

From Substitution to Solidarity: Towards An Abolitionist Atonement Theology

Hannah Bowman

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Political Theology*, 11 February 2022,

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2038937>

Hannah Bowman is a graduate student in the M.A. in Religious Studies program at Mount Saint Mary's University, Los Angeles, and the founder and director of Christians for the Abolition of Prisons (christiansforabolition.org)

Abstract

The emphasis on retribution in American penal culture derives in part from our history of white supremacy and our Christian theological heritage, particularly the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. This essay considers the mutually-reinforcing ways atonement theology has acted in service of racialized narratives of punishment and control, and asks: is it possible to construct a liberatory theology of substitutionary atonement, which can undermine the retributive basis of mass incarceration? It uses the concept of “debt” incurred by harm to read substitutionary atonement as a divine intervention in human violence in two ways: as an interruption of the “transfer” of the debt of harm which defines retribution, and as an act of “doubled divine solidarity” with both victims and perpetrators of violence in a way that respects and does not erase the debt of harm owed to victims. It considers human response of solidarity, reparations, and abolition such divine intervention provokes.

Keywords: abolition, mass incarceration, restorative justice, transformative justice, atonement, substitution, satisfaction, retribution

From Substitution to Solidarity: Towards An Abolitionist Atonement Theology

American mass incarceration has been driven by many ideological factors, including the pernicious influence of theological conceptions of “penal substitutionary atonement.” Racial and religious ideologies have made America the most-imprisoned nation in the world, and have made our prisons unusually punitive, driven by cultural emphases on retribution. In this essay, I will consider the mutually-reinforcing ways in which atonement theology has acted in the service of racialized narratives of punishment and control — and explore the question: is it possible to construct a liberatory theology of substitutionary atonement with the potential to undermine the retributive basis of mass incarceration, and of imprisonment in general?

I will propose a framework for reading “substitutionary atonement” as an instance of divine intervention in human relationships of violence: as a way of recognizing the valid debt owed to victims of harm while rejecting the violence inherent in forms of retributive/punitive justice that turn that debt back on the perpetrator of harm; and as a demonstration of “doubled divine solidarity”—solidarity with both the victims of harm and oppression and those who have harmed them — in a way that respects the real differences of power and culpability between them. This is an understanding of atonement not as a transactional divine-human interaction, but as divine reconciling action in response to human violence and oppression. As such it requires a human response: such doubled divine solidarity requires of us human solidarity with those who have been harmed and oppressed; solidarity which rejects retribution and punishment, while insisting on real reparations for harm and participation in transformative actions against oppression. This praxis is the result and reality of such an abolitionist vision of atonement, and is

our participation in the divine atoning action which exposes the violence of retribution but does not deny the real debt in cases of harm, violence, and oppression.

Satisfaction, Punishment, and Racial Control

Discussion of substitutionary/ “satisfaction” language in atonement theology usually begins with medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury and Protestant reformer John Calvin. Where Anselm’s theology of satisfaction was concerned primarily with the necessary payment of debt to satisfy God’s honor impugned by sin (and, as Timothy Gorringer notes, to protect the social order represented by the divine cosmic order),¹ Calvin’s theology emphasizes legal punishment for sin which must be borne by *someone*. Gorringer summarizes it succinctly: “In Anselm Christ pays our debts; in Calvin he bears our punishment.”² He traces how such retributive theology reflects and is reflected in legal penal practice; similarly T. Richard Snyder identifies a “spirit of punishment” at play in American Protestant theology tracing back to its emphasis on the fallenness of creation and the individualized nature of salvation.³

In the United States, penal practice cannot be separated from the history of white supremacy and racial control. Michelle Alexander has laid out the history of how mass incarceration since the 1960s was built up as a form of racial control, a “new Jim Crow.”⁴ Kelly

¹ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 68.

² Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 139.

³ Snyder, *Protestant Ethic*, 12.

⁴ Alexander, *New Jim Crow*.

Brown Douglas presents mass incarceration as an expression of American “stand your ground” culture designed to protect the “cherished property” of whiteness against purported threats from Black and indigenous people.⁵ Rima Vesely-Flad’s work is of particular interest; she draws connections between America’s Protestant history and its carcerality through the lens of “social pollution.” Historically, Vesely-Flad suggests, Blackness has been viewed as a kind of “social pollution” in the body politic; this is closely related to Douglas’ understanding of “stand your ground” culture as intended to preserve the public square for whiteness. Vesely-Flad goes further to explore how the view of Black people as socially polluted is then moralized into an understanding of them as “morally polluted,” so that harsh punishment and criminalization are perceived as a necessary response to such moral pollution.⁶

Resistance against such racialized logics of punishment and criminalization has taken various forms: most pertinently, in the movement for prison-industrial complex abolition and the practices of restorative/transformational justice. These related movements present two distinct emphases that shed light on what atonement requires. First, abolitionists emphasize the social construction of crime and the need to think *systemically* about whose interests and power are served by police/prisons, and especially how police and prisons function to maintain racialized and capitalist hierarchies (see, for example, the work of Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore). At the same time, restorative and transformational justice proponents (such as Howard Zehr, Danielle Sered, Creative Interventions, and others, as well as Davis) focus on building the alternate ways of responding to harm that are necessary in order to, in Davis’ terms, “make

⁵ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*.

⁶ Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies*.

prisons obsolete.”⁷ Both emphases are essential. Abolition requires a systemic viewpoint that accounts for the inequitable social realities affecting every act of harm and the societal construction of crime and punishment. But abolition also requires that we deal creatively with real harm and violence that occur — and the complex reality that each of us are both harmed and responsible for doing harm to others during our lives (sometimes at the same time), and that those who do harm were often themselves victims of violence first.⁸ Ontologically, we are simultaneously victims and perpetrators of harm.

The language of “victims” and “perpetrators” has been justly critiqued as losing the nuance that every person both does harm and is harmed in favor of a false binary; while recent restorative justice practice has tended toward language of “harmed party” and “responsible party” or similar, I am using the syntactically-shorter victim-perpetrator language for simplicity. But we must remember that “victim” and “perpetrator” are not characteristics of people but rather roles in a particular situation of harm; both can apply to each of us. This reality, that everyone has done harm and been harmed, is central to my theological anthropology and my abolitionist praxis, and indeed central to my argument here for the complex nature of divine solidarity in atonement. The multiplicity of our existence simultaneously as victims and perpetrators is an essential element of the theological anthropology underlying my atonement theology.

Nonetheless, such subjectivity cannot be constructed separately from the ways that racial dynamics affect who is constructed as criminalized or a “perpetrator” of violence and who is

⁷ Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011).

⁸ See Sered, *Until We Reckon*, 4.

constructed as a “suitable” victim of violence⁹. Feminist and womanist theologians have raised objections to substitutionary atonement in part because of its reinforcing effects on racialized systems of punishment and control, in light of the societal imbrication of the identification of perpetrators of harm with the racialized construction of certain persons as “criminalized.” Nikia Smith Robert’s “liberation theology for lockdown America” emphasizes the role that Anselmian substitution plays in supporting racialized mass incarceration: “Applied allegorically to the contemporary social context of the Carceral State, not Christ but Black bodies become the sacrifice for human sin. This is to say, in the feudal economy as in the Carceral State there is an analogous hierarchical relationship where lords can be understood interchangeably with dominant privileged society and serfs with the criminalization of the subaltern..... Hence, Anselm’s feudal cosmology of salvation and the U.S. criminal justice system have this in common: both are religious, retributive, and require the sacrifice of a lower class.”¹⁰ For Robert, the liberating work of God is found not in atoning “systems of sacrifice” but in “creat[ing] disruptive spaces of resistance to forge community, restore personhood, overthrow oppressive structures of power and secure human flourishing.”¹¹ Williams, meanwhile, resists notions of

⁹ In addition to the works of Vesely-Flad and Douglas on this point, see also Nelson Maldonado-Torres’ discussion of whose subjectivity is constructed as suitable for violence in “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21 no. 2–3 (March/May 2007), 255.

¹⁰ Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 46–7.

¹¹ Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 68. Douglas similarly emphasizes God’s “nonviolent but forceful” response to overcome violence (*Stand Your Ground*, 184).

atonement that depend on making Jesus a “surrogate” for humans, instead emphasizing salvation through his “ministerial vision of right relationships.”¹² Meanwhile, Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock identify substitutionary narratives of atonement as replicating abusive power dynamics, “cosmic child abuse.”¹³

Substitutionary atonement has formed part of an American Christian conceptual matrix encouraging harsh punishment and incarceration, in connection with a racialized conception of criminalization and “moral pollution.” As Robert notes, when the need for punishment is reified in God, those who are already marginalized — Black Americans — are the ones scapegoated in the name of such divinely-acceptable punishment. Can anything of this theological theme be salvaged for a liberatory theology?

Constructing a Reverse Discourse

Given the many harmful effects that “penal substitution” concepts have had on American penal practice, why try recovering any sort of substitutionary doctrine of atonement? Can substitution as a theme be saved? I believe it can; that it is possible to construct a “reverse discourse” (to borrow Foucault’s language) within the broad traditions of substitutionary atonement, to provide a theory of substitution as divine solidarity with both victims and perpetrators of harm, in a way that undermines the retributive logic of incarceration.

¹² Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience,” 30.

¹³ Parker and Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 157.

Why bother? Why not let the concept of substitution go? I offer two arguments for the value of reclaiming such language in resistance against the way it has been used for oppression:

First, the reality is that substitutionary language is still a dominant paradigm in the church and a source of comfort to many, in the concreteness of its promise of reconciliation with God, illustration of the lengths God will go to for us, and God's "affinity" with us in suffering (to borrow a term from Jon Sobrino).¹⁴ As long as "substitution" and the related "sacrifice" remain potent symbols in Christian thinking and ritual, new liberatory interpretations of them offer a way to couch concepts supporting abolition in familiar terms. On solely pragmatic grounds, engaging with such terms provides an avenue for persuasion that simply rejecting them does not.

But more importantly, the hard questions about punishment, retribution, and forgiveness raised by substitutionary theories expose real and important tensions in the work for non-carceral responses to harm. Mark Heim writes that the cross represents the truth that forgiveness is costly, even if the crucifixion is not understood as a precondition for divine forgiveness.¹⁵ He phrases it in psychological terms in his discussion of Anselm, suggesting that Anselm's replacement of a human scapegoat with a divine scapegoat offers a way out of the psychological needs of victims

¹⁴ Thanks to Prof. Elise Edwards for raising this point in comments on an earlier version of this argument. Sobrino uses "affinity" in relation to the humanity and suffering of Christ throughout *Christ the Liberator*. See also William Placher's discussion of solidarity as central to substitutionary atonement, "Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 53 (January 1999), 5–20.

¹⁵ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 10.

for vengeance and the guilty to make infinite restitution.¹⁶ Fleming Rutledge couches her discussion of substitution in the resistance to “impunity”¹⁷ and what is owed to victims of harm.¹⁸ Samuel Pillsbury similarly argues for the need for criminal punishment to represent the community’s rejection of the “moral disregard” underlying acts of violence.¹⁹ Sered lays out the interpersonal debt owed to victims concisely: “It is my belief that when we hurt people, we owe something, and one of the things we owe is to face what we have done.”²⁰ Violence and harm must be addressed. Something is “owed” to victims of harm, and those responsible for doing harm have the primary responsibility to address what is owed.

My point here is not to argue for the necessity of criminal punishment, but rather to lift up the validity of the *desire* for retribution in response to harm: the sense that something must be paid. Without such a recognition of the validity of victims’ anger and the debt owed them, theories of divine forgiveness can become coercive calls for victims to forgive without reparations. If God in Christ forgives the trespasses against God without cost, what right do human victims have to demand repayment of the interpersonal debt owed to them?

¹⁶ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 299, 317.

¹⁷ Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 152.

¹⁸ Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 128.

¹⁹ Pillsbury, *Imagining a Greater Justice*, 54.

²⁰ Sered, *Until We Reckon*, 92. She adds: “In that sense, when it comes to demanding that those who have committed wrongdoing pay that debt, there is nowhere softer on crime than prison” — because of the ways in which prisons do not foster meaningful accountability!

This is not to say that restorative or transformative responses to harm must take the form of repayment or restitution. Often, restorative/transformative justice takes more creative forms of healing and transformation — especially where reparations or restitution are unobtainable (because of systemic biases) or impossible (as in cases of violence where the trauma cannot be undone). But to explore such creative forms of justice requires us first to deal honestly with the questions of debt and restitution, and the related desire for vengeance and retribution. I address these questions through the lens of atonement in order to lay the groundwork for further creative and communal acts of justice — justice that may transcend the conceptual logics of debt, restitution, and reparations, but cannot ignore them.²¹

The symbolic language of debt *forgiveness* holds an unavoidable place in the Christian theology of abolition, e.g. in Jesus’ proclamation of the coming reign of God at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:17–21) in which he declares that he has been anointed “to set the prisoners free” and to “declare the year of the Lord’s favor” — the latter a direct reference to the traditions of the Sabbath and Jubilee years described in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15.²² The rules surrounding the Sabbath and Jubilee years require the forgiveness of monetary debt, and relatedly the freedom of those who had sold themselves into bondage. Griffith explains the Sabbath and Jubilee years as not only a law governing monetary debt but more broadly as a politico-economic anamnesis of the primary liberating action of God, the exodus from Egypt,

²¹ Douglas sees reparations similarly as requiring creative work toward a new future, not simply as repayment; see “A Christian Call for Reparations,” *Sojourners*, July 2020, <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2020/christian-call-case-slavery-reparations-kelly-brown-douglas>.

²² Griffith, *Fall of the Prison*, 97.

writing: “It was on the basis of God’s liberation of the slaves that a covenant was established with Israel, and it was also on the basis of that history of liberation that Israel was to observe the Sabbath and Jubilee.... The proclamations of liberty to the captives were concrete social responses to God’s liberating activity in the exodus of Israel from Egypt.”²³ According to Griffith, during the Babylonian captivity this symbol of liberation from slavery was extended to the liberation of all prisoners, so that by the time of Jesus’ proclamation in Galilee, the Jubilee “year of the Lord’s favor” could be understood to involve the general freeing of captives as well as the forgiveness of monetary debts.²⁴ In the modern case of those imprisoned for crimes—those serving what some call their “debt to society”—these two understandings of the “year of the Lord’s favor” coalesce: the Jubilee year is when those in prison are set free, even those who have incurred interpersonal debts (as opposed to monetary ones) through interpersonal harm, because captives are freed and debts forgiven in God’s Jubilee.

Ched Myers and Elaine Enns similarly analyze the relational, not simply economic, consequences of the Sabbath/Jubilee traditions in their analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:18–19: “The unilateral seventh- and forty-ninth-year ‘release’ from debt-bondage...is alluded to in God’s decision ‘not to count our trespasses against us’ (the explanatory addition in 2 Cor 5:19). Christ heralds the renewal of this divine economy of grace: the old ‘debt system’ is passing away.”²⁵ For them, this divine practice of debt-forgiveness has immediate practical applications for how we deal with crime and harm: “The deeply engrained retributive logic of the domination

²³ Griffith, *Fall of the Prison*, 99.

²⁴ Griffith, *Fall of the Prison*, 102, 109.

²⁵ Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 11–12.

system—the way we think ‘according to the flesh’—stipulates that debtors must be imprisoned and offenders punished. In stark contrast, God models in Christ the practice of victim-initiated reconciliation.”²⁶

But applying the originally economic language of debt forgiveness to the interpersonal debt incurred by harm makes certain claims about the nature of the relationship between the parties. This is particularly challenging when debt is used to describe the human-divine relationship. Devin Singh has explored ways that the prevalence of debt language within atonement theories has the problematic result of “an incorporation of debt into the identity of God.”²⁷ My reinterpretation of the concept of substitution here does not presume that the debt in question is our debt to God, but instead our interpersonal debts to one another as a result of harm and violence. This bears similarity to J. Denny Weaver’s proposal of sin as primarily being expressed through “distorted social relationships.”²⁸ It also brings to mind the older “ransom” theory of the atonement — in which the debt paid by Jesus on the cross is a debt owed to the devil, not to God — rather than Anselmian views of “satisfaction” owed to God. Instead of a debt to the devil, though, I am proposing that substitution is a helpful symbol for expressing the divine interruption of the transfer of interpersonal debts that we owe *to one another*. As such, what I am offering here is a *new* atonement theology, not claiming an older Anselmian or Calvinist tradition of substitution that reifies God as “demanding” payment of debt or

²⁶ Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 13.

²⁷ Singh, “Sovereign Debt,” 257.

²⁸ Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*. Andrew Sung Park similarly sees atonement as primarily addressing the relationship between sinners and sinned-against (*Triune Atonement*, location 109).

punishment. God does not demand debt or punishment, but, according to my theory, substitutionary language in atonement can be helpful in expressing how God intervenes in the world to transform interpersonal harm, violence, debt, and retribution. Of course, it is not as simple as the divine payment of our moral debts to one another. The challenge is how to hold the Jubilee tradition of forgiveness — a tradition that goes beyond monetary debt to also address moral/interpersonal/relational debt — in tension with the very real interpersonal debt of harm which requires reparations: to overcome debt without nullifying it.

What I would propose, then, is that the concept of substitution in relation to the crucifixion offers a symbolic way to hold in tension the truths of divine and human forgiveness, which comes only at a cost, and the necessity for repayment of the interpersonal debt of harm, which should nonetheless not justify violent retribution (including the state violence of incarceration). I will turn now to consider the mechanisms by which substitutionary concepts can undermine the basis of retributive systems: first, by engaging with Heim’s work on scapegoating violence in relation to the crucifixion and considering the applicability of his argument to retribution more broadly; and then by considering “substitution” through the lens of divine solidarity with humanity.

Scapegoating, Retribution, and the Transfer of Debt

Heim’s Girardian reading of the crucifixion offers a helpful starting place for attempting to reconstruct a substitutionary theory. Heim argues that the “problem” addressed by the crucifixion is the problem of scapegoating, as identified by René Girard: that in order to overcome the tendency for societies to erupt into uncontrolled retribution and violence,

individuals are sacrificed as scapegoats, a violence veiled in sacred language and practice so that it is not seen as violence. Heim writes that Jesus' crucifixion presents a view of scapegoating violence from the scapegoat-victim's perspective — exposing it as violence, no longer veiled by sacrality — and Jesus' resurrection shows God's solidarity with every victim of scapegoating, overcoming sacrificial violence.²⁹ Heim suggests that the Bible, across the Old Testament and particularly in its interpretation of the crucifixion, offers an “ambivalent” perspective that “testifies to an ongoing struggle,” what he calls a “stereoscopic” view of scapegoating — at times presenting sacrifice as “good” sacred violence that upholds the community but at the same time always maintaining an insistence on exposing its violence, for the sake of ultimately letting Jesus' crucifixion both be recognizable as a sacrifice and exposed as violence.³⁰

Heim's argument about the crucifixion as an exposure and destruction of scapegoating violence — a divine intervention in a particular form of human violence³¹ — has immediate relevance to the question of incarceration because of the ways in which the American criminal punishment system functions as a tool of scapegoating violence. Robert ties this to the role of sacrifice in America's religious history: “America requires a sacrifice for the Carceral State to function. Prisons are therefore needed to systemically produce delinquents by disenfranchising,

²⁹ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 17–19.

³⁰ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 70, 116. The Bible also presents a similar ambivalence toward retribution; see, e.g., John Dominic Crossan, *How To Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian* (New York: HarperOne, 2016).

³¹ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 303.

disqualifying and dehumanizing the least of these. This normalization of criminalization engenders a liturgy of punishment that essentially legalizes the sacrifice of Black bodies.”³²

Heim himself admits the scapegoating potential of criminalization.³³ However, he maintains a distinction (which I do not think stands) between legal punishment of the guilty and scapegoating violence for the sake of social peace; from his perspective a criminal legal system offers another mechanism for interrupting the cycle of escalating retribution and mimetic violence.³⁴ I think his view is too optimistic, and that the impersonal justice of the entire society — as opposed to interpersonal, communal restorative justice for harm — always has the “shape” of sacrifice because, as Robert writes, it always is willing to sacrifice marginalized populations “to restore law and order to safeguard the privilege and power of dominant society.”³⁵ As Vesely-Flad has explained, the criminal legal system turns against marginalized people into “criminals” because they are viewed as “morally polluted,” not just because of actual guilt. Any system of criminalization will face the pressure to make criminals in response to perceived “moral pollution,” not simply as an objective response to actual guilt, and so any criminal legal system will tend toward scapegoating. A similar tendency toward scapegoating comes from Henrique Carvalhos’ and Anastasia Chamberlen’s concept of “hostile solidarity” against those

³² Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 47.

³³ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 288. See also his discussion, 60, of cases where the legal system was swept up in sacrificial violence.

³⁴ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 288.

³⁵ Smith Robert, “Penitence, Plantation and the Penitentiary,” 54.

guilty of harm.³⁶ Hostile solidarity produces solidarity among those punishing against those who have been found guilty — promoting social peace by punishing the guilty as scapegoats. In so doing, it produces a sort of moral/social pollution out of the fact of guilt for harm. Solidarity *against* those who are guilty makes them into a “polluted” class, suitable for scapegoating. This is the converse of the process described by Vesely-Flad whereby those constructed as “socially polluted” are then deemed “morally polluted” — instead, by the mechanism of hostile solidarity, actual guilt is turned into moral/social pollution promoting social solidarity against the guilty. Both tendencies push a legal system, even one intended to punish actual guilt, toward a system of sacred scapegoating violence. As Miroslav Volf puts it: “The tendency of persecutors to blame victims is reinforced by the actual guilt of victims, even if the guilt is minimal and they incur it in reaction to the original violence committed against them.”³⁷ For all these reasons, Heim’s interpretation of the “sacrifice” of the crucifixion as not supporting but rather exposing such violence is directly relevant to efforts to undermine mass incarceration. Systems intended to punish the guilty inevitably become sites of scapegoating.

However, I would argue that Heim’s system can be extended further, to understand the crucifixion as undermining not only scapegoating as it appears in the modern criminal legal system but also the “sacred violence” of retribution in all its forms. In other words, I argue that

³⁶ Carvalho and Chamberlen, “Why Punishment Pleases.”

³⁷ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 293. Volf makes this point in the context of an argument that unmasking the scapegoat mechanism at play in the crucifixion is not sufficient to overcome it. I agree with him only insofar as the question of actual guilt is a problem for critiques of “pure” scapegoating.

there is something essential to the *nature of retribution* which makes systems of criminal punishment inevitably tend toward scapegoating violence.

I return here to the question of debt. Above, I laid out the case, made eloquently by Sered, that the debt owed to victims of harm by those who have harmed them is real and must not be set aside.

Retribution, however, is not the same as restitution or reparations. Retribution relies on the “fungibility” of debt: the key underlying concept of retribution is that the debt of harm owed to the victim can be transferred — in the form of punishment, the intentional infliction of harm — back onto the perpetrator. In retribution, the debt of harm, rather than remaining an unchangeable obligation from the perpetrator to the victim, instead becomes a commodity, a calculable and interchangeable “amount of suffering owed” which can be repaid through further violence and suffering on the part of another (the perpetrator).

The connections to the sacred violence of scapegoating appear. In the Girardian scapegoating relation, what is owed or what “must be paid” to restore social peace is transferred onto the scapegoat. The actual violence of the murder of the scapegoat is hidden under the veil of the sacred.³⁸ Per Heim, the scapegoating sacrifice represents an erasure of the violence that threatened the social order, while the violence of the sacrifice itself is ignored. In retribution, it is similar: what “must be paid” is transferred onto the perpetrator in the form of suffering. The actual violence of punishment — the fact that the imposition of suffering by state powers is an act of violence — is hidden under the sacred veil of “justice.” The symbols and rituals of courtroom procedure — themselves an expression of civil sacrality — hide the violence of

³⁸ See Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 50–60.

judicial murder and incarceration. Even more directly, the invisibility of the suffering in prisons, because they are secretive, remote, and intentionally hidden from the public eye, hides the violence of punitive incarceration. Retribution and state punishment, like scapegoating, promise social safety while hiding the cost of the violence done by the state.

The major difference between scapegoating and retribution is in the innocence of the victim. Heim protests that measured retribution against a guilty perpetrator can be defended, and that the scapegoating mechanism is only relevant where the guilt attributed to the perpetrator is dissociated from the magnitude of their factual guilt.³⁹ I disagree, and suggest that the essential element in sacred violence is not the innocence (or at least, relative innocence compared to attributed guilt) of the scapegoat victim, but instead precisely the “fungibility” of the debt of harm that allows for its transfer into further violence — which is in effect in both Girardian scapegoating and retribution. The perpetrator may be actually guilty: but once the debt of harm is made fungible and transferred back in violence against them, the stage is set for scapegoating. Understanding such debt as transferrable is the basis for its further transfer to a (perhaps innocent) scapegoat. Instead of trying to limit retribution only to the “sufficiently guilty,” I am suggesting, the sacrifice of God on the cross instead offers a way of interrupting every such transfer of the debt of harm, and cuts off retribution at the start.

The concept of the “fungibility” of debt at play in retribution also raises the problem of using economic debt language to address social obligations. It is worth returning briefly to Singh, who presents the history of debt in penal theory as providing a sort of scapegoating transfer: he describes how debt to be repaid between parties in cases of harm was gradually replaced by debt

³⁹ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 288.

paid to the sovereign authority through the penal process.⁴⁰ His response in general is to deconstruct the use of debt as a category for describing interpersonal obligation. I am suggesting here that instead of jettisoning such debt language, we jettison the move by which the “debt” of interpersonal obligation is constructed in economic terms as a fungible or transferrable commodity. Such an attempt to decouple the concept of “interpersonal debt of harm” from economic understandings of debt is particularly urgent given the realities of the greater burden of debt for the poor and marginalized. My goal is to reach an understanding of interpersonal debt (as used by Sered, for example) that holds space for the necessity of restitution and reparations for harm while not upholding economic or retributive debt logics. I propose that the cross’s exposure of the violence of retribution provides one way to unsettle an economized, fungible understanding of interpersonal debt.

Heim’s discussion of the crucifixion focuses on the passion narratives as presenting a scapegoating sacrifice from the scapegoated victim’s point of view, exposing the violence against the scapegoat.⁴¹ Scapegoating and retribution are not identical, but I would use a parallel method to argue that the crucifixion also exposes retribution as sacred violence. Here is where the language of substitution becomes unavoidable. If Jesus is understood as a substitute for the guilty who are punished by retributive violence; if by “bearing the sins of the world” (cf. John 1:29) and “becoming sin for us” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21) we understand him to be suffering the “just punishment” due to others, repaying the (real) debt of harm as it is transferred by retribution: if we posit these traditional assumptions, then Jesus’ suffering and its expression in the passion

⁴⁰ Singh, “Sovereign Debt,” 252.

⁴¹ See Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 269.

narratives unavoidably exposes the violence inherent in retribution. We cannot veil it in sacred narratives of justice or repayment. Once the debt of harm is constructed as a fungible commodity, able to be transferred by retribution, then “substitutionary atonement” means that God, in Jesus, is able to “take on” that transferred debt in place of the guilty party, and in so doing reveal the violence of such a transference. Heim’s explication of the revelation of the crucifixion as the “sacrifice to end sacrifice”⁴² provides a mechanism for divine interposition, through sacrifice, into the transfer of debt in retribution. God’s substitution in Jesus reveals the similarity between retribution and scapegoating and the violence underlying both.

My point is not that God must literally pay the debt of retribution in order for guilty parties to somehow avoid it. It is instead to suggest that God’s intervention in the atonement interrupts the transfer of the debt owed to the victim back onto the perpetrator in retribution; in a substitutionary model Jesus “steps in” and the debt is laid on him, and thereby the violence is made visible. Jesus, as scapegoat, takes the suffering which was described as “just payment of debt” by perpetrators onto himself, and thereby exposes it as the violence it is. The violence of Jesus’ death forces the question: is this violence wrong only because it happened to Jesus, an “innocent scapegoat”? Or would the violence also have been wrong if it were applied to the guilty party in retribution?⁴³

⁴² See Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 157–160. Similarly, Volf suggests that “the biblical texts narrate how God has necessarily *used the sacrificial mechanism* to remake the world into a place in which the need to sacrifice others could be eschewed” (*Exclusion and Embrace*, 295).

⁴³ Placher makes a similar argument for the anti-retributive impulse of the cross, writing: “The cross has brought an end to retribution...it is not just that we should stop scapegoating the

I am offering a sort of proof by contradiction: If the debt of harm is in fact fungible and understood to be transferred in a form of “justice,” then it can also be understood to be transferred, by divine act, from the guilty party onto Jesus: but Jesus’ passion makes visible to us the extent of violence involved in such a payment of debt. When the debt is transferred to Jesus and “paid” by his suffering, we see it for the violence it is and reject such violence as effective payment. Therefore, we conclude that the debt of harm is not fungible; it cannot be transferred by suffering; further violence does not repay the debt. The divine revelation provided by the symbol of substitution interrupts the logic of retribution by which the debt of harm is turned back onto perpetrators. It exposes the violence of such logic. Reparations cannot be replaced with punishment. The abiding debt to victims cannot be satisfied with the violence of punishment or suffering on the part of perpetrators: instead, the interpersonal debt to victims is indelible until reparations and restitution are made. If sufficient reparations are impossible, the debt remains—although perhaps it can be transformed.

Where then does atonement occur?

Solidarity as a Mechanism of Atonement for Victims and Perpetrators

innocent, but that we should stop punishing the guilty” (“Christ Takes Our Place,” 15). I first saw this argument in a blog post from Morgan Guyton, “If you need for undocumented immigrants to be punished, then you don’t believe in Jesus’ cross,” 20 November 2014, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/mercynotsacrifice/2014/11/20/if-you-need-for-undocumented-immigrants-to-be-punished-then-you-dont-believe-in-jesus-cross/>.

Atonement, God's reconciling action in response to human violence, begins with divine solidarity with humanity. Such solidarity — if it includes solidarity with the guilty or perpetrators as well as the oppressed or victims — raises new issues where a reworked conception of substitution proves useful.

Solidarity or participation in the totality and depths of human nature as an essential element of atonement or theology of the cross is expressed throughout Christian history, from Gregory of Nazianzus to Paul Tillich to Kathryn Tanner.⁴⁴ Liberation theologians emphasize God's solidarity with the oppressed or victims, specifically. Sobrino insists on God's "partiality with victims,"⁴⁵ and Andrew Sung Park also expresses atonement in terms of divine solidarity with victims for their healing and liberation.⁴⁶ Gorringer writes: "In the theology which emerged in response to [the Holocaust] the significance of the cross is first of all God's solidarity with the *victims* of torture and murder....If there is to be forgiveness in God, it can only come from the

⁴⁴ See especially Tanner, "Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal," *Anglican Theological Review* 86 no. 1 (Winter 2004), 35–56. Also relevant is Joseph Morgan-Smith's conception of atonement as "incarnational friendship," in "Incarnational Friendship: A Feminist- and Womanist-Inspired Revision of Luther's 'Happy Exchange' Theory of Atonement," *Priscilla Papers* 31 no. 1 (Winter 2017), 9–14, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/incarnational-friendship-feminist-and-womanist>.

⁴⁵ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 32.

⁴⁶ Park, *Triune Atonement*, location 528.

God who is, as Godself, a victim.”⁴⁷ Douglas also emphasizes Jesus’ solidarity with the “crucified class” of his day.⁴⁸ Cone has explicitly identified Christ as Black, and the crucified Christ specifically with lynched Black people;⁴⁹ Robert goes further to demonstrate how that identity extends to those who are incarcerated: “Christ’s identification with the outcasts in the exodus corresponds to his solidarity with those under the control of the U.S. criminal justice system. Both Jesus and the oppressed encountered the cross of a retributively punitive system of sacrifice and were scapegoated because they occupied Black flesh.”⁵⁰ Their work places in the concrete historical context of Black life in America the broader tendency to emphasize divine solidarity with victims.

The vindication of victims of violence, including state violence, is the primary form of divine solidarity and divine action in situations of human violence and oppression. Cone writes that Christ’s Blackness “disclos[es] that he is with [those who are oppressed], enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants.”⁵¹ Parker and Brock use the language of Presence in their quest to seek nonviolent understandings of atonement and healing: in particular, they *do* suggest God’s presence with victims of extreme violence, while denying that such presence is conditioned upon the violence.⁵² Their objection to

⁴⁷ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 246, discussing Moltmann’s theology of the Crucified God.

⁴⁸ Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 174.

⁴⁹ Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.

⁵⁰ Smith Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 48.

⁵¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 125.

⁵² Parker and Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 211.

the violence of traditional atonement narratives derives in part from the way they make the death of Jesus “unique” and therefore separate it from other acts of violence: “When the victims of violence are made singular, solitary, unprecedented in their pain, the power of violence remains. Jesus’ death was not unique.”⁵³ In their reconstruction, the similarity of Jesus’ death by violence to other acts of violence is the only basis for seeing through it to divine solidarity with victims, experienced in their survival. For them, Jesus’ death does not save, but divine solidarity, Presence, with those who suffer violence might.⁵⁴

Robert similarly emphasizes the element of overcoming in divine solidarity with those who are criminalized: “God acted in solidarity (unity) by assuming a criminal body and making space for criminals to find life amid state sanctioned persecution. At the moment of his death, Jesus extends salvation to the penitent thief sharing in the persecution of those victimized by the Carceral State. This act of reconciliation demonstrated by Jesus essentially restores the penitent thief from criminal into unity with the divine. In similar fashion, Jesus transcends criminality on the cross when he dies a malefactor but is raised as the Messiah. These two events, Jesus’ proximity to criminals and his position of criminality, make the cross and resurrection a site of retribution and resistance that points to the possibilities of transformation in all systems of sacrifice, including Lockdown America.”⁵⁵

But to assume the primacy of divine solidarity as a mechanism of atonement — of divine reconciling action in situations of harm — requires solidarity not only with victims but with

⁵³ Parker and Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 249.

⁵⁴ See Parker and Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 250.

⁵⁵ Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 55.

perpetrators of violence. One key lesson of abolition is that all of us have both done harm and been harmed. Abolition requires that we look clearly at both sides of this “doubled solidarity,” what Fleming Rutledge describes as God’s undergoing “helplessness and humiliation *not only for the victims but also for the perpetrators*,”⁵⁶ because abolition requires facing the reality that all people have the capacity for harm. Insofar as mass incarceration is the modern form of lynching (as Robert argues⁵⁷), God’s solidarity is with incarcerated people in vindication against the violence and oppression they face (what Robert identifies as “vicarious punishment”⁵⁸). But abolition also demands solidarity with incarcerated people *who are guilty of having caused great harm*. Atonement cannot just be for the victims, because no one is only a victim and never a perpetrator of harm.⁵⁹ I am seeking here for a way to extend divine solidarity to the guilty: yet justice demands that divine solidarity with perpetrators of violence must be *different in form* than solidarity with their victims. Solidarity with victims takes the form of vindication, overcoming, survival; solidarity with the guilty must take a different form that does not deny the harm they have done.

⁵⁶ Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 132. Rutledge notes explicitly that the method of crucifixion is a sign of solidarity with victims of injustice, 143. Gorringer, meanwhile, notes Luther’s theology of “wonderful exchange” at the cross as a form of solidarity with sinners (*God’s Just Vengeance*, 132), while Placher writes that “we find our salvation in solidarity with the Christ who came to be in the place of sinners” (“Christ Takes Our Place,” 10).

⁵⁷ Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 49.

⁵⁸ Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 57.

⁵⁹ See Volf’s discussion of the concept of “innocent victims,” *Exclusion and Embrace*, 80–81.

Here is where I propose the language of substitution is helpful. What substitution offers, symbolically, is a form of divine solidarity with perpetrators that does not erase the distinction between perpetrators and victims in a given situation. To describe it in terms of guilt, substitution provides for divine solidarity with perpetrators, in the person of Jesus, only at the cost of recognizing their own guilt and the harm done to their own victims. Heim describes it this way, drawing on Markus Barth's concept of justification: "The only way to acquittal is by admission of guilt. We can be legitimately justified, but only as sinners. For our evil intent and action we can be forgiven, but not if we insist on rejecting the redemption and witness of the victim. If we do not recognize the right of victims to testify against us, we cannot be acquitted."⁶⁰ Or as Volf puts it, "There can be no redemption unless the truth about the world is told and justice is done....In taking upon himself the sin of the world, God told the truth about the deceitful world and enthroned justice in an unjust world. ... *The cry of the innocent blood was attended to.*"⁶¹

Jesus, acting in solidarity with the victims of violence, takes the role of a "substitute" in loving solidarity with those who have done violence *only insofar* as they recognize in him those they have harmed. To describe it using the symbol of debt, substitution — the payment of the debt incurred by violence on behalf of another — is a form of solidarity that demands recognition of the reality of the debt, which, in being "paid" by Jesus, is therefore made visible, *not forgiven or erased*. The symbols of debt and substitution, when applied to the action of Jesus,

⁶⁰ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 147. He is summarizing an argument from Barth and Verne H. Fletcher, *Acquittal by Resurrection* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964).

⁶¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 294, emphasis mine.

provide a way of expressing divine solidarity with the guilty *only insofar* as they recognize the magnitude of the debt they owe (to others, not to God) and take part in making reparations.

A helpful perspective here comes from comparison again to Park's atonement theology. Park writes, concerning atonement for perpetrators of violence, that atonement comes from repentance and that "[Jesus'] cross directs the attention of wrongdoers to the suffering of victims. ... Jesus' blood is the visible symbol with which the invisible Paraclete confronts sinners or wrongdoers with their need to change."⁶² I would perhaps go further than Park in emphasizing, however, how divine solidarity must precede human ability to change (repent) in response to such symbolic confrontation. This insight is derived from the practice of restorative/transformatory justice, where practitioners recognize that a space of acceptance is required first in order for someone who has done harm to acknowledge it.⁶³ Solidarity — without forgiveness of what is owed — precedes the ability to repent. The "blood of Jesus" in my view

⁶² Park, *Triune Atonement*, location 903.

⁶³ I am paraphrasing here Kay Pranis, who writes: "This is why it is so important than anyone who needs to acknowledge harm is never sitting alone when they need to take responsibility. They must have someone next to them who will love them no matter what they have done" (Pranis, "Individual and Collective Accountability in a Restorative Framework," 12 November 2018, <http://restorativesolutions.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Kay-Pranis-Accountability-Talk-Nov-2018.pdf>). Placher, similarly, notes that "the road to rehabilitation can be a tough one...[but] it becomes bearable...if it is not borne alone," specifically in reference to Christ's presence alongside the guilty ("Christ Takes Our Place, 17).

thus also symbolizes, via the concept of substitution, divine solidarity with perpetrators even in their guilt.⁶⁴

It is worth noting here that such solidarity with perpetrators does rely on understanding the death of Jesus as a unique divine act — an act of divine interposition within the retributive transfer of the debt of harm, demonstrating its violence. While Cone or Brock and Parker’s understanding of divine solidarity with victims of violence and oppression rely on the similarity between the violence done by humans to Jesus and the violence done by humans in other situations, the mechanism of solidarity with perpetrators I am suggesting here does present Jesus’ death as in some sense an intentional divine act. Here I follow Heim’s construction, where Jesus’ death is a uniquely effective intentional taking-on of the scapegoat role in order to disarm it, and I suggest that Jesus’ death is also uniquely effective intentional taking-on of the role of “one who repays the debt of harm,” to expose and disarm retribution, for the sake of divine solidarity with those responsible for violence. I am ultimately claiming that Jesus’ death is not only due to human conditions but also part of a “divine plan of salvation” — but one which occurs only and in order to heal human interpersonal relations.

Jesus’ death is both an ordinary human death caused by ordinary human violence and an extraordinary and effective divine act of interruption of the cycle of retributive violence. Myers and Enns — although they do not espouse the language of substitution — suggest that Jesus’ death and resurrection be understood as an act of “victim-initiated reconciliation” from the cross

⁶⁴ Jesus’ conversation with those crucified beside him (Luke 23:39–43) provides a stark example of his solidarity with those who, by their own admission, are guilty of having done harm!

which similarly interrupts a retributive cycle through solidarity with the victim.⁶⁵ Jürgen Moltmann frames this as an interruption of the scapegoat mechanism via “Christ transforming human guilt into divine suffering.”⁶⁶ Scott Cowdell’s interpretation of the “Christus Victor” model of atonement similarly focuses on the interruption of the cycle of violence: “God in Christ absorbs human violence and, in refusing retribution, acts in solidarity to break the cycle of violence.”⁶⁷ Gorringer phrases it this way: “If the cross records the in-justice of earthly systems of law ... then it is more that all of our theories of crime and punishment are deconstructed, in exactly the same way that theories of sacrifice are deconstructed by the Letter to the Hebrews. That Christ is ‘made a curse for us’ is effectively *the overthrow of all retributivist theory*, its exposure and denial.... The cross is not an endorsement of punishment but an announcement of its end.”⁶⁸ Placher, similarly: “For those whose lives are transformed by the story of the crucified

⁶⁵ Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 13, 98. They write: “God models solidarity with the violated and relentless moral initiative toward the violator. On Jesus’ cross, God dignifies the victim’s suffering by *becoming* the victim—even while still reaching out to the executioner” (98).

⁶⁶ The quoted language is Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 246. Heim similarly suggests the importance of God’s solidarity in our suffering for the sake of transforming violence when he concludes: “It is God’s willingness to suffer in our place that is the unique and only transformative meaning for sacrifice” (*Saved from Sacrifice*, 298).

⁶⁷ The quoted language is from Travis Ables’ review of Cowdell: Ables, “Only Legal if it Works,” 476.

⁶⁸ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 237.

Christ, belief in retribution can no longer lie at the heart of things.”⁶⁹ Myers and Enns, Cowdell, Gorringer, Placher and I all agree on the importance of Jesus’ death as a demonstration of divine solidarity to interrupt retribution (and Placher even defends the concept of substitution). I am suggesting that the key role of substitutionary language in atonement is to express the nature of such solidarity without softening the very real rift between those who have been harmed and those responsible for the harm, or the very real debt owed to those who have been harmed — to allow for solidarity with perpetrators in a way that does not minimize victims’ claims for justice, including restitution/reparations.

It is also worth recognizing that the construction I have proposed does not entirely address Williams’ objections to viewing Jesus as a surrogate — although it does make solidarity, rather than surrogacy, the fundamental reality behind atonement. The solidarity I identify with the symbol of substitution at the cross is in line with other acts of solidarity throughout the life of Jesus, for example, in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10), where Jesus’ placing himself in proximity to Zacchaeus through table fellowship precedes Zacchaeus’ repentance. Park defines solidarity as “sharing a common goal, communal identity, commiseration, and liberative work.”⁷⁰ Understanding this as the base reality of atonement, I interpret substitution in light of solidarity, as one of the varied forms it can take.

⁶⁹ Placher, “Christ Takes Our Place,” 14.

⁷⁰ Park, *Triune Atonement*, location 530. Park also addresses the story of Zacchaeus, location 1069, as a way of emphasizing the role of repentance for forgiveness — while I see it as primarily an expression of solidarity on Jesus’ part.

I would add that the weight of Williams' objections requires that substitution never become the *only* understanding of the meaning of Jesus' life, death, or atonement. I agree with Williams that this language may not resonate for all people. An atonement theology of solidarity must take multiple forms, as God's solidarity with humanity takes differentiated forms consonant with our varying needs. The "doubled divine solidarity" proposed here is one example of such differentiation of divine solidarity in ways suitable and salvific to the multiplicity of human subjectivities (in this case, addressing the way each of us exists as both victim and perpetrator of harm, and the complex and overlapping categories of "guilty" and "criminalized").

I nonetheless hope the theology I have presented here is an interpretation which brings comfort to some. And I believe it has further potential to support the liberating practice of abolition, as follows:

A justly-constructed solidarity with perpetrators of violence can destabilize the foundations of American criminal punishment. James Logan identifies "retributive degradation," shaming people in response to harm done, as an essential dynamic in American penal practice. In response, he proposes a criminal justice system based on "ontological intimacy" based in human dignity as created in the image of God.⁷¹ Beyond common humanity, doubled divine solidarity with victims and perpetrators offers a further basis for such ontological intimacy. Solidarity with those who are guilty of harm is also an effective antidote to the dynamics of "hostile solidarity" proposed by Carvalhos and Chamberlen. Hostile solidarity against the guilty presents them as valid, "morally polluted" (Vesely-Flad) subjects of retributive degradation. Doubled divine solidarity, however, solidarity with both victims and perpetrators in ways suitable to each, offers

⁷¹ Logan, *Good Punishment*.

a just basis for solidarity across the gulf of guilt that can (we hope!) replace hostile solidarity as a way of forming community. Robert writes of the “cross and resurrection [as] a site of retribution and resistance that points to the possibilities of transformation in all systems of sacrifice, including lockdown America.”⁷² Ultimately she describes God’s work as that which “eradicates systems of sacrifice... and creates disruptive spaces of resistance to forge community, restore personhood, overthrow oppressive structures of power and secure human flourishing.”⁷³ I propose that doubled divine solidarity is another way of forming such “disruptive” communities of transformation and flourishing.

Related to this conception of a community formed around such doubled divine solidarity is Heim’s presentation of Christian community as an anti-scapegoating community which provides “a substitute for sacrifice, made possible by God’s new creation in Christ.”⁷⁴ Doubled divine solidarity with victims and those who are guilty provides another mechanism for the creation of such a new community. The Girardian account of human society to which Heim is responding depends on the sacred violence of scapegoating for community solidarity, while Carvalhos and Chamberlen’s hostile solidarity depends on retribution against the actually guilty. But doubled divine solidarity with both scapegoated victims and those who are guilty applies in both cases to structure a new community whose basis for solidarity stands against scapegoating and retribution. Such divine solidarity recognizes retribution, even against the guilty, as a form of crucifying violence.

⁷² Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 55.

⁷³ Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary,” 68.

⁷⁴ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 220.

Human Solidarity in Response to Divine Solidarity

What response is required to such divine solidarity? I have hinted at such responses above. Our response to divine solidarity with victims must be to build a community of solidarity, ourselves, with victims of harm and those who are scapegoated or excluded by retributive systems. Simultaneously, our response, where we see ourselves as guilty and complicit in harm, must take the form of reparations, where possible, and transformation of harm. The solidarity-of-substitution requires us to recognize the debt of harm that we owe and repay it, individually and systemically. Of course, such systemic reparations themselves form an act of solidarity with those — especially Black and Brown people in America — who have been the victims of retributive scapegoating and exclusion in the name of justice. Our response of solidarity must not be limited to personal amends for harm but must include transformation of society in a way that recognizes the racialized mechanics of scapegoating, retribution, and hostile solidarity. Doubled divine solidarity calls us to human responses of solidarity with those who are victims of harm and those who are perpetrators of harm in ways that do not deny or minimize the harm done. In the case of the victims and perpetrators of systemic oppression, to avoid denying or minimizing the harm done requires our solidarity *especially* with those who are scapegoated and criminalized by systemic injustices, such as Black, Brown, and other marginalized people.

Robert asked me in a conversation about this topic: what does it mean that Jesus has overcome the world *in a Black body*? I am suggesting that it means that Jesus stands *first* in solidarity with Black people and all who are scapegoated, criminalized, and marginalized, and secondarily in solidarity with all people insofar as they are actually guilty of causing harm (in a

way that makes the harm and its victims visible).⁷⁵ The “doubled” divine action in atonement is a response to the complex and overlapping categories of “guilty” and “criminalized,” whereby many are criminalized who are not guilty, and many people who are “guilty” are never criminalized — yet some are also criminalized for doing actual harm. Jesus stands in solidarity with the scapegoated and criminalized against scapegoating, but to destroy such scapegoating and criminalization also requires ending retribution through solidarity with the actually-guilty. Our praxis in response to this doubled action of atonement, if it takes seriously Jesus’ Blackness, must therefore not be limited to “race-neutral” restorative actions (such as making reparations for the harm we are responsible for or, as Gorringer suggests, repaying our debt to God by “remitting the debts of our neighbors”⁷⁶) but our response must also take the form of solidarity with all Black (and other marginalized) bodies, acting for real transformation of the conditions of oppression that scapegoat and exclude them. As Cone says, we must “become Black with God.”⁷⁷

It is worth noting all these responses are (liberation-influenced) variations on traditional interpretations of the response provoked by atonement. Kathryn Getek Soltis interprets Anselmian satisfaction as demanding of us “the need to restore the moral order as God has

⁷⁵ Cf. Park’s insistence on the primacy of victims for theological reflection, e.g. in *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

⁷⁶ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 66.

⁷⁷ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 70.

created it, to set right the due relationships in God’s world,”⁷⁸ in her call to rediscover the virtue of justice and stand against the injustice of mass incarceration. The response of human solidarity to divine solidarity reflects satisfaction’s main competitor among medieval atonement theories, Peter Abelard’s “moral influence” theory, in which Jesus’ sacrifice inspired human atoning acts of repentance. What my interpretation of divine solidarity adds is the insistence that human response must not be generic repentance or justice, but explicit solidarity with those scapegoated, criminalized, and constructed as polluted. The concrete responses required include not only reparations for harm we have done but also actions of solidarity intended to transform systemic conditions of oppression. Violence is both interpersonal and constituted by systemic conditions. As such, responses of solidarity must address questions of interpersonal debt and reparation but also go beyond them to creative transformation of societal conditions.

The truth about incarceration is that it has never been solely about “incapacitation” or “rehabilitation” for public safety — in fact, rehabilitation relies on human relationships broken by imprisonment, while insisting on the necessity of indefinite incapacitation ignores the relational and contextual reasons for violence. Prisons do not exist simply for public safety but in service of retribution, whether the retributive motivation is made explicit or not. Furthermore, it is the logic of scapegoating that insists that safety depends on the exclusion, rather than transformation, of particular guilty individuals — and in particular, the logic of scapegoating racialized into a technique of white supremacist control. Where such an emphasis on retribution and exclusion prevails, a divine act of solidarity with the scapegoated *and* the guilty is a profound symbol of resistance — resistance in which we participate in response. Such an act of

⁷⁸ Getek Soltis, “Christian Virtue of Justice,” 44–45.

divine solidarity interrupts the distinction between victim and perpetrator in transformative ways and insists on forms of justice that restore and transform, rather than punish and exclude.

Atonement theories that posit a debt between humans and God have been used to uphold systems of scapegoating, oppression, and retribution. Reinterpreting atonement as divine interruption of human systems of retribution and hostile solidarity, through the mechanism of doubled divine solidarity with all of us, suited to the ways we are both victims and perpetrators, opens space for social transformation. More than just “salvaging” an old doctrine of atonement, this interpretation provides a new theology of liberating possibilities. The radical possibility of atonement is: the vindication of victims of harm, oppression, and scapegoating, including the harm of retribution and imprisonment; the transformation of each of us, insofar as we are guilty of harm, as we respond in solidarity with those harmed; and the social replacement of retribution with real reparations — and then beyond reparations to further creative transformation and healing. Such atonement is an honest response to the real debt of harm and a divine act of liberation for a world of complicated, complicit, hurting, hurt people.

Bibliography

- Ables, Travis. “‘It’s Only Legal if it Works’: Atonement and Violence.” *Anglican Theological Review* 102 no. 3 (Fall 2020): 469–481.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2010.
- Carvalhos, Henrique, and Anastasia Chamberlen. “Why Punishment Pleases: Punitive Feelings in a World of Hostile Solidarity.” *Punishment and Society* 20 no. 2 (April 2018): 217–234. doi: 10.1177/1462474517699814
- Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011.
- Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed* (revised edition). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997.
- Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fourtieth Anniversary Edition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010.
- Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015.
- Getek Soltis, Kathryn. “The Christian Virtue of Justice and the U.S. Prison.” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 8, no. 1 (2011): 37–56.
- Gorringe, Timothy. *God’s Just Vengeance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Griffith, Lee. *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Heim, S. Mark. *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Logan, James Samuel. *Good Punishment: Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

- Myers, Ched, and Elaine Enns. *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, vol. 1*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.
- Park, Andrew Sung. *Triune Atonement: Christ's Healing for Sinners, Victims, and the Whole Creation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. Kindle edition.
- Parker, Rebecca Ann, and Rita Nakashima Brock. *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon, 2001.
- Pillsbury, Samuel. *Imagining a Greater Justice: Criminal Violence, Punishment and Relational Justice*. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Placher, William. "Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 53 (January 1999): 5–20.
- Robert, Nikia Smith. "Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary: A Liberation Theology for Lockdown America." *Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School* 12 (2017): 41–69.
- Rutledge, Fleming. *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015.
- Sered, Danielle. *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair*. New York: New Press, 2019.
- Singh, Devin. "Sovereign Debt." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46 no. 2 (June 2018): 239–266. doi: 10.1111/jore.12217
- Snyder, T. Richard. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Sobrino, Jon. *Christ the Liberator*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015.
- Vesely-Flad, Rima. *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives, and the Struggle for Justice*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Weaver, J. Denny. *The Nonviolent Atonement*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Williams, Dolores. "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption." In *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, edited by Marit Trelstad. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006. 19–32.