

The background of the cover is a classical painting depicting a person in a state of intense grief or despair. The person's head is buried in their hands, and their body is rendered in warm, earthy tones of brown and tan. The background is a dark, textured blue-green. The overall mood is somber and emotional.

MEDIEVAL SENSIBILITIES

*A History of Emotions
in the Middle Ages*

DAMIEN BOQUET
PIROSKA NÁGY

MEDIEVAL SENSIBILITIES

In memory of Jacques Le Goff

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A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages

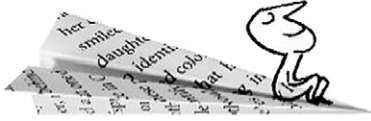
Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy

Translated by Robert Shaw

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FOREWORD

Barbara H. Rosenwein

What were the emotional consequences of the Christianization of Europe? In *Medieval Sensibilities*, Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy bring to the English-speaking audience the fruits of their long reflection on this question. They show how, far from being a stagnant ‘Middle Age’ standing between the learned ancient world and discontented modernity, the period was in constant affective ferment. Social and economic changes in themselves brought new sensibilities and needs. These new milieus, drawing on and filtering, but also adding to, the many intellectual traditions increasingly available to an expanding clerical elite, transformed their thoughts about Christ’s Passion. In turn, these new understandings, taught in the schools, proclaimed in the churches, preached on the streets, and acted out by rulers, transformed the feelings and behaviours of Europeans in general.

Theologies of the Passion were thus put into practice. As Boquet and Nagy show, the emotions implied by new understandings of Christ’s human nature and passion came to shape the very ways in which medieval people lived their lives. Initially, this was not the case; the affective implications of the Christian God were at first largely the monopoly of one man (Augustine). But they soon became the focus of an ever-expanding religious elite, taken up first by men and women in hermitages and monasteries and then, eventually, becoming the concern of people in every walk of life.

This book is itself the fruit of a different sort of progressive inclusion. The authors began their careers working separately. Boquet’s dissertation, which became his first book, was on the affective life and thought of Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth-century monk and abbot who wrote extensively on the meaning of love and friendship. Nagy’s early work was on the ‘gift of tears’: she unravelled the tangled threads involved

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in the idea that crying could have salvific meaning. When they began to work together, they founded a website, emma.hypotheses.org, dedicated to ‘the study of medieval emotions in tandem with the scholarship of the humanities and social sciences’. They organized conferences to which they invited speakers to consider medieval sensibilities from every point of view. Together the two scholars edited and published the results of these conferences in books ranging in topic from the political uses and meanings of emotions to the role of the body to intellectual history.

Medieval Sensibilities reflects that prior work – and goes beyond it. Its emphasis on the suffering Christ as the starting point for medieval sensibilities draws on the authors’ interest in the role of the body in experience and expression. In taking up theologians like Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, and Thomas Aquinas, they distil the fruits of long rumination on medieval theories of the passions. When considering the ‘politics of princely emotions’, they exploit their own and others’ work on performativity. Above all they weave together these and other topics in a coherent narrative covering the entire medieval period.

The story really gets underway with the missionizing work of the Irish monk Columbanus. Charismatic and fiercely determined, he brought the monastic ideals of affective restraint first to the Frankish royal court and thence to the elites. A still more thorough diffusion of Christian values occurred under Charlemagne (d. 814) and his early successors, as churchmen incorporated Christianized notions of the passions into masses for monks and books for the laity. Learned clerics turned the idea of Christian love, *caritas*, into an ideal of worldly love as well, as if the Christian community could come together through the bonds of charity.

Secular society did not live up to these expectations, except in its cultivation of vernacular literature, which expressed the ideals of measure and restraint, put emphasis on joy, and celebrated longing. But in the monastery the accent on love became something of an obsession. Eleventh- and twelfth-century monks were in their era what neuroscientists are in our own: recognized experts on emotions. Above all, the monks considered themselves – and were seen as – the go-to authorities on love. Hermits, ascetics, Cistercians, even some secular clerics parsed the various forms of love, explored their causes and effects, elaborated ways to show affection, tenderness, and compassion, and taught themselves and others how to practise the right – that is, Christianized – emotions. They elaborated on new forms of meditation, dwelling on and participating in the life, feelings, and travails of Christ. Just as significantly, they unabashedly celebrated love among friends, so that what had hitherto been seen as the ‘secular’ institution of friendship became as holy as love of God and neighbour.

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Once worldly love was valorised, the question of sex was not far behind. In a brilliant chapter, Boquet and Nagy illustrate the tensions that came in the wake of this development: between clerical models of chaste love and the sexualized intimacies praised by the troubadours; between sexual consummation regardless of matrimony and sex within marriages alone; between heterosexual love and same-sex love. Churchmen harnessed the energies behind these tensions, turning marriage into a sacrament: an efficacious conduit of God's grace.

For all its emphasis on love, however, *Medieval Sensibilities* is in many ways a history of pain. Unlike today, when most of us anaesthetize ourselves to avoid even the slightest agony, medieval Christians increasingly sought to experience suffering. The age of martyrdom was long over, and gradually the age of ascetic monasticism came to an end as well. But physical torment based on the model of Christ's torments was ever more valued. St Francis suffered the stigmata, the very wounds of the crucified God; Henry Suso carved the initials of Jesus on his chest over his heart; flagellants walked the streets of medieval towns, beating themselves until their blood ran. Mental pains were also privileged, as penitence – along with the sad, fearful, embarrassed feelings that accompanied it – was ever more stressed in the course of the Middle Ages. These phenomena were connected with the growth of medieval mystical movements, so often associated with women. But, as Boquet and Nagy point out, the narratives of female mystics were generally written by men, who controlled the evidence for their own purposes.

The Middle Ages of *Medieval Sensibilities* is complex, nuanced, and in constant flux. It is a period in which ancient ideas are endlessly transformed and new ones tirelessly elaborated as men and women grapple with the legacy of a passionate and afflicted God. Boquet and Nagy are learned and eloquent guides to the many ways in which Christ's model was both imitated and pushed to limits never before imagined.

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From conception to completion, this book is the result of many years' work, following in the footsteps of our EMMA research programme ('Emotions in the Middle Ages', emma.hypotheses.org). The latter's success has astonished us, delighted us, and strengthened our desire to give emotion and the affective life their due place within historical study, and to do so in the spirit of the Annales school, which Jacques Le Goff, to whom we dedicate these pages, so thoroughly embodied. We take this opportunity to thank once again the dozens of researchers from France and further afield who have participated in the EMMA programme. The fruits of their research have nourished us. The unknown territories they explored have expanded our horizons.

Writing in tandem was an adventure in itself! Our shared voyage has lasted over ten years or thereabouts. Sometimes we have sailed side by side, but more often than not, we have had to defy the seas and the continents that separate us. Throughout this journey, there are few emotions present in this book that we have not felt, imagined, or dissected. In short, we have sailed with and towards the emotions, both our own and those of our historical subjects. This book of emotions and history can be seen as our logbook.

At various stages of the writing process, many friends and colleagues have read or annotated chapters, or even the entire book, asked us useful questions, or responded to our anxious queries. The following all deserve our heartfelt and sincere thanks. Their names are arranged in alphabetical order for convenience: Emmanuel Bain, Jacques Dalarun, Jeroen Deploige, Julien Dubouloz, Margot Farthouat, Cédric Giraud, Martin Gravel, Patrick Henriët, Pierre Levron, Serge Lusignan, Laurence Moulinier, Monique Paulmier, Jean Pichette, Sylvain Piron, Martin Roch, Barbara H. Rosenwein, Laurent Smaghe, Clément Vauchelles,

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the emotions: that great silence!¹

What remains of the joys and pains of the men and women of the Middle Ages? Their laughter, their moans, and their cries built no monuments, and yet their echoes live on within them. Reading texts and studying images from across the long thousand years of the Middle Ages, a historian would have to possess a heart of stone not to be moved by the life behind them. That life was not solely one of hierarchies, means of production, and taxes. It was also full of desires, tensions, sudden gasps, and endless sighs.

It is impossible to understand any human society without exploring its emotional rhythms, from the most dramatic to the most subtle. For too long, historians have ignored this simple truth. At times, they have perhaps been myopic; but above all, they have been too tied to their own times. The discipline of history that took root in the nineteenth century had trouble taking emotions seriously, and even more in admitting that they were not merely intimate expressions, but also an essential part of cultural and social systems.² Yet in the Middle Ages, emotions were everywhere. They could be found not only deep within the heart but far beyond it: they were present in the churches, in the palaces, in the shacks, in the markets, and on the battlefields. Saint Louis (d. 1270), on return from Egypt in 1254, was inconsolable at the loss of the crusade: 'Fixing his eyes to the earth with a profound sadness and sighing deeply, he lingered on his captivity and the general confusion of Christianity wrought through it.'³ The princes grieved for the misfortunes of their realms and were loved for doing so. Yet they did not hesitate to unleash their wrath, the terrible *ira regis*, which struck rebels like divine lightning. While Louis the Pious (d. 840) was known for his wisdom, he still

blinded his own nephew, Bernard of Italy (d. 818), king of the Lombards, for daring to defy his authority.

All manner of emotions – hate, laughter, jealousy, and so on – could serve to enliven the theatre of politics and engender social harmony. Through them one negotiated, through them one governed. In the celebrated fresco painted in 1337 by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (d. 1348) that adorns the walls of the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, a winged figure personifying ‘Security’, who protects the gates of the city, assures that ‘without fear, let every man may walk safely’.⁴ She seems to add that, while the inhabitants should not fear chaos, they should still tremble before justice – in her hand she brandishes a gibbet, from which a corpse hangs. The fear brought to life in this image was encouraged by others elsewhere, such as the innumerable depictions of the Last Judgement that adorned church walls by the end of the Middle Ages. Here, it was no longer the marks of good and bad government that were portrayed, but rather those of a virtuous life and one abandoned to sin. In the mid-thirteenth century, the Dominican Humbert of Romans (d. 1277), author of a preaching manual, *On the Gift of Fear*, encouraged priests to go ever further in reminding their congregations of the horrible demonic figures who visited every sort of torture on the damned. The faithful were to fear the torturers of hell on account of their ceaseless cruelty. They were to tremble before the anger of God – for if he was roused by the people of Israel, he would surely be merciless with inveterate sinners at the moment of judgement. Already horrified at the thought of demons, they would only be more aghast when they learned that the anger of God would ‘be so great that it will attack them like a furious madman’.⁵ Worse still, God would compound their pain with humiliation, heightening the suffering of the damned by mocking them: ‘I also will laugh in your destruction, and will mock when that shall come to you which you feared’ (Prov 1: 26).⁶

In societies where the imperatives of honour were profoundly important, shame was often even more dreaded than physical suffering. One can thus understand the way in which the Church came to challenge the faithful: it maintained that there was nothing better for delivering man from sin than shame, a shame which had to be deeply felt, and at times even acted out in public. By the eleventh century, a time when honour was defined less by material wealth or office than by a collection of values and sentiments synonymous with good repute (*bona fama*), the reparation of faults was no longer enough to complete the penitential journey: one was also expected to make a sincere, moving expression of moral suffering and repentance. Emotions went to the very heart of man’s social and symbolic bonds: there was nothing secondary or incidental about them.

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Difficult though it is to believe, for the last twenty years the history of the emotions has been seen as essential.⁷ Without doubt, that is a testament to the tenacity of a certain set of historians, both in France and further afield. Their work nevertheless stands on the shoulders of some notable pioneers: Johan Huizinga, Lucien Febvre, Robert Mandrou, Georges Duby, and Jacques Le Goff. This recent development is a sign of the times and especially of changing attitudes towards the emotions within Western societies. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, emotion had a bad reputation, mistrusted at best, especially when it appeared outside of the cathartic enclosure of the arts or the private sphere. Today, however, it appears to be a central component of social life. This new emphasis can be attributed to various factors. For one, the collapse of globalist ideologies and the crisis of liberal democracy has brought the individual and the inner life to the fore.⁸ Other factors include the rise of many new disciplines (neuroscience, cognitive psychology) that have highlighted the rationality of emotions;⁹ the reaction against an all-powerful economy that has rendered man an object of management;¹⁰ and the multifaceted achievements of therapeutic culture.¹¹ The effects of this transformation are palpable. They have challenged the dichotomy of reason and emotion, which for so long had structured the Western conception of man, and in turn revealed its strangeness.¹² Integrating emotion into how we understand society – as it is today and as it was in days gone by – has consequently become essential. Past and present here go hand in hand.¹³

In 1941, Lucien Febvre published an article in *Annales* that would become the manifesto for a history of the emotions.¹⁴ Here, he called for a ‘vast collective study of the fundamental sentiments of humanity and their forms’. The project was prompted by one conviction: emotions, contagious by nature, reveal the most profound cultural phenomena, which language and social codes are unable to embrace. At the same time, and like his contemporaries, Febvre saw them as irrational and spontaneous, an expression of unconscious trends. How then are historians to understand the medieval period, a period characterized by exactly this sort of emotional enthusiasm? The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga made this question the foundation of his masterwork, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. First published in 1919 and translated into English in 1924, this book has fascinated generations of historians. For Huizinga, affectivity, aesthetics, and the life of the senses were at the heart of the mindset of medieval civilization. He stressed the ‘extravagance and emotivity’ of the men and women of the Middle Ages: they seemed to pass in a split-second from laughter to tears, from sweetness to cruelty. Incapable of controlling the emotions that overpowered them, medieval people were ‘like giants with the heads of children’. Behind the flamboyant

scene that Huizinga painted lay a grand historical narrative founded on the emotions: the Middle Ages heralded the Modern Age, characterized by self-mastery and reflective distance. The vitality of the Middle Ages resided in its raw and violent emotional dynamism. Its decline resulted from an exhaustion that led to formalism. Incapable of regeneration, medieval civilization fell into a kind of *fin de siècle* depression according to Huizinga: ‘Here above all, if men were not to fall into crude barbarism, there was a need to frame emotions within fixed forms.’¹⁵

Michelet had already said something similar when he compared the Middle Ages to a tormented child that had to die ‘in heartfelt anguish’ so that modernity and its triumphant herald, the rational spirit, could arrive.¹⁶ Historians have long sought to trace the development of this civilizing march of reason. They thus enthusiastically took up the idea of ‘the civilizing process’, a model first elaborated by Norbert Elias in 1939, but which only became widely influential in the 1970s.¹⁷ Elias established a truly bold parallel between the advent of monarchical states and the developmental psychology of individuals: he bound the two together under a governing principle of rationality. As orderly political regimes expanded in Europe, individuals became better able to master their emotions and to transcend them within the social theatre. The power of Elias’ model came from its capacity to theoretically unify the individual and society, the political and the unconscious. But this grand theory – influenced by Freud as much as Huizinga – only perpetuated the view that the Middle Ages had an infantile character: ‘Because emotions were here expressed in a manner that in our own world is generally observed only in children, we call these expressions and forms of behaviour “childish”.’¹⁸

Today we see just how distorting such conceptions can be: the emotions of the Middle Ages were no less codified and rational than our own.¹⁹ But in the 1930s, for humanist intellectuals witnessing the collapse of Enlightenment civilization, the cradle of their education, the matter was existential. How could they understand this historic defeat of reason and respond to the perceived decline of the West, if the past was not also interrogated in a new way? At that very moment, Marc Bloch took aim at the present and came up with a similar diagnosis:

Quite deliberately – as one can see by reading *Mein Kampf* or the records of Rauschning’s conversations – Hitler kept the truth from his servile masses. Instead of intellectual persuasion he gave them emotional suggestion. For us there is but one set of alternatives. Either, like the Germans, we must turn our people into a keyboard on which a few leaders can play at will (but who are those leaders? The playing of those at present on the stage is curiously lacking in resonance); or we can so train them that they

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may be able to collaborate to the full with the representatives in whose hands they have placed the reins of government. At the present stage of civilization this dilemma admits of no middle term ... The masses no longer obey. They follow, either because they have been hypnotized or because they know.²⁰

The urgency was palpable. Despite these expectations, however, the appeal for a history of the emotional life was barely followed up in the postwar decades.²¹ The history of mentalities and sensibilities that took off in the 1970s certainly made space for what was 'felt', sometimes even placing one emotion or another at the heart of a study. But it did so without truly questioning the historicity of the emotions and, above all, without reconsidering how enduring their definitions were.²² The real goal is not simply to recognize that the emotions have a role within history, but to acknowledge that they themselves have a history, a history as complex and diverse as the social and cultural environments in which they are expressed.

Studying medieval emotions and grasping their capacity to shape a vision of humanity and its world enables us to better understand our own social outlooks and customs by way of a historical 'detour'. We can understand more clearly how we apprehend and shape our emotional lives, and why we sometimes no longer know how or no longer dare to cultivate this aspect of our humanity.²³ Conversely, this critique of emotional modernity allows us to take stock of the biases through which we consider the past and which feed our complacency: in our transitory position of superiority, we must not become drunk on hindsight. To make the emotional culture of the Middle Ages the object of study is thus to dispute the validity of the 'civilizing process' thesis inherited from Norbert Elias, which is also a history of Western rationalization. An infantilized vision of the men and women of the Middle Ages has wormed its way into our imaginations, a result of how emotions were publicly and often very demonstratively expressed. Mobs yelled out their hatred in public places. Princes failed to temper their anger or, worse still, their sobbing. The devout wailed their love for Christ in the churches. Surely, such displays could only derive from a culture of immature people still on the path towards civilization ...

It is this dialogue – the epistemological foundations of which have evolved significantly from the 1930s – that we continue here. Since the 1980s, numerous researchers across Europe and North America have begun to explore the history of emotions, responding to what some have already christened the 'emotional turn'.²⁴ The success of this new field has fostered a flourishing body of research. It has presented new tools of investigation and inquiry, many of them referenced in this work:

notions of ‘emotional community’ (Barbara H. Rosenwein),²⁵ of ‘emotional regimes’, ‘emotives’, and ‘emotional navigation’ (William M. Reddy),²⁶ and of ‘ennobling love’ (Stephen Jaeger).²⁷ Such approaches help us to conceive and guide a truly mature history of the emotions, disentangled from theories concerning the historical progress of reason.

Today’s historians face a two-pronged challenge. Firstly, to propose an alternative to the grand theory of the ‘civilizing process’ without eschewing a long-term history of the emotions. Secondly, to write that history in a manner true to its strict cultural context in an age where thought on affectivity seems more than ever to be dominated by scientists.²⁸ Building on their epistemological and institutional foundations, the human and life sciences each propose their own definition of emotion, distinguish it meticulously from feeling, mood, and affect, and define some emotions as positive, others as negative. How can historians find their feet in this environment, especially when discussing an era where emotional anthropology and terminology were so radically different from our own?²⁹ To follow a discrete, closed definition of emotion, to pay blind faith to the scientific categories of our times, themselves rather confused, would not only be a purely practical illusion, but the mark of a ruinous ‘scientism’ projected onto a malleable human reality.³⁰

Neither universal nor timeless, emotions are whatever the men and women of each era, of each society, of each group make of them. How do they conceive of the nebula of affections and the mysteries of feeling, and what role do they accord to them? As historians tackle these issues, they must, by necessity, cast their nets wide. If the focus needs to tighten, the frameworks should not be those of psychology or neuroscience, but the outlooks of medieval men and women themselves. They too named, considered, and experienced ‘affective matters’, and did so according to their own codes, motivations, and aims. The use of the term ‘emotion’ to terminologically encompass the various affective categories also merits explanation.³¹ It is absent from medieval vocabulary: it first appeared in French during the fifteenth century within descriptions of uprisings and popular revolts.³² The most obvious justification stems from the very emergence of the historiographical current which focuses on it: in the last twenty years, this terminology has become increasingly common in almost every Western language, paralleling the rise of the ‘sciences of emotion’.

Departing from this consensus, we prefer to speak of what, in French, we call the *sensible* – a term dear to Lucien Febvre and the Annalist historians³³ – when approaching this vast field. The meaning intended here is neither that of ‘sensoriality’, nor of ‘sensitivity’, but of ‘sensibility’: the title of this English translation indeed derives from the latter. We speak often of feelings, of passions, of affects, and of impulses. But

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affectivity also includes more stable aspects: atmospheres, moods, and lasting dispositions. Wherever we have found emotions, we have tried to draw together the sparse traces of emotional feeling – pleasures, pains, joys, and sorrows – as much as possible. As historians, we seek to analyse norms, rhetoric, games of interaction and of power, and cultural products and performances: we thus try to avoid any distinction between felt emotion and expressed emotion, any frontier between the authentic and the uncertain. The emotions that were voiced, expressed by an action, or displayed by the body possessed their own cultural and social efficacies. They are, in any case, the only emotions to which we have access. As Marcel Mauss understood so well, the ritualization of an emotion and its expression in a pre-defined scenario do not necessarily mean that it is not sincerely felt.³⁴

This book proposes a cultural history of affectivity for the medieval West. It aims to prove the essential importance of emotions in history – and *a fortiori* in the Middle Ages – and also to offer an emotional journey through this thousand-year epoch. This history is a cultural history, since emotion was expressed in images and texts, the works of medieval culture. Our approach takes account of the Christian religious dynamic of the Passion and the passions, a dynamic which had so much structural importance on an anthropological as well as an institutional level. In fact, this is truly our thesis: we are convinced that emotion was at the heart of the anthropology of the Western Middle Ages. Thus, our aim has been to produce a history of medieval sensibilities, albeit not the only one that could be written or that demands to be studied. This history, tied to other cognitive processes (imagination, memory, reasoning, etc.), is founded on a history of experience – that total psychological fact – but also pertains to social history. To take an interest in the history of the emotions is in no way to promote an atomized history, one centred on the individual and microscopic level. Rather it is an anthropological history: a history of humankind, of the human being as a whole, and of shared singularities.

We have of course made choices, followed some paths, and departed from others. Christian anthropology was founded on the centrality of the emotions, above all love and suffering (Chapter 1): God sent his Son who suffered, through love, in order to save humanity. Augustine (d. 430) made the sensitivity of the soul a consequence of original sin. From then on, humanity was passionate and life on earth was anything but impassive. Nevertheless, the emotions could be turned towards God or away from him, since they pertained to the system of vices and virtues. The education of monks, that elite of an ideal Christian society, was founded on this idea: it was present even within the earliest desert monasticism. To ‘convert’ the soul towards God meant to turn the emotions

towards salvation by adopting a way of life and an interior disposition that promoted this spiritual movement (Chapter 2).

Rooted in the experiences of the Desert Fathers and the doctrinal formulas of the Church Fathers, medieval sensibilities were continuously evolving. During the early Middle Ages (fifth to tenth centuries), normative and moral texts written by monks and clerics charted a course for the conversion of the emotions. These were initially intended for monastic circles, but soon turned their gaze on lay society (Chapter 3). In the age of Charlemagne and again, with fresh force, during the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a new project for society took shape atop that key pedestal of Christian social relationships: the love present in charity and true friendship.

Within this Christian context, a slew of new processes began to direct the emotional culture of societies from the eleventh century onwards. Reformed monasticism nurtured the possibility of direct contact with God, attainable through the sincere expression of emotions (Chapter 4). Courtly literature, written in the vernacular, displayed a complex and refined emotional culture, an expression of the values and tensions that cut across aristocratic and bourgeois settings. It was directly related to the religious re-purposing of desire and the clerical offensive to spiritualize conjugal love and supervise the interior life; at the same time, it also frequently came into conflict with them (Chapter 5). From the end of the eleventh century, in the learned circles of the monasteries and urban schools, the rise of a naturalistic spirit led to the integration of the emotions within human nature (Chapter 6). Such varied discussions spurred and spread a positive re-evaluation of the emotions at the end of the Middle Ages: their religious and social uses became richer and more diverse than ever before. This can be sensed in political theory and the practices of princely government, which gave star-billing to the emotions (Chapter 7). On another level, the extraordinary promotion of the Incarnation and Passion of Christ from the high Middle Ages onwards further reinforced the religious efficacy of the emotions. They became the foundations of affective mysticism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a current which enjoyed an ambiguous relationship with the institutional Church (Chapter 8). Finally, the more numerous and diverse sources from the last centuries of the Middle Ages open a window onto the emotions of those who were previously anonymous, especially in the towns. They demonstrate not only the diversity of emotional cultures that existed at that time, but above all the importance of emotional levers within social relationships (Chapter 9).

THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF EMOTION (THIRD TO FIFTH CENTURIES)

A large part of the Western medieval conception of emotions and of the affective life was established between the third and fifth centuries. This period in the development of Christian thought exerted a considerable influence on culture – and learned culture most of all – throughout the remaining centuries of the Middle Ages. This was in part because this period witnessed the general adoption of the Vulgate, the Latin version of the Bible translated by St Jerome (d. 420), which was read and ruminated on for the next thousand years, but it was also a result of the position of authority enjoyed by the earliest generations of Christian theologians and philosophers. Yet the authors to be discussed here were not understood or read by medieval people as they are understood and read today. Notably, their works were transmitted by multiple paths, both direct and indirect, at times encumbered by erroneous attributions or in incomplete or corrupted states. Over the course of the Western Middle Ages, the thought of the Church Fathers, always invoked as an inviolable authority, was constantly reinterpreted, adapted, even distorted by the contemporary inspirations of the authors who claimed to represent them. This book will follow the evolution of Christian thought on the emotions, which innovated only while hiding behind the prestige of the past. Here it will be shown how the Latin masters who espoused the Christian faith in this formative period developed, both from the Bible and their inherited philosophical culture, a conception of humanity, and especially of the emotions, that was profoundly new.

The theology of emotion

An emotional God

The Bible is rich in emotions of every sort and every intensity.¹ From the most violent to the most subtle, from the most noble to the most vile,

they abound in its historical and prophetic books and saturate those of poetry and wisdom (the Psalms, the Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Sirach). These latter texts were given pride of place in the meditations of medieval intellectuals, especially those in religious orders. The emotions described in the Scriptures are not solely those of humans, but also those of God. The God of the Bible was neither unemotional nor impassive – especially in his often tumultuous relations with his people. The Old Testament overflows with situations where the wrath of God is palpable: ‘Therefore the Lord heard, and was angry; a fire was kindled against Jacob, and wrath came up against Israel’ (Ps 77: 21).² In return, this irascible God could also show mercy and let himself be moved: ‘But he is merciful, and will forgive their sins: and will not destroy them. And many a time did he turn away his anger: and did not kindle all his wrath. And he remembered that they are flesh: a wind that goeth and returneth not’ (Ps 77: 38–9). The image here is of a wrathful God rendered suddenly tender, almost hesitant, by the fragility of his creation.

In the New Testament, divine wrath is likewise present. The advent of God made man in the person of Jesus changed everything, however.³ More than his Father, Jesus overflowed with emotions that he sought neither to hide nor to neutralize, since they were signs of his own humanity. Christ, God made flesh, thus experienced compassion, fear, love, and pity. He felt no jealousy, envy, or hate. Rather his emotions were virtuous, contributing to salvation but also to just wrath. On the Mount of Olives on the eve of his death, Jesus’ anguish and pain were so intense that an angel came to comfort him (Luke 22: 42–3). He wept for the fate of Jerusalem before bringing his full wrath to bear against the merchants of the Temple, whom he ruthlessly expelled (Luke 19: 41). By contrast, the canonical Gospels are less inclined to evoke Christ’s emotions during the Passion, beyond his famous cry of anguish: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15: 34; Matt. 27: 46). How did Jesus experience the outrages and humiliations he suffered? Did he feel shame or indignation when faced with the jibes and spitting of the crowd? Did he suffer in spirit over and above the physical pain that he had to endure during his ordeal? In paradise, did he continue to suffer as a man for the sins of humanity? The authors of the Middle Ages posed all of these questions. They were especially crucial in so far as they determined the very nature of God, and the writers developed specific responses to them. During his corporeal life, Jesus was able to feel all of the virtuous emotions as a man, from the sweetest to the most painful. On the other hand, if the resurrected Jesus continued to feel emotions, these were experienced in a non-carnal – and thus non-human – manner. He could thus no longer shed tears, however great his pain.⁴

The first and foremost commandment of the Gospels is the commandment of love: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind' (Matt. 22: 37); 'This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you' (John 15: 12); 'Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you' (Matt. 5: 44). To love God, to love oneself, to love one's neighbour, to love one's enemies: such is the order of love – both in the sense of injunction and of hierarchy – which ought to preside over the social life of man and his ties to God. When Western Christians received the message of the Gospel, they identified this commandment with a specific form of love: 'charity'. Jerome used *caritas* to translate the Greek *agapè*, a term which described a measured and impartial attachment that engaged every aspect of one's being, including both reason and the will. This love could be distinguished from *amor* – *erôs* in Greek – without necessarily being opposed to it. The latter term implied longing, a drive to possess something, whether spiritual or material, that was often irrepressible.⁵ Described as an encompassing and inclusive embrace, the love found in charity was meant to expand outwards, without excess or passion: it called for the care of one's neighbour as well as oneself. The love described by *amor*, however, was an intense state of feeling which picked its target and plunged towards it, like a hunter's spear towards its prey. It was a hazardous, exclusive, and violent experience. As such, it galvanized mystics, pulling them wholly towards God and creating an inseparable bond, while blinding the greedy, who remained ensnared in worldly desires.

The theologians of these first Christian centuries also used the word *dilectio* to describe the love that emanated from the spirit and the soul. Its meaning was very close to *caritas*, but more personal: the term was related to *electio*, choice.⁶ If the term *caritas* was not unheard of in pagan Latin – Cicero includes it within the family of virtues upon which social life was founded – this *dilectio* was absent. The duty of Christian love proved a fitting substitute for the Roman ethical value of *fides*, i.e. trust in one's word and in the law. 'Trust' configured as 'faith' developed into 'love'. For Paul, this 'commandment of love' – a neat expression of this new alliance – subsumed the Mosaic Law: 'Love [*dilectio*] is the fulfilment of the Law' (Rom. 13: 10). St John completed this emotional revolution. He bound the Law and God himself together to form a conclusion that contained the quintessence of Christianity in the medieval West: 'God is charity: and he that abideth in charity, abideth in God, and God in him.' God was not only endowed with emotions: he was himself the emotional force of love.

God's wrath: a proof of his existence

For the most part, the Latin theologians of these first Christian centuries were educated in the schools of the Empire. From Tertullian (d. c. 220) through to Augustine, all the Latin Fathers – a list that includes Lactantius (d. c. 320), Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), Arnobius (d. early fourth century), and Jerome – had a solid formation in classical culture.⁷ Some, like Lactantius and Augustine, had even been masters of rhetoric and philosophy before devoting their life and their quills to their new faith. Christian theology did not emerge by spontaneous generation: it was deeply anchored in the Scriptures but also nourished by pagan culture, especially the immense Greco-Roman philosophical heritage. This was a great accumulation of thought, beginning with Socratic philosophy and continuing through to the Neo-Platonic thought of Plotinus, the Peripatetic school, and the Stoicism of the late Empire.⁸ For these philosophical schools, however, the mere mention of a God capable of wrath was nonsensical. Wrath was a passion, and as such, a deviation from reason. God, the prime mover, was by nature *apathès*, and thus devoid of all passion. This doctrine of divine *apatheia*, an impassivity which the Latins sometimes called *tranquilitas*, the tranquillity of the soul, was essential. Nevertheless, impassivity, the absence of passions, did not necessarily mean insensibility, the incapacity to feel emotions or an indifference towards them. How rigid these philosophical conceptions were depended on the school. The disciples of Aristotle were less dismissive of such possibilities than the Stoics, for whom God was a being of pure reason: for them, certain palpable emotions, such as measured joy, could be considered compatible with *apatheia*.

Greek theologians, greatly influenced by Stoicism, did not seek to break from philosophical tradition on this point. They professed a belief in divine impassivity, whilst holding that *agapè*, charitable love, was the very expression of the total freedom enjoyed by the Logos. They thus stood for a 'sensitive *apatheia*'.⁹ Yet the question over the wrath of God remained: how could a God without passions display fits of anger? Origen (d. c. 253) disposed of the contradiction quite rapidly by invoking the spiritual sense of the Scriptures. Passages which spoke of the wrath of God were not to be understood literally. Rather, it was necessary 'to understand them in a way worthy of God'.¹⁰ The function of such 'stories' was to reinforce the faith of mankind by promoting a healthy fear of God. Nevertheless, was the paradox actually removed? In a significant break from Eastern perspectives on the matter, the response of Latin Christianity suggested that it was not.

The theologians of the West were less receptive than their Eastern peers to the philosophical theory of divine *apatheia*. Using Latin as a scriptural

language rather than Greek, the ‘maternal’ language of philosophy, they lacked a certain legitimacy within this field: it seems that they sought to resolve this by more clearly distinguishing themselves from the philosophers and increasing the separation. In the fertile culture of these first Christian centuries, there were of course Latin authors who proclaimed the impassivity of God: this was the case with Marcion (d. c. 160), and later with Arnobius. In fact, it was in the context of his dispute with Marcion that Tertullian came to refute this doctrine. For Tertullian, divine wrath was not a disorder, but an expression of the power and justice of God. He thus shifted the debate’s centre of gravity from the territory of philosophical anthropology (whether wrath was a passion or not) towards that of morality (whether wrath was good or bad). The wrath of God was an expression of God’s goodness. Seen from a certain aspect, it was in fact the twin of charity. Charity upheld man in the justice of the Law, while wrath brought him back to it when he strayed: ‘For if God is angry, it stems from no vice in Him. Rather, He is angry for our benefit.’¹¹

This split from philosophical tradition was significant. Moving beyond the apologetic enterprise of legitimizing the divine wrath found in the Bible, a radical critique of the disruptive nature of passion had begun. Against this background, the entire ancient anthropology of the emotions was being reshaped.¹² Lactantius likewise followed suit. More than just a theologian, Lactantius should be read as a Christian philosopher.¹³ He is a perfect example of the Christian acculturation that affected part of the elite educated in the schools of the Empire from the end of the third century. As such, his profile is characteristic of the new learned culture within Latin Christianity. Lactantius was a professor of Latin rhetoric, which he taught to the emperor Diocletian (d. 305) at Nicomedia in Bithynia. It was probably during his stay at the imperial court that he was converted to Christianity and came into contact with the future Emperor Constantine (d. 324), whom he is said to have tutored. Following the great persecutions in the latter part of Diocletian’s reign, he began writing his masterpiece, the *Divine Institutes*. This vast work, divided into seven books, represents the first Latin synthesis of Christian doctrine. In parallel, Lactantius also composed a number of other works: uniquely within the literature of late antiquity, one of these was dedicated to *The Wrath of God*.¹⁴ In this text, Lactantius immediately engaged the philosophers in debate over divine impassivity, a question he saw as vital for the new Christian faith. For beyond the question of wrath itself, the very nature of God was at stake. If the philosophers were correct when they affirmed that anger was always a failure of judgement, then it would follow that the God of the Bible was a weak God. To counter such an accusation, Lactantius reprised Tertullian’s argument: the wrath of God

was not of the same nature as the wicked anger that man was capable of, but rather a product of his omnipotent goodness and justice. It was proof of God's mercy.

But Lactantius went further still when he refuted wholesale the theories of the Epicureans and the Stoics on divine impassivity. The reasoning was simple but powerful. For Epicurus to be correct, it was necessary to conceive of an immovable and indifferent God who existed in a state of perpetual rest. But would such a God – unmoved by the worship of his followers, unable to exercise his providence, and disinclined to perform any other activity – not lack divine character altogether? Meanwhile, to those Stoics who believed in a God who was solely benign and never succumbed to anger, Lactantius asked: how can one love the good without hating the bad? For loving what was good derived from hating what was bad. In order to be provident and show his omnipotence, God had to be moved by these two emotions: 'he is not God if he is not moved (*movetur*)'.¹⁵ As shown by this construction, which consciously identified impassivity with immobility, the debate had shifted significantly. What began as an attempt to legitimize the biblical anomaly of a God who was both good and prone to anger had ultimately resulted in a doctrine which made God's power – and thus his existence – conditional on his emotivity. This original position on divine emotion, which was further developed by Lactantius through philosophical argument, became the standard position of the Catholic Church from the fifth century onwards.

God is love

The argument over divine wrath was only one of the avenues that led to the proclamation of a God who was sensitive to emotion. That debate had primarily been a matter of justifying Christian doctrine, founded on the Scriptures, from an apologetic perspective in the face of a philosophical consensus. From an early stage, however, the ontological value that was assigned to love was more of an intrinsic construction.¹⁶ For Augustine, love shown towards God was much more than simply an expression of a just piety. Rather it gave meaning to man's relationship with himself and with his neighbour, to the entirety of creation, and even to the mystery of the Trinity, in which three persons were bound together by love. Across his sizeable oeuvre, the Bishop of Hippo delivered this message in numerous guises. This analysis will look at just one of these descriptions, drawn from his early writings.

In his treatise *The Happy Life*, written just after his conversion in 386, Augustine took as his point of departure the existential observation made by the pagan philosophers, most notably Cicero: all men want to be happy.¹⁷ From this perspective, man was a being of desire and joy, always