Atonement: An Analysis of Transaction and Transformation Theories of Reconciliation

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In a religious sense, atonement means "at-one-ment." This is the state of being "at one" -- or reconciled -- with God. Christianity has historically taught that:

1. A gap arose between God and humans as a result of the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
2. Either:
   a. Original sin consequently plagued all of their descendents worldwide down to the present generation, or
   b. Through their sin, the universe permanently changed and became a place of death, destruction, sin and the alienation of humans from God
3. Jesus’ life, and particularly his death on the cross, allowed some humans to bridge the gap and be reconciled with God.

Somehow this gap between humans and God must be reconciled. Christianity teaches that Jesus’ life, and particularly his death on the cross, bridged the gap. However, the question to be asked is just how Jesus’ life and death could serve as the bridge to such a gap.

Many of the atonement theories developed thus far have promoted somewhat violent reasons for Jesus’ Incarnation and death, and yet Christian ethics uphold a peace based grounding. In some areas of Western cultural discourse, any attempt to promote Christian ethics as a solution for the many difficulties besetting us runs into a presumed cultural fact:

Christianity’s historic and continuing complicity with violence invalidates any Christian claim to moral goodness. Many of the skeptical observers of Christianity have for many years believed that Nietzsche got it right, that Christianity’s legacy has merely been a reversal of values through which an ethic purportedly driven by love and service has been used as an opportunity for control and subjugation. In this view, Christian ethics is an oxymoron.

Perhaps the Nietzschean view is well grounded as the early Christian theologians did not delve deeply into how the atonement came to be. Philip Schaff writes: "...the primitive church teachers

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lived more in the thankful enjoyment of redemption than in logical reflection upon it. We perceive in their exhibitions of this blessed mystery the language rather of enthusiastic feeling than of careful definition and acute analysis." A majority of theologians from Origen (185-254 CE) to the present have held that the atonement is related in some way to the sacrificial and/or voluntary torture and death of Jesus. They selected certain passages in the Scriptures that agreed with their beliefs, and ignored others. In this way, they arrived at very different, conflicting, bible-based theories, and yet each one still thrives in complicity with violence. In recent decades, some theologians have rejected atonement theories based strictly on the violent crucifixion. They argue in favor of a non-violent explanation for the atonement, i.e. promote a focus based on Jesus’ life, rather than his death.

I will be looking at what I take to be the three main theories of atonement; although, various writers state that there are numerous theories of the atonement. Broadly speaking, the three traditional theories are:

1. The Ransom Theory: God and Satan are in competition for souls; God must pay off Satan with a bribe. (Introduced by Origen in the third century CE.)

2. The Satisfaction Theory (Jesus appeases God by being a ritual human sacrifice) Introduced by Anselm in the late 11th century CE.

3. The Moral Exemplar Theory (Jesus’ life and death is an example for the rest of humanity to emulate) Introduced by Abelard in the 12th century CE.

In this paper I will carefully examine these three atonement theories, and ultimately conclude that the moral exemplar theory, which irradiates the historical Christian tendency toward violence, is the most accurate of the atonement theories given thus far in western culture.

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The Ransom Theory -- God and Satan are in competition for souls:

The Ransom Theory, also commonly called the “classic theory”, was the dominant atonement view of the early Christian church. Although few theologians espouse this theory today, it was accepted by church leaders for nearly a millennium. Therefore, some have argued that its main strength was its acceptance by Christian leaders within two centuries after Jesus’ death. Accounts of the events that took place were, most likely, more accurate.

The basic view of this theory is that God and the Devil are in competition for souls. If a human being is stained by sin, he or she becomes the Devil’s possession. However, God loves us and desires to be in union with us. He must not violate the rules of competition; He cannot simply snatch human souls back from the Devil. Christ, who lived a sinless life, becomes the sacrificial lamb, dying the very painful Roman crucifixion as a ransom for our sins. Thus, Christ pays a price that earns God the right to our souls despite our sinful lives.

The Ransom Theory was based, in part, on Mark 10:45, 1 Timothy 2:6, and Hebrews 10:15, where the word "ransom" seems to be taken quite literally:

--Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."\(^4\)

--1 Timothy 2:5-6: "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."\(^5\)

--Hebrews 10:15: "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant."\(^6\)

Therefore, the ransom theory seems to claim some legitimacy by being the first of the atonement theories, and by being ‘directly’ referred to in many passages in the Bible. That being said, I feel there are stronger objections for this theory to overcome.

\(^4\) [http://www.ibsstl.org/bible/verse/index.php?q=mark%2010:45]
First, the ransom theory implies that either an all powerful God is simply playing a kind of ‘game’ for our souls with the Devil offering a ‘ransom’ to the Devil in the name of sportsmanship (as opposed to simply exercising his power and snatching our souls back); or, that God is on an equal playing field with the Devil—that they are two equal and opposing powers. The first of these suggests that the Devil has some sort of ‘control’ over fallen souls or sinners whether permanent or not. The Bible identifies Satan as a created being; a fallen angel who disobeyed God. Similarly, humans are commonly portrayed as created beings that disobeyed God and have fallen. There is no obvious rationale for assuming that Satan had control over all of humanity any more than the reverse might be true. Neither is it logical to assume that this is merely an entertaining game for God.

The second of these possible implications, that God and Satan are two equal and opposing powers, is neither consistent with Christian doctrine, nor is it logically possible. It is not possible to have two all powerful beings that rule the universe—the very concept is contradictory. Therefore, either God or the Devil has more power than the other. As a fallen angel, it is illogical to assume the Devil’s omnipotence, much less his ‘control’ over humans. If God is all powerful, we are back to the suggestion that it is merely a game; or we can consider a second possibility.

Christian doctrine teaches God is omniscient, omnipotent, just, ethical, and loving. It is illogical to think that such a God would be willing to allow his son to be crucified if there were another way to achieve atonement. God might have, for example, simply forgiven Adam and Eve for their sin. According to the gospels, Jesus repeatedly taught that extending forgiveness is to take the moral ‘high road’. If it is not merely a game for God, then he (assuming he is omnipotent) could practice the forgiveness he preaches and forgive those who have wronged him
through sin, instead of allowing them to be prisoners of the Devil. Perhaps he is in fact such a forgiving God, but then the need for a ‘ransom’ is not accounted for.

Another objection that has been posed to the ransom theory is in line with the next atonement theory I will discuss—the satisfaction theory. Several passages in the Bible imply that Christ's death was a ritual sacrifice to God, and thereby not to Satan:

-- Isaiah 53:10: "Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand."

-- Ephesians 5:2: "And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour."

Satisfaction theory—Jesus appeases God by becoming a ritual human sacrifice

The satisfaction theory is grounded in the concept that human sin dishonors God. God, being our creator, deserves our infinite honor and reverence. Because we sin, we are further indebted to God. A price must be paid to ‘balance out’ the cost of our sins. In the ancient Hebrew tradition, it was thought that ritual sacrifice was a worthy offering to God for any wrongs committed. Thus by allowing himself to be ritually sacrificed, Jesus’ death replicated this ancient tradition in order to restore the relationship between humans and their creator.

The satisfaction theory is generally attributed to Anselm of Canterbury, (1033 to 1109 CE).\(^7\) It is contained in his book, Cur Deus Homo ("Why God Became Man"), written around 1098 CE.\(^8\) The theory is similar to the ransom theory in that a price must be paid for deliverance from sin. However, it was paid to God rather than to Satan. Theologians in the Middle Ages believed that such restoration would not be possible by merely sacrificing humans for we are less than God. Therefore, the only way to satisfy the large debt amassed by human sin was a sacrifice as great as God. God the Son became man, practiced the utmost obedience to God, and

\(^7\) [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-curdeus.html]
\(^8\) Ibid.
was sinless. His death by crucifixion was a sacrifice to God but one in which he was not paying for his own sins, but for the sins of all mankind. Because of the nature of the sacrifice, most denominations teach that all persons in all eras and countries can achieve atonement. However, many denominations in the reform tradition believe that one can only achieve atonement by accepting the gift of Jesus’ sacrifice. Eleonore Stump, in her article, “Atonement According to Aquinas” writes:

> Because the point of making satisfaction is to return the wrongdoer’s will to conformity with the will of the person wronged, rather to inflict retributive punishment on the wrongdoer or to placate the person wronged, it is possible for the satisfaction to be made by a substitute, provided that the wrongdoer allies himself with the substitute in willing to undo as far as possible the damage he has done.\(^9\)

If one does not accept Jesus’ satisfaction as a substitute, one’s sins are not atoned for and the debt is not cancelled. What of the people who are not introduced into the Christian tradition? Are they to be held responsible for not choosing to align themselves with this ‘substitute’? Shouldn’t everyone have an equal opportunity for salvation? This objection is not accounted for and is one of the weaknesses of the satisfaction theory.

Another objection that has been raised is to question exactly what, through this sacrifice, is satisfying God? Again, Anselm writes: "...the price paid to God for the sin of man [must] be something greater than all the universe besides God... Moreover, it is necessary that he who can give God anything of his own which is more valuable than all things in the possession of God, must be greater than all else but God himself....Therefore none but God can make this satisfaction."\(^{10}\) Although the sacrifice of God is greater than that of a human, it is still not clear what satisfies God by Jesus’ death in particular. In my opinion, there is no an adequate answer

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\(^{10}\) Anselm, Chapter IV. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-curdeus.html>
for this question. Perhaps this theory is ‘missing the point’; it focuses entirely on Jesus’ death rather than his life.

Although the satisfaction theory has been widely accepted and taught, as Eleanor Stump points out, “[the theory]…rests on a conception of God that makes him seem something like an accountant keeping double column books on the universe.”\(^{11}\) The belief that God’s pride is wounded by sin such that he keeps a running account of what mankind owes him in repayment for this ‘dishonor’ is inconsistent with the Christian teaching. Again, God, being omnipotent, could simply forgive humans, or find some other way for humanity to attain ‘atonement’.

Therefore, perhaps the concept of atonement as a transaction or *repayment* is mistaken. If atonement as repayment is rejected, the concept might resemble something closer to what the word actually means: at-one-ment. Stump continues along these lines as she writes,

> But on Aquinas’s account, God is not concerned to balance the accounts. He is concerned with the sinner, with his child. What he wants is for that person to love what God loves and to be in harmony with God. His aim, then, is to turn the person around; and what will satisfy him is not punishment and repayment, but the goodness and love of his creature.\(^{12}\)

Stump’s summary of Aquinas’s account seems to be more in line with our last theory, the moral exemplar theory. This theory is non-violent and focuses on the restoration of the sinner to its creator through harmony and forgiveness.

**The Moral Exemplar Theory--Jesus’ life and death is an example for the rest of humanity to emulate**

It seems that most Christians would want to say that everyone has an equal opportunity for salvation, even those who follow a different religion. If we make this claim, it seems the satisfaction theory collapses. We have seen the criticism of ‘God’s inability to forgive without

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\(^{11}\) Stump. Pg. 68

\(^{12}\) Ibid. pg. 69.
payment’ in both the ransom and satisfaction theories. This is in contradiction to his omnipotence. John Hick, in his article ‘Is the Doctrine of Atonement a Mistake?’ writes,

The basic fault, as I see it, of the traditional understanding of salvation within the Western development of Christianity is that they have no room for divine forgiveness! For a forgiveness that has to be bought by the bearing of a just punishment or the giving of an adequate satisfaction or the offering of a sufficient sacrifice or reparation is not forgiveness at all, but merely an acknowledgment that the debt has been paid.\(^\text{13}\)

Therefore, an atonement theory must consider: God’s omnipotence, including his ability to forgive; a restoration of *harmony* between sinner and creator; and the ability of everyone, Christian or not, to achieve this restoration and/or salvation.

Hick combines all of these elements by arguing that all religions have a common theme, which stresses a transformation from self-centeredness to an other-centeredness; this is salvation. Hick writes, “If ones sees salvation as the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the ultimate divine Reality, then transaction theories of salvation appear as answers to a mistaken question.”\(^\text{14}\) For Hick, salvation has a positive focus of transformation rather than a negative focus grounded in guilt. His theory focuses on a salvation that is achievable by all, not just Christians, because it is ultimately grounded in transformation, which he argues is common to all religions; it is non-violent and emphasizes harmony. If atonement is about transformation, *transaction* theories collapse.

Hick’s concepts resonate with the moral exemplar theory. This theory, introduced by Peter Abelard in the 12 century CE, teaches that atonement is not attained through a payment to Satan as in the ransom theory. It is not attained by a payment made to restore God’s favor as in the satisfaction theory. Perhaps in the name of justice, it would be fitting for God to punish us for our sins against him; we owe him some type of compensation. But God does not ask for it.


\(^\text{14}\) Ibid. pg. 251.
Rather, his limitless and unconditional love overrules his need to treat us ‘justly’. This love is characteristic of his omnipotent nature.

Although we are all sinners, we are still called to live with reverence to God our creator. Jesus’ life and death becomes an inspiration and an example for Christians to follow. The focus of the atonement is not Satan or God as in the two previous transaction theories. It is the individual Christian believer seeking wholeness—‘at-one-ment’. Hick continues,

There is continuity here with what Adolf Deissmann called St. Paul’s ‘mysticism’, which involves humans undergoing a transformation (metamorphosis) in Christ; for we ‘are being changed into [Christ’s] likeness from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Cor. 3:18). We are to be transformed from the state of slavery into the state of sonship (Romans 8: 15-17); or again, conformed (symmorphosis) to the image of Christ (8:29). ‘Do not be conformed to the world’, Paul urges the Christians in Rome, ‘but be transformed by the renewal of your mind’ (2:12). And indeed, we may say that to be a Christian is to be one in whose life Christ is the major, the largest single, influence (often among a variety of influences) for salvific transformation. This way of thinking seems to suggest that salvation is in our hands rather than God’s hands. This has been one of the main criticisms of the moral exemplar theory. However, the theory does not suggest that humans control whether or not they get into heaven; this is ultimately God’s decision. Rather, humans are responsible for trying to undergo a transformation of mind, as Hick suggests. This transformation of mind should revolve around ultimate faith and trust in God. However, this does not simply mean proclaiming ‘I believe in God,’ it means actively leaving behind self-centeredness.

Jesus modeled for us this ability to leave self-centeredness behind by the way he lived his life. J.R. Lucas, in his article “Reflections on the Atonement” writes, “Jesus’ death was part of His life, and in so far as we use the language of sacrifice to describe His death, we need to make it clear that it was His whole life that He dedicated to the father.” His life was an example of the utmost faith and trust in God regardless of any worldly price that must be paid to do so.

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15 Ibid. pg. 260-61.
Lucas continues, “…I am interpreting the whole Incarnation as a plan of God’s to reconcile the whole of humanity; and since human selfishness, exemplified in my own selfishness, is the great barrier to our being at one with God, that plan needed God to undergo the worst fate that can happen to man, both to demonstrate his sincerity and to be someone we can identify with, however bad our own lot is.” 17 Nowhere in Lucas’ view is the word ‘guilt’ used. God’s Incarnation and death were not about making us feel an overwhelming guilt, but rather an overwhelming recognition of love.

I find the moral exemplar theory to be the most accurate theory of the three traditional theories which I have examined in this paper. This theory defeats the oxymoron in Christian ethics by removing the complicity with violence as it considers God’s omnipotence including his ability to forgive; a restoration of harmony between sinner and creator; and also takes into account that everyone, Christian or not, can achieve this restoration and/or salvation. I will conclude with a quote from Hick:

“Nevertheless, we have to insist that these ecclesiastical theories are all misleading. It is misleading to think that there is a Devil with legitimate rights over against God. It is misleading to think of the heavenly Father on the model of a feudal lord or a stern cosmic moralist. And it is misleading to see acceptance of the Christian mythology of the Cross as the only way to salvation for all human beings. Let the voluntary sacrifice of a holy life continue to challenge and inspire us in a way that transcends words. But let us not reduce its meaning to any culture-bound theological theory.”18

17 Ibid. pg. 274.
18 Hick. Pg. 262.