Love plays God.

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'Almost two thousand years — and not a single new god!' cried Nietzsche in 1888.1

But he was wrong. The new god was there — indeed was right under his nose. That new god was love. Human love.

Human love, now even more than then, is widely tasked with achieving what once only divine love was thought capable of: to be our ultimate source of meaning and happiness, and of power over suffering and disappointment. Not as the rarest of exceptions but as a possibility open to practically all who have faith in it; not as the result of its being infused into us by a creator-God or after long and disciplined training, but as a spontaneous and intuitive power with which, to some degree, we are all endowed.

Though this faith in love as the one democratic, even universal, form of salvation open to us moderns is the result of a long religious history that saw divine love as the origin of human love and as the model to be imitated, it has paradoxically come into its own because of a decline in religious faith. It has been possible only because, since the end of the eighteenth century, love has increasingly filled the vacuum left by the retreat of Christianity. Around that time the formula 'God is love' became inverted into 'love is God',[2] so

that it is now the West's undeclared religion — and perhaps its only generally accepted religion.

What does this really mean? It means that in cultures formed by the Christian tradition genuine love tends to get modelled on a certain picture of divine love, whether or not we are Christians. This picture has less to do with what Jesus is reported to have said — indeed, as we will see, he seldom mentions love (and almost never speaks of sex) — than with much later beliefs and practices.

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The key beliefs are these:

Love is unconditional: it is neither aroused nor diminished by the other's value or qualities; it is a spontaneous gift that seeks nothing for the giver. (Paradigm case: parents' love for their children.)

Love relates to and affirms the loved one in their frill particularity, the 'bad' as well as the 'good'.

Love is fundamentally selfless: a disinterested concern for the flourishing of loved ones for their own sake.

Love is benevolent and harmonious — a haven of peace.

Love is eternal: it — or its blessings — will never die.

> Love transports us beyond the messy imperfections of the everyday world into a superior state of purity and perfection.
>
> Love redeems life's losses and sufferings: it delivers us from them; gives them meaning; overwhelms them with its own value; and reconciles with that highest good from which they express our separation.

These sorts of ideas saturate the popular culture. They are also repeated by otherwise bold thinkers, who promulgate clichés such as love as 'disinterested concern for the well-being' of the loved one 'for their own sake', or Ide as the spontaneous 'bestowal of value', or love as directed at the loved one's 'full particularity' — and who are quick to chide great forebears like Plato and Proust for failing to subscribe to such worthy commonplaces.[3] Above all, these ideals fuel our expectations of romantic love and of parents' love for their children. To its immense cost, human love has usurped a role that only God's love used to play. This divinization of human love becomes most obvious when we are personally confronted with severe loss — the sort that can abruptly drain our lives of

meaning and security. Faced by the fragility of our achievements, possessions, health, jobs; by the helpless

suffering of illness, poverty, bereavement, terrorism, or unemployment, love is enlisted as the one measure of value to which most Westerners, whether they are religious believers or not, can cling. Why me? Why the innocent child? To what end such calamity? Only love seems undefeated by such questions. Only love seems to have the all-conquering force to flood horrors with meaning — 'he didn't die in vain' — or, where even it cannot do that because he obviously did die in vain, then to give his life unquestionable value — 'he loved and was loved, and this vindicates his life, and this vindication of his life obliterates the meaninglessness of his death'.

The religion of love is no less attractive to the diehard atheist than to the agnostic or the believer. Many atheists find in love a taste of the absolute and the eternal that they rigorously deny to any other realm of life. There is hardly a humanist funeral that, having begun with a defiant statement that it is a godless celebration, doesn't seek comfort in the love that 'survives' the deceased person and thus gives him a measure of immortality: survives in his acts of loving and in his being loved; survives in the memories that the still-living have of that love.

If you then ask an atheist whether love, or its consequences, somehow lives on when even those touched by it have themselves died, he will, in many — perhaps most — cases, wish to say 'yes', as if love were a moral energy that, once expressed, can never be extinguished. For the inheritors and successors of Christianity, this belief is their last defense against despair. They would agree with St Paul that 'Love never ends' (1 Corinthians 13:8). The final line of Philip Larkin's

poem of disenchantment, 'An Arundel Tomb', speaks for a whole civilization: 'What will survive for us is love.'[4]

By contrast, since the West started losing its faith in God in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, all his substitutes — all those objects of worship that have, at one time or another, been seen as harbingers of human exaltation and redemption; as imbuing with value and meaning anything they structure — have, one by one, been found wanting. Reason, Progress, the Nation, the State, Communism, and the bevy of other idols and 'isms' that were, and in one or two cases — like nationalism and art — still sporadically are, elevated to religions of salvation to fill the void left by the slow 'death' of God, all failed to deliver the ultimate contentment or limitless promise expected of them.

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For all the spiritual and moral significance attached to them, none could sustain that vision to which the Western imagination is still so addicted and for the sake of which it continually erects its idols: the vision of some final state of perfection where all good things harmoniously coexist. None could successfully serve as the master ideal or experience that gives meaning to life as a whole and, in the process, redeems, explains, justifies, washes away, or otherwise defeats suffering and injustice.

Freedom — the only other perennial candidate for a mass religion — will not do the trick, if only because it cannot be, even theoretically, unlimited to either extent or value. Though almost universally acclaimed in the contemporary world as a great good, including by its enemies (always a sign of how powerful a value has become), it cannot lend value to anything genuinely done in its name in the way that love can. Nor is every increase in freedom necessarily good in the sense that we think every increase in love is.

Art is better than freedom at meeting man's religious needs — but only for the few (and, as creators of art, for even fewer), quite apart from the fact that contemporary art has become too determinedly ironic, too intentionally everyday in tone, too scornful of the idea of salvation or ultimate meanings or the unconditional or the enduring, to be in a position to do the job reliably. Yet other ideals, such as racial and gender equality, or protection of the environment and animal rights, have sprung up; but no matter how noble and vital and revolutionary they are, none provides the final justification of life's aim and meaning that the Western mind still craves. The more individualistic our societies become, the more we can expect the value of love, as the ultimate source of belonging and redemption, to keep rising. In the wasteland of Western idols, only love survives intact.

THE PERILS OF HUBRIS

To give any human ideal a divine character does it no favors. For the reality — of which so many ancient myths speak, from

Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to Prometheus's theft of divine fire, to the Babylonians' ambition to build a tower that would reach the heavens — is that any attempt to appropriate the powers of a god or to divinize the human ends in disaster.

Love is no exception. By imputing to human love features properly reserved for divine love, such as the unconditional and the eternal, we falsify the nature of

This most conditional and time-bound and earthy emotion and force it to labor under intolerable expectations. This divinization of human love is the latest chapter in humanity's impulsive quest to steal the powers of its gods, and the longest running such attempt to reach beyond our humanity. Like the others it must fail; for the moral of these stories is that the limits of the human can be ignored only at terrible cost.

But one might object, the world is also a frill of skepticism about love as religion — or even as a story of Hollywood optimism in which, after the inevitable trials, soulmates find and cherish perfect happiness for the rest of their lives. There are many today — as there were in previous times — who do reject the divine model I sketched earlier; and who echo long traditions that see love in naturalistic terms, traditions which we will also consider in this book.

For example, there are hedonists like Ovid who advise us to enjoy the delights of courtship, sex and the amorous

imagination for as long as they last; to cultivate them as a refined sport or art; to be cautious about the madness of 'falling in love'; and to be unmoved by the mirage of a higher meaning to love. There are deflationists like Schopenhauer who see passionate love, with all its ideals and illusions, as the machinations of a reproductive drive aimed at getting two people obsessed with each other for long enough to produce and raise the next generation. There are advocates of friendship-love, such as Aristotle or Montaigne, for whom devotion to the welfare of another whom we experience as our 'second self is more conducive to our flourishing than love that strives to storm the heavens — and, for Montaigne at least, every bit as intense. More recently, there are psychoanalysts, beginning with Freud, who depict love as a primal and often regressive search for physical gratification and protective union — and love's maturation as liberation from its infantile patterns. And there are those, like Proust, who regard most love between humans as a ruthless, fickle and often deluded mission to escape from us into the security and novelty of someone else.

In the end, though, love plays too important a role in fulfilling our inescapable religious needs — today, widely unsatisfied — to dislodge the divine model. And yet there is another way of thinking about love that, I hope to show, does justice to the powerful and universal needs behind it, while avoiding both the divine and the deflationary accounts of it. On this point, love is neither an unconditional commitment to the welfare of others for their own sake, nor can it be reduced

to drives for recognition, intimacy, procreation, or sexual gratification. So, what, then, is it?

LOVE, A History By Simon May Footnotes

PREFACE

1. I variously use he/his/him, she/her, or they/them/their as a pronoun for the loved one.

CHAPTER 1 LOVE PLAYS GOD

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, sect. 19, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, 1954), p. 586.
2. I owe this formulation to Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love* (Chicago, 1984–87), vol. II, p. 294.
3. For example, Harry Frankfurt claims that love 'consists most basically in a disinterested concern for the well-being or flourishing of the person who is loved. It is not driven by any ulterior purpose but seeks the good of the beloved . . . for its own sake' (*The Reasons of Love*, Princeton, NJ, 2004, p. 79, cf. pp. 42 and 52). Irving Singer, in his trilogy, *The Nature of Love*, repeatedly distinguishes love as 'appraisal' of value in the loved one from love as spontaneous or gratuitous 'bestowal' of value – a distinction that, as we will see, is just another expression of the old Eros/agape dichotomy, though it rejects the religious framework from which such distinctions derive and in which alone they make full sense. He goes on to admonish any thinker, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, who fails to recognise the importance of bestowal, which he considers the greater of the two (again on the conventional lines of the traditional prioritisation of agape). Another example of this remarkable respect for received wisdom by leading contemporary thinkers is Martha Nussbaum's criticism of Proust for failing to subscribe to what are, in effect, contemporary clichés, without pausing to ask whether Proust might have reason to do so. Thus she raises three 'worries' about what is lacking in Proust's account of love: 'a worry about compassion, a worry about reciprocity, and a worry about the individual'. The latter is a worry about any thinker (Plato is another) who fails to see that love must recognise that people are 'qualitatively distinct and, especially separate, having their own lives to live', a recognition that must 'embrace the very fact of difference' (*Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 496–9 *passim*). And she adds that 'a lover who focuses on objects as sources of good and well-being will be unlikely to love them in all their full particularity' (ibid., p. 527). But at no point do these three philosophers – three of the small minority who write about love at all – really investigate whether love is fundamentally about such worthy ambitions; and, if it is, whether such omniscient-sounding claims as being able to love others 'in all their full particularity' are possible or even meaningful.
4. Philip Larkin, 'An Arundel Tomb', l. 42, in *Collected Poems* (London, 2003), p. 117.

5. I owe the points on Hindu texts, Plotinus and Rumi to Singer, *The Nature of Love*, vol. I, pp. 216–19.
6. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), Part I, sect. 11.