

Love and Politics

Eszter Kováts (ed.)



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ANDRÁS MÁTÉ-TÓTH
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Amor vacui

Religious attempts to tame love

Intro: safe sex?

You can read a few adverts on the website of the French dating site (www.meetic.fr) that left the French philosopher Alain Badiou quite outraged. “*Love exclusive of chances*” – the page tempts you; “*We can be enamoured without being in love*” – they write, and they offer safe love for which you can even hire a love coach who will prepare us for and guide us through the safe adventure. These adverts discuss love from the perspective of safety, and they are about quasi the “*full scale car insurance of love* “. This is the kind of propagandistic war without victims. Action and pleasure with complete aversion of responsibility and consequences.

However extreme these publicity slogans are, they still highlight a typical logic of our current culture, which splits the human and the social phenomena. Pleasures and goods are on one side, while suffering and negative consequences are on the other. We try to build the safe zones of the “risk society” (Beck 1991). The first person plural in this case means the rich, the wealthy

of the upper class of society who will give anything for the security of their pleasures – much like sex tourists in Taiwan. In contrast to them Badiou warns that “we must rediscover risk and adventure as opposed to comfort and safety” (Badiou 2011: 15-18).

The cheat of safe sex, risk-free eroticism is false not only in the sense that accidents can never be completely excluded, but even more because it does not account for the true nature of eroticism, which annuls the usual frames of existence and understanding and conveys experience and knowledges that cannot be integrated into the safe framework of the logic of our everyday routines. Eroticism is an existential risk, total adventure. Just like religion.

Examples from the history of religion

In the majority of religions, love is displayed from the perspective of sexuality, which has positive and negative connections to religious myths and the rituals that convey them. The positive manifestations of sexuality include fertility rituals and sacred orgies; while the negative ones include the techniques of asceticism and sexual self-control. The following is a – consciously arbitrary – selection of pre- and post-hierology religious traditional elements on the basis of one of the most prestigious encyclopaedia of theology (Jones 2005), which delineate the vast space and complicated relations in that eroticism and religion, i.e. the all-subduing sexual drive and the all-encompassing myth intersect. These otherwise very different traditions have one common point in that they do not use love/sexuality on a standalone basis, but interpret them from the religious myth, and for the reinstitution and symbolizing of mythical states.

The framework and rules of everyday life are suspended in the orgies of the *Aranda* people in Central Australia: the ecstasy of orgies is supposed to recall the ideal circumstances of the mythical ancestors. Similarly, the *Ngayau Dayak* tribe in Borneo performs sacred orgies to ritually display the mythical beginnings. The ritual of androgynisation amongst Australian aboriginals

also want to ritually restore or show the original, ancestral past by circumcising the penis and making an incision that reminds of the vulva. Thereby man symbolically returns to his original state and becomes both man and woman “again” (cf. Sexuality in: Jones 2005).

Sexual self-control and other practices do not always presume a dualism of body and spirit. The Han dynasty in the East (25-220 a.D.) the *coitus reservatus* of the Taoist tradition played a ritual role. The male’s ejaculation was prevented through applying pressure on the vas deferens, while female secretion was captured and swallowed. Both were associated with the concept that these secretions guarantee eternal life. The religious teachings of India about sexual desire are known from the *Kama Sutra* (poems of desire) collection, which is very far from the public perception that it is merely a technological guide to sexuality. The *Kama Sutra* discusses sexuality in the reference frame of the Tantra. Tantric texts often use erotic or sexually charged expressions to describe internal feelings or psychological states. For example the adjective of the hymen is the flash, which also denotes emptiness; and expressions used for women also denote non-existence. Tantric texts can be read in a completely spiritual way, but they can also be seen as realistic descriptions of images. The couple performing a sexual act transform into the gods Shiva and Shakti through initiation. The ultimate purpose of the sexual act is to stop, suspend breathing, thinking and discharge (cf. Sexuality in: Jones 2005). These ancient mythologies hint to something that later, noble religious traditions consider further in the form of increasingly complex normative teachings and casuistic guidance. Eros and Amor are interesting for us from this aspect, because they subvert the systems in Europe: they represent the most passionate challenge to our metaphysics, moral and politics.

Amor and Eros – the gods of all-consuming desire

Love opens an empty space where the space is filled with relationships, routines, institutions and judgments. This full space is our basic experience until

love enters and wounds us with its arrow. When love enters, all completeness vanishes; all that was disappears without a trace. Unbreakable bonds break, impossible becomes possible, the opposition of good and bad evaporates; and suddenly there is only nothing, the moment of deepest crisis and creation.

Eros is the Greek embodiment of love or, more precisely, sexual desire, the son of Aphrodite who is attributed great power: He can loosen the limbs of gods and humans (Hesiodos & Most 2006: 121), he is tempestuous and irresistible. He looks like a little child with golden locks who is completely void of any feeling of responsibility. This is what the charming child shooting around with his arrow symbolises in the Hellenistic pantheon. Plato separates the figure of Eros into two, and describes him as the opposition of the intelligent (*sophron*) and the provocative (*aisros*) (Plato & Griffith 2000: 180).

Since Hesiodos there has been a different image of Eros as well, which refers to the cosmological and philosophical reflection. Eros is an ancient potential, the original ancient force that is born from Chaos together with Gaia and Tartaros (the earth and depth), but has no parents. (Hesiodos, Theog. 116-122) Parmenides says that the Nix is Eros's father who is born from the world egg created by him. Amor and Cupid, treated as synonymous, correspond to the figure of Eros in Latin (cf. Eros in: Cancik et al. 2004 <2013>).

The all-consuming, irresponsible vagrancy of Amor is also described in the Jewish and Muslim mythology and poetry. According to the Song of Songs, Amor is an irresistible and lethal passion. "For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away" (Song of Songs 8:6-7). And as we know, the popular tradition of Islam teaches that faithful men are received in paradise by 72 virgins ready to fulfil their every whim. "As for the righteous, they will be in a secure place. Amidst gardens and springs. Dressed in silk and brocade, facing one another. So it is, and we will wed them to lovely companions. They will call therein for every kind of fruit, in peace and security. Therein they will not taste death, beyond the

first death; and He will protect them from the torment of Hell.” (Qur’an 44:51-56). Thus the Qur’an does not promise a perfect celestial harem⁸ that the mortal human (man) desires so much with his sexual drive, but it also refers to the promise of fulfilled desires, the harmony that is in opposition to the experience of earthly life – if Amor wounds you with his arrow. Thus the figures of Eros and Amor in ancient traditions do not represent the immanent vertical of either romantic love or sexual fantasy or practice, but rather the completeness and checklessness of all-encompassing desire.

Amor vacui – endless pleasure in the shadow of nothing

After this excursion into the history of religion, we can also sum up a few aspects of how mythologies of antiquity and pre-antiquity look at Amor. Amor is one of the supreme gods, he is an arbitrary and total power. He represents a passionate threat in earthly life, and endless pleasure and complete satisfaction in the celestial environment. As in case of any other totality, the total demand for Amor is opposed by the void. However, systems try to channel the need and drive of desires to devour all in culture, the soul of the individual and politics alike. One of such systems is called religion.

“Amor vacui” is thus the love of the void, the desire for complete satisfaction, the parallel presence of wanting all and complete oblivion. Love is directed towards the void because it wants satisfaction there alone. It is there in the antecedent void where it wants to enfold, fill up everything, be the being that is alone. The loneliness of complete attention to the other, the one opposite to me, and absolute difference from the other. Amor is the actor and action at the same time. Subject and deed. Amor vacui and horror vacui are the two approaches to the same matrix of relations. All is juxtaposed to the void; it is the fear that fills all according to horror vacui, and the desire

⁸ There has been a centuries long debate amongst the exegetes of the Qur’an on how to interpret paradisiacal huri. Theology lately states that the right translation is about white doves rather than the celestial harem of virgins.

that fills all according to amor vacui. The relationship with nothing, the void can be destructive, depressive passivity, or the *carpe diem*, the unlimited hedonism of halfway satisfactions. But it can also be more creative like Derrida's khora (Derrida 2005), van Gennep's (van Gennep 1960) or Turner's (Turner 2002) liminality of rites of passage that represent being outside of time and systems, Nietzsche's abyss in which he looks down with pride (Nietzsche 1954 524), or it can be the experience of Jesus in the wilderness where he is surrounded by tame beasts and attended by angels (Marc 4:12-20).

The three models of Christianity for the domestication of love

Amor became an arch enemy of sorts in the teachings of Christianity. This verdict was imposed by Augustine, the bishop of North-Africa and the unsurpassed theologian of the age of the 4th century – he relied on and was inspired by his own existential experience. Augustine's Confessions and other works of theology equalled eroticism with sin and hell, the evil itself; and thus a relentless, but forlorn, fight was launched to ban the mischievous Amor. Although his approach is the most influential up until today, the characteristics of Amor as described above are more multifaceted than that Christianity deals with them according to Augustine's teachings only. Let's look at the models of exclusion, inclusion, and finally contrast harmony.

Exclusion

Augustine knew love from his youth, which he opposed with corporeal desire called "sensual love" in Confessions (Augustine 2009), which he used to be a slave of. Sensuality became literal hell for him because only he was important to himself instead of his partner or God. He lived with a woman in mutual faithfulness, but he considered sexual communion a sin unless it led to the birth of a child. Therefore there are two sorts of love that exist for him: one that is directed towards the world, which is a sin, and the one directed towards God, which never fades in the service of pleasures.

„But the living soul takes its origin from the earth, for it is not profitable, unless to those already among the faithful, to restrain themselves from the love of this world, that so their soul may live unto You, which was dead while living in pleasures, – in death-bearing pleasures, O Lord, for You are the vital delight of the pure heart. (Confessions, Book 13, Chapter XXI)

Inclusion

The process coined by Augustine, which tried to exclude Amor completely and shove him into the dark void of sin and perdition, was not and could not be fully successful. Christian teaching experimented, and is still experimenting, with a kind of domestication (Cf. e.g. Catholic catechism). We would like to highlight but a few elements of that. First, the differentiation within the concept of love was already there at Augustine, which separated corporeal love and the higher level divine love from each other. Later a *triple division* became dominant: eros is the corporeal love, filia the friendly love, and agape is the divine love.

For Plato, eros does not only mean pure sexual desire driven by instincts, but also a desire for transcendent beauty behind the beauty of the present. He differentiates between vulgar eros and elevated, celestial eros. Real beauty lives in the world of ideals (Phaidros 2000, 249E). This desire cannot be completely satisfied as long as we live. The expression 'filia' in Greek does not only denote friendly love but also loyalty to the family, the political community, the employer and the master (Nicomachean Ethics, Book 8). Agape means the divine love towards humans, and the human's love towards God, but also love felt for the whole of humanity. In Augustine's concept, agape contains the determination and passion of eros, and the quality of agape, but also surpasses these because it is in contact with the transcendent. Agape even extends to the enemy in extreme cases, as it is described in the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 5:44-45).

The theology of Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventura are closest to the theological exploitation of the erotic nature of love.

In his work *Agape and Eros* (1930-37), the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren takes a strongly opposing stance to all earlier explanations of the concept of love that has preserved something from the Greek or Latin mythologies. He is in opposition to these when he expands on the strictly Biblical contents of love (agape), and discards the values of eros and filia. The opposition of Catholicism and the Protestant church also receives major emphasis in his work, with more support for the latter when he says that love is a direct action and virtue between God and human, so that no mediation by the church is needed at all (Nygren 1982).

However, one of the most influential theologian of the 20th century, Paul Tillich, discusses the threefold nature of eros-filia-agape in patristic by assigning a special Christian content to each of the phenomena, and the essence is that love primarily wants to reunite what has been separated, it wants to unify with the other. The eros quality of love manifests in the wish to unify with transpersonal beauty and truth. The filia quality manifests in the personal unity of I and You. And the agape quality is “the deep dimension of love, i.e. love with regard to the foundation of life “ (Tillich 1999: 63). A next step along this line is the constraint of eroticism in the institutional framework of *marriage*. Surpassing Augustine, the normative teaching of Christianity no longer considers sexual pleasure a sin even if it is not pursuing directly the production of offspring. The deepening of marital love will also legitimate eroticism within a marriage. Another solution for the restriction of unbridled Amor is the elevation of sexual self-restraint (*celibacy*) to the level of extraordinary blessings, and the designation of otherworldly objects for erotic desires instead of mundane objects, primarily with the person of Mary the Divine Mother. And last but not least the spiritualisation of eroticism is achieved with the canonisation of *mystical persons* and the institution of observant orders and the acceptance of their regulations. It was certainly not only Saint Teresa of Ávila or Saint Angela of Foligno, known by many, but also a great number of other distinct mystics who lived

through the deepest erotic experiences in the mystical union with Christ, which is not alien to other religions, but is best known in Europe from the Christian tradition.

Contrast harmony

While the first model wants to exclude eroticism from the religious space entirely and labels it as sin, the second model uses the energy inherent in eroticism. However, we do not consider these two models the most important when considering the religious dimensions of love and sexuality. Namely, the term 'amor vacui' is, beyond all of these, a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*: it shows its specific depth along the paradoxical unity of contradictions. Amor is the god of unbridled arbitrariness and total subversion to whom everything is non-existent that is against him. He recreates the completeness of relationships and things with his appearance in a devastating manner. If he wounds you with his arrow, everything that has been so far becomes something different. The scholastic name of this phenomenon is *transsubstantiation*, transfiguration. This technical term entered the Christian teachings through the 4th Lateran Council (1215) and it was applicable to the Eucharist. Along this line, amor vacui allows the perception of eroticism and religion in a contrast harmony. I would like to highlight this solution from the perspective of Georges Bataille who was perhaps the most important philosopher of eroticism in the first half of the 20th century.

The erotic experience is close to the sacred – says Bataille – because both can shatter our lives fundamentally. It belongs to the essence of both to turn us inside out. “The erotic activity liberates the beings who participate in it, it reveals their deep-rooted continuity like waves that of the story sea” (Bataille 1992: 923). In his concept, orgy is exaggeration, turmoil, religious zeal (Bataille 2001 [1958]: 147). It opposes labour with confusion. Labour means discipline, while confusion is eroticism, which represents the inspiring and all confusing challenge of the extremes. The essence of eroticism is that

it crosses the world of taboos, it is transgression. Just as confusion transgresses the system of rules of order.

In his work *Eroticism* (2001) Bataille systematically explains his concept of eroticism that he often discussed in his earlier lectures and essays. His key notions include continuity and interruption, different levels of eroticism (body, heart, mysticism), and also the sacred and the profane. With regard to Christianity he explains that this religion has built up a whole system of taboos and regarded them as sacred. Eroticism has been excluded to outside the religious system and expelled to the satanic sphere of sin. While pagan religions considered transgression sacred, Christianity sees sanctity in compliance and system. His considerations are, on the one hand, provocative and paint a unique picture of eroticism and Christianity. On the other hand they are rough and equal one characteristic of Christianity with the whole. One could state more that Christianity has been trying to turn eroticism into its service at least as much as it has been trying to exclude it. Bataille also refers to this possibility when he gives a positive interpretation of sin from the perspective of redemption at the analysis of the theological term of *felix culpa* (blessed sin). However, in the case of mysticism that is related to eroticism, he does not reflect on erotic spaces within the Christian religious system.

The Christian religion differentiates three forms of eroticism: that of the body; the soul; and the religion. What is common in them is that they can release the individual from his or her closedness. The opposite of closedness is nudity, which is not only the space of approximation of the erotic act, but also of execution. (Stripped of his clothes...) This moment connects the erotic act with the mortal sacrifice. The naked person is virtually destroyed in his or her shame. The erotics of the body is a violent act of communion irrespective of securing the offspring, in which both parties attempt to reunify what was split into two: woman and man. The eroticism of the heart is the longing for the other which, when consumed, also dies and ends up in the erotic act of the body. If it is not consumed, then it becomes creative self-expression,

poetry. And finally the eroticism of religion, sanctity (which could also be described as the divine) is the sacrifice and mysticism; both are benign encounters with continuity that many religions name god.

Conclusion

Amor vacui – by examining the expression in the title we can gain insight into how the interaction of eroticism and religion is not primarily defined by a competitive fight. The related demand of eroticism and religion for complete inspiration is more important, with pornography and kitsch at the opposite extreme. Pornography performs sexuality on the level of the technology of satisfaction, while kitsch replaces unique and existential aesthetic or religious experience with a mass product.

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