Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 9 | Issue 2

Article 11

4-1-1992

Colin E. Gunton, THE ACTUALITY OF ATONEMENT: A STUDY OF METAPHOR, RATIONALITY AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Philip L. Quinn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Quinn, Philip L. (1992) "Colin E. Gunton, THE ACTUALITY OF ATONEMENT: A STUDY OF METAPHOR, RATIONALITY AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19929225

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol9/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

ceptance of the philosophy of religion as a legitimate and thriving subdivision of philosophy, the existence of the Society of Christian Philosophers, and the influence of certain of its most respected members who led the way into theology (many but not all of whom are contributors to the current book).

But another reason must in honesty be mentioned (despite the discomfort it will cause)—dissatisfaction with the current state of theology. In connection with their professional work, especially in the philosophy of religion, Christian philosophers occasionally find themselves reading theological texts from people like Anselm or Aquinas or Calvin or Barth. And it appears that many Christian philosophers find the work of such thinkers to be more careful, stimulating, and faithful to the Christian tradition than the work of many contemporary theologians, especially the more radical ones.

One of the dangers of philosophers doing theology, of course, is that their work will seem naive or uninformed. If Christian philosophers want to continue to address themselves in a convincing way to the Christian community on theological topics, then I am convinced that they will need to educate themselves in both the history of doctrine and biblical exegesis. Sound Christian theology simply cannot be done without a firm foundation in both disciplines. Fortunately, the contributors to the current work point the way for us. Plantinga, Brown, Stump, and others show us how important the first is; Plantinga (in his brief but excellent discussion of the New Testament basis for the doctrine of the Trinity) shows us how important the second is.

Where will the movement go from here? I do not know. Will it have any influence on professional theologians? Will it affect the training of clergy? Will it reach "the intelligent layperson in the pew"? Again, I do not know. I do believe, however, that *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* is a book of such high quality on topics so important that it will be hard to ignore.

The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition, by **Colin E. Gunton**. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989. Pp. xiv + 222. \$24.95.

PHILIP L. QUINN, University of Notre Dame.

In recent years there has been a dearth of books in English about the Christian doctrine of the Atonement. Neither theologians nor philosophers of religion have been much interested in submitting this doctrine to sustained examination. It is therefore striking that not just one but two books on this topic appeared in print in 1989. One is a philosophical study by the Nolloth Professor of Philosophy of the Christian Religion at the University of Oxford.¹ The other, which is the book under review here, is a theological study by the

Professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College, University of London. This may, of course, be mere coincidence, but I am inclined to think it is indicative of important developments in both philosophy and theology. It seems to me a manifestation of a revival within both disciplines of serious engagement with traditional understandings of distinctively Christian doctrines. And perhaps it also augurs well for the prospects of interdisciplinary collaboration between Christian philosophers and Christian theologians. Certainly there is much in Gunton's book that will be of interest to Christian philosophers who wish to discuss the Atonement.

The book's first chapter sets the stage for what follows by arguing that Christian tradition has suffered "mistranslations" (p. 24) at the hands of Enlightenment rationalism. Gunton is severely critical of the theological reductionism he finds in the work of Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel; we must try, he claims, to go beyond and to some extent against these seminal thinkers. Clearly a strong case can be made for this conclusion, and so it is unfortunate that Gunton's historical argument often rests on oversimplification or misunderstanding of the views of his opponents. He supposes that the effect of Kant's work "is a transmogrification of Christianity into its opposite" (p. 7) because he takes Kant's doctrine of moral autonomy to lead to the conclusion that we save ourselves. But this oversimplifies matters considerably by neglecting Kant's insistence that we must postulate the assistance of divine grace if we are to conceive of the practical possibility of moral perfection.² And Schleiermacher is bound to be misunderstood if he is thought of as a rationalist rather than as a leading figure in the romantic reaction against rationalism.

However, the inadequacies of Gunton's brief introductory foray into the history of German philosophical and theological thought do not detract from the interest of his constructive account of the Atonement. The second chapter is devoted to laying out assumptions about theological method and language on which that account is based. Gunton argues that "metaphor is a primary vehicle of human rationality and superior to the pure concept" (p. 39). Citing with approval Kripke's version of the causal theory of reference, he contends that metaphors of atonement use religious, legal, commercial and military language to identify a divine action in which God actively remakes broken relationships. This is, he concludes, "a causal fixing of reference in the sense that reference is made to God by means of a narration of historical happenings and their outcome" (p. 46). The next three chapters explore in some detail three such metaphors of atonement.

Chapter 3 focuses on the metaphor of the battlefield and the demons. Christ's atoning work is, metaphorically speaking, a military victory over demonic forces that hold us in bondage. Gunton insists that the aptness of this metaphor provides us with no basis for a theory of the Atonement of the sort advanced by Gustaf Aulen.³ Yet Gunton himself is implicitly guided by

theoretical assumptions in interpreting the metaphor. Thus, for example, he deplores the tendency in the later patristic period "to picture the defeat of the devil as a kind of deceit, in which the devil, believing that Jesus is merely a human victim, swallows him, only to be impaled on the hidden hook of his divinity" (p. 63). Indeed, he appears to be skeptical about the existence of the devil. The language of demons, he tells us, "is used to express the helplessness of human agents in the face of psychological, social and cosmic forces in various combinations" (p. 70). These examples serve to illustrate the general point that the interpretation of metaphor is itself an activity that is, as philosophers of science are wont to say, theory-laden. In these cases I find Gunton's theoretical presuppositions congenial, but I think it only fair to acknowledge that Christians who are committed to the existence of the devil are likely to find them reductionistic.

In Chapter 4 Gunton discusses what he characterizes as the metaphor of the justice of God. In terms of language drawn from legal sources, Christ's suffering and death somehow compensate God for human default on obligations owed to Him and thereby right the cosmic balance. The chapter is notable for its sympathetic treatment of Anselm's attempt to conceive the Atonement in terms of the legal category of satisfaction. As in the previous chapter, theological convictions Gunton brings to the task of interpretation play a crucial role in determining which uses of legal language are legitimate and which are not. Like Anselm, he has little use for the notion that Christ paid a price to ransom sinners from the devil. He rejects the idea that the devil "had obtained, as a result of the Fall, certain rights over humankind, either on his own account or by divine permission" (p. 87), and he considers it a mistake to take literally the allusion to ransom at Mark 10:45 by "treating the blood as an actual price and asking whether it was paid to God or to the devil" (p. 88). But he also faults Anselm for concentrating too exclusively on sin as offense and salvation as remission of penalty and rejects the anthropomorphic picture of God as "a rather testy monarch punishing offences against his personal honor" (p. 95).

Chapter 5 develops the metaphor of Christ as sacrifice, which Gunton supposes we will find problematic. Roughly put, the problem is that either sacrifice is a dead metaphor, in which case it cannot be used to cast light on Christ's work, or it is not, in which case it suggests the revolting idea that God demands the blood of an innocent victim. Gunton's solution, which is indebted to the work of anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, involves subsuming sin under the rubric of uncleanness or pollution and understanding sacrifice in "its function in the removal of the uncleanness which pollutes the good creation" (p. 119). There is, however, reason to doubt that the proposed solution will work. Because the sacrifice in question involves Christ's suffering and death, those who are revolted by the very idea of blood sacrifice

can hardly be expected to take comfort from the thought that this sacrifice functions as an antidote to pollution.

Gunton devotes the penultimate chapter of the book to weaving together the metaphors of victory, justice and sacrifice into a larger tapestry. According to Gunton, the pattern that emerges exhibits Christ not merely as an example to us or our representative but also as a substitute for us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. "That includes," Gunton insists, "undergoing the judgement of God, because were we to undergo it without him, it would mean our destruction" (p. 165). And the book concludes with a chapter in which Gunton makes a number of thoughtful suggestions about how the metaphors of atonement he favors might be embodied in and inform "a concrete community of language and life" (p. 177).

It seems to me that Gunton is right to suppose that our best hope for deepening our understanding of the mystery of the Atonement is to try to weave together into a coherent pattern various strands of Christian reflection on the subject. Scripture provides us with several motifs to serve as starting points, and Christian tradition is rich with developments and elaborations of the scriptural suggestions. Indeed, tradition yields an embarrassment of riches, for many combinations and permutations of themes are possible. How are we to decide which of them to prefer? This methodological question is urgent because Gunton is not the first to attempt to synthesize several of the traditional motifs. Though the book does not comment on this fact, Aquinas had earlier employed the strategy Gunton favors.⁴ The pattern Aquinas weaves is interesting both for its similarities to and for its differences from the one that emerges from Gunton's endeavors. The two of them agree in regarding the themes of satisfying demands of divine justice and sacrifice as central to a full account of the Atonement. Unlike Gunton, however, Aquinas does not highlight the military motif of battle and victory, but he does hold that humans are literally subject to the devil's bondage on account of sin and even insists that the price of ransom has to be paid not to the devil but to God. And many Christians who would have no qualms about going against the seminal thinkers of the Enlightenment would consider it sheer folly to do the same with respect to Aquinas. So we must engage in the comparative evaluation of the merits of several tapestries woven from strands of Christian reflection on the significance of the life and death of Christ.

It is at this point that I think the appeal to theoretical considerations and supporting philosophical arguments becomes inevitable, and it is at this point that Gunton's book disappoints the philosophically inclined reader. It does a good job of expressing the theological opinions that underlie its judgments about which metaphors are apt and which are not, but it does precious little to argue for their superiority to the available alternatives within Christian tradition. Is Aquinas's belief in the devil a vestige of a now unacceptable

mythological way of thought? Or does Gunton's skepticism about the devil represent a mistaken concession to the prejudices of secular modernity? Whether the position this book sketches out can be developed into an account of the Atonement that satisfies standards of theoretical justification appropriate for theology and philosophy is a question that stands in need of further discussion. Perhaps the conduct of such a discussion could be an opportunity for fruitful collaboration between philosophers and theologians.

NOTES

1. Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
2. For discussion, see Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 232-48.
3. Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, tr. A. G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1969).
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. III, q. 48, aa. 2, 3 and 4.