


Introduction

 AFTER CONSIDERING SEVERAL ALTERNATIVES for this book's title I settled first on *The Asymptote of Love*, and then with editorial encouragement on *The Asymptote of Love: From Mundane to Religious to God's Love*. The title is descriptive. This book is indeed about the asymptote of love. An asymptote is a line that approaches a point, ever drawing nearer, but reaching its endpoint only at infinity. The asymptote of love reaches toward the infinite endpoint of love, love at its uttermost, the zenith of love, God's love in theistic traditions. In writing the book I discovered that Leo Tolstoy had used the image of the asymptote in a related application in his *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, where he said, "Divine perfection is the asymptote of the human life." Tolstoy's reflections on Christianity will come into our discussion, although what Tolstoy understands as an asymptote of the human life toward divine perfection differs from the asymptote of love. Still, his trope of the asymptote, which approaches its ideal in an infinite journey, ever drawing nearer as it approaches its ideal, serves well the premise of our discussion and coincides with the intended meaning of this book's title. The asymptote of love ascends from quotidian and even mundane love to religious love and God's love and approaches love at its infinite, its zenith, its uttermost, God's love in a theistic understanding.

The idea of uttermost love owes much to religion, in particular to Christianity, in which God is love, but not to Christianity alone. We are called on to love or to have compassion in more than one religious tradition, and the traditions of several religions will be consulted as we seek an understanding of uttermost love. Also we will consult authors who speak from outside religion, some of whom are negatively disposed toward religion and some of whom are

not. Their critical perspectives will augment the religious sources that we draw on and will help us to consider issues and possibilities relevant to the nature of uttermost love and the form of love that begins to approach it.


The nature of love as a general concept, along with the range of expressions of love, is a preliminary part of our subject. In pursuing it we will address what in a sense we already know. It is a paradox of intellectual or philosophical reflection going back to Plato and his teacher Socrates that in asking what the nature of love is (or knowledge or beauty), as Socrates did, we pose a question using a term that we are already familiar with and use with comparative ease. Moreover, if we proceed to proffer an analysis or account of, say, knowledge, we can test that analysis or account using our pretheoretical understanding. While there may be a point to complaining to someone “You don’t know what love is!” it remains that speakers of natural languages have *love* (or *amour* or *Liebe*, etc.) in their vocabularies.

So we may already have a grasp of the nature of love implicitly, without being able to articulate its nature, not fully. Yet knowing its nature in this way, and even being able to distinguish expressions of genuine love from expressions of false love, is not yet to know the zenith of love. It is not in itself being able to trace the asymptote of love in its approach to infinite uttermost love.

Uttermost love is love. But love, as we will remind ourselves in chapter 1, can be of many different things and have many different emotional shadings. The form of love that is our subject will emerge over the extended course of our discussion. It can be said at this point, however, that uttermost love, in its concept, is rooted in religious sensibility and tradition. If we allow a religious grounding of uttermost love in the Jewish and Christian traditions, it would not be wrong to think of love of God and of neighbor as significant parts of uttermost love or of love that approaches uttermost love. Yet doing so is but an initial step, for the character and demands of that love are not disclosed thereby. Furthermore uttermost love has a possibly fuller range that is not captured in the Christian and Jewish commands.

As we pursue our discussion we will at various points encounter concerns and issues. Some will relate to love in its general concept; some will relate to religious love; some will relate to understanding God’s love as uttermost love; and some will relate to the nature and scope of love that begins to approach

uttermost love. Some of these concerns, though not all, will be raised by religious writers and thinkers from within a religious tradition, especially Christianity. Some will be raised by those whose reflections are not religiously grounded.

 IN CHAPTER 1, as we have indicated, we will look at the range of love's varieties and types; and we will see how love is a multifarious concept that resists an essentialist definition.

Love is relational, but it can be embodied in many different relationships. In chapter 2, we will give attention to interpersonal forms of love, especially romantic love, and offer initial reflections on two forms of religious love that can seem problematic, proper self-love and love of God. The thesis that love bestows value, as opposed to responding to the one who is loved and that person's value, will be examined; and two issues that relate to love in general and religious love in particular will be recognized and introduced—the issue of love's rationality, grounded in modern thinking, and the older issue of the place in love of self-denial.

In chapter 3, which is on the love of others, we will turn our attention to religious love of one's neighbors, one of the book's major themes. How one is to love one's neighbors is, in the Christian tradition, contained in the teachings of the New Testament, and we will consult some of these, including the parable of the Good Samaritan, to bring into relief how religious love of one's neighbors is at variance with the requirements of conventional morality. Also in this chapter, drawing on a particular religious sensibility, we will introduce the theme of loving God through loving others.

Some have posited a connection between knowing God and loving God that makes them identical: to know God is to love God. There are questions, though, about this thesis, including a question about the nature of the knowledge of God that is to be identical with love of God. An examination of this thesis and its issues is the subject of chapter 4.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions there are two great commandments to love. One is to love God with all one's heart and soul, and the other is to love one's neighbors as oneself. Immanuel Kant, though, challenged the idea that there can be a command or duty to love, as opposed to a duty to do

good for others. Even some more clearly within the Christian tradition have raised a question about the command to love if it commands us to have the *feeling* of love, as it arguably does. These concerns will be treated in chapter 5.

The subject of chapter 6 is love of God, another major theme of this book. Here we will consider the question of whether love of God, or of neighbor, can be purely a response to a duty to follow a command, and we will note how medieval monastics thought it necessary to designate “signs” of genuine love of God. In this chapter we will also attend to the expressions of love of God identified by St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Francis de Sales. Some have spoken of loving others “in God” or “for the sake of God,” and these significant but opaque religious categories will be addressed in chapter 6.

Chapter 7 has as its subject God’s love. It too is a central theme of this book. For theistic religions God’s love is the highest form of love. It is the zenith of love and in this book’s terms it is the infinite endpoint of the asymptote of love. But how is it known? And can it be known? Both of these questions will be addressed, drawing on two divergent religious sensibilities and two different theological approaches with which they are correlated, one the apophatic approach of Dionysius, the other the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Different Christian images of God’s love will be presented, which point a way toward an experience of God’s love. And in the chapter’s final section Buddhist analogues of God’s love and a devotional Hindu image of God’s love will be brought forward.

One question regarding uttermost love and a religious love that begins to approach it regards the scope of love. What is included in the circle of such love? In chapter 8 this question will be taken up. Religious love of neighbor is universal, but how can distant strangers, never seen, be loved? And beyond God and human beings does the circle of religious love include other beings of the earth?

In chapter 8 the scope of religious love is considered; in chapter 9 its complement, the depth of religious love, is considered. The depth of religious love, as for all love, importantly involves love’s interior dimension. An integral part of the interior depth of religious love is loss of self, and the character of religious love’s loss of self will be examined. However, the interior dimension

of religious love can be given a disproportionate stress, it will be argued, and two instances of this will be discussed.

Chapter 10, whose chapter title is the book's title, considers God's love, the endpoint of the asymptote of love, in its role as an infinite ideal of love, at once unattainable and directive. Chapter 10, along with chapters 8 and 9, attempts to address the character of uttermost love or religious love that begins to approach it, as much as it is knowable. Compassion, so important for Buddhism, is compared with Christian love, or *agape*, and their interconnect-edness will be traced. Chapter 10 returns to the issue of love's reasonableness, but reintroduces it as a question about appropriateness as it relates to religious love. In this chapter it is shown how, for at least some religious sensibilities, religious love is appropriately given to the beings of the earth and given as the beings loved deserve. In the chapter's final section a recapitulation of the book's themes and concerns is provided.

Often the themes of this book that are introduced in one chapter will be returned to and enlarged in another. The theme of God's love and how it might be known, for instance, is introduced in chapter 7 and returned to in chapter 9. Some important themes run through the book as threads run through a fabric. One of these is the theme of the multiple connections between God's love and human love. The major themes of God's love and human religious love run through many of the book's chapters because many of the book's other themes, such as the scope of religious love, reflect back on them.