

One is the happiest number

Valentine's Day is for lovers. There are also many movies and innumerable pop songs that fit the bill. But what if romantic love is the wrong way to go about finding contentment?

by Steve Burgess



Valentine's Day is a religious celebration. Unlike Christmas, you never hear the Fox news crowd complaining about how St. Valentine has been taken out of the holiday, but nonetheless, Feb. 14 is the feast day of St. Valentine (a.k.a. Valentinus) on the Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran calendars. And although this may not have been the original intention, the idea of Valentine's Day as a religious festival now seems apt. For many whose traditional faith has been lost to rational skepticism, romantic love has become the last true religion.

For believers, romantic love is similar to religious faith: tenaciously sought, celebrated as the ultimate goal in life, often touted as the only key to a meaningful existence. The dream of romance carries a more universal power than any particular religious dogma. God is love, the preachers say. But in the secular world, Love is a god and, as many lovers find out the hard way, not necessarily the benevolent sort. Love is the Old Testament Jehovah. As long as you remain among the chosen it's all blessings and

bliss and victory. But that fickle deity will turn on you and when it does, say hello to locusts, boils, and frog rain.

Organized religion is looking more and more like the newspaper business these days—still popular with the diehards but facing a steadily eroding market share. In Canada, the U.K., and even relatively devout America, the ranks of those who declare themselves to be without religious affiliation are growing exponentially. Something similar is happening with marriage rates, but there's no evidence that this means people are abandoning the dream of romantic love. The gods of romance—St. Valentine, Aphrodite, mischievous Cupid—still reign.

Happily ever after is our most enduring dream. Diamond merchants, wedding fairs, reality shows—it isn't just sex that's a booming industry. The prospect of love and marriage is sold to us every day.

Love and religion can both inspire great deeds. But at this point we're all familiar with

the flip side. The search for love can lead to misery, desperation, denial, violence, and more homicides than the drug trade. Yet somehow the ideal remains untarnished. Like God in his Heaven, the dream of romance exists on a plane high above the grubby Earth.

Considering that he has come to represent love, it's fitting that St. Valentine is a mystery. Even early Christian writings acknowledge that he is one those martyrs about whom little is known. Stories collected around him through the centuries, but how did Valentine come to be associated with romance? The best bet among scholars and historians: Geoffrey Chaucer did it. The author of *The Canterbury Tales* also wrote a 14th-century work called *Parliament of Fowles* that contained tales of "Saynt Valentynes day." According to Chaucer it is the time when birds select their mates. In the epic poem three male



illustrations by Kyle Metcalf