

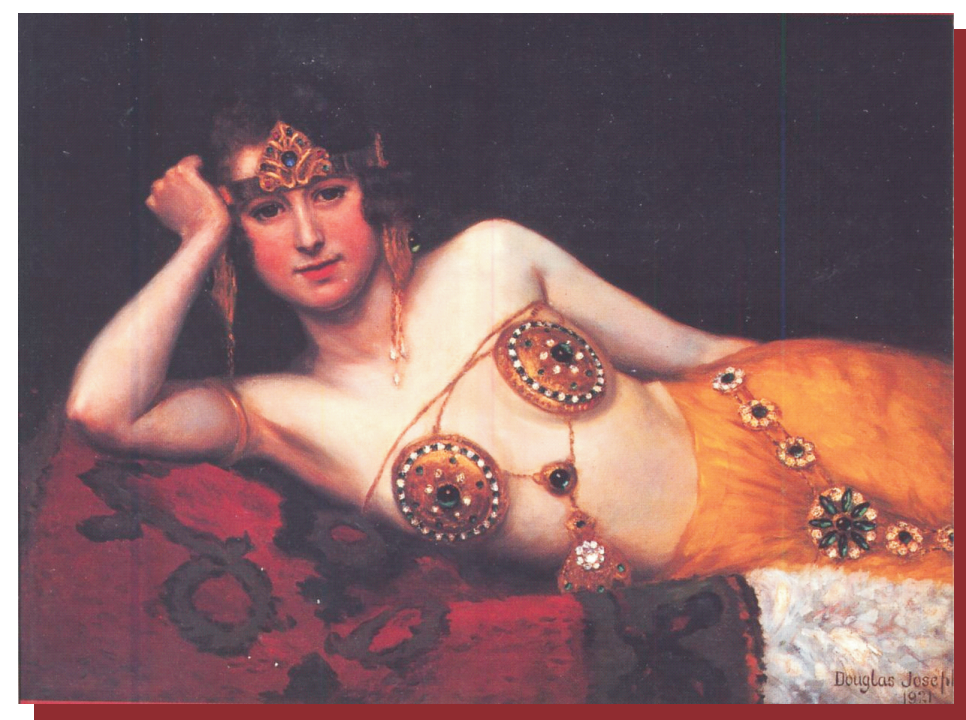
"I love thee, my God, with all my heart, soul and mind"

Blending the Erotic and the Divine in Mystical Literature



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- ☞ In our everyday individual and collective life, sex is a conditioning force: it is present in movies and TV, the media and in advertisements.
- ☞ On the other hand, there is a sort of *de contemptu eroticorum* made of flesh and sensuality that is despised by psychologists, theologians, sociologists and the traditional moralists alike.
- ☞ However, sex is not only human, but it is the meeting point of the human's three dimensions: material, intelligent and spiritual.
- ☞ It may be surprising to many that the erotic experience has been used as a metaphor of the religious experience, not only using images of chaste love, but also ones more typical of poems of passionate love.

- ☞ Why does a religious system in which the sexual mores are so rigorous and the punishments so harsh not contradict itself when it admits such relatively explicit images of those same sexual acts to explain the Sublime?
- ☞ In other words: why chose erotic metaphors to talk about mysticism and not other types of metaphors, such as clothing or cooking?
- ☞ Moreover, what is the relationship between the erotic and the religious?



The Emergence of Symbolic-Religious Cognition and

The human neuro-psychological evolutionary process has intended us to live in a social world in which the establishment of an Ego separate from others is almost inevitable. Human beings are, among other things, the product of those social interdependencies driven by the evolved brain. This includes the capacity of constructing "impossible worlds" and thinking hypothetically, considering the possibility of experiencing and representing the world around us intentionally and allowing humans to have a spiritual life. The human nervous system has probably evolved so that a social interdependence is necessary and not only contingent for the survival of the species, influencing phylogenesis (Sinha, 2000). This does not imply reductionism, however it does want to properly emphasize the interaction between what happens within the individual and what he may perceive around him in the construction of the person. Human reasoning tends to interpret abstract concepts in more concrete, embodied terms. Representations of divinities are unquestionably symbolic, and in human evolution, cognitive symbolic activity is profoundly tied to the social act of communication. In virtue of the co-evolution of the brain and language (Deacon, 1992) humans are able to have religious experiences and communicate them.

About 30,000 years ago (70,000 years after the fossil records of the anatomically modern human), religious thought and symbolic conceptual activity arose from the capacity of integrating specific-domain, a process called "cognitive fluidity" (Mithen 1996). The knowledge of society and nature is blended and integrated, and then represented not as two worlds, but as one. The product would be an anthropomorphic view of nature and a totemistic view of humans, giving way to myths, rites, and other cognitive processes that are kept to this day. Religion thus becomes a re-connection (*re-ligio*) and humans wanting to find their place in nature devise their supernatural or non-human descent. Of all the templates for supernatural concepts, the ones that seriously matter to people are invariably person-like, because people are the most complex type of object that people know (Boyer, 2001). Anthropomorphism progressed especially during the Neolithic which coincides with social progression (Watkins, 2000). Dunbar (1996) has shown a strong correlation between the proportional growth of the human brain and society during this time. Non-linguistic capabilities of symbolic reference were easily systematized because of physical symbols, and divinities were more and more created in man's image.

Why God as an Erotic Lover?

To reason about the ties between divine and human, man looks at his repertoire of human relationships, and the more significant ones are used to explain and speak of his *re-ligio*. The image of the divinity is more than often human-like and it is an anthropological universal that supernatural beings are thought to have a mind (Boyer, 2001), placing man much closer to the divine than to animals on the Great Chain of Being.

There are many metaphors used to represent the relationship between the divinity and the devotee:

- ☞ King-subject
- ☞ Father-child
- ☞ Doctor-patient
- ☞ Teacher-pupil
- ☞ etc.

The most significant relationship chosen by the mystic is Beloved-lover. Since the mystic feels in a very close relationship with the Divine, he or she almost feels as one with it. Other types of relationships imply an imbalance of status, notwithstanding the understanding that human finiteness vanishes in light of the Divine infiniteness, the mystic feels the need to live a more intimate relationship, which coincides with the human experience of two lovers and their enthusiasm.

The human need to give oneself to another person, albeit divine, and the desire to have a relationship like the one the mystic might have within his or her society, is part of his or her human nature. Man has the innate ability of symbolizing and the desire to communicate, as well as the innate need to feel socially tied to those like himself, and thus is also capable of the Divine.

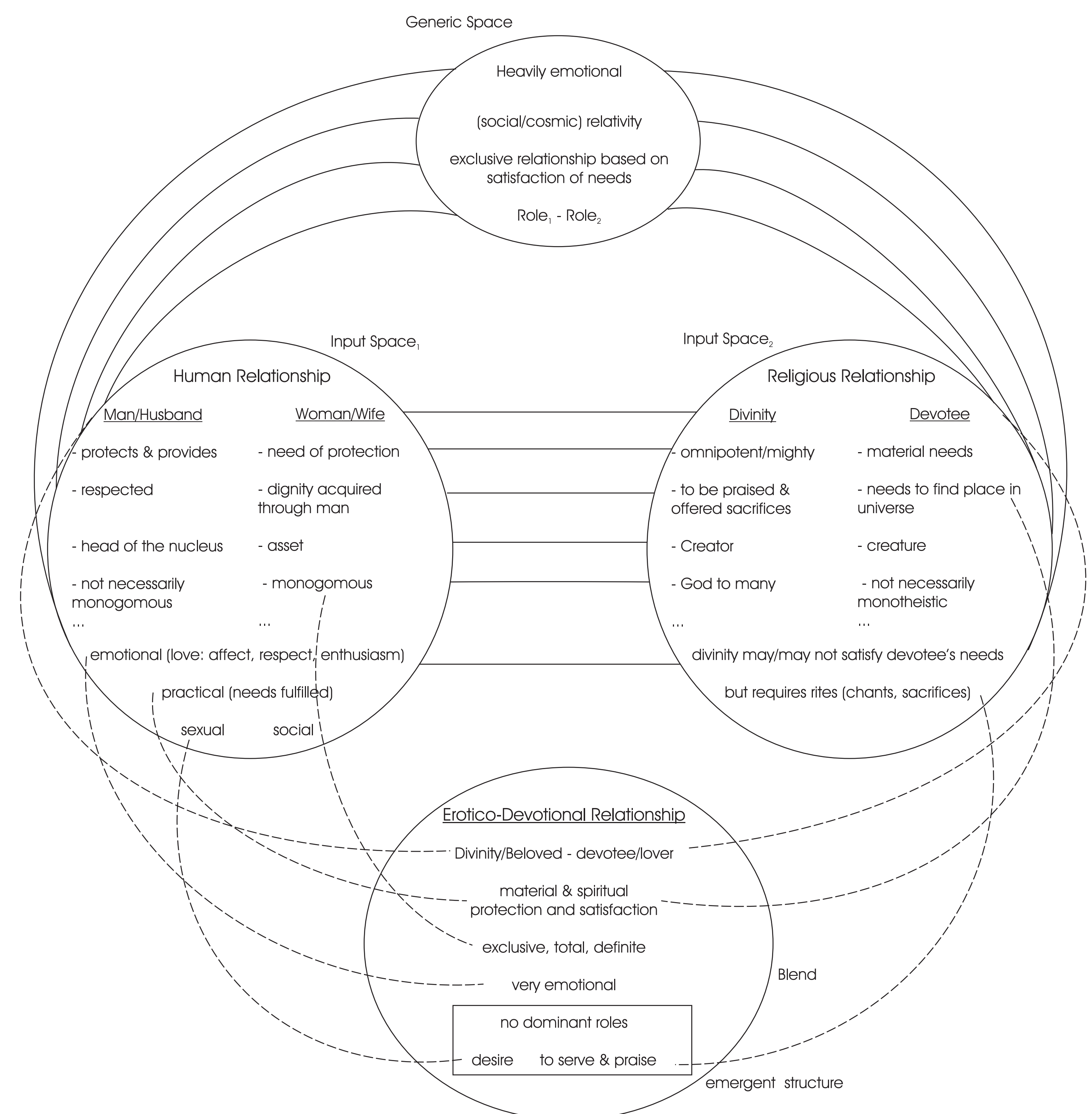
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Blending between God and Lover

The idealized conceptual models of the Divinity/beloved and of a devotee/lover began to blend through composition, completion and elaboration. The concept of human love relationship of these ancient cultures probably needs to be re-evaluated by modern students if it had become such an entrenched concept to be used as a source for a cognitive input space. Examples of erotic religious texts include Sir hassirim, or Song of Songs (Judeo-Christian); Jayadeva's Gita Govinda (Hindu); Rumi's Mathanawi (Islam).

Strongly erotic in content, these are part of the canons of the respective religious traditions, and so have deeply influenced subsequent elaboration of the erotic symbolism. The lover (the devotee) and the Beloved (the Divinity) are usually on a par, and the domination of one is hardly ever present. Poetic descriptions include psychological states of jealousy, passion, separation and reunion, and ultimate union. What emerges is a relationship that not only unilaterally satisfies the material and spiritual needs of the religious person, but is reciprocal. In other words, the needs of both parties are fulfilled (devotee: food, explanations; god: praise, sacrifice). Moreover, due to the blend, an emotional need is also fulfilled, and the sexual is transformed to be an erotic need of the beloved. The dignity of the woman is finding her place in society, like the devotee finds his/her place in his/her creator's creation, and so their relationship must be lived in the same natural setting. Because of the fusion between counterpart input spaces, there is a completion that humanizes the divinity so it becomes a he, the Man, motivated by the dominating role. However the elaboration of the blend tends to eliminate any domination in the relationship, as the needs of both sides are equal, and only when they are united do they feel completely realized. The imagery is not explicit, however, and very allusive, hidden behind a veil, because the experience is ineffable, a universal in religious experiences (d'Aquili & Newberg, 1999; James, 1902/1985). Religious texts that use erotic metaphors want to protect the mystery between man and the Divine, and not resolve it. Through the use of metaphor, the mysterious becomes even more mysterious.



Conclusions

The language used to manifest the religious experience is heavily embodied, thus motivated on a phenomenological order (see d'Aquili & Newberg for neurological correlations between ecstasy and sex), and Kövecses (2000) has shown how the language used to speak about emotions, and love in particular, influences the way of thinking and living them out. Not only has the Cartesian dualism fallen, but also the Christian (and for the most part Western) tri-partism of body-soul-mind. In virtue of the concept of embodiment, it is possible to affirm that consciousness is something that emerges, and is not transcendental, and humans are multilevel psychosomatic unities. Thus a devotee who wants to give him-or herself totally to God is truly free to say, "I love thee with all my heart, soul, and mind."