

QUAESTIO DISPUTATA  
THE ATONEMENT PARADIGM:  
DOES IT STILL HAVE EXPLANATORY VALUE?

LISA SOWLE CAHILL

*Until the mid-20th century, the reigning Western paradigm of Christian salvation was the Anselmian theory of Christ's death as atoning for sinful humanity by paying a debt to God. Recent liberationist, feminist, and antimilitarist theologies strongly critique personal and structural violence, leading many to reject the atonement paradigm as sacralizing violence. This article argues that soteriologies should remain pluralistic. A model of salvation through sacrificial love, embodied on the cross, can still have transformative moral and political value if linked with a vibrant belief in the Incarnation and Resurrection*

WAS IT NOT NECESSARY that the Christ should suffer these things?" (Lk 24:26). This tormenting question has bedeviled Christians down to the present day. Multiple answers have been given, no one of which is fully satisfying. This is one reason why the key plank of Christian faith, salvation in Jesus Christ, has never been explained definitively by any creed or council. *That* we are saved is clear; *how* we are saved is not. What is particularly elusive is the precise relation between Jesus' suffering death and human salvation received from God.

The first Jewish Christians found explanatory models of Jesus' suffering and death close to hand in their martyrological traditions, in temple sacrifice, and in the liturgy of the Day of Atonement, leading to interpretations of Christ's suffering death as expiation for sin.<sup>1</sup> One of the most

LISA SOWLE CAHILL received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School and is now the J. Donald Monan, S.J., Professor of Theology at Boston College. Specializing in bioethics, ethics of sex and gender, war and peacemaking, and theological and Scriptural ethics, her recent publications include *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, and Change* (Georgetown University, 2005) and *Genetics, Theology, and Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Conversation* (Crossroad, 2005) which she edited. In progress is a monograph on the foundations of Christian theological ethics.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Gerard S. Sloyan, *Why Jesus Died* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 80–100; Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 70–82; Frank J. Matera, "Christ in the Theologies of Paul and John: Diverse Unity of New Testament Theology," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 237–56, at 244; and Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement:*

prolific and imaginative of early theologians of Christ's death, the apostle Paul, created a rich yet hardly coherent matrix of interpretive metaphors, among which atoning sacrifice is prominent. Sinners are saved by Jesus Christ, "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood" (Rom 3:25). "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God" (Rom 5:8-9). Yet atonement by sacrificial death is not the only paradigm put forward by Paul. He also provides legal and economic models of Christ's suffering and death, as, for instance, ransoming or taking the place of a slave, debtor, or captive. Furthermore, not all New Testament models of salvation focus on the death of Christ. Alternative models, found even in Paul, are salvation through the incarnation, which unites humanity to divinity (Phil 2:5-8); or through the entire life of Jesus, which for Paul recapitulates the history gone so wrong in Adam (Rom 5:14-19; 1 Cor 15:45-46).

Several contemporary authors have observed with dismay and even outrage that, despite biblical variety, one specific model of salvation, attributable to the influence of the eleventh-century Benedictine Anselm of Canterbury, has attained hegemony in Western Christian theology and piety. This is the model of Christ's death as a substitutionary sacrifice for human sin, needed to repay a debt to God, whose infinite honor has been offended past the limit of any purely human act of compensation. A "Man-God" is called for, because only a man who is also God can make up for an infinite offense. In the view of modern critics, the paradigm of Jesus' death as atoning sacrifice, especially if seen as penal substitution, seems to compromise God's mercy, to make God demand and even engineer innocent suffering, and to make a suffering death the entire purpose of the incarnation. It sets up violence as divinely sanctioned and encourages human beings to imitate or submit to it. For example, in the pages of this journal, Robert Daly has insisted that the "assumption of the necessity of Christ's suffering resulted in and/or went along with false ideas about God. Such false ideas about God and a consequent false morality are inevitable if the scapegoating death of Jesus is a necessary, divinely planned, transactional sacrificial event that God brings about like a puppet master manipulating human events."<sup>2</sup>

Daly joins a chorus of other voices objecting that the atonement paradigm sanctifies violence (Denny Weaver, Stephen Finlan); worships a di-

---

*The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2005) 31-38.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Daly, S.J., "Images of God and the Imitation of God: Problems with Atonement," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 36-51, at 48-49.

vine sadist (Dorothee Soelle); turns God into an omnipotent child abuser (Rita Nakashima Brock); speaks no word of salvation to African American women and others resisting oppression (Delores Williams); and provides murderous fanatics, fascists, and torturers with validating symbols (Jürgen Moltmann, Mark Taylor).<sup>3</sup> These are concerns with a long and respectable pedigree. Only a generation after Anselm, Abelard complained “how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Anselm himself puts the following in the mouth of his interlocutor in *Cur Deus homo*, a former student named Boso, whom readers have sometimes felt got the better of the argument: “If God could not save sinners except by condemning a just man, where is his omnipotence? If, on the other hand, he was capable of doing so, but did not will it, how shall we defend his wisdom and justice?”<sup>5</sup>

One can hardly disagree with critics who reject the idea that God desires violence, or that imitation of Christ requires masochism or submission to injustice. It is important not to overlook or minimize paradigms of salvation that focus on the incarnation as enabling human “divinization” (as proposed by the Cappadocians and Eastern Christianity); that revolve around Jesus’ inauguration of the reign of God through his entire life, ministry, and teaching (feminist and liberationist theologies and ethics); or

<sup>3</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*; Dorothee Soelle, *Leiden* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1973) 38 and Helga Sorge, *Religion und Frau: Weiblich Spiritualität im Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1985) 43—as cited by Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 175–76; Rita Nakashima Brock, “And a Little Child Shall Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); Jürgen Moltmann, “The Cross as Military Symbol for Sacrifice,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 259–63; Mark Lewis Taylor, “American Torture and the Body of Christ: Making and Remaking Worlds,” in *ibid.* 264–77.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Abelard, “Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans,” in *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *From Its Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation*, ed. William C. Placher (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 150–151, at 150.

<sup>5</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus homo (Why God Became Man)* 1.8, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University, 1998) 275. Hereafter, citations to *Cur Deus homo* will include the book and chapter number followed in parentheses by the parallel page number(s) in *Major Works*.

that see the cross as God's solidarity with innocent victims of malign power (liberation theologies, including new voices from Asia and Africa). I fully support the thesis that Christ was put to death on the cross as the result of the way he lived in unity with God and humanity, not because a suffering death was the major point of the incarnation. That Christ suffer and die was not willed *as such* by God or by Christ himself. Yet I believe an argument can be made that it is nonetheless appropriate to see Christ's death as necessary, and even as a sacrifice for human guilt.

I propose such an argument, proceeding in three steps. First, following Richard Southern, one may recover Anselm from the "Anselmians." Anselm himself focused not on the death of Christ or on divine appeasement but on Jesus' unbreakable relationship with God as restoring the harmony of creation. Second, legitimate moral objections to some uses of sacrifice and atonement notwithstanding, it is important to appreciate the moral *validations* of these concepts that can be found in some theologies of liberation and reconciliation, and in theologies that address the fact of human guilt and that threat of despair. Third, the pluralism of biblical symbolism reflects the real multivocality of human experiences of salvation granted in Christ, experiences that are contextual and perspectival. The variety and even apparent incoherence of the corresponding symbolism can be but little reduced and never resolved through conceptual analysis and systematic theology. Instead, salvation and the cross must be integrated and appropriated through the kinds of Christian practices (liturgy and ethics) within which New Testament metaphors for salvation were generated in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

### ANSELM RECONSIDERED

Anselm maintained that in offending God's honor, human sin upset divine order in the universe. The death of Jesus satisfies divine honor and restores cosmic harmony. It is important to realize that Anselm's theory was a rejoinder to another view that was dominant in the early Middle Ages: *Christus Victor*. In this model, Christ's death resolves a contest between God and the devil over sinful humanity. There are different versions of the contest: in one, God hands Jesus over as a ransom; in another, God tricks the devil using the outwardly human Christ as bait; in yet another, there is a cosmic battle between God and Satan. In all versions, God ultimately gains victory over the devil through the resurrection.<sup>7</sup> Anselm

<sup>6</sup> See Richard N. Longenecker, *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1969); Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement* 14–16.

rightly discerned that the devil could never have legitimate rights before God. His theory is an attempt to explain the biblical symbols of salvation through the cross of Christ in terms of the relationship between God and humanity alone. Humans are responsible to God, not to the devil. Hence Anselm's emphasis is on finding an explanation for the cross as necessary within the terms of this relationship.

Anselm himself did not prioritize the idea that Christ substitutes for humanity in bearing the punishment or penalty for sin, as in the "penal substitution" theory later developed by interpreters of Luther and Calvin. Instead, Anselm focused on the determination of God to restore the harmony of creation disrupted by sin. God's "honor" refers not to individual personal dignity, but, as in feudal society, to an integrated system of relationships, revolving around an authoritative benefactor. According to Richard Southern, "God's honour is the complex of service and worship which the whole Creation, animate and inanimate, in Heaven and earth, owes to the Creator, and which preserves everything in its due place."<sup>8</sup> The incarnation and the suffering and death of Jesus Christ must be understood in terms of God's mercy as undeterred love for creation, and in terms of God's justice as the will and power to make creation right. "*Beauty* is a new word in Anselm's theological vocabulary, that first comes into prominence in the *Cur Deus Homo*. In using it, he refers not to poetic or pictorial beauty, but to the beauty of a perfectly ordered universe."<sup>9</sup> God's mercy and God's justice meet in God's determination to restore to the entire creation the beauty, harmony, and rectitude for which it has been created, and which participates in God's own supreme goodness.<sup>10</sup> In Anselm's words, God's reason for the incarnation is that "the human race, clearly his most precious piece of workmanship, had been completely ruined; it was not fitting that what God had planned for mankind should be utterly nullified, and the plan in question could not be brought into effect unless the human race were set free by its Creator in person."<sup>11</sup>

Boso presses the question whether God cannot save humanity from ruin and restore order simply by merciful forgiveness, particularly since Christ urges continual forgiveness on his followers.<sup>12</sup> It is easy to sympathize with Boso's feeling that "it is a surprising supposition that God takes delight in, or is in need of, the blood of an innocent man."<sup>13</sup> Yet Anselm continues to insist that the ability to give recompense for sin and unload the burden of

<sup>8</sup> Richard W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (New York: Cambridge University, 1990) 226.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 212. Southern cites *Cur Deus homo* 1.15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 214.

<sup>11</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.4 (269); see also 2.4 (317–19).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 1.12 (284–85).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 1.10 (282).

guilt is essential to the eventual happiness of the repentant sinner, to whom he refers as “wretched little man.”<sup>14</sup>

This argument becomes more psychologically and emotionally persuasive in the hands of a modern interpreter, Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann was drafted into the German army at age 17 during World War II. It was only later, in a prisoner of war camp, that he came to realize the atrocities for which he had served. He then grasped that Christ is not only the brother of history’s victims, he is “the one who delivers us from the guilt that weighs us down and robs us of every kind of future.”<sup>15</sup> The compassion of God atones for the guilty. Moltmann came to realize that in order to live with a burden of guilt like Auschwitz, “expiation is needed.” Without forgiveness based on some real possibility of atonement, “the guilty who recognize their guilt cannot live, for they have lost all their self-respect.” In the cross, God is on the side not only of the victims but of the guilty as well. In the person of Jesus Christ, humanity and divinity are united in such a way that evildoers are allowed to make amends. Justice lies within the work of divine compassion, and together with it creates new hope. “Compassion is the love that overcomes its own hurt, love that bears the suffering which guilt has caused, and yet holds fast to the beloved.”<sup>16</sup> It is not necessary to see God as the “cause” of Christ’s suffering, nor Christ as “the meek and helpless victim.” Instead, through the life of Christ that ends on the cross, “God seeks out the lost beings he has created, and enters into their forsakenness, bringing them his fellowship, which can never be lost.”<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the stereotype of “Anselmian” atonement theory, Anselm does not see the cross or suffering as the main point of the incarnation, much less as necessary to mollify an angry, unforgiving, and violent God. In some ways, his approach is more like the recapitulation (“Second Adam”) model of Paul and Irenaeus, for it is Christ’s unbreakably close relation to God throughout his life that rectifies the human situation and leads to his rejection and death. Anselm uses the language of “obedience” to name Jesus’ intimacy with the Father and the concordance of their wills. Christ’s suffering and death “were inflicted on him because he maintained his obedience,” an obedience “consisting in his upholding of righteousness so bravely and pertinaciously that as a result he incurred death.”<sup>18</sup>

From the standpoint of today’s religious and moral sensibilities, Anselm can be faulted for speaking repeatedly of Jesus’ life and death as a “debt” owed by sinners, if not by Jesus himself; and for setting up too great a

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 1.11 (283); 1.24 (309–13, at 312).

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.9 (276, 277).

contrast between the roles or perspectives of the Father and Son, so that Jesus Christ seems to supply something that God demands. This tendency is exacerbated by the language of “obedience,” since to us it can suggest submission to an external authority rather than a unity in love. Moreover, Anselm does not always maintain the focus on obedience rather than on death as the primary axis of salvation, as when he opens with the question, “By what logic or necessity did God become man, and by his death, as we believe and profess, restore life to the world?”<sup>19</sup> These issues notwithstanding, Anselm of Canterbury is no Mel Gibson. He has not prefigured or legitimated *The Passion of the Christ* by writing violence into the heart of the divine, set up God as a Destroyer whose almighty wrath must be appeased, or Jesus as a Superman who withstands an ungodly amount of violence to rise again unscathed. To avoid such problems, it is salutary to keep in mind that the agenda of *Cur Deus homo* is to explain the incarnation, not only the cross. And, as keys to the saving significance of Jesus Christ, it is important to balance soteriologies that focus on the cross and suffering with those highlighting recapitulation, divinization, inauguration of the reign of God, and resurrection.

### MORAL TESTING OF ATONEMENT THEORIES

A fundamental point is that “atonement” does not *of itself* denote punishment or sacrifice. “Atonement” simply means to bring into unity, and in a Christian theological context it refers to the creation of a mutual relationship of love between God and humanity.<sup>20</sup> Insofar as a prior state of alienation is presumed, atonement is also “reconciliation.” As accounting for reconciliation after sin, atonement theory in general is characterized by a positive reading of Christ’s death, if not in its own right, then as an expression or consequence of God’s atoning love. Roger Haight speaks for many when he expresses doubt about atonement theories that make salvation available through the cross, “indirectly make Jesus’ death something good,”<sup>21</sup> and engender a spirituality that is fascinated by suffering.

Yet it remains true that “on a topic as deep as the Christian theology of the cross, there can be no single exhaustive understanding.”<sup>22</sup> The idea and

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 1.1 (265). Yet on the next page, Anselm allows Boso to restate the question, without rebuttal, as follows: “By what necessity or logic did God, almighty as he is, take upon himself the humble standing and weakness of human nature with a view to that nature’s restoration?” (1.1 [266]).

<sup>20</sup> Michael Winter, *The Atonement* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1995) 2. The word has roots in Middle English, signifying to be “at one” or “in harmony” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* [Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1976]).

<sup>21</sup> Roger Haight, *The Future of Christology* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 78.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 76.

imagery of salvation through the sacrificial death of Christ, united with his resurrection as one redeeming event (rather than as separate and sequential), remain central to the New Testament sources of Christian faith. The image of Christ on the cross has a disclosive power regarding our salvation from sin that escapes systematic analysis but that enduringly informs Christian ritual and prayer. The cross is a powerful religious symbol of suffering humanity, even for many who are oppressed by other Christians and who look to Christ as their liberator, a symbol that indeed inspires their resistance. If resistance and liberation are potential moral outcomes of an atonement paradigm that includes cross and sacrifice, what additional aspects or emphases are required to actualize this potential? One answer is resurrection. Yet resurrection is not only neglected by proponents and adversaries of atonement theories, it is also muted in many liturgical re-enactments of Jesus' passion and death.

The South African theologian Takatso Alfred Mofokeng tells us "it is common knowledge in black churches that Good Friday celebrations occupy a position of prominence in the black Christian church calendar while the resurrection event comparatively remains in the shadows." The story of Jesus' passion and death is narrated by "sweating, crying and sometimes even fainting 'witnesses,'" before congregations "packed with young and old people. . . . In fact it is their own painful life story that they are reliving and narrating. Jesus of Nazareth is tortured, abused and humiliated and crucified in them. They are hanging on the cross as innocent victims of white evil forces. Jesus' cry of abandonment is their own daily cry. They experience abandonment by their own God, who they believe is righteous and good."<sup>23</sup>

But God's righteousness and goodness are not lost in the cross, even if eclipsed in immediate pain. Jesus not only voluntarily enters into the human experience of suffering; Jesus brings forth the power of divine love within and through suffering. Divine life is already a part of a process of self-emptying that culminates on the cross, and that is visible in the suffering of Christ. The resurrection is a premise of the cross. As Moltmann observes, "If the resurrection event is an eschatological one, then the risen Christ cannot be what he is only from the time of his resurrection. He must also have this same identity in his suffering and death on the cross, in his proclamation and ministry, in his whole life from the very beginning."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Takatso Alfred Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology* (Kampen, South Africa: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1983) 27–28.

<sup>24</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christianity in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 170. Others who emphasize the essential role of the resurrection in soteriology are Sebastian Moore: *The*

Shawn Copeland corroborates this assessment from the standpoint of African-American slaves and the spirituals they sang. "If the makers of the spirituals gloried in singing of the cross of Jesus, it was not because they were masochistic and enjoyed suffering. . . . The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them."<sup>25</sup> In the cross of the Lord, "the enslaved people celebrated his healing power." The cross not only "testified to their belief that Jesus stood with them in their abject suffering . . . it signified the opaque power of God."<sup>26</sup> In the cross, God accompanies and God transforms. As Katie Geneva Cannon attests on the basis of the experience of black churchwomen who fought slavery and segregation in the United States, resurrection life lends strength to battle existential oppression with faith and hope. "God's sustaining presence is known in the resistance to evil."<sup>27</sup>

As an ethical model, the cross properly inspires resistance, not acquiescence. Jesus' death, precisely as the death of the Son of God, is an example of power assuming vulnerability (Phil 2:6-11); it does not model behavior to be emulated by those who "suffer 'innocently,'" as Mofokeng puts it.<sup>28</sup> The ethical criterion of human behavior is established by the fact that the one who in Jesus' teaching paradigmatically undertakes suffering is not only motivated by love and solidarity, but is one whose action is voluntary and whose personhood is not radically endangered by suffering. The power of God is found in powerlessness and weakness, taken on with compassionate love. This is different from destructive suffering that crushes the poor. In an essay on the potentially harmful implications of a theology of redemptive suffering for abused women and other oppressed groups, Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner reminds us that, since Jesus is a revelation of the love of God, the full meaning of divine love must take into account Jesus' whole life and teachings. She points out that the synoptic Jesus never preaches the sacrificial self-immolation of the socially marginal. In fact, the parable of the Good Samaritan gives a constructive view of the Christian disciple's sacrifice, in which a man of adequate means assists a robbery

---

*Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1977) and *The Fire and the Rose Are One* (New York: Seabury, 1980); and James Alison: *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, "Wading through Many Sorrows," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 120.

<sup>26</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, "To Follow Jesus," *America* 196/7 (February 26, 2007), <http://www.americamagazine.org/printfriendly.cfm?textid=5310> (accessed March 8, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Katie Geneva Cannon, "The Wounds of Jesus: Justification of Goodness in the Face of Manifold Evil," in *A Troubling in My Soul* 229.

<sup>28</sup> Mofokeng, *Crucified among the Crossbearers* 28.

victim without concern about repayment. Significantly, having rescued the wounded man in the road, the Samaritan still is able to *continue on his journey*, making arrangements to return at an appropriate time.<sup>29</sup>

According to Mofokeng, what is necessary for a full black Christology is to make the resurrection operative in the experience of the faithful, so that they are motivated “to seek life in a struggle against forces that deny and destroy life.”<sup>30</sup> Mofokeng’s point is as true of theologies of salvation as it is of the existential experience of suffering black people: while it is clear that Jesus’ sacrificial death is linked to our salvation, it is not at all clear what exactly is redemptive about this death, unless it is seen simultaneously as an act of God’s compassion, and of God’s resurrecting the dead and bestowing new life. Redemption as giving life eschatologically through Christ’s passion must communicate something about a divine love that already is restorative. Mofokeng’s call for a reunification of cross and resurrection discloses what it is about the cross of Jesus Christ, besides his self-sacrifice, that saves us from our own suffering.

Resurrection narrates a personal presence of the divine that is not limited to Christ’s existence after death. Christ’s comprehensive salvific identity mandates a view of atonement in which God’s own creative, nonviolent will and work are already fully alive in Jesus’ self-offering.

Viewing cross and resurrection in light of the atonement paradigm respects the demand of Anselm and Moltmann for a theory of salvation that transforms the guilty as well as the innocent. God in Christ intends a new reality that incorporates both into the “body of Christ.” Through his passion and death on the cross, Jesus Christ does more than put himself “on the side of the victims.” He is a guilty one among the perpetrators. “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Christ even shares the guilt and terror of the damned. Between the crucifixion and resurrection, according to the Apostles Creed, Christ “descends into hell” (see 1 Pet 4:6; 3:18–20).<sup>31</sup> This “descent” indicates his thorough identification with the human condition, especially death. It might also be read to indicate Christ’s sharing of our most hopeless guilt and despair, as well as his saving presence among the lost and corrupt, even among the dead. The human Christ in hell suffers the pains of hell, and the divine Christ dispels its terrors with his light. This would be consonant with Moltmann’s conviction that Christ suffers the worst that human existence

<sup>29</sup> Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, “The Road to Perfection: An Interpretation of Suffering in Hebrews,” *Interpretation* 57 (2003) 280–90, at 286.

<sup>30</sup> Mofokeng, *Crucified among the Crossbearers* 29.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Peter depicts Christ preaching the gospel to the dead, so that even they might live in the Spirit (4:6); and as going to “make proclamation” to spirits “in prison” who had been “disobedient” during “the days of Noah” (3:18–20).

can offer.<sup>32</sup> And Paul's proclamation of redemption is certainly no weaker: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

Nowhere in the New Testament does forgiveness depend on punishment or retribution. "Wrath" is present as a minor note in the New Testament's symphony of salvation. We are justified by Christ's blood and will "be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom 5:9; see Rom 1:18; 1 Thess 1:10; Heb 3:11, 10:31). God's wrath is God's refusal to accept alienation of God's beloved. God's wrath is God's opposition to suffering, not God's determination to cause it.<sup>33</sup> James Dunn suggests that for Paul "wrath" means the destructive consequences of sin (Rom 1:18–22). In Paul's theology of sacrifice, "the primary thought is the destruction of the malignant, poisonous organism of sin," a process to which the term "expiation" might be applied.<sup>34</sup> Atonement as expiation in this sense is necessary for the reconstitution of a community of God's beloved creatures in which all alienation and violence are overcome.

Christ is *truly God* among victims and perpetrators, empowering their actions and renewing their hearts. "The meaning and purpose of Christ's suffering is our liberation from the power of our sin and the burden of our guilt."<sup>35</sup> Hence Paul pleads, "we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). "Justification," Moltmann notes, refers to God's love as it "brings men and women who are closed in on themselves into the open love of God," so that they can be reborn in the Spirit into new community with human beings and the cosmos.<sup>36</sup>

The thesis toward which these affirmations and caveats point is the following: in the *human* being of Jesus Christ, *God* enters fully into the human condition. God's uniting love for all creatures reaches into every dark, lonely, and tormented corner of existence and brings God into every place, not excluding the suffering of the wicked and the damned. In that darkness and with unfathomable self-emptying God becomes "guilty" and dies in Christ, in a radical act of maternal aching and yearning for the child who has been "disappeared" by evil.<sup>37</sup> God invades the despair of her child

<sup>32</sup> Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ* 173.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Schmeichen, *Saving Power: Theories of the Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005) 219–20.

<sup>34</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus as Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice and Redemption* 50.

<sup>35</sup> Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ* 182.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 185.

<sup>37</sup> This is a reference to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires, who courageously joined in demonstration against a repressive government that had abducted their children—"the disappeared." See Regina M. Anavy, "Hope Ends 29-Year March of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: 1,500th Demonstration over

with the consolation of her absolute presence and sustenance. In Jesus Christ, God enters all of the human condition, save sin—and human beings enter completely, if eschatologically, into God. “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:4–5).

While human mothers, in impotent grief, long to take on the suffering and even guilt of their children, so to heal them by their love, the insurmountable vulnerability of mothers lies in the fact that their love will always surpass their power. Traditional discourses of the “aseity,” “impasibility,” and “omnipotence” of God are obstacles to faith and salvation when used to remove God from the human condition or to locate a will to cause suffering scandalously within the divine dispositions. Perhaps this language can be recovered if taken in the context of divine surmounting love: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16). Jesus captures for us the unity of God’s unchanging and reliable love and God’s suffering with wayward, disconsolate children in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–32).

God’s aseity and suffering are pictured as one in the moment in which the father aches to embrace the son in whose approach his love already rejoices: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). It is the security of parental love that has drawn back the erring child, and it is this same unfailing love that continually endears the child to his father’s heart, and makes separation so intolerable for the father.

The force of God’s uniting and healing love endures. Its constancy is unsurpassed. It is always powerful enough to reconcile, is never defeated by grief and sin. It is abiding, faithful, and victorious. “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39). God herself enters unfailingly into the very place and heart of her child. Her child is being raped, is committing rape; is in prison, is torturing the prisoner; is dead on a dark road, is in the electric chair. A beloved child of God demands just vengeance with cold eyes; a beloved child of God weeps inconsolably for her own justly condemned and executed son. The mysterious God loves in tender vulnerability and in sustaining power.

As mothers’ hearts rend with their children’s suffering more readily than

---

Disappeared Children,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, February 26, 2006, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2006/02/26/ING5RHDJ471.DTL> (accessed March 6, 2007); and Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1994).

with their own, so God's unsurpassed love for humans is narrated scripturally as a love both that *is* and that *gives up* the beloved one who dies in compassion for us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (Jn 3:16). The Lord Jesus Christ "gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal 1:4). "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom 8:32). The point here is not that God "wants" the death of Jesus, but that God is with and in our human situation, into and beyond death and hell. "Only a suffering God can help."<sup>38</sup> In the divine-human Christ, God even bestows upon us the resources to satisfy our need to rectify wrongdoing, hold up our faces to God's gaze, and accept the forgiving and restoring love that already surrounds us. Jesus' death is "necessary" insofar as death is the place of our ultimate desolation, where the infinite love of our Mother-Father God comes to meet us and lift us up.

### ATONEMENT, ETHICS, AND POLITICS

Metaphors for atonement are pluralistic, whether in biblical writings, theological traditions, liturgy, or spirituality and private prayer. This pluralism must be maintained in Christian ethics and politics, both because Christian ethics interfaces with theology at many different points, and because Christian practices evolve in many different historical contexts that present varying demands. Even more importantly, the plurality of metaphors for redemption in the Bible and tradition are more than an indicator of the cultural diversity of authors and audiences, and more than accommodation to the limits of human understanding. This plurality, Trevor Hart suggests, "points to the multi-faceted nature of the redemptive activity of God itself," of "the fullness of God's saving activity in Christ and the spirit." We risk losing sight of this full and multifaceted activity of the divine in human life unless we continually refer to a complementary and dialectical array of metaphors and concepts of salvation.<sup>39</sup>

This same insight applies to Christian ethics, understood as reflection on the normative contours of personal and communal life in the light of salvation granted in Jesus Christ. Christian ethics and the standards of moral existence it defines should reflect the multifaceted experience of

<sup>38</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1953) 220.

<sup>39</sup> Trevor Hart, "Redemption and Fall," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (New York: Cambridge University, 1997) 190. See also Matthew M. Boulton, "Cross Purposes," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 34.3 (2006) 101–7. Boulton reviews several recent works on atonement, emphasizing the coexistence of diverse models in the Bible, tradition, and contemporary theology.

God in human life, and should respond to new resources, demands, and challenges.

Certainly the cross has been exceedingly visible in depictions of the Christian moral life in the past half century, owing to disillusionment after World War II with any optimistic assessment of the potential of Christianity to be a catalyst for progressive social change. Christians urged upon themselves the obligation to take a stand against the corruptions of political power, and to accept that suffering and likely defeat would be the price of a cruciform way of life in fidelity to Christ. This approach has seemed particularly to characterize theologies and theological ethics rooted in the cultures of North America and Western Europe, in which the churches have run a high risk of diminishing their capacity to take a critical stand against their own countries' proclivities for fascism, militarism, neocolonialism, materialism, and global economic exploitation. In new theologies and Christologies from around the globe, the cross has engaged Christians in transformative action on behalf of the poor and empowered those suffering domination to resist on their own behalf and to work confidently for social and political changes. On the other hand, cross-oriented atonement theories also can work, as Daly and others have shown, to fuel acceptance of violence or even its embrace in service of idolatrous ends. The idea of salvation through self-sacrifice to a lord or master has always been a mortal danger to abused women and other oppressed groups within the churches. As "Christian" nations become involved in military interventions and economic neocolonialism around the globe, critiques of Christian theologies that seemingly condone violence have gained a higher profile.

I hope that the present discussion will show a way forward on two fronts. First, Christ's death is always seen biblically in relation to incarnation and to resurrection, as present realities with relevance to the experience of Christ and salvation in every age and place. As Christians conform to the way of Christ's cross, they hope and strive for a way of life free from all violence and suffering. On the way, they also experience "divinization" through the incarnation of the Word and exist eschatologically out of resurrection life. This resurrection life signifies that a new manner of existence—not just spiritually but socially and politically—is already available to those who follow Christ in willingness to take on the necessary consequences of absolute commitment to divine love and justice.

Second, the New Testament is replete with corporate images for Christian existence. Christian faith is expressed in practical life and community, especially in the forms of Eucharist, ethics, and politics. Christian community takes up as its own mission the reconciling action of Christ, interceding for the desperate and the sinful, and uniting them to the love of God, even while they "still were sinners" (Rom 5:8). Writing of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee, and of its support by religious lead-

ers and churches, John de Gruchy calls the church to be embedded in the life of the world, and “in solidarity with the world in its sin, its suffering, its struggles and its hopes.”<sup>40</sup> “It is through the mediation of human beings, fallen and fallible, but also seeking to be a community of vicarious love in the world, that reconciliation becomes a reality,” a social and political reality, not only the practice of a community of believers.<sup>41</sup> This insight was borne out for me personally at a conference on Catholic peace-building initiatives held in Burundi in the summer of 2006.<sup>42</sup> Like other peoples in the Great Lakes region of Africa (including Rwanda, Congo, and Uganda), communities in Burundi have experienced ethnic violence in which great numbers on both sides have participated. Yet communal reconciliation and rebuilding are necessary for life to go on. Churches have an essential role to play in confessing sin, avowing repentance, and uniting all in a shared narrative of hope. This role will require a theology of salvation in which the guilty are included along with the innocent, and in which expiation, forgiveness, and restoration are counterparts. As De Gruchy observes, the community can play a role in these processes, both liturgically and through exemplary social action, that goes beyond the ability of any one individual to repent, forgive, or make amends.

The atonement paradigm of salvation, when tied to resurrection and complemented by soteriologies of incarnation and ethics of the reign of God and option for the poor, can inspire communities of vicarious sacrifice for others that can make a difference in the world around us. Far from sabotaging the radical Christian social impetus with symbolic mediations of violence, the atonement paradigm can bridge the distance between sinful humanity’s violent social structures and the transformed life to which Jesus calls us. Atonement enables human persons and societies to grow in conformity to the love and justice of God that engender harmonies among all creatures and their divine source of life.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 94.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

<sup>42</sup> This conference, one of a series, was sponsored by the Catholic Peacebuilding Network of the Kroc Institute, University of Notre Dame, and by Catholic Relief Services. For more information, see <http://cpn.nd.edu> (accessed March 6, 2007). One outcome of the series will be a collection of essays on the theology of peace-building.

<sup>43</sup> My thanks go to my Boston College colleague, Robert Daly, S.J., for reading and advising me on the first draft of this essay, which is, in part, a response to his own work.