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Disciplinary Brief

THE SUPREMACY OF LOVE IN CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

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A View From Theoretical Computer Science

Oliver O'Donovan offers an inspiring and illuminating account of the supremacy of love in Christian moral thinking. He clarifies how Jesus' teaching about the greatest commandment in the law offers a principle that guides and interprets all of life. 'To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever' was said to be the 'chief end of man' according to a popular catechism [1] – that enjoyment is fulfilled in love.

I found O'Donovan's arguments quite persuasive and pregnant with possibilities for the Christian scientist. Ian Hutchinson's response offers a helpful kickstart to the exploration of these possibilities. I will respond principally from the vantage point of theoretical computer science and mathematics. In brief, I will argue that love of God and neighbour is implicit in the very practice of our discipline, and that in the calling of discipleship we have the opportunity of making that love explicit and intentional.

Love of Things as Love of God

How can the love of 'impersonal' topics (such as mathematical ideas) be at all related to or even subsumed by the love of God and neighbour? This is perhaps one of the most difficult dilemmas for the Christian scientist provoked by O'Donovan's discussion.

Vocation

I loved how O'Donovan's response first points to *vocation*: if we attend to our task as a response to God's calling, we will be loving God in our work. Indeed, the very joy we feel in knowledge will bring us back to Him in praise and point us to the future joy of knowing Him fully. I am reminded of Augustine's words in the *Confessions* [2]:

> For he loves Thee too little who loves along with Thee anything else that he does not love for Thy sake.

Augustine's words here reflect the 'order of loves' (*ordo amoris*) that O'Donovan explains. Only God is to

be loved for His own sake because He is the only source of all good – ‘I have no good apart from you’ (Psalm 16:2). One can however also love God by recognising His hand in the gift of intellectual pleasure.

This is of particular importance to mathematicians and theorists. Thinking about mathematics demands so much of our mental energies, and is so far removed from day-to-day life, that it risks absorbing the entirety of our souls. Halmos, [3] an influential mathematician, wrote that a mathematician ‘must love mathematics more than anything else’. He is specific:

> You must love mathematics more than family, religion, money, comfort, pleasure, glory.

Halmos may be an extreme example, but it illustrates that the practice of mathematics is usually accompanied by passion and sacrificial frugality. This can be inspiring to students, but can also be the fruit of disordered love. In recognising God’s call and gift in the allure of mathematics, we give it the attention that is proper.

The Order of Loves

Hutchinson finds fault with the *ordo amoris* because he thinks creation in general, and mankind in particular, is loved for its own sake. Though he doesn’t explain it further, I venture to guess he is guided by the correct intuition that creation does not exist to fulfil some necessity in God. Nonetheless, any value that creation has is of course derivative from the One who bestows that value. The order of loves recognises this hierarchy, alerting us to disordered love, and reminding us of the Giver who gives all good gifts (James 1:17).

Creation and Providence

There is also another reason for why a personal encounter with God is implicit in the sciences. As the apostle teaches, ‘in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:3). Christ is also the one in whom ‘all things hold together’ (Col. 1:17) and the one who ‘upholds the universe by the word of His power’ (Heb. 1:3).

I believe this means that, if we are able to understand anything about the universe at all, it is because Christ sustains it and makes it intelligible and coherent [4]. Further, whatever knowledge we can obtain comes from the self-revelation of God by means of a ‘common grace’ operating in all human beings. From that perspective, there is nothing that can be known which is truly and absolutely impersonal – we encounter God’s self-communication at every corner of this ‘theatre of God’s glory’ [5].

Now, it is true that discerning the thoughts of God behind His works can be quite challenging. In an abstract research topic like mine (theoretical computer science and mathematics), it may not be clear that I’m encountering God anymore than my unbelieving colleagues are. C.S. Lewis [6] encourages us to stay humble in the face of our ignorance, entrusting God to unveil their spiritual significance in a future stage:

> Humility, no less than the appetite, encourages us to concentrate simply on the knowledge

> or the beauty, not too much concerning ourselves with their ultimate relevance to the vision of God. That relevance may not be intended for us but for our betters — for men who come after and find the spiritual significance of what we dug out in blind and humble obedience to our vocation.

Loving to Know

Attention

O'Donovan suggests that we think about love as an *affective and directive attention to the good of persons.* He explains that love fills us with something we feel and steers us to something we may do. He then goes on to clarify that *attentive acts* such as listening, learning and wondering are also acts of love and may indeed have some priority over 'busy and energetic acts'.

In theoretical computer science, as in many other fields, it is impossible to fulfil our calling without attention: hours of silent pondering, or in discussion with colleagues over a whiteboard. Successful mathematical research is borne out of patient attention to a problem, even after multiple failures, and often in collaboration with others whose ideas one also commits to verify or improve upon. This attentive journey is itself an act of love [7]. And as Weil [8] discusses, attention directed towards God is the very substance of prayer.

Eros and Beauty in Mathematics

O'Donovan's discussion of Eros is the one that most closely speaks to my heart as describing the experience of doing research [9]. The elegance of a mathematical proof that inspires admiration, the interconnectedness of all things that points to a mysterious coherence to the multiplicity of ideas – these are the things that inspire and guide us to that devoted attention without which truth will never disclose itself to us.

Ultimately, it is the 'beauty of the Lord' (Ps. 27:4) that we seek. The realisation that our attention is an act of love directing us to the Beautiful One, and that prayer is attention towards God, opens up the possibility that our study can erupt into prayer and praise. In this way, the Christian has the unique privilege of fulfilling the deeper purpose of study: to advance to the vision of God in Christ [10]. *Ora et labora.*

Friendship in Science

One of the greatest joys in theoretical computer science is that we are a community where collaboration is encouraged and common. This happens most often in sharing and debating ideas, sometimes leading to the joint solution of a problem. Even when this interaction produces no visible results, it nonetheless helps to strengthen the community by creating new relationships and disseminating ideas.

In working with peers I regularly have that feeling of friendship that C. S. Lewis describes in *The Four*

Loves, one that would inspire me to say ‘What? You too? I thought I was the only one.’ This makes research much more enjoyable than it would be otherwise. My love of learning is increased by interactions with other lovers.

The Christian Call to Foster Scientific Friendships

By bringing together a relatively small group of people with a narrow interest and purpose in common, research communities like mine make this kind of friendship almost unavoidable. Nonetheless, the Christian can play an important role in the community by living out the ‘sovereignty of love’ in a cogent and winsome way. By rejoicing in God, truth (even when found by others) and the process of discovery, we show a way that nurtures the ties of friendship that could easily be undone by the ‘love of the world’ (1 John 2:15–17) that leads to pride and selfish ambition (Phil. 2:3).

In Defence of Personal Love as the Fulfilment of Intellectual Love

I’m compelled by O’Donovan’s vision that intellectual love ultimately finds its culmination in personal love – a vision that Hutchinson seems to disagree with when he argues that ‘it would be a mistake to limit the Christian understanding of love to the good of persons.’ If my discussion above of the love of God in science is correct, then O’Donovan’s point is right at least as it refers to God. However, I think he is also on target when it comes to the love of neighbour. The moments when the grace of God bestows insight in isolation from others are few and far between in comparison to the knowledge we acquire from or with others. Newton’s famous phrase about standing on the shoulders of giants expresses that even the greatest acts of genius presuppose a community of love which passes forward a body of knowledge on which others can build.

The Effects of Love in Contemporary Academia

The reorientation of life according to Jesus’ instruction about love carries significant critiques of modern academia, some of which were sketched by O’Donovan.

Restoring the Vision of the University

O’Donovan notes how an imbalance of love leads to a splintering of the university into fenced communities of enquiry in competition with each other. Over a century ago, Bavinck [11] discussed this as caused by the widespread adoption of positivism, which leaves no space for ‘scientific knowledge’ in the humanities, let alone in theology – thus creating a hierarchy of the sciences with the natural sciences at the top.

This splintering may also foster suspicion even between neighbouring so-called ‘hard sciences’. For instance, theoretical computer science itself is divided in *Theory A* and *Theory B*, with little interaction between the two outside of few notable exceptions. [12]

The orientation towards the love of God and neighbour ought to give us a better path. Though the sciences

are as diverse as the objects studied, they find their ultimate unity in the God who is the cause and *telos* of them all. We ought to expect that truth will rhyme across disciplines and maintain a childish curiosity in our colleagues' work across the street – for that also is love.

This highlights the key role of Christian communities of interdisciplinary dialogue (such as GFI), which are one of the few places where the mutual disinterest (if not outright suspicion) between the disciplines can be overcome in Christian love. They thus offer to the world a visual parable of the unity of knowledge, parallel to that unity of love between believers which reveals that Jesus is the Christ. 'That they may all be one' (John 17:21–23).

And dare I say that we ought to restore theology as the *queen of the sciences*? Though we may have been called to particularly love particular disciplines, we have all been called to love God. Theology is not called to dominate or dictate to other disciplines, but rather to provide the unifying vision, as a conductor in an orchestra, that brings knowledge together to glorify God with one voice.

The Formation of Virtue in Mentoring

O'Donovan also highlights that love of knowledge points to the centrality of education. In our moment where students can pretend to study by delivering AI-generated coursework, we run the risk of making them merely capable of reproducing existing knowledge with current technology, instead of being inducted into the traditions of thought which enabled that knowledge to emerge in the first place.

Here the virtues of relational love are increasingly relevant. Education may now require a greater degree of trust from the student that certain activities (which can easily be automated) are worth engaging in to train their abilities. It may also require educators to pay greater attention to the *student* instead of the 'artefacts' they are able to produce. Love may demand that instructors and students develop relationships where honest interaction allows for true understanding to be verified and cultivated. Such an education can go beyond the completion of tasks to 'educate for the life' – as O'Donovan beautifully puts it – 'in which those tasks have their place'.

End Notes

[1] See Question 1 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

[2] Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. by H. Chadwick. Oxford World's Classics. Orig. c. 397–400; see esp. Book X, ch. 29. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[3] P. R. Halmos. I Want to Be a Mathematician: An Automathography in Three Parts. Originally published New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985; quotation at p. 3. Washington, DC: Mathematical Association of America, 1988.

[4] The divine order of the universe, and its implications for scholarship, are extensively discussed in a recently published dialogue with the Global Faculty Initiative. N. Biggar. *Order and Disorder: Nigel Biggar in Dialogue with the University*. Cross-Disciplinary Encounters with Theology 2. Ed. Terence C. Halliday and Khiok-Khng Yeo. Langham Global Library, 2025.

[5] J. Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. by F. L. Battles. Library of Christian Classics. Ed. John T. McNeill. Orig. 1559; see esp. I.5.8, I.6.2, I.14.20 on creation as the "theatre of God's glory". Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

[6] C. S. Lewis. "Learning in War-Time". In: *The Weight of Glory*. Revised. Orig. delivered as a sermon, Oxford, 1939. New York: HarperOne, 2001.

[7] That love is the very condition of knowledge has been explored deeply in E. L. Meek. *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011.

[8] S. Weil. "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God". In: Waiting for God. Trans. by E. Craufurd. Essay written 1942. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009.

[9] Thus O'Donovan's defence of desire in its proper relations is a balm to the scientist's conscience.

[10] Lewis, "Learning in War-Time"

[11] H. Bavinck. *Christianity and Science*. Trans. and ed. N. Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock. Orig. *Christelijke Wetenschap*, Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1904. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023.

[12] This split is well-demonstrated in the decade-old blog discussion started by Moshe Vardi. See M. Vardi. Why Doesn't ACM Have a SIG for Theoretical Computer Science? (Guest Post by Moshe Vardi). Windows on Theory blog. 2015. url: https://windowsontheory.org/2015/06/09/why-doesnt-acm-have-a-sig-for- theoretical-computer-science-guest-post-by-moshe-vardi/ (visited on 31/07/2026).

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