

The Atonement: A Transformational Model

Richard Oxenberg

What is the meaning of the atoning act of Christ?

Etymologically, we can break the word ‘atonement’ into ‘*at-one-ment*.’ Through ‘at-one-ment’ we resolve a rupture in the relationship between the human being and God.¹ Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection are supposed to, somehow, help us overcome this rupture. But how? What can there be about a man – or a ‘God-man’ for that matter – dying on a cross that can help to overcome human alienation from God?

That is the question of my essay. To begin to make headway in answering it we must come to understand the nature of the estrangement existing between human beings and God, the character of reconciled existence, and the process through which the one may be transformed into the other.

The aim of this essay is to pursue a *transformational* understanding of the atonement, in contrast to the *juridical* understanding so prevalent in traditional Christian thought. In my view, this juridical model is flawed in serious ways, in ways that become a barrier to an understanding of atonement itself. I begin then with a critique of the classical juridical model, and then sketch out a transformational alternative.

I. The Juridical Model

According to the juridical model, Jesus is offered as a sacrificial ‘satisfaction’ to God for the sins of humanity. Although this interpretation is most fully elaborated in Anselm’s

Cur Deus Homo? we can find a concise formulation of it in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas:

**It was fitting for Christ to die. First of all to satisfy for the whole human race, which was sentenced to die on account of sin, according to Genesis 2:17. . . Now it is a way of satisfying for another to submit oneself to the penalty deserved by that other. And so Christ resolved to die, that by dying he might atone for us.
(ST, P3, Q50, A1).**

The very first thing to note about this is that Genesis 2:17 does not in itself support the interpretation Thomas gives. The passage reads as follows:

**And the Lord God commanded the man “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”
(Gn. 2:16-17, NRSV).**

There is nothing here about a judicial process through which “the whole human race” is “sentenced to die.” What we have here is a warning, perhaps a threat, but not a legal sentence. Indeed, if we take the passage literally, the warning itself pertains to the specific act of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and is directed to the single individual Adam. The relevance of this warning to “the whole human race” is entirely unspecified.

Aquinas’ interpretation of this passage has its biblical roots in Paul’s epistle to the Romans. In *Romans* we read:

The gift of God is not like the result of the one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive

God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. (Rom. 5:15-18)

Here it may seem that Paul provides biblical authority for Thomas' juridical interpretation. But a closer reading of Paul calls this into question. We are told, for instance, that "by the trespass of one man, death *reigned* through that one man." We are told that those who receive God's grace will "*reign in life*" (my emphases). But what are we to understand by these phrases? In what sense can death *reign*? What does it mean to say that one will "*reign in life*?" To speak of a sentence of death as a 'reign of death' seems an odd formulation.

Indeed, the more we read Paul the more we become aware that the language he employs is that of metaphor and symbol, not that of law books. We are told, for instance, that:

Our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Rom. 6:6-7)

This is no longer juridical language but a poetic language of transformation. The "body of sin" – whatever that means – will be done away with because "anyone who has died has been freed from sin." Death, now, is no longer a punishment but a liberator – it frees us from sin. It is not at all obvious how Paul's juridical language maps onto this transformational language. True, Paul speaks of "trespass," "condemnation," and "justification" in speaking of Adam's sin and its resolution, but what Paul appears to be doing is applying juridical *symbols* to the symbolism of the Eden and passion stories

themselves. Paul's juridical interpretation itself demands interpretation. Just what his language ultimately refers to remains obscure.

That this is so becomes even more apparent the moment we try to think through the juridical interpretation in literal terms. To do so we must distinguish between two related but distinct strands of the juridical interpretation: the one that understands the crucifixion as a necessary *satisfaction* for human sin and the other that understands it as a necessary *punishment* for sin. Let's consider each of them in turn.

1. Satisfaction as Atonement

The most well-known version of the satisfaction theory of the atonement is to be found in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* Here it is claimed that the sin of Adam involved an infinite transgression against the honor, or dignity, of God. This infinite transgression required an infinite satisfaction, which, given human sinfulness and finitude, no human being could make. Hence, in order to fulfill the demands for satisfaction God became incarnate and, through the crucifixion, provided the required satisfaction himself. We participate in Christ's satisfaction for human sin to the extent that we accept it as our own.

In order to understand this doctrine and determine its adequacy to the Christian message we need to unpack its terms. What are we to understand by an offense against 'dignity'? In what way does such an offense demand 'satisfaction'? How can such offense and satisfaction be 'infinite'?

Let's begin with the idea of dignity. We may define dignity as the intrinsic worth native to personhood. A person, as Kant most famously tells us, is never to be regarded as

a mere instrument for another's use. Rather, person's have a dignity, an intrinsic worth, that demands respect. Moral transgression is in essence violation of the dignity of the person, considered as an end-in-herself. Given this, we can speak of two ways in which a human being may be harmed: We may be harmed *materially* by being deprived of something we require for our material well-being. And we may be harmed in our very *personhood* to the extent that our dignity itself is violated. It is this latter that constitutes the specifically *moral* harm.

The distinction between these two forms of harm becomes clear when we reflect upon the different ways we respond to a natural injury (say an injury delivered by a hurricane) and an injury deliberately inflicted by another person. Though a natural calamity may do us terrible material harm, it does not offend us *morally*. In the case of a natural injury we feel harmed but not *violated*. In the case of a moral injury we feel *violated*, even if the amount of material harm we suffer is negligible.

It is with regard to the offense against dignity that the moral category of 'satisfaction' has its specific meaning. A material injury can be repaired materially, but an offense to dignity requires some response from the offending party. It is necessary, so to speak, to impress the worth of the violated person upon the violator, so that the violator and all observers of the violation will be made to see that worth. This is accomplished through making the violator experience something of the violation she has caused. In this way, the violation is revealed *as* violation. Through suffering the very violation she has caused, the violator is forced to 'taste,' so to speak, the very wrong she has committed. In this way, the wrongfulness of the violation is made manifest, and, thereby, the offense to dignity satisfied.

But why is such satisfaction needed? If the intrinsic worth of a person is indeed *intrinsic*, wouldn't this suggest that it *cannot* be violated by the actions of another? Another can deprive me of something extrinsic to my selfhood but not something intrinsic to it; for what is intrinsic to selfhood remains as long as selfhood itself remains. This suggests that, though I can be wounded in my material needs and wants, I cannot be wounded in my *dignity*. No one can deprive me of my intrinsic worth as a person. If this is the case, then it seems there would be no need for satisfaction.

The explanation of this is to be found in the social or relational nature of human existence. Human beings are not islands unto themselves but are essentially social beings. Our very capacity for self-affirmation depends, more perhaps than we would like to admit, on the affirmation we receive from others. This, of course, is why human beings have always sought honor and glory.

Our *sense* of dignity is not mediated to us strictly through ourselves but through our relations with others. In effect, our dignity requires acknowledgement from others in order to be fully well in itself. Strictly speaking, it is not dignity that is violated in moral transgression, but the *demand for respect* that dignity makes. Disregard of this demand constitutes an actual harm to the violated person; i.e., a harm to his or her social and psychological well-being. Satisfaction is a means through which the self-worth of the violated is reaffirmed by society at large, an affirmation necessary to the psycho-social well-being of the violated party.

But it is just here that we can see the inappropriateness of projecting such a demand for satisfaction upon God. Although God can indeed be spoken of as having a dignity that

demands respect, the demand for respect made by God's dignity has a fundamentally different basis from the demand for respect made by human dignity.

The human demand for respect is based in human psycho-social interdependency, such that human beings require respect from one another in order to be fully well in themselves. This itself is a function of human finitude, of the fact that a human being's self-relation depends upon healthful relation with others. The same cannot be said of God. God's sense of self does not depend upon the opinion of human beings. Hence, God cannot require respect from human beings in the way that human beings require respect from one another.²

This is not to say that God's dignity does not make a demand for respect, but that God's demand for respect rests upon another basis. God's demand is based in the ontology of God, such that God's 'dignity,' i.e., God's intrinsic worth, constitutes the supreme good of all that is. The human being who offends against God's dignity does not harm God *per se* but herself. God's demand for respect, in other words, is based upon God's *love* for human beings; it is not protective of God's well-being but of human well-being. God demands respect *from* human beings *for the sake of* human beings, not for the sake of God. Jesus expresses this when he says, "Man was not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made for man" (Mk, 2:27).

Thus, although it may still be possible to speak of a demand for satisfaction emanating from God's demand for respect, 'satisfaction' in this regard must be understood in an entirely different manner. Whereas the human demand for satisfaction is predicated upon the need to restore something of worth to the *victim* of transgression, the divine demand for satisfaction, if we still wish to use this word, is predicated upon the need to restore

something of worth to the *transgressor herself*. It is just this that we find expressed in John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that all who believe in him might have eternal life.” God gives his only begotten Son for the sake of the world, not in order to restore some good God himself has lost.

To put this another way, the *infinity* of God’s dignity does not imply that offense against God requires an ‘infinite satisfaction,’ as Anselm would have it, but the reverse. That God is infinite (i.e., ontologically whole) implies that God requires no satisfaction whatever *for God’s own sake*. God does not act out of a sense of wounded dignity, as does the human being who demands satisfaction, but out of love.

Our conclusion is that the Anselmian doctrine of satisfaction, and doctrines similar to it, involve an inappropriate anthropomorphism, projecting specifically human motives onto the divine. A certain amount of anthropomorphism is inevitable in thinking and speaking about God. What we must avoid, however, are anthropomorphisms that apply attitudes and motivations that are specifically derived from human *finitude* to God. To do so is to depict God in a manner that deprives God of just that which renders God divine and worthy of worship.

In the case of the doctrine of satisfactory atonement this problem is especially pronounced. In commanding human beings to love God and neighbor the Bible is commanding them to adopt a *self-transcending love*. But the human demand for satisfaction is not based in self-transcending love but self-love. Rightly seen, as John 3:16 indicates, the atonement of Christ is an expression of *God’s* self-transcending love. The Anselmian doctrine reduces it to an expression of God’s *self-love*. In so doing, it distorts the very meaning of God, as well as the character of atonement.

It follows that the atonement cannot have its meaning in a satisfaction provided for God's wounded dignity. The question remains, however, as to whether we can nevertheless regard it as punishment. In what sense is it legitimate to speak of Christ as taking upon himself the 'punishment' due to sin? It is to this question we will next turn.

2. Punishment as Atonement

What is the purpose of punishment? Satisfaction in the sense we have developed it above is certainly *one* of its purposes. By punishing a violator, the dignity of the violated is affirmed by society at large and, in some sense, impressed upon the violator. This is protective of the psycho-social well-being of human beings. The necessity of protecting such psycho-social well-being is the justification for satisfactory punishment.

As we've seen, however, these considerations do not apply in the case of God. God's well-being does not have the dependencies of human well-being. God cannot rightly be likened to a violated human being whose capacity for self-affirmation has been wounded due to transgression and must be restored through satisfaction. The nature of God's infinity is such that God does not require human acknowledgment as a *means* to God's own self-affirmation.

Nevertheless, there are other purposes that punishment can serve. Punishment, in the form of incarceration, can serve a protective function. By isolating those inclined to crime, the well-being of society is protected. But it's obvious that the passion of Christ can serve no such protective function. There is nothing in Christ's death and resurrection that *forces* human beings to refrain from sin.

Another purpose of punishment is deterrence. In deterrence an undesirable consequence is visited upon an undesirable act so as to dissuade people from committing it. But the substitutional nature of Christ's atonement means that its primary significance cannot lie in deterrence. In particular, deterrence functions by demonstrating that a transgressor will suffer for his transgression. And yet, in the atonement of Christ it is precisely the transgressor who does *not* suffer. If the primary purpose of the atonement were to deter sin it is Satan who would have been crucified, not Christ.

Moreover, the ultimacy of Christ's atonement means that its function cannot be to deter. The purpose of deterrence is to instill fear, whereas the purpose of Christ is to instill love. Seen merely as a deterrent the atonement would be penultimate. We would have to look to something else to fulfill the actual purpose of Christ. "Perfect love," writes John, "casts out fear" (1Jn. 4:13). The fear of God may be the 'beginning of wisdom,' as proverbs says, but love of God is its fulfillment. Thus, to live in fear of the punitive power of God is not, as such, to live in right relation with God. Christ's atonement must, somehow, be that through which we are brought to a *love* of God.

There is one other purpose of punishment that we may consider, however. Punishment can have a reformatory purpose. One whose will is misdirected can be acted upon in a manner designed to alter that will so as, hopefully, to bring it into a new alignment with the good. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that the atonement of Christ can be interpreted as a kind of substitutionary punishment. The atonement is for the purpose, not of soothing God's wounded dignity nor of frightening human beings into submission, but of transforming hearts and minds alienated from God into hearts and minds in

communion with God. The challenge of any Christian doctrine of atonement must be to show *how* it serves this purpose.

II. Toward a Transformational Model

The basic narrative thrust of the Bible can be expressed simply enough: Human beings are created to find their primary good through a life in communion with God but fall away from this, which results in misery for themselves as individuals and for human society at large. God then acts in human history to bring human beings back to a life in communion with God.

From the Christian point of view, the culminating moment in this narrative is the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. It is through this that human life in God is to be fully restored. Such restoration is the core meaning of *at-one-ment*. What we wish to understand is *how* Christ's atoning act serves as a way back to 'life in God' for alienated human beings.

We can make headway in understanding this through considering 1.) What it means to have a 'life in God,' 2.) In what way human beings fall away from this, and 3.) What is required to restore human beings to this.

1. Life in God

The biblical phrase for 'life in God' is *eternal life*. What it means to live such a life is given in what has come to be known as the 'great commandment':

And a lawyer stood up and put [Jesus] to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with

all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; Do this and you will live.” (Lk. 10:25-28)

The first thing to note here is that eternal life, or life in God, is defined in terms of a certain directedness of love. To love something is to hold it as of *final* worth or value. I use the word ‘final’ here to distinguish the valuing associated with love with the valuing of things that serve merely as means to another end. We may value pen and paper as instruments for writing, but we do not love pen and paper. Love refers to the valuing of something as an end rather than a means.

Because the ends we seek determine the means we employ, our loves affect the way we relate, not only to the objects of love, but to all that leads to them. To love God with ‘all your heart, soul, strength and mind’ is to hold God as our supreme value, as that in terms of which all else is valued.

Exactly what this means, of course, requires interpretation and elaboration. One central elaboration is given in the Great Commandment itself: Love of God entails love of one’s neighbor as oneself.

It is to such love, then, that the atonement is to lead. The problem of human life, as the Bible presents it, is that we fail to live in accordance with such love. This failure is the meaning of *sin*. The atonement is to take us from sin to love. But to understand how, we must first of all consider the state of sin.

2. The Fall

In the Garden of Eden story, the Bible gives us a paradigmatic account of the nature of human sin. There are various inadequate ways of reading this story, which are related to

the inadequate doctrines of the atonement. In particular, it is inadequate to read the story as a record of an historical event in which our first parents sinned and passed down that sin to the rest of humankind. This inadequacy becomes apparent upon any careful reflection.

In the traditional account, as we see in Aquinas' statement above, the whole human race is said to have been "sentenced to die" because of the sin of Adam and Eve. But even the harshest biblical standard of punitive justice – 'an eye for an eye' – would rule this out. First, no one who has not willfully committed a crime can rightly be held accountable for that crime. Next, a just punishment must be proportionate to the crime committed. In this case, the punishment (eternal damnation for billions) is not only wildly out of proportion to the crime (a single act of disobedience on the part of two), but the guilt for the crime is imputed to countless generations who did not commit it. This interpretation involves such a strained understanding of justice as to pollute our very understanding of what justice means. It is thus worse than inadequate. It is pernicious.

In order to support its interpretation, the traditional view holds that Adam's act led to a corruption of human nature that we all inherit, and it is for this corruption, presumably, that we are all now "sentenced to die." If we take this seriously, we must suppose that God deliberately corrupted human nature after Adam's sin. But why would God do such a thing? Presumably, God does not want us to sin. If God does not want us to sin, why would God alter our nature so as to force us to sin?

Every attempt to answer this question digs us into a deeper theological hole. Is God's alteration of human nature supposed to be a *punishment* for Adam's sin? But what kind of punishment would force a criminal to keep committing the very crime it is intended to

punish? The various purposes of just punishment are all motivated by the desire to rectify or prevent wrong. The corruption of human nature would have the *opposite* effect. So it cannot be a just punishment.

Indeed, it appears that the traditional interpretation confuses justice with vengeance. The vengeful person wishes to harm another as a way of asserting his power over one who has in some way undermined it. As in the case of satisfaction, vengefulness is an attitude that arises in the context of human interdependency and weakness, which are functions of human finitude. Vengefulness in this sense cannot be a motivation of God. In characterizing God as vengeful in this way we corrupt our very understanding of God.

Thus, we must find another way of interpreting the Eden story. The mythological motifs of the story – the talking serpent, the trees of Knowledge and of Life, the angels with flaming swords, etc. – make it clear that the story is to be interpreted symbolically. This story, set at the beginning of the biblical narrative of God’s redemptive activity in the world, is not presented as the record of a particular sin that occurred at a particular time, but as an expression of what is essential to human sinfulness as such.

A full interpretation of the Eden myth would require a work unto itself. We will have to content ourselves with sketching out some of its principal features.

Adam is shaped from the dust of the ground and given life through the breath of God. Adam’s life, in other words, is a limited version of the life of God, contained within otherwise lifeless matter. It is this containment that constitutes Adam’s finitude. Adam is permitted to sustain himself materially through eating any of the fruit of the garden, and to sustain himself spiritually through eating from the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life may be understood to refer to the divine power of life as present in the creation. Thus, the

Tree of Life is the immanence of God. So long as Adam's spirit is nourished by communion with the life of God – whose life is the very font of life – Adam's spirit is sustained in health.

The one tree from which Adam is not permitted to eat is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. On the day he eats of this tree, he is told, he will die. As the story unfolds, we find that he does not die physically upon eating from the tree, but loses access to the Tree of Life. "Death" here, in other words, means being cut off from the immanence of God, the nourishing life of God. One can still live under such conditions, as the story indicates, but such a life is now a life *encompassed* by death, *cut off* from the sustaining source of life itself. Such a life is now – to employ Paul's arresting phrase – a life lived under the "*reign of death.*"

But what is it about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that has this effect? The serpent tells Eve that upon eating from it she will become like God, 'knowing good and evil.' This is later *confirmed* by God when he says "behold, the man has become as one of us, knowing good and evil." But can it be that God does not want human beings to know the difference between good and evil? This seems strange when we consider that the remainder of the Bible involves God's attempt to get human beings to distinguish between the two. How may we understand this?

It must be that the 'knowledge of good and evil' is somehow degraded and corrupted when *appropriated* by human beings, an appropriation symbolized by the *eating* of the fruit. We can make sense of this by reflecting on what such knowledge means from God's standpoint. God's very being, as the font of life and hence the supreme good, *is* the absolute and universal standard of good and evil. To express this more concretely, love

(“God is love” 1Jn. 4:8) is the standard of good and its absence the standard of evil. This standard has universal validity because God’s being is the foundation of all being. All beings achieve their highest good by living within the communion of love that is the ‘kingdom’ of God. Thus, God’s very being serves as the rightful standard for all judgments of good and evil.

It is this standard that the human being *usurps* in an effort to make herself *like* God in her own finite person. The human being now takes herself to be the supreme standard of good and evil. She makes a universal standard of her own private desires and will, demanding that everything (and everyone) serve these. This is the essential sin. We can see how this is the corruption of the Great Commandment. Rather than loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we now love our private will and desires with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, as if *we* were supreme. All our values are now organized around this. What is good for *me* – my private interests – is good, what is bad for *me* is bad. *My* desires become the standard of good and evil by which I assess everything else in existence, including other human beings.

Two consequences flow from this essential sin, a moral and an existential one. Morally, I become incapable of fully honoring the dignity of others. I now see others as having worth only to the extent that they have worth for *me*. I see others only as objects of my desires, rather than as persons having a worth and dignity in themselves. Of course, since this is the essential human sin, others look upon me in this same way. This creates what amounts to a state of war between human beings, as each competes with the other for supremacy. In this war, the prize sought is not merely material goods but honor itself,

as we each seek to be heralded above others so as to fortify our own fragile sense of self-worth. Such rivalry makes it impossible for us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Existentially, by holding my private, finite, life as supreme I am catapulted into anxiety and despair, for I haven't the wherewithal to sustain or satisfy this life in any definitive way. I try desperately to control the world of things and others in order to secure the finite goods I depend upon, but at some level I know this effort to be futile. Given that finite goods are themselves impermanent, even my worldly successes are failures.

It is just this state of *warring despair* that Paul calls "the *reign of death*." It is a *reign of death* insofar as our *dread* of death now governs the conduct of our lives. The horrific consequences of this reign of death are depicted in the very next biblical story after Eden: the story of brother murdering brother.

The Eden story, thus, may well be viewed as a story that reveals the meaning of *original sin* – but not because it is the story of a sin committed by our first parents and passed down to us, but because it is a story that symbolically depicts what lies at the basis (or origin) of sinfulness itself: the attribution of universal and ultimate value to my own private, finite, interests and will.

The biblical narrative that follows tells the story of God's struggle to redeem human beings by bringing them to a *knowledge of good and evil* centered in God rather than themselves. The Great Commandment is the statement of this. To the extent that humans center their love upon God, they are liberated from the *reign of death* and enter upon *eternal life*. Through this transformation of moral-existential consciousness from *self-*

centeredness to *God*-centeredness, human beings realize their potential as ‘images of God.’

It might be noted that there is an irony to the Eden story that is not to be missed: In the story, human beings become like God in some respects but insufficiently like God in others; that is, they become like God in their ability to discriminate between good and evil but without God as the *criterion* of their discriminations. And this suggests something rather extraordinary: that the eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for all the horrors it unleashes, is ultimately a *good* thing. The consciousness of good and evil imparted by this tree, for all its problems, is necessary to the ultimate perfection of human beings. Indeed, this is the human dilemma that brings the horror of death: that human beings are like God (i.e., knowing and judging universal good and evil, unlike animals) but *without knowing* God, because their finite commitments eclipse their experience of God. We cannot read the Eden story as an account of a time when human beings *became* this way; it is an expression of the dilemma itself, a dilemma native to human personhood as we know it.

So, the dilemma of sin is not that human beings have committed a crime against God for which God requires ‘satisfaction.’ It is that our very nature as *like* God tempts us to take ourselves *as* God, which alienates us from the true God, and leads us to commit crimes against each other rooted in desperation and despair. What is required is for the human ‘likeness unto God’ to be *fulfilled* by bringing the consciousness of God into the very heart of human *self*-consciousness, so as to make *God* the axiological center of

human personhood; that around which the human being organizes her values, aspirations, and hopes. This is what it means to “love God with all one’s heart, soul, and might.”

It is the possibility of such a life that is revealed in the Christ, the man who is both God *and* man.

In this sense, Christ’s very personhood is a revelation of the *at-one-ing* (i.e., uniting) of the human and divine. Christ is himself the “atonement”; a human being whose *self*-consciousness is wholly shaped by *God*-consciousness. Christ’s teachings express the character of this *at-one-ment*. Christ’s crucifixion-resurrection performs the *way* of this *at-one-ment*.

3. The Atonement

We are now in a position to discuss the meaning and efficacy of Christ’s passion as an act of atonement. Before considering it in detail, however, we should perhaps consider the truth status of the story.

We have characterized the Eden story as paradigmatic myth; it does not refer to a real historical event but is intended to convey the essence of the human predicament. The story of the passion-atonement differs from this in a basic way. Whereas the Eden story reveals the spiritual state of human beings in general, the crucifixion-resurrection (the ‘passion’) reveals a spiritual *possibility* for human beings. Whereas the truth of the Eden story can be assessed through an examination of the human condition as we observe it empirically and via self-reflection, the truth of the passion-as-atonement can only be verified by one who experiences such atonement in her own person.

In this sense, the story of the passion-atonement may be said to have a *mystical* as opposed to a *mythological* meaning. It is not a story about the human condition in general; it is, or professes to be, the revelation of a mystical possibility, the possibility that human nature as we know it can be transformed in such a way as to yield a *profound intimacy* between the human and the divine. In other words, something beyond the natural as we generally understand it is claimed here.

Thus, to speak of the story of the atonement as a mere myth is to mischaracterize it. It is a *claim*. It is a claim that demands of those who would take it seriously a decision as to how to live. No decision is demanded by the Eden story. One can appreciate it as an insightful symbolic account of the human condition without making any life-decision in respect to it. But to ‘appreciate’ the story of the atonement of Christ in the same way would be to misconstrue it. The atonement story professes to reveal a spiritual possibility that is neither empirically evident nor evident to ordinary self-reflection and with respect to which we are called upon to make a decision. We can, of course, be unpersuaded that such a possibility really exists and, thus, dismiss it; but in dismissing it we pass a judgment about a *claim*, we do not merely dismiss a myth.

Christianity’s insistence on the *historicity* of the event of Christ seems to bear some relation to this. It is, we might say, an oddity of Christianity that it insists that the historicity of Christ be affirmed on faith. Faith is an orientation of the heart and mind; it can direct our life-decisions but it cannot serve to confirm historical fact-claims. But the insistence on the historicity of Christ seems to be a way of insisting on the seriousness of the claim that Christianity makes. The Christian believes that something extraordinary is true, something that cannot simply be read off from human nature as we ordinarily know

it: that the human spirit can enter into an intimate communion with the divine, a communion that resolves the dilemma of human alienation and death. This claim arose in response to an historical event in which its truth was – at least as far as Christianity is concerned – revealed in an astonishing way. It is in this respect that we are no longer in the domain of mere myth. Of course, one can deny that the Christian claim is true, but one has not yet encountered it who has not yet recognized that this claim *is* a claim – about the meaning of life and how we are to live it.

But once we fully recognize this, we can be freed from insisting that the historical events recorded in the Bible must have occurred just as they are recorded. Their significance lies, not in their historicity, but in the *possibility* they reveal for the resolution of the human predicament. The physical events recorded are expressions of this possibility. What is ultimately demanded is faith in the reality of this *possibility*, not faith in this or that historical account.

How, then, does the passion of Christ reveal and shed light on this transformative possibility?

In Christ's passion we have a cycle: a tormented and condemned man dies and is restored to a renewed life. Christ's torment is the torment of humanity under the 'reign of death.' Christ's resurrection bespeaks the possibility of humanity's emergence from this reign of death into communion with the eternal life of God. In Paul's terms, Jesus "dies to the flesh" and is "resurrected in the Spirit." But to grasp the meaning of this we must examine the meaning of life and death as revealed in the story itself.

4. Four Meanings of Death

Death has a complex and multi-faceted meaning in the Bible.

In its first meaning, death refers simply to the physical death to which all finite life forms, including human beings, are subject.

In a second meaning, as we see in the Eden story, death refers to the state of being cut off from the immanence of God (the “Tree of Life”); thus, the state of being abandoned to our finitude, i.e., our *sense* of mortality.

In a third meaning, death is said to be a punishment for, or a consequence of, sin: “the wages of sin is death.”

Finally, in yet a fourth meaning, revealed in the passion of Christ, death is that through which we transition from a life in the “flesh” (sinful life) to a life in the “Spirit” (life in God).

Is there any way to relate these meanings to one another?

We can make headway in this by reflecting on the way death is manifest to us in our own experience. How do we know of death? Why do we dread death? Having never died, how does it happen that we are even aware of death?

Of course, we know of death through the death of others. Others die and cease to be present with us in our world. Their bodies become lifeless; we lose the ability to communicate or interact with them; suddenly they are gone, never to return. If they are among those we love very much, we suffer a great loss.

Surely this is one of the significant ways we know of death. But we know of death even more intimately through the dread we have of losing *ourselves*. Here, though, we

encounter a mystery: What exactly do we dread when we dread losing ourselves, our own death?

If we were to put it into words, we might say we dread our *no longer being there*, in the world with others. But how does it happen that we can even form an idea of ‘no longer being there,’ given that we have never thus far ‘not been there’?

When we reflect, we come to realize that we experience forms of ‘not being there’ all the time. When we are rejected, when we fail, when we are abandoned, when we are neglected, when we are defeated, when we are marginalized, when we are isolated, when sickness prevents our active participation in life, etc., we experience modes of ‘not being there,’ modes of not being *able* to be there in the ways we desire. In this broadened sense, we experience modes of death throughout life.

From this perspective, physical death, through which we are utterly severed from the world, appears at one end of a long continuum, with full robust participation in life at the other end.

Ordinary human life is lived on this continuum, as a struggle to avoid death in its many manifestations and to further our full participation in life. But, as we have discussed, our limitations as finite beings make it impossible for us to succeed in this struggle in any secure or definitive way. The finite world is always slipping away from us, and we from it. Try as we might, we cannot hold it, or ourselves, in place. Given our finitude, the threat of death in all its manifestations is with us continuously.

This then leads us into the second meaning of death: Death as the despair of feeling *destined* to die, of feeling cut off from the sustaining power of life (God). This is the death betokened in the Eden story. Though we live from day to day, and may live to a

ripe old age, we cannot secure our *access* to life. We feel abandoned to ourselves and our own ontological inadequacy, our existential ‘nakedness,’ which humiliates us, frightens us, and which we therefore seek to hide from ourselves and each other.

But why? How do we lose touch with our connection to God?

Traditionally, Christianity answers this question by regarding it as punishment for the disobedience of our first parents, as if God deliberately withdrew support in response to their offense. As we have discussed, taken literally this answer is deficient in any number of ways (although it can have meaning at the psycho-mythological level, which we will discuss later).

We might better see it as a function of the emergence of the human individual as such. As human beings emerge from the animal kingdom, our consciousness evolves into *self*-consciousness, our instincts evolve into a power of self-determination. We acquire the ability to think for ourselves and choose for ourselves how we will be. As a result, we become more and more aware of ourselves as distinct individuals, apart from our environs. This awareness is in many ways the glory of human existence, it sets us on our own two feet, allows us to be self-aware and self-responsible. But it also has the effect of closing us in on ourselves. My very awareness of self is *also* the awareness that no one experiences me as I do; my fears, my heartaches, my desires, my perceptions, are mine and not yours. I can struggle to make you see me but it is a struggle that often fails, sometimes tragically – because you are also enclosed in yourself. So we are alone in ourselves, with the rest of the world ‘over there,’ opposed to us, or simply other than us. Given this, our valuations (our ‘knowledge of good and evil’) naturally become self-

involved and self-referential. This is not something we deliberately choose, for which we might be duly punished; it is a stage in the evolution of consciousness.

Let us call this stage 'self-crystallization.' Of course, it is not an altogether negative thing. It is just such self-crystallization that gives us the potential to become 'images of God.'

Still, self-crystallization produces a kind of ontological exile. Animals are still more or less continuous with their environment. They act from instinct not from choice. They are only marginally self-aware and have no true self-responsibility. This is their 'innocence.' The human being, in contrast, is intensively aware of herself as distinct from nature and (especially in modern society) from others. Thus, (ironically) the very awareness that lifts us above the animals and makes us more Godlike also closes us in on ourselves and exiles us from God. It is this moment of self-crystallization that is symbolized in the Eden story as the *temptation* to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; the temptation to center our values in ourselves.

Now we experience ourselves as wholly contained in ourselves and, therefore, as *trapped* in our finitude, our ontological *inadequacy*. This is the ordinary 'fallen' human experience. This self-centered exile from God is the second meaning of death.

And it leads to the third meaning: In our effort to escape the trap of our finitude we strive to control the things and people of the finite world so as to make ourselves the basis of our own security. We seek supremacy over our world so as to escape the trap of death. This results in intensive rivalries and murderous competition between human beings, as each of us struggles for mastery over the other and over our common world. In the Bible, the story of Cain and Abel provides a paradigmatic example of this. Cain's

spiritual impoverishment leads him to murder his own brother in a moment of envious rage over his brother's superior standing. This struggle for supremacy produces a general human condition of *warring despair*, as each seeks to dominate the other, even destroy the other, in an effort to prop himself up at the other's expense. This is the "*the reign of death*" to which Paul refers.

And here we encounter a great tragic irony: In our endeavor to escape death we visit death upon one another: we belittle, we reject, we defeat, we suppress, we rage, we envy, we steal, we cheat, we lie, we exploit, we kill. In biblical language, we *sin*. And as we visit death upon one another we are catapulted more and more into the very death we are trying to escape: "the wages of sin is death." In response to this, Paul cries out in *Romans*: "Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24).

To heal sin at its *root* we must somehow heal the rupture created by our own emergence into individuality. This *rupture* is the deep meaning of original sin, which gets symbolically expressed, but also terribly muddled, in the traditional notion of *inherited* sin. But it is not that we have literally inherited the sin of our first parents, or that God has deliberately corrupted our nature in an unfathomable display of divine pique; it is that the very structure of human existence cuts us off from any full-fledged communion with God and others. Hence, we are 'born into sin.' What is required is a radical restructuring of our very mode of being. This is the true meaning of 'repentance,' the New Testament word for which is '*metanoia*,' which might be literally rendered: transformation of heart and mind. In the language of scripture, we must be "born again," or "reborn from above" (Jn. 3:5). We must be restructured *such that* our self-consciousness will come into alignment with God-consciousness.

And this leads us, finally, to the fourth meaning of death, and to the atoning act of Christ.

5. The Cross of Christ

Christ on the Cross mystically undergoes all four forms of death; finally to be resurrected into full communion with the Spirit of God.

I use the word ‘mystical’ here to mean something that is difficult to put into words. The Christian believes that Christ’s death and resurrection is an outward display of a divine *power* of redemption that is quite real and efficacious; a power that he or she participates in through the Christian life. Thus, Jesus’ death and resurrection is neither a mere symbol, nor a mere historical event pertaining to the single individual Jesus. It is the outward expression of the redemptive power of God, made available to us *through* our participation with Christ in his death and resurrection. I think it important to say (against Christian exclusivism) that this divine power may be recognized as available in other forms and other religions. Christianity’s traditional insistence that it has the God-ordained monopoly on this power is – in my view anyway – one of the ways institutional Christianity is itself ‘fallen.’ This power of redemption is of the very nature of God, and hence universally available. Nevertheless, for the Christian, it is accessed through mystical participation with Christ in his death and resurrection.

In the image of Christ on the Cross we see, at once, the physical death to which we are all subject, the torment of the human being cut off from God, the violence such torment leads us to inflict upon one another, and the redemptive surrender in faith of the penitent into the hands of the all-loving God.

But we see something else as well: we see the *participation of God* in these modes of death and redemption. For Jesus is not only man on the Cross but God *with* man on the Cross. And it is just because God is with us on the Cross, with us in our suffering, our dying, even our sin, that God is *there* for us to surrender to. In other words, the Cross of Christ reveals that we are not alone, not even in the depths of our experienced aloneness. It is this ‘withness’ that is the ‘grace’ of God and – to express it in traditional juridical language – the *forgiveness* of God, offered through Christ.

It is the experience of this divine ‘withness’ that is, finally, salvific and transformative.³ In the Hebrew Bible we read a prophecy that the Messiah will be named ‘Emmanuel,’ which literally means, ‘God with us.’ In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ father is told by an angel to name his son Jesus in order to fulfill this biblical prophecy. Literally construed, this passage is puzzling. How can naming a man *Jesus* fulfill a prophecy about a man to be named *Emmanuel*? When we read beneath the surface, however, we see the answer: Matthew is linking the name Jesus, which literally means ‘God saves,’ with the name Emmanuel, which means “God with us.’ In their deep meaning, he is saying, the two names are one. Jesus, the *God-man* (the man whom God is wholly *with*), is the supreme revelation of *God with us*, and, hence, of *God’s salvation*.

Christ on the Cross, then, is a revelation of God’s participation with us even in the extremity of our anguish and alienation, even in the extremity of death (in all its forms). That God participates with us in our suffering, in our lostness, in the destructive consequences of our sinfulness, even unto death, is a function of divine love. It is this divine love that is expressed in Christianity as the *willingness* of God, incarnate as Christ, to suffer the extremities of sin *with us* for the sake of our redemption. Thus we read in

the Gospel of John, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

In traditional juridical language, it is said that Christ, out of love, suffers the punishment due to sin *for us* so that we won't have to suffer it ourselves. Expressed just this way, however, it seems a confused idea. If God wishes to absolve us from punishment, why doesn't he just do so? Why must anyone suffer so horrendously? But underlying this rather confused language is a profound message that speaks to the heart: God's love is so complete that God would suffer, indeed does suffer, the death due to sin *with us* so as to conduct us to renewed life. God can't simply absolve us of punishment by divine decree because the death due to sin is not, at base, a punishment. It is a consequence. It is the spiritual condition of alienation from God that is itself the state of sin. The only way to free us from this condition is to eradicate the state of sin that underlies it. And the only way to achieve this is to effect a transformation in the human heart and mind (*metanoia*). By suffering the consequences of our own alienation with us, Christ reveals, among other things, the unremitting nature of God's love, a revelation that invites from us a reciprocal response of love and trust in God. It is through such trust that we are able to open ourselves to the presence (grace) of God, and it is the *experience* of God's presence that saves and transforms.

I emphasize the word *experience*, for it is not enough to understand this cognitively. Cognitive understanding is not unimportant (hence the need for good theology) but it is insufficient in itself. What is required is an inner transformation that allows us to *experience* the presence of God at the most intimate level. It is this transformative process that is represented by the Cross. Hence Jesus says to his disciples: “If anyone

would come after me he must take up his cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24). The cross we are to take up is *our own* – it is the cross of our own alienation, our own anguish, our own despair, our own rage, our own lustfulness and selfishness, our own ‘death’ – but we do not take it up by ourselves. We take it up with Christ, whose death and resurrection reveals *the way*.

This is easily enough said. The actual process of transformation, on the other hand, is complex and psychologically difficult. The psychological structures that isolate us from one another and entwine us in ourselves are deeply engrained. It is easy enough, and common enough, for someone to mouth a commitment to ‘justice,’ ‘love of neighbor,’ ‘faith,’ ‘God’ – it is another thing to change one’s basic pattern of thought, feeling, and behavior so as to make such commitment real. This process of inner transformation is also figured in the Cross of Christ, as Christ’s *surrender* to God’s love, a surrender made possible for us by the revelation of that love. This surrender is the fourth meaning of death; it is that through which the transition from life under the reign of death to life under the Spirit of God occurs.

6. The Surrender of Christ

Life is lived as a struggle for life. This is a function of the structure of finite life as we know it. It is not the result of sin; it is the nature of the world into which we are thrust at birth. At the most basic level, we require material things in order to survive and thrive. We must struggle to attain them. And, of course, this struggle often takes the form of competition with others, for both the material goods and the social goods we require.

What the Bible calls ‘sin’ arises when we make this struggle and our efforts to succeed in it our *supreme* commitment. This is the essential meaning of idolatry: to love worldly goods in place of God.⁴ As we have discussed, this leads to the murderous rivalries Paul calls ‘*the reign of death*.’ The biblical narrative portrays this reign of death as it plays itself out in the lives of its central figures; in its stories of Cain and Abel, Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Pharaoh and the Hebrew slaves. At the heart of the Christian doctrine of original sin – often poorly expressed within Christianity itself – is the recognition that human beings are *naturally inclined* to such ‘sin.’⁵ This natural inclination arises from our experience of ourselves as enclosed in ourselves. In modern societies, it is often the individual *qua* individual who feels self-enclosed. In tribal societies, it is often the *tribe* that is regarded as the self-enclosed unit, to be defended at all cost. But from the biblical perspective, these amount to the same thing. To regard *any* finite entity as supreme is idolatry. At its heart, idolatry is the regarding of *finite life itself* as supreme. If finite life is supreme, then death is our ineluctable destiny.

And this brings us to the fourth meaning of death: to attain eternal life we must surrender our *idolatrous* commitment to finite life; whether our own, our family’s, or our tribe’s.⁶ Such surrender is not abandonment; we do not *abandon* commitment to finite life. Rather, we *subordinate* it to God. This surrender is what Paul calls ‘death to the flesh’ which opens us to rebirth (resurrection) in the Spirit. This surrender is figured in Christ’s *willingness* to die – at God’s behest, and for our sake – on the Cross.⁷

But what might it mean to ‘surrender’ to God?

God is the infinite basis of the finite, the eternal basis of the temporal, the indestructible basis of all that is susceptible to corruption and decay. What we surrender,

in surrendering to God, is our futile endeavor to find ultimate security and satisfaction in our finite, fragile, and impermanent selves (or families, or tribes, or nations, etc). This endeavor (again) is a function of our experience of self-enclosure. We cling to our finite selves as to a life raft, because we know of no other life raft. But all finite things – including our finite selves – are sinking ships. God is the only true life raft. The fourth ‘death’ is a death to our structures of self-clinging, which Paul calls ‘the flesh.’⁸ So long as we believe that such self-clinging is necessary for our self-preservation its surrender does indeed seem a kind of death. But the Christian believes that it is through just such ‘death’ that we are finally able to abide in the true source of *life*. In this fourth death we do not lose ourselves, we gain eternity.⁹

Thus atonement is a dance done in two steps. The first is surrender of our spiritual pride/self-enclosure to God (death/crucifixion). The second is partnership with God (eternal life/resurrection). We surrender our self-enclosure to God *in order* to partner with God. Christ – whose very being *is* this divine-human partnership – is ‘the way.’

This surrender is not something that can be accomplished in a moment. It is psychologically complex, involving a revolution in our basic mode of being in the world, a revolution in our understanding, our desires, our emotions, our ambitions, our habits, our perceptions, our loves, and more. For most people it takes place in stages, with difficulties, confusions, and setbacks all along the way. Indeed, the struggle even to *understand* the struggle is an ongoing one; hence the continual need for theological and contemplative reflection. In this life, for the vast majority of even the most faithful, the *struggle* to surrender – the wrestling with God¹⁰ – continues throughout life.

But such surrender is not finally a *loss*. What is surrendered is one's commitment to the *ultimacy* of finite life. What is gained is communion with the ultimacy of eternal life. Eternal life is not something one attains only after one dies. *Eternal life is here and now*. It is inclusive of finite life. It is what finite life rests in. We are blocked from experiencing it by our enclosure in the finite – as we are blocked from seeing the stars by the intensity and proximity of the sun. Only once the sun sets are we able to see the vast Cosmos in which the sun is situated. Likewise, we must surrender our clinging to the finite in order to know its Eternal basis. It is only from the standpoint of our self-enclosure that such surrender seems a death and a loss. Once we break into the Eternal, we are filled with wondrous joy.

7. Transformed Life

For Christianity, Jesus is the supreme revelation of the transformed person: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6). In other words, it is only through incarnating Christ in our own lives that we come to know God. *We* must be transformed into what Christ is.

This transformation is to take place in two related areas: first, in our fundamental sense of self; second, in our basic life commitments.

As for the first, we are to come to see ourselves as no longer isolated in ourselves but as part of the community of all beings, bound together in the divine life. We see ourselves as continuous with, and abiding within, the eternal life of God. Thus, we cease to experience our own individuality as absolute. We see ourselves as indissolubly linked to the font of life and all that proceeds from it.

As a result, our own individual death no longer appears to us an absolute end. This gets expressed, at one level, as belief in an afterlife. But what is essential here is not belief in the afterlife *per se*, but belief that, even in *this life*, we are not ontologically confined to ourselves. At the deepest level our being extends to all other beings, and, ultimately, to the font of being, God.

This restructured sense of self removes what Paul calls “the sting of death.” Our experience of ourselves as confined to our finitude, and therefore destined to die, leads to despair. Despair is death’s ‘sting.’ It is removed as we come to see ourselves, and *experience* ourselves, as abiding within the eternal life of God.

This change in our basic sense of self conditions a change in our basic life commitments. Simply put, we become committed to the welfare of all beings, not simply our own. We see ourselves as continuous with, and connected to, the web of all life; before us, after us, around us, transcendent of us. We are released from the desperate feeling that we need to save ourselves through our own feeble efforts. Hence, the basic structure of sin, which is rooted in this feeling, is dismantled from the bottom up.

These two transformations find expression in the Great Commandment. We are to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. The first part calls us to a transformed sense of self. Our self-love, initially trapped in itself, is to open up to God. This is not a loss of self but an *expansion* of self; we become partners with God.¹¹ The second part calls us to a transformed life commitment. Rather than a life of rivalry, of warring despair, we are to live a life of caring solicitude for all. Of course, these two transformations are not independent of one another, but mutually implicit. As

we come to associate our lives with *all* life, we are naturally drawn into caring concern for the good of all.

The end of this transformational process is a life characterized by an abiding sense of peace, love, and joy – even in the midst of life’s hardships, losses, and tragedies; hence, a peace, love, and joy no longer contingent on the vicissitudes of worldly circumstance.

III. Religion as Path: Revisiting the Juridical Model

Having said all this, we are now in a position to take another look at the juridical model in order to consider, not its rational coherence or plausibility, but the way in which it may or may not serve the process of transformation we have outlined above. But to do so we must say a bit about the *spiritual function* of such theological models in general.

The various world religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. – each provide cognitive maps or frameworks for bringing us into relation with ultimate reality. But the very fact that it is *we* who must be brought into relation requires that they address us in terms and concepts that we can understand, *even if* those terms and concepts are imperfect reflections of ultimate truth. If you wish to communicate with a four-year-old, you must speak in language a four-year-old can understand. We are *all* ‘four-year-olds’ in relation to ultimate reality. This needs to be borne in mind as we assess the various theological and mythological frameworks presented us by religion. The question to ask is not ‘are they true’ in a literal sense, but are they *efficacious* in providing a path for spiritual advance.

Human individuals do not exist as islands in themselves; we are socially and historically situated. The conceptual frameworks through which we understand ourselves

are largely passed down to us in our heritage. The juridical interpretation of the human relationship with God is one such framework. It arose, I believe, in response to the horror, outrage, and sorrow felt by inspired individuals upon witnessing the catastrophic abuses human beings inflict upon one another. In the Bible, this outraged horror finds its most pronounced expression in the mouths of the prophets. They warn the children of Israel of destruction if they will not repent of their sins and turn from their abusive ways. But they also promise a renewal of life for those who do.

The prophets speak in the name of God: “Thus sayeth the Lord...” they declare. What are we to make of this? Are their words the literal words of God? Or are they merely projecting their own subjective feelings onto God? I don’t believe either is true. My view is that they have indeed had a compelling intuition of the supreme good, but that this intuition is neither complete nor unadulterated (although they themselves may not realize this). The prophets are indeed ‘hearing’ God and declaring what they hear, but the voice of God they hear and declare is shaped by their own capacity to receive and understand. Their apprehension of God is channeled through their own subjectivities such that what we get is not the divine *as such*, but the divine as *translated through* and *limited by* the feelings and concepts available to the prophets as human beings. Paul expresses a recognition of this when he writes, “we see through a glass darkly.” The human apprehension of God – even at its best – is imperfect, myopic, and colored by human modes of understanding and experiencing. We see and understand very little of what is ultimately true. Sometimes, in moments of profound insight, we see and understand a little more. But even then it remains very little.

Still, it is *with* this little that we must work in order to make our way forward. And it is just for this reason that we must believe in a gracious God, a merciful God, a God who will forgive our many and inevitable blunders, missteps, and confusions as we strive to make progress along the way.

The juridical interpretation of the human relationship with God is one imperfect way in which the divine-human relationship has been conceptually framed. In it, our alienation from God and, more particularly, the horrors we inflict upon one another due to this alienation, is interpreted as an offense against God for which God will punish us. This idea is not without its (limited) value. It expresses the absolute impermissibility of violating others. It can serve as a deterrent, and, thus, as a way of keeping human transgression in check (similarly to the law of karma in Eastern religions). It provides authority and ‘muscle’ for the divine statutes that demand we treat others with love and respect. And if we read it symbolically or mythologically, it does indeed express a truth, for we are indeed punished terribly by our alienation and transgressions.

Still, as we have discussed, this way of viewing God leads to problems. It can turn God into someone we feel threatened by rather than someone we can open ourselves to and trust. It can lead to legalistic obsession with the minutia of ritual, in fear that an intemperate God will punish us for the least oversight. It can encourage an attitude of self-righteous judgementalism on the part of the ‘pious,’ who prop themselves up by noting their superiority in meeting God’s demands. Indeed, it is this juridical understanding of God from which Paul seems to be recoiling when he speaks of “the curse of the law” (Gal. 3:13).

In this context, the juridical interpretation of Christ's passion as a substitutional 'satisfaction' for human sin may actually be seen as an attempt to *overcome* the impediments of the juridical understanding from *within* its framework, and thus to provide a path to transformation from within its terms.

As Paul presents it, our surrender to God is a way out of the psychological bind of feeling ourselves under the condemnation of God. We now look upon Christ's willingness to pay the penalty for our sin as an expression of God's love and forgiveness. Within this framework, we surrender to God as a criminal might surrender to the police, but with the profound difference that, whereas the police wish to punish us, God wishes to save us. Whereas the police act for the sake of social order, God acts for the sake of our own well-being. In the end, we find that God is not a jailer, but a liberator.

As Paul expresses it, this juridical framework presents three stages through which the human being passes in order to achieve final communion with God.

The first is the stage *prior* to the revelation of law, prior to any sense of being answerable to the demands of God. It is a stage of general anxiety and existential despair, but without any particular sense of *guilt*. As we have discussed, this anxiety and despair is the basic human condition, arising from our finite limitations.

In the second stage, with the revelation of divine law, our anxiety and despair – and especially the moral abuses and violations that stem from them – are interpreted as *sin*, sin for which we are duly condemned to death. Our existential anxiety and despair are now experienced as guilt, a guilt that will lead (if left unaddressed) to *eternal* damnation. Hence our initial anxiety and despair are now intensified intolerably. This is "the curse of the law." But, ideally, this curse is ultimately a blessing, for it drives us to the third

stage, the moment of surrender. In this moment of surrender we throw ourselves upon the mercy of God. In effect, we accept the death sentence delivered by the juridical God, but only to discover that this death sentence is actually an invitation to a new and repaired *life*, a life lived in partnership with God, hence an eternal life no longer under subjection to “the whips and scorns of time.”

As we pass through these three stages the face of ultimate reality itself undergoes transformation (in our eyes). At first reality has a chaotic face; it is arbitrary and pointless but nevertheless anxiety-producing as we struggle to survive and thrive amid the general chaos. Next, in the second stage, reality appears judgmental, demanding, condemnatory, even hostile, in the face of a wrathful God. We no longer experience reality as arbitrary and pointless but as oppressive and menacing. We tremble under the “curse of the law.” Still, there is a hope offered in this second stage that was not present in the first: the hope that if we can somehow bring ourselves into alignment with God we can escape the menace. Thus, behind God’s menacing countenance we begin to discern a hitherto unknown graciousness.

Finally, in the third and final stage, God’s graciousness prevails; the face of reality is welcoming, forgiving, loving. God, through Christ, absorbs our guilt by suffering the punishment for it himself, and thereby frees us from it; we rest in the “peace that passes all understanding”; the peace, love, and joy of the all-beneficent God.

In effect, this model works by gathering up our existential anxiety and despair under the category of *sin*, then condemning this sin to death, and then using our dread of death to induce us to *surrender* to God. This surrender, finally, liberates us from our existential anxiety and despair.

To the extent the juridical model actually accomplishes this – and it surely does for some – it has pragmatic value and validity. The problem is that the life of faith, for most, is not a simple life of surrender, but a life of *struggling* to surrender. One engaged in this struggle, under the juridical model, is caught *between* the second and third stages of transformation, such that the face of God becomes a confusion of condemnation and graciousness. This confusion can have – and in the course of Christian history *has* had – devastating consequences. Attempts to reconcile God’s condemnatory and gracious aspects have led to a polluted understanding of God. God is said to be gracious only to a select few: the elect, or called, or faithful. Everyone else is viewed as *rightly* condemned. The face of God is split in two. God smiles on *us* and condemns *them*, which gives us license to condemn them as well (if only to divert our attention from our fear that God will turn his condemnation back upon us). Now, rather than complete the movement of surrender, we get stuck in the effort to please an arbitrary and essentially wrathful God. And to the extent that we experience God as arbitrary and wrathful we *cannot* truly surrender. All we can do is appease. We get stuck in our guilt, which *intensifies* our existential anxiety and despair intolerably, and find ourselves in need of salvation from our salvation!

In this way, the juridical model – tragically and ironically – produces the opposite of what it intends. Rather than liberating us from our anxiety it imprisons us within it. Rather than inducing us to love our neighbor (and enemy) it induces us to celebrate God’s *condemnation* of our neighbors and enemies (while we all the time *mouth* words of love, which lose their meaning). Thus we war in the name of God, we torture in the name of God, we burn heretics in the name of God, we persecute members of other religions in

the name of God. The morally checkered history of Christianity testifies to the troublesome nature of this model, even from a pragmatic point of view.

Still, it may be that this model once had utility as a way of curbing the violent excesses of a world reeling under the ‘reign of death’ by threatening it with damnation. I believe, though, that it has now outlived whatever usefulness it may once have had. We are ready for, and in need of, a truer model of Christ’s atonement. Let us review, then, in our final section, the essential elements of this alternate model.

IV. Atonement as Transformation

In Jesus on the Cross we see – in a single image – the horror and tragedy of our alienation from God, the surrender required to heal this alienation, and the participation of an infinitely loving God who suffers our alienation *with us* so as to make our surrender possible. Let us speak of these as the three *disclosures* of the Cross.

Much of the Bible is written from the perspective of the first disclosure. The biblical authors do see something of God (we posit), but they often see God from the perspective of their horror and outrage over the injustices and violence that arise from human alienation from God. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible attribute their divinely inspired outrage over human depravity and injustice to God, and present an often “wrathful” God to us in this light.

The second disclosure reveals what we are to do in response to the first. To overcome our alienation from God, and the ‘reign of death’ to which it leads, we must surrender ourselves – our insistence upon our self-will – to God. Thus, the Bible tells us: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” “Fear” here does not mean fright, but respectful

submission. Still, viewed from the perspective of the first disclosure, this call for surrender can seem a call for appeasement: We must surrender ourselves to God's will in order to appease God's wrath. The traditional, juridical, interpretation of the atonement seems largely presented from this standpoint.

But what is revealed in the third disclosure of the Cross, as well as in the life of Christ as a whole, is that God's essential response to human alienation, and to the moral violations that arise from it, is *not* wrath, but boundless sorrow, sympathy, and compassion. God's desire is not to condemn us but to heal us. God suffers our alienation and the violent consequences of this alienation *with us*, that we might overcome our alienation through God. God's call for surrender is not a call for appeasement, but a call to come home. We are to surrender our lonely self-involvement to God, so as to live within the embrace of God's love.

This is the *final* meaning of the Cross, and any adequate theology of atonement must be written from this perspective.

We might, then, summarize the transformational doctrine of atonement in this way: God, through Christ, *participates* with us in death (in *all* its manifestations) in order to conduct us from death to eternal life. Christ does not suffer the punishment *for* sin, but the punishment *of* sin; the punishment sin itself brings. This punishment is not imposed on us by God (as the juridical model suggests) but by sin itself. Christ, the *God-Man*, suffers it both *as* us, in his human aspect, and *with* us, in his divine aspect, and thereby reveals God's loving and compassionate presence *to* us in the very depths of our darkness and alienation. This presence, when *experienced*, dispels this darkness and heals our alienation; a healing revealed in the resurrection.

In order to reap the benefits of Christ's atoning act we must participate in it. That is, we must participate in God's participation with us. Only thereby do we come to know and experience that participation. The entire life of faith is our participation in God's participation. As we grow in faith, as we let go our desperate hold on ourselves, as we come to discern and experience the eternal Presence underlying and supporting our tremulous, fleeting lives, our darkness is turned increasingly to light, our deathliness to life, and our lives under the "reign of death" are transformed into lives of peace, love, and joy that – in the words of Paul – "pass all understanding." To be transformed thus is the deep meaning of "atonement."

¹ The word 'atonement' is an English word with no exact equivalent in either the Hebrew Bible or the Greek New Testament. In Hebrew, the word often translated 'atonement' is *kippur*; which, etymologically, means something more like 'cleanse.' In the New Testament, a word sometimes translated 'atonement' is *katallage*, which means 'reconciliation.' This is a rare instance in which the etymology of the English translation gets us closer to the heart of what is at stake than the etymology of the original words. In all cases, the Bible is concerned with the mending of a rupture in the human relationship with God.

² How can we know this? How can we know what God's well-being requires? We know this through reflection on what the spiritually mature human being is like. Such a person rises above the need to *exact* respect from others, and hence the need for satisfaction, which is a need of the ego in relation to other egos. This is why Christ on the Cross is able to say – not "Father, grant that I may have satisfaction for what they are doing to me" – but, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

³ What I am here calling 'divine witness' is what Martin Buber speaks of as the I-Thou relation.

⁴ In the first epistle of John we read: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. . . The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever." (1 Jn 2:15-17).

⁵ "The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (Gn. 8:21).

⁶ This finds dramatic, and unsettling, expression in the biblical story of God's command that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. This story is something of a biblical *koan*: we can understand it only by

transforming our understanding of life itself. To the extent that we envision God as a distinct being acting for his own sake we cannot understand it. Abraham seems to be trying to appease a tyrannical God. This seems far from admirable or edifying. We can begin to understand it only as we come to see God as the eternal good underlying and supporting our own finite lives. Abraham has not agreed to destroy Isaac but to place him into the hands of God, Isaac's own eternal ground. Abraham is able to agree to this because he *knows* and *trusts* God, and trusts that Isaac's essential well-being is not at stake. The story is telling us, in the most dramatic terms, that we must not hold finite life as ultimate. We must finally trust ourselves and our loved ones to a good beyond the finite play of life and death. Such trust is the meaning of faith. We are scandalized by the story precisely to the extent that we cannot manage such faith.

⁷ We are called to follow Christ in this: "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15: 12-13).

⁸ This is echoed in Buddhism, where this structure of self-clinging is called 'tanha.' Only by overcoming tanha, says the Buddha, can we enter nirvana, a state of true peace, compassion, and joy.

⁹ It might be worthwhile to reflect more fully on just what we are to understand here by the word 'surrender.' To surrender something is to voluntarily give it up when one does not entirely wish to. One surrenders under duress, often to avoid a consequence even worse than the surrender itself. In the context of atonement, what is surrendered is something for which we do not have an entirely good word. We might call it *pride*, or *self-will*, but these terms are less than fully adequate. What is surrendered is actually a *project* – the project of making ourselves our own ontological ground. Expressed in this abstract way we might not recognize this project as our own. Nevertheless, it is a project that underlies much that we do recognize: greed, envy, rage, tyranny, egoism, vanity, malice, even despair.

All the great religions speak of the need for such surrender in their own terms. In Islam it is spoken of as submission. In Hinduism it underlies the ideas of renunciation (*sannyasa*) and non-attachment. In Buddhism it is related to the doctrine of *anatma* (no self) and the overcoming of *tanha* (self-clinging). In Taoism it is referred to as *wu-wei* (not-doing). All of these various terms point to a single notion: that to achieve true peace the human individual must desist from the desperate project of trying to become absolute in her own finite individuality, and come instead to experience her rootedness in that which lies beyond the world of finite, fleeting, things.

The inner movement of surrender is a kind of existential relaxation, a loosening of one's grip, an unclenching of one's fist. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart speaks of it as *Gelassenheit*, letting-be. But it is the loosening of a grip held so deeply within us that for the most part we are unaware we are even doing the gripping. Thus, we cannot surrender as a simple act of will. We must first get in touch with that part of us that is all clenched up. And even then, there is that in us that does not *wish* to surrender, that is *afraid* to surrender, that is less than confident there is anything to surrender *to*. Thus, the spiritual life is an ongoing struggle, a 'wrestling' with God (see footnote 10).

Finally, we should note that to speak of this unclenching as 'surrender' is to look at it from the perspective of one who has not yet surrendered. From the perspective of one who has already surrendered it seems, rather, a *liberation*. Finally we have come out of the darkness and into the light. Finally we are at peace, freed from the desperation of having to save ourselves through ourselves. Hinduism speaks of it as *moksha*, Buddhism as *nirvana*. And Jesus says, "Everyone who sins is a *slave* to sin," but "the truth shall set you free" (Jn. 31-35). On the other side of surrender is not defeat, but great freedom and joy.

¹⁰ In *Genesis* Jacob is renamed Israel after his night of wrestling with the angel of God. We are told that 'Israel' means 'he who wrestles with God and prevails.' From the Christian perspective, the 'children of Israel' (the Hebrew people, of whom modern Jews are the descendents) are the ones initially charged to engage in this spiritual 'wrestling.' With the advent of Christ, the rest of the world is invited to join in.

¹¹ As Jesus expresses it: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn. 15:15).

Richard Oxenberg
Roxenberg@live.com