'God is love': a familiar verse of Scripture (1 Jn 4:8). It has become a commonplace in Christian theology to deny the reverse, that ‘love is God’. The shadow of Ludwig Feuerbach haunts all discussion, since to say that ‘love is God’ seems to replace God with a human ideal. But might it be possible to affirm that ‘love is God’ without a reductionist account of God and without confusing the creator with the created? The accompanying question, as I hope to show, is ‘in what sense is love knowledge?’

I suggest that this is a cutting-edge question because: first, the affirmation that ‘love is God’ opens up the possibility of a non-objectifying way of talking about ‘God’; second, it addresses the situation of secularity in society, or at least an era where people are no longer familiar with Christian concepts; third, it seems to offer a common ground for inter-faith conversation; and finally, it responds to the late-modern philosophical emphasis on immanence and either rejection of transcendence or doubts about it as a diversion from attention to human life. I will return to all these potential advantages in the course of my argument.

Feuerbach’s objection to the phrase ‘God is love’ without its reverse form is still worth reflecting on. If love is simply a predicate of God (God is love, among other attributes) then ‘love recedes and sinks into insignificance in the dark background – God.’ According to the Christian story itself, protests Feuerbach, it is out of love that ‘God renounces his godhead’ in the incarnation, so that ‘love is a higher power and truth than deity.’1 Despite his reduction of divine love to an idealised projection of human love, Feuerbach is surely on the right track when he points out that the logical distinction between subject and predicate in the statement ‘God is love’ usually leads to an ontological difference between God and love. Love is not being regarded as something essential in itself, so that ‘there lurks in the background of love a subject who even without love is something by himself’, which Feuerbach concludes means ‘an unloving monster’.2

Two significant theological strategies have been developed to meet this objection and make it possible for a theologian with a non-reductionist idea of God to affirm that ‘love is God’. In the first place, Eberhard Jüngel (following Karl Barth) regards it as legitimate in theology, as long as the love we are talking about is what is revealed and disclosed through the cross of Jesus, which then becomes our love for each other.3 This is the love with which we can identify God, who has identified God’s self with love – that is, the kenotic love of Christ. But this formulation taken alone involves the danger that we push human and divine love apart, in defining human love entirely ‘from above’ rather than out of the phenomena of human experience, and so risk being a short step from denying human agency in true love altogether (as Kierkegaard effectively does).4 Jüngel himself characterizes human love as a ‘still greater selflessness in the midst of such great self-relatedness’ in which the loving self ‘comes to itself’ in an ever-new way through the other, so integrating eros (desire for fulfilment by another) with agape (sacrificial self-giving).5 There is much to be said for this
description, but Jüngel fails to show how ‘coming to one’s self’ applies to the love of God as revealed in the cross.

Jean-Luc Marion provides a further way of affirming the phrase ‘love is God’, within the context of his argument that we must think God as entirely free from the categories of being. Love enables us to do so, since ‘God loves before being’ and love surpasses being with an excess that knows no measure. This is true of both human and divine love, but God loves ‘infinitely better’ than we do. We can only think God as giving himself (sic) as love, to be thought as the gift. He writes, ‘To think GXd, therefore, outside of ontological difference, outside the question of Being, as well, risks the unthinkable .... What name, what concept, and what sign nevertheless yet remain feasible? A single one, no doubt, love ....’ 

This alone can free human beings from making idols in place of God, since ‘the gift’ liberates Being/being from ontological difference. This account, we notice, retains the element of revelation (the gift) that we find in Jüngel. But a similar question arises: does Marion’s assertion of the superabundance and gratuity of the gift of God’s love weaken his appreciation of the potential of human love? Further, Christian theology has always placed the declaration ‘God is love’ in the context of the Trinity – a communion of loving relations – but Marion’s argument in itself requires only an undifferentiated view of God as source of the gift. We might also ask, since all talk about God is bound to be metaphorical, whether there might not be a place for the metaphor of ‘being’ alongside – though not superior to – the analogy of love in attempts to think God in a non-objectifying (non-idolatrous) way.

Two recent contributions from outside theological discourse raise ideas about love that I suggest are significant for the theological enterprise, for coping with Feuerbach’s challenge and gaining from the responses of Jüngel and Marion to it. First, Judith Butler envisages the human body as vulnerable because it is dependent on relationships which form a network throughout the world, whether human, animal or the whole environment. Primary among these relations are those of love, in which we are ‘open to others’. Butler writes that ‘to say any of us are vulnerable beings is to mark our radical dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining and sustainable world. This has implications for understanding who we are as emotionally and sexually passionate beings, as bound up with others from the start.’ For Butler, there is something mysterious and ungraspable about this dependence of the bodily self on a world of relations. She writes that ‘Something is larger than one’s own deliberate plan, one’s own project .... ’ And she asks, ‘Something takes hold of you: where does it come from? What claims us at such moments, such that we are not masters of ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized?’ Her answer is certainly – by a complex of relations on which we depend. But her way of expressing this registers some mystery about this situation of the self. The relational network escapes final analysis or conceptualization, rather like the rhythmic chora of Julia Kristeva to which, at one point, she was indebted for her thought.

A second philosophical voice is Martha Nussbaum who insists that the emotions, and primarily among them love, are a form of knowledge. Love, like other emotions such as grief and anger, is not an unthinking movement, a tide by which we are simply pushed around. It is a form of cognition because it is object-orientated, has intentionality towards the
object of love, involves belief about the object, and – above all – perceives value in the object for the lover’s own flourishing and for the growth of others. Love, she thus claims, is an evaluative judgement and a ‘value-laden cognitive state.’ She detects, however, a problem with the evaluative cognition of love: it tends to a partiality in valuation, accompanied by an ‘excessive neediness’ and even vengefulness when thwarted. It may lead to attempts at mastery and the making of totality. She thus goes on to suggest that love is not just object-orientated, but is always a ‘more complex interaction of relations’. The evaluation of love is not simply eudaemonistic, or concerning our own flourishing, but ‘more cognitively dense’. While always erotic (desiring another), it requires ‘wonder’ and imagination, which foster relational virtues of compassion, reciprocity and a sense of the particularity of oneself and others. Nussbaum’s analysis thus moves beyond mere object-orientation into the kind of participation in a network of relations envisaged by Butler, while keeping the perception that love is a form of knowing.

The philosopher Alain Badiou agrees that love is ‘a truth procedure’, or ‘an experience whereby a certain kind of truth is constructed’. When asked, then, to elaborate on his statement that Christianity is a ‘religion of love’, Badiou replies that: ‘Christianity grasped perfectly that there is an element in the apparent contingency of love that can’t be reduced to that contingency. But it immediately raised it to the level of transcendence, and that is the root of the problem. This universal element I too recognize in love as immanent. But Christianity has somehow managed to elevate it and refocus it onto a transcendent power’. The result, thinks, Badiou, is that Christianity develops a love which is ‘passive’ and ‘deferential’ to an absolute authority, and ‘Love on bended knee is no love at all as far as I am concerned’. We catch echoes of Feuerbach’s protest here. Is it possible to retain the transcendence – or infinite ‘otherness’ – of God and yet recognize the value of human love?

In the light of this recent discussion about love I want to name Butler’s ‘network of relations’ and Nussbaum’s ‘complex interaction of relations’ by the Christian theological name of the Trinity. It is this that enables us to affirm that ‘love is God’ and opens out a path of investigation into love which can draw on the methods of phenomenology and science. ‘Trinity’ is about thinking God as an event of interweaving relations of love – which must include justice – into which all living beings are immersed. Taking up Marion’s rejection of an objectified ‘idol’ of thought, I am not thinking of three divine agents (let alone ‘beings’) who ‘have’ relations with each other and yet remain one, but three dynamic movements of relation which we can only know by participating in them.

The traditional name ‘persons’ in God refers to nothing more or less than relations. The traditional names ‘Father, Son and Spirit’ point to the direction of these relations: there is a love that gives in moving out into the lives of others in a costly way (‘The Father sends the Son’), a love that gives in response to others (‘the Son glorifies the Father’) and a love that opens these relations up to new depths and a new future (‘The Spirit of hope’). Each of these movements of love receives as it gives: they are eros and agape at once. They can of course be gendered differently, using other appropriate metaphors. The range of metaphors we use to denote them might even – pace Marion – include analogies of being, though we will want to say that this being is always a becoming.
There will be those who object that we cannot envisage relations without subjects exercising them. This, of course, is true with regard to finite beings such as human persons. But the word ‘God’ denotes a mystery of love which cannot be categorized like other things because God is self-existent; in the words of an ancient Hebrew prophet, God is ‘incomparable’.\(^{25}\) This is the transcendence of love as identified by Badiou in Christianity, but - in reply to Badiou - it is always immanent at the same time. These divine relationships can only be known in and through the bodily relations of created beings, whether human or other members of the organic world. Infinite otherness can only be known through the otherness which marks relations in the material world. Theologically, we may say that this derives from the desire (eros) of God to create and have fellowship with finite beings, a desire that eternal relations of love should always be open to embrace time and history.

Yet there is the element of transcendence, as created beings find themselves immersed into a field of relations where love is stronger, wider, more inexhaustible and indestructible than their own. This engagement transcends the subject-object structure by which we know things in the world, and yet it enables us to treat the finite objects of our knowing (whether people or the environment) in a less dominating and controlling way. Because we are not thinking of supra-natural ‘subjects’ but of relations themselves, this is not an experience of being ‘subjected’ to higher powers. Perhaps this accords with Nussbaum’s perception that love as an emotion is object-orientated, while the problems that arise from this cognitive evaluation need to be dealt with through a ‘more complex interaction of relations’ which foster empathy and compassion.

Engaging in the love of God is, then, a form of knowing. It is knowledge not by ‘observation’ but ‘participation’. Since these divine movements of love are self-disclosing (Marion’s ‘gift’), we can also say with Jüngel that they are normatively revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Christians will find that this particular life fits exactly into the pattern of giving and receiving in love into which all beings are immersed, though they will be ready to find the same rhythms of love in all religious experience. As long as we recognize that there is this transcendent dimension within human love, we can say that ‘love is God’ as well as ‘God is love’.

This is, I suggest, the cutting-edge issue for the exploration of love today. We can use the tools of phenomenology and also neuroscience (examining, for instance, the working of the social-neurone network) to investigate the immanent conditions of love, while all the time being alert to the ‘more’ and the ‘excess’ of love that is there. In immanent networks of relation we can find traces of the wider network that sustains them. This is a two-way process. The religious perspective shapes our empirical investigation, prompting the questions that need to be asked: after all, God is love. The empirical results will shape theology, offering ways of thematizing and conceptualizing an experience that in itself eludes objectification. Love, indeed, is God.

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2 Ibid.


8 Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, p. 222.

9 Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 47

10 Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 102.


19 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 64.


21 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, p. 64.


23 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, pp. 66-7. He adds: ‘even if love sometimes arouses passion in us that makes us yield to the loved one’.
