

A Darwinian Look at Atonement Theory

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After presenting various atonement theories, especially in light of evolutionary explanation, I conducted a brief survey among students to determine their level of theological understanding and scientific literacy. Based on this data, I conclude that students are given a poor education in theology. This paucity of wisdom needs to be mitigated. I offer some suggestions for rectifying this lacuna.

In a lecture aimed at freshman students at Abilene Christian University, a clip from *The Passion of Christ* was played depicting the scourging of Jesus. The speaker then posed the question, “How is God present in this act?” One student replied with confidence, “Jesus died on the cross for our sins.” The response was met with applause.

Those who grew up in a Christian household have likely heard this penal substitution atonement theory from preachers, pastors and parents. At a Christian university, this message was repeated; but we are also exposed to new ideas – Universalism, world religions, evolution and other atonement theories. The simple answers seem to raise more questions. *Why* did Jesus die? Did Jesus *have* to die? When is my salvation activated?

These are the questions addressed by various atonement theories. A common understanding of atonement is any process that removes any obstacle which might block one’s connection with a supreme being. Atonement is a difficult concept because scriptural exegesis is not always clear on precisely why Jesus died and what that means for 21st century Christians. Additionally, the passages in the bible which have information about atonement are sometimes difficult to exegete.

Atonement theory deals with the origins and fate of humanity. It is often tied to the idea of Original Sin, according to Augustinian understandings of the Genesis creation story. It is no surprise to the modern reader that a historical couple in a mystical garden with a talking snake and magical fruit is often called into question not only by the scientific witness but by modern theological reflection as well. What are Christian students to do with atonement in light of evolutionary theory where a historical couple is replaced with a hominid population?

To address these questions in part, I have outlined historical atonement theories in light of evolutionary explanation. Then, to get a snapshot of how students are dealing with these issues, I conducted some research among my peers.

Atonement Theories

Christians have always tried to discern the purpose of Jesus’ death and resurrection. From these ruminations, five main historical theories have arisen which remain popular in Western culture. These key theories are Governmental, Moral Example, Penal Substitution, Ransom to Satan, and Recapitulation. Perspectives on atonement can differ somewhat dramatically in certain Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. These views, defined below, differ primarily in the need for propitiation

versus expiation. Propitiation is the act of making one less angry in exchange for something tangible or verbal that is desired by that entity. Expiation is simply the act of making an atonement or a payment. Although the terms are somewhat difficult to differentiate, expiation does not have the connotation of wrath or demand that propitiation does. This subtle distinction between propitiation and expiation becomes clear as these historical theories are described next.

Penal Substitution Theory

Penal Substitution Theory is widely popular in Western Evangelical Culture. In the epistle to the Romans, Paul says that “the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹ Like a monetary transaction, someone can offer to take the punishment of death in place of the indebted party. Therefore, the Son, who was willing to be our substitute came to satisfy the demands of justice on our behalf.² Ideas of penal substitution and other satisfaction-type theories have been offered since the very beginning of the Church, with figures like Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Justin Martyr cited as early proponents.³

Governmental Theory

The Governmental Theory of atonement states that God’s system of justice and righteousness must be upheld in order to avoid “a breakdown of the moral fiber of the universe.”⁴ From this viewpoint, Christ’s death served not as a paid penalty for humanity’s sin, but as a substitution for a penalty. If God is omnipotent, then there is no reason God could not choose to simply wipe-away all sins of humanity. However, God still holds morality and justice in high

standing. Governmental Theory says Jesus’ death was a way for humanity to be forgiven of their sins, without having to suffer in the way that they deserve.

Ransom Theory

Ransom Theory and the variant known as *Christus Victor*, or Classic Theory claims that, “human sin gives the Devil a legitimate right to the possession of human souls.”⁵ It could be argued that this is the earliest explanation of Jesus’ death. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus himself says that he came “to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁶ Of the Early Church Fathers who described this view, including Origen, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa, all of them emphasized *victory* over sin and death.⁷ A notable expression of Ransom Theory in popular culture is C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The Christ-figure Aslan exchanges his own life in return for Edmund Pevensie, who, after betraying his family, becomes owned by the White Witch (Satan) because of the laws written in the “Deep Magic.”⁸

Moral Example Theory

Moral Example Theory, also known as Moral Influence Theory and Moral Exemplar Theory, is notably different from the others listed here. In Moral Example Theory, Jesus died (and lived) to serve as an example of how humanity should live. Jesus’ death was not a sacrifice, ransom, or cosmic transaction. The Stanford Encyclopedia says about Moral Example Theory: “[T]he work of Christ is fundamentally aimed at bringing about moral and spiritual reform in the sinner—a kind of reform that is not fully possible apart from Christ’s work.”⁹ This theory does not regard Christ as *only* an example to

¹ Romans 6:23, King James Version

² Murray and Rea, 2014

³ Vlach, 2009, p.204-205

⁴ Erickson, 2002, p.806-7

⁵ *op. cit.* ref. 2

⁶ Mark 10:45, New International Version

⁷ *op. cit.* ref. 2

⁸ Lewis, 1950, p.141-145

⁹ *op. cit.* ref. 2

humanity, but rather maintains that the love of Christ is incomparably transformative to human hearts, and that this transformation results in salvation.¹⁰

Recapitulation Theory

In Recapitulation Theory, Jesus is seen as a second Adam who succeeded in all of the ways that Adam failed. It was first clearly defined by Irenaeus.¹¹ The course of humankind is reversed from disobedience to obedience. There is a distinct note of healing- or restoring-type language in many of the texts related to Recapitulation: “He became incarnate, [...] He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam—namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God—that we might *recover* in Christ Jesus.”¹²

Eastern Orthodoxy and Theosis

Daniel Clendenin writes that Eastern Orthodox traditions place “the questions of human destiny, sin and salvation at the forefront of [their] entire theological vision, albeit in ways very different from the western Christian tradition.”¹³ Theosis, a central doctrine in Eastern Orthodox traditions, says that the ultimate fate of humanity is deification.¹⁴ That is, becoming one unified being with God. Theologians from this tradition see Western theology as “unduly dominated by legal, juridical and forensic categories” which were perhaps originally framed in terms of Roman civil law.¹⁵ Theosis certainly developed out of Irenaeus’ Recapitulation Theory. Irenaeus states that Christ “became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is

Himself.”¹⁶ Here Irenaeus is echoing Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”¹⁷

Original Sin and Atonement

Original sin has two main definitions. One refers to the fallen state of humanity as a result of the first man’s (Adam’s) actions; the other maintains that there is a tendency toward sin because of the moral corruption that Adam brought on.¹⁸ St. Augustine suggested that Adam’s sin, and therefore his guilt, was passed down through his children, and eventually to every person who has ever lived.¹⁹ Without sin, discussions of atonement are not really relevant, as all Atonement Theories revolve around reconciliation of humans to God through Jesus. The important issue on which theologians disagree is that of the hereditary stain passed down from Adam. That is, are all humans guilty of Adam’s sin? Roman Catholic doctrine firmly believes in the hereditary stain, and it is central in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.²⁰ Several of the Atonement Theories described above rely heavily on hereditary stain, most notably Ransom Theory, in its suggestion of lifelong bondage to sin, death, and/or Satan. Moral Example and Recapitulation Theory do not rely entirely on a hereditary guilt. Eastern Orthodox doctrine does not believe in the guilt of Adam, but instead believes that Adam’s actions introduced a sinful nature.²¹ Another common belief about original sin is that Adam also brought death into the world, meaning that there was no human death

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Mackintosh, 1920, p.89-90

¹² Schaff, 2012

¹³ Clendenin, 1994, p.365

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.366

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.367

¹⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, 1869, p.55

¹⁷ John 12:32, New International Version

¹⁸ Harent, 1911

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Azkoul, 1994

before Adam sinned.²² Paul even says in the first letter to the Corinthians that “since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.”²³

Science and Atonement

Many people believe that sometime in the nineteenth century, the war between science and religion began. This supposed conflict was largely fabricated by John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White. They each wrote about the warfare between religion and science, mostly in response to institutionalized Christianity but based on little actual history of conflict between the two.²⁴ Because of these authors and the myth of conflict, Christians and scientists require convincing that the two are not incompatible.

A key source of perceived conflict for many Christians is the theory of biological evolution and its implications for human origins. In this section I will describe the theory of evolution, what it means for human origins, and Christian reactions to evolutionary theory.

Evolution by Natural Selection

Natural selection as the mechanism for evolution was proposed by Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin spent his life studying and gathering the data for this contribution to science, which has become the cornerstone of modern biology. Natural selection can be summarized in four points, as follows: 1) variation exists among individuals within species; 2) organisms produce more offspring than the environment can support; 3) competition for resources exists among individuals and, regardless of the rate of reproduction in a species, all of the young do not survive to

become reproducing adults; 4) the organisms whose variations best fit them to the environment are the ones who are most likely to survive, reproduce, and pass those desirable variations on to the next generation.²⁵ This is how natural selection works to cause the evolution of species. Using this model, evolution of even small traits takes generations for change to occur.

One point of misunderstanding is the phrase “survival of the fittest.” First coined by Herbert Spencer, and later adopted by Darwin in his 5th edition of *On the Origin of Species*,²⁶ the phrase is often misused and misunderstood as “survival of the strongest.” However, “fittest” refers to biological fitness, which means not only surviving to reproductive adulthood, but also passing on genes through production of progeny.²⁷ Proliferation of progeny counts, not individual survival.

Human Origins

Where do humans come from? What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? Science, through experimentation and evidence, has proposed answers; religion, through revelation and philosophy, has proposed answers too. *Homo sapiens* are thought to have arisen around 200,000 years ago. Many paleoanthropologists believe that our direct evolutionary ancestor was *Homo heidelbergensis*, and before that there was *Homo habilis*, *Australopithecus africanus*, and others.²⁸ The lineage continues to stretch back until the very first evidence of life—sedimentary stromatolites from 3.5 billion years ago.²⁹

Christian’s Reactions

Christians often obtain their identity as humans from the Genesis creation story.

²² *op. cit.* ref. 18

²³ I Corinthians 15:21, New International Version

²⁴ Welch, 1996, p.29-31

²⁵ Pojeta and Springer, 2001

²⁶ Weinstein, 2012

²⁷ *op. cit.* ref. 25

²⁸ Smithsonian, 2014

²⁹ *ibid.*

Many passages speak to what it means to be a man or woman, including the image passage in Genesis 1:27. In this story, God creates a male and female, and tells them to reproduce and fill the earth. In the second chapter, a slightly different story is told. The man and woman have names—Adam and Eve. The man is created first and the woman second as his helper. Interestingly, these two chapters are often read as though they are one continuous story, although the narrative becomes disjointed when they are combined. After Adam and Eve sin in the third chapter of Genesis (The Fall), they are banished from the Garden of Eden and doomed to live separated from God.

These explanations of human origins do not necessarily conflict. However, extremists on both sides have decided that they are incompatible. Pure materialists say that there is no evidence of a creator, therefore it cannot exist. Young-Earth Creationists take a literal interpretation of Genesis. The myth of warfare between science and religion persists with these fundamentalist stances.

Student Survey: Methods

I distributed a nine-question survey to current undergraduate and graduate students at Abilene Christian University via email, Facebook, and word of mouth. Four of the questions were demographic: classification, gender, major, and ethnicity. The options for major area of study were: STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math), Religious Studies, and neither of these. Question five asked with which belief system the student most closely aligned. The next page presented the reader with five atonement theories, asked them to select the one with which they would most likely agree, and asked if they were familiar with the theory they chose. Page three presented the theory of evolution by natural selection, as already described above, and asked the

reader if they accepted this explanation. The final question asked if the reader accepted that evolution also applied to humans. The options for these questions are listed below along with the response data.

Survey Results

In total, 34 students responded to the survey: 12 freshmen, 2 sophomores, 3 juniors, 15 seniors, and 2 graduate students; 16 men and 18 women. Twenty-two responders were white, 5 were Hispanic/Latino, 3 did not specify, 2 were black/African American, 1 was Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 was American Indian/Alaskan Native. There were 16 STEM majors, 10 Religion, and 8 of neither major.

In terms of Christian tradition, most were non-denominational (11), Church of Christ (7), Methodist (4), Baptist (5), Unspecified Protestant (3), non-specified (3), and Catholic (1). There were no Eastern Orthodox or non-religious individuals.

With respect to the various atonement theories, students agreed mainly with Penal Substitution Theory (13), Moral Example Theory (7). Ransom and Governmental Theory were favored by two students each. Recapitulation Theory was not chosen; ten students were unable to make any choice. When asked if they were familiar with any of the theories prior to this survey, the majority (26) admitted ignorance with only 8 familiar with them.

When asked if they accepted the theory of evolution by natural selection once it had been validly explained to them, nearly two-thirds agreed (21 of the 34 or 62%). Thirteen students either still rejected it (6) or were undecided (7).

These numbers shifted when applying natural selection to humans. Half accepted it as an explanation pertaining to humans (17); nearly a third (11) rejected it but with almost one-fifth (6) leaning toward its acceptance.

Survey Discussion

Most of the results of this simple survey were expected. A majority of students identified as Non-Denominational or Church of Christ; most students chose Penal Substitution Theory (38%) followed by Moral Example Theory (21%) more than any other Atonement Theory.

Unexpected results were that nearly two-thirds (62%) of the students accepted the theory of evolution with half saying it also applied to humans.

Undoubtedly though, the most concerning results were that a little less than one-third (29.4%) of respondents did not know which atonement theory they accepted. This result occurred despite being informed within the survey of the various theories. Three-fourths (76%) admitted they never knew which atonement theory they believed prior to being informed by this survey. Students being unsure of what atonement means to them and being uneducated regarding atonement theories represents a problem in the Christian education system and churches, I believe.

Suggestions for Reconciliation

If young people are not equipped to answer the hard questions that will inevitably arise, they will find themselves confused after leaving home. “Jesus died on the cross for our sins,” is not an adequate answer when faith seems challenged. The solution to reconciling faith and learning lies not in tolerance or the post-modernist pablum of “everyone’s entitled to their own opinion.” We must actively search for the common ground, and seek out the Truth in the mysteries. I offer here a few steps to ease the cognitive dissonance that often faces Christians when integrating faith and learning.

First, we must educate ourselves about our own faith. We should study real theology. Children and youth need to learn in simple, but clear, terms what salvation means, and why Jesus died. Regardless of the faith tradition or Atonement Theory, the responsibility of education of the young lies with the parents, grandparents, and teachers. Many non-denominational churches suffer from a weak liturgical or catechism training. Faith must be passed down within a tradition and this must include the fine-print details of solid theological reflection, not merely bible study where the opinions of the unqualified are offered. As Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”³⁰

Second, we do not have to see science as an adversary to religion. Atonement doctrine and science, such as evolution by natural selection, can work together to shed light on some of the mysteries. Evolutionary theory, particularly, can help us understand scripture and vice versa. Evolution, scientifically speaking, does not have a goal. Evolution is only an explanation for the phenomenon of species changing into other species. To say that evolution is drawing humanity toward a goal of perfection would be a fallacy. However, we could state that God is drawing humanity toward a goal *using* evolution.

Contrary to popular belief, in the past centuries, humanity *has* become more peaceful and less violent because of the advancement of government, economics, and literacy.³¹ Do we live in a world fallen from perfection or an upward trending one? Patrick Franklin suggests a “Trinitarian eschatological hermeneutic” when discussing creation and evolution.³² He suggests that God gave creation “the

³⁰ I Peter 3:15, New International Version

³¹Pinker, 2011

³² Franklin, 2014, p.154

intrinsic potentiality to develop, to mature, and to evolve over time” as the Holy Spirit “incessantly draws creation to the Father's intended destination.”³³

Recapitulation Theory, Moral Example Theory, and the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of Theosis especially adopt this same hopeful, upward trending view of humanity. Evolutionary theory points us toward a hopeful theology like these—one of grace, progress, and a New Earth.

Conclusion

On the other hand, clichés like those at the start of this paper do not help young Christians to participate in the world around

them; and they perpetuate a warfare myth that only serves to increase contention with a modern world. Let us teach our brothers, sisters, and children about the richness of our salvation, and about the exciting truths that can be found in science.

We believe in an Almighty Creator—one who created the universe intentionally, embedded with purpose and Truth. Religion and science have this in common: both are searching for the Truth. There must be a unifying answer in all of the chaos. If we are earnestly searching for the Truth as a team, perhaps we will come upon a sliver of Reality—a glimpse of the Creator.

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³³ *ibid.*

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