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DIVINE WRATH AND HUMAN ANGER: EMBARRASSMENT ANCIENT AND NEW

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The author argues that embarrassment over references to divine wrath in more recent times reflects a similar embarrassment or at least ambivalence among writers, pagan and Christian, in Late Antiquity. Patristic writers were especially sensitive to the ways human rage could inform Scripture readers' understanding of divine wrath. Although insisting that God's indignation was a component of divine justice, these writers employed a range of strategies to dissociate God from forms of violence generated by anger.

THEOLOGIANS OF ALL GENERATIONS have betrayed discomfort with images of an angry God. In our own age, however, acutely aware of the ways religious sentiment can fuel and legitimate violence, reference to supernal rage seems particularly liable to abuse. The deaths of soldiers, terrorist acts, AIDS, even the disaster of Hurricane Katrina have been claimed as signs of God's anger for a whole range of sins.[1] A highly controversial group that protests at military funerals avows that the country is "pour[ing] gasoline on the raging flames of God Almighty's wrath

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[1] The activities of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, are well publicized. See the recent documentary by the BBC, described by director Louis Theroux, "God's Squad," *Guardian* (March 31, 2007). A fine discussion of religious responses to AIDS can be found in Earl E. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland, *AIDS and the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 16–28. On Katrina see, for instance, Tom Zeller, "To Some, Katrina Was Mission Accomplished," *New York Times* (September 12, 2005).

which is punishing America by killing and maiming troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Worse and more of it is coming."[2]

Although most people recoil from any notion that God kills and maims, Scripture is replete with references to divine indignation. How we appropriate images of God's wrath is far from obvious. In the Book of Revelation, seven angels pour out bowls of God's fury, which turns the sea into blood (16:3), burns blasphemers with scorching heat (16:9), and rains hail stones on the wicked (16:21). "God remembered great Babylon, giving it the cup filled with the wine of his fury and wrath" (16:9). This punishment, moreover, does not only await some future apocalypse. Paul tells the Romans that "the wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness" (Rom 1:18), and the Gospel of John declares that God's anger remains on those who disobey the Son (Jn 3:36). Such references to divine choler reach far back into biblical tradition: Isaiah warns the people to hide "until the wrath is past" (Isa 26:20), where the angel of the Lord slays the first-born of Egyptian families (Exod 11–12), and Moses and the Israelites sing praise to the Lord, who "loosed your wrath to consume [Pharaoh's charioteers] like stubble. At the breath of your anger the waters piled up" (Exod 15:7–8).[3]

If some believers relish such images, others find them an embarrassment.[4] In the Easter Vigil of the Roman Catholic Rite, for instance, the exultant Song of the Israelites constitutes the response to the third in a series of nine readings. Taking the crossing of the Red Sea as a type of baptism, Christians sing the song as celebrating freedom from slavery to sin. Yet in the Lectionary, the awkward verses referring to God's wrath are discreetly omitted. Such embarrassment, I will demonstrate, is neither a recent phenomenon nor the product of modern religious sensibilities. On the contrary, patristic authors were deeply uneasy with references to divine wrath and used a range of strategies to minimize the potential harm, scandal, or misunderstanding that such biblical passages might engender. The authors were aware of strains in ancient philosophy that denied the gods could be angry, and, like non-Christian interpreters of classical texts, most were attuned to the problems of anthropomorphism.

[2] Westboro Baptist Church News Release (May 2006), http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/written/fliers/archive/20060511_week-777.pdf (accessed July 3, 2008).

[3] On this subject, see Gary A. Herion, "Wrath of God: Old Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6:989–96; H. Travis, "Wrath of God: New Testament," in ibid. 6:996–998; G. H. C. MacGregor, "The Concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament,"*New Testament Studies* 7 (1960) 101–9.

[4] On the problem of homilists facing passages depicting the wrath of God, see Richard Lischer, "Embarrassed by God's Wrath," *Dialog* 33 (1994) 259–62.

In this article I argue that references to God's ire present such a problem to ancient Christian theologians because they, like many thinkers in antiquity, were deeply sensitive to the destructive consequences of human anger. They worked within a social and intellectual environment that emphasized the virtue of humans to control their rage. Furthermore, they saw that the terrible experience of human anger often supplied the context in which many readers of the Bible would come to understand divine wrath. Anxious at the easy projection of mortal fury onto God, early Christian writers generally employed one of two strategies. Some denied outright that God could be angry. These thinkers generally worked from philosophical principle rather than from scriptural texts. Others heeded the biblical testimony but insisted vigorously on the gap between divine wrath and human anger. They continually asserted that God's anger cannot simply be identified with human anger. While surely to be dreaded, God's anger functions within patristic texts as a guarantee of God's ultimate justice and as a deterrent to sin. Again and again authors present divine wrath in radical contrast to the anger endemic to so many processes of human society, which operates in profound ignorance and employs mechanisms of brutality even in the name of justice. God's anger, they say, is not like that.

Many ancient authors address the problem of divine wrath. I will focus on North African writers Tertullian (d. 235), Cyprian (d. 258), Lactantius (d. 320), Arnobius (d. 330), and Augustine (d. 430). Although Africa was part of the Roman Empire, it produced a form of Christianity with a distinct temperament. Long before the arrival of Christianity Africans had worshipped Saturn—in Peter Brown's words: "an exacting, ill-defined father called, in reverent dread, 'The Old Man.'"[5] A spirit of religious intensity, a concern for purity, and an emphasis on submission to the divine will antedated conversion but also endured through the persecution of the church. North Africa, with its stress on martyrdom and the multiple divisions among Christians after persecution, yielded a religiosity where both human and divine rage remained ever a threat. Thus W. C. H. Frend concludes that, unlike Western Europeans who conceived of God as a loving father, Christians in Africa "concentrated on the prospect of Judgment hereafter, and on the consequent necessity of propitiating the wrath of God. [Theirs] was a religion of fear and dread."[6] Furthermore, "the God of the African Church writers was conceived as a Being capable

[5] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000) 21.

[6] W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951) 97.

of the worst human passions, of implacable jealousy, rage, and desire for vengeance."[7]

If the religious sensibility of ancient North Africans may seem foreign to us, their strategies for distinguishing divine wrath from human anger are all the more important. Their discussions anticipate most later theological explanations, which emphasize how God's anger is tied to moral ends, is a result of God's love and providence, and relates to the reality of sin.[8] Furthermore, like ancient discussion, modern embarrassment over references to God's wrath frequently mirrors misgivings about the possibility of virtuous human anger.[9] Still, anger will always be part of our emotional complex, and ignoring it is risky. Careful discernment of the dynamics and effects of human anger serve the common good. So too biblical references to divine anger call for analogous reflection. As Abraham Heschel notes in his classic work on prophets, "it is, indeed, impossible to close one's eyes to the words of the wrath of God in Scripture."[10] Such wrath, if appropriately understood, points to God's care for humanity. The writings of ancient theologians may thus offer us resources for attending responsibly to biblical images of God's anger. We may still wish, for instance, to invoke divine wrath against violent destruction enacted among nations and individuals. We may still hold on to our conviction that God urges us not to wrong or oppress the alien, widow, or orphan, lest "my wrath . . . flare up " (Exod 22:24a). Yet we can only use such biblical language in full knowledge of its attendant risks and dangers, for God also threatens: "I will kill you with the sword: then your own wives will be widows and your children orphans" (Exod 22:24b). Patristic distinctions may serve us well and help us avoid catastrophic errors. The radical dissociation of divine wrath and human anger, for instance, represents a strong refusal to allow Scripture to legitimate destructive, hateful human behavior, while admitting the possibility of acting on divinely inspired anger.

For a variety of reasons, the strategies of patristic writers may fail to convince modern readers, who frequently choose to ignore biblical references to God's anger or omit them entirely. Before turning to the ancient

[7] Ibid. 99.

[8] For example, Steven T. Davis writes: "The wrath of God is our only hope because it teaches us the moral significance of our deeds and shows us how life is to be lived" ("Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant,"*Modern Theology* 6 [1990] 184–85). For a good synopsis of how divine wrath has been treated by 20th-century theologians, see Jerry K. Robbins, "God's Wrath: A Process Explanation," *Dialog* 33 (1994) 252–58.

[9] See most recently William C. Mattison III, "Jesus' Prohibition of Anger (Mt 5:22): The Person/Sin Distinction from Augustine to Aquinas," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 839–64.

[10] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 279.

Christian authors, therefore, I will first adduce an example of more recent strategies for attending to our embarrassment. Then, to contextualize patristic sources, I will discuss in turn the significance of anger in Late Antiquity, the arguments on divine indignation among patristic (and especially North African) writers, and finally return to the problem of divine wrath and human anger in contemporary discussion.

OMITTING ANGER: THE REVISED LITURGY OF THE HOURS

A common pastoral strategy for attending to our embarrassment with biblical images of an angry God is to edit texts used in public worship. In the Roman Catholic liturgical reform following Vatican II, for example, three whole imprecatory psalms and many verses were dropped from the Liturgy of the Hours at the insistence of Pope Paul VI.[11] The conciliar document *Sacrosanctum concilium* had not called for their omission, and the use of the entire Psalter had always been the tradition of the church. After the council, though, concern over references to divine wrath had grown.[12] Excluded, for instance, was Psalm 58, with its prayer that God might smash enemies' teeth (v. 7) and that the just may "bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked" (v. 11). Psalm 83, which includes a verse calling on God to set upon the enemy like a fire raging through a forest (v. 15), disappears, as does Psalm 109, which prays, among other things, that the enemy's children be vagrant beggars (v. 10). Although the prayer of Psalm 69 remains ("Save me, O God, for the waters threaten my life"), dropped is the verse in which the Psalmist asks God to "pour out your wrath upon [the enemy]; let the fury of your anger overtake them (v. 25)." Psalm 137, the beautiful song of the exile, is still used for evening prayer but not the verse declaring blessed those who smash Babylon's infants against a rock (v. 9). Desire for a continuous reading of Scripture notwithstanding, many are grateful to be spared this image.[13]

[11] Stanislaus Campbell, *From Breviary to Liturgy of the Hours: The Structural Reform of the Roman Office, 1964–1971* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1995), details the process of revision.

[12] On the various arguments, see ibid. 56–59, 71 (on the pope's decision, see 151–54, 248–49).

[13] On the larger question of violence in the psalms, see Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville,: Westminster John Knox, 1996). On the debate at Vatican II, Campbell (*From Breviary* 151–52) writes: "At Vatican Council II . . . a number of bishops had called for the elimination of some psalms, especially the imprecatory ones, because they represent a stage in revelation insufficient to employ in Christian prayer. Others had countered with the argument that all Scripture is inspired, that difficult psalms, when prayed with a Christian interpretation, are spiritually profitable, and that omission of selected psalms is made according to principles that could be

Although articulated reasons for suppressing such verses in the prayer of the church have varied, a particularly poignant reflection came from Gemma Hinricher, the prioress of the Carmelite convent at Dachau. In 1980, she noted the serious pastoral problem raised by biblical references to God's wrath, particularly when the recitation of the office moved from obscure Latin to the vivid vernacular:

> In the immediate vicinity of the concentration camp, we felt ourselves unable to say out loud psalms that spoke of a punishing, angry God and of the destruction of enemies, often in hideous images, and whose content was the desire for destruction and vengeance, in the presence of people who came into our church agitated and mentally distressed by their visit to the camp.[14]

While one would not wish to second-guess Hinricher's judgment, much less her sensitivity to people's needs, one might also ask, at least in principle, where reference to God's anger would be more appropriate than in a concentration camp where humans exhibited such abominable cruelty. What kind of God, we might ask, would not be angry?

Central to the prioress' concern, however, is not her interest in how we might imagine God but how such images affect, or even elicit, human emotions. Tourists who enter the church are "not only moved by the hideousness and brutality they encounter . . . but also by their own feelings of hatred and revenge because of the dreadful thing that happened in this place."[15] For the many who seek some kind of peace in the midst of this terrible place, biblical verses praying for destruction or vengeance shatter any hope of stillness the chapel may provide. Far removed from this situation, theologians may interpret such scriptural passages in ways that reduce their offensiveness, but in Dachau, as in many other places, the verses themselves remain raw, volatile, and dangerous—as anger often is.

What Hinricher's sensitivity underscores, however, is that depictions of divine wrath evoke corresponding human emotions. Such correspondence, I assert, is theologically significant. Persons who announce God's fury may implicitly define it by the very expression of their own outrage. In other words, it is frequently mortal rage that supplies the meaning, contour, and expectation of immortal anger. We see this dynamic even within Scripture itself. For instance, in verses of Psalm 59 cut out of the revised Liturgy of the Hours, the Psalmist prays that God "slay [the enemy] . . . destroy them in anger, destroy till they are no more" (vv. 12, 14), but the motivation for

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termed 'rationalistic'—a procedure dangerous in that it invites human tampering with divine revelation."

[14] Gemma Hinricher, "Die Fluch- und Vergeltungspsalmen im Stundengebet," *Bibel und Kirche* 35 (1980) 55, as quoted in Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 20–21.

[15] Hinricher, "Die Fluch- und Vergeltungspsalmen" 55, as quoted in Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 21.

God's wrath is the Psalmist's own expressed indignation at being ambushed, betrayed, hounded, and deceived. If it is a relatively simple matter to omit or ignore biblical verses suggesting God's vengeance or to avoid the embarrassing topic of divine wrath, it is far more difficult to excise human anger from the scope of religious activity, motivation, and expression. As we clearly see in our own day, it continues to flash out. A more articulated awareness of the correlation between divine wrath and human anger, such as we find in patristic writings, has potential not only for disciplining human anger but also for speaking of divine wrath in ways that may encourage justice rather than hatred. Besides simply ignoring it, therefore, how can we receive the biblical testimony without simply equating it with human anger or allowing it to legitimate blazing violence?

ANGER IN ANTIQUITY

Before turning directly to patristic writers themselves, some background on Greco-Roman treatments of anger, both human and divine, will help to situate the reflections of Christian theologians on God's wrath within their own context. Historians and anthropologists have cautioned against treating ancient emotions univocally, as if terms like "anger" immediately correspond to our contemporary categories. Although there may be a biological basis for feelings, the meaning of emotions, whether of the ancients or our own, are at least in part socially constructed and culturally defined. We learn from others, that is, why, how, and when to be angry.[16] Anger appears a universal concern among ancient philosophers, but we cannot presume that it (or any other emotion) neatly fits either our own or biblical categories.[17] The very range of definitions points to a complex field where Christian debates over divine wrath and human anger would admit distinctions that may not be immediately obvious to us.

In a very influential definition Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) calls anger a "desire, accompanied by pain, for a perceived revenge, on account of a perceived slight on the part of people who are not fit to slight one or one's own."[18] Clearly anger is here a response to a violation of social norms. Not simply a spontaneous, undifferentiated surge of feeling or even pain, anger depends a great deal on an agent's evaluation of events and relative social position. A master, for instance, has reason to be angry with a slave for a perceived slight, but it simply makes no sense, according to Aristotle, to say that a slave could ever be angry with a master. For Aristotle, anger's

[16] William V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2001) 36–38.

[17] David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2006) ix.

[18] Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.2, 1378 a 31–33; translation from Konstan, *Emotions* 41.

context is a highly volatile social world, where certain agents compete for honor and status.[19] Within such a world the anger of elites comes off as entirely appropriate. Centuries later Plutarch, in a work on controlling anger (ca. 100 CE) asks who would not tear down the walls with shouts if a slave forgot to buy bread for a dinner party.[20] Cicero's (d. 43 BCE) treatment of anger as a longing to punish a person who seems to have harmed you maintains the emphasis on the desire for revenge of a perceived wrong, but Cicero's conception of anger is not nearly as tied to social position as Aristotle's.[21]

The surprisingly high number of tracts by Greco-Roman authors on how to control or even to eliminate anger suggests that anger was a central concern. A recent survey of pertinent literature finds testimony for some 25 treatises, most of which are not extant.[22] Unlike Aristotle, many authors pathologize anger itself. The most ancient extant manuscript *De ira*, written by Philodemus in the 60s BCE, describes the consequences of anger at great length. Although some may think that a wise person can be angry, Philodemus notes that angry people who commit such abominations as patricide are also extremely ugly: they gnash their teeth, turn red, and speak in a high voice. Through philosophy a wise person learns not to be offended and is thus healed, more or less, of irascibility.[23] The fullest tract on anger is the *De ira* of Seneca (d. 65 CE), who avers that the angry have the same physical symptoms as the insane:

> The marks of anger are the same: eyes ablaze and glittering, a deep flush over all the face as blood boils up from the vitals, quivering lips, teeth pressed together, bristling hair standing on end, breath drawn in and hissing, the crackle of writhing limbs, groans and bellowing, speech broken off with words barely uttered, hands struck together too often, feet stamping the ground, the whole body in violent motion "menacing mighty wrath in mien," the hideous horrifying face of swollen self-degradation—you would hardly know whether to call the vice hateful or ugly.[24]

In the next century the physician Galen (d. 200 CE) wrote of seeing a young man so angry at his inability to open a door that he bit the key,

[19] See Konstan, *Emotions* 41–76.

[20] Plutarch, *De cohibendi ira* 13 (461 D) in *Sul controllo dell'ira*, ed. Renato Laurenti and Giovanni Indelli (Naples: D'Auria, 1988) 130.

[21] "Libido poeniendi eius qui uideatur laesisse iniuria" (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4:21).

[22] Harris, *Restraining Rage* 127–28.

[23] Philodemus, *De ira* (fragment) 6, xiv 8–29; see Philodemus, *L'ira*, ed., trans., and commentary Giovanni Indelli (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1988) 55, 72–73. For a discussion of Philodemus, see Harris, *Restraining Rage* 102–3.

[24] Seneca, *De ira* 1.1.3–4, as translated in Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. and trans. John M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé (New York: Cambridge University, 1995) 17–18 (hereafter cited as Cooper/Procopé).

kicked the door, "glared wildly like a madman and all but foamed at the mouth like a wild boar."[25] Authors' repeated emphasis on such physical displays suggests that social manifestations of passions remain integral to the emotional life. They are more than symptoms disjoined from some internal reality: rather, emotions cannot be conceived of apart from their public demonstration and effects. The therapy that Seneca suggests for anger, therefore, consists not just of cognitive readjustments but of physical exercises. To restrain anger, one should not easily trust what others say, because it is easy to lose one's temper on account of false judgments. One should avoid undue self-regard, choose the right friends, and even listen to the right music. But one should also relax the face, modulate the voice, and slow down one's pace, for "little by little the externals will be matched by an inner formation."[26] Managing one's own irascibility was so important that philosophical tracts on the subject proliferate well into Late Antiquity. Even major Christian writers such as Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom preached sermons and wrote poems on anger.[27]

The social conditions giving rise to this genre shed light on why patristic writers felt the need to distinguish divine wrath from human anger. In the hierarchical world of antiquity people in power could wreak significant damage if they did not restrain their rage, and even within a household the unrestrained *paterfamilias* could cause great harm.[28] That Seneca addresses his treatise to his brother, Novatus, a provincial governor, suggests the importance of anger control especially among the powerful.[29] Peter Brown notes: "A lurking fear of arbitrary violence, untrammeled by legal and political constraints, insensibly shifted the weight of philosophical discussion toward ethical issues, involving self-formation and control of the passions."[30] An anonymous early fourth-century textbook describes the open cruelty of regular legal processes. Before a judge an interrogator tortures the accused by hammering through his sternum, hanging him up,

[25] Galen, *De propriorum animi cuiuslibet affectuum dignotione et curatione* 4.5, as in Galen, *On the Passions and Errors of the Soul*, trans. Paul W. Harkins (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1963) 38.

[26] "Paulatim cum exterioribus interiora formantur" (Seneca, *De ira* 3.13.2 [Loeb Classical Library (hereafter LCL) 1.256; Cooper/Procopé 89]). *De ira* 3 offers strategies for controlling anger: avoiding undue self-regard, 3.5.7 (Cooper/Procopé 82); friends, 3.8.5 (84); and music, 3.9.2 (85).

[27] See Basil, *Hom*. 10; Gregory Nazianzus, *Carmen morale* 25; and Chrysostom, *De ira et furore*; for full references see Harris, *Restraining Rage* 125–26.

[28] On angry rulers, family dynamics, and treatment of slaves see Harris, *Restraining Rage*, chaps. 10, 12, 13.

[29] For the political context of Seneca's treatise see Cooper/Procopé 14–16.

[30] Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1992) 50.

and beating him with rods. Finally, unable to extract a confession, the torturer leads him off for beheading.[31] Early Christians' descriptions of martyrdom include gruesome accounts of public rage, but Constantine himself seems to have ushered in a rise in severity. He promulgated laws that threatened government officials with amputation of "rapacious hands" and condemned household servants to death by pouring molten lead down the throat.[32] In 390 the famously orthodox emperor Theodosius ordered the massacre of the population of Thessalonica as punishment for killing an imperial general during a riot. Although the massacre was descried as an atrocity, imperial reprisals against populations had precedents, and an emperor's anger seems to have been considered necessary for public discipline. Still, in a famous letter excommunicating the emperor, the bishop Ambrose wrote of Theodosius's natural liability to being incensed.[33] Ambrose and, later, Augustine praised the humility of the emperor for his repentance over this "grievous crime," but his sin reflects just how easily the power wielded by late ancient emperors could give rise to extremely violent outbursts of anger.[34]

If the social world of antiquity reflects an anger given to progressively more grisly violence under the cover of human justice, the philosophical tradition, perhaps in reaction to the cultural reality, increasingly insists that gods are not subject to such anger. Epicurus's (d. 270 BCE) denial that gods endure outbursts of fury appears again and again in the thoughts of ancient writers.[35] Cicero argued that God never feels anger nor inflicts harm,[36] and Seneca asserted that the divine nature can only be beneficent: "The immortal gods . . . neither wish to cause trouble, nor can they. Their nature is gentle and kindly, as averse to wrongdoing others as to wrongdoing themselves."[37] Lucretius (d. 55 BCE), writing within the Epicurean school, declared that we should never fear the gods, since they are un-

[31] The text is reproduced in A. C. Dionisotti, "From Ausonius' Schooldays? A Schoolbook and Its Relatives,"*Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982) 104–5. For a general discussion see Ramsay MacMullen, "Judicial Savagery in the Roman Empire," in his *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1990) 204–17.

[32] *Codex Theodosianus* 1.16.7; 9.24.1.1. The latter is a penalty for nurses who tell wicked stories leading to the rape of a virgin.

[33] Ambrose, *Extra collectionem* 11.4–5 (Corpus scriptorum eccleisasticorum latinorum [hereafter CSEL] 82.10/3, p. 213).

[34] Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii* 27; see Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* 5.20.

[35] See Epicurus, *Kuriai doxai* 1.

[36] "Commune est omnium philosophorum . . . numquam nec irasciri deum nec nocere" (Cicero, *De officiis* 3.102 [LCL 378]).

[37] "Di immortales, qui nec uolunt obesse nec possunt; natura enim illis mitis et placida est, tam longe remota ab aliena iniuria quam a sua" (Seneca, *De ira* 2.27.1 [LCL 1.222; Cooper/Procopé 64]).

touched by wrath.[38] Indeed, Sextus Empiricus (fl. 2nd to 3rd centuries CE) stated that it is a "dogma of the philosophers" that the divine does not endure passion.[39] The philosophical schools in Late Antiquity gradually rejected the idea of divine anger, and yet it remained in the religious beliefs of the larger populace. As Robin Lane Fox has noted, for both pagans and Christians, whatever philosophers may have taught in antiquity, "in crisis fear of the gods' anger came to life."[40]

It would be untrue, however, to claim that fear of divine wrath existed only among the uneducated. If people hastened to appease and avert the gods' ire through a variety of religious practices, towering literary authorities such as Vergil gave people good reason to be concerned. The *Aeneid* begins with a graphic depiction of the goddess Juno's fury, and the poet thus asks the epic question: "Can such wrath exist among the gods [Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?]."[41] For centuries the question exercised learned commentators, who were well aware of philosophers' denial of divine rage but still took Vergil's narrative seriously. Modern scholars have frequently argued that Vergil's "educated contemporaries" demythologized the divine machinery in the epic and interpreted Juno's rage as an allegory for the forces that obstructed Aeneas's mission. Divine anger as such ceased to be a "live reality."[42] Yet commentaries on the *Aeneid*, written around the time of Augustine, reveal significant ambiguity on the question of supernal rage. In some places they seem to endorse an allegorical explanation of gods' and goddesses' wrath, while in others they suggest that the divine anger, irrational as it seems in the narrative, is still in fact a threat.[43] The tension these commentators feel is much like that found in

[38] "Nam priuata dolore omni, priuata periclis, / ipsa suis pollens opibus, nihil indigna nostri / nec bene promeritis capitur neque tangitur ira" (Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.649–51).

[39] Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhōneioi hypotypōseis* 1.162.

[40] Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1986) 426.

[41] Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.11.

[42] See Robert Coleman, "The Gods in the *Aeneid*," *Greece and Rome* 29 (1982) 144: "The reconciliation of polytheism with a more rational theology, by the very act of demythologizing the anthropomorphic mythology, dissociated it at once from the conventional piety and from the *fabulae poetarum*, for both of which a phrase like *saeuae Iunonis ob iram* still had a valid meaning and a live reality."

[43] The fourth-century grammarian Donatus begins his *Interpretationes Virgilianae* using Juno's rage almost in a forensic defense against any suspicion that Aeneas gave cause for divine enmity. Aeneas, says Donatus, was "much tossed on land and sea" (1.3) not because of any *culpa* of his own but "on account of the unforgetting wrath of savage Juno." And Juno is truly savage, he says, not just powerful (as other well-meaning commentators had suggested). She is savage because her anger is entirely out of proportion to what the innocent Aeneas deserves. Vergil asks the epic question about divine wrath because gods should not be angry without reason nor seek revenge beyond moderation, lest what is displeasing

patristic interpreters of Scripture. All face the problem of accommodating different systems, of inhabiting a space of tension before the graphic depictions of divine wrath in authoritative texts, the philosophical or theological disavowal of God's fury, and the deep ethical reflection on how badly anger, human or divine, can harm societies and individuals.

CHRISTIAN DENIAL OF DIVINE WRATH

Just as philosophers and literary commentators in the ancient world struggled with the idea of divine wrath, so did Christian theologians. As early as the second century, the anger so problematic for humans was perceived by Christians to be thoroughly inconsistent with the immutable nature of God. The Athenian Aristides (d. 134), for instance, proclaimed that, because divinity is immortal and self-sufficient, God is above anger: "Wrath and indignation he possesses not."[44] Like the ancient philosophers to whom he claimed affiliation, Athenagoras (d. 190) argued that if anger is entirely unworthy among mortals the same must be true of divinity as well. Thus, the theology of those who accused Christians of atheism, cannibalism, and incest is absurd. Referring to examples of immortal passion in

among humans be more gravely reprehended among the gods. See Tiberius Claudius Donatus, *Interpretationes Vergilianae*, 2 vols., ed. Heinrich Georges (Lepzig: Teubner, 1905) 1.3–4, 9–11. So too the late fourth-century commentator Servius fails to resolve the problem of Juno's anger, even though he often cites philosophical positions at odds with the narrative presentation. To Vergil's early question why Juno is so terribly grieved (*quidue dolens* 1.9), Servius explains that the poet submits a good philosophical (i.e., Epicurean) doubt: "For some people say that nothing concerns the gods." In places Servius offers naturalistic explanations of Juno. When, for instance, she rants that she who is "both sister and wife of Jove" (1.47) cannot destroy her mortal enemies the way other deities do, Servius adds that natural scientists take "Jove" to be ether and "Juno" air. Since both elements are similar in their lightness, they are called twins, but since air is subjected to ether, Juno is called Jove's consort. Yet such allegorical approaches to the divine machinery hardly exhaust Servius's commentary on the gods. Servius indicates that Vergil is amazed at the extent of Juno's anger, since anger that has no regard for human piety is excessive (1.11). He articulates his puzzlement, says Servius, in the manner of the Stoics, who espouse the position that the gods do no harm. Yet the commentator tells us that we can also read the question in an Epicurean manner, as if Vergil wonders why there is anger at all, "for the Epicureans say that the gods have no care for human affairs whatsoever." See Servius Grammaticus, *In Vergilii Carmina Commentarii*, 3 vols., ed. Georg Thilo and Hermann Hagen (Leipzig/Berlin: Teubner, 1923) 1.15–16, 32.

[44] Aristides, *Apology on Behalf of Christians* 1 (trans. D. M. Kay, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html [accessed May 11, 2008]). For a treatment of all the texts discussed here, see Ermin F. Micka, *The Problem of Divine Anger in Arnobius and Lactantius* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1943) 17–21.

the *Iliad*, he writes: "One would be bound to consider these doctrines laughable nonsense: for in God there is neither anger nor lust and desire, nor yet semen for producing offspring."[45] God simply cannot suffer rage.

What makes the issue of divine wrath especially complicated, for both ancient and contemporary Christians, is the representation of God in Scripture. Marcion (d. 160), for instance, postulates two divinities: an inferior Hebrew God, who created the world but behaves in a reprehensible manner, and a supremely good God, whom Jesus came to reveal. Marcion thus dropped Hebrew Scripture entirely and severely edited what we know as the New Testament. Through a radical sort of omission, he quite effectively cut out the sources of embarrassment early Christians may have felt over the biblical depictions of divine wrath. The generations after Marcion, more deeply sensitive to the conflict between scriptural images of God and philosophical tenets about the divine, began to construct more subtle responses. Irenaeus (d. early 3rd century), for instance, insisted that an angerless God can hardly exercise judicial power, and the great exegete Origen (d. 254) offered a way of reading Scripture "spiritually" so that God need not be condemned for behavior more characteristic of the "most savage and unjust of humans."[46]

As I will show, the most sustained response to Marcion is that of the North African Tertullian, whose tract *Adversus Marcionem* was completed by 208. Tertullian argued vigorously that the enactment of divine justice requires God's anger. As late as a century after Tertullian, however, another North African again denied the possibility of divine wrath. Hardly concerned about Scripture, yet troubled about imputing human emotions to divinity, the rhetorician and convert Arnobius of Sicca (d. 330) wrote an attack against pagan adversaries of the faith around the time of the persecutions of Diocletian in the early fourth century. Although scholars debate whether Arnobius's treatise *Adversus Nationes* constitutes a "Christian apology," the text reveals a strategy of defending the faith through language that would have been familiar to the pagan intelligentsia.[47] The charge he answers, as he notes at the beginning of the work, is that since Christianity the world has gone to ruin and the gods have withheld divine benefits.[48] Throughout his long response Arnobius betrays no knowledge of Hebrew Scripture, shows no understanding of any relationship between

[45] Athenagoras, *Apology* 21.1, in Athenagoras, *Legatio and De Resurrectione*, trans. William R. Schoedel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 45.

[46] Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.40.1; Origen, *On First Principles* 4.2.1, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973) 271.

[47] Michael Bland Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 22.

[48] Arnobius, *Adversus nationes* (hereafter *Adv. nat.*) 1.1 (CSEL 4.3). The best English translation is still that of George E. McCracken: Arnobius of Sicca, *The*

Judaism and Christianity, and indicates little grounding in "orthodox" theology. He denies, for instance, that the supreme God created wretched, changeable humans, and in places he seems to suggest that pagan gods are divinities subordinate to the Christian God.[49] One scholar, finding a strong influence of Epicurean philosophy, cited Arnobius's sense of God's "aloofness" as central to a theological system for which divine anger can simply have no place.[50] His denial of God's wrath does not suggest any attempt to wrestle with biblical sources but reflects his own appropriation of classical arguments for the impassibility of God. What is particularly interesting, however, is just how much his disavowal of divine anger depends on his understanding of human anger as leading to vice, corruptibility, and violent harm. Divinity, therefore, whether conceived as the "Supreme God" or the lesser gods whom pagans worship, cannot suffer rage.

The main line of argument in Arnobius's denial of divine wrath comes within his refutation of the pagan polemicists' claim that the gods are angered by the Christian people. Arnobius asks his interlocutor: "Do you not see how shameful, how disgraceful are the mad feelings [*adfectus . . . insanias*] which you thus impute to the deities?"[51] To be angry, he says, is nothing else than to be insane (*insanire*), to rage (*furere*), to be carried away into the lust of vengeance (*in ultionis libidinem ferri*), and to be in a frenzy by alienation of the heart (*pectoris alienatione bacchari*).[52] Such gods would be worse than beasts, monsters, and deadly snakes that can contain their poison. Furthermore, if gods can be angry at Christians, then epic descriptions of their dramatic fury must be true: "from their eyes fiery flashes shine out, their breast gives forth a pant, foam rushes from their mouth, and from their burning words their lips become dry and pale."[53] Not only do such descriptions match various poets' portrayals of the gods, but they also echo the physical description of the mad anger of humans in Seneca's *De ira*. If gods "boil with anger and are shaken by emotion and

Case against the Pagans, Ancient Christian Writers 7 and 8 (consecutively paginated) (Westminster, Md. : Newman, 1949) (hereafter cited as McCracken).

[49] Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 2.46 (on God's not creating human souls); 3.2 (on the pagan gods' inclusion of Christian worship of the supreme God). The most up-to-date discussion, including references to the scholarly debate, is that of Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca* 131–63 ("God and the World") and 174–83 ("God and the Gods").

[50] Micka, *Problem of Divine Anger* 39–40, challenged by Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca* 131–37.

[51] Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 1.17 (CSEL 4.13; McCracken 71). For complementary readings of some of the passages discussed here, see Micka, *Problem of Divine Anger* 65–77; and Hallman, "Mutability" 388–89.

[52] Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 1.17 (CSEL 4.13; McCracken 71).

[53] Ibid. For possible allusions to Seneca, Lucretius, and Vergil, see McCracken 277 nn. 85–86.

disturbance of this sort, they are not immortal and eternal nor should they be thought to possess any of the quality of divinity."[54]

Unlike other Christian thinkers I will consider, Arnobius offers no conceptual basis for distinguishing between divine wrath and human anger. As a result of this lack of qualification, he concludes that God's rage must compromise the sense of justice held to be central to divine nature. Pagan polemicists' attribution of the gods' random and capricious fury against Christians convicts their own gods of the worst form of violence. "What is so unjust as to be angry at some and to harm others . . . to ruin the harmless crops of grain, to hate Christianity and to ruin its worshipers with every loss to them?"[55] True gods, he asserts, "neither grow wrathful nor indulge a grudge, nor do they devise cunning stratagems to harm anyone."[56] Later in the work he rebukes the pagans for attributing to the gods "natures fierce, cruel, monstrous, ever rejoicing in evils and the destruction of humankind."[57] Sacrifices to such gods are like the tossing of food to wild beasts so as to circumvent their lust to do harm.[58] Why should I kill a pig, he asks, to make god change his mood? Should a goose or goat or peacock "work as medicine for the angry one?"[59] In a passage intended to reduce to absurdity claims that sacrifices appease the gods, Arnobius asks:

> Is the conclusion that the gods sell their wrongs and, like little boys—to induce them to spare their hot tempers and to stop their bawling—get little birdies, dolls, hobbyhorses and pieces of bread with which to divert themselves, so also the immortal gods receive these palliatives from you to give up their wrath and anger and be on good terms again with those who offend them?[60]

Although common people are concerned to appease the gods, the philosophical tradition in which Arnobius grounds himself holds that "all agitation of spirit is unknown to the gods."[61] Thus gods can never suffer anger, which is "far removed from them and from their state of existence."[62] Arnobius's failure to wrestle with Scripture limits his use for the theological tradition, but it does suggest yet again the great anxiety at attributing violent and destructive human characteristics to those we admire and worship as just, blessed, and unchanging. Disavowal of divine wrath is just one strategy for insisting on God's otherness.

[54] Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 1.18 (CSEL 4.13–14; McCracken 71–72).
[55] Ibid. 1.20 (CSEL 4.14; McCracken 72).
[56] Ibid. 1.23 (CSEL 4.15; McCracken 73–74).
[57] Ibid. 3.25 (CSEL 4.129; McCracken 212).
[58] Ibid. 7.6. (CSEL 4.241–42; McCracken 485–86).
[59] Ibid. 7.8 (CSEL 4.242–43; McCracken 486–87).
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid. 7.5 (CSEL 4.241; McCracken 485).
[62] Ibid.

CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION OF DIVINE WRATH

Although a minority of Christians in antiquity disavowed God's wrath, the majority defended it. For example, in an apology for Christianity addressed to his friend Autolycus, Theophilus of Antioch (d. 185) waxes philosophical on God's ineffability but asks: "Is God angry?" He answers: "Of course. God is angry with evil doers but is good, kind, and merciful to those who love and fear him."[63] Over half a century later Cyprian of Carthage replies in a similar vein. In a treatise (ca. 252) against the African proconsul Demetrianus, who blamed Christians for wars and pestilence sent as punishment for not worshiping pagan gods, Cyprian declares that, on the contrary, "the Lord is indignant and wrathful and threatening because you do not convert to him. And you wonder and complain in this obstinacy and contempt of yours, if the rains scarcely fall, if the earth wastes away in the deterioration of dust. . . . God is even more indignant when so many and such great misery happen to no avail."[64]

While discrete discussions of God's ire can be found in many sources, an early systematic treatment is that of Tertullian, who strains both to assert divine immutability and to espouse the biblical testimony as revealing who God is. In response to Marcion's insistence that a supremely good God would not act like the one depicted in much of the Bible, Tertullian argues that divine goodness entails the ability to judge. Thus he denies that "a god is to be accounted such by virtue of goodness alone, to the exclusion of those other adjuncts, those feelings and affections [*sensibus et affectibus*], which the Marcionites deny to their god . . . but which we recognize as no dishonor to God."[65] Accusing Marcion of Epicureanism, Tertullian says that Marcion has removed from God all strength of severity and judgment. Yet it is precisely such divine emotion that signifies God's will to save. That is, the goodness of God cannot be efficacious without those feelings and affections that include anger and indignation. Any divinity conceived as "lacking in those feelings and affections it ought to possess" must be ruled out as irrational.[66]

[63] Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 1.3, in *Corpus Apologetarum Christianorum Saeculi Secundi* 8, ed. Johann Carl Theodor Otto (Iena: F. Mauke, 1886) 10.

[64] "Indignatur ecce Dominus et irascitur et quod ad eum non conuertamini comminatur: et tu miraris aut quereris in hac obstinatione et contemptu uestro, si rara desuper pluuia descendat . . . et plus exacerbetur Deus quando nihil talia et tanta proficiant" (Cyprian, *Ad Demetrainum* 7 [CCSL 3A.38]).

[65] Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* (hereafter *Adv. Marc.*) 1.25, as in *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 69 (hereafter cited as Evans). On Tertullian and the questions raised by Marcion, see Joseph M. Hallman, "The Mutability of God: Tertullian to Lactantius,"*Theological Studies* 42 (1981) 374–86.

[66] "Ne sic quoque irrationalis praescribitur, si careat et sensibus et affectibus debitis" (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 1.25; Evans 73).

Divine wrath, therefore, is a necessary component of justice, by which God reveals great care to save us. Why, asks Tertullian, would any good deity set out commandments and then not require us to perform them? Marcion's notion of God is thus *peruerssimum*, and any moral law given by such a divinity remains profoundly unstable. To what end, Tertullian asks, does Marcion's God "prohibit transgressions if he does not exact penalties, if he is incapable of judgment, a stranger to all emotions of severity and reproof?"[67] Later in his treatise Tertullian complains that to reject God's anger, as Epicureans do, is like complaining that a surgeon has to cut. "It is much the same when you admit that God is a judge, yet you refuse those emotions and feelings [*motus et sensus*] by which he exercises judgment."[68] The reason why Marcionites adopt a heretical position, Tertullian argues, is that they cannot distinguish between divine and human predicates. They think that "if a god becomes angry or hostile . . . he will be liable to corruption and die."[69] Yet such a pattern of thinking, says Tertullian, is for the *stupidissimi*, and he urges the reader to distinguish between human and divine substance. Scripture speaks, for instance, of God's right hand, eye, and feet, and yet we do not imagine that God has bodily parts the way humans do. "Great is the unlikeness of the divine body and human, though their members are identical in name: equally great must be the difference of divine mind and human, though their sensations are referred to in the same terms."[70] Because divine emotions differ radically from human ones, God's wrath must be distinct from what we generally understand as anger. We ourselves, says Tertullian, cannot experience anger happily, because it renders us as victims of some quality of suffering. Not so with God, who can indeed enjoy a blessed anger. "He can be angry without being shaken, can be annoyed without coming into peril, can be moved without being overthrown."[71] All such affections God experiences in a manner fitting only to God.

A similar line of argument recurs a century later in Lactantius's *De ira Dei* (ca. 314–321), where the native North African rhetorician sets out to refute the "error" espoused by many philosophers that God does not get angry. For Lactantius, the denial of God's anger overthrows the foundations of human life (*ad euertendum uitae humanae statum*),[72] though he admits the familiar problem: "If anger is not becoming to a man even provided he is wise and respectable, how much more is such unseemly

[67] Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 1.26; Evans 73.

[68] Ibid. 2.16; Evans 131.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.; Evans 133.

[72] Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 1, *Sources chrétiennes* (hereafter SC) 289 (1982) 90. Translations of Lactantius are from his *The Minor Works*, Fathers of the Church 54, trans. Sister Mary Francis McDonald (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1965) (hereafter cited as McDonald). On divine anger in Lactantius, see the discussions of Micka 113–14 and Hallman, "Mutability" 389–92.

mutation unbecoming to God?"[73] And yet, like a good householder, who must both encourage and punish members of his house, God is both kind and angry. The trouble with the philosophers' position on divine anger, argues Lactantius, is that they simply project human attributes of anger onto God in an unqualified way. Crucially, for Lactantius, God's anger is a consequence of his kindness (*consequens esse ut irascatur deus, quoniam gratia commouetur*). Furthermore, it is the "hinge of piety and religion [*cardo religionis pietatisque*]."[74] Appropriate fear of God keeps human beings attuned to the demands of justice, just as an expectation of God's kindness increases worship. This fear of divine anger protects human life from foolishness and crime. As Lactantius says: "Conscience greatly checks people, if we believe we are living in the sight of God; if we realize that not only what we do is seen from above but also what we think or say is heard by God."[75] Although philosophers will admit the existence of one supreme God, their denial of divine wrath minimizes any sense of God's engagement with the world. Knowing that our actions are seen by God, on the other hand, serves the common good and keeps us from being reduced to the "wildness of beasts." Yet even beasts, says Lactantius, spare their own kind in a way that humans, who frequently degrade each other, do not:

> What would be more fierce than a human being, what more unmerciful than, if the fear of a higher being taken away, one should be able to escape the force of laws or despise it? It is the fear of God alone, therefore, which guards the society of people among themselves; through it life is sustained, fortified, governed. But that fear is taken away if we should be convinced that God is without anger. God is moved and indignant when injustices are done.[76]

Here again, though, the distinction between divine and human ire remains crucial. Whereas an Epicurean would link all anger to other affections such as fear, Lactantius argues that such an inference is wholly inappropriate when talking about God. Because a human is exposed to multiple forces that can destroy him, the affection of fear "has matter" in a human but not in God (*timoris adfectus habet in homine materiam, in deo non habet*). On the other hand, wrath, kindness, and pity do have matter in God, who uses them "for the preservation of things."[77] Although God is free from affections such as desire, fear, avarice, grief, and envy because they are "affections of vices [*uitiorum adfectus*]," anger toward the wicked (*ira in malos*), love toward the good (*caritas in bonos*), and compassion for

[73] Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 5 (SC 104; McDonald 68).
[74] Ibid. 6 (SC 289:110; McDonald 70).
[75] Ibid. 8 (SC 289:118; McDonald 74).
[76] Ibid. 12 (SC 289:150; McDonald, 88–89).
[77] Ibid. 15 (SC 289:166–68; McDonald 96–97).

the afflicted (*miseria in adflictos*) are worthy of divine power. God, who is just and true, possesses these “affections of virtue [*adfectus uirtutis*].”[78]

In a very important passage where he takes up classical definitions of anger, such as those of Seneca, Posidonius, Aristotle, and Cicero, Lactantius suggests that these thinkers too frequently reduce anger to a desire for repaying pain with pain. “Truly,” he writes, “this should be restrained in a human, lest through rage a person should rush forth to exceedingly great evil.”[79] Since God does not experience harm, however, definitions of anger as the desire to return painful injury cannot apply. A good judge, as an impartial minister of the law, acts out of a “just anger [*ira iusta*],” not because he is harmed but so that discipline may be preserved, ways of life corrected, and license suppressed.[80] Like the anger of a good judge, God’s anger is “a movement of the mind arising to the restraint of offenses [*ira est motus animi ad coercenda peccata insurgentis*].” Anger as the “desire for revenge [*libido ulciscendi*],” says Lactantius, ought to be suppressed and contained:

> The anger which we are able to call either fury or rage ought not even exist in a human because it is completely vicious; but, that anger, on the other hand, which has to do with the correction of vices ought not to be taken from man, nor can it be taken from God, because it is both useful and necessary for human affairs.[81]

What is more scandalous to Lactantius is that, despite God’s just anger, wicked people continue to live and wreak havoc among human societies. The survival of bad persons, he concludes, is the result of God’s mercy. Whereas a just judge, who serves but does not make the law, does not have the authority to pardon a criminal, God determines the law and so can pardon.[82] While no one can escape the final judgment of God, Lactantius notes that, if God were to punish us according to our merits, we would all die at once. “The frailty of the flesh with which we are clothed is prone to sin to such an extent that, unless God gave indulgence to this compulsion, perhaps too few would be living.”[83] God’s patient and perfect wrath stands in contrast to the unjust anger of humans, which flashes out violently. While allowing human anger as a “necessary part of creation,” God forbids its continuance, tempers it, and chastises us so as to keep our anger within “measure and justice.”[84] Furthermore, because God’s anger is not like human anger, which is a disturbance due to the heat of rage, depictions of a furious God who must be appeased by sacrifice are false: “God is

[78] Ibid. 16 (SC 289:170; McDonald 98).
[79] Ibid. 17 (SC 289:180; McDonald 101).
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid. 17 (SC 289:180; McDonald 102).
[82] Ibid. 19 (SC 289:188; McDonald 104).
[83] Ibid. 20 (SC 289:192; McDonald 107).
[84] Ibid. 21 (SC 289:196; McDonald 109).

appeased, not by incense, not by sacrifice, not by precious gifts, all of which are corruptible, but God is appeased by an improvement of one's way of life, and whoever puts a stop to his sinfulness makes God's anger mortal."[85] Lactantius seems to be saying here that God's anger exists only to the extent that one sins; when one ceases to sin, so does God's wrath.

Lactantius thus pathologizes most expressions of human anger in a way that emphasizes its distinction from the perfect wrath of God. In doing so Lactantius attends to the great anxiety we have seen in every writer over attributing problematic emotions to God. Human anger, again, is not the measure of divine wrath, which guarantees final justice tempered by mercy that in the meantime allows the wicked to live within limits.

AUGUSTINE

Like Tertullian and Lactantius, Augustine affirmed that divine wrath is a function of God's justice and insisted that human predicates cannot be attributed to God without qualification. Yet Augustine attended to exegetical issues more carefully than his predecessors, and in his vast writings we find important variations in his understanding of divine wrath. God's anger, for Augustine, may indicate: the divine power to punish, the correction one endures painfully when one recognizes estrangement from God, an inveterate sinner's darkness of mind toward God, or even God's raising up anger within a person who recognizes that someone else is violating the divine law. Augustine moved beyond philosophical speculation to consider more practically how divine and human anger may interact. He does not resolve multiple problems regarding when and how a person might exhibit righteous indignation. Still, like other ancient writers, he does reflect restraint and anxiety toward the violent potential of ire in spite of what some might find in him "a disturbing emphasis on anger."[86]

God's Power to Punish: "You grow angry, yet remain tranquil" (*Conf.* 1.4.4)

Early in his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the oratorical competition he entered as a schoolboy. "I was required to produce a speech made by Juno expressing her anger and grief at being unable to repulse the Trojan king from Italy, but in words I never heard Juno use."[87] Augustine tells us

[85] Ibid. 21 (SC 289:198; McDonald 109).

[86] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University, 2001) 548–49.

[87] Augustine, *Confessions* 1.17.27, ed. M. Skutella (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1981) trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1997) 57 (hereafter cited as Boulding).

the performance aimed to imitate the goddess's emotions (*affectus*) of anger and grief in language that would move the audience. Such an exercise was typical of ancient rhetorical training. A few decades later, the grammarian Macrobius admires in Vergil the realistic portrayals of Juno's "being borne to and fro amid surging waves of anger."[88] To the Christian bishop writing in the late fourth century, however, her fury points to the unworthiness of pagan divinities. Like other philosophers, Augustine criticizes poets who attributed human actions to the gods. Much later he would distinguish the poetic tradition's "discreditable fictions" from philosophical reflection on the divine: "The poets give such a distorted picture of the gods that such deities cannot stand comparison with good humans."[89] Thus, Augustine regards his youthful emulation of the angry Juno and other such literary fantasies as no more than smoke and wind when compared to his later education in Scripture.

If Augustine followed Cicero in suggesting that divinity does not share human shortcomings, however, the God represented in Scripture, at least on the face of it, hardly comes off as less terrifying than Juno.[90] As we have already seen, the psalms quoted so often throughout Augustine's works are replete with references to divine wrath. One can sense Augustine's embarrassment precisely over this problem when he responds to a Manichean that Christians interpret "the law and prophets far, far differently than you suppose. . . . We do not worship a God who is repentant, jealous, needy or cruel. . . . You are accustomed to inveigh violently and at length against these silly ideas and similar ones. Hence, your attack does not touch us."[91] Augustine's answer reflects the predicament of many philosophically minded persons who still adhere to the authority of a text depicting divine figures through an array of anthropomorphisms.

Augustine's own affirmation and explanation of divine anger remained remarkably stable over the course of his writing. For him, as for Tertullian and Lactantius, divine wrath is an attribute of divine justice. The anger of God, he writes in book 13 of *De Trinitate*, is "nothing else but just retribution." Yet, perhaps anticipating a Stoic objection, he adds: "God's

[88] Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 4.2.3–10, ed. J. Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970) 1.218–21, trans. Percival Vaughan Davies (New York: Columbia University, 1969) 257–58.

[89] Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* 4.27 (CCSL 47.121); *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003) 169 (hereafter cited as Bettenson).

[90] For Augustine's espousal of Cicero see *De ciu. Dei* 4.26.

[91] "Quare nos inuectio uestra non tangit" (Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* 1.10.16 [CSEL 90]; in *The Manichean Debate*, trans., intro. and notes Roland J. Teske [hereafter cited as Teske] [Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2006] 38).

wrath is not like a human's, an emotional disturbance [*perturbatio animi*]."[92] Here, as in many other places, Augustine cites a verse from the Book of Wisdom: "You, Lord of hosts, judge with tranquillity" (Wis 12:18). To Adimantus the Manichean, Augustine argues that the anger of God no more suggests emotional agitation than that the jealousy of God suggests the anguish of a husband tormented over a wife: "What is called the wrath of God," he says, "is not a disturbance of the mind but the power of retribution [*non perturbatio mentis est, sed potentia uindicandis*]."[93] Underlying all such concerns, however, is the nature of biblical language. How may we understand the anthropomorphisms that constitute so much of the Bible's dramatic effect?

In *City of God* Augustine addresses the point most directly. In a section from Book 15, after quoting God's reason for sending the flood ("I will blot out humanity whom I have created . . . for I am angry that I have made them" Gen 6:5–7), Augustine asserts once more that God's anger is not a disturbance of the mind but a judgment (*iudicium*) imposing punishment on sin. God does not repent of any divine activity but has unwavering foreknowledge of all things. Then Augustine offers a rationale for the dramatic quality of narratives such as God's soliloquy in the account of Noah and the flood:

> If scripture did not employ such words, it would not strike home so closely, as it were, to all humanity. For scripture is concerned with humans, and it uses language to terrify the proud [*perterreat superbientes*], to arouse the careless [*excitet neglegentes*], to exercise the inquirer [*exerceat quaerentes*], and to nourish the intelligent [*alat intellegentes*]; and it would not have this effect if it did not first bend down [*inclinaret*] and, as we might say, descend to the level of those on the ground [*quodam modo descenderet ad iacentes*].[94]

If we can speak about God having emotions, it is only by analogy or in relation to the human emotions experienced by Christ, who for Augustine models the ideal of affective life.[95] By definition God does not change, so any predication of a divine *motus animi* occurs because, through Scripture, God becomes available (*inclinare*) to human language, yet only "as if" (*quodam modo*) lowering himself to the human plane. What is far more crucial is the emotional life of humans, who

[92] Augustine, *De Trinitate* 13.5.21 (CCSL 50a.511); in *The Trinity*, trans., intro., and notes Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1991) 360. For a list of references to divine wrath in Augustine's works see Jean-Claude Fredouille, "Sur la colère divine: Jamblique et Augustin,"*Recherches augustiniennes* 5 (1968) 7–13; and Joseph M. Hallman, "The Emotions of God in the Theology of St. Augustine," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 51 (1984) 5–19.

[93] Augustine, *Contra Adimantum* 11 (CSEL 25.136); Teske 189, with modifications.

[94] Augustine, *De ciu. Dei* 15.25 (CCSL 48.493); Bettenson 643.

[95] Ibid. 14.9.

experience very diverse affective movements as a result of biblical language. God's anger, therefore, is not unlike the simulated wrath of a Stoic or Epicurean sage, who never suffers disturbance yet gives the impression of showing anger because of its salutary effect on others. Just like the sage, God can always mete out just punishment without being inflamed.[96]

Such a theology of Scripture allows Augustine to turn potential embarrassment over divine wrath into an advantage. On the one hand, he can deny that God ever suffers anything like human anger, while maintaining, on the other hand, the narrative integrity of the Bible and a theological claim of God's ultimate justice. Augustine's extensive commentaries on the psalms offer a particularly interesting view of how his exegetical strategy allows him to negotiate potential contradictions with dexterity and consistency. In many explanations of psalm verses depicting divine anger, Augustine returns to his standard argument. So, for instance, on Psalm 2:5 ("He will speak to them in his anger, and in his rage he will throw them in disarray"), Augustine notes that anger/rage must not be understood as a *perturbatio mentis*, but the power by which God justly punishes.[97] On Psalm 57:10 ("Before the bramble brings forth your thorns, he will swallow them up as though they were alive, as though in his anger") Augustine insists that the Psalmist did not say that God acted "in anger" but "*as though* in anger," so as to make clear that God punishes without being disturbed.[98] Likewise, when Augustine's congregation hears the dramatic verse "Whirl them round like dust, O God, . . . harass them in your anger," he tells them to eliminate any idea of emotional agitation from our concept of God's wrath.[99]

[96] On the question of pretended anger among the wise, see Richard Sorabji, *Emotions and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (New York: Oxford University, 2002) 191–92. Note too Seneca, *De ira* 2.14.1: "So anger can never be permitted, though it may sometimes be simulated if the sluggish minds of the audience are to be aroused, in the same way that we use spurs and brands on horses that are slow to bestir themselves." On the question of anger and punishment, see Seneca, *De ira* 1.15.1–3.

[97] Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos* (hereafter *En. in ps.*) 2.4 (CCSL 38.4) in *Expositions of the Pslams 1–32*, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2000) 72 (hereafter cited as Boulding 1). All citations of the psalms here are according to Augustine's numbering system, explained in Michael Cameron, "*Enarrationes in Psalmos*," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) 290.

[98] Augustine, *En. in ps.* 57.20 (CCSL 39.727), in *Expositions of the Psalms 51–72*, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2001) 144. Again, Wis 12:18 remains a crucial text.

[99] Ibid. 82.12 (CCSL 39.1144) on Ps 82:15–16.

God's Power to Correct: The Interaction of Divine and Human Anger

If Augustine frequently repeats the argument of divine impassibility to maintain some sense of theological coherence, even more interesting is how often he does *not* make the apology. Augustine understands divine anger not only as the power to punish but also as the power to correct, whose execution he regards as a deep mercy. As Philo of Alexandria (d. 50 CE) had explained that Moses spoke of God's anger because it is "the only way the fool can be admonished" to eradicate evil, so Augustine sees therapeutic value in biblical images of God's ire.[100] In his sermons on the psalms, Augustine appears far more concerned to foster the appropriate emotions in his flock than to make the more philosophical point that God is not really angry the way we are inclined to imagine. The rhetorical skills he cultivated as a young boy to stimulate emotions in his audience are fully effective in his career as bishop. Throughout his sermons he takes biblical references to divine wrath as moving his congregation to constant repentance and conversion. On Psalm 79:5 ("How long will you be angry with the prayer of your servant"), for instance, Augustine urges his flock not to suppose that "God's anger has passed now that you are converted." Even a good Christian, he reminds them, must accept chastisement as remedial.[101] Although he insists that God suffers no emotional disturbance, that fact is, in many respects, far less important to Augustine the preacher than the effect such references to God's wrath will have on hearers, for he recognizes divine anger in this life as a kind of mercy leading to wisdom.[102]

Such wisdom, however, accrues not only to the personal benefit of someone corrected. Divine wrath might also move a person to act against another's transgression. As Augustine explains in several places, biblical language attributes to God what God causes in human beings. He writes in his commentary on Psalm 2: "God's anger, then, is the emotion which occurs in the mind of someone who knows God's law [*motus qui fit in anima quae legem Dei nouit*], when it sees that same law being transgressed by a sinner. Through this emotion in the souls of the just [*per hunc motum iustarum animarum*] many things are avenged."[103] If God's anger means one thing for just souls, however, it means something else for those incapable of discerning God's law. Augustine continues: "God's anger could also

[100] Philo, *Quod Deus immutabilis sit* 13.60.68 (LCL 3.44–45).

[101] Augustine, *En. in ps.* 79.5 (CCSL 39.1113), in *Expositions of the Psalms 51–72*, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2002) 144. See too *En. in ps.* 75.11 on Ps 75:8: "How terrible you are! On that day, who will withstand your anger?"

[102] See Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 2.7.9.

[103] Augustine, *En. in ps.* 2.4 (CCSL 38.4); Boulding 1:72.

reasonably be interpreted as the very darkening of the mind [*ipsa mentis obscuratio*] which befalls those who transgress God's law."[104] On a later verse of the psalm ("Take hold of discipline, lest the Lord at some time grow angry and you disappear from the righteous path"), Augustine notes the blessing of being aware of God's anger. By contrast, those "to whom God's anger is not openly revealed [*quibus non aperte reuelatur*]" may well wander in great distress through iniquity.[105] On the verse, "his anger flares up quickly," Augustine stresses how the righteous person must live with a constant sense that final judgment and punishment are near. The sinner, on the other hand, will think God's anger is far away and in the distant future.[106]

William Harris has called Augustine's attempt to explain divine wrath as movements within the soul "the extreme of sophistry."[107] Yet in Augustine's exegesis attributes of one subject are frequently transferred to another. He notes, for instance, that in the ancient court system the law itself is said to be angry when agents of justice are roused to punish someone according to that law.[108] For Augustine a great deal of biblical language would make little theological sense apart from some transference of meaning. When Paul speaks of the Galatians "becoming known to God" (Gal 4:9), for instance, he does not mean to suggest that there had been a time when God was ignorant of them. Rather, "God is said to have come to know them at the time because it was then that he brought it about that he should be known to them."[109] So too any predication of alteration in God, whether Scripture speaks of God "changing his will" or "becoming angry," actually refers to change experienced by humans. And such experience of God's wrath is, on the whole, as salubrious as the correction it initiates. "In our discipline, the question is not whether the devout soul is angry but why. . . . To be indignant with a sinner with a view to his correction . . . no sane judgment could reprove."[110]

Human anger that is appropriately motivated and directed may usefully serve the well-being of others, and in many passages Augustine identifies the wrath of God with such a movement within a person's soul. We may rightly regard the notion of divinely inspired human anger as potentially quite dangerous, yet in Augustine's taxonomy a far more troubling instance of God's wrath is the total insensitivity of an incorrigible sinner. The Pharaoh's heart, for instance, was hardened to the pleas of Moses to

[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid. 2.10 (CCSL 38.6); Boulding 1:74, on Ps 2:12 .
[106] Ibid.. 2.11 (CCSL 38.7); Boulding 1:75, on Ps 2:13.
[107] See Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 396 n. 32 on *De ciu. Dei* 22.2.
[108] See Augustine, *En. in ps.* 82.12.
[109] "Sed tunc cognouisse dictus est, quod tunc ut cognosceretur efficit" (Augustine, *De ciu. Dei* 22.2 [CCSL 48.807–8]; Bettenson 1024).
[110] Augustine, *De ciu. Dei* 9.5 (CCSL 47.254); Bettenson 349.

set Israel free. Such darkening of the mind represents God's forsaking of human agents who in arrogance refuse to listen. On Psalm 75:7 ("At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, those who mounted horses fell asleep"), Augustine adverts to the those who, like Pharaoh, proudly toss their heads against God's call to justice: "Because you are rich you have mounted your high horse, but God rebukes you and you fall asleep. Fierce must be the anger of him who issues that rebuke, fierce indeed!"[111]

Anger as Charity: The Confessions

Augustine fails to specify sufficiently the conditions when human anger may appropriately mediate divine wrath. He distinguishes anger, which seeks the good of another, from hatred, which merely looks for harm.[112] As William Mattison has recently argued, Augustine nonetheless "offers far too little detail to determine the reasonableness of anger."[113] The liabilities of such a failure are potentially grave, and his work therefore has been taken as legitimating "a politics of anger and retribution."[114] The *Confessions* do not systematically circumscribe appropriate expressions of anger, but they provide examples of the ways divine and human anger may interrelate for the benefit of a person. Augustine interprets his own experience in the narrative in such a way that recognition of God's anger almost always marks a shift out of various forms of darkness. In the prologue, references to divine anger are set within a catalogue of paradoxes reflecting on the ways a transcendent God still acts in this world. At one point he asks God, "What am I to you, that you should command me to love you, and grow angry with me if I do not, and threaten me with enormous woes?"[115] Chief among such woes, however, is the very failure to love.[116] While describing his adolescence, Augustine apostrophizes to God, whose anger had "grown hot at my doings."[117] Such anger is silent, as Augustine cannot yet perceive his alienation from God over the clanging chains of his habits.

[111] Augustine, *En. in ps.* 75.10 (CCSL 39.1044), in *Expositions of the Psalms 73–98*, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2002) 63. Although beyond the scope of this article, the question of the Pharaoh's heart raises deeply problematic aspects of Augustine's theology of grace; see Gerald Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity: St. Augustine's Teaching on Divine Power and Human Freedom* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2007).

[112] Among many examples see *En. in ps.* 78.14.

[113] Mattison, "Jesus' Prohibition of Anger" 863.

[114] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* 549, where she notes that "so much of Augustine's literary output expresses anger against heretics, pagans, unbelievers, Jews."

[115] Augustine, *Confessions* 1.5.5 (Skutella 4; Boulding 42).

[116] Ibid.

[117] Augustine, *Confessions* 2.2.2 (Skutella 25; Boulding 62).

Increasingly throughout the *Confessions*, though, God's anger and the human disturbance it generates is presented as intensifying a sense of longing for God. While Augustine is still searching for the truth after he rejects astrology, he notes that his swollen pride kept him from understanding the nature of God. Still, God humbles the proud with a wounding blow and "will not forever be angry with us."[118] This correlation between anger and correction is evident throughout the dramatic sections relating his conversion. As soon as the official at Trier read the *Life of Antony* and was filled with love of holiness and angered by the "sober shame at himself," he decided to become a servant of God, not the emperor.[119] During his own struggle in the garden Augustine was shaken by a "most troubling anger [*indignatione turbulentissima*]" because, while wanting to form a covenant with God, he was attached to his former habits.[120] Yet this anger was therapeutic and stimulated conversion to the light. His own exasperation led to the point that he cried out many things, the gist of which he tells us was the psalm verse, "How long, O Lord? Will you be angry with us for ever?"[121] Shortly after this point in the narration he heard the voice of the child chanting, "Pick up and read," and the "light of certainty flooded my heart."[122] This same sense of anger with oneself, as a kind of graced prick of conscience, appears again in his reading of Psalm 4 in Book 9. Augustine reads the verse "Let your anger deter you from sin," and exclaims: "How these words moved me, My God! I had already learned to feel for my past sins an anger with myself that would hold me back from sinning again." Within the inner chamber of his heart he felt a new life where "you made me feel sweetness."[123]

All these examples amplify Augustine's equation of God's anger with an interior change. If his own interpreted experience in the *Confessions* is an indication, perception of God's anger brings no devastation, much less reason for self-loathing, but the turn from death to life. Augustine's actual experience of divine wrath was therapeutic, not destructive, and a contrast between different types of anger depicted in Book 9 may help us discern the positive effects of divine wrath from the frequently brutal reality of human anger. In a small eulogy of his mother at the end of the narrative section of the *Confessions*, Augustine tells the story of how Monica, as a

[118] Ibid. 7.8.12 (Skutella 136–137; Boulding 169) on Pss 85:5; 103:9.

[119] "Sobrio pudore iratus sibi" (Augustine, *Confessions* 8.6.15 [Skutella 166]). In light of what we have seen about rising judicial violence even against imperial officials, it is worth noting how the two court officials present their lives as filled with risks. God's anger is clearly sweeter than the emperor's.

[120] Ibid. 8.8.19 (Skutella 170).

[121] Ibid. 8.12.28 (Skutella 177) on Ps 6:4.

[122] Ibid. 8.12.29 (Skutella 179; Boulding 207).

[123] Ibid. 9.4.10 (Skutella 187–88; Boulding 216–17).

girl, had fallen into a habit of drinking goblets of wine. Her loving old maid became angry at the little mistress and called her a "wine swiller." Augustine notes that this "shaft went home," and Monica at once foreswore her conduct. Clearly for Augustine the maid's angry reproof was an instrument of God's healing: "How did you cure her, how bring her back to health? Did you not elicit a hard, sharp reproof from another soul, and use it like a surgeon's knife drawn from your hidden, providential resources to cut away that diseased tissue in a single sweep?"[124] For Augustine, the angry maid, like the perceived sting of God's wrath, represents the "tumultuous way" God continues to cure people. Human anger may indeed be part of a providential restoration of health, but note how the social location of the maid reverses our expectation of the direction anger usually moves.

In marked contrast to this episode with the elderly maid, Augustine gives the example of Monica's patience with her husband, Patricius. His hot-tempered anger always threatened the kind of violence whose effects one could see in the bruises on other women's faces: "These other women knew what a violent husband she had to put up with, and were amazed that there had never been any rumor of Patricius striking his wife, nor the least evidence of it happening."[125]

Augustine's description of his father and other husbands points to the violent anger we have already seen as characterizing the highly stratified, patriarchal social world of antiquity, where the more powerful enacted their anger upon the less powerful. Although most modern readers are exceedingly uncomfortable with the way Augustine valorizes Monica's willingness to endure the situation and her advice to other women not to resist their husbands, he does not in any way condone the brutality of his father or other husbands. In marked contrast to the anger of Monica's socially powerless childhood maid, Augustine finds nothing in his father's destructive rage to remind him of God. His father's anger, like the violence noted by so many philosophers throughout the ancient world, was simply brutal, and he calls the common social experience of anger among groups a "grisly gangrene of sin."[126]

CONCLUSION

The range of attitudes in the patristic writings represented here points again and again to the perceived danger of anger, both human and divine, in the social setting of early Christianity. Those who categorically deny divine wrath omit or ignore the problem of biblical images. Those who,

[124] Ibid. 9.8.18 (Skutella 195; Boulding 223–24).

[125] Ibid. 9.9.19 (Skutella 196–97; Boulding 225).

[126] "Horrenda pestilentia peccatorum" (Augustine, *Confessions* 9.9.21 [Skutella 198; Boulding 226]).

like Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine, maintain the biblical testimony of God's anger do so cautiously. Although deeply aware of the liabilities of projecting destructive fury onto God, they espouse the importance of anger in maintaining justice and healthy social functioning. The tensions we see in patristic writings, I argue, stay with us today.

In an important modern discussion, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," feminist ethicist Beverly Harrison has argued that "anger is a mode of connectedness to others and is always a vivid form of caring."[127] The long avoidance of anger so popular in Christian piety, by contrast, subverts authentic relationships and risks the atrophy of community. So too Giles Milhaven argues for "Good Anger": that "vindictive fury" aimed at another can actually be love.[128] He cites Aquinas's approval of anger as the passion for justice and as essential to a good human life.[129] Both Harrison and Milhaven move against the tendency to disavow anger, and in that respect they would find support in the main patristic writers discussed above. Although Harrison and Milhaven make bold claims on behalf of anger, both work within carefully circumscribed contexts. Harrison speaks about anger as serving love, and her primary setting is that of Christian churches. Milhaven regularly limits his hypothesis: "Anger is love only as one of a cluster of loving feelings about the individual in question. Good anger is relative, part of a whole. To absolutize or feel anger and nothing else for an individual is inhuman and evil."[130]

On the question of divine wrath, Heschel makes analogous points. Arguing that Greco-Roman disdain for emotions as irrational surges has led to the repudiation of divine pathos as represented in Scripture, he tries to retrieve the biblical presentation of God as deeply concerned with human affairs and committed to justice, especially for the poor and oppressed. Scripture communicates God's compassion robustly in terms of divine wrath. To those embarrassed by anthropopathism of God, Heschel distinguishes "passion," understood as irrational, emotional convulsion, from "pathos," understood as a kind of active ethos, intentionally formed and driven by a sense of care.[131] Divine wrath, he argues, is a "pathos," not a "passion," and in the prophets it functions as part of God's concern for justice. It is contingent on human provocation, does not last,

[127] Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," in her *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 14.

[128] John Giles Milhaven, *Good Anger* (Kansas City, Mo:. Sheed & Ward, 1989) 22–23.

[129] Ibid. 124.

[130] Ibid. 204. Milhaven acknowledges how easy it is to indulge in angry fantasies, such as those he has regarding Nazi guards in concentration camps (11–12).

[131] Heschel, *Prophets* 247–57.

and is not an essential attribute of God but rather a "tragic necessity" that ultimately reveals divine compassion. Heschel admits that anger "comes dangerously close to evil," that like fire it may be either a blessing or a fatal thing, touching off "deadly explosives" but also guaranteeing God's commitment to the well-being of the world.[132]

Although each of these modern authors acknowledges certain embarrassment at the violent potential of anger, they nonetheless insist that righteous indignation constitutes a valid response to injustice. Nor do they advocate omission of anger from the range of religious emotions. In that respect they are engaged in the same project as many of the ancient writers discussed here. The ancient concern was overwhelmingly to show that God decidedly does not act the destructive way angry humans frequently do, wreaking harm on their social inferiors. Many of the patristic writers attempted, rather, to create a space where references to God's wrath may be regarded as part of God's providence, leading people to greater life, justice, and well-being. We cannot presume that we always inhabit such space, but the patristic testimony gives us yet more grounds for insisting that divine wrath has nothing to do with violence generated through human anger. Human rage cannot be the frame wherein we come to understand what God's anger means. And in a world where misguided rage can easily masquerade as righteous indignation, it is no small thing to exercise great caution when we are tempted to project our wrath onto God.

[132] Ibid. 279–98.