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**Eros in Paradise:  
Resisting Imperial Love**

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*Resisting Imperial Peace*

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In *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200-1000*, Peter Brown, describes early Christianity as a life-affirming, this-worldly, optimistic religion. Brown's characterization is captured by the second century Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, who described the

church as “the paradise in this world.” Irenaeus led an Anatolian-speaking diaspora community circumscribed by hostile anti-Christian neighbors whose previous bishop had been martyred; Irenaeus may also have been martyred himself. Paradise—the garden of God—was a soteriologically dissident space against empire, a theology found throughout much of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup>

While it has often puzzled historians how Christian movements grew and spread during its pre-Constantinian period, the oppressive, tumultuous conditions of life under second and third century Roman rule were answered by Christian communities that organized networks for famine relief, social welfare, education, medical care, and ministries of compassion, courage, and joy. Irenaeus’ claim about the church reflected a common early ecclesiology, and churches enacted this theology in their rituals of the Eucharist feast, which celebrated the beauty of creation and the goodness of life. In feeding the poor from the remainders of the feast, the church affirmed the grace of divine generosity for abundant life. Perhaps he rounded-up the numbers, but the fourth-century John Chrysostom claimed the Antioch church fed three thousand widows, orphans, and poor people every day.

The theology that grounded Christian understandings of sanctified and blessed Christian life was the incarnation. God in human flesh, modeled in Jesus’ acts of healing, feeding, teaching, and resisting oppression, revealed how the baptized community became divine through

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200-1000* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub. Ltd., 2003). My book, co-authored with Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) is a study of paradise as a counter-imperial strategy that traces this strategy from the ancient Sumerians to the Americas.

doing “deeds that are divine.” The resurrection defeated the principalities and powers of death and reopened the paradise garden in on earth. Christians entered that garden of everlasting life through baptism in the waters of paradise—all water on earth flowed from the great river of paradise. Churches maintained and cultivated the flourishing of life through work for justice, liberation, and healing; and the spiritual journey of the church toward wisdom revealed the presence of the same incarnate Spirit that was in Jesus Christ, so that all lived everlastingly in paradise. Death was a transition to a new, gated neighborhood free of Satan, where the beloved saints rested and visited the Eucharist with the risen Christ.

The idea that the church believed itself the earthly paradise may sound especially odd in the context of its emergence in an ancient society where life expectancy was twenty-five, two-thirds of all infants died, slavery was a major institution, and episodic persecutions of Christians as dissidents generated many martyrs. However, paradise acquired its unreal, utopian character in the medieval period, when it was seen largely as an afterlife reward for enduring this world of woe. Unlike these later idealized sensibilities, the church of late antiquity understood the garden of God on earth as a place of much imperfection and intense struggle against evil, especially imperial oppression. Theologians noted that the serpent was in the garden before the Fall, as Genesis 3 claimed. The principalities and powers lurked, ever ready to tempt Christians to abandon their faith or commit other sins. The second century church in Rome personified Satan as the goddess Roma.

The desire to confess sin and to be supported in making recompense and being forgiven, to grow wise, and to be righteous bound Christians to each other as the community of the Holy

Spirit, to God, to beauty, and to creation. Each community was only as blessed and wise as its members. They sought to support each other, to hold each other accountable for moral behavior, and to struggle against evil. Their cultivation of wisdom, righteousness, and works of justice and love were a response of gratitude for grace already given at baptism, not a works-righteousness to achieve grace. Christians were to safeguard the gifts of the Spirit and to hold them fast against all threats and all odds, even, if necessary, against all threats of torture and death. For to die to hold fast to salvation was a witness to the entire community of their collective faith in divine grace and everlasting life already experienced together. To abandon this faith was a living death that was more final and eternal than dying for the faith.

To maintain such faith required each person to use their power for moral agency and for keeping circles of vulnerability and care in motion. Desire, *eros* for life in the community of paradise and desire for spiritual union with the living, risen Christ was the life-giving power of the church. The newly baptized were proclaimed brides of Christ, with whom they had become one in communion. Baptismal liturgies often quoted liberally from the Songs of Songs, which was the story of humanity as God's beloved and God as humanity's beloved. The sanctified church incarnated the same Spirit of power, wisdom, and love that they showed in their lives. Christians did divine deeds in Jesus name. Love—as desire, as generosity, as friendship, and as compassion—was the church's great power. Among many fourth century theologians who wrote of paradise, Ephrem and Ambrose of Milan had particularly wide influence in articulating

paradise both as the material human home on earth and as a journey toward human divinization in the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

The Eucharist in paradise, hosted by the risen Christ, enacted the feast of abundant life. Its meaning was captured in the gospel stories of the feeding of the multitude with fish and loaves, blessed by heaven and broken or divided so they might be shared—this bread of life blessed by Spirit was broken for the feast. Its abundance contrasted with the measly Roman grain dole used to pacify the populace and quell urban riots. The Holy Spirit descended in the Eucharist *epiclesis* prayer to consecrate the whole community, which was lifted up to commune with Christ and with the great cloud of witnesses who had departed from this life. This Eucharistic movement of descent and ascent reflected an incarnational christology and anthropology—the Spirit descended into human flesh so that humanity could be lifted up to divinity. In other words, Jesus lived, so we might live; Jesus took on humanity, so humanity might become divine. Augustine told his newly baptized catechumens to imagine, at their first Eucharist, their own newly resurrected and glorified bodies on the Eucharist table. To eat and drink was to taste and see freedom and new life.<sup>3</sup>

The great feast trained desire, *eros*, toward greater appreciation for divine creation and its blessings, perception of the Spirit in them, love of sensual and spiritual beauty, and a moral

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<sup>2</sup> Ambrose articulates this prevailing view of a material/spiritual union in his commentary on Genesis 2, *Paradise*, in *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961), and Ephrem in Brock, *ibid.* Delumeau, *ibid.*, notes that Ambrose's position comes to dominate the Western understanding of paradise.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Miles quotes Augustine in *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 41.

relationship to life in this world. It encouraged acute attunement to present experience as a way to love the world, love which was the source of an ethical commitment to maintain life in paradise as salvation already delivered and appreciated in the feast.<sup>4</sup>

After Constantine decriminalized Christianity and patronized it, the church did not suddenly capitulate to imperial power—a view of the post Nicene church that ignores theological continuities with the formative period under persecution, continuation of similar ministries, and the ongoing veneration of martyrs. Instead, the tension between church and empire favored a heightened emphasis on masculinity and power, as historian Virginia Burrus notes. Bishops who maintained a separate moral authority and challenged imperial power tended to be pugnacious, politically savvy men such as Ambrose, who had been a Roman governor himself before baptism and was at times unpopular with the women of his church. He excommunicated the Emperor Theodosius, which impressed his pupil Augustine (354-430). Though baptized, Christians understood sin as an ongoing problem in paradise that required confession and, in severe cases, extensive penance—this is the context in which Augustine anguishes about original sin. In Roman society, male sexuality was understood to be aggressive and uncontrollably volatile, “a human espresso machine,” in Peter Brown’s memorable characterization. Augustine examined an

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<sup>4</sup> For information about first millennium Eucharists, see Paul Bradshaw, ed., *Essays on Early Eastern Eucharistic Prayers* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997); Hans Leitzmann, *Mass and the Lord’s Supper: A Study in the History of the Liturgy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979); Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

epicenter of male compulsion and the mysteries of his own and others' internal urges, which inhibited sanctified people from being who they aspired to be for others.<sup>5</sup>

Dwelling in paradise required knowledge of one's own propensities to sin, but also wisdom about Satan and his legions of demons; these included, especially, imperial powers of violence, exploitation, propaganda, and oppression, Augustine's "city of man." Christians who grew together in wisdom—in the knowledge of good and evil—gained greater power to resist evil and to do divine deeds. Some churches raised funds to buy enslaved members their freedom. Augustine's community did so for over a hundred.

Competing bishops sometimes colluded with imperial powers against rivals. The bishop of Antioch reported Cyril of Jerusalem to Emperor Constantius II for selling Constantine's gifts to the church in order to feed the poor. The emperor deposed Cyril for a time, but he managed to hold the Jerusalem seat on and off for forty years. He likened his role as a teacher and baptizer of new Christians to that of a porter who carries the bags of catchumens so they might more easily cross through portals of paradise, which suggests the maintenance, still in the mid fifth century, of a commitment to maintaining an ecclesiology of life that resisted imperial control and oppression.<sup>6</sup>

The post-Constantine church sought to maintain a long-standing tension, especially, between the moral demands of Christian life and the obligations of Roman military service. If Christians shed human blood, even in self-defense or in service to a just war, most bishops required them to confess before the community and to undergo penance as medicine for a sick

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<sup>5</sup> See chapter four in Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, for a discussion of this period.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter five of Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, discusses the fifth century and Cyril of Jerusalem.

soul, who, if left untreated, could infect the entire community. Penitents were not banished, but quarantined; they stood in a special place during the service of the word so all could pray for and support them. Ex-communication meant they had to leave before the Eucharist feast, not remain apart entirely from the community. Penance reshaped harmful, broken, or traumatized desire and restored it to life in paradise. Theologians described penance in medicinal terms as a form of therapy, of healing a sick soul. This practice was so deeply ingrained that even during the medieval crusades, which Pope Urban II claimed were willed by God, returning warriors often sought time for penance in monastery gardens.<sup>7</sup>

An early christology of glory through incarnation and resurrection was joined with a theological anthropology that understood the power of the Holy Spirit in human flesh as a transformative power, grounded in erotic power, in love of this life and this world. Paradise, as a counter-imperial community of blessing, was the soteriological space in which a sanctified humanity, with all its flaws, failures, and frailties, lived, blessed by heaven and each other.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) describes occupations which prohibited applicants from being eligible for Christian baptism—in the third century, Roman officials or soldiers were excluded. For the evolution of ideas of penance, see Peter Brown, “The Decline of the Empire of God: Amnesty, Penance, and the Afterlife from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages,” in Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, eds., *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000): 41-59, and James Crichton, “Penance,” in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought: Intellectual, Spiritual, and Moral Horizons of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 528-9.



## Imperial Crucifixions

Dramatic changes in Western Europe began in the fifth century, when northern tribes penetrated the Roman frontiers, sacked Rome, and destabilized life in Mediterranean Europe. With the sixth century collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the social stability supporting European churches disintegrated. Cycles of invasions from the east, north, and south afflicted churches and monasteries, and, while the Eastern Christians continued to hold to the traditional theologies of incarnation and paradise, those in the West began a gradual and devastating turn away from those theologies toward the sanctification of imperial violence. This turn began as the church leaders most preoccupied with the conflicts plaguing Western Europe attempted to justify the use of violence to protect church property and people.<sup>8</sup>

The eighth century Carolingian Empire re-established social stability in Europe, most notably with Charles Martel's turning back of the Muslim invasions at the Pyrenees. The Pope crowned his grandson Charlemagne the emperor of the Roman Empire of the West in 800. Against the resistant Saxon territories, he instituted a death penalty on resisters. With this injunction against Saxon forms of Christianity, which had long mixed Norse and Christian practices, he dissolved the ethical ban against violence, despite the protests of some of his bishops.

Charlemagne used Latin Christianity as the ideological system to control the people he conquered. He used the cross in imitation of Eusebius' legend of Constantine, as a symbol that

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<sup>8</sup> Thomaš Mastnak provides a sixth to the sixteenth century study of crusading in Western Europe in *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

inspired his battle victories against enemies of the empire. Charlemagne, however, added his own twist to that earlier symbol of victory. His imperial cross waged war on the enemies of God; it symbolized, not just imperial victories over military enemies, but also over the forces of evil, unmediated by the ethical injunctions of the church against unjust wars and shedding human blood. Thus, Charlemagne made the sword a missionary tool. He also began essentializing ethnic minority identities as a basis of imperial control. His laws governing different groups claimed they reflected the ancient laws and customs of subject peoples, though his definition of their supposed regulations always favored his empire. As historian and biographer of Charlemagne Roger Collins notes:

A number of other indications exist that show the Franks of the late eighth century trying to ‘tidy up’ their neighbours and to impose firm ethnic identities on them and give them distinct customs and laws. They seem to have been, from our perspective, strangely anxious to think of their neighbours and also non-Frankish groups within their own territories as being distinct *gentes* or peoples.<sup>9</sup>

Carolingian missionaries to Saxon lands preached vividly the suffering of Jesus on the cross to show what Saxon sins had done to him. As innocent victim, Jesus’ corpse replaced the real victims of the Carolingian sword who were transformed into the sinful murderers of Christ. The Saxons were to regard their suffering at the hands of their Christian conquerors as divine punishment for their sins. The idea of original sin became the prevailing view of unredeemed

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe: 300-1000* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991): 275. *Gentes* can also be translated as races. Collins notes: “As Christianity was introduced and then imposed on the Saxons . . . there are no grounds for seeing these as representing ancestral customs or traditional laws amongst them. In other words these are Frankish rules that the Saxons were required to abide by.”

human nature. Jesus' death eternally revealed that sin. Through this network of ideological control united with the sword, Charlemagne attempted to impose loyalty to his empire.<sup>10</sup>

In the 830s, a debate erupted between the Saxon and Carolingian theologians about the meaning of the Eucharist. The Carolingian theologian Paschasius Radbertus had offered a new interpretation: the Saxon Eucharist body no longer contained the risen Lord whose power of spirit filled all who took the bread and cup. Instead, their Eucharist contained the crucified blood and flesh of the Lord. In proposing that the Eucharistic elements were the literal body and blood of the crucified Christ, Radbertus re-interpreted the Eucharist as an encounter with Christ the

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<sup>10</sup>The Romans admired Saxon virtues and recruited them into their armies. Writing in 95 C.E. Tacitus described the warrior ethic in his *Germania*, "Both prestige and power depend on being continually attended by a large train of picked young warriors, which is a distinction in peace and a protection in war ... On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to be equal to the courage of their chief ... To defend him and protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance. The chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief." Tacitus, quoted in Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 113.

The early history of Christianity among the Saxons is difficult to reconstruct with any certainty. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200-1000* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub. Ltd, 2003): 410-411, 413, cites archeological evidence from regions around Strasbourg to Stuttgart that indicates the presence of Christian churches, insignia, and ornaments dating to four centuries before the Carolingian "conversion" of the Saxons. The figure of Christ and Woden/Odin are linked in the ancient Norse epic, the *Hávamál*, suggesting a hybrid of Christianity and older pagan traditions in the North, though the poem's dating is uncertain. Brown, 420. points out that the Saxons in Britain already had adopted Christian ideas and practices before they were missionized by Augustine in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century: "The pagan kings and aristocracies of Saxon Britain with whom Augustine and his monks made contact may have been formidable and unfamiliar. But they themselves were not ill-informed about Christianity. The issue was not whether Christianity would 'come' to a world that knew nothing of it. Christianity was already there and the Saxons knew it. What was at stake, rather, was not only 'whether' the various Saxon groups would accept Christianity, but also, once they did, 'which' Christianity it would be and 'how' it could be thought as having come to them" (Brown, 342).

Judge. Unrepentant Saxon sinners dared not approach the Eucharist without having performed sufficient penance, or they would eat and drink damnation.<sup>11</sup>

The ninth-century Archbishop Hincmar went further in sanctifying violence, suggesting that the Mass re-enacted Christ's crucifixion, i.e. it was ritual murder. He proclaimed, "Declare him killed and offer him to be sacrificed in his mystery." He said that by eating the flesh and blood of the crucifixion, repentant Christians obtained the benefit of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, which redeemed the sins of humanity.

Theologians in Saxony and elsewhere reasserted the traditional resurrection-based theology of the Eucharist. They were denounced, stripped of their priestly offices, flogged, and imprisoned. Their texts were burned. The ensuing conflict about the Eucharist took two centuries to be resolved in Radbertus' favor. In the late eleventh century under Pope Gregory VII, believing otherwise was declared heresy.

### **Death Conquers All**

With the momentum of these political, liturgical, and theological shifts, Pope Urban II could promise in 1095, when he launched the first Crusade, that all who "took the cross" could count their duty as penance for sin. The Pope promised that, if the Crusaders died, all their financial and religious debts would be forgiven and they would immediately enter paradise.

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<sup>11</sup> Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), summarizes this early debate about the Carolingian changes in the Eucharist. Celia Chazelle, *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era: Theology and Art of Christ's Passion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), presents a multi-sided and detailed study of these shifts to greater focus on the crucifixion in ninth-century Carolingian theology, liturgy, devotion, art, and imperial ambitions.

Killing or being killed in God's name became a holy act and the fastest route to salvation.

Genocide became the fulfillment of divine justice against all enemies deemed "evil."

Three years later, Anselm of Canterbury reinforced the Pope's ideas by underscoring Jesus' death as payment of the debt of sin. In *Why God Became Man*, Anselm constructed a relentlessly rational theology to support the crucifixion-centered Mass and holy war, setting salvation in feudal terms of debt, retribution, and justice. Anselm said the sole reason for the incarnation was for Christ to die to restore God's honor. He failed even to mention the resurrection. He taught a spiritual piety of intense terror of hell.

Peter Abelard, younger than Anselm by twenty years, opposed the crusades and criticized Anselm:

Indeed, how cruel and perverse it seems that [God] should require the blood of the innocent as the price of anything, or that it should in any way please Him that an innocent person should be slain—still less that God should hold the death of His Son in such acceptance that by it He should be reconciled with the whole world.<sup>12</sup>

Theologians of the twelfth century were especially interested in Augustine's idea of the love that transforms faith, but unlike Augustine's sense of love as taking pleasure or joy in God as beauty, Abelard's contemporaries were obsessed with suffering and self-sacrificing love. Augustine's doctrine of original sin was favored especially by Abelard's most vehement foe, the popular and influential Bernard of Clairvaux, who preached the disastrously failed second

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<sup>12</sup> *Epist. Ad Romanos* 2, 835D-836A, cited in Paul L. Williams, *The Moral Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), 156.

crusade. Bernard had Abelard condemned for heresy twice, the second time in 1139, just a few years before Abelard died.<sup>13</sup>

Abelard rejected the idea of original sin because it was illogical for God to hold people culpable for something inherent in their nature. Though humanity did not bear the guilt for Adam, human beings suffered the consequences for his sin. Those innocent of sin could suffer the consequences of the sin of others. Blame for sin, Abelard asserted, lay with the intentions of the actor; intention alone determined the morality of acts. Abelard hung everything on the willing consent of the sinner, not on behavior. Actions derived their moral value from intent, which only God could judge truly. Actual behavior did not have to occur for sin to be present—consent was the key, though not exclusive, element in sin.<sup>14</sup>

Many in Abelard's time believed that internal urges themselves were sinful. His emphasis on intent, or the consent of the acting agent, is considered a major innovation in ethics. Abelard accepted desire as a neutral capacity of the soul, and he did not believe that any particular act was either inherently good or evil. He neither disparaged desire nor denied the ambiguity of what people desired. Behavior could be only morally evaluated when a moral agent consented to evil,

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<sup>13</sup> Abelard's writing has not been well preserved and he tended to leave works unfinished. George P. Fedotov, *Peter Abelard: The Personality, Self-Consciousness, and Thought of a Martyr of 'Enlightenment'* (Vaduz, Europa: BUCHER-VERTRIEBSANSTALT, 1988) sees him as a harbinger of the enlightenment. Kathleen M. Starnes, *Peter Abelard: His Place in History* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981), 104-6, notes his contributions to theology, especially his dialectical method. Some think, with his method, independent of catechetical Cathedral schools, Abelard invented theology as a discipline.

<sup>14</sup> See Daniel F Blackwell, *Non-Ontological Constructs: The Effects of Abelard's Logical and Ethical Theories on His Theology: A Study in Meaning and Verification* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988) for an assessment of Abelard's philosophy and ethics.

in other words, intended evil, not because people had desires or personal weaknesses, which everyone had.

Abelard's most important move in explicating his theory of the atonement was to reject Anselm's notions of rational jurisprudence and replace them with the pieties of feudal family relationships. Abelard based his understanding of atonement on divine grace, which was the boundless love of God for sinful humans. He contrasted this divine generosity with the Anselmian lack or need in God that required a ransom or substitution. God gave the ultimate sacrifice of his own Son to reach out in selfless love to sinners, not to restore his own honor.

God, omnipotent, omniscient, and good, created the best of all possible worlds; the Fall created the need for the atonement, all of which created a deeper love for God than would have been possible without it. Through his suffering, Christ proved the extent of divine love. As supreme moral exemplar, Christ was patient in suffering, steadfast in prayer, perfect in obedience, and selfless in sacrificing for others. This sacrifice indicted all sinners and asked them to recognize their sinfulness. To consent to follow Christ's example effected the inner transformation of the human soul, the animating principle that provided human beings with a new incentive to accept the cup of salvation and walk in righteousness by a change of heart.

Abelard asserted that only love, *dilectio*, of God could guide the will to do good because God was the highest good. Salvation lay in the turn of heart toward love of God, without fear of punishment or hope of reward, i.e. without self-interest. Estrangement from God came from self-love, which caused humans to fail in their filial responsibility to love God selflessly. Hence, love

must be motivated without regard for self. Selfless love of God meant to desire what God required for God alone, absent all self-interest and inconstancy.

In imitating Christ, Christians must follow the moral example of the crucified Christ, submitting to crucifixion to demonstrate love. Selfless love for God in response to grace was, therefore, the ultimate basis for Christian ethics. All other love flowed from this selfless love. The neighbor was loved selflessly through love of God, for the sake of God. Actual people injured by sin played no necessary part in the process of repentance, and restitution for those sinned against, though commendable, was not required for absolution. The efficacy of absolution came from an internal change of heart and a change in moral intentions, not the outward action of the church and its representatives.

Abelard's theory of the atonement presents different and greater dangers than that of Anselm. Anselm framed the death of Jesus in objective jurisprudence terms and made redemption a one-time occurrence. The event only needed to be accepted as true to be efficacious. Abelard's atonement is based in love for the crucified victim and a desire to be like him by becoming him, which theologizes from an imperial gaze, from the perpetrator of violence. The depth of divine love for sinners was revealed in the extremity of Christ's suffering—the more hardened and recalcitrant the sinner, the greater must be the emphasis on suffering to effect a change of heart and a desire to change. Anselm's driver toward salvation was terror. For Abelard it was guilt and a desire for suffering and self-annihilation.

By reducing sin, love, and absolution to individual consent and identification with Christ, the supreme victim, Abelard turned knowledge of sin inward into the soul's experience of guilt,



contrition, and repentance. The fullest desire is the desire to suffer and to die for love. The ideal of selfless love begs the question of what remains as love when there is no self to consent to love, or what, finally, will comfort and relieve suffering if it is the goal of piety. It also begs the moral question of who or what holds unrepentant perpetrators of violence accountable for their sin.

Abelard defined love as powerless passivity, a form of love useful to imperial control. His selfless love was a form of passive acceptance, of willingness to suffer, to endure the sin of others. As he notes:

*love has its origin in goodness. . . . Goodness, in fact, is not power or wisdom, and to be good is not to be wise or powerful.*

Abelard grounded love in Jerome and Augustine's trinities, describing the Spirit as the bond between Father and Son. As many have noted, this version of the Trinity made the Spirit a very weak third party, more a bond than a full third person. The Western Spirit is no longer incarnate in humanity and is reduced to the glue in a dyad.

As with Anselm's theory, Abelard's atonement had no role for the resurrection, no escape from perpetual dying for God. Because his Holy Spirit was an internal transaction between father and son, the community was not a category in Abelard's theology. He lacked a robust sense of on-going incarnation in this life, and he provided no means for individual accountability to community as a place where God dwelt and encountered persons. The individual's relationship to God and to her or himself determined innocence of sin or guilt—an individual subjectivism at its most narrow, a form of self-scrutiny without grounding in anything beyond its own turning on itself.

Abelard's atonement confuses trauma with love. This confusion is psychologically accurate. Recent works in trauma studies, especially on the psychological effects of repeated, inescapable violence, show that violence can destroy healthy distinctions between selves. Perpetrators of violence see their victims as extensions of their own needs, rather than as distinct selves, what psychologists call narcissism. Narcissism makes it possible to think of a relationship as disappearance into the other. Abelard's critique of self-interest can be applied to the dangers of this sort of narcissism, a critique he raises against his own predatory behavior toward his student, lover, and wife Heloise. However, narcissism is not overcome by witnessing violence, which he suggests in his theory of the atonement—a position reflected in contemporary Gerardian theories of the atonement. In creating a narcissistic structure for salvation and moral responsibility, Abelard provided no way for Christians to participate in each other's healing and journeys toward greater moral virtue and nearness to God, in the community of saints, filled with the Holy Spirit. He provides no means to resist imperial love.

Abelard sought both to use and deny erotic power. His redemptive relationship is the yearning of the contrite perpetrator for union with the loving victim. The more the perpetrator could imagine Christ's suffering, the stronger was the sinner's emotional trigger, or desire, to bond with the victim. He noted that the crucifixion was necessary because, without it, human beings would not love God as profoundly as they could in gratitude for Christ's suffering. With this theology, Abelard romanticized suffering, violence, and death and intertwined them with desire as a necessary condition for redemption. He eroticized them into necrophilia and sadomasochism, as if the only conceivable response to witnessing violence was guilt, gratitude,

and love, as opposed to revulsion, outrage, resistance, or avoidance. He made witnessing extreme suffering ethically necessary to evoke compassion, repentance, a change of heart, and a loss of self for the sake of union with the victim—self-annihilation—in other words, the end of subjective desire, the end of love.

### **Love as Power for Good**

Abelard's wife, the Abbess Heloise, was his most loyal supporter, but also his most astute critic. The affair of Heloise and Abelard has been idealized from medieval times as a great romance brought to a tragic and premature end by his castration. Heloise's own letters to Abelard, which place her squarely among the most rhetorically brilliant and compelling ancient writers on love, likely constructed the popular legend and their mythic place in the pantheon of great lovers. However, her actual relationship to Abelard was fraught with tensions. Her differences from him offer us clues to a Christian figure of the twelfth-century whose understanding of love resisted violence, false piety, and the romance of suffering. Her voice of integrity, steady and clear resistance to self-deception or self-pity, honesty about human feelings

of love and loss, and commitment to responsible uses of power offer compelling antidotes to the dangerous pieties erupting from the cloisters of her age.<sup>15</sup>

The young, intellectually gifted Heloise and Abelard, twenty years her senior and her teacher, became secret lovers. Heloise regarded voluntary love as a stronger bond than marriage, which was not a church sacrament at the time, but a civil contract, saying she preferred “love to wedlock, freedom to chains.”<sup>16</sup> She observed that women often married for money, which she viewed as a form of prostitution. She asked if anything ordained by God, such as sexual intercourse, could be sinful, and asserted that she would rather be his mistress than his wife. “God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honor me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honorable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, however, Heloise became pregnant. Abelard forced her to marry, sent her to his parents’ estate, and arranged for their son, Astrolabe, to be raised there. He attempted with marriage to appease her furious

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Dronke, “Heloise,” in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 107-142. Some scholars still debate whether Heloise actually wrote these letters. Dronke makes a strong argument for her authorship. Heloise lived at a time of the rise of powerful women. The era also saw the development of romantic troubadours, some of whom opposed the crusades through their songs and extolled erotic, sexual love. If Heloise did not herself write the letters, they reflect values and a perspective that were conceivable for women in the twelfth century and present a marked contrast to the devotional piety of Anselm, Abelard, and Bernard. Dronke also argues that Heloise taught Abelard her “Italianate” epistolary writing style. For other studies of Heloise see Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) and *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Betty Radice, trans. and intro. (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1974).

<sup>16</sup> Heloise to Abelard, First Letter, trans. Radice 113-114.

<sup>17</sup> Heloise to Abelard, First Letter, trans. Radice, 114.

guardian Fulbert, who had hired him to tutor his brilliant niece. In retribution, Fulbert paid two men to castrate him.

Abelard entered monastic life, starting a community he called the Paraclete. Abelard left the Paraclete to Heloise when his attempts as abbot failed. She was a successful abbess, in contrast to Abelard's inept leadership—his monks tried to poison him. Under her guidance, the Paraclete grew to have five subsidiary communities. She called on Abelard to function as her spiritual advisor through sporadic episodes of correspondence between them, and she collected his theological works.

Years after the scandal, Abelard wrote an autobiography called “The Story of my Misfortunes,” and repented of his behavior. In it, he said his castration was justifiable punishment for having betrayed the trust of Heloise's uncle. He characterized himself as a predator who connived to have access to her. Abelard's confession, written after his first excommunication, may have been a self-serving attempt to restore his reputation and gain a teaching position by sounding appropriately repentant and contrite.

In her fiery letter in response to his autobiography, Heloise said she was moved to tears by the recollection of his sufferings, but she also regarded his focus on his tales of personal woe as a disruption of his capacity to meet the obligations of love, not only to her but also to her community. She did not suggest that Abelard needed to be more selfless—she said he did not love enough because he was not open to receiving love and, so, had failed to reach out to those who cared the most about him.

Heloise reminded him that he had neglected to call on others to help bear his burdens: “We beseech you to write as often as you think fit to use...with news of the perils in which you are still storm-tossed. We are all that are left you, so at least you should let us share your sorrow or joy..”<sup>18</sup> She chided him for his self-absorbed self-pity, and accused him of not loving her because he described his motivation as lust alone. She made a request of him: “I beg you then to listen to what I ask – you will see that it is a small favour which you can easily grant. While I am denied your presence, give me at least through your words – of which you have enough to spare – some sweet semblance of yourself.”<sup>19</sup>

Heloise never spoke of their relationship as a source of shame, guilt, or dishonor. Nor was she enthusiastic about his suggestion that she should put love for God ahead of love for him. She entered religious life, she insisted, because he asked her to, not out of any particular love for God. “No reward for this may I expect from God, for the love of Whom it is well known that I did not anything.” Moreover, Heloise thought Abelard was wrong to dismiss erotic joy--he had come to assess his castration as a justified act of divine grace, saying, “how justly God had punished me in that very part of my body whereby I had sinned,”<sup>20</sup> She refuted his conclusion that their sexual union was an unclean departure from the divine will and disagreed that it marred the “beauty of chastity.” Late in life, she reminded him of the pleasure he shared with her, and she grieved his castration. Heloise asked him to remember their sensual union and to stay faithfully in relationship to her, as well as to stay connected to her religious community.

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<sup>18</sup> Heloise to Abelard, First Letter, in Radice 110.

<sup>19</sup> Heloise to Abelard, First Letter, in Radice, 116.

<sup>20</sup> Abelard, *Historia Calamitatum*, Ch.8, in Bellows.

Abelard presented himself and Heloise as embodying an ideal of selfless love in their post-trauma relationship. “Each grieved most, not for himself, but for the other. Each sought to allay, not his own sufferings, but those of the one he loved.”<sup>21</sup> Heloise countered that he took her love for granted and that she did not understand love as selfless. Instead, she loved both boldly and with expectations of reciprocity. “If only your love had less confidence in me, my dear, so that you would be more concerned on my behalf! But as it is, the more I have made you feel secure in me, the more I have to bear with your neglect.”<sup>22</sup> He failed to acknowledge that he owed her anything, she commented, even a letter! She asserted that love was right to have expectations; it was grounded in integrity, connection, and care. Abelard, in contrast, idealized a love that was unbounded by obligations, fears of punishment, or hopes of reward. For him, love was internalized as a condition of the heart—not a web of obligations and behaviors in real relationships.

Throughout her life, Heloise remained passionately devoted to Abelard. She held out for love shared in the intellectual and spiritual dimensions that she thought Abelard could sustain. Challenging his self-absorption and sense of himself as a victim, she politely but pointedly noted that he used his own suffering to tell another man that his anguish was insignificant in comparison. He paid attention to the suffering of an acquaintance, Heloise noted, but ignored her and the community he founded with no sense of obligation or responsibility to them.

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<sup>21</sup> Abelard, *Historia Calamitatum*, ch. 6, in Bellows.

<sup>22</sup> Heloise to Abelard, First Letter, in Radice, 117.

Heloise understood compassion as something more than full identification with another's pain and sorrow and the internalizing of the most abject, abyssal suffering. For her, compassion was more than subjective feeling, weakness, and devotion. Love required action. Heloise admonished Abelard,

I do not want you to exhort me to virtue and summon me to the fight, saying, "Power comes to its full strength in weakness" and "He cannot win a crown unless he has kept the rules." I do not seek a crown of victory; it is sufficient for me to avoid danger, and this is safer than engaging in war.<sup>23</sup>

Heloise understood moral agency based on empathy was grounded in resistance to violence, the alleviation of pain, acts of healing, and compassion. Her form of compassion maintained a tensile consciousness that combined empathy for another's pain with sufficient self-possession to be able to offer to someone mired in his own suffering a world beyond pain and helplessness, a world glimpsed in community and companionship—a world that offered, still, the possibilities of love, of friendship. Her love was not afraid to make demands—it expected accountability and responsibility and understood that the best love was mutual. In her understanding and experience, love was a great power.

When Abelard died in 1141, on his way to Rome to defend himself at his second excommunication trial, he had admirers and students who carried on his intellectual innovations, but few friends. Heloise sent a letter to the abbot at Cluny who was Abelard's superior at his death. She asked for a written statement of her husband's absolution, "to be hung on his tomb," and she appealed for a position in the church for their son, Astrolabe.<sup>24</sup> Abelard's body was

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<sup>23</sup> Heloise to Abelard, Second Letter, in Radice, 135.

<sup>24</sup> Heloise, "Letter (167) to Peter the Venerable," in Radice, 285.



brought back to the Paraclete and buried there. Heloise assured that he remained within the embrace of the community where she served as abbess until she died twenty-three years later.

### **The Marriage of Venus and Mars**

Abelard's chief opponent and nemesis, Bernard of Clairvaux, became the most sought-out preacher and religious advisor of his time. In sixty-seven sermons on the Song of Songs, Bernard led his monks to follow the path to mystical, erotic union with God, casting the feminine soul as the seeker of God. He had a more active understanding of love and desire, and he more successfully joined love and crucifixion to eros as an on-going love of violence.<sup>25</sup>

Bernard called sufferings sweet, and he eroticized torture. He described God's beloved as wounded and disfigured and used her black color in the Song of Songs to mark her as humiliated. The bride's black skin was a sign of her deep pain and therefore her deep love, like the blows Christ endured on the Cross. Torture and abuse marked the Bride of Christ, who gloried in the cross of affliction because it united her to Jesus, in mystical, erotic union. Bernard prayed that he would suffer similarly: "Sufferings are their joy equally with their hope ... Let me be not merely

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<sup>25</sup>For a discussion of Bernard's unique use of this text and the relationships between Christian mystical ideals of love and the courtly love that emerged in the same period, see Jeanne Nightingale, "Inscribing the Breath of a Speaking Voice: *Vox Sponsae* in St. Bernard's Sermons on the Canticles and in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*," in *Courtly Arts and the Art of Courtliness: Selected Papers from the Eleventh Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 29 July-4 August 2004*, Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz, eds. (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 2006). We read this paper in unpublished form, sent to us by the author at our request. For Bernard's sermons, see Bernard, *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: Song of Songs I-II*, Kilian Walsh, trans. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publ., Inc., 1981).

weak, then, but entirely resourceless, utterly helpless, that I may enjoy the support of the power of the Lord of Hosts!”<sup>26</sup>

For Bernard, who preached the second, disastrous crusade, war forged a new form of love: ecstatic union with Christ’s sufferings in life and death. He was an avid supporter of the Knights of the Templar. Many have noticed the homoerotic dimensions of Bernard’s interest in eros. But Christians had long appreciated love between same-sex people, especially in the environments of monastery and convents. Few studies of Bernard have discussed how he eroticized violence and pain. The heterodox union of love and violence was Bernard’s own contribution to atonement theology, a marriage of Eros, the goddess of love, and Mars, the god of war. Bernard fused monks and warriors into a holy army and transformed the inebriating grace of paradise into a spiritual, erotic potion of suffering piety, murder, and death—and he identified love with imperial aggression.

Abelard and Bernard, especially, were harbingers of changes in Western Europe that would long shape the modern world’s understanding of desire and love and faith and humanity. Abelard’s narcissistic ideal of self-sacrificing love as the highest Christian moral achievement encouraged victims to acquiesce to violence in forgiving, impotent, selfless narcissism. Bernard’s faith, loving and yearning, pastoral and kind, had a Janus-face of hatred for infidels and even for

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard, *Commentary*, Sermon 25.8, Walsh, *Songs II*, 56. Bernard comments in 25.3 that when she reaches heaven, the bride’s glorified body will become white. Speaking of Paul in 25.8 he writes, “this the Doctor of the Nations is reputed abject, dishonorable, black, beneath notice, a scrap of this world’s refuse ... though black without he is beautiful within.” For an analysis of this early form of racism, see Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002).

other Christians, like the Cathars, who opposed the crusades. He sanctified killing for God as a form of love and exalted self-abasement as true erotic love, as ecstatic desire.

Christians moved from faith in the risen Christ who lifted humanity to the same divinity to an exalted fierce Christ of Judgment who lorded it over sinful humanity, unable to cross the great chasm of sin without leaving self behind. A high christology and high anthropology of glory were replaced with a high christology of judgment and a low anthropology of sin, united by terror and guilt.

Christianity increasingly embraced ideals of love as submissive, broken-hearted, and perpetually unrequited, always longing for final fulfillment. The church in Western Europe was once in love with the risen Christ who joined his bride in the earthly garden of delight and helped her tend it. However, beginning in the ninth century, she began to doubt her lover and took a violent Lord into her bed, lay with him, blessed him, and finally, took him into the Christian family by marrying him.

Erotically enthralled by her seductive abuser, the church spawned devotional pieties of fear, sorrow, torture, and death, whose progeny journeyed into the world determined to destroy their own shadows and neighbors. To solidify this unholy union, the church sacrificed her former love by killing him repeatedly and partaking of his mutilated body. She told herself that conquest, genocide, and the colonization of Jerusalem were God's will, a holy pilgrimage that would someday, if she sacrificed and suffered enough, deliver salvation, end the violence, and restore her to her first love. This delusional pattern would later carry conquistadors and pilgrims to the Americas and leave Jerusalem as one of the most contested cities on the planet. To assuage

her broken heart and bleeding body, she told herself that such a marriage was good and pleasing to God. She hung, suspended in eschatological terror and hope, longing elusively for release, relief, and love's fulfillment. They did not come.

The image of this murdered lover appeared in Europe's churches beginning in the tenth century. Atonement theology in the eleventh century correlates to the proliferation of crucifixion images. Once the dead Christ was depicted, the gore and horror of his image escalated over several centuries. Artists depicted, in images of crucifixion, the increase of violence in Western Europe when torture and capital punishment became public spectacles that imitated the passion. To evoke the pity and piety of spectators, the convicted would forgive the crowd for killing him. This theology reflects the imposition of an imperial theological anthropology that shaped love as self-sacrifice and disciplined desire as the union of eros and holy war.

### **Conclusion**

The longing for paradise on earth has been a hunger since it was displaced by crucifixion. The hunger is felt in the nostalgia of utopias, in poetic longings, in the colonizers' impulses to find or recreate Eden in new lands, in idealizations of wilderness, and in romantic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, especially, this-worldly forms of Christianity began to participate in democratic movements. Christians began to look again at the New Testament Kingdom of God traditions and their vision of justice on earth as it is in heaven. Supernatural promises of an afterlife were displaced by calls to create justice and peace in this life and the human Jesus of history, the one like us, became increasingly the focus of

progressive scholarship, while his divinity became an embarrassment or mystery. These liberation-oriented forms of post-enlightenment Christianity have unlocked again, and perhaps, opened a crack in the portals of paradise that the atonement had slammed shut. In the modernist mode, however, a low anthropology has been accompanied by a low christology. We lack a sense of the spiritual power and bedrock sanctity of life on earth, of creation, and of human community.

Love for the living, incarnate and risen Christ is a different pietism and moral sensibility than love for the suffering, dying Christ. Faithfulness to the risen Christ means commitment to the body of Christ, sustained by works of love. Love for beauty; care for the material life that gives pleasure and joy; appreciation for the numinous world, revealed by the Spirit in life; and embrace of the eros that empowers human beings as social creatures to seek others—these are spiritual powers that deliver salvation. They are elusive, fleeting, and stubbornly persistent. They ground the struggle for justice and the journey to God in a response to the gift of life in this world and a desire to see it flourish. They encourage a responsibility for the common good motivated, not out of violence, guilt, and selflessness, but out of gratitude, generosity, and joy. They enable us to see that the atonement theology that haunts the Western imagination is a fundamental betrayal of the Jesus movement and of Christian faith.

Assuredly, we live in a world in which the struggle for life and for justice must continue. Realizing this requires us to let go of the notion that paradise is life without struggle. We must wrestle with legacies of injustice, lament the tragedies evil inflicts, and do all we can to overcome injustice and violence. However, it is also true that we already live on holy ground, in

the presence of God, with bodies and souls sanctified by the spirit's anointing, surrounded by the communion of saints. We re-enter this world as sacred space when we love life fiercely, and, in the name of love, protect the goodness of our intricate web of life in all its manifold forms. Thus immersed in the flow of desiring, we find ourselves more responsive to and responsible for life in this world. We give thanks for gifts of love that have been ours all along, an ever-widening circle of beauty, the Spirit in life, the heart of our deepest desires, our most saving loves.