

## CHAPTER I

*The setting*

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

(Matt. 25:40)

Intuitively we sense that feeling compassion for the suffering of another human being is deeply connected to the essence of our humanity. When we remove our emotions and our experiences from the suffering in our midst, we not only fail those around us but also place our own humanity in jeopardy. The way in which this happens is perhaps unexpected. In refusing to connect with the suffering of another human being we actually refuse the vulnerable part of ourselves that we are ashamed of. This vulnerable part is the frailty of our human condition. To deny this frailty is to lose sight, in some mysterious way, of what it means to be a human being. The unfathomable evil of genocide and of widespread poverty, hunger, and disease in third-world nations are the extreme manifestations of a failure of compassion on the part of those of us with the means, but not the willingness or commitment, to help. This evil stems from the reluctance to really see the other person suffering as fully human and, therefore, as connected to ourselves.

**The early Christian context**

The early Christians were deeply engaged with every facet of compassion. They defined it, argued about it, urged people to practice it, and described in graphic detail how and when it must thrive. With a shared moral concern for human flourishing, they articulated the meaning and relevance of compassion for the Christian life. Each of the early Christians I consider here approached it in a particular historical and geographical context extending from the fourth to the seventh centuries and spanning regions of the late antique Mediterranean world as varied as Turkey, Italy, North

Africa, and Palestine. Given these differences, the early Christians do not speak with one voice, nor should they be made to. It is precisely this diversity of voices that emerges as a virtue, allowing us to see the range of possibilities that speak to the richness of human experience.

While compassion is, as I shall argue, the very heart of the Christian tradition, some of the early Christians retained a fragile ambivalence toward it. They at once acknowledged its importance for cultivating the moral and ethical virtues, and pondered its relationship to the life of contemplation and renewal known as ‘asceticism’.<sup>1</sup> The tension resided in the experiences of the monks, nuns, and spiritual elite who were committed to achieving emotional tranquility by joining a religious community, such as a monastery or nunnery, or by withdrawing to a life of solitary contemplation. Feeling emotion passionately – as many of the early Christians think we must do when relating compassionately to the suffering of another human being – was sometimes thought to challenge this ascetic ideal. At the very least, it required explanation and justification. Compassion as an emotional response was rarely, if ever, taken for granted. It challenged the laity to expand their moral universe by engaging with the suffering around them, while it threatened to disrupt the emotional serenity the ascetics were trying to cultivate. Early Christians did not undertake such challenges lightly.

This was certainly the case for Augustine (d. 430), the bishop of Hippo in Roman North Africa, and the greatest theologian of western Christianity.<sup>2</sup> He wrestled with articulating the intellectual foundations for, and with justifying the necessity of, a feeling – or what we might call an ‘affective’ – compassion that connects people emotionally with the suffering of other human beings. Gregory Nazianzen (d. c.389/90), the bishop, poet, and theologian from the region of Asia Minor known as Arianzum in Cappadocia, Turkey, pondered the value of his own turbulent emotions.<sup>3</sup> He also considered how passionate feeling for human suffering informs social action and connects human beings to the suffering of Christ in the divine economy and on the Cross. His friend, Gregory, the mystical theologian and bishop of Nyssa (d. c.395), wondered how passionately he should grieve for the friends and relatives he had lost. Basil, the monastic leader, humanitarian, and bishop of Caesarea (d. 379), friend to Gregory Nazianzen and brother of Gregory of Nyssa, reflected upon the relationship between the virtuous emotion (‘*pathos*’) he called pity (‘*eleos*’) and the morally ambiguous state he defined as the passions (‘*pathē*’).<sup>4</sup> He thought that pity was the appropriate response to another person’s emotional distress.

*The early Christian context*

3

The source of the confusion they were grappling with lay in the fractured landscape that described much of the ancient discourse on the passions. The early Christians sought to understand the variations of the emotional life in the context of a moral psychology and a philosophy of the emotions they had inherited from pagan philosophy and then adapted for their purposes.<sup>5</sup> It was not always an easy fit. First, they had to resolve the tension between the platonic view of the human person as a rational being consisting of an intelligible, immortal soul, and the Christian need, as Rowan Williams has remarked, to account for the soul “as a complex moral agent capable of being judged for good and bad actions.”<sup>6</sup> Then they had to come to terms with the fact that pagan philosophy had developed a theory of the emotions to serve a society committed to using rhetoric and persuasion to shape public life.<sup>7</sup> In its origins, the pagan theory had little to do with the Christian view that emotions are part of a larger moral and theological framework connecting the suffering of human beings to the actions of divinity along a temporal trajectory. This accounts for much of the complexity and ambiguity of the early Christian theology of the emotions.

Among the pagan philosophers they interpreted, Aristotle (d. 322 BC) had described certain feelings and affective states as ‘passions’ (‘pathē’) accompanied by pleasure and pain that influenced people’s judgments.<sup>8</sup> Pity (‘eleos’) and other such passions as anger and fear were the feelings a speaker stirred in an audience while listening to a speech, whether in the law courts or during some other civic function. They were not the virtues and vices of the later Christian world, but rather the psychological reactions people had to the stories they heard and to the circumstances of their lives. Understanding the emotional experiences of the people they wished to influence enabled rhetoricians to manipulate responses to their advantage.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle explained that a person feels pity when he determines that suffering is undeserved, or when he recalls, “evils have happened, or expects that they may happen, either to himself or to one of his friends.”<sup>10</sup> Such observations were meant to facilitate the work of the rhetorician.

Imagined possibilities for suffering also came to light when witnessing tragic poetry, which, as Aristotle said in the *Poetics*, both incites and releases pity and fear.<sup>11</sup> Like the stories they heard in the law courts, tragedy allowed people to witness suffering from the safe vantage point of the periphery. Such a controlled experience of pity was feasible only in the context of distance. Emotional closeness actually excluded feelings of pity, because “what is terrible (‘deinon’) [i.e., the loss of a loved one] is different from what is pitiable.”<sup>12</sup> Along these lines, Stephen Halliwell has

remarked, “pity [for Aristotle] is not felt toward those who are so close and important to us that their sufferings *become* ours too.”<sup>13</sup> The early Christians reexamined such cultural constraints when they demanded emotional engagement with all forms of suffering.<sup>14</sup>

Add to this complexity the fact that Aristotle offered only one definition of ‘pathos’ among many in the ancient world. In Greek, the word ‘pathos’ (or ‘pathē’ in the plural) evoked a variety of meanings, from ‘what someone has suffered or experienced’ to ‘the state a person is in’. This semantic range expanded further to encompass what we might call ‘an emotion, mood, or passion’. Like the Latin word ‘passio’, the Greek word ‘pathos’ came to signify the particular kind of emotional disturbance that caused pleasure or grief in a living being. It was no longer linked primarily with rhetorical judgments, as it had been for Aristotle. Central to this development was the work of the Greek physician and philosopher Galen (d. AD c.200/216), who defined ‘pathos’ as a motion in one thing that comes from something else.<sup>15</sup> To illustrate, he contrasted the normal beating heart with the heart in the throes of palpitations. Because the former involved motion originating within the subject, it was a natural activity indicative of health. The latter, imposing motion from the outside, signaled an objectionable ‘pathos’. It was a problematic deviation from normal functioning. He applied the same logic to emotional states, such as anger. It could be either an activity of the spirited part of the soul where it resided, or an external ‘pathos’ that the rational soul had failed to restrain.

The emotional dimensions of ‘pathos’ were reinterpreted in a Christian moral context. Nemesius (c.400), the bishop of Emesa in Syria, examined how ‘pathē’ that originate from motion outside the person could be relevant to our flourishing.<sup>16</sup> He posited that these pathological deviations (the ‘pathē’) from health could be restored to their natural function when properly controlled. Although ‘pathē’ were problematic, they were not necessarily so. Vital to our moral lives, they were “the components of a living creature, for life could not be sustained without them.”<sup>17</sup> Because the ‘pathē’ were simply healthy activity gone awry, under the right conditions they could support typical emotional processes.

This flexibility had moral consequences. Removed from the civic and poetic discourse of Aristotle and absorbed into the medical theories of Galen, the ‘pathē’ were no longer limited to their role in rhetorical persuasion and literary experience. With Nemesius, understanding the ‘pathē’ and their mechanisms triggered a moral psychological development that helped people differentiate the body undergoing pathological change from the feeling subject that experienced it. Self-awareness emerged from

this new feeling subject that deepened the bonds of moral accountability. The ‘passions’ encompassed these nuanced shades, becoming the rough equivalent of what we now refer to as ‘the emotions’. They were the feelings, moods, and mental states that respond to, interpret, and color our experience of the world.

The ‘passions’ were not necessarily morally neutral in either the Christian or pagan context. As the Greek and Latin words ‘*pathos*’ and ‘*passio*’ implied, they were also a disturbance – a departure from an imagined ideal of emotional tranquility – that implied suffering in the soul. Here lies the difficulty Christians sometimes encountered when articulating philosophical arguments for making pity and compassion virtues. When such early Christians as Basil of Caesarea borrowed Aristotle’s definition of ‘pity’ (*eleos*) as a ‘*pathos*’, they considered whether pity might then be construed as the kind of distress that threatened to undermine the moral fabric of the person. The challenge had nothing to do with the later negative implications of the English word ‘pity’, meaning ‘to feel sorry’ for someone in a condescending sense. The problem was the emotional disturbance. If ‘pity’ was indeed a ‘*pathos*’, then that required further investigation to determine how, and under what conditions, something virtuous could also be linked to something ominous.

Coming to terms with this darker side of the passions was the work of the monks and nuns who practiced a common asceticism in the monasteries and nunneries beginning in the fourth century. Similarly for the men and women who withdrew to the farthest reaches of the desert to practice a solitary asceticism from as early as the third century.<sup>18</sup> They too were troubled by the moral implications of an inner turmoil that must have seemed like the unending chatter of turbulent emotions. Left unchecked, this emotional chatter produced a kind of rupture in their moral life that was the inevitable result of human desires being aimed at the wrong sorts of things and in the wrong direction. Macrina, the leader of a nunnery she directed in her home and the sister of the theologians from Cappadocia, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, referred to the passions as warts on the soul. In a highly stylized dialogue with her brother Gregory, she examined whether they were accretions that spoiled the soul’s impassive, godlike beauty.

Such a negative view of the passions was not the end of the story among the early Christians. A closer look at the same dialogue between Macrina and Gregory reveals that the passion of desire serves a crucial function. Although it can be either virtuous or evil, depending on the object of its longing, it cannot be eliminated through ascetic practice. Without the

longing for the good that emerges from the faculty of the soul responsible for desire, the soul would lose its way, having nothing to orient it in the direction of God.<sup>19</sup> That desire continues even after the soul has achieved ascetic perfection confirms its significance for human nature. This is the case even though the essence of the human being is an impassive and rational mirror of the divine nature.<sup>20</sup> Rowan Williams has made sense of the apparent contradiction by highlighting Gregory's distinction between the soul's essence "as distinctively active and intelligent" and its nature as "the more complex lived reality of soul as animating a body."<sup>21</sup> The emotions are not warts on the soul, because they are necessary for, and useful to, living in a physical body.

It was around this time that Nemesius had conceived of the human person as a rational being whose passions were not only intimately connected with the physiological workings of the body but were also essential to human action. Without the motivating drive of the passions, people were hardly inclined to do anything virtuous. Even though he was heir to the same tradition that had made the passions the object of focused scrutiny, he thought they were necessary for construing the individual as a morally responsible agent. Allowing for the inevitable differences in interest, context, and geographical location, a similarly nuanced case can be made for nearly every theologian in the early Christian world. We begin to get the sense that we should not trust the critical lens through which the passions are often portrayed.

If the early Christians were not committed to denigrating the passions, then why should a tension exist at all? Why should they ever make a case for feeling deep emotions for people who are suffering? And what implications do their efforts in this regard have for developing a Christian ethic?

A pessimistic view of the passions has a long history in Graeco-Roman philosophy that the early Christians could not dismiss lightly. In the Greek philosophical tradition, the passions were associated with the basest impulses of the human condition. Socrates lamented that the body and its desires led to war and civil discord. The pagan philosophers that commented upon this tradition, including the Neoplatonists Plotinus (d. 270) and Proclus (d. 485), developed a moral psychology that incorporated and reinterpreted this view. Plotinus envisioned the soul that has wiped away irrational desires and passions as having nothing to do with the body.<sup>22</sup> He saw the evil aspects of the soul as accretions that came from elsewhere, not unlike the so-called warts that Macrina contemplated with her brother a century later. Although she and her brother ultimately rejected such a negative view of the passions, they were thoroughly

committed to examining its implications. Like Plotinus, his interpreter Proclus (d. 485) said that souls that were liberated from the passions and from the body ascended to a life free from necessity and from the disgrace of endless generation.<sup>23</sup>

A similar skepticism prevailed in the Latin philosophical tradition. The Roman Stoic philosopher, Seneca (d. 65), wrote an exhortatory address to Emperor Nero titled, *On Mercy*, in which he urged him to practice the leniency and moderation of clemency, but not to feel pity toward his subjects.<sup>24</sup> The problem with pity was that it made people vulnerable to the emotional fluctuations that others were experiencing. There was even more at stake for the wise man. By destabilizing the boundaries between the steadiness he valued and the emotional flux of ordinary human beings, pity shattered his place in the world.

Commiseration ('*misericordia*') is misery's neighbor, whence it derives some of the same quality. Eyes that well up when another's are inflamed are weak, you can be sure – just as, by God, it's a sickness, not hilarity, that always makes one smile when others are smiling or open one's own mouth wide every time someone yawns. Commiseration is a vice of minds too frightened of misery: for someone to demand it of a wise man is virtually to demand that he groan and wail at the deaths of strangers.<sup>25</sup>

There was something undignified about the wise man surrendering his self-control to pity. This does not mean that the wise man did nothing to help the unfortunate. While maintaining equanimity, the wise man was expected to honor his ethical obligations. He could not avoid feeling pity simply by averting his gaze from the man with a withered leg, or from the poor person dressed in rags. He must test his resolve by looking at the misery. What Seneca was objecting to was the wise man's affective engagement with another human being. Relieving the misery he looked at was acceptable, but feeling deep emotion ('*misericordia*') for it was not.<sup>26</sup>

Seneca did not have the last word on what a wise man should and should not feel. The Roman philosopher and statesman, Cicero (d. 43 BC), had alluded to the psychological benefits of sympathy when he said "misfortunes would truly be hard to bear without someone for whom they are more burdensome than [they are] even for yourself."<sup>27</sup> Classical notions of friendship left some moral space for the wise man to respond emotionally to the people and situations he encountered. Even though many intellectuals in late antiquity subscribed to the ideal of the Stoic wise man who was emotionally indifferent to, or detached from, external goods and evils, T. H. Irwin has confirmed our suspicion that the reality was more nuanced. From his piecing together the sources of both critics

and practitioners of Stoicism, we know that sometimes the wise man wept and sometimes he grew pale with fear. It seems that Stoic moral psychology envisioned the wise man experiencing what we might call ‘first impressions’ about the nature of good and evil. These fledgling emotional responses provided him with useful moral information. A vague irritation might signal the appropriateness of righteous indignation, while trembling might indicate the onset of courage. The possibility for moral transformation inherent in such emotional awareness interested the Christians. Of their reception of Stoic ideals, Paul Blowers has remarked, “The true goal of the moral life would rather be a therapeutic affectivity, wherein certain eupatheia – not ‘good passions’ as such but trained, reasonable affective responses – would displace irrational or diseased ones and bring stability to the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

The Stoics were taking into account what many of us know intuitively. Human nature is driven more often by vague emotional states and impressions that can hardly be named than by rational judgments. We should not then be surprised that the complexity and ambiguity of people’s emotional responses did not live up to the ideal of a tranquil disengagement from the roughness of real-life encounters with suffering.

It was the ideal, nevertheless, and not the nuanced reality, that challenged Christians to articulate an ethic that borrowed from, responded to, and corrected what they knew of Stoic moral teaching. To be clear, the ideal the pagans and Christians were talking about was ‘apatheia’ or ‘equanimity’, a normative emotional state in which people feel tranquil and calm in the face of adversity. To achieve ‘apatheia’ was to be ‘without the *pathos*’ of emotional disturbance. Regarding the unlikelihood of ever achieving such a state, it is useful to keep in mind that even ideals that are ultimately rejected often weigh heavily upon those who fall under their spell. Consider what Jay Dolan has to say about the culture of sin and authority that the Catholic church of the early twentieth century promoted: “You could resist and rebel, as many did, but even in your resistance the culture pursued you like Francis Thompson’s ‘Hound of Heaven’, never letting you forget what you were fleeing.”<sup>29</sup> It was certainly the ideal, and not the measured scholarly interpretation, that weighed heavily upon the Latin author Lactantius (d. c.320) in formulating his impression of the Stoics. He went so far as to call them ‘mad’. If he was not exactly fleeing Stoic culture, as the hare flees the hound and the wayward soul flees God’s grace, its principles seemed to torment him as he complained bitterly of their inhumanity: “they do not moderate [passions], but cut them off, and in a way want to castrate a human being of things



*The early Christian context*

9

that are implanted by nature.”<sup>30</sup> Concerning Lactantius’ obsessive criticism, T. H. Irwin has remarked that even Augustine, who grappled with and criticized the Stoics, thought they had feelings.

The passions became the studied object of the ascetic’s gaze in the context of this ambivalent trajectory. By focusing on the passions and bringing them under the control of the higher faculty of the soul, the ascetic acquired the mental stability she needed to eradicate the problematic among them from her being. The conscious goals of the practice – its ideals – were to cultivate emotional tranquility and redirect errant desires toward God.<sup>31</sup> A sense of inner calm developed along this arduous journey, during which the ascetic defined her moral purpose and made herself in God’s image.

The motivation for this journey lay in the early Christian interpretation of Genesis 1:27, which said that men and women were created in the image of God. The passage resonated deeply with early Christians, such as Irenaeus of Lyons in southern France (d. c.202), who was frankly optimistic about humanity’s potential for growth and spiritual progress. He thought the human body was made in God’s image and that the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden had tarnished only the likeness. With the Incarnation, Christ showed humanity this image in all its perfection and also gradually restored humanity to the divine likeness through the progress of the divine economy. For Irenaeus, this progress was integral to human nature and the means by which people achieved spiritual perfection.<sup>32</sup> The possibility of progress and of growth over the course of time was also intrinsic to the ascetic agenda.

Like Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa was deeply committed to the conception of the human person as a unity of body and soul, a principle he developed in conversation with the Greek philosophy and science he had inherited from Aristotle, Galen, and their heirs. This view is evident in his understanding of the fall from grace as bringing about the sexual differentiation of the human race into male and female. Without the fall, human beings would have generated in the mysterious way of the angels and their perfection would have been self-evident. After the fall, perfection comes about by means of the living body interacting with the soul, where the image of God resides. For the divine character to be properly reflected in this image, Gregory insisted on the virtues of passionlessness, blessedness, purity, and the differentiation from evil, as well as the capacity to love. What distinguished him from his brother, Basil, and from Irenaeus, was his conviction that these virtues were intrinsic to the beauty of the soul.<sup>33</sup> It is significant in this regard that Gregory envisioned a unified human

person, whose body and soul are connected through the function of the senses and through the natural capacity of the body to receive the soul's activity.<sup>34</sup> As a consequence of this fluid integration, Gregory acknowledged the importance of our experiences in shaping moral life and in providing the conditions under which we remake ourselves in God's image.

While the early Christians agreed that the fall of Adam and Eve had tarnished the purity of this image, leaving people morally vulnerable to the vicissitudes of their emotional life, they differed in their assessment of how precisely it had all gone wrong. Augustine thought that Adam's free will and pride led to his disobedience in the Garden and to the subsequent stain of original sin that humanity then inherited as intrinsic to its nature. Adam transmitted not only the stain but also the guilt of his transgression. More than two centuries later, Maximus the Confessor, the great mystical theologian and monastic leader of the seventh century who died defending the orthodox understanding of Christ defined at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), refined and developed this idea.<sup>35</sup> He, like Augustine, envisioned a fall from grace that corrupted human nature with sin, passion, and death. The origin of this corruption lay in the perversion of Adam's capacity for spiritual pleasure and self-determination toward sensible things. People were not born with this corrupted nature, as they were for Augustine, but followed Adam's lead by deliberately assenting to sin and by "turning the rational desire for God towards the objects of the senses."<sup>36</sup> Maximus thought this misuse of individual freedom accounted for the fragmentary nature of human relationships and for our failure to live according to the common rationality or 'logos' of creation.<sup>37</sup> This did not make humanity morally responsible for its fallen state, only for the deliberate continuation of sin that followed.<sup>38</sup> In spite of such differences, they, like the majority of early Christians, made the goal of ascetic practice the restoration of the fallen soul to its godlike glory. To reach the heights of spiritual transformation, they urged Christians to purify their passions from such negative emotions as anger and pride.

We should not conclude from this narrative of the fall, and the emotional therapy needed to overcome it, that the early Christians advocated a complete withdrawal from the emotional life. Maximus dissolved the tension between silencing the emotions and welcoming them by acknowledging that a love that embraces everyone leads to freedom from passion. "What form of the good does love not have?" he asked, "[It has] self-control and endurance, long-suffering and kindness, peace and joy, through which we easily calm passion and desire and their ardor and burning. And ... love is the goal of every good, as it is the highest of