Introduction

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In early summer of 2015, a group of scholars, drawn from a range of disciplines, was gathered together in Metochi, up from the village of Kalloni, on the island of Lesvos, or Mytilene, to address ancient and modern perspectives on love. Apart from the academic questions raised in the papers, the place itself reminded all of those present of the manifold dimensions of love. Lesvos itself recalls the ancient Greek poet, Sappho, whose poems, only surviving in fragments, celebrate human love. It is the island, too, on which Longus set his tale of love, *Daphnis and Chloe*, the first Greek novel. As we travelled down towards Kalloni, we passed the dwelling place of the schoolmistress in Stratis Myrivilis's novel, *The Schoolmistress with the Golden Eyes*, which raises issues of human love from many different angles. While we were at Metochi, refugees from Syria and elsewhere were arriving on the north-eastern shore of Lesvos from Turkey, some of whom we encountered; their arrival inspired heroic endeavours of love from many Lesvians, not least the parish priest in those parts – Papa Stratis – whose efforts to provide practical support, and the constant anxiety caused by this, eventually claimed his own life. Above the place where we met was a monastery – our accommodation being a *metochi(on)*, a dependency, of the monastery, probably intended originally for the monks who worked the agricultural land that stretches out immediately below – which reminded us of other dimensions of love: that of contemplative waiting on God, as well as caring for the natural world. The theme of our conference manifested itself in other ways, too. The Norwegian University of Agder does not want to be regarded as a wealthy invader of the peace of a Greek island, but has taken care that the work in adapting the buildings to a study centre, as well as the food and accommodation provided, respect the simplicity of the life of the Greek

islanders – in this way showing some loving regard for those amongst whom we were spending our time.

The colloquy itself gathered together scholars from different countries and a wide range of disciplines: many came from Norway or Greece, but others came from other European countries, from Ireland to Serbia, indeed the scholar hailing from Ireland came straight from Uganda, where she has made her life for more than twenty years. There were theologians (of various stripes – biblical and patristic scholars, systematic theologians and philosophers of religion), as well as sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and others whose main field of interest lay in political matters. In this volume the historical contributions will be presented.

As was fitting in a colloquy convoked by a Scandinavian foundation, the initial papers concerned the hugely influential, though also controversial, analysis of love, or modes of love, advanced by Anders Nygren in his book translated into English as *Agape and Eros*. For nearly a century now, no theological or philosophical approach to the question of love has been able to escape his influence, even, or sometimes it seems especially, by those most concerned to call his ideas into question. Torstein Theodor Tollefsen and John Kaufman approached his monumental work in a predominantly critical spirit. Their papers were complementary, Tollefsen's being more strictly philosophical in its approach, while Kaufman placed Nygren in the context of what one might call the Nordic theology of the beginning of the last century. They also shared a great deal: both highlight how, for Nygren, Christianity's most faithful exponents were the Apostle Paul and the Reformer, Martin Luther (or, one might say, Martin Luther's interpretation of the Apostle), and they home in on his notion of "fundamental *motif*" as central to his contrast between *eros* and *agape*. Both of them find basic flaws in such *motif*-research, not least in the way in which ways of life are trapped in the Procrustean bed of a fundamental *motif*. Both papers are very rich, and it is difficult to single out specific themes. In Tollefsen's paper it is striking how he sees Nygren as limiting religion in general and Christianity in particular to the relationship between God and the human: the created order is simply a back-drop to the drama of redemption. The whole cosmic dimension of Christianity, characteristic of the patristic

vision, is sidelined by such an approach. Kaufman draws two other figures into his analysis of Nygren: his slightly younger contemporary, Gustaf Aulén, and the great Church Father, Irenaeus. Irenaeus is discussed because Nygren almost approves of him, virtually alone among the Church Fathers; Aulén is discussed because, in a different context, he shared with Nygren a predilection for *motif*-research. Simply drawing these parallels is thought-provoking; Kaufman's treatment of them is deeply illuminating.

Then followed a carefully analytical paper on the biblical language of love by Tor Vegge. Vegge begins by pointing out that *agape* and its cognates are the words most frequently used for love in the Scriptures even though, in the Greek culture in which the early Christians moved, the commonest words for love were *eros* and *philia*, the former of which is never used in the New Testament, the latter but once. This does not, however, lead Vegge into the kind of sharp distinctions that characterize Nygren's work; rather he pursues a careful analysis of various New Testament passages to show how love among believers, Jesus's love for his disciples (as often expressed by the verb *phileo* in Johannine texts), and God's love for humankind interrelate and inform each other. Then Vegge goes back to the Old Testament, not least the Greek Septuagint version, that formed the early Christian's *Scripture* (*graphe*), later Old Testament. There is now detected a different, more social, more political context, for all that the Old Testament texts inform the New Testament ones. We were encouraged to be aware of the various strategies to which the language of love could belong.

The Fathers then made their entrance, with papers on Diadochus of Photiki by Henny Fiskå Hägg, on Gregory of Nyssa by Vladimir Cvetković, and on Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor by Andrew Louth. Hägg explores the notion of love in Diadochus of Photiki, a fifth-century bishop of whom we know very little. Diadochus, she demonstrates, forms a kind of rich epitome of Byzantine ascetic and mystical wisdom. Love is central to his understanding of the Christian life, and it is the human heart that is the organ of love. Along with this emphasis on the heart, the place of experience is underlined. The stress Diadochus lays on the necessity of experience in prayer recalls a remark

by another Byzantine, Gregory Palamas, nearly a millennium later, who remarks early on in the controversy with Barlaam that "it is dangerous to speak *of* God, if one does not know how to speak *to* him". Another striking feature of Diadochus's theology of the heart is that he seems to be the very first person to refer to what we now call the Jesus Prayer, for he speaks of recourse to a prayer he called the "Lord Jesus" (in the vocative): either the prayer itself or perhaps the beginning of the prayer. With Cvetković's paper on Gregory of Nyssa and the notion of "distance" (*diastēma*), we move on to properly philosophical territory. Cvetković explores the different ways in which the fundamental notion of distance functions in different stages of Gregory's thought. Distance is characteristic of creaturely existence, a function of its finitude and its manifold nature. Yet, within creaturely existence is a longing – a love-longing – to overcome this distance, a distance with both spatial and temporal dimensions. In relation to God, this yearning to overcome distance leads to an understanding of creaturely perfection as consisting in a constant reaching out after God (which Daniélou called, echoing some of Gregory's language, *épectase*). In Louth's paper the metaphysical nature of love, stressed by Dionysius the Areopagite, is complemented in St Maximus the Confessor by a strongly practical stress on the accessibility of being able to love, something rooted in the very nature of humanity.

Parallel to this exploration of the Christian patristic heritage, there were papers by experts in the Neoplatonic tradition. Dimitrios A. Vasilakis begins from the conviction of one of the great interpreters of classical philosophy of recent times, Gregory Vlastos, who maintains that Platonic love is necessarily abstract – love for the Form of Beauty – and cannot have as its object any particular person. Vasilakis replies to Vlastos's contention by appealing to a Platonist of the fifth century, Proclus, who, in his *Commentary on Plato's First Alcibiades*, developed a notion of interpersonal love in which lovers foster one another's ascent towards the divine, reflecting in this the divine providential (*pronoetikos*) love of the cosmos. Deirdre Carabine, also a distinguished scholar of Neoplatonism and the continuation of this tradition in the Latin Middle Ages, shows how the apparent abstractness of negative or apophatic theology enhances the experience of love of the divine, taking as her

example the apparently simple and unsophisticated teaching of Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.

What conclusions were we left with at the end of the colloquy? It was remarked by many of those present that love is taken for granted as the basis of Christianity, and beyond that of any adequate understanding of human relationship. On examination, however, both the definition of love and the entailments of love proved to be, if not problematic, at least liable to raise serious questions of meaning and obligation. What does it mean to love? What obligations does the acknowledgment of love give rise to? Is there not a danger in narrowing down the nature of human response and human experience by taking for granted that love is essentially concerned with human relationships? What do we make of the cosmic dimension of love, that was a feature of much pre-modern reflection on love? What of *l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*, in Dante's words?

This volume is dedicated to the great Norwegian philosopher and believer, Egil A. Wyller, who sadly passed away a short time ago. A central notion in his intellectual journey (for one cannot read Wyller for long before realizing that what we are concerned with is not just a matter of learning and knowledge, but of wisdom and, yes, love) is the notion of *henology*: the study of the One, the notion that we begin and end with the One, with union, with unity. As a commanding vision it makes sense of a great deal of the Western philosophical tradition (and I daresay of Eastern traditions, too, but I must speak of what I know, at least a little). The grand vision of henology encounters love at every turn. So it is appropriate that this volume is dedicated to Egil A. Wyller.

The colloquy proved to be a rich intellectual feast, and in publishing this volume, it is hoped that others will be able to share, at least, in the exchange of ideas that took place in those unforgettable early summer days on a Greek island.