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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

LOVE of God, understood as both God's love of people and the human love of the divine, has proved over the centuries to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Hindu and Christian devotees, finding expression in sacred scripture, learned commentaries, poetry, song, dance, art, and architecture. This issue of the Journal takes up the theme of divine love, offering reflections from a comparative perspective.

In the first essay Martin Ganeri compares the teachings of two central medieval theologians, Thomas Aquinas and Ramanuja, both of whom share much in their teaching on divine love. For each of these thinkers the highest goal of life is seen to be the "full and blissful knowledge and love of God." Yet despite this foundational convergence in teaching on the centrality of love Ramanuja has been castigated over the years by numerous Christian scholars who have alleged conceptual problems with his metaphysics, which, they assert, tends finally towards an unacceptable pantheism. But Ganeri rejects the charge that Ramanuja is pantheistic; moreover, he goes on to assert the potential value of Ramanuja's ontology and soteriology to enlarge and enrich Christian thinking. In particular, Ganeri believes it is Ramanuja's understanding of the world as the body of God that has most to offer Christian theologians. "Embodiment cosmology" can be regarded as a "powerful symbol of the continuity of the created and redeemed levels of human existence." He goes on to point out substantial similarities in the way the spiritual path is presented by Ramanuja and Aquinas, for example, that faith and charity in Aquinas correspond to Ramanuja's higher bhakti and that divine grace is absolutely necessary to attain the highest spiritual fulfillment.

In the second essay Tinu Ruparell reflects on the relation of love and wisdom in two western thinkers, Plato and Leibniz. For Plato, for whom the love of God amounted to love of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth, the attainment of wisdom is made possible by openness to the world, by a growth in awareness of the divine immanence and love manifested in various finite instantiations. The eternal form of Beauty is

thus discovered in the earthly beloved; wisdom arises from love. Later, through Plotinus and Neo-Platonism, the Platonic Forms are regarded as identical with the One, thus preparing in Christian theology the teaching that the Good, the True, and the Beautiful reside naturally in the one transcendent creator God. For Leibniz, unlike Plato, love arises from wisdom, from a knowledge of unity described as "an appreciation and awareness of God's necessary perfection and of creation arising from it."

In the next essay Archana Venkatesan traces the various ways the pining heroine (*talaivi*) of Tamil poetry has been reconfigured in the transition from early secular Cankam to later Alvar bhakti poetry and the Srivaishnava commentators. While in the earlier poems the heroine had longed for an absent purely human lover, in the poetry of the Alvars the object of her love has become God, who is sometimes experienced as cruel and distant. Rendering the heroine's lover as God necessitated that the poets find new ways of presenting the *talaivi*. The longing feminine voice is then reconstructed to represent every dependent human soul hungering for the Divine. This voice is expressed in the singular and plural, in local as well as in universal terms. The variety of voices is constructed in such rich and varying ways to express human love and longing that it is not possible to speak of a generic *talaivi* of Alvar poetry. The author draws particularly on the poems of two Alvars, Andal, a woman, and Tirunkamai, a man who writes as a woman.

John Carman, in the concluding article, comments on the other three essays, focusing especially on Ganeri's treatment of Ramanuja and Aquinas. Carman himself has long been recognized as a leading Western scholar of Ramanuja. He suggests that a proper understanding of Ramanuja's systematic thought necessitates an awareness of the poetic expressions of love used by the Alvars as well as Pancaratra ritual practice. Carman agrees with Ganeri that the key to Ramanuja's understanding of divine love is Ramanuja's concept of the relation of the soul to God as "accessory" to "principal." To know God is to know one's

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relation to God, who is embodied in all finite reality. Further, he sees similarities between Ramanuja and Aquinas, for instance in “the natural tendency of all things to realize their inherent nature,” as well as in divine remedies for the world’s “fallenness.” Carman finds the saving activity of God most eloquently expressed by Ramanuja in his introduction to the commentary on the Gita. While recognizing the importance of establishing real differences in doctrine between Ramanuja and Aquinas for the purpose of mutual enrichment, the first aim of interreligious dialogue, he says, should be mutual understanding. He goes on to critique the Western and Vedantic tendency to articulate human love of God in individualistic terms, and recommends a more communal approach, one that is more in keeping with both New Testament ecclesial teaching and the community of Ramanuja’s followers.

In reflecting on Ruparell’s interpretation of Plato and his drastic transition from a physical to a spiritual interpretation of love Carman asks whether a similar shift exists in Hindu and Christian views of loving God. Perhaps surprisingly for scholars who are accustomed to speaking of Hinduism’s matter-spirit dualism,

Carman suggests that modern readers of South Indian devotional poets and their commentators might be “struck by the powerful metaphors of physical love that are used to express the passion of spiritual love, both in yearning and fulfillment. . . . The physical is more than a metaphor: both the human devotee and the Divine Lord yearn to possess one another’s physical bodies.”

Likewise, in commenting on Venkatesan’s essay, Carman highlights how the “woman passionately in love with a masculine god is seeking a union that is physical as well as spiritual.” He goes on to suggest, moreover, that one widen one’s reading of the longing female devotee in Tamil bhakti poetry to include other expressions of separation than the most extreme moment of alienation and anger. The poems, he says, need to be read in the context of a larger literary corpus and in the context of a worshipping community attached to divine consecrated images in particular South Indian temples.

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