
Introduction

This book is an exercise in Christian theological anthropology. It is the result of many years of teaching undergraduate courses in philosophy and Christian history and theology. The confluence of these subjects has taught me that there are two narratives regarding the Christian view of the body and its passions and desires. One narrative is Christian-friendly and asserts that a few stalwart defenders of the faith, notably Irenaeus (second century CE), heroically defended the goodness of God's creation against the world-hating, body-denying depredations of Gnostics. The other narrative received classic statement by Friedrich Nietzsche, who contrasted the overly ascetic, world-hating beliefs of early Christians with the world-affirming religion of Dionysus. The mutual incompatibility of these narratives suggests that Christian attitudes about the material world and the body and, consequently, about passion and desire contain more than a bit of ambivalence.

I will argue that the Christian tradition inclines more enthusiastically toward soul-body, reason-passion dualism than its

apologists would like to concede and that it has a decided preference for human rationality—hence the near-unanimous view that the image of God, in which humans are created, is rationality. This view fits nicely with the assumption that God is superlatively rational and that the Bible’s embarrassing way of ascribing strong, occasionally irrational emotions to God is best regarded as a literary device. And yet, other branches of the Christian tradition, especially Pietism, have argued to the contrary that true religion is a matter of the heart—affections, passions, and desires. So, the Christian tradition can’t quite decide whether, in our relation to God, reason or the nonrational passions take precedence.

Having, over the years, written some books that used some of Paul Tillich’s ideas, I have decided that the word *ambivalent* best describes the Christian tradition’s views of the extra-rational elements of the soul. Because of the doctrine of creation, the tradition is committed to affirming the goodness of the body; with the body come passion and desire. However, the goodness of the body does not mean unqualified approval of passion and desire, for reasons I will explain in chapters 2 through 4. Human rationality, meanwhile, associated with the divine Logos, from the beginning received a more favorable, less ambivalent treatment. Christian ambivalence about passion and desire and its preference for reason reflect the fact that the Christian tradition arose in dialogue with Greco-Roman philosophies. Although the Christian tradition did not simply borrow its ideas about these matters from classical philosophy, there is a substantial measure of continuity as we move from the classical era to the Christian era. To help readers see this point, chapter 1 expounds the thoughts of Plato, Aristotle, and Stoicism on reason, passion, and desire. To give further context and to show how classical and Christian concerns played out in the modern world, chapter 5 briefly summarizes the ways in which these matters were presented by some illustrative people and movements.

This book, then, is an attempt to state clearly why and how the Christian tradition thinks about reason, passion, and desire. However, it is more than a historical recitation. It is also an attempt to recommend how the Christian community should think about these matters today. To that end chapters 6–8 consider the ways in which the scientific community thinks about these things. I include these chapters because, in our context today, a theological attempt at understanding human nature mandates an engagement with scientific theories and argumentation. Admittedly, the scientific community does not possess a monolithic view of human nature. Such a harmony cannot be expected on any subject, certainly not on a subject as complex as human nature. Nonetheless, scientific evidence can, I think, help determine questions that the Christian tradition has pondered, especially questions about the nature of passion and desire and their relation to rationality. Of course, scientific theories do not constitute the totality of all that can be said about human nature. On the contrary, there is a properly theological contribution to the quest for understanding; however, examples such as the Galileo affair and the rise of modern geology have taught us, or at least should teach us, that no theological affirmation can be both true and authentically theological if it contradicts reliably established scientific findings. It is also true that locating reliably scientific findings can be tricky, as scientific research is highly dynamic and its results dwell in a fluid state. Still, five hundred years after Galileo heliocentrism seems well established; after two hundred years of geology one is not going out very far on the speculative limb if one believes that the earth and, indeed, the entire universe is a bit older than six thousand years. Scientific debate will always rage on regarding this or that theory, but some matters do eventually get settled to a tolerable degree of assurance. As I argue in chapters 6, 7,

and 8, the scientific understanding of passion and desire seems to be on its way to having this degree of assurance.

The final two chapters represent my recommendations for thinking about passion and desire (chapter 9) and reason (chapter 10) in ways that are sensitive to the affirmations of the Christian tradition and also to the results of scientific research.

A brief word on terminology: over the centuries, terms for reason, passion, and desire change. In some eras, for instance, “passion” is more in vogue; in others, “affect” is more often used. As a convention, then, I have chosen to primarily use the word *emotion* to designate the extra-rational dimensions of human nature: passion, desire, appetite, affect, instinct, impulse, appetite, sentiment, feeling, drive, and so on. I am aware that each of these terms has its own distinctive meaning and that there is some danger in lumping them together under a generic term like *emotion*. My justification for doing so is that the Christian tradition has itself lumped them together by contrasting them all with rationality.

Finally, I have included many transliterated Greek and Latin words in chapters 1 through 4. This is more than a show of erudition; I am trying to help the reader see the extent to which there was a common vocabulary of moral psychology in the classical and Christian eras, a common vocabulary that bore the weight of common concerns and modes of understanding. Where the Greek and Latin terms seem important, I have included in the notes a reference to the original text. For the sake of convenience, I have also included a glossary of the leading terms in the original languages, transliterated, and with conventional translations.

Every exercise in theology is a prayer—an offering to God with the hope that the labor expended in the exercise will be used by God. Even a work of scholarship can be such an offering, if both the writer and the reader will consecrate their work together to the cause of

God. May it be so as we together seek to understand the impassioned life of humankind.