

The Slaughter of Jesus Christ and the Culpability of God

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Why did Jesus Christ have to die? The traditional answer given in Western Christianity is that Christ died as a sacrifice to atone for human sin. But why must he die as he did? What is the mechanism of the efficacy of his ghastly death? In answering these questions, Ronald Goetz challenges traditional interpretations of the atonement and hamartiology. The Augustinian doctrines of the fall and original sin, he argues, are historically and theologically untenable and scientifically impossible. Not only must they be rejected, but with them the idea that human beings are solely culpable for all the evils that afflict God's world. For if there never was a time when human beings existed in a state of physical and moral perfection, if a primeval human pair never lived in an environment free from violence and death, then human beings never stood poised before a fateful choice between good and evil which would affect the fortunes of the whole human race. Human beings, therefore, cannot be said to be fully responsible for their own sinfulness. But if this is the case, then Jesus' dying for human sin is only one part of his work. A different diagnosis of the problem that Jesus' work addresses calls for a different understanding of the remedy. The problem, Goetz asserts, "is in creation itself." For God, in advancing his eschatological purpose, willed to create the world and the human beings in it incomplete, corruptible and subject from the very first to violence, decay and death. As a consequence, "the givens of existence make sin primordial, inevitable, and necessary." Thus Goetz insists that the first consideration, indeed, the decisive consideration, in formulating a viable contemporary doctrine of the atonement must be, not human sin, but divine responsibility—a responsibility which God takes fully on Himself in the cross of Jesus Christ. These ideas lead Goetz in the conclusion of his article to formulate a startlingly different doctrine of the atonement. Provocative, challenging, theologically stimulating, "The Slaughter of Jesus Christ" seeks to establish a new framework for a much-needed conversation on the meaning of the Christian doctrine of the atonement in the twenty-first century.

Twentieth-century theology has witnessed what approximates a consensus in its endorsement of what was once considered heresy. Ours is the age of theopaschitism—the suffering of God.¹ It is therefore rather odd that this modern "polar shift" *vis-à-vis* Christian thinking about the nature and sovereignty of God has not produced a corollary atonement theory. One might think that at least among those Christian theologians who speak of the death of the Son of God as the supreme paradigm of God's sovereignty and love, there would be urgent interest in the question: Precisely how does the terrible death of Jesus on the cross, a death that was pursuant to the "definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), serve to advance God's sovereignty and love?

Christians are so accustomed to hearing talk about the death of Jesus as a sign of God's love that they overlook the genuine offensiveness of such a claim. In the heyday

¹ See my article "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy" in *The Christian Century* 103: 13 (April 16, 1986), 385-89.

of neo-orthodoxy it was even fashionable to glory in the scandal of the cross presumably on the assumption that on the matter of the crucifixion a strong offense is the best defense. Such offensiveness might not prove convincing to the unbeliever, but it at least serves to hide from the believing community the indefensibility of some of its own thinking about the atonement.

To be sure, there is no want of books and articles affirming the soteriological power of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* even made the theological best-seller list. However, although frequently rich in suggestive metaphors and vital rhetoric, contemporary theology has provided only the foggiest hint of a theory or even a modestly rational account as to precisely *how* the bloody death of Jesus does anybody any good.

A classic example is Karl Barth's impassioned "forensic" reading of the crucifixion. Passionately affirming Christ's cross as a substitution which evidences God's solidarity with us, Barth finally locates the motive for the crucifixion in the "good pleasure" of God.² Why it would be the good pleasure of the Father to save us through the bloody death of the Son, Barth never explains. The whys and wherefores of the cross lie hidden in the apparently imponderable good will of God. Barth acknowledges that God's judgment is "strange."³ God judges us as hopeless, absolutely guilty sinners, yet astonishingly, rather than punishing *us*, God in Jesus Christ becomes the object of God's own judgment. Although everything seems stacked against such a judgment, inconceivably, God in utter freedom determines in Jesus Christ to be "the Judge judged in our place," and thus to "fulfill the sentence to which man has fallen inescapably victim." God was not required to do this, God was subject to no "inner compulsion," and certainly no human claim could elicit this "strange judgment."⁴

For Barth there is no Anselmic probing into the divine considerations which gave rise to the Son's volunteering to become human and die, or into God's willingness for the Son to die. Barth is content to recite at great length the redemptive benefits of Christ's death. Thus Barth asks: "*Cur Deus Homo?*" And he answers: Jesus Christ by becoming human can thus "fulfill all righteousness," bear "our accusation and condemnation and punishment, in His suffering in our place and for us," and thereby bring about "our reconciliation with God."⁵

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter: *CD*], four vols. in thirteen parts, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-1975), IV/1, 282.

³ *CD*, IV/1, 221.

⁴ *CD*, IV/1, 211, 221, 273.

⁵ *CD*, IV/1, 223.

However, if anyone, unbeliever or believer, were to inquire as to why the all-sovereign God, free to save us or not to save us, should elect to save us by so terrible a method, he or she would read vainly in Barth for an answer. Barth has no *theory* of the atonement. Barth, deservedly described as the most “catholic” theologian of our century for his willingness to engage an extremely broad range of classical theological issues – from the Trinity to angels, from the virgin birth to predestination – does not attempt to think beyond our experience of salvation to a speculative probing of those divine calculations which might have figured in God’s determination to save us through the slaughter of Jesus. Although filled with Anselmic reverberations as well as occasional echoes of the Eastern atonement theories of recapitulation, ransom, *Christus Victor*, and even Abelardian exemplarist motifs, Barth’s theology answers almost everything – except “Why?”

It seems odd that the highly speculative Barth would not eagerly press forward to ask the questions, Why was this strange rejection of the Son by the Father necessary? If it was not necessary, why was it employed? And what is the mechanism of its helpfulness? Compared to questions concerning the inner-nature and self-determination of God, or concerning the mysteries of God’s election, there appears to be nothing qualitatively unique about the atonement which would justify its being privileged, immune to theological pondering.⁶

In like manner, Jürgen Moltmann’s theological enterprise, although centered in a theology of the cross, becomes hazy at the very point at which one would expect clear atonement thinking to be most required. In arguing his “Trinitarian” understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Moltmann uses the cross as a lever by which to uncover theologically both the distinctiveness and the mutuality of the sufferings of the Father and the Son in the very inner life of God. Father and Son suffer together but suffer differently. “The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The

⁶ Barth, of course, was fully aware that our God talk is analogical. He was fully aware that our theology always runs the risk of heresy, indeed, that we may be most egregiously in error precisely when we believe ourselves to be most faithful and correct. Still, on other issues Barth felt no timidity about issuing highly speculative theories concerning the inner life of God. Thus, Barth thinks us capable of knowing that God has, by an act of free will, determined the divine being as a triune being – as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Barth is confident that “God’s being consists in the fact He is the one who loves in freedom” (CD II/1, 322). Moreover, the electing purpose of God which Calvin and the whole predestinarian tradition found hidden in God’s secret, dark decrees, Barth finds to be bathed in light. In God’s eternal purpose it is God Himself who is rejected in His Son. “There is, then, no background, no *decretum absolutum*, no mystery of the divine good-pleasure, in which predestination might just as well be man’s rejection. On the contrary, when we look into the innermost recesses of the divine good-pleasure, predestination is the non-rejection of man. It is so because it is the rejection of the Son of God” (CD II/2, 167).

Father suffers in his love, the grief of the death of the Son.”⁷ Both suffer, but the Father, unlike the Son, does not die.⁸

Curiously, Moltmann has counseled a certain pious agnosticism concerning questions as to precisely what transpired at the personal level between the Father and the Son at the crucifixion.

The uniqueness of what may have taken place between Jesus and his God on Golgotha is therefore something we do well to accept and respect as his secret, while we ourselves hold fast to the paradox that Jesus dies the death of God's Son in God-forsakenness.⁹

If Moltmann is prepared to discuss openly the inner sufferings of the Trinity, are we not entitled to inquire on what basis he can suddenly declare that the tensions arising from the unequal burdens borne by the Father and the Son, tensions which Jesus himself from the cross made a matter of scandalous public record, are to be hushed up by theologians as God's “secret”? Why is Moltmann, who elsewhere dissolves the deepest theological paradoxes in speculative rationales, here content to resort to “paradox”? If the doctrine of the Trinity is not an “exorbitant and impractical speculation about God”

⁷ *The Crucified God* [hereafter: *CG*], trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), 245.

⁸ Moltmann criticizes the orthodox use of the two natures doctrine which allowed it to attribute suffering to Christ's flesh but not to his divinity (*CG*, 227ff). Orthodoxy thereby argued that although the cross of the incarnate Christ truly occurred (*contra* docetism), God remained impassible. Moltmann insists that it was not “necessary to dissolve the personal union of the two natures in Christ in his cry of desolation” (*CG*, 229). Nevertheless, Moltmann sees the need for a certain isolation of the Father from the death of the Son. But rather than using the doctrine of the two natures to accomplish this, Moltmann employs his distinctive variety of trinitarianism. If orthodoxy resorted to a God-flesh dualism in order to protect God from suffering, Moltmann resorts to an even higher-order dualism. He protects the Father from the death of the Son by distinguishing radically between the Father's suffering and the Son's dying. Ironically, Tertullian invented the trinitarian formula in order to save the Father not just from death but from what he thought of as the contamination of suffering. By distinguishing the persons of the Father and the Son, Tertullian could spare God the Father from any contaminating suffering in the suffering of the Son. Although Moltmann—*contra* Tertullian and ironically in alliance with the modalist Praxeas—affirms God's suffering in Christ's suffering, he insulates God from death by arguing that the Father merely suffers empathetically while the Son actually suffers and dies. If there really is a difference in the respective sufferings of the Father and the Son, then the terrible cry of Jesus from the cross would seem to imply more than that the Father suffers with the Son. To the extent that the Father suffers at a distance, and indeed the Son *dies* alone, the Son has been left holding the bag.

⁹ *The Way of Jesus Christ* [hereafter: *WJC*], trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 167.

because it “is nothing other than a shorter version of the passion narrative,”¹⁰ how can Moltmann arbitrarily privilege the intimate personal relations of the Father and the Son at the point of the cross? I will argue that the personal friction between the Father and the Son is one of the very issues that any coherent contemporary thinking about the atonement must confront.

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann asks, “But how can deliverance and liberation for godforsaken man lie in the figure of the godforsaken, crucified Christ?”¹¹ Moltmann does not answer this question. He is content to cite affirmingly several Pauline texts¹² which, typical of the whole New Testament, assert with great suggestive power that God planned the delivering up and slaughter of Jesus Christ, but make absolutely no effort to explain precisely why.¹³

Moltmann later dramatically raised anew the question of the divine motivation lying behind the crucifixion. “Jesus’ death on the cross is ‘the open wound’ of every Christian theology, for consciously or unconsciously every Christian theology is a reply to the ‘Why?’ with which Jesus dies.”¹⁴ As he did in *The Crucified God*, having pointedly focused the question, Moltmann permits the focus of his answer to drift. Why did Christ die? The question-begging answer Moltmann gives is that Christ died so that the “com-passion of God” can be manifested in the suffering of Jesus Christ.¹⁵ Moltmann continues to imagine that by citing Scriptures concerning the saving effect of Christ’s crucifixion, together with his own deeply felt endorsements of those Scriptures, he has addressed theology’s great “open wound” – the question, why was Jesus crucified?¹⁶

¹⁰ CG, 246.

¹¹ CG, 242.

¹² Romans 8:31f.; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13.

¹³ Perhaps Moltmann’s most basic criticism of Barth’s theology lies in his contention that the suffering of God, which Barth clearly affirms, demands a different sense of sovereignty than the austere, authoritarian sovereignty he finds in Barth. That Barth in his radical departures from Calvin integrated his doctrine of divine sovereignty with his theopaschitism more fully than Moltmann finds it convenient to acknowledge need not concern us here. What is of vital concern, however, is that Moltmann seems to assume that a more thoroughgoing assertion of the suffering of God than he finds in Barth will, by itself, provide answers to such questions as: How does the bloody death of Jesus demonstrate God’s love? And how does it benefit us?

¹⁴ WJC, 166.

¹⁵ WJC, 178-181.

¹⁶ WJC, 182. The Pauline passages he cites are Romans 4:25, Romans 14:9, 1 Corinthians 15:25f., 28 and Philippians 2:9, 11. His use of the Romans 4 passage is typical: “Christ ‘was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4.25). The meaning and purpose of his suffering is our liberation from the power of sin and the burden of our guilt. The meaning and purpose of his resurrection from the dead is our free life in the righteousness of God. Forgiveness of sins and new life in the

Paraphrases of Scripture and forceful rhetorical assertions that the Father suffers in the suffering of the Son do not address the perplexing problems that older atonement theories attempted to solve. Indeed, one wonders if Moltmann fully grasps that the claim that God suffers radically shifts the ground on which atonement thinking must be done, and thus demands a painful rethinking of every aspect of the tradition.

Denying the sovereign impassibility of God opens a battery of new problems. Perhaps the most obvious questions: Why is all this divine suffering in solidarity necessary in the first place? Why did God not create a universe in which neither God nor the creature must suffer? Why did God not create a universe in which the human and non-human creation were driven, not by pain, but by unmixed joy?

Moltmann replies very defensively to Dorothee Sölle's charge that "Every attempt to view suffering as caused indirectly or directly by God is in danger of thinking about God sadistically."¹⁷ He lamely claims that such a reading of his own position comes from a misguided identification of his views with those of Wiard Popkes: "What happened here is what Abraham did not need to do to Isaac (cf. Romans 8:32): Christ was quite deliberately abandoned by the Father to the fate of death [I]n the words of the dogma of the early church: the first person of the Trinity casts out and annihilates the second"¹⁸ Given the context of the quotation in *The Crucified God*, Sölle seems justified in thinking that Moltmann had linked himself to Popkes. I certainly thought Moltmann had. Apparently Sölle found this section the worst part of *The Crucified God*. I found Moltmann's implication that he agreed with Popkes to be the best.

What is distressing to me is not just that Moltmann retreats from the ferocity of Popkes' forthright recognition of the terrible thing the cross represents, but that Moltmann trivializes the anguish of the crucifixion by arguing that God didn't really *cause* Christ's suffering. God merely planned it, and after all, Christ volunteered! Thus, Moltmann puts the following rationalization in God's mouth in answer to Jesus' anguished cry:

For a brief moment I forsook you, so that you might become the brother of forsaken human beings, and so that in fellowship with you nothing can separate

righteousness of God: this is the experience of faith. And in this experience Christ is there 'for us.'" Moltmann's dense overpacking of language and his intense insistence on the saving "effect" of Jesus' crucifixion ought not be permitted to obscure the fact that although he claims to answer the "Why?" question, he does not get beyond a listing of the soteriological benefits of Christ's death as Scripture has stated it.

¹⁷ WJC, 175ff.

¹⁸ WJC, 175. Moltmann quotes Popkes in CG, 241.

anyone at all from our love. I did not forsake you eternally, but was beside you in your heart.¹⁹

Such a God is clearly no mere sadist. Indeed, one wonders how Moltmann, based on what he has written to date, would answer the charge that such a God is something of a sadomasochist—one deeply into suffering so that joy might abound.

No atonement theory, no matter how carefully constructed, can ever be free of paradoxes, free of tensions. However, it is one thing to acknowledge the poverty of our understanding of the things of God and quite another to indulge intellectual slipperiness. Many modern theologians give the impression of making constructive proposals when addressing the precise whys and wherefores of Christ's death. In fact, however, much contemporary reflection on the atonement is little more than a patchwork of biblical citations and motifs, undergirded by half-believed fragments of older theories which no one can any longer successfully defend. For example, most theologians today are aware that Anselm's theory is indefensible. Many would also agree that no reworking of the theory in the centuries that followed Anselm provided any decisive improvement in terms of coherence.²⁰ Yet if Anselm's approach is unworkable, what systematic approach to the substitutionary motif of Scripture is left? One common strategy used to retain a substitutionary understanding of the atonement is to affirm the basic thrust of Anselm's theory while piously acknowledging that our understanding is unequal to the mystery. In fact, Anselm's theory is so riddled with difficulties that the only way to speak coherently about the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ is largely to reject the Anselmic tradition and start from scratch. To remind us of how hopeless Anselmic argumentation has become, I will briefly summarize Anselm's foundational theory.

Anselm rejected the then regnant ransom theory. The devil, he argued, is a mere usurper to whom the all-powerful God owes nothing. The idea that the death of Christ was a justly required ransom payment to the devil was abhorrent to Anselm. Instead, for Anselm, the necessity of the crucifixion must be understood in light of God's honor and human sin. Humanity's disobedience brought death into the world and threatened to subvert the divine purpose for the world. Such disobedience and disorder violated

¹⁹ *WJC*, 180.

²⁰ Indeed, later modifications to Anselm's theory seem to make matters worse. For example, Thomas Aquinas insisted *contra* Anselm that the sacrifice of Christ was due to no divine necessity. Although God could have saved us otherwise, God chose this way as the most wise and efficient. This leaves us with the incredible claim that God might have saved us without the cross, yet God found the slaughter of Jesus Christ the best way to go! No better is the Calvinist penal substitution theory and the limited atonement that is consistent with such an idea.

God's sovereign honor. Thus, God's honor as well as the very order of the universe required either that human disobedience be punished or that satisfaction to God be made. If God were to punish humanity fully it would mean its destruction and thus frustrate God's original purpose. The only course consistent with divine honor is that full satisfaction be made. However, humanity cannot make such satisfaction because human beings are born in original sin. Thus, even if at some stage in life humans were to begin to live perfectly, the satisfaction offered would be too little, too late—for God expected of humanity perfect obedience from the beginning. Only God *can* make the required satisfaction, but only humanity *must* make satisfaction. The only way that sufficient merit can be earned by which satisfaction can be made is if God becomes human. Everyone, even the God-man, owes God perfect obedience; however, because the God-man lived a sinless life, he did not deserve to die. In dying, the incarnate Son of God achieved a meritorious deed of infinite supererogation which deserves an inexhaustible reward. This merit Christ in his infinite compassion makes available to human beings in satisfaction for their sins.

Briefly, some of the more obvious difficulties:

1) Does Anselm's feudal concept of the honor of God—that is, the idea that God's honor depends on God letting no offense pass unpunished—square with the biblical witness? In Scripture does the honor of God lie in the creature's unwavering obedience to the inflexible will of God? Or does it lie in the triumph of God's love in and through the creature's freedom?

2) The whole theory seems to founder on the doctrine of the Trinity, the very doctrine that it presupposes. How can the Son, who together with the Father and the Spirit is fully divine (indeed in the West what is predicated of one person is predicated of them all and vice versa), freely forgive us when the Father cannot freely forgive us?

3) Why does not the cross of Jesus Christ exacerbate human guilt? If by merely eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve brought potential ruin upon the human race, what should the slaughter of God's Son bring but annihilation? Anselm's argument that human guilt in the death of God's Son is mitigated by ignorance is circular.²¹ Further, to meet Jesus, and then to deny his divinity, to despise and murder him would seem to be more than an excusable lapse in awareness!

4) Despite Anselm's tortured efforts to argue that the death of Jesus is required by justice, it is difficult to see precisely how in Anselm's own schema the "just" way to deal with the guilty is to slaughter the innocent.

²¹ St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. J.G. Vose, second edition (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962), 263-264.

5) Unlike the New Testament, which conceives of the resurrection of Jesus as the *sine qua non* for any understanding of the cross as salvific, Anselm's theory reduces the resurrection to little more than an epilogue to Jesus' real soteriological work.

6) Finally, Anselm's insistence on the immutability and impassibility of God's imperious sovereignty, which is foundational to his argument, makes it difficult to see how the creature could in any way affect God's honor. Indeed, Anselm acknowledges that God's honor is unassailable.²² Therefore, we are left with the dubious claim that Jesus must die and die hideously, not to satisfy the actual honor of God, but to satisfy what is merely the appearance of God's honor!

Several of these objections were voiced as early as the twelfth century by Abelard. Yet despite these apparent gaping holes in Anselm's theory, it became the virtual orthodoxy of Western Christianity almost from its inception. Its triumph was partly related to the fact that Anselm's vision of divine sovereignty, honor, and power was in line with his era's feudal system. However, it was above all due to his theory's perfect harmony with the reigning theological assumptions of Western orthodoxy. Anselm could take as axiomatic both the immutability and impassibility of God and the Augustinian doctrines of a historical catastrophic fall and original sin. Such assumptions necessitate a soteriology grounded in the helplessness of the human situation and the unwavering imperiousness of God. Any holes in Anselm's logic were concealed by the overriding assumption of a divine sovereignty so absolute that it created its own logic.

The modern mindset creates radical tensions for the claim that God planned the crucifixion. Ironically, sacrifice and substitution seem to contradict many of the very modern attitudes which we Christians have adopted in our attempts to be obedient to the love and call of Jesus. For example, Jesus' command, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matthew 7:1), finds sympathetic resonance in the enlightened social attitudes of many contemporary Christians. Of course, Jesus' words are construed in ways that find support in the hermeneutics of such as the Marxists, or the Freudians, or the feminists, or the behaviorists, etc., who find mitigation for certain human frailties in the evils and injustices of society. Indeed, Christians who have enjoyed a measure of success in a society characterized by injustice often see themselves as particularly culpable for their collaboration with our corrupting society.

Yet how do such "enlightened"—indeed, "Christian"—attitudes square with allegiance to the God of the New Testament? God demands that human creatures forgive one another freely, but God also requires the bloody slaughter of Jesus Christ in

²² Ibid., 208ff.

order to forgive human sin. Why does God—who commands Jesus’ followers not to take vengeance but to forgive freely—not abide by God’s own advice?

Many Christians find such moral schizoprenia too much to endure. Consequently, they relegate New Testament language about Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God to the ash heap of obsolete mythology. However, many other Christians—even those who regard themselves politically and socially progressive—can’t quite jettison the Augustinian-Reformation traditions. They find the modern tendency to reduce sin to bad genes or bad diet or inadequate social conditioning morally simplistic. Calls for free, unatoned-for forgiveness, they find shallow. Yet it seems impossible simply to dismiss the various modern analyses of humanity which require one to take seriously the effects on human conduct of a myriad of environmental and genetic considerations.

The cautiousness of neo-conservatives with respect to atonement theory demonstrates the impact upon the wider church of modern cultural attitudes regarding justice and retribution. It also reflects a contemporary theological situation in which the sense of divine suffering has become nearly universal. The evangelical New Testament scholar, Leon Morris, typifies this general trend.²³ Morris still believes that Anselm was basically right, but he is well aware of the array of criticisms that substitutionary theories of the atonement have attracted. Yet he contents himself with some rather sketchy replies to several of the more telling objections, sanguinely acknowledging that they “may or may not be regarded as successful defences of the theory.”²⁴ Morris insists that even if the theory is flawed it points to the abiding truth that “God saves us in a way that is right.”²⁵ In short, we can assume what the theory seeks to prove even if the theory fails to prove it. Morris does not seem to grasp that in having seriously qualified the rational coherence of the substitutionary theories, he has effectively denied their significance as theories. Ironically, he ends up close to the neo-orthodox predicament. He substitutes a passionate description of the saving effects of Jesus’ hideous death for a theological account of how Jesus saves us by dying hideously.

Why has there been no contemporary readiness to come to terms rationally with the crying scandal of the cross? One vital reason, I suspect, is that to deal with the atonement systematically would require a revolution in the doctrine of sin comparable to the theopaschite revolution—and Christian theology has too much invested in its sin talk to contemplate overturning it. The Anselmic tradition is incomprehensible without the dual assumptions of the imperious, immutable sovereignty of God and some

²³ *The Cross of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

version of the Augustinian doctrine of a historical, catastrophic fall. Mainstream theology has largely abandoned the first assumption. Yet it continues to operate as if the second assumption, the historical fall, remained theologically and historically viable. After clearly acknowledging that the narrative of the fall in Genesis is not literal history, theologians nonetheless speak of the brokenness of the human situation as if it were due exclusively to a primordial flawed decision that human beings made, implying there was an original innocence which *we* corrupted. Even so ruthless a demythologizer as Rudolf Bultmann speaks of redemption as a return to humanity's original innocence. Bultmann asks:

So what point has the divine righteousness, the forgiveness of sins? . . . It means that the original relationship of creation has been restored, that the complex of sin in which I am always involved – the complex of being-flesh, of being-world – is ended, and that the ancient revelation is made visible once again.²⁶

Moltmann, who cites this text, does not chide Bultmann for his quasi fundamentalism. Moltmann is concerned only that Bultmann's understanding of salvation is backward looking.

For Karl Barth the story of the fall is a "saga," that is, an intuitive and imaginative narration grounded in the prophetic tradition of "events" which "are no longer susceptible as such of historical proof."²⁷ Barth insists there never was a "golden age." "The first man," he writes, "was immediately the first sinner."²⁸ Nevertheless, Barth holds that "the groundless and inexplicable eruption of chaos into the good creation of God" was "the work of man, himself supremely the good creature of God."²⁹ Thus, if for Barth there was no golden age, there was at least a golden Sunday morning. But human beings cannot have been the originators of chaos unless at least an instant existed in which there was no chaos. Finally, for Barth, the fall is an historical event even if it can only be described in saga.

Reinhold Niebuhr prefers to speak of the fall as a myth and thus regards it as unhistorical. Yet when it comes to sin talk, he paradoxically argues that while the sin of humanity is inevitable it is not a "natural necessity."³⁰ Sin is therefore finally the responsibility of humanity despite its inevitability. Thus, while denying the historicity

²⁶ Cited in Moltmann, *WJC*, 188.

²⁷ CD IV/1, 508.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ CD IV/1, 421.

³⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 263.

of the fall, he maintains a doctrine of sin that makes sense only if somehow, somewhere, there was a time when human beings might not have sinned. One must suspect that Niebuhr, in his paradoxical understanding of sin, sought to evade the inevitable implication that if there never was a fall, then the condition in which humanity presently finds itself reflects its primordial condition. But if this is true, then our sinful state cannot be solely our doing. God's culpability must somehow be faced and addressed.

Interestingly, Niebuhr attacked Paul Tillich at the point of Tillich's identification of creation and fall.³¹ There is, for Tillich, a "point of coincidence between the end of creation and the beginning of the fall."³² Of course, this has implications for the orthodox insistence on the unambiguous innocence of God in the brokenness of the human situation. Tillich salutes the courage, if not the formulations of the "supralapsarian Calvinists, who asserted that Adam fell by divine decree."³³

Yet even Tillich does not seem to recognize the radical implication which an acknowledgment of the inevitability of human sin must have for the doctrine of the atonement.³⁴

Contemporary liberation theologies, although having a vital sense of social evils, show little interest in the question of the ultimate historical or ontological roots of evil and sin. The liberationist tendency is to be content to name the present source of oppression—males, white males, dead white males, capitalists, oligarchists, etc.—and then to turn back on the oppressor the ultimate responsibility for the sins of the oppressed. The sin of the oppressed essentially consists in their permitting the oppressor to define their being. James Cone goes to the extreme of denying that sin has any universal meaning.³⁵ As sin is a denial of community, every group defines its sin for itself; and each group's critique of sin is valid only for itself. By holding to the historical and ethnic relativity of sin and avoiding a universal analysis with its universal implications, such liberationism can hold open a certain promise of utopia. If there is nothing ontological or primal-historical in our sinful situation, then there are no absolutely limiting conditions which would render evolution into a historical utopia

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich's Theology," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1952), 216-227.

³² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 256.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ As is evident in Tillich's rather conservative reflections in *Systematic Theology*, vol. II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 29-58, 168ff.

³⁵ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 110ff.

inconceivable. A doctrine of sin that does not preclude the possibility of utopia is incompatible with the theology being developed here.

As Reinhold Niebuhr never tired of reminding us, the oppressed are not rendered innocent by their victim status. When the power roles are reversed the oppressed will become the oppressor. To be sure, there are moments in history when the victory of the oppressed leads to the liberation of both the oppressed and the oppressor, as in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. The healing of the oppressor in the liberation of the oppressed is the highest ideal of Christian social ethics. However, when it occurs it is always a momentary event. These occurrences serve as historical parables of the kingdom of God. But they cannot last. For the givens of existence make sin primordial, inevitable and necessary. Modern science has made this increasingly apparent.

In the big bang theory of the universe, matter, space and time came into being in an episode of inconceivable force. As this "creation" continues and our universe expands at dazzling speeds, galaxies are still being formed in the same natural processes that led to the inevitable destruction of others. Though our ancient ancestors suffered the consequences of this violently changing world—consequences they called by such names as mortality or finitude—they could not know as we do that perishing is an inevitability in the natural givenness of things. Thus it was that morally affected as they were by the burdens of mortality, some of our ancestors attempted to shoulder the blame for mortality. The Western Christian tradition has characteristically understood the book of Genesis to say that human sin brought physical death into the world. Science, however, makes it clear that there is an inseparable link between the primal, insensate violent power and impermanence of the big bang and the sensate violence and impermanence of biological existence. That the very building blocks of living matter are unstable dictates that all must die. Beyond this fatal ontological given is the fact that there can be no life without animal violence, for it is in killing and in being killed that evolution progresses.

Our evolution from pre-human to human existence was achieved on a natural continuum. Existence on that continuum simply does not permit humanity to transcend the animal violence that characterizes all life and that constitutes the medium in which and through which humankind evolved into being. There never was a time when human beings stood poised before a choice that would have permitted them to opt for perfectly just, absolutely benign social structures and individual lifestyles. Our pre-human ancestors in the evolutionary chain created, long prior to our appearance, violent structures for surviving. We can never wholly transcend our antecedent environment, and thus all our initiatives, however well meaning, are affected by the givens of humankind's evolutionary past.

On the face of it, if only because of its obvious internal difficulties, it seems astonishing that residues of the Augustinian myth of humanity's original perfection have survived so long. How could the first man and woman have been both perfect and yet ripe for a fall? Presumably a truly perfect creation would be perfectly incapable of falling—particularly on day one. And what of the metaphysical absurdity that by eating of the fruit of the tree Adam and Eve created virtually *ex nihilo* that which God did not create or will, i.e. evil. However, if its theological and metaphysical inadequacies have not brought about its demise, one might have expected that modern science would have ended mainstream theology's dreaming fascination with the myth of humanity's original innocence.

Increasingly, I have become convinced that the Augustinian reading of the fall is not only theologically, ontologically, and scientifically problematic, but is also a one-sided reading of the "J" writer's literary intent. Augustine read into the core of the story the late Roman Empire's sense of decadence and catastrophe as well as his own personal struggle with psychological ambiguity. While this impulse is far from being altogether wrong, Augustine initiated a whole tradition which shifted the focus of the epic from Yahweh, the new creator, struggling on an *ad hoc* basis to get the new creation right, into the story of the Promethean creature who with a single wrong turn disastrously corrupted the whole of Yahweh's creation. In the "J" author's hands the story is a story not of a creation in primal innocence—the presence of the serpent in the Garden is evidence of this—but a creation in the process of being fine-tuned. Of course, humanity is the chief focus, for humanity is the most daring and highest of Yahweh's creations. The human creature, whom Yahweh made capable of freedom, was not only a likely candidate for a fall, but the creature capable of straying farthest. "J's" story of Yahweh's dealing with the problem of sin is the story of how Yahweh learns by trial and error.

Yahweh initially tries to keep Adam and Eve from trouble by restrictive and finally self-contradictory rules. Adam and Eve would surely have come to the knowledge of evil through the very experience of living. The magic of the tree simply gave them instantaneously the knowledge that was their eventual destiny.

Having failed to save Adam and Eve from the dangers of their freedom by an arbitrary legalism incompatible with the freedom in which they were created, God resorts to what might even be read as tantrums. He curses the serpent and the ground, expels Adam and Eve from the Garden, curses Cain, and finally in an expression of less than fully mature outrage, God seems to despair of the whole human enterprise: "I am sorry that I have made them" (Genesis 6:7).

After venting his wrath by drowning most of the life on earth, Yahweh comes to the decisive recognition that proves to be the turning point in all his relationships with

humanity. Legalistic paternalism is no answer; neither is the raging of an aggrieved Father. For the problem is in creation itself. Human beings as Yahweh created them can never be perfectly compliant automatons. Judging humanity from the perspective of his original plan, i.e., Yahweh arbitrarily commanding and humanity submissively obeying, humanity proves to have hearts that are evil from their youth (Genesis 8:21). The only way to deal with such creatures is the way of blessing. Thus Yahweh makes a new covenant with Noah and all living things. Finally, after the further discord of the tower of Babel, God calls Abraham. And God calls him not just for the sake of Abraham and his progeny, but that through Abraham all nations might be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3).

The God of Israel, the God who claims to be the creative source of light and darkness, weal and woe (Isaiah 45:7), neither needs nor desires our theological efforts to exculpate divinity by taking the primal blame for sin and evil upon ourselves. To do so is finally a function of human presumptuousness. As if our sin were so magnificent in its malevolence that it could be the ultimate source of the anguish of the cosmos, and not merely a puny, insignificant intrusion in God's world. The Apostle Paul was not so naïve. He recognized that the "bondage to decay" in which the creation is presently "groaning" is due to the determination of God: "For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it . . ." (Romans 8:20). Paul goes on in hope to affirm that the ultimate end of this travail will be new birth unto glory. But it is God who works in both the weal and woe that God, and God alone, creates.

It is the gospel that God intends eschatologically to raise human beings from finitude to the eternity of God's own life. However, God has made this creation in all its anguish, including human beings in their inevitable sinfulness, to be the seed from which the new creation is to grow. This makes the theodicy question one that will never go away. Many people are angry at God. Witness, for example, the prevalence of "protest atheism" together with another indirect expression of human outrage, utopianism. Utopianism, at root, is the determination by an understandably frustrated humanity to take over the moral ordering of the world after the seeming failure of God to do so. If, as I have been suggesting, the only viable Christian answer to the problem of evil is the answer of the cross, it is vital that Christian theology begins to come clean on what it thinks the cross accomplished.

I can now sketch my own trinitarian understanding of why the Father willed the Son to die and to die hideously, and why the Son accepted the Father's determination as the only way that our eschatological destiny could be concretely established, the power of death arrested, sin and evil atoned for, and God's loving Spirit made manifest to a humanity so in bondage to the structures of sin and death that it could even mistake

death for the ultimate spiritual lord of the world. I make use of the insights of the three classic atonement traditions³⁶ but I think my focus is so different as to constitute a fourth alternative.

The necessity of Christ's death stems from many factors. To begin with Christ must die for us because having determined from eternity to deify and redeem us in a manner consistent with God's being as love, that is, in solidarity with us, his destiny with death was preordained. For nothing that enters the realm of finitude can hope to leave it alive. Unrestricted solidarity with mortal men and women entails death. Christ came in order to fulfill on the earth God's eternal commitment to our deification, a commitment implicit in creation itself as an act of love.

Reconciliation and the bestowing of eternal life in earthly solidarity with the creature means that the death of Christ was always to be God's capstone work for the completion of the creation. This aspect of Christ's self-sacrificial death does not raise the question of how there can be justice in the guilty being saved through the death of the innocent. The only injustice would be if God were eschatologically impotent and thus if God, lacking the power to recreate all things, were to withhold Christ's incarnation and his inevitable death as pointless or impossible. It would be injustice if God's essence were not love, if God's essence were, for example, the will to power, and thus God withheld the incarnation lest such an act of mercy might compromise God's imperious majesty. Only a God who cannot or will not redeem in the solidarity of love is devoid of an answer to the charge of injustice concerning the creation. However, to redeem in total solidarity with finitude means the redeemer must die in the process.

Of course, such a dying and the justice it achieves might have been accomplished by the death of Jesus Christ at age ninety after years of worldly success. But that Jesus Christ was betrayed, tortured, denied and died in total abandonment is another matter. Here a very different justice was at work.

The claim of the Epistle to the Hebrews (9:22) that there can be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood reflects more than the immediate Jewish priestly, sacrificial traditions on which its writer focuses. It reflects a far more primitive sense of the terrible givens of existence which gave rise to the primitive sacrifice traditions in the first place and from which Jewish sacrifice evolved despite its uniqueness. Blood sacrifice is very ancient. Prehistoric peoples knew as an immediate certainty how deeply submerged human beings are in blood, indeed, that we must shed blood to live. We who get our food in the supermarket and are far removed from the hard necessities required to produce it can avoid facing these bloody givens as a daily reality. However,

³⁶ 1) The Eastern ransom, *Christus Victor*, deification tradition. 2) The Western Anselmian satisfaction tradition. 3) The liberal exemplarist tradition.

our science underscores in objective if less personal terms the bleak implication of the fact that life is constantly evolving. In short, that evolution is lubricated by the blood of the losers in the constant struggle to survive. The earth is thus one vast sacrificial altar on which all finite life is being sacrificed unto the purpose and glory of God.

Therefore, it ought not to be regarded as primitive, unenlightened, illiberal, or sadistic to suggest that sacrifice is the *sine qua non* of any gesture of redemption, reconciliation and certainly of solidarity from God's side. It would be a travesty of love if God became human and did not bear at the very heart of the Godhead the same burden that we, God's living sacrifices, must bear.

What the Western atonement tradition says of the need for satisfaction for sin looks very different if one recognizes that such satisfaction is but one side of the work of the Son of God. The incarnate God makes atonement for both humanity and God. From humanity's side, Jesus Christ makes satisfaction for sin; from God's side, Jesus Christ makes satisfaction for the finite brokenness of the world in which sin is inevitable.

In the face of human evil we often feel a deep desire for retribution. Civilized people attempt to curb this impulse but at times it overwhelms our most urbane self-restraints. The state of Israel, for example, changed its constitutional ban on capital punishment in order to execute Eichmann "legally." Many of the survivors of the Holocaust were unable to bear the thought that Eichmann, who claimed that he would go laughing to his grave at the thought of the Jews he had slaughtered, was not himself in his grave. If God did not claim the right to vengeance, if the Son of God had not earned that right by bearing both God's fury over human sin and human outrage against the God who created a world of such manifest injustice and horrific suffering, if Jesus Christ had not been raised from the dead, then opposition to capital punishment would, in my view, be both callous and unjust. For if no one atones, humanity or the incarnate Christ, no one but the victim pays the ultimate price of criminality; and the impact of evil upon the aggrieved is inexcusably trivialized.

Anselm argued that ignorance mitigated the blameworthiness of Jesus' executioners—no one could knowingly slay the Son of God. Yet I think that Jesus was executed both because his tormentors didn't recognize him but also because they did. To be sure, Jesus was executed through the undertakings of those who, having poured over the messianic prophecies, honestly failed to recognize in the ministry of Jesus anything but heresy.³⁷ John the Baptist had his doubts. Even Jesus' disciples had great

³⁷ In a refreshingly frank appraisal of Jesus and his rejection by his people, Rabbi Joseph Klausner writes, "Judaism is a national life, a life which the national religion and human ethical principles embrace without engulfing. Jesus came and thrust aside all the requirements of the national life. . . . In their stead he set up nothing but an ethico-religious system bound up with his conception of the Godhead. . . . Jesus ignored everything concerned with national civilization: in this sense he does not belong to

difficulty in reconciling their national messianic hopes with the otherworldly suffering ministry of their Lord. God spoke through law and prophecy in terms easily misinterpreted. The Roman imperialists, ignorant of Jewish theological subtleties, had the excuse of any colonialist who blunders into the religious concerns of a subject people. How could they judge? Pilate even found Jesus essentially blameless—for all he knew.

However, Jesus' execution was also a conscious rejection of the vision that Jesus offered of Israel's destiny and of Israel's Messiah. There are stories coming from Europe's Black Plague that as the plague neared some towns, the residents executed the priests. If God were beyond reach at least they could kill God's agents. The anti-Semitic claim that Jews are Christ killers is shameless not only because it seeks to implicate Jesus in racism, and a racism against his own flesh, but because it arrogantly fails to take to heart the Christian recognition that Christ died for our sins. The sins of Gentiles fully as much the sins of Jews nailed Christ to the cross.

However, an anti-Semitic reading of the cross is also unspeakable because it is a reflection of a smug blindness to the universality and the understandableness of human protest against the doings of God. The Old Testament is replete with cries of outrage over the doings of God from Moses to Job, from Jeremiah to Ecclesiastes. Certainly, no Christian who has not sold all he or she has and given to the poor, who has taken any heed for the morrow, who has countenanced divorce, who has resisted those they regard as evil, or at least slept well because the army and police guard us, etc. has any basis whatsoever to criticize the Jewish forthright rejection of Jesus' messianic claims and the God whom Christians claim stand behind them. Christians want it both ways, we want the salvation of the theological Jesus while we crucify his commandments. If Jesus was in truth a reflection of the loving heart of God then our deeds, if not our words, demonstrate that all of us one way or another are angry at God. We are angrier at God than God is angry at us. In any case, in the cross all sides have taken their best shots. God has responded by turning the other cheek. Christ did not come back from the grave seeking vengeance.

Christian theology has for too long sought to limit the full implications of Jesus' cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Theology has been reluctant to consider how drastically such a cry of dereliction must affect our understanding of the Trinity. We have seen how even Moltmann, for whom the claim that the crucifixion affects the inner life of God is foundational, shies away from an

civilization." Of Jesus' rejection by Israel, he writes, "[T]wo thousand years of non-Jewish Christianity have proved that the Jewish people did not err." Cited in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 3-4.

examination of the personal rupture of relations between the Father and the Son that the cross revealed.

Yet how can it be legitimate to claim that other aspects of the life of Jesus Christ, his ethic, his self-sacrificial agape, his openness to tax collectors and sinners, etc. reflect the very essence of God's being, revealing it to be love, and then refuse to pursue radically questions as to precisely how Jesus' cry of dereliction also reveals something of the very essence of the Godhead? Surely Jesus' very last words are as revelatory as his more penultimate actions and utterances. Can it truly be imagined that the terrible tension that exists between the Father and the Son on the cross is a momentary spasm of conflict utterly untypical of the heretofore eternally blissful relation of the Father to the Son and thus is revelatory of only an earthly moment and not of the inner life of the triune God?

This has, of course, been the basic mainstream Western contention. Jesus' terrible cry is seen as that unique moment in which the Son voluntarily bears the full brunt of God's wrath for human sin. Just as our sin disrupted a perfect creation--so the punishment due to our sin leads to this all-so-temporary disruption of the perfect harmony of the Father and the Son. I agree entirely that Jesus Christ became a sin offering and thus bore the full onus of our sin, and that in the moment of his supreme agony learned the utter bleakness of Godforsakenness. However, the side of the atoning work of Jesus Christ pertaining to our sin tells but half the story, and seen in isolation distorts the truth of the atonement. If the creation was never in a state of "perfection," then the assumption that our sin was wholly our responsibility falls, and with it falls the mainstream claim that atonement is a one-way street. Gone also must be the sanguine assumption that the creation of a world where suffering and sin are inevitable caused no tension within the Godhead itself.

God wills to bring the creation to eschatological glory. Paul's claim that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21) would find no dissenting voice in the New Testament. A non-eschatological Christianity is a Christianity that prefers the vision of the Sadducees to that of Jesus (Mark 12:18-27). This is not to deny that the Sadducees had a point, for there is indeed a radical tension between this world and what will be. God has determined to achieve the second creation, the new creation, out of the caldron of the finitude, the suffering, and the death of the old creation. Creation is not just from the top down it is also from the bottom up—as it is our destiny in struggle to contribute to our own creation. God has created us free but we are not yet perfectly free. For our imagination, evil from our youth, often leads us into willing bondage not to hope but to the structures of sin and death. We often exacerbate the suffering of nature and of our fellow humans in ways that cannot simply be attributed to our ignorance and lack of

foresight. Yet God intends that the glory of the eschatological end will justify the slaughter necessary to achieve that glorious end. Perhaps so. As a Christian, I say certainly so.

Nevertheless, the terrible question remains as to how a God who is both almighty and the eternal lover can, aeon after aeon, watch the anguish unto extermination of all sentient life, indeed watch the glorious beauty of galaxies and all the life forms that may have evolved in them rise and collapse without reaching out and intervening, softening the blow of the often heartless cruelty of finite destiny. However, faithful to God's original intent in the creation, God usually does nothing tangible save letting nature take its fatal course—intervening only episodically, an occasional fortuitous wind or rainstorm, an intense revelatory experience, a healing here, a resuscitation there, one resurrection, just enough, just barely enough to spark some awareness of the transcendent or to keep the faithful going. But for the most part, God lets the world proceed on the basis of the orders of finitude that God has created and usually enforces.

Jesus Christ, the very fruit of the Father's love in the Spirit, cried out passionately on his own behalf when he faced the anguish of the cross with the Father unwilling to comfort or to intervene. Are we to suppose that self-same Christ from the safety of heaven has shared the steely, unwavering resolve of the Father as he has witnessed the anguish of all sentient life for eons? Could it be that Jesus Christ who out of eternal compassion became human reserved his awful protest against the abysmal impact of death for himself alone?

Or could it be that the tension between the Father and the Son exhibited on the cross is emblematic of a deep pondering and debate within the Godhead itself? If the cross of Christ affects Christ's very eternal deity must not Christ cry out to the Father at all times as every pestilence and famine, every war and act of genocide, every personal betrayal and every star crossed life is added to the Father's terrible burden? Is not the eternal Christ, our advocate, constantly asking of the Father, "Must we leave our beloved creatures so utterly to their own poor devices? Is there not some better way to fit them for eternity? And if there is not can you not ease their burden and bleed as I have bled, not just empathetically but in the flesh? How can you be so unwavering?" I think that such a pondering, emblematic of the tension we experience between God's love and God's imperious lordship, has gone on since the creation. God will not fully be at perfect peace till the creation is at perfect peace.

And the answer Jesus Christ has ever received as he pleads for a suffering creation is the answer he receives when he faces his own Godforsakenness on the cross: silence and then after a time resurrection. The triumph of Christ's resurrection is an eschatological foretaste of the creation's ultimate destiny, it is God's down payment on

what until then was but a hope. However, it is an event that points directly to the eschaton; thus it also painfully reminds us that for the time being the Father imperiously and unblinkingly accepts the full onus for the finitude of the created order – *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani* notwithstanding.