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Disciplinary Brief

# A THEOLOGY OF LOVE IN CONVERSATION WITH OLIVER O'DONOVAN

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## O'Donovan's Theology Of Love

### The Order of Love

The heart of Oliver O'Donovan's paper is an Augustinian view of the “order of love”. Though he does not come to state this overtly until over half way through, its influence has been pervasive from the beginning. In his own words:

> The idea of an order of love goes back to the early patristic period. Augustine developed it at length: inanimate things are loved “for the sake of animate things”; creatures are loved “for the sake of God”; God alone is loved “for his own sake”' (8).

Things and persons are certainly to be loved, but not for their own sake; God is to be loved through them. I shall come to what I believe to be the negative side of this theology of love in due time, but we should register the positive aspect of Augustine's theology: God is to be loved in all things, and our love is itself created by God's own love, whose love operates through our love.

### Ways of Loving Scholarly Disciplines

With this Augustinian understanding of the “order of love”, O'Donovan tells us how a theology of love can make a difference to pursuit of the different disciplines of human knowledge. Whatever our speciality, we should love it “for God's sake”. This means first loving it as a vocation from God, an offering to God (7).

Second, it means loving it as related to other goods in God's order in creation, recognizing the relative importance of things, according to the order of love. This in turn means three ways of procedure in our scholarship; (a) we are not to pursue our discipline in a competitive way, fencing it off from those we think are not part of our professional community, or thinking we own it as our property; (b) we are always to be open to the interpretation of love: love for God and our neighbour should give us new perspectives on our

research and its practical applications; (c) we should always be aiming to communicate our discoveries to other persons, linking our love of the subject with our love for our neighbour (7-9).

Third, building on this last point, we should love our academic subject as something in the service of others, or as a means of education. Transmitting our knowledge we educate others for life, strengthening them to live well, enabling them to sift the merits of their goals (9-10).

O'Donovan stresses continually that love is love of knowledge. It is right to love the form of knowledge to which we are dedicated, as long as we recognize that love of an *object*, that is, a mass of knowledge, must be subordinate to love of other persons, and finally to love of God. This is the order of love: things for the sake of persons, particular persons for the sake of God. Indeed, *knowing* a discipline is subordinate to *knowing* other persons, and finally to *knowing* God. O'Donovan implies that love is not just love *of* knowledge, but love *as* knowledge: love is a kind of knowing. Here he draws out the nature of love as *eros*, as a *desire* for what is good and beautiful. So eros is, he says, “the birth of enquiry” (6), a curiosity about the universe and a fascination with it. Indeed, his definition of love of God and neighbour is “an affective and directive attention to the good of persons” (4)—not just willing the good of another (sometimes called *agape*), but an emotive desire for this good (*eros*).

If we ask what insights O'Donovan has given us for our pursuit of different disciplines of knowledge, we have these three rather general claims about love: love of our speciality as a vocation, love as related to an order of goods, and love as education. Within the second and third loves, we can ask our own productive questions about how love might be a means of interpretation, and how we might use our discipline to help others to live well.

### Justice Must be Interpreted by Love

O'Donovan does, however, conclude by giving more detail about love in one area of knowledge, that is the area of justice. Here he is picking up his discussion at the beginning about “how love interprets law”. His reason for choosing this area appears to be the debate in the early church about the status of Jewish religious law in the light of the gospel, which gave rise to the Apostle Paul's idea that “Christ is the end of the law” (Rom 10:4), and so an affirming of what Paul calls “the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). O'Donovan explains that this law is an inner power of love, fulfilling the intention of all religious and natural law (2-3). Written law, he maintains, is a complex and elusive thing. It is less a set of principles than a “living and constant presence in society”. It changes as the human situation changes, and so love for particular persons in particular contexts must always interpret the law. Love, moreover, resolves problems when law throws up competing moral demands.

When O'Donovan returns at the end of the paper to the theme of law, it is in the form of the pursuit of justice, and now he appeals to the “order of love” - things, people, God. As love of knowledge ends in knowing God, so love of practical knowledge will end in justice for persons in God's kingdom. In love's order, human justice, he stresses, is provisional in the light of God's justice, and so must be interpreted by

love. O'Donovan's appeal to making “judgements” in the light of love might be extended beyond the realm of law into other judgements we make in other disciplines. We might explore how the making of judgements can be shaped by the influence of love when we draw conclusions from our observation of the world, whether in social sciences or the hard sciences, or when we read a text in literature or analyse a cadence of music. When we make a decision about the meaning of this observation or reading, that it where love makes a difference. But as a matter of fact, O'Donovan himself restricts judgement to *law*, taking two examples. International law, especially the law of war, depends not just on natural law but on love for persons. Penal justice must be moderated by love, and must be shaped as “a witness to the forgiveness of sins” (13).

## Questions about O'Donovan's “Order of Love”

As I indicated earlier, the strength of Augustine's approach is in the intimate inter-connection between loves, divine and human; O'Donovan makes good use of this in insisting that human justice is always provisional. But I suggest there is a problem with Augustine's, and O'Donovan's, notion “for the sake of”. Love of the inanimate world is “for the sake of” animate creatures, and love for them is “for the sake of” God. O'Donovan underlines that “God alone is loved 'for his own sake'”, but then appears to distance himself from Augustine's conclusion, that only God as the *summum bonum* can be *enjoyed* in love, while creatures are to be *used* to enter this love and this enjoyment. O'Donovan writes that the order of love is not “an ordering of means to ends, as though one might value creatures solely for their utility value” (8). He does not mean that we use creatures as a *means* of loving God, but simply recognize the true relation of things in the world, our neighbours and God to each other. We may then excuse O'Donovan from an Augustinian utility, but the problem is still there in the notion “for the sake of”. In that case we are giving the attention of love to things and people, while having *something else in view* as our greater love: things and people do not have our full attention. If we cannot love things in the world and people for their own sake, we are not seeing them just as they are, but as occupants of various stages of an order: things, creatures, persons, God. This is, theologically, a matter of the theology of creation. *God* loves everything God has made for itself, not for his own sake - if God were simply loving God's self in creation, there would have been no reason to create a reality other than God at all. If we love other things and people *only* for God's sake, we are not loving with the love of God.

So I find three sub-problems in an order which is governed by the notion of loving “for the sake of” someone else.

## Is Love of Neighbour Undermined?

First, it appears to undermine love of our neighbour. O'Donovan writes that “God and neighbour are not equal claimants on our love” because the neighbour presents us only with “a reflection of God's claim”. He writes that “it is *really* God who claims our love” (1). I question whether God's intention is for us to make this scale of valuation (“not equal claimants”). With Emmanuel Levinas, I suggest that the moral demand of our neighbour on our love cannot be graded and is always infinite. [ 1 ] God of course also makes an

absolute claim on our love, but the neighbour's is the claim of created being, while God's is the claim of uncreated being which is the source of all life and love. As soon as we say that the neighbour's claim is "*really* God's claim", we seem to be opening a slippery slope towards not giving attention to our neighbour as he or she really is. It would be different to say that God makes a divine claim *through* our neighbour's claim on our love, or *in* our neighbour's claim, or that in our neighbour's claim on our love we *encounter* God's claim.

Here I venture to question O'Donovan's exegesis of John 4:20, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen". O'Donovan's interpretation of this is that "the brother is the visible focus of love for the invisible God" (1), as if loving the brother is really for the sake of loving God in him. The author's point is that lack of love for the brother or sister *incapacitates* us for loving God. O'Donovan is surely right in going on to say, however, that "in loving one another we know God" (1).

### Is the Natural World our Neighbour?

A second problem is that the order O'Donovan envisages appears to subordinate the love we show towards creatures in the natural world to the love we show towards persons. While he begins by speaking of the love of "fellow creatures" to each other, and later on describes the love of the inanimate as being love "for the sake of the *animate*", he soon moves on to replace "animate" with persons. So he defines love for God and neighbour as "an affective and directive attention to the good of *persons*" (4, my emphasis). The result of this is that nowhere in the paper does he refer to the natural world as our neighbour, nor the creatures in it as our neighbours.

### How Far does the Reciprocity of Love Extend?

A third and associated problem is that O'Donovan limits the reciprocity of love to human persons and the personal God. He writes, "Personal loves are open to reciprocity and mutual communion as other loves *are not*" (4). But the biblical affirmation that God makes covenant with the whole of the natural world (Gen 9:15, Hos 2:18), and much biblical poetry about God's compassionate relation to the whole of nature and its own responsive praise of God, implies a reciprocity both between God and creation and between the inhabitants of creation themselves. It is easy to see a reciprocity of response between human beings and higher animals, but our theology ought to be able to embrace a responsiveness in creation at every level. In my own work I have explored ways of expressing a responsiveness to a loving God and to created realities (and failure to respond) even in the quantum world. [ 2 ] The fact that this responsiveness only rises to the level of love at or near the top of the evolutionary chain does not exclude analogies to love elsewhere. The project on 'Love in Religion' that I run in Oxford has explored this reciprocity from the perspective of different world faiths. [ 3 ]

## Extending O'Donovan's Theology of Love

My questioning of the Augustinian “order of love” provides a context for ways which I suggest might extend valuable insights in O'Donovan's paper.

### Holding Together Agape and Eros

First, I want to affirm O'Donovan's holding together of the dimensions of love often called for convenience *agape* and *eros* (though the usages cannot be pressed in terms of etymology). In genuine love, a will for the good of the other (*agape*) must be combined with a desire for union with the other (*eros*). If the first involves self-giving, even self-sacrifice, the second involves self-fulfilment and self-love, since desire searches for satisfaction. O'Donovan is right to say that affirming only *agape* leaves “no place for a developing history of the self with the other”, (5) and when two subjects are objects of love to each other, there is a “truthfulness with which each grasps the reality of the other” (6). I understand him to mean that when one person reaches out with love for another, wanting their good, they are willing to receive what the other has to give, and so open to being fulfilled through the other (which is *eros*).

O'Donovan just hints that this experience of human love is an analogy for the love of God, when he says that it “may lead to a vision of its Creator” (6), but he does not explicitly work this out in a doctrine of God. In my own work I have tried to take seriously an *eros* as well as an *agape* love of God, and so conceive of a God who desires to be fulfilled and completed through the world as well as acting beneficently towards it. [ 4 ] I have long argued that this does not deny what theologians call the *aseity* of God, since a God who is *a se* (meaning 'only from himself'), owing nothing to any other reality for existence, may still desire in sovereign love to be enhanced in God's own life *through* creation. [ 5 ] To be self-existent need not mean to be self-sufficient or unconditioned. All depends on the freedom of God's love. We might even say that God chooses to be in need of loving, created partners. [ 6 ] This kind of vision does, of course, modify any absolute distinction between divine and human love. It also leads to a doctrine of the Trinity in which the triune persons are not self-sufficient in love, needing no created partners; rather the divine persons are freely opening themselves eternally to make room for creation within their interweaving relations or movements of love (in the language of the church fathers, their *perichoresis*). [ 7 ] Rather oddly, O'Donovan discusses “the sovereignty of love” from a Christian perspective, without any mention of the Trinity as the environment of love for created things and persons.

The integration between *agape* and *eros* offers opportunities for reflecting on the place of love in many disciplines, though O'Donovan does not extend it in this way. The relation between self-interest and self-giving in love throws light on many areas of human enterprise. For example, the 'Love in Religion' Project I direct has been working recently on this dialectic in business and the economy. [ 8 ] *Agape* love can be seen in the concern of a business not just for share-holders' profit but the well-being of all stakeholders—employees, customers, the surrounding community and the sustainability of the whole natural environment. At the same time *eros* love, or self-love and self-interest, which has become

dominant as sheer greed in modern capitalist economics, has a proper part to play in the satisfactions that come from entrepreneurship, the opening up of competition, and delivery of services It also supplies much of the energy for this activity.

### Going Farther with Love as Wisdom

A second area of O'Donovan's thought that can be built upon is his important insistence that love is knowledge and wisdom. From a perspective of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, wisdom has two dimensions to it. First it is a careful observation of the world from which deductions may be drawn about prudent living. Second, it is a participation in the wisdom of God which is moving through the world, a process that is described as being like a love-relationship with Woman Wisdom who is walking the paths of the world (Proverbs 8-9, Ben Sirach 24). [ 9 ] Moreover, proper observation, giving attention to everything *in its own right* (rather than “for the sake of” something else) leads to participation. From a Christian perspective, and developing a doctrine of a Trinity, this participation can be understood as being immersed into threefold movements of relational love in which all creation is held. It is the experience of a love which is always more than human love, inexhaustible in its depth; it is like being carried on a current of love which is already there.

## How Academic Observation Participates more Deeply in Divine Love

The belief that proper observation of the world leads to a deeper participation in the divine love, even where the observer would not describe it in this way, can result in a particular approach to many disciplines of knowledge. Careful and disciplined observation of how things are, whether through the social sciences, the hard sciences or the creative arts, will lead to moments of disclosure, a leap of understanding, a paradigm shift. A Christian view of the world will interpret this as being drawn more deeply into the divine creative love, and will understand that this is what is happening even when the observer does not see it in this way. The perspective of love should keep the observer alert to find the moment when, as O'Donovan puts it, the love of knowledge is “ordered to an end in the full knowledge of God” (12).

## Endnotes

[ 1 ] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*. Or Beyond Essence, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 110-12.

[ 2 ] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Outlines of an Eco-Love-Theology', in Fiddes (ed.), *Loving the Planet* (Oxford: Firedint, 2022), 191-224; Fiddes in Christopher Southgate et al., *God, Struggle, and Suffering in the Evolution of Life* (London: T & T Clark, 2025), 48-70, 134-50.

[ 3 ] See www.loveinreligion.org. The project networks scholars from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu traditions to explore the impact of the double command to love God and neighbour on critical areas of society today.

[ 4 ] Fiddes, 'God Is Love, But Is Love God? Towards a Theology of Love as Knowledge', in Fiddes (ed.), *Love as Common Ground. Essays on Love in Religion* (Lanham: Lexington/London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1-30.

[ 5 ] Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 67-71.

[ 6 ] Fiddes, 'Creation out of Love', in John Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love. Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 167-91.

[ 7 ] Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God. Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 150-166; Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 45-65.

[ 8 ] Fiddes, 'Benevolence, Empathy and Self-love—Dimensions of Love with Relevance to Business and Economics: A perspective from Christian Doctrine', in Paul S. Fiddes and Hugh Whittaker (ed), *Love in Business and the Economy: A Pluralist Approach* (Forthcoming, London: T & T Clark).

[ 9 ] Fiddes, Seeing the World and Knowing God, Part 2, 'Wisdom and Observation and Participation'.

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