

## God's Passions: Unfitting Attributes? Aquinas on the Biblical God

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IN BOOK 5 OF HIS *ETHICS*, Baruch Spinoza dismisses the passions and emotions (or affects) of God, because they are inconsistent with his perfection.

Proposition 17 : God is without passions, and he is not affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain.

Proof: All ideas, insofar they are related to God, are true, that is they are adequate. Thus, God is without passions. Again, God cannot pass to a state of greater or lesser perfection, and so he is not affected with any emotions of pleasure or pain.

Corollary: Strictly speaking, God does not love or hate anyone for God is not affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain, and consequently, he neither loves nor hates anyone.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, bk. 5, prop. 17, in *Complete Works*, trans. S. Shirley, ed. M. L. Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), 371 (translation slightly adjusted). An earlier version of this article was given to participants of the “Theological Exegesis Conference” held by the Thomistic Institute of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, February 22–23, 2019. This paper articulates some key arguments drawn from my recent book *Les Émotions de Dieu: indices d’engagement* (Paris: Cerf, 2019).

We could spend much time, I suspect, refining the interpretation of this statement within the framework of Spinoza's own system. It might be an attempt to prune the biblical character of God to match the requirements of rational theism or a more radical denial dressed in a soft cloth of some gentle atheism. Radically, adequate ideas entail actions, whereas inadequate ideas entail passions.<sup>2</sup> God has only adequate ideas, which exclude passions as such. Moreover, the passage from passivity to activity provides joy, whereas the passage from activity to passivity entails sadness. A perfect God cannot go through such changes. At first sight, this contention makes sense. If we accept the impassive God, how do we approach the somehow "passionate" God of Scripture? Let me just use Spinoza's statement as an intellectual provocation. We could find similar radical critics in contemporary atheistic literature.<sup>3</sup>

One linguistic precaution has to be taken into account. Passions and emotions are not exactly the same. We may argue for a clear distinction of their descriptions—as Kant did for instance, stating that emotions shake us and are very limited in time whereas passions last much longer and are much more powerful.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the biblical narratives reveal a God who has both passions and emotions. Therefore, I will treat both at once here, while distinguishing between them.

At least two basic reasons should restrain us from dismissing too easily the emotions of the biblical God: first, by himself and through prophets, God spoke a human language to human beings, addressing not only their intellect and will, but also their appetites and emotions; and, secondly, God the Son became man. Consequently, the emotions of the Son may have something unique to reveal regarding God's disposition toward us.

This will be one of my underlying assumptions: human emotions are not just perceptions of bodily changes and animal reactions;<sup>5</sup> they demonstrate and signify specific modes of engaging with others and with the world. Thus, when the biblical God reveals himself as having emotions, we learn something about the unique manner of God's engagement with his beloved creation and creatures.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Spinoza, *Ethics* 3, props. 3–15.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Valerie Tarico, "God's Emotions: Why the Biblical God is Hopelessly Human," in *The End of Christianity*, ed. John W. Loftus (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 155–77.

<sup>4</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, bk. 3, nos. 73–87, especially no. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike reductionist views inspired by William James, "What is an Emotion?," *Mind* 9 (1884): 188–205.

<sup>6</sup> I have unfolded this insight in *Les Émotions de Dieu*.

I suggest beginning with Aquinas's treatment of the problem of God's passions, in *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, which leads to a different outcome from Spinoza's (part 1 of the present essay). I will highlight the linguistic dimension of Aquinas's interpretation of God's improper passions. He uses two different constructions of metaphors, giving way to two very different strategies of interpretation (part 2). I will then suggest this innovative insight of Aquinas can be unpacked thanks to Paul Ricoeur's twofold characterization of metaphor, in rhetoric or in semantic. Regarding God's emotions, the semantic frame should be extended to include narrativity (part 3). I will eventually suggest one possible application of this line of investigation, to be applied to God's sadness. Overall, my approach requires slowing down the process of interpreting God's emotions (part 4).

### **Aquinas on the Limited and Significant Fittingness of God's Passions**

Chapters 89–91 of *SCG* I are a short treatise on God's passions. Aquinas starts by listing sound and compelling arguments which should impede us of attributing any passion to God:

- Passions require senses and are rooted in sensible knowledge;
- Passions entail bodily modifications of many kinds;
- Passions draw people out of their natural and calm dispositions;
- Each passion is directed toward *one* specific object;
- Passions affect beings who are in potency.

For all these reasons, passions as such, according to the generic dimension of the concept, are inconsistent with the nature of God.

Aquinas then moves from the genus of the passions to their species, to investigate further possibilities. The proper meaning of a specific passion is drawn from its proper object and from the mode through which a patient or a subject relates to this object. For instance, an angry man relates to some present disturbing evil by way of confrontation, disapproval, and possibly revenge. The loving woman relates to the object of her love through inner adequacy, attraction, tenderness, delight, or excitement. Nowadays, we call this mode of reference the "intentionality" proper to such or such passion. Abstracting passions from their common genus and considering them according to their specific intentionality opens new possibilities of fittingness.

According to Aquinas, most of the passions, even if we leave aside the genus and consider only their specificity, do not properly suit God. He excludes the following ones:

Sorrow and pain, whose object is some present evil;  
 Hope whose relation to its object is unmastered non-possession;  
 Fear, whose object is a threatening evil;  
 Regret (literally “penance”), a sadness entailing a change of the will;  
 Envy, a sadness built on the perception that the other’s good is an evil  
 for the one who perceives;  
 Anger, an appetite for revenge following a sadness about an injury from  
 others.

Nevertheless, a few passions can be properly attributed to God in respect of their specific mode of relation to their proper objects: joy (*gaudium*), delight (*delectatio*), and love (*amor*). Only these three are properly attributed to God.

Two further developments deserve particular notice here. First, among human beings, each of the passions of joy, delight, and love have a corresponding specific act of the will. In our experience, the two registers (sensible passions and rational will) are so entwined that the same names are used to label both complex passions of the sensible appetite and simple acts of the will when it rejoices in, delights at, or loves someone or something. Thus, when applied to God, these passions signify simple acts of the divine will.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, Aquinas provides a shrewd observation about human love, which is a unitive power:<sup>8</sup> the more extended are the activities shared by the lovers, the more intense is their love; and the more deeply rooted (in nature or in habits) is the source of some love, the stronger is this very love, as in familial bounds.<sup>9</sup>

Let me suggest a possible benefit of this observation. Most of the time, intensity and stability do not get along together in human experiences of love. Intensity is often a property of some passion, whereas the will is usually more determined, reasonable, and stable. As a consequence, once we deal with God’s love in human language, it might be fitting to use both the register of passions and the register of the will, in order to signify the completeness of divine love: it is both intense and stable, because it is entirely actual. We know that God’s love for his Son and for his creatures goes far beyond any passion, but this very love combines some properties,

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 90, no. 3, and *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 22, a. 3, ad 3.

<sup>8</sup> This classical definition of love was drawn from Ps.-Dionysius Areopagite, *On Divine Names* 4, which Aquinas commented on at length early in his career.

<sup>9</sup> See Aquinas, *SCG* I, ch. 91, no. 4.

like intensity and stability, which are somehow divided along passions and acts of the will among human beings. Out of experience, we also know that a human love is more integral, durable, and perfect when it combines both the intensity of passion and the stability of the will. So we might need these two distinct perfections of created love to signify properly the fullness and uniqueness of divine love.

According to this broad theological analysis of the limited fittingness of divine passions, which could be disputed in some of its anthropological assumptions,<sup>10</sup> most of the passions or emotions attributed to God in biblical narratives, such as sorrow, anger, regret, or envy, are not to be understood as properly signified. It does not mean that they are irrelevant, but that their mode of attribution is of a different kind. Improper attributes might be highly valuable and revelatory, as well as proper attributes.

My main interest is now to highlight two different schemes of metaphorical attributions made available by Aquinas to receive and value the price of unfitting passions of the biblical God. One of them is traditional among Aquinas's predecessors. The other one seems to be quite new. Let us consider this intriguing novelty.

### **Aquinas on the Twofold Use of Metaphors, of Which One Is Intriguing**

Regarding biblical affections of God, which cannot be attributed properly to him, because they contradict his perfection—as Spinoza will later assert—Aquinas proposes to interpret them *metaphorice*:

It must be noted . . . that the other affections which in their species are repugnant to divine perfection, are also said of God in Sacred Scripture, not indeed properly, as has been proved, but metaphorically, because of a likeness either in effects or in some preceding affection.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I think of the discontinuous distinctions among passions and the object/patient conception of emotions, compared to contemporary psychology more concerned with continuity of emotional valences, appraisal, and cognitive components of the emotions. See Gerald L. Clore and Andrew Ortony, "Appraisal Theories: How Cognition Shapes Affect into Emotions," in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett, 3rd ed. (New York: Guilford, 2008), 628–42, to be contrasted with Paul Ekman, "Basic Emotions," in *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, ed. Tim Dalgleish and Mick J. Power (Sussex: UK, John Wiley, 1999), 45–60. Elementary emotions are listed by Ekman as follows: amusement, contentment, disgust, embarrassment, excitement, fear, guilt, pride in achievement, relief, sadness/distress, satisfaction, sensory pleasure, and shame.

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas, *SCGI*, ch. 91, no. 15, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 281.

Aquinas's understanding of metaphors is subtle and not perfectly defined.<sup>12</sup> Most of the time, his notion of metaphor is qualified by reference to some similitude, a proportion which is imperfect and limited, yet relevant and true. Regarding God's passions, the metaphorical attribution is said to operate in the following ways.

*Primo*, it operates because of a similitude between God's acts and some effects of the passion mentioned by Scripture to signify such actions.<sup>13</sup> In this way, God's anger might signify some just and wise punishment; God's sadness when confronted by his creatures' misery might signify the action of relieving them of such burdens; and God's repentance might signify that he restores or destroys what he had previously done (or announced). The similitude on which the metaphorical attribution is built may apply not only to effects but also to properties. For instance, the audacity and strength of the lion justifies using that image for God in Scripture. This line of explication is often used in Aquinas's writings, as it was among his predecessors.<sup>14</sup>

*Secundo*, metaphorical attribution operates because of a similitude between such or such passion mentioned by Scripture in a specific passage and another passion which is not expressed but precedes the one attributed to God in the text under consideration. Here is Thomas's exposition of this kind of metaphorical attribution:

And I say *in some preceding affection* since love and joy, which are properly in God, are the principles of others affections, love in the manner of a moving principle, joy in the manner of an end. Hence, those likewise who punish in anger rejoice as having gained their end. God, then, is said to be saddened in so far as certain things take place that are contrary to what He loves and approves; just as we experience sadness over things that have taken place against

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<sup>12</sup> See Gilbert Dahan, "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la métaphore: Rhétorique et herméneutique" (1992), in *Lire la Bible au Moyen Âge. Essais d'herméneutique médiévale* (Geneva: Droz, 2009), 249–82. Dahan has revealed that the notion of metaphor has three constitutive elements: *similitudo*, *convenientia*, and *analogia*.

<sup>13</sup> See Aquinas, *SCG* I, ch. 91, no. 16.

<sup>14</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 34, q. 3, a. 1, resp. and ad 2; a. 2, ad 4; d. 45, q. 1, a. 4, resp.; *In II sent.*, d. 13, q. 1, a. 2, resp.; *In III sent.*, d. 32, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 1 and ad 1; *SCG* I, ch. 91, nos. 11–12; *ST* I, q. 13, a. 9, resp.; q. 20, a. 1, ad 2; q. 33, a. 3, resp. [1]; I-II, q. 37, a. 2, resp.; q. 46, a. 5, ad 1. See also Gilbert Dahan, "Les émotions de Dieu dans l'exégèse médiévale," in *Émotions de Dieu: Attributions et appropriations chrétiennes (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)*, ed. Chrystel Bernat and Frédéric Gabriel (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 97–121.

our will. This is apparent in Isaiah (59:15–16): God “saw, and it appeared evil in His eyes, because there is no judgment. And He saw that there is not a man, and he stood astonished, because there is none to oppose Himself [Douai-Rheims].”<sup>15</sup>

In such occurrences, God’s sorrow might be deciphered by taking into account another passion, here the simple passion of love, properly applied to God. Consequently, sorrowfulness becomes a metaphorical expression of God’s disapproval in front of the disfiguration (by sins or other damages) of those he deeply loves. The quotation of Isaiah hints at some astonishment on the part of God when faced with evil, a sorrowful reversal of his prior amazement in front of goodness.

In such a case, sadness is not to be interpreted according to the first configuration of metaphorical attribution mentioned earlier. In theory, sadness could have been interpreted according to some actions or effects we usually do or endure when we are saddened by something or someone: we tend to withdraw from reality or we feel overwhelmed. But God does not do so.

To clarify the second possibility of metaphorical attribution, which may be more fitting and sound than the first one, we may have to introduce the category of narrative. Searching for an antecedent passion that is not identified in the text but nevertheless remains explanatory for an explicit passion entails some element of temporality and, therefore, a subtextual plot. The literary structure is somehow of a narrative kind.

We may also assume that the reference to an antecedent passion might be to one that is improper to God (anger, sorrow, or repentance) or to one that remains proper (love, joy, or delight). But it seems to me that, at some point, we would end up with love and joy, which are radical and final among the passions. In this way, metaphorical attributions would eventually be explained by reference to some proper attribution of simple passions signifying divine acts of will.

From the start, the main concern of Aquinas was to avoid confusion between these two registers, proper and metaphorical, as he thought that certain Jewish scholars were fostering confusion. These are the last words of his short treatise on God’s passion in *SCG*. We have to recall that the theological issue coincided with a heated historical sequence of Christian–

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *SCG* I, ch. 91, no. 17, trans. Anton C. Pegis, 282. On the genealogy of love in Aquinas’s writings, one might see E. Durand, “Au principe de l’amour: *formatio* ou *proportio*? Un déplacement revisité dans l’analyse thomasiennne de la *voluntas*,” *Revue thomiste* 104 (2004): 551–78.

Jewish theological controversies. They led to a form of trial, sadly ended by the burning of copies of the Talmud in Paris, around 1242.<sup>16</sup>

### **Metaphors, Plain or Unending? Rhetoric *versus* Semantic and Narrative**

I would like now to move further in the direction of the narrative use of biblical metaphors related to God. When metaphorical attributions are not just made according to effects or properties, it might be difficult to figure out what proper signification they both deliver and conceal. This problem can be clarified by calling upon contemporary philosophical qualifications of metaphors.

Ricoeur shed light on two typical metaphorical constructions in language.<sup>17</sup> The first one was defined by Aristotle in his *Rhetorics* and *Poetics*.<sup>18</sup> Let us call it a “rhetorical” use. For the sake of convincing or charming, a proper word or expression is replaced by an improper one, having some imaginative power and connection with the term for which it is substituted. Some of these metaphors are so well-known and commonly used that we do not pay any attention to them. “This man is a shark” means that he is so greedy that he will have no scruple swallowing your small familial company. Most of the time, rhetorical metaphors can be immediately translated in our hearing or our reading. There would be no difficulty agreeing with others on the proper word or expression which would restore the proper meaning of the metaphorical terms.

Some metaphors, however, are much more intriguing and difficult to grasp. Let us think of a poem where a metaphor cannot be matched with a unique clear and proper meaning. We have to let it echo in our mind through interactions between the different allusions of the poem—and other more subjective words and emotions of ours. Ricoeur calls this kind of metaphors, out of which no one can claim to hold a definitive and

<sup>16</sup> See: Thomas Aquinas, *SCG* I, ch. 91, no. 18; Gilbert Dahan, “Textes et contextes de l’affaire du Talmud,” in *Le Brûlement du Talmud à Paris, 1242–1244*, ed. Gilbert Dahan (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 7–20; André Tuilier, “La condamnation du Talmud par les maîtres universitaires parisiens, ses causes et ses conséquences politiques et idéologiques,” in Dahan, *Le Brûlement du Talmud à Paris*, 59–78. Albert the Great, Master at the university of Paris at that time, was one of the signatories of the condemnation. Aquinas was his student.

<sup>17</sup> See: Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History* 6 (1974): 95–110; Ricoeur, “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 143–59.

<sup>18</sup> See Aristotle, *Rhetorics* 3.2. 1405a3–1405b19; 3.10.1411a1–b21; *Poetics* 21.1457b6–33. Aristotle explains the notion of metaphor by the one of analogy. For a counter statement, see Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 31–47.



settled meaning, “semantic.” They may retain substitutions, but interpreting them has almost nothing to do with restoration. It is a matter of uncertain echoes. Think of Constantine P. Cavafy’s poem entitled “The City”:

You said: “I’ll go to another country, go to another shore,  
find another city better than this one.  
Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong  
and my heart lies buried as though it were something dead.  
How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?  
Wherever I turn, wherever I happen to look,  
I see the black ruins of my life, here,  
where I’ve spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally.”

You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore.  
This city will always pursue you. You will walk  
the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods,  
will turn gray in these same houses.  
You will always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere:  
there is no ship for you, there is no road.  
As you’ve wasted your life here, in this small corner,  
you’ve destroyed it everywhere else in the world.<sup>19</sup>

What does the “city” signify? We have many open possibilities, which are not random and are yet difficult to spell out. My home city? My inability to settle? My restless quest? My inner self? And so on. If we move from a poem to a narrative, some kind of plot or story becomes the frame for interpreting specific metaphors.

### Slowing Down in Interpreting God’s Emotions

In the *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine states that an obscure sentence of Scripture should, at the end of the day, mean something which is stated plainly elsewhere in Scripture. In the first question of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas, following Augustine, applies this rule specifically to metaphorical terms compared to proper language.<sup>20</sup> This equation is true in the large frame of the *analogia fidei* applied to the whole canon. But the cost

<sup>19</sup> Taken from Constantin P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> See Augustine of Hippo, *De doctrina christiana* 2.6.8–9 and 2.6.14; Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 9, ad 2; *Quodlibet VII*, q. 6, ad 3.

of applying this ultimate resource too hastily to singular items could be to lose some pearls of biblical revelation. Explication is always an attempt to enlighten some unknown territories or uncertain enigmas by starting from a clearer ground, but being too impatient in this kind of natural process would be unwise when the nature of God is at stake.

If we deal with biblical narratives involving God's passions or emotions, we come close to the kind of investigation that Aquinas proposed: we may have to search for something which is not immediately at hand in the text and which allows us to interpret such or such unfitting emotions as expressing God's own and true dispositions within the logic of some complex narrative. As sorrow could be interpreted as a kind of disapproval grounded in amazing love, some of God's anger might be interpreted as his inability to accept evil as such, a radical incompatibility between God and sin.

However, I suggest that we should not move too fast in interpreting God's passions. We should pay attention to each occurrence of sorrow or anger, as they may have very different roles in diverse biblical narratives or sequences. Aquinas indicated that we should search for some precedent passion, simple and proper, as being explanatory for the one which is improper and metaphorical. He mentioned two possibilities: love as being the radical passion and joy as being the final one. Therefore, joy may not precede improper passions in the same way that love does. There is room for many different plots, here, I suspect. We may also imagine other configurations. The preceding passion may be an underlying passion, concealed through the echoes and tricks of the words.

For instance, what does God's sadness hint at in Genesis 6? This cannot be known by assuming that we know exactly beforehand what sadness is in its essence, its properties, or its effects. Dealing with God's sadness, we have to slow down in order to hold together what we experience in human sadness and the unusual sequence of divine action (love, amazement, sadness, repentance, and so on) in which this very sadness of God is enshrined as a deep mystery to be approached with awe and wonder.

### **Sketching the Metaphor of Sorrow in Proper Terms**

To capture the proper signification of God's sadness in conceptual terms, I will suggest that God's sorrow is a compassionate love related to the self-disfiguration of his creatures.

If God were not immutable, his sorrow would belong to the same genus as human sadness. The difference would be merely one of degree, not nature. It is his immutability that renders a deep mystery of his sorrow. God's passions provoke our amazement, as they seem to contradict his

immutable nature and magnitude, but this awe and wonder of ours presuppose that we do not dismiss immutability from God.<sup>21</sup>

According to our human experience, sadness is a secondary passion, which presupposes a love invested in something or someone. This occurs in such a way that obstacles, hindrances, losses or injuries become harmful for the one who loves, because they harm or remove the one who is loved. God invests an overflowing love in his creatures through creation and election. His love creates its objects and their proper goodness, as unique and singular as they might be. This divine intentionality of love is the ground for attributing sorrow to God.

Even though God remains inalterable in himself, vulnerability in love is a human perfection derived from God's exceeding perfection. Pure act, God embodies in himself the fullness of what we experience as fragmented positive affective dispositions: sensibility, benevolence, attention, care, vulnerability, and compassion. All these qualities of ours preexist in God as simple, unified and perfect.

Since he is pure act, God is not disfigured in himself by the evils, sins, and sufferings which affect his free creatures. When a human being is betrayed in his/her love, two aspects might be taken into account: the humiliation of the one who is offended and the self-disfiguration of the offender. When we endure such situations, we experience a mixed sorrow: for ourselves and for the other. Most of the time, the personal wound overcomes the concern for the offender. In some cases, human parents are capable of being almost exclusively concerned with their son's self-destruction, leaving aside for a while their own anger, distress, and hurts, for the sake of rescuing their child drawn in addiction, for instance. This kind of experience is imputed to God in Hosea 11, where he overcomes his own anger and offense when confronted by a rebel son, in order to let his compassion and love overflow. In this way, God appears exclusively saddened by the self-disfiguration of his creatures, rather than sad in himself. His sorrow proves to be exceeding love, pure compassion.

Divine love is continually exposed to refusal, denial, betrayal, and irrational hatred that originate in the inner will of his creatures, whom he has

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<sup>21</sup> With others (more qualified in this field than I am), I think that this is the right reading of the amazement of Origen at the *passio caritatis* of the Son and the one of the Father, prior to the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ; see: Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 6.6; Samuel F. Eyzaguirre, "'Passio caritatis' according to Origen in *Ezechielem Homiliae VI* in the light of *DT* 1,31," *Vigiliae Christianae* 60 (2006): 135–47; Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 99–100.

endowed with freedom. The self-destruction is theirs. Nevertheless, God's sorrow is a metaphorical expression of an overflowing compassionate love. It remains proportionate to the amazement of love that God experiences as their Creator. N.V