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## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW AND THE ATONEMENT

THE FOCUS OF CHRISTIANITY is the Cross of Christ. Here, the Christian believes, the Saviour reached the ultimate depth of humiliation, but, at the same time, the Cross was evidence of the Divine Love. The Cross is a paradoxical mixture of love and hate, of exaltation and humiliation, of victory and defeat. To the non-believer, it is a scandal of degradation that such a man should come to such an end, and that his message of love should be terminated so violently. To the believer, it is a scandal, but it is also the evidence that God has identified himself with man even to the point of death, that God must take man's sin seriously. If man is to be exalted through his representative, Christ, then that representative must also share man's death as well as his life. There are problems here. The human mind, without initial faith in Christ, boggles at the scandal of the crucifixion. St. Paul recognized the paradox of the death of Jesus when he wrote his first letter to the Christians at Corinth: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:22).

In the history of Christian theology an Atonement theology, which emphasizes the Cross of Christ, has always been popular when the spirit of the time has had a predominantly pessimistic view of human nature. The significance of the Cross has been realized when man has discovered that he is bound by the world about him, and that salvation, temporal or eternal, comes not through his own efforts, but through faith in an act of God. The Reformation was such a time. Protestant reformers saw the dangers of secularism, war, and corruption within the Church. As a result, they turned to doctrines such as Luther's justification *sola fide* and to a theological posture stressing the Atonement. There was such a time just after the first World War. Christians were beginning to realize that the optimism regarding the nature of man, an optimism which had dominated the previous fifty years, was inadequate in the face of an internecine war. The fading of the old optimism renewed interest

in Reformation theology, and Protestant theologians, most notably Karl Barth, again stressed the Cross and the Atonement.

Much of the Victorian intellectual climate had been decidedly optimistic about the nature of man. The primary concern of the more enlightened theologians had been to rid the Church of some of the vulgar shibboleths which belonged to a primitive religion. Among these was the obsolete doctrine of the Atonement, an offence on two counts. First, it was often over-simplified. Belief that the blood of the Lamb would wash away the sins of the world was thought sufficient to admit the believer to eternal bliss after death. This doctrine, among the evangelical sects, became little more than a formula which was a password to heaven. In the second place, however, the paradox and the scandal of the Cross were incongruous in an intellectual atmosphere which stressed the divinity of man and the unlimited possibilities of the evolutionary appetite.

The thinking Victorians were in revolt against the descendants of the Anselmic and Calvinist doctrines of the Atonement. These doctrines emphasized the sacrifice of the obedient and loving Son to the demanding justice and righteousness of the Father. The result was a religion of terror which became characteristic of early nineteenth-century English revivalism. Calvin's Atonement theology itself offers a frightening idea of God. With some of the lesser evangelical preachers, the fear of the divine Being became even more acute.

George Bernard Shaw saw in Calvin the source of much of the distortion of Atonement theology. In the Preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, he suggests that traditional Christianity has become "the most infernal of fatalisms", and in view of much of the contemporary Atonement theology he has justification for that suggestion: "In the hands of a logical Frenchman like Calvin, pushing it to its utmost conclusions, and devising 'institutes' for hard-headed adult Scots and literal Swiss, it becomes the most infernal of fatalisms; and the lives of civilized children are blighted by its logic whilst negro piccaninnies are rejoicing in its legends" (p. 85).

The "it" in this statement, however, is not merely the Atonement of Christ on his Cross; rather "it" is the doctrine of the Atonement, as it was corrupted by Shaw's Biblical villain, St. Paul. Shaw believed that modern Christianity should look to Paul as its founder, not to Jesus. He felt that Paul's Atonement theology with its sacrificial imagery had corrupted Jesus' "mystical" religion into a superstition which he called "Crosstianity".

The early religion of Israel, which testified to a God who interfered

with natural law and delighted in animal offerings and human sacrifices, was eventually superseded by the religion of the prophets. Shaw, however, believed that Paul had dragged the prophetic moral religion down to the level of the primitive religion by substituting Jesus as a kind of universal sacrifice in place of the individual sacrifices of the Hebrews. Man's justice runs deep. If he has sinned, he must pay a penalty. Shaw believes that the Christian avoids the penalty by using Jesus as the one who suffers the divine retribution.

Traditional Christianity affirms the centrality and the significance of the concept that Christ's death was an expiation for the sin of man. However, the ideas of expiation and the rest of the sacrificial imagery do not constitute, as Shaw believed, a hard and fast doctrine. Nor can they be attributed exclusively to St. Paul.

The salvationism which Shaw opposes does have its roots in Paul's statements, but they are embryonic roots, vastly different from the revivalist salvationism that Shaw saw in some contemporary evangelical groups. Any statement of the Atonement is almost universally conceded by theologians to be so elusive that it cannot be placed in water-tight compartments. Because this doctrine is so elusive, there have been many mistaken versions of it. More than any other Christian doctrine, the doctrine of the Atonement has been subjected to the utmost scrutiny by the Christian Church. It has adopted new characteristics in order to become credible to the cultural and intellectual development of new generations. Indeed, one of the early Church Fathers, Gregory of Nazianus, made the comment that "the death of Christ is an article of faith about which it was not dangerous to be mistaken."<sup>1</sup> The truth of this statement has been testified to until the present day.

Paul did use the imagery of sacrifice to explain the Atonement, because that imagery was meaningful to the people to whom he was writing. But nowhere does Paul speak of the Atonement in sacrificial terms in a sustained argument such as is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews (which post-Shavian scholarship does not attribute to St. Paul). Shaw, choosing to overlook the Epistle to the Hebrews, picks out Ephesians 5:2, and upbraids Paul for destroying the message of Jesus by making him a human sacrifice to propitiate an angry God; "... we find Paul holding up Christ to the Ephesians as 'an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour', thereby dragging Christianity back and down to the level of Noah" (*Adventures of the Black Girl*, p. 91).

Here Shaw betrays an inadequate knowledge of Pauline theology. He

wrenches the text out of context, not admitting that it is the love in which Christ walked which naturally culminated in his death. This love is to be considered as the "offering and sacrifice" and not the death alone. Shaw sometimes slips into the errors of Biblical literalism by confusing metaphor with literal truth. The main weakness, however, in Shaw's criticism of St. Paul as the progenitor of all the vulgar brands of Atonement theology is that he fails to mention that Paul explained the Atonement in other ways as well. Paul was not totally dependent upon the imagery of sacrifice. In fact, either the view of Christ as the new Adam or that of Christ as the conqueror of all malignant influences may be said to be more central to the theology of St. Paul.

Even if Paul was not the founder of nineteenth-century "Crosstianity", the vulgarity of many concepts of the Atonement appalled minds which were more sympathetic to Christianity than was Shaw's. The visions of a higher morality and a more equitable society were dawning in England, and both morality and justice were beginning to speak to a previously sacrosanct religion. It was the awakening of this moral conscience which most affected the change in the old doctrines of the Atonement, not only among secularists with humanist leanings but also among liberal theologians.

In 1850, the popular view of the Atonement was that Christ died to satisfy God's justice and to open the avenues for God's forgiveness of man. Even then, however, there was much opposition to this simple view. Secular concepts of justice were taking on moral overtones, and they were advancing beyond the primitive idea that justice was legalized revenge. Shelley, who had greatly influenced Shaw's early attitude to Christianity, recognized that an adequate view of moral justice had to supersede the primitive *lex talionis*. The Victorian moral conscience was changing its emphasis. Retributive justice had to be replaced by the concept that the goal of punishment was reformation and rehabilitation, not revenge.

If the emphasis in terms of secular attitudes to justice was changing, those religious doctrines which were concerned with divine justice could not lag far behind. If God is just and good, as all religions profess, then He would not endorse any doctrines which questioned His justice. And on this basis, the Anselmic and Calvinist doctrines of the Atonement could not be supported in terms of moral justice.

Justice was one consideration. Morality was another. To many who felt that man alone should be responsible for his own actions, substitutionary

Atonement was repugnant. George Eliot commented that the world "would be infinitely better and happier if men could be made to feel that there is no escape from the inexorable law that we reap what we have sown."<sup>2</sup> People no longer accepted a church doctrine as a pronouncement *ex cathedra*. If that pronouncement opposed a morality which they deemed superior, it had to be exchanged for one that was compatible with moral principles. Morality could not be made ancillary to religious dogma; rather, religious dogma, if it was to have any practical value at all, had to confirm morality.

One other consideration formed a part of the reaction against the old doctrines of the Atonement. Any Atonement theology that suggests a propitiatory sacrifice to an angry God is a theology which corrupts the Christian view of God as a Father. Perhaps this consideration was most instrumental in shaping a doctrine of the Atonement that would be congruous with the idea of God in the parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance. A split between God as tyrant and God as loving and obedient Son is no more tenable in orthodox theology than it is in liberal theology. Hence, any satisfactory doctrine of the Atonement must offer a position in which Father and Son are not of opposed natures.

Orthodox Protestantism usually feels that liberal theologians take an unrealistically optimistic view of the nature of man. This optimism tended to discredit Atonement theology among the liberals, or at least to relegate it to a subordinate position. Consequently, the idea of sin slipped into the background, and the current evolutionary theories corroborated the idea that sin was comparable to a physical defect which would be superseded as the human race progressed.

These views did not mean that all Atonement theology had been rejected by liberal theologians; the Atonement remained, but it bore little resemblance to the old doctrine of a universal human sacrifice. It was shaped on contemporary morality and a belief in the goodness of man. R. J. Campbell's *The New Theology*, published about 1905, provides a good example of what the Atonement had come to mean to some liberals. The book enjoyed an ephemeral popularity, but it is particularly important because Shaw once commented that he could become a Christian if such a theology were ever to be accepted by the Christian Church.

Atonement, says Campbell, does not involve punishment or escape from punishment. Rather it suggests that man and God are one. There is no gulf between God and Christ, and none between Christ and the rest of mankind.

The oneness between man and God is brought about by the self-giving love of Christ, manifested in his vicarious death. The love of Christ, however, is not the representative love of God for mankind, nor is his death a representative death as it is in orthodox theology. Instead, the selfless life of Christ is the prototype of the life to which everyone should aspire. It is selflessness which is Atonement, and which makes every individual one with God. Consequently, according to Campbell, the Atonement of Christ is not unique. Anyone who exhibits selfless love is one who atones. Christ's Atonement was not once for all, but is a continuing process, evident whenever an individual subordinates his own will to the will of another. Dogma is a dead issue. It is replaced by love in action. The sinner is redeemed by becoming a saviour.

This brief survey of contemporary secular and theological forces which shaped Christian Atonement theology is prerequisite to an understanding of Shaw's attitude to the Cross and the Atonement. In the face of such an upheaval within the Church, Shaw's heresy and hostility to the Cross and the Atonement are not as radical as they may seem at first. Shaw did not glean his ideas from the liberals, or even from Campbell; it is true, however, that their similar rejections of the old Atonement and their similar concerns that a new religion would have to rise from the old, would suggest that the same forces which influenced the liberals also influenced Bernard Shaw.

Shaw's repugnance to "Crosstianity" was so strong that it even passed the boundary of his death. In his will, he left an explicit statement regarding his religious belief and his antipathy to the Cross: "As my religious convictions and scientific views cannot at present be more specifically defined than those of a believer in Creative Evolution, I desire that no public monument or work of art or inscription or sermon or ritual service commemorating me shall suggest that I accepted the tenets peculiar to any established church or denomination nor take the form of a cross or any other instrument of torture or symbol of blood sacrifice."<sup>3</sup> For Shaw the symbol of Christianity was also the symbol of his reaction against it.

Moral responsibility is the crux of Shaw's argument against substitutionary Atonement. Substitution is an accretion to the message of Christ, supplied by a later superstitious people. "There is", he says, "no record of Christ's having ever said to any man: 'Go and sin as much as you like: you can put it all on me'" (*Androcles and the Lion*, pp. 83-4). To Shaw, salvation is attainable not through the atoning death of one individual but through the achieve-

ments of the Life Force working through individuals, and Socialism has moved the vision of these achievements closer to a present reality.

Atonement theology which ignores individual responsibility not only destroys a man's courage for facing life, but it also makes him dishonest. If a man fears death or damnation, he can find in Christ a ready scapegoat. Shaw believes that this cheapens religion and even life itself. The Lutheran Reformation, he said, was "a triumph of cheapness. It brought you complete salvation and asked you for nothing but faith" (*Androcles and the Lion*, p. 21).

Shaw felt that a human being usually seeks the path of least resistance. The Atonement of Christ was such a path. By placing his burden on Christ, the individual can avoid the responsibility of accepting the way which the Life Force offers to him. By avoiding this responsibility, he avoids life itself. Man will not work and he will not live "more abundantly" if he has his work done and his life lived for him.

Atonement theology, in Shaw's view, had adopted many of the undesirable characteristics of the capitalistic society. These characteristics were fostered by the Church, which was itself a tool of that society. In the first place, the God of Atonement, he felt, was popularly conceived as a God who could be swindled, and whose law could be bent to the entreaties of human will. The concept of God as Judge is an anthropomorphic idea, and the flattery and bribery to which human judges are susceptible has been attached to the Divine Judge. The Atonement of Christ was the greatest bribe, the principal means of cheating God and compromising the individual. There was evidence, however, of lesser bribes, of smaller atonements, which were designed to accomplish the same result:

The Kantian moral law within you makes you conceive your god as a judge; and straightway you try to corrupt him, also with presents and flatteries. This seems shocking to us; but our objection to it is quite a recent development; no longer ago than Shakespear's time it was thought quite natural that litigants should give presents to human judges; and the buying off of divine wrath by actual money payments to priests, or, in the reformed churches which discountenance this, by subscriptions to charities and church building and the like, is still in full swing (*Androcles and the Lion*, p. 17).

In *Major Barbara*, Shaw argues that salvation is available in two distinct doses—one for the rich and one for the poor. The Salvation Army depends on the money of the armament magnate, Undershaft, and the whisky distiller, Bodger, because no other money is available. However, it can afford to reject



the trifling contribution of the poor man, Bill Walker. The latter cannot buy his salvation. The Salvation Army "leaves him no means of salvation except ceasing to be a ruffian. In doing this, the Salvation Army instinctively grasps the central truth of Christianity and discards its central superstition: that central truth being the vanity of revenge and punishment, and that central superstition the salvation of the world by the gibbet" (*Major Barbara*, p. xxii). The theology of the Atonement, according to Shaw, is thus seen in an even less favourable light when it is further distorted by the capitalistic system.

Bernard Shaw rejected Christianity because he rejected the Cross. His repudiation of all forms of Christianity which centre around the Cross betrays an inability to understand why the Christian believes that a Cross was necessary. Perhaps the crux of this inability was for Shaw, as it was for Campbell and those liberals who shared his thought, a failure to comprehend what orthodox Christianity meant by sin. Whenever Shaw discusses the Atonement, he refers to the reality and presence of specific evils. Bodger was a whisky distiller. Undershaft was an armament magnate. Bill Walker sought redemption for a specific act of violence. For the first two, a payment of money was suggested to have allayed any pangs of conscience for being a whisky distiller or for being an armament magnate. For Walker, an attempt was made to atone in kind for sins committed; however, as Shaw has pointed out, real redemption could only come by "ceasing to be a ruffian". Everywhere Shaw seems to suggest that a "sin" is a specific offence against a moral law.

The Christian, of course, views sin as the state of alienation from God, and specific acts of evil are symptoms of that state, not the state itself. Moreover, the Christian maintains that Christ has, by his life and death, restored to communion with God those who had been alienated from Him. Such restoration does not mean that Christians cease "to sin", in the Shavian sense. Rather, Christians, having realized that God has acted in Christ, are supposed to change the focus of their lives from self-centredness to God-centredness. The shift in focus would suggest a moral shift as well.

Shaw weakens part of his argument by suggesting that, in the eyes of the Church, atonement and redemption are available to Undershaft and Bodger for trifling sums of money. It may be conceded that they are buying rest for their conscience, but no Christian doctrine would ever suggest that they are buying atonement or redemption. Evidence of redemption is "ceasing to be a ruffian". This is the change of focus upon which Christ insisted.

In spite of theological arguments about the nature of sin, of questions



of morality and justice, and of disagreements about the Fatherhood of God and the nature of man, Shaw failed, in the last analysis, to understand Christianity because the Cross offended his Puritan mind. He could not entertain any idea that the Cross might be more than a violent execution. Paul's comment in I Corinthians 1:22-24 suggests that without faith in the central truth of the Cross, the whole idea of Christianity is incomprehensible. As to the Jews and to the Greeks, the Cross was also a "stumbling block" and "folly" to Bernard Shaw. As G. K. Chesterton has said, "He does not understand Christianity because he will not understand the paradox of Christianity: that we can only really understand all myths when we know that one of them is true."<sup>4</sup>

The scandal of the Cross was "a stumbling-block" for Shaw's aesthetic sense. In *The Adventures of the Black Girl*, he has Jesus say: "People idolize me as the Dying Malefactor because they are interested in nothing but the police news." It is a scandal to his sense of morality: "I detest the doctrine of the Atonement, holding that ladies and gentlemen cannot as such possibly allow anyone else to expiate their sins by suffering a cruel death" (*Sixteen Self Sketches*, p. 79). Most of all, however, it was a scandal to his intellect, for he would accept nothing unless he was able either to understand it completely, or to postulate it as a result of his own independent thinking.

The theology of the Church in Victorian England was, for the most part, feeble and primitive. It either clung to its religious heritage, accepting the good and the bad without discrimination, or it was swept up in the wave of secular thought. The former was an ignorant literalism. The latter was the extreme liberalism, such as that of Campbell, which was far remote from traditional Christianity.

Shaw and the liberals were right in rejecting the primitive doctrines of the Atonement. Many of them were indeed an offence to justice, to morality, and to a true conception of the nature of God. However, a doctrine which had been preserved as an essential doctrine of Christianity for nineteen hundred years should have been seen to have contained at least one kernel of truth, however primitive and repugnant its container might have been. The liberals looked for this truth. Shaw did not. He complained that the neo-Darwinians, in substituting for their Biblical literalism an equally ignorant evolutionary literalism, had "thrown the baby out with the bath water". Perhaps Shaw did the same with the Christian Atonement.

## NOTES

1. L. E. Elliot-Binns, *English Thought 1860-1900: The Theological Aspect* (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1956), p. 246.
2. Elliot-Binns, p. 250.
3. St. John Ervine, *Bernard Shaw* (London, 1956), p. 443.
4. G. K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (New York, 1962), p. 135.

## VIATIC

*Padraig O Broin*

Sidling by graveyard Unbefriended Whistling in the dark A much recommended	That mordant salt Corroding laughter Leaves the heart Unarmoured after
Solvent for fear's Ugly mordant —Or to exorcise ghosts If quite discordant.	And who spills tears Where ghosts partakers Permits them tent On his soul's acres
Whimpering like a child Or a trapped rabbit, Crying in the dark A grievous habit—	Till salt of faith And bread of reason Eaten. Then, The famine season.
Whistling in the dark Much recommended Approaching the grave Unbefriended.	