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Third Millennium Christianity and Quakerism

Alastair McIntosh

This article is drawn from a lecture delivered at Rawtenstall on 23 March 2019 to the Lancashire Unitarian Church, the Progressive Christianity Network and the Pendle Hill Quakers, as part of the 'Future of Faith' series. The spoken version was published as 'Towards Third Millennium Christianity' in the Unitarians' theological journal, Faith and Freedom (Vol 72:1, No. 188, Summer 2019). This shortened text version is published with their kind approval.

Introduction – signs of our times

My theme in this article is Christianity. Specifically, whether it has anything distinctly beautiful to set upon the table of world faiths, a table that befits our being children of cultural diversity but of One World? I ask, because there are many who would answer that Buddhism, Taoism, Islam or perhaps a shamanic version of neo-Pagan nature spirituality are the higher paths. These are less contaminated (they would usually like to think) by two millennia of violence and power play such as has beset the Christian faith.

I am most certainly not seeking to trump other faiths with Christianity. Christ himself acknowledged "other sheep that are not of this fold". (John 10:16) I often have a chuckle that the very oil – the nard (or spikenard) with which Jesus in Mark 14:3 was anointed – came from a plant that was, in those days, endemic to the Himalayas and imported to the Holy Land through Persia. That Jesus oil was Hindu-Buddhist oil! And I love that, not least because of Jesus' observation of the woman's action, that she had

done something beautiful to him.¹ I likewise am concerned with beauty as a touchstone of the spiritual, and not least, the intercultural and interfaith aspects thereof.

Another reason why I ask what Christianity brings today to the table of world faiths, is that there are many who in good faith argue that, after two millennia, it has passed its sell-by date. They might be right, but when I engage, especially with "nontheists" amongst Quakers, I invariably find myself wondering whether they appreciate just what they might be bulldozing into the landfill site? Perhaps before so doing so fast, consider the Psalmist: "The stone that the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone."²

Yet another reason why I ask whether Christianity might be more than just flogging a dead horse, is because for much of my adult life I've lived and worked amongst people suffering from poverties of body and/or soul. The beatitudes (or blessings) of Jesus minister to both of these. "Blessed are the poor," says Luke's gospel, simply, and the Greek translated there as "poor" means, quite straightforwardly, the economically destitute. Personally, and as Gandhi also recognised from his Hindu standpoint, and as many Muslims will testify, I think the acid test of any faith that claims to be grounded in love, is how it treats the poor.

Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, the 'father' of liberation theology reminds us that: "To liberate = to give life."³ It gives outer life at the material level, such as in the feeding of the multitudes. And it gives inner life at levels of our being which bread fails to reach. As Mother Theresa said when she came to Britain, it is with the latter poverty, spiritual poverty, that our need in this country today is the greatest. We see this, more and more expressed, I believe, as Britain lies upon the couch of Brexit. We find testimony to it if

¹ Jesus, speaking of the woman with the jar of precious perfume, Mark 14:6, "... she has done a beautiful thing to me." The Greek *kalon* is variously translated as "good" (KJV) or "beautiful" (NIV).
² Psalms 118:22, own rendition.
³ Gustavo Gutiérrez *A Theology of Liberation* (SCM, London: 1988 edn.) p. xxxvii. This rests on the foundation of John 10:10.

we listen to poets, to our minstrels, and the words of the prophets that “are written on the subway walls/ and tenement halls.”

Sometimes those who outwardly appear most to deny the spiritual life, express the hunger for it with the greatest rawness in their art. I have in mind Black Sabbath’s lyrics for ‘Paranoid’. The lyricist yearns for someone – he seeks a living real presence – who can show him “the things in life [he cannot] find”.⁴ In the absence of that which gives life, of “life abundant”, (John 10:10) and beset with the false satisfiers of a consumerist society not to mention its attendant ills today, such as climate change, the lyricist slides relentlessly into a suicidal nihilism. He can see no prospect of redemption, ending with the assertion that “it’s too late”.

In contrast, for Jesus, no matter how shot the situation (such as the emotional deadness just described), life is held within a greater hand. His last line, a little cryptic but determined, reads: “Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children”. (Luke 7:35) The Greek word translated here as “wisdom” is *sophia*, the feminine perspicacity (or sharp-sightedness) of God. It is with this – sometimes known as Woman Wisdom – that Jesus self-identifies in implying his own vindication. As Woman Wisdom concludes her speech in Proverbs, “whoever finds me finds life...but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death” (Proverbs 8:34)

I want to ask what in Scotland we call, a ‘daft-laddie’ question, one that seems too obvious, or too insignificant, to be sensible asking. What if a child who might be seeking wisdom – or the “true happiness” of Black Sabbath’s lyric – were to enter the average church and notice a crucifix, the fundamental symbol of the Christian faith, and they popped the question: “What is the meaning of the cross?” How might you answer? Do we still have a credible answer, by which I mean one that carries credibility as *credo*, which is to say, faith: and faith not as blind belief, but as a journey, an opening of the way of God, an unblocking of deep wellsprings long neglected?

⁴ Black Sabbath *Paranoid* (Vertigo: 1970)

Some people say to me, “Why do you bother with such questions?” They say, “You’d be so much more effective if you left that God and Jesus stuff aside. It might play out OK up in the Outer Hebrides, but not here.” Well, our critics bring our greatest gifts. So let’s just catch that ball. Let me put it to you like this to give traction to my question and the criticism of it.

On 15 March this year somebody who admires Donald Trump – a person who describes himself as “a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose”⁵ – massacred some fifty Muslims who were at prayer in Christchurch. He did so live on video, to a soundtrack he’d created with a Serb nationalist song that called for Muslims to be killed, “The British Grenadiers” that celebrates the warmongering of imperial power, and a song called “Fire” by the English rock band, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, that celebrates the Devil’s triumph.

The Christchurch gunman’s manifesto contains two sections on Christianity. In the first, he addresses the question: “Were/are you a christian?” (spelt in the lower case). He answers: “That is complicated. When I know, I will tell you.”

The second section is headed, “To Christians”, and comprises a quotation from Pope Urban II in the early Second Millennium, as he rallied the belligerently faithful to the First Crusade. Urban describes non-Muslims, his would-be recruits, as “the race of the elect.” The “elect” mean those who are elected, or chosen, by God. He summons them “to fight against the enemies of the Christian people.”

The notion of the elect is based on an authoritarian religious psychology that is also found in other faiths, but my responsibility here is towards Christianity. Versions of Christianity that create a binary worldview of Heaven or Hell, of Saved or Reprobate, and of Elect or Damned, feed upon ontological insecurity. They drive what readily finds expression as an

⁵ The Christchurch gunman, *The Great Replacement*, manifesto of the New Zealand mosque shooter, 2019 (as widely reported, and downloaded from a transient internet site).

in-group versus out-group cult mentality. They run counter to the teachings of the apostle John, that: “perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” because “God is love.”⁶

In my book *Poacher's Pilgrimage* – and specifically in Brian D. McLaren's Foreword to the US edition ⁷ – I have put the case that Donald Trump's obsession with his wall with Mexico expresses this binary divide, that runs through his own mind and that of many in his constituency. It has come about because during its first millennium Christianity, which started out as a largely pacifist movement, became progressively infected by violence after its adoption by the emperor, Constantine, in the fourth century.

If we are to tackle that; if we are to have any hope of redeeming Christianity from the fear-driven dynamics of violence and domination that John was addressing in his epistle; if we are to show a different way from that which has been appropriated by the alt-right who claim Christianity even as a badge of fascism, and if we are to renew the original wings of our Quaker peace testimony, then we have to reappraise the faith's relationship to violence. That means, centrally, addressing the ostensible divine violence of theories of the cross, of soteriology, the theory of salvation. Only then can we open up what I would see as a credible Christian theology for this the Third Millennium, that can stand proud upon the table of world faiths. Hence the importance of my hypothetical child's question, “What is the meaning of the cross?”

Christianity as Spiritual Activism

When activists say to me as they sometimes do – “Why Jesus? Wouldn't we be better with another faith, or none?” – and often because they have been repulsed by authoritarian forms of religion that tend to be suspicious of spirituality – I answer, “For starters, he was one of us.” We need his style of activism today.

⁶ ¹ John 4:16-18, NIV.

⁷ Alastair McIntosh *Poacher's Pilgrimage* (Wipf Stock: 2018); also online at <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/poacherspilgrimage/Trump.htm>.

Consider. The Buddha was a prince, Krishna was a god. I love the teachings both of Buddhist sutras and of the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna lucidly reveals a depth of metaphysics that first enabled me to grasp the mysticism of Saint John's gospel.

But Jesus ... there is a visceral rather than an otherworldly reality about Jesus. He had little cause or call to have to check his privilege. A dodgy genealogy, a seemingly “illegitimate” birth, no room at the inn, witnessed by low-status shepherds, fleeing as a refugee to Egypt, and then three years of persecution by the religious and, eventually, the imperial authorities, ending in death by torture. He identified with the marginalised, for example, “I was a stranger, and you took me in” (Matthew 18:15). Note that the Greek used there for “stranger” is *xenos*, from which we get our word, “xenophobia”. In privileging such marginalised people as Samaritans – a despised sect of heretical Jews – he exercised a preferential option for the poor in prototypical liberationist mode, “from the underside”.

That is why I say to my more secular activist colleagues and to some of my fellow Quakers who feel the Christian cringe: “Not so fast. Are you going to abandon one of ‘the least of these’ among us?” (Matthew 25:40) “Are you going to hang out one of us to dry? Well, ‘First they came for... And I did not speak out.’” As for those who see spirituality as a private pursuit, Jesus' ministry was indeed concerned with personal salvation – the word means healing, as in “to save”. But it was not a singular obsession. His theology was both individual and collective, set in contexts of the whole community. He prayed for “our” daily bread, not just “my” daily bread, because the big picture's not about the “me” and “my soul”, topped up with a dash of the prosperity gospel. The way of God is not for those who have given their lives for an excess of material security in this world and to crown it all, want heavenly fire insurance as well, purchased on the cosmic futures market.

No. The way of Heaven is a metanoia, an utter transformation of being, both of individuals and of this world. Integration of the outer and the inner life is an imperative. “Thy kingdom come...on Earth as it is in Heaven.”

Here is a spirituality that, to borrow from bell hooks,⁸ is “all about love”⁹ – all about the individual and cosmic self-realisation or profound interconnectedness through what Audre Lorde calls “the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.”¹⁰ No spirituality of love can be a purely private affair. It has to be about relationships with others and Creation.

So what about sin? After all, John the Baptist paved the way for Jesus, preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mark 1:4) For sure, when Jesus healed folks’ ailments, he would often tell them that their sins were forgiven. But the cultural and psychological context of his era is important. The religious mainstream were obsessed with sin. They had commodified sin and made an industry out of forgiveness. That was why the Baptist’s bypass of the high priest’s function was such a subversive thing. Like usurers, the priesthood had ratcheted up sin to torture people with their misery, and it still goes on in some faith groups today.

Jesus dealt elegantly with such burdens of guilt. “Rise, take up thy bed and walk,” (John 5:8) he said. Off you go! Get on with it! Now find yourself a life worth living. As the late Fr Raimon Panikkar put it from his Hindu-Catholic standpoint: “Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma.”¹¹ Jesus’ forgiveness of sins was literally a breaking of the chains that bind us, chains the weight of which had made folks literally or metaphorically deaf, blind, lame and mentally deranged. Such activism is about action to relieve the sufferings of the world. It deepens to these levels.

In overturning the wheeler-dealers’ tables at the temple, he overturned the priesthood’s sacrificial system that abused spiritual power by exploiting the psychology of guilt, fashioning a whip not for use against human beings, as the King James translation suggests, but to drive out and free the animals lined up for sacrifice.

8 The pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins

9 William Morrow, *All About Love*, (bell hooks: 2016)

10 Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider*, (Crossing Press: 1984)

11 Raimon Panikkar, “Nine Sutras on Peace” in *Interculture*, XXIV:1, 1991, pp. 49-56

That said, our spiritual activism must not be all do, do, do. Jesus, like other great spiritual teachers, did not just do his stuff among the multitudes of the marketplace. He kept a life-work balance where he frequently went off to nature to pray, connecting to the ground of being of the inner life, resting down into the hand of God. That is not to cut off from the world. As my late friend and inspiration, Walter Wink has written:¹²

We are not easily reduced to prayer...Prayer is...the interior battlefield where the decisive victory is first won, before engagement in the outer world is even attempted...Unprotected by prayer, our social activism runs the danger of becoming self-justifying good works, as our inner resources atrophy, the wells of love run dry, and we are slowly changed into the likeness of the Beast.

Quaker Christianity – an appeal for depth

I have sought to establish that we cannot just write Jesus off if we are concerned, as most Quakers would purport to be, with justice and our peace testimony. I have led this into Walter Wink’s spiritual metaphysics. Here, spirituality becomes a way of looking at the interiority of outward structures such as being a person, a nation, an institution or any other outer entity that finds coherence through a galvanising reality of meaning.

Before his passing, Wink told me that he attended a local Quaker Meeting, near where they lived, up-country from New York city.¹³ We glimpse here how some of these small Meetings hold a precious trust. In developing what he called calls “an integral worldview” – one is reminded of the “integral human development” that came out of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. Wink acknowledged that the ancient world view

12 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress Press: 1992) p. 297-8.

13 In checking this article with June Wink, Walter’s wife, she emailed on 21 August 2019: “We attended the South Berkshire Friends Meeting in Great Barrington, MA. I joined but he was an ordained Methodist clergy and we worked with all dominations and retreat centers without affiliation under the auspices of Auburn Theological Seminary which was rooted Presbyterian but was situated in the buildings of Union Seminary in New York City. It was not necessary for him to join. I am the clerk of the Great Barrington Meeting now simply because we do not have enough members to fill all the committees.”

spoke truth, but that it does so in a framing of the “Powers that Be” that is no longer credible in times when “few of us can any longer actually think that God, the angels, and departed spirits are somewhere in the sky, as most ancients literally did.” The ancients, he suggested, projected their “felt or intuited spiritual qualities onto the screen of the universe, and perceived them as cosmic forces reigning from the sky.” A key theological task of our times, he proposed, is to withdraw those projections into a unitary worldview whereby the spiritual realm interpenetrates the material realm. As such:

The relevance of the Powers for an understanding of structural evil should by now begin to be clear. Any attempt to transform a social system without addressing both its spirituality and its outer forms is doomed to failure. Only by confronting the spirituality of an institution and its concretions can the total entity be transformed, and that requires a kind of spiritual discernment and praxis that the materialistic ethos in which we live knows nothing about.¹⁴

Here lies the danger if Quakerism falters in taking spirituality seriously, and becomes just the humanist party at prayer. The very dynamic by which we can be a “gathered” or “covered” meeting, held “under concern” in the Spirit, becomes weakened if what Wink calls the “materialistic ethos” gains an upper hand. Our Meetings, after all, are supposedly for “worship” including our “Meetings for Worship for Business”. We might well ask how, or what, a nontheist might be worshipping? Why, indeed, might they want to be in the company of worshippers of a sense of reality with which they might be militantly in disaccord?

The problem with most but perhaps not all ‘nontheist’ Quakerism is that it marginalises the mystical. I say “not all” to cut a little slack for what may be mystical but apophatic approaches. Leaving aside such Zen-like Quakerism, I find myself questioning how far nontheism can be thought

¹⁴ Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Augsburg Fortress: 1992) pp. 5-10.

of as Quakerism at all, and how appropriate it is for full membership as distinct from being a respected attendee. However, such considerations require qualification. Nontheism covers a broad kirk. For many, nontheism is just the not-very-worked-through agnosticism of, “I think that there is some kind of a spirit, but I just don’t believe in God or Jesus.” For others, it may be a laconic pensiveness, echoing the author Julian Barnes’ line: “I don’t believe in God but I miss him.” In other words, such nontheism can be a space of openness that permits a gentle re-evaluation of or introduction to spiritual inquiry, sometimes after prior experiences elsewhere of spiritual abuse.

The main problem with nontheism is when it finds expression as a militant atheism that cuts across Quaker process. That, to an extent that leaves those with theist and in particular, Christocentric positions feeling that the guests have taken over the guest house, as if as a kind of agency capture (as it is called in NGO and governmental regulatory parlance). For example, I remember one occasion where, immediately after a ministry, someone shot up and said, “I hate it when people talk about God in Meeting.” Perhaps it came from the Spirit. If so, the said Spirit acted mighty hastily between ministries. I am reminded also of Thomas Merton’s biographical account of how, as a boy growing up in rural France, his mother often took him to Quaker Meeting. Later in life he wrote that he might have carried on in the tradition, but for what he experienced of its deficit of spiritual depth. Following what he felt to be some inane ministry at Flushing Meeting in New York, 1933, he resigned himself to conclude:¹⁵

They are like all the rest. In other churches it is the minister who hands out the commonplaces, and here it is liable to be just anybody...I cannot see that they will ever be anything more than what they claim to be – a Society of Friends.

Seasoned Friends might point out that in a priesthood of all believers, in one that has abolished not ordination, but the laity, not all might match the articulation of trained ministers in other denominations. That might be a

¹⁵ Thomas Merton *The Seven Storey Mountain* (SPCK: 1990) p. 116.

valid riposte. But a ministry of “I think this, I think that,” is of the head more than the heart. It worships reason and, less consciously, the ego’s control thereof. It misses the deep mystery, and thereby confronts the very basis of what we mean by discernment. Is discernment a question of logic sought by human reasoning, or is it of the Holy Spirit invited by the heart’s inner listening? Such is the question of what can be tied down and defined, versus that which is ineffable. In the ongoing debate around nontheism that runs, Neil Morgan of St Albans Meeting wrote recently:¹⁶

Discernment, as a central Quaker event, is not something that can be reduced to something else. It calls forth to us, and cannot be reduced. [It involves] seeing through to the transcendent – to seeing, to sensing, to feeling, and connecting with God [and that as] central to Quaker identity.

The problem of militant atheism, is that its logic implies that the “I” or the “we” can work things out alone. Quakerism will most certainly invoke reason, but it does not place its faith in reason. I think I read once, somewhere, that some early Quakers referred to the Devil as “the great reasoner”. And an old fable.

“What is that?” the Devil is reported to have asked Jesus, when they walked down the street together.

“It is the truth,” said Jesus.

“Give it to me,” said the Devil, “and I’ll organise it.”

There lies the problem with the hyper-rationality that follows from a loss of the transcendent. There is no grace of mystery, no mystery of grace.

In contrast to the rattling logic of overtly atheistic forms of nonthesim, it is from a grounding in the Godspace – or Buddha nature, or the Tao, or whatever we might prefer to call it – that our deepest traction with reality’s

¹⁶ Neil Morgan “Losing our religion?” in *The Friend*, 9 August 2019, pp. 8-9.

fullness can ensue. This is time-honoured Quaker testimony. Such spiritual activism, far from being dilettante or woo-woo, is spirit led. “For we marry none; it is the Lord’s work, and we are but witnesses,” said George Fox of marriage: but the same applies to every other endeavour.¹⁷

Both Quakers and Jesuits have made a speciality of understanding these approaches to activism, nourishing each other’s traditions of “discernment”. I would draw renewed attention to the Jesuit scholar Michael Sheeran’s work. As a young priest, Sheeran did his PhD on the Quakers and took what he discovered back to the Jesuits who, as called by Vatican II, were seeking to recover their lost roots.¹⁸ Now the Quakers go to Jesuits.

The violence or nonviolence of the cross

I turn now to that child’s question: “What is the meaning of the cross?” Put another way, “Why did Jesus have to die?” To answer this, it helps to see the violence of his times as a microcosm of the wider violence of the world.

In 2005 I was given the gift of visiting Walter Wink at his home, with June. He told me of the time he visited Jerusalem.¹⁹ “For three nights I couldn’t sleep,” he said. “All night long I was kept awake by wrestling with the Angel of Jerusalem.” I wondered what he meant by “wrestling” with an angel, in this case, the inner spirit of that place. “I mean wrestling, just like I might wrestle with you,” he replied. “Because Jerusalem has been the most violent city that the world has ever known.” In other words, Walter experienced violence as a dynamic inner force, as a brute animated interiority of abused power. Carl Jung, with his understanding of archetypal forces, would well have understood.

These days, when I hear the word “sin”, I subvert the cringe associated with its uses and abuses. I substitute it in my mind, with “violence”. Violence

¹⁷ *Quaker Faith & Practice*, 16.01

¹⁸ Michael J. Sheeran *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting: 1983). Sheeran describes how the Jesuits went to learn from the Quakers after Vatican II. Ever since, the Quakers have learned from the Jesuits.

¹⁹ Personal communication 11 June 2005, with James Cashen and Christopher Reed of Friends of Hudson.

is that which violates. In French, *le viol* is rape. Gutiérrez outlines three dimensions of liberation from sin, in which the links to both the personal and the structural violence of the world are plain.²⁰

The social level: which he describes as “liberation from social situations of oppression and marginalization.”

The psychological level: as “a personal transformation by which we live with profound inner freedom in the face of every kind of servitude.”

The spiritual level: as “liberation from sin, which attacks the deepest root of all servitude; for sin is the breaking of friendship with God and with other human beings.”

We can see here that whereas love is that which gives life, violence rips it apart, thus my synonymy of sin and violence. I think that Jesus made this synonymy too, where he said, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). Note that he said, “until now”. Change was and remains in the air.

Sometimes it takes a little context to see how deeply Jesus challenged the domination systems of his time. His most frequent miracle, the feeding of the multitudes, is attested to six times across all four gospels. When he asks in John 6:5, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”, at least two things are happening. He assumes a responsibility for the hungry. And he challenges Philip to think about the economics of the way of Heaven. He is asking: “Is the way of Heaven about the cash economy, or the love economy?”

As such, we can treat the feeding of the five thousand literally, as a miracle of magic. Or we can treat it as a miracle of love, the multiplication of the daft laddie’s bread and fishes by the miracle of sharing. Either way, whether

²⁰ Gutiérrez, op. cit., p. xxxviii. The labellings as social, psychology and spiritual are mine.

we want to read the texts in a manner that is literal, or metaphorical, or both, commentators have pointed out that such actions usurped one of the Roman empire’s key ways of holding order. It overturned the scarcity economy, where power was retained through such distractions as *panem et circenses*, bread and circuses, a.k.a. reality TV.

Jesus’ simple act of asking how the people could be fed thereby subverted the dominant paradigm. It exposed the structural violence by which a colonised people, their land to varying degrees expropriated, had become wage slaves to the Roman war economy.²¹ In a similar way, in Britain today, food banks unmask the blasphemy of austerity in a nation that has idolised consumerism, leaving an underclass to be the wage and rent “slaves” of those who have cornered a disproportionate share of capital, especially in the property markets.

Jesus’ whole life exemplified nonviolence. The question of the meaning of the cross, of why “the King of Peace” had to die, goes to the heart of Christian soteriology. His own answer is in Mark 10:45 – “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many.” Or, as a version attributed to Paul had it, “as a ransom for all”.²² Known as “the Ransom Saying”, this was seen as answering a prophesy in Isaiah that the Messiah would become “an offering for sin” (Isiah 53:10).

The million dollar question in Christian history has accordingly been this. If human souls are the ransomed – who might be the Ransomer of Souls? And here I shall lean upon the work of the Mennonite theologian, J. Denny Weaver.²³ As a generalisation, the answer of First Millennium Christianity, and still the prevailing position of the Eastern Church, was what is known as the ‘Classic’ or Christus Victor theory. In this, the Devil is the Ransomer of Souls. Christ is the ransom price on the cross. Gregory the Great said

²¹ See wider discussion of the subversion of such imperial mores in Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan *The Last Week* (SPCK: 2008).

²² Also Matthew 10:28, and Paul’s (as attributed to him, but more likely, of one of his schools) is 1 Timothy 2:6.

²³ J. Denny Weaver *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Eerdmans: 2001).

that it was as if the Devil was a great sea monster, gobbling up the human souls as they fell into his realm. God dropped Christ like a bait into the depths. Along comes the Devil – chomp, chomp, chomp – another tasty human morsel – only to be impaled upon the hook of God, his wicked power thereafter held in check, pending the final showdown.²⁴

Come the second millennium, *Christus Victor* (or Christ the Victor) theory as it later became known, was facing two criticisms. To God, it attributed deception. To the Devil, too much power.

Where might be found an alternative theory of 'the atonement' – the idea that Christ, in offering himself as the ransom payment, had 'atoned' or vicariously paid the price for human sin? Enter Anselm, a monk from a noble family from feudal Lombardy, who, in 1093, was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by William II, the brutal son of William the Conqueror.

If the Devil was no longer to be the Ransomer of Souls, who else was qualified to take the vacancy? Anselm reasoned that human sin, starting with Adam's apple, had robbed God of due honour. Without the honour code of fealty in place, the feudal system and, in this instance, the cosmic order, collapses. Punishment therefore had to be inflicted to sustain the very structure of reality. However, God took this on God's own chin, saying in effect to humankind, "Receive my only Son, and offer him for yourselves." In this way, humankind was spared eternal torment. God's honour was thereby duly 'satisfied', leading to it being known as the Satisfaction Theory of the atonement.

Anselm's ideas were further ramped up to their logical conclusion in the sixteenth century by the legal mind of Geneva's John Calvin. "We are all," he said, "offensive to God, guilty in his sight, and by nature the children of Hell." Not one of us can examine ourselves "without feeling that God is angry and at enmity with him." As a result of human sin, our disobedience,

²⁴ References for this section to the end, and deeper treatment, are in Alastair McIntosh *Poacher's Pilgrimage: an Island Journey* (Birlinn: 2016 and Wipf and Stock: 2018) with a foreword to the US edition by Brian D. McLaren.

God is "armed for vengeance". Christ, however, was sent to "the bar of God as a criminal in our stead". He "interposed, took the punishment upon himself and bore what by the just judgment of God was impending over sinners." This, concluded the turbulent reformer, is "what is meant and implied by ransoming us from the justice of God."

In this way, Christ's sacrifice "satisfied and duly propitiated God the Father ...appeased his anger...and by this tie secured the Divine benevolence."²⁵ At least, it did so for the Christian Elect. In the Calvinist schema, the doctrine of "limited atonement" teaches that the Damned forever remain the Godforsaken.

Anselm's *Satisfaction Theory* was thereby given turbo boosters by Calvin's Penal *Substitutionary Atonement Theory*, which has dominated Christian theology in the Western church throughout the Second Millennium. As Denny Weaver in 2001 told a World Council of Churches' conference of the Historic Peace Churches, with which it launched its Decade to Overcome Violence:

The conclusion from these observations about classic atonement doctrine is that they portray an image of God as either divine avenger or punisher and/or as a child abuser, one who arranges the death of one child for the benefit of others. This is hardly the image of God that supports nonviolence, nor of the God who is revealed in the nonviolent story of Jesus.²⁶

Drawing heavily on black and feminist-womanist theologians such as James Cone and Kelly Brown Douglas, Weaver concluded that it is small wonder that those who champion such a god might justify their own and society's violence "under a variety of divinely anchored claims and images." Having

²⁵ John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, again, detailed references to this material are in *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, especially Chapter 16, "The Great Cosmic Poacher".

²⁶ J. Denny Weaver, "Atonement and the Gospel of Peace" in *Seeking Cultures of Peace: A Peace Church Conversation*, eds Fernando Enns, Scott Holland and Ann K. Riggs (Cascadia and World Council of Churches: 2004) pp. 109-123.

been present with him as a Quaker speaker at that event, I vividly recall a huddle of us, crammed into his room at the end of a day's proceedings. All were enthralled as he unpacked the violence of those atonement theories developed after the Church had been appropriated by the Roman empire, under Constantine. He has since pointed out in later writing that this shift came to be paralleled by a visible shift in the "art and iconography of [a] resurrected Jesus to images of a dead Jesus"²⁷ – as has been documented by Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker in their book, *Saving Paradise*.²⁸

The Mystical Imperative

Since William James gave his Gifford Lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* at the turn of the 20th century, researchers have gathered more than a century's worth of social science and religious data on spiritual experience, including its apogee, the mystical experience of God. These studies explore radical shifts in consciousness where transcendence is directly experienced. The *Mandukya Upanishad* of Hinduism puts the case for God plainly: "In the union with Him is the supreme proof of His reality. He is peace and love."

As our Friend Derek Guiton discusses in a provocative book with the subtitle, *Standing up for God in the Religious Society of Friends*, George Fox's test of spiritual reality, was: "This I know experimentally." God, argues Guiton, following the leadings of the mystics, is not a "human construct" or a "human projection".²⁹ Rather, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Experience, and that means, experience in consciousness, while not infallible has considerable persuasive validity.

"What is the meaning of the cross?"

As I watched the setting sun drop down into a golden sea across a bay at the ancient ruined Temple of Saint John the Baptist, back home on the Isle

²⁷ J. Denny Weaver *The Nonviolent God* (Eerdmans Publishing: 2013) p. 81

²⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock & Rebecca Ann Parker *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Beacon Press: 2008)

²⁹ Derek Guiton *A Man that Looks on Glass: Standing up for God in the Religious Society of Friends* (FeedaRead Publishing: 2015) pp. 49 and 236

of Lewis... As I later read Pope Francis' epistle of the 50th World Day of Peace, 2017, calling for *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*...³⁰ As so many things melded in my mind with Walter Wink's and Denny Weaver's calls and pointers to a nonviolent theory of the atonement...As all of that, and more, I thought to myself, as I rode that transiently dying ball of fire into the shortened midnight of a Hebridean summer's eve...the cross absorbs the violence of the world.

Ask only secondly, "Is it rational?" Ask firstly, "Is it beautiful?"

That is the power of love from depths beyond this world, transfixed by wood and nails. He came to give his life, "a ransom for many." A "ransom" – *lytron* in the Greek, from which we get our verb "to loosen"; a freeing, a liberation from the chains in which our karma, unforgiven, has kept us bound.

He came to give his life, a liberation for all.

Because Jesus never taught "just war" theory. Jesus taught full-on nonviolence. "Put away your sword," he told Peter. "We shall have no more of this" (John 18:11, Luke 22:51). And to Pilate at his trial: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it was, my followers would fight to save me" (John 18:36-37). Why is his kingdom, or community, not so? Because he taught us when we pray to say, "Thine kingdom come...". The realm of mercy, love and justice come, not "Caesar's kingdom come," the realm of cruelty, war and slavery.

"He descended into Hell," claims the Apostles' Creed – Hell, again, that darker realm of consciousness, where, in the words of the Black Sabbath lyricist, "Happiness I cannot feel and love to me is so unreal." And yet, and yet, as Livvy, a street theologian in Govan, once put it to me: "Hell cannot hold such love as this."

³⁰ See *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, and Pope Francis, *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*, (Vatican: <https://goo.gl/Gwify9>)

And as Paul Evdokimov, a Russian Orthodox theologian said:

The only message which could reach atheism today is that of Christ descending into hell. As deep as the hell in which we find ourselves, it is even more profound to find Christ already there waiting for us.³¹

All his life, Abbé Pierre of France had struggled with the Ransom Saying. He wrote:

It has been while living for a long time amongst drug addicts that another explanation came to me. The addict is, in effect, at the same time his own executioner and the victim. He is both the ransomer and the hostage. Based on this observation, I realised that it is the same with all human beings. Because we are disconnected from our authentic divine source, we have become our own executioners. We are slaves to our disordered desires, to our egotism.³²

And there perhaps we have it.³³

First millennium – *Christus Victor* Theory – ransomed to the Devil.
Second millennium – Satisfaction-cum-Penal Substitutionary Theory – ransomed to God.
Third millennium – Liberation Theory – ransomed to ourselves.

What kind of love is this, that absorbs all the violence of all the world? This is a love that shifts the very axis of reality, “that moves the sun and other stars”.³⁴ This is a love incarnate, both born in space and time, and, as tells the Prologue of the gospel of Saint John, standing since “the beginning” outwith all bounds of space and time.

³¹ Paul Evdokimov *In the World, Of the Church* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press: 2001) p. 191.

³² Abbé Pierre, *Mon Dieu... Pourquoi ?* (Plon) pp. 69-70, own translation.

³³ Chapters 20 and 21 of *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, “The Temple of Crò Naomh” and “The Heart of the Sun”, also for discussion of time and eternity, Chapter 15, “The Baptism of the Gods”.

³⁴ Dante *Paradiso*.

“Which wert, and art, and evermore shall be.”³⁵

For the scholars, we are talking here of apocatastasis,³⁶ of the metaphysics of eternity, of a realised eschatology of “the times of restitution of all things”, the times held in eternity when all is found again, restored again to its original perfection, again.

For the Holy Spirit is diachronic. Love cuts through time. And time, as Plato said, is but “a moving image of eternity.”³⁷ And death, therefore, a trick with mirrors; the greater part of who we are having never been born in the first place.

And so, a love that cannot die. To which resurrection – the Resurrection, all resurrection – is intrinsic. A realm of being where “I and the Father are one”, indeed, where all self-realise, or realise their true selves, as “partakers of the divine nature”.³⁸

There lies the meaning that the child who asked about the cross sought after: a path, perhaps, for us to walk in this, the Third Millennium.

A path to where the cross absorbs the violence of the world.

Rejoice.

³⁵ “Holy, Holy, Holy” (an old hymn by Bishop Reginald Heber) www.victorianweb.org/religion/hymns/heber4.html

³⁶ Acts 3:21, “the time of restitution of all things”.

³⁷ Plato, *Timaeus*, 37 c-4; Jowett.

³⁸ John 10:30, NIV; 2 Peter 1:4 KJV. Such mystical eschatology is known as theōsis, divinisation or deification in the Orthodox traditions of Eastern Christianity. See, for example, Stephen Finland & Vladimir Kharlamov *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology* (James Clarke & Co: 2006). Also, Olivier Clément *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New City Press: 1993)