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The Cult of Love¹

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Winner of the Religious Studies Best
Paper Prize 2005

There can be no doubt that romantic love is, at a minimum, a cultural preoccupation; arguably, it closer resembles a frenzied obsession. Love is the subject of song lyrics, television shows, films, books, water-cooler conversation, gossip, scandal, historic tragedy, and uncountable daydreams and fantasies. Type “romantic love” into a Google search and you will retrieve over 4,570,000 hits for websites featuring the topic. We even recognize a national holiday in its honor. Certainly one could say that love is an ultimate concern in American culture. Just how deep, though, is our devotion to its tenets? I argue that people live and die for love; they structure their value systems and morals around its doctrines. I argue that love is an American religion, offering hope, meaning, and purpose to its followers.

In the introduction to his text, *The World's Religions*, Ninian Smart outlines a scheme of ideas that help readers think about and appreciate the nature of religion. Smart claims that there are certain aspects common to most religious traditions, and by analyzing these dimensions, one can “make sense of the variety and discern some patterns in the luxurious vegetation

of the world's religions and sub traditions².” He goes on to outline seven dimensions, the

- (1) Mythic/narrative
- (2) Ritual/practical
- (3) Experiential/emotional
- (4) Doctrinal/philosophical
- (5) Ethical/legal
- (6) Social/institutional
- (7) Material³

Using Smart's categories it is possible to look at love not only as commonplace, but in a new way, that is, to try to see how it functions religiously in our lives.

A Side Note on Sex and Marriage

If we were to analyze Love as a religion, it would be impossible not to examine the connection between romantic love, sex, and marriage. While each of these categories tends to be lumped together in our society, we cannot freely substitute one for another. There is certainly loveless sex. It is also possible to have a sexless marriage, sexless love, and a loveless marriage. That said, none of these conditions hold the same religiously inspirational qualities for large segments of society, as does the union of Love with either or both sex or marriage. Hence, I will argue that Sex and Marriage are deities in the Cult of Love. I will develop this concept further in the course of the discussion that follows.

The Mythology of Love: Boy Meets Girl, or, Boy Meets Boy, or, Girl Meets Girl, or...

¹While the term *cult* can be both controversial and misleading, I have employed it here merely as a clever sounding title, with no social connotations intended.

² Smart 11-12

³ Ibid. 12-21

Children's tales are rife with love stories. While the situation, era, and location of the romance may change, the general theme goes a little something like this: boy meets girl, or, more often, prince meets princess. There arises an obstacle to their union (disapproving parents, magical ailment, deadly monster, etc.). The two overcome the impediment and they live happily ever after. Sometimes a sunset is involved. We are groomed from birth to fulfill a romantic destiny rarely, if ever, attained as adults. In *Pink Think: Becoming a Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons*, Lynn Peril addresses the atmosphere of the mid-twentieth century towards femininity and male-female relations.

“Even though a baby couldn't read and she might not like the opposite sex until some time after puberty (and maybe not even then), that didn't mean she couldn't start learning how to get a date while she was still in her crib... Early childhood set the stage for dating and mating that would occur later in a girl's life. It was up to her parents, ably assisted by the experts, to see that she followed the proper path⁴.”

Peril's tongue-in-cheek treatment of the expectations made of women in our recent past does not dilute the truth of the nature of culturally imposed gender roles in America. While today's efforts at political-correctness have helped keep such blatant sexism and overt references to 'a woman's place,' from permeating the mainstream, this sort of gender-role reinforcement is still prevalent and not exactly subtle.

The mythology of love persists along these male-female guidelines throughout the predominant number of

households in America, despite the surge in openly homosexual and bisexual relationships⁵. The primary means of proliferation of the mythology is through children's films, most notably those produced by Disney. Henry A. Giroux, the director of the Waterbury Forum in Education and Cultural Studies at Penn State University, expounds this premise in his 1995 essay, *Animating Youth: the Disnification of Children's Culture*.

“The construction of gender identity for girls and women represents one of the most controversial issues in Disney's animated films. In both *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King*, the female characters are constructed within narrowly defined gender roles. All of the female characters in these films are ultimately subordinate to males, and define their sense of power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives⁶.”

Disney's animated movies are lovable and entertaining. Most parents feel they offer kids a safe, peaceful alternative to the often violent and suggestive programs found on television. While few people would argue that these movies are harmful, children are influenced by the myths the movies perpetuate. “[Children] are strongly positioned to believe in the end that desire, choice, and empowerment are closely linked to catching and loving

⁵ I would like to put emphasis on the term 'openly' because I am aware that there has seemingly always been a significant gay/lesbian/transgender presence in society, however, the taboo has been broken of late in a way that is unparalleled in American history. While the rights of members of this community are by no means equal, we at least seem to be on a path toward greater tolerance

⁶ Giroux 7-8

⁴ Peril 25

handsome men⁷.” The prince/princess narrative endows children and adults alike with the hope of finding love, as many religious narratives lend hope of attaining redemption. There are heavenly undertones associated with a “happily ever after” ending. There are hellish consequences promised for the unfortunate spinsters who fail to achieve love’s ends (think wicked- witches, stepmothers, queens, etc.).

Romance Rituals: The Rite to Love One Another

The Cult of Love has elaborate rituals and practices that vary with age, tending to intensify over time. The earliest love rituals are concerned with preparing children for “real” romance later in life; Peril discusses some of the rituals of girlhood in *Pink Think*. “A little girl [practices] her arsenal of womanly skills on her father.”⁸ Drolly, she claims flirtation is the first ritual practiced by female children. “Just as Daddy found it impossible to resist his tiny flirt’s demands, so too could a future husband be coaxed into all sorts of useful behaviors, from asking her out on a date to buying her a new Frigidaire⁹.” The rituals of childhood are not limited to little girls.

Little Boys have their own rituals at this early stage. “The Male child desires the touch of the mother, the mother’s physical gratification of its biological and psychic needs, and sees in the image of the father (whether or not the biological father) his rival... Yet, in light of the size of their rival, young boys find the desire for their mother too

dangerous to express¹⁰.” According to James McBride in his essay: *Symptomatic Expression of Male Neuroses: Collective effervescence, Male Gender Performance, and the Ritual of Football*, “boys have to transfer their desire from their mother- to girlfriends, wives or mistresses. When that desire is not successfully transferred... what Freud called ‘sublimated’ (rather than repressed) desire among young men led to culture building activities: law, government, war, sports, religion, and so on¹¹.” In other words, to cope with their abandonment issues, boys take up sports and the like. This eases their transition as they move from romantically loving their mothers to romantically loving other women. Furthermore, interest in sports, war games, and aggressive behavior help identify them as male, reinforcing the gender roles so essential to the mythology of love. The rituals of childhood are practice for young adulthood, where the ritual of dating is first introduced.

Dating is the “rite of passage” enacted by adolescents. Generally, fifteen or sixteen is the age deemed appropriate by most parents for their children to begin to date. In concept, this rite initiates the process of selecting a mate for marriage. There are many things a girl can do to “win” a date. Signs that a girl will be successful to this end have traditionally been, for example, that “she is friendly with boys, but she’s not too forward, [and,] she does her best (by grooming, diet, exercise, etc.) to make herself attractive¹².” Of course, many women find categories such as these repulsive and laughable, that does

⁷ Ibid. 8

⁸ Peril 30

⁹ Ibid 33

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud quoted in McBride 131-133

¹¹ McBride 133

¹² Peril 44-45

not change the fact that the ritual of preening is a time honored process carried out by many, if not most, adolescent females.

The ritual of deceit is a common practice in the Cut of Love. *Cosmopolitan* magazine currently boasts one of the highest circulations among women's fashion magazines. One common theme in their articles is tricking a man into falling in love, or admitting he's in love. The article *Meet More Boys than Ever Before*, found in their November 2003 issue, offers "the best lines and lures" for picking up men. An article in October 2003 provides *Get him to Call Tactics*. Another article in the same issue suggests *Secret ways to Bond With your Boyfriend*. The first two suggest that a girl should touch a boy a lot so he knows she likes him. "Breaking the physical barrier shows him you think he's special¹³." The third selection implies that a girl must be "secretive" in order to bond with a man, as though if she does not employ trickery, he certainly will not like her. These stealth tactics are all part of the dating ritual of deceit.

The establishment of tradition is often touted to cement a relationship. Long-term couples often have a "song" that holds a private meaning between them. Furthermore, Couples are often happy to share "their story" which usually tells how they met, or about the moment when they first knew they were in love. In her article, *Secret ways to Bond With your Boyfriend*, Andrea Scott writes, "sharing a passion with your partner creates a fresh way of bonding with someone you're already intimate with¹⁴. Rituals of tradition are the cornerstones of all religious practices.

¹³ Hollingsworth 161

¹⁴ Scott 4

Once the bond between couples is sufficiently strong, they may consider marriage. In the past, marriage was considered the sole purpose of dating. While there have always been a few people who consciously reject matrimony, it wasn't until recently that you could find soaring rates of cohabitation, serial monogamy, and career bachelors and bachelorettes. Marriage is no longer considered necessary in America, yet it perseveres as the ultimate love ritual. Individual wedding ceremonies can be as different as the individuals getting married can be. The common thread is the concept of uniting two lives into one. Marriage is it the climax of the love mythology, and while nowadays about fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce, it is intended to be the "happy ending" of a young couple's story. Perhaps it is this quality that attracts throngs of women to matrimony, that is, the search for their "happy ending."

Love is a powerful entity. To see a person "love struck" or "in love" is invocative of a person in the throws of religious fervor, such as a Whirling Dervish, or a thrashing Pentecostal. The rituals of love are a means by which not only the individuals affected, but also society as a whole, are able to cement the mythical prince/princess narrative.

A Side Note on Valentine's Day

Somewhere between Myth, Ritual, and Experience fits the holiday, Valentine's Day. "Valentine's day, along with so many other days, are more creations by various corporations to create a market- therefore make it something you almost have to do, or otherwise you'll feel guilty about it¹⁵,"

¹⁵ Terry Richard Quoted in Freeman 2

says Terry Richard, professor of Sociology at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. We cement the day into our love mythology as children, where cards and candies are exchanged in classrooms. Subsequently, as adults, we partake in the capitalistic exchange of goodies like chocolate, flowers, cards, and perhaps even diamonds. The ritual aspect of the exchange signifies the bond between lovers and acts to reinforce the union. The exchange of gifts “becomes almost a requirement- if you don’t get one you feel upset¹⁶.” Enter the emotions.

Partaking in rituals of reciprocity creates an obligatory relationship where the value transcends that of the material, and enters into the realm of the emotional. The process introduces a sense of entitlement, guilt, disappointment, and insecurity as often as it does the desired feelings- closeness and adoration. At the risk of sounding cynical, I would argue that Valentine’s Day offers more opportunity for destroying a bond than it does for tightening one. Nevertheless, the day is ever intertwined with the mythology, ritual, and experience of Love.

Fools in Love: Experiential Expressions of Faith

Religious traditions connect with their followers in a number of ways. In Pentecostal and Charismatic faiths, it is both common and encouraged that people experience God personally. In these faith traditions, this usually involves inviting the “Holy Spirit” to enter one’s body, resulting in a sometimes-euphoric encounter. The Cult of Love is no different. The pinnacle of experiential love is sex. However, with

sex comes a host of emotions. Firstly, though, it may be useful to discuss the physiological aspects of sexual behavior. Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University in New Jersey and author of *Why We Love: the Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*, conducted a study in 1996 using a functional MRI to determine the brainwave activity associated with falling in love. She found that the brain releases a significant amount of the stimulant dopamine when participants viewed a picture of their “beloved.”

The fact that intense, early-stage romantic passion is associated with areas rich in dopamine suggested to us that romantic love is not, in fact, an emotion, but primarily a motivational state designed to make us pursue a preferred partner. Indeed, romantic love appears to be a drive as powerful as hunger. No wonder people around the world live -- and die -- for love¹⁷.”

Fisher suggests love is a physical phenomenon originating in the brain, opposing the belief Love is a purely psychological phenomenon.

In a region other than the brain, there is a quite different physical experience of love. According to *The Encyclopedia of Sex*, written by Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Men and women’s bodies follow a “sexual response cycle” than consists of four stages. While not all stages may be experienced in a sexual act, ideally, it goes as follows: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution¹⁸. It is sure that the completion of this cycle does not happen for both partners during each act of

¹⁶ Ibid. 2

¹⁷ Fisher 1

¹⁸ Westheimer 193

sexual intercourse, however, the situation I'd like to examine is the prototypical case where each partner *does* complete the cycle. According to the mythology of the Cult of Love, it is the combination of Love and sex that allows this case to occur. Rest assured, I am not claiming that merely combining love and sex results in mutual orgasm for the sexual participants, nor am I proposing that if both parties are gratified there must be love involved. I claim that the idyllic narrative of Love consists of two individuals falling in love, commencing sexual intercourse, and achieving orgasm together. In this narrative, orgasm can be compared to enlightenment or redemption. However, this situation is rarely the case and I'd like to investigate why that is.

In his essay, *The Sexual Revolution is Immoral*, Francis Canavan, a Fordham University political science professor and Jesuit priest writes, "We are living material beings composed of both body and soul, and therefore endowed with our male or female sex as a natural and essential part of our humanity. Without our sex we would not be human¹⁹." Our sex is part of our humanity: Father Canavan has really hit the nail on the head. Our gender differences go right to the heart of our human-ness, and one of the ubiquitous qualities of humankind is the attachment of romantic love with the act of sex. Through sex, we find the major experiential aspect of love, but that experience can be different for men and women.

In *The Dr. Drew and Adam Book, a Survival Guide to Life and Love*, Dr. Drew Pinsky and Adam Corolla discuss the role gender differences play in sexual relations. The pair hosts a

popular radio call-in show, *Love Line*, where guests attempt to work out their woes and ills through participation in a public confessional²⁰. From their experience they have found that men and women receive different sorts of gratification from sex. "[Women] want the attention and the caressing... the insertion part is just a good excuse to get a guy to lie on top of them and hold them and make love to them²¹." They feel, on the other hand, that "for men it's usually a mechanical act; it can be very unemotional. The biology points toward genetic diversity, to multiple partners. With a man, the commitment is to the physical encounter²²." While Adam and Dr. Drew tend to be crass and over-generalizing in their book, the concept that women achieve greater emotional satisfaction from the bond of intimacy while men achieve the greater experiential satisfaction from the mechanical act of sex (or from orgasm) rings true. It is the union of these qualities, however, that ultimately leads to the peak experience of Love, resulting from sexual intercourse.

"Cosmo," "The Rules," and "The Kama Sutra:" Doctrines of Love

The main source of doctrine and philosophy for the Cult of Love is literature on how to find a man, how to keep a man, and what to do with a man once one has gotten him. While there are

²⁰ The concept of call-in shows providing public confessionals, and the religious ramification of such a phenomenon, are discussed in Suzanne Holland's essays *Our Ladies of the Airwaves: Judge Judy, Dr. Laura, and the New Public Confessional*. The essay can be found in the compilation *God in the Details*, referenced in the bibliography.

²¹ 16

²² 11

¹⁹ Canavan 5

certainly men who are interested in finding, keeping, and pleasing women, women have, for the most part, taken the lead in orchestrating love, albeit by means that can range from subliminal to overt.

Women's magazines and self-help books are the prominent source of philosophical doctrine on how to find a man. *Cosmopolitan*, *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen*, and countless other magazines instruct girls on how to get pretty hair, soft skin, and attractive physiques in order to lure men physically. Self-help books offer a range of services; from psychologically unburdening one's self to dieting, so that one can become emotionally attractive. There are also books dedicated to keeping a man, or encouraging the man you already have to commit. Books like *The Rules* offer guidelines a girl must follow in order to get a husband. Finally, the *Karma Sutra*, *the Joy of Sex*, and the like all instruct couples on ways to make sex more physically enjoyable and emotionally fulfilling.

The philosophy of the Cult of Love decrees that Love is necessary to achieve redemption and enlightenment. Love, Sex, and Marriage may be combined in such a way that true happiness becomes attainable while suffering and loneliness may be assuaged. The Philosophy promises a "happy ending" to those who honor the mythology, practice the rituals, and engage in the emotional aspects, of Love.

Ethical and Legal Constraints of Love

All's fair in Love... little else need be said.

Bars and Cars: The Social Institutions of Love

The institution of love is a dynamic locale. Love is rumored to dwell in marriage chapels, bars, the heart, or even the back seat of a car. Ultimately, wherever a couple feels comfortable expressing their mutual attraction or solidifying the bonds of their union, there resides Love.

Diamond's are a Girl's Best Friend

The Cult of Love is exceedingly material. Flowers, chocolate, candy, the color red, the image of a heart- all represent Love. Perhaps the most prominent symbol of Love, however, is a diamond. These little buggers are the most precious gem, and are therefore valuable love currency. Diamonds are choice for wedding rings, holiday gifts, and anniversary commemorators. Moreover, Diamonds last forever, as one hopes Love, too, will.

Conclusions

The Cult of Love is possibly one of the largest denominations in America. Across race and gender lines, Love is of ultimate concern to virtually every human being in our culture. As a commercial enterprise, Love is a booming success. Love is associated with peace, happiness, and the promise of a "happy ending." Romantic love fulfills each of the seven dimensions of religion as outlined by Ninian Smart, and brings meaning, purpose, and the promise of redemption to its dedicated followers.

Cosmopolitan Magazine. Nov. 2003. pp 116.

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