



Book Review of *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation*, Timothy Gorringe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 280 pages

Introduction

In 1978 Roman Catholic lay theologian Gerald McHugh wrote *Christian Faith and Criminal Justice: Toward a Christian Response to Crime and Punishment*.

Nothing in English has since appeared that gives the breadth and depth of theological treatment as the publication under review. The book is the ninth study of a series entitled "Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion". Timothy Gorringe, an Anglican theologian, is obviously well suited to the task, with several noted publications already to his credit.

This book examines the relationship between the theologies of atonement and penal strategies. is the description from the inside cover. Its theme is

[t]he question of the impact of religious sensibilities, or the structure of affect surrounding the crucifixion, on penal practice, and the correlative effects of the development of criminal law on the understandings of the atonement...

Publication of such a book is highly significant to Western readers and all cultures impacted by the West, given the dominance of Christian ideology upon criminal justice practice for a millennium. "...Christian theology constituted the most potent form of ideology in Western society for at least a thousand years, up to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its ideological importance is by no means dead (p. 7).

Layout

The book's structure is simple. An introductory chapter on "Religion and retribution" gives way to three sections:

- Part I, THE CULTURAL FORMATION OF ATONEMENT: BIBLICAL SOURCES;
- Part II, MAKING SATISFACTION: ATONEMENT AND PENALTY 1090 - 1890;
- Part III, CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS IN ATONEMENT AND PENAL PRACTICE.

The opening chapter tells the story of a saintly 18th century Anglican divine who was exemplary to his contemporaries in every way as a Christian minister. But he condoned fully the execution of an 18-year old for housebreaking and highway robbery. The author instructs that this was the normal Christian attitude throughout England at that time. He asks:

How is it that the question whether the law might be wrong, or even wicked, does not arise for these good Christian people? How could they come away from scenes of judicial murder feeling that this was 'the most blessed day of their lives'? (p. 5)

Atonement Theory

The reason, explored fully throughout the book, is the satisfaction theory of the atonement (p. 6), a doctrine which drew on legal notions that

formed part of a formidable body of legal-theological rhetoric which exercised a potent ideological function (p. 6).

“Atonement” is the word describing the theorized effect upon humanity in Christian theology of Christ’s death upon the cross. “Satisfaction” connotes the need for punishment in response to sin (wrongdoing). Satisfaction theology became in theory and practice rationalized vengeance, first of an angry deity in response to sin, and by analogy, of an angry state (“Regina” or “the people”) against crime.

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033 - 1109) is the first person to systematize the atonement teaching into a theory that greatly impacted the Christian and secular West ever since. The landmark publication of his satisfaction theory was *Cur Deus Homo? – Why God Became Human?* Gorringer not only provides a helpful account of Anselm’s theology of atonement, he also critiques it solidly as a mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood (p. 102).

This, the author contends, is nothing other than an inversion of the gospel which validates criminal law as the instrument of God’s justice instead of what it is in the gospel, an alienating construction which is at best a tragic necessity (p. 103).

Over against Anselm’s view, which dominated Western and secular views of criminal justice from the 11th century, a contemporary theologian, Abelard (1079 - 1142) proposed a different understanding of the atonement which the author argues reflects the founding texts more accurately, though has remained a minority view within Christian theology. This alternative reading of the texts “deconstructs (p. 58)” retributivism, undergirded by the satisfaction theory of the atonement, and points to the New Testament as a “protest against judicial cruelty (p. 81)” and of

God’s movement ‘downwards and to the periphery, his unconditional solidarity with those who have nothing, those who suffer, the humiliated and injured’ (p. 82).

Gorringer states near the outset:

I shall argue that whilst a powerful tradition in Christian atonement theology reinforced retributive attitudes, an alternative tradition, as I hope to show more squarely rooted in the founding texts, always existed to critique these. In understanding the roots of retributivism I hope at the same time to contribute to its deconstruction (p. 7).

Satisfaction Theory and Retributive Justice

Gorringer follows two writers, Norbert Elias and David Garland, in his positing of the “structures of affect (p. 8)” which for several centuries predisposed an entire Western culture towards the practice of retributivism in response to crime. Given that

satisfaction theory emerged, in the eleventh century, at exactly the same time as the criminal law took shape (p. 22).,

there was a fateful interplay between law and religion for the next millennium – to the despite of the gospel and criminal alike!

The author has done an admirable job of deconstructing retributivism in this publication. In both his careful rereading of the biblical texts (Chapters 2 and 3) and in his pointing towards alternative directions in penal practice (Chapters 9 and 10) he has offered secular and religious readers much by way of challenge. One can complain that the discussion appears too continental and British, but that is minor. (I wonder at his non-use of *Law and Revolution* by Harold Berman, an American author, who wrote a classic on “*The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*”. He also fails to cite (American) Gerald

McHugh's earlier work, mentioned above.) He is in excellent command of his theological and historical sources, and is highly competent to exegete the scriptural texts in an insightful fashion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, not only has Gorringer in the reviewer's opinion achieved an admirable theological challenge to retributivism, he has pointed hopefully to another way in theory and practice, the way of costly forgiveness, which, in the end, is our only hope.

In holding before us the claims of an imagined community the New Testament, far from providing legitimation for retributivist practice, in fact advanced the claims of an alternative, nonviolent, way of life. Forgiveness... lies at the heart of that - not as a benign doctrine, but as a remorselessly difficult praxis (p. 265).

From this study, the reader might be encouraged to consider next *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, by L. Gregory Jones.

References

Berman, Harold J. (1983). *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Jones, L. Gregory (1995). *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

McHugh, Gerald Austin (1978). *Christian Faith and Criminal Justice: Toward a Christian Response to Crime and Punishment*, Paulist Press, New York.