

# Anger

## Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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UNIVERSITY

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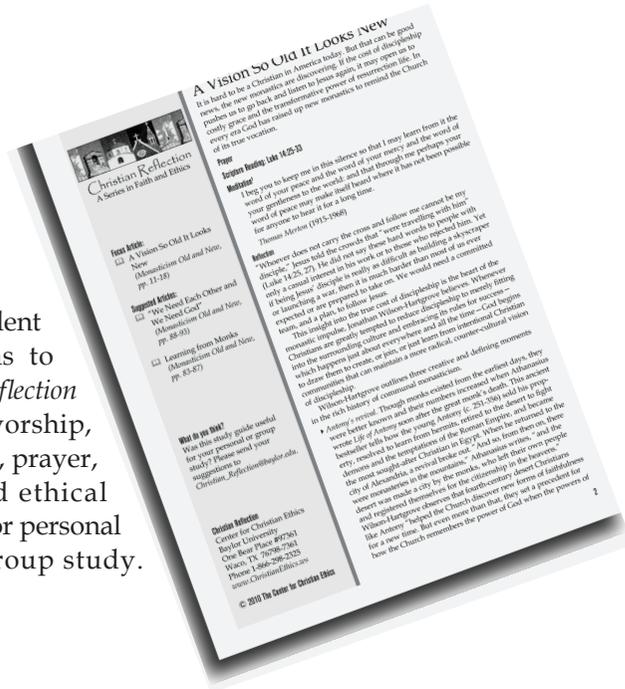
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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The role of anger in the Christian life seems problematic. Our contributors help us discern when it is a necessary spur to recognize and confront evil, and when it is an inordinate response—either misdirected, too quick to flare up, blazing too hot, or too slow to burn out.

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The role of anger in the Christian life seems problematic: when is it a necessary spur to recognize and confront evil, and when does it become a capital vice, or “deadly sin,” we must avoid? “That we are moved to anger by matters small and great, inconsequential and grave, is commonplace,” Jay Wood has observed. “Less common is knowing when, if ever, our anger is justified and what affects it has on our character.” Our contributors explore the nature of anger as an emotion and a character trait, which can be righteous or inordinate, and the impact these have on our loving God and others.

“Anger expresses a sense of justice and a sense of being in the presence of responsible agents,” Bob Roberts explains in *Anger in the Christian Life* (p. 11). “A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective.” But he warns that inappropriate anger can become habitual, and then things get ugly: “When anger gets deep and pervasive in a life it really does kill love and everything lovely.” Of course, knowing that we *should* control our anger—e.g., by making sure it is not “misdirected, too quick to flare up, blazing too hot, or too slow to burn out”—and knowing *how* to control it are two different things. Fortunately, “the Christian tradition is rich with practical guidance for us, including the anger antidotes of watchfulness,

practicing virtue, and prayer,” writes Ryan West in *Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger* (p. 21).

Jesus’ teaching on anger in the Sermon on the Mount—“I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:22a)—is certainly a “hard saying,” as Steven Voorwinde notes in *Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?* (p. 30). Can we really avoid anger, and should we try? Voorwinde seeks guidance by studying the passages in the Gospels in which Jesus seems to express anger. He concludes, “Although often sourced in his foreknowledge, the way Jesus handles his anger provides a model for Christians today. He knows how to be indignant, irate, and even furious, but without the slightest trace of derision, contempt, or abuse.”

If we are reluctant to say that God (or Christ) is ever angry, we are in good company with early Christian theologians. They “were deeply sensitive to the destructive consequences of human anger, and feared it would be the context in which believers came to understand divine wrath,” Michael McCarthy, S. J., writes in *Divine Wrath and Human Anger* (p. 37). “While some early Christian scholars disavowed God’s wrath, the majority defended it by insisting vigorously on the gap between divine wrath and human anger. The latter operates in profound ignorance and employs brutality. God’s anger is not like that.”

“We often reserve our severest wrath for those we love most,” Dan Johnson and Adam Pelser observe in *When Love Turns to Anger* (p. 73). “Uncontrolled anger ruins close friendships, destroys marriages, and severs the familial bond between children and parents, brothers and sisters.” They trace the roots of this destructive anger against loved ones to “a two-fold source” in modern culture “that can be summarized in the popular slogans: ‘Love is God’ and ‘I have a right to be happy.’” For the two-fold cure, they turn to the Christian teachings on neighbor-love and human sinfulness.

We may not think it is morally correct or prudentially wise to get mad at God, but many of us do sometimes. “Can we be angry at God and still love God?” psychologist Julie Exline asks in *Getting Angry at God* (p. 65). In her research, she discovered that “people who reported the closest, most resilient relationships with God saw it as morally appropriate to do some complaining and to ask God tough questions. Having a voice in the relationship was seen as a good thing.” She offers wise advice about how to help others resolve their anger toward God.

In the worship service (p. 46), we turn to God for discernment about how to respond to offense and injustice, praying: “Teach us, through your daily goodness and merciful love, to deal rightly with our anger when we are offended, and with our guilt when we have offended others.” The liturgy incorporates a new hymn, “Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus” (p. 53), that draws upon the psalmist’s insights into anger in Psalm 4.

Heidi Hornik traces the central themes of this issue—the nature of divine wrath and the justification and destructiveness of human anger—through artwork by the Mannerist painters of the sixteenth century. In *Righteous Indignation* (p. 56), she studies Domenico Beccafumi's *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law* (on the cover). The drama of the scene is expressed in the figures' exaggerated poses and the bright colors of their drapery which are characteristic of the mannerist style. Giorgio Vasari's *The Damned Soul* shows that drawing can be a powerfully expressive art form, as she explains in *Consuming Fury* (p. 58). In *Zeal for God's House* (p. 60), she explores Scarcella's depiction of Jesus' emotion in *Christ Driving the Money Lenders from the Temple*. Though "the cleansing the Jerusalem temple is the story that most often comes to mind when we think of Jesus getting angry," she explains how the artistic tradition focused instead on Jesus' zeal and turned the story into "a symbol of the Church's need to cleanse itself both through the condemnation of heresy and through internal reform."

Through BuildaBridge International, Nathan Corbitt is privileged to work with creative artists who help their communities deal with injustice and the anger it causes. He says they are "therapists who painstakingly work with survivors of abuse, torture, and trafficking" and "prophets who stand on the edge of society providing a window to the reality of our world." In *Artful Anger* (p. 81), he shares with us three of their prophetic works of art.

In *Bringing Anger into the Light* (p. 89), Trevor Thompson commends four resources for further reading: Stephen Voorwinde's *Jesus' Emotions in the Gospels*, Robert C. Roberts' *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*, Lytta Basset's *Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus, and Anger: Minding Your Passion*, a collection of short writings compiled and introduced by Amy Lyles Wilson. These authors further our understanding of the powerful emotion of anger. Thompson concludes, "As Jesus warns, in our anger, we are liable to judgment (Matthew 5:22). Yet, as these authors suggest, the path to holiness must include our emotions, especially the way anger invites us to live more faithfully into the mercy and love of God." ❖

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# Anger in the Christian Life

BY ROBERT C. ROBERTS

**Anger expresses a sense of justice and a sense of being in the presence of responsible agents. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective. But, as the Apostle Paul suggests, the problem with most of us is not that we are too slow to anger but that our anger tends to be sin and to spawn sin.**

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**M**olly and Mort have been married since Monday. For months they have planned a honeymoon tour of Kansas. On Tuesday they got as far as Indianapolis. They bedded down in a comfortable motel that served an early breakfast, and were set to make Topeka by night fall on Wednesday. Molly has heard so much about Topeka. She is sure this is going to be a perfectly wonderful beginning to a storybook honeymoon. But now Mort, returning to the room, has a sheepish look on his face.

“What’s up?” Molly asks. “Are we all ready to go?” “I’m awfully sorry,” says Mort. “For safe keeping I set the keys to the rental car just inside the trunk while I loaded it. And you know when I next remembered they were there? It was the split second before I heard that trunk lid snap shut as firm and final as my decision to marry my little Molly-melon.” To hide his embarrassment, interrupt the line of vision between their eyes, and protect himself from the emotion that he feels rising like a mighty tide in his sprightly bride, he approaches her for a kiss. (Mort, I might mention, is more mellow than Molly.)

Molly is in no mood for kisses, and becomes less so when they discover that the locksmith is not available until 4:00 p.m. The hope of Topeka by nightfall is dead. Molly is mad. Not to be able to get to Topeka tonight is

*very bad*. You could say she is frustrated: the circumstances are contrary to her wishes. You could also say she is disappointed: she was expecting something wonderful and now sees that it will not happen. But her emotion is more than irritation or disappointment. It is anger. In addition to seeing the circumstances as bad, she sees somebody as culpable.

Molly's anger is like a double spotlight: it shines on the evil that has befallen her, and it shines on the responsible and blameworthy originator of that evil, and his name is Mort. Mort appears as a bad agent, and not just a bad agent, but a responsibly bad agent—a blameworthy one. And to be blameworthy is to be worthy of punishment. In Molly's anger, Mort appears to deserve to be hurt. And this means that she would like to hurt him, or at least would enjoy seeing him hurt.

Now this sounds nasty, and many people resist such a description. They say, "When I am angry at somebody, I do not want to hurt him, nor would I enjoy seeing him hurt; I am just angry, that's all." My point is not that whenever you are angry, you want to devastate the offender, murder him or see him subjected to excruciating torture. Molly wishes nothing of the sort for Mort. But she does want him to suffer. She would like to detect in him a little more anguish about closing the trunk lid on those keys. And chances are she will say things to him that are intended to annoy him and make him squirm. You need not do physical harm to punish somebody. A dirty look, a slight snub, a little edge in the voice, the neglect of some little habit of kindness—these are actions characteristic of anger, and they function as punishment. Of course, really big-time anger may lead to mayhem and murder.

I noted that Molly is in no mood for smooching. This could be explained as another way of punishing Mort, but I think there is more to it than that. A person we are angry at appears unattractive. Even if the person is somebody we love—our spouse, our friend, our daughter, our father—he or she looks for the moment like an enemy. Anger tends to push love to the side and obscure it. An important part of love is seeing what is good in the beloved, appreciating him or her, taking pleasure in his company, finding her to be lovely, wonderful, clever, and sweet. But anger makes the other appear, for the moment, a bit repulsive, defective, and deformed—not the sort of person you would hug.

There is a gestalt drawing that nicely illustrates the relationship between love and anger. If you look at the drawing one way, you see an ugly old woman with a large nose and pursed lips. If you look at it in another way, you see a beautiful young woman with a little turned-up nose looking coyly away from you. This change is known as a gestalt switch: the perceived difference is a matter not of seeing different details but of seeing the whole thing ("gestalt") in a different way. There are two different whole pictures. The two views blot each other out: when you are seeing the ugly

woman, the beautiful one is invisible, and when you are seeing the beautiful one, the ugly woman is invisible.<sup>1</sup>

If you are able to see the drawing both ways, then any time you are seeing the ugly woman you are on the verge of seeing the beautiful one. All you have to do is switch gestalts. But some people are more inclined to see the ugly lady, and others more inclined to see the pretty one. You might say their gestalt switching has different default modes.

Molly's default mode with respect to Mort is firmly set on love. Her wonderfulness-gestalt of him is on a hair-trigger switch. She may be angry for a while, but her heart is disposed in such a way that his good qualities are insistent in her mind. The gestalt of Mort's ugliness quickly fades. But for the moment Molly's anger eclipses her sense of Mort's goodness.

I need to mention another mark of Molly's mind: in her anger, she sits in judgment on Mort. It is as though she looks down from a moral height on his blameworthiness. So her anger involves not just a view of him but also a peripheral perception of herself in which she sees herself as someone who is in a moral position to judge. We can see that anger is judgmental in this particular way by considering what happens to an angry person when she reckons seriously with her own blameworthiness. If it occurs to Molly that on Monday it was she who laid \$100 on top of the cash machine in Wheeling and then drove twenty miles down the road before remembering what she had done, her anger at Mort is likely to dissolve in a vision of moral equality. Serious reckoning with her own faults brings her down off the judge's seat.

The story of Mort and Molly illustrates four features of anger. Anger involves casting blame on someone; wanting that person to be hurt; seeing the person as unattractive; and seeing oneself as in a position to judge. We now need to consider what is right and wrong about anger. If anger is ever to be right and fitting, two things must be true: first, that people are sometimes blameworthy, and their blameworthiness makes them unattractive and makes them deserve to be hurt; second, that somebody is in a position to judge. If this sounds harsh, remember that there are degrees of blameworthiness and degrees of anger: someone can be just a little bit unattractive, and for just a moment and in a particular context, and one can deserve to be hurt just a little bit. If anger is to be right and fitting, it needs not only to be in response to someone who is actually blameworthy and unattractive and who deserves to be hurt, but also to be limited to a degree of intensity that matches the case.



From first to last, the Bible affirms that anger is sometimes right and fitting. God's anger provides the clearest case of righteous anger. The prophets often report that God is angry and recount the hurtful things that

he has done or threatens to do to the people who now appear repugnant in God's sight.<sup>2</sup>

On several occasions Jesus displayed a similar anger:

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

*Mark 3:1-6*

Jesus is angry with those in the synagogue because of their flagrant disregard for what God cares about (the wellbeing of the man with a withered hand), their hyper-concern with less important matters, and their willingness to "work" on the sabbath themselves in the nasty business of pursuing Jesus' death. Jesus' anger is fully appropriate: the synagogue attenders are deeply blameworthy; they deserve to be hurt; and they are morally repulsive to anyone with eyes to see. Furthermore, Jesus is in a moral position to make the "judgment" that his anger expresses. Jesus is pictured as angry in other passages as well, but he is never pictured as angry about the kind of minor offenses and frustrations that anger most of us.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible proclaims not only that God is often angry, but also that God is perfect love. Indeed, his anger is based in his love. And it is because Jesus loves the man with the withered hand, and because he loves God and his kingdom, that Jesus is angry at those who would obstruct compassion and plot against his life. But Jesus also loves the plotters; he is strongly disposed to see the beauty and wonderfulness in these creatures of God. The switch on his love-gestalt has a hair trigger, so that with the first sign of true repentance his eye for their goodness will overwhelm his eye for their sin.

Because God can be angry, we know that anger can be right and fitting. But is the anger of ordinary human beings ever right and fitting? The biblical answer is that even though our anger is not necessarily sinful, sin is a constant danger where anger is concerned. Sin always lurks in the vicinity. The classic text is Paul's: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). What on earth is human anger good for?

Biologists point out that anger is very useful as a signal to the offender. The anger of our fellows is like the sting of a hot pan: it is intended by our creator to elicit corrective action. Molly's anger tells Mort that he has done something offensive, and this is information he needs if he is to adjust his behavior in the future. A husband and wife who never show any anger are either perfect, which is unlikely, or they are not spontaneously communicating some of the things that are important to them.

Anger is a natural consequence of morally well-formed concerns. Consider a person who is completely disinclined to get angry. Nothing you can do will anger him. He is walking down the street with his old mother, and a couple of neighborhood knuckleheads walk up calmly, push her into the street, and spit on her. She is rattled and weeping, and he says, "Aw, Mom, I'm sorry that happened, but quit complaining; that sort of thing happens all the time in this neighborhood." The son's failure to get angry at the knuckleheads probably signals a defect in his character. Maybe he does not care enough whether his mother gets humiliated; or maybe he is so cowardly that he would rather condone the knuckleheads than arouse their wrath by condemning them; or maybe he does not have enough sense of his own dignity, and his mother's. Or maybe he does not have enough respect for the knuckleheads. He thinks: these are not responsible persons; they are just part of the neighborhood blight.

Anger expresses a sense of justice and a sense of being in the presence of responsible agents. In sinful human beings the sense of justice is often distorted, as in the case of a person who becomes livid when someone cuts in front of him in line; but people ought to have a sense of justice, and to have one is to be prone to anger.

So anger has some happy aspects: it is, ideally, a natural signal that somebody's behavior needs to be adjusted; it can be a sign of proper moral concerns and of a proper perception of moral truths. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective. But, as the Apostle's comment suggests, the problem with most of us is not that we are too slow to anger but that our anger tends to be sin and to spawn sin.

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**Is the anger of ordinary human beings ever right and fitting? The biblical answer is that even though our anger is not necessarily sinful, sin is a constant danger where anger is concerned. Sin always lurks in the vicinity.**

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Molly's anger at Mort is to their marriage as salt is to a good meal: it's good, but a little goes a long way. If, instead of lightly salting your food, you sit down to a hearty bowl of salt tablets and wash them down with a couple of glasses of seawater, first you gag and then you die. The same thing happens to a marriage – or any other relationship – that overdoses on anger. The reasons for this should be clear. In the moment that Molly is mad, Mort's good qualities fade into the shadow, and she sees a repugnant and unlovely person whom she wishes to see hurt. Love, by contrast, is a perception of the goodness of Mort, whom she wishes to see happy. The relationship can stand moments of anger if they are followed by forgiveness – feelings and expressions of love.

Molly is in a good position, because her love-gestalt switch is on a hair trigger where Mort is concerned. This is natural during the honeymoon. But it may come less naturally and take more effort afterwards, as Mort continues to be a little on the irresponsible side, and then is too mellow for her taste when she protests. The trigger on the love-gestalt switch may begin to rust a little, so she must force it, and oil it now and then with special kindnesses. The danger of letting the sun go down on your anger, again, and again, is that the switch will get so stiff that anger becomes the default mode: what you are most inclined to see in the other is her blameworthiness, her unattractiveness, and that she deserves to be hurt. The social dynamics of anger give the devil even more room for play than I have indicated so far. Perhaps our gestalt switches naturally find a default mode where they are most often set, but anger and love almost always have a context of personal interaction that encourages and tends to perpetuate the one setting or the other. Were Mort less mellow, he might respond to Molly's anger by getting angry himself and calling her childish or judgmental or coming up with something even more irrelevant and hurtful to say, like, "The whole idea of taking a honeymoon in Topeka is the stupidest thing I ever heard of. If I had married Helen Wessel I would be headed for Paris right now." To put it mildly, this does not help Molly get over her anger and get on with her love. So she may take an equally creative snip at Mort's emotional jugular, and the two of them spiral downwards into that enmity and bitterness that the devil so adores. Temporarily, both of their gestalt switches are locked in the hate position. If this becomes an unbroken pattern with them, love will die.

The enmity between human beings that unchecked anger promotes is not the only way anger gives the devil working room. We saw earlier that when a person is angry, she sees herself as in a position to look down in judgment on the one she is angry at. And we saw that when Molly is able to think of some offense of her own that is on a par with Mort's and to hold the two offenses in her mind, her anger is undercut. This judgmental aspect of anger means that if anger is practiced wholeheartedly and habitually, it can

lead to a very distorted sense of one's status vis-à-vis other sinners and vis-à-vis God. It can seem to a person that he or she is really quite a bit better than other sinners and has a special moral alliance with God.

Molly's position of being just as blameworthy in her own way as Mort is in his is the position we are all in, according to God. Before God we all have such a blotchy moral record that we are hardly in a position to judge one another. Anger, especially if indulged in steadfastly, makes us into judges in a way that only God can be a judge. Remembering our own sin, and remembering that God alone is God, is a powerful resource for diffusing our anger and strengthening our love.

But now our thinking seems to have gotten us into a conceptual fix. If seeing oneself as in a position to judge the offender is a part of anger, and if we are never in a position to judge one another, how can human anger ever be permissible? Instead of saying, "Be angry, but do not sin," shouldn't Paul have said, "Never be angry, because 'Judgment is mine,' says the Lord"?

We must admit that the condemnation ingredient in anger always involves an illusory self-perception. But sometimes illusions are an inevitable part of our human situation and ones that we get around not by eradicating them but by compensating for them. The sun will always look to us as though it goes down in the west, though we know that the earth is just rotating in such a way that the sun is becoming hidden to our part of the earth. We need not be deceived or make any false inferences from sunsets as long as we keep our larger

knowledge of the solar system in mind. If we never saw the sun as setting, something important would be lost from our lives.

In a similar way, it is useful and fitting, besides being unavoidable, for Christians to get angry from time to time. Recall the man whose mother was knocked into the street, who should rightly be outraged on her behalf as well as his own.

And Molly, when confronted

by Mort's delinquencies, need not always excuse them in light of her own failures. Sometimes she can see them in the more local and simple terms of Mort's responsible agency, his moral unattractiveness and his deserving to be hurt. It is true, after all, that Mort, and not she, performed *this* offense. But in the back of her mind should always be the catalog of her own offenses, forgiven by God, which she can bring into connection with Mort's. By being

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**When a person is angry, she is looking down in judgment on the one she is angry at. If anger is practiced wholeheartedly and habitually, it can seem to a person that she is better than other sinners and has a special moral alliance with God.**

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ever ready to add this information to her construal of the situation, she will be able to keep anger in its proper place so that it enhances, rather than erodes, her love.



The Apostle Paul often lists things that are contrary to the Holy Spirit and the new life of the Christian. In a couple of these lists he mentions “anger and wrath” as belonging to the old self and needing to be “stripped off.” In their place we are to clothe ourselves with such things as love and peace (see Colossians 3:5-17 and Ephesians 4:31). Since the Apostle allows that proper anger in small quantities can be good, perhaps he is speaking here not of all *instances* of anger but rather of the *vice* of irascibility – of being an angry sort of person. Molly’s anger at Mort is just an episode of anger and does not by itself indicate a general irascibility.

What would Molly be like if she became an *angry person*? Let us imagine Molly after twenty years of indulging anger. As Molly’s children say, “Mom gets mad about *everything!*” Jeff is sixteen now, and when he cooks lunch for himself he sometimes doesn’t clean up the kitchen. This infuriates Molly. But the really infuriating things, like the way politicians play political games with the well-being of poor people’s children or the way the rector speaks out of both sides of his mouth to members of the congregation, do not upset Molly at all. She gets mad only about things that affect her directly, and in those cases she is quite indiscriminate.

When Mort is late getting home from work and doesn’t call, Molly exaggerates the offense, looking for the ways it was truly heinous and underhanded and irresponsible and despicable. She just hates it when Mort has solid excuses for his delinquencies, and does her best to refute them. She likes to think of him, and all the people who offend her, as deeply culpable and completely inexcusable. Their good qualities become invisible to her. When she gets really mad, she would like to destroy people, or make them suffer agonies. She enjoys picturing her offenders as shriveled in humiliation for their offenses against her. If somebody points out that she too has failings, some of which are pretty similar to Mort’s and the kids’, she doesn’t want to see the point and in fact doesn’t see it. When Mort and Molly get into one of those spiraling exchanges of angry responses, Molly never takes the initiative to stop the cycle, but just plows ahead until either a relational disaster occurs or Mort takes responsibility by injecting an element of humanity.

Few things are uglier than a thoroughly irascible person, and it is clear why very early in the history of the Church anger came to be regarded as one of the seven deadly vices. When it gets deep and pervasive in a life it really does kill love and everything lovely. What a miserable life this Molly has, and how she spreads suffering wherever she goes!



But, since Molly is a fiction of my imagination, I can jolly well imagine her any way I like. And so I say that Molly and Mort have a future very different from the one I just sketched. The nightmare of the irascible Molly is only a warning. The real Molly has borne, with her Mort, fruit of the Holy Spirit. The real Molly does get angry, of course. Sometimes her anger is justified and sometimes it isn't. But Molly has the habit of monitoring her anger and bringing it into submission to God and to her love of those around her. When she finds herself spiraling downward into the bitterness of an angry exchange, she takes the initiative of saying a kind word, telling a joke on herself, offering a compromise, or making a gesture of reconciliation. And the funny thing she has found is that taking the initiative in an intelligent way hasn't meant that others treat her like a doormat. On the contrary, over the years Mort and the kids have responded by following her lead so that they often take the initiative, early in the process, to stop the nasty spiraling.

One thing Molly asks, when monitoring her anger, is whether she is exaggerating the offense. If she finds herself "demonizing" the offender, she takes herself in hand and says, "Let's see if we can find extenuating factors. Were the kids tired when they became so whiny? Had I done something earlier that provoked Mort into that unkind word?" Sometimes her spirit resists hearing

excuses on behalf of the offender, but she finds that if she presses herself just a little to search them out and hear them, they are really not so humiliating to acknowledge, and it is an exhilarating experience to see love emerging from the storm, the devil cramped in the strait-jacket of the Holy Spirit.

The result of these disciplines, over time, is that Molly never feels so angry

that she wants to devastate the offender. Even in the midst of anger, she remains quite open to perceiving his or her good qualities; the default mode of her gestalt switch has become more and more prone to the love position. And she seldom gets angry at all about merely trivial offenses against her own person; the anger she does feel is much more often occasioned by real cases of significant injustice.<sup>4</sup>

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**Few things are uglier than a thoroughly irascible person, and it is clear why anger came to be regarded as one of the seven deadly vices. When it gets deep and pervasive in a life it really does kill love and everything lovely.**

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## NOTES

1 For a brief history of this nineteenth-century illusion drawing, see “Young Girl and Old Woman Optical Illusion,” (August 14, 2011), [www.opticalillusioncollection.com/2011/08/young-girl-and-old-woman-optical.html](http://www.opticalillusioncollection.com/2011/08/young-girl-and-old-woman-optical.html) (accessed July 11, 2014). Many contemporary variations are available on the Internet.

2 For more on God’s anger, see Michael C. McCarthy, S.J., “Divine Wrath and Human Anger” *Anger*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 37-45.

3 For an exploration of Jesus’ expressions of anger, see Stephen Voorwinde, “Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?” *Anger*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 30-36.

4 This article is based on my “Tempering the Spirit of Wrath: Anger and the Christian Life,” *The Christian Century* (June 18-25, 1997), 588-592.

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# Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger

BY RYAN WEST

A wide gap looms between knowing *that* we should eliminate inappropriate anger from our lives and knowing *how* to do so. The Christian tradition is rich with practical guidance for us, including the anger antidotes of watchfulness, practicing virtue, and prayer.

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When Bob Roberts envisages two life trajectories for his fictional Molly – the irascible Molly who indulges her anger for twenty years and now gets mad about every slight that affects her directly, and the gentle Molly who brings her anger under control and bears the fruit of the Holy Spirit – we root for the gentle one and rejoice when he chooses to make her “real.” We do not wish anyone – ourselves, our family and friends, or even strangers – to descend into the miserable, loveless nightmare of wrath that he describes.<sup>1</sup> Yet, we live in what Henry Fairlie has rightly called “an age of Wrath,” and many of us are children of our age.<sup>2</sup> Molly had the good fortune of being transformed ever so quickly from wrathful to virtuous by authorial fiat. Our transformation, however, if it is to happen at all, will surely be more difficult and drawn out.

The Apostle Paul instructs believers to “get rid” of anger (Colossians 3:8) and to “put away...all bitterness and wrath and anger” (Ephesians 4:31). While many Christians (rightly, in my view) allow for the possibility of “righteous” anger, these Pauline warnings are indicative of a more pervasive theme in Scripture: that much anger is not righteous and must be “gotten rid of,” and we have an active role to play in getting rid of it. There is a gap,

though, between knowing *that* we should eliminate inappropriate anger and knowing *how* to do so. Many frustrated souls call this gap home. My aim is to help fill this gap by offering some practical guidance to those who want to heed Paul's anger-ridding exhortation.

My advice is come by honestly: my name is Ryan, and I am a recovering angry dad. Allow me to explain.

My children are among the greatest joys in my life. They also know how to push my buttons. There was a time when I saw my anger over my children's misdeeds as not only justified but morally necessary – it is my job as a parent to train my children in goodness, after all, and my anger communicates to them the nastiness of their wrongdoings. At some point, though, my perspective began to shift. Perhaps it was when I noticed a pattern developing: Child disobeys, Daddy gets angry, Daddy cools off, Daddy realizes Child's "disobedience" was less a flagrant violation of filial piety and more an instance of (somewhat) innocent playfulness, Daddy apologizes for getting so upset. The pattern has recurred more often than I would like to admit. (Kids are rambunctious, you know, and I am rather hard-headed.) It dawned on me that I was starting to look like irascible Molly: the default mode of my gestalt switch was rusting in the anger position rather than the love position. I was more inclined to see my children's blameworthiness and unattractiveness and to wish them to be hurt, than to notice their loveliness and goodness and to wish them to be happy. Something had to change. I needed a plan.

As it happens, the most helpful tool for developing my anger attack plan was coming to understand the nature of anger. Anger is a way of "seeing" that presents the world to us in terms of blameworthy offense, presents us to ourselves as being in a moral position to judge, and breeds in us a desire for "pay back." Thus, getting rid of inappropriate anger – anger that is either misdirected, too quick to flare up, blazing too hot, or too slow to burn out – will involve (among other things) reshaping one's heart in such a way that one is not so apt to see the world in anger's terms. The Christian tradition – especially the seven deadly sins tradition – is rich with practical guidance for retraining our ethical vision in this way. Here I draw on that tradition, adapting (somewhat loosely) some of the anger antidotes proposed by Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century.<sup>3</sup> I focus on three potential remedies – watchfulness, practicing virtue, and prayer – highlighting how these cures can help redirect and retrain the "eyes of our hearts."

## **WATCHFULNESS**

The sort of watchfulness I have in mind has two aspects: a kind of self-reconnaissance and then a tactical implementation of the "intel" that one gathers. In any battle, combatants must "know the enemy." In the battle for our character, this military maxim partially merges with the

Socratic dictum, “Know thyself,” for we are at war not only with “the world” and “the devil,” but also with our (old) self. Thus, Rebecca DeYoung is wise to suggest that, “if we find ourselves habitually wrathful, the first question to ask is what we are really getting angry about and why.”<sup>4</sup> The Christian tradition has identified a number of common sources of inappropriate anger, including, but not limited to, our over-attachment to worldly goods, unrealistic expectations of the people in our lives, an inflated sense of our own importance, and a misinformed or misdirected passion for justice. Familiarity with these patterns of the fallen heart is a helpful first step toward knowing ourselves. But it is not enough. We must also appreciate which of these ailments beset *us*. That is, my knowledge must not simply be of the *human* condition, but of *my* condition. And my knowledge cannot simply be a matter of “knowing the facts” about myself, but must include “heart knowledge,” a measure of motivating insight about my inner life that includes repentance and desire to change. This can be a tall order, given the relative opacity of our hearts (see Jeremiah 17:9). But we are not without resources.

To help discern both the roots and the (in)appropriateness of one’s anger, DeYoung recommends keeping an anger journal. For one week, be “on the watch”: record your episodes of anger, briefly noting the cause and rating the intensity on a five-point scale. Then put the journal away for a week. When you return to the journal, duly cooled, ask yourself: Was my anger justified? Too quick? Too intense? Too long-lasting? Did I express it well? In the heat of the

moment, it is easy to justify our anger. Indeed, anger tends to distort our perception, typically magnifying the putative offense, causing it to loom large in our moral vision. Anger is, in this way, self-deceptively self-justifying. Practices like this one give us distance and perspective with which to assess ourselves. Moreover, the insights gleaned from this kind of watchful self-examination—particularly if done

prayerfully, in conversation with trusted loved ones, and leaning heavily on God’s Spirit—can equip us to be more effectively “on the watch” in the future. Here we come to the second aspect of watchfulness mentioned above, the tactical implementation of self-intel.

As we come to understand ourselves and our ire, we can learn to recognize internal and external cues of impending anger and act preemptively

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**Getting rid of inappropriate anger—anger that is either misdirected, too quick to flare up, blazing too hot, or too slow to burn out—will involve reshaping one’s heart in such a way that one is not so apt to see the world in anger’s terms.**

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to avoid it. The sort of ongoing watchfulness I have in mind is akin to defensive driving. Experienced drivers appreciate the devastating consequences of inadequate caution, and more or less automatically monitor for potential hazards. A ball rolls into the street, and we scan for a ball-chasing child; an overgrown tree blocks our view of an intersection, and we check a few extra times for oncoming traffic; and so on. Analogously, the watchful person working on her anger will appreciate her potential hazards and will monitor for cues that anger may be just around the corner, so to speak.

An example may help. Consider Rodney, a repentant road rager. Through self-examination, Rodney has come to appreciate that his heart is set on promoting what DeYoung calls the “Me-first agenda” — “I want what I want, and woe to anyone or anything that gets in my way.”<sup>5</sup> He now sees that his single-minded pursuit of his way on the highway is the root of his tendency to be set off by any and every delay, even though (in his cooler moments) he knows, for instance, that having to wait through a rush hour traffic jam hardly qualifies as a blameworthy offense. When it becomes clear that his evening commute is going to take longer than he would like, then, Watchful Rodney may say to himself, “Look out! You’re in danger of overreacting!” Having warned himself, he is better equipped to fight actively against his overreaction, perhaps by actively attending to how utterly unremarkable this delay is, or by reminding himself (possibly even aloud) that other people need to get home just as badly as he does. In these ways, Rodney actively disrupts his anger by catching it before it starts and reinterpreting his situation for himself in non-offense terms. At first, this self-monitoring will not be automatic. It will take time for the angry person to recognize what his hot spots are; and learning to take his anger cues *as cues to fight against anger*, rather than *as cues to become angry*, will presumably be a new cognitive activity that requires conscious effort. Eventually, though, after he gains enough experience, vigilant watchfulness will become as automatic as scanning for kids when a ball rolls in front of his car.

So, the watchful person appreciates her own propensity to anger, and is poised to notice cues of its imminent onset. But what, precisely, is she supposed to *do* to counteract it? Rodney gave us a hint of one strategy. Two other good options would be to *practice virtue* and to *pray*.

## THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUE

When Paul urges believers to “get rid of anger,” he also instructs them to “clothe” themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgivingness, love, peace, and gratitude. These virtues are good in themselves — that is, we should seek them for their own sakes. But they are also instrumentally good: “putting them on” can serve as an instrument for “taking off” anger. For as we “practice” these virtues — and I intend a strong analogy with athletic or musical practice — we actively retrain our emotional perceptions of our situations. Each of the virtues the Apostle

commends can counteract anger in its own way, and the varieties of anger may call for different virtue practices. Space precludes a treatment of each, so let me emphasize one: gentleness. (I invite the reader to explore how practicing the other virtues could defuse anger, and what such practice might look like concretely. The “real” Molly is quite skilled in some these.)

The virtuously gentle (or meek) person is not anger-free; significant injustice draws her ire. But she is not angered by the trivial slights that provoke many of us to wrath, and the anger she does experience is appropriately tempered in duration and intensity. As such, the gentle are characteristically tender and calm, avoiding harshness and severity in favor of mildness. Not so the angry. The angry parent—myself included—is inclined toward manifestly un-gentle behavior: flushed face, bulging eyes, raised voice, firm grip, and aggressive movement. Practicing gentleness involves intentionally avoiding these outward manifestations of anger, and replacing them with manifestations of gentleness. This can be very difficult. But the effort pays dividends.<sup>6</sup> Here is how it can work.

My son is very good at whining, pouting, fussing, and just about every other tantrum-trick known to children. It is very natural for me to react to his tantrums with tantrums of my own. But I have come to appreciate this about myself, and so am “on the watch” and ready to counteract my incipient anger through gentleness. When his tantrum starts, I follow my gentleness script. I lower myself to his height by squatting down, rather than towering over him (both literally and

“morally”). I intentionally use a calm voice, rather than my instinctive yell. I call him “my precious boy,” rather than using his first, *middle*, and *LAST* names. I tenderly put my arm around him, avoiding all aggression. My aim in these gentle practices is not simply to avoid *expressing* inappropriate anger. (It is possible, if one is sufficiently strong willed, to act gently while seething under the surface. This

should not be our ultimate goal, even if it may be a necessary waypoint.) Rather, my aim is to avoid *becoming* inappropriately angry at all. I still have a way to go in this, but I am pleased to report that it often works. One reason it works, I think, is that my gentle behavior provides me with an interpretation of the situation that is in deep tension with anger: when I observe myself acting gently, it is very hard—though, I

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**Practicing gentleness involves intentionally avoiding outward manifestations of anger—a flushed face, bulging eyes, raised voice, firm grip, and aggressive movement—and replacing them with manifestations of gentleness.**

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admit, not impossible – to see my son as a blameworthy offender and myself as his victim. Another reason is that when I remain “cool,” I am better able to “see” the factors that should count against my anger – my son’s age, his tiredness, his hunger, his non-malevolent intent, and so on – factors to which my angry self is blind. This is especially so when the practice explicitly calls such mitigating factors to mind (“my precious boy”). Though enacting this script was quite difficult at first, by God’s grace I often do not even have to think about it anymore. In this way, the practice of gentleness has shaded toward genuine gentleness, and has made it easier for me to keep my gestalt switch in the love position: my precious boy does not look like an offender to me very often; he simply looks precious.

### **PRAYER**

A third tactic in the battle against anger is prayer. Surely the chief reason is that prayer is an appeal for divine assistance, and without God we can do nothing. However, here I will focus on the direct effect prayer can have on us, in changing our “take” on a situation.

First, consider how on-the-spot prayer can change our perception. Praying can become automated in a positive way – not robotic and without meaning, but habitual and second nature. For instance, many Christians have developed the habit of saying the Jesus Prayer throughout the day: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The novice must focus on her praying if she wants to recite the prayer dozens or even hundreds of times in a day. The veteran, though, need not *endeavor* to pray the prayer; she simply *does* it, without “trying.” It is possible for such a prayer to be robotic, in the pejorative sense of the term. But it can also be deeply meaningful. Indeed, it can be deeply meaningful even when done somewhat robotically.

Other automated prayers – like the brief, condemnatory ones that might slip from our angry tongues when someone cuts us off in traffic – are not so nice. Still, such unsavory supplications are worth pondering. The person who has habituated herself to damning offenders has (unintentionally) attached a prayer to a cue: perceived offenses. I want to suggest that the person trying to put aside anger could redeem this mental mechanism. One way might be to adapt the Jesus Prayer as an automatic response to offense. When an anger cue is present, we might pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on *us sinners*,” including both ourselves and our offenders (whether actual or merely perceived) in our prayer. This is not only a good way to ask for God’s help and to heed Jesus’s exhortation to pray for our enemies, it is also a direct assault on our angry “take” on the situation. By praying that God might have mercy on the jerk that just cut me off, I counteract my desire that she be punished. In asking for mercy for myself, a sinner, I redirect my attention to my own liability to wrongdoing – perhaps the very same sort of wrongdoing I have just suffered – and so may be less tempted to take on the role of judge. By connecting myself to my offender –

"us sinners" – I begin the process of reconciliation, or preemptively avoid the break in relationship that comes with anger, by attending to our shared membership in the community of those for whom Christ died and who stand in need of God's forgiveness. In these and other ways, anger is undercut.

We can supplement such on-the-spot prayers, and the shifts in perspective they may precipitate or embody, with off-the-spot prayers. Here is an excerpt from one such prayer crafted by Mother Teresa:

Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and, whilst nursing them, minister unto you.

Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you, and say: "Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve you."

Lord, give me this seeing faith, then my work will never be monotonous. I will ever find joy in humoring the fancies and gratifying the wishes of all poor sufferers.

O beloved sick, how doubly dear you are to me, when you personify Christ; and what a privilege is mine to be allowed to tend you.<sup>7</sup>

Though few of us share Mother Teresa's precise calling to minister to

the sick, we interact daily with other people – from impatient drivers to our children, from over-demanding bosses to our spouses – who sometimes fall under the descriptions "the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable." I fully admit, it can be very hard for me to see my Terrible Two as a disguise worn by Christ, or the third diaper change in one night as a sweet opportunity to serve the Risen Lord. It is far more natural for me to regard my fussy son as an offender, and his dirty diapers as irritating interruptions. But both aspects of my situation admit of reconstrual. C. S. Lewis puts it well:

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**Prayer is a key tactic in battling anger. The chief reason is that prayer is an appeal for divine assistance, and without God we can do nothing. But here I focus on the direct effect prayer has on us, in changing our "take" on a situation.**

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The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's 'own,' or 'real' life. The truth is of

course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life – the life God is sending one day by day; what one calls one's 'real life' is a phantom of one's own imagination. This at least is what I see at moments of insight: but it's hard to remember it all the time.<sup>8</sup>

One way we could remember this insight more often, and thereby regard the unpleasant things in our lives, would be to pray Mother Teresa's prayer (or a version of it adapted to our own station in life) with some regularity. (Her prayer is designated for *daily* use in the Missionaries of Charity Children's Home.<sup>9</sup>) Doing so not only enlists God's help, but also provides us with an alternative set of interpretive categories and primes us to apply them. In a sense, as we speak to God, we say to ourselves: "Put away your offense lenses, and stop thinking about punishment. Christ is before you; look for him; serve him. This is your real life; and this is life indeed." To the extent we can make headway here, it will be anger's undoing.

## **CONCLUSION**

I have sketched an anger-ridding plan, but let me close with two words of caution. First, dealing with anger is rather person-specific. (Remember, we are responding not just to the generic human condition, but to our own.) In presenting the foregoing anger remedies, my examples have largely been drawn from my own experience. While I have tried to use widely applicable examples, it may be that my experience is unhelpfully narrow. Thus, others will likely need to modify my examples, or even devise wholly different tactics of their own. I hope, though, that my examples, and the more general strategy outlined here, provide enough of a sense of how to proceed that the reader can develop and implement her own anger attack plan.

My second word of caution is this: be patient with yourself. Coming to terms with our anger is difficult; figuring out how to fight against it takes time, and successfully retraining our habits of construal and desire requires much more time. We should not expect to turn into paragons of love or gentleness or any of the other virtues overnight. In other words, we need to learn to practice patience with regard to our own progress in spiritual development. We should strive to appreciate God's patience toward us and to emulate his attitude. Toward this end we would do well to pray another portion of Mother Teresa's prayer. In these concluding petitions she once again gives us words that address not only God, but also our own hearts:

And O God, while you are Jesus, my patient, deign also to be to me a patient Jesus, bearing with my faults, looking only to my intention, which is to love and serve you in the person of each of your sick.

Lord, increase my faith, bless my efforts and work, now and forevermore. Amen.<sup>10</sup>

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**NOTES**

1 I borrow the character “Molly” from Robert C. Roberts, “Anger in the Christian Life,” *Anger, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 11-20, and introduce a few of my own to illustrate the vice of anger and its correction.

2 Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 90.

3 In *Four Faces of Anger: Seneca, Evagrius Ponticus, Cassian, and Augustine* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), Gertrude Gillette discusses Evagrius’s remedies for anger under six headings: discernment of thoughts, reconciliation, virtue, prayer, asceticism, and gentleness.

4 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 123.

5 *Ibid.*, 122.

6 Evagrius commends gentleness as the most important cure for anger (see Gillette, *Four Faces of Anger*, chapter 2). His judgment coheres with my experience: practicing gentleness has been the most helpful tactic in my effort to get rid of inappropriate child-directed anger.

7 This prayer, “Jesus My Patient,” is quoted in Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986 [1971]), 74–75.

8 C. S. Lewis, *The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 1914-1963*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 499.

9 Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God*, 74.

10 *Ibid.*, 75.

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# Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?

BY STEPHEN VOORWINDE

**Although often sourced in his foreknowledge, the way Jesus handles his anger provides a model for Christians today. He knows how to be indignant, irate, and even furious, but without the slightest trace of derision, contempt, or abuse.**

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One of Jesus' genuinely "hard sayings" is found in the Sermon on the Mount, "I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:22a).<sup>1</sup> From as early as the second century Christian scribes sought to soften this statement by adding the phrase "without cause," a reading that has been retained by both the King James and the New King James translations. Popular as this addition has become, it is unlikely to have been original.<sup>2</sup> Jesus does not qualify anger in this way. He is not referring to anger "without cause," but to anger pure and simple. His claim is stark and absolute. Anger will lead to judgment.

Such an unqualified reading of Jesus' statement is not without its problems. On several occasions in the Gospels Jesus would appear to become quite angry himself. So how does his behavior square with his strong denunciation of anger in the Sermon on the Mount? All the expressions of Jesus' anger in the Gospels are worth examining in light of this question.

## **THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE**

In discussions of Jesus' anger, the example that is most often cited is his cleansing of the Jerusalem temple. All four Gospels record this event. On closer inspection, however, none of the accounts make any explicit reference

to Jesus' anger. The Synoptic Gospels record what appear to be violent actions on the part of Jesus. They report that he drove out of the temple area "all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:15). Luke's version of events is more muted. He simply records that Jesus "entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling" (Luke 19:45). Nevertheless, in each case readers are left with the distinct impression that Jesus is expressing outrage at what he sees happening around him. In point of fact, however, none of the Synoptic accounts attributes any emotion whatsoever to Jesus in connection with this incident. A clue to this silence is suggested by Mark's account which alone indicates a day's interval between Jesus looking around at everything in the temple (Mark 11:11) and his cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15-17). This interval leads Richard France to conclude, "The day's delay mentioned by Mark suggests...that it was less a spontaneous outburst of anger than a planned act of defiance and public demonstration of the Messiah's authority."<sup>3</sup> So perhaps Matthew, Mark, and Luke deliberately underplay Jesus' anger in what is often regarded as his clearest expression of the emotion in the New Testament. Far from being an expression of uncontrolled rage, Jesus' actions in the temple are well thought through and carefully premeditated.

In John there is no reticence to attribute an emotion to Jesus in connection with the temple cleansing, but the emotion specifically mentioned is not anger, but zeal. "His disciples remembered that it is written: 'Zeal for your house will consume me'" (John 2:17). John's description of events is more vivid than the Synoptic Gospels'; he adds more details. He alone mentions the whip and the fact that all the sheep and cattle are driven from the temple area, as well as the challenge to those selling doves, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:15-16). These words and actions are very aptly described by the word *zeal*. Zeal is more than anger. It is the ardor of red-hot passion. What Jesus sees happening in the temple precincts at Passover is enough to make his blood boil. The best way to describe his emotional state is the disciples' later recollection of Psalm 69:9, where the Psalmist expresses a passion for the house of God — so much so that it is all-consuming. It eats him up. The same is true of Jesus when he cleanses the temple. But there is more; the Psalmist says, "Zeal for your house *consumes* me" (present tense) or "*has consumed* me" (past tense). Both are legitimate translations of the Hebrew perfect tense used in Psalm 69:9. But John 2:17 adopts neither of these alternatives. It deliberately opts for the future tense: "Zeal for your house *will consume* me."<sup>4</sup> Why this change? The reason lies in the nature of Jesus' zeal. For him it is more than an all-consuming passion. Something is yet to happen. The Messiah must die. Zeal for God's house will not just eat him up psychologically, as was the case with the Psalmist. Jesus has more than a passionate ardor for the house of God. He has a zeal that will consume him utterly and totally. This quotation from the Psalter is a prediction of his death.

Strictly speaking then, neither John nor the Synoptics see Jesus' temple cleansing as an expression of anger. The most that can be said for the Synoptics is that they describe an incident of well managed outrage. John, on the other hand, refers to it as an all-consuming zeal. This contrast should not be lost on us. In the Synoptic narrative the growing conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities reaches a new intensity at this point. He takes control of the temple, the very center of Jewish religious life and ritual. It is by God's authority that he does these things. In John's Gospel he acts in his capacity as the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36). It is dangerous for a lamb to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. This Lamb must die – but not yet, for his hour had not yet come (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20).

### **A SABBATH HEALING**

The healing of the man with the withered hand in the synagogue at Capernaum is recorded by all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:1-11), but only Mark reports Jesus' emotional reaction. "He looked around at them in anger...deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" (Mark 3:5). These emotions are more understandable in their context. They come toward the end of Mark's first controversy section (Mark 2:1-3:6). The religious leaders' antagonism toward Jesus has been mounting steadily. Finally it culminates in the Pharisees' plot with the Herodians to kill him (Mark 3:6). For the first time in Mark's narrative the conflict has become deadly.

The immediate context throws further light on Jesus' intense feelings at this point. They set the scene for the healing and come in response to the Pharisees' stubborn refusal to answer Jesus' simple but well-targeted question, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). The implications are clear: by healing the man Jesus is saving life and doing good, and by plotting to kill him the Pharisees are doing evil. With superhuman insight Jesus reads their minds and knows their hearts.

Mark's account provides a penetrating insight into Jesus' psyche. His anger and distress complement one another. It would be tempting to conclude that his anger is tempered by his grief. But this is not entirely correct. More accurately, anger is the outward emotion and distress the inward. His anger is felt by all who sit under his wrathful gaze during that tense and hushed moment in the synagogue. His distress lies deeper, in the inner recesses of his soul. With perceptive insight into human nature, Benjamin Warfield has observed that "the fundamental psychology of anger is curiously illustrated by this account; for anger always has pain as its root, and is a reaction of the soul against what gives it discomfort."<sup>5</sup> The hardness of the Pharisees' hearts deeply hurts Jesus and his anger rises in response to the cause of his pain.

### **INDIGNATION AT THE DISCIPLES**

As was the case with the healing of the man with the shriveled hand, the pericope of the blessing of the children is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). Once again Mark is unique

in recording an emotion of Jesus. When he sees the disciples rebuking people who are bringing little children to have him touch them, Jesus is indignant (Mark 10:14). Including this detail in his Gospel is clearly a bold move on Mark's part. It appears that he is attributing a rather unpleasant emotion to Jesus. The other contexts in which he mentions indignation are never positive. The ten other disciples are indignant with James and John for asking Jesus for special places of honor in his coming kingdom (Mark 10:41; cf. Matthew 20:24). At the home of Simon the Leper the disciples are mistakenly indignant at the woman who anoints Jesus because they think it is such a waste of money (Mark 14:4; cf. Matthew 26:8). By noting Jesus' indignation, Mark seems to link him to his disciples at times when they are obviously not at their best.

The remaining New Testament references further underscore the unpleasantness of this emotion. Matthew notes the indignation of the scribes and Pharisees when the children in the temple are shouting, "Hosanna to the son of David" (Matthew 21:15). Luke observes that a synagogue ruler is indignant because Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14). Jesus' indignation therefore does not place him in the best of company.

Why is Jesus so aroused and angry when the disciples prevent children from being brought to him? Why this strong, negative emotion? There appears to be two reasons. First, by their actions the disciples are failing dismally to put into practice Jesus' earlier teaching that to receive a child in his name is to receive him (Mark 9:37). The second reason comes from the immediate context: "Let the little children

come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:14-15). The disciples are hindering from coming to Jesus the very kind of people to whom the kingdom of God belongs. These children are such suitable candidates for the kingdom not because of

attractive, childlike qualities they have to offer, but—in sharp contrast to the rich young ruler in the preceding periscope—because they have nothing to offer at all. Entry into the kingdom is by grace, and by grace alone.

Therefore what really incenses Jesus is not just the fact that the disciples have such a tenuous understanding of God's grace but that they manage to stand in its way. By hindering the children's access to Jesus they are also

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obstructing God's grace. As a result, they earn Jesus' ire. It cannot be a pleasant experience for the disciples to be on the receiving end of his indignation, but they need to learn an important lesson.

### THE CASE OF AN UNUSUAL GREEK VERB

The verb *embrimaomai* is used only rarely in Scripture. Its sole occurrence in the Septuagint is in Daniel 11:30 where the Romans rebuke Antiochus Epiphanes. In the New Testament it is used five times. In four of these occurrences Jesus is the subject of the verb. Twice he sternly warns people he has just healed not to tell anyone about the miracle (Matthew 9:30; Mark 1:43). At the tomb of Lazarus it says twice that Jesus is deeply moved (John 11:33, 38). These translations of the verb in the Gospels certainly have emotional overtones, but how can we know that anger is the underlying emotion in each case?

The only other occurrence of *embrimaomai* is instructive. In Mark 14:5 those at the home of Simon the Leper harshly rebuke the woman who has anointed Jesus for wasting the expensive perfume rather than selling it and giving the money to the poor. In this instance anger is explicitly mentioned. In the previous verse we are told that some people who are present at the dinner are angry or indignant at what was happening. This anger then spills over into their speech rebuking the woman. The Gospel reports "They scolded her" (ESV, NRSV), "They criticized her harshly" (TEV), "They snarled" (LB), "They turned upon her with fury" (NEB), "They were angry with her" (JB). It would seem a bold move to attribute such a strongly negative emotion to Jesus in the other contexts, and most English translations appear reluctant to do so. Yet if *embrimaomai* is understood consistently across all five Gospel occurrences, some fascinating perspectives on Jesus' anger are opened up.

Why would he be angry with two men whose sight he has just restored (Matthew 9:30) or with a beggar whom he has cleansed from leprosy (Mark 1:43)? In both cases the reason for the anger is essentially the same. He is angry with them not for what they have done but for what they will do. They are about to show flagrant disregard for his clear command to keep these miracles quiet. Instead, they are going to spread the news like wildfire. This will make his mission dangerous and his ministry more difficult. In Matthew the stage is set for a conflict that will escalate into the "Beelzebul controversy" (Matthew 12:22-37). In Mark the man's loose tongue has major implications for Jesus' early ministry in Galilee: "Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places" (Mark 1:45). On his eventual return to Capernaum he will be dogged by increasingly hostile opposition (Mark 2:1-3:6). In his stern rebukes to the formerly blind and leprous men, Jesus foresees the looming storm. His anger is driven by his foreknowledge. The way his supplicants had approached him had hinted at his divinity (Matthew 9:27-28; Mark 1:40). He now responds in character.<sup>6</sup>

The same dynamics would appear to operate as Jesus approaches the tomb of Lazarus. Seeing that Mary and the Jews who had come along with

her are weeping, “he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33). After shedding tears himself, he goes to the tomb and is “once more deeply moved” (John 11:38). Jesus’ emotions become decidedly complex at this point. Outwardly he expresses grief. Hence the reaction of the Jews, “See how he loved him” (John 11:36). But inwardly he is driven by indignation. His anger is triggered by the weeping of Mary and her companions. Yet he is not angry at their weeping, but rather because of their weeping. As Warfield explains:

It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he has come into the world to destroy. Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes, but this is incidental. His soul is held by rage.... Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe, Jesus smites on our behalf.<sup>7</sup>

In Lazarus’ death Jesus foresees his own. It is probably this that disturbs him most of all. Amidst the tears he is profoundly enraged. This is no ordinary human emotion. Once again it is driven by his foreknowledge of what lies ahead. In John’s Gospel the raising of Lazarus becomes the proximate cause of Jesus’ death (John 11:45-53). Lazarus is a friend for whom Jesus is prepared to lay down his life (John 11:11; 15:13).

## **CONCLUSION**

Jesus’ anger in the Gospels is therefore a nuanced emotion expressed in a variety of ways. His zeal or passionate ardor is unleashed on those who dare to turn his Father’s

house into a market (John 2:17). He is angry with the Pharisees who are about to plot his death, pained at their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5). He is indignant with his disciples standing in the way of children (Mark 10:14). He harshly rebukes those who are about to flagrantly disobey his clear command not to spread the news of a miracle (Matthew 9:30; Mark 1:43).

At the tomb of Lazarus, he is enraged at death and the devil (John 11:33, 38). Apart from his indignation with the disciples, there is an element of supernatural insight or divine foresight in every case. We catch glimpses of the wrath of God. There are also forebodings of his death.

For all the hints of divinity that might be detected in Jesus’ various expressions of anger, the question still needs to be asked whether his

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behavior lives up to the high standards he sets for others in the Sermon on the Mount. Does he in fact practice what he preaches?

Jesus' statement that "everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:22) must of course be read in context. In the same verse Jesus speaks of that brother being called "Raca" and "a fool," both strong terms of abuse that carry overtones of insult, derision, and contempt. Clearly Jesus never expresses his anger in that way. His is never the kind of anger that, according to his teaching, would have been in violation of the sixth commandment not to murder. Although expressed strongly, and on occasion even violently, his wrath always falls within the category of sinless anger or righteous indignation. Jesus' behavior clearly exemplifies the later instruction by the apostle Paul: "Be angry [an imperative!], but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26). Jesus' anger is always well controlled, precisely targeted, and short-lived.

But not only is Jesus' anger expressed differently than sinful human anger, it also is generated differently. His anger is not an instant response to provocation, but a function of his impeccable holiness. Although often sourced in his foreknowledge, and at times best understood in the light of his coming Passion, the way Jesus handles his anger still provides a model for Christians today. He knows how to be indignant, irate, and even furious, but without the slightest trace of derision, contempt, or abuse. The high standards that he sets for others are the standards he lives up to himself.

## NOTES

1 The New Testament translations in this article are my own.

2 Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, second edition (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies, 1994), 11.

3 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 783.

4 For a detailed discussion of the textual and grammatical issues underlying this change of tense, see Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel: Human or Divine?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 132-136.

5 Benjamin B. Warfield, "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord," in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950), 108.

6 For further detailed discussion of these incidents, see Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Gospels* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 21-24, and 68-74.

7 Benjamin B. Warfield, "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord," 117.



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# Divine Wrath and Human Anger

BY MICHAEL C. MCCARTHY, S. J.

**Embarrassment over references to God's ire is not a recent phenomenon or the product of modern religious sensibilities. Early Christian theologians were deeply sensitive to the destructive consequences of human anger, and feared it would be the context in which believers came to understand divine wrath.**

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**T**heologians of all generations have betrayed discomfort with images of an angry God. In our age, references to supernal rage seem particularly liable to abuse. We are acutely aware of the ways that religious sentiment can fuel and legitimate violence. For example, the deaths of soldiers, terrorist acts, AIDS, and even the disaster of Hurricane Katrina have been claimed as signs of God's anger for a whole range of sins. One highly controversial group that has protested at military funerals avows that the United States is "pour[ing] gasoline on the raging flames of God Almighty's wrath which is punishing America by killing and maiming troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Worse and more of it is coming."<sup>1</sup>

Although most people resist and recoil from any notion that God kills and maims, Scripture is replete with references to divine indignation. How we should 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 down huge hail stones on the wicked (16:21). "God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath"

(16:19b, NIV).<sup>2</sup> This punishment, moreover, does not only await some future apocalypse. Paul tells the Romans that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people” (Romans 1:18, NIV), and the Gospel of John declares that God’s anger remains on those who disobey the Son (John 3:36).

If some believers relish such images, others find them an embarrassment.<sup>3</sup> 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 by no means a recent phenomenon or the product of modern religious sensibilities. On the contrary, patristic authors were deeply uneasy with references to divine wrath and employed a range of strategies in order to minimize the potential harm, scandal, or misunderstanding such biblical passages might engender. All 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.

References to God’s ire presented 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 placed great emphasis on 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. In this article I will focus on four North African writers: Tertullian (d. 225), Lactantius (d. 320), Arnobius (d. 330), and Augustine (d. 430).

## **TWO STRATEGIES: DENIAL AND DISTANCING**

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 worshipped Saturn – in Peter Brown’s words: “an exacting, ill-defined father called, in reverent dread, ‘The Old Man.’”<sup>4</sup> 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 Judgement hereafter, and on the consequent necessity of propitiating the wrath of God. [Theirs] was a religion of fear and dread.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, “[t]he God of the African Church writers was conceived as a Being capable of the worst human

passions, of implacable jealousy, rage, and desire for vengeance."<sup>6</sup> Anxious at the easy projection of mortal fury onto God, these early Christian thinkers generally employed one of two strategies: the denial of God's wrath and the clear distancing of divine from human anger.

The North African rhetorician and convert Arnobius of Sicca is one early Christian scholar who denied God's wrath outright. Arnobius's treatise *Adversus Nationes* reveals his strong belief in a theological system for which divine anger can have no place. To be angry, Arnobius says, is to be insane, to rage, to be carried away into the lust for vengeance, and to be in a frenzy by alienation of the heart.<sup>7</sup> Such gods would be worse than beasts, monsters, and deadly snakes that can contain their poison. True gods, he asserts, "neither grow wrathful nor indulge a grudge, nor do they devise cunning stratagems to harm anyone."<sup>8</sup>

Unlike other Christian thinkers, 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. The philosophical tradition in which Arnobius grounds himself holds that "all agitation of spirit is unknown to the gods."<sup>9</sup> In consequence, gods can never suffer anger, which is "far removed from them and from their state of existence."<sup>10</sup> Arnobius's failure to wrestle with Scripture limits his use for the theological tradition, but it does suggest the great anxiety at attributing violent and destructive human characteristics to those we admire and worship as just, blessed, and unchanging.

Although a minority of early Christian scholars disavowed God's wrath, the majority defended it by insisting vigorously on the gap between divine wrath and human anger. While it is surely to be dreaded, God's anger functions within many 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.

Tertullian, a prolific early Christian author from Carthage, argues in *Adversus Marcionem* that divine goodness entails the ability to judge. He

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claims that divine wrath is a necessary component of justice and 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. Later in his treatise Tertullian complains that rejecting 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 by which he exercises judgment."<sup>11</sup> Tertullian urges his audience to distinguish between human and divine substance. Because divine emotions differ radically from human ones, God's wrath must be distinct from what we generally understand as anger. We humans, 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."<sup>12</sup> All such affections God experiences in a manner fitting only to God.

A similar line of argument is evident in the works of Lactantius, a Latin-speaking native of North Africa and pupil of Arnobius. For Lactantius, the denial of God's anger overthrows the foundations of human life, 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 mutation unbecoming to God?"<sup>13</sup> And yet, like a good householder, who must both encourage and punish members of his house, God is both kind and angry. Crucially, for Lactantius, God's anger is a consequence of his kindness. 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 a human life from foolishness and crime. As Lactantius says: "[C]onscience 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."<sup>14</sup> 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." Here again, the distinction between divine and human ire remains crucial. Although God is free from desire, fear, avarice, grief, and envy because they are "affections of vices," anger toward the wicked, love toward the good, and compassion for the afflicted are worthy of divine power. God, who is just and true, possesses these "affections of virtue."<sup>15</sup>

### **AUGUSTINE ON DIVINE ANGER**

Like Tertullian and Lactantius, Augustine of Hippo affirms that divine wrath is a function of God's justice and insists that human predicates cannot be attributed to God without qualification. Yet Augustine attends 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 a person endures painfully when he or she 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 moves 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 interpret as his "disturbing emphasis on anger."<sup>16</sup>

For Augustine, as for Tertullian and Lactantius, divine wrath is an attribute of divine justice. In Book 15 of Augustine's *City of God*, after quoting God's reason for sending the flood in Noah's day, Augustine asserts that God's anger is not a disturbance of the mind but a judgment imposing punishment of sin. If we can speak about God having emotions, it is only by analogy or in relation to the human emotions experienced by Christ, who represents to Augustine the model affective life.<sup>17</sup> By definition God does not change, so any predication of divine emotion occurs because, through Scripture, God becomes available to human language – yet only "as if" lowering himself to the human plane. What is far more crucial is the emotional life of humans, who 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 who gives the impression of being angry because of its salutary effect on others. Just like the sage, God can always mete out just punishment without being inflamed.<sup>18</sup> 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 understands divine anger as not only the power to punish but also the power to correct, whose execution he regards as a deep mercy. As Philo of Alexandria (d. 50) explained that Moses speaks of God's anger because it is "the only way the fool can be admonished" to eradicate evil,

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**Augustine's theology of Scripture turns potential embarrassment over divine wrath into an advantage. He can deny that God ever suffers anything like human anger, but maintain the narrative integrity of the Bible and a theological claim of God's ultimate justice.**

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so Augustine sees therapeutic value in biblical images of God's ire.<sup>19</sup> 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 in the way we are inclined to imagine. The recognition of divine anger is a kind of mercy leading to wisdom.<sup>20</sup> Divine wrath might even move a person to act against another's transgression. 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, when it sees that same law being transgressed by a sinner. Through this emotion in the souls of the just many things are avenged."<sup>21</sup> 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 reasonably be interpreted as the very darkening of the mind which befalls those who transgress God's law."<sup>22</sup> On the verse saying that "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 far away and in the distant future.<sup>23</sup>

## **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, 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 same tensions we see in patristic writings are 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."<sup>24</sup> 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" to the other can actually be love.<sup>25</sup> He cites Aquinas's approval of anger as the passion for justice and as essential to a good human life.<sup>26</sup> Both Harrison and Milhaven move against the tendency to disavow anger, and in that respect they would find support in the important patristic writers discussed above. Although they make bold claims on behalf of anger, both authors work within carefully circumscribed contexts. Harrison is speaking 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."<sup>27</sup>

On the question of divine wrath, Abraham Joshua 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, or projecting human emotions on 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.<sup>28</sup> 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, 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" – like fire it may be either a blessing or a fatal thing, touching off "deadly explosives" – but it also guarantees God's commitment to the well-being of the world.<sup>29</sup>

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. 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 that 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.<sup>30</sup>

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**Human rage cannot be the frame wherein we come to understand what God's anger means. 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.**

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## NOTES

1 The quotation is from a Westboro Baptist Church (Topeka, KS) press release on May 11, 2006. The well-publicized claims of Fred Phelps (1929-2014) and the Westboro Baptist Church are the subject of Louis Theroux's documentary film, "The Most Hated Family in America" (2007). Theroux describes his experience with the Phelps family in "God's Squad," *The Guardian* (March 31, 2007), [www.theguardian.com/media/2007/mar/31/tvandradio.usnews](http://www.theguardian.com/media/2007/mar/31/tvandradio.usnews). A fine discussion of religious responses to AIDS can be found in Earl E. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland, *AIDS and the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), 16-28. For claims regarding hurricane Katrina, see Tom Zeller, Jr., "To Some, Katrina Was Mission Accomplished," *New York Times* (September 12, 2005), [www.nytimes.com/2005/09/12/technology/12link.html?pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/12/technology/12link.html?pagewanted=print).

2 Scripture passages marked "NIV" are from Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

3 On the difficulty in preaching from passages that depict the wrath of God, see Richard Lischer, "Embarrassed by God's Wrath," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 33:4 (1994), 259-262.

4 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 21.

5 W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, Oxford Scholarly Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003 [1951]), 97.

6 *Ibid.*, 99.

7 Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes* 1.17 (*Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* [hereafter CSEL] 4.3). The best English translation is still that of George E. McCracken: Arnobius of Sicca, *The Case against the Pagans*, Ancient Christian Writers, 7 and 8 (Ramsay, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003 [1949]).

8 Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes* 1.23 (CSEL 4.15; McCracken 1.73-74).

9 Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes* 7.5 (CSEL 4.241; McCracken 2.485).

10 *Ibid.*

11 Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 2.16, as in the text edited and translated by Ernest Evans (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1972), 131. For an excellent discussion of Tertullian on the questions raised by Marcion, see Joseph M. Hallman, "The Mutability of God: Tertullian to Lactantius," *Theological Studies*, 42:3 (September, 1981), 374-386.

12 Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 2.16 (Evans 133).

13 Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 5 (*Sources Chrétiennes* [hereafter SC] 289 [1982], 104). The translation of Lactantius is by Sister Mary Francis McDonald in *Lactantius: The Minor Works*, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 68. On divine anger in Lactantius, see the discussions of Ermin F. Micka, *The Problem of Divine Anger in Arnobius and Lactantius* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1943), 113-144, and Hallman "Mutability," 389-392.

14 Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 8 (SC 289, 118; McDonald, 74).

15 Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 16 (SC 289, 170; McDonald, 98).

16 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 548-549.

17 Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.9.

18 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 Press, 2002) 191-192. 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.

19 Philo, *Quod Deus Immutabilis Sit* 13.60.68 (*Loeb Classical Library* 3.44-45).

20 See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.7.9.

21 Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos* 2.4 (*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* [hereafter CCSL] 38.4), in *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, translated by Maria Boulding, O. S. B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000) 1.72. All citations of the psalms here are Augustine's numbering system, explained in Michael Cameron, "Enarrationes in Psalmos," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) 290.

22 Ibid.

23 Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 2.11 (CCSL 38.7; Boulding 1.75) on Ps. 2:13. For a discussion of God's anger as charity within the narrative of Augustine's *Confessions*, see Michael C. McCarthy, "Divine Wrath and Human Anger: Embarrassment Ancient and New," *Theological Studies*, 70:4 (2009), 870-872.

24 Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 14.

25 John Giles Milhaven, *Good Anger* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 22-23.

26 Ibid., 124.

27 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).

28 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 247-257.

29 Ibid., 279-298.

30 For more on this topic, see my "Divine Wrath and Human Anger: Embarrassment Ancient and New" in *Theological Studies*, 70:4 (2009), 845-874. This article is an abridgment of that essay.



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# Worship Service

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

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## GOD'S PEOPLE GATHER

### *Chiming of the Hour*

#### *Call to Worship: Psalm 130*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

**Lord, hear my voice!**

**Let your ears be attentive**

**to the voice of my supplications!**

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.

**I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,**

**and in his word I hope;**

**my soul waits for the Lord**

**more than those who watch for the morning,**

**more than those who watch for the morning.**

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

**It is he who will redeem Israel**

**from all its iniquities.**

### *Hymn of Gathering*

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!

O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation!

Come, all who hear; now to his temple draw near,

join me in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, above all things so wondrously reigning;  
sheltering you under his wings, and so gently sustaining!  
Have you not seen all that is needful has been  
sent by his gracious ordaining?

Praise to the Lord, who will prosper your work and defend you;  
surely his goodness and mercy shall daily attend you.  
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,  
if with his love he befriends you.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!  
All that has life and breath, come now with praises before him.  
Let the Amen sound from his people again;  
gladly forever adore him.

*Joachim Neander (1680); translated by Catherine Winkworth (1863), alt.*  
*Tune: LOBE DEN HERREN*

### *Prayer of Gathering*

Almighty God, King of creation,  
we gather to praise your name.  
You have made us,  
daily sustain us with good gifts,  
and constantly draw us to yourself in love.

Thank you for the good gifts  
of this place and moment for worship  
and all those who gather here before you.

Draw us together and ever more deeply into your wonderful life.

Teach us through our worship  
to know and adore you more completely,  
and through that knowledge and praise  
to see and embrace one another  
as you see and embrace us in steadfast love.

Teach us, through your daily goodness and merciful love,  
to deal rightly with our anger when we are offended,  
and with our guilt when we have offended others.

In your holy name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
we pray and worship. Amen.

## TO RECEIVE GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY

### *Silent Meditation*

*The fourth-century Christians who retreated to the deserts of Egypt and Palestine in order to live in faithful community became very familiar with the daily annoyances of living shoulder-to-shoulder with others. They told this story about their lingering, lurking propensity to anger.<sup>†</sup>*

A brother was restless in his community and he was often irritated. So he said, "I will go and live somewhere by myself. I will not be able to talk or listen to anyone and so I shall be at peace, and my passionate anger will cease." He went out and lived alone in a cave. But one day he filled his jug with water and put it on the ground. Suddenly it happened to fall over. He filled it again, and again it fell. This happened a third time. In a rage he snatched up the jug and smashed it. Coming to his senses, he knew that the demon of anger had mocked him, and he said, "Here I am by myself, and he has beaten me. I will return to the community. Wherever you live, you need effort and patience and above all God's help." So he got up and went back.

### *Silent Prayers for Healing*

Pray first for those you know  
who endure abuses of poverty, discrimination, or war,  
who are mistreated in their families, schools, and communities,  
who need an advocate stirred by righteous anger.

*(Members offer silent petitions.)*

For these we pray:  
**Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

Pray also for those you know  
who inflict injury on others by neglect,  
who abuse their power,  
who need correction, repentance, and forgiveness.

*(Members offer silent petitions.)*

For these we pray:  
**Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

Pray now for your own need  
for discernment about when to be angry,  
for a patient and forgiving spirit,  
for openness to correction,  
for forgiveness for injustices done and injuries permitted.

*(Members offer silent confessions.)*

For ourselves we pray:

**Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

*Words of Assurance and Pardon: Psalm 145:8-9, 18-19*

The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The LORD is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.  
He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry, and saves them.

### TO LISTEN FOR GOD'S WORD

*Old Testament Reading: Exodus 34:6-9*

The LORD passed before [Moses], and proclaimed,  
"The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children  
and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation."

And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

*New Testament Reading: Ephesians 4:21-5:2*

For surely you have heard about [Christ] and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin;

do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### *Hymn of Response*

*“Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus”*

Answer when we call, Lord Jesus, source of all our righteousness;  
bend your holy ear, relieve us from all terror, all distress.  
Lord, receive our prayers for rescue; with your grace, come save and bless.

Wicked men reproach and scorn us, loving what is vile and vain;  
God, in mercy, shields, adorns us through the Savior’s blood and pain.  
Jesus Christ, who bought and bore us, hear our cries for help again.

Should our anger flare, we’ll sin not; meditate, be still, and rest;  
turn our hearts to God, begin not trusting in our righteousness.  
By our Savior from sin ransomed, trusting him to save and bless.

Wicked men may scorn and try us, casting doubt upon God’s grace;  
send your Spirit, Lord, to shield us till we see your glorious face.  
You who through your Son redeemed us, fill our hearts with joy and grace.

Safe in your peace, let us lie, Lord; keep us in your love and care;  
rooted in your strong and wise Word, may we find your comfort there.  
Guard and keep us till we die, Lord; go before us everywhere.

*Anonymous, based on Psalm 4*

*Tune: LAUDA ANIMA*

### *Gospel Reading: John 14:8-10, 15-17, 25-27*

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”  
Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How

can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

### *Sermon*

## AND RESPOND IN FAITH

### *Communion*

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

*1 Corinthians 11:23b-26*

### *Communion Prayer*

Bread of Life, you command us  
to avoid all unrighteous anger and insults  
toward those who offend us,  
and to love our enemies.  
By the model of your life and death,  
and through the power of your resurrection,  
enable us to do what you command. Amen.

### *Offering of Gifts*

## THAT THE WORLD MAY KNOW

*Hymn of Departing*

“Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing”

Lord, dismiss us with your blessing;  
fill our hearts with joy and peace;  
let us each, your love possessing,  
triumph in redeeming grace;  
O direct us and protect us  
traveling through this wilderness.

Thanks we give and adoration  
for your gospel’s joyous sound;  
may the fruits of your salvation  
In our hearts and lives abound;  
ever faithful, ever faithful,  
to your truth may we be found.

*John Fawcett (1773), alt.*

*Tune: SICILIAN MARINERS*

*Benediction: 2 Thessalonians 3:16, 18*

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace  
at all times in all ways.

The Lord be with all of you.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

**NOTES**

† *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, 7.33, translated by Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 71.

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# Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus

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Answer when we call, Lord Jesus, source of all our righteousness;  
bend your holy ear, relieve us from all terror, all distress.  
Lord, receive our prayers for rescue; with your grace, come save and bless.

Wicked men reproach and scorn us, loving what is vile and vain;  
God, in mercy, shields, adorns us through the Savior's blood and pain.  
Jesus Christ, who bought and bore us, hear our cries for help again.

Should our anger flare, we'll sin not; meditate, be still, and rest;  
turn our hearts to God, begin not trusting in our righteousness.  
By our Savior from sin ransomed, trusting him to save and bless.

Wicked men may scorn and try us, casting doubt upon God's grace;  
send your Spirit, Lord, to shield us till we see your glorious face.  
You who through your Son redeemed us, fill our hearts with joy and grace.

Safe in your peace, let us lie, Lord; keep us in your love and care;  
rooted in your strong and wise Word, may we find your comfort there.  
Guard and keep us till we die, Lord; go before us everywhere.

# Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus

A N O N Y M O U S

J O H N G O S S ( 1 8 6 9 )

Ans - wer when we call, Lord Je - sus, source of all our  
Wick - ed men re - proach and scorn us, lov - ing what is  
Should our an - ger flare, we'll sin not; med - i - tate, be  
Wick - ed men may scorn and try us, cast - ing doubt up -  
Safe in your peace, let us lie, Loed; keep us in your

right - ous - ness; bend your ho - ly ear, re - lieve us  
vile and vain; God, in mer - cy, shields, a - dors us  
still, and rest; turn our hearts to God, be - gin not  
on God's grace; send your Spir - it, Lord, to shield us  
love and care; root - ed in your strong and wise Word,

from all ter - ror, all dis - tress. Lord, re - ceive our  
through the Sav - ior's blood and pain. Je - sus Christ, who  
trust - ing in our right - eous - ness. By our Sav - ior  
till we see your glor - ious face. You who through your  
may we find your com - fort there. Guard and keep us



prayers for res - cue; with your grace, come save and bless.  
bought and bore us, hear our cries for help a - gain.  
from sin ran - somed, trust - ing him to save and bless.  
Son re - deemed us, fill our hearts with joy and grace.  
till we die, Lord; go be - fore us ev - ery - where.

*Tune:* LAUDA ANIMA  
8.7.8.7.

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*Christian Reflection*.

**Domenico Beccafumi's *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law* depicts the people "caught in the act" of idol worship and horrified by what Moses, in his righteous anger, is about to do.**

*Domenico Beccafumi (c. 1485-1551), MOSES BREAKING THE TABLETS OF THE LAW (c. 1529-1535). Painting on wood. 77 1/2" x 54 3/4". Duomo, Pisa, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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# Righteous Indignation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Moses becomes furious when he returns from Mt. Sinai with God's ten commandments and discovers that the people are worshipping a golden calf: "As soon as he came near the camp, and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 32:19). As he witnesses both idolatry and extreme wickedness by God's people, Moses' righteous indignation manifests itself in a rage of destruction. Domenico Beccafumi, a Mannerist or Late Renaissance artist from Siena, Italy, paints the people "caught in the act" and horrified by what Moses is about to do.

The artist heightens the action by an exaggerated pose, with Moses' left hip slung dramatically outward to create a strong diagonal leading our eyes up to the tablet in his hand. His golden robe and the *changeant* drapery (changing colors of yellow, pink, and blues) of the woman in the foreground are characteristics of the Mannerist style. The reclining male figure in the left foreground, almost nude, further emphasizes this elongated body type often used by Michelangelo in his sculpture and paintings in the sixteenth-century. This figure may also symbolize the aftermath of the people's reveling before the idol. Sydney Freedberg describes the painting: "These brilliantly precise manipulations of *Maniera* forms are infused with a renascent power of narrative imagination."<sup>1</sup>

Beccafumi, like the other Mannerist artists of his time, reacted against the classicism of the Renaissance by changing the proportions of the body and using bright, vibrant color palettes such as those found in the Sistine Chapel ceiling figures by Michelangelo.<sup>2</sup> We are uncertain as to whether Beccafumi actually saw the ceiling but Vasari states that Beccafumi was exposed to the first generation of Mannerist painters in Florence, namely Pontormo and Rosso. Beccafumi then brought that style to Siena and, as in the case of this painting, to Pisa.

## NOTES

1 S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500-1600*, third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 244.

2 Fiorella Sricchia Santoro, "Beccafumi, Domenico," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T007187](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T007187) (accessed September 8, 2014).

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version of *Christian Reflection*.

**Is the all-consuming fury, which is so powerfully expressed  
in Vasari's *The Damned Soul*, the result or the cause of the  
figure's eternal damnation?**

# Consuming Fury

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

Is the all-consuming fury so powerfully expressed in Vasari's *The Damned Soul* the result or cause of the soul's damnation? The figure is tense with open mouth, furrowed brow, and strained neck muscles; his hair and drapery, flying upwards, convey movement as well as the burning anger felt throughout his being.

Attributed to Giorgio Vasari on the basis of stylistic analysis, this drawing is a faithful copy of Michelangelo's *The Damned Soul* (Uffizi, inv 601 E), using the same black chalk technique.<sup>1</sup> Vasari, who is best known as the father of art history because he wrote the first set of biographies of artists, was also an influential painter and architect in the sixteenth century.

Like his good friend and colleague Michelangelo, Vasari stressed the importance of *le arti del disegno* (the art of drawing with accuracy, precision, and emotion). He and other Mannerist (Late Renaissance) artists looked to Michelangelo's drawings as the unsurpassable pinnacle of expressive form. "By copying his drawings, Vasari was able to understand intimately Michelangelo's vocabulary and to emulate it with astonishing accuracy," notes Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, former director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.<sup>2</sup> Vasari formed a committee of reformist painters (Michele Tosini, Agnolo Bronzino, and Pier Francesco di Foschi) and sculptors (Montorsoli and Francesco da Sangallo) to help him draft the constitution of the *Compagnia ed Accademia del Disegno*.<sup>3</sup> This first "art institute" in Florence was established in 1563 by Cosimo de' Medici upon the suggestion of Vasari, and Michelangelo, although aging and absent, was named alongside Duke Cosimo as a *capo*, or head, of the Accademia.<sup>4</sup>

Michelangelo and Vasari approached drawing not only as an instrument of study (and elevation of artists' status out of the guild system for craftsman), but also as an autonomous expressive medium to create perfectly executed, finished works.<sup>5</sup> *The Damned Soul* was part of a group of "Divine Heads" drawn by Michelangelo that was extremely influential in the history of art as artists became more observant of nature.

## NOTES

1 Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, *Michelangelo, Vasari, and Their Contemporaries: Drawings from the Uffizi* (New York: The Morgan Library and Museum, 2008), 55.

2 Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* (Florence, 1568), edited by Gaetano Milanesi, 9 volumes (1878-1885).

3 Heidi J. Hornik, *Michele Tosini and the Ghirlandaio Workshop in Cinquecento Florence* (Eastbourne, UK and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 40.

4 Anthony Hughes, "'An Academy for Doing'. I: The Accademia del Disegno, the Guilds and the Principate in Sixteenth-Century Florence," *The Oxford Art Journal* 9:1 (1986), 3.

5 Tofani, 5.

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**Jesus' cleansing of the Jerusalem temple became a familiar subject in art, not to justify anger, but to remind the Church of its own need for purification.**

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# Zeal for God's House

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The cleansing of the Jerusalem temple is the story that most often comes to mind when we think of Jesus getting angry. All four Gospels record the event, though none of them explicitly mention his anger, and in John the disciples attribute Jesus' actions to "zeal" for his Father's house.<sup>1</sup>

This powerful scene became a familiar subject in art. We will discuss the version by a lesser-known sixteenth-century painter Ippolito Scarsellino, or Scarcella as his contemporaries called him. This artist lived in the period of transition between the third, and final, generation of Mannerist painters and the earliest artists associated with the Baroque.<sup>2</sup>

The son of a painter, Scarcella was born and died in Ferrara, Italy. After being apprenticed to his father, he traveled to Bologna and studied the Carracci family of painters, and to Venice where he was strongly influenced by Veronese and Tintoretto. Ugo Ruggeri comments that Scarcella's paintings at this time have a "flowing sequence of a very lively narrative quality and a feverishly spontaneous technique of execution reminiscent of Tintoretto."<sup>3</sup>

*Christ Driving the Money Lenders from the Temple* is very close to the Gospel narratives, especially regarding the visual details of the story in John 2:13-18. Jesus is immediately identifiable slightly to the left of center in the painting; his arms are raised, his pink gown and green mantle hang loose because he has removed his belt and made it into "a whip of chords" (John 2:15). The man of nonviolence is seen here as a man of violence.<sup>4</sup> The scene takes place on the porch of the temple in Jerusalem; a Solomonic twisted column is prominent in the foreground, as one of the moneychangers grasps it to steady himself as he leans down to collect the basket of his coins that has spilt onto the ground (cf. 2:15). Sheep, birds, and cattle crowd the composition to indicate that the temple has become a market place where sacrificial animals are sold and money is exchanged for them (2:14). The artist invents further narrative details to capture our interest.

One of the birds has escaped, and a young boy, oblivious to Jesus' actions in front of him, tries to trap the bird on a stick. Two women to the right of Jesus with baskets and cages on their heads try to rush off while attempting to regain the attention of another young child who is enthralled by what Jesus is doing.

During the Catholic Reformation, this scene, also known as the Purification of the Temple, was a very popular "teaching" subject. It became a symbol of the Church's need to cleanse itself both through the condemnation of heresy and through internal reform.<sup>5</sup> The idea of cleansing refocuses attention on Jesus' motive of "zeal for [God's] house" rather than momentary anger, which seems to be a more productive and positive reading of this famous story.

## NOTES

1 See Stephen Voorwinde's discussion of this episode in "Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?" *Anger*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 30-36.

2 In this issue of Christian Reflection, we discuss the work of all three generations of Mannerist painters. Beccafumi, from Siena, is among the first generation and Vasari, from Arezzo but most famous for his work and associations in Florence, is part of the second generation.

3 Ugo Ruggeri, "Scarsellino," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T076347](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T076347) (accessed September 8, 2014).

4 "Dawson Carr on 'Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple,'" web podcast (The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London, UK), [www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/el-greco-christ-driving-the-traders-from-the-temple](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/el-greco-christ-driving-the-traders-from-the-temple) (accessed September 10, 2014).

5 *Ibid.*, webpage.



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## ❖ Other Voices ❖

The marks of anger are the same [as insanity]: 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.

**SENECA ( 4 BC - 65 AD ), *On Anger 1.1.3-4***

The vice of anger (as if it were the voice of reason!) will say something like this to the heart it has conquered: “The things that have been done to you cannot be borne patiently; indeed, to endure them patiently would be a sin; because if you do not stand up to them with great indignation, they will be heaped on you again and without limit.”

**POPE GREGORY THE GREAT ( C. 540 - 604 ), *Morals on the Book of Job, 31.90***

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

**FREDERICK BUECHNER , *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (1973)***

In some manner Christian love has reopened the space within which fear, and anxiety, and grief, and intense delight, and even anger, all have their full force. And correct love promises no departure from these other emotions – if anything, it requires their intensification.

**MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (2001)***

Of the seven deadly sins, anger has long been the one with the best box of costumes. When the guy in the next car rages at you, he’s dangerous. When you rage at him, you’re just.

We can usually recognize the results of anger, especially in others, as destructive and evil. But there are times when we think our own anger is justified, say as a kind of fuel to fight injustice. There are times when we think it is holy.

**FREDERICA MATHEWES - GREEN , *“Unrighteous Indignation,” Christianity Today (October 23, 2000)***

Who among us has not flared to sudden anger (perhaps accompanied by some indelicate international hand gestures), prompted perhaps by the actions of a rude driver yakking on his cell phone? Have we not all been roused to anger at news reports of child abuse or brutal murder or “ethnic cleansing”? That we are moved to anger by matters small and great, inconsequential and grave, is commonplace. Less common is knowing when, if ever, our anger is justified and what affects it has on our character.

**J A Y W O O D**, *“Bad Karma: Anger Management,” Books and Culture (July/August 2006)*

When it is good, anger is a passion for justice, motivated by love for others. We get angry when someone we care about is hurt or threatened. This person may be ourselves or a “neighbor whom we love as ourselves.” This is often most intensely expressed in families, where ties of love are strongest: novelist Alan Paton described one mother as “like a tigress for the child.” The fiercer the love and the greater the good at stake, the more intense our capacity for anger. Great love is the root of great anger. You don’t get angry unless you *care*...

Anger turns vicious, however, when it fights for its own selfish cause, not for justice, and when it fights dirty. That is, anger becomes a vice when there are problems with its target—whatever it is that makes us angry—or with the way we try to hit that target—how we express our anger.

**R E B E C C A K O N Y N D Y K D E Y O U N G**, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies (2009)*

We cannot live without love. And so to the soul who, through his special grace, clearly sees the exalted and wondrous goodness of God, and who knows that we are forever one with him in love, it is the most impossible thing that he could ever be angry. For anger and friendship are opposites.

I did not see any kind of anger in God—neither in passing nor for an extended time. The truth, as I perceive it, is that if he were to be even one iota angry, we would have no life, no place to be, no being.

**J U L I A N O F N O R W I C H ( F O U R T E E N T H C E N T U R Y )**, *from The Showings of Julian of Norwich: A New Translation, translated by Mirabai Starr (2013)*

Anger is an important part of the divine emotional life, since anger is an aspect of God’s love (both of the offender and of the victim), and is implicit in the notion of forgiveness, which involves the ‘giving up’ or waiving of the right to resentment (a form of anger). However ... God’s anger must always be expressed redemptively and creatively rather than destructively, such as in the pedagogy of the offender. Second, God’s anger must always be rational in the sense of being based both on rational motives and sufficient knowledge. Thus the irrationality and destructiveness that is frequently found in human anger is not present in divine anger.

**A N A S T A S I A P H I L I P P A S C R U T T O N**, *Thinking through Feeling: God, Emotion and Passibility (2011)*

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# Getting Angry at God

BY JULIE J. EXLINE

**Regardless of whether it is safe or adaptive or morally correct, many of us sometimes feel angry at God. But people tend to get nervous talking about it—especially believers. We worry that anger is totally incompatible with positive feelings toward God. Can we be angry at God and still love God? Does being angry necessarily imply a major rift in the relationship?**

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**D**oes anger have any legitimate place in the life of Christians? One potential answer is that anger may serve us well in response to a clear injustice, where it may provide some valuable motivation and energy to rectify an unfair situation.

Even if we grant that anger can have this moral justification in response to injustice, is anger toward God ever justified? According to most Christian views, God is perfect. God is incapable of committing mistakes, much less injustices. Using this logic, it could be difficult to see anger toward God as having any sort of legitimate moral backing. And to make things worse, getting angry at God also sounds like it could be dangerous: Is it really safe to get on God's bad side?

Regardless of whether it is safe or adaptive or morally correct, the fact is that many of us feel angry at God. Large-scale survey data in the United States suggests a clear pattern: a large proportion of the U.S. population—between one-third and two-thirds, depending on the study—report that they are sometimes angry at God.<sup>1</sup> And when people focus on specific events involving suffering (for example, the loss of a loved one, or a cancer diagnosis), usually about half of them endorse some anger or other negative feelings toward God in response.

Many cases of anger toward God arise in response to major life crises, deaths, and natural disasters. But even smaller-scale events can lead to anger. For example, in our studies of undergraduates, anger toward God often comes in response to stressful but non-traumatic events such as romantic breakups, athletic injuries, or failing grades. In fact, low-level irritation toward God might only require a few pesky daily events: a stomach virus, a traffic jam, or rain on the day of a picnic. Apparently, any negative event that can be attributed to God may seem like fair game. It does not take a tsunami for someone to get angry at the Creator.

### **QUESTIONING OUR ANGER AT GOD**

At some level, simply knowing that a lot of other people are mad at God might take the edge off: "At least it's not abnormal for me to be feeling this way." But the question of whether anger at God is common is still separate from the question of whether it is morally acceptable. And let's face it: in moral terms, the topic of anger toward God is an uncomfortable one. People tend to get nervous talking about it—especially believers. One reason for this reluctance, I believe, is that people worry that anger is totally incompatible with positive feelings toward God.

For believers who want a close relationship with God, this issue of positive versus negative feelings is crucial to address. Can we be angry at God and still love God? Does being angry necessarily imply a major rift in the relationship? Granted, Christians usually report much more positive emotion than anger toward God, even in painful life situations. But it is important to note that the presence of positive feelings toward God do not rule out the possibility of negative feelings, and vice versa. As in close human relationships, feelings such as love, respect, and closeness toward God often coexist with feelings of anger. Even if the predominant feeling is a sense of respect and trust, some negative feelings might still be lurking. But Christians are often reluctant to disclose angry feelings, especially when God is the target.

In interpersonal terms, some of this concern about disclosing one's anger toward God is certainly warranted. There is indeed a possibility that you will be shamed, judged, or at least "shushed" if you take the risk of acknowledging these shadowy feelings to others. A few of our studies have looked at the types of responses that people received from others when they admitted that they were feeling mad at God.<sup>2</sup> Most people reported that when they took the risk of telling someone about their anger, they got supportive responses: the people that they told were able to relate to their feelings, or they said something encouraging. But still, despite the preponderance of positive responses, about half of those who disclosed anger received a response that felt less supportive. Again, as with the anger itself, these negative responses were usually not at high levels of intensity.

But many people received at least some little indication that their feelings were wrong or dangerous.

Our data also suggests that the response of the listener has some important correlates in terms of how people handle their anger toward God. To the extent that people reported supportive responses to their disclosures of anger at God, they were more likely to report that they had approached God and that their faith had grown stronger as a result of the incident. However, to the extent that people reported receiving unsupportive responses, they tended to stay angry. They were also more likely to try to suppress their angry feelings and to do more dramatic things to exit from the relationship, such as rebelling against God or rejecting God. In addition, they were more likely to report using alcohol or other drugs to cope. In terms of helping people resolve their anger toward God, then, a valuable first step simply may be to provide a supportive, non-shaming response if someone reveals such feelings to us.

An important side effect of the taboo aspect of anger toward God is that people may be afraid to admit these feelings: not only to other people and to God, but even to themselves. It can simply seem too scary to “go there.” Even if we do not fear the literal lightning bolt coming down from heaven, we do not want to sin. We do not want to disappoint God by turning away.

The problem, of course, is that there are a lot of people out there who do have these feelings but are afraid to admit them. So they try to suppress these scary emotions. They sweep them under the rug. To compensate, they try to do the right things: pray the right prayers, read the right things, serve God with humility and obedience. But even if these behaviors are carried out in an honest and virtuous way, and even if

some positive feelings toward God are genuinely felt, the negative feelings might still be hovering there in the background. And if we are afraid to acknowledge negative feelings, a wall can go up. Intimacy is blocked. The anger can become the proverbial “elephant in the room” as we go on pretending that it is not there. When important feelings are suppressed and covered over, our relationship with God can become dry and cold.

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**Simply knowing that a lot of other people are mad at God might take the edge off: “At least it’s not abnormal for me to be feeling this way.” But the question of whether anger at God is common is separate from whether it is morally acceptable.**

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There is an irony here: considering the Christian belief that God knows everything, do we really think that we are covering anything up from God by keeping these forbidden feelings to ourselves? Doesn't God already know? We might realize this intellectually, but in everyday life we might be tempted to keep these areas walled off somehow, as though we can keep them a secret from God.

Yet it is understandable that people would be reluctant to admit feeling angry at God if they see such feelings as being morally wrong. A few of our studies took a closer look at the moral evaluations that people made about angry feelings and other forms of protest toward God.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, it looked as though believers who were more serious in their faith commitments were more likely to see any form of protest toward God as wrong. But when we did analyses that accounted for different types of moral evaluations (rebellion/rejection of God; angry feelings; assertiveness) at the same time, we found something interesting: people who reported the closest, most resilient relationships with God definitely saw it as wrong to do anything that implied rejection of God or rebellion against God's authority. But once we accounted for this decision to not rebel and not walk away, those who saw their relationships with God as being more close and resilient actually saw anger at God as being morally neutral – rather than being in the taboo category. (“As long as it's clear that I'm not walking away, then the angry feelings don't carry a lot of moral weight.”) And, importantly, these same people also saw assertive behaviors toward God as being morally permissible. In other words, they saw it as morally appropriate to do some complaining and to ask God tough questions. Having a voice in the relationship was seen as a good thing.

The parallel with intimate human relationships comes in handy here. We know that in close relationships it is important to be honest, to be authentic, and to be heard. And this can be accomplished while still being respectful. In order to express what we are feeling, we do not necessarily need to yell and scream and curse and rage at God. Some people will do these things, and they might later say that taking these risks represented a turning point in their level of intimacy with God. But negative feelings can be expressed in a respectful way, especially if it is clear that leaving the relationship is not one of the options on the table. If we are able to commit ourselves to the relationship and to feel reasonably secure there, finding the freedom to express our thoughts and feelings in an open way can truly free us. And it can provide hope for a closer, deeper, and more intimate relationship with God.

### **UNCOVERING UNDERLYING REASONS BEHIND ANGER**

Once anger toward God has been identified, what are some strategies to help resolve the anger? Often a good rule of thumb with anger, as with

other negative emotions, is to try to pinpoint what exactly is making you angry. In some cases, closer inspection will reveal that our anger does not have such great justification: it might be rooted in envy of others, a selfish desire to always get our own way, or expectation of special treatment by God. In cases like these, where the anger might seem to be an unwarranted response, we can identify it as such and do whatever it takes to pull close to God again. If we perceive that the anger truly is a sinful response on our part, repentance may be a vital part of the resolution process. If we can see that our anger was not warranted and turn away from it, the strong feelings may start to dissipate on their own.

In other situations anger is what psychologists call a secondary or defensive emotional response, one that is actually covering up more vulnerable feelings such as hurt, shame, or fear. If one of these deeper sources of pain is identified, then our best way to deal with the anger will be to focus on the primary area of vulnerability.

But in some cases anger really is the primary issue. We are troubled by the presence of suffering and injustice in the world: things just do not seem fair or right. We may feel what seems to be righteous anger about evil that is allowed to proliferate, bad guys who win and good guys who lose, sickness and losses and death.

### **SEARCHING FOR A THEOLOGICAL MAGIC BULLET**

When I started to do work in this area, I wanted so much to be able to find a theological “magic bullet.” I wanted a one-liner or a little story that would give a satisfactory explanation of suffering. I knew that people had been struggling with this problem for thousands of years. But still, I was hoping that I could find some sort of reasonably simple, workable answer — something that I could share with people to help them resolve their anger toward God.

For a while, I thought that I had a magic bullet: my Bijou story. This was an illustration from my own life that had helped me to make sense of suffering.

When I was in graduate school and would sit at my office desk to write on the computer, I was often joined by our family dog, Bijou — a beautiful

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**In our studies, people who reported the closest, most resilient relationships with God saw it as morally appropriate to do some complaining and to ask God tough questions. Having a voice in the relationship was seen as a good thing.**

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mix of a golden retriever and a Sheltie. Bijou was my near-constant companion, underfoot at my writing desk. Sometimes she would gaze pensively at me while I was typing, with a look that asked “What on earth was I doing, just sitting there tapping my fingers on those keys, looking up at that screen?” And it occurred to me that despite all of the animal-based learning models that are used in psychology (remember Pavlov’s salivating pups?), and all of the similarities between Bijou’s brain and mine, there was still no way that I could ever explain to Bijou what I was doing tapping my fingers on those keys. She would never, could never understand what I was doing.

And what about those situations that were painful or uncomfortable for Bijou, such as being taken to the vet? What good could possibly come of that? From Bijou’s perspective, we simply dragged her into this stinky place with its cold tables and prodding assistants. And then to make things worse, people would stick her with needles. What could all of this possibly be about? Unfortunately, it would do me no good to explain myself to her: “Bijou, I’m doing this to inoculate you against future diseases.” Nope, Bijou simply was not going to get it. She would never understand. All that she knew is that the vet’s office was scary – and those shots hurt.

In many ways, my brain and Bijou’s brain were similar. But, in terms of explaining the reasons why certain things happened, there was a gulf between us that I simply could not breach.

“And yet,” I asked myself, “I think that I should be able to figure out what God is doing?” The thought was admittedly sobering. I might be a few notches above Bijou in terms of intelligence, but where is God on the scale? Right here at my level, or a few notches higher? No. God’s ways are infinitely higher – I simply cannot grasp them. And yet, at some level, I behave as though I should be able to explain God’s actions.

Of course, Bijou is fundamentally different from me. As a mere beast, she can never formulate reasons of her own or understand my reasons. So a better analog for our relationship to God might be children’s relationship to the adults who care for them. My own daughter, when she was young, would have been just as mystified as Bijou by what I was doing tapping on the keyboard, or by why she had to get her own painful shots. We are both human beings – just separated by a few years – but given where she was developmentally, there was no way for her to grasp what I was doing; it had to remain a mystery to her, at least for a time. There was indeed a purpose for those painful shots – her dad and I and the doctor knew that – but to her it was a mystery. Both Bijou and my daughter had to trust that my husband and I had a higher purpose, but it was one that we could not explain to them.

So I tried to apply this analogy to my own life. Given how much higher God's ways were than my ways, could I accept that many of God's ways would remain a mystery to me while still trusting firmly in God's goodness and wisdom?

For me this focus on the mystery of God proved genuinely helpful. Theologically, it satisfied me. And I really thought that it was going to be my magic bullet, the story that I would tell people that would cause their anger toward God to dissolve. This all sounded good – until I tried it out on a therapy client whose father had died recently.

The response to my little story went like this: "Well, it's nice if God has his plan. But it sure would be nice if he told me what it was about!" It turns out that my client did not have a strong foundation of trust in God, so she did not share my basic premise that God had her best interests in mind.

Another time I told the story to a colleague and got this retort: "If you told that story to a Jew whose family went through the Holocaust, he would break a bottle over your head!" He protested that in cases of catastrophic suffering and profound evil, there needs to be a guarantee of eventual justice. These are outrageous wrongs, totally off the scale from the trivial pain instanced in the Bijou story. And these horrific wrongs need to be righted. Period.

Needless to say, these were not exactly the responses that I was expecting to my nice little Bijou story.

But they taught me an important lesson. When talking about matters of suffering and evil, the deep stuff of the brokenness of the world, it is risky to offer easy answers. Probably no single theological solution will be helpful for everyone. And when people are in crisis, we may serve them better by simply listening and acknowledging their pain, rather than trying to correct their theological views.

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**It's risky to offer easy answers for the brokenness of the world. No one theological solution will help everyone. When people are in crisis, we serve them better by listening and acknowledging their pain, rather than correcting their theological views.**

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The problems of evil and suffering are big ones, and I do not have the answers. But that is all right, because I believe that I have a true relationship with God. This is a relationship where I can continue to bring up tough issues. I trust that, over time, deeper truth will be revealed to me in response to these big questions. And if a lot of that revelation has to wait until after this life is over, that is fine with me, too – at least for the moment.

**NOTES**

1 Julie J. Exline, Crystal L. Park, Joshua M. Smyth, and Michael P. Carey, "Anger toward God: Social-Cognitive Predictors, Prevalence, and Links with Adjustment to Bereavement and Cancer," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100:1 (January 2011), 129-148.

2 Julie J. Exline and Joshua Grubbs, "If I Tell Others about My Anger toward God, How Will They Respond? Predictors, Associated Behaviors, and Outcomes in an Adult Sample," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 39:4 (Winter 2011), 304-415.

3 Julie J. Exline, Kalman J. Kaplan, and Joshua B. Grubbs, "Anger, Exit, and Assertion: Do People See Protest toward God as Morally Acceptable?" *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4:4 (November 2012), 264-277.

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# When Love Turns to Anger

BY DANIEL M. JOHNSON  
AND ADAM C. PELSER

We often reserve our severest wrath for those we love most. Uncontrolled anger ruins close friendships, destroys marriages, and severs the familial bond between children and parents, brothers and sisters. Why does our love so easily spawn terrible anger? And how can we cure this spiritual disease?

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Most of us have more than enough anger to go around. Yet, we often reserve our severest wrath for those we love most. No one can infuriate us quite like our spouses, our closest friends, our parents, our children. As a result, uncontrolled anger is perhaps the number one cause of death for relationships. It ruins close friendships, destroys marriages, and severs the familial bond between children and parents, brothers and sisters.

The phenomenon of love turning to anger is particularly prevalent within romantic (or erotic) relationships. In a popular rap song “Love the Way You Lie,” Eminem poignantly describes the paradoxical way in which the most intensely felt romantic love—“You ever love somebody so much you can barely breathe when you’re with ‘em?”—can quickly devolve into a destructive cycle of anger, abuse, and false repentance: “You swore you’d never hit ‘em, never do nothin’ to hurt ‘em. Now you’re in each other’s face spewing venom...you push, pull each other’s hair...throw ‘em down, pin ‘em, so lost in the moments when you’re in ‘em.”<sup>1</sup>

While not all love-turned-to-anger manifests in the kind of physical abuse Eminem depicts, anger naturally gives rise to a desire to punishingly hurt the object of our anger—emotionally and psychologically, if not physically. And this is no less the case when the object of our anger is a family member or friend whom we love than when it is a stranger. Eminem’s

observation echoes the view of Christian thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and C. S. Lewis who claim that many forms of love quite naturally and regularly turn to anger, hatred, jealousy, and other negative attitudes and emotions.<sup>2</sup>

From these troubling observations, two interrelated questions emerge. Why does our love so easily and commonly turn to terrible anger? And, how can we fight this tendency to become wrathful and even abusive toward those closest to us? If we can answer the first question, we will have a head start on answering the second. Understanding the source of a problem is the first step toward solving it.



That we typically direct our wrath toward people who are closest to us may seem unremarkable. After all, anger needs an object and the people we love are often our easiest targets. Because we spend a great deal of time interacting with our family and friends and thus know them best, they are most vulnerable to us and the easiest for us to hurt. We are also most vulnerable to them and most willing to reveal the uglier sides of ourselves—for surely, we think, they will forgive us no matter how badly we treat them!

But the mere proximity and vulnerability of close family and friends does not explain the awful extent of the anger we direct toward them, especially when that anger is strong enough to cause the death of those relationships. There must be deeper sources for this pernicious, relationship-destroying anger. We propose that the first source is a particular species of the sin of idolatry. In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis observes that we have a tendency to idolize the “natural loves” of affection, friendship, and erotic love. We are tempted to worship these forms of love as gods, attempting to find our ultimate happiness in them, since they are among the most god-like aspects of human life. Yet, these forms of love are not God and they are not the highest form of divine or spiritual love—which the Christian tradition often calls “charity” and Kierkegaard terms “neighbor-love.” Lewis warns that while the natural loves are valuable as “preparatory imitations” of charity, when we worship them as gods they lose their value and become downright evil:

St. John’s saying that God is love has long been balanced in my mind against the remark of a modern author (M. Denis de Rougemont) that “love ceases to be a demon only when it ceases to be a god;” which of course can be restated in the form “begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god.” This balance seems to me an indispensable safeguard. If we ignore it the truth that God is love may slyly come to mean for us the converse, that love is God.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the claim that “love is God” has become a kind of orthodoxy in popular culture, especially for the faithful in the religion of Oprah. Yet, as

Lewis warns, to treat any of the natural loves as God is idolatrous and dangerous. With respect to erotic (romantic) love in particular, Lewis observes that when we idolize this natural love, we begin to believe that anything done in the name of love is good and noble, no matter how objectively lawless and unloving it might be. For, the feelings of infatuation and “being in love” seem to compel us toward action with “the voice of a god.” But eros is notoriously the most mortal and fleeting of all the loves. Despite our best efforts, the intense feelings of infatuation, romance, and selfless concern for the beloved that constitute eros simply vanish into the emotional fog of the mundane details of life. Lewis remarks, “Can we be in this selfless liberation [of eros] for a lifetime? Hardly for a week. Between the best possible lovers this high condition is intermittent.”<sup>4</sup> When the feelings of erotic love fade, dissatisfaction and frustration ensue. Lewis observes,

These lapses [of feeling] will not destroy a marriage between two ‘decent and sensible’ people. The couple whose marriage will certainly be endangered by them, and possibly ruined, are those who have idolized Eros. They thought that he had the power and truthfulness of a god. They expected that mere feeling would do for them, and permanently, all that was necessary. When this expectation is disappointed they throw the blame on Eros or, more usually, on their partners.<sup>5</sup>

Such disappointed expectations are always the result of some kind of idolatry. When we come to value a created thing above God and expect that thing to satisfy our most fundamental desires and the deepest longings of our soul, the inevitable result is frustration and dissatisfaction. Nothing can satisfy our deepest longings but God. And, as Lewis suggests, when we become disappointed by a natural love’s inability to live up to the divine status we have bestowed on it, we tend to blame the beloved. For example, when spouses expect love to make them happy and then find themselves unhappy, all too often they blame their beloved for failing to make them happy – and so begins the tragic story of countless divorced marriages.

This, then, is the beginning of an explanation for why love so often turns to anger. Recognizing the god-likeness of the natural loves, we idolize them

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**The mere proximity and vulnerability of close family and friends does not explain the awful extent of the anger we direct toward them. The first source for pernicious, relationship-destroying anger is a particular species of idolatry.**

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and ultimately find ourselves disappointed by them. Then instead of recognizing and repenting our idolatry — making strides to love God more than love itself and to love our neighbors as ourselves — we blame those we love for our dissatisfaction and unhappiness. This explains why love gives way to a variety of negative emotions such as sadness, loneliness, depression, disappointment, and even some frustration and mild anger; however, it does not yet explain the extent of the anger felt and expressed toward those we purport to love.



To understand why such idolatry-induced dissatisfaction can lead to intense anger toward the beloved, we must say more about the emotion of anger itself. Like other emotions, anger is not a mere physiological reaction or “feeling”; rather, it is a way of seeing or construing what makes us mad in terms of certain evaluative concepts. This means that anger represents the world as being a certain way, and therefore it can be accurate or inaccurate. For example, to be afraid is to see (or construe) the object of one’s fear as a threat or danger, which means that fear is accurate when there is really danger and inaccurate when there isn’t any. Anger is similar. As Bob Roberts explains, in anger we see ourselves or someone we care about as having been seriously wronged by an offender (the object of our anger) whom we perceive to be culpable for the offense.<sup>6</sup> Since anger is grounded in a concern for justice, in anger we see the wrong done as an injustice that has been committed and we see it as a bad thing in need of remedy or rectification. Thus, although the desire to punish the offender for the offense is not strictly part of the content of the anger perception, such a desire follows naturally and immediately from the emotion.

Understood in this way, some anger surely is justified. There are real injustices in the world, after all, and it would be vicious, not virtuous, of us to fail to notice those injustices or to understand them as the evils that they are. Yet, for most of us, our primary anger problem is not that we fail to get angry enough about real injustices (though this is also a common problem), but that we get angrier than we should at minor offenses and, worse, we get angry when no injustice has been committed at all. Henry Fairlie suggests this problem of unwarranted anger is due in part to the overblown sense of individual rights that pervades our society. “We have given Wrath its license by elevating a concept of individual and human rights that is flagrantly misleading,” he explains. “Any felt need or desire or longing, for anything that one lacks but someone else has, is today conceived to be a right that, when demanded, must be conceded without challenge. And if it is not at once conceded, the claimants are entitled to be angry.”<sup>7</sup>

Today, even minor inconveniences may give rise to the angry feeling that our rights have been violated. Believing we have a right to get home

from work in a predictable amount of time, we become angry when traffic slows down as a result of construction, an accident, or just more people than normal trying to drive on the roads at the same time; believing we have a right to expect restaurant and coffee shop workers never to make mistakes with our order, we become angry if they fail to bring what we wanted; believing we have a right to the innumerable conveniences afforded by modern technology, we become angry when our smart phones, tablets, or computers break down or fail to work as expected.<sup>8</sup>

In an extreme but illustrative example, a young California man murdered six people, injured many more, and took his own life, explaining on a YouTube video entitled “Retribution” that this violent rampage was to be a punishment for “an injustice, a crime” – namely, his having “been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to [him].”<sup>9</sup> While few people’s anger eventuates in murder, the phenomenon of anger in response to unfulfilled desires is all too common. Of course, given that anger is essentially an emotional perception of injustice, anger in response to unfulfilled desires is just what we should expect in a society in which advertisers, politicians, journalists, educators, televangelists, and motivational speakers tell us that we have a right to whatever we feel that we need – indeed, that we have a right to be happy.

Here, then, is a second sin – irresponsibly believing that we have a right to be happy – that combines

with idolatry of love to give rise to relationship-destroying anger. Intimate personal relationships are one of the most important constituents of human flourishing. It is therefore unsurprising that, having been convinced that everyone has a right to be happy, so many people come to believe (implicitly or subconsciously, if not explicitly and consciously) that they have a right to be happy in their relationships. Then, when they find themselves unhappy in their relationships, they naturally see the impediment to their happiness as a serious offense, an injustice, a violation of their rights. Herein lies their anger.

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**A second sin—irresponsibly believing that we have a right to be happy—combines with idolatry of love to produce relationship-destroying anger. When unhappy in a relationship, we see the impediment to happiness as an injustice, a violation of our rights.**

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The disease of love turning to anger, we conclude, has a two-fold source that can be summarized in the popular slogans: “Love is God” and “I have a right to be happy.” When we come to expect that love and our

loving relationships will do for us what only God can do – save us from our sinful selves and satisfy the deepest longings of our souls – we inevitably end up disappointed and unhappy. And when we buy into the lie that we deserve – that is, *we have a right* – to be happy, we construe our unhappiness and disappointment as a violation of our rights and we angrily seek to punish the only offenders we can think to blame – the ones whose love for us, together with our love for them, we expected to make us happy.



Is there a cure for this spiritual disease of love turning to anger? We need to treat both of its underlying causes: we need to stop idolizing love and stop believing that we have a right to be happy. We will discuss these in reverse order.

First, we need to stop believing, deep down, that we have a right to be happy. This is easier said than done; our beliefs, like our emotions, are rarely (if ever) under our direct voluntary control, and so we must take an indirect approach if we are to free ourselves from them. To resist this mistaken belief in deserved happiness, we might meditate on the Christian doctrines of sin and grace. The first would foster a deep awareness of our sinfulness and unworthiness, and the second would foster a corresponding sense of gratitude for every good thing as an undeserved gift from God. The liturgy of the Church – the prayers of confession, the songs of thanksgiving, and the biblical preaching that evokes appreciation for God’s undeserved kindness – can guide us. A deep appreciation of our own unworthiness and consistent grateful recognition of all good things as gracious gifts will work to stifle any sense that we are entitled to happiness.

Second, we need to stop idolizing love and the people whom we love; we must look to God for our ultimate fulfillment. But this raises a puzzle: how do we genuinely love and desire relationships with other people (as God has commanded us) without idolizing them and depending on them too much for our own fulfillment? This is an old puzzle that Augustine wrestled with, but without coming to an entirely satisfactory conclusion. Søren Kierkegaard has an answer: we must love them, he says, with God as the “middle term.”<sup>10</sup> What this means is that we must love other people *because of* our love for God, so that our love for other people becomes an extension of our love for God. Our love for God demands that we love others (and that we love ourselves) for at least two reasons: all of us are created in the image of God, and God, who loves us, has commanded us to love ourselves and others. So when we love others (and ourselves) with God as the middle term, we love them *because* we recognize in them the image of the God we love, and *because* the God whom we love loves them and has commanded us also to love them. Kierkegaard thinks that this is the sort of love that we are commanded to bear toward our neighbor in the second

great commandment—“love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39)—and so he calls this sort of love “neighbor-love.” Of course, any neighbor-love we might bear toward another can be only as strong as our love toward God (since neighbor-love depends by its very nature on our love for God). So, our ability to fulfill the second great commandment depends on our ability to fulfill the first great commandment: to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). We must love God if we are to love others because of our love for God.

Neighbor-love—love for others that makes God the “middle term”—is the only sort of love that is immune to idolatry, because it makes our other-love (and self-love) dependent on and subordinate to our love for God. To protect against idolatry, we must surround our love for other people in a cocoon of neighbor-love. We must love them *first and primarily* as our neighbor, recognizing and loving the image of God in them, and *only then* love them as spouse, or child, or friend. Then we are prevented from idolizing them and they are protected from the consequences of our idolatry, including the sort of inordinate anger we have been discussing.

The twofold cause of the anger that we direct at our closest loved ones therefore has a twofold cure. We can be cured of our deeply felt conviction that we have a right to be happy by coming to possess an even more deeply felt conviction of our unworthiness because of sin and corresponding gratitude for every good thing as an undeserved, gracious gift from God—in short, by internalizing Christian teachings about sin and grace.

More fundamentally, we can be freed of our tendency to idolize both the people we love and our love itself by learning to love God most of all and to love others as God’s image-bearers and, indeed, as God’s beloved—in short, by obeying the two great commandments that sum up the Law and the Prophets. This second task amounts to loving others with God as the “middle

term,” which makes our love for them an extension of and dependent on our love for God. Both tasks are gargantuan. They are beyond our unassisted capabilities, which is why we must proceed by depending on the Holy Spirit, whose power alone enables us to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:1b-2).<sup>11</sup>

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**To protect against idolatry, we must surround our love for other people in a cocoon of neighbor-love. We must love them first as our neighbor, recognizing and loving the image of God in them, and only then love them as spouse, child, or friend.**

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**NOTES**

1 Eminem, "Love the Way You Lie," from *Recovery* (Shady Records/Aftermath Records/Interscope Records, 2010).

2 See C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960) and Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, translated by Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 49-52.

3 Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 6-7.

4 *Ibid.*, 114.

5 *Ibid.*

6 See Robert C. Roberts, "Anger in the Christian Life," *Anger, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 53 (Waco, TX: The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University, 2014), 11-20.

7 Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 91.

8 Comedian Louis CK, in an interview with Conan O'Brien, cleverly and comically critiques how we believe we have a right to brand new technologies and then get angry when those technologies fail. See "Everything's Amazing, Nobody's Happy" *www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEY58fiSK8E* (accessed June 6, 2014).

9 Transcript of Elliot Rogers's "Retribution" video, *www.cnn.com/2014/05/24/us/elliott-rodger-video-transcript/index.html* (accessed June 5, 2014).

10 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 70.

11 The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U. S. Air Force, the U. S. Department of Defense, or the U. S. government.

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# Artful Anger

BY J. NATHAN CORBITT

Serving their communities as artists, ministers, social workers, educators, and therapists, these three creative people open a window to the reality of our world. They call all of us to action, even as they use therapeutic art-making to heal survivors of abuse, torture, and trafficking.

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**I**t lay on my shoulder heavy. I turned my head and momentarily froze as I saw the muzzle of an automatic rifle pointed directly at my neck. I grabbed the pot of fear boiling up from my gut. I decided it would be in my self-survival interest to hold that pot of fear and not spill my emotions in the direction of a voice that was now becoming stronger.

“Sir, Sir, SIR! Where are you going?”

*I want to go home.* That was my first thought, like a small child running to his mother. But I could neither fly home nor fight the situation. The fear was now turning to anger. The boiling pot was beginning to burn as my physical space was threatened. I was at a border crossing in a war zone where tensions were high and violence hovered waiting to swoop down with falcon speed. I would not be prey; I bolstered myself and held on.

I looked at the border officer with all the respect I could muster and became very confused. Here was a woman holding a weapon of death—and carrying new life. She was pregnant, her belly pushing the uniform beyond its limits.

“SIR! Where are you going?” She repeated sharply.

My mind was sorting for a response, one that might appeal to her nurturing side and encourage her to pull the gun from my shoulder. My mother’s voice was now in my head, “Nathan, a soft answer turneth away wrath.”

“I’m going to the capital to judge a youth choir festival.” I managed a smile as I responded.

“Hmph.” She grunted with unconcern and pulled the gun to her side as she waved me on.

I did judge the choir festival. In the middle of devastating poverty and what I now know as the trauma of war, I watched children and youth dance and sing with cathartic vigor that released their fear and anger and helped to bind their scattered emotions within a safe space.

That was nearly thirty-five years ago. Then, the destination and purpose seemed so insignificant. What reasonable good could a musician, or any artist, do in a place filled with so much hatred and violence?

Since that time, I have witnessed firsthand the injustices of war—death, human trafficking, and forced human migration, among a long list of rights withheld and needs denied by aggression at the point of a gun, or spear, or fist. My anger was sparked by that single incident and has been continually ignited by similar ones. My hope, encouraged by the play of those children, led me to encourage and engage creative people in responding to injustice with love, compassion, and the healing power of art-making wherever they find themselves.

Over the course of nearly twenty years through my teaching and non-profit work, I have met some remarkable creative artists who understand the therapeutic nature of art-making. They serve their communities as artists, ministers, social workers, educators, and therapists. At times these creative people are prophets who stand on the edge of society providing a window to the reality of our world. Their art serves as a mirror where we are forced to see ourselves at our best, and our worst. They bring a critical awareness to a world many of us do not know exists, even in our own neighborhoods, and they call us to action.<sup>1</sup> At other times these creative people are healers, highly trained creative art therapists who painstakingly work with survivors of abuse, torture, and trafficking.

Three of these artists are Jamaine Smith, Hannah Poon, and Natalie Hoffman. Each of them has personal experiences to share that give voice to injustices they have witnessed. Their art is sometimes disturbing to see. Yet, each one calls for action.<sup>2</sup>



The artist, Jamaine Smith, comes from a social work background and currently serves as the Director of Community Programs at BuildaBridge International in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He has an M.A. in Urban Studies with a concentration in Community Arts from Eastern University.

One morning Jamaine was shocked to read a news article about a sex-trafficking ring in Brooklyn, New York. It was discovered very near where he was living with his family, in a peaceful and caring community. Neither he nor his neighbors were aware that the crimes they knew happened in other parts of the world were occurring just blocks away from their homes. He desired to change that. *15 Times a Night* was a piece created to bring critical awareness to the prostitution and sex-trafficking of adolescent girls.



*Jamaine Smith, 15 TIMES A NIGHT (2011). Pencil, charcoal, and colored pencil on paper. 10.5 x 9.5". Used by permission of the artist.*

He says that as he created the piece, "it was non-verbal lamentation and intercession all in one. There were emotions swirling within my chest that I could not put into words." The angst, sadness, anger, and determination for change are represented in every hard stroke of pencil, charcoal, and colored pencil.

*15 times a Night* is a prayer. Unable to adequately understand the complexity of the issue, Smith says:

I must enter into a space of prayer in order to process and release the feelings, the images, the unction only God can understand. This state of prayer is complex and can result in a visual representation of both lamentation and intercession like *15 Times a Night*. I believe God does hear, acknowledge, understand, and consider every voice. He validates the voiceless. God has the power to do what we cannot. This is a hope we can hold onto in a world where it appears justice is seldom served.



The artist, Hannah Poon, currently works as a social worker at a shelter for homeless families in Calgary, Alberta, where she facilitates art classes and recreational opportunities for children and youth as a means to build resiliency and skills. Like Jamaine Smith, she is a graduate of the M.A. in Urban Studies with a concentration in Community Arts from Eastern University.

In *Objecrated*, Hannah drew on a memorable experience for a piece that would be part of a campaign against sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. The event was sponsored by an arts and justice group in Calgary called *Dikaios*, from the Greek word that is translated “justice” or “righteousness.” She explains:

I once met a woman who was a street worker. She was not much older than me. I remember the evening she came into our outreach van for a sandwich and hot chocolate. The skin on her face was weathered and leathery. Her hands were shaky, swollen, and rough. Looking closely at her, I could see that she was once really beautiful. A petite native woman with coffee-colored skin and gentle features that were almost all hidden by years of street life and prostitution, she now looked like a cartoon that you see on posters at Halloween. She smelt of rotting flesh. When she left, one of my co-workers asked if I had met her yet. When I said no, my co-worker proceeded to fill me in that this woman was well known on the \$5 stroll. She was a crack addict (and had picked away at her leg until it was rotting) and at that time the smallest rock of crack cost \$5. If the saying “the eyes are the window to one’s soul” is true, then that night when I saw her eyes and took a moment to look into them, all I saw was darkness and brokenness.

The piece *Objecrated* is a message of the brokenness of one’s body and soul shipped and taken for someone else’s pleasure. The pain of rejection and of betrayal at any level is immobilizing and deflating. It can take a lot to heal from that. To imagine that someone has been stripped of their dignity and is constantly placed in a situation where they are rejected and betrayed until they are senseless raises in me a sense of deep anger for their situation and compassion for everyone involved. The piece expresses my disgust towards the dismal treatment of another human being.

Those who work in justice fields, particularly social work, know that there is never an easy solution. Issues like sexual exploitation and sex trafficking are complex, grey, and seemingly unsolvable.



*Hannah Poon, OBJECRATED (2012). Mixed Media Sculpture: Maple wood, Plywood, plaster bandages, hemp string, and cotton/polyester fabric. 30 x 16 x 16". Used by permission of the artist.*

When faced with injustices such as these, you can feel helpless, particularly when you have worked with people who have been exploited who either choose to go back into their situation or are killed for their attempts to leave. This piece is a prayer of anger towards this injustice. It is a cry of frustration towards the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of finding solutions. It is a lament for God to hear and intercede with a miracle. It is an intercession for

those experiencing this injustice to find true restorative freedom. There is a calling towards reconciliation, restoration, and justice that propels us to find solutions, to act for change, and to stand for a greater good.



The artist, Natalie Hoffman, is a Certified Art Therapist trained at the Art Therapy and Counseling Program at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As an art therapist with BuildaBridge International, she works with adults who are living with acute mental illness, substance abuse, or both. She also works with children living in transitional housing, and children who have come to this country as refugees.

The common thread that unites all of these artists' works is trauma. Hoffman says of this piece:

Hopelessness can be contagious. To me, hope does not exist because the world is a beautiful place. Hope exists because the world can be an extremely challenging place, which gives us the opportunity to see and feel the possibility of happiness in the future, when we look with not just our eyes. I wanted the viewer to look someone in the eyes who may be at that moment without hope, but instead of joining them in that hopeless place, to be able to see the humanity in the person, and to become a vessel that allows for hope to grow.

Throughout my career I have learned to empathize less with my patients, in order to better treat them. Allow me to explain: a therapist will often come across a person at the bottom of a hole. In order to help that person, they may crawl down the hole as well. The person may feel better understood, but now both therapist and the person are stuck at the bottom of this hole. I view my job as being able to reach down, or travel down the hole only momentarily, and then to switch the focus to working together to climb back out of the hole.

I know how quickly a person's life can change, how quickly a person can fall down a 'hole,' and I am learning how to help others out of those holes without joining them at the bottom.

I have seen some traumatized individuals possess what could be considered a righteous anger over the hand they have been dealt in life. From a clinical perspective, this anger, although it may be justified, can isolate a person and increase their symptoms.

Perhaps it is for this reason that I rarely find myself getting angry over some of the traumas I have seen others experience in my line of work. My job is to create a safe space where my patients can, through



Natalie Hoffman, *HOPE IN THE EYES OF THE HOPELESS* (2013). Acrylic paint on canvas, magazine collage. 18 x 18". Used by permission of the artist.

the act of art-making, express feelings of righteous anger, or to lament over some of the losses they may have had in life. I am fortunate that through working with traumatized individuals, as well as by creating and displaying my own artwork inspired by them, I have become more connected to the needs in the world around me.

I believe that God acts through us, through our actions and our relationships to one another. When I think about justice, I can only see it occurring when we choose to let love guide our actions. Many of the individuals I work with have suffered injustices. When I think about my response, and God's response to this injustice, it boils down to being able to love that person, in that moment, even if loving them does not seem easy.

**NOTES**

1 See J. Nathan Corbitt, "Prophet Muse," *Singing Our Lives*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 18 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2006), 28-35.

2 For further reading on the scientific dimensions of anger, see the *International Handbook of Anger: Constituent and Concomitant Biological, Psychological, and Social Processes*, edited by Michael Potegal, Gerhard Stemmler, and Charles Spielberger (New York: Springer, 2010). Regarding variations in anger among children within and between cultures, see Deborah C. Stearns, "Anger and Aggression," *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, [www.faqs.org/childhood/A-Ar/Anger-and-Aggression.html](http://www.faqs.org/childhood/A-Ar/Anger-and-Aggression.html) (accessed July 6, 2014). On art therapy for anger, see the articles in Frances F. Kaplan, ed., *Art Therapy and Social Action: Treating the World's Wounds* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), and Marian Liebmann, ed., *Art Therapy and Anger* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008). Artist Rose Deniz explores anger as a motivation for artwork in "Do Angry Artists Make Better Work?" [www.rosedeniz.com/2011/01/21/do-angry-artists-make-better-work/](http://www.rosedeniz.com/2011/01/21/do-angry-artists-make-better-work/) (accessed June 23, 2014).

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# Bringing Anger into the Light

BY TREVOR THOMPSON

What is anger's source? What is its aim? How might we be angry without welcoming the devil? How do we let go of our anger? Which biblical figures have modeled an anger that turned holy by sunset? The four books reviewed here can help us sort through these questions from a Christian perspective.

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Where did we get the message that God wants us to be happy all the time? Our countless emotions often emerge haphazardly and in surprising mixtures. This seemingly irrational, and sometimes wicked, aspect of ourselves has made many Christians wary of emotions. The stoic, dutiful wife and the judicious, even-keeled husband fill our hagiography, and we have too often equated faith with being "upbeat" and "cheerful." The darker emotions often have been left without a hearing in our spiritual traditions.

Anger is one such "dark" emotion that Christians struggle to face in the life of discipleship. The Apostle Paul's exhortations haunt us:

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. ... Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice....

*Ephesians 4:26-27, 31*

While Paul's injunctions remain wisdom for the people of God, we nevertheless need a thoughtful lens through which to see and understand our anger. What is anger's source? What is its aim? How might we be angry without welcoming the devil? How do we let go of our anger? Which biblical figures have modeled an anger that turned holy by sunset?

The following four books, all part of the recent surge of research on the subject of emotions, offer at least a starting point for sorting through these questions from a Christian perspective.



In *Jesus' Emotions in the Gospels* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2011, 255 pp., \$34.95), New Testament scholar Stephen Voorwinde explores how each of the Evangelists portrays the emotional life of Jesus. Acknowledging that references to Jesus' emotions in the Gospels are sparse (there are only sixty such references), Voorwinde aims to unpack each one in a systematic fashion. His approach is neither historical nor psychological but rooted in the narrative-critical methodology in which each Gospel provides a narrative of Jesus in light of the Evangelist's theological concerns and priorities.

Voorwinde first zeroes in on Jesus' anger in his investigations within Mark's theological biography, which reveals the widest range of Jesus' emotions in the Gospels. Jesus' restoration of the man with a withered hand (Mark 2:23-3:6) is one passage where his angry gaze at the Pharisees is striking. Voorwinde explains,

By not allowing Jesus to do good for a man for whom the Sabbath was made, they have overlooked the mercy and grace of God in favour of their own legalistic requirements. Their indifference to divine grace and human needs angers Jesus, as does his awareness of their murderous design. (p. 78)

Behind this look of anger, the passage notes another emotion, a rare Greek compound verb *sullupeomai*, only found in the New Testament, translated as "to be deeply grieved" or "to be deeply distressed." Voorwinde suggests Jesus is not grieved *for* the Pharisees but *at* them. Anger and grief – are these unacceptable emotions in the Son of God? Mark's portrait of the "Man of Sorrows" proposes that we think not. Voorwinde concludes with an insightful reference to Benjamin Warfield that at the root of Jesus' anger was perhaps an experience of deep pain at the Pharisees' inability to recognize God's grace in their midst. Anger, pain, and grief then emerge as related emotions of Jesus' acutely sensitive soul.

The scene that most frequently comes to mind when we think of an angry Jesus is his cleansing of the Jerusalem temple. Voorwinde sees this emotional outburst, however, not as anger but rather as an expression of Jesus' all-consuming "zeal" for his Father's house. Jesus' fervor is of the same color as Yahweh's divine emotion aroused by Israel's idolatry and false worship. Unpacking this passage in the context of the Fourth Gospel, Voorwinde does not stray from John's high Christology where Jesus' emotions can rarely be understood in purely human terms. Voorwinde claims that "Jesus experiences emotions that are extraordinary, paradoxical

and at times also mysterious and incomprehensible. Often they lie beyond the realm of normal human experience” (p. 213).

In the end then, with this emphasis on Christ’s messianic identity and divine foreknowledge shaping his emotional life, Voorwinde’s text does not offer a Jesus to imitate but to worship. While this is an orthodox conclusion, it feels flat when held up against the desire for more clarity on how we should navigate the dark corridors of our emotional lives. For this, Voorwinde suggests disciples go to the Scriptural injunctions that provide this kind of guidance (i.e., the actual teachings of Jesus and Paul) and to the Holy Spirit who will guide disciples to respond to situations in “emotionally appropriate ways in conformity with their God-given temperament and personality” (p. 217).



Robert C. Roberts’s *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 207 pp., \$16.95) offers a guide in integrating human emotions with Christian spirituality. Roberts, a moral philosopher at Baylor University, hopes that by paying attention to what emotions are, how they are formed, and the nature of particular spiritual emotions, we might better form Christian disciples and become better Christians ourselves. Roberts proposes that emotions are “concern-based construals.” Our central concerns shape how we see the world and influence our emotional lives. Roberts encourages the Church to see herself, particularly in her liturgy, as a “school of character,” a place whereby the emotional lives of the people of God are formed in light of central Christian concerns.

These Christian concerns are our hunger and thirst for righteousness, the yearning for an eternal fellowship with God, and the desire for God’s kingdom. With dialogue partners like Sigmund Freud, Leo Tolstoy, and Iris Murdoch, he hopes to convince the reader that the Gospels provide a way of “reading” ourselves, our neighbors, creation, and God. The last section of the book explores the kind of new emotional life that emerges when one’s vision and character are entirely Christ-shaped. Roberts focuses here on the fruits of the Holy Spirit: contrition, joy, gratitude, hope, peace, and compassion. The more we practice these emotion-virtues, as he calls them, the more our character will reflect our Christian commitments.

Roberts treats the emotion of anger in greatest detail in his penultimate chapter on the emotion-virtue of “peace.” He places anger within the context of what he calls the “emotions of upset,” emotions like anxiety, grief, and guilt that make a person frustrated and wishing something were not so. Anger, in his view, is triggered when we get frustrated because we see another person as an offender, as morally bad and deserving of punishment (p. 176). This construal of a person as an offender, however, does not align with the ideal Christian way of seeing the world in terms of God’s reconciling shalom wrought in Jesus Christ. Because of this, the construal of God’s

shalom should mitigate – even eradicate – the emotions of upset. “Christian peace is at odds with the alienation involved in the grammar of anger,” Roberts concludes. “Christian peace, when one really feels it, dispels anger and tends to bring conflict to an end and fellowship to a beginning” (p. 176). Even though our emotional lives often feel more fickle than Roberts allows, his broader efforts at connecting human emotions to discipleship and character formation are nevertheless useful.



The book in this group that offers the most to ponder is Lytta Basset’s *Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 295 pp., \$12.80). Basset, a Swiss pastor and theologian, explores the constructive role anger can and should play in the structure of identity and faith. While probing the role of anger in the lives of three biblical characters, Basset employs Hebrew and Greek word studies, reflections on French poets and social critics, observations by Jewish and Christian biblical commentators, and modern psychoanalytic theory to create a challenging yet mesmerizing book. Often this work feels like a dream or an art film full of textured images that only hint at meaning and direction. Thus, depending on the reader’s disposition and interests, this psycho-spiritual journey can either feel invigorating or frustrating. Regardless, compelling questions emerge that prove to be vital for becoming emotionally mature disciples.

Holy anger and the OTHER are key concepts in Basset’s study. As she notes in the opening chapters, “By OTHER I mean all that happens to us, all that befalls us and does violence to us, without anyone asking for our consent and without our agreeing to accept it” (p. 12). This OTHER pushes us to react, to take a stand, and to wage a battle against it. This reaction, a kind of vital energy that forces us to face the OTHER, is what Basset sees as “holy anger.” Her chapters then unfold with illustrations of how this plays out in Job and Jacob.

The sections on Jacob are particularly fascinating, with Jacob lifted up as an example of someone who embodies this holy anger in his face-to-face encounter with the OTHER on the banks of the Jabbok river. Jacob, a man full of fears and anxieties, is about to meet his brother, Esau, who has vowed to kill him. Alone and powerless in the wilderness, stripped of all his possessions, he falls into a deep sleep. Only after this all-night psycho-spiritual wrestling match with the OTHER does Jacob receive the blessing of a new name, a new identity, a deeper and surer sense of the OTHER and himself. It forever alters his walk in the world. Basset narrates this absorbing look at Jacob’s courageous and “angry” act of self-differentiation by entering deeply into his dreams and imagining every scene from multiple perspectives.

Is anger always an invitation? Is confrontation with the OTHER always a blessing? Basset does not address how anger can be twisted, directed at the wrong person, or expressed with an off-beam intensity. Nevertheless,

Basset's work fills an important gap, especially for Christians who too often avoid confrontation and anger in the name of peace and happiness before sunset. The haunting counterexample Basset points to is the figure of Cain who, in censuring his anger, loses his opportunity to grow more mature through the necessary yet demanding face-to-face encounter with God and his brother. Instead, through an unholy rage and act of violence, Cain eliminates the OTHER and the possibility for a deeper life of friendship and blessing.



*Anger: Minding Your Passion* (Nashville, TN: Fresh Air Books, 2010, 96 pp., \$10.80), a collection of short writings compiled and introduced by Amy Lyles Wilson, might be exactly the kind of resource we need to bring anger out of the darkness and into the light. The intended purpose of this collection is to remind us that "anger is natural, anger is human, and anger can be of God. It's what we do with it that matters" (p. 9). The pages that follow are filled with an assortment of personal stories, stand-alone quotes, and short theological musings. Authors range from those nearly everyone would recognize (essayist Frederick Buechner, civil rights leader Howard Thurman, and novelist Madeleine L'Engle) to others who labor in the vineyard as coaches, therapists, and ministers. Not all authors are Christians, nor are all speaking out of a religious lens. Nonetheless, the publishers' intended audience is the demographic of "spiritually curious people." The final pages of this collection provide a list of ten suggestions for handling anger.

Of all that this little book offers, the power of creating meaningful rituals that both provide an opportunity to face the OTHER and invite us to acknowledge and let go of our anger strikes me as the most wise. Take a deep breath. Look in the mirror and offer a blessing. Take a quiet walk down to the river. Watch the way anger constricts the body and gratitude opens it up. Release a good cathartic cry into the universe. Offer a gesture of reconciliation.

As Jesus warns, in our anger, we are liable to judgment (Matthew 5:22). Yet, as these authors suggest, the path to holiness must include our emotions, especially the way anger invites us to live more faithfully into the mercy and love of God.



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