

# All You Need is Love?

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by Lawrence Moonan

It is embarrassing to utter a screaming banality in public: yet love, in all candour, is what the Catholic Church, to say nothing of the world in general, does desperately need. Think of a Christian. Then of Christians as a group. Busy. Long-suffering. Self-effacing. Can you think of them making little sacrifices for one another? Of course. Or perhaps laying down their lives for their brethren? Yes, again. Some of them at least. But do you think of them unzipped and uninhibited, actually loving each other? Ah, well now. . . . *Auch unter ihnen sind Helden; viele von ihnen litten zuviel-: so wollen sie andre leiden machen.* Amen, Zarathustra.

A French magazine carried out a survey among its readers (Catholics, nearly all of them) on birth control: What the readers thought or did about it, what they thought the Church in general should do about it. What is to the point here is not that the views expressed showed wide divergence, nor even that they revealed such a mass of human suffering:

‘. . . I would have been completely blind if my husband hadn’t shown great love for me by abstaining from pleasure, when he felt the approach of his sexual emission. That’s what love is, otherwise it’s self-love for the sake of pleasure.’

‘Our young couple have been reading a book, *The Joys of Loving*, which is far too concerned with sex, then *Better Love*, which is sheer filth, since they ended up knowing more than their parents did after twenty-seven years of marriage.’

‘Everything I learned in the catechism and later about the rules of the church, under pain of mortal sin and hell, has absolutely poisoned my life. . . . We speak of “Our mother the Church”, but for me she is a crushing and authoritarian mother when she should be a mother to whom we can appeal, to whom we can go to find the truth and love of Christ.’

‘. . . where’s the effort and the sacrifice, just like painless childbirth? [*sic*] Where is the gospel “with pangs thou shalt give birth to children” . . . .’<sup>1</sup>

For some of the readers quoted, ‘real’ love means abstinence, restraint, sacrifice; for others it should remove constraint, be affirmative, enjoyable, spontaneous. (‘Love is more than copulation by order’ was one remark on rhythm methods.) What is to the point here is

<sup>1</sup>All these extracts are from *Slant*, London, No. 16 (1967), 14-16. The French magazine in question is *Clair-Foyer*, and its survey was published, ed. P. and M. Lambert, in 1966, by *Editions Ouvrières*, Paris, as *3,000 foyers parlent*.

that both groups agreed that *the* view of the practising Catholic, at least up to now, was the first. Some accepted this willingly, other lamented it bitterly, all agreed that it was so. Effort—sacrifice—crushing and authoritarian—sheer filth—abstaining from pleasure—with pangs—poisoned my life. All the words are there for the insensitive to make a burlesque, or a grotesque and bitter parody, of Christian love in practice; or for others to react in other ways to the irony of people torn asunder in their desire and pursuit of the whole. The wedding garment of the Christian has become the darg of Dylan Thomas's postmistress: a beige, woollen, shroud with 'thou shalt not' on the bosom.

This is not Christianity at all, many are claiming. Where is the brief Galilean vision of humility and tenderness, where is an echo held of a message without arrogance? Consider the lilies of the field—take no thought to your life, what you will wear, your body where-with it will be clothed—take neither staff nor begging bag—love one another—not in word or speech but in deed and in truth—he who does not love does not know God—there is no fear in love—follow love. Drop out, does it not say? All you need is love?

If it does say this, modern Catholics would seem to have little to offer. Not much to be hoped from the moralists, the 'Catholic marriage counsellors' or a celibate clergy. Oh yes—the Pope kissing Patriarch Athenagoras. It is easy to smile cynically at the gesture, but will there not be more joy before the angels of God over one institution-haunted pope who repents than over a thousand hippies who, in this respect at least, need not repentance?

Drop out, all you need is love. It comes *multifariis linguis multisque modis* from jukeboxes. It is writ large and psychedelically MAKE LOVE NOT WAR across sweaters where girls, when fashion allows, wear breasts. It has not been unknown among Christians. The early Christians in Jerusalem, in the community of the elect who had all things in common, and were doubtless not uninfluenced by a belief that the world was going to end soon, anyway. The hermits of the deserts of Syria or Egypt, fleeing society to love God in caves or on poles. St Francis of Assisi and his companions cutting themselves off from a society they saw as corrupt. Numerous small groups that broke from the reformed churches. The benediction Catholics of the nineteenth century who isolated themselves from a rough-spoken world and told their love in the intimacy of familiar rites in an incense-filled chapel. What a fissigenous force this love proved to be.

But it had to prove so, says another speaker in the dialogue. It was too 'spiritual' to do anything else. Take your Christian lovers down from their pillars and out of their Franciscan habits. Put them in scarlet or white breeches and let them love real people with their bodies, not just their minds, and the democracy of touch is around the corner. All you need, in other words, is the right kind of love, when you drop out.

It is arguable that the Gospel according to Mellors, limited and fault-suspect though it is, is an improvement on the disembodied spirit he reacted against; but it is not really the *kind* of love, from the point of view of the individual person, which is important here. What is important here is the intractability of personal love to remain *and to remain on the level of strictly interpersonal relationships* alone. Either it dies or it induces ripples in less 'personal' social relationships. Or the lovers die, and the question is open to any solution. Romeo loves Juliet. But Romeo is a Montague and Juliet a Capulet. Between Capulet and Montague, a stroke of exclusion. But Romeo and Juliet insist. Therefore social conflict. Romeo and Juliet die, lovers. A Capulet and a Montague are one flesh, inamissibly. Therefore exclusion replaced by a new relationship of overlap between Capulet and Montague, since they now have at least one common element. Social reconciliation through rebirth from a Montague-Capulet tomb becomes possible, though not inevitable. (The result could have been anywhere in the regions of non-overlap: escalation in bloodshed, for instance, through either party failing to recognize the tomb as common.) And in any case there comes a change, for better or worse, in the social relationships.

But when the sources of social conflict are deeper and wider than the Montague-Capulet rivalry and are too great to be overcome by individual lovers, what then? The answer comes quickly: drop out. Never mind society as a whole. Be content with a smaller world, the world of a love-in, or a religious order, or a revivalist group or whatever it may be. Find there a life of more perfect love and beauty and honesty than it is possible for you to live by conforming to the ways of established society. O men of little faith, do not be anxious saying what shall we eat or drink or wear. Opt out of your rotten society, its industries, its banks, its social services, its social problems. Love is all you need.

There is a considerable truth in this answer. Erich Fromm has more than once drawn attention to one important source of social conflict too great to be expected to be overcome by individual lovers, in the western capitalist democratic system, and in the 'fairness' ethics by which it is ruled. In countries ruled by this system, he argues, people can love only in so far as they can refuse to conform to the society around them.

'People capable of love, under the present system, are necessarily the exceptions; love is by necessity a marginal phenomenon in present-day western society . . . because the spirit of a production-centred, commodity-greedy society is such that only the non-conformist can defend himself successfully against it' (*The Art of Loving*, London, 1966, at p. 54).

Fromm is arguing that love is not something which can be switched on and off. It implies a loving attitude towards everybody, it is a character trait. 'There is no "division of labour" between love for

one's own and love for strangers. On the contrary, the condition for the existence of the former is the existence of the latter' (*The Art of Loving*, 92). This thesis is open to dispute, but whether it is or is not valid in the form quoted need not be discussed here, or even postulated. What is to be noted is that most relationships of everyday life in western society are not governed by anything like love but at most by 'fairness'.

'... our relations are actually determined, at their best, by the principle of *fairness*. Fairness meaning not to use fraud and trickery in the exchange of commodities and services, and in the exchange of feelings. "I give you as much as you give me", in material goods as well as in love, is the prevalent ethical maxim in capitalist society' (*The Art of Loving*, 92).

Yet if fairness ethics bedevils the integrity of the lover in a capitalist system, his counterpart in present-day Eastern Europe, for instance, seems little better placed. 'To each according to his needs, from each according to his capacity' has a *prima facie* attractiveness which 'I give you as much as you give me' lacks. But it has the same flaw, when applied to people, of setting the discussion in the context of commodity exchange, in the language of economics, and leaving it there. Love is often, and well, expressed in terms of response to a need. (To pretend otherwise is to carry romanticism to the point of excluding the real. The point where one crosses into psychosis.) But a condition of its authenticity, even in these need/response situations, is a love which exceeds any given *need* (taking 'need' as any demand or urge which can at least in principle be satisfied), and which has better discussed in terms of a *desire* in principle incapable of satisfaction:

'Metaphysical desire does not sigh to return home, for it is the desire of a land where none of us was born. Of a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we will never betake ourselves. Metaphysical desire rests on no pre-existing kinship. It is a desire which can never be satisfied. It is customary to speak unthinkingly of satisfied desires, or sexual needs, or moral or religious needs. Love itself is considered in this way as the satisfaction of a sublime hunger. If this language is possible it is because most of our desires, and love among them, are not without alloy. Desires which can be satisfied are like metaphysical desire only in their failure to satisfy, or in the exasperation in the non-satisfaction and in the desire which constitutes *voluptas* itself. Metaphysical desire has another intention: it desires what is beyond anything which could satisfy it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not crown it but makes it deeper.' (This is from *Totalité et Infini, Essai sur l'exteriorité*, by Emmanuel Levinas, The Hague, 1961, 284 pp., at p. 3ff. See the quite beautiful development of the need/desire distinction in many parts of the book, particularly in the section *Interiorité et Economie*.)

In any case it would not be difficult to argue to a need for non-conformism in the USSR or in Czechoslovakia, say, and to insist that there as in the West 'important and radical changes in our social structure are necessary, if love is to become a social and not a highly individualistic, marginal phenomenon' (*The Art of Loving*, 94). East or West, therefore, in the technically advanced countries at least, the sources of social conflict standing in the path of love seem too closely bound to the social fabric itself to be overcome by would-be Romeos or Juliets.

In the face of a situation of this kind, possible lines of conduct are legion, but they seem to reduce to two. One is that the lovers will accept their environment without material reservation, and will go along with the system in which they find themselves. Not twenty-four hours each day, of course, for even those most complaisant towards their social system will seek some islands of non-conformity, even in 1984, but these islands of their nature will be brief and fleeting. The very incidence of such islands will become of less and less vital significance as time goes on, and the lovers will begin to seek even these mechanically. When this happens, the system already rules and the lovers are merely players, with no more power to create or love than the keys of a pianola.

This particular approach to the relationship of a loving person to his environment is more than a *via affirmationis*. It is a way of inexorably increasing acquiescence. It can offer encouragement and can put off the evil day of total acquiescence, even beyond the limits of an individual's life. But this is at most success *per accidens* for individuals in a doomed society.

The second approach has been discussed, the negative way of flower power and Franciscan levity. A much more lovely way than the first, especially in youth and in summer and in beautiful places. The Galilean vision. Yet there is a great weakness in this approach. It presupposes a binding of the powers that rule in this nether world, a suspension of the economic system and the realities of thermodynamics. For beautiful people, primitive Franciscans or benediction Catholics, this happens:

'O take me to Thy Sacred Heart  
And seal the entrance o'er  
That from that home my wayward soul  
May never wander more.' (*Nineteenth-century benediction hymn.*)

Shut out the ugly world, the wicked world. Close the doors. Fill the air with incense and have an orgy of benediction.

'One Heart alone is worth my love,  
That Heart that grows not cold.' (*Same hymn.*)

A sacral world is created, distinct from the world of profanity, whether in a chapel or in the love-ins of the Vondel Park or Woburn Abbey. In a sacral world the laws of thermodynamics, etc., are

suspended. At least so far as those involved are concerned. For a time. Two people very much in love, a groping group perhaps, or a devout congregation can for a time ignore the rest of the world. Or rather, for the time of their suspension their world *is* the Vondel Park or the love-nest on Anacapri or the cosy chapel where there is a heart that grows not cold.

But sooner or later ignored bodiliness reasserts itself—how curious that exclusive and concentrated love should ignore of all things bodiliness. And benediction ends and the love-in is over and someone has to go outside the love-nest to bring in the milk; and the rain comes and the bills have to be paid and the cold virus makes its presence felt. The coach becomes a pumpkin again, the sacral is seen to be mundane after all. To resist the mundane permanently is to take the option of the psychotic. To resist it knowingly is an affectation and a hypocrisy deeper set than the hypocrisies of the everyday world which the lovers seek to flee.

To avoid this, in the Franciscan approach, what can be done? The lovers can attempt a double life, living by the sacral in the sacral world, by the mundane in the world of men. By *eros* in the temple, by *phthisis* in the market place. This was in fact the way of the benediction Catholics of the nineteenth century. By valuing the sacral they sought it as frequently as they could, and doubtless escaped thereby being quite so strongly marked by their corrupting environment as their more fashionable neighbours. They were not alone in their desires. The eminently respectable Kierkegaard commended not dissimilar values, though with more radical goals and rather different means, to his own co-religionists: 'By ceasing to take part in the official worship of God as it now is . . . thou hast one guilt less . . . thou dost not participate in treating God as a fool, calling it the Christianity of the New Testament, which it is not.' And the supposedly detached Roman theologians of the time—it is not for nothing that the most trumpeted dogmas of the time were exceptions to general and notorious frailty and failure: the Immaculate Conception of the virgin Mary, the infallibility of the pope. 'One guilt less.' This is the attraction and the weakness in the Franciscan approach. It is a weakness as old as Plato: separation from bodily involvement in the mundane as a prerequisite for love.

Yet the error is not Plato's, but of those who have made of his ideal a goal to be achieved. And the weakness is that 'one guilt less' is not what love, any more than Christianity, is about. Even if an unconditioned love is to be a condition of authentic human love here and now, it does not follow that authentic human love here and now must itself be unconditioned in every instance.

If complete acceptance of the total environment must lead to the individual's being dominated by the system of that environment and the love-destroying forces by which it runs, and opting out is

transient or self-deceptive: what is left? Only a heat-death of love eventually, and the dissolution of all order, with not so much as a whimper to mark an end.

On the assumption, that is, which this essay has so far made: that, people are at the end of the day creatures of the totality of nature which has spawned them, and *therefore* limited by its intrinsic limitations. The assumption need not, however, be made. The therefore is not written by any hand of fate. *If human creativity or human love is in principle unlimited, even if conditioned in any given exercise*, there is no longer need to fear acceptance of the total environment. For given a human creativity in principle unlimited the powers of the nether world are already bound and have ceased to be absolute, if they ever were: for on the new assumption the ultimate intentionality of any or all that is or gives to be cannot but be a human project or desire. While technical limitations remain, in the immediacy of man's informing control over the corpse of nature, the inertia still resisting human projection, there will still be occasions when a gesture of 'opting out' of the surrounding system will still be practically indispensable to people. But what will keep such retreats from futility is not the actual opting out, but again the assurance that human creativity is in principle unlimited and human love in principle unconditioned.

Such an assurance, however, who can give? Or even take?

Only one who is *causa sui* bound in servility to neither God nor man. A strict atheist, perhaps, is one who can do it. Another is the Christian: such an assurance is precisely what he claims, in theory at least, to offer.<sup>1</sup> If the Word is made flesh, human creativity is in principle unlimited. If the Christ is ascended, the powers of the nether world are bound. If the Spirit is given, men and women are *causa sui*, or can be, and human love is in principle unconditioned.

So whether you seek strict atheism or the Christianity of the Gospel, whether you want to struggle in the system or opt out, whether you want to affirm or deny, all you need is—a love in principle greater than you will ever *need*.

<sup>1</sup>For those who claim the Christianity of the Gospel and seek to struggle *in and with* the system, such assurance is persuasively argued by Jürgen Moltmann, in *Theology of Hope, On the Ground and Implications of Christian Eschatology*, S.C.M., London, 1967: see Fergus Kerr, O.P., 'Eschatology as Politics', *New Blackfriars*, April, 1968, and Gerald O'Collins, S.J. 'The Principle and Theology of Hope', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 21 (1968), 129-144. The present writer was encouraged, particularly in Fr Kerr's review-article, by the phenotypic consonances between positions which Moltmann's book and this essay accept or reject. Further consideration suggests, however, that Moltmann's use of 'creative expectation' puts emphasis on expectation of a *something* to the detriment of the creativity permitted. It is difficult to see how any such limitation of creativity will avoid, in the long run, reduction to one of the positions professedly rejected by Moltmann, that of acquiescent Christianity, blessing Polaris submarines and saying grace at the feast of White Anglo-Saxon domination; once more leaving hope and politics for different worlds. It is clear, however, that it would be an impertinence to such an important book as Moltmann's to do more at this point than to register present reservations and tentatively promise a future analysis of some of Moltmann's arguments.