



Interactive, Partial Book Review of: [The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes](#), James Alison, New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998; 323 pp.

Introduction

Many years ago, I was tasked to present at a Christ and Violence Conference some kind of overview on the thought of [René Girard](#). I felt quite intimidated—especially because I had only 20 minutes to do so. (Though I thought then that if I had an hour, I'd still feel the same. . .)

I wrote my paper, and decided to run it by an independent Girardian scholar: Gil Bailie¹. He emailed back that he initially had thought he'd have no time to read it, but then did, intrigued that someone would attempt such a thing. He was very gracious in response.

In undertaking to do a partial interactive book review of the above, that kind of feeling has returned. Yet, after my second read just last month—and now a third time at a very slow pace for this review—I feel compelled to try to capture some of what Dr. Alison is getting at, in the hope that I may help others perhaps less versed in Girardian theory, catch some of the exuberant joy felt under the spell of Dr. Alison's entrancing interpretation. I think I get overall why there is *joy in being wrong*, and I strive to help others *get it* too. *Much more so, the hope is that others will be spurred on to put into practice what the author points us to*, and of course go to read the book(s) themselves to be spurred on and on.²

The Foreword by [Sebastian Moore](#)³ has this:

On almost every page of the second part of the book . . . Alison proceeds to unlock the Christian Scriptures. . . Over and over again. One had forgotten that theology could do this—if “forgotten” is the word. Has it ever? (vii)

¹ Some of his excellent publications are mentioned in Footnote 6.

² The reader is also directed to this delightful presentation of Girard's ideas: [The Theory of René Girard: A Very Simple Introduction](#). The serious, though dated (1996), academic readings are found in: [The Girard Reader](#), with an excellent Introduction.

³ Dom Sebastian Moore—a Benedictine monk—embraced René Girard's understanding of desire thus:

For Sebastian, Jesus was, to cite another title of his, the liberator of desire. After René Girard, he realised “desire is love trying to happen”—not a source of guilt, but a driving force—bringing us closer to the God who made us to love. This God, who made us to love, does not condemn our ways of loving. Sebastian was open about his homosexuality [as is James Alison: see for instance: “[An Interview with James Alison: Theology as Survival](#).”] and a critical voice in the debate on sexual ethics and reform in the Church, from the consultation before *Humanae Vitae* to the preparations for the Synod on the Family half a century later. . .

“At the heart of the universe there is a stillness, the place where God meets man in desire which is love trying to happen... The point is that what we believe and teach, what the saving Passion made Paul nearly incoherent with ecstasy, needs to find at the still point an energising of the heart. In contrast with this huge concentration is an insipid and consciously explanatory theology. We have to pray, with the deepest in us whither we are led by a contemplative tradition to come daily into this critical mass of divine energy, desire being love in and among us.” (Sebastian Moore OSB, 15th June 2013; [Dr Kate Sotejeff-Wilson remembers the theologian and poet ...](#)). His essay, later a book, captures some of this beautifully: “[Jesus the Liberator of Desire: Reclaiming Ancient Images](#).”

Agreed. It is that good! It is that Good News!! It is a great joy!!!

Moore also writes:

The work of Alison is, on Girard's own avowal, the most profound and thorough theological elaboration of his anthropological insight. [Karl] Rahner said long ago that what was needed was no longer a theology for man but an anthropology for God.⁴ Well, this is it. (vii)

In *Jesus and Marx: From Gospel to Ideology*, brilliant French sociologist and lay theologian [Jacques Ellul](#) wrote:

Recently we have witnessed the appearance of a new interpretation grill presented by René Girard in *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978),⁵ a nonsacrificial interpretation of biblical texts. Rather than presenting merely another interpretation, Girard gives us a genuine method. Since it fits no ideological canon, *I feel certain it will never attract notice or be taken into account by biblical scholars.* (86, Footnote 2; emphasis added).

This is a reminder to be careful in what we predict! The book under review (and others by Dr. Alison) are outstanding examples to the contrary!⁶

There is as well, since 1990, an annual conference called: [Colloquium on Violence and Religion](#), that attracts scholars and activists in a variety of disciplines—in particular literature, the social sciences, and *yes indeed, theology*. There is also a vast store of related resources to be discovered by clicking on the above.

One other thing Dom Moore advises is reading the Introduction and Chapter 1, then (if wished) jumping to Part II. *I shall follow his advice in this review*. Though this partial review was exhausting enough (but by no means exhaustive!), much of the rest of the book is excellent, but this below is enough for my purposes.

In fact, I have only highlighted aspects of the content mentioned that help me to understand (and that I *think* I understand). Again: turning to the book itself is the most rewarding—though *caveat lector*—it is very challenging, and for me at least, requires significantly focussed attention. Then much harder: conversion and action!

⁴ See on this: [The Anthropological Turn: The Human Orientation of Karl Rahner](#) by Anton Losinger. The Introduction begins:

Today dogmatic theology must be anthropology and such an 'anthropological turn' is necessary and fruitful. [Karl Rahner, "Theologie und Anthropologie," *Schriften zur Theologie* 8 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967): 43.]

⁵ *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford University Press; First Edition, 1987.

⁶ Please see the list of **James Alison**'s books here: <https://jamesalison.com/en/books/>. Other Girardian scholars' books are: *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence*, by **James G. Williams**; several works by **Robert Hamerton-Kelly**; **Gil Bailie**'s *God's Gamble: The Gravitational Power of Crucified Love*; and *The Apocalypse of the Sovereign Self: Recovering the Christian Mystery of Personhood*; and **Raymund Schwager**'s *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, and *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*.

“Total Depravity” No!, and a Different Atonement Story

Alison was raised “. . . with the radical Evangelical view concerning the absolute corruption of fallen humanity. . .” (2), one he now eschews, and in a way the “Why” is partial burden of the rest of book—and still so much more! He discovered that, according to the Council of Trent, desire (*epithumia*) in Christians is not necessarily sinful—*au contraire!*—that as *concupiscence*, it arises from sin and inclines towards sin, but there is great hope! In fact he spends an entire chapter on “Hope and Concupiscence” that I’ll discuss below.

He explains that upon discovering René Girard’s grand anthropological insights, he intuited a connection to the Christian doctrine of original sin, such that it. . .

. . . would be able to breathe spirit into the letter of the doctrine and offer a perspective, at once absolutely traditional and completely fresh, by which to live as a Catholic Christian⁷
. . . (3)

Hence the book under review, one the author hopes might help our attempts to forge the Christian story.

He sees the doctrine of original sin as ancillary to soteriology:

. . . indeed, it is my contention that the doctrine is really the explication of the critical anthropology which became available to us in the light of salvation. (4)

In Chapter 1 of Part II, Alison calls us to a shift in the story line of original sin, which story he states is “seriously inadequate.” The dominant Western narrative goes like this:

- God created the world as good.
- Adam and Eve fell from grace by committing the first sin, that was then passed down the annals of history to all humankind.
- God wanted to save us, and sent his Son to atone for humanity’s sin.
- The grace lost through Adam is restored through our appropriating that saving death.
- If we can hold onto that grace through moral living and the sacraments, we go to heaven⁸.

The author avers that the controlling factor in the story of salvation is the sin. . . .

But there is no Jewish doctrine of original sin, he points out, and the mess we’re in that Jesus came to rescue us from is not self-evident. So though the reigning story is inadequate, and since *all Christian doctrine is post-resurrection*, the sheer death-conquering reality challenges it, nonetheless the story above has an incredible hold on Christian imaginations, dictating the terms

⁷ “Catholic Christian” can readily be construed as *catholic* (universal) Christian.

⁸ There are of course variations within Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.

of reference of who God is. It also controls our understanding of the atonement⁹, and thus of Jesus' life and ministry. As well it sets the parameters of our moral struggle. For,

The new story offers a strikingly different perception of the same realities, but a perception that has to be very slowly elaborated as it gradually becomes available. (8)

Alison acknowledges the invitation to see things differently can be frightening, due to its entrenched hold on us. But it can be also,

Exhilarating, because in the new story¹⁰ it is the story of the deathless and unambiguous nature of God made available at the resurrection which leads to our being empowered to move beyond an unfinished creation, one which we tend to snarl up. (8)

The Anthropological Nature of Desire: Mimetic Theory

The writer proceeds to direct us to a process of discovery of our involvement in original sin. He begins with the anthropological nature of desire in which all humanity participates; drawing on René Girard's understanding of desire known as *mimetic theory*. Girard makes clear that this insight is *not his invention*, but rather one hit upon by many great writers such as Cervantes, Shakespeare, Stendahl, Proust, Dostoevsky, etc. The nature of desire is that it is structuring of, and structured by, human violence. We desire not lineally—with a direct line to the person/object desired—but. . .

All desire is triangular, and is suggested by a mediator or model. This imitative desire leads to conflicts, which are resolved by a group's spontaneous formation of unanimity over against some arbitrarily indicated other who is expelled or excluded, thereby producing a return to peace. In this way we humans create and sustain social order. (9 & 10)

The success of the arbitrary mechanism of expulsion of an individual is the blindness of the participants as to what is *really* going on, thereby enabling a victim all-unknowing to be scapegoated as source of the danger or evil in society.

There are three moments of mimetic theory:¹¹

1. The first moment is that of *imitative desire*. Example: Tom Cruise's bomber jacket in *Top Gun*. He becomes mediator of my desire. A friend asks me to go with him to buy a

⁹ There is much on my [website](#) about a doctrine of atonement that challenges the old story as seen above, and points to a far grander love-story of salvation for humanity. An outstanding recent book in this direction is by Catholic theologian [Elizabeth Johnson](#): *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*. One I contributed to 15 years ago, with authors from all the major Christian traditions, edited by Michael Hardin and Brad Jersak, is: [Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ](#). It has enjoyed a wide readership and reception.

¹⁰ In Part III, Chapter 10 (which I will not review), Alison asks the question, "Is This What the Church Believes?" In some detail, he answers affirmatively, both from considering the Catholic [Magisterium](#), and from reading [Saint Augustine](#) and [Thomas Aquinas](#).

¹¹ I describe this as well in my [René Girard and Violence 02-25-2014](#). (There is [much else](#) on my website about Girard's mimetic theory.)

bomber jacket. The one he hits upon is too expensive. Suddenly, there is no other bomber jacket in the store that I now want. I go back later and purchase it. My friend, upon seeing me wearing it is not amused. We quarrel over who wanted it first and wants it most. Our mutual suspicion deepens.

2. The second is a unifying expulsion—scapegoating—of someone. We play on the same team, so we must not let the antagonism (now half-hidden) interfere with our play. We suddenly hit upon someone on the team to direct our violence at. We work together to get him dropped. Successful, the bomber jacket quarrel forgotten, we're friends again.
3. The third moment (not necessarily achieved) is that of *revealed discovery* of our complicity in scapegoating violence and of the roots of that violence in our envious desire. (11)

For Girard, it is the biblical texts that are revelatory of the scapegoat mechanism in which all humanity throughout history participates. Girard points to Hebrew Scriptures thus:

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 underway, 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.¹²

Alison:

. . . Girard's understanding [is] that it has been in fact the work of biblical texts, culminating in those produced around the death and resurrection of Jesus, that have opened up "what we're really doing" in our social and cultural lives [that] made it possible for us to detect the innocence of our victims, and nudged us into trying alternative forms of creative human togetherness. (11 & 12)

Because an understanding of mimesis is central to Alison's theological argument, he explains that *mimesis* is more than *external imitation*, for it also involves the formation of our very *interior self* through being drawn into the imitation of others.

Mimesis is therefore interior to the constitution of humans and not merely something external added on to an already independent being. (12)

Girard mainly writes about *acquisitive mimesis* (sometimes called *possessive mimesis*)—followed by *conflictual* or *antagonistic mimesis*):

This is the desire whereby I imitate the desire of someone else for an object and so enter into rivalry with that person for an object. (12)

A little later:

¹² Quoted in Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G., ed. (1987). *Violent Origins*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; 141.

This is the moment of desire when, as the frenzy of desire causes the original object of the rivalry to lose importance, while the mutual imitation of all in the conflict continues to grow, at last the same imitation unifies the rivals against some arbitrary other whose expulsion brings peace. (13)

Alison points to one other modality of imitation, that of *pacific mimesis*, whereby one imitates a model where there is no object of desire to create rivalry, where one imitates ultimately Christ of the Gospels in nonrivalrous, pacific mimesis.

It is indeed desire that constitutes our humanity, but we can learn, through pacific mimesis, to have desire in us re-created as in the text of II Corinthians 5:17:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

This of course is the arduous process of *conversion*.

For Girard, much of modernity largely exhibits a desire that

. . . is the “interindividual¹³” living out of a sacrificial crisis without public resolution. (14)

And desire itself, writes French neuropsychiatrist, psychologist, philosopher and author, [Jean-Michel Oughourlian](#) (in step with Girard) is,

. . . the movement by which mimesis gives autonomy and individuality to humans. (14)

Alison explains that all desire is mimetic, and all mimesis is desirous. He continues:

That is, all imitation is part of a movement between people relating to the very constitution of their being. (14)

A final modality of negative mimesis is what Girard designates *metaphysical mimesis*¹⁴. This is where a person is. . .

So involved with the mediator or rival that we would use words like “prestige,” “snobbery,” and so on, to describe the desire—what in other circumstances would be called pride. (15)

Alison goes on to discuss Girard’s understanding of the process of hominization, which I won’t; except to note that,

¹³ This concept, closely related to intersubjectivity, is a term coined by psychiatrist [Jean-Michel Oughourlian](#) (along with Guy Lefort and René Girard) in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* to express their conviction that a monadic, isolated subject does not exist and that the self can only be understood in relation to others.

¹⁴ A classic contemporary example of colossal metaphysical mimesis is Donald Trump. But it is also the “grasping-after” reality of every tin-pot dictator, strongman, and fascist leader. Trump has said he wasn’t content to be any old billionaire, he wanted the world to know his ubiquitous footprint! And all hell has broken loose ever since he burst onto the political scene: one likely however only a mild warm-up, should he be successful (or not!) in the presidential election cycle of 2024.

. . . the constitution of [human] consciousness is linked to the victim and to the creation of the sacred that is strictly simultaneous with the development of human culture. (16)

Girard calls this the “genetic model,” whereby the victimage mechanism is passed on to all generations of humanity, such that,

The victim appears to be good and evil, peaceable and violent, life that brings death and death that brings life. (16)

And this means that there is no original “I” or “me,” but only one whose consciousness is brought into being through imitation of the desires of others—the triangulation of desire as discussed above.

Alison:

All infants are born into a world where the very desire that constitutes what comes to be their consciousness is already rivalistic, formed by the process of the constitution of human culture. . . (17)

But this raises the issue of the “double bind.” A child imitates the mother in reaching for a cuddly toy from her, but if it suddenly reaches for the kettle that he just saw her boil water in, in a panic she screams “No!” The message?: imitate me here, but don’t imitate me there—*the double bind*.

But it is mimetic desire that drives the child to act out its impulses, a desire already hopelessly rivalistic and competitive. When that child is part of a group, where there is acquisitive mimesis afoot,

Violence rages among the members of the group until the group settles, thanks to the working of conflictual mimesis, spontaneously and arbitrarily upon a surrogate victim, who, because unable to retaliate, offers no threat of continuing the violence. (18)

So, the “deserving victim” is expelled—murdered in ancient societies—at times more subtly in today’s, thereby producing a moment of peaceful unanimity, which is the foundation of the new social order. But once that peace pervades, the victim is rehabilitated (though dead), and may even be considered in antiquity a “god,” since it brought peace to that society.

The new group then tries ritually to repeat the process over the years. And prohibitions arise to forestall any repeat of the violent victimage mechanism that created the chaos in the first place. This all is done to create unanimity and order. Myths then develop around telling the story of the foundational murder in a way that disguises the truth of the actual killing. And real responsibility is displaced onto the gods or god in that society’s divine panoply.

But over time—possibly thousands of years—the rituals and prohibitions work less and less:

This is the period called the “sacrificial crisis” by Girard. Eventually the system of order wears down so far that another outbreak of violence occurs, leading to another blood-letting, culmination in another expulsion and the establishment of a new altar to a new god. (19)

Alison points to our Western culture as one such example. Not that it is any less “sacrificial,” but our blindness to the process is increasingly fragile, given the longstanding impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁵ So, while all other myths structurally are the same as the Christian story, contrary to them,

God is progressively revealed as on the side of the victim, not of the sacrificers. The old lie is undone from within.

The full revelation of the mechanism of the surrogate victim, and thus the introduction of definitive incredulity as regards its efficacy into the human community, is realized in the Gospels, and in particular in the passion of Christ. (20)

And so Christian Scripture—above all the Gospels—is the Grand Demythologizer.

Again, Alison underscores that Girard does not claim originality in introducing this mimetic theory. He allows he has perhaps pursued this discovery more rigorously, but it has been detected by the great novelists/playwrights such as mentioned above, and many others.

Part II: Stretching the Shape of Forgiveness

Chapter 4, entitled “The Resurrection and Original Sin,” has as first heading the book’s title: “**The Joy of Being Wrong.**”

Alison states that of course the apostolic witness does not have a developed doctrine of original sin—nor of the Trinity. He avers however that

. . . these doctrines are, in some sense, parallel and mutually dependent outworkings of the presence of that salvation in the midst of humanity. (115)

He reiterates that the starting-point for all Christian theology is the resurrection of the crucified and risen Lord. And the resurrection, while embraced within the framework of Jewish understandings of God, at the same time “blew apart” those beliefs about God. So,

The complete freedom and gratuity of God is learned only from the resurrection, not because it did not exist before, but because we could not know about or understand it while our understanding was shaped by the inevitability of death. (116)

¹⁵ In [Tom Holland’s *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*](#), one reviewer states:

Christianity’s principles . . . continue to dominate much of the world; Tom Holland’s thoughtful, astute account describes how and why . . . An insightful argument that Christian ethics, even when ignored, are the norm worldwide.—[Kirkus](#) (starred review)

Put differently: As a first step, God is indifferent to death whereas past awareness of God has been bounded by an all-too-human frame of reference structured by death: a death that has nothing to do with God, that not simply *is*, but *need not be*.

A second step is the sheer particularity of Jesus' execution by humans and *not willed by God* (*pace* the satisfaction and substitution theories of the atonement—see Footnote 9), thereby revealing the iniquity of his murder by religion and the state, mired as they are in all-too-human scapegoating mechanisms of death, in direct opposition to God's way with humanity.¹⁶

God, in raising Jesus, was not merely showing that death has no power over him, but also revealing that the putting to death of Jesus showed humans as actively involved in death. In human reality, death and sin are intertwined: the necessity of human death is itself a necessity born of sin. In us, death is not merely a passive reality but an active one, not something we merely receive but one we deal out. (116)

A third step is the raising up of Jesus for us. Alison:

The victim of human iniquity was raised up as forgiveness; in fact the resurrection was the raising up of the [generic] victim as forgiveness. This it was that permitted the recasting of God as love for us.¹⁷ (118)

Not only is death a mere human reality, one inflected by sin, but death as a human reality is also forgiven. And so,

If death is something that can be forgiven us, then we were not only wrong about God, but we were fundamentally wrong about ourselves. (118)

The Joy of Being Wrong

Hence *the joy of being wrong!* This being wrong however is *beyond just being mistaken*,

. . . but wrong as actively involved in death. . . This then might be said to be a first approximation to original sin: that the doctrine of original sin is the doctrine according to which divine forgiveness makes known the accidental nature of human mortality, thus permitting an entirely new anthropological understanding. (119)

The Gospel of John

The author checks the above assertion against apostolic witness: specifically the Gospel of John, chapter 9, and Saint Paul.

In the Johannine text, we meet a blind man from birth interacting with Jesus. The story unfolds as at once one of inclusion and exclusion. By Jesus' healing the man, he suddenly is theoretically

¹⁶ Classic instances are retributive justice systems. For a robust critique of such death-dealing systems of justice through a Girardian lens, please see my friend Vern Redekop's: [Scapegoats, the Bible, and Criminal Justice: Interacting with René Girard](#). As well, my website abounds in such critique. See: [Restorative Justice](#); and [Justice That Transforms—Book Series—First 3 Volumes Fall 2018](#), etc.

¹⁷ See: [I John 4:8](#). As well: [John 3:16 - 17](#); [Romans 3: 21 – 26](#); and again [I John 4: 9 – 10](#).

included in the life of Israel. But after interrogation by the Pharisees, the blind man is immediately thrown out. Then increasingly, the blind man who gained sight, gains also *insight* into who Jesus is, and he worships him. Meanwhile, the Pharisees, who believe they truly “see,” end up blinded by their spiritual arrogance. We read:

Jesus’ final comment, “For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind,” is his assessment of the whole story. . . This is part of the ironic Johannine recasting of judgment: it is by being crucified that Jesus is the real judge of his judges. . . the sense in which Jesus is a judge is a subversion from within of the notion of [punitive] judgment. The judgment that excluded the former blind man is revealed as the judgment (also discernment) that the expellers are really blind. (121)

Alison sees in this story a revolution in the understanding of sin. At the beginning of the tale, the blind man is thought blind due to his or his parents’ sin. At the end however, *the very act of exclusion is the sin!* Thus:

. . . the real blindness is the blindness which is not only present in those who exclude, but actually grows and intensifies during the act of exclusion. (121)

Sin in other words is recast as involved in mechanisms of judging, exclusion, and scapegoating violence. Alison says that when this insight is linked to other texts in John, there begins to emerge a theology of original sin. First then, sin is blindness to our complicity in the murderous order of the world—a governing principle—in which all humanity is caught unless enlightened by the revelatory Light of the World. This subversion of our understanding of sin connects to that same subversion of our understanding of the Father. For,

The doctrine of original sin is the anthropology that is uncovered by the resurrection as the necessary counterpart to the discovery that God is Trinity.

...

Being wrong/blind can be forgiven: it is insisting on being right that confirms our being bound in original murderous sin. (125)

The Letter to the Romans: 1 - 8

Alison moves then to Saint Paul, from whom a new theology about God and a new anthropology emerge in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ.

He considers the first eight chapters of Paul’s letter to the Romans, and draws on Robert Hamerton-Kelly’s [*Sacred Violence: Paul’s hermeneutic of the Cross*](#), especially chapter 4, “Sacred Violence and Original Sin.”

Hamerton-Kelly challenges the idea that “wrath” is inflicted by God, as Alison explains:

That is to say, the wrath, rather than being an act of divine vengeance, is a divine nonresistance to human evil. (127)

He speaks in terms of the text indicating that God handed us over to our own choice of doing evil. But even more, in the connection of “handed over” with Gospel texts,

I would suggest that it is the handing over of the son to our killing him that is in fact the same thing as handing us over to our sins. Thus wrath is life in the sort of world that kills the son of God. (127)

Paul’s only other use of “wrath” is in I Thessalonians 2:16 where the death of Christ is caused solely by human violence, and not through any kind of “satisfaction substitution” willed by God—as seen above. This “wrath” demonstrates at once who God in essence is (*nonviolent*) and who humanity in essence is (*violent*).

Alison then discusses the Old Testament’s discovery of sin, one that is the inverse of what is found in mythologies worldwide. In the latter,

The perspective is always the same, a collective exculpation at the expense of a victim and consequently a vision of good and evil that is blind to its own origin. (133)

For the Hebrews, law is the main source of their understanding of sin. But it

. . . institutes a social project for the victim people [who suffered ritual expulsion from Egypt] so that it not engage in the sort of victimary practices in which the former persecutors of Israel had engaged. . . The law is given as part of a covenant of love. . . Here it is quite clear that sin is defined in terms not of some maintenance of a social order, or magico-ritual abuses, but in terms of a positive theological reality: a divine plan, from which sin is a form of defection. (134)

And,

Hence the arrival at simple universal prescriptions such as [Leviticus 19:17 – 18](#): if the problem is fratricide, then the solution is love of neighbor as self. (137)¹⁸

Skandalon

In the following chapter, Alison moves on to examine Jesus’ life in light of being a *skandalon* (stumbling block), by whom the world is scandalized, but his disciples have been learning not to be such according to the world. This in order to build a new edifice with Christ as cornerstone. We read:

¹⁸ This of course was entirely jettisoned—its abject opposite activated—in the founding of the modern state of Israel, and since. Hence the horror of the Gaza *über*-massacres in 2023; beginning with the Nakba of 1948, described thus in [Wikipedia](#):

The **Nakba** ([Arabic](#): النكبة, [romanized](#): *an-Nakbah*, [lit.](#) ‘the catastrophe’) was the violent displacement and dispossession of [Palestinians](#), and the destruction of their society, [culture](#), identity, political rights, and national aspirations.^[1] The term is used to describe both the events of 1948, as well as the ongoing occupation of the [Palestinian territories](#) (the [West Bank](#) and the [Gaza Strip](#)) and persecution and displacement of Palestinians throughout the region.^[2]

There is only one way not to be locked into the scandals of this world, and that is by learning to forgive, which means not allowing oneself to be defined by the evil done. (144)

We humans are locked into reciprocities of doing violence and are called instead into reciprocities of perfect gratuity in imitation of the Father in whom there is no *skandalon*. Alison sees in Matthew 7—Jesus’ call to “*Judge not*”—that all judgment is scandalous because we have already demonstrated the presence of a log in our own eye. Saint Paul in Romans 2:1 says bluntly:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

Alison points out that this understanding of *skandalon* turns on an understanding of desire. Hence, Matthew 7: 7 -11:

⁷“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸“For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹“Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰“Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask him!

It’s not remotely that God will give us anything we want when we pray as in the “Wealth and Health Gospel,” rather, he will rightly order our desires such that he gives us what we really need, as in Psalm 37:4:

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Prayer in this respect then is a constant re-education out of desire invariably tainted by *skandalon* violence,

. . . into a mode of desiring and receiving gratuitously. . . we must treat others in the same way, learning how to substitute a gratuitous reciprocity for a reciprocity formed by the *skandalon*. (144)

Again, the point is, we humans without exception are locked into the *skandalon*—the way of death. So,

It is exactly at this level of our constitution in death-related desire that Jesus’ ethical teaching seeks to set us free by teaching a new, but no less reciprocal, form of desire, which will enable us to fulfil the law and the prophets from the heart. (145)

So the real content of the sin of the devil from the beginning (see [I John 2 - 3](#)) is murderous hatred—the absolute inverse of love—that bars one from eternal life—that is, as we’ll see below, on offer within History as we practise pacific mimesis of Christ.

The Violent Sacred

Alison proceeds to discuss Paul in terms only of understanding that, first,

(a) *The human condition is constituted by distorted desire.* (148)

The commandment to love the neighbor as oneself is universal, according to Paul in Romans 1:32.¹⁹ It fulfills the original prohibition in Genesis, the former designed to restore a fractured human relationality. Alison, drawing on Jewish interpretations, suggests this is indication of how envy entered the world. God was seen as withholding something from humanity, thus making God into a rival. This leads to death, thereby creating the “violent sacred” at the root of all idolatry and human culture. And so the original prohibition in Genesis is turned into a stumbling block; and for Paul, the law tilts in the same direction. Consequently, the whole of human life and culture are utterly infected with distorted desire. Hence,

Mimetic Interdividuality

(b) *The human condition is lived out in a mimetic interdividuality in which it is the “other” who forms and moves the “I.”* (151)

There could be no clearer indication of a mimetic psychology than the de-possession of the “I” formed by the world and the constitution of an “I” that is possessed by Christ.

Now, with the coming of Christ, by producing an imitation of Christ, the Holy Spirit forms a new “I” that is at peace with God (Rom. 5:1²⁰) (151)

The Ubiquitous Human Condition

(c) that in Paul’s view *the human condition* constituted by distorted desire and lived out in mimetic interdividuality *comes from and leads to death.* (154)

(d) that in Paul’s view, the human condition which I have been outlining above *has been from the beginning and affects the whole of the human race.* (155)

This, explains Alison,

. . . permits a further approximation to the doctrine of sin: that it describes the universal human distortion of desire toward death within an interdividual, or mimetic, understanding of human psychology. (156)

Original Sin in the Context of the Church

Alison’s chapter 6, “Original Sin Known in its Ecclesial Overcoming,” posits that the post-resurrection foundation of the Church is *both a theological and an anthropological reality.* And

¹⁹ Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

²⁰ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . .

where, he avers, in the Gospels there is a shift in theological understanding, it is attended by a shift also in anthropological understanding.

He then identifies a *third* angle the New Testament has on original sin, and first lists the other two, then the third:

- One derived from the original murder by Cain.
- One derived from an original distortion of desire in Adam—whereas in Christ, the Second Adam, we are learning the undistorting of desire.
- One derived from an understanding of an original futility in the foundation of human social order—that of *Babel*, whose counterpart is *Pentecost*.

Called to a Pacific Imitation of Christ

Followers are called to a pacific imitation of Jesus,

That is to say, they learn to receive their identities as human beings from an entirely nonrivalrous, nonenvious, nongrASPing practice of life. (168)

For only Christ is foundational, and our only identity and being foundational

. . . is strictly derivative from the one foundation who is Christ. (168)

So Alison states:

It is the ecclesial hypostasis [underlying fundamental church reality] alone which, as discipleship produces the undistorting of desire, enables fraternity, because the social order is itself the bearer of gratuity. (169)

Central Thesis About Original Sin

We come to *his central thesis* on the next page:

It is (perhaps) the central aim of this essay to show that original sin, precisely as understood from the standpoint of the ecclesial hypostasis, is not foundational at all. It is the revelation of a failed, futile foundation. There is nothing solid about original sin, nothing on which anything can be based. The doctrine is above all *not an exercise in culpabilization, not a seeking to attribute some foundational guilt*, but a parting glance at the drastic nature and the futility of a condition out of which we are being empowered to move. (170 & 171; emphasis added)

In what appears as a superficial reaction to the doctrine of original sin that attributes guilt to humanity, one hears said: *not “original sin” but “original blessing”²¹*. While God did indeed

²¹ A classic expression of this is the book [Original Blessing](#) by Matthew Fox, an Episcopalian priest, formerly a Dominican. We read in [Wikipedia](#):

Due to his questioning of the doctrine of [original sin](#), in 1988 [Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger](#)—the future Pope Benedict XVI—forbade Fox from teaching or lecturing for a year. Fox wrote a “Pastoral Letter to Cardinal Ratzinger and the Whole Church,” calling the Catholic Church a dysfunctional family. After a year

bless his original creation, and with it humanity—calling it *good*²²—Alison argues that this misses the point, namely, that original sin is above all *original futility* in how humanity is structured according to rivalistic mimetic desire, out of which we are invited into freedom! Hence we read in Romans 8:

²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not by its own will, but because of the one who subjected it, in hope ²⁴that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Hence too Paul’s cry in Galatians 5:

¹It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

The expressions “bondage to decay” and “yoke of slavery” signal the way of the world which is caught in endless mimetic rivalry that leads to death. Alison writes,

. . . it was really an efficacious and constructive revelation of a purely gratuitous project that existed even before the human capacity for foundational distortion had come into being. (171)

In other words: Original sin is not God’s decree/judgment about/of humanity—with its attendant utterly negative anthropology (“total depravity”)—rather that out of which we are being called: endless violent mimesis.

The word *dei* [Greek: it is necessary] in these contexts has a quite specific meaning: it refers to the necessity that the human order— based on death—is in thrall to. What enables Jesus to point this out is the willingness of divine gratuity to allow itself to suffer the consequences of this human order precisely to free it from the realm of the necessity of death. (171 & 172)

Alison thus observes:

It is in this that the new and definitive covenant made by Jesus consists: in the making present of a new way of being human that is the fulfillment of the original intention²³, access to which is made available by our being constantly unlocked from our insertion into the futility of the human foundation. (175)

“sabbatical,” Fox resumed writing, teaching, and lecturing. In 1991 his Dominican superior ordered Fox to leave the [ICCS](#) [Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality that Fox founded in 1976] in California and return to Chicago or face dismissal. Fox refused.¹⁶¹ (cont’d. . .)

Fox’s conflicts with Catholic authorities climaxed with his expulsion from the Dominican Order for “disobedience,” effectively ending his professional relationship with the church and his teaching at its universities.

A personal note: It seems tragic that Fox was expelled by the Catholic Church on the issue of original sin. As I understand Alison, such expulsion is classically rivalistic mimetic desire, at odds with the pacific mimesis of Christ. Then again, I have no awareness of the dynamics at the time, so choose to “*judge not.*”

²² This as indicated flies in the face of any kind of “total depravity” about humanity deserving death.

²³ I. e. “*Original blessing!*”

Paul likewise insists on this: namely, his call to imitate the self-giving of the victim. So when in I Corinthians 4, Paul urges his readers to imitate him as he does Christ, it is not a kind of misplaced arrogance, or self-aggrandizement about his own greatness as some of Paul's critics suggest,

It is his free self-giving and willingness to subject himself to the condition of others for their own sakes that make Paul an imitator of Christ ([I Cor. 9:19 - 23](#)). [with not a whiff of pride!]. . .—the learning of a new sort of desire which is not in rivalry with any desire at all, because it is the pacific imitation of the one who is on his way into expulsion.)
(176)

And such self-subjection for others eventuates in freedom, that he urgently wishes on others! He yearns to see his readers embrace this freedom from rivalistic desire—a *grasping ego*—that destroys community.

Paul's use of "flesh" then is not a notion of his being a killjoy of legitimate desires, perhaps sexual above all (*pace* [Saint Augustine](#)²⁴), rather,

The flesh is precisely the world of rivalistic desire leading to futile foundationalism. (176)

Alison sees also in Paul the undoing of the *skandalon* to be the heart of the building up of the Church. His famous hymn to love in I Corinthians 13, mentioned above, celebrates a desire that is entirely peacefully mimetic.

The Trinity, Creation, and Original Sin

In Chapter 7, "The Trinity, Creation, and Original Sin," Alison indicates that in Chapter 14 of John, the "many mansions" are the very indwelling of the Father and Son in us.

So the Father's house now appears clearly to consist in the creation of many dwellings among human beings. (190)

But it is precisely loving imitation of Jesus' self-giving that opens the door as it were to the welcomed habitation of the Father and Son. Alison explains:

That is to say, belief is a [gnosiological](#) discovery which is simultaneously a participation in life. It is not such as a simple acquisition of truths, but as an expanding possession of the believer by the Father and the Son creating eternal life in the midst of this world through the creation of an imitative adhesion by the believer to the word and self-giving of Jesus. . . [John] explains that the reason for writing is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. [John 20:31, and "what exegetes take to be the last verse of the original Gospel. . ."]

²⁴ We read in [Wikipedia](#):

Augustine claims that, following the Fall, sexual lust (*concupiscentia*) has become necessary for copulation (as required to stimulate male erection), sexual lust is [consequently] an evil result of the Fall, and therefore, evil must inevitably accompany sexual intercourse (*On marriage and concupiscence* [1.19](#)^[228]). Therefore, following the Fall, even marital sex carried out merely to procreate inevitably perpetuates evil (*On marriage and concupiscence* 1.27; *A Treatise against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 2.27).

In this we can see that belief plays a rôle for John that is absolutely identical with that of justifying faith in Paul. It is the access to the truth of God-beyond-death made manifest in the self-giving of Jesus, and this access it is which permits the reordering of the whole of a person's life so that it is no longer bound in by the parameters of death. (191)

On the next page, Alison elaborates:

Belief is the hypnotic draw into the security of imitation. By it we are empowered ourselves to act as if death were not and so to create life stories which have no end and which are not affected by the judgment of this world with its story line etched in the monotony of rivalry and death. (192)

On the Trinity,

The bringing into being of the understanding of the Trinity was (and is) also the making accessible of the original dynamic participation in God which is the fruit of the beneficent mimetic bringing into being of the creator Spirit, that is to say, the original image of God of which [Genesis 1: 26 – 27](#) gives us a distant inkling. (202)

The Trinity is a perfect structure of. . .

The creative mimesis which was to bring us to become sharers in divine life. (202)

There is utterly no rivalry within the Trinity, and so we are invited to become caught up in that dynamic of *peaceful mimetic interdividuality*, namely the *ecclesial hypostasis* at its most pacific, to become collectively as it were and some suggest, *a kind of fourth partner in the Trinitarian dance of love*. This dance was referred to by ancient Church Fathers as [perichoresis](#).²⁵

In this respect, and as John sees it, Jesus is. . .

. . . the original man, the trinitarian image of God, bringing into being a new creation. (204)

This of course is Paul's statement in II Corinthians 5:17, mentioned above. It also resonates with Paul's claim in I Corinthians 15:

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. ⁴⁸As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

²⁵ *Circumincession* is a Latin-derived term for the same concept.^[2] . . .

Modern authors extend the original usage as an analogy to cover other interpersonal relationships. The term "co(-)inherence" is sometimes used as a synonym.^[5] ([Wikipedia](#)) *Peaceful interdividuality*—as explained above—is the preferred relational term for Alison.

Alison moves on to consider that ecclesiality is actual participation in the very (*re*)creation of the world. He writes:

That is to say, the creative activity of God in the midst of the world is subjected to realizing itself as a sign of something not available within the world as we know it.

...

I suggest that the creative activity of God made present in imitative dependence on the practice inaugurated by Jesus takes a very precise form: what we call the forgiveness of sin. . . I mean that the whole visible practice of the ecclesial hypostasis *is* the forgiveness of sin. The creative self-giving up to death (because unmoved by death) in the midst of human violence, forgiving that violence, *is* what divine creation looks like in the midst of the creation-shot-through-with-vanity in which we live. (208)

Alison declares that in practical terms, forgiveness of sins is central²⁶—

. . . a process of recovery of creatureliness always passes through our creating signs of the forgiveness of sins for others. (209)

He adds a footnote after “others” about strictly interpersonal forgiveness that is succinctly brilliant. I shall therefore copy it in full:

When I forgive someone who has hurt me, I am not performing a juridical act. Before, I was a prisoner, locked (by resentment) into the hurt which the other inflicted on me, living in function of that other person, and thus subjected to the receiving and the giving out—perpetuation—of violence. By forgiving that person I am actually participating in God’s bringing me into *being* as part of the new creation, not run in function of futility, but a sign of something else. To the extent that the other person is enabled to see and participate in that sign (for I may have to forgive the person without him or her knowing or asking for forgiveness), then what I am creating is an efficacious sign of the reconciliation of all humanity with God: the bringing into being of the new creation. It is this that is behind the Matthean insistence that we enter into the perfection of God by not allowing ourselves to be defined by the violence of the other. ([Matt. 5:38 - 48](#)) (209)

But according to the seeming solid order of the world—yet is in fact futility—forgiveness is a sign of weakness, and the practitioners are of no account. So Alison cites Paul’s classic inversion of the “strong worldly standards” of the old creation—by which the weak have been cast out—in I Corinthians 1:26 – 28:

²⁶Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are. . .”

²⁶ This is also seen as central in Matthew 18:15 - 22, and in the Lord’s Prayer.

The author ends Chapter 7 with:

We talk of original sin because the only way that God can realize creation in our midst and involving us is as forgiveness. It is the creative forgiveness, which is the bringing into being of the ecclesial hypostasis through the self-giving victim on the way out of the world, that defines the state of the apparently “strong” world, in fact passing away, as one marked by original *sin*. (210)

Hope and Concupiscence

Chapter 8 begins with the above title.

The author discusses “**The Eschatological Imagination**²⁷,” acknowledging that some see in the early church’s eschatological avowal either a playing down of “this world,” or a delay in the *Parousia*. The former is resisted in theologies of liberation; the latter sees Jesus and the apostolic witness to be simply mistaken.

The important thing in the eschatological imagination is,

. . . the beginning of the living out of the deathless time participating in eternity even now, something that already happens before this generation passes away. (219)

Time itself within the purview of this imagination is the time of history that has ceased post-resurrection to be a theological reality. It will come to an end when it will come to an end. That is irrelevant to living in pacific mimesis of the crucified Christ. New time post-resurrection is what counts. Thus,

Any final “apocalypse” will be of purely human making, the outworking of death-related rivalistic desire. (219)

In this light, Alison sees our participation in time and history as redundant and futile: “original sin” that we have been set free from, though we have long been captive to. In answer to the question, “*Can we be good without God?*,” Alison’s point is that living in this new “time warp,” freed from a culture of death, in retraining our minds²⁸ to do good—means disentangling ourselves from the death-orientation of surrounding culture, towards doing justice²⁹.

Alison moves on to *concupiscence*,

²⁷ He devoted an entire book to this understanding: [Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination](#).

²⁸ See Romans 12:1 & 2:

¹Therefore I urge you, brothers, on account of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

²⁹ A justice as in [Matthew 23:23](#), drawing on Micah 6:

⁸He has shown you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you
but to act justly, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God?

. . . the disordered state resulting from original sin such that even when a person has been set free (by baptism³⁰) that person is still heavily inclined to sin though this inclination can be successfully struggled against. . . (221)

The writer claims that original sin is discovered at the very moment it became possible to leave it behind. So being pre-formed by the multiplicity of desires in our participation in the death-oriented ways of the world, concupiscence is, while not a sin,

. . . but a condition, and one we are called to collaborate in changing from within, so that we may “be run by” the beneficent creative mimesis of God which brings the new creation into being through and with us. (222)

Pre-formed by original sin according to the order of the world, we are to be *re-formed* in our desires (Romans 12:2 calls it *trans*-formation) through creative mimesis of the Holy Trinity. Alison points to the interface of these two modes of desire spelled out clearly by Saint Paul in [Romans 7:15 - 25](#).

He takes pains to assert how totally we are in thrall to the utterly death-oriented ways of the world, in our

. . . intelligence, sexuality, will power, affectivity, memory, way of being involved in history, sense of time, consciousness, conscience. . . (222)

Then he continues:

In exactly the same way as it was the depth of forgiveness made present in the eschatological imagination that reveals the cultural omnipresence of concupiscence; and this hope, of course, reveals the concupiscence as something that can be overcome. (222)

Alison asserts that if this is the universal distorted human condition, then no amount of “law” *qua* “legal rules/state criminal justice systems of punishment and retribution” can ever be the basis of Christian morality. For “law” shares in the same distorted anthropological state—strictly rivalistically mimetic and man-made—and hence invariably appears as punitive/retributive justice³¹. Alison makes a classic point, one not grasped by Church morality police, or secularists³²:

The important feature of this understanding of the roots of Christian morality is *that it respects essentially the priority of grace over law*: it is because we are being given something that we are able to do without other things. (227; emphasis added)

³⁰ For Alison in the Catholic and Orthodox practices; for Protestant traditions, the embrace of the spirituality of baptism: death to self and raised in newness of life—metaphorically for all traditions.

³¹ See Footnote 16, where I point to Restorative Justice work I have been caught up in since 1975.

³² “Super-Christians” as it were, rightly rejecting such death-distorted morality, and with it *authentic Christianity that formed their ethics in the first place*. [David Cayley](#) writes:

Modern [secular] reformers complain, quite justly, about the violence of Christianity, René Girard says, but they fail to notice that “they can complain [only] because they have Christianity to complain with.”—[Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey](#), p. 404. Please also see Footnote 15.

So when in *My Fair Lady*, Alfred Doolittle belts out “[With a Little Bit of Luck](#),” his “theology” and that of the creators of the musical could not hold a more opposite view to a concept of the Christian morality Alison is talking about. Doolittle sings:

They're always throwin' goodness at you
But with a little bit of luck
A man can duck
The Lord above made man to help his neighbour
No matter where, on land, or sea, or foam
The Lord above made man to help his neighbour but
With a little bit of luck
With a little bit of luck
When he comes around you won't be home.

Alison states to the contrary:

[An eschatological imagination] depends on an entirely positive view of desire: we can desire things that are good for us, and should³³, and these desires will not be frustrated—rather than having us engage in any voluntaristic struggle with our desires, which very struggle remains within the mode of the desire that is to be overcome. (228; emphasis added)

So Jesus was pointing towards the satisfaction of *real desires* that alone exhibit the [Three Theological Virtues](#)—*Faith, Hope, and Charity*—*leading to freedom and joy—literally out of this world, yet realizable now!*

We’re called then to leave Mr. Doolittle to track down the “drinks and girls all over London³⁴,” but they never satisfy or fulfill; they never liberate; they, in [Robbie Burns](#)’ words, in [To a Mouse](#) leave us so often with this bitter lesson:

*The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men
Gang aft agley,
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain
For promis’d joy. . .*

Redeeming the Time

Alison continues with a discussion of how the Church is called to redeem the time, namely by living out the “new creation” within the context of the old order of rivalistic mimetic desire that is passing away, moving towards its own pointless and futile end. *Interdividuality* is still the

³³ The Introduction to the incredible *Love* panegyric of [I Corinthians 13](#) is I Corinthians 12:31:

³¹But eagerly *desire* the greater gifts.

And now I will show you *the most excellent way*.

The most excellent way of *desire*, because it is the most freeing, and the most God/neighbour/enemy-oriented is of course [Agape](#). And the “most excellent way” therefore, is desiring Love above all.

³⁴ From: [Get Me To the Church on Time](#).

human condition in the new creation, but the dynamic is the inverse of that in the old. Alison writes:

The conclusion to this passage is almost embarrassingly apropos of the analysis I have been trying to set out: “Therefore be imitators [*mimétai*] of God as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:1 – 2).” (231)

The author underscores the absence of any kind of world-denying escapism or “pie in the sky” understanding at work. On the contrary, the very living out the “new creation” will clash with the old order, the old creation of death-embracing mimetic rivalry. The process of disentangling ourselves from the old web and way of death-oriented desire is long and arduous, requiring patience and wisdom, but it is the way of “redeeming the time, for the days are evil (Ephesians 5:14).” This Alison calls living out the “eschatological imagination.” He says it is “inherently historical”—to be lived fully within futile historical time that is passing away.

The History of the Victim

The above vision, Alison states,

Enters into conflict with any universalist vision of history or progress. It suggests that there is no such thing as a universal secular history, but that there are only a multitude of histories, constructed by people who by their work give sense to time. . . . The bringing into being of the ecclesial hypostasis, complete with eschatological imagination, is the empowering of people to construct history around those who are not, those who are going out of being, those whom the vanity and power of the world emptied of sense and of meaning. (232 & 233)

Living out this new vision above all creates a new history around the victim, brought about by the crucified and risen victim. The “*forgiving victim*” is central to this new story, this new history. Girard in his essay,

. . . “History and the Paraclete³⁵” gives an extended meditation on the way in which the presence of the Gospel texts, making visible the founding murder, has acted inexorably, and often against the understanding of those who thought themselves faithful to those texts, to reveal the mechanisms of persecution, the self-deception flowing from murder that is the basis of the distorted desire of “this world.” (233)

³⁵ [*The Scapegoat*](#), (London: Athlone, 1986) 198 – 212.

Since the publication of the book reviewed, Girard also has written: [*Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*](#) (I’m honoured to have a physical copy in French, signed by the author, while at the 2008 COV&R Conference in Riverside, California—the last I presented at: [*Achever Clausewitz: Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre*](#).)

Alison points to this new imagination at work in history *to desacralize the social order*: one upheld as much by the left as by the right. In a nod to *liberation theology*, Alison claims this way of being embraces at once the supernatural working of God, and a sacralization of history,

. . . only by its construction around the victim. (234)

The chapter concludes with an understanding that,

It is how we forge the forgiveness we have received into a real creative human presence for others, enabling them too to enter into the beneficent mimesis of the new creation. It is as we are unbound into the possibility of a creative imagination beyond death that we struggle in hope between forgiveness and the new creation in the time of liturgy and prayer. (236)

This brings to mind Romans 12:

¹Therefore I urge you, brothers, on account of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship [or: *your reasonable service*]. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

Alison might add. . .

And so we pray ([Luke 11:4](#)):

Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And our “reasonable service” has had vast human expression in the life of the Church.³⁶

In Chapter 9, **Reimagining the Symbol of Original Sin**, Alison considers the historicity of original sin. Again, it is stated there is no “originary act” by a mythical Adam and Eve in view that was “original sin.”

For Paul, Alison argues,

. . . the law, rather than being God’s bulwark against human violence was a human way of sacralizing violence, as shown in the crucifixion of Christ and Paul’s own zealous persecuting of Jesus in his followers.³⁷

...

In the light then, of Christ’s self-giving up to death and bringing to an end the law and permitting a sociality which lives the deepest intention of the law without needing to be

³⁶ One contemporary chronicler is [Robert Ellsberg](#) of [Orbis Books](#), who has written/published many books on “saints” of all descriptions, such as: [Blessed Among Us: Day by Day with Saintly Witnesses](#).

³⁷ The most advanced religious system of the day, and the most advanced state legal system of the day, conspired together to crucify the Lord of Glory!

bound by the law, it becomes possible to engage in a rigorously christological demythologization of God's establishing the protective laws against violence. (250)

Later in the chapter, Alison posits, following [John Milbank](#) and others, that Christian theology

. . . is an entire social theory from a revealed perspective, a rival discourse to other social theories, whose internal problems it seeks to resolve more coherently. (258)

In searching for a theory of human origins, definitive empirical evidence is unavailable to all parties, secular and Christian. Rather, *a view of humanity* is the controlling factor in such a search. It is, argues Alison, part of the requisite responsibility of the Christian theologian to address this question. Christian theology rightly has a thoroughgoing anthropological vision—as mentioned by Sebastian Moore at the outset, and called for by Karl Rahner.

Under the heading, *Mysterium Caecitatis* [Mystery of Blindness], Alison asks why the Church should bother with the doctrine of original sin at all. As mentioned earlier, it is taken as an offence, even a *skandalon*, something to be jettisoned in favour of (perhaps simplistically) “original blessing,” as discussed above. Alison sees this as completely wrongheaded. In fact, it is,

Rather that the coming into being of a Christian anthropological vision is a development simultaneous to and rigorously dependent on the coming into being of the Christian understanding of God.

...

The function of the Church's doctrine of original sin, whether its symbol be the straightforward fruit and tree of Adam and Eve or the somewhat more complex [anthropological] version I have set out, is to keep alive the beam in my eye³⁸. We can go even further: God keeps alive the beam in my eye by making that beam a living Cross, a beam on which there hangs a murdered victim.

...

The doctrine of original sin is not an accusation against humanity, and by keeping it alive the Church is not engaged in an accusation against humanity. What the Church is keeping alive is the possibility that even those who bear the tremendous burden of being “right” may recognize their complicity with those who are not, and so construct a sociality that is not cruciform. (260 & 261; emphasis added)

For Alison, there is caution in our not being too certain of what sin is, except as something we're on our way out of. He writes:

³⁸ See [Matthew 7: 1 – 6](#), especially verses 3 - 5:

³Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but fail to notice the beam in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while there is still a beam in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite! First take the beam out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

That is to say there is a certain radical blindness as to both good and evil that began to be unveiled only as a result of the resurrection. The forgiveness of sins, which became part of both the preaching and the power that flowed from the resurrection and its central meaning, is what enables us to approach the question of sin. . . *and any claim to understand sin that is not an understanding of how it is forgiven is automatically suspect.* (263; emphasis added)

Alison indicates that, according to dominant Western theology, a first fruit of the “Fall” was in fact the knowledge of good and evil. He wonders in that light at the supposed epistemological basis for knowing that an action or structure is necessarily “evil,” when gaining such knowledge (of evil) was, by such reckoning, what caused Adam and Eve to be cast out of the garden. *Not too quick to judge he avers! And all our discernment and consequent action must ever pass through the filter of forgiveness.* We too in our moral certainty can also be blind to the victims we create, yet we need not do so! In this way, *God is Master of suspicion about our own ethical epistemological pretensions!* The Chapter concludes thus:

The ecclesial function of the doctrine of original sin is to participate in the Holy Spirit’s keeping alive among us of the creative suspicion of God. This essay has no other ambition (but no less an ambition) than to be a contribution to that function. (265)

Summary

The above has been quite a journey of attempting to make more accessible some of what the author of the reviewed book is getting at. I hope it has been helpful, though maybe not at all! You’re welcome to tell me either way!

After my somewhat personal **Introduction**, I discussed “**Total Depravity**” **No!**, and a **Different Atonement Story**, and how the author counters a longstanding view of original sin as “total depravity,” and the invitation to see things differently, yet is classically “orthodox”—for him highly important.

I then looked at **The Anthropological Nature of Desire: Mimetic Theory**. This is mainly introduction to Girard’s theories, as they set the stage for discussing the doctrine of original sin.

I discussed only the Introduction and first chapter of Part I, before jumping to Part II, where I probed all the chapters. This followed the suggestion of Sebastian Moore.

In **Stretching the Shape of Forgiveness**, Alison underscores that the development of the doctrine of original sin, intertwined as it is with development of the doctrine of the Trinity, in fact with all Christian theology, are clearly post-resurrection. Original sin, for Alison, can be cast as something that can be forgiven, thereby likely showing we are too readily wrong about God and ourselves.

This means, the book’s title, there is **The Joy of Being Wrong**. But this is that much more than being *mistaken*; it is . . . being wrong to the point of being actively involved in death.

Alison moves to consider the apostolic witness of the **Gospel of John**, and that of Saint Paul in the **first eight chapters of Romans**. In the former, there is great blindness of those religious

leaders who think they “see,” that only in fact deepens their blindness in not seeing that the very act of condemning the blind man of John 9 is fundamentally *involved in mechanisms of judging, exclusion, and scapegoating violence*. In the latter, God’s *wrath* is seen as life in the sort of world that kills the son of God, and understands that “wrath” demonstrates at once who God in essence is (*nonviolent*) and who humanity in essence is (*violent*). Instead, we are to embrace love of God and neighbour as the true expression of God’s wrath: one in a kind of Divine Lover’s agony to see others and ourselves find our way to God, who is Love.

The author introduces next the idea that Jesus was invariably a cultural “*skandalon*”—stumbling block—and his yearning was to help his disciples not to take offence at him too. For Alison, there is only one way not to be locked into the scandals of this world, and that is by learning to forgive. Otherwise, we humans without exception are locked into the *skandalon*—the way of death.

In **The Violent Sacred**, we are introduced to the important term (mimetic) “*interdividuality*,” a concept closely related to intersubjectivity, used by psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian (along with Guy Lefort and René Girard) in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, to express their conviction that a monadic, isolated subject does not exist and that the self can only be understood in relation to others. This means that there is no original “I” or “me,” but only one whose consciousness is brought into being through imitation of the desires of others—the triangulation of desire.

The Ubiquitous Human Condition in Paul’s view *one is* constituted by distorted desire and lived out in mimetic interdividuality that *comes from and leads to death*. For Paul, the doctrine of original sin describes the universal human distortion of desire toward death within an interdividual, or mimetic, understanding of human psychology.

In **Original Sin in the Context of the Church**, Alison posits that the post-resurrection foundation of the Church is *both a theological and an anthropological reality*. He contrasts an *original futility* in the foundation of human social order—metaphorically *that of Babel*, with *Pentecost*, where not only language is “undistorted,” such that all understand the others, but desire itself.

We are called then, to a **Pacific Imitation of Christ**. It is the ecclesial hypostasis [underlying fundamental Church reality] alone which, as discipleship produces the undistorting of desire, enables fraternity, because the new “in Christ” social order is itself the bearer of gratuity. Now, identities as human beings are embraced from an entirely nonrivalrous, nonenvious, nongrasping practice of life—however demanding and arduous.

For Alison in his **Central Thesis About Original Sin**, it is (perhaps) the central aim of his essay to show that original sin, precisely as understood from the standpoint of the ecclesial hypostasis, is not foundational at all. It is the revelation of a failed, futile foundation. *There is nothing solid about original sin, nothing on which anything can be based—such as a doctrine of salvation*. Above all, by implication, any theory of atonement that is contrary to the pacific imitation of Christ is suspect in God’s eyes and should be so likewise in Christ’s would-be followers/imitators. *In other words: Original sin is not God’s decree/judgment about/of humanity—with its attendant utterly negative anthropology (“total depravity”)—rather it is that*

out of which we are being called: endless violent mimesis. And when Paul encourages his readers to imitate him as he does Christ, it is not function of some kind of pride or arrogance, rather a yearning to see his readers embrace his felt freedom from rivalistic desire—a *grasping ego*—that destroys community, that is juxtaposed with the learning of a new sort of desire which is not in rivalry with anyone’s desire at all, because it is the pacific imitation of the one who is on his way into expulsion. *God is never a rival, and so should it be the case for Christ’s followers in their interdividual relationships.*

In **The Trinity, Creation, and Original Sin**, we, God’s followers, says Alison, are the “*many mansions*” to be indwelt by the Father and Son. And it is precisely loving imitation of Jesus’ self-giving that opens the door as it were to the welcomed habitation of the Father and Son. So “*belief*” in John is tantamount to Paul’s “justification by faith.” Alison states that The Trinity is a perfect structure of the creative mimesis which was to bring us to become sharers in divine life. It is all *peaceful mimetic interdividuality*. *And Jesus is the original man, the trinitarian image of God, bringing into being a new creation.*

And for Alison, the whole visible practice of the ecclesial hypostasis *is* the forgiveness of sin. The creative self-giving up to death in the midst of human violence, forgiving that violence, *is* what divine creation looks like within the *futile* old creation with its mimesis of death, the very inversion of Christ’s salvation.

But acts of forgiveness in that old creation are seen as weak—indeed culturally *cast out*—and its practitioners are seen to be woefully not in touch with the “real world” of endless mimetic rivalry. It is the creative forgiveness, which is the bringing into being of the Church through the self-giving victim on the way out of the world—indeed executed—that defines the state of the apparently “strong” world, one in fact passing away, as one marked by original *sin*.

Alison posits an **Eschatological Imagination** (a whole book by him, [*Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*](#) is devoted to this) as the beginning of the living out of the deathless time participating in eternity even now, something that already happens before “this generation passes away.” In fact, time itself within the purview of this imagination is the time of history that has ceased post-resurrection to be a theological reality.

He discusses **Hope and Concupiscence**, the latter that which *pre*-forms us comprehensively—our intelligence, sexuality, will power, affectivity, memory, way of being involved in history, sense of time, consciousness, conscience—along the trajectory of the world of mimetic violence which is not in itself “sin” but derivative from and oriented towards it. We are rather to be *re*-formed (Romans 12:2 calls it *trans*-formation) in mimesis of the Holy Trinity. Alison asserts that if this is the universal distorted human condition, then no amount of “law” *qua* “legal rules/state criminal justice systems of punishment and retribution” can ever be the basis of Christian morality. For “law” shares in the same distorted anthropological state—strictly rivalistically mimetic and man-made—and hence invariably appears as punitive/retributive justice. In brief: the important feature of this understanding of the roots of Christian morality is *that it respects essentially the priority of grace over law.*

We in-Christ followers are to be constantly **Redeeming the Time**, which is inherently historical. He quotes Ephesians as embarrassingly apropos:

Therefore be imitators [*mimétai*] of God as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (5:1 – 2).

There follows **The History of the Victim**. There is for Alison no universalist vision of history or progress. We in the Church, are called to the empowering of people to construct a new history around victims: those who are not, those who are going out of being, those whom the vanity and power of the world emptied of sense and of meaning. He says that the “*forgiving victim*” is central to this new story, this new history. He also points to this new imagination at work, active in history, to desacralize the social order (one invariably violent). For him it is as we are unbound into the possibility of a creative imagination beyond death that we struggle in hope between forgiveness and the new creation in the time of liturgy and prayer. To that, I add a translation variant in Romans 12:2, that it is a call to “*reasonable service*”—to God of course, but also to Neighbour—as in Jesus’ Two Greatest Commandments.

Alison wants us to do a **Reimagining of the Symbol of Original Sin**, that includes a rigorously christological demythologization of God’s establishing any protective laws against violence.

Under the heading, *Mysterium Caecitatis* [Mystery of Blindness], Alison asks why the Church should bother with the doctrine of original sin at all. He sees it to be absolutely necessary for the Church to embrace, above all he says, it is *to keep alive the beam in my own eye*. One can go even further, he adds: *God keeps alive the beam in my eye by making that beam a living Cross, a beam on which there hangs a murdered victim*. For him, *The doctrine of original sin is not an accusation against humanity, and by keeping it alive the Church is not engaged in an accusation against humanity*. What the Church is keeping alive is the possibility that *even when we’re “right,” we may be woefully wrong* if we do not recognize our complicity with those who fail to construct a sociality that is cruciform. For Alison, *any claim to understand sin that is not an understanding of how it is forgiven is automatically suspect*. Alison sees in this regard that God is the *Master of Suspicion* about our ethical epistemological pretensions: a very sobering challenge indeed! In fact, he sees the book as a way *to hold before the Church a constant need to be at once creatively vigilant and suspicious of our best moral intentions*, lest, as in Matthew 7:

For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

On that note, I must retreat to my cell and learn/do again repentance, make a renewed commitment to change/conversion, pursue making amends to those I have wronged, and recommit to, in Jesus’ words: *Go and sin no more*. . . This entails not just a conversion/renewing of the mind, not only a change of heart, but an active taking up the Cross daily in service to God and Neighbour. *Amen*.