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A Compassionate Space-making Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Friendship

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Abstract

Using the lens of trinitarian theology of friendship, this article discusses the idea of compassionate space-making. By showing the primacy of friendly love (philia) over agapeic love, it argues that the idea of trinitarian friendship can offer a creative and imaginative way for constructing a theology of friendship in the communal and broader social contexts. The article then presents five marks of theology of friendship that enable Christians to participate in this trinitarian friendship by making space for and befriending others: vulnerability, unpredictability, reimagination, propheticity, and compassion. The article concludes with a practical spiritual exercise which exemplifies this trinitarian theology of friendship.

Keywords

Trinity, friendship, compassion, space-making, vulnerability, unpredictability, reimagination, propheticity

In this article, we discuss the primacy of friendly love (*philia*) over other forms of love and how it is extended to the idea of hospitality or befriending strangers as our social presence in public spaces. We set out how the Christian notion of friendship provides alternative ways for space-making, hospitality, and compassion

in public spaces. The imagination of friendship in this article is based on the idea of trinitarian space and friendship. To develop this, we begin by setting out a paradigm shift from the primacy of *agape* to *philia*. Then, we ask: How do we reimagine the public space? The next part is our constructive proposal for a theological notion of friendship using a trinitarian lens. Finally, we set out five marks of Christian friendship.

Shifting the Focus from *Agape* to *Philia*

Love as the main characteristic of Christianity has been preached in many services. Christian preachers often describe love in three forms: *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*. Often, such preachers emphasize that in the Christian scriptures these three forms of love are not equal. *Agape* is the highest and purest form of love. It is the love that God pours out to all creation. Then, in the second rank, we have *philia* or friendly love. Since it is a human bonding, it must be lower than the agapeic love of God. *Philia*, however, is better than *eros*, because *eros* is seen as the perverted form of love, a love which entails sexual bonding and carnal desire. For many reasons, these preachers suggest that *eros* is not a Christian love; rather, it is diverted by human concupiscence.

Does Christianity teach such a differentiation? We believe that this is not the Christian teaching of love. The belief that *agape* is the true Christian love while *eros* is not was promoted by the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren (1890–1978). He asserted that in the history of Christian tradition, there is a sort of hierarchy of love, with *agape* being the true Christian notion of love, and *eros* being human desire.¹ Since then, many preachers have taken Nygren's view as being what the scriptures teach. What we are now proposing is a way of understanding love in a more multidimensional way, in which *agape*, *philia*, and *eros* are seen as three dimensions of the same love. The source of love is God, through God's inner relation in the communion of the three persons, which is also poured out toward all creation. In this article, we focus on the idea of friendly love.

Four decades ago, in his book *The Open Church: An Invitation to a Messianic Life-Style*, the German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann explored the theme of friendship.² In a more recent book, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, he writes, "Friendship is

¹ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Love*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1955); The Oxford thinker C. S. Lewis also popularized four different loves in *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960).

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Life-Style* (London: SCM, 1978).

lived freedom.⁴³ In this love, we find a truly egalitarian love, a love which does not entail sexual bonding. Since then, the idea of love has been developed by other theologians. Feminist theologian Sallie McFague offers a model of God as friend. In so doing, she focuses on the word *philia*, “friendly love.” For McFague, *philia* is different from *agape* and *eros*. *Agape* is God’s “creative love,” a love which emphasizes life in all its bountiful manifestations, a love which delights in the existence of the others and nourishes them. *Eros* is God’s “salvific love,” a love which desires the others to find wholeness and liberation, a love which draws the others to Godself. Meanwhile, *philia* is God’s “sustaining love,” a love which expresses the joyful relationships of all beings with one another and with the wellspring of being – the God of life. McFague puts it this way: “God as mother says, ‘It is good that you exist!’ [*agape*]; God as lover says, ‘You are valuable beyond all imagining’ [*eros*]; God as friend says, ‘Let us, all of us, break bread together in fellowship and joy’ [*philia*].”⁴⁴

We suggest that in the gospel of John, *philia* or friendly love is deemed to be highly important, if not the most important love. It is Jesus himself who says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friend” (John 15:13). It implies that *philia* or friendly love is the greatest love, because one proves one’s love by laying down one’s life for one’s friends. *Philia* is thus the sacrificial face of love.

The fourth gospel also makes use of the idea of *philia* as sacrificial love even more extensively toward its end, and specifically when Jesus was engaged in a set of deep conversations with Peter, the one who betrayed Jesus, his beloved friend. By using Nygren’s hierarchical model, many preachers used to say that Jesus had lowered his expectation of Peter by using *philia* in the final conversation after he uses *agape* for the first two conversations. In all these three sets of conversations, however, Peter constantly – three times – uses *philia* as the only possible way for him to love Jesus. If we interpret the conversations by seeing *philia* as the spearhead of love, through which one is willing to die for one’s friend, then the scenario becomes totally different. Instead of lowering his expectations of Peter, Jesus has been pushed by the disciple to elevate his expectation, from the ordinary *agape* to the sacrificial *philia*.

Public Space: Experienced and Imagined

McFague quotes C. S. Lewis, who wrote that friends stand “side by side, absorbed in some common interest.” In such friendship, a friend says to their friend, “Do you see the

⁴³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Future of Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox and Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015), 119.

⁴⁴ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), 168.

some truth?" or "Do you care about the same truth?"⁵ Friends are heading out toward one common vision which bounds their relationship. This vision is not merely a common play or activity. As McFague puts it, friendly love "opens it onto the world." As such, the culmination of friendship is not mutually exclusive bonding, an attraction which is shown between friends; friendship also brings about a common vision or project for the other and for the world. Only in friendship is inclusive and non-hierarchical love found. As such, friendly love destabilizes the patriarchal and hierarchical society.

In the Christian scriptures, the bonding between God and human beings is called "covenant." YHWH covenanted with Abraham and the Israelites. This covenant can be seen as "God-human friendship." They are God's friends to undertake a mission: to be blessings for the nations. It is, however, not an exclusive relationship. God frees human beings to choose to walk and share in the divine life or reject it, but, most of all, God bids human beings to be God's partners for the well-being of the cosmos – "the reunification and liberation of the body of God," as McFague puts it.⁶

How deep is the affection between friends? It is as deep as the sharing of the best of life. Another word for friend is "companion," which is derived from the Latin words *cum* (together) and *panis* (bread). Thus, it literally means "sharing of bread" or, as McFague puts it, "together at bread."⁷ Think of bread as being one's main meal. As such, when one has a friend, one will delightedly share one's sustenance with them. Think also of life being like a journey through deserts and the wilderness; you have nothing but a friend who is willing to break and share their bread with you so that you have nourishment for your body to continue your journey. To have a friend, therefore, means to find joy on the pilgrimage of life because of the presence of someone who shares their life with you.

In friendship, friends will also see some common goals. Friends will find missions to do together. To undertake these, many friends are needed. This means that Christian friendship always opens toward those who are outside, inviting others to be companions. Moltmann believes that friendship is "the soul of a friendly world."⁸ If freedom and solidarity are the primary ingredients of friendship, then such a "free and just society" will never exist without a willingness to extend our hands to reach out to those who are not part of our circles. Thus, the Christian notion of friendship is always conceived and enacted in public spaces. Daniel G. Groody recounts a fascinating story of

⁵ *Ibid.*, 163 (emphasis in original).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁸ Moltmann, *The Living God*, 119.

an encounter between strangers who became friends through the willingness of sharing:

Along the U.S./Mexico border, a few groups offer humanitarian aid to migrants who make the grueling trek of 40 miles or more across deserts, mountains, and other dangerous terrain. One summer in Arizona, as temperatures reached 120 degrees [Fahrenheit], a group called the Samaritans sent volunteers to keep watch for any immigrants who might be in need or in distress. When a group of 20 immigrants came walking along a dry river bed, a volunteer called out to them from a ledge on a hill and asked, "Is anybody injured?" "Do you need any food?" "Do you have any water?" Suddenly the group of immigrants stopped. Unsure of who was speaking to them, they huddled together and deliberated awhile. Then slowly the leader began walking toward the Samaritan volunteers and said, "We don't have any more food. And we only have a little bit of water. But if you are in need of it, we will share what we have with you."⁴

Trinitarian Space and Friendship

For Christians, it is the belief in the triune God that determines how we live out our friendly love in public spaces. If the Christian presence in public spaces requires us to think deeply about our identity in relation to the others, then we should turn to the source of our identity as relational beings: the triune God. Our Christian faith teaches us that the triune God is communion of three persons loving one another eternally, who coinhere in each other without any confusion, separation, or division – a mutual indwelling of the three divine persons described in Christian doctrine is *perichoresis*.

Such a trinitarian perspective provides an imaginative way of seeing the divine "space-making" among the triune persons. There is a sort of "space" within Godself, within which the three persons relate to one another and live together in love. What we appreciate with the idea of *perichoresis* is that it not only refers to the divine space or room within Godself, but that the triune God also makes space for all creation. The root word *chōra* (space) in *perichōresis* – meaning "moving around the space" – becomes the space into which all creation – including you and me and other creatures – is invited to participate in the community of the triune God. Thus, the space becomes the space of friendship among the three persons as well as between the triune God and all creation.

We are intrigued by the maxim of Aelred of Rievaulx (1109–67), *Deus est amicitia* (God is amity), as a modification of *Deus est caritas* (God is love) in 1 John 4:8. In this maxim, friendship is the very identity of the triune God. By opening up God's space for us

⁴ Daniel Groody, "Jesus and the Undocumented Immigrant: A Spiritual Geography of a Crucified People," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009), 298–316.

– through creation, providence, incarnation, and consummation – God demonstrates God’s willingness to embrace us as God’s friends. As the systematic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson puts it, “The circular dynamism within God spirals inward, outward, forward, toward the coming of a world into existence, not out of necessity but out of a free exuberance of overflowing friendship.”¹⁰ At the centre of this dynamic trinitarian movement is Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word. Jesus expresses the embracing act of God toward the others in this way: “I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). Jesus is the embodiment of God’s friendship toward all creation and as such Jesus is also the model of Christian friendship within the church and of the church toward the world.

Let us think more deeply about *obora*, from which Christians have derived *perichoresis*, the “moving around the space,” as we have seen. The power of the Trinity is not found in each independent person. Too often, traditional Christians have spent time debating over how the one God can be conceived as three and how the three can be conceived as one. This is not the heart of the matter, however. What really matters is the relationship. One person does not have identity apart from this person’s relationship to the other two. This of course determines the way we think and live our lives. Can we have space apart from our relationship to others? Several years ago, Ann Belford Ulanov answered that we cannot. “We have no space of our own,” she wrote, “except as it is defined in relationship to other spaces, the multiple and interpenetrating spaces of our unconscious life, our life together in society and our life in relation to Being-itself, to what we call God.”¹¹ Our identity as human beings, therefore, is determined by space that we share with the others.

In the Eastern tradition of Christianity, *obora* is depicted as an empty space and female. As all persons of the Trinity dance around an empty space (*obora*) as a “fourth dimension,” this event becomes a “sacred milieu” in which space-making, freedom, and charity are found. Without this, all reality collapses. Richard Kearney writes,

Three persons dancing around (*perichoresis*) a fourth dimension, an empty space (*obora*) – that sacred milieu of mutual withdrawal, letting be, love. Three persons who would collapse into indifference and indifferentiation were it not for that free feminine spacing opening up between them: an Open that holds them at once together and apart.¹²

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *The Wound Is the Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 222.

¹¹ Ann Belford Ulanov, “Being and Space,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 33:1 (1977), 12.

¹² Richard Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 10.

The “she” of the *chosn* is of importance to sustain the perichoretic relations. *Chosn* is always depicted as female. It is “the matrix of all things.” It can be said therefore that gender otherness is needed in the dynamic move of reality as the ground or container of everything that is.

Such an imagination is beautifully expressed in one of the most famous icons of the Trinity, painted by Andrei Rublev (ca. 1360–1430). In the icon, the three divine persons are seated together around a eucharistic chalice. Kearney says powerfully about this icon and the chalice, “As in the chalice-womb at the heart of Rublev’s *perichoresis* icon, the female matrix at the center of the Trinity – without which it could never be, nor be kept in motion forever. Here we encounter a fourth dimension – before, between, and after the three.”¹³

When Kearney asserts that the three persons dance around a fourth dimension, he does not intend to say that the fourth dimension becomes another person in addition to the three persons. The fourth dimension is rather a *chosn* within which the three persons share their common space and interact with one another in love. The fourth dimension is also of importance, since it is a space provided by the triune persons for all creation to participate in the triune dance. In the icon, both the chalice and the empty space at the front of it symbolize God’s making space for all creation. In this sense, all creation becomes God’s “others,” participating in God’s loving communion. If the triune God is the God of friendship, then all creation is invited to partake in God’s communion and to be God’s friends. In sum, *chosn* is both a space “before, between, and after” the three divine persons and a space reserved for all creation. All are welcome.

Five Marks of Christian Friendship

The trinitarian space within which we develop theological notions of relationship and interrelationship among friends opens ways in which we see ourselves and others. We are not our own and we are not alone. We have something to share and receive from others. At the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine (think of Rublev’s chalice), there is no stranger, because the stranger is welcome. The guest, in turn, can be the host. This brings about five marks of friendship as follows.

First, vulnerability of the self. Comparative theologian Marianne Moyaert is of the opinion that people today idealize invulnerability. We like others to see us as strong, independent, and important. Vulnerability, indeed, can bring us pain and loss. It can be, however, our source of creativity and possibility. Vulnerability limits us and yet

¹³ Ibid., 75.

empowers us. We can suffer when we are vulnerable, being subjugated to violence and suppression. However, only those who are vulnerable can truly fall in love, learn from others, and be joyful and grateful in the presence of their friends. Vulnerability in friendship must be based on equal subjects in mutuality.

Vulnerability can also mean our human virtue of mutual affection. We can affect and be affected in turn. In being vulnerable, we partake in interaction and mutual responsibility. We can be moved, challenged, interrupted, changed, and transformed throughout this process, as we can also do the same to the others. Thus, to be invulnerable can mean that one is “*indifferent, irresponsible, inaccessible, inapproachable*.”¹⁴ In friendship, invulnerability can be seen as a denial of our human nature.

The second mark of Christian friendship is that of the openness to the future and its unpredictability. Friendship consists of at least two human beings. Every human being is a hybrid person constituted by engagement with others, with events, and with changing environments. Relationships between friends should always be fluid and, therefore, open to any form of surprise and unpredictability. One can unpredictably hurt one's friend, but one can also show greater love toward one's friends in unexpected ways.

When one meets a stranger (*xenos*), the encounter creates many possibilities. The stranger might become a new friend (*philos*) who will make one happy; but the stranger might also become an evildoer (*barbaros*) who will hurt one. There is no other way to ensure this than by opening oneself to the unpredictable future. Thus, Christian friendship always involves risk-taking. As Allen Smith and George Newlands have asserted, “Outcomes cannot always be predicted. A theology of hospitality is inevitably a theology of risk and a theology at risk. That is also of the essence of the Christian gospel.”¹⁵

Third, friendship reimagines the future. But what is the future? For many years, people debated eschatology in terms of the destruction of the cosmos. However, the *mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz envisions a non-apocalyptic eschatology, in which freedom coming from mutual commitment of the people of God becomes reality. She writes, “Action born out of commitment to mutuality are ‘eschatological glimpses’ which clarify the vision of liberation that will become a reality in the kingdom of God.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Marianne Moyaert, “On Vulnerability: Probing the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology,” *Religion* 3 (2012): 1156 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ Allen Smith and George Newlands, *Hospitable God: A Transgressive Discourse* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 19.

¹⁶ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 21st Century,” in *Let Every Vision Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Preter Fangel (Maeckel, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), 38.

If God is not an immutable deity but dynamic in fidelity – the triune God of grace, who calls us to be God’s friends – then the future must be revisited. In the Irish Celtic tradition, when one has a “soul-friend” (*anam cara*), one has glimpsed the eternal kingdom. In having a soul-friend, fear, emptiness, and distance are gone, because the friends have been in the relation of giving and receiving love. Moreover, they have encouragement, fullness, and intimacy. For John O’Donohue, the soul-friendship awakens the “soul-space” – the eternal. He is of the opinion that the soul-friendship experience

opens a friendship that is not wounded or limited by separation or distance. Such friendship can remain alive even when the friends live far away from each other. Because they have broken through the barriers of persona and egotism to the soul level, the unity of their souls is not easily severed. When the soul is awakened, physical space is transfigured. Even across the distance, two friends can stay attuned to each other and continue to sense the flow of each other’s lives. With your [soul-friend] you awaken the eternal. In this soul space, there is no distance.¹⁷

The future, therefore, is not about the end of time but a game, a game which we play now, a game which we cannot master since its becoming is always beyond our efforts. God who has called us to be friends offers to us the eternal and joyful play so that we can join the perichoretic dance. When we say “Yes” to this invitation, we enter the play of the ever-new genesis – the transfiguration of the cosmos. In this way, we partake Christ’s nature as God’s “Yes” for us to the glory of God (2 Cor. 1:19-20).

Fourth, we also need to mention the prophetic and critical dimension of Christian friendship. Our witness is our with-ness. We tend to romanticize Christian friendship by sanitizing or sterilizing it from its capacity to reject and protest against any social and communal relationships that imperil the authentic and equal friendship. In particular, Christian friendship criticizes many forms of *kyriarchy* (leadership by masters). It is through *philia* (leadership by friends) that Christian friendship rejects those who claim themselves as master and subordinate others within a hierarchical pyramid of power. It can appear in many forms: gerontarchy (leadership by adults), patriarchy (leadership by males), clericalism (leadership by clerics), and so on. The critical position of *philia* against *kyriarchy* is done not only through its direct criticism but also through presenting itself as an alternative and counter-cultural community. By being faithfully present as a “community of amity” in the “world of enmity” the church presents and re-presents God – the triune friend.

Fifth, the idea of “compassion” is of importance for our theological exploration. It is derived from the Latin *com* and *passio*; the Greek equivalent to this word is *syn* and *pathos*.

¹⁷ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: The Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), 10.

God is the one who sympathizes with the suffering world. Jesus is depicted by our canonical gospel as the compassionate Messiah. When Jesus sees those who are marginalized, he is immediately moved with compassion, which means his innermost being is moved by the suffering of others, like a mother whose womb is moved when she sees the suffering of her dear one.

Our Christian tradition also teaches us that the triune God is also the one whose heart is for the liberation for the suffering world. Because the three persons can be seen as the ultimate community of friends, the divine friendship always extends toward those outside, inviting the others to be companions. For this, the triune God befriends humanity so that we can see God's vision for a just, humane, and peaceful world. Humanity is not God's sole object of salvation. God longs for the liberation of all creation. God invites us and shares with us the mission, so that the world can be freed from all bondage and decay. We are God's companions – God's friends – for this liberating mission.

An Unconcluding Conclusion

This material was presented at the 2016 and 2017 Youth in Asia Training for Religious Amity (YATRA) programmes of the World Council of Churches at the Jakarta Theological Seminary, Indonesia. Both of us emphasized the importance of developing a theology of friendship in Asia. We proposed that trinitarian theology can bring a fresh theological perspective in friendship, because in the triune God we find space-making, hospitality, and compassion.

At the end of the session, we invited the participants to undertake an exercise on hospitality, intended to help each of them realize that the better each person knows others, the better they know themselves. First, we asked them to form a group of three (or four) persons, asking them to ensure, if possible, that they were not in a group with person(s) from the same country or denomination. Second, each group was given a mirror. We asked them to place (or hold) the mirror so that each person's face was seen in it. What did they see? Each was asked to say something about their friends, as much as they wanted. Third, when someone said something about themselves or their friends, we asked them to be mindful of their feelings and thoughts: Were they surprised? How did each receive the other person's words? How did their bodies or faces react? Were they annoyed? Did each person learn something new about themselves? Fourth, we asked them to gather in a large group for a debriefing. People could share whatever happened in their group and what they thought. Finally, we asked them what their takeaway from this exercise would be.

Although we decided not to publish their reflective comments on the activities, we can share some observations here. The activity created a "circle of trust" for the young people who participated in the 2016 and 2017 programmes, especially in the way they experienced spaces together with their friends. Some of them saw the faces of those they had only known for a couple of days as if they were old friends. Others expressed amusement to see their own faces as strangers. The interplay between friends and strangers here is of importance, especially for the YATRA programme, whose purpose is to train young Christian people to engage with those of other religions who are both strangers and friends. In sum, the activity provided a glimpse of the joyful trinitarian friendship that Christians can embody in their lives in order to learn how to make space for and befriend strangers.