The Fallacy of the Atonement? Can the Doctrine of the Atonement be Supported?

By

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Abstract.

This paper will argue that the Christian doctrine of the Atonement – in all its versions – is probably fallacious, and that, therefore, the idea that the death of Jesus of Nazareth, whenever it took place, relieves either all or some humans of the burden of original sin (assuming there is such a thing) and actual sins cannot be sustained. The whole basis of Christian soteriology – its theology of salvation – is, if this thesis is correct, thereby fatally undermined.

Keywords: Christian doctrine; Atonement; death of Jesus; original sin; actual sins; Christian soteriology; salvation; Christian theology; dystheism; misotheism.

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1. Introduction.

In what follows, we shall be making use of the helpful summary of the history of the Christian doctrine of the atonement provided by Allison (2007 [1]) and of discussions by Grant (1986 [2]), Helm (1985 [3]), Mather (1958 [4]), McGrath (2009 [5]), Thurow 2023 [6] and Schmidt (2024 [7]).

Most importantly, we shall be arguing that the doctrine of the atonement ('at-one-ment'; Hebrew, *kippur*; Greek, *hilasmos*, *katallagē*) does not satisfy the requirements of either justice or mercy, and is unnecessary, in any event, if there is no such thing as original sin: the other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, which are also unitarian, and Unitarianism itself, do not have a doctrine of the atonement, as it is understood by Christians, any more than they do doctrines of the Trinity or the Incarnation, precisely because they lack a doctrine of original sin (see Tollefson 2011 [8]); Blaber (2023a [9]); Blaber (2023b [10]). We shall,

however, also be taking account of the work of Burnhope (2017 [11]); Rist (2023 [12]); Klocová (2023 [13]); and Sheeder (2023 [14]).

It should be noted that the concept of 'sin' is not a moral, but a theological one, defined by St Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) as *factum, dictum vel concupiscem contra legem eternam* ('anything done, said or desired contrary to the eternal law [of God]'; see Augustine *c.*408-410 CE [15], 27). We are obliged to obey the moral law, if we wish to be morally good, but are not similarly obligated to obey any putative divine one if (a) God does not exist, or (b) he exists, but is either bad or not wholly good. In any event, the moral law (the *dharma* or *Dao*) should take priority. Either case would be a problem for Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity.

The argument presented is obviously controversial, but that ought not to prevent it from being given a hearing.

2. Atonement in Judaism.

The ritual outlined in Leviticus 16 – that of the 'scapegoat' – might seem to contradict the above assertion, but see Jastrow and Margolis (1906 [16]): there are two goats placed before the Lord (Lev. 16:8), over which lots are cast (ibid.), and one of these is sacrificed to God as a 'sin-offering', the other, the live goat

> **'was now brought forward. The high priest laid his hand upon its head and confessed "all the iniquities of the Israelites, and all their transgressions, even all their sins," which were thus placed upon the goat's head. Laden with the people's sins, the animal was sent away into the wilderness (verses 20-22).'**

However, as Jastrow and Margolis note, the real purpose of these rites was to render the Holy of Holies (*Sanctum Sanctorum*)

> **'free from all impurities attaching to it through the intentional or unintentional entrance of unclean persons into the sanctuary.'**

The focus of the Levitical priesthood was always the issue of ritual purity and its opposite (Regev 2000 [17]). Hayes (2002 [18]) argues that *moral* impurity (Lev. 18-20) as well as *ritual* impurity (Lev. 11-15) defiled the Sanctuary, but that would include laws such as Lev. 20:13, which condemns male (but not female) homosexual acts, and demands the death penalty for them. The fact that the word rendered 'abomination' in modern English translations of Leviticus 20:13 (translations including the Revised English Bible [REB] and the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]) as well as the King James' Authorised Version of 1611, is *toebah* in Hebrew, which means 'ritual impurity', seems to have escaped

Hayes' attention. Lev. 17-26 constitutes the so-called 'Holiness Code', or 'H', named by A.H. Klostermann (1837-1915) in 1877, and dating from the 7th Century BCE (Coogan and Chapman 2019 [19], p.126).

McCarthy (1969 [20]) informs us (p.168) that, for the major centres of the more ancient civilisations of the Near East,

> **'Sacrifice is offering food to the gods, and blood as such had no special, explicit part in it.'**

However, he notes (ibid.), propitiatory rites were conflated with magic, and he refers to one rite entailing sympathetic magic where blood was involved, cleansing a building contaminated by bloodshed (p.169). McCarthy argues (ibid.) that the Babylonian New Year ritual purification is *not* similar to the rite of Lev. 16, because the Akkadian text is rendered '"The incantation priest shall purify... the temple with the corpse... of the sheep."' This sheep's corpse, though, McCarthy admits:

> **'absorbs impurities, becoming so contaminated that it and the men who handled it were cast out of the holy precincts, carrying away impurity' (ibid.).**

In other words, this sheep acts like the scapegoat in the *Yom Kippur* rite.

Turning to the 'Suffering Servant' (*Ebed Yahweh*) figure of Deutero-Isaiah, and specifically of Isaiah 53, there has been much debate between scholars regarding his, or its, identity – see, for example, Morgenstern (1961 [21]); Roth (1964 [22]); Wilshire (1975 [23]); and Moyaert (in Roberts, ed. 2016 [24]). As Moyaert says:

> **'In the prevailing Christian hermeneutic, Christ's life, suffering, and resurrection function as the hermeneutical key for understanding the Old Testament... Although this hermeneutic can be criticized from a historical-critical perspective, it still receives a great deal of support in Christian faith communities where it is confirmed week after week in the liturgy... Such preaching cultivates a kind of direct, uninterrupted, and continuous connection between "Old Testament prophecies" and the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians *cannot*, it seems, understand the suffering servant in any other way than as a Messianic prediction of the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (p.219, my emphasis).**

As she notes, however (p.220), Jewish interpretations are not so unanimous, and are divided between seeing the suffering servant as an individual or in collective

terms – as Israel, for example (see Morgenstern), with the latter being the predominant view. Again, the point she makes on p.221 is unanswerable:

> **'Many Jews saw (and see) Jesus's death as a contraindication to the claim that he is the Messiah who would liberate Israel (Luke 24:21). It is possible that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah, but he was mistaken: He did not do what a messiah was expected to do – liberate Palestine from Roman oppression and restore the Davidic golden age. For Jewish interpreters, the Christological reading of the suffering servant, which sees Jesus as the Messiah, is intuitively unacceptable.'**

The concept of the 'Messiah' (*mashiach*, 'the anointed one') is, after all, a *Jewish* one – it seems counter-intuitive, to say the least, that it should be defined by Christians (see de Villiers 1978 [25] – who points to the distinction made by Jews of the 'inter-testamental period' between the 'Royal' Messiah, and the 'Levitical', or 'Priestly', one).

The 'Teacher of Righteousness' was *not* a messianic figure, but the leader of the Essene community at Qumran in the 1st Century BCE, according to Wise (2003 [26]). The 'Zealot' Judas of Galilee, who led revolts against Roman rule in 4 BCE and 6 CE, may – or may not – have been a messianic claimant, but *was* a claimant to the Hasmonean throne, according to Loftus (1977 [27]). Islam denies that Jesus (*Isa*) was crucified in Qur'an 4:157, and denies that he is the incarnation of God (Qur'an 5:73, 116).

3. The History of the Doctrine in Christianity.

In Rom. 3:23, St Paul tells us that all have sinned, and are deprived of God's glory, and this is why we are in need of Jesus Christ, who has made atonement (*hilastērion*) by his death (vv.24-25). In 2 Cor. 5:21, he tells us that God made Jesus, who was sinless, become sin for us, so that in him, i.e., in Jesus, we might 'become' the righteousness of God.

The anonymous writer to the Hebrews describes Christ as a 'high priest' (9:11), who offers, not the blood of goats and calves, but his own blood (v.12), and that, not annually and repeatedly, as with the Lev. 16 rite, but once and for all (vv.26, 28). In this, the writer echoes John 1:29, which describes Jesus as 'the Lamb of God... who takes away the sin of the world.' Jesus is thus described a making a vicarious sacrifice of himself on behalf of sinful humanity.

Allison [1, p.4] cites the *Letter to Diognetus* (2nd Century CE) saying:

> **'"[God] himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us – the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, 'the just for the unjust' (1 Pet. 3:18), the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the**

> **mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins?"'**

Allison also cites St Justin Martyr (p.5):

> **'"The Father of all wished his Christ to take upon himself the curses of the entire human family – while knowing that, after he had been crucified and died, he would raise him up… His Father wished him to suffer this, in order that by his stripes the human race might be healed."'**

On p.7, Allison cites St Athanasius, telling us that:

> **'"It was necessary that the debt owed by everyone should be paid, and this debt owed was the death of all people. For this particular reason, Jesus Christ came among us… He offered up his sacrifice on behalf of all people. He yielded his temple – that is, his body – to death in the place of everyone."'**

One could cite many other instances, but it would be tedious to do so.

Grant [2] informs us that there has never been a single, defined orthodox doctrine of the atonement, although that of St Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo* ('Why God Became A Man', *c.*1094-1098) is awarded pride of place.

> **'Amid the concern of the feudal age with integrity and honour, Anselm concluded that sin was such an affront to God's honour that it could only be dealt with if in some way that affront could be recompensed. Since only man should, but only God could, accomplish this, that constituted the explanation for the God-man.'**

Mather [4] asks whether the atonement is representative or substitutionary, and comes to the conclusion that it is both. McGrath [5] criticises the 'moral', or subjective, theory of the atonement proposed by Hastings Rashdall (1858-1924), and incidentally, denies that it was held by Peter Abelard (1079-1142).

Schmidt [7] refers to Christ's 'vicarious repentance of humanity's sin', which is the means of God's achieving our 'objective redemption' (p.9, pdf.).

Thurow [6] covers a variety of atonement theories, of which two are of note: the penal substitution theory and the *Christus Victor* theory of Gustaf Aulén, Bishop of Strängnäs (1879-1977; bishop 1933-1952, book published in Swedish, 1930, in English, 1931).

Penal substitution, Thurow states, entails Christ suffering punishment on behalf of humans for human sins: it is vicarious punishment, as opposed to

vicarious sacrifice. The *Christus Victor* theory is quite different: on this view, humans are enslaved to the power of sin, and require a rescuer, Jesus Christ, to free them from this power.

Burnhope [11] argues that, whereas the doctrine is, as Leon Morris claimed, 'the central doctrine of Christianity', it is understood through multiple models and metaphors, and he notes what he calls a 'theological oddity': the absence from Christian thought on the subject of any positive contribution drawn from the relationship between Israel and its God.

Helm [3] discusses the logic of the Calvinist atonement doctrine, which sees it as being efficacious only for those who have been predestined to salvation. We are not free, on this account, to have faith in Christ's saving work on the Cross – that faith is purely a gift of God's grace, and that is only available to the elect. The rest of humanity is damned, and doomed to spend eternity in Hell.

> **'According to the doctrine of limited atonement the elect do not experience God's justice as it concerns them, for it is satisfied by the atonement of Christ for them. All are liable to punishment for their sin, but only some are punished since the elect are "punished" in Christ their substitute' (p.49).**

Helm may try to escape the implications of the dogma by placing the word 'punished' in inverted commas, but his own logic defeats him. He is trying to defend the utterly indefensible.

4. Critique of the Doctrine.

Rist [12] finds no contradiction between the penal substitutionary theory and divine justice. Sheeder [14], on the other hand, argues that the combination of original sin, penal substitutionary atonement and eternal conscious torment for the 'unsaved' constitutes a 'gospel' that is 'abusive, and the God behind it is an abuser.'

Klocová [13, p.2] notes that:

> **'some theological systems replace the notion of an immediate supernatural punishment with the notion of a delayed but usually eternal penalty in the form of damnation in the afterlife. On the one hand, such beliefs eliminate the chance to be informed and, as a result, deal with norm breaches whenever an external issue manifests. On the other hand, since an individual cannot rely on immediate divine retribution to warn them of their transgression, more emphasis is placed on self-monitoring and the requirement of frequent, ongoing atonement rites. There is always some violation to atone for in order**

> **to avert the ultimate (afterlife) punishment for individuals who participate in atonement rituals.'**

Christianity has, largely, dispensed with the need for frequent atonement rites (unless the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox rites of Confession and Absolution count), but the rest of what Klocová has to say still applies.

Tollefson [8] gives us a Unitarian account of sin as it appears in Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *Ruth* (1853). The eponymous heroine dies, but her death is not an atonement for her sin, as it might have been had Mrs Gaskell been an Evangelical – but she was, instead, a Unitarian, and:

> **'Unitarian theology... focused on the sinner's penance as a spur to personal spiritual development... Ruth's death can be read as a demonstration of her spiritual development into a person who exemplified Christ's love... a Unitarian reading, rather than a redemption for her sin, an Evangelical reading' (pp.48-49).**

Insofar as they have an atonement theory at all, Unitarians are compelled to adopt the 'moral exemplar' or subjective view. As Allinson [1, p.13] notes, the Socinians denied the doctrine of the Incarnation, and claimed Jesus' life was a model of integrity and virtue to be followed. There was no need of 'satisfaction' because there was no original sin, and God could, and *did*, forgive sins without the need for any sacrifice. Can there be such a thing as 'vicarious repentance', as [7] argues? Even if he is right that Aquinas' word *pœnitentiam* in the *Summa Theologica* III is an accurate rendering in Latin of the Greek *metanoia* – and this is extremely doubtful, given that both Erasmus and Luther found fault with the Vulgate's translation of the word *metanoeite* in Matt. 3:2 as *pœnitentiagite* ('do penance') – the idea that anyone, divine or human, can 'repent' on behalf of someone else is nonsensical.

Similarly, the notion of vicarious punishment is also absurd. If Smith commits a burglary, and is convicted in a court of law of that burglary, would it make sense for Jones, an innocent person, to be punished in his or her stead? How would that satisfy the demands of retributive justice? When persons are imprisoned for crimes they did not commit, we call that 'miscarriage of justice', and people are outraged, not only by the fact that an innocent person has been unjustly punished, but that a guilty one – the one actually responsible for the crime – has escaped punishment.

Supposing Jones *volunteered* to take Smith's punishment on his or her behalf? This might raise questions regarding Jones's sanity, but the court could still not accept the offer, and nor would it be right for it to do so. The guilty parties must be punished, and their guilt cannot be transferred to anyone else.

What, then, of vicarious sacrifice? In combination with the *Christus Victor* theory (see [6]), this might seem more promising. Moyaert [24], describing Jürgen Moltmann's theology, quotes his *The Crucified God* (1972), thus:

> **'The crucified Son, Christ, cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). This exclamation is one of agony, confusion, and outrage. Christ, the Son of God, thus experiences Godforsakenness: He experiences God's absence. But not only the Son suffered, but the Father suffered as well: He suffered the loss of his Son' (p.224).**

An immediate problem with this is that it contradicts the orthodox view of the divine nature as impassible (to use the words of Article 1 of the Church of England's XXXIX Articles of Religion, '[God is] ever-lasting, without body, parts, or passions'). Jesus had emotions, or passions, given his human nature, but *qua* second Person of the Trinity, in orthodox theology, he did not, although the picture is complicated by the concept of the *communicatio idiomatum* (see Pedersen 2024 [29]).

As Moyaert also notes, Moltmann's theology is open to serious challenge on other, and far more serious, grounds (she does not raise the impassibility issue).

> **'It is far from evident that he can simply compare the death of six million Jews and one and a half million Jewish children with the death of an obstreperous Jewish man living in first-century Palestine under the oppressive regime of the Romans. This comparison is not "credible in the presence of the burning children"' (p.226).**

As Moyaert goes on to say, Moltmann re-presents Christological triumphalism disguised as anti-triumphalism, and turns Elie Wiesel's eye-witness testimony in *Night* (Wiesel 1958, 2006 [30], pp.64-65) on its head (Moyaert, ibid.).

The teenage Wiesel witnessed the hanging of a 12 year-old Jewish boy in the Buna Concentration Camp by the SS (the *Waffen* SS would later hang 'Aryan' German boys of about the same age for not fighting the Americans, see Pfeifer 2025 [31]). Part of Wiesel's account of the event reads:

> **'All eyes were on the child. He was pale, almost calm, but he was biting his lips as he stood in the shadow of the gallows... The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the chairs. In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks. "Long live liberty!" shouted the two men. But the boy was silent. "Where is merciful God, where is He?" someone behind me was asking. At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over. Total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was**

> **setting... Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive... But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing... And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes... Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows." That night, the soup tasted of corpses.'**

This is a vivid, eloquent and powerful description of Nazi violence and injustice – but it is also testimony of the fact that Wiesel could not hold onto his faith in Israel's God except by believing that God to be passible and suffering alongside his people. However, by the same token, that God could also *not* be the omnipotent God capable of rescuing his people from the Shoah, or preventing the Shoah in the first place. Perhaps this is why, in Wiesel's play, *The Trial of God* (Wiesel 1979, 1995 [31]), his defence counsel is the Devil!

It is deeply, and sadly, ironical that so many of the descendants of the Holocaust's victims now living in Israel are advocating, and participating in, the wholesale slaughter of Palestinian men, women and children – a new Holocaust (Amnesty International 2024 [32]; Burke and Borger 2025 [33]). How can God – a God who *is* love, according to 1 John 4:16 (*ho theos agapē esti*) – permit this? The answer is, such a God, if he existed, could not do so. The fact that this genocide is taking place, and the fact that the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews – the 'chosen people' – *took* place, tells against the existence of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent deity. He can be one or the other, but not both.

It is the view of the present author that such a 'God' does not correspond to the orthodox description of God as not merely just, merciful and loving, but eternal, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. He has argued in [10], and in Blaber (2024a [34]) that God can be eternal, omnipotent and omniscient, but not omnibenevolent.

Lassley (2015 [35]) interviews a number of Holocaust survivors who have now become agnostics or atheists because of their experiences in the Nazi Concentration Camps, and quotes an anonymous graffito written on the wall of a prison cell in the Mauthausen Camp: '*Wenn es einen Gott gibt muß er mich um Verzeihung bitten (If there is a God, He will have to beg my forgiveness)*'. Dystheism – belief in a bad God – would, naturally, evoke misotheism – hatred of God, see Schweizer (2010 [36]).

Luther argued, in his *De Servo Arbitrio* ('On the Bondage of the Will'; Luther 1525, 1823 [37]), Section 25, that 'free will' is not 'free'

> **'but is immutably the captive and slave of evil, since it cannot, of itself, turn to good... we do all things by necessity, and nothing by Freewill,**

> **so long as the power of the free will is nothing, and neither does nor can do good, in the absence of grace.'**

This is because, in Augustinian terms (and it must be borne in mind that Luther was an Augustinian – ironically, like the new Pope, Leo XIV), humans after the Fall, and before receiving the grace of baptism, are *non posse non peccare* (i.e., they cannot *not* sin – that is impossible).

The Catholic view is that, after baptism, this changes, and the Christian is now *posse non peccare* (able to refrain from sinning), although they seldom, in fact, do so, which is why the Sacrament of Confession is necessary. The Protestant Reformed view, on the other hand, is that the baptised remain *simul iustus et peccator* ('at once justified and sinners'), meaning that the change at justification is purely forensic and extrinsic (see Fry 2017 [38]). What, though, if the Christian doctrine of 'original sin' is a myth, with no basis in prehistorical or palaeoanthropological fact, as [9] argues? Humans cannot escape responsibility for the evil they commit by postulating the existence of some impersonal force that 'compels' them to do wrong, any more than they can do so by arguing that they were tempted to 'sin' by the Devil, or devils. Any talk of 'atoning sacrifices', like that of 'vicarious' ones, or 'vicarious punishments', particularly involving humans, takes us straight back to the dark and primitive past of our species when such things were considered acceptable (Watts *et al* 2016 [39]).

5. Conclusion.

We live in a radically imperfect world, ruled, if Blaber [10, 35] is correct by a radically imperfect God, who is only fitfully good, at best.

One certainty about this world is that its thermodynamic entropy – a measure of the chaos and disorder within it – is increasing inexorably over time. If Blaber (2024b [41]) is correct in his view that information and social entropy are increasing inexorably over time as well as our global capitalist society – which we are pleased to call a 'civilisation' – becomes ever more complex and intricately interconnected, then it is doomed (see Tainter 1988 [42]).

Christians see Jesus of Nazareth as the Saviour, whose death on the Cross saves them from sin and death, which is the 'wages of sin', according to St Paul (Rom. 6:23) – which is not, of course, true – because death is, in fact, the 'wages' of entropy, and afflicts all living beings, and has done since there were living things on this planet, millions of years before there were any humans to perform evil acts.

If 'death' here means spiritual, as well as physical, death, meaning separation from God, then this gives rise to problems for Trinitarian doctrine, as it implies that Jesus the God-Man was spiritually separated from the other two

Persons of the Trinity at the time of his death – but how can that be the case? The answer is that, metaphysically, it cannot, neither for Christ's divine nor his human nature. Yet the Incarnation, although 'at-oning' in the sense of bringing the divine and human together in the person of Jesus, in orthodox Christian theology, is not seen as sufficient to 'at-one' for sin.

St Paul says, in 1 Cor. 15:17-19 (quoting REB):

> **'if Christ was not raised, your faith has nothing to it and you are still in your old state of sin. It follows that those who have died within Christ's fellowship are utterly lost. If it is for this for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all people are most to be pitied.'**

However, the death and alleged resurrection of Christ had nothing to do with sin, as Paul mistakenly believed. He himself gets into difficulties over the resurrection, claiming that Jesus was raised with a 'spiritual body' (*sōma pneumatikon*), as opposed to a 'psychic body', telling us that 'flesh [*sarx*] and blood [*haima*] can never possess the kingdom of God [*basileia tou theou*]' (*sōma psuchikon*; 1 Cor. 15:44, 50; REB translates the latter as 'physical body').

We are left with the picture painted by such scholars as Ehrman (2001 [43]), that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet of the kingdom of God in Palestine in the first half of the 1st Century CE, who was not a 'miracle worker', was not divine, was not raised from the dead, and whose eschatological expectation was not fulfilled. His death is no more 'redemptive' than that of the boy hanged at Buna, or of any other Jew or Gentile of any century. The four Gospel accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that of 1 Cor. 15, are inconsistent, and cannot be relied on as historical evidence. The explanation for the subsequent survival and success of the Christian religion can only be accounted for in terms of the social psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, which is extraordinarily powerful – see Festinger, L. (1957 [44]; 1962 [45]).

In the case of the UFO cult that Festinger and his Stanford University co-workers studied in 1956 (Festinger, Riecken and Schachter 1956 [46]), the members of the cult simply adjusted the failure of their belief in the end of the world to be turned into fact (they had given up their jobs, sold their houses, given away their savings in anticipation of the event) by postponing their version of the *eschaton*. It is not so much a case of 'seeing is believing', as 'believing is seeing': people see what they want to see, and not what they do not.

Thus, no amount of logic will shake Christian belief in the atonement, no matter how illogical it may be, if the above argument is correct – but that will not stop about 2.6 billion human beings worldwide from continuing to pay at least lip-service to Christian dogmas (Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary 2025 [47]).

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