

# 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.

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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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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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## 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.



**MICHAEL C. MCCARTHY, S.J.**

is Executive Director of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California.