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Disciplinary Responses to Theology Brief Preview

TRUTHFUL LOVE BEYOND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH?

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Professor O'Donovan's provocative Preview raises questions in relation to my own work. As I work with adherents of other religions, or with atheists, it is my perception that genuine love is operative in their way of being and acting (in varying degrees, naturally). Consequently, I have reservations about the assertion that "the love of God is the condition for truthful love of any created thing." By this way of seeing things, should I be disabused of my impression that the love expressed by my Muslim or atheist friends is genuine? Surely not. So, if I am going to stipulate to the reality of the love of non-Christians, how should I square that with the idea that love of God is the condition for truthful human love?

Perhaps I ought to suppose that my Muslim friends love God truly even if their understanding of God's attributes that is (I believe) to some degree erroneous. That approach strikes me as tenable in the case of theistic non-Christians. But it is less obvious that I can make an analogous claim about the love of my atheist friends—in other words, I feel uncertain about saying that the genuine love evinced by atheists bespeaks that they really do love God, even though they deny doing so. Is there a different condition under which truthful love can exist apart from conscious love of God? Should we assume that the genuine love of atheists a consequence of their unwitting love of the Creator—perhaps loving God indirectly because they find much to love in the creation that reflects Creator?

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