CHAPTER III

THEMES

After the discussion on the traditional sources for Herbert and Nammazhvar, one naturally turns to the various themes afforded by their poetry. Out of the several themes handled by them, a few seem to beg attention specifically. It is remarkable that these two poets belonging to different ages and religions and literary backgrounds seem to share several similarities in their handling of eternal themes such as Love and Grace, Sin, Surrender, Death and Liberation.

Herbert's poems have been grouped under three sections: "The Church-Porch", "The Church" and "The Church Militant". The main body of the lyrics forming the core of the book lies in the second section. "The Church-Porch" is a long didactic poem in which the poet dwells at length on how a good Christian should conduct himself in order to win the grace of the Lord. Poetically, this section and "The Church Militant" which traces the historical development of the church, are not as valuable as the lyrics grouped under "The Church", which reveal Herbert's personality, reflect the sway of his turbulent moods and mirror the torment and tranquillity of his mind. In such lyrics, besides speaking in the first person, Herbert dramatizes his spiritual
conflict. Only in these lyrics does one enter the poetic soul of devout Herbert. Though these poems are on a personal note, they are not exclusively personal, and the 'I' in such poems may include his fellow-Christians as well.

The most predominant theme in Herbert's poetry is the ambiguously worded "love of God". As Crierson has observed, 

The Temple is a series of metaphysical love poems depicting the love between man and God. To him, it is "a record of God's wooing of the soul of Herbert, recorded in the Christian story and the seasons and symbols of the Church and Herbert's wooing of God, a record of conflict and fluctuating moods and expostulations with God and himself" (qtd. in Bottrall 88). Herbert, moreover, believed that God's love did not merely operate on a personal level between God and the individual soul but transcended all personal experience and was in fact the force behind the very scheme of existence.

Herbert accepts the teachings of the church and God's providence with absolute faith. He is for ever preoccupied with man's sin and Christ's redemptive love, his dearest theme. The poet laments that man crucifies Christ everyday, again and again, by his ingratitude, pride and other sins. It makes Herbert build up a feeling of bonhomie with the
Jews ironically, as he believes that together they share the guilt of crucifying Christ ("Affliction (III)").

The overwhelming feeling about the immensity of God's love and the abundance of His grace permeates Herbert's poetry. "The Agonie" proclaims that the full extent of God's love can be measured by the grace of God alone:

Who knows not love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquour sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.

(13-18)

He spells out the great love showered on him by God and admits that he can never compete with Christ in the matter of love. In "The Reprisall" he declares: "There is no dealing with Thy mightie passion; / For though I die for thee, I am behind" (2-3).

The sonnet "Redemption" dramatizes the story of Herbert's search for God "to make a suit unto Him" which culminates in Christ's redemption of man on the Cross. Firmly believing that Christ has come for the sake of sinners, Herbert finds him amidst thieves and murderers. He
saves mankind from damnation through His death. The poem ends dramatically thus: "Your suit is granted, said & died". Christ dies to grant his suit. Little wonder that the poet finds Him in the company of thieves and murderers. In "Church-lock and key" Herbert expresses the conviction that the blood shed by Christ for the sake of man will plead his cause much more effectively than he can ever hope to do.

The perennial gush of God's love naturally flows down to the sinner, unasked. God showers His grace on the sinner, not because of his effective prayer, but because of His infinite love. Herbert is confident that God's grace will be showered on him. The grace of God pours down to man with the same pace with which blood gushed out of the wounds of Christ ("Home").

Herbert is moved by the redemptive love of Christ. There is no greater proof of a rare, selfless, non-pareil love than that of Christ's dying for our redemption: "... thy death and bloud / show'd a strange love to all our good:" ("Obedience" 26-27). In "Conscience" he again talks of his Saviour's blood and exclaims: "I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me ... / The bloudie crosse of my deare Lord / Is both my physick and my sword" (15, 23-24).

We can see Herbert thus constantly preoccupied with the crucifixion events. Every time he needs a tonic for his
soul, every time he needs spiritual nourishment, every time he wants a medicine to mend his wandering and weak soul, he remembers the crucifixion and Christ's blood becomes a curative medicine. But the thought of the crucifixion, while curing his sins, seems to be conducting a minor surgery, for it pricks his conscience, cuts it open and makes it bleed with remorse. And once the bad blood gushes out of him, Christ's blood nourishes and cleanses it.

Grapes are crushed to get wine, which gives joy to man. But God bore the cross and allowed himself to be pressed and when His own sweet self was crushed, what sweet wine or blood has been obtained by man and what great joy it can give! "The Bunch of Grapes" dramatizes this idea.

Herbert declares in "Time" that Christ's coming and dying has made man God's debtor. We are redeemed by the blessed stream "whose spring and vent / Is in my deare Redeemer's pierced side" ("Baptism (I)"). The very thought of the cross is a perennial reminder of God's redemptive love which makes Herbert go through a gamut of emotions.

Herbert is thrilled by the quick and easy access to God's love. The merciful, melting heart of God is well portrayed by him in "Prayer (II)": "If I but lift mine eyes, my suit is made; / Thou canst no more not heare, then
thou canst die" (5-6). God's grace is there in abundance for the mere asking. If at all Herbert's mind is tossed and tormented by doubt, despondency and despair, it is not as if God's love is doubtful, but it is only because of the inconsistency of the human mind. Man's ignorance and forgetfulness, his ego, love of materialism, selfishness— these are the scales before his eyes, which momentarily hide the glory and grandeur, the radiance and redemptive love of God. God's love and grace is always there but we fail to see it and that makes us sad. The poem pictures God in an unusual way for Herbert talks of "Love" itself waiting on God. It is peculiar indeed to imagine love waiting on Love.

In "Obedience" Herbert enters into a contract and binds himself legally to God and talks of the document on which his "heart doth bleed". He is sure that all his actions will be "as thy love shall sway". These lines ironically seem to echo Faustus registering his soul to Satan with blood, the dominant difference being that in the case of Herbert it is a contract between two loving souls.

The quick grace of God is once again portrayed in "Sion". Herbert wonders why the Lord of all creation is "struggling with a peevish heart". God is constantly watching over man and such is His love for man that He is not affected or impressed by pomp, glory and riches.
Temples, architectural wonders and costly carvings made for God in the house of God are "not so deare to thee as one good grone". When the groan emerges from a suffering heart, God leaves everything and rushes to shower His grace on the sufferer. To Herbert "grones are quick and full of wings". His poetic imagination continues when he portrays the groans mounting up to heaven "And ever as they mount like larks they sing; / The note is sad, yet musick for a King" (23-24).

Herbert promises to love God forever in "Praise II" for He had cleared the cobwebs of sin from his heart. He had heard every plea of his and so the poet decides to raise Him in his heart. Such is God's love that "Ev'n eternitie is too short / To extoll thee" (27-28). Nothing but pure love can make God quell Herbert's turbulence in "The Collar". When the poet rants and raves against God's control over him, God subdues him with just one word, but a word filled with a universe of love - "Child". The child in tantrums is drawn at once to the loving parent and all thoughts of rebellion are forgotten.

Herbert seems to realize that at times even God's actions which appear to be stern to the sinner are only out of His immense love for man. This is the theme of "Love Unknown" in which Herbert understands that God controls man
only with the intention of correcting an erring child. God's love is a love that cares and thus strictness springs out of immense love and concern as God has our total well-being at heart.

God cares not for art and sophistication but only for a sincere heart. A heartfelt wish to love Him and to be loved by Him is immediately accepted by God in "A True Hymne". God is epitomized as love in "Love (III)" : "Love bade me welcome", "Quick eyed love", "love took my hand", it "drew nearer to me sweetly questioning". When the sinner is abashed by God's bounteous love and hospitality, loving God puts him at ease. Not only does God love the sinner, not only does He forgive him but more, takes on Himself all his sins.

This illustrates how tender-hearted the Creator is in spite of all our sins. Little wonder Herbert portrays Him thus: "Thou grew'st soft and moist with tears" ("Praise (II)" 21). Nothing but pure love can make God shed tears for the sinner. God is not only the epitome of love and quick grace, but He is also quick to forgive us and embrace us, as in "The Collar" and in "Love (III)". He not only forgives, but goes a step further by assuring the poet that he is no longer a sinner as He has taken upon Himself the burden of man's sins.
Herbert experiences "sugred strange delight" overflowing his heart ("The Glance"). If the first, sweet and gracious glance of the Lord can give him so much joy, he wonders how it would be when he receives His "full-eyed love". He says that the loving glance of the Lord is enough to "look us out of pain". With the poetic turn of the phrase, Herbert is able to convey the depth and immensity of God's love, which can sustain us through thick and thin with a mere glance.

If at all we reach heaven, it is not because of our wit and wisdom but because of God's grace. God in all His mercy and love throws down the silk thread of grace for us to climb unto heaven and Him: "... thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me / Did both conduct and teach me, how by it / To climbe to thee" ("The Pearl" 38-40).

It is only God's grace dropping from above that can improve his state ("Grace"). God's grace is again described in "Easter" where the loving Lord "...takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise / With him may'st rise" (3-4).

God's love, grace and mercy challenge human understanding. God is the symbol of love. Herbert says in "Longing": "From thee all pitie flows / Mothers are kinde because thou art..." (13-14).
God has poured all His blessings on man, except "rest". Even that He has kept back not because He is stingy. The very fact that "rest" has been kept away from man denotes God's love. God cannot bear to be away from man; He is worried that man will neither search for Him nor come into His embrace if he had rest as well. The holding back of "rest" is only to draw man up to Him as on a pulley. Such is God's love that He waits for man to come back to Him ("The Pulley"). God's love of man is thus more than man's love of God. He is the pursuer feeling lost without man, trying to procure the heart of man and grieving for his sins. Ironically, it is God who is constantly thinking of man. Herbert wonders why God grieves for him who is nothing but a silly worm, who forever crosses the ways of God ("Grieve Not"). Man is only "a rotten tree," but God loves him as if he were the most precious of all His creations ("Obedience" 22).

God's love for man is such that even after man has betrayed and crucified Him, "Christ left his grave-clothes, that we might, when grief \_ Draws tears, or blood, not want a handkerchief" ("The Dawning" 15-16). It is unique poetic imagination on the part of Herbert when he says that even at the moment of death Christ's thoughts were for man. Christ was worried that man may have nothing to wipe his tears and blood with, when wounded by sin and grief. Christ
has thoughtfully and lovingly left even his grave clothes to be used by man as a handkerchief. Christ in all His mercy does not show us the face of sin lest it make us mad ("Sinne II"). The loving God is unable to see man's suffering endlessly. So, at one point, God declares:

... It doth suffice;
Henceforth repose; your work is done

Thus in thy ebony box
Thou dost inclose us ... ("Even-Song" 19-22).

No wonder Herbert calls death "fair" and a "chair" to relax on after a weary journey in "The Pilgrimage". The reader is moved as much by God's love for man as by Herbert's love and understanding of God's love, for it is Herbert's poetic vision that portrays the unseen Lord of all creation as love itself.

Love is the origin from which spring several other concepts - such as grace, mercy, forgiveness etc. Love is composed of all these and much more. Grace, then, like the other qualities, is one of the manifestations of love. It attracts and wins us over and draws us nearer to an understanding of the greater, inexplicable quality of love. Grace, in lay terms, is the demonstrative aspect of love. It is more easily understood and accepted by man than the
quality of love, which because of its immensity, depth and scope baffles human understanding.

Next to love and grace, the most obsessive topic for a Christian devotional poet is the talk of sin in all its varied shades. Herbert takes a very close, incisive and comprehensive look at sin in many of his poems.

Christianity has a fully developed theory of sin. Sin is man-centred and is considered to be an ethico-religious, negative act. At the ethical level, it is usually associated with evil deeds; theologically it refers to the evil attitude rather than the deeds themselves. It includes notions like pride, disobedience etc. But the distinct character of sin is the notion of "lost-ness", of being alienated not only from one's true self but also from all fellow creatures and at the deepest level, from the Creator Himself. Popularly, sin is the off-shoot of any evil, as evil brings in estrangement from love of God.

The Christian religion talks of three kinds of sin - the original sin, which was passed onto mankind as a result of Adam's transgression; the venial sin, committed without the full awareness of its seriousness; and the mortal sin committed willfully.
Herbert is often in a quandary as there is some tension between love and sin in his mind. This is because of his firm conviction that man is capable of reaching his goal, but his inherent corruption makes the job difficult. It is not the usual Christian fear or abhorrence of sin that Herbert emphasizes but its degrading effects which clip the wings of the aspiring soul. Man gets entangled in the vicious cycle of sin, which operates on the three levels of thought, word and deed endlessly and thus makes man lose tomorrow the ground won today. Sin threatens to snatch away from man not only paradise but more, on the realization of his being a sinner, he suffers from pangs of guilt and shame and worse still, he is tormented when he understands that he has pained and grieved his loving Creator.

As much as Herbert is aware of God's love and is overwhelmed by His grace and mercy, he is equally obsessed with man's sin. Since sin is as immeasurable as God's love, he asks philosophers to try and measure man's sin and God's love: "... there are two vast, spacious things, / The which to measure it doth more behove: / Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love" ("The Agonie" 4-6). He describes sin thus: "Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain / To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vain" (11-12).
Before Adam's sin, it was very easy for man to reach Heaven, says Herbert. Then, "A fervent sigh might well have blown / Our innocent earth to heaven" ("The H. Communion" 31-32). But it was "before that sinne turn'd flesh to stone / And all our lump to leaven" (29-30).

In "Nature" Herbert delineates some of his own sins. He is full of rebellion, he fights God, travels away from Him and denies Him. He is afraid that if the venom of sin were allowed to be in him it might succeed in disintegrating his soul. He finds in his soul "quarries of pil'd vanities" ("The Sinner"). He compares his hardened heart to stone. God had created a tender heart in man but man has hardened it by his sins. He confesses in "Grace": "Sinne is still hammering my heart / Unto a hardnesse, void of love" (17-18).

Man's love of the world is depicted in "Self-Condemnation". Herbert says that every man who has wedded his soul to gold is a "Judas-Jew". Wordly delights and materialism is the sin discussed in this poem.

The poem "Decay" refers to God's old foes, Sin and Satan, which keep troubling Him always. Sin is greedy and not satisfied with what it has gained with its hold on man's heart. It uses every art to completely drive out God from man's heart and wants to totally occupy his heart.
The power of sin in capturing man's heart and soul is clearly depicted in "Sinne (I)". Parents and school masters take so much care to wean us away from sin. They take the help of rules of reason, holy Messengers, pulpits and Sundays to keep us away from sin. We are given the fear of sin and the promise of blessings if we avoid sin; the threat of shame and the prick of conscience also join in the campaign against sin. But sin is powerful and cunning: "Yet all these fences and their whole aray / One cunning bosome-sinne blows quite away" (13-14).

In "Affliction (I)" Herbert very nearly leaves God's service when plagued by sickness and sorrow. This wavering mind and inconsistency is also a part of man's sinful nature. He openly admits in "Repentance": "Lord, I confesse, my sinne is great / Great is my sinne ..." (1-2). The reiteration in the lines is introduced mainly to emphasize how Herbert is obsessed with the immensity of his sins. Herbert ponders over the appearance of sin in "Sinne (II)". It is grotesque compared to the majestic and beautiful appearance of God. He realizes that God in all His mercy has not let us see sin face to face for it may drive us mad.

Man's preoccupation with sin creates more and more conflicts. In "Affliction (IV)" Herbert is torn between
the material world and the spiritual one. His thoughts are injurious. Everything - the elements, his senses - is in revolt and plotting against him. In panic he prays to God: 
"Oh help, my God! Let not their plot / Kill them and me / And also thee" (19-21).

Man is becoming wanton as seen in "Affliction (V)". There is "profaneness" in his head, "defects and darkness" in his breast and "noise of passions" rings his death knell ("Aaron").

Man is deceived by illusory pleasures in this world. Herbert's poetic fancy makes him describe the transience of worldly pleasure as "sugr'd lies", "blushing woes" and "coloured griefs".

Herbert raves about man's ingratitude which is a sin. Beginning with the crucifixion, man has ever been ungrateful to God. He sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver and made Him suffer for our sins on the cross. ("The H. Communion"). He laments in "Ungratefulness": "When thou demandest but a heart, / He cavils instantly" (26-27). It is absolute ingratitude on the part of man to refuse the one thing that God demands of him after all that He has done for him out of His "bountie" and "rare clemencie".
Not only are we ungrateful but we are downright unkind and use God very badly: "I would not use a friend, as I use Thee" ("Unkindnesse" 5). Man forgives his friends for their many mistakes. He is kinder and more tolerant to friends than to God, though He has done so much more for him and is his best friend. Such is his ingratitude and unkindness to God who died to redeem us that the poet concludes: "Yet use I not my foes as I use Thee" (25).

In "Sinnes Round" Herbert defines the cyclic process of sin. At first thoughts are inflamed; this leads to fiery words; hands join thoughts and words and this results in sinful deeds. And these "ill deeds" supply "New thoughts of sinning". Herbert is sorry for getting caught in this vicious cycle.

Herbert gives a fresh interpretation to the biblical incident where Marie Magdalene washes the feet of Jesus. The poet wonders why she washed His feet with her tears. She could have kept her tears to cleanse her filthy self. Herbert imagines that she was wise enough to realize "...that her sinnes did dash / Ev'n God himself:..." ("Marie Magdalene" 14-15). Herbert concludes that such is the immensity of our sins that there is a fear of our sin defiling even God, the ultimate in purity.
In "Giddinesse" and "Love Unknown", among other sins, Herbert talks about the sin of hypocrisy. Man has lost power, peace and rest due to sin. Herbert describes how man behaves in a false and hypocritical manner: "He is some twentie sev'rall men at least / Each sev'rall houre" ("Giddinesse" 3-4).

In "Love Unknown" Herbert acknowledges that his heart is foul, hardened and dull. Above all, he is a hypocrite: "... so that when I pray'd / Though my lips went, my heart did stay behinde" (58-59). His condemnation of hypocrisy is reflected in "Affliction (I)": "Let me not love thee, if I love thee not" (66).

Herbert realizes that his sins do not bring grief to him alone. This idea is brought out in "Grieve not the Holy Spirit". His sins grieve God too.

The human heart is torn by several sins. Man's revolt against God is one of the major sins described in "The Collar": "I struck the board and cry'd, No more. I will abroad" (1-2). Added to man's disobedience is his greed and folly. Man could not "leave one poore apple for thy love:" ("Home" 22). In his ignorance man refuses to rise above sin, "No, not to purchase the whole pack of starres:" ("Miserie" 52). Besides, man is fickle-minded. In "Giddinesse" therefore Herbert requests God:

85
Lord, mend or make us: one creation
Will not suffice our turn:
Except thou make us dayly, we shall spurn
Our own salvation. (25-28)

It is for the same reason that in "Good Friday" Herbert
pleads with God to fill up the place in his heart vacated by
sin with His grace, "Lest sinne take courage and return" (31).

Herbert who has been obsessed by the magnitude of his
sins is always comforted by the thought that God will redeem
him from sin for He took upon Himself the sins of man and
died for him on the cross: "Thou hast restor'd us to this
ease / By this thy heav'nly bloud" ("The H. Communion" 37-38). The blood and wine received at holy
communion can alone enable man to control "rebel-flesh" and
"affright both sinne and shame". When man is weakened by
sin, Herbert declares: "... by the way of nourishment and
strength / Thou creepst into my breast" (7-8). God's
redemption of the sinner is dealt with thus in "Praise
(II)": "Though my sinnes against me cried / Thou didst
cleare me;" (13-14).

In "The World" Herbert describes man as a "stately
house" built by love. Sin and death threaten to demolish
the building. But love and grace "built a braver palace than before".

Herbert offers several methods of washing away sin, like shedding tears of remorse and repentance, confession, total surrender etc. What is needed most is sensitivity to sin. In "Businesse" Herbert reiterates the fact that man cannot delay repentance after committing so many sins. He must repent, weep, sigh, groan and above all remember Christ on the cross and for this the sinner should first feel, be humble and repent from his heart: "Who in heart not ever kneels, / Neither sin nor Saviour feels" ("Businesse" 37-38).

The theme of surrender inevitably and naturally follows the concept of sin. In many poems, Herbert speaks of the value and impact of surrender. Generally we surrender either for love or due to weakness. Surrender takes place usually after a long and difficult battle. It is either due to our being conquered by the other person's love, charm or other wonderful attributes or because we realize our weakness and the futility of the struggle when we are beaten by the powerful opponent. In both cases the surrender takes place when we can fight no more whether with the attraction or with the might of the opponent. After the surrender, everything of the vanquished belongs to the conqueror.
Nothing remains with the vanquished. The defeated person gives up everything to the other and serves the conqueror as his servant. He starts living on the victor's mercy.

Herbert's relationship with God seems to begin with a fight. He rebels and revolts; he is also attracted to God's immense love. At one point unable to fight any more either with the power or with the attraction of God, he surrenders. Ironically, here the poet has surrendered to the loved one who he had believed was his opponent. In fact it has been only a fight between two love-filled souls. Love conquers Herbert and in one stroke he realizes God's power and his own impotence. After this nothing belongs to Herbert, everything belongs to God. The conqueror does not grab all of Herbert's possessions by force; it is he, who gives up everything voluntarily. He becomes God's servant willingly and starts living on his Master's mercy. In the opening lines of "The Collar" we find Herbert in the first stage of revolt fighting against his Lord and Master. He who is roaring like a lion in rebellion submits meekly in the end by one loving word from God.

In "Artillerie", the relationship assumes a slightly different form. The rebel has turned into a slave:
... I am thine:
I must be so, if I am mine.

There is no articling with thee:

I am but finite, yet thine infinitely. (29-32).

After the conquest in "The Collar", Herbert has become, in this poem, God's property for ever. A similar idea is expressed in "The Discharge" where he tells his 'Busie enquiring heart': "Thy life is God's, thy time to come is gone, / And is his right" (11-12). Herbert has surrendered not only his life, not only his present but his future as well to God.

His total surrender and yearning to see God is beautifully portrayed in "Home". He cannot bear to be separated from God and he suffers physical and mental agony when God delays coming to him. He wonders why he should be in this world if God stays away from him. For nothing in the world is worthwhile, nothing can give him happiness. Either God should appear before him or take him upto heaven.

Herbert wants no separate identity for himself and this is the idea expressed in "The Quip". God should own him up as His own. In "Clasping of Hands" also it is the obliteration of identity and a total union that he craves for: "Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine, / If mine I
am: and thine much more,... / Or rather make no Thine and Mine!" (1–2, 20). Herbert wants to mingle with his God so that no trace of his self is left behind.

In "The Elixir" Herbert prays to God to make him see Him in everything for, such an attitude, Herbert feels, will make even "drudgerie divine". Herbert has reached such a state of submission that he is able to accept everything as His will.

In "The Crosse" Herbert accepts even the contrarieties of life as His will, "With but foure words, my words, Thy will be done." (36) An echo of this note of acceptance and surrender is heard in "The Temper (I)" also:

Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best:
Stretch or contract me, thy poore debter:
This is but tuning of my breast,
To make the musick better. (21–24)

Herbert is absolutely sure that God knows best on how to deal with him. We see him passing through the various stages of surrender. He accepts, submits, obliterates his identity, wants to give up the world and cannot bear to be away from God. He offers himself completely to God and finds great joy only in his union with God.
With the surrender being total and overwhelming, the devotee starts portraying God in various ways. Images of God and His differing roles form the theme of many of Herbert's poems. God is viewed from different angles by poets in religious literature. Predominantly Christian poets see God as father, lord, master, shepherd, king and so on. But it is when Herbert sees God through the eyes of poetry that as many images of God are interestingly created as his fancies. It is interesting to note that poets thus become demi-gods and paradoxically create their Creator Himself as it pleased their fancy.

In Herbert's poetry we get a wide array of the several images of God. God is personified as Love and Grace; He is seen as Lord, King, and Master; Christ is the Way, Truth, Life, Light, Feast, Strength, Joy and Heart ("The Call"). He is the saviour, Rod, as well as Judge ("Sighs and Crones"). God is the king and all the stars are His ministers ("Artillerie"). He is the commander of the whole universe ("The Providence"). He is "Lord of Power killing and quickning", "Lord of Love" ("The Flower").

Herbert excels in portraying God as the epitome of love and delights in showing the several faces of love. God is a strict and loving father in "The Collar" for He is able to tame the tantrums of an intransigent child by just calling
him "Child". That one word should have been brimming with great love to quieten and pacify the raving, ranting Herbert.

In "Longing", Herbert feels that the maternal qualities of love, care and kindness flow down from God to mothers on earth. The poet uniquely imagines that God has disposed a part of Himself to mothers:

From thee all pitie flows
Mothers are kinde, because thou art,
And dost dispose
To them a part:
Their infants, them; and they such thee
More free. (13-18)

Just as infants suck mothers, all beings on earth, including mothers, suck love from God.

It was typical for religious poets of the seventeenth century, when love poetry also flourished, to use the conventions of the latter to express their God-love. Thus, God is Herbert's love and he often searches for Him, languishes for Him and experiences both joy and pain because of this love. God is personified as love in "Love (III)": "Love bade me welcome", "quick-ey'd Love", "Love took my hand" etc.
In "The Search" Herbert grieves due to the absence of his Love: "Whither, O, whither art thou fled, / My Lord, my Love?" (1-2). He, who is distraught when his love is away from him, is positive that love's nearness will make both of them into one being. We again see the poet like a separated lover pining away for his love in "Dulnesse": "Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull, / As if I were all earth?" (1-2). In "Longing" he pleads with his love to heal his "troubled breast which cries, / Which dies" (83-84). This can be done only if love will pluck out its dart embedded in his heart. The lover image continues in "A Parodie" and "Clasping of Hands" where Herbert wants his love and himself to be inseparable. God is addressed as "Sweetest of sweets" in "Church-Musick". This sweet love, God, is projected as an enticer in "Affliction (I)".

Herbert's vision is so tinted by his God-love that he sees God in every conceivable human relation. Thus He is also a dear host ("Christmas", "Love (III)", "The Invitation"), captor ("The H. Communion") victor ("Reprisall"), wrestler ("Temper (I)"), hunter ("Mattens"), architect ("The Church-floore" and "The World"), messenger ("The Bag"), music conductor ("Providence"), potter ("Trinitie Sunday" and "The Priesthood"), friend ("Sunday") and a loving Master ("The Odour").
Themes are, as any reading of Herbert's poetry will reveal, aplenty and varied. Love, sin and surrender are occupations of our lifetime. But, as many writers have put it, the greatest event in man's life is death. Herbert's thematic preoccupation with death is as complex and subtle as his theology.

Herbert's ill health is responsible for his thoughts ever circling round the idea of death. The impact of bodily pain and the idea of the inevitable end often break through his poems. It is interesting to note that death was looked upon as a solemn consummation of life during Herbert's time (More 307). This thought has inspired some of the best poems of Herbert. Herbert anticipates death and is sure that it will release him from pain, "when thou shalt look us out of pain" ("The Glance" 21).

In "The Pilgrimage" Herbert talks of death in a whimsical way: "After so foul a journey death is fair, / and but a chair" (35-36).

His rosy view of death has come to him

.... since our Saviour's death did put some bloud

Into thy face;

Thou art grown fair and full of grace,

Much in request, much sought for as a good

("Death" 13-16)
The world wearies him and there is nothing left for him in it. He wants to get up and reach upto his God. This is the central idea of "Home" where he prays to God for death: "Oh loose this frame, this knot of man untie!" (61). Death does not spoil, it only cleanses as is seen in "The Church Floor". "Vertue" talks of the death of day, rose and spring. Only the virtuous soul has no death. The inevitability of death is expressed in "Repentance". Man's life "is one undressing, / A steady aiming at a tombe" (5-6).

"Mortification" describes the advance of death from the moment a person is born: Swaddling clothes are shrouds, youth's music becomes the knell and the house is in a way a coffin.

When boyes go first to bed
They step into their voluntarie graves ....
Successive nights like rolling waves
Convey them quickly, who are bound for death
(7-8, 11-12)

Herbert only prays to God: "Yet Lord, instruct us so to die, / That all these dyings may be life in death" (35-36).

This leads to the eternal theme of Christ's crucifixion, Resurrection and His dying to make man live.
It also indicates man living in Christ after his physical death.

Such is Herbert's preoccupation with death that he talks more of Christ's death than His birth. Although the keel of Herbert's heart is tossed by waves of despair and doubt now and then, it does steadily voyage on towards the harbour of rest. He wants release from the shackles of the world and the pains of the body. He wants to be free from all pain, physical and mental, from hampering doubts, fears and confusions. Paradoxically, for him such a freedom can be got only by absolute submission to the will of God. It is a willing surrender between two loved ones which obliterates the feeling of I and Thee. At that stage there is no distinction and "thine" and "mine" mingle and become one. Once this union is realized, Herbert who had earlier wanted to be lifted up to God or climb up to heaven on a sun beam, has calmly come to believe that "heaven and God are planted in him" ("Frailtie").

His aim is to reach and mingle with God rather than reside in His abode, Heaven. Herbert can find rest only in God's love: "My God, thou art all love... / And in this love more then in bed, I rest" ("Even-song" 29-32). Herbert has come to the conclusion that heaven and hell matter not much to him for,
Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
Thy hands made both, and I am there:
Thy power and love, my love and trust
Make one place ev'ry where.

("Temper (I)" 25-28)

One can see a gamut of feelings, emotions and moods in Herbert. He is heart-broken one moment but soon bids farewell to despondency: "Away despair! my gracious Lord doth heare ..../ Well may he close his eyes, but not his heart" ("The Bag" 1,6). He wonders how God, who left His throne for man can tarry while he dies. One moment Herbert feels the boat of his life reeling, but quickly realises that storms are His art and He will preserve the boat. He groans and sighs in despair, but is confident that his sighs are but messengers and will surely convey his grief to Him. He reasons with Him, he rebels, he accepts, he demands, he praises God. In short, in nearly every poem of his there is a total swing in mood, a fall-rise graph. Herbert is sure that he and God are inseparable. Herbert declares he will praise God alone all the time: "... my busie heart shall spin it all my dayes: / And when it stops for want of store, / Then will I wring it with a sigh or grone" ("Praise (III)" 3-5).
Herbert has either forgotten his oneness with God in a moment of weakness or may be, God makes him forget it so that the cream of his heart is culled in torment and offered to Him, or may be, the poet protests only to win God's attention. All said and done, it is this forgetfulness, deliberate or God-induced that adds a sparkle to Herbert's poetry. Moments of crisis are fertile grounds for poetry. Rebellion and repentance, demand and dejection, praise and protest, though extremes nurture poetry in a sensitive heart. This is evident as such poems are poetically superior to the calm, placid ones praising God. These poems spurred by volatile thoughts throb with life. Wishing to hear Herbert's best, God seems to have taunted him.

During the handling of various themes, there can be seen in Herbert's poetry an oscillation from one extreme mood to another. He is bold and believes that everything, himself and his faults, is His. This springs out of his basic confidence and conviction in God's love for him and his love for God. The cobwebs of doubt and fear are cleared by the thought of Christ on the cross and His non-pareil love. Love, longing, praise, protest, demand, dejection - these play hide and seek in Herbert's poetry and give it a pied and chequered quality which delights the reader. Herbert and God, like children, play bo-peep. The poet indulges in childish tantrums, God cajoles him, taunts and
teases him, makes him weep and wail and then gathers him to His bosom. While Herbert is a lively temperamental child in God's hand, poetry becomes a frisky child in Herbert's hands. Suddenly somewhere the child grows up. Now it becomes a lovers' quarrel between God and the poet, yearning for each other, searching for each other, ever thinking of each other, yet peevish and hurting each other with petty quarrels, which spring up but to spice up the relationship. The quarrels usher in variety and vivacity. These tests and torments only further strengthen their love as "trees are fastened by shaking". In short, suffice it to say, there is never a dull moment in Herbert's poetry.

Herbert's poetry thus deals with different themes in a complex web of poetic imagery. The Christian and Western world revolves in the groove of tradition, expressing itself on love, grace, death and sin as conventions of human existence. Herbert's preoccupations with such themes can thus be viewed as traditional. When we turn our attention on the Tamil poet Nammazhvar, the analysis unearths many surprising similarities in thematic concerns. The argument that love, grace, sin and death are indeed universal themes notwithstanding, the poetic effusions of Herbert and Nammazhvar on these themes are in the same strain in a remarkable manner.
One of the major themes in Nammazhvar's poetry is love. He devotes about one-fourth of Tiruvaymozhi and the entire Tiruviruttam to the theme of love. As is the case with many a mystic poet, the Azhvars describe their love of God in terms of human love - that of the bride for the Divine Bridegroom. The mystic experience of communion with Him is considered by Nammazhvar as the consummation of the philosophy of love. In this process the human soul is purified and transformed into its original, divine nature. The Azhvars and the Nayanmars speak this language of love while giving expression to their mystic experience.

When love is directed to the Lord, who is the source of all human love, it is spiritual love and is considered a virtue. This urge of love in due course becomes a craving for the spiritual marriage with the Lover. This is what one sees in Nammazhvar. In him, it is not a mere mental feeling but an organic craving. It is this intense passion for God that results in his songs of anguish and rhapsody. In Tiruvaymozhi 3.8 for example, Nammazhvar talks of how every one of his senses and faculties thirsts for God: His mind keeps calling Him; his tongue chants His name all the time; his hands grope for Him; his eyes want to see His exquisite form; his ears want to hear the sweet sound of the wings of the Lord's bird, Garuda and his spirit yearns to have its ears filled with songs sung in praise of Him. It may be
noted that "each faculty is anxious to obtain realization not only in the manner legitimately and normally obtainable by it, but by exceeding and transcending even its functional limitations, - a sort of synaesthetic interchange of functions. Thus his hands want to praise Him with lofty words, the eyes want to worship Him with flowers, the ears long to see Him and so on" in addition to their normal functions (Reddiar 387). This super-sensuous and organic love and infatuation towards God is the hallmark of Nammazhvar's compositions. He avowedly attempts to attain, and ultimately attains, God through love.

Nammazhvar frequently uses the term ava ("desire") which signifies an intense craving. In all his four works one comes across this God-infatuation. In his first work Tiruviruttam, we see the springing of the craving when the poet says he merely longs to see the Lord. If he cannot continue to enjoy personal communion with Him, he wants to at least see Him even if He is in a crowd (Verse 84). In Tiruvaciriyam, the craving begins to outgrow the Azhvar. Referring to the nectarean flood that springs and flows from the love of God he declares that only the unwise will cling to the things of the earth (Verse 2). This longing is said to flow like a river in the third work of Nammazhvar, Peria Tiruvantati, where he uses another term anpu.
"Affection"). Not knowing how to approach Him, he being a sinner, he wonders how love for the Lord gushes forth in his heart although he has not seen Him (Verse 8).

The Azhvar's love for the Lord keeps growing, taking immense proportions and in his last work Tiruvaymozhi, it becomes as large and tumultuous as the sea. The little grain of love in the Azhvar's heart has been made to grow into a vast expanse like the sea by the cloud-hued Lord (5.3.4). In 7.3.6 the poet realizes that his love for the Lord is bigger than the sea. And in 7.3.8 he is amazed that his love grows to cosmic dimensions enveloping the entire earth, the seven seas and the immeasurable vast space. Even this does not seem to satisfy the Lord, and so the Azhvar whips up his love so that it engulfs his soul and becomes a vetkal or yearning. The innermost parts of his soul are too inadequate to hold this yearning of cosmic dimensions (10.3.2) and so the love outgrows the Azhvar and slowly envelops the Lord Himself till He looks small compared to the Azhvar's enormous love.

The Lord could not but respond immediately to the ardent call of the Azhvar and so He hastened to him and held him in tight embrace. This was perhaps the only way the Lord could avoid being engulfed completely by the Azhvar's love for Him, which had by now grown to such an extent like
a whirlwind, that it assumed supra-cosmic proportions. Finding that the Lord had forestalled him and proved more than a match for him by shedding on him His love, far more intense than his own and thus setting him at rest, the Azhvar gratefully acknowledges the Lord's great gesture in TVM 10.10.10. In the powerful effulgence of the Lord's love, the poet's love for Him pales into insignificance. Nammazhvar now realises that he has reached his goal, the blissful union with the Lord and he sings about it in the last verse of Tiruvaymozhi.

It is evident that the Lord reciprocates the poet's love in equal, and in fact in more abundant, measure. The Azhvar affirms that the Lord has taken residence in his heart and will not leave him (Peria Tiruvantati 35). It is out of a great liking for the poet that the Lord has entered his mind, never to part from him (TVM 2.6.7). The Azhvar cannot think of any pretext to leave Him (TVM 1.7.4). And the Lord came to him although the poet did not take the effort of keeping Him in his mind. But the loving Lord had vowed to get into his mind and stuck to his body and soul and wrought a change in him. He is sure that such a Lord will not agree to part from him ever (TVM 1.7.7).
Even if the Azhvar wants to leave Him, the Lord does not want to let him go. According to Nammazhvar, if there is anything that the all-powerful Lord cannot do, it is leaving the Azhvar's mind (1.7.8).

Nammazhvar is convinced of the Lord's love for him. At the same time he is aware of his own worthlessness. In TVM 5.1.7 he confesses that he just feigned devotion and addressed the Lord in hollowness as the great one who rescued the elephant in distress. Even this was enough for the Lord, for, He at once pounced on the Azhvar even as a hungry man pounces upon food. When such is the case, he is sure that God's love extends even to great sinners. This convinces him that he should take only Him as his relative - mother, father, wife and children (5.1.8). The Lord's love and grace does not stop with the Azhvar. Seven generations of his relatives before him and seven generations after him have been blessed by the Lord (2.7.1, 4). The spiritual growth resulting from the Lord's spontaneous love and grace is astounding. As Subbu Reddiar asserts, "God seeks the soul even more than the soul seeks God, and it is therefore said that the soul-hunger of God is greater than the God-hunger of the soul" (373). God can therefore be called the "Hound of Heaven". He chases the soul endlessly; the more it runs away from Him, the more vigorously does He chase it. This shows the redemptive motive of His love. The very fact
that the Lord descended to the earth on several occasions illustrates the soul-hunger of God. While the poet is caught in the cycle of births and deaths due to his Karma and is taking refuge in Lord Madhusudana, singing hymns in His glory, Lord willingly subjects Himself to a similar cycle and takes incarnations every time the Azhvar is born and failing perhaps in His mission all along (TVM 2.7.6).

Nammazhvar's passion for God consumes all his earthly passions. He does not experience it merely as an undercurrent of joy which waters the depths of his heart but as a torrent that overflows the caverns of his heart into all his senses. Through all his senses he realizes it as if it were a sensuous delight. He describes his insatiable love of God in TVM 9.6.1. When he dotes on the Lord, his heart starts melting and he is unable to suppress his restless love.

He wonders how he can stem the on-rush of his God-love and the resultant melting down of his heart. In the next verse he confesses that he is neither able to think of the Lord's auspicious traits nor talk about His glory. It melts down his mind and his soul burns with passion. The Azhvar's intention was to gather the Lord up and devour Him! But, anticipating this, He pounced on him, stealthily entered his heart, and gulped his body and soul. Thus the Lord, with
His all-conquering love for the **Azhvar**, consumed him, proving to him thereby that His love for him is greater than his love for the Lord. As A.K. Ramanujan puts it, "The devotee is within him and he is within the devotee... the eater is eaten, the container is contained, in a metonymy many times over" in this 'mutual cannibalism' of God and devotee (151).

Nammazhvar expresses his love for the Lord in terms of human love in a number of hymns. In **Tiruviruttam**, for example, the poet expresses the longing of his soul for union with God under the figure of the love of a maid for a man. The note of the whole poem is one of almost unrelieved yearning for God. The poet pictures his own yearning as that of the mistress for her absent lover. Following the ancient Tamil literary tradition, he introduces a few characters in this drama of love, who play the role of a go-between. This technique gives the poet limitless scope to describe in human terms his otherwise indescribable passion and yearning for God. When it concerns two human beings it is love, and when it is directed towards God, it is referred to as **bhakti** or devotion.

The course of **bhakti** involves a training in three stages known as **Karma yoga** (Path of Action), **Jnana yoga** (Path of knowledge), and **Bhakti yoga** (Path of Devotion), in
the soul's progressive realization of the ultimate goal. The path of action includes adoration of God, performance of austerities, visiting holy places etc. *Karma yoga,* for Nammazhvar could be even offering flowers to the Lord.

*Jnana yoga* is to be practised by one who has conquered his mind by action. He contemplates on the essential nature of the soul. In *TVM* 1.7.1 the poet talks about people who constantly meditate on the Lord to get salvation. In *TVM* 2.9.2 the poet cries out to the Lord for Wisdom, which can take him to His feet.

The path of devotion is considered a special path and it is of the nature of unsurpassed love for the Lord. The seeker following this path is free from egoism, attunes himself to the will of God and wants nothing short of eternal communion with the Lord. *TVM* 6.7.1 illustrates how the Lord is everything for the *Azhvar* - the food that he eats, the water that he drinks and the betel that he chews. He seeks communion with the Lord who is full of noble and auspicious qualities. Nammazhvar's *bhakti* (devotion) develops into an intense desire for the vision of the Lord. The Lord showers on him His grace, with which he gains perfect visual perception of the Lord. Soon this ripens into an unquenchable thirst for union with the Lord. He comes to a stage when he can no longer live without the union and the everlasting bliss that accrues out of it.
Nammazhvar describes this experience in TVM 10.10.1: The Lord has won him over and is dear unto him exclusively like life. He has alighted on the Azhvar's head and he does not want to let Him go off. In 10.10.2, he makes his position clear to the Lord: "You courted me on your own and mingled with me freely as if you and I were one. You should not play your tricks on me any more but take me to your feet without any further delay." This intense love of Nammazhvar melts His heart and generates a desire in Him to satisfy the Azhvar's yearning, which He does at the end of Tiruvaymozhi.

Among the manifold auspicious qualities of the Lord, Nammazhvar is impressed by His saulabhya (easy accessibility), sausilya (loving condescension) and vatsalya (tenderness), all of them being different aspects of His infinite love.

In TVM 1.3.1 and 1.3.2 Nammazhvar sings of the accessibility of the Lord in His incarnation as Krishna. According to him, He is simplicity personified and is easily accessible to those who turn their minds unto Him whereas to others He is unattainable. Such a one allowed Himself to be tied down to a mere mortar by His mother Yasoda for stealing butter. It is again His simplicity that made the Lord reduce Himself to the status of a mere charioteer to Arjuna in the Mahabharata war (TVM 3.6.10, 8.5.8).
According to Nammazhvar, if one were to believe in the Lord's accessibility without doubt, He would be really accessible to him and do him good by taking the role of any relative (Peria Tiruvantati 36). The greater the love of God, the more accessible does He become (Verse 29).

Sausilya or loving condescension or the intimacy that grows between the infinitely great Lord and the infinitesimally small soul is the theme of a few hymns of Nammazhvar. The Lord spanning the three worlds in His incarnation as Vamana so that His lovely, tender feet touched everything high and low without any distinction is an instance of His condescension (TVM 1.5.3) In 1.9.11 he wonders how the Supreme Lord, adorning the heads of the celestial beings coveted the Azhvar's head, entered it slowly in stages.

The love of the Lord for the soul is so tender that it is like the love of the cow for the calf (Vatsalya). This quality of the Lord makes Him forget the sinfulness of the human being. As an illustration of this quality the Azhvar describes repeatedly the incident in which the Lord rushed to the rescue of the elephant, Gajendra, caught by a crocodile (TVM 2.9.1. and 5.1.7). Similarly, the Lord's lifting of the Govardhana Hill to protect the cows and cowherds from the torrential rains is praised by Nammazhvar in many verses of Tiruvaymozhi (3.5.3, 6.4.1, 7.4.10).
This also shows the Lord as the embodiment of mercy. It is this quality which made Him save the world from Deluge, of which there are frequent references in Nammazhvar (TVM 2.5.3, 2.3.4, 8.1.5 and Tiruvaciriyam 2,4,6).

The infinite love of the Lord manifests itself through His grace. In Hinduism divine grace is looked upon as a powerful weapon to strike at the very root of Karma or deeds, responsible for man's sufferings. Grace is described as natural (svabhavika) and unconditional (nirhetuka). God only waits for some pretext to save the human soul. Even an act remotely connected with the Holy is enough to make the redemptive power of grace operate. In TVM 10.8.1. Nammazhvar says that he merely articulated the name of the holy mount, "Tirumaliruncolai" and the Lord entered his heart and filled it. Even if one feigns devotion and calls Him out, the Lord's grace is sure to flow down (5.1.7).

Vaishnavism describes God as dayanidhi (treasure-house of mercy). Mercy is for its own sake and is not the fruit of righteousness; it is spontaneous. Such is the nature of God's mercy that it "needs no cause, requires no struggle, only an occasion" (Ramanujan 140).

The poet ponders over the fact that the Lord, who has all the three worlds within Himself, has entered his heart, of His own accord. He wonders what merit in him could have
invited the grace of the Lord in such magnitude. The poet realizes that the only merit in him is his mere non-resistance to the influx of His grace. He cannot think of any effort on his part to deserve the Lord’s grace (TVM 8.7.8). It is said that the devotee needs to take just one little step towards God and He takes ten steps towards him. But at the same time even this little step cannot be taken if He does not will it so. In TVM 8.8.3, the poet declares that even to invoke the Lord’s grace, His grace is required.

In his struggle to realize God, Nammazhvar understands that his effort alone is of no avail. He turns to the Lord’s feet to find sanctuary there (TVM 6.10.10). According to him, the fact that he has been able to find sanctuary there is itself the result of God’s boundless love and grace and not of his deserving. In TVM 8.5 the Azhvar expresses his yearning to see the beautiful form of the Lord. The Lord, in His infinite grace, thought about how to satisfy his yearning. If He presented Himself before the Azhvar all of a sudden his joy would be excessive and he would not be able to withstand it. So, the Lord manifests Himself in His iconic form at Tirukkatittalnam for the sake of the poet, who gives vent to his joy in TVM 8.6.1, extolling His grace.
In *Tiruvaymozhi* 4.5.5, Nammazhvar asserts that the Lord revealed His auspicious traits to him in stages, taking his in-take into consideration. The Lord is graceful even while making His grace reach the human soul.

*Tiruvaymozhi* 7.5.1. illustrates how God’s grace is given free; how it is unearned and universal:

Why would anyone want

to learn anything by Rama?

Beginning with the low grass

and the creeping ant

with nothing

whatever,

he took everything in his city,

everything moving,

everything still,

he took everything,

everything born

of the lord

of four faces

he took them all

to the very best of states.

(Ramanujan 47)

Commenting on the infinite grace of the Lord as exemplified above, Ramanujan notes: "The poem makes short work of the
human struggle for salvation, and of special elective grace" (141). God's grace is unfathomable. The devotee should realize that "such grace demands an unlimited answering devotion, and salvation comes when God's boundless grace is met by man's faith and love" (Hooper 28).

This leads to the inevitable question of the relation between the grace of God and the answering faith of man. On this point, a great division occurred among the Vaishnava commentators. The northern school or vatakalaiks laid stress on man's share while the southern school or tenkalais emphasised God's grace and God's responsibility, and maintained that all that man has to do is to remain passive. These two contrasted attitudes to grace were illustrated by a striking pair of metaphors: the monkey's way and the cat's way. According to the northern school man's hold of God and God's hold of man are like that of the monkey and its young one, in which it is the responsibility of the young one to maintain its grip and hold on to its mother's body. The southern school maintains that just as the kitten is merely passive in its mother's mouth, man has to remain passive and allow God's grace to work. Nammazhvar seems to conform more to the southern than to the northern school. Ramanujan goes a step ahead and declares that in Nammazhvar's poems, "one does not have to earn God's grace;
it is always there in the very nature of the relation, as that between mother and child, God and devotee" (140).

This leads us to the study of the theme of sin in Nammazhvar's poetry. According to common Christian understanding sin refers to an offence against God for which man is responsible and also the inherited sin, called "original sin". In the Hindu system, it is a totally different concept and the Sanskrit terms karma, papa and the Tamil Vinai, pavam, tuyar etc. are used to mean "sin".

The law of karma is a unique and characteristic feature of the religious thought of India. It is said that just as the Law of Cause and Effect works in the physical world, the Law of Karma works in the moral sphere. Every individual carries his own past with him. His deeds in a particular birth determine the surroundings in which he will be born in his next birth. This process goes on through several lives till the individual soul attains moksha or liberation. One escapes from the bonds of karma when one does everything as an act of worship to God, without craving for the fruits of the action (Nishkama Karma), which the Bhagavad Gita emphasizes.

Hindu scriptures divide a man's karma into three parts: i) Prarabdha Karma ii) Sancita Karma and iii) Agami Karma. Prarabdha Karma is that part of man's accumulated karma
which has begun to bear fruit in the present life. It cannot be avoided. Sancita Karma is the accumulated Karma of all the previous lives of a man which has determined his present character and innate tendencies. This could be expiated by penance. Agami Karma is that which is created in the present life, the fruits of which will come to a man in a future life.

The Vaishnava writers do not theorize about sin generally. It should be mentioned that there is no counterpart of the doctrine of "Original sin" in Vaishnavism nor in Hinduism anywhere. One essential difference between the Christian and Hindu concepts is that while the former does not emphasize the merit aspect so much, the latter covers both merit and demerit.

In Nammazhvar one frequently comes across terms such as vinai (very often with adjectives added, like tolvinai, aruvina, valvinai), pavam (equivalent of Sanskrit papā), tuyar, tunpam, noy etc. all of them in the sense of sins and the poet calls himself a sinner. His hymns lament over the alienation or separation from God, which makes him miserable. What he yearns for is continuous communion with God and he is not satisfied with the intermittent communions which he gets. He realizes that among the several factors standing in the way of his achieving his goal is his Karma
or Vinai. The poet confesses that he had been abstaining from the Lord's service due to his powerful Karma which follows him from previous births (mun ceyta muzhu vinai).

In TVM 1.3.8, the poet says he is in a state of mental imbalance as he is oppressed with his inexhaustible and terrible sins (kotuvina):

All the old, old Karma
That age-long evil burden, will die.
There will be no want,
Nothing imperfect,
If only you wash your mind and inner self
Of all dirt,
And worship everyday
The gracious feet of the Lord of Sri...

"Sri" is another name of goddess Lakshmi, consort of Lord Vishnu. In this hymn, Nammazhvar asserts that devotion to Lord Vishnu will wash away one's sins. But he feels that his sins are so great that God, however infinite His grace is, will not appear before him:

I have no virtue, no merit
No good in me
I am small, puny,
Though my Karma is infinite. (4.7.1)

(Raghavan 50-51)
That he has done endless sins is evident to the Azhvar from the fact that the Lord has not appeared before him. So, he does not mind being called a sinner by the Lord. But let Him come before the Azhvar at least to call him a sinner, so that he can see Him face to face (TVM 4.7.3). Here 'sinner' is used as an equivalent of pavi for want of a better word in English. The Tamil Pavam from which Pavi is derived, means bad or evil deed and thus is similar to Karma. A pavi is not necessarily one who is morally bad; it refers to one who is now reaping the fruit of his past deeds, a sufferer. Similarly the word Karma may also mean worldly action, the result of the play of the mind and the senses.

Nammazhvar does not blame God but himself for his Karma. He is not very sure of what bad deeds of his, either in his past lives or in the present one, could have resulted in his present situation. All that he can remember is that he has not given alms to the poor or offered flowers to the Lord and sung His glory. He wonders whether these sins are powerful enough to prevent the Lord from appearing before him.

The same cry of anguish is heard often. The poet soon realizes that there is an easy way to get rid of sins, which operate as serious impediments: A mere contemplation of service into the Lord will root out not only his past sins but also the future ones (TVM 3.3.6).
Nammazhvar alludes to the theory of the sins of the elders descending on their children (TVM 4.4.10).

To the Azhvar, God is "medicine for removing sins" (Vainai theer marunthu TVM 7.1.4) and a great poisonous medicine, which removes the sins of His devotees (atiyavar vainai ketukkum Nachu mamuruntu TVM 3.4.5).

Karma causes rebirths, which in turn add to the propensity of the evil and this vicious cycle throws the human souls in neverending misery. Birth itself is considered as a great sorrow, piravi tuyar and one should try to escape from this. Good and bad deeds are talked about and both are considered to be chains that fetter the human self, one a gold chain and the other an iron chain. He uses the terms tivinai and nalvinai to refer to evil and good deeds respectively. In TVM 1.5.10 and 1.6.9. Nammazhvar praises the Lord as one who liberates him from both kinds of Vainai. Vainai is hanging over man like clouds obscuring Reality and causing all kinds of miseries to him (Peria Tiruvantati 76).

Nammazhvar's sense of unworthiness and inadequacy constantly reminds him of his Karma, making him feel miserable. But this feeling is almost always short-lived as he remembers at once the Grace of the Lord who is ever ready to forgive him and enter into his heart (TVM 1.10.2). But,
the next moment his own inferiority and inadequacy surface again and he is fed up with himself: "How dare I, a sinner, likewise meditate / And call Him my Father, my Master and all that?" (1.10.7) (Trans. SSA 92). These moods keep alternating throughout Tiruvaymozhi.

The Azhvar was beseeching the Lord in a number of verses to come and stay in his heart. He realizes that this was superfluous as the Lord has been looking forward to getting firmly lodged in his heart. Having got inside the Azhvar He keeps looking at him with love and concern like a father who looks at his beloved son recovering from a serious illness. The Lord's longing for the Azhvar is greater and deeper than his for the Lord: "It seems I am unto Him the sole concern, / He values not so much even His overlordship of the three worlds" (8.7.3) (Trans. SSA 798).

The surest way to win the Lord's grace, according to the Vaishnavas, is through Prapatti or unqualified and absolute self-surrender. It is also referred to as saranagati and it is considered to be the highest stage of God-love.

While Nammazhvar speaks in moving terms of his struggle to realize God, he understands that his effort by itself is of no avail and that complete surrender to Him is the only way to reach Him. Addressing the Lord at Tiruvenkatam,
the proclaims: "I have no refuge / And so I turn to Thy feet / And find sanctuary there" (TVM 6.10.10) (Raghavan 68). Here the poet gives expression to his abject destitution and exclusive dependence on the Lord.

Nammazhvar considers love of God and surrender to Him as "the path way and the City of Truth to which it leads" (Raghavan 69). The moment one surrenders to Him, the Lord's mighty grace becomes operative and it washes away all man's sins (TVM 1.3.8).

In TVM 5.8.7 he wonders how the Lord who enlisted him in His service out of His grace can be away from Him. He prays to the Lord to cut out this body and grant him His feet. In the next verse, the poet declares that whether or not the Lord removes his miseries, he will not relax his hold on the Lord's feet. The Azhvar here, in a mood of surrender, invokes the grace of the Lord. He is determined not to move away from his steadfastness.

Nammazhvar's compassion for the sorrowing mankind is so great that he wants people follow the path of loving surrender to Him. He assures them that all those who seek refuge at His feet will get salvation (TVM 9.10.6). The Lord in His iconic form at Tirukkannapuram will grant a whirlwind, that it assumed supra-cosmic proportions transcending all the three principles of matter, soul and
the Supreme Lord. Finding that the Lord had forestalled him and proved more than a match for him by shedding on him His love, far more intense than his own and thus setting him at rest, the Azhvar gratefully acknowledges the Lord's great heavenly bliss to such a devotee. Tiruvaymozhi 9.10.9 expresses the poet's sense of fulfilment that he does not want anything as a result of his surrender to the Lord. Nammazhvar enumerates the benefits that have accrued to him as a result of his attaining the Lord's feet: the cycle of births and deaths has been destroyed; he is thus free from all diseases; the delusion that is responsible for his earthly life has also been severed (TVM 10.8.3).

It is a pathetic cry of the Azhvar that we see in TVM 10.10.3, in which, like a thirsty man crying for water, the Azhvar cries for the Lord's succour. Even as a creeper needs a prop to nestle around, the poet seeks the Lord to cuddle round for survival. This is the highest stage of the Azhvar's God-love.

In Tiruvaymozhi 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 Nammazhvar refers to the Lord as his father's father's fathers' father. The Lord is the Azhvar's progenitor. In 1.10.6 the poet talks of the grace of the Lord, who is "Our Father and Mother". The Lord is Father as He chastises us and is bent upon reforming us; and Mother, whose love knows no logic. In 5.1.8, Nammazhvar who is convinced of the Lord's grace even for sinners
decides to take only Him as his relative - father, mother, wife and children. The Lord would take the role of any relative if only one believe in His accessibility (Peria Tiruvantati 36).

Very often Nammazhvar calls himself the Lord's vassal and the Lord, as his Master. This illustrates the servanthood attribute of the human soul. In TVM 8.8.2 the Azhvar professes that the Lord who pervades all things all over the world and the regions beyond stays in him, the Lord's exclusive vassal and his body. The Azhvar has thus identified his soul as the servant of the Lord and thus brings to the fore the servanthood (sesatva) attribute of the soul. The servanthood differentiates the soul from the Lord and it sustains the individual soul and makes it thrive. In the next verse, the poet confesses that the Lord revealed to him the true nature of his soul as belonging to Him as His exclusive vassal. The Azhvar is indeed grateful to the Lord for such a revelation (8.8.3).

Nammazhvar describes himself not just as God's vassal but as the vassal unto him that stands at the end of a long line of God's devotees, steeped in His loving service; "the vassal of the vassal of the Lord's vassal's vassal" (Tiruvaymozhi 6.9.11, 8.9.11). The Azhvar has as one of his goals in life a loving service at the feet of the Lord.
Service to God is nothing but doing loving service to His devotees. He would prefer this to the sovereignty of the three worlds (8.10.1). He goes one step further and asserts in the next verse that neither sovereignty over the three worlds nor the perennial freedom from bodily ties, called kaivalya can equal the bliss of service at the holy feet of the selfless devotees of the Lord. He would consider even the Cantala, who is socially inferior to the most depraved caste of men to be his Master if he is a devotee of Lord Vishnu.

Another predominant image in Nammazhvar's poetry is that of God as Lover and himself as the lady in love. Nearly one-fourth of Tiruvaymozhi and the whole of Tiruviruttam are on God-love and so the Azhvar pictures God as the Lover wooing the soul of the Azhvar, who is now called "Purankusa Nayaki". The Lord plays hide and seek with the Azhvar leaving "her" very often in a mood of dejection and desolation. In TVM 1.4, the Nayaki, who is love-intoxicated, sends birds as messengers of love to the Lord who is away. The Lord is always depicted as exquisitely beautiful although cruel to the girl in love. The Azhvar gets instances of women who loved the Lord in His different incarnations and identifies himself with them. He speaks in TVM 10.2.1. as one of the gopis in the agony of separation from the Lord, the divine Cowherd:

123
Thou art leaving me, going away to tend the herds,
And the day will lengthen to an age.
Why didst thou cleave my heart
With Thy eyes, lovely as the lotus?
Going after cattle indeed!
It is unworthy of Thee, most unworthy.

(Raghavan 40).

In the next verse, she talks of other gopis waiting for the Lover, who is the lover of all souls. In all such poems the Azhvar yearns passionately for union with Him.

In Tiruviruttam too, we see an expression of this passion for the Lord, with the poet in the role of the girl in love. Such is her love for the divine Lover that she appears to be "possessed".

The poet addresses the Lord as a thief (TVM 1.5.1). He is the thief, who in His incarnation as Krishna stole butter from the houses of cowherdesses in Gokulam and now has stolen the heart and soul of the Azhvar. We have the picture of the Lord as the Architect of all the worlds in TVM 1.4.10 and 1.5.2.

So immense is Nammazhvar's God love that he is not concerned with death in the sense in which ordinary men are. Death, as one understands it, puts an end to all physical pain and releases the soul from the body so that it can
reach the Ultimate. One who wants to escape from pain or one who wants to attain the feet of the Lord will welcome death. But, for Nammazhvar, death is not a necessary precondition for the realization of the Ultimate. It is still possible for him, remaining in this world with all its temptations and donning this mortal coil, to achieve the goal of his spiritual endeavour. He has been able to convert this world of births and deaths into a world of eternal bliss. Therefore neither is he afraid of death nor does he eagerly await it.

In Peria Tiruvantati 48 Nammazhvar expresses his desire to meditate on Lord Krishna always by remaining in this world. He does not want even Heaven.

There is a note of joy when Nammazhvar sings in TVM 5.2.1 that the upsurge of devotion of the people to the Supreme Lord has destroyed all sins; the very hell has been uprooted and so there is no work for Yama, the god of Death, in this world hereafter.

There are frequent references in Nammazhvar to the need for freeing oneself from the cycle of births and deaths. He is interested in Heaven only because it will offer him an opportunity to serve the Lord always. In TVM 2.9.5, the poet declares that it is immaterial to him whether, after
death, he reaches heaven or hell. All that he desires is the enjoyment of thinking unceasingly of the Lord.

Nammazhvar considers Moksha or Heaven as God's abode and also a place for the freed souls who are immortal. He refers to this place in his works as Veetu, Vinnatu, Vaikunta and so on. In TVM 1.2.5 the Azhvar affirms that the soul attains the state of Kaivalya Moksha or emancipation when it gives up its attachment to worldly things.

Salvation according to Nammazhvar is not something to be attained at a future point of time. It is already present in the life of a devotee. According to him, if one can discard the senses, understand the true nature of the self, give up the fruits of one's action with all one's heart and is freed from all worldly desires he is said to have attained liberation" (TVM 8.8).

Attaining liberation is attaining that state of continuous communion with the Lord. And Nammazhvar seems to have attained his goal. He illustrates that liberation can be attained in this life itself. Heaven, according to the Azhvar, "does not contradict but rather confirms the most fulfilling experience which life in the here and now affords; its greatness lies in the fact that the highest and the best that can be known in the here and now, but
known only intermittently and incompletely, can then be the constant and the only experience" (Kaylor and Venkatachari 110).

Such is the craving of the Azhvar for union with the Lord that it has quenched all desires, including that for liberation. Final redemption is possible even for the sinner, not by his efforts or wisdom but only through God's infinite love and grace, according to Nammazhvar. The most effective way to win His love and grace is through total surrender, giving up everything but Him. Once this is done, total identification with the Lord becomes possible. "And I too am Thee" (TVM 8.1).

Nammazhvar's goal is freedom from all things pertaining to the world. This can be achieved by complete submission which includes total annihilation of the self and the total identification with the Lord. It is this mystical union which can fill the Azhvar with ecstasy. After this nothing matters; nothing attracts him and he wishes for nothing more - not even heaven or salvation as is exemplified in Peria Tiruvantati 56: "He has come into my heart / There is nothing more to wish for".

An analysis of the poems of both Herbert and Nammazhvar in the light of some of the predominant themes reveals several similarities and a few differences. In both poets
God-love is immense and God is viewed as infinite love and grace. The poets think alike that God's grace comes unasked, irrespective of the worth of man, the sinner. God's love for man is infinitely greater than man's love for Him and so He pursues man lovingly. But man is so immersed in sin and worldly pursuits that he is unable to understand the depth of God's love. The concept of surrender and submission has been handled in a similar fashion by the two poets. Their God-love makes the poets see several human images of God. The themes of death and liberation in the two poets offer points of divergence, probably due to their entirely different religious backgrounds.

The goal aspired for by these two poets is no doubt quite the same. The way in which the mystical journey is undertaken by them is a complex and subtle process. From the thematic concerns to their mystical outlook is but the natural next step.