



The Atonement

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 2C

Key Concepts:

- Some scholars argue that the main way of viewing the **Atonement** from the earliest Christians to the medieval era was as a '**victory**' of God over the devil and the forces of death and darkness. (1 Corinthians 15)
- Associated with 'victory' is the theme of **ransom**; the souls of humanity were held by the Devil and a price needed to be paid for our release (Mark 10:45).
- Gregory the Great** (b. 540CE) developed the idea that the devil had acquired the rights over fallen humanity and that the only way he could lose those rights was if he were to exceed his authority.
- Jesus acted as a **baited** hook: the Devil thought he had control over Jesus as he did over all humanity; however, Jesus was sinless, and in killing Jesus, the Devil forfeited his power over human souls.
- The 20th C. theologian **Gustav Aulén** saw the Christus victor approach having appeal in the context of the two World Wars in terms of the darker sides of human nature they revealed and the need for spiritual liberation.
- Some rejected Gregory's view as it implied
 - (i) God was not omnipotent and
 - (ii) the world did not ultimately belong to God, but to the devil.
- Anselm** set out his **substitutionary** theory of the atonement in his book **Cur Deus Homo** ('Why Did God Become Man?').
- The main theme of this approach is the **righteousness** of God which requires human obedience. Sin breaks a righteous state and the only way it can be restored is if **satisfaction** can be made for sin.
- The notion of 'satisfaction' can be understood as 'restitution' as was reflected in the laws of his time and the penitential system of the Church.
- Only God has the ability to make satisfaction, and so comes to earth in the form of Jesus. Jesus lives the obedient life that humans could not and then is punished with humanity's sin on the cross.
- Thus, this theory involves an '**economic**' approach (sins need to be paid for) and a **legal** approach (God's righteous laws need to be kept).
- Belief in supernatural intervention was abandoned in favour of **naturalistic** explanations in the enlightenment; some focussed on Peter **Abelard's** view (not an enlightenment thinker) of the cross as a sign of God's love.
- These thinkers rejected the notion of inherited sin, belief in the Devil and a **savage God** that required the sacrifice of his son.
- Instead, Jesus was approached as an **enlightened** human being who set a superior **moral example**. Those who felt inadequate, judged and threatened by Jesus' good example had him murdered out of greed and envy.
- Yet, Jesus faced his persecution with composure, compassion, integrity and fidelity to his message and beliefs. In this view, the cross - and how Jesus faced it - becomes an inspiration for us to stay true to our **moral compass**.

Key quotes:

'Our Lord therefore, when coming for the redemption of humanity, made a kind of hook for himself for the death of the devil.' (Gregory the Great)

'Christ offered to God something greater than what might be exacted in compensation for the whole offense of humanity.' (Anselm)

Key arguments/debates:

Some see the three Atonement models as contradictory - the first two presume a supernatural view of the universe and have different views of God and the Devil. The third model offers a subjective vs. an objective view of the cross. Others see it as a strength to have multiple models, emphasizing different dimensions of the Atonement (morality, sin, the devil, forgiveness etc.).

Dawkins views atonement theory as reflecting a God who is a '...vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser.' God could be criticised as a child-abuser, obsessed with maths and legalism. However, God could be seen as sacrificial for enduring pain out of love in situations where a supernatural solution is needed.

Key questions:

- Is the human predicament beyond a naturalistic solution?
- Are 'ransom' or 'substitution' powerful as metaphors to describe human bondage to badness?
- What is the relationship of these theories to temple sacrifices - Hebrew Bible?
- Who is crueller - God or humans?

Key words:

Atonement | victory | ransom | Gregory the Great | bait | Gustav Aulén | substitution | Anselm | Cur Deus Homo | righteousness | satisfaction | economic | legal | naturalistic | Abelard | enlightenment | savage God | moral example | moral compass