

# Theology and Cultural Sadomasochism

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Let me outline what I wish to present in this essay. In the late 1960s Paul Gebhard, a pupil of Kinsey of the famous reports on human sexuality fame, redefined sadomasochism. His redefinition opened new doors for exploration and had profound social implications. Prior to Gebhard, with the work on sexuality by Krafft-Ebing, sadomasochism had been catalogued as a pathological condition evident in certain individuals. Freud, in his late essay, 'Civilisation and Its Discontents' and his development of the super-ego and the death-drive, had democratised this pathology, demonstrating that not only are we all sadomasochists (that to be human was to be a sadomasochist), but that all we termed cultural was an expression of this sadomasochism. While Gedhart accepted Freud's thesis, he refined it by arguing that sadomasochism as a cultural phenomenon becomes dominant in the popular imagination in particular social and historical conditions. For example, in societies where aggression is valued and dominance-submission characterises social relations, then forms of sadomasochism define what is normative.

It is following this thesis that I wish to submit the contemporary Western and North American representation of relationships to a critical examination. Adorno frequently described capitalist culture as tied to a sadomasochistic understanding of relation (although he portrayed the relation onesidedly — from the masochist's point of view). Commodity fetishism, the pathological heart of capitalism for Adorno, creates a masochistic mass culture which «corresponds to

the behaviour of the prisoner who loves his cell because he has been left nothing else to love.»<sup>1</sup> We will return to fetishism later, but for now, the question of the characterisation of this erotic exchange, in what has been described by Fredric Jameson as our current late-capitalism, announces itself.<sup>2</sup>

## Signs of the Times

During the latter half of the 1990s a number of books by cultural theorists brought to public attention the significance of examining sadomasochism as a cultural practice. It became a way of describing and analysing the cultural conditions of contemporary North America and Western Europe. As one of these analysts put it, «the sadomasochistic psyche may be becoming the

<sup>1</sup> *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 40. Masochism cannot operate alone. It functions with respect to the sadist's pleasure. Adorno's refusal to examine the sadist's pleasure, and the bond of complicity that weds masochism to sadism, is a consequence of his lack of analysis of forms of power. His concern lies too naively with victimage.

<sup>2</sup> See *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991. For a more substantial economic and historical account of the shift to 'flexible accumulative capitalism' in the mid 1970s see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. For a theological appraisal of the implications of late-capitalism see my *Cities of God*. Routledge, London 2000.

order of the day (somewhat as Christopher Lasch said that the narcissistic psyche was the order of the 1970s)»<sup>3</sup> Lasch had made his name as a socialist-orientated cultural theorist in the 70's by using the Freudian category of narcissism to explore the attitudes and actions of his contemporaries. By the mid 80s the famous cultural guru, Michel Foucault, could openly talk positively about his sadomasochistic preferences: «they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body — through the eroticisation of the body.» In 1994 the *New York Magazine* proclaimed that sadomasochism had become the sexual mode of the '90s. And at various Ann Summer's «parties» around Britain sadomasochism was no longer viewed as bizarre and quirky, but simply something that the curious customer could try out. What is being suggested by this attention is that a certain form of sexual behaviour that sought pleasure in receiving and inflicting pain, a form of sexual behaviour which emerged in the late eighteenth century and continued as a deviant sub-culture, is now shaping and determining certain attitudes towards social relations more generally.

It would seem to me then that Christian theology, called to read the signs of the times, needs to examine the nature of this cultural sadomasochism. It must try and assess what is at stake, what the issues are with respect to this phenomena. It must attempt to appreciate the kind of liberations promise. For it is in the name of liberation that alternative lifestyles and sexual practices have emerged from the twilight. And liberation and freedom to chose have become the secularised modes of understanding salvation or redemption. Two forms of theological enquiry must follow. First, Christianity must examine this phenomenon critically, drawing it into a comparison, and a contrast, with the operations of desire and the characterisations of human relations that govern its own orientation towards transformative practices of hope. Secondly, Christian thinking must allow this phenomenon to inform its own understanding of eros, salvation and redemption, in order to

respond to what it discerns as the presence and activity of God in the world today. Christian theology must do this, I suggest, because this is what the Church is here to do. It is not here to perfect its own teachings or to form a holy enclave. It is here to serve the greater ends of God — to wit: the redemption of the world. Following the Fall, as Augustine saw, the danger is that the world will disintegrate into a place of infinite dissimilarity from God (*in regione dissimilitudinis*). But, in Christ, all things are to be made anew. That is, all things are again to find their place in God. The Church works in the world as the body of Christ not simply to pass on information but to bring about its transfiguration and to make manifest a kingdom already within the world. The dialectical negotiation between the Christian tradition and the production of the contemporary *Zietgeist*, described here as Christian theology's task, would admit that Christianity is not immune from sadomasochistic elements and that, furthermore, not everything about the current appeal of sadomasochism is sinful. So that, on the one hand, Christian theology is not innocent. The Church is composed of those being redeemed: we remain all too human. The late Mediaeval and Baroque fascinations with the crucifixion of Christ, the bishops and priests populating the world of the Marquis de Sade, the search for a corporeal mysticism through flagellation and a holy anorexia would all argue that one of the roots of cultural sadomasochism lies within Christianity itself. In exposing the issues at stake in sadomasochism, then, we might uncover elements of Christian thought and practice that also need transfiguration. While, on the other hand, the attention to the body, to pleasure, to desires for liberating effects, and to the liturgy of trust-cultivating relations in sadomasochistic practices all have to be taken seriously by Christian theologians as important contemporary elements of salvation and redemption which have to be understood.

## Two forms of Sadomasochism

Let me begin then by examining two related forms of sadomasochism in order to arrive at an understanding of its principle concerns. The first is sadomasochism as a certain kind of erotic

<sup>3</sup> Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism and the Culture of the Gothic*. Harvard University Press, Harvard 1997, p. 132.

activity, an economy of desire in which the giving and/or receiving of pain heightens sexual pleasure. The mistress-slave scenarios of Sacher-Masoch's novel of 1870 *Venus in Furs*, the master-slave scenarios of *The Story of O* — illustrate these sexual practices most recently extolled by Anita Phillips in her book *Defence of Masochism*.<sup>4</sup> David Cronenberg's first film *Videodrome* and more infamous film *Crash* are contemporary representations of sadomasochistic activity. But they are also more than this. For sadomasochism invests heavily in the arts of representation; its actions are liturgically defined practices of desire. Timing, role-play, rules, even costumes — the arts of fiction — are all employed in an *ars erotica* that dances with death. The second form then, not unrelated to the first, views sadomasochism more widely as the enjoyment of one's own suffering and its perpetration, one's felt need to experience and inflict pain in and through various symbolic stagings. Films like *Fight Club* and, in fact, most films where to be horrified and held in a painful tension, illustrate this cultural rather than explicitly sexual practice. It is no coincidence that the emergence of sadomasochism from its subcult status is paralleled by the rise of the slasher films that began to proliferate in America around 1975. Consider the mixture of the pain and delight, the *frisson* involved in observing voyeuristically and experiencing sympathetically, the tortured fears of *Halloween* or *Nightmare on Elm Street* or the more intellectually sophisticated versions of the slasher film in *Silence of the Lambs* or, more recently, *American Psycho*. One might suggest, the cultural theorist Slavoi Zizek has done so, that Hitchcock's work is important here for what it made manifest about the post-Second-World-War soul. Of course, the spectacle of violence as entertainment is not a new phenomena. In the *Confessions*, Augustine's describes his friend's powerful attraction to gladiatorial combats — and that would be another illustration of an institutionalised form of sadomasochism. But what I am suggesting is the cultural dominance of a sadomasochistic

aesthetic in contemporary culture. We will return to Augustine later.

Four key elements are evident in both sexual and cultural sadomasochism, and it is these elements that make it difficult to prise one form from the other. In both forms there is the appeal to, even the production of, through the staging of, a certain desire and its satisfaction. And in both forms human relations constituted through inequality are compulsively, even erotically, sought. In both forms, suffering is managed through pleasure. In brief, what is at stake in sadomasochism is love, power, pain and pantomime or their aestheticisation; erotic relations as power relations enjoy their own staged violation and victimage. I will flesh this out, quite literally, in a moment, but for now allow me to be abstract in order to expose the principles which constitute this culture in which serial killers can be viewed as avenging angels (see *The Crow* and *Natural Born Killers*); where voyeuristic fascination at the mind of a psychopath can become a box office success; and where body piercing, branding and tattooing are high on the accessories' agenda. We are taking pleasuring here in becoming, both in our imaginations and the practices of our everyday lives, victims. Not real victims but symbolic victims; victims who displace their victimage — acting it out. We are becoming willing subjects to the stimulation of fear, and the promotion of paranoia by aesthetic means. We are cultivating dark pleasures that reflect profound anxieties about exactly those four key elements: desire, relations, power and symbolism.

### A Cultural Analysis: *Rock D.J.*

So let me focus more sharply the nature of sadomasochistic desire and relations by giving you an analysis of one of its more recent, and to my mind, concentrated forms. In the autumn of 2000 Robbie Williams soared to the top of the British charts with a song entitled 'Rock DJ' and a video that most TV stations in Britain banned from being shown in its entirety. The song-lyrics focus around a person caught between the pain of wanting to go home and the pleasuring of dancing to the music. He is trapped in a cylindrical set like Adorno's prisoner. The pleasure he

<sup>4</sup> Faber and Faber, London 1998.

gains from his situation is autoerotic, for he is separated from the DJ (a female figure in the video) who stands above him in an alcove set into the cylinder. He submits himself continually to the rhythm and the beat in an arousal that cannot come to a climax. The focus of the drama is repeatedly rehearsed in the chorus of the song. «I don't want to rock, DJ/ But you're making me feel so nice/ When's it gonna stop DJ./'Cause its keeping me up all night.» The «up» is a *double entendre*. The verses offer fragmentary glimpses, strobe-lit, of a certain Babylon «back in business» where there is coupling but rejection. There is dancing and sexual pleasuring, on the one hand, isolation and deception on the other. The video stages this erotic activity, in which one man, Williams himself, is surrounded by sixty female models. Again the theme is foreplay — «Baby just tease me» — and no consummation. Williams at the centre of a giant disc dances sporadically while the women skate around and around him. He is attempting to gain the attentions of the DJ in this perpetual circulation of desire. But Williams goes no where. The teleology of his own movements is the painful (this video is not for the squeamish) destruction of his own body in order to get a response from the DJ. First he removes his clothes, continuing the erotic economy, then he begins to remove his skin and, finally, he tears away at his flesh, throwing clumps of muscle at the female skaters who lick and chew upon it. The women, excited but distant, continue to skate around him inciting his libidinal energies. Suffering, distance and *spergmos* create a Dionysian frenzy in which Williams, unlike either Pentheus or the Bacchae turns upon himself. When only the skeleton of the dancer remains the DJ joins him on the giant disc. She still does not touch him and their dancing is not a coupling, but the scene has descended from gothic violence into comic absurdity. The video fades.

Taking our four key elements let me play them through this video. First, let us examine desire. There are various focuses for this desire. There is the predatory desire of the women who eat the dancer's flesh; a sadistic desire sated with cruelty and enjoyed voyeuristically. There is William's desire that goes out and returns to him, endlessly, cyclically, getting increasingly

violent. What response there is from the DJ only comes when the self has been pulled apart and painfully disintegrated. Finally there is our desire, as watchers of the several sides of this event. Frequently the camera cuts to women standing outside the action observing it. Our desire parallels theirs and it is focused on watching for entertainment Williams' masochistic autoeroticism.

Secondly, there is the creation of relations. But relationality is intensified here through the lack of attaining the relation itself. There is a highly pitched tension between several positions maintained in and through the absence of reciprocity. It is the very inability to relate that produces the frenzied degree of desire to relate. In a recent work entitled *The Politics of Friendship*, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has characterised the heart of friendship as such a double-bind:

As if I were calling someone — for example, on the telephone — saying to him or her, in sum: I don't want you to wait for my call and become forever dependent upon it; go out on the town, be free not to answer. And to prove it, the next time I call you, don't answer, or I won't see you again. If you answer my call, it's all over.<sup>5</sup>

This is the kind of relationality evident in Williams' song; it consists only in a tension that both promises and deprives. The tension, the pleasure of the tension, substitutes for relation itself.

In this substitution, the suffering (our third key issue) is simultaneously heightened and transfigured. It is heightened insofar as it intensifies and propels the erotic ecstasy — like the mistress exciting and enticing the slave while not allowing him to touch himself and bring about the satisfaction and relief of his fantasies. But it is transfigured because it is never experienced as such. The video shows this plainly: the activity is framed by the exaggerated symbolism of the turntable, the techno-gothic cylindrical wall around the turntable and the disco lights. Worthy of a Ken Russell film-set the surrealism emphasises the aesthetics of this suffering. The

<sup>5</sup> Tr. George Collin. Verso, London 1997, p. 174.

suffering can be enjoyed only through and because of the aesthetics.

The self-conscious theatricalisation of the suffering is the fourth of the key elements I outlined above. Thomas Weinberg, who has explored the psychology and the sociology of sadomasochism notes, «It is the illusion of violence, rather than violence itself, that is frequently arousing.» He adds, perceptively, «At the core of sadomasochism is not pain but the idea of control.»<sup>6</sup> For all the staging of his self-destruction, the theatre of his own victimage at the hands of a desire he cannot or will not satisfy (at the hands of women who tease him perpetually), Williams remains at the centre. He does not want what he plays at seeking for anyway, because that would mean surrendering his control to the women. His pleasure is in the postponement of pleasure. Their pleasure is in watching the continuing postponement of his whilst inciting that desire further. Desire for both the masochist Williams and the sadistic women is for the perpetuation of desire not its satisfaction. Is it often observed about sadomasochistic practices that it is the masochist not the sadist who has the power; though the staging often seems to reverse that. What we discover here is a profound complicity established in and through the demarcation of boundaries. Both Williams and the women maintain the boundaries and never seek to cross them; the power is made equal through the rules governing the game. Only in this way can the pleasuring be mutual, though received and experienced in different ways.

## Contemporary Construals of Embodiment

The quotation from Derrida enables us to move beyond the world of Robbie Williams, and into the wider cultural situation in which we find ourselves, in which a video like «Rock DJ» is an acceptable form of popular entertainment. For let me emphasise, I am not concerned here with excavating an individual's pathology, but exam-

ining a cultural phenomenon. As Gebhard and Weinberg emphasize this cultural phenomenon is embedded in social relations. What then does this culture sadomasochism say about our attitudes to and understandings of desire, relationships, pain and the aesthetic? Gebhard and Weinberg both suggest that sadomasochistic relations are valued and culturally significant operates where there is social inequality producing the dominance-submission theme and where sexual aggression is valorised. But I want to develop this insight further, and the video of «Rock DJ» allows for this. The focus for all the operations of desire, relation in non-relation, pain and its aestheticisation is the body. Something is being said here about embodiment. What is being said is inseparable from our present obsession with the body. For the body is today the site for the contestation of many forces — it is the object of theory, of social policy, of medicine, of economics, of ecology, of aesthetics. Whether we are reading Foucault, watching our favourite chef prepare a dish, listening to account of body parts kept in jars on hospital shelves or working out at the gym — it is the body that preoccupies us. That is why criminal characters like Hannibal Lector both appals and fascinates us. One person interviewed by a social anthropologist examining the cult of body piercing, branding and tattooing spoke of how «I look forward to the pain because it keeps my mind on the importance of what's happening to my body.»<sup>7</sup> Sadomasochism is part of a new attention to embodiment. And not simply physical embodiment, but social, political even spiritual embodiment. Sadomasochistic relations, for example, are excessive to and transgressive of the ideals of liberal democracy, and the much-boasted autonomy of the liberal subject. To those implicated in their practices, they are forms of liberating *jouissance* — liberations, that is, from the social integration and social contracts of modernity's State and from the politics of identity.<sup>8</sup> There does appear to be a

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>8</sup> See John K. Noyes *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

<sup>6</sup> «Introduction», *Studies in Dominance and Submission*, ed. Thomas S. Weinberg (Prometheus Books, New York 1995), p. 19.

strong connection between the rise of sadomasochistic fantasy and the pursuit of democratic ideals. Sadomasochism combines political conservatism with the anarchy of sybaritic play; totalitarianism (there are mirrors or screens whereby one can watch one's own pleasuring) with camp irony. Hegemony becomes seductive; sovereign power is affirmed with a cabaret grin. I suggest cultural sadomasochism is a by-product of the sovereignty of the self. It is no coincidence therefore that in 1791 when the rights of man were being loudly declared by the French post-revolutionaries of 1791, and Thomas Paine publishing in America his own *Rights of Man*, the Marquis de Sade published *Justine*. We might take this further, by suggesting that though sadomasochism reacts against liberal humanism, it pays attention, like liberal humanism, to victimage. For the language of respect for the human rights of the individual is, in fact, a negative statement about the nature of being human. As Alain Badiou has consistently argued, «Human rights» are rights to non-Evil: rights not to be offended or mistreated with respect to one's life ... one's body ... or one's cultural identity.» But as such human rights rest upon «Evil as that from which the Good is derived, not the other way round.»<sup>9</sup> Human rights are concerned with the violation and suffering of victims; they give victimage a cultural value. We could suggest from this, a way that returns us to Paul Gebhard's thesis, that the culture of human rights ironically is an optimum setting for the valorisation of sadomasochistic relations because of the way it ontologizes the submission-dominance dyad.

What then is the contemporary western and North American body saying, the physical bodies of many of us, the social and political bodies of which we are members? What is the sadomasochistic body announcing? And what has Christian theology, so much itself concerned with incarnation and embodiment, to say with respect to the sadomasochistic body? Let me suggest from the analysis I have been engaged with so far that the sadomasochistic body speaks of a fundamental absence. It is constituted by a

non-relation that it invests with intensity and enjoys autistically. The elaborate staging displaces the absence, becoming another enjoyable substitute for what is fundamentally lacking. What is lacking is reciprocity and in that lack of reciprocal relations the body is forced continually to reaffirm itself in the only way it knows how: intense experiences of pleasure and pain. The body has to announce «Here I am» because the danger of non-relation is that bodies can disappear, quickly, silently, namelessly. Isn't this what Robbie Williams dramatises? In cultural sadomasochism the body turns itself into a consumer object, a desirable property in order to enjoy itself. As a sadist it will not allow others to enjoy it and as a masochist it knows it will only be abused in an intense relation without reciprocity. The sadomasochistic body takes pain and pleasure in what it lacks. The sadomasochistic body fantasizes about being eaten, consumed, but also wants to remain in control, to maintain itself as a focus for the attention of others. When a film like *Silence of the Lambs* takes accolades at the Oscars, it is an indication that slasher movies are fulfilling a wider cultural need, tapping into a more pervasive cultural imaginary which recognises that relations to others have become ob-ligue, paranoiac, voyeuristic. It would seem that, in a culture where digital communication drives so much, there is little communion — and the sadomasochistic body accepts that and finds its pleasures where it can. And it is at this very point that Christian theology has something to say.

## Developing a Different Cultural Imaginary

Now before I sketch how Christian theology has something to contribute to the development of a different, cultural imaginary let me make two points clear. First, theological discourse is not inoculated against the culture and history within which it is embedded. Neither can it provide inoculation against that context. The discourse always arises in a particular cultural context, is contoured by that context and, in some ways reproduces the hopes, agendas and concerns of that context. It is not situated above the world. It

<sup>9</sup> *Ethics An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, tr. Peter Hallward. Verso, London 2001, p. 9.

has no special keys for opening doors to quick panaceas. It plays its own part in what I have called in another essay 'cultural politics'.<sup>10</sup> It is not innocent. It is written by men and women who are as limited and fallen as other men and women in the world. They are certainly no better. The judgements such theology makes it makes in the light of a final judgement yet to come. Its own judgements then are partial and provisional; based in any theologian's interpretation of the revelation of God through Christ handed down and preached by the church. As Augustine said in his *De Civitate Dei* — it is necessary to judge and equally necessary to admit ignorance. The second point I want to make clear, which develops out of the first, is that the resources of the Christian tradition are one thing and the history of the Christian tradition is another. There always has been a distinction and until the world is fully redeemed, and we are fully redeemed, the distinction will remain. I pointed earlier to the ways in which the Christian tradition might be said to have fostered cultural sadomasochism. Certainly in today's obsession with the body, which has produced various forms of cultural exhibitionism, we are witnessing a reaction against years of repressing the body in favour of the mind or the spirit: the privatisation and emasculation of the corporeal, the sexual and the sensual. This is partly the consequence of a Christian heritage and it is here that Christian accounts of salvation and redemption can learn from our contemporary situation. In the first part of his *History of Sexuality* Foucault points out how repression serves to heighten not lessen interest in the object being repressed. The theologian's task today is to weave the resources of the tradition into the contemporary debates; to read the signs of the times, to rethink the tradition in the context of these signs and to speak what hopefully will be a word in season. The reasonable word is one that points the way towards transformative practices of hope and, in the context of cultural sadomasochism, transformative practices of desire, relation and embodiment. Christian theo-

<sup>10</sup> 'Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics' in Laurence Paul Hemming (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy — A Catholic Enquiry*. Aldershot 2000), pp. 97–111.

logy has the resources to do this. I can only sketch those resources here and draw your attention to my book *Cities of God* where I attempt to give a more elaborate theology of sexual embodiment.<sup>11</sup>

Let us return to those four key elements of cultural sadomasochism again: desire, relation, suffering and aesthetics and see what happens when we refigure them in terms of the Christian tradition. I view relation to be at the heart of the Christian world-view. What is relation? Relation as *such*? We have grown accustomed to thinking about relation as between two or more terms, two or more objects, two or more people. We ask who or what is related. The dyadic relation of subject and object reflects the very structure of domination and submission that founds the sadomasochist relation. What the theological voice provides is an account of the world as created and an account of a relation between creation and its uncreated creator. There is then a theological relation prior to any relation between two or more subjects and objects: a theological relation that is itself in relation. For the Christian God is a triune God operating in and through difference, constituting the basis for both difference and sameness.<sup>12</sup> I don't wish to venture too deeply into trinitarian thinking at this time, only

<sup>11</sup> *Cities of God*. Routledge, London 2000. pp. 97–202.

<sup>12</sup> The contemporary attention to the politics of difference, which is implicit in all human rights thinking, will continually reproduce sadomasochistic relations — as Derrida's work on friendship demonstrates. For where what is is defined simply in terms of difference then differences as such are rendered insignificant. There has to be an account of sameness in and through difference (but never beyond it) in order for the particularity of any particular to present itself, and not dissolve into the nihilism of the indifferent. This nihilism of the indifferent would be the ultimate consequence of the Fall into dissimilarity for Augustine. The Trinity, on the other hand, provides a transcendent account of identity-in-difference. That does not mean the Trinity can be wielded as some talisman to ward off contemporary sadomasochistic relations, only that *from a theological point of view* the Christian account of relations begins by thinking through the nature of Trinitarian relations insofar as that is possible *on the basis of the event of Christ*.

to point to the transcendental relational view of God that the tradition bears testimony to. To think through relation *as such*, theologically, is to consider relation as more primordial than I or Thou, I and It, He and She, She and She etc. That is, relation comes before identity, before subject and object, before positioning, before dominations or submissions. In coming before it also orders all other relations. To consider relation as such is to consider being in-relation, the nature of that being that is in-relation and what that in-relation consists of. This relation, never grasped in itself, only in the way its effects all other understandings of relation, provides an account of divine intention and divine desire with respect to the created orders such that the various co-implicated bodies (physical, social, ecclesial, sacramental) gain the weight of mystery. Rather than simply being a site of contesting forces, the body becomes a place for the activity of grace. The operation of grace does not erase contestation, but it does redeem it from working merely negatively in the world. The body is affirmed in its createdness as a gift from God, sustained by God; a singularity that cannot be replaced or substituted for and, but for God's grace, might not have been at all. Theological relation refigures the body, makes it always more than itself by revealing its participation in and responsibility to all other bodies (social, ecclesial, sacramental and ultimately Christic). In that participation lies all the possibilities for reciprocity; that which is the focal lack in cultural sadomasochism.

Theological relation not only refigures the body, transcendently affirming its particularity, and socially affirming its existence in the way it is understood to participate in a number of extended bodies (social, political, ecclesial, sacramental and Christic). Theological relation also refigures desire. Desire is not reduced to libidinal circulations of arousal and satisfaction. The erotic is not merely defined in terms of the sexual. Desire is expanded to encompass the many forms of loving relationality in which the body participates: constituting friendships, collegiality, affections, and a range of empathies, sympathies and familial bondings that take in the animal and created orders as well as the human. Desire is excessive to sexual satisfac-

tions and sexual relations. It participates in a universal erotics of redemption. It is inspired and orientated by God's desire towards the world operating through the Spirit of Christ as it moves through creation calling all things back to God. It is inspired and orientated by the intra-communion of love that is God's triune self.

The desire operating in these multiple forms of social relation is not without its pains and suffering as it is not without its pleasures and satisfactions. But (taking up the third of our key elements of sadomasochism) the pain is not enjoyed as such. It is not an end in itself. Where there is suffering that suffering is rendered meaningful because it is a continuation, a fleshing out and a completing of the suffering of Christ. As St. Paul describes his own suffering as part of the sufferings of Christ.<sup>13</sup> This is complicated and I need to move more slowly here to draw out the nature of the suffering-in-relation that I am describing here.

In several places Gregory of Nyssa will speak of this suffering as the wounding of love (a double genitive). The suffering issues from the experience of the agony of distance that is installed by difference (between the Bride of Christ and the Christ himself) and discerned by love. The agony is the very labouring of love whereby «the soul grows by its constant participation in that which transcends it.»<sup>14</sup> Nyssa takes up a theological motif of circumcision to describe this movement: «Here, too, man is circumcised, and yet he remains whole and entire and suffers no mutilation in his material nature.»<sup>15</sup>

## Suffering Difference

To take this further we need to explore the economy of that loving which incarnates the very

<sup>13</sup> See here my essay 'Incarnation and Suffering' in Graham Ward (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Post-modern Theology*. Blackwell, Oxford 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Nyssa's *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles* in Herbert Musurillo, S. J. (ed.) *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood 1995, p. 190.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 193.



logic of sacrifice as the endless giving (which is also a giving-up, a kenosis) and the endless reception (which is also an opening up towards the other in order to be filled). The suffering and sacrifice which is born of and borne by passion is the very risk and labour of love; a love which is profoundly erotic and, to employ a queer theory term, genderfucking. It is a suffering engendered by and vouchsafing difference; first Trinitarian difference, subsequently, ontological difference between the uncreated Godhead and creation, and finally sexual difference as that which pertains most closely to human embodiment. But here is not the valorisation of difference as such, only difference in relation to the oneness of God. Neither do we have here a suffering and a sacrifice predicated on the universal possibility of victimage.<sup>16</sup> For the suffering and the sacrifice participate in a redemptive process; they are moments in what is finally a doxological movement. Augustine describes time in creation in spatial terms, as *distentio*, and *distentio* bears the connotations of swelling, of a space that is the product of a wounding: a wounding in and of love. The primordial suffering is the suffering of loving and being loved. The incarnation the divine — that is the nature of all things «because in him [*oti en auto*] were created all things in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible» (Colossians 1:16) — is inseparable, then, from a passion, a suffering whereby we bear fruit, grow (1:6) and glorify even as we are glorified.

The Christian economy of suffering and incarnation sketched here is not sadomasochistic for two reasons: First, it does not view difference as rupture and therefore it does not install a (non)foundational violence (the *wholly other*) as the principle for its momentum; a violence which is either projected (sadism) or introjected (masochism). Secondly, the economy of its desire is not locked into love as not-having. Rather love is continually extended beyond itself and, in and through that extension, receives itself back from the other as a non-identical repetition. Love construed as having or not-having is a

commodified product. It is something one possesses or does not possess. It is part of an exchange between object and subject positions. But love in the Christian economy is an action not an object. It cannot be lost or found, absent or present. It constitutes the very space within which all operations in heaven and upon earth takes place. The positions of persons are both constituted and dissolved. The linearity and syntax of Indo-European languages barely allows access to the mystery of Trinitarian persons and processions: where one ends and another begins. The wounds of love are the openings of grace.

As we draw to a close let me emphasise that the job of the theological discourse is to transfigure the cultural imaginary and the cultural symbolic. That is, with respect to the omnipresence of cultural sadomasochism, theological discourse seeks a) to transfigure the way we think about the nature and purpose of relations and b) to inspire transformative practices in those relations. Its task is to create the space for transformative practices of hope in a culture that believes its most credible representations of itself are sadomasochistic. When it looks in the mirror what this culture sees is the beautiful and highly intelligent detective behind which lurks the genius of Hannibal Lector; what it sees is the savage irony of the central character in *American Beauty* whose moment of supreme self-respect is also the moment of his most violent death. The skaters in «Rock DJ», like the voyeurs in the wings and Williams himself go no where. There is frenetic movement, but no direction, no purpose, no order to which this movement proceeds. The theological voice can then possibly stall a certain quietism or maybe paralysis of action and desire. In arguing in this way I am not attempting to persuade atheists and agnostics to become practitioners of a tradition-based faith. Theological thinking cannot be applied like a poultice to the bodies politic; rather the bodies politic have to be understood, lived and acted upon from within the theological tradition. But I am attempting to clarify the social and political implications of a different cosmology and in doing that point up the significance of a Christian theological account of relationality.

<sup>16</sup> René Girard's understanding and elucidation of the mechanisms of sacrifice detail this association between sacrifice and victimage, which is again another aspect of cultural sadomasochism.