



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Love, Not Atonement

Last Easter, I was sent an article. It was adapted from a book by Richard Rohr ([Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi](#), p183-188). I've edited it a little, but thought others might find it interesting this year.

The common Christian reading of the Bible is that Jesus "died for our sins" - either to pay a debt to the devil (common in the first millennium) or to pay a debt to God the Father (proposed by Anselm of Canterbury, 1033-1109). Anselm's infamous *Cur Deus Homo* has been called "the most unfortunately successful piece of theology ever written." After Anselm, Christians have paid a huge price for what theologians called "substitutionary atonement theory" - the strange idea that before God could love us God needed and demanded Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to atone for our sin-drenched humanity. With that view, salvation depends upon a problem instead of a divine proclamation about the core nature of reality. As if God could need payment, and even a very violent transaction, to be able to love and accept "his" own children - a message that those with an angry, distant, absent, or abusive father were already far too programmed to believe.

The incarnation of God and the redemption of the world could never be a mere mop-up exercise in response to human sinfulness, but the proactive work of God from the very beginning. We were "chosen in Christ before the world was made," as the hymn in Ephesians puts it (1:4). Our sin could not possibly be the motive for the divine incarnation, but only perfect love and divine self-revelation! God never merely reacts, but always supremely and freely *acts*, and always acts totally out of love.

The best way I can summarize how to change the old notion of retributive justice is this: *Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity (it did not need changing)! Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.* God in Jesus moved people beyond the counting, weighing, and punishing model, that the ego prefers, to the utterly new world that Jesus offered, where God's abundance has made any economy of merit, sacrifice, reparation, or atonement both unhelpful and unnecessary. Jesus undid "once and for all" (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) all notions of human and animal sacrifice and replaced them with his new economy of grace, which is the very heart of the gospel revolution. Jesus was meant to be a game changer for the human psyche and for religion itself. When we begin negatively, or focused on the problem, we never get out of the hamster wheel. To this day we begin with and continue to focus on sin, when the crucified one was pointing us toward a primal solidarity with the very suffering of God and all of creation. This changes everything. Change the starting point, change the trajectory!

We all need to know that *God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.* Nothing humans can do will ever decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love.

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