

NO SHADOW OF TURNING:

On Divine Impassibility

David Bentley Hart

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. — James 1:17

DIVINE SUFFERING, DIVINE BECOMING

When such a rupture between ages occurs within a supposedly continuous and internally consistent tradition of discourse, such as Christian theology, it constitutes something potentially far worse: it calls into serious question the intrinsic stability of that tradition.

Time, of course, is not a transparent medium; of the future we can glimpse only the shadows of possibilities, and whatever we can discern of the past recedes incessantly into an ever greater distance, and is visible usually only through the distorting atmosphere of the preoccupations of the present. At times it proves practically impossible to forge between ourselves and an earlier epoch those ties of imaginative sympathy that would allow us to understand it from within something like its own language and sensibilities; at that point we are no longer able credibly to represent to ourselves the spirit of that other age, but only to preserve the relics of a lost and irrecoverable world. This is always a cultural and intellectual bereavement, of course, as understanding is a precious thing, but when such a rupture between ages occurs within a supposedly continuous and internally consistent tradition of discourse, such as Christian theology, it constitutes something potentially far worse: it calls into serious question the intrinsic stability of that tradition, and hence the validity of its claims to probity and truthfulness. Of course, the loss of the past never occurs suddenly or convulsively; a catastrophist model of change can never capture the slow but relentless process that transforms the stable and even apodeictic truths of

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one age into the quaint and curious débris by which another at best diverts itself; the change occurs discretely, as one element of a coherent whole becomes detached from the context that made it intelligible or necessary, and then another, until integral order has dissolved into a mere collection of monuments.

If the evidence of twentieth century literature on the matter is rightly weighed, the topic of this essay—God’s impassibility, the venerable patristic and mediaeval doctrine that the divine nature is in itself immutable and immune to suffering—may well prove to be a piece of conceptual furniture for which fewer and fewer theologians can find or remember a proper use. That the Christian God is possessed of impassibility, or *apatheia* (to employ the proper Greek term), that he is impervious to any force—any pathos or affect—external to his nature and is incapable of experiencing shifting emotions within himself, seems to many an impossible proposition now to affirm, one certainly that is *prima facie* incompatible with the biblical portrait of the God of Israel and that, even more certainly, is wholly irreconcilable with what Christians believe occurred in the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. Surely, it is now often asserted (with a confidence whose increase is exactly proportionate to understanding’s withdrawal), this word *apatheia* is the residue of an obsolete metaphysics and a sign that, however necessary it was for the early church to employ the resources of pagan philosophy to articulate Christian doctrine, the baptism of Hellenism was never entirely complete.

This is not to say that the doctrine is altogether moribund: many a metaphysically canny modern theologian still knows to insist on its necessity, at least as a grammatical restraint, a negative moment in our theology that reminds us that, as Rowan Williams writes, “we should not delude ourselves that God’s difference is merely that of one thing from another: we need to put down those formal markers (immutable, impassible, omnipotent, etc.) as a way of insisting that we cannot write a biography of God.”¹ But even here two observations should be made. The first is that, stated thus, *apatheia* is a purely apophatic term, serving simply as a safeguard against the theologian’s speculative ambitions; and this in itself demonstrates something of the distance we have traveled from earlier ages of theology when the teaching of divine impassibility was not simply a limit placed upon our language, a pious refusal to attempt trespass upon God’s majesty in his light inaccessible, but was in fact very much part of the ground of Christian hope, central to the positive message of the evangel, not simply an austere negation of thought, but a real promise of joy in God. And the second observation is that it is indeed a “biography” of God, in some

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1. Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” in *idem., On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 160. Williams is describing the view of D. M. MacKinnon here (it should be noted), but with approbation.

Not that the church fathers were not aware of the profound difference between the God of the philosophers and the God of Scripture, between the serenely abstract and remote deity who, in late antiquity, had become the object of "rational worship" — or, at any rate, admiration — for many a refined soul, and the loving and wrathful God of the Bible.

sense, that certain theologians now think we should write—or rather should find already written for us in Scripture. After all, it might reasonably be asked, in the story of God's dealings with Israel and of the Son's incarnation, death, and resurrection, have we not been given, quite concretely, the narrative of God's identity? Have we not seen the story of God unfold before our eyes, and is it not a story in which divine love and wrath, pity and suffering, are clearly substantive elements of God's presence with us? Have we not, in short, seen the wounded heart of God, wounded by our sin in his eternal being and wounded to death at Golgotha? And these questions, for some, become immeasurably more pressing in the wake of the twentieth century—in the wake of death-camps, and gulags, and killing fields, and the fires of nuclear detonations: in this age in which we have seen such unutterable horrors, can we really believe in a God essentially untouched by pain, removed by nature from all suffering, beyond all change? Can we vest our hope in such a God, or believe he loves us, or love him in turn?

Not that the church fathers were not aware of the profound difference between the God of the philosophers and the God of Scripture, between the serenely abstract and remote deity who, in late antiquity, had become the object of "rational worship" — or, at any rate, admiration — for many a refined soul, and the loving and wrathful God of the Bible, who shook with jealousy at the infidelities of his people, who created out of the depths of his love, and for his pleasure, and who finally poured himself out in Christ, even unto death, in pursuit of those who had forsaken him. And, indeed, *apatheia* is not an entirely univocal concept in the theology of the church's early centuries. But it is nonetheless striking that, in the course, say, of the great disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries concerning trinitarian dogma and Christology, divine impassibility was a principle that all parties concerned accepted without serious reservations, even though it was a principle that, on the face of it, better served the causes of what came to be viewed as the heterodox schools of thought: Arians and Eunomians quite plausibly argued against the essential divinity of the Son on the grounds that real generation within the changeless Godhead is unimaginable and that the adventure of the incarnation and death of the Son is obviously impossible for a nature truly divine; Nestorians could insist upon a real and inviolable distinction within Christ between the activities of the Logos and those of "the man" because, as God, the divine Logos was beyond suffering and change altogether. Still, however, the orthodox were every bit as adamant as their opponents. Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Cyril of Alexandria: all were equally certain that God is immutable by nature, eternally the same, and beyond every perturbation and pathos to which a finite nature is subject, even though this unyielding commitment to the metaphysics of divine impassibility could produce what look like very odd formulations indeed. Cyril, for

instance, who insisted with more fervor and ferocity than any other theologian of the early church upon the absolute unity of Christ, the perfect simplicity of the identity of the incarnate Logos in all his acts, could write, without any sense of contradiction:

When the only-begotten Word of God became a human being, he did so not by discarding his being as God, but by remaining, within the assumption of the flesh, that which he was. For the nature of the Word is changeless and unalterable, and can suffer no shadow of turning.²

And this indeed was the pattern of Christian discourse from the earliest period of patristic theology: more than three centuries earlier, Ignatius of Antioch, who could anticipate his own martyrdom as his opportunity to become “an imitator of the suffering of my God,”³ had nonetheless exhorted Polycarp of Smyrna to

Wait for him who is above every season, the timeless one, the invisible, made visible for us, the intangible one, who suffers not, who suffered for us, who in every way endured for us.⁴

Even Origen, who was at least on one occasion willing to speak of a passion suffered by God before the incarnation, even of a kind of passibility of the Father,⁵ ultimately refused to allow such language anything more than metaphoric status; though indeed we may and must speak of divine rejoicing over our virtues and divine grief over our vices, “The divine nature is entirely removed from every affect of passion and change, remaining ever unmoved and undisturbed upon the summit of blessedness.”⁶ Surely, one might be justified in protesting, there is an essential incoherence in this language; what purpose does the language of *apatheia* serve, anyway, if it must always accompany every affirmation of God’s love and suffering as a sudden disorienting paradox?

What purpose does the language of apatheia serve, anyway, if it must always accompany every affirmation of God’s love and suffering as a sudden disorienting paradox?

Even if it is the case (as it is with the present author) that one’s sympathy with such complaints is small—that one entirely rejects the suggestion that the language of divine impassibility is inconsistent with the story Christians tell of the acts of God in Christ, and regards such a claim as evidence only of misunderstanding filtered through emotion—

2. Cyril, *Homiliae Diversae*, Homilia II, PG 77: 985-89. [γέγονε δὲ ἄνθρωπος ὁ μονογενὴς τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγος, οὐκ ἀποβεβληκῶς τὸ εἶναι Θεός, ἀλλ’ ἐν προσλήψει σαρκὸς μεμενηκῶς, ὅπερ ἦν. Ἄτρεπτος γάρ ἐστι καὶ ἀναλλοίωσις ἢ τοῦ Λόγου φύσις, καὶ οὐκ οἶδε παθεῖν τροπῆς ἀποσκίασμα.]

3. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans* 6.3. [...μιμητὴν εἶναι τοῦ θεοῦ μου.]

4. Ignatius, *Epistle to Polycarp* 3.2. . [τὸν ὑπὲρ καιρὸν προσδόκα, τὸν ἄχρονον, τὸν ἀόρατον, τὸν δι’ ἡμᾶς ὄρατόν, τὸν ἀψηλάσφητον, τὸν ἀπαθη, τὸν δι’ ἡμᾶς παθητόν, τὸν κατὰ πάντα τρόπον δι’ ἡμᾶς ὑπομείναντα.]

5. Origen, *In Ezech.* Hom VI.6, in Origène, *Homélie Sur Ézéchiél*, ed. Marcel Borret, SJ (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1989), pp. 228-30. See especially p. 230: “*Ipse Pater non est impassibilis.*” For Origen such a pronouncement is a kind of *pia fraus*, fitted to the capacities of the spiritually callow.

6. Origen, *In Num.* Hom XXIII.2, PG 12: 748. [*Aliena porro est divina natura ab omni passionis et permutationis affectu, in illo semper beatitudinis apice immobilis et inconcussa perdurans.*]

One species of modern "pathetic" theology that seems particularly pluriform and perdurable is a kind of trinitarian reflection within modern systematics that attempts—in a variety of ways, but always in some sense as an effort to repristinate the "trinitarianism" of Hegel—to collapse the distinction between God's eternal being as the triune God and the temporal history of God's unfolding presence with his creatures as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

still one must acknowledge that *apatheia* does generally tend to appear within Christian discourse now, if at all, as a metaphysical predicate only, necessarily implicit within certain quite classical philosophical definitions of the "divine," but in no real sense part of the rational coherence of the Christian narrative, or certainly of the "good news" it has to offer. Moreover, as speculative grammars and intellectual fashions have changed, versions of theology have taken shape in which the teaching of divine impassibility enjoys no welcome; indeed, there are now alternative theologies aplenty that insist upon not only a capacity for suffering in the divine nature, but a necessity for it. Some, of course, like the various forms of process theology, stray far beyond the identifiable boundaries of the Christian story in their pursuit of metaphysical completeness (though not, apparently, in pursuit of a cogent ontology), but others hew nearer the straight and narrow of dogmatic tradition.

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God has elected along with his own identity in Christ, for God's redemptive actions are not simply gracious, but definitive of his nature, and so evil is present in creation as the shadow accompanying God's decision to be this God and not another.

Of course, a story laid out in such broad terms corresponds exactly to the system of no one theologian, and many of those to whom something like this story can be attributed differ from one another quite radically. In the realm of theological celebrity, one can identify a very serious engagement with Hegel's logic, worked out in quite a rigorous and biblical fashion, in the thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Robert Jenson (neither of whom allows the language of divine passion to displace from their theology the reality or centrality of Easter); but one can also find a far more incautious and vulgar "Hegelianism" prodigally displayed in the loose, rhapsodic, paraenetic discourse of Jürgen Moltmann, with all its chaotic sentimentalism, or a Hegelianism saturated with a palpable metaphysical nihilism in the altogether different and immeasurably more systematic (and yet paradoxically even more incoherent) thought of Eberhard Jüngel. For Moltmann, the event of Christ—in particular, the event of the cross—is that "crucial" moment in which God's identity is achieved: on the cross, Moltmann says, God constitutes himself as suffering love;⁷ there he inaugurates the trinitarian history of divine suffering,⁸ there he takes all godforsakenness and rejection into his eternal being,⁹ there he truly exposes himself to the dark annihilating nothingness over against which he affirmed creation in the beginning,¹⁰ and so "becomes the God who identifies himself with men and women to the point of death and beyond."¹¹ And Jüngel, sounding the rich, dark Wagnerian chords of his strange and quasi-mystical discourse of purulence (*Verwesung*) and death, sees the event of the cross as God identifying himself with the dead man Jesus, thus constituting himself in relation to transience, to nothingness, as the unity of life and death in favor of life;¹² in the absolute opposition between Father and Son on the cross,¹³ the struggle between possibility and nothingness, God makes "room for nothingness in the divine life" and, "suffering annihilation in himself . . . shows himself to be victor over nothingness"¹⁴ by remaining one God, both life and death, in the love of the Spirit.¹⁵

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7. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, pp. 244-45; *idem.*, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 82-83.

8. *The Crucified God*, p. 255.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 276-77; *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 81-83, 118-19.

10. *Idem.*, *God in Creation*, p. 102.

11. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 119.

12. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, p. 299.

13. See Jüngel, "Das Sein Jesu Christi als Ereignis der Versöhnung Gottes mit einer gottlosen Welt: Die Hingabe des Gekreuzigten," *Evangelische Theologie* 38 (1978).

14. *God as Mystery of the World*, p. 217.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 328.

The only way in which the distinction between being and becoming can be overcome (if this is at all possible or desirable) is by way of a complete collapse of the difference. Being must be identified with the totality of becoming as an "infinite" process. Otherwise one cannot avoid some version of Heidegger's onto-theological critique.

It is possible to treat of none of this adequately here, though one must observe, if only in passing, that it is unlikely that such approaches to trinitarian theology can withstand very close philosophical scrutiny. Perhaps that should always be a subordinate concern for theology, but still it should be remarked that, when all is said and done, the idea of a God who becomes through suffering passions, whose being is determined in a history, according to "encounters" with other realities, even realities he creates, is simply a metaphysical myth, a mere supreme being, but not the source of all being. To wax vaguely Heideggerean, he is a God on this side of the ontological difference. For one thing, it is an oddly quixotic expectation that one could rescue Hegel's "insights" from Hegel's metaphysics by shifting the narrative from the generality of the system's universal horizon, whereupon the constant play of the Concept's diremption into finitude and recuperation into *Geist* shows itself as the sublime logic of all human labor, struggle, and reflection, to the particularity of the identity and fate of Jesus of Nazareth, who is now understood as the one historical object of God's self-defining determination. Hegel's logic cannot work that way, and the system is not something to be trifled with: it is too well thought out, and one step towards it is complete capitulation. The only way in which the distinction between being and becoming can be overcome (if this is at all possible or desirable) is by way of a complete collapse of the difference. Being must be identified with the totality of becoming as an "infinite" process. Otherwise one cannot avoid some version of Heidegger's onto-theological critique (and, frankly, Heidegger's critique almost certainly holds against the complete system anyway): one is identifying being with a being among beings, one's God is an ontic God, who becomes what he is not, possessed of potential, receiving his being from elsewhere—from being. And, as a being, he is in some sense finite, divided between being and being *this*, and so cannot be the being of creatures, even though he is their cause.¹⁶ Among other things, this means that this God fails the test of Anselm's *id quo maius cogitari nequit*: a standard whose provenance may not exactly be biblical, but whose logic ultimately is, and that teaches us to recognize when we are speaking of God and when we are speaking of a god, when we are directing our mind towards the transcendent source of being and when we are fabri-

16. See E. L. Mascall, *He Who Is: A Study in Traditional Theism* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1945), p. 112: having argued that while a God who is determined by the world can provide a metaphysical explanation of the course of worldly history, he can still never actually provide an explanation of the sheer "that it is" of the world, Mascall concludes "nothing less than a strictly infinite God can provide the explanation of the world's existence, and that, in consequence, the world must be, in the fullest sense, contingent and altogether unnecessary to God. Various objections ... complain that, on such a view, God could not have the intimate interest and concern with his creatures that is manifested in the Christian religion ... while this would certainly be true if God was a finite being, it is not true if God is infinite." I do not believe that this is a logic that theology can intelligibly forsake.

cating for ourselves a metaphysical fable, when we are being Christians and when we are being mere theists.

But the greatest problems with such approaches to trinitarian theology are as much moral as metaphysical, for once the interval of analogy between the immanent and economic Trinities (between God in himself and God with the world) has been collapsed into simple identity, certain very unsettling conclusions will become inevitable. Moltmann and Jüngel both, for all their differences, attempt to avoid depicting God, in his history of becoming, as merely the passive creature of his creatures: freely, they insist, he chooses his course. But this idea of God as a finite subject writ large, who elects himself as a project of self-discovery, only compounds the problem; in place of the metaphysically necessary "God" of the system, this sort of language gives us only an anthropomorphic myth, a God whose will enjoys a certain indeterminate priority over his essence, in whom possibility exceeds actuality, who is therefore composite, ontic, voluntaristic...and obviously non-existent. More to the point, as many of the fathers would have argued, a God who can by nature experience finite affects and so be determined by them is a God whose identity is established through a commerce with evil; if the nature of God's love can be in any sense positively shaped by sin, suffering, and death, then sin, suffering, and death will always be in some sense features of who he is. Among other things, this means that evil must enjoy a certain independent authenticity, a reality with which God must come to grips, and God's love must—if it requires the negative pathos of history to bring it to fruition—be inherently deficient, and in itself a fundamentally reactive reality. Goodness then requires evil to be good; love must be goaded into being by pain. In brief, a God who can, in his nature as God, suffer cannot be the God who is love, even if at the end of the day he should prove to be loving, or the God who is simply good, or who is the wellspring of being and life. He like us is an accommodation between death and life.

Nor is it enough to say that, as God's identity is infinite, the conditions of the finite do not determine its ultimate nature; for while a truly transcendent infinity might be able to assume the finite into itself without altering its nature, an "infinite" that realizes itself in and through finite determinations can in no sense remain untouched by the evils it passes through, even if the ultimate synthesis of its identity is, in its totality, "infinite" in the circular Hegelian sense. Such can be only the infinite of total repletion, the fullness of ontic determinations in their interrelated discreteness and dialectical "yield"; only thus can being be one with becoming. Again, one simply cannot say that God finds himself in the one historical object of Jesus *tout court*; in specifying this one historical object God must also specify the entire web of historical and cosmic contingencies in which this object subsists; no worldly reality

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can stand apart from the entire reality of the world. And so, if one pursues the logic of divine becoming to its proper end, one will find that all things are necessary aspects of God's odyssey towards himself; every painful death of a child, every casual act of brutality, all war, famine, pestilence, disease, murder...all will turn out to be moments in the identity of God, resonances within the event of his being, aspects of the occurrence of his essence: all evil will become meaningful—speculatively meaningful and so necessary—as the crucible in which God is forged. If, metaphysically, Hegelian trinitarian theology fails Anselm's test, morally it fails the test of Ivan Karamazov: if the universal and final good of all creatures required, as its price, the torture of one little girl, would that be acceptable? And the moral enormity of this calculus is obviously in no wise mitigated if all of creation must suffer the consequences of God's self-determination. The God whose identity subsists in time and is achieved upon history's horizon—who is determined, however "freely," by his reaction to the pathos of history—may be a being, or indeed the totality of all beings gathered in the pure depths of total consciousness, but he is not being as such, he is not life and truth and goodness and love and beauty. God belongs to the system of causes, even if he does so as its total rationality; he is an absolute *causa in fieri* but not an ultimate *causa in esse*. And so he may include us in his story, but his story will remain both good and evil even if it ends in an ultimate triumph over evil. After all, how can we tell the dancer from the dance? The collapse of the analogical interval between the immanent and economic in the Trinity, between timeless eternity and the time in which eternity shows itself, has not made God our companion in pain, but simply the truth of our pain and our only pathetic hope of rescue; his intimacy with us has not been affirmed at all: only a truly transcendent and passionless God can be the fullness of love dwelling within our very being, nearer to us than our inmost parts. This "Hegelian" God is not transcendent—truly infinite—in this way at all, but only sublime, a metaphysical whole that can comprise us or change us extrinsically, but not account for or transform us within our very being. And this is a fearful thought, especially if, like Moltmann, one seeks in the passions of the divine an explanation for the suffering of creatures: what a monstrous irony it would be if, in our eagerness to find a way of believing in God's love in the age of Auschwitz, we should in fact succeed only in describing a God who is the metaphysical ground of Auschwitz.

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Let us at any rate be certain we truly understand what is at stake when the tradition says that God is by nature impassible, immutable, and timeless, and understand also how all these words have been refined and transfigured by the story of what occurred in Christ, and by the proper grammar of trinitarian dogma. I shall attempt at least, in what follows, to give a brief account of these things, under the form of a kind of "patristic synthesis," drawn from the writings of various of the fa-

thers, and arranged in a very simple sequence of three distinct moments: *apatheia* as love; *apatheia* as trinitarian love; and *apatheia* as trinitarian love seizing us up into itself.

APATHEIA AS LOVE

Apatheia entered Christian thought not only as an attribute to be ascribed to God, but as a virtue to be pursued and, in this latter acceptance, the term was borrowed primarily from the Stoics, for whom it signified chiefly a kind of absolute equanimity, an impassive serenity so fortified by prudent self-restraint against any excesses of either joy or sorrow as to be virtually indistinguishable from indifference. Not that it was not an ethical quality: one who could become truly free from the passions could also learn to treat others, whatever the accidents of their births, with regard, concern, and justice; but it was also most definitely conceived of as a kind of regal inactivity of the will. When Christians adopted the term, however, it became something much more. According to Clement of Alexandria, for instance, true *apatheia* consists in the cultivation of understanding and charity,¹⁷ and as we are drawn to God in Christ, we are being conformed to a God who is without *pathē*—devoid of pain, free from wrath, without anxious desire, and so on—not as a result of having mastered the passions within himself, but from his essence, which is the fullness of all good things;¹⁸ and ultimately the Christian who has so advanced in understanding as to be purged of emotions is one who has become entirely love.¹⁹ a single inexorable motion of utter *agapē*. Far from being mere Stoic detachment, then, *apatheia* is in fact a condition of radical attachment. And Clement is in no sense unusual here. In the “Letter to Anatolius” with which he prefaces his *Praktikos*, Evagrius of Pontus states that “*apatheia*

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17. Clement, *Stromata*, III.5, PG 8: 1144-48.

18. *Ibid.*, IV.23, PG 8: 1360-61.

19. *Ibid.*, VI.9, PG 9: 292-300. See especially 293-96: “But [those who believe that one cannot be impassible and still desire the good] obviously do not know the divinity of love [*agapē*]. For love is not passionate longing on the part of the lover. It is rather a loving act of appropriation, restoring the gnostic to the unity of the faith, notwithstanding time and place. But he who has already, through love, entered into these things, advancing beyond hope by knowledge, does not long for anything, possessing, as far as possible, the thing longed for. He naturally, therefore, remains in one changeless condition, loving knowingly [“gnostically”]. Nor, therefore, will he fiercely crave to be assimilated to the beautiful, as he already possesses beauty by love.” [‘Αλλ’ οὐκ ἴσασι, ὡς ἔοικεν, οὗτοι τὸ θεῖον τῆς ἀγάπης. οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἐπὶ ὄρεξις τοῦ ἀγαπῶντος ἡ ἀγάπη, στερκτικὴ δὲ οἰκείωσις, εἰς τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως ἀποκατεστηκυία τὸν γνωστικόν, χρόνου καὶ τόπου μὴ προσδεόμενον. Ὁ δ’ ἐν οἷς ἔσται δι’ ἀγάπης ἤδη γενόμενος, τὴν ἐλπίδα προειληφώς διὰ τῆς γνωσεως, οὐδὲ ὀρέγεται τινος, ἔχων, ὡς οἶον τε, αὐτὸ τὸ ὄρεκτόν. εἰκότως τοίνυν ἐν τῇ ἀμεταβόλῳ, γνωστικῶς ἀγαπῶν. οὐδ’ ἄρα ζηλώσει ἐξομοιωθῆναι τοῖς κάλλοις εἶναι δι’ ἀγάπης ἔχων τοὺς κάλλους.]

This tradition reaches its most profoundly developed form in the thought of Maximus the Confessor, whose Chapters on Love is a virtual manual of instructions for the cultivation of apatheia, which is to say, for him, the cultivation of a spiritual vision that—having divested itself of all the fantasies summoned up by self-love, pride, the desire for power, and all other sins—can see all things with a pure heart, as images and reflections of the Logos who shaped them, and so love them without restraint, with a love so perfect that no perturbation or pathos can obviate its intensity.

has a child called *agapē* who keeps the door to deep knowledge of the created universe."²⁰ In the text itself, moreover, he defines *apatheia* as the very health of the soul,²¹ at which we arrive only to the degree that true spiritual love has conquered our soul's *pathē*.²² He even insists that this is in no sense a suppression of the soul's vital energies—its irascible (*thymos*) and concupiscible (*epithymia*) elements—but is simply their conversion towards natural integrity: a ferocity directed against evil and a desire directed towards divine virtue.²³ This tradition reaches its most profoundly developed form in the thought of Maximus the Confessor, whose *Chapters on Love* is a virtual manual of instructions for the cultivation of *apatheia*, which is to say, for him, the cultivation of a spiritual vision that—having divested itself of all the fantasies summoned up by self-love,²⁴ pride, the desire for power, and all other sins—can see all things with a pure heart, as images and reflections of the Logos who shaped them,²⁵ and so love them without restraint, with a love so perfect that no perturbation or pathos can obviate its intensity. The mind's life of illumination, he says, is born only of love,²⁶ which is possible only for a mind purged of all hatred for others,²⁷ because God is love itself and can be known and possessed only in love.²⁸ Again, the attainment of this love is a refinement of the soul's innate dynamisms, so that concupiscence is transformed into divine desire and irascibility into divine love,²⁹ and this grants us a true delight in divine beauty.³⁰ And this state of mind is, for Maximus, properly called *apatheia*.

Obviously, at this point, one is not talking about the sort of austere impassivity or want of feeling one would ascribe to Aristotle's or Plotinus' "God," or of some sort of pure and dispirited indifference. Augustine, for instance, who believed perfect impassibility to be impossible for us in this life, and probably undesirable, says that

...if [*apatheia*] is taken to mean ... a freedom from those affects that are contrary to rationality and that perturb the mind, then it is plainly a good thing and most desirable.... But if by *apatheia* is meant a state in which no feeling can touch the mind, who would not adjudge such insensibility

20. Evagrius, *Praktikos*, in Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, ed. and trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. 14. See also chapter 81, p. 36.

21. Ch. 56, p. 31.

22. Ch. 35, p. 25.

23. Ch. 24, p. 23; chs. 84-86, p. 37.

24. See also, and in particular, Maximus, *Epistola II: De Charitate*, PG 91: 392-408.

25. *Idem.*, *Capita de Charitate*, II.100, PG 90: 1017; IV.72, PG 90: 1068.

26. *Ibid.*, I.9, PG 90: 964.

27. *Ibid.*, I.15, PG 90: 964.

28. *Ibid.*, I.23, PG 90: 965; 38, PG 90: 968; IV.100, PG 90: 1074.

29. *Ibid.*, II.48, PG 90: 1000.

30. *Ibid.*, I.19, PG 90: 964.

to be worse than all vices? ...that perfect future beatitude will be without any goad of fear or any sadness; but who except him who is wholly lost to the truth would say that neither love nor joy will be there?³¹

For Gregory of Nyssa it is even possible to say that nothing that does not lead to sin is properly called a pathos.³² But, one might ask, at this point has not the meaning of the term impassibility been so thoroughly altered as to have no real use? Is it not the case that once we have admitted love into our definition of the word we have thus rendered it unintelligible, inasmuch as love is a reaction evoked by what one suffers of another?

To state the matter simply—No: love is not primordially a reaction, but the possibility of every action, the transcendent act that makes all else actual; it is purely positive, sufficient in itself, without the need of any galvanism of the negative to be fully active, vital, and creative. This is so because the ultimate truth of love is God himself, who creates all things solely for his pleasure, and whose act of being is infinite. And this is why love, when it is seen in its truly divine depth, is called *apatheia*. If this seems an odd claim to us now, it is largely because we are so accustomed to thinking of love as one of the emotions, one of the passions, one of those spontaneous or reactive forces that rise up in us and spend themselves on various objects of impermanent fascination; and of course for us “love” often is just this. But, theologically speaking, at least according to the dominant tradition, love is not, in its essence, an emotion—a pathos—at all: it is life, being, truth, our only true well-being, and the very ground of our nature and existence. Thus John of Damascus draws a very strict distinction between a pathos and an “energy” (or act): the former is a movement of the soul provoked by something alien and external to it; but the latter is a “drastic” movement, a positive power that is moved of itself in its own nature.³³ Of such a nature, most certainly, is love. Or—to step briefly out of the patristic context—as Thomas Aquinas puts it, love, enjoyment, and delight are qualitatively different from anger and sadness, as the latter are privative states, passive and reactive, whereas the former are originally one act of freedom and intellect and subsist wholly in God as a purely “intellectual appetite.”³⁴ And thus Gregory of Nyssa can portray his sister Macrina as teaching that the soul joined to God, who is beauty itself,

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31. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XIV.ix.4, CCL 48: 428. [*.. si ita intelligenda est...ut sine his affectionibus vivatur, quae contra rationem accidunt mentemque perturbant, bona plane et maxime optanda est.... Porro si apavqcia illa dicenda est, cum animum contingere omnino non potest ullus affectus, quis hunc stuporem non omnibus vitis iudicet esse peiorem? ...perfectam beatitudinem sine stimulo timoris et sine ulla tristitia futuram; non ibi autem futurum amorem gaudiumque quis dixerit, nisi omni modo a veritate seclusus?*]

32. Gregory, *Contra Eunomium* III.4.27, GNO II ; 44.

33. John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* II.23, PG 94: 949-52.

34. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* I.xx.1a.

Logically prior to any pathos we encounter, even the pathos of sin that confines our nature from the first, love is active in us as the very power of our existence, the truth of a nature that is in its essence sheer yearning, summoned out of nothingness towards union with God.

And precisely because it is prior to and—in God—ultimately impervious to any contrary power (hatred, pride, anger, pain, death) such love as this is the only true impassibility.

will have no need of the energy of that appetent desire (*epithymia*) that arises from need or anxiety to unite it to divine goodness and loveliness,³⁵ but rather will “attach itself thereto and mingle with it through the movement and energy of love (*agapē*)”³⁶—which she defines not as a reactive agitation of the will, but as a habitual inward state oriented towards the heart’s desire.³⁷

Logically prior to any pathos we encounter, even the pathos of sin that confines our nature from the first, love is active in us as the very power of our existence, the truth of a nature that is in its essence sheer yearning, summoned out of nothingness towards union with God, who is the source and consummation of every love. It is a patristic commonplace, which one could illustrate copiously from Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus, and many others, that the true freedom of the rational creature is a freedom from all the encumbrances of sin that prevent us from enjoying the full fruition of our nature, which is the image and likeness of God; when sin is removed, when we are restored to the condition in which God called us from nothingness, our entire being is nothing but an insatiable longing for and delight in God, a natural and irresistible *eros* for the divine beauty.³⁸ We spring up into God. This is that ultimate liberty that Augustine places above the mere voluntative liberty of being able not to sin: it is the condition of being so entirely free from sin and death, so entirely transformed in the love of God and of, in God, one’s fellow creatures as to be incapable of sin altogether.³⁹ Or, to use the language of Maximus, it is natural freedom, restored in us by Christ, who frees us from the false passions of our “gnomic” freedom (the power of the finite will to consent to love, or to bind itself to destructive passions).⁴⁰ It is the state, as the Pseudo-Dionysius phrases it, in which our ecstasy meets the ecstasy of God.⁴¹ Once this bond of love is forged, no transitory impulse of resentment, fear, or selfish appetite can sever it. And precisely because it is prior to and—in God—ultimately impervious to any contrary power (hatred, pride, anger, pain, death) such love as this is the only true impassibility. For, as Christ showed

35. Gregory, *De Anima et Resurrectione*, PG 46: 89. [..οὐκετι ἔσται χρεία της καρ’ ἐπιθυμῶν κινήσεως. ἢ πρὸς τὸ καλὸν ἡγεμονεύσει.] One should note that the relation of charity to desire becomes increasingly complex in Gregory’s work, the word *eros* coming at last to assume the latter into the former.

36. *Ibid.*, PG 46: 93. [...προσφύεται τε αὐτῷ καὶ συνανακίρνεται διὰ της ἀγαπητης κινήσεως τε καὶ ἐνεργείας ...]

37. *Ibid.* [τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν ἡ ἀγάπη, ἢ πρὸς τὸ καταθύμιον ἐνδιάθετος σχέσις.]

38. To offer one example, almost at random, Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis* II, GNO VII, I: 112-3.

39. Augustine, *De Correptione et Gratia* II.xii.33, in Divi Augustini, *De Correptione et Gratia*. Ed. C. Boyer, SJ (Rome: Pont. U. Greg., 1931), p. 46.

40. See Maximus, *Opuscula* III, PG 91: 45-56; VII, PG 91: 69-89; *Ambigua* V, PG 91: 1045-60.

41. Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus* IV.12-3, PG 3: 772-76.

on the cross, God's love is an infinite act, and no passion can conquer it: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

APATHEIA AS TRINITARIAN LOVE

Of course, an understanding of divine *apatheia* as the absolutely inextinguishable vehemence of infinite love, what the Pseudo-Dionysius calls divine ecstasy or divine eros, which therefore—precisely as impassibility—is ceaselessly active and engaged in creatures, was unimaginable for pagan philosophy. This image of God's immutability as *semper agens* rather than *semper quietus* would obviously have made no sense within a tradition that understood divine purity as a cold, remote, perfectly immobile simplicity, not mindful of us at all, even if—in some sense—it is a wellspring of being, bliss, and beauty for us. But not only did Christian theologians have it on scriptural authority that God is love, as doctrine developed they had an ever richer and more concrete way of understanding this truth: the doctrine of the Trinity. That is to say, for Christians even the simplicity of the divine nature is the simplicity of utter fullness, including the fullness of relation and differentiation: the interior life of God, so to speak, is also an infinite openness, for in his eternal being he is God always as an infinite gesture of self-outpouring love, the Father's entire gift of his being in the generation of the Son and the breathing forth of the Spirit. This is, so to speak, the eternal event that is God's being, and so he is never a purity of essence withdrawn from every other, but is entirely the utter generosity and joy of self-giving. This is why, also, God creates. According to the Pseudo-Dionysius, the flowing forth of God's goodness in finite beings is not simply the irrepressible ebullition of sheer divine power (as it is for, say, Plotinian neoplatonism), but is the act of one who lovingly shares himself with all, who in his transcendence over all beings leads all things into being, and who is full within his self-emptying act of differentiation.⁴²

More than that, God's is a life of real pleasure in the other, always already full of delight, fellowship, feasting, responsiveness, and love. For Gregory of Nyssa, what we see in the economy of creation and redemption is true of God's eternal being: that in God's acts, the Father inaugurates, the Son effects, and the Spirit perfects their one indivisible movement⁴³ (though, of course, in God this is not a successive or composite reality). God is the fullness of an infinitely completed, and yet infinitely dynamic, life of love, in which there is regard, knowledge, and felicity; writes Gregory,

...the divine nature exceeds each [finite] good, and the good is wholly beloved by the good, and thus it follows that when it looks upon itself

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42. Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus* II.11, PG 3: 649-52.

43. Gregory, *Ad Ablabium: Quod non sint tres Dei*, GNO III, I: 47-50.

For us, of course, as finite beings, our every expression of ourselves and sense of what we are—in word and will, knowledge and love, form and recognition—is fragmentary, the frail emanation of a confined subjectivity, present to itself only as a play of presence and absence, light and darkness; but as God is not a finite being, but infinite being, his expression of himself and knowledge of and delight in that expression are, in each moment, completely and infinitely God.

it desires what it possesses and possesses what it desires, and receives nothing from outside itself.⁴⁴

And thus:

...the life of that transcendent nature is love, in that the beautiful is entirely lovable to those who recognize it (and God does recognize it), and so this recognition becomes love, because the object of his recognition is in its nature beautiful.⁴⁵

No one expresses this better, or in more luminously exquisite trinitarian terms, than Augustine, for whom the mystery of God's being lies in the boundless depths of a perfect love, whose dynamism is the Father's eternal generation of his image, the full likeness of his imperishable glory, and the absolute delight—*delectatio*—by which the light of the Spirit, in whom the Son is seen, makes perfect the eternal drama of this love.

...the Son is from the Father, so as both to be and to be coeternal with the Father. For if the image perfectly fills the measure of him whose image it is, then it is coequal to its source... He has, in regard to this image, employed the name "form" on account, I believe, of its beauty, wherein there is at once such harmony, and prime equality, and prime similitude, in no way discordant, in no measure unequal, and in no part dissimilar, but wholly answering to the identity of the one whose image it is.... Wherefore that ineffable conjunction of the Father and his image is never without fruition, without love, without rejoicing. Hence that love, delight, felicity or beatitude, if any human voice can worthily say it, is called by him, in brief, use, and is in the Trinity the Holy Spirit, not begotten, but of the begetter and begotten alike the very sweetness, filling all creatures, according to their capacities, with his bountiful superabundance and excessiveness....⁴⁶

And so we say:

In that Trinity is the highest origin of all things, and the most perfect beauty, and the most blessed delight. Therefore those three are seen to be mutually determined, and are in themselves infinite.⁴⁷

44. Gregory, *De Anima et Resurrectione*, PG 46: 93. [Ἐπει δὲ οὖν παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ ἐπέκεινα ἡ θεία φύσις, τὸ δὲ ἀγαθὸν ἀγαθῶ φίλον πάντως, διὰ τοῦτο ἑαυτὴν βλέπουσα καὶ ὁ ἔχει, θέλει. καὶ ὁ θέλει. ἔχει, οὐδὲν τῶν ἔξωθεν εἰς ἑαυτὴν δεχομένη.]

45. *Ibid.*, PG 46: 96. [ἢ τε γὰρ ζωὴ τῆς ἄνω φύσεως ἀγάπη ἐστίν, ἐπειδὴ τὸ καλὸν ἀγαπητὸν πάντως ἐστὶ τοῖς γινώσκουσι (γινώσκει δε ἑαυτὸ τὸ θεῖον), ἡ δὲ γνῶσις ἀγάπη γίνεται, διότι καλὸν ἐστὶ φύσει τὸ γινωσκόμενον.]

46. Augustine, *De Trinitate* VI.x 11, CCL 50: 241-42. [*Imago enim si perfecte implet illud cuius imago est, ipsa coaequatur ei, non illud imagini suae. In qua imagine speciem nominavit, credo, propter pulchritudinem, ubi iam est tanta congruentia, et prima aequalitas, et prima similitudo, nulla in re dissidens, et nullo modo inaequalis, et nulla ex parte dissimilis, sed ad identitatem respondens ei cuius imago est.... Ille igitur ineffabilis quidam complexus patris et imaginis non est sine fruitione, sine charitate, sine gaudio. Illa ergo dilectio, delectatio, felicitas vel beatitudo, si tamen aliqua humana voce digne dicitur, usus ab illo appellatus est breviter, et est in trinitate spiritus sanctus, non genitus, sed genitoris genitique suavitas, ingenti largitate atque ubertate perfundens omnes creaturas pro captu earum....*]

47. *Ibid.*, VI.x.12, CCL 50: 242. [*In illa enim trinitate summa origo est rerum omnium, et perfectissima pulchritudo, et beatissima delectatio. Itaque illa tria, et ad se invicem determinari videntur, et in se infinita sunt.*]

This last sentence is crucial, for it means that the triune God stands in need of no determination in the finite, no probation of the negative, no moment of becoming; nothing can give increase to that fullness of community and joy. God enjoys a peace that is absolute, never needing to define itself over against death or violence (for then it would not be essentially peace, but only final armistice). With or without creation, as Athanasius so often insists, God would be fully God as he eternally is.⁴⁸

This, again, is why God's love is called *apatheia*. For us, of course, as finite beings, our every expression of ourselves and sense of what we are—in word and will, knowledge and love, form and recognition—is fragmentary, the frail emanation of a confined subjectivity, present to itself only as a play of presence and absence, light and darkness; but as God is not a finite being, but infinite being, his expression of himself and knowledge of and delight in that expression are, in each moment, completely and infinitely God: God's Word is the perfect expression of God and so is God; the living Spirit of God is God's life and joy, and so is God. An infinite and infinitely full distance is here, an infinite capacity, that is also infinite unity; in God, in these hypostatic distinctions, there opens up that infinite "place" that is the possibility of every place—of creation and in creation (as Hilary of Poitiers says, there is no place but is in God).⁴⁹ No created interval could possibly add to or subtract from that distance, which is the distance of an eternally accomplished act. And in that distance there is always more than mere difference: there is the infinite longing of desire and the infinite peace of satiation, for the Spirit—the desire, love, power of the Father—comes to rest in the Son, there finding all the delight he seeks. As the light and joy of the Trinity's knowledge and love, the Spirit re-inflects the distance between Father as Son not just as bare cognizance, but as perfected love, the whole rapture of the divine essence. To call this infinite act of love *apatheia*, then, is to affirm its plenitude and its transcendence of every evil, every interval of sin, every finite rupture, disappointment of longing, shadow of sadness, or failure of love—in short, every pathos.

Another way of saying this is that God has—indeed is—only one act: the single ardent movement of this infinite love, delight, and peace. Indeed, so insistent are many of the fathers on the simplicity and singleness of the divine essence—that is, the trinitarian event—that they will not acknowledge that God in any literal sense ever tastes of any other "feeling" than this love. Even the wrath of God in Scripture is a metaphor, suitable to our feeble understanding, one which describes not the action of God towards us, but what happens when the inextinguishable fervency of God's love towards us is rejected; according to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, Isaac of Ninevah and oth-

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48. See Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* II.11, PG 26: 168-69; *Epistola ad Serapion* I.14-7, PG 26: 536-49; II.2, PG 26: 609-12; III, PG 26: 624-37; IV.1-6, PG 26: 637-48.

49. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, I, 6, in Hilaire de Poitiers, *La Trinité* I, ed. G. Pelland (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999), p. 216.

ers, even hell itself is not a divine work, but the reality we have wrought within ourselves by our perverse refusal to open out—as God himself eternally has done—in love, for God and others, for when we have so sealed ourselves up within ourselves, the fire of divine love cannot transform and enliven us, but only assail us as an external chastisement:⁵⁰ For our God is a consuming fire, and the pathos of our rage cannot interrupt the *apatheia* of his love.

Does such divine self-sufficiency, though, in some terrible way leave us out (to resort to the emotive terms in which this complaint is often framed)? If the fecundity of divine love is an infinitely achieved act, do all the dark passages of history and pains of finitude then have no ultimate meaning? How could such a God want us, if he has no intrinsic need of us? But, again, love is not need, is not lack, but is itself creative, and so is always gracious; and because God's is a Trinitarian love, one that is always open to the other, it can include us in itself without changing in its nature: indeed love us with an ardor that no mere finite passion could evoke. *Apatheia*, defined as infinitely active love, "feels" more than any affect could possibly impress upon a passive nature; it does not require our sin and death to show us "mercy": God loved us when we were not, and by this very "mercy" called us into being. And this is the ground of all our hope.

Of course, at the end of the day, the modern theologian who wants to reject the language of divine immutability and impassibility is generally one who is attempting to do justice to the story of God's incarnation in Christ and death upon the cross. It seems simply obvious that here we must be talking about a change within the being of God, and of a suffering endured by God.

APATHEIA AS TRINITARIAN LOVE SEIZING US UP INTO ITSELF

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50. See, e.g., Origen, *Contra Celsum* IV:72, PG 11: 1141-44; *Hom. In Ezech.* III.7, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-42; *De Principis* II.10.4, PG 11:236-37; Gregory, *De Anima et Resurrectione* PG 46: 97-105; Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, LIX, PG 90: 609.

51. Cyril, *Third Epistle to Nestorius* (Ep. XVII) 6, in Cyril of Alexandria, *Select Letters*, ed. and trans. Lionel R. Wickham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 20. [τὰ τῆς ἰδίας σαρκὸς ἀπαθῶς οἰκειούμενος πάθη.]

52. Melito, Fragment XIII.15, in Méliot de Sardes, *Sur la Pâque et Fragments*, ed. and trans. Othmar Perler (Paris: Les Iditions du Cerf, 1966), p. 238. [*impassibilis patitur...*]

The truth is, however, that we err when we read such phrases principally as paradoxes; they are actually intended as simple formulae for explaining, quite lucidly, the biblical story of our salvation in Christ. To begin with, the denial that the incarnation of Christ is a change in God's nature is not a denial that it is a real act of the living God, really coming to partake of our nature, nor certainly is it an attempt to evade the truth that, as the Second Council of Constantinople put it, "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh."⁵³ The divine Person of the Logos has really, through his humanity, suffered every extreme of human dereliction and pain and has truly tasted of death. What the fathers were anxious to reject, however, was any suggestion that God becoming human was an act of divine self-alienation, an actual *μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος*, a transformation into a reality essentially contrary to what God eternally is: for this would mean that God must negate himself as God to become human—which would be to say God did not become human. Hence, a strict distinction must be drawn between the idea of divine change and that of divine "kenosis." When Scripture says, "the Logos became flesh," says Cyril of Alexandria, the word "became" signifies not any change in God, but only the act of self-divesting love whereby God the Son emptied himself of his glory, while preserving his immutable and impassible nature intact.⁵⁴ God did not, he says (here following Athanasius),⁵⁵ alter or abandon his nature in any way, but freely appropriated the weakness and poverty of our nature for the work of redemption.⁵⁶ And Augustine makes precisely the same distinction:

When he accepted the form of a slave, he accepted time. Did he therefore change? Was he diminished? Was he sent into exile? Did he fall into defect? Certainly not. What then does it mean, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave?" It means he is said to have emptied himself out by accepting the inferior, not by degenerating from equality.⁵⁷

This may appear at first to be a distinction without a difference, but it is in fact a quite logical—and necessary—clarification of terms, which can be justified on many grounds. To begin with, there is a qualitative disproportion between infinite and finite being, which allows for the infinite to appropriate and accommodate the finite without ceasing to be infinite; or, to put it in more strictly ontological terms, if every being derives its being from God, and so all the perfections that compose a

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53. Anathema 10.

54. Cyril, *OTI ΕΙΣ Ο ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ*, in Cyrille d'Alexandrie, *Deux Dialogues Christologiques*, ed. G. M. de Durand (Paris: Les Iditions du Cerf, 1964), pp. 312-16.

55. Athanasius, *Epistola ad Epictetum*, PG 26: 1064.

56. Cyril, *Scholus de Incarnatione Unigeniti*, PG 75:1374; see also the *Third Epistle to Nestorius*, 3, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

57. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos LXXIV.5*, CCL 39: 1028. [*Sicut formam servi accepit, ita et tempus accepit. Demutatus est ergo? deminutus est? exilior redditus? in defectum lapsus? Absit. Quid ergo semetipsam exinanivit, formam servi accipiens? Exinanisse se dictus est accipiendo inferiorem, non degenerando ab aequali.*]

For God to pour himself out as the man Jesus is not a venture outside of the trinitarian life of indestructible love, but in fact quite the reverse: it is the act by which creation is seized up into the sheer invincible pertinacity of that love, which reaches down to gather us into its triune motion.

creature as what it is have their infinite and full reality in God, then the self-emptying of God in his creature is not a passage from what he is to what he is not, but a gracious condescension whereby the infinite is pleased truly to disclose and express itself in one instance of the finite. Indeed, in this sense, to say God does not change in the incarnation is almost a tautology: God is not some thing that can be transformed into another thing, but is the being of everything, to which all that is always already properly belongs. Simply said, there is no change of nature needed for the fullness of being to assume—even through self-impoverishment—a being as the dwelling place of its mystery and glory. If one finds such language unpalatably abstract, one may prefer to adopt more obviously biblical terms: as human being is nothing at all in itself but the image and likeness of God, then the perfect dwelling of the eternal image and likeness of God—the Logos—in the one man who perfectly expresses and lives out what it is to be human is in no sense an alien act for God. The act by which the form of God appears in the form of a slave is the act by which the infinite divine image shows itself in the finite divine image: this then is not a change, but a manifestation, of who God is. And, finally, the very action of kenosis is not a new act for God, because God's eternal being is, in some sense, kenosis: the self-outpouring of the Father in the Son, in the joy of the Spirit. Thus Christ's incarnation, far from disassembling his eternal nature, exhibits not only his particular *proprium* as the Son and the splendor of the Father's likeness, but thereby also the nature of the whole trinitarian *taxis*. Christ is indeed the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. For God to pour himself out, then, as the man Jesus is not a venture outside of the trinitarian life of indestructible love, but in fact quite the reverse: it is the act by which creation is seized up into the sheer invincible pertinacity of that love, which reaches down to gather us into its triune motion.

On the other hand, even in affirming the appropriateness of divine incarnation, the fathers still insist, in Gregory of Nyssa's words, that in Christ "that heavenly *apatheia* proper to the divine nature was preserved in the beginning and in the end of his human life."⁵⁸ And this is most definitely not the result of a failure to think the gospel through to its end: it is in fact, for them, the very substance of the gospel. After all, as a rule, the patristic narrative of salvation begins from the Pauline language of the glorification of creation through Christ, and achieves its most perfectly coherent form in the Christology of the fourth, fifth, and subsequent centuries: it is the story, that is, of *theosis*, divinization, God becoming human that humans might become God. And it is in Christ that this economy occurs: for insofar as the person of the eternal Word can at once comprise divine and human natures in himself, we too, by dwelling in Christ, come to partake of the divine nature without ceasing to be hu-

58. Gregory, *Epistle III*, GNO VIII, II: 26. [φυλασσομένης τη θεότητι καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ζωῆς καὶ ἐν τῷ τέλει τῆς θεοσχεποῦς τε καὶ ὑψηλῆς ἀπαθείας.]

man. Which means that the formula “the impassible suffered” is one whose terms must not be dissolved into one another. Only because, in Christ, our nature came into intimate contact with the eternal vitality of the divine nature, which no passion or interval of alienation can disrupt or alter, and through that contact death and sin were slain, can we be saved from all that separates us from God, and brought into the radiant shelter of his eternal peace, his *apatheia*. So Gregory can say that, in Christ,

What is by nature impassible was not changed into what is passible, but what is mutable and vulnerable to passions was changed into impassibility through its participation in the changeless.⁵⁹

And Cyril, for whom the unity of Christ is so profound, and the union of natures so intimate, that we must speak of the *communicatio idiomatum* in the incarnate Word, if we are to be true to the gospel, still—perfectly consistently with this Christology—asserts that “According to his own nature, [Christ] suffers absolutely nothing; as God he subsists incorporeally, and is entirely beyond suffering.”⁶⁰ This is the essence of the miracle of the incarnation, for patristic theology as a whole, and indeed is the good news Christians proclaim; for in the sufferings that the incarnate Word feels in his human nature, and so experiences even as the divine Person he is, a marvelous transaction is accomplished. In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus:

...we do not separate the man from the Godhead, but say that he is one and the same, who was formerly not a man, but God and the only Son, eternal...who in these latter days has assumed humanity for our salvation: passible in his flesh, impassible in his divinity; circumscribed in body, uncircumscribed in the Spirit; one and the same, earthly and heavenly, tangible and intangible, comprehensible and incomprehensible, so that in this one and the same who was at once wholly human and also God, the whole of humanity, fallen through sin, might be created anew.⁶¹

This is the economy whereby, as Maximus phrases it, God gives us, in exchange for our destructive passions, his healing and life-giving passion on the cross⁶²—which is worked by deathless love.

59. Gregory, *De Vita Moysis*, II, GNO VII, I: 42. [τότε οὐ τὸ ἀπαθὲς τῆς φύσεως εἰς πάθος ἠλλοίωσεν, ἀλλὰ τὸ τρεπτόν τε καὶ ἐμπαθὲς διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὸ ἄτρεπτον κοινωνίας εἰς ἀπάθειαν μετεστοιχείωσεν.]

60. ΟΤΙ ΕΙΣ Ο ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, pp. 482-84. [Πάθοι μὲν ἂν αὐτός εἰς ἰδίαν φύσιν τὸ σὺμπαν οὐδεν. Ἀσώματος γὰρ ὑπάρξων ὡς Θεός, ἔξω πού πάντως κείσεται τοῦ παθεῖν.]

61. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistola ad Cledonium* (Ep. CI), PG 37: 177. [Οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸν ἄνθρωπον χωρίζομεν τῆς θεότητος, ἀλλ' ἓνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν δογματίζομεν, πρότερον μὲν οὐκ ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλὰ Θεὸν καὶ Υἱὸν μόνον προαιώνιον ... ἐπὶ τέλει δὲ καὶ ἄνθρωπον, προσληφθέντα ὑπὲρ τῆς σωτηρίας τῆς ἡμετέρας, παθητὸν σαρκί, ἀπαθηθεότητι, περιγραπτὸν σώματι, ἀπερίγραπτον πνεύματι, τὸν αὐτὸν ἐπίγειον καὶ οὐράνιον, ὀρώμενον καὶ νοούμενον, χωρητὸν καὶ ἀχώρητον, ἴν' ὅλῳ ἀνθρώπῳ τῷ αὐτῷ καὶ Θεῷ ὅλος ἄνθρωπος ἀναπλασθῆ πεισὼν ὑπὸ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν.]

62. Maximus, *Mystagogia*, VIII; PG 91: 688.

Only because, in Christ, our nature came into intimate contact with the eternal vitality of the divine nature, which no passion or interval of alienation can disrupt or alter, and through that contact death and sin were slain, can we be saved from all that separates us from God, and brought into the radiant shelter of his eternal peace, his apatheia.

Salvation is the transaction, that is, the admirable commercium of divine and human natures that occurs in the incarnation of the Word, the miraculous reconciliation of God and humanity that simply is the very communicatio idiomatum of Jesus's identity, and that opens out to embrace us within its mystery in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Indeed, it is fair to say that it is in this sense—before any other—that salvation is a matter of exchange for many of the fathers. Salvation is the transaction, that is, the *admirabile commercium* of divine and human natures that occurs in the incarnation of the Word, the miraculous reconciliation of God and humanity that simply is the very *communicatio idiomatum* of Jesus's identity, and that opens out to embrace us within its mystery in the death and resurrection of Christ when, as Cyril says, he accomplishes in himself the exchange of our slavery for his glory⁶³ and, having assumed our sufferings, liberates us from them through his unconquerable life.⁶⁴ The great Alexandrians, especially, tended to see salvation in terms of the atonement offering of Israel, whose central action was the bearing of the blood of the sacrifice—the blood of the people, as it were, dead in sin—into the holy of holies, where it came into contact with the deathless indwelling glory of God, so that Israel was purified of its sins and made alive by God himself, the fountain of life. Just so, Athanasius⁶⁵ and Cyril like to speak of Christ's body as the temple wherein this immortal glory encounters our humanity, and by a divinizing contact, makes it live eternally. Following Hebrews 10:19-20, Cyril speaks of the veil of Christ's flesh—like the temple veil that hid the holy of holies—concealing the transcendent supereminence and exceeding glory of the Logos,⁶⁶ so allowing Christ “both to suffer in the flesh and not to suffer in his Godhead (for he was at once himself both God and human)” and thus show through the resurrection “that he is mightier than death and corruption: as God he is life and the giver of life, and raised up his own temple.”⁶⁷ And this is in fact the consummation of the miraculous commerce that occurs in Christ: the perfection of our nature in Christ's resurrection body, a body entirely divinized and so entirely without pain.

To put the matter somewhat differently, the saving exchange that occurs for us in the incarnate Word is perfectly expressed for Cyril in John 20:17, when the risen Christ says, “I am going to my Father and your Father; to my God and your God;” for here we see how the Son's Father by nature has become our Father by grace, precisely because our God by nature has become his God through condescension.⁶⁸ Indeed, for Cyril, whenever Christ calls upon his Father as “My God,” he

63. ΟΤΙ ΕΙΣ Ο ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, pp. 366-68.

64. See Cyril, *Apologeticus pro XII Capitibus contra Orientales*, XII Anathematismus, PG 76: 337-80.

65. See *Epistola ad Epictetum* x, PG 26: 1068.

66. ΟΤΙ ΕΙΣ Ο ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, p. 456

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 474-76. [...καὶ τὸ σαρκὶ μὲν ἐλέσθαι παθεῖν. θεότητι δὲ μὴ παθεῖν—ἦν γὰρ <ὁ αὐτὸς> Θεός το ὄμου ἄνθρωπος ... Ὅτι γὰρ ἐστὶ θανάτου κρείττων καὶ φθορας. ζῶη καὶ ζωοποιὸς ὑπάρχων ὡς Θεός. μεμαρτύρηκεν ἢ ἀνάστασις· ἐγήγερκε γὰρ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ ναόν.]

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 334-36.

does so on our behalf and in our place: especially in the cry of dereliction from the cross.⁶⁹ And this is our salvation: for when the infinite outpouring of the Father in the Son, in the joy of the Spirit, enters our reality, the *apatheia* of God's eternally dynamic and replete life of love consumes every pathos in its ardor; even the ultimate extreme of the kenosis of the Son in time—crucifixion—is embraced within and overcome by the everlasting kenosis of the divine life. Because divine *apatheia* is the infinite interval of the going forth of the Son from the Father in the light of the Spirit, every interval of estrangement we fabricate between ourselves and God—sin, ignorance, death itself—is always already exceeded in him: God has always gone infinitely farther in his own being as the God of self-outpouring charity than we can venture in our attempts to escape him, and our most abysmal sin is as nothing to the abyss of divine love. And as the Word possesses this Trinitarian impassibility in his eternal nature, and so as God cannot suffer, as a man he can suffer all things, bear any wound—indeed, bear it more fully than any other could—as an act of saving love: as Easter. And while God's everlasting outpouring, which is for him a life of infinite joy, in assuming the intervals of our estrangement from God, appears for us now under the form of tragic pain and loss, the joy is the original and ultimate truth of who he is, is boundless, and cannot be interrupted—and so conquers all our sorrow; our abandonment of God, and the abandonment of the Son and of every soul in death, is always already surpassed by the sheer abandon with which the Father begets and breathes forth his being. And the terrible distance of Christ's cry of human dereliction, despair, and utter godforsakenness—"My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—is enfolded within and overcome by the ever greater distance and always indissoluble unity of God's triune love: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

This is our salvation: for when the infinite outpouring of the Father in the Son, in the joy of the Spirit, enters our reality, the apatheia of God's eternally dynamic and replete life of love consumes every pathos in its ardor; even the ultimate extreme of the kenosis of the Son in time—crucifixion—is embraced within and overcome by the everlasting kenosis of the divine life.

FINAL REMARK

Whether one is moved to embrace as warmly as one ought the doctrine of divine impassibility, it remains the case that the doctrine was never simply a philosophical mistake on the part of patristic and mediaeval tradition, the anomalous trace of an alien metaphysics, a fragment of paganism floating in the wine of faith; nor certainly was it the result of a failure to pay heed to the narrative of Scripture. But neither, one must acknowledge, was it so great a subversion of metaphysical rationality as to detach it utterly from its philosophical origins. For though Christians altered many of the nuances attached to the word *apatheia* radically, still they preserved its most essential speculative elements intact: immutability, eternity, simplicity, and so forth. This was a laudable and

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 442-44.

This strange word apatheia allows us to say not only piously, but meaningfully, that we belong to the lamb slain from the foundation of the world, that love is as strong as and stronger than—death.

necessary thing: for the affirmation of God's impassibility is also an affirmation that God is truly good, that creation is freely worked and freely loved, that evil and violence and all the cruelties of human history enjoy no metaphysical or divine warrant, but stand under the everlasting damnation of the cross; that God simply is the fullness of charity, and so remains as he ever is in creating and redeeming and joining to himself creatures whom he summons into being not out of need, but for the much higher purpose of serving his delight. (And what dignity could be greater or gift more utterly gracious than to exist solely for the pleasure of an infinite charity, that needs no increase in its joy, but freely gives?) This strange word *apatheia* allows us to say not only piously, but meaningfully, that we belong to the lamb slain from the foundation of the world, that love is as strong as—and stronger than—death, that God loved us even when we were not, that in him there is no shadow of turning, that indeed God is light and in him there is no darkness at all, that in Christ all was Yea and Amen... It allows us to say not only that God loves, that is, but that, simply enough, God is love. □



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