

On Not Losing the Cross in Today's Debate on the Atonement

Colleagues,

Bill Yancey is my pastor at Bethel Lutheran Church in St. Louis. Years ago I was on the committee for his doctoral dissertation. His is one of the four (only four!) doctorates granted by Seminex in systematic theology. Bill has appeared in ThTh postings before.

See <https://crossings.org/thursday/2007/thur020807.shtml> for one example. Today's post is his review of Gregory Anderson Love. LOVE, VIOLENCE, AND THE CROSS: HOW THE NONVIOLENT GOD SAVES US THROUGH THE CROSS OF CHRIST. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock. 2010. Paperback. 316 pp. [Retail Price: \$35.00 Web Price: \$28.00]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Gregory Anderson Love introduces LOVE, VIOLENCE, AND THE CROSS: HOW THE NONVIOLENT GOD SAVES US THROUGH THE CROSS OF CHRIST with William Butler Yeats' image of a center unable to hold. The center for a cohesive Christian theology is the cross of Christ. Without this vital center, fundamental Christian doctrines, like the trinity and salvation, fly apart. Love tells us first why and how the center came apart. He then identifies three flawed attempts to establish an alternative center. Finally, he offers five models which restore the cross to its salvific center. Post script: The center holds.

Why has the center fallen apart? Because the prevailing interpretation of the cross and atonement, from the middle ages, through the Reformation, up to the present, has undermined the purpose of Jesus' crucifixion to save persons. The penal substitution theory, in the lineage of Anselm's satisfaction theory, emphasizes retributive justice designed to save God's holy sense of justice. In addition, according to the penal substitutionary model, God motivates more by fear and threat than by mercy and forgiveness and so appears to be violent, even while sending a non-violent son. A conflicted God becomes an ambivalent figure, untrustworthy to save.

In Part One, Love, a Presbyterian pastor and theologian, cites Presbyterian theologians Charles Hodge and John R.W. Stott to describe the theological issues behind the penal substitutionary theory. They ask: How can a just God be merciful to sinners? The answer: A substitute must suffer the requisite penalty for sin. The conclusion emerges that God wills the death of Jesus. We are left with a violent image of God.

In Part Two, Love cites those whom he characterizes as the "sharp critics" of the penal substitutionary theory. Examples of sharp critics include Roberta Bondi, Marcus Borg, and Dorothea Solle. Love also draws upon CROSS EXAMINATIONS, edited by Marit Trelstad, to illustrate the sharp critics' position. Rather than seeing the cross as an event of salvation, the sharp critics view the cross as abusive and a source of violence. They reject the notion that the suffering of an innocent one is redemptive. These critics emphasize Jesus' life and ministry as the transformative events for humanity. Contrary to the theology which they critique, God is not responsible for Jesus' death. The crucifixion is a political act. The image of God is a loving one.

Love also draws upon the critique of Eugen Drewermann, a German

Catholic theologian new to the North American theological context. The story of the Fall forms the foundation for Drewermann's psychoanalytic theology. He claims that the Fall inserts fear instead of trust into humankind's relationship with God. The temptation is to fear instead of trust God. After the Fall, humankind's unconditional relationship with God becomes conditional. According to Drewermann's interpretation the penal substitutionary theory encourages the very temptation it proposes to overcome: God cannot be trusted.

Love presents his own response in Part Three. He is in agreement with the sharp critics in their understanding of God as non-violent with no desire for retributive justice. However, he retains the centrality of the cross of Christ as salvific. Love also agrees with much of Rene Girard's argument which identifies violence as the fundamental sin and sacrifice as a violent act against an individual or minority to prevent the violence of all against all. Like Girard and followers, such as S. Mark Heim, Love envisions a God who identifies with victims and rejects violence. How then, can the violent act of the cross save, he asks? On the cross, God endures all violence and sin, but in compassion puts an end to their power. The cross should not have happened, but it has saved everything. According to Love, "The cross both is and is not the will of God." The cross constitutes a new divine-human relationship, a gift of new creation from God.

By siding with Girard and Drewermann, Love challenges theologians for whom a necessary feature of any atonement theory is its ability to solve the internal conflict within God between justice and mercy. However, Love disagrees with the sharp critics who see the cross as the epitome of violence, not the end of violence. The cross is unnecessary for the sharp critics, Love argues, because they are not sharp critics of the human condition. Their analysis assumes greater agency for the person

in his or her salvation. Jesus becomes just one of many exemplars who can provide the wisdom and encouragement for the joint effort of salvation. Jesus as great teacher, or a loving role model, will suffice. The cross slips away and with it most of the central doctrines of Christian theology, asserts Love.

To maintain the integrity and necessity of Christ and the cross, Love insists on a more radical analysis of the human condition. He retains a sense of sin in which individuals stand accused of violence against God and others with no internal resources "to save." While God remains opposed to humankind's destructive ways, this is not a wrathful God needing to be satisfied, but a compassionate God offering salvation as a gift. Love recalls the story of Peter's denial of Jesus to illustrate Jesus' saving action. Before Jesus ("coram deo"), Peter stands accused as the one who has denied Jesus and abandoned him to the violence of the crowd and death. We all stand in Peter's spot. Jesus, however, gazes upon us with compassion and forgiveness. Jesus bears the death we fear and inflict, but in exchange offers transformative forgiveness and new life.

With St. Paul, Love maintains a scandalous specificity for the person of Jesus Christ who relates to the depths of our human condition even unto death, and retrieves us with forgiveness and compassion. By sending Jesus, the first person of the trinity is intimately involved with us in the salvific enterprise. God's honor, sense of justice, and holiness, need no saving. We do. When God is no longer an ambivalent figure, conflicted within God's self, the cross is lifted up as the action to save humanity.

In Parts One and Two, Love clearly describes penal substitutionary theory and its critics. In Part Three (Chapter 6), he offers his own argument for the rejection of a violent God while retaining the saving event of the cross. In some respects the book could

have concluded here. Although the five atonements models he develops to illustrate his position contain many insights, they blend together so that individually they do not quite achieve the distinctiveness the author proposes. Furthermore, it is not always clear that Love differs from the sharp critics in understanding Jesus as more than example. How is humanity empowered to accept the gift of the new creation brought by Jesus? How are we empowered to receive the gift of life which we could not accept prior to the cross? A more systematic emphasis on the empowering force of forgiveness which forges transformation in persons and establishes new relationship with God would counter the impression that Jesus is only an example of new life, rather than the agent of change.

Love's book insightfully joins the current conversation about atonement theories and the meaning of the cross of Christ. He uses movies, literature, and history to illustrate the human condition and need for salvation. These stories provide analytical intimations for our own political and personal relationships. What does it mean to live in a society in which doctrine or ideology often overcomes the needs of persons? Does the penal substitutionary model mirror a fundamental socio-political model of a domineering parent (read patriarch) who rules by fear and violence?

At root, Love's radical theological purpose is described by the book's subtitle: "How the Nonviolent God Saves Us through the Cross of Christ." Love seeks to replace Protestant theology's fundamental paradox (paradigm) without mitigating humankind's need for the cross of Christ. The paradoxical problem of how a just God can be merciful to sinners is replaced by how the violence of humanity toward God and persons is overcome by the crucifixion. God's identity changes from ambivalent to explicitly nonviolent, and the necessity of the Christ shifts from satisfying a problem within God to working the radical

transformation of persons.

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[PS from ES. Herewith a teaser. What is Luther's atonement model in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism? "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned sinner, purchased and won me from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death, so that I may be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."