

‘Loving in Freedom’: Resolving some Conundrums about God as Love

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The theologian Karl Barth, in an often-quoted phrase, named God as ‘the one who loves in freedom’. *With*—but only with—a significant modification to his words, I want to suggest in this lecture that they provide a key to resolving some long-standing conundrums about what it means to say that ‘God is love’ (1 John). *That* of course is an even more frequently-quoted phrase, considerably older than Barth’s. I hope that this exercise may be of interest to an audience of philosophers of religion, though I should warn you at once that I am myself a *theologian* and not a philosopher. So let’s begin with:

1. Barth’s challenge to the philosophers

Barth created the dynamic name of ‘The one who loves in freedom’ because he wanted to shake free of metaphysical constraints that seemed to him to be attached to the notion of God as ‘Being’, and that he thought philosophers were imposing on God. Affirming the freedom of God he sets himself against a whole tradition of philosophy of religion in a revolutionary section in his *Church Dogmatics*, paragraph 28.

In thinking about Barth’s phrase, we notice that he develops four points to explain it. (1) First, the ‘being’ of God is at the same time the *act* of God, so God is ‘the one who *loves*’, an action. For Barth, God ‘is’ in God’s act of loving self-disclosure to us, and so he writes that:

with regard to the being of God the word ‘event’ or ‘act’ is *final*, and cannot be surpassed or compromised. To its very deepest depths, God’s Godhead consists in the fact that it is an event—not any event, not events in general, but the event of his action, in which we have a share in God’s revelation.¹

Barth makes clear that this act is a complex one: it is the interweaving of God as triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as disclosed in the act of revelation. We also notice that Barth is not espousing the classical idea of God as ‘pure act’ —that is, in which all potentialities in God are eternally actualized. For Barth, this act is a particular event, the event of love as God reveals it to us.

(2) Second this act is personal, *in that* it is love. Barth underlines that God is not a personified being (*ein personliches Sein*). We don’t think of God as a super-kind of person and then attach love to God as one of God’s attributes. God is personal in so far as God acts in love.

Barth admits that 'love' is a metaphor, like all language about God, but as God reveals God's self in an act of encounter we can only say that we know God as love (286).

(3). Third, God's being is God's *decision* – God is what God freely decides to be (271-2), and this is the one who loves, loving not just God's self but creatures God has made. Barth writes that 'God does not will to be Himself in any other way than he is in this relationship' with us (274). Barth thinks that God's decision to be for *us* in love is not *necessary*, whereas it *is* a necessary decision for God to love God's own *self* in the fellowship of the Trinity, in the love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God does not need created beings in order to love (280, 317); this belief has a long history, going back to Augustine. But now Barth gives it a twist. He asserts that, since God is what God freely determines to be, we can never 'get behind' God's decision to love us as creatures: we cannot envisage or talk about any other kind of God than this. Barth writes:

... in the free decision of His love God is God in the very fact, and in such a way, that he *does* stand in this relation, in a definite relationship, with the other. We cannot go back behind this decision if we would know God and speak accurately of God.²

We cannot go back behind this event. We should not seek or think of God anywhere else than in this act, or as any other than the One who is at this point and in this way. (281)

(4) Fourth, since God's act of love is completely free, it is self-moved. God needs no other to form the ground of God's existence as the one who loves (280). Here Barth affirms the ancient tradition of the aseity of God. But now comes the twist: because God's act is free, in the history of God's relation to the created world God is also free to be moved by others if God so wills. For Barth, aseity does not mean being totally unconditioned by other reality. Here he is cautious about the traditional idea of 'necessary being'. God is absolute in not being dependent on creatures for existence, but he is *also* absolute in being absolutely committed to them and immanent with them, with all that entails. He writes:

According to the biblical testimony, God has the prerogative to be free without being limited by His freedom *from* external conditioning, free also with regard to his freedom ... God must not only be unconditioned but, in the absoluteness in which He sets up this fellowship, He can and will also be conditioned. He who can and does do this is the God of Holy Scripture, the triune God known to us in his revelation (303).

Barth goes on to write that:

God is free to be despised in the world, and rejected in the world ... free to die the death which symbolises the end of all things earthly, in utter abandonment and darkness. God is free to be entirely *unlimited* over against the world: not bound by its finitude or its infinitude ... He is equally free to *limit himself* ... to be shut up in the totality of our time-space universe. (315)

So there is the four-point argument about ‘the one who loves in freedom’: first, God is God’s act of loving; second, God is *therefore* personal; third, God is *God* only in the way that God determines in love; and fourth, in love God is free to be conditioned and limited. But for this to be a key to turn the lock of the conundrums of love, Barth’s argument will need to be modified and a little re-shaped. So now I shake myself free from Barth, as he has shaken free from the tradition of philosophy. I will be *returning* to Barth’s four important points, but with my own *modification* of them. And our first question is this:

2. *Is God’s love benevolence or emotion?*

As Barth recognizes, talk of God as love can only be a metaphor. All language about God as the ultimate reality and final mystery of life must consist of metaphor and analogy, but I am taking the view that theology aims to find the most *appropriate* way of speaking about God. So I’m claiming that it is *more* appropriate to affirm that God loves than to say that God does not love, or even that we cannot say *whether* God loves or not. Classically, theology—taking its lead from scripture—has in fact affirmed a loving creator, but it has added hastily that that this love is purely benevolent, a matter of good will and *doing good* which is beneficial only for the creation, and which does nothing at all for God.

The strongest approach to love as ‘doing good’ denies that God has *any emotions at all*, taking the view that this would mean that God was being moved by something external to God; this in turn would mean that God would be a suffering and changing God, denied by classical theism. Those holding this view find it reflected in classical Christian writers. Augustine, for example, seems to distinguish between emotions and moral actions as far as the perfect love of God is concerned, writing ‘His is not the wretched heart of a fellow-sufferer . . . the pity of God is the goodness of his *help* . . . when God pities, he does not grieve [but] he liberates.’³ Anselm suggested that while God’s mercy is not *actually* compassionate (in the sense of suffering sorrow with us), it seems to us *as if* God were compassionate when we receive the effects of his mercy in our experience; in fact, confesses Anselm, ‘since You are impassible, you do not have any compassion’.⁴ Calvin maintains that when scripture speaks often of God’s grief and compassion for his people this is a mere figure of speech which accommodates to our understanding, ‘in order to move us more powerfully and draw us to himself’.⁵ Aquinas asserted that love, like joy but unlike sadness or anger, can be an act purely of the will and the intellect, so that love can be ascribed to God as an intellectual appetite.⁶

Those who deny emotions in God like this hold to a tight package of divine attributes including impassibility, immutability, timelessness, simplicity and pure activity. The explanation for a contingent and changing world is found in a creator who is unchanging, a world-view which has at times been influenced by Plato’s two worlds of Being and Becoming. A totally immutable God cannot suffer, since suffering necessarily involves

change, and such a God will be timeless, dwelling in an eternal present that lacks any succession of ‘before’ and ‘after’.⁷ In a God who has ‘simple being’, all essential attributes are identical to each other, and so one ‘part’ of God cannot alter while others remain the same, as is required by the notion of change and suffering.⁸ This God is also ‘pure act’ (*actus purus*) and so there is no movement from the potentiality to actuality which would be required by suffering (Weinandy 2000: 120–2).

Barth was protesting against this metaphysical bundle. But recently, among those who (generally) do hold it, there has been a ‘weaker’ approach to love as ‘doing good’. There have been attempts to recognize *something like* emotions in God, but in a way that falls short of being *passible* to external forces. Some have maintained that Augustine, Aquinas and other earlier theologians do not in fact exclude *all* emotions from God, but only those that are irrational, immoral, uncontrollable and disruptive to God’s bliss.⁹ Noting that Augustine and Aquinas distinguish between two kinds of *human* emotional phenomena, involuntary *passiones* and voluntary *affectiones*, it is suggested that God’s love and mercy are more akin to *affectiones* as a ‘subjectively warm states’ (that’s Anastasia Scrutton)¹⁰ or ‘God-befitting emotionally coloured characteristics’ (that’s Paul Gavrilyuk).¹¹ The love of God for the world is, in this view, not just good will but ‘intense passion’ and ‘compassion’ (that’s Tom Weinandy)¹². In this view God is both impassible *and* ‘impassioned’ (that’s Robert Lister).¹³ While some analogy with human emotions is thus affirmed, this approach also stresses the differences.

Some philosophers of religion can, then, see truth in the view that a God of love *must* be emotionally affected by suffering in the world. Impassibility is nevertheless maintained by envisaging God as *selecting* from a range of responses to the world that are eternally conceived and willed in God, and as applying them in a way suitable for the situation which obtains at any particular time.¹⁴ God is thus (I quote) ‘both invulnerable to involuntarily precipitated emotional vicissitude, and supremely passionate about his creatures’ practice of either obedience or rebellion’ (that’s Robert Lister again)¹⁵ Such a God might also be described as ‘voluntarily responsive’ and ‘emotionally responsive’ but never ‘passive’ (that’s (that’s R. T. Mullins¹⁶ and Richard Creel¹⁷).

All emotions as we know them in our experience involve movement, a ‘motion’ from one mood to another, and so a change in feeling. Those who think that God is prompted to make a certain response by something—especially suffering—in the world, admit that this implies an emotional change, and thus they are compelled to modify the attribute of immutability in God, while holding generally to the package of attributes traditionally connected with impassibility. Although God is held to be immutable in nature and in will, an exception is made for divine *feelings like love*. In this view, God does undergo change, but it is a change which is entirely driven by God’s own internal will, and by God’s control of divine emotions.

All these views I have been describing have one constant feature. They recognize that God's love must be called an emotion, but all divine feeling about the world, all love, is said to be entirely *voluntary* on God's part, and is a response controlled by the will of God. To maintain divine impassibility means that nothing 'happens' to God from outside the divine life which can cause God to suffer involuntarily; if this were the case, the argument runs, the distinction between creator and created would be lost.

This is the moment where one point of Barth's argument—the fourth one—can alter our approach to the question. If the love of God is *voluntary*, then in God's own freedom God can consent, not only to be affected, but to be *conditioned* by the world. God can allow something to *befall* God, something to *happen* to God. As Barth expresses it: 'God must not only be unconditioned but, in the absoluteness in which He sets up this fellowship, He can and will also be conditioned.' Putting it another way, a God who is 'a-se', *self-existent*, or dependent on no other reality for being, need not also be *self-sufficient* in the whole of the divine life, if God desires not to be. Elsewhere Barth says that God 'ordains that He should not be entirely self-sufficient as He might be (CD 3.2.10).⁵⁷ Keith Ward, who takes a remarkably similar line to Barth, declares more firmly that as creator,

[God] *is* no longer the completely self-sufficient eternal one; he is one who both expresses and creatively determines his own nature in relation to creatures. . . Thus when God returns to himself from his encounter with the other, he returns enriched.¹⁸

Passibility is about being vulnerable to what befalls us, and so a God of love will be passible. Now is not the occasion for working out this insight with regard to God's relation to time: suffice it to say that there is no reason why we should not understand God as indwelling time and history, even having a future, but in a way that is not *identical* to us.

Being conditioned by the world, and being enriched by the world, means an end to self-sufficiency. This challenges a move of thought which is similar to the approach of 'willing and doing good'. Here, *emotion* may be attributed to God but not the *particular* emotion of desire. Those who take this view distinguish between two sorts of love in human experience, self-affirming and self-giving love. In self-affirming love, which is often called 'Eros', people search for an object of love to satisfy their own being; love is desire, and the object of desire fulfils the lover. In contrast, self-giving love, which is often called 'Agape', is understood as persons spending themselves freely and carelessly for the other person, sacrificing themselves without any calculations about gain. God, it is said, notoriously by Gustav Aulen,¹⁹ needs nothing but God's self, and shows a love which is entirely agape, with no trace of eros.

By contrast with all these views of divine benevolence I am proposing that if the word 'love' is to have meaning, analogy though it is, it must include aspects of love as we know it in our own relationships. The love we know in human terms is reciprocal; each lover not only *gives* herself to the other, but *receives* a gift from the other. Each enables the other to be more

fully what they can be, contributing to the other's life and joy, and so fulfilling their needs. Love which is self-giving, often called *agape*, is inseparable from the love which desires to be satisfied, often called *eros*:

But now we have arrived at *our first conundrum*, arising from the question of whether love is benevolence or emotion: if God is indeed *enriched* emotionally by the love of the world, how is this compatible with the perfection of God? The Anglican poet and mystic of the seventeenth century, Thomas Traherne, wants to affirm the emotion of desire in God, but sees the problem—as well as for him, a solution [and in doing theology we should listen to the experience of mystics]. (He writes):

This is very strange that God should want, for in Him is the fulness of all blessedness.... He is from eternity full of want: or else He would not be full of treasure, infinite want is the very ground and cause of infinite treasure. It is incredible, yet very plain: want is the fountain of all his fulness ... Infinite wants satisfied produce infinite joys.²⁰

The twentieth-century Orthodox philosopher Nicholai Berdyaev, takes a similar approach, writing that: 'The fact that God *longs* for His other self, for the free response to His love, shows *not* that there is any insufficiency or absence of fulness in the Divine Being, but precisely the superabundance of His plenitude and perfection.'²¹ Traherne and Berdyaev affirm that the satisfying of God's desire by fellowship with created persons is not a lack of perfection, but a mark of the 'superabundance' of the divine perfection. This is an insight I gladly affirm: perfection is not a fixed total, as if *growing* in perfection means being less than perfect. In this it should be distinguished from *completion*. God can be perfect in relation to all the reality there is at one time, while incomplete because there is still 'more' reality to come through God's project of co-creativity with the world.

Following Barth, we may then affirm that a God who loves in freedom is free to be conditioned and satisfied by the world. But this point of Barth's argument still, I suggest needs some adjustment. Barth lays all the stress on the *will* of God to be free in one way or another. With his Reformed background of thinking about the decrees of God, it is all up to God's sovereign choice, and this can look like an arbitrary decision between options A and B. When Barth affirms that God is free to choose to be unconditioned *or* conditioned, this also looks like a swinging between two states of being, and questions might arise about the justice of God's choosing to be conditioned in one situation and not in another. The language of 'desire' may be of help here, not as an alternative to will, but as a dimension of it, expressing the 'settled quality' of God's will. It indicates something about God's choice that makes it infinitely different from our choosing between this and that, which might well be fickle and unstable. When we talk of God's eternal desire (*eros*), I suggest, we are recognizing that God's decision to be enriched by creation is the furthest frontier of our knowledge of God. The desire of God to be in a loving relationship with created beings means that God *will*

always be conditioned by the world, always open to being emotionally enhanced and completed by the love of those created.

We require all the resources of language, combining the ‘willing’, ‘deciding’ and ‘desiring’ of God in order to express the primordial fact that God makes covenant with creation, and not only—surely—in the universe that we know. But now we stand on the verge of another conundrum, which we can identify when we ask another question:

3. *Does God need the world to be a God of love?*

I have been suggesting that *if* it is appropriate to use the word ‘love’ about God, then the God who creates ‘out of love’ also has *desires* to be satisfied. But then, as the mystic Traherne perceived, this surely means that God has *needs*. When Traherne says that ‘God is from eternity full of *want*’, he means both that God is full of desire, and that God wants in the sense that God lacks, or is in need. So he goes on to say:

For had there been no *need* He would not have created the world, nor made us, nor manifested His wisdom, nor exercised His power, nor beautified eternity, nor prepared the joys of heaven. But He wanted [i.e. needed] angels and men, images, companions. And these He had from all eternity.

This is why Traherne concludes; ‘Infinite *wants* satisfied produce infinite joys’. In the reciprocal love we know as human beings, each giving and receiving in a fusion of eros and agape, each lover enables the other to be more fully what they can be, contributing to the other’s life and joy, and so fulfilling their *needs*. If the analogy is to hold with God, then as Traherne puts it, ‘infinite wants satisfied produce infinite joys’. A loving God desires and *needs* response from some kind of created world, and especially from personal beings that emerge from it.

Immediately we see the conundrum: a God who loves appears to need the world, and yet this need appears to infringe upon the freedom of God, restraining the freedom of the very One whom I have been naming (as least provisionally) as ‘the One who loves in freedom’. Karl Barth, whose phrase this is, is among those who deny the conundrum altogether. For Barth, the *negative* absoluteness of God means that God does not need the world, while the *positive* absoluteness of God means that God is completely committed to the world. But then Barth has to underplay the desire of God, the *eros* of God, in favour of the will of God. He has little to say about desire, and so ironically he qualifies the love of God.

One attempt to resolve this conundrum would be to say that the restraint on God’s freedom, arising from love, is simply a property of the *essence* of God. Because love is *essential* love, God is bound to reach out beyond God’s self to fellowship with the Other. Such ecstatic love cannot be satisfied with the otherness that is there within the fellowship of God’s own triune being, and this overflow of love necessarily involves a limitation on God’s

freedom – for example, making it impossible for God to act unilaterally or coercively in creation, without the cooperation of created beings, or to escape suffering, or to know the future in detail. I have already quoted Barth as affirming that God must be free to limit God's self, and I suggest that all these 'impossibilities' are appropriate for a self-limitation in love. But the affirmation of 'essential love', typified by Thomas Jay Oord, is highly critical of the idea that God *limits God's self* as an act of free will, believing that this introduces a note of arbitrariness. Instead, God is simply compelled by God's own nature into accepting restrictions out of love. Such an approach leaves the uneasy feeling that freedom has been discounted in favour of love, rather than envisaging one who loves *in freedom*. It is also not possible to take up Barth's assertion that the final word about God is that God acts, or is an event, a perception that I want to build upon in a moment. Rather, it seems there is a divine essence with certain properties that control subsequent actions. Trying to capture the dynamism of his idea of God as event, or a happening, Barth affirms radically that 'God does not need [even] his own being' (306).

Another solution may therefore be offered to the conundrum of love and freedom. Some (for example, Keith Ward)²² certainly root loving creativity in the essential properties of God's own nature, but distinguish this *general* inclination from the creation of any *particular* world. A more technical way of putting this is to distinguish between 'essential' and 'contingent' properties in God.²³ Thus it may be supposed that the disposition to create and to enter into loving fellowship with created beings is as much an attribute of God's 'necessary being' as is God's goodness, wisdom or everlastingness. God being what God is, this outward-directed love and creativity *must* be actualized at some particular time and place. The divine freedom is, however, claimed to be preserved in so far as God freely chooses a *particular* world in which to actualize this potential for relationship with created beings. However, I doubt whether this solution really does justice to the need-love of God. If we adopt it, we are bound to say that while *some* created universe is 'necessary' to satisfy God's ecstatic love, we ourselves in this particular world are not necessary. This takes little account of the needs that arise within actual relationships. It is not possible, in this way of thinking, to say that 'God needs *us*', but only 'God needs *some* creatures somewhere', and this severely disrupts the analogy of love we have been exploring.

I suggest that Barth's phrase, despite his own use of it, offers a basis for a way through the conundrum. God is 'the one who loves in freedom'. In freedom, therefore, God may surely, in divine humility, choose *to be in need*—in need not just of worlds in general, but of the particular world in which we live. If I may be personal for a moment, I first advanced this idea in my book *The Creative Suffering of God* as long ago as 1988, and it has been taken up by a number of other writers since then, including the philosopher Vincent Brümmer [in his book *The Model of Love*].²⁴ The objection has been made that (and I quote from Keith Ward) 'the creator cannot choose its own nature [that is, a needy nature], since that nature must exist *prior to any actual choice being made*'.²⁵ But any talk about God

‘stretches’ language, using it in an odd way; the question is what language is most adequate, or least inadequate. To speak of God’s ‘choosing to be in need’ is certainly odd, but it is a linguistic attempt to divert us away from a view of God as some kind of substance which exists and then subsequently acts; this kind of approach inevitably ends in thinking that God can be ‘observed’²⁶ like other objects in the world, even as an object of perception in the mind.²⁷

As I’ve already proposed, the language of ‘choosing’ to be in need needs to be augmented and corrected by the language of ‘desiring’. This desire is not just another form of essential love: it is an act or event. The advantage of beginning from the dynamic idea of God’s ‘willing’ or ‘choosing’ or ‘desiring’ is that it immediately speaks of God as such an event or a happening. It therefore prompts us to think in a more ‘participational’ way, using metaphors to speak of God which reflect our experience of being involved in God as an act of love.

This proposal engages with two of the points in Barth’s argument, that God is ‘the one who loves in freedom’. First, it accords with Barth’s stress that ‘with regard to the being of God the word ‘event’ or ‘act’ is *final* (his first point). [Of course, this is not the ‘pure act’ of classical theism, because ‘need’ implies potentials that have not yet been actualized.] Second it accords with Barth’s insistence that ‘God is his own willed decision’ (his third point) – in my account, God *is God* in freely willing and desiring to be in need. Here, however, I am making a modification. If God is choosing God’s own being when God chooses us as covenant partners, then — as Karl Barth himself expresses it — ‘in the free decision of love God *is God* in the very fact that he *does* stand in this relationship with the other’, so that ‘we cannot go back on this decision if we would know God and speak of him.’²⁸ However, because Barth does not want to speak of the ‘need’ of God at all, he introduces the reservation that with regard to loving us, God could have done ‘otherwise’. Barth thus distinguishes between two kinds of freedom of will in God. With regard to the world there is an otherwise, i.e. God could have chosen *not* to love us, but there is no otherwise in God’s own choice to love himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For all that, Barth emphasizes that there is no other God *in fact* than the one who *has* made a loving covenant with created beings, and it is sheer speculation to ask what God might have been like if God had not.

But there seems to be something profoundly unsatisfactory about the notion of God’s choosing to love the world in such a way that he need not have done so. [There is a hint of nominalism here]. It does not seem to touch the core of the meaning of love which must be more than willing the good of another as one alternative among other possibilities. Jürgen Moltrmann surely reaches the heart of the matter when he objects, ‘Does God really not need those whom in the suffering of his love he loves unendingly?’²⁹ It is not hard to think of an ‘otherwise’ in *our* loving, but this is because ours is limited by circumstances and lack of knowledge. We are not fully free to love. Since it is a matter of fact that God *does* direct

God's love towards us, it seems odd to say that 'he need not have done so', and here I am presuming to make Barth more consistent with himself. When we talk of God's eternal desire, I suggest, we are recognizing that God's decision to be in need of creation is the furthest frontier of our knowledge of God. We cannot go behind it and say 'if God had not created, then *this* would have happened instead' or 'God would be like *this* instead.' Further, we can't say that God *can* do anything 'otherwise' in the *future*, such as ceasing to limit God's self and reverting to coercive activity in the world (a scenario envisaged in much so-called 'open theism').

My formulation that God freely 'chooses and desires to be in need' is an odd kind of language, that alerts us to participation in an event of love. That is, we find that we are summoned to be involved in movements or rhythms of love and justice which are *like* relationships between persons. The model of God as Trinity is not an observational kind of language ('so, that is what God looks like') since God can never be an object of our knowing; it is a language of *participation*. When we pray to God as father, for example, we find ourselves involved in a movement of responding and obeying like that of a son towards a father; this is interwoven with a movement of mission like that of a father sending out a son; and these movements are themselves interrupted by a movement of discovery, opening up new depths of relationship and new vistas of the future, with a momentum like that of a fresh wind blowing, or water streaming or a searing fire burning (to use some of the biblical images for the Spirit). We are praying to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit.³⁰ 'Persons' in God are mutual relationships of ecstatic, outward-going love, giving and receiving. Each of these movements of love receives as it gives: they are *eros* and *agape* at once. They can of course be gendered variously, using other appropriate metaphors, such as mother and daughter.

Augustine had already made the experimental suggestion that 'the names, Father and Son, do not refer to the substance but to the *relation*, and the relation is no accident'.³¹ Later, Aquinas was to develop the notion of a 'subsistent relation' – the idea that relations have the same reality as substance—writing that 'divine person' signifies a *relation* as subsisting.³² They had, of course, their own philosophical frameworks for this language, but in our day I suggest that Barth gives us the clue when he insists that the last word we can say about God is that God is event. Going beyond Barth, I suggest that the language of Trinity is about finding ourselves engaging in inexhaustible movements of love and justice that are like the relations we know in everyday life. Indeed, we can only be engaged in God *through* our everyday relations.

Advocates of a social doctrine of the Trinity, such as Moltmann, insist that there must be individual divine persons, or at least distinct centres of consciousness, to 'have relationships'.³³ But if we think in a participatory way about God, we can only talk of being involved in movements of relational love, of choice and desire. In a further modification of Barth's key, we should then speak not of God as '*the one* who loves in freedom', which may

imply a divine person or super-being, but rather of God as a '*loving in freedom*'. When the John of the Johannine Epistles tries to speak of a God whom—he says—nobody has ever seen, he declares that 'God is *love*', not that God is the *one who* loves. This, I suggest, is taking Barth's second point seriously, that God is person (not a person) because God loves. In fact, it is taking it more seriously than Barth himself. But this then brings us to a third conundrum:

4. *If God is love, is love God?*

'God is love,' affirms the verse of Scripture to which I have just referred (1 Jn 4:8). It has become a common-place in Christian thinking 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 merely 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?

Feuerbach's reason for objecting to the phrase 'God is love' without its reverse form (love is God) is still worth reflecting on. The conundrum cannot be easily suppressed. To say 'God is love,' without saying also 'Love is God,' makes love just one predicate of God, as if God is love, among *other* attributes; the result, Feuerbach says, is that 'love recedes and sinks into insignificance in the dark background – God.'³⁴ Feuerbach is surely on the right track when he points out that in the statement 'God is love' 'there lurks in the background of love a subject who even without love is *something* by himself,' which Feuerbach concludes means 'an unloving monster.'³⁵ This objection is remarkably close to Barth's affirmation that God is personal *because* God loves, not that God is a person *who* loves, among other characteristics. Yet Feuerbach's insistence that love is God reduces divine love to an idealized projection of human love,

Jean-Luc Marion shows a way towards resolving the conundrum. His argument goes a step beyond Barth in insisting that we must think God as *entirely* free from the categories of being. Love enables us to think like this, since (he says) 'God loves *before* being'³⁶ and love *surpasses* being with an excess that knows no measure.³⁷ In the case of humans, love exceeds our being to some extent, but God loves 'infinitely better' than we do, and so is *entirely* free of being in a way that is not the case with us.³⁸ 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 Beingrisks the unthinkable What name, what concept, and what sign nevertheless yet remain feasible? A single one, no doubt, love³⁹

This alone, he says, can free human beings from making idols in place of God, since (he says) 'the gift' liberates Being/being from ontological difference'—that is, from thinking of the difference between human persons and God in terms of different kinds of being.⁴⁰

Marion thus helpfully claims that we can think of God as love without first thinking of God as a being *who* loves, or even as being itself as a reality that loves. For Marion this should lead us to avoid focussing on our being which is given us by God, and should prompt us to return our being to God. The love of God is not, like human love, attached to a being, but is experienced as sheer gift, always bringing something ‘more’ or ‘excessive’ into existence, so that some phenomena appear ‘saturated’, offering an experience that goes beyond the bounds of conceptual, categorical, and intentional limitations.⁴¹ God, we may say in the terms I have been developing, is ‘*loving freely*’, not a being *who* loves. In distinction from Marion, I suggest that the language of God as ‘being’ (though not a being) nevertheless *can* be appropriate alongside God as love—in thinking for example of the relation of being to non-being—but it is not essential or required *for* thinking of God as love. In a later revisiting of his thinking Marion may be making a move in this direction when he claims that Aquinas can think of God as being without *subjecting* God to the category of being.⁴²

However, the 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?⁴³ Are we being swamped by divine love, or in his metaphor, being ‘saturated’ by it? Curiously, is this like the view of Anders Nygren that we should all be mere channels for divine *agape*?

‘Trinity’, I have suggested, is about knowing God as an event of interweaving relations of love – which must of course 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; this would be to make God an object of knowing. Rather, I suggest we might conceive of three dynamic movements of relation which we can only know by participating in them.⁴⁴ In response to our uneasy question about Marion, we can say that human love is not being underplayed, because we can only know these excessive movements of love in and *through* human relations of love. There is no other place to encounter the triune God. Nevertheless 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. In this love there is always ‘excess’ or ‘more’ to come.

And yet we are still left with a final question. If ‘loving freely’ is God, does this suppress human freedom? Are we left with a God who is certainly free but who thereby limits human freedom? In the vision of Trinity I am commending we are not thinking of supra-natural ‘subjects’ but of relations themselves. We are thinking of God as ‘loving freely’, not of beings who love freely, or even of subjects of any kind. So we do not have an experience of being ‘subjected’ to higher powerful beings, and so we are not encouraged to replicate mastery over others. This is an engagement which transcends the subject-object structure by which we know things in the world. We will of course still experience things in the *world* as objects, but participation in infinite personal relations will enable us to treat finite objects of our knowing (whether people or the environment) in a less dominating and controlling way.

Engaging in the love of God is, then, knowledge by participation. When we say that ‘love is God’ we will mean that God is the name for the ‘excessive’ and inexhaustible love that is always a transcendent dimension within human love. If we know God only by participation in the triune currents of love that are always more than human love, though they are inseparable from human love, then we can truly say ‘love is God’. The key has turned in the lock of the conundrums, and we can go through the door into the open space that God intends for all creation. It is in fact the space that God opens up in God’s self, in the eternal dance of love.

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NOTES

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, transl. & ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-77), II/1, 263.

² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 6.

³ Augustine, *Contra Adversarium Legis et Prophetarum* 1.40, trans. J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 106–7.

⁴ Anselm, *Proslogion* 8, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, *St Anselm’s Proslogion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 125.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* 63:9, trans. W. Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 346–7.

⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.20.1.

⁷ Rory Fox, *Time and Eternity in Mid-Thirteenth-Century Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 226–7.

⁸ Creel, ‘Immutability and Impassibility’, 322–3.

⁹ R. T. Mullins, ‘Why Can’t the Impassible God Suffer? Analytic Reflections on Divine Blessedness’, *Theologica* (2018), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v0i0.1313>: 11–18.

¹⁰ Anastasia Scrutton, *Thinking Through Feeling. God, Emotion and Passibility* (London: Continuum, 2011), 53.

¹¹ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51. Richard E. Creel, ‘Immutability and Impassibility’, in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Second Edition, edited by C. Taliaferro, P. Draper and P. L. Quinn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 326–7 now allows for a change in God’s feelings, correcting his former view in his *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 113–40.

¹² Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 59.

¹³ Robert Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned. Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 216.

¹⁴ Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned*, 225–6; Creel, ‘Immutability and Impassibility’, 325; cf. earlier, R. E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility. An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 82–101. Creel thus thinks that God is passible in knowledge of the world, but not in will.

¹⁵ Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned*, 153.

¹⁶ Mullins, ‘Why Can’t the Impassible God Suffer?’, 15.

¹⁷ Creel, ‘Immutability and Impassibility’, 323.

¹⁸ Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 138, 140.

¹⁹ A separation between eros and agape was maintained strongly by Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. P. Watson (SPCK, London, 1953); by contrast, Daniel Day Williams urges the integration of agape and eros in his *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (Nisbet, Welwyn, 1968).

²⁰ Thomas Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, ed. Anne Ridler (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966), The First Century, 42-3, spelling modernized.

²¹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), 191; cf. 19–20.

²² See note below.

²³ So Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 186–91, and also earlier Ward, *Rational Theology*, 140–6. This has some similarity with a dipolar view of God in process theism; see e.g. Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for our Time* (Open Court, La Salle, 1967), 27, 44. Also now Thomas Jay Oord, *Pluriform Love. An Open and Relational Theology of Well-Being* (n.pl.: SacraSage Press, 2022), 195, 199

²⁴ Examples, Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 237; Iliá Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being. God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll: Orbis), 77.

²⁵ Ward, *Religion and Creation*, 163; my italics.

²⁶ Nicholas Lash uses the term ‘spectatorial empiricism’ in this context: see Lash, *The Beginning and the End of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), 79.

²⁷ Nicolas Berdyaev emphasizes that God is not a substance, and neither is the human person: see Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1943), 73–81.

²⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 6.

²⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom. The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 53.

³⁰ For more detail, see Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God. A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 34–46.

³¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.6; cited from Augustine, *The Trinity*, translated by Stephen McKenna (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 180.

³² Aquinas, 1a.29.4c, translated by E. L. Mascall, *The Triune God* (Worthing: Churchman Press, 1986), 22.

³³ See e.g. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 171–4.

³⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper, 1957), 52–53.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xx.

³⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 71–2.

³⁸ Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 222.

³⁹ Marion, *God Without Being*, 47

⁴⁰ Marion, *God Without Being*, 102.

⁴¹ See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given. Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 196–9.

⁴² Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Text, Second Edition*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 199–233.

⁴³ See the criticisms of Werner Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love* (London: T & T Clark Continuum, 2010), 160; Richard Kearney, *The God who May Be. A Hermeneutic of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 31–3.

⁴⁴ See Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God. A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 34–52.