

# **The Cross: God's Peace Work – Towards a Restorative Peacemaking Understanding of the Atonement**

By Wayne Northey

## ***Introduction***

Atonement means a theory (theology) about the effect of the death of Christ on humanity. The New Testament employs several images to interpret the impact of Christ's death on the cross. Some are<sup>1</sup>:

- A Conflict-victory-liberation motif called “Christus Victor”. This was title of a famous study by Gustaf Aulén (1969). Christ is victor over the “powers” A key Scripture is Phil. 2:9 – 11.
- One of vicarious suffering, mostly found in the Gospels. This arises from Jesus' self-understanding based upon the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah, in particular chapter 53. Key Gospel Scriptures are: Matt. 3:17, Luke 4:18 - 22, Matt. 8:16 - 17, Mark 10:45, 14:24.
- Certain archetypal images. Jesus, in his death is referred to as: representative man (Rom. 5:12 - 21; I Cor. 15:20 - 22, 45 - 49; Eph. 2:11 - 22), pioneer (Acts 3:15; 5:30 - 31; Heb. 2:9 - 19; 12:2), forerunner (Heb. 6:20), firstborn (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5).
- There is also a Martyr motif. Seven times the martyr-witness of Jesus is mentioned in the book of Revelation, such as Rev. 1:5.
- There is too a sacrifice motif that draws heavily on Old Testament sacrificial background. Key Scriptures are: II Cor. 5:21 and much of Hebrews. This is a motif for understanding the nature of life in Christian community: praising God, doing good to others, living in communion with others, etc.
- There is an expiation theme with reference to the wrath of God. It is a dynamic related to living a life of forgiveness towards others. Some key Scriptures are: Rom. 3:25; I John 1:7 - 2:2; 4:10 – 11.
- A Redemption-Purchase image picks up on the Old Testament redemption of Israel that is now a “new Israel” redeemed by Christ. A key Scripture is: Rom. 3:21 – 26.
- Reconciliation, the restoration of broken relationships, what widely in criminal justice is known as “Restorative Justice”, is another image. Key Scriptures are: Rom. 5:6 - 11; Eph. 2:14 - 16; II Cor. 5:17 - 20; Col. 1:20; 3:10 – 11, with reference to the new humanity of reconciled relationships, and to the reconciliation of humanity with God.
- Justification as justice or justification, righteousness or setting right, making righteous are essential metaphors of biblical justice as in Micah 6:1 – 8, the high water mark of Hebrew Scriptures spirituality. Key Christian Scriptures are: Rom. 1:16 - 17; Rom. 3:21 – 26.
- An adoption-family image is also part of New Testament revelation. Key Scriptures are: Rom. 8:23; Gal. 4:4 - 5; Eph. 1:5 - 7; Gal. 4:4. They underscore

---

<sup>1</sup> From Driver, 1986, pp. 15 – 36. Some of the following material is also drawn from Driver.

the depth of intimacy in Christ's work, permitting God to be called "Abba" a deeply tender term of endearment. The entire Prodigal Son/Father story of Luke 15:11ff is powerful instance.

Beginning before the era of Emperor Constantine (early fourth century), but intensified during and since, the early church emphasis on becoming "Christlike" based upon Christ's atonement shifted to becoming merely "Christian", an abstraction or even legal fiction based upon physical sacraments performed (Baptism and Eucharist in the Catholic tradition) or an intellectual change of beliefs (Justification by Faith in the Protestant tradition). It allowed people to become "Christian" without really having to change anything about their lives, lifestyles or political commitments/actions/realities, not least without having to become "Christlike"<sup>2</sup>.

There were several factors that emerged in the Church since the fourth century to buttress a movement away from understanding the work of Christ as above all a call to ethical/political/lifestyle "imitation of Christ", a change of behaviour so drastic Jesus called it denial/death of self (Matt. 16:24 and *passim*), and Paul dubbed it clothing oneself with the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 13:14 and *passim*).

*First*, the onset of **rationalism** in the history of the church demanded wrestling the various images into a coherent "dogma" that often put at arms' length the necessary change needed in one's personal *behaviour*, in favour of change only in one's personal/religious *rituals* or *belief*.

*Second*, there was change in **conceptions of law** away from an emphasis upon right relationships maintained and restored, to one of retributive/punitive justice. Just deserts and punishments became the primary thrust of law in the course of Christian thinking rather than an understanding of a call to forgiveness and repentance. The dominant image of God became and remains in Western Christianity, Sentencing Judge<sup>3</sup>.

*Third*, the central preoccupation of law gradually came to do with **guilt needing expiation** through punishment, rather than grace as undeserved gift. The setting for the jewel called law was grace not guilt, biblically. Guilt is hardly a New Testament category<sup>4</sup>. But in Constantinian and post-Constantinian Christianity guilt became the

---

<sup>2</sup> "The literal ethical components of Christ's saving work have gradually atrophied, and the transcendent aspects, especially of sacrifice and expiation which lent themselves more easily to sacramental expression, became almost exclusively the lens through which the saving work of Christ was viewed. The practical results of this Constantinian shift in the way of perceiving the atoning work of Christ soon appeared. Admittedly un-Christlike people could be assured of the benefits of the saving death of Christ, bereft of its power to transform (Driver, 1986, p. 31)." Roman Emperor Constantine was baptized into the Christian faith only on his deathbed. At the time of Francisco Franco's death, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish dictator, upon his receiving the last rites as a faithful Roman Catholic, a piece of graffiti read: "God cannot be trusted. Franco is in heaven."

<sup>3</sup> I have often asked in teaching on this: How many times did Jesus call God "Judge" in the Gospels? The answer is *never*. How many times did Jesus call God (nurturing, caring, and forgiving) "Father" in the Gospels? The answer is a staggering *170 times!*

<sup>4</sup> Krister Standahl argued brilliantly that it is hard to find "any evidence that *Paul the Christian* had suffered under the burden of conscience regarding personal shortcomings which he would label 'sins' "

dominant setting for law necessitating expiation or satisfaction for the wrong or sin committed.

### ***Four Dominant Theories of the Atonement***

In the history of the church, three theories of the work of Christ, the atonement, have been developed, according to John Driver, to which Charles Bellinger adds a fourth. They are:

1. Conflict-Victory (Christus Victor);
2. Satisfaction (Saint Anselm – 1033 – 1109).
3. Moral Influence (Peter Abelard – 1079 – 1142);
4. Penal substitution (John Calvin – 1509 – 1564, *et al.*)

The first was never systematized like the second; the third was systematized, but was eclipsed by the second, though Abelard was a younger contemporary of Saint Anselm; the fourth was developed during the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformation.

The Conflict-Victory or Classic Dramatic or Ransom theory flourished between the second and sixth centuries, and was revived this century in particular through Gustaf Aulén's book, *Christus Victor* (1969). Christ the Victor in this view fights against and overcomes the evil powers of the world. Sin is submission and enslavement to evil powers overcome through Christ's death and resurrection. This view has known widespread revival in the West this past century, and "has always been foundational for the Eastern Orthodox tradition built upon the Fathers such as Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa (Bellinger, 2001, p. 134)."

The Moral Influence understanding demonstrates God's matchless love. There is a strong ethical thrust based on Christ's life and death.

The Satisfaction theory has been seen as basic to Western orthodoxy and evangelicalism, a non-negotiable pillar of evangelicalism in terms of its appropriation. Its essential logic is:

- Sin is transgression of God's law.
- God's honour is paramount, and sin takes away honour due God.
- Satisfaction must be at least equal to the sin committed (tit for tat): "The main justification [for 'new concepts of sin and punishment based on the doctrine of the atonement'] given by Anselm and by his successors in Western theology was the concept of justice itself. Justice required that every sin (crime) be paid for by temporal suffering; that the suffering, the penalty, be appropriate to the sinful act; and that it vindicate ('avenge') the particular law that was violated. As St. Thomas Aquinas said almost two centuries after Anselm's time, both criminal and civil offenses require payment of compensation to the victim; but since crime, in

---

(Standahl, 1976, p. 82, italics in original). His entire essay (first published in English in *Harvard Theological Review*, 56 (1963), pp. 199-215) is a watershed in modern Pauline studies in reinterpreting Paul in the opposite direction of Saint Augustine, as one with a very robust conscience and rarely plagued by guilt.

contrast to tort, is a defiance of the law itself, punishment, and not merely reparation, must be imposed as the price for the violation of the law (Berman, 1983/1997, p. 183).”

The only satisfaction equal to the guilt of humanity is death, but it can only be offered if the person paying it is without guilt himself, argued Saint Anselm. Only Jesus fits this need, and he is furthermore God, and thus his expiation pays for all humanity. The logic is straightforward: “Only God can complete this work of restoring his honor, but the work must be done by man: ‘otherwise man does not make satisfaction’... Thus Christ makes the payment needed to restore God’s honor and cancel the debt of the human race. His death satisfies God’s justice and opens up the way of salvation once again, reestablishing the right and fitting order of the universe (Bellinger, 2001, p. 135).”

This theory is set out mainly in forensic and commercial terms. In Anselm’s day, the sacraments received made one beneficiary of this expiation. For Protestants, faith leading to justification made one the beneficiary.

The message of this theological understanding could be put in terms of *The Four Spiritual Laws* language Evangelicals know (developed by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ): *God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life (heaven) based upon Christ’s blood sacrifice for you. But if you ignore this sacrifice, God hates you, and has a terrible plan for your after-life (hell), based upon your rejection of God’s blood sacrifice.*

The satisfaction theory of Anselm, closely followed by the Reformers in the penal substitution theory, shows a central preoccupation with rationalistic scholastic theology in Western Christianity. It elicits two fundamental questions: Is the Bible primarily a book of timeless propositional truths and law codes, necessitating only categorization of its pronouncements to know exactly how to live or be damned? Or, is the Bible primarily God’s Story inviting us to join our story to God’s, so that on the way we can learn how to live like God intended through imitation of Christ?

In the history of the Western Church since the era of Constantine, God as Stern Moral Sentencing Judge eclipsed God as Loving Story-Teller, who weaves a Transformative Tapestry of faith, hope and love through the ages, strands of which all humanity, the entire creation, are invited to become in God’s grand gesture of ceaseless elicitive and everlasting *love* (*hesed* in the Old Testament, *agape* in the New Testament), God’s ultimate words for the cosmos, become flesh (incarnated) in Jesus.

Charles Bellinger presents a fourth view, “penal substitution”, close to the hearts of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformers, easily confused with the satisfaction theory since strictly aligned:

The substitution theory stresses the idea that Christ, the innocent one, took upon himself the penalty for sin that human beings deserve...

The wrath of God the Father is turned away from us by being turned toward the Son on the Cross.

The power of this vision has exerted great force down through history to the present day. It is seen particularly in the preaching of Protestant Christianity from the Reformation to Jonathan Edwards to Billy Graham (Bellinger, 2001, pp. 136 – 137).

### *Commentary*

On the surface of it, perhaps the most remarkable fact about Christian understandings of the atonement is the dominance of the satisfaction theory in Western Christendom<sup>5</sup>.

A character, Hans, in my forthcoming novel, *Chrysalis Crucible*, agonizes:

My conclusion from simple observation is that Evangelicals routinely practise an under-your-breath ideologized footnote theology’ that reads repeatedly, ‘Except our enemies,’ when quoting John 3:16 and all similar New Testament ethical teachings. How could Billy Graham tell the North Vietnamese that God loves them when he fully blessed his own country in displaying the exact opposite feeling—hatred unto death? How could he do this when he was still praying with the President for victory in the War, when he apparently willed the utter inversion of the Gospel regarding treatment of neighbour, enemy, and Creation? (Northey, 2007, p. 397)

The short answer to Hans’ questions is: because of the satisfaction theory of the atonement. There is an enormous punitive dynamic in this doctrine that permits Christians, of course through “legally constituted authorities”, i.e. the state, to destroy its enemies to which judeo-christian revelation says the opposite. A theologian writes, after his conclusion that the univocal New Testament ethic is nonviolence equally for church and state: “One reason that the world finds the New Testament’s message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry (Hays, 1996, p. 343).<sup>6</sup>”

Columnist Matt Miller wrote ironically of Evangelicals’ take on John 3:16, the all-time most quoted Bible verse by Evangelicals, “For God so loved the world that he temporarily died to save it from himself. But none of that really matters because most people will be tortured for eternity anyways.”

---

<sup>5</sup> St. Anselm of Canterbury developed his satisfaction theory of the atonement against the dominant political background of feudalism in a book entitled *Cur Deus Homo – Why God Became Man*, where God was the Feudal Lord of Creation, who could exact Ultimate Punishment/Satisfaction for humankind’s sins only through sacrificing the perfect God/Man Jesus Christ. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformers developed this further into the idea of a “penal substitution” that saved humans from God because God took the punishment from God humans deserved. This was against the backdrop of well-developed penal law preoccupied with what criminologist Nils Christie called “pain delivery” (1981).

<sup>6</sup> This is likewise the conclusion of *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Swartley, 2006), the most extensive theology to date on *peace* as central Gospel ethic in the New Testament.

This was not the understanding in Eastern Orthodoxy, which Matt Miller unwittingly points to. Alexandre Kalomiros wrote in *The River of Fire*:

Some Protestants consider death not as a punishment but as something natural. But, is not God the creator of all natural things? So in both cases, God — for them — is the real cause of death.

And this is true not only for the death of the body. It is equally true for the death of the soul. Do not Western theologians consider hell, the eternal spiritual death of man, as a punishment from God? And do they not consider the devil as a minister of God for the eternal punishment of men in hell?

The “God” of the West is an offended and angry God, full of wrath for the disobedience of men, who desires in His destructive passion to torment all humanity unto eternity for their sins, unless He receives an infinite satisfaction for His offended pride.

What is the Western dogma of salvation? Did not God kill God in order to satisfy His pride, which the Westerners euphemistically call justice? And is it not by this infinite satisfaction that He deigns to accept the salvation of some of us?

What is salvation for Western theology? Is it not salvation from the wrath of God?

Do you see, then, that Western theology teaches that our real danger and our real enemy is our Creator and God? Salvation, for Westerners, is to be saved from the hands of God! (Kalomiros, 1980, pp. 4 & 5)

The protagonist, Andy, in *Chrysalis Crucible*, muses about

... what it would mean to be the son of a feudal lord in some ancient time who fell madly in love with the beautiful daughter of a serf. The lord of the manor would finally approach the daughter’s father at the repeated bidding of his son. “My son would have your daughter’s hand in marriage,” he would declare, and proceed with an announcement of all the arrangements to be made.

He imagined if, when the father presented this to his daughter, she refused the son’s intentions.

“But you must understand,” the lord of the manor would declare to the father, with his son present, “my son does love her greatly, and has a marvellous plan for her life that he cannot wait to unfold for her. *But*,” his tone would turn menacing, “if she refuses my son’s hand, then hear this: After a fixed time, which I forthwith decree as two months, if your daughter will not have my son’s hand in marriage, then we have together agreed that she shall be subject to the most abject tortures and mutilations for three days, after which she shall be fully dismembered and thrown to the wild dogs.”

Then the lord and the son would withdraw to await the daughter’s decision.

Could it be truly said that the son ever loved the daughter if he could contemplate such retributive vengeance for not taking his hand in marriage? Could it ever be said that God truly loves us if He was perfectly prepared to exact everlasting conscious punishment upon us for failure to make a decision for Christ? “Once to die, and after this judgment.” Could such love and hatred

abide together in the same bosom? Did God love the whole world—except those, of course, He consigned to hell, whom he “loved” with a pure hatred? (Northey, 2007, pp. 552 & 553)

A few pages later we read:

Andy pondered this for a time. “Janys,” he began, “what would be one time of total contentment for you in your life? Think about that. I’m guessing one such is beyond memory, when you were a newborn child totally surrounded by your mother’s warmth, love, and nurture. Think about the image of a newborn baby, Janys, of a mother’s total care of and love for her. Then imagine God in that role. That fits what we know and say about God. Remember, Jesus wanted to gather the people of Jerusalem to himself like a mother hen gathers her chicks. Remember all those biblical images of God nurturing His people like a mother?

“Then switch your imagination to a torture room in Central America, where that same little baby, now grown to mature adult, is stretched out on a cold mattress, is viciously raped and undergoes routine indignities beyond imagination. She cries out for the release of death, but that does not come. And the pain and torture are endless.

“Now, can you honestly imagine the same mother in both roles, arranging for and superintending the second reality, no matter what the rationalization? Yet that is precisely what teaching you and I have been led to believe, that the same “god” who created us out of an enormous free act of love—who loved us so desperately that He gave ‘His only begotten Son’ to birth us a second time—somehow just as determinedly plans the most malicious eternal outcome imaginable if we do not *believe* in Him. In that case, Jesus dies *above all to save us from God!* That’s crazy! It boggles my mind, Janys, that this has been taught for two thousand years! If this is the only way we can think about God according to the Bible, I’m checking out. It is sick beyond all human imagining! But the reason I say this now, Janys, *is precisely because I read my Bible!*

“Meanwhile, I have to hand out an evangelistic tract, as do you, about God’s love for us that forewarns, at the same time, that any who reject Christ’s offer *werden Schmerzen, Kummer und Pein erleiden in der ewigen Dunkelheit der Hölle*. That’s what it says, Janys, in just about those exact words. That if we reject Christ we will experience everything that woman tortured in Central America experienced *in the eternal darkness of Hell*. And Dr. Harlow’s book says the same thing: that if we reject Christ we will experience *Furcht, Trauer und Zorn*. Fear, sadness, and wrath, Janys. He quotes several passages from Matthew to prove it. That’s what we’re saying God is planning for each person who rejects Him! Do you really believe that? I don’t. I can’t. I won’t! (*ibid*, pp. 560 & 561)

A final scene from the novel finds Andy riveted by an epiphany while touring Dachau Concentration Camp:

Then a realization blasted into his consciousness like the imagined sudden

blistering heat of those ovens at full burn: *Dachau is Christendom's most perfect human picture of hell!*

The parallels overwhelmed. *God is Hitler. The ovens are God's specially built chambers of eternal conscious torment*, to which human victims by the billions are fed because they refused to take the hand of the feudal lord's son in marriage. Jesus the Jilted Lover, whose cry of wrath echoed throughout the Corrupted Cosmos. Only unlike Daniel and his companions in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, these victims would experience the full suffering of the oven for ever and ever, God be praised, amen! For there even the worm "dieth not." This was Christendom's "god." This was Evangelical's hell. This was what Billy Graham warned his listeners about... This was the deep dark open secret about ... Bill Bright's, Evangelicals' "God who loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."

"*Nein!*" Christendom, Evangelicals, Christians, Billy declared. But their eyes betrayed them. Deep down, they all said, "Yes!" This was the fundamental, fundamentalist, Evangelical footnote theology of John 3:16. This was the truth about their god: God is the Ultimate Sadist of the Universe... (*ibid*, p. 577)

Herald Berman in a magisterial work on the formation of Western penal law writes:

However broadly Anselm conceived justice, reason required that he stop at the boundary of grace. God is bound by his own justice. If it is divinely just for a man to pay the price for his sins, it would be unjust, and therefore impossible, for God to remit the price. In *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm's theology is a theology of law.

Before the time of Anselm (and in the Eastern Church still) it would have been considered wrong to analyze God's justice in this way. It would have been said, first, that these ultimate mysteries cannot be fitted into the concepts and constructs of the human intellect; that reason is inseparable from faith – one is not the servant of the other, but rather the two are indivisible; and the whole exercise of a theology of law is a contradiction in terms. And second, it would have been said that it is not only, and not primarily, divine justice that establishes our relationship with God but also, and primarily, his grace and his mercy; that is his grace and mercy, and not only his justice, which explains the crucifixion, since by it mankind was ransomed from the power of the devil and the demons of death – the very power which had procured the slaying of Jesus in the first place but which then itself was finally conquered through the resurrection (Berman, 1983/1997, p. 180).

The satisfaction theory of the atonement led to brutal political realities in Western culture down to the present:

For the Church Fathers, it is the devil who – illegitimately – insists on the payment of the debt incurred by humankind. Anselm inverts this. Now it is God who, legitimately, exacts the payment of debt... In both Old and New Testaments an indebted person could be 'redeemed' by the payment of his or her debt. Jesus, following Deuteronomy, insists on the cancelling of debt as a



fundamental aspect of Christian practice. Anselm, however, makes God the one who *insists* on debt. The debt humanity has incurred must be paid with human blood. The God who rejected sacrifice now demands it... From the start sacrifice and satisfaction run together... The God who liberates from law is now, in Anselm, understood as hypostasised, personified law... What remains... is a mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood. In this move a most fundamental inversion of the gospel is achieved, which prepares the way for the validation of 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.

The penal consequences of this doctrine were grim indeed. As it entered the cultural bloodstream, was imaged in crucifixions, painted over church chancels, recited at each celebration of the Eucharist, or hymned, so it created its own structure of affect one in which earthly punishment was demanded because God himself had demanded the death of his Son (Gorringe, 1996, pp. 102 & 103).

In the belief that God would give God's enemies "Ultimate Hell" according to the satisfaction theory of the atonement, it was only a small step for Christians to authorize the state, and to participate in the state's giving, its enemies penultimate hell in the death penalty (with many forms of exquisite punishment and torture), and in war.

The exegetical problems of the satisfaction theory/penal substitution view of the atonement may be summarized under four considerations:

1. God is set as object, not agent, of reconciliation. But God did not break with humanity; humanity broke with God according to II Cor. 5:18 – 20. God is not an angry deity like a feudal lord needing appeasement by expiation. Humanity, not God, needs reconciliation. The central text is the picture of God the Father in the Prodigal Son story (Luke 15:11ff.), endlessly yearning for reconciliation with his son – a picture of us "all, like sheep [who] have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6).
2. There is hardly mention in the New Testament of humanity's guilt. The texts speak rather of humanity's separation from God. Likewise, in the Old Testament, "atonement" had to do with restoration of a broken relationship with God, not with guilt requiring punishment. "The central concern of the Anselmian theory for guilt and its removal would appear to find inspiration more in Western concepts of justice and punishment than it does in the Bible and its world of thought (Driver, 1986, p. 58)".
3. Redemption is not, as in Anselm, freedom from indebtedness and punishment, rather, it is liberation from the former Master, sin, to freedom under the new Master, Jesus (Gal. 5:1). It is a change of lordship, not decree of punishment that is in view.
4. "I often wonder why when the Old Testament and the Gospels see atonement through the perspective of becoming clean from ritual uncleanness; when it is filled with so much about both becoming unclean and being an unclean person contaminating the community

and the land, and with an elaborate system of atoning and cleansing administered by the priesthood; that now that the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world comes, it is suddenly understood in a narrow forensic sense? That does not make sense to me. Anselm in a newly Norman world of power and control creates a contractual system of atonement, moving away from the relationship oriented feudal one. The concept becomes more abstract and contractual from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries by the rapidly increasing influence of the emerging burgher class with its economic and utilitarian interests. The classical school of criminology emerges with a forensic rational choice theory (choice by the individual and reason to deter) and Kant's a-historical concept that punishment rights a metaphysical imbalance. It is about time that the atonement theory is looked at in its historical context, and that we return to a biblical understanding of atonement, atonement as an historical cleansing, righting and healing of community and the earth. And what does it mean to say that 'It is finished'? It means: No more executions are needed for satisfaction to be satisfied (Prison Chaplain Henk Smidstra, British Columbia, personal e-mail, February 23, 2007)".

### ***Toward A Restorative Peacemaking Understanding of the Atonement (Part 1)***

Hans Boersma has written a brilliant book entitled *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (2003). There is so much to commend this book on the atonement, especially his appreciation of atonement as *recapitulation*, following Church Father Irenaeus<sup>7</sup>. Sadly, Boersma introduces a concept of "violence at the boundaries" into a reading of the atonement that simply is not in the founding texts. I choose to discuss this book since it perhaps is the most sophisticated contemporary statement of violence in the atonement.

No one reads the Bible without ideological glasses. In Boersma's case, those glasses are explicitly the Reformed tradition, that is *deformed* I submit on the issue of violence. Timothy Gorringer uses the term "deformation of biblical faith (Gorringer, 1986, pp. 81 & 82)<sup>8</sup>". This *deformation* tarnishes Boersma's superb work. It is helpful to explain why, since this has been endemic in Western theological studies on the atonement since Anselm.

Immediately in the Preface, Boersma declares: "This [Reformed tradition] comes to the fore in my re-evaluation of violence as something that is not inherently negative; in my insistence that boundaries can function in wholesome ways and need at times to be defended; as well as in my argument that restorative justice can

---

<sup>7</sup> This "recapitulation" understanding incorporates, Boersma argues, elements of all three of the traditional models. (He collapses satisfaction theory and penal substitution into one.) "Christ [takes] the place of Adam and of all humanity and as such [gives] shape to the genesis of a new humanity (*ibid*, p. 112)." But how? "This is where the three atonement models come in. As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ instructs us and models for us the love of God (moral influence). As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ suffers God's judgment on evil and bears the suffering of the curse of the Law (penal representation). As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ fights the powers of evil, expels demons, withstands satanic temptation to the point of death, and rises victorious from the grave (Christus Victor) (*ibid*, p. 113)."

<sup>8</sup> A fuller quote is below.

only function if we are willing to include the notion of punishment (Boersma, 2004, p. 10)<sup>9</sup>”. As one discovers in reading the entire manuscript, Boersma never becomes specific on these issues. Just how much or exactly what kind of state violence is “not inherently negative” is never indicated<sup>10</sup>.

Boersma writes that “The exclusionary practices of the Christian Church, the violent suppression of internal dissenters throughout its history, and the collusion of the Church with the sword of the state all seem to illustrate the fact that violence, not hospitality, lies at the heart of the Church (*ibid*, p. 16).” He says later: “Put provocatively, God’s hospitality in Christ needs an edge of violence to ensure the welcome of humanity and all creation (*ibid*, p. 93).” And again: “A tragic view of reality can hardly uphold non-violence as an absolute or nonnegotiable standard but would have to recognize that violence lies at the heart of things and cannot possibly be avoided (*ibid*, p. 199).” *With this line, he introduces perhaps the most ethically objectionable piece of ideology of the entire Reformed tradition* – and of most Western church traditions – one that stretches back theologically to Augustine in his formulation of the Christian “just war” tradition: *Realpolitik*. Notice that he did not claim that “violence lies at the heart of biblical Kingdom witness”, for such is simply false. Over against biblical revelation, *Realpolitik* to which rival revelation Boersma points as moral lodestar claims that human institutions from state governments to Microsoft to Church, are indeed “fallen”, “sinful”, “under God’s judgment”, but they’re all we have, and they will not change this side of Kingdom Come, especially the violence endemic to them, to all human culture. “So if we can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em!”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Chris Marshall advocates the term “restorative punishment” in his outstanding study of the New Testament theology of Restorative Justice (2001). However, he redefines such punishment non-violently as “the pain of taking responsibility”, *pace* Boersma.

<sup>10</sup> I have found in debates and presentations on violence in warfare, that my dialogue partners fall silent or become angry the moment it is suggested that they insert even one of their loved ones into the inevitable “collateral damage” of civilian deaths picture, and still say that “accidental” killing of their loved one is a (mere) regrettable part of warfare. The stakes suddenly become personal. Are we in defence of “just war” so anaesthetized to believe no one’s loved ones are ever sacrificed in “collateral damage” from warfare? I suggest that in company with others Boersma is okay with violence at the boundaries so long as he and his loved ones are not impacted – so far an almost exclusive luxury of North American existence. Raising this consideration is strategically a great conversation stopper, the Ultimate Trump Card.

Since the introduction of aerial warfare in World War I, the civilian death rate in warfare has not surprisingly soared. Tami Biddle wrote that when aerial warfare was still only imagined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it meant “English-speaking peoples raining incendiary bombs over the enemy *to impose the customs of civilization* (Biddle, 2002, italics added; page number lacking).” In Luke 9:55, Jesus’ disciples wanted to rain fire down upon a Samaritan village, and Jesus “rebuked them”. So ever is the Way of Jesus. Willard Swartley comments: “Rather than eradicating the enemy, as was the goal of Joshua’s conquest narrative in the earlier story – in a similar location [Samarita] – the new strategy eradicates the enmity... Instead of killing people to get rid of idolatry, the attack through the gospel is upon Satan directly (Luke 10). Instead of razing high places, Satan is toppled from his throne! [Note 48 reads: ‘Hence the root of idolatry is plucked from its source...’] (Swartley, 2006, p. 144).”

<sup>11</sup> This fatalism is only present amongst Christians *politically*. The alcoholic, drug addict, sex addict, *sinner!*, are never so admonished.

I suggest that the fundamental political error of Reformed and most Western church traditions is: they choose to serve God and *Realpolitik*. As with Mammon, (Money), God brooks no rival (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13).

Jean Bethke Elshtain, author of *Just War Against Terror* (2003)<sup>12</sup>, on a website defending her book says: “Just war restraint and indiscriminate slaughter belong to different moral and political universes (Hauerwas and Griffiths, 2003).” She of course is correct. Only, in the history of Western warfare as argued by John Howard Yoder (1984), there never has been “just war restraint”, let alone a just war according to its advocates’ own developed criteria<sup>13</sup>. There never can be is the counter *Realpolitik* challenge.

Father George Zabelka was the Catholic chaplain with the US Army air force who blessed the men who dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. He said in an interview:

The mainline Christian churches still teach something that Christ never taught or even hinted at, namely the just war theory, a theory that to me has been completely discredited theologically, historically, and psychologically.

So as I see it, until the various churches within Christianity repent and begin to proclaim by word and deed what Jesus proclaimed in relation to violence and enemies, there is no hope for anything other than ever-escalating violence and destruction.

To fail to speak to the utter moral corruption of the mass destruction of civilians was to fail as a Christian and as a priest as I see it. . . . I was there, and

---

<sup>12</sup> See my online review at:

[http://clarionjournal.typepad.com/clarion\\_journal\\_of\\_spirit/wayne\\_northey/index.html](http://clarionjournal.typepad.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/wayne_northey/index.html).

<sup>13</sup> World War II has often been called a “just war”. James Berardinelli in a review of Errol Morris’ 2004 film, *The Fog of War*, writes: “Long before [Robert] McNamara became president of Ford motor company or entered the public spotlight, he served in World War II under the unrelenting command of General Curtis LeMay, the commander of the 20th Air Force. In 1945, LeMay was in charge of a massive firebombing offensive in Japan that resulted in the deaths of nearly 1 million Japanese citizens, including 100,000 in Tokyo during a single night. LeMay’s B-29 bombers raked 67 Japanese cities, sometimes killing more than 50% of the population. McNamara points out that, had the United States lost the war, he and LeMay would have been tried as war criminals. But, of course, it’s the victors who write the rules and determine what is justified. (Berardinelli, 2003).”

The Chief of staff for Presidents Roosevelt and Truman wrote of the atomic bombs dropped:

It is my opinion that *the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki* was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons.

The lethal possibilities of atomic warfare in the future are frightening. My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, *we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages*. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children (Leahy, 1950, p. 441, italics added).

Leahy begs the question: when has war been other than “in that fashion”, one that invariably is “barbarous”, all just war theory notwithstanding? “War is hell”, observed Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman. Just war theory claims in Orwellian doublespeak: “War is peace”.

I'll tell you that the operational moral atmosphere in the church in relation to mass bombing of enemy civilians was totally indifferent, silent, and corrupt at best—at worst it was religiously supportive of these activities by blessing those who did them.... I, like the Catholic pilot of the Nagasaki plane, “The Great Artiste,” was heir to a Christianity that had for seventeen hundred years engaged in revenge, murder, torture, the pursuit of power, and prerogative violence, all in the name of our Lord.

I walked through the ruins of Nagasaki right after the war and visited the place where once stood the Urakami Cathedral. I picked up a piece of censer from the rubble. When I look at it today I pray God forgives us for how we have distorted Christ's teaching and destroyed his world by the distortion of that teaching. I was the Catholic chaplain who was there when this grotesque process that began with Constantine reached its lowest point—so far (Zabelka, 1980).”

Boersma asserts: “The limitation of Eucharistic hospitality to those who are baptised indicates again that the Church has boundaries that the Church's hospitality cannot be absolute if the Church wants to remain the Church (*op. cit.*, footnote 37, p. 220).” True, as far as it goes. One must rejoin: Nor can its violence in warfare or criminal justice be absolute/terminal, which in warfare and capital punishment it by definition is. While the Church practises discerning discipline, it must be ever restorative in intent, this side of the Age to Come. This can be seen in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13; his teaching about conflict resolution in Matthew 18; Paul's call for restoration in Galatians 6, etc. Boersma himself writes correctly: “Confession and penance... constitute one of the ways in which the Church safeguards and protects its character as a hospitable community (*ibid.*, p. 228).” Vengeance is God's purview, which in itself is God's wrath in an agony of restorative covenant love (Romans 12:19 and context; compare the book of Hosea, especially 11:8)<sup>14</sup>. The Church is tasked to offer endless invitation to the sinner, carry out incessant peace evangelism.

Dr. Boersma mentions theologian James Alison's book *Raising Abel* with reference to René Girard, discussed below. But he never discusses the book. Alison posits a Christian call to embrace *now* an “eschatological” (non-violent) imagination/praxis, over against dominant “apocalyptic” (violent) practices in the Church and world. “This whole book,” he writes, “is structured around this principle of analogy: God's revelation is known thanks to a subversion from within of human violence (Alison, 1996, p. 33).” He says later:

The phrase ‘God is love’ is not one more slogan which we can tack on to the end of other things we know about God and which we can brandish when we

---

<sup>14</sup> John Driver argues thus: “God's response to the unfaithfulness of humanity... is wrath. However, in the biblical perspective the wrath of God is not an abstract law of cause and effect in a moral universe to which somehow even God must subject himself. Biblical wrath is an intensely personal response of God to the unfaithfulness of his people with a view to protecting the salvific covenant relationship which he has established in the Old Testament and the New....

“Inasmuch as God's wrath is his wounded covenant love, it is in reality more salvific than punitive in its intention.” (Driver, *op. cit.*, 1986, p. 183).

feel like it. It is the end result of a process of human discovery which constitutes a slow and complete subversion from within of any other perception of God... The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion (*ibid*, p. 48).

Finally, with reference to the ultimate violence of the traditional doctrine of hell, Alison writes:

The commonly held understanding of hell remains strictly within the apocalyptic imagination, that is, it is the result of a violent separation between the good and the evil worked by a vengeful god. It seems to me that if hell is understood thus, we have quite simply not understood the Christian faith; and the Christian story, instead of being the creative rupture in the system of this world, has come to be nothing less than its sacralization. That is, the good news which Jesus brought has been quite simply lost (*ibid*, pp. 174 & 5).

Boersma moves us towards a restorative peacemaking theory of the atonement, but ultimately posits Christ's work as ahistorical, its imitation beyond human attainment or attempt.

*If violence is the ultimate addiction of the human race, Boersma with most of his Reformed and Western theological colleagues would not join Violence Anonymous – or the church! – to learn the ways and practices of abstention from it.*

### ***Toward A Restorative Peacemaking Understanding of the Atonement (Part 2)***

René Girard is an historian, literary scholar, and anthropologist who is compared in intellectual impact in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to figures such as Freud, Hegel, and Nietzsche in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He is also a Christian (Roman Catholic) who taught in U.S. universities from 1950 until his retirement in 1995. A meeting of scholars and others takes place annually to discuss application of Girard's thought to a vast array of academic disciplines<sup>15</sup>.

Girard takes pains to state he is not a theologian. He says he reads the Bible "anthropologically"<sup>16</sup>, and considers it the most revolutionary text of all human history<sup>17</sup>.

A discovery made by him in his observation of human culture in terms of the question of the origins of violence, is a universal "scapegoat mechanism" he discerns that constantly operates to create social cohesion (peace) out of disintegrating violence that would

---

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/>.

<sup>16</sup> "His method is to begin, not with theology or the revelation of God, but with an understanding of human beings and human relations that the Bible and the early Christian tradition disclose (Girard, 2001, p. ix, Foreword)."

<sup>17</sup> He writes: "In the Hebrew Bible, there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut-and-dried thing. Rather, it is a process under way, a text in travail... a struggle that advances and retreats. I see the Gospels as the climactic achievement of that trend, and therefore as the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world (Hamerton-Kelly, 1987, ed., p. 141)."

threaten social cohesion (human culture). This is the ongoing saga of all cultures, no less Western “civilization”.

In other words, all cultures in all history, according to Girard, are based upon violence to guard against violence leading to dissolution. He claims that all cultures, and all cultural institutions, are based upon a “founding murder” that places violence at the very core of human culture time and world over.

After Girard’s presentation of this universal phenomenon throughout recorded history in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), he wrote, with two others, another book entitled *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987). In the interval between publication of these, Girard made (for him) the astounding discovery that the Bible alone stood out in world literature as that place that began to question the legitimacy of a “scapegoat mechanism” in response to violence, and ultimately subverted its legitimization.

This subversion was to be seen supremely in the story of Jesus, and supremely again in his death on the cross<sup>18</sup>. It is the story of a small group of dissenters who begged to differ with the scapegoating violence of the mob that cried “Crucify him!”, and justified his death as a way of bringing law and order to Israel in the face of resistance to Roman occupation.

The words of Caiaphas, the High Priest are illustrative of the scapegoating dynamic/mechanism universal in all cultures:

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life. (John 11:47-53)<sup>19</sup>

This for Girard is classic illustration of the “scapegoat mechanism” at work: to make one person die for all, which the author of John’s Gospel ironically says happened indeed, however not because of God’s will, but because of scapegoating violence endemic to the human condition in all cultures.

---

<sup>18</sup> “... Paul’s exalted idea of the Cross as the source of all knowledge is anthropologically sound (Girard, 2001, p. 3).”

<sup>19</sup> This is the rationalistic “lesser of two evils” argument that plagues much state violence rationalization. The implicit biblical witness here is: In contemplation of the lesser of two evils, choose neither. The explicit witness is: “Love your enemies.” Living this out at the individual and state levels is the only “impossible possibility” biblically called for, *pace* Augustine and Niebuhr.

Girard contradicts all readings of the Gospel that would understand Christ's death primarily in terms of bloodletting sacrifice willed by God which otherwise would be required of everyone of us, and will in fact be required by all who reject Jesus' substitutionary death. He states:

... it is important to insist that Christ's death was not a sacrificial one. To say that Jesus dies, not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices, is to recognize in him the Word of God: 'I wish for mercy and not sacrifices'. (Girard, 1987, p. 210)

What Girard is saying is: the revelation that comes through Jesus is of a God completely without violence. Therefore, it is a total misreading of the Gospels to believe that God required "satisfaction" for humanity's sins through the (violent) sacrificial death of his Son. Rather, living out a consistent life ethic of non-violence will always elicit violence, which in Jesus' case meant violent death on the cross. The early church understood that this very submission to humanity's violence (not God's demand for sacrifice!) became, paradoxically, its ultimate overthrow, hence humanity's salvation/liberation.

There is consequently a new light put on I John 2:2: "[Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." Why is this so?

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. (I John 2:3-11)

Christ's death is effective in all humanity, like leaven in flour, to enable us to fulfill our ultimate human calling: *love*, what James calls "the royal law": "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right." (James 2:8), and Paul calls "the fulfillment of the law": "Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Rom 13:10)<sup>20</sup>

I John a little later puts it bluntly: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." (I John. 4:20 & 21) *The biblical test case for love of God is love of*

---

<sup>20</sup> Love is above all *external (nonviolent) action* towards the other, as is God's action towards us in Christ, not mere *internal (loving) disposition*, *pace* Augustine, on which misreading of the biblical text and atonement (tragically for Western culture!) Augustine's just war doctrine turned.



*neighbour; the biblical test case for love of neighbour is love of enemy. Failure to love the enemy is failure to love God.*

It is hard to reconcile a message that says: “God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life (heaven) based upon Christ’s blood sacrifice for you.” with “But if you ignore this sacrifice, God hates you, and has a terrible plan for your after-life (hell), based upon your rejection of God’s blood sacrifice.”

Does this not make God into a god of unparalleled violence? For who has that kind of power to effect “eternal conscious punishment” upon one’s enemies except God? Does this not paint a picture of God that is worse than the worst the world has seen of violent tyrants? Does this not paint a picture of a schizophrenic god, at once overwhelmingly loving, but likewise eternally violent?

Timothy Gorringer argues no to such a god, based upon the founding texts, referencing Girard. I shall quote him at some length<sup>21</sup>:

If the New Testament were quite unambiguous, there would be no argument. Most commentators wish to hold both that Jesus preached a gospel of non-retaliation, of love for the enemy, *and* that he died a vicarious death. The problem is that, to the extent the notions of vicarious suffering presuppose scapegoating, then they presuppose violence. The New Testament can certainly be read as supporting satisfaction theory. What I have tried to argue is that it does not *have* to be read in this way, and that there is much which points in other directions. Suspicions about the conventional reading are raised both by the fact that it did not form a part of the understanding of the early Church Fathers, and also by the way it functions.

According to this argument, the Father of Jesus is still a God of violence, despite what Jesus explicitly says. Indeed he comes to be the God of unequalled violence, since he not only requires the blood of the victim who is closest to him, most precious and dear to him, but he also envisages taking revenge upon the whole of mankind for a death that he both required and anticipated.

In effect, mankind is responsible for all this. Men killed Jesus because they were not capable of becoming reconciled without killing [Girard, 1987, p. 213].

[Girard]... has put his finger on a profound truth about the way in which this interpretation of the crucifixion has functioned. Not only were the scapegoat and sacrificial themes amalgamated, but these were read *politically* in conjunction with a series of texts (Romans 13, I Peter 2, Titus 3) which taught that ‘the powers that be are ordained of God’. The judicial arm of the state, exercised above all in capital punishment, was understood, quite explicitly by

---

<sup>21</sup> Footnote 22 in square brackets is my insertion; the other square brackets except “[Girard]” are footnotes in Gorringer’s original.

Luther<sup>[22]</sup>, as the exercise of God's rule. Thus a story which was a unique *protest* against judicial cruelty came to be a *validation* of it. The community which was supposed to be not conformed to the world now underwrote its repressive practice. That this could happen, and not be perceived, was due not just to the ambiguity of the New Testament texts, but to the fact that profound and necessary truths about vicarious love are concealed within the conventional interpretation. The justification of retributivism by Christianity does not represent the intrusion of an 'alien element' but, like the justification of crusading, is a deformation of biblical faith. The church has contributed both to the mentality in which people make war, and to vengeful attitudes towards offenders. It is this which makes the work of exegesis on the founding texts so important [I am alluding to Yoder, 1972, p. 247].

Are we left, then, with irreconcilable interpretations, equally justified in terms of appeal to the founding texts? I believe not. Our fundamental hermeneutic principle must be derived from the overall *direction* of the New Testament documents. The central story they tell speaks of God's movement 'downwards and to the periphery, his unconditional solidarity with those who have nothing, those who suffer, the humiliated and injured'. This represents a diametrically opposite perception to the Roman view which assumed that, as Caesar once said to his rebellious soldiers, 'as the great ordain, so the affairs of this world are directed'. The crucifixion of Jesus, on the other hand, constitutes a 'permanent and effective protest against those structures which continually bring about separation at the centre and the margin'. [Wengst, 1987, pp. 140 – 1]. It is this protest, I contend, rather than an endorsement of expiatory sacrifice, which is the heart of New Testament witness. Turning Christianity into a cult centred on an expiatory death achieved long ago, and honoured in the present by other – or inworldly asceticism, represented an easy option, a refusal of the costliness of the gospel ethic, of a realisation of the Jubilee prescriptions. The recovery of a text of protest and critique would serve to create quite different mentalities and structures of affect from those avowed by Christendom, and it is these I shall argue for in the present debate on penalty (Gorringe, 1986, pp. 81 & 82)."

Gorringe states near the outset of his book: "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 (*ibid*, p. 7)". He follows two writers, Norbert Elias and David Garland, in his positing of the "structures of affect (*ibid*, p. 8)" which for several centuries predisposed an entire Western culture towards the practice of retributive/punitive justice in response to crime. Given that "satisfaction theory emerged, in the eleventh century, at exactly the same time as the criminal law took shape. (*ibid*, p. 22)", there was a fateful interplay between law and religion for the next millennium – to the despite of the gospel

---

<sup>22</sup> Luther wrote: "Let no one imagine that the world can be governed without the shedding of blood. The temporal sword should and must be red and bloodstained, for the world is wicked and is bound to be so. Therefore the sword is God's rod and vengeance for it (Megivern, 1997, p. 142)."

and criminal alike! Domestic and international state enemies equally could be brutalized and eliminated, in direct political consequence of the satisfaction/penal substitution theories of the atonement.

To quote again Gorringer's commentary:

The penal consequences of this doctrine were grim indeed. As it entered the cultural bloodstream, was imaged in crucifixions, painted over church chancels, recited at each celebration of the Eucharist, or hymned, so it created its own structure of affect one in which earthly punishment was demanded because God himself had demanded the death of his Son (*ibid*, pp. 102 & 103).

James Megivern has written the most comprehensive English text to date on the history of the death penalty in the West. In it he interweaves significant theological reflection. At one point he writes. "Once Christianity had become the state religion, the imperial values articulated in Roman law tended to overwhelm gospel values... As a result, the legacy of Constantinian-Theodosian Christianity to subsequent ages was highly ambiguous on the ethics of killing, whether in the case of war or capital punishment. Less and less attention was paid to that most troublesome of the teachings of Christ: the prohibition of the taking of revenge (Megivern, 1997, p. 50).<sup>23</sup>" In the Introduction he states: "As is evident, the problem being addressed extends far beyond the issue of capital punishment as such, since this practice is symptomatic and only one piece of the much larger puzzle, the puzzle of accounting for the oxymoronic phenomenon of 'Christian violence' in its many forms (*ibid*, p. 4)."

The *locus classicus* text on the atonement is Romans 5:6 – 11. It is a text not only completely devoid of violence modelled for humanity to execute, rather to endure; it is on the contrary peacemaking to the core. It reads:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

---

<sup>23</sup> Alistair Kee wrote, "But there is one conquest made by Constantine, the effect of which still continues to the present day, his most surprising yet least acknowledged... He conquered the Christian church. The conquest was complete, extending over doctrine, liturgy, art and architecture, comity, ethos and ethics... But this achievement, unheralded then, unrecognized now, represents Constantine's greatest conquest, the one which has persisted largely unchallenged through the centuries in Europe and wherever European Christianity has spread..."

"To be declared heretical by the norms of orthodox Constantinian Christianity may be a source of relief and encouragement to those who seek to follow Christ (1982, pp. 154 & 169)."

Another classic text on the atonement reads:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

This is, I submit, the direction Girard's groundbreaking work on sacrifice and the scapegoat mechanism takes us *politically*.

A third classic text on the atonement reads:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (II Cor 5:17-21)

The first line in this passage (verse 17) does not read "he is a new creation"! There is no (male) pronoun in the original (nor verb). It reads rather: "[*there is a*] new creation" – and should be trumpeted across the cosmos! For that short packed phrase explodes with the magnificent peacemaking thrust of the atonement, hence the title I chose for this essay: *The Cross: God's Peace Work*. The cross reverses all brokenness throughout the cosmos through reconciliation: between God and humanity (*theologically*); within ourselves (*psychologically*); amongst ourselves (*sociologically*); and within all creation (*ecologically, cosmologically*). It is all seamless; all equally part of God's work; all to be lived out *now* in light of Kingdom Come *then*.

*The cross: God's peace work*<sup>24</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

New Testament theologian Walter Wink, author of a significant three-volume study on the Powers, writes: "I submit that the ultimate religious question today should no longer be the Reformation's 'How can I find a gracious God?' It should be instead, 'How can I find God in my enemy?' What guilt was for Luther, the enemy has become for us: the goad that can drive us to God (Wink, 1987, p. 49)." He continues a little later: "It is our very inability to love our enemies that throws us into the arms of grace. What law was for Luther, the enemy has become for us (*ibid*, p. 50)."

---

<sup>24</sup> A recent conference explored the "peace work" of the atonement. An article about it is found at this site: <http://peace.mennolink.org/articles/atonementconf.html>. Two related sites are: <http://ecapc.org/>; <http://www.preachingpeace.org/>.

The New Testament witness is consistent: there is no love of God without love of enemy. How we treat the enemy is the ultimate indicator of how we respond to God. Avowed love of God is a religious farce if it is not shown in concrete love of the enemy. We read: “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do (James 2:18).”

Justification by faith is legal fiction if not demonstrated in the identical attitude towards neighbour and enemy that God takes towards us in the offer of justification in the first place. This is the biblical “plan of salvation” so central to the Gospels. “The strength of this plan of salvation [lies] in the tight bond it [creates] between divine grace and a total human response. Christian conduct [does] not follow (by some kind of inference or induction) as a consequence of salvation: it [is] itself salvation. The salvific gift of God and its human answer in following Jesus [are] two sides of one reality (McClendon, Jr., 1994, p. 118).”

This “reality” I submit is biblically Ultimate *Realpolitik*, that is *restorative peacemaking* to the core.

To a persecuted 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptist leader belongs the final word:

Mere faith alone is not sufficient for salvation... Yea, I confess... that mere faith does not deserve to be called faith, for a true faith can never exist without deeds of love (Balthasar Hubmaier, quoted in *ibid*, p. 117).

## **References**

Alison, James (1996). *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*, New York: Crossroad.

Aulén, Gustaf (1969). *Christus Victor: an Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Berardinelli, James (2004). *The Fog of War: A Film Review*, [http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/f/fog\\_war.html](http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/f/fog_war.html).

Bellinger, Charles K. (2001). *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Berman, Harold J. (1983/1997). *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Biddle, Tami (2002). *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: the Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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

- Christie, Nils (1981). *Limits to Pain*, Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Driver, John (1986). *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, Scottsdale/Kitchener: Herald Press.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke (2003). *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*, New York: Basic Books.
- Girard, René (1977). *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
- Girard, René (1987). *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Girard, René (2001). *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, New York: Orbis.
- Gorringe, Timothy (1996). *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, violence and the rhetoric of salvation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G., ed. (1987). *Violent Origins*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hauerwas, Stanley, and Griffiths, Paul J. (2003). "War, Peace & Jean Bethke Elshtain", *First Things*, 136, (October 2003), pp. 41 – 47, <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0310/articles/hauerwas.html>
- Hays, Richard B. (1996). *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, HarperSanFrancisco.
- Kalomiros, Alexandre (1980). *The River of Fire*, Seattle: St. Nectarios Press.
- Kee, Alistair. (1982). *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*, London: SCM Press Ltd.
- Leahy, William D. (1950). *I was There; the Personal Story of the Chief of Staff to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, Based on his Notes and Diaries made at the Time*, New York: Whittlesey House.
- Marshall, Christopher D. (2001). *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- McClendon, Jr. James Wm. (1994). *Doctrine* (Systematic Theology, Volume II), Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Megivern, James J. (1997). *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey*, New York/Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist Press.

Morris, Leon (1974). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, J.D. Douglas, General Editor, "Atonement", Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.

Northey, Wayne (2007). *Chrysalis Crucible*, Aldergrove: Fresh Wind Press.

Standahl, Krister (1976). "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West", *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, pp. 78-96.

Swartley, Willard (2006). *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Wengst, Klaus (1987). *Pax Romana: and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, London: SCM.

Wink, Walter (1987). *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.

Yoder, John Howard (1972). *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Zabelka, George (1980). "I Was Told it Was Necessary", [interview] *Sojourners* 1980, 9/8, pp. 12 – 15.