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The Erotic Trinity

Assuming the perspective of Side A affirming Christianity creates a dilemma. To disagree with those Christians who consider same-sex relationships and/or same-sex attraction to be a sin doesn't, after all, mean that affirming Christians do not believe that such a thing as sexual sin exists.

Unfortunately, however, the traditional arguments which help guide most denominations in their avoidance of sin are largely discarded by affirming Christians--not because they are ignored, but rather because affirmation destroys them, necessarily. The teleology of a Thomas Aquinas, for instance, must fall by the wayside long before a Christian may express approval of same-sex relationships (and deservedly). Similarly, unconvinced by teleological arguments, the typology/iconography of the marriage as an icon of Christ and His Bride the Church must also collapse under the reexamination of marriage. In short, how can one understand polyamory (or, for that matter, so-called promiscuity, adultery, and fornication) as either the error of perennialism (for straight men) or polytheism (for straight women) if same-sex relations are no longer understood to be iconographic of deism (in the case of men) and atheism (in the case of women)? Christianity, then, if it truly desires to embrace a plethora of possible relationship types according to a new understanding of scripture and tradition, must find a way to reconstitute the icon of marriage with a similarly new understanding.

The first task, especially in light of a renewed Christian emphasis on love, is to speak directly toward the definition of love. Often, the definition of love offered by Christianity derives from Thomas Aquinas, that old Illusionist. He tells us, quoting Aristotle, that to love "is to wish good to someone" (ST I-II.Q26.A4). In Aristotle's own words, "Let loving, then, be defined as wishing for anyone the things which we believe to be good" (Aristotle Rh. 2.4.2). Here the English translation uses the word "loving" in place of the Greek φιλεῖν, which would be friendship, or, rather, loving in the same manner as we would a friend. Aquinas here uses the phrase *amare est velle alicui bonum*. Clearly, Aquinas recognizes that Aristotle does not use the Greek ἀγάπη and thus himself refrains from using the Latin *caritas*. The grafting of the Aristotelian friendship to the Christian agape becomes where the Illusionist's sleight of hand appears particularly artful. Characteristically with Aquinas, the eyes focus so much on the objections and their answers that the weak link in his argument is lost in admiration of his mind; in other words, the intelligence behind the construction of his answer hides the weakness of a premise. In this case, Thomas answers against the charge that "charity is not friendship," "[o]n the contrary, It is written (John 15:15): 'I will not now call you servants . . . but My friends.' Now this was said to them by reason of nothing else than charity. Therefore charity is friendship" (ST II-II.Q23.A1). *Caritas/agape* is friendship, friendship is willing good for the other, therefore agape is willing good for the other, and so a definition of love for subsequent Christian generations is born. And yet the basis for the comparison relies on a single proof-text without any justification even offered--we are told that "this was said to them by reason of nothing else than charity," and yet there is nothing to indicate such a statement is true. Now, we may note that Christ tells his Apostles that they are his friends immediately after he gives them the commandment to love one another. However, he uses the word ἀγαπᾶτε, and so while we may agree with Thomas that Christ here is speaking of Christian charity, that doesn't require us to believe that Christ was agreeing with Aristotle's definition of friendship in calling them friends. Given that Christ has already provided the commandment in question, apart from any discussion of friendship (John 13:31-35) and the Johannine books of the New Testament's tendency toward asides, repetition, and abrupt shifts in conversation, we have no reason to assume that Christ is equating the terms in the way that Aquinas assumes he is (and assumes Aristotle is, for that matter).

But if the definition of love offered by Aquinas is not adequate, then where do we search for one which satisfies? As it so happens, as with many of our questions, scripture itself offers a solution. In this case, the Song of Songs. While there are some who may read Song of Songs as merely an ode to

marriage, it has a long tradition of being read as an allegory for the relationship between God and His people (originating in Judaism, where the Bride symbolizes Israel itself, and with Christianity following suit, interpreting the Bridegroom as Christ and the Bride as the Church).

If there is one thing in which Song of Songs is awash, it is love. Some examples follow, although the work is so replete with the language of lovers that in some ways it would be easier to list the verses which do not apply. In all of the following

Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine, Smelling sweet of the best ointments. Thy name is as oil poured out: therefore young maidens have loved thee. Draw me: we will run after thee to the odour of thy ointments. The king hath brought me into his storerooms: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, remembering thy breasts more than wine: the righteous love thee... shew me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou liest in the midday, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of thy companions.... my company of horsemen, in Pharaoh's chariots, have I likened thee, O my love... In my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loveth

(Songs 1:1-3, 1:6, 1:8, 3:1)

the word for love employed is some form of agape, whether ἠγάπησάν or ἠγάπησέ or ἠγάπησεν, except for πλησίον in Songs 1:8 which indicates more of the word companion. Notice that in the quoted passage, the same verb is used both in reference to the speaker's soul in addition to the speaker as a sexual being.

The exchange continues on between both parties, the Bride and the Bridegroom so that it is clear that the relationship is not one sided, as with “How beautiful art thou, my love, how beautiful art thou! thy eyes are doves' eyes, besides what is hid within. Thy hair is as flocks of goats, which Come up from mount Galaad” (4:1). Additionally, the language often is specifically sexual throughout, for which we can take “Thy two breasts like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies” as a representative verse (4:5). Some, if we apply a critically attentive eye to the language employed and don't, on account of its scriptural source, let it pass over our heads like Prufrock's peach over so many high school students, might incline us to blush, as when the Bride says “Arise, O north wind, and come, O south wind, blow through my garden, and let the aromatical spices thereof flow. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat the fruit of his apple trees” (4:16-5:1). In that context, best perhaps to leave “I have drunk my wine with milk” on the page without remark (5:1).

The obvious objection would be the flexibility of the word agape in scripture. After all, the Apostle John tells us that many men “loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” and uses the word ἠγάπησαν to do so (John 12:43). We could perhaps debate over exactly how much those who rejected the teachings of Christ out of fear loved the praise of men, but the easier interpretation is clearly the context of the word. For instance, few would interpret the love of God in John 3:16 to be a vague affection or a general feeling of preference, and indeed it isn't surprising to find that God so ἠγάπησεν the world.

Indeed, David Bentley Hart, in his book *The Beauty of the Infinite*, defends the essential role of eros in agape. He tells us that “[John] Milbank is surely right to deplore...the echo of a certain theological current that has so severed agape from eros as to reduce the former to a sterile, almost suicidal expenditure of love” especially because “[t]his current so exaggerates the selflessness of divine love as effectively to evacuate the image of God of all those qualities of delight, desire, jealousy, and regard that Scripture ascribes to him” (Hart 264). Instead, we should understand that “[i]n simple human terms, a love that is inseparable from an interest in the other is always more

commendable, more truly selfless, than the airless purity of disinterested expenditure, because it recognizes the otherness and delights in the splendor of the other” (Hart 265). That is, “it is a love always of recognition and delight...giving to receive and receiving to give, generous not in thoughtlessly squandering itself, but in truly wanting the other” and that crucial “the ‘ethical’ must belong, for theology, to an aesthetics of desire: of gratuity, grace, pleasure, eros, and interest at once” (Hart 265). In short, a “Christian ethics cannot help but concern itself with the cultivation of desire” (Hart 265).

Of course, Hart affirms only the traditional but oft-forgotten relationship between the Trinity, the divine perichoresis, first articulated by Church Fathers such as Gregory Nazianzen, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus. Perichoresis in a manner in which laity might be familiar may be best summed up, albeit perhaps accidentally, by the classical shield of the Trinity. That is, it is precisely because the Father is not the Son is not the Holy Spirit which allows the Trinity to be a God of Love, the Persons infinitely giving of Themselves in a celebration of Their own alterity, perfectly permeating each other, the infinite added to the infinite in a deep kenotic, loving eros, a total self-sacrificing erotic embrace. Such is the love between the Trinity that its Persons do not live outside of Their desire for and privileging of the Other. As Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov puts it, to “love is to live for and in the beloved whose life becomes our life...‘The Father loves the Son’...The Son ‘abides in the love of the Father’...And the Holy Spirit we know as love all-perfect...This love makes the sum total of Divine Being a single eternal Act. After the pattern of this unity, mankind must also become one man” (28-29).

Theologically, this relationship is quite important to our understanding of God. After all, the Christian at least ostensibly believes God is Love, and yet one of the traditional beliefs of Christianity is also that God doesn’t require creation. That is, though God might find it most fitting out of His infinite nature to create, He is what He is, so to speak, without needing for there to be a creation in order to be What He is. In other words, God is Love even when there is no “thing” other than God to love.

As Father Dumitru Staniloae articulates

Love must exist in God prior to all those acts of His which are directed outside Himself. Love must be bound up with His eternal existence. Love is the ‘being of God.’ Each Person of the one God, having His being in the Others, is therefore wholly selfless...Each Divine ‘I’ puts a ‘Thou’ in place of Himself...The Father sees Himself only as the subject of the Son’s love, forgetting Himself in every other aspect. He seems Himself only in relation with the Son. But the ‘I’ of the Father is not lost because of this, for it is affirmed the Son Who in His turn knows Himself only as He Who loves the Father, forgetting Himself...This is the circular movement of each Divine ‘I’ around the other as center. They are Three, yet each regards the Others and experiences only the Others. The Father beholds only the Son, the Son only the Father, reducing themselves reciprocally by love to the other ‘I,’ to a single ‘I.’ But each pair of Persons in the Trinity, reduced in this manner to One, beholds only the third Person and thus all three Persons are reduced to One

(qtd in Damascene 251-252).

As the hieromonk Damascene explains in further elaboration upon Staniloae’s words, “Could there not be only two persons?...perfect objective Love could not exist if there were only two Divine Persons, for exclusive love between two persons, like self-love, can be self-absorbed and subjective” (Damascene 252).

What faces those who would rebuild the iconographic love of marriage becomes rather clear: God desires all humans to be one in love, God extends His love to all persons both in their unity and in

their individual manifestations (loving their alterity as alterity, their particularity as particularity), and the love that God extends is already plural. The Persons of the Trinity are already in a loving, self-sacrificial relationship with Themselves, and so any entrance of creation into said relationship is both superfluous and polyamorous.

It is likely understatement to suggest objections to what has been posited here exist. The first which comes to mind would be whether or not an understanding of the Trinity and our relationship to God and humanity necessarily requires eroticism in a sexual sense, with no doubt a follow-up question concerning children or others unable to provide consent and thus malign the entire theory by associations with untoward sexual practices. To that, perhaps an anecdote by way of explanation. Two seminarians began their studies the same year, and almost immediately found that they disdained one another. Their theological perspectives were different, their pastoral approaches were different, their personalities were different, they seemed to share nothing in common except a mutual aversion. Being men of faith, they attempted as best they could on several occasions to overcome these difficulties, offering something in the way of a “we got off on the wrong foot” to one another before sliding soon after into hostility again. At last, the spiritual director of one of the men, after some considerable time spent relating the issue and its detrimental effect on the spirituality of the penitent, suggested that the best course of action was to keep contact to an absolute minimum. Asked about Christ’s command to love one’s neighbor, the confessor replied that sometimes the way in which we love our neighbor is avoiding them, if there is no other option. That is, we are to love to the extent which love is appropriate in a situation and in a way which respects the human dignity of the person being loved. As Hart points out, “love your neighbor” is not an empty abstraction, the general golden rule platitude which it has become in our society--it means literally to love our neighbor as neighbor; that is, we should love our neighbors in their particularities and because we actually love them, we truly desire their particularity in the vast sea of infinite being. Thus, all love should not only fill us with desire for the other but also incline us toward kenosis, putting the other before ourselves. As a result, our sexual pleasure contains no priority in a situation where said pleasure becomes detrimental to the one who should be put above ourselves. Additionally, just as in the hitherto monogamous, matrimonial-centric paradigm of sexual morality, we are not expected to have identical relationships with each person on earth--that is, there is less imperative toward a sexual relationship as expression of agape so much as the opening of the possibility that previously marginalized relationships in Christianity may be theologically acceptable.

A second obvious objection comes from the mouth of Christ Himself. After all, does the Gospel of Matthew not relate “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (5:27-28). Similarly, do the synoptic Gospels not all relate some variation of Matthew’s “‘It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (5:31-32)? And let us not forget the words of Christ in the Gospel of Luke, where we are told “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother” (18:20). All of which of course draw upon the Ten Commandments as well. The scripture arrayed against the argument threatens to become insurmountable. But is it actually?

What precisely is the sin of adultery? We might here offer an Aquinian teleological argument against but we have already departed from that dark land, and so must make do in the light of day. In other words, lest we become divine command theorists, is the sin of adultery a sin simply because God says so or does God say so because there is something inherently wrong with adultery? The

Christian is probably inclined toward the latter, but in the context of affirmation we've already dispensed with the tools necessary to make the philosophical argument if we insist on carrying a traditional sense of adultery alongside an untraditional view of marriage. But we know that our charity is intended to be kenotic--and therein lies the means to reconstruct an understanding of sexual prohibitions within a new understanding of our relationship with one another and with God. After all, the adulterer is selfish. The adulterer seeks pleasure at the expense of his or her spouse. Whereas we have already established that all relationships exterior to the Trinity are necessarily polyamorous, it doesn't become a stretch to find that adultery may not include extramarital relationships provided that everyone is being treated with love and everyone is engaged in love selflessly. Christ's prohibitions of divorce can be addressed in similar language and with similar sentiments, though it will not be addressed here due to no desire to rehash the longstanding debate over divorce itself between most Protestants on one hand, Roman Catholics on the other, and Eastern Christians as a kind of position unto themselves.

Promiscuity or Biblical condemnations of fornication certainly find no immunity from the argument, as the transgression there becomes one of selfishness rather than purely the act of using one's genitals. In other words, pre-marital and extra-marital sex may not be sinful acts provided that they are not selfish acts; if those engaged are truly loving, with Christian charity, all involved who may be possibly affected by such a situation, and provided the act itself cannot be substituted with masturbation (in other words, provided that one partner is not "using" the other for mere gratification, where a hand or any other method could take the place of the lover) then as much as it might sound strange to ears so used to hearing a certain perspective on sexual morality it may not constitute an actual sin. Restated, the problem with fornication is not the marital status nor the numbers (which just becomes a kind of slut shaming) but the intent of those involved. This is why masturbation, under a new interpretation of marriage, love, and sexuality, remains a sin--it is a selfish act, completely cut off from the Other and intended only for the masturbator's sexual release.

To this one could of course respond that Apostles and the Church Fathers appear to have not interpreted Christ's words in this manner. As for Paul, he provides us with the oft-quoted 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, which the RSVCE rather horrendously translates as "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." And yet, as usual, we find the answer in one of the Johannine books. In 1 John, the Theologian tells us "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him" (3:6). And yet were we to take the verse literally, that would require us to believe that no one who was a Christian would be capable of sin. Theological perspectives of various denominations aside, John removes for the reader that possibility in the same book, as when he writes "If we sin we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (3:6). The Christian community to which John writes was falling victim to the teachings of a group of proto-Gnostics, and John makes clear that some of their teachings (having a special relationship with God exempting them from sin) were heretical. In doing so, he makes bold statements like the one in chapter three, and yet his purpose is not literally to say that Christians who fall short of Christ's perfection do not know God, but rather to make clear that the faulty teachings of this group are, in fact, heretical.

Similarly, it is well-known that Paul's letter to the Corinthians is, in part, correcting the behavior of a number of them who had fallen into what might be today deemed a cult of sex; and so, were the reader to take Paul's admonitions in the same spirit as those in the first epistle of John, the text of Corinthians would lend itself more to interpretation as letter than binding dogmatic

statement. Rephrased, Paul perhaps say nothing so much as has been said here, that sexual immorality is indeed immoral; what constitutes sexual immorality, though, is not offered to us in such a clearly delineated fashion, and relying on age old interpretations based on age old translations with ideological goals (this verse must be translated with these specific words because we are a Reformed or Catholic or Anglican or Orthodox Church) is precisely what prompted the project of the Hart New Testament in the first place. Paul, as usual, proves to make for more slippery reading than upon first glance, and it helps no one to continue to rely on such doctrinally motivated translations as πόρνοι translated as fornication, ἀρσενοκοῖται as homosexuals, μαλακοὶ often left out altogether, or pretending that the Greek μοιχοὶ meant the present, English definition of the word adultery (when it fact referred to men who had sex with married women).

As far as Church Fathers, saints, popes, etc. may be concerned, sometimes it behooves us to remember that the holy frequently obtain holiness despite their flaws and not because of them. While acknowledging that there is a case for a particular reading of Scripture based on patristics and the like, one need only reflect on Chrysostom's *Against the Jews*, Nicholas V's *Dum Diversas*, the decision of Bellarmine and the other qualifiers in the Galileo affair, Justinian's interference at the fifth ecumenical council, disagreements among the Fathers on everything from a literal or allegorical creation to a liturgical rubrics, and of course without even delving into the heated if tired topics such as the filioque, original sin, predestination, ecclesiology, or soteriology. And yet on even the most controversial issues, Christians generally seem to regard other denominations as more or less as valid if not sound in their theology, and rarely as actively supporting sin even on controversial topics as important as the nature of God. True, in the dark corners of polemical excess one can find Catholics and Orthodox still prepared to murder one another over the filioque, but one is far more likely to find the millions (dare we admit, billions?) of Christians who don't care and never will care whether or not other Christians are wrong. Which is to say, as a worst case, if one were to remain convinced that the Fathers provide a compelling enough argument to retain the traditional view of sexuality, marriage, adultery, etc., it could surely be relegated to the same category occupied as pants vs skirts, headscarves vs bare heads, beards vs no beards, leavened vs unleavened, statues vs no statues, wine vs grape juice, or dancing vs a joyless life in Kansas. In short, perhaps that in the end all that remains, once Scripture provides the glimpse into the life of love and unity with God which it does, is arguing over the secondary sources, this is another issue which could be relegated to "agree to disagree" rather than as a central plank of any denomination.

Why, then, speak of marriage at all? Why have a concept of marriage if relationships, even of a sexual nature, outside of or in addition to marriage do not necessarily constitute sin? It would be foolish to suggest that navigating the waters of relationships is always an easy task, and even more difficult to suggest knowing the difference between selfish and unselfish love always comes easily to the inquirer. Christ therefore provides humanity with a means of prioritizing relationships so that the Christian may be assured that he or she intends to act selflessly should a conflict arise. Hence the importance of marriage as a kind of relationship barometer, keeping our love grounded and provided a framework in which we may learn to love selflessly. Marriage becomes a "first among equals" of sorts in comparison to the infinite relationship options which extend from marriage, in much the same way as creation stems from the Trinity in all its endless permutations while remaining grounded in the infinite but not chaotic love of the Trinity itself.

And at last, before us rests the return. In the beginning the icon of Bride and Bridegroom shattered before a changing perspective toward love, marriage, relationships, and sin, and difficult task was to reconstruct from the shards such a venerable and esteemed analogy in the history of Christianity. The truth of the matter is that the icon for which we searched was the icon from which we started; Christ and Church, Bride and Bridegroom, the icon of marriage itself. The problem, after

all, consisted not in the icon itself but the rigidity of the interpretation of the icon. Maximus the Confessor, for instance, in his centuries contained in the *Philokalia*, finds great meaning in the placement of the tent of Moses outside the camp of the Hebrews. What he doesn't find, however, is great meaning in the tent as tent, but rather iconographically what the tent can teach the Christian. In the same way, marriage as icon of Christ and Church has much to teach us about relationships, marriage, and Church, but only if we recognize it as icon and not in a rigid, ossified immobility. Scripture does indeed present us with a heterosexual relationship as an image of our relationship with God; but what of it? Scripture presents us with a monogamous relationship as an image of our relationship with God, but again what of it? Do we allow the analogy to operate on its own terms, unfolding to us its meaning, or do we insist on reading it on its literal face? After all, Ark of the Covenant is often seen as iconographic of the Theotokos Mary (and vice versa), and yet we wouldn't insist on Mary's construction out of gopher wood because we understand the analogical relationship.

“Creation...is a symphonic and rhythmic complication of diversity...a song praising God, the true, primordial, archetypal music, in which human nature can glimpse itself as in a mirror,” which in part is why Saint Gregory of Nyssa can inform us that “the pursuit of virtue is not...simple ethics, but the acquisition of God, and that moral and mystical knowledge differ not in kind but only in intensity” (Hart 194, 197). The separation of virtue/ethics and mysticism causes the sort of legalism and rigid interpretations which limit a proper understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, in particular because one can only participate in union with God through the mystical, which before a Western separation of the concept remains also the moral. Rather than engaging in a relationship with God which is hindered or helped by our moral decisions, the moral decisions and the prayerful union and the communion of the Church are the same action, so that we cannot separate marital ethics from our basic interaction with God Himself. Through a reappraisal of marriage and sexuality in light of God's infinite delight in particularity and alterity, as well as through the recognition of iconographic relationships as analogical relationships rather than univocal, not only does space within the Christian tradition open for affirmation of relationships of all types but also strengthens the community in exploring new ground and improving communion with God.

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