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Why atonement?

Why do we need atonement? Why is God so violent? Why did Christ have to die? Doesn't the Church need to atone for its own past? How do we connect with atonement today?

No matter how hard they try, human beings cannot hide from the past. Neither can they avoid taking responsibility for history in the present. Global conflicts from the Middle East to the Balkan States, and from Africa to Northern Ireland, have shown that it is impossible for any one generation to opt out of the ongoing events which make their history by attempting to forget without having first forgiven. Without an ongoing and truthful forgiveness, the past returns in violent episodic attempts to shift the burden of blame on to the other person or group.

'To begin to live in the present, we must first atone for our past, and be finished with it . . .'¹ These words from Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* express an underlying human anxiety about blame. Blame and responsibility for suffering are either assumed to belong together or are confused with each other, so that someone or something must be blamed, or held responsible, if suffering is to be at all bearable. But blaming the other makes a victim of both. There is very little one party can do when blamed for the cause of a dispute, except to pass the blame back to another person or to an earlier event, or bring it forward into the present by transferring it to a group or individual involved in the current conflict situation. Bringing it forward into the present widens the circle of violence and feeds into the existing stagnant pool of distrust and recrimination which, so far, has failed to sustain the common life or give hope for the future. The Cold War years were an example of the kind of sterile and static climate of fear in which a war that was in every sense cold

was sustained. Unlike blame, taking responsibility for the suffering caused to another involves an active, or dynamic, initiative. It moves the situation forward and allows for the possibility of a future by involving the active engagement of one or both parties with the pain which has been caused. Where blame looks for a passive victim, taking responsibility works in a common will for active reconciliation which will in turn sustain the renewed life of a future community or relationship.

Chekhov was writing towards the end of the nineteenth century when psychology was still in its infancy. There were few acceptable ways of explaining and attempting to address feelings of personal guilt or of a shared sense of historical responsibility for the actions of previous generations. Despite this, the need to make up for past actions and events has figured in our emotional landscape for as long as human beings have been able to record their story. Art dating from the earliest millennia seems to link sacrifice with the need to atone for something in placating a wrathful god. In the early part of the twentieth century Jung connected the subconscious and dreams with the conscious thoughts and feelings of his patients. At the same time, he allowed his thinking to be informed by the spiritual dimension of the human psyche and with the way in which paying attention to the shadow side of human personality helps us come to terms with guilt. Jung's understanding of the spiritual was also shaped by an understanding of a higher power which embodied both dark and light, good and bad.

Alienation and blame – on not being a loser

The idea of atoning for past actions implies a human need for the kind of relatedness which comes with forgiveness, when the bond of trust is re-established and a person no longer feels alone or alienated. Alone, we cannot bear ourselves, or the harsh realities which confront us daily in the news. But, at the same time, we are accustomed to them and to having to live at times in a state of chronic loneliness. Human beings have learned to adapt to violence and pain by putting up defences which separate, or alienate, them from each other. Violence and pain are also deeply embedded in our unconscious or inner world,

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and we accept the fact that most people, as well as whole nations and communities, experience alienation at some point in their individual lives or in their history.

Alienation, as it is defined from the word ‘alienate’, is a sense of ‘isolation or estrangement’ from others.² Violent crimes such as those witnessed in Hungerford in 1987, Dunblane in 1996 and, more recently in 2010, on a single day in a number of small villages in Cumbria, suggest that alienation is part of even the most apparently ‘normal’ person’s emotional constitution. While it does not usually result in multiple killings, for most of us alienation amounts to what Jesus would have called ‘hardness of heart’. It is part of a technique for surviving and succeeding in a hard world. To be a ‘loser’ is to be ‘soft’, and a soft person becomes a soft target, someone who cannot survive, who cannot fight their patch and who is therefore a natural victim.³ War, massacres and crime on the streets are the result of alienation caused by the human capacity to inflict damage on ourselves and on our surroundings. It requires that we continually review and revise the language we use to explain evil and the Christian understanding of atonement.

In the world and in people’s lives, things have gone wrong. Decisions have been taken and choices made for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes we sense, from having lived with the consequences of these errors of choice and judgement, that we lack something, that we live in a state of estrangement with regard to the kind of relationship that fills the gap which work and lifestyle cannot fill. Alienation brings with it a sense of a particular friendship having been spoiled, even if the friendship has carried on without the shared pain or disappointment ever being mentioned, let alone resolved. This suggests that, through the spoiling of human relationships, there is a greater relationship which needs to be put right.

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Coming to terms with reality

In his poem ‘The Hound of Heaven’ Francis Thompson speaks of the way denial of this particular relationship, and of the need to put it right,

affects our perspective on happiness and our sense of self-worth. In spoiling this unique relationship we have wounded ourselves, so that our actions and choices become a form of self-betrayal, a denial of our true self and of the good in us which can only be re-created in relationship with the God who is Love itself. 'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'⁴

We know ourselves to be relating beings and that our attempts at relationship go wrong because of our human nature and its inclination

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for destroying the people and things we need most. But this self-awareness is also a sign of maturity and of a coming to terms with reality itself. It begins to make reality 'bearable'. Knowing who we are and what we lack is grounded in something

which has to do with realizing the full implication of what it means to be human and the effect human nature has on our attempts to relate to others, including the physical world and those with whom we share it. Right relationship with the higher power which we call God is worked out in all other relationships, although this productive working can only take effect when both parties, God and human beings, are working towards the same ends, the purposes of a loving God for *all* people, and not only for one group or one individual. The paradox lies in finding success in understanding ourselves as responsible beings acting within this wider loving purpose, if we are to truly 'succeed' in our individual lives. Chekhov's words therefore speak of something more than drawing a line under the past, or a veil over past wrongs.

Reconnecting with the past

Atoning for the past is about reconnecting the past with the present. In other words, it allows for a healing of the past in facing the pain which it caused and which is still being experienced in the present. One of the most recent examples of healing and atonement on a national scale was effected through the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, mediated by Archbishop Desmond

Tutu. It revealed atonement to be a process of reparation, like the mending of a torn fabric. This kind of atonement process does not try to pretend that the damage never happened. Instead, a new creation emerges out of the damage itself, so that what has 'gone wrong' is 'put right' in bringing past and present together in a truthful way. But historical, or collective, atonement has to be simultaneously worked out in individual relationships. Both of these processes begin and end in God's own atonement 'worked out' *with* and *for* us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Atonement and the Church

Losing sight of the solidarity which exists between God and human beings in the person of Jesus Christ leads to serious misunderstandings about the Christian faith, as well as the Church. For one thing, it has created the impression that Christianity is a religion which manipulates and damages the individual and that the Church is a hierarchical and largely male-dominated institution which exists to maintain the status quo by reinforcing feelings of personal guilt or inadequacy. This gives the impression that the Christian faith is manipulative and that the Church uses the Christian doctrines of atonement and redemption to exercise its power, although many Christians are only too aware of the Church's need for forgiveness for its own past, up to and including the present day.

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For Christians, their relationship with God is being worked out in the dynamic presence of Christ, his Holy Spirit, working in and through his Church on earth, a Church of which they are an integral part.⁵ When the institutional Church gets in the way of this work, through its divisions and conflicts and increasingly secular priorities, it sends out some very confusing messages about the unconditional love of God and the values and priorities of his kingdom. These

messages undermine the Church's own faith in the reality of God's unconditional forgiveness and so help to perpetuate, in the minds of

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many people who do not go to church, a picture of a vindictive God whose only concern is to remind people of their shortcomings and general unworthiness. In other words, blocking forgiveness in its own life makes it difficult for the Church to be a channel of forgiveness to the secular world.

God, atonement and people

These ideas about the Church not only misrepresent God but also give a false idea of the nature of culpability, and here I would like to distinguish between culpability and guilt. Briefly stated, culpability involves taking responsibility for the effect of wrong actions, while guilt is the result of the imposition of that culpability through judgement or blame. With the free owning of responsibility comes forgiveness. With judgement come guilt and condemnation. Feelings of guilt reduce any sense of responsibility for the consequences of our words and actions to the fear of punishment. This has the effect of removing, or at least obscuring, the healthy regret which a person ought to feel when he or she has wronged someone else.⁶

Fear of punishment is ultimately ego-driven and feelings of guilt and denial will allow us to contrive any number of ways to avoid it. One of these allows a person to avoid responsibility for what has occurred, as well as for putting matters to right. Avoiding responsibility comes with adopting the position of victim, which is not the same as being presumed to be a soft target in the sense I described earlier. In this context, being a victim is a means of exercising control over others through guilt. In other words, it is always someone else's fault that things are the way they are and it is always with someone else that the blame lies. Governments are blamed and individuals often held unfairly to account for everything that is wrong in society, all of which conveniently ignores the fact that it is we who vote governments into power in the first place, so there is perhaps some truth in the saying that we get the governments we deserve.⁷

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The victim mentality also allows those who may have been wronged, and are therefore genuine victims, to avoid taking responsibility for repairing the damage done to themselves or to a third party, including the perpetrator. Sadly, we see this syndrome occurring in the context of the most righteous causes. Minority groups allow themselves to continue to be seen as the victims of injustice, even when the injustice has begun to be put right. In some cases, a whole group continues to be blamed for their suffering, irrespective of the efforts and sacrifices made by many individuals to see justice done; as when all men are seen as sexist, or all women as power-hungry men-haters. All of this hostility is fuelled by fear. Fear now becomes the source of the two most pernicious effects of wrongdoing on the human person and on relationships between people in the wider contexts of history and society. These are the fear of retribution, from God as well as from people, and the fear of other people for other indirectly related reasons. By allowing these two closely related fears to subtly dominate their moral consciousness, human beings have wrought all manner of destruction upon themselves and upon the world.

Jesus Christ enters into this destruction and takes into himself the pain which it causes. In other words, he takes responsibility for it. In so doing, he inaugurates an entirely new and completely effective approach to the overcoming of fear by meeting human beings in their own fear and in the alienation which it causes. He himself becomes 'alienated'. He experiences what it means to be an outcast, to 'not belong' in the context of human relationships. At the same time, he remains profoundly connected to us in love. In the perfection of his own divine nature, he fully identifies with our fear of retribution by accepting the inevitable consequence of what is a very *human* desire for 'payback'. The Christian idea of atonement involves an ongoing 'working' relationship between a loving Creator and his people from within the scene of devastation itself and from within God's own being; in other words, from within the life of the Trinity.⁸

The Christian idea of atonement involves an ongoing 'working' relationship between God and people

We get glimpses of the ongoing relational life of the Trinity, and the freedom of God's love, as it is reflected in the love which

surfaces when human beings work together to rebuild and make good the evil and destruction of war.⁹ We see it also in the courageous love of people caught up in major disasters as, for example, in the London Blitz of 1940, Sarajevo in the 1990s, New York in 2002 and Haiti in 2010. All of these are examples of the potential for a human response to God's invitation to be in relationship with him in his ongoing work of salvation in which love overcomes fear, and the desire to heal breaks down enmity.¹⁰ The Christian understanding of atonement involves, first, a recognition of our need for healing and for the renewal of relationship, and second, overcoming the kind of fear which obliges us to protect ourselves from retributive punishment. So how is it that we have lost sight of the way God's atoning work, his being with and for us, heals and reconciles us to him and to one another?

Atonement and the Bible – the Old Testament legacy

In order to address these questions Christians need to re-evaluate where they are coming from in their own history as it relates to that of God's people, the Jews. One of the criticisms levelled at Christians is that they have appropriated the Scriptures which were first given to the Jews, in order to explain and justify the atoning work of Christ. The way in which Christians read Scripture as pointing to the salvation of the whole human race therefore becomes very problematic when the three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, are seen to be fundamentally in conflict with each other and not the joint heirs of a single Abrahamic legacy. This is because, in relation to the atoning work of Christ, Scripture appears to speak of a once and for all event, a promise made to Abraham concerning a particular people. But Christ's reconciling work of atonement applies in equal measure to anyone who wants it, irrespective of ethnicity or gender. He suffers and dies not only as a Jew, but as the 'second Adam', the one who holds the whole human race in his own humanity.

God's reconciling work is also ongoing, a dynamic and living process of healing and of restoring human beings into relationship with God, as promised to Abraham, set down in the covenant and realized in Christ up to and including the present day. This dynamic movement

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is the ongoing working presence of the Holy Spirit in history, and history is to be read contextually if we are to learn from it today. Events are shaped by cultural circumstances, or contexts, and can only be fully understood within those contexts. They also take place at a particular point in time and for specific reasons. All of these considerations need to be taken into account when we think of the atonement as it is presented in Scripture.

The social or cultural contexts in which God's work of atonement is described in the Old Testament are already shaped by the culture of the indigenous people of Canaan, and later of Egypt and Babylon. In all three of these contexts the idea of a God who desires to be known and loved by his people would have been unimaginable. On the whole, these early civilizations would also have found it very difficult to conceive of a God who did not need to be appeased, or who could not be worshipped in the form of inanimate objects or through the spirit world. Early Canaanite and Babylonian worshippers explained God to themselves through stories and myths in order to try to make sense of what they believed to be the supreme life force at work in the world. They also domesticated their idea of God by making him 'tangible'. They erected 'shrines' and fashioned 'gods' from wood or stone to which they sacrificed animals and sometimes even children.

These sacrifices were designed to appease a wrathful deity and to persuade him to act in the interest of his worshippers by blessing their crops and protecting them from disease and aggression. Sacrifice was so closely bound to the cultic myth that it became part of it, both as a visual enactment of a people's own self-understanding in relation to these gods and as a visual re-enactment of the whole story of the created order and human existence. The story was simple and dualistic, a battle between the destructive forces of nature and the survival of humanity, between light and darkness and good and evil. In this kind of sacrificial thought-world human beings acted both as mediators between these opposing forces and as servants of the creator god, Baal or, in the case of Babylon, Marduk. Sacrifice was the principal language of worship.

Allowing for the fact that much of Genesis was written after the second exile, when monotheism was more firmly established, Abraham's

obedience and faith introduced the idea of monotheism into a particular culture context and it is from this context that the relationship between sacrifice and atonement was originally forged. For the early Israelites, the atoning work of sacrifice emphasized a separation between a holy God and an impure people. This separating of the holy from the 'profane' had two long-lasting effects on the way Christians think about atonement. First, atonement and holiness became closely associated with the concept of purity, leading to a conceptualization of God as distant, jealous and vengeful. He was a God who was only concerned with retribution for sins, which were usually an infringement of laws relating to purity.¹¹ These laws were a means of setting the people of God apart from the surrounding nations, endowing them with a clear identity, and of maintaining a sense of the holy and the sacred in relation to God himself.¹²

Second, these portrayals of an essentially violent God encourage us to think of Christ's atonement as a violent event. Allowing Christian

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theology to be coloured by a violent perception of God can make Christians violent towards others, and ultimately leads to triumphalist attitudes towards other Christians,

or towards other faiths. Between Christians, this violent attitude stems from a fundamental distrust of those who do not understand Christian atonement as primarily concerned with God's retributive and violent punishment for sin, and as taking precedence over God's reciprocal loving relationship with his people. In the Old Testament, God journeys (literally 'tents') with his people as a sign of his covenant with them, that he is in solidarity with his people, so that over time they might learn to shape their priorities on the basis of being in right relationship with him, on a desire to know and be known by God. For Christians, this desire is met and consummated in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

Atonement and the Bible – the New Testament

The New Testament embodies the fulfilment of God's promise and is also known as the New Covenant. The relationship which until now

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has been reserved for God's own people, the Jews, now embraces all of humanity. It is brought about by the transformation of the human predicament from one of alienation from God to one of reconciliation and friendship. The covenant embrace we experience in Jesus can be compared to two long-standing friends who have been separated by a quarrel and are now reunited. The healing and reconciliation which takes place between them is of such depth that it is as if they are seeing each other both for the first time and as if they had never been apart. The relationship between human beings and God, as a result of God's atoning work in Christ, brings a new intimacy between him and those who accept his invitation to be 'at one' with him.

Throughout his life, the friendships and healing encounters which Jesus has with people from every kind of background are intimate, as if he has always known the person in question. He knows about the past life of the Samaritan woman who says of him, '[He] told me everything I have ever done,'¹³ not because he is a clairvoyant, but because he knows her as a uniquely created and loved child of God. In his encounter with the woman brought to him by the religious authorities who were about to stone her for adultery, he knows their own perfidious nature and literally spells it out to them in the sand.¹⁴ He also knows the full set of circumstances which have brought the woman to this point in her life. In this respect, it is perhaps worth noting that while he tells her to 'go your way, and from now on do not sin again', it is not immediately obvious that the sin consists only in adultery. In terms of the Jewish law it almost certainly did, but in terms of the values which Jesus had come to inaugurate, and which define the kingdom of God, it may well have been the *consequence* of her adultery which most concerned him. She may have caused great pain to others, as well as to herself, in neglecting or abusing people close to her. It is these underlying consequences which have to do with the well-being of human beings that concern Jesus as much, if not more, than the law itself.

Jesus comes therefore to inaugurate a new era, a kingdom in which outworn values and priorities which distance God from his people and reinforce the authority of a powerful religious elite are now reversed. His conversation with Nicodemus, himself a Pharisee, revolves around the subject of rebirth and the dynamic life of the Holy Spirit working

in a person who knows God from the heart, as well as with the mind.¹⁵ Jesus picks up on Nicodemus' lack of spiritual insight. Despite the fact that he is an expert in Jewish law, Nicodemus is only able to see God through the prism of this law. He is a rational thinker, who has not yet experienced the kind of need for God which would give meaning and substance to his theology.

Unlike Nicodemus, the woman who was healed of an incurable haemorrhage 'knew' that if she only touched Jesus' garment she would be healed. Her intuitive 'knowing' was the knowledge of faith which allowed her to draw close to Jesus and enabled his healing to take effect.¹⁶ The blind man who interrupted Jesus as he was teaching, with loud cries to the Son of David for mercy, was making a similar 'movement of faith'.¹⁷ Both of these incidents, and others like them, depict a covenant movement, a movement which makes two people 'at one' with each other and, as in the case of the people Jesus healed, at one with their own bodies and with God. Taken together, they suggest that the Christian idea of atonement begins in a deeper understanding of the significance of the life of Jesus, as well as of his death. The cross is the consummation of his life and of God's promise to be 'at one' with all who recognize their need for God and turn to him in a relationship with his Son.

Atonement in Jesus Christ

The Christian idea of atonement in Jesus Christ is revolutionary. It turns the things we take for granted about forgiveness and reparation, and the subsequent rebuilding of relationships, completely upside down. It does so by declaring that where there has been a wrong committed, things are set right without the wrongdoers having to be punished for what they have done or make reparation through some form of retributive moral 'pay-back' process. All that is required is a person's acceptance of his or her need for forgiveness and of God's grace.

Why then was it necessary for Christ to actually die for our sins? Many people are understandably put off Christianity by the idea that the brutal sacrifice of God's own Son was necessary in order to make us worthy of salvation. Even before they try to come to terms with

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the need for this sacrifice, they instinctively recoil from a God who seems to require it. In fact, everything I have said so far about God's reconciling work, as well as the healing and forgiveness which embodies atonement, makes no sense at all in the context of such a requirement. But just as the kingdom which Jesus inaugurates during his earthly life reverses all the priorities of the old law, the sacrifice of his death is also of a different order. In order to make sense of it, we need to remember that this sacrifice had nothing in common with the sacrificial methods of the past in which animals were slaughtered as a way of 'paying for' sin and assuaging an angry deity.

The sacrifice of Christ begins from the moment of his conception, in God's decision to be wholly involved with the human predicament. Paul, using a hymn adapted from a non-Judaic source, describes this engagement with humanity as 'God . . . being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.'¹⁸ It is with his acceptance of death itself that the key to making sense of atonement lies. The death of Christ was not simply imposed by the Father. Jesus could have refused it, and was tempted to do so in the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed on the night he was arrested. Neither was it the case that death alone was necessary to set to rights the relationship between God and humanity. The sacrifice of Christ is that of a whole life lived to God and an acceptance of suffering and of human mortality as part of that life and part of the *consequence* of human sin. But even the acceptance of death would not alone have proved that human beings are ultimately destined for eternal life with God.

The Christian idea of atonement only begins to make sense when the death of Christ is seen in the context of his life and resurrection. Christ's resurrection is sometimes treated as a kind of postscript to his Passion rather than as its central meaning and purpose. Christ entered fully into our human predicament and by his dying and rising redeemed the human race from alienation and ultimate oblivion. In the final chapter of this book I shall have more to say on how the resurrection of Christ is the ultimate sign of redemption for the human race, but for the moment it is enough to say that Christ

experiences *with* us and *for* us the depths of desolation, of God-forsakenness, on the cross.

This brings us a little closer to understanding in what sense his suffering and dying was a ‘punishment’ for sin. The ‘punishment’ was in fact God’s Son deliberately taking into himself the inevitable *consequence* of humanity’s tendency to give up on God, a tendency which results in its own self-destruction and in the destruction

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of God’s world. Destruction is our default position, insofar as we have a proclivity for protecting our selves and our perceived self-interests over those of others. God’s

loving of the world required that Christ reverse this trend in his birth, in all his relationships and in his dying. But why should this be necessary?

Conclusion

We begin to find an answer to this in contemplating the loneliness of human suffering. Christ owns this loneliness for himself. He also takes responsibility for the alienation human beings experience as a direct consequence of selfish living. The selfish act, from which all other destructive actions flow, is done to protect my own interests, to use others in order for me to feel safe and needed, but it has the reverse effect. The selfish person is ultimately the loneliest. In Christ’s suffering we see him experiencing the very depths of this loneliness. This is his suffering ‘with’ humanity, rather than ‘instead of’ humanity. If Christ’s act of obedience on the cross is reduced simply to an ‘instead of’ act, or what we call *propitiatory* atonement or *penal substitution*, we see only a very small and distorted part of the bigger picture. Christ dies *for* our sins because he chooses, with the whole of his life, to be *with* us in them by taking human sin into himself, as well as by accepting the consequences of sin. In this way, God in Christ dies from within his own self in order to meet people in their true selves.¹⁹ He becomes as we are in order that we may become as he is.²⁰ When this happens, his divine nature is so joined with our human nature, without in any way being compromised or diminished by it, that our

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humanity is embraced by God and becomes a part of him. This raises a very important question. If we are changed by being so closely bound to God himself, how do we account for our ongoing complicity in the evil we see around us?