ex vetere* into *creatio nova*¹⁸ is of the utmost importance to the rest of creation. Here we can learn of Paul's burning interest in raising faith, love and hope in a community (in fact: in different concrete communities with individual profiles of faith, love and hope), in sharing and rejoicing in it - in the common expectation of eschatological fulfilment and in growth toward it. According to Rom. 8 this development and growth is not just of importance for fellow-Christians. The lives of those who live in God's kenotic love are of the greatest importance because they point the expectation of the whole creation to nothing less than the full revelation of God and God's intentions with the world. For this reason "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." (Rom. 8:19)

17 Cf. 1. Cor. 12, particularly 12:7.

18 Cf. John Polkinghorne, *Kenotic Creation and Divine Action*, in this volume; also *The Faith of a Physicist*, Princeton University Press 1994, Chapter 9.

God's kenotic love, which gives an unconditional share in itself and in that power of new life to creation, which it is, time and again directs the human beings towards God and God's fuller revelation.¹⁹ The power of God's kenotic love, revealed in Christ's love and bestowed on creatures by the working of the Holy Spirit, draws the human lives into the creative love which makes them bearers of God's presence and the incarnation of the new creation.

19 John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, Trinity Press: Harrisburg 2000.