Sacrifice, Suffering, and Salvation: A Brief Aesthetic and Theological Comparative Analysis of Two Great Symbolic Images of Divine Love

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Sacrifice, Suffering, and Salvation:
A Brief Aesthetic and Theological Comparative Analysis of Two Great Symbolic Images of Divine Love

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Abstract
This brief comparative study seeks to understand specific imagery and symbolism of divine love within the Carmelite Catholic and the Chaitanya Vaishnava traditions. Here I examine some of the nuanced aesthetic and theological dimensions of their greatest symbolic imagery of divine love: the crucifixion of Jesus and the Rāsa Maṇḍala of Krishna. The juxtaposition of the shift between the standardized depiction of divine love within each tradition and their later developed depictions demonstrates how each tradition’s dramatic departure embodies a more personal, more distilled and intensified unique expression, while possibly even sharing a particular theological moment within the experiences of sacrifice, suffering, and salvation of divine love.

Ultimate imagery of divine love
THE Catholic tradition within Christianity and the Vaishnava tradition within Hinduism each celebrate a singular focal point of worship, a supreme emblem of faith, and an ultimate image of divine love. The imagery of each expresses what is most deeply cherished, and what is considered to be most precious in each tradition respectively. Each vision of divine love contains the powerful elements of sacrifice in love, suffering in love, and salvation in love. Each image arises out of a sacred narrative found in their respective scriptures, which then in turn receive deep theological reflection and explication. However, each tradition through its symbolism of supreme love paints a picture of sacrifice, suffering, and salvation very differently and distinctively.

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In this brief presentation, it is the crucifixion for the Carmelite Catholics and the Rāsa Maṇḍala of Rādhā and Krishna for the Chaitanya Vaishnavas on which I will focus. Specifically, from each of these traditions, I examine an older, very original sample of the imagery and couple it with a significant later image that certainly represents a departure from the earlier imagery, yet which illuminates and expands upon the earlier. My purpose for engaging an earlier or more original model of divine love in the background of both the later developed Carmelite and Chaitanya expressions of divine love is to demonstrate how both traditions, in their own ways, distill, intensify, and develop further the experience of divine love as evidenced in their later developed, unique aesthetic forms of expression.

For the crucifixion, which I will examine first, I only briefly engage an early crucifixion icon from the Greek Orthodox Church, which represents the standard, frontal view of the crucifixion in contrast to the three-quarter angle aerial view of the crucifixion drawing of John of the Cross. Focusing on the latter allows me to highlight the unique forms of expression and elements of sacrifice, suffering, and salvation in the crucifixion. For the Rāsa Maṇḍala, my examination will emphasize the classical, very popular depiction of the “great circle dance” and then its abbreviated or collapsed imagery of it in the portrait of the two figures of Rādhā and Krishna that are so treasured and worshipped in temple settings. Each of these displays of supreme love contains the three major elements:

1. sacrifice in divine love
2. suffering in divine love
3. salvation in divine love

In order to observe these three elements, I will resort to the narrative material that contextualizes these images.

The Crucifixion: aesthetic and theological analysis

The history of the depiction of the crucifixion is extraordinarily rich and complex. The sheer variety of depictions is tremendous. And one also finds a great variety in the depictions of the Rāsa Maṇḍala imagery as well. The variations and permutations of the imagery for the ultimate focal point in worship attests not only to the ultimate importance of the image but also to its infinite capacity to be personalized in its representation—two essential factors that indicate the greatness of ultimate religious symbols of a tradition.

The depictions of the crucifixion in painting throughout its history almost always show a ground level, frontal view of the event. Whether the viewer is placed farther or closer to Jesus on the cross, the depiction involves one of seeing Jesus from a standing position looking slightly up at Jesus who is raised above the ground on the cross. The view is usually one from being directly in front of the cross, though there are some depictions from a three-quarter view from one side or the other, but always as if standing on the ground. Often the depiction of the crucifixion is without anyone else standing by witnessing the suffering Jesus on the cross. It is just the viewer alone with Jesus in those instances. However, we the viewer often join other onlookers who are grieving the loss of Jesus, who, standing much closer to the side or directly in front of Jesus, visibly feel the devastation of the event. In Figure 1, an early Greek Orthodox icon, we join onlookers who are crying out and grieving.
Various figures have a nimbus around their heads, as does Jesus, indicating their elevated holy status. Also present are angels in midair, flying in the background. However, the little drawing of the crucifixion by St. John of the Cross presents us with a very different, yet extraordinarily powerful expression that is worthy of our attention.\(^1\)

The first feature which immediately stands out in the drawing is the unusual perspective St. John provides for his viewer (see Figure 2). The cross and the figure of Christ have a strong, downward, one-point perspective from a three-quarter aerial view. One is virtually looking down from above, and slightly in front of, the cross on to the left side of Christ. This angle of vision of Christ on the cross immediately sets St. John’s drawing apart from all other representations of the crucified Christ in the history of Christian art. The effect of this unusual angle and perspective is dramatic: it gives the picture a great deal of tension.

While this angle of viewing the crucifix establishes the drawing’s drama, there are other elements that contribute to its intensity. The cross itself leans so far to the right of the composition that it appears as though it were about to fall backwards. One struggles to keep the cross upright while viewing it. Most people, seeing the drawing for the first time, are compelled to turn the picture on its left side to compensate for this strained angle.

At the same time, the strong downward force of the perspective and the weight of Christ’s body, which is accentuated by his knees buckling under him and his head hanging parallel to the ground, is in competition with the dramatic angle of the cross itself. Christ’s body is falling forward to the left of the composition, pulling in the opposite direction from the backward-leaning cross.
Christ’s outstretched arms add still further to the vexing tension that vibrates throughout the composition. The spikes through the palms are large, with the limits of strain in the arms portrayed by long, tendon-like lines, and drops of blood fall in the air. This tension created in the arms is further emphasized by the swollen chest, shoulder and back muscles, and the feeling of the weight of Christ’s body as he is falling forward.

Certain responses are invoked by the work whether the viewer is familiar with St. John’s writings. The work commands a new attention from the viewer. The radically different angle from which the crucifix is seen emphasizes, perhaps even more than other depictions of the crucifix, the intense suffering of Christ. The angle causes Christ’s left hand, with the spike prominent, to be the part of his body closest to the viewer. Again, the suffering of Christ is emphasized. And finally, this angle causes Christ’s face to be hidden. All these features of the picture are generated simply by the angle and would leave the viewer with a feeling of devastation.

Aside from the influence of angle, however, there is another powerful element at work. This element is the interplay of light and shadow which is the most subtle, intriguing, and important aspect of the composition. The source of light appears to be above the cross; but, unlike the viewer who is at a three-quarter angle slightly in front of the cross, the light comes from behind and from above the cross while still close. As light comes from above and behind the cross to the right of the viewer, and as light illuminates the sides and top of the cross, it leaves Christ’s form in shadow, with his head falling away from the light. The figure of Christ is dark with lines indicating only the general shape and form of it. One’s vision is irresistibly drawn, by the angle, down toward Christ’s darkened bodily form, and is simultaneously drawn toward the light reflected on the cross that is near. This illumination gives the viewer a subtle sense of relief from the utter despair portrayed in the strained and darkened figure of Christ.

Thus, the power of this composition lies in the dynamic between the influences of the angle of vision and the effect of light on the subject. What is the significance of this very vivid and dramatic portrayal of Christ’s suffering? Why is the light coming from behind, and what is the source of this light? And why is the viewer placed in this position in relation to Christ and to the light coming from behind Christ?

The full significance of this work must be understood in terms of St. John’s mystical doctrine of divine love. Anyone who is acquainted with the extensive writings of St. John of the Cross knows that he de-emphasized trinitarian mysticism. But more importantly, he dwelt even less on the crucifixion of Christ. In his writings, he intricately describes the rigorous ascetic practices of the mystical life and the experiences of divine union with God. This perfection of divine union is characterized by a marriage between the individual soul, who is always the bride, and Christ, who is the beloved Bridegroom. This is known as “Bridal Mysticism,” which is central to St. John’s teachings. Given this, why does St. John emphasize the crucifix through this very vivid drawing?

St. John wrote very detailed and didactic treatises, but he also utilized aesthetic forms for expressing his religious experiences. He wrote much poetry that communicated divine
Sacrifice, Suffering, and Salvation matters in a way that mere prose could not, for all his treatises are commentaries on his poetry. As for this drawing, it is known to be the product of a vision. But he chose not to express this vision in poetry. Apparently, the subject of this vision was better communicated through a picture than through any verbal expression.

The work was obviously derived from an inner-religious experience—for its style and composition are unique. It was not meant to be a public image, or even an icon. Rather, it was the pure and simple expression of an esoteric vision, shared only with his fellow spiritual aspirants. Therefore, if we are to interpret this drawing, we must go to St. John’s works. In St. John’s prose or poetry, it is rare to find anything that relates the crucifixion to his doctrine of the divine marriage. But we do find three small stanzas in one of his lesser-known poems. Here, Christ is speaking to the Father:

Your great power will be seen
And Your justice and wisdom.
I will go and tell the world,
Spreading the word
Of Your beauty and sweetness
And of Your sovereignty.

I will go seek My bride
And take upon Myself
Her weariness and labors
In which she suffers so;

And that she may have life
I will die for her
And, lifting her out of that deep,
I will restore her to You.²

These few verses poignantly and powerfully reveal the mystery of St. John’s unique depiction of the crucifixion. As these verses plainly express, Christ, the Bridegroom, wants to relieve the bride, or the soul, of her suffering by taking it upon himself. And, in doing so, he restores her to the Father.

The viewer of this work is verily the bride, who is looking on from above at the tortured Bridegroom, and who is compelled in the direction of the light source, being restored to the Father. The picture, even more than these revealing verses, conveys the absolute suffering and sacrifice of Christ, expressing his intensity of love for the bride. While the bride experiences feelings of grief and separation, the light provides a sense of the presence of the Father to whom the bride is restored. Thus, the crucifix for St. John is an expression of the intensity of love that the Bridegroom has for the bride as she enters the inner life of God.

The Rāsa Maṇḍala: aesthetic and theological analysis

As the event of the crucifixion is the climactic event of the Jesus story in the biblical New Testament, so the formation of the great circle, or maṇḍala of dancers—Krishna with the cowherd maidens of Vraja, or the Vraja Gopikās—is the climactic event within the ultimate story, known as the Rāsa Lilā (the “play” or lilā of the “circular dance” known as the rāsa), within the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (see figure 3).³ Again, there are endless depictions, with all their variations, for this most celebrated vision of the Rāsa Maṇḍala. And the Rāsa Maṇḍala and its manifestation in the two divine figures of Rādhā and Krishna function as the ultimate vision of divine love, the very focal...
point of worship, as the crucifixion is for so much of Christianity.

The word rāsa indicates a certain ancient dance form that is comprised of the circular formation of many female dancers, whose hands or arms are interlocked with each other in a chain-like manner, and around whose necks the arms of their male dance partners are placed. In the līlā or play of Krishna’s rāsa dance with the Gopīs, however, it is Krishna who duplicates himself from the center of the rāsa circle by virtue of his divine power and becomes the sole male partner for each and every Gopī.

The dance takes place in the paradisal forest of Vraja in which the lotus flowers, full fruit trees and honeybees come alive during the enchanting night, when this divine dance is performed under the full moon of the autumn harvest season. Indeed, the colors that fill the scenery are those of autumn. The viewer of any depiction of the Rāsa Maṇḍala can immediately grasp the joyous occasion of the event. Though the event occurs at night under the full moon, the dancers are always very colorfully adorned and luminously glowing from the arena of the forest setting. The viewer witnesses from an angular, ariel view the full circle of the Vraja Gopikās as they dance, each experiencing the exclusive attention of the divinity, Krishna. It is almost as if the viewer, in effect, joins the other distantly depicted celestial beings floating in the sky who all joyously witness the performance while singing, playing instruments, and showering flowers down upon the dancers. We, the viewer, have joined the audience that is most often depicted in artistic renderings of the Rāsa. The narrative informs us that they sing songs of love in harmony with Krishna and in chorus, as the percussive sounds of the bells on their ankles and belts tingle, while their bracelets clang to the rhythmic movements of their forms, and celestial beings shower flowers down, joining in with song and drumming from the heavens.

Figure 3. The Wondrous Circle of the Rāsa Dance: Rāsa Maṇḍala. Painting by Krishna Priya in Jaipur, State of Rajasthan, India (2001). Opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on handmade jute and cotton board (31 ½” by 23 ½”).

Composition designed, commissioned by and located in the private collection of the author.4

The formation of dancers in a circle or maṇḍala is loaded with symbolic significance. A circle has no beginning or no end, both in time and space, and thus expresses what is unending and eternal. There is no limit as to how many dancers may join this circle. Just as in geometry, a singular point can be inserted between any two points that constitute the circle, indefinitely and repeatedly. There is no limit to how many dancers may join the eternal circle of the Rāsa dance. The space within the circle projects a feeling of a closed and exclusive intimacy, while the space outside the
The circle is open to and inclusive of everything and everyone. This simultaneously existing concavity and convexity of the circle points to the synergistic necessity of both, and a feeling of closedness and openness in the Rāsa, which speaks to the exclusivism and inclusivism, respectively, in a relationship of supreme love with the divine. Moreover, the Rāsa Maṇḍala promotes a balanced sense of individuality that is fully supported by a powerful sense of community and unity.

The circle of the Rāsa is not just any circle, but a circle of dancers that is one of dynamic sacred movement. Note that around the heads of all the female dancers as well as the duplicated forms of Krishna is the glow of a nimbus, which indicates the transcendent and holy state of this event and the personages within it. This event is otherworldly, yet also feels like a paradisial part of this world.

The circle of the Rāsa is not static. It revolves around the circle’s center point, indicated by the circular movement of dancers. Krishna became the very center point of the circle when the Vraja Gopikās linked arms with each other surrounding him. Then, as it were, Krishna adds to the circle of Gopī his own centrifugally duplicated forms to attend each Gopī in the dance. But invariably, almost always, the viewer does not see Krishna standing at the center alone, as the Bhāgavata narrative describes him. Rather, Krishna is almost always depicted as standing there alongside his goddess consort, Rādhā, the most beloved among all the Vraja Gopikās. It is far more the exception than the rule to find Rādhā missing at the center of the Rāsa Maṇḍala.

The presence of a singular Vraja Gopikā, identified as Rādhā, is a radical departure from and addition to the Rāsa Lilā’s passage wherein the Rāsa Maṇḍala is described in detail. There is not even a hint of any other figure accompanying Krishna in such descriptions. This discrepancy between the narrative and artistic expressions points to the theological vision of the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism, the school that is responsible for the natural expectation on the part of almost every Hindu to find Rādhā with Krishna at the center of the Rāsa.

Put in the simplest terms, the school explains that the Vraja Gopikās who make up the circle of female dancers are the embodiments of Rādhā’s emotions. Thus, the whole Rāsa Maṇḍala is simply a portrait of both Rādhā and Krishna: the Vraja Gopikās, each as a particular embodiment of Rādhā’s emotions, are themselves partially duplicate forms of the goddess Rādhā herself. Krishna’s duplicate forms standing with each one of the Gopīs are, of course, ways in which Krishna lovingly attends to each and every emotional display of Rādhā. While the narrative of the sacred text centrifugally sends multiple duplications of Krishna out into the circle of female dancers, the interpretive eye of the Chaitanya theological school centripetally projects from the Vraja Gopikās into the very center of the circle with Krishna the goddess Gopī, Rādhā, from whom all the other Gopīs originate.

How can Krishna be without his greatest beloved, Rādhā, at the center of the Rāsa Maṇḍala? Impossible, says the Chaitanya school. Thus, the Rāsa Maṇḍala is an expanded form of the divine couple, as I have spelled out in previous work I have done. And the standardized, intimate depiction of Rādhā and Krishna standing together united in divine love is essentially a condensed form of the Rāsa Maṇḍala. When gazing or contemplating the
divine figures of Rādhā and Krishna, cultivated worshippers see all the Vraja Gopikās and all the duplications of Krishna; and when gazing upon the imagery of the Rāsa Maṇḍala, worshippers see a portrait of the two divine figures.

The standard portrait of both Rādhā and Krishna can be seen in Figure 4. By standard, I am referring to both the image’s artistic and ecclesiastical contexts. Both Krishna and Rādhā are standing, facing forward with their gazes toward the viewer. Now the viewer has a direct frontal view of the divine figures, in contrast to the ariel view of the Rāsa Maṇḍala. In the rendering of the divine couple shown in Figure 4, one easily observes the emphasis on the loving couple, not only by Rādhā’s loving posture that favors Krishna’s form, but also in the various traditional and conventional motifs of loving couples employed in painting, such as pairs of birds, a pair of calves, a tree with a vine wrapped around it, etc.

In contrast to the divine figures of Rādhā and Krishna who are dancing within the circle of the Rāsa, here in the standard portrait they are standing closely to one another as if calling out to the viewer. Indeed, Krishna, while holding a flute up to his mouth with both arms, stands with one foot casually crossing over the other stationary foot. This pose of Krishna, with its flowing bodily curvature, is known as his very lovely and attractive “three-fold bending form.” It is with the music of the flute that Krishna calls souls to himself and his yearning heart, the very music he makes to attract the Vraja Gopikās out of their homes to be with him in the forest to perform the Rāsa dance. It could perhaps be conjectured that when Krishna is closely present with Rādhā and playing the flute, that the divine couple is calling us, the viewer, to them. It is as if they are calling viewers to join them in the eternal dance of the Rāsa.

Western and Indian scholars alike have viewed the amorous or even “erotic” imagery of the Rāsa Līlā allegorically as the soul’s passion to be united with God, and some take it as a form of mystical eroticism. Still others fear that its impassioned expressions might promote a degrading form of religion. The Vaishnava devotee, however, to this day, embraces the episode as the perfect picture of God’s most intimate self, in the most profound revelation of divine love.

Comparative reflections: Sacrifice, suffering, and salvation

The view afforded by the artistic rendering of these greatest symbols of divine love send powerful theological messages to the viewer.
The viewers of St. John’s crucifixion and the Rāsa Maṇḍala experience a viewpoint that is aerial. Such an aerial view dramatically draws the viewer closer to the arena of salvation. With the former, the viewer is being lifted up into the realm of light in which God dwells. With the latter, the viewer is being lifted up to view the full circle and splendorous sight of the Rāsa dance, as an invitation to enter it, to participate in it, and ultimately to be drawn into it. The frontal view of most crucifixion depictions and the conventional frontal view of the divine couple are both confronting and beckoning at the same time. Both call the viewer into engagement with the event of redemption, salvation, and elevation.

The contrasts between the two great images and their surrounding, altar-like narratives are dramatic and telling. In the Christian context, it is God that makes the sacrifice, while in the Vaishnava context, the soul makes the sacrifice. In the former, God sends his only son, and when he does, he is tortured, suffers, and dies a most agonizing death. In the latter, God as Krishna does not sacrifice, but the Gopīs do. They leave home and effectively die to the world, sacrificing all social norms, and they even relinquish their physical bodies to be with Krishna, undergoing a kind of death. Both expressions of sacrifice are ultimate, total, and necessitate death as a means to a salvific end. Both speak to the ways in which the power of divine love is boundless and ultimately cannot be contained by anything in this world.

The greater narrative of the Christian symbol begins in the divine realm with God sending his only begotten son to this world, and then returns to the divine realm via the resurrection. Again, it is God doing all the work here. In contrast, it is the soul that begins in this world (as a Gopī does in her home), undergoes a transformative death that gives the soul a spiritual body to be with Krishna in the Rāsa, and then the soul returns to this world (as the Gopīs do at the end of the Rāsa event). In the Vaishnava instance, all the work is being done by the soul. The former displays the power of God’s love through his grace, and the latter displays the power of the soul’s love through her devotional passion. The former displays God’s power of love to become weak and meek like a human, and the latter displays the soul’s power of love to become elevated to the divine to participate in the inner life of God. It is God who initiates the gift of grace to humans through Jesus. It is also God who, out of a divine yearning, calls all souls to his heart through the sounding of the divine flute. In the former, souls are absolved of their sins and suffering by God’s sacrifice, whereas in the latter, souls are absolved of any suffering and even worldly happiness by their own sacrifice and intense passion in their love for the divine.

Both traditions infuse in the hearts of their worshippers an intense longing for the divine but in very different ways. In the suffering that Jesus undergoes, worshippers suffer with Jesus. Some Christians may even feel or experience his wounds or desire to do so. There is a profound sense of the suffering in Jesus’ sacrifice that is powerful enough to save souls from sin. This longing and grieving for Jesus is a powerful, divinely uniting force for the Christian, and the crucifixion in compelling ways stimulates this relationship.

In my analyses of the Rāsa Līlā, I have shown that there are nine phases or characteristics of divine love: (1) awakening (2) anticipation (3) meeting (4) conflict (5)
separation (6) devastating loss (7) reunion (8) rejoicing, and (9) returning. The formation of the Rāsa Maṇḍala occurs during the eighth phase, rejoicing in the triumph of love. I believe that these phases can be observed as occurring in the Jesus narrative as well. The crucifixion, for example, would be occurring at the sixth phase, which is devastating loss and grief in the experience of God's absence and an intense longing to be with God and to be saved by God. But the existence of the sixth phase, as with any other phase, depends on the existence and experience of the other phases. And thus, within the devastating loss expressed in the crucifixion, is the rejoicing in the triumph of love through the resurrection. In love, one cannot have one phase without the others, at least to some minute degree. Within the rejoicing in the triumph of love expressed in the Rāsa Maṇḍala is the devastating loss when being separated from Krishna or the inability to find Krishna, as is narrated in the story line of the Rāsa Līlā.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that these remarks are only a “sketch,” and volumes could be written on the subject matter at hand. In closing, it should be pointed out that, in the image of the crucifixion, there is an expression of suffering and loss not just on the part of humans for the divine, but also on the part of the divine from within the divine (that is, God for his only begotten son). The contemplation on devastating loss in the form of the depths that suffering takes in the crucifixion is unexcelled, fueling the meaning and power of the resurrection. On the other hand, it must be observed that the Rāsa Maṇḍala is a celebration of the power of love, not just over the hearts of humans, but also over the heart of God. God becomes subsumed even by the love coming from souls, and this is expressed by the Rāsa dance itself. Krishna is known to have a bluish complexion, and the Vraja Gopikās have a golden one. The narrative of the Rāsa, in a key verse, points out that Krishna's complexion changes to an emerald-green color, yet the complexion of the Vraja Gopikās does not change. Mixing the complexions of both, the blue of Krishna and the gold of the Gopīs, produces the secondary color of green. But it is significant that it is Krishna’s complexion that changes and not that of the Gopīs, thus expressing how even the divinity can be transformed by the power of the soul’s love.

Notes
3 Rāsa Līlā (also known as rāsa-krīḍā) is the name of a particular līlā or a special dance of divine love between the supreme divinity Krishna and his divine cowherd consorts, the Gopīs. The Rāsa Līlā, as it is described in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, is especially treasured by the Chaitanya (or Gauḍīya) school of Vaishnavism as the highest and most sacred revelation of God’s love. In modern times, the phrase rāsa līlā can also refer to dramatic and
musical performances of the many other childhood līlās of Krishna that are performed in and outside of India.

The complete episode of the Rāsa Līlā, including the events that lead up to Krishna’s dance of divine love, is often referred to as the rāsa-līlā- paṅcādhyāyi, the “five chapters of the Rāsa Līlā,” comprised of chapters twenty-nine through thirty-three from the tenth book of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa text. Although the episode is found in less theologically rich and poetically elaborate forms within the Harivarṇa and Vishnu Purāṇa, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa version has been the most celebrated and honored source of the Rāsa Līlā. Especially for the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism, for whom this episode is held as the most sacred and ultimate culmination of all other līlās of Krishna, the Bhāgavata is the authoritative text.


5 Ibid. See my chapter titled, "The Special Gopī: Rādhā, beginning on page 147.

6 Ibid. See my chapter titled, "Messages of the Text" on pages 180-1.