Flame of Yah: Trinity and Divine Eros

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I.

Impressive as it is, few books of twentieth century theology now seem so dated as Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*.[1] The "and" of the title does not really function as a copula, but as a contrast; Agape *or* Eros would capture Nygren's theme. According to Nygren, the two forms of love named in his title "originally have nothing whatsoever to do with each other" and "belong originally to two entirely separate spiritual worlds, between which no direct communication is possible." Nygren's overview recounts a history of the unfortunate entanglement and confusion of these two themes, the synthesis of Hellenistic Eros with biblical Agape, which eventually become "so thoroughly bound up and interwoven with one another that it is hardly possible for us to speak of either without our thoughts being drawn to the other."[2]

Originating in mystery religions before being taken up by the Platonic tradition, the doctrine of Eros presents a love that responds to the "quality, the beauty and worth, of its object," is "acquisitive desire and longing," an egocentric love that impels a self-reliant upward climb into union with God. Agape, by contrast, is indiscriminate with regard to its object, embracing both evil and good, lovely and revolting. Eros is primarily human love for God, and when used of divine love treats that love as self-interested; Agape is God's unselfish, self-sacrificial love for men. Eros arises from the desperation of

[1] *Agape and Eros* (2 vols. in 1; trans. Philip S. Watson; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).
[2] Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 30-31.

human need; Agape from the calm of God's plenitude. Eros grasps; Agape releases. Eros responds to the beauty of the beloved; Agape loves in defiance of appearances.[3]

One of Nygren's chief villains is the figure we now know as pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite. Though deceptively presenting himself as a disciple of Paul (Acts 17:34), the pseudo-Dionysus presents a Neoplatonic viewpoint "but scantily covered with an exceedingly thin Christian veneer." Because of his alleged connection to the apostle, "the spurious works were universally regarded as genuine for a thousand years, and enjoyed almost canonical authority."[4] During the medieval period, theologians such as John Scotus Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor, Roberty Grosseteste, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas wrote commentaries on Dionysian works, Bonaventure found in Dionysus a theology for Franciscan piety, and Dionysian themes infiltrated biblical commentary on the Song of Songs.

Pseudo-Dionysus represents the most thoroughly erotic theology in the Western tradition. For Dionysus, God Himself can be described as Eros and Agape, the yearning love itself, as well as the object of the yearning, the Beloved sought by all that is. As eternal Eros, God is in eternal movement:

> He is yearning (*eros*) on the move, simple, self-moved, self-acting, pre-existing in the Good, flowing out from the Good onto all that is and returning once again to the Good. In this divine yearning (*eros*) shows especially its unbeginning and unending nature traveling in an endless circle through the Good, from the Good, in the Good and to the Good, unerringly turning, ever on the same center, ever in the same direction, always proceeding, always remaining, always being restored to itself.[5]

[3] Nygren concisely summarizes the contrast in a chart (*Agape and Eros*, 210).
[4] Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 576.
[5] *Divine Names*, 712C-713A. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (Classics of Western Spirituality; trans. Colm Luibheid; Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1987) 82-83.

Creation is an overflow of erotic ecstasy: "The very cause of the universe," he writes, is "in the beautiful, good abundance of his benign yearning (*eros*)" by which God is "carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything." God as the cause of all

> loves all things in the superabundance of his goodness" and "because of this goodness he makes all things, brings all things to perfection, holds all things together, returns all things. The divine longing is Good seeking for the sake of the Good. That yearning which creates all the goodness of the world preexisted superabundantly within the Good and did not allow it to remain without issue. It stirred him to use the abundance of his powers in the production of the world.[6]

God is, as it were, "beguiled by goodness, by love (*agape*) and by yearning (*eros*) and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things."[7] Redemption is equally erotic. Products of divine Eros, creatures long to return to their source. Eros is the outgoing of creation, and Eros in a creaturely form is the impulse that brings creation back to God.

It is hardly surprising that Nygren found this alarming. Pseudo-Dionysius refuses to distinguish Eros and Agape, and comes close to implying that God *had* to create. A yearning God is, on Nygren's analysis, a needy God, not the sovereign God who comes to us in self-giving love. A God who makes all things out of creative yearning is a grasping and self-interested God, who loves in order to possess, who may well need us as much as we need Him.

What seemed to Nygren a tragic and dangerous synthesis looks very different today. Pseudo-Dionysus is all the rage. In a May 2008 address, Pope Benedict XVI commended Dionysius as a

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[6] *Divine Names*, 708b-C; *Complete Works*, 79-80.
[7] *Divine Names*, 712A-712B; *Complete Works*, 82.

theologian with "new relevance" whose apophaticism reminds us that "God can only be spoken of with 'no,' and that it is only possible to reach him by entering into this experience of 'no.'" As Dionysus mediated "between the Greek spirit and the Gospel," so today he can serve as a "mediator in the modern dialogue between Christianity and the mystical theologies of Asia."[8] Dionysius has also become an important mediator between postmodernism and Christianity, offering a negative theology that comports well with Derrida's deconstructionism and other varieties of post-structuralism.[9] Alongside and interwoven with the revival of interest in Dionysius have been a revival of interest in Divine Eros. Von Balthasar found the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius "genuinely Biblical and consistent with the most authentic covenant-theology of either Testament, a theology that sees the jealous and consuming love of the divine Bridegroom doing its work in his bride in order to raise her up, invite her, and bring her home to the very same answering love."[10] Following Dante, however, Balthasar goes much further than Dionysus in integrating human desire, including especially sexual desire, into God's love. Eros draws man to woman, in whom the lover sees the divine image, "the beloved as God sees him." Thus human Eros is incorporated into the path of return, and is a variation on divine Eros.[11] David Bentley Hart condemns Nygren's "disastrous" separation of Eros and Agape as an "utterly Kantian" perspective that tends to "evacuate the image of God of all those qualities of delight, desire, jealousy, and regard that Scripture ascribes to him." How, he asks pointedly, "is an agape purified of eros distinguishable from hate?"[12]

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[8] Address available online at http://www.zenit.org/article-22588?l=english. Accessed October 14, 2009.

[9] See Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique of 'Ontothology,'" *Modern Theology* 24:4 (October 2008) 725-741. This entire issue of *Modern Theology* was devoted to Dionysius, and Sarah Coakley's introduction provides a concise overview of the various impulses behind the revival.

[10] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: I: Seeing the Form* (trans. Erasmo Live-Merikakis; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982) 123.

[11] Quoted in Raymon Gawronski, "Balthasar on Eros," *Second Spring*, available online at http://www.secondspring.co.uk, accessed October 14, 2009.

[12] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 264. Other recent work on Eros include Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller, eds., *Towards a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books 1992); Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, "Julian of Norwich's Theology of Eros," *Spiritus* 5:1 (Spring 2005) 37-53; Lief E. Vaage, "Learning to Read the Bible with

These are bracing challenges to Nygren's separation of Agape and Eros, and they raise, for my purposes, two central questions. First, does the Bible, as Hart suggests, teach that God acts erotically, that is, that He is moved by yearning and desire. I answer that question affirmatively, relying primarily on the Song of Songs. But that raises the second, systematic question: If God's love is erotic yearning, does that imply that God is needy? Do we have to choose between a stiff but sovereign Agape and a warm but tremulous Eros? Do we have to choose between an unmoved Love and a Love that remakes God according to human need? I will answer negatively, drawing on some recent philosophical work on desire and ultimately suggesting that only a Trinitarian theology can make sense of a God both sovereign and desiring.

II.

The Song of Songs was among the most popular books for commentary in the Latin middle ages.[13] Despite important variations in style and conclusions among these commentaries, the commentary tradition was largely allegorical. The Song of Songs was viewed as an allegory of the mutual love of Christ and His church, of Yahweh's tortured love affair with the nation of Israel and Israel's yearning for her promised Messiah, or as the longing of the individual soul for God. In this commentary tradition, the Eros of the Bride is unproblematically recognized. That is hardly surprising. Unlike most of the love poetry of the ancient east and the courtly poetry of the medieval West, the Song is largely spoken by the

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Desire: Teaching the Eros of Exegesis in the Theological Classroom," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10:2 (March 2007) 87-94; David Clough, "Eros and Agape in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2:2 (2002) 189-203; John Anthony McGuckin, "Symeon the New Theologian's Hymns of Divine Eros: A Neglected Masterpiece of the Christian Mystical Tradition," *Spiritus* 5:2 (Fall 2005) 182-202.

[13] On medieval commentary on the Song, see the compilation of texts in Denys Turner in *Eros & Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), as well as Turner's superb and lengthy introduction. Turner does not include the homilies of Bernard or Origen, which are widely available; cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, Selected Works (Classics of Western Spirituality; trans. G. R. Evans; Mahwah, NY: Paulist, 1987). See also E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) and Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middles Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

Bride,[14] and so the passion of the poem is largely *her* passion. The plural "kisses" in the first lines of the Song point, Bernard says, to the fact that "if anyone once receives the spiritual kiss of Christ's mouth he seeks eagerly to have it again and again," and the Bride who longs for more kisses from her Lover is "satisfied" to receive His kiss.[15] Because of a Hebrew ambiguity and a Latin mistranslation, the words of the bride in the Vulgate of Song of Songs 1:2b reads "*meliora sunt ubera tua vino*" – "your breasts are better than wine." Denys the Carthusian knows about the translation difficulty, but defends Jerome and says that the Bride, by recognizing the breasts of her husband as features "she herself possesses" her love is "set on fire all the more intensely" because of "their likeness in this respect."[16]

What is more surprising, given the allegorical framework for these sermons and meditations, is the fact that the *Bridegroom's* Eros is also unreflectingly affirmed. "The main purpose of this work," Giles of Rome says, "is to give expression to the kinds of desire by which the Bridegroom and the Bride – that is, Christ and the Church – long for one another."[17] Thomas Gallus, an explicitly Dionysian commentator, says that the "Bridegroom, who is more loving than loved, without any delay responds to these spiritual, burning desires and, as it were, extends his hand."[18] Commentators had no qualms, apparently, about attributing erotic passion to the Bridegroom, and then immediately adding that the Bridegroom is Christ Himself. From the texts I have examined, there is very little discussion of the point and no apparent recognition that the commentators were making an important, much less a radical, theological claim. For medieval commentators, the Song of Songs was both an obvious depiction of the longings of the soul or of the Church, and an equally self-evident portrayal of divine Eros.

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[14] Anstell, *The Song of Songs*, 10.
[15] Bernard, *Selected Works*, 221, 237.
[16] Quoted in Turner, *Eros & Allegory*, 428.
[17] Quoted in Turner, *Eros & Allegory*, 359.
[18] Quoted in Turner, *Eros & Allegory*, 324.

Two assumptions thus guided this medieval tradition. First, commentators believed that the Bridegroom was desirous of the bride; second, it was believed that the Bridegroom was Yahweh or, more commonly, Christ. Can these two assumptions be sustained from the text?

There is no need to belabor the first. Canticles is a sensual poem and as such obviously represents the desires of the two characters. Still, a few things can be said to elaborate the obvious. The poem as a whole is an interweaving dialog between Bride and Bridegroom. In both individual sections and in the overall pattern of the poem, speeches from Bride and Bridegroom alternate, until the final, Sabbatical section that brings them to final reconciliation.[19] The interweaving of the two voices highlights the mutuality and reciprocity of the love being depicted. It is also evident that the Bridegroom responds to the Bride's beauty. Nearly his first words in the Song commend the bride as the "most beautiful among women" (Song of Songs 1:8), and he breathlessly adds "How beautiful you are, my darling (*ra'yah*), how beautiful you are! Your eyes are doves" (1:15; cf. 4:1). The invitation to "arise, my darling, my beautiful one" is repeated twice (2:10, 13). Later, he Bridegroom marvels that "there is no blemish in her" (4:7), and calls her "my perfect one" (5:2).[20] She is as "beautiful as Tirzah" and "lovely as Jerusalem," sublimely awesome in her beauty "as an army with banners" (6:4). In the blazons that punctuate the poem, he dwells in excited detail on the features of her body, once moving from her eyes and face to her breasts (4:1-6) and then reversing the gaze as he glances from her feet to her hips to her navel, her breasts, neck, eyes, nose, and hair (7:1-9).

Moreover, the Bridegroom wants to have the Bride, and ultimately does. Three times in the poem, the Bride speaks of the mutual possession of the lovers (2:16; 6:3; 7:10). These are strategically

[19] See David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 199-213.

[20] "Blemish" (*molid*) evokes the Levitical system. It is the word used to describe physical deformities that disqualify a descendant of Aaron from serving as priest (Leviticus 21:17, 18, 21, 21; 22:20, 21, 25). Though not used directly with reference to the sacrificial system, "perfect" (*tam*) but the related term *tamim* is a technical term used to describe qualified sacrificial animals (Leviticus 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32; etc.). Used of human beings, *tamim* typically has a moral connotation (Genesis 6:9; 17:1). This language lends some support to a cultic interpretation of the Song: The Bride is Israel approaching Yahweh for sacrifice, offering "bridal food" (*ishshah*) to celebrate the marriage supper of the Lord.

placed in the poem, the first ending the second unit and the last preceding the corresponding sixth subsection of the poem.[21] In 2:16, the Bride says "my Beloved is to me, and I to him," a chiastically arranged declaration in which the Bride's self-references ("me . . . I") are surrounded by references to her man. Song of Songs 6:3 is also chiastically arranged, but the arrangement is inverted, so that the Bride now embraces her beloved: "I am to my beloved and my beloved to me." The text itself thus pictures the perichoretic mutual possession, now enclosing the Bride by the Bridegroom, now surrounding the Bridegroom with the Bride. More, the Beloved is grammatically inflected by the first person possession; the Bridegroom is not just "Beloved" but "*my* Beloved" (*dody*), just as throughout the poem the love names of the Bride are inflected with the Bridegroom's possessive "my" (my sister, my bride, my perfect one, my dove). From the perspective of the gospel of John (that most "Canticled" of evangelists), the Bride is the beloved community of the Son who has been brought into the internal mutual love of Father and Son. Just as the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father, so the disciples indwell and are indwelt by both (John 17:21-23). That reality is figured in the mutual possession statements of the Son. Desire is thus implicated in inter-Trinitarian relations, as well as in relations between God and His church.

Several passages, finally, refer explicitly to the Eros of the Bridegroom:

> You have made my heart beat faster (*labab*),[22] my sister, my bride; You have made my heart beat faster with a single glance of your eyes, with a single strand of your necklace. How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than all kinds of spices (4:9-10).

> Turn your eyes away from me, for they have confused me (6:5).

[21] Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 212.
[22] The verb puns on *leb*, heart, and means either that the bride gives or takes away his heart.

> Your head crowns you like Carmel, and the flowing locks of your head are like purple threats; the king is captivated (*'asar*) by your tresses (7:5).

> I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me (*teshuqah*, 7:10).

The last of these is especially significant. It is the third declaration of mutual possession, but it is modified to include an explicit reference to the Bridegroom's desire for the Bride. In the earlier instances of this chiastic refrain, the Bridegroom surrounds the Bride, or vice versa. In 7:10, however, the poet breaks with the chiastic structure in favor of a parallel: "I am to my beloved, and on me is his desire." While his desire is *his*, it is an ecstatic desire, a desire reaching out to the beloved. And that desire, which is the furthest thing from being self-contained, is what make the Bridegroom what He is. He *is* his desire for his bride. Again, we may allegorize toward theology proper: God *is* the God of Israel. That qualifying genitive phrase – "of Israel" – is no charade, no ornament. It names God in terms of His bride. He has so identified with His Bride that He takes her name.

In short, there is no reason to doubt that the poet is attributing erotic love to the Bridegroom, but of course these passages will support a theology of divine Eros only if we can establish that the book should be read as an allegory, whether an allegory of Yahweh with Israel or of Jesus with the Church.

Drawing on Jewish tradition, Nicholas of Lyra interpreted the Song as Israel's Song concerning Yahweh.[23] If that is accurate, then we may have grounds for concluding that the poem was *originally* intended as an allegory. Several lines of evidence point in this direction. Edenic allusions are abundant in the poem, most clearly in the eight uses of the word "garden" (*gan*; 4:12, 15, 16 [2x]; 5:1; 6:2 [2x]; 8:13), more than in any Old Testament book besides Genesis (13x). The garden of Eden was Adam's original sanctuary, and the overlay of sanctuary and garden motifs is evident in the Song of Songs. The house is

[23] Turner, *Eros & Allegory*, 114-115.

cedar and cypress (1:17), like the temple; the garden is a place of feasting (2:4; 5:1), and the anointing (1:3) and frequent references to fragrances are reminiscent of the sacrificial smoke from the altar.[24] As Ros Clarke summarizes, "These lovers enjoy sanctuary relationships and engage in sanctuary activities in a place that looks and smells like a sanctuary."[25] Since Yahweh's relationship with Israel is often figured as a marriage,[26] and the lovers' tryst is here taking place in a sanctuary, it is entirely plausible to take the poem, in its original setting, as an allegory of Israel and Yahweh. The poem is about Israel's yearning love for Yahweh, and about Yahweh's desire for and delight in His bride. But we can press this in another direction too, for the Bride herself is a garden (Song 5:1) and Jesus Himself is also temple (John 2:21). The Bridegroom's yearning for His garden-Bride is then the Son's yearning to be joined in flesh with His Bride, His yearning for incarnational union with His people. And it is also the Father's yearning and desire for His well-beloved Son, who has joined with His Bride to rescue her.

Tradition assigns the Song to Solomon, and there is no reason to doubt his authorship. He is mentioned three times in the poem, beginning, middle, and end (1:5; 3:7-11; 8:11-12), and the poem alludes in many particulars to the peace, prosperity, and exploratory wisdom of Solomon.[27] The Bridegroom is explicitly identified as the king (1:4; 1:12-14; 3:6-10), and one traditional line of interpretation sees the poem as a love poem from King Solomon to Abishag the "Shunamite" (= Shulamite, the name reworked into a feminine of Solomon). Temple references of course fit into this reading of the poem as well. Solomon, of course, is a type of the coming Messianic son of David, and Solomon's passionate enchantment with his bride reaches ahead to Jesus. Luther believed that the whole Song was political,

[24] On Eden in the Song, see Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98:4 (1979), 513-528; and Ros Clarke, *Song of Songs: A Biblical Theology* (M.A. Thesis, Oak Hill College, 2006; available at www.beginningwithmoses.org/articles/songofsongs.htm, accessed October 20, 2009.
[25] Clarke, *Song of Songs*, 28.
[26] See Seock-Tae Sohn, *YHWH, the Husband of Israel* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002); Nelly Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), both summarized by Clarke, *Song of Songs*, 41-43.
[27] A thorough assessment of the evidence may be found in Christopher Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 98-116.

celebrating the delight that a faithful king takes in the fruitfulness of his people and land. So too, then, it expresses the delight of the final Davidic King in His people.

Passages of the New Testament that allude to the Song provide some additional support for an allegorical reading.[28] The most dramatic and important of these is in Revelation 1:18. John offers a blazon of the "one like a son of man" standing among the lampstands, moving from the robe that reaches to his feet, to the girdle at his breast, to the hair white like wool and snow, to the burning eyes, and then back to the feet that are not as "burnished bronze" (1:13-15). The style, though not the details, is reminiscent of the Bride's description of the Groom in Song of Songs 5:10-16. More substantively, Revelation 1:18 reveals Jesus as the "living One" who was dead and now lives, having been given "the keys of death and of Hades." This is one of four passages in Revelation that use both *thanatos* and *'ades* (cf. 6:8; 20:13, 14), and these are the only places in the New Testament where these words occur together.

Jesus' mastery of death and Hades alludes to the programmatic Song of Songs 8:6-7:

> Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, jealousy as severe as Sheol. Its flames are flames of fire, the flame of Yah. Many waters will not be able to extinguish the Love, and floods will not wash it away.[29]

Burning like bronze, Jesus is the incarnate Flame of Yah, the Love that cannot be washed away, the Love that is strong as death and triumphant over the grave.[30]

If Jesus is "*the* Love" that is as strong as death, He is the bridegroom who is "dazzling and ruddy" to his bride (Song of Songs 5:10). And if He is the Bridegroom of the Song, then He is the one whose heart beats faster at a glance from the eyes of His beloved, the One terrified by the beauty of her glances, the

[28] I'm reliant here on the extensive review of New Testament allusions to the Song found in Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 29-34.
[29] The translation of the latter part of the verse is from Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 32.
[30] Mitchell (*Song of Songs*, 33) suggests that the reference to "mighty waters" also links the passages. Jesus speaks with the voice of many waters (Revelation 1:15), but many waters cannot quench love.

One imprisoned in her tresses, the One whose desire is for His bride, the One who virtually becomes His desire for His bride. If Jesus is the Bridegroom, in short, His love for His Bride is Eros and not mere Agape. He comes to His Bride because He *wants* her and the pleasant fruits of her garden, because He is transported by her beauty.

III.

This is the conclusion that raises theological difficulties. How can we say that God the Son desires His Bride erotically without saying that God the Son is needy? To repeat: Do we have to choose between a stiff but sovereign Agape and a warm but tremulous Eros?

One might answer this problem by distinguishing between the human Eros of the Son and His divine Agape. As man, He longs for the Beloved, and craves to possess her beauty; as God, He remains selflessly above it all, asking nothing but giving all, indifferent to the revolting ugliness of His chosen. This Nestorian answer is unsatisfying for any number of reasons, but in our present discussion it is unsatisfying because it fails to do justice to the sense of the Song of Songs. As noted above, the poem in its original context hints at Yahweh's erotic pursuit of Israel, and the programmatic claim of 8:6, briefly mentioned above, makes it clear that the love that animates Jesus the Husband is divine love. "Love is strong as death," but which love, whose love? Love's "burnings are burnings of fire, the flame of Yah," but whose burnings, whose flame? In context, the answers to these questions are ambiguous, and the import seems to be the very Dionysian notion that love, wherever it flames out, is the flashing of the flame of Yah. Even if that is too much to draw from a tantalizingly cryptic text, there is little doubt that the fiery love is Yahweh's own. Jesus is the Flame of Love because He is Yahweh incarnate, because His flame is the flame of Yah.

The Song of Songs thus leaves us with two options: One is to accept the widespread view of desire articulated succinctly by the poet Wallace Stevens – "not to have is the beginning of desire" –

apply it to God, and conclude that God is as needy as we are. As one writer said, "I need you, you need me; yum yum." The other option is to rethink what desire might be.

At the heart of this problem is the assumption that pervades the Western philosophical tradition, namely, the assumption that desire is necessarily an expression of lack or need. Hegel gave the problem of desire its most explicit contemporary expression. More specifically, the Hegelianism that put desire in the forefront of philosophical discussion was the Hegelianism of Alexandre Kojeve's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.[31] Through Kojeve, the notion of desire as lack came to Jacques Lacan, the Freudian theorist whose seminars formed so much of postmodern theory.[32]

Kojeve placed Hegel's famed "master-slave dialectic" at the center of his account of Hegel's philosophy, and sees that dynamic at work in the basic structures of Hegel's account of desire and human existence. "The (human) I," he said, "is the I of a Desire or of Desire." It is Desire that constitutes the I as a separate entity that is not absorbed into an object. Contemplation of an object threatens to absorb the I, but desire – the desire for food or sex – pulls us away from the object and reveals "a subject different from the object and 'opposed' to it."[33] Because action is motivated by Desire, and Desire draws me away from my object, action and the desire that motivates it are essentially negative. This is evident in the way that desire is fulfilled. Desire motivates action toward an object of Desire, but the satisfaction of Desire involves the destruction of the object: To satisfy Desire for food, I must eat it, destroying or at least transforming it. So, Desire is what establishes the I but this I is established only by negation: "the I of Desire is an emptiness that receives a real positive content only by negating action that satisfies Desire in destroying, transforming, an 'assimilating' the desired not-I." But the paradox of desire is that the "positive content of the I, constituted as a negation, is a function of the positive content of the negated

[31] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (assembled by Raymond Queneau; trans. James Nichols; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[32] Bataille is of the same opinion. See Tod Linafelt, "Biblical Love Poetry (. . . and God)," *Journal of the American Academic of Religion* 70:2 (June 2002), 323-345, who unfortunately bails as soon as he raises the important questions.

[33] Kojeve, *Introduction*, 3-4.

not-I."[34] In other words, the I and its self-consciousness lives by what it feeds on, is constituted by destroying what constitutes it.

This is what happens when the I confronts a natural object, an object that is not itself a subject. For the desiring I to attain self-consciousness and negate negation, it must direct its Desire to something that can respond by desiring the I in turn. Desire advances from natural to human when it is not simply desire for an object or for a body but a "Desire of the other." In this way, Desire becomes a desire to be desired, a desire to be recognized by the other and loved in turn. But this does not relieve the paradox or the strife at the heart of desire: "Human Desire, too, tends to satisfy itself by a negating – or better, a transforming and assimilating – action. Man 'feeds' on Desires as an animal feeds on real things." Humans are formed "in terms of a Desire directed toward another Desire, that is – finally – in terms of a desire for recognition." But the other also has a desire for recognition, and each is "ready to risk its life – and consequently, to put the life of the other in danger – in order to be 'recognized' by the other, to impose itself on the other as the supreme value." Desiring humans can thus only meet in "a fight to the death" in which one masters the other. The only escape from this fight to the death is surrender, if one or the other of the desiring egos gives in to the other. That is, one or the other must recognize without recognition from the other, or, in short, to recognize the other as Master and himself as Slave. At the most basic level, "man is never simply man. He is always, necessarily, and essentially, either Master or Slave."[35]

At the core of Kojeve's Hegelian account of desire is the notion that the "I of Desire" is the emptiness that receives positive content only in the negation of the object. If this is truly what desire is, then presumably no theology of Eros is possible: How can God be an emptiness that needs fulfillment in another? To speak of Divine Eros in this context is to deny God's independence from His creation.

[34] Kojeve, *Introduction*, 4.
[35] Kojeve, *Introduction*, 6-8.

Kojeve's assumption that desire arises from need or lack has not, however, gone unchallenged. At the heart of the argument of *Anti-Oedipus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari[36] is a refutation of this negative assessment of desire, especially as it appears in Lacan. The authors unmask a tragic impulse within the Western tradition from Plato to Lacan that arises from its equation of desire with lack. Inspired by Nietzsche's affirmation of life in all its gory glory and fertility, what they call "schizoanalysis" claims that far from being "lack," desire is productive, a "desiring-machine." Life is desire, and life as desire is productive.[37] Eugene W. Holland explains that for Deleuze and Guattari, desire produces reality in a fashion similar to the way that lawyers produce evidence in court: "They cannot 'wish' it into existence; they don't make it up, but they do make it count as real." In a court, the reality that is "produced" by the lawyers is not identical to reality outside the court; what counts as fact in a case does not necessarily match what is the case. But that distinction does not hold for Deleuze and Guattari. Desire is more fundamental than any inside/outside distinction, more basic than the difference between psychic production and the production of labor, more deeply rooted than the distinction between phenomenological "constitution" of objects by intention and the technical construction of objects: "Through the investment of energy in psychic as well as physical form," Holland concludes, "desiring-machines produce reality both in the cognitive sense of psychic drives shaping the phenomenonal world and in the economic sense of labor-power shaping the material world."

In part, this represents Deleuze and Guattari's effort to overcome the conflict between Marx and Freud without privileging either; a desiring-machine is a Marxo-Freudian contraption that transcends both of the nineteenth century's great theorists. For "schizoanalysis," Freudian desire and Marxist labor are essentially the same productive force at work in different ways, and only the capitalist system, they argue, assigns them to "different regimes." The difference between the factory that produces pins and the

[36] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane; London: Athlone Press, 1984).
[37] Eugene W. Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999), 22-23.

psychic factory is not a difference between fantasy and reality: "There is no such thing as the social production of reality on the one hand," Deleuze and Guattari write, "and a desiring-production that is mere fantasy on the other . . . social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions."[38]

Desire, then, does not necessarily arise from need. Desire is productive. We might gloss this by considering the love of parents for children. Some people, perhaps, *need* the comfort of holding a baby, having another human being utterly dependent; in their disappointments, some adults need to find fulfillment of their own failed dreams by having children. But parents have children for other reasons, not least because of the overflow of their love for one another: They want to bring another into the realm of their own ecstatic Eros. Desire is thus productive, literally so.[39] Desire here arises out of fullness, not out of emptiness.

IV.

I cannot accept the larger philosophical claims that Deleuze and Guattari offer. They posit a kind of desiring life-force with characteristics similar to Sponza's pantheistic *Natura sive Deus*. At the same time, they shake desire free from the tragic moorings that have often burdened it. We can reason top-down: If, as the Song of Songs indicates Yahweh yearns for His people, and Yahweh is the free Creator of the universe, then of course desire is not necessarily from lack or absence. Yahweh's desire is productive: God's love is the source of creation, and Israel's entire existence arises from the free sovereign love by which Yahweh chose Israel.

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[38] Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus*, 23.

[39] For medieval theologians such as Richard of St. Victor and Bonaventure, "condilectio" – the shared love of two for a third, the shared love of parents for a child – was the highest form of love, and thus this was the reason why God *had* to be Triune.

But can we make this coherent? How can we affirm God's Eros and His freedom, His desiring love and His independent sovereignty? I want to fill out some of my earlier hints at a Trinitarian solution. This filling out is less than full, but it perhaps makes some progress.

The Father loves the Son. This love is self-giving, but it is also possessive. The Father desires the Son's obedience and love, and the Father's love for the Son is a response to the Son's eternal beauty as the radiance of the glory of the Father, the exact representation of the Father's character. The Father possesses the Son, delights in the beauty of the Son, wants the Son to return His love, which the Son eternally does. The Spirit is the flame of that Desire, the flame that flashes out to the Son, and returns to the Father, in an eternal circle of Eros, rainbow on rainbow. But none of this eternal round of love arises from lack. The Father lacks nothing because He has never been without His fullness, the Son who is His glory and image. He eternally knows and loves the Son in the union of the Spirit, and the Son of course lacks nothing since He has received all that the Father has to give. Here is Trinitarian Eros in which lack or need has no place.

From this, it is a fairly straightforward step to an account of God's desiring love for the creation. Jonathan Edwards said that God created a world to form a bride for His Son, and so creation itself, as Dionysus said, is an expression of Eros, of the desire of the Father to form a bride for the Son, the Son's desire for a bride in obedience to His husband, the Spirit's desire to adorn a bride that would delight the Son who delights the Father. Because the creation is formed by the Son for the Father, formed by the Son through the Spirit, it is an object of delight to the Father. Wisdom takes pleasure in her works, and the Father delights in the works of the Son. On the other hand, creation is formed by the Father for the Son, formed by the Father through the Spirit, and therefore an object of delight to the Son. The Father makes through Word and Spirit, and at the end of each day He pronounces the results to be "good." He reacts to the beauty of the creation, and takes pleasure in it. When the Father is thrilled at the beauty of creation, He is thrilled that the imprint of His own glory, the Son, that the world bears.

That is, as it were, the easy part. The difficulty of course arises when we attempt to account for the Triune God's love for a world that bears only a marred imprint of the Creator, the shattered mirror of fallen humanity. How can a holy God *desire* a harlot Bride? Here, I think that only a strong account of eternal election will do the trick.[40] The Father loves the Bride because she is the eternal Bride of the Son, because He has loved her in the Son from the foundation of the world, and never sees or conceives of her except as the Beloved Bride united to the Beloved Son. The Son does what He sees the Father doing, and as the Father loves the Bride with His eternal paternal love, so the Son loves the Bride with the eternal brotherly love, and woos her, as Solomon does the Shulamite, as "My sister, My bride." The Spirit is the flame of Yah, the seven Spirits who are the eyes of the Lord. The Father regards the fallen world in the Son by the eyes of the Spirit, and the Son regards the fallen Bride through eyes flaming with the Spirit that is the flame and fiery love of the Triune God. It is surely one of the unexpected pleasures of working through these issues to discover that oh-so-harsh predestinarianism is the only secure basis for an account of Triune erotics.

In a Trinitarian framework, then, Eros is not needy, desiring, lacking. Nor is it selfish grasping love. Within the inner-Trinitarian fellowship, each Person desires each, and eternally "wins" and possesses the other by self-giving "agapeic" love. And when God acts in the world, He acts according to the pattern of that inner-Trinitarian fellowship, desiring His wayward bride and winning her by a supreme act of love, for greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

[40] The account of election I have in mind is fundamentally that of Calvin and the Reformed tradition, but nuanced by Barthian themes. Especially important here is Barth's insistence on the identity of being and will in God. God *is* the God He *wills* to be. When we work out the doctrine of election in the light of that assumption, election is part of the doctrine of God. Out of the overflowing fullness of His love, God has freely chosen, without any constraint or need, to create and redeem a bride for the Son, a daughter of the Father perfected in the Spirit. By that free decision and election, God has determined to *be* the God of Israel, the Head of the Church, the indwelling Spirit in the temple that is the Body of Christ. Those descriptions are not "mere" titles, but ontological statements about the Triune God.