IMAGES OF GOD AND THE IMITATION OF GOD: PROBLEMS WITH ATONEMENT

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Overly logical applications of some of Paul's metaphors have led to widely accepted atonement theories that, because they project human legalistic and transactional thinking onto the image of God, have been egregiously contradictory to an authentic trinitarian and incarnational view of sacrifice and atonement. The Eastern emphasis on apophatic theology and theosis coupled with the Western development of and confidence in historical critical analysis suggest ways in which theologians can come to a better understanding of these issues.

B AD THEOLOGY LEADS TO BAD MORALITY. This statement was the title and the thesis of the first version of this article.[1] It was inspired by the pregnant statement of Thomas Aquinas in *Contra gentiles*: "Error circa creaturas redundat in falsam de Deo scientiam [mistakes about creatures lead to mistaken knowledge about God]."[2] Obviously, if this is true, so too is its converse: mistaken knowledge of God leads to errors concerning creatures, or, in the context of the traditional Christian understanding of the imitation of the divine, leads to bad morality. Residues of this thesis will be found throughout the present article, but my focus is now more on

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[1] Delivered at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, July 6–10, 2005, at Schönstatt near Koblenz, Germany. The conference theme was "Mimetic Theory and the Imitation of the Divine." A further development of it under the present title, "Images of God . . ." was presented to the Boston Theological Society on December 8, 2005.

[2] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 2, chap. 3. The title of this chapter reads: "Quod cognitio creaturarum valet ad destructionem errorum qui sunt circa Deum (That knowledge of creatures helps in the refutation of errors made about God)."

a specification of the first part of that thesis agenda, namely, bad theology, and specifically, bad theology of the atonement.

This article also builds on remarks I made at a June 2000 meeting of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, namely that the widespread popular traditional Christian concept of a God who readily condemns many to the ultimate violence, eternity in hell, helps account for the fact that Christians down through the ages have been so ready to accept and inflict violence as a relatively unchallenged part of their practical Christian lives. If God, whose perfection Christians are supposed to imitate—see Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (*teleios*)"—is violent, can we expect Christians to be nonviolent?[3]

Tragically, I am not referring only to Christians in the past. Many contemporary Christians, quite possibly even a majority of them, take violence for granted as an integral part of their specifically Christian worldview. For example, although the great majority of people in the United States profess to be Christian, many of the 50 states practice capital punishment. Throughout the so-called Christian West, support for war, even far beyond what is allowed by the just war theory, is widespread and considered to be quite consistent with Christianity. Indeed, many selectively interpret biblical teaching in such a narrow and radically literal way that they imagine— indeed even long for—the Second Coming of Christ when the select few "will be swept upward in rapture, while Catholics and the rest of the unbelievers are sent the other way."[4] For many, the "wrath of God" is not a metaphor; it is a reality that is not merely to be dreaded by sinners, but a reality that the just hope and pray will descend upon those who are not.

It would be economical to argue against such views with the syllogistic major: "All Christians believe violence is wrong." But that is unfortunately not true. Even to approximate the truth, one must say something like: "All Christians believe that *unnecessary* violence is wrong." That, of course, leaves individuals and groups free to define what is necessary as opposed to unnecessary violence. We are back with the presupposition behind the title of this article: behind all justifications that Christians can offer either for violence or for nonviolence lies, at least implicitly, an image of the divine that is, correspondingly, violent or nonviolent.

In other words, behind the caesaropapism of the post-Constantinian church, behind the Crusades, behind the Inquisition and the witch-burnings, behind all the wars of religion, behind the great World Wars of

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[3] See Robert J. Daly, S.J., "Violence and Institution in Christianity," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 9 (2002) 4–33, at 29–30.

[4] Quoted from Paul Wilkes's review of Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed,* in *America* 192.17 (May 16, 2005) 17. The more than 50 million sales of books in the "Left Behind" series now rival translations of the Bible as America's best-selling books.

the 20th century (waged largely by nominally Christian nations), behind much of the economic, military, and cultural imperialism that characterizes the current *pax Americana,* to say nothing of the warring factions of the Middle East—behind these and countless other massive deviations from good morality, and inseparably connected with these deviations, lie false and mistaken ideas about God.

Serendipitously, while this article was taking shape, I had the privilege of reading in manuscript Mark Heim's recently published *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*.[5] I share with Heim the awareness that much of what Christians have traditionally thought of as Christian sacrifice or as atonement theology is, in fact, inauthentically Christian. In that sense, many Christians do indeed need to be "saved from sacrifice." As this article will point out, "sacrifice" and "atonement," while not synonymous, are actually so closely interrelated that problems with atonement generally also end up being problems with sacrifice and vice versa. This article could easily be called: "Saved from Atonement."

If one were to divide Christians into those who accept violence or take it for granted as an integral part of authentic Christian life, and those who do not, or into those who locate some violence even in God and in their image of God, and those who do not, I, along with Mark Heim and Stephen Finlan (from whom I take the subtitle of this article),[6] clearly identify with those who do not. We are not constructing a straw horse, for there are serious and highly respected theologians on the other side of this issue. Hans Boersma, for example, may be one of them.[7] As Miroslav Volf has put it: "Those who tend instinctively to reject any notion of violence as unworthy of God better take Boersma's arguments seriously."[8] However, Boersma's position is highly nuanced; it may not be fair, as the following quotation suggests, to place him, without qualification, among "those who do":

Underlying much of this study has been the appeal to paradox: all acts of hospitality in history share in the limited and conditional character of creation and require, as such, some degree of violence. I have argued that this violence can be redemptive and does not need to detract from the hospitable character of these acts. I have made the case that God's hospitality on the cross implies such redemptive violence, and that human hospitality requires a certain degree of violence as well. I have also maintained that it is only in the eschatological resurrection of Christ, completed on

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[5] S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

[6] Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2005).

[7] Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004).

[8] From the dust jacket of Boersma's book.

the last day, that this violence comes to an end and God ushers in his unconditional or absolute hospitality. Only the telos of this resurrection is sufficient justification for all good violence, whether divine or human.

If it is true, however, that all human practices of hospitality are in a paradoxical relationship with violence, precisely ultimately to overcome violence, what does this do to our humanity in the eschaton? Will the boundaries of time and space no longer hold at that point? Would that not mean that we cease to be human? And would it not imply that the telos of the resurrection amounts to a negation of the very structures of God's good creation?[9]

Boersma is laudably ecumenical and nonpolemical in his approach. But it also seems to me that his (not uncritical) fidelity to the Reformed tradition is the main reason for his apparent inclusion of violence in the divine redemptive process, just as my fidelity to my moderately progressive Roman Catholic theological tradition may be the main reason for my desire to exclude violence from that process. But if that is so, to what tradition is the Prostestant Heim being faithful? This apparent anomaly suggests that we should try to prescind from where we are coming from and try to argue the issue on its theological merits.

So far, this has been the easy part of this article—supporting with rhetorical affirmation the thesis that bad theology leads to bad morality. The greater challenge is to critically demonstrate that the thesis cannot be easily cancelled out by opposing rhetoric. Some of the traditional Christian understandings—or, perhaps more accurately, misunderstandings—of the atonement provide rich lodes to support my thesis. For central to common understandings of Christianity is that Christians are called to be followers of Christ and imitators of God. Regardless of whether or not one is a follower of Girardian mimetic theory, we can all see that Christian existence is mimetic existence. But who/what is the God Christians are to imitate? If God is seen primarily as a "Sacrifice Demander," and Jesus primarily as a "punishment-bearer,"[10] this seems, with inevitable logic, to lead to a worldview in which violence is taken for granted. The logical implications of some of the classical Christian atonement theories have Christians imitating a violent God whom they perceive as arbitrary, or impotent, or deceitful: arbitrary, because God chooses to inflict violence and does so in ways that seem unfair, or arbitrary, or make no sense to us;

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[9] Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* 257 (from his "Epilogue: The End of Violence: Eschatology and Deification").

[10] Phrases taken from Finlan, *Problems with Atonement* 120. I am dependent on Finlan not so much for the substance, with which I was already largely in agreement, but for much of the content and big-picture overview of Christian atonement theories presented in this article. I will indicate this dependence in appropriate places via parenthetical documentation, e.g., (Finlan 120).

impotent, because God sees the violence but cannot prevent it; deceitful, because God claims to put mercy above justice but does not do so.

Thus, the "problems" with atonement, and especially the consequences of these problems, are serious and real. They coincide extensively with "problems with sacrifice." This particular take on the issue has been receiving increasing attention lately, for example, in Heim's *Saved from Sacrifice.*

Aspects of the traditional Christian atonement theories constantly intertwine and overlap. Similar intertwining and overlapping will inevitably be part of my own exposition. I will, nevertheless, attempt to keep to the following order: (1) the relationship between the Incarnation and atonement theories; (2) the sometimes stunning differences between the implications of the metaphors of atonement and authentic Christian teaching about atonement and salvation; (3) the problem of divine violence; (4) sacrifice and cult; (5) the pervasiveness of the legal and the judicial, especially in the West.

INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT THEORIES

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is a central Christian doctrine. It embodies the hinge event and the essential idea of what is specifically Christian in revelation. Take away the Incarnation and there is, at least for mainline or trinitarian Christianity, no Christianity left. In contrast, the atonement is not central. It is derivative of the Incarnation.[11] Furthermore, since many aspects of atonement theory, specifically as developed in the Western Christian tradition, are flatly incompatible with an authentic Christian understanding of God, it is profoundly mistaken to identify atonement, as commonly understood—see below—as central to Christian doctrine (Finlan 120).

This insistence that the Incarnation, but not the atonement, is a central Christian doctrine can be further supported by the obvious simple thought experiment of asking what we would have if one or the other doctrine were removed. If one takes away the Incarnation in the broad sense, meaning at least the existence of Jesus, one can hardly explain the existence of Christianity in any of its forms. And should one take away the Incarnation in the strict sense—God taking on human form in the person of Jesus Christ—

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[11] "It is incorrect to identify 'Christianity' with atonement, without remainder. Atonement is not an essential doctrine of Christianity but is in fact derivative. The more central doctrine is the Incarnation (see chapter 5) [esp. section 5.1, "The Incarnation Interpreted through Secondary Doctrines"]. The Incarnation need not issue in the mythology of substitutionary atonement. God's participation in human life and God's indwelling of Jesus of Nazareth in particular did not make the Crucifixion inevitable or necessary" (Finlan 104).

one can hardly explain the existence of Christianity in its main trinitarian forms. But if one takes away the atonement, meaning the atonement theories developed in the Christian West, one still has the vibrant Christianity of the East that, although founded on the same biblical and patristic origins as that of the West, based its theology of salvation, fully trinitarian and fully incarnational, much more on theologies of theosis/divinization rather than on Western-type atonement theories.

Stated oversimply and in its most blatant stereotypical form, traditional Western atonement theory includes or is ultimately reducible to: (1) God's honor was damaged by human sin; (2) God demanded a bloody victim—innocent or guilty—to pay for human sin; (3) God was persuaded to alter the divine verdict against humanity when the Son of God offered to endure humanity's punishment; (4) the death of the Son thus functioned as a payoff; salvation was purchased (Finlan 1).

If this, or this kind of, atonement theory is central to our idea of God and of salvation, we are in deep trouble. In effect, this notion turns God into some combination of a great and fearsome judge, or offended lord, or temperamental spirit. It calls into question God's free will, or justice, or sanity (Finlan 97–98). It is incompatible with the central biblical idea of a loving and compassionate God.[12] How, then, could such a notion come to be regarded as Christian? Much of the explanation—not necessarily the blame but at least the beginning of an explanation—can be found in the Pauline corpus.

For Paul, Christ is simultaneously the final scapegoat, the price of redemption, the long-promised Messiah, the reason for God's fostering of Abraham's descendants, and the leader who teaches the children to live by God's Spirit (Finlan 50). When we ask what is achieved for us through this Christ-Messiah, the answer is: justification, reconciliation, adoption. When we ask further about the processes of achieving these, the answers are, respectively, judicial relief (justification), diplomatic repair (reconciliation), and familial positioning (adoption). These processes, almost immediately seen by following generations as transactions (susceptible, as subsequent developments show, to the residual overlay of archaic magical ideas) are expressed in a rich congeries, even wild range, of metaphors. But they all build upon Paul's cultic, commercial, judicial, social, diplomatic, and familial metaphors.

As we proceed, we have to keep reminding ourselves that Paul was not a systematic theologian, at least not in any modern sense of that term. And

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[12] This is a clear instance of the inevitable circularity or "bias" of my own argument. For although I can begin to demonstrate that the authentic biblical image of God is that God is loving and compassionate, the reason why this is the position I would choose to demonstrate goes back to my autobiographical faith position.

we must also try to keep in mind not only the great range of metaphors with which Paul was groping to express something of the mystery of salvation, but also that he was quite possibly the first to try to do so in this way.[13] We must pursue the implications of the way in which he combined, conflated, and rapidly switched between these metaphors. This switching suggests his apparent awareness that no one metaphor or no narrow selection of them is normative. Pursuing this line of analysis makes us sensitive to the extent of the deformation that took place when theologians began to select just some of these metaphors and push them to their "theological" conclusions. For some of these conclusions are at odds not only with each other but also with the central biblical revelation of a loving and merciful God eager to save, rescue, and forgive far beyond what the human mind and imagination often thinks is right and proper—and, significantly, at odds with what Paul himself was groping to express (Finlan 34, 62). One can see this deformation already beginning to take place as early as the Pastoral Epistles and the Deuteropauline Letters where fidelity to right doctrine was increasingly seen as the sign of a true Christian (Finlan 63–66).

Increasingly, an *interpretation* of Jesus' crucifixion, seen more and more as a *transaction,* indeed as a cultic, juridical, and even quasi-magical transaction, became the core message, while the actual teachings of Jesus, which had little, if anything, to do with such an interpretation, "became a secondary body of information" (Finlan 57). It was a devolution, a reduction of atonement theory down to the idea that God deliberately intended Jesus' violent death (Finlan 101, agreeing with Walter Wink). Accompanying this devolution was a change in how one would talk about God the Father. Jesus would talk about God not only as "my Father" but also as *your* Father—as all four Gospels attest.[14] But as time went on, that locution shifted increasingly to talking about God as *Jesus'* Father (Finlan 112). There was also a shift away from how Jesus used to speak and teach— which, in his mouth, seemed to be quite remarkably uncultic—and more toward a way of speaking about Jesus as a cultic sacrificial victim, and about his death as a cultic transaction (Finlan 113–15). In Christian teaching, at first in the common patristic tradition, and then increasingly, espe-

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[13] "I find that Paul uses many metaphors as well as the martyr motif and even uses one metaphor to interpret another. The metaphors interpenetrate, yet they can be discerned as discrete building blocks that are differently combined in different passages. Paul has not invested everything in any one metaphor but he *has* invested everything in the *range* of metaphors, explaining the death of Christ as a saving event that accomplishes cleansing or freedom-purchase or establishment of a family-like community" (Finlan 55).

[14] Finlan refers to this way of speaking as "virtually the identifying mark of the dominical tradition" (Finlan 112).

cially in its Western developments, atonement developed into the primary "vehicle for conveying information about salvation and the Incarnation" (Finlan 120). However, knowledge and information about the Incarnation does not need to be transmitted solely through the atonement doctrine with its narrow focus on violent crucifixion as the central transactional moment. Put positively, the Incarnation, Jesus' human life—that by which we are in fact saved—was not merely a lengthy prologue to the crucifixion (Finlan 123).

METAPHOR AND DOCTRINE

As already pointed out, many of Paul's metaphors have unacceptable "theo-logical" implications. Does God's favor or forgiveness have to be *bought*? Does God's *anger* have to be *assuaged by sacrifice*? Is God a retribution-seeking, restitution-seeking *judge*? Is God a *dishonored lord* whose honor needs to be restored? Atonement theories generally pick and choose among the metaphors, overlook both their range and complexity, and overlook the implications of how Paul would rapidly shift between them. Focusing on some of the implications of these metaphors, atonement theorists would turn them into doctrines. In doing so they would generally neglect Paul's actual teaching of a merciful God. For example, the metaphors sometimes imply a selfless Messiah *over against* a God who must be paid off. The metaphors sometimes imply an implacable Father *over against* a compassionate Son (Finlan 39–62). These were the implications of some of Paul's metaphors, rather than what he directly taught or was groping to communicate in those places where, apparently giving up on attempted "theo-logical" exposition, he would break into song (see especially Rom 11:33–36 and Phil 2:6–11).

Excursus: Trinitarian Theology

The "over-against" implications of the atonement metaphors, when they are turned into doctrine, logically introduce a tension into the Trinity that is at odds with what was (later, of course) achieved in a mature trinitarian theology. Such inner-trinitarian tension fails to appropriate the insight that, in sending the Son, the Father is actually sending himself. Despite the rhetoric, some of which is embedded in Scripture itself (e.g., Rom 8:32: "He who did not withhold ["spare"—*ouk epheisato*] his own Son, but gave him up for all of us"), the Father was not doing something *to* the Son; the Father was giving/offering himself.[15] The seeds of many of the theologically

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[15] See Robert J. Daly, S.J., "Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited: Trinitarian and Liturgical Perspectives," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 24–42, at 28.

unacceptable implications of atonement theory were planted relatively early in the patristic age, before the full maturation of trinitarian theology. Some of these unacceptable implications were already being superseded in the theology of the late fourth-century Cappadocians, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great.

For example, it was not until the post-fourth-century maturation of patristic theology that it became even possible to articulate a trinitarian theology of Christian sacrifice such as the following:

First of all, Christian sacrifice is not some *thing* that we do or give up. It is above all a mutually self-giving and profoundly interpersonal event. It begins not with us but with the self-offering of God the Father in the gift of the Son. It continues in the self-offering "response" of the Son, in his humanity and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the Father and for us. And it continues further, and only then does it begin to become Christian sacrifice, when we, in the power of the same Spirit that was in Jesus, begin to be part of that mutually self-giving, mutually self-communicating Father-Son relationship.

This, in a nutshell, is the whole story. Everything else is just dotting the "i"s and crossing the "t"s. But, of course, it is only in these details, in the concrete experiences of life, that the love of God is revealed and becomes real for us. As we now begin to break open these details, we have two challenges: not just to remain faithful to the theology of the Trinity (that took the early Church centuries to unpack), but, equally important, to remain connected to the flesh and blood of our human lives and experiences.[16]

In other words, Jesus in his teaching seems to have a quite different instinct regarding God and access to God's mercy than does Paul—at least in contrast with the implications of some of Paul's metaphors. A sharply worded paragraph from Finlan highlights this striking contrast:

Can we account for Paul's pessimism by saying that he is sensitive to the ever-present danger of human pride and sin? Is Paul, perhaps more savvy to human deceptiveness than is Jesus, and never speaks of open and free access to God by the pure in heart because most people will dishonestly convince themselves that they are pure? Undoubtedly, Paul is perceptive on this point, but one can hardly say that he is more perceptive than Jesus, who could sniff out any scent of hypocrisy, or that Jesus' Gospel is the result of naivety. We are dealing with two entirely different instincts about God and access to God. Jesus, with fully adult know-how and lack of illusions, is able to say that a sincere and childlike faith opens the portals of heaven. There really *are* some truth-hungering, merciful, and "utterly sincere" people, who "will be filled . . . will receive mercy . . . will see God" (Matt 5:6–8).[17]

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[16] Adapted from my unpublished paper, "Sacrificial Preaching," presented at the August 2005 meeting of the *Societas Liturgica* in Dresden, Germany. I owe the substance of what is expressed herein to Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1998).

[17] Finlan 61. "Utterly sincere" is from Matt 5:8 in J. B. Phillips, *The Gospels Translated into Modern English* (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 8.

However, to do Paul justice, if we take away the metaphors and look only at Paul's direct teaching and exhortation, we do not see that strong tension between "implacable Father and compassionate Son" (Finlan 71). Further, when we attend to all that Paul is attempting to communicate, attend to his teaching and to the implications of his hymns as well as to the implications of *all* of his metaphors and models, we see that he is expressing not merely transactional ideas in metaphors that are cultic, economic, and legal; he is also expressing spiritually transformative ideas. Notably—to jump ahead a millennium—it is especially the latter, the transformative ideas and implications, that Abelard (due perhaps to his heightened literary and imaginative sensitivity?) picks up and develops with his emphasis on moral influence (Finlan 74–75). Anselm, by contrast (more sensitive to at least some aspects of the "theo-logic"?) focused more on the transactional aspects of the cultic, economic, and legal metaphors.

DIVINE VIOLENCE

Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo* (1098) has been called "a master text of divine violence."[18] Even those who disagree with it recognize it as perhaps the single most famous and influential postbiblical text on the atonement. Significantly, by the time atonement doctrine has developed (or devolved) to this point, it is no longer, as many patristic authors had thought, the devil who is the source of violence against humanity, but God the Father (Finlan 72). What is laid out, even taken for granted here and in so many of the traditional atonement theories of the Western Church, is an inner-divine "scenario of divine violence restrained by divine mercy, but a mercy that had to be mediated through violence" (Finlan 75). Hence the angry, punishing God of Calvin, or the always severe Father and always compassionate Son of Luther, or the schooling of devout Catholics to make reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What all this does, whether consciously or subconsciously (and at odds with a mature trinitarian theology as I indicated above) is to locate violence and the negotiation of violence within the divine.

Present in this whole line of development is the belief, going back at least to Augustine, that all humanity faces damnation. Some of the theories developed the idea that, to save humanity from condemnation, "God pre-planned the killing of the Son from the beginning of time" (Finlan 76). Facilitating this development was the fact that, in contrast to much of the East, the idea of apocatastasis (universal salvation) was generally not even discussed in the West. More commonly taken for granted in the West was

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[18] Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2001) 76.

the idea that God freely chose to save only some, and perhaps only the fortunate few, from damnation (ibid.). And if one did not have the good fortune to hear the gospel and be baptized, one had no chance at all. Nor was it only the churches of the Reformation that subsequently emphasized so strongly the absolute depravity, the universal guilt of humankind. Jansenism, primarily a Roman Catholic phenomenon, was just as earnest in this regard. Saving humankind meant the transfer of divine wrath to the Son. "Faced with such monstrous teachings" (Finlan 78), theologians have desperately tried to make sense of it all. But as long as they remained bound within the framework of atonement theories that locate violence within the divine, they could not break out of a pernicious taking-for-granted of violence on all levels of existence, divine and human. Bad theology led to bad—that is, violent—morality.

René Girard, especially in his central major works, challenged the hegemony of this way of thinking, basically by exposing the violent mechanisms of sacrificial scapegoating, and by rejecting these mechanisms and the traditional (destruction-of-the-victim) idea of sacrifice as essential to Christianity. However, the theological appropriation of Girard's insights, that is, developing an authentically Christian (i.e., essentially nonviolent) concept of God and atonement) remains a work in progress. Major contributions in this direction have come from the recently deceased Raymund Schwager, S.J. (d. 2004), especially in his *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation*[19] and *Banished from Eden.*[20] In these works, especially the latter, Schwager not only develops the concept of violence as the primordial sin, that is, seeing original sin as the common human tendency to reach for violent solutions, but also points out the "natural" support for, and indeed the "natural" origin of, this concept in the findings of contemporary biosciences.[21]

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[19] Raymund Schwager, *Jesus im Heilsdrama: Entwurf einer biblischen Erlösungslehre*, Innsbrucker theologische Studien 29 (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1990); ET: *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption*, trans. James G. Williams and Paul Haddon (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

[20] Raymund Schwager, *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*, trans. James G. Williams (London: Gracewing, 2005 = ET of *Erbsünde und Heilsdrama: Im Kontext von Evolution, Gentechnologie und Apokalyptik* (Münster: LIT, 1997). See the account of a panel discussion of this book, "Celebrating Raymund Schwager: At the AAR Meeting in San Antonio, Texas, November 2004" in *The Bulletin of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion* 26 (April 2005) 5–7.

[21] Schwager arrives at this insight not by beginning with a traditional theology of original sin, and then asking how contemporary science relates to that theology. Rather, as far as possible, he begins with science itself. For example, he begins specifically with the finding that organisms at all levels, including the human psychic organism, have "memories." What the human organism has in its bio-psychic

Among the problems still needing adequate theological explanation is that of the residue of magical transactional thinking (see Finlan 98) in Christian atonement doctrine (as well as in some popular understandings of the sacraments). Related to this is, for example, the persistence of seeing the crucifixion as a kind of transaction that, ultimately or implicitly, calls into question the free will, or the justice, or the sanity, or the power of a benevolent God.[22] Similar to this transactional kind of thinking is the theological inconsistency of making the scapegoating of Jesus (an act of violence) a part of God's eternal plan (Finlan 101). Similar also is the readiness to imagine magical power solutions (Hello, Harry Potter!). Is that far from the readiness to believe in miracles? All this seems to connect with the readiness to think of a violent God, or at least of the existence of some violence in God. It contributes both to the widespread human tendency to look for scapegoats (Finlan 116), and to the widespread tendency to take violence for granted in human affairs.

Connected with all this seems to be what can be called the absolutization of suffering. The popularity of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of Christ* is only a more recent example. In the suffering of Christ there is, undeniably, a transcendent sacredness. But there is no unconditioned absoluteness there in the suffering of Christ. For Christ did not *have* to suffer. There is no absolute divine necessity there; but there is—viewed from what I would insist is an authentic Christian point of view—absolute divine necessity in the *love* with which Christ suffered. For ultimately, it is not suffering but love that saves. In other words, as Cynthia Crysdale has observed, suffering and the violence that causes it is a consequence of union with God, not the means to it.[23]

SACRIFICE AND CULT

As Finlan points out early in his book, atonement, although not synonymous with sacrifice, overlaps with it. Problems with atonement generally

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memory, from that critical evolutionary "moment" that we call hominization, is the memory, encoded in our beings, that, when faced with the choice of spiritual self-transcendence, human beings generally chose to react in the (indeed tried-and-true) basically violent and instinctual ways that characterized the existence of their prehuman forebears. Influenced as he is by Girardian mimetic theory, Schwager suggests that this is a good way for us to begin to understand *peccatum originale originatum*—the original sin that continues to exist in us.

[22] It is a common pastoral strategy, when faced with the need to "explain" evil and suffering, to point to the passion of Christ. That, however, does not solve the problem; it merely transposes it.

[23] See Finlan's develoment of this theme on pp. 104–6. He acknowledges his dependence on Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (New York: Continuum, 1999) passim, but esp. 100.

also end up being problems with sacrifice (Finlan 3). In the end, sacrifice, along with atonement, is commonly perceived as an instance of divine violence. Emphasis on the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ can indeed spare Protestants from the problem their Catholic counterparts have in explaining how the Sacrifice of the Mass can be, as defined at the Council of Trent, a "true and proper sacrifice."[24] But the problem still remains, whether located in a once-for-all past, or also in a continuing liturgical celebration, that the sacrifice of Christ ends up being an act of divine violence that God planned from all eternity.

In writing about atonement Paul assumed the existence of, and familiarity with, already existing cultic patterns. He used several cultic metaphors and assumed that salvation came from a cultic act (Finlan 44, 51). But it is what happened after Paul that causes most of the problems I am attempting to deal with in this article. For, as Christian reflection developed, the increasing emphasis on and blending together of ideas of penal substitution and the idea of death-as-payment caused sacrifice to become, for many, the dominant image of atonement. This is obvious in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Subsequent patristic theologians then glued together Paul's atonement metaphors into the notion of a sacrificial and redeeming transaction (Finlan 65–66). This attachment filled the perceived need. For despite the inroads that the spiritualization of sacrifice had already made and was continuing to make in Greek religious philosophy, in late biblical Judaism, and in early Christianity, Christian antiquity was still a time when sacrifice in the traditional history-of-religions sense of that word, that is, an external cultic act involving the destruction of a victim,[25] was generally taken for granted as an essential part of religion. It was still a time when almost everyone assumed that a sacrificial death was required for a mediator or reconciler to appease God with a unique sacrifice (Finlan 70–71). We have to remind ourselves that this necessity for a sacrificial and redeeming transaction was perceived to be a necessity *in God,* or a necessity outside of God to which God was bound. Part of the problem is, of course, the apparent scriptural warrant for this necessity (e.g., Lk 24:26: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer . . . ?"). This 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

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[24] "Verum et proprium sacrificium" (*Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum, et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Henricus Denzinger and Adolfus Schönmetzer [Freiburg im Briesgau: Herder, 1967] no. 1751); see also nos. 1743 and 1753: "sacrificium vere propitiatorium [truly an atonement sacrifice]."

[25] For a detailed exposition of how damaging this destruction-of-a-victim idea of sacrifice can be when applied to Christian sacrifice, see Robert J. Daly, S.J., "Robert Bellarmine and Post-Tridentine Eucharistic Theology," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 239–60.

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.

LEGAL AND JUDICIAL THINKING

From the outset, judicial metaphors were among the metaphors used to explain the atonement. In the post-Pauline developments, the blending of penal substitution ideas with those of death-as-payment resulted in presenting redemption as sacrifice-dominant. Then, the summing up of Paul's atonement metaphors into the notion of a sacrificial and redeeming *transaction*, and the concomitant increasing emphasis on the logic underlying that atonement transaction, made recourse to legal thinking all the more necessary (Finlan 65–66, 98–99). As a result, by the time of Augustine, ransom theory (with its subthemes of rescue, deception, mousetrap, etc.) was being increasingly trumped by legal theory (Finlan 70). Then Gregory the Great, in his blending of legal and sacrificial motifs, and in his stressing of the need for a *proportionate remedy*, locked legal-logical thinking into the core of Western atonement thinking. Characteristic of Western theological thinking, generally, and even to this day, has been the fundamental importance of law, even on the divine level.

The significance of the adjective "Western" in the previous paragraph is central to what I am trying to understand. Here, precisely here, may be the most significant fork in the road where the West went one way, understanding the Christian mystery of salvation after the model of a legal transaction, and the East went another way, understanding the Christian mystery of salvation as *theosis*, divinization.

These characteristically Western developments help explain why Anselm's theory was so powerful and influential. It was a social theory based on the feudal structure of his time. It involved a structural form of vengeance/reparation, all of which had to be governed by "law" (see Finlan 70–71). This emphasis on law was consistent with the fundamental psychology of atonement that I have already mentioned, namely, that it is based on a belief that nothing is free, and on the intuition that ritual establishes order (Finlan 80). "Law and order" may not be synonymous, but they are inseparable.

As Girard has pointed out, Jesus exposes and repudiates the victimization mechanism by which atonement has been thought to work. Nevertheless, the need of human societies for social and other appropriate mechanisms remains as strong as ever. Take away the legal and the juridical, and one takes away human culture as we know it. We cannot prescind from the legal and juridical ways of thinking by which we live. But to project our human and thus inevitably flawed (at least inevitably finite) juridical

thinking—or any kind of human-experience-based thinking—onto God, and then to take the resulting image of God as a model both for understanding God's actions and for us humans to imitate, is simply bad theology; it leads to bad, and sometimes to very bad, morality.

CONCLUSION

So, what can we do? Who, or what, can free us from this vicious circle?[26] Few indeed are the mystically graced who, like Julian of Norwich, can see through the limitations in the theology of an Anselm and begin to speak *with real knowledge* and experiential wisdom about her all-loving, all-merciful God.[27] The rest of us can only humbly—or at least with attempted humility, since humility is hard to maintain when one is indulging in the *Schadenfreude* of pointing out how so much previous theology has been wrong—attend to developments in the tradition that seem to point to a more authentically Christian understanding of atonement. The first two such developments that come to mind derive more from the East than from the West: apophatic theology and *theosis.*

Apophatic theology reminds us that all our projections onto God are just that, faulty human projections, and that developing a theology from the implications of such projections can be devastatingly mistaken.

Theosis reminds us that our salvation does not come about by any transaction that can be adequately explained or imagined in human terms; salvation comes about by beginning to become one with the ineffable God. Good theology can proclaim that this "divinization" is what is actually happening to us, but it is at a loss to explain how divinization comes about. On this point, however, we can at least be grateful for a highly significant ecumenical theological convergence among recent Christian writers. Both the atonement critic Stephen Finlan and the atonement redefiner Hans Boersma have, apparently quite independently of each other, concluded their books by pointing to *theosis*/deification as probably the best possible solution to our Christian "problems with atonement." The final chapter subheading of Finlan's book is "5.2 *The*ôsis"; the final section of Boersma's book is "Epilogue: The End of Violence: Eschatology and Deification."[28]

But then two more thoughts come to mind, and these are gifts that the West can bring to the table. The first is the Western intellectual conviction

[26] Notice the similarity to the aporetic cries of Paul: "What then should we say . . . Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:7, 24).

[27] See Joan M. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 611–45; Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

[28] Finlan 120–24; Boersma 257–61.

that humans are capable of true knowledge and right thinking. We must not, however, exaggerate this capability. It is in fact related to apophasis on the negative side, because it primarily serves to identify and eliminate what is bad theology. On the positive side, we can cautiously hope that our capacity for right thinking can also begin to point us in the right direction.[29] The second gift that the West can bring is its modern development of critical biblical and historical studies. All the faulty theories of atonement that have developed in the Christian tradition have roots in this or that part or aspect of biblical revelation, but not in the whole of it. Modern biblical studies afford access to that whole; they provide an ability, not possible to earlier ages, to contextualize the different parts of that whole. In addition, all of the faulty theories of atonement that have developed subsequent to the Bible can also be contextualized, and thus deabsolutized, by locating them in their historical, intellectual, and cultural situations of origin.

To sum up: (1) I have tried to show what bad theology of the atonement is. (2) I have claimed, but largely left it to the imagination of my readers to conclude, how bad theology of the atonement leads to bad morality. (3) And, I humbly admit, I have left largely undeveloped, at least in this article, what good theology of the atonement might be. Lord have mercy! Christ have mercy! Lord have mercy!

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[29] In an epoch we call "postmodern," it is countercultural to insist on our ability to attain true knowledge of things, to have assurance that some of the "great stories" can be truer than others, or that we have the ability to cull out at least some truth from a variety of "great stories."