

RYNE BEDDARD

University of North Carolina Chapel Hill

RETHINKING ANSELM'S ATONEMENT THEORY -
"UNMAKING" THE INDEBTED MAN

Throughout Church history Christians have used various images and illustrations to explain why God became a human and died, and why these actions have been considered by the tradition to be salvific. These are referred to as atonement theories, and in general they seek to answer three questions: How is humanity saved through Jesus? Who or what is humanity saved from? And what is the scope of this salvation? These theories have developed and adapted over time but we can group them in three main categories.

The oldest of the three are ransom theories of atonement, sometimes also referred to as the Patristic tradition. Fourth century thinker Gregory of Nyssa is a classic example of a patristic theologian with a ransom theory of atonement. The second category are satisfaction theories, which first developed with Saint Anselm in the eleventh century, but also covers later substitution theories. The third category are called moral influence theories and are usually attributed to twelfth century scholar Peter Abelard.

In this essay I will consider two of these three categories – the ransom theory of Gregory of Nyssa and the satisfaction theory of Saint Anselm – in order to examine how the structure of atonement, and the positions of God, the devil, and humanity, develop over time. Following the work of Adam Kotsko and Hollis Phelps I will argue that the satisfaction theory is, in part, implicated in the moralistic individualism that characterizes neoliberalism.

Finally, I will suggest that a shift back towards a collective suffering may be a starting point for Christians to rethink their relationship to evil in a way that can account for structural injustice and provide a basis for a newfound solidarity, rather than demonization, of those who bear a disproportionate weight of that suffering.

Ransom Theory

In *Christ the Conqueror of Hell* Archbishop Hilarion Alfayev shows, seemingly beyond a doubt that the most prominent view of atonement among the early church founders was what can be called the Christus Victor theory of atonement, a variation of ransom theories of atonement.¹ While these theories of atonement are diverse they all focus on the necessity of Jesus saving humanity from the bondage of death, a bondage which is usually enforced by the devil. In other words the devil played a prominent role in early atonement theories, usually opposite God who works through Jesus in order to liberate humanity from their captor.²

¹ Archbishop Hilarion Alfayev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 2009).

² Of specific interest to Alfayev is the widely shared belief that Jesus descended into hell in order to conquer it and liberate those who are being held captive there. He demonstrates how widespread this belief was by

A classical understanding of the ransom theory can be found in Gregory of Nyssa. According to Gregory humanity "bartered away our freedom" when they sinned, giving themselves over to the reign of the devil. So the problem humanity faces is that they are now under the devil's reign, and salvation will then be liberation from the devil.

But because humanity gave themselves over freely to the devil it is necessary that "no arbitrary method of recovery, but the one consonant with justice should be devised" by God in order to save humanity.³ In other words God, who is by nature just, cannot merely snatch humanity away from the devil, as the devil has a legitimate claim to humanity and this would be unfitting of God.

In order for God's salvation to be just some ransom must be paid, a ransom which the devil finds acceptable. God must make a deal with the devil, giving the devil something in exchange for humanity that the devil finds to be of greater value. The devil finds something worthy enough of an exchange in the person of Jesus, about whom Gregory says the following:

The enemy, therefore, beholding in him such power, saw also in him an opportunity for advance, in the exchange, upon the value of what he held. For this reason he chooses him as a ransom for those who were shut up in the prison of death.⁴

What the devil is blinded to by his lust for power over Jesus, is that because Jesus was God the devil does not have a legitimate claim over his life, and death cannot contain God. Gregory uses the illustration of fishing bait to explain what proceeds. The humanity of Jesus is like the bait which entices the devil to claim Jesus' life.

The divinity of Jesus is like the hook, which also gets swallowed by death, much to the surprise of the devil. Once this divinity is in "the house of death" it bursts forth as a life-giving light which overpowers the darkness of death because, "it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active."⁵ In this way Jesus conquers the devil so that the devil no longer has a claim over humanity.

This raises problems for Gregory, because according to his theory God essentially tricks the devil. But how can God, who is just, use deceit? Would that not be unfitting for God to do? Gregory argues that it is not, and that God was actually justified in deceiving. As he says regarding the devil,

He who first deceived man by the bait of sensual pleasure is himself deceived by the presentment of the human form. But as regards the aim and purpose of what took place, a change in the direction of the nobler is involved; for whereas he, the enemy, effected his deception for the ruin of our nature, He who is at once the just, and good, and wise one, used his device, in which there was deception, for the salvation of him who had perished, and thus not only conferred benefit on the lost one, but on him, too, who had wrought our ruin.⁶

quoting, among others, numerous early church founders including the following: Ignatius, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa. See *Ibid*, 43-101.

³ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, 493.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*, 494.

⁶ *Ibid*, 495.

In other words, God is justified in deceiving the devil because in doing so God not only benefits those who are held captive, but also the devil as well. Gregory uses the illustration of a surgeon who has to cut a person open, but in doing so the surgeon is justified because they are healing the person they are hurting. If the person is healed from the surgery then they will be grateful for what the surgeon did. In the same way God is acting in deceit in order to ultimately save even the devil, and God does so in such a way that even the devil, according to Gregory, "will not be likely to dispute that what took place was both just and salutary."⁷

Satisfaction Theory

That the infinite God of the universe would become a lowly human being was apparently no small scandal in Medieval Europe. This scandal is what St. Anselm seeks to address in *Cur Deus Homo*, which is presented as conversation between Anselm and Boso. According to Boso the opponents of Christianity ridicule the faith saying,

We do injustice and dishonor to God when we affirm that he descended into the womb of a virgin, that he was born of woman, that he grew in the nourishment of milk and the food of men; and, passing over many other things which seem incompatible with Deity, that he endured fatigue, hunger, thirst, stripes and crucifixion among thieves.⁸

It is out of this context that Anselm feels he must justify the doctrine of the incarnation, that in Jesus, God became a human. In doing so Anselm shows that he is aware of the ransom theory when he says "It was proper that the devil, who, being man's tempter, had conquered him in eating of the tree, should be vanquished by man in the suffering of the tree which man bore."⁹ Anselm goes on to give this theory, at least on the surface, its due praise saying that it gives "a certain indescribable beauty to our redemption."¹⁰

Boso, Anselm's likely fictional conversational partner, agrees that this picture of the atonement is a beautiful one, but it is just that: a picture. It is a nice image, but it is not the reality on which salvation is ultimately based, and moreover, it is no longer convincing to those who would challenge the truth of Christianity.

It is essentially an outdated image which should be rejected for something more substantial. Boso insists that Anselm reveal to him the true nature of salvation. He asks Anselm how it can be that God would even have need of ransoming humanity from the devil when it is God who is ultimately sovereign over all of creation. Why should God grant any validity to the devil's claim over humanity when the devil is merely a "servant, who had seduced his fellow-servant to desert their common Lord?"¹¹

In other words the problem with the ransom theory is that, according to Boso, it grants too much power to the devil. It creates a dualism within the cosmic power structure in which even though the devil is not as powerful as God, the two are at least comparable. The problem is not that God does not simply use force to snatch humanity away

⁷ Ibid., 496.

⁸ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, 188.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 192.

from the devil, which according to the Patristic theories God could have done if it were not contrary to God's nature.

The problem is that, in the ransom theory, the devil is understood as somehow having a legitimate claim on humanity in the first place. The idea that God must become human in order to ransom humanity from another being is, for Boso, a ridiculous one, unfit for the Creator of the universe. As Adam Kotsko points out, despite the earlier prominence of the ransom theory by the time Anselm is writing, "The notion that God should acknowledge any claim made by the devil came to seem self-evidently wrong."¹²

This raises a problem: If the devil has no legitimate claim on humanity then why would God need to become human in order to save humanity? If humanity is not being rescued from the devil then who or what are they being rescued from? There is a telling dialogue between Anselm and Boso in *Cur Deus Homo* which lays the framework for Anselm's understanding of salvation. It reads as follows:

Anselm. If man or angel always rendered to God his due, he would never sin.

Boso. I cannot deny that.

Anselm. Therefore to sin is nothing else than not to render to God his due.

Boso. What is the debt which we owe to God?

Anselm. Every wish of a rational creature should be subject to the will of God.

Boso. Nothing is more true.

Anselm. This is the debt which man and angel owe to God, and no one who pays this debt commits sin; but everyone who does not pay it sins.¹³

The problem which humanity faces, according to Anselm, and the problem from which they need saving is a problem of debt. Every rational creature automatically owes to God what Anselm calls a "sole and complete debt of honor," and to not give God due honor is to sin, it "robs God." Therefore it is only right that anyone who rob God in this way ought to pay back the honor which that person owes to God.¹⁴ This debt must be paid in full because "It is not fitting for God to pass over anything in his kingdom undischarged,"¹⁵ and "God maintains nothing with more justice than the honor of his own dignity."¹⁶

This a problem for humanity because any sin against an infinite God, i.e., not giving God the debt which is due, accrues an infinite debt which cannot be satisfied by a finite person. So Anselm says very plainly: "None but God can make this satisfaction," but at the same time it is only fitting for a human to pay for it, because it is humanity, and not God, that owes it.¹⁷ In other words, the only possible satisfaction for a debt which only God can pay, and yet humanity, and not God, owes is a payment made by a being that is both fully God and fully human. This, for Anselm, explains the necessity of God becoming human in order to save humanity.

¹² Adam Kotsko, *The Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 126.

¹³ Anselm, 202. Italics in original.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

¹⁶ Ibid., 205.

¹⁷ Ibid., 237.

Christ does not have to die, suggests Anselm, because he is not bound by sin. He owes no debt to God, and yet he gives his life in order to please God's honor, meaning that he gives to God something more than what is owed to God.¹⁸ Because Christ gives freely what he did not owe he is owed a reward by God. It is necessary for God to reward Jesus, but Jesus is God and is therefore not in need of any reward. Jesus, who now has a gift of which he has no need, is free to pass along the gift to sinful humanity, in order pay the debt of sin.¹⁹ In response to this gift given by God, and passed along by Jesus, now all those who accept this gift of grace owe to God a debt of gratitude.²⁰

Anselm's theory of atonement is a radical departure from the patristic tradition, which he claims only presents a beautiful picture of the atonement, but not its reality. There is a fundamental shift in what it is that humanity needs salvation from, which results in a shifting of the mechanism by which humanity is saved. In the patristic theories the problem that humanity faces is being in a state of being subjected to the devil, and therefore to death.

In Anselm's theory the problem is the debt we owe is to God, because the devil could never make a legitimate claim on us. Now it is humanity's sinfulness, rather than their being subject to death, that is the cause of our suffering, because it is sin that prevents people from paying the debt of obedience to God which they owe from birth. We can call this shift in focus from death to sin a move from an ontological theory to a moral theory. This is, as Kotsko points out, a step towards the more individualized substitutionary atonement theories, in which the focus is not on humanity's collective death problem, but on the moral failures of individuals before God.²¹

Problematizing Anselm's Satisfaction Theory

Kotsko points out that Anselm does not do away with the devil altogether, a move that would have been far too controversial, but he displaces the devil.²² The most obvious way in which Anselm does this is the shift in whom humanity is enslaved or indebted to. In Gregory's theory the problem humanity faces is they have become enslaved by the devil, and it is the devil, therefore, that keeps them bound to death. Salvation, in this scenario, means liberation from the captivity of the devil and the power of death. In Anselm's theory humanity is indebted to God for violating God's honor, therefore salvation ends up meaning that humanity is not saved from the devil, but rather salvation from God. In displacing the devil Anselm essentially posits God in the role that the devil once played.

Anselm's theory becomes even more problematic when considering God's motivation for the redemptive action of Jesus. Kotsko points out that God's love for humanity, a common theme in earlier atonement theories, is "virtually absent in Anselm's argumentation." What motivates God is not love for humanity but God's own honor.

¹⁸ Ibid., 245-247.

¹⁹ Ibid., 263-267.

²⁰ Ibid., 235.

²¹ Kotsko, 126. However, as Hollis Phelps points out, this is not "strictly speaking, a substitute, as later atonement theories will hold." That is to say, Jesus does not become a substitute for individuals before God, paying off their individual sins. Instead Jesus' death satisfies God's honor, earning a gift from God, which is then passed on by Jesus to cover for the debt of sinfulness owed by all of humanity. See Hollis Phelps, "Overcoming Redemption: Neoliberalism, Atonement, and the Logic of Debt," *Political Theology* 17, no. 3 (2016): 264-282.

²² Kotsko, 132.

As Kotsko says, "the outgoing and loving God of the Patristic account who desires relationship with humanity has been replaced by a God who is remarkably self-involved."²³

Even though Anselm likely did not intend to do so, the picture he creates of atonement seems to imply that God and Jesus are not on the same side. In Gregory's account God works in and through Jesus in order to save humanity but in Anselm's account God seems to have little concern for humanity and it is Jesus who shows both faithfulness to God and love for humanity. Jesus saves humanity not from the devil, but from the God to whom they are indebted.

In Anselm's theory God essentially takes over the role played by the devil in Gregory's theory. It could even be said that, in Anselm, the mechanism of deceit functions in a remarkably similar way. For Gregory, God takes advantage of the devil's obsession with power, and through Jesus tricks the devil into relinquishing control over humanity.

For Anselm, it appears that Jesus, now working on his own, takes advantage of God's obsession with honor and tricks God into relinquishing humanity from their indebtedness caused by sin. If the implications of Anselm's theory are taken seriously it is inescapable that God seems less and less like a loving God, worthy of admiration, and more like a self-obsessed psychopath – setting the trajectory in motion for Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."²⁴

Anselm was trying to solve a particular problem within the Christian tradition, the problem of the role of the devil. He saw it as inconsistent with a sovereign God that the devil would have so much power and be able to affect the world in such a way that God would have to make a deal with the devil for humanity. However, in trying to solve this problem, he creates a whole host of other problems. He successfully does away with the dualism, present in earlier theories, in which the devil is in some way in competition with God, but in doing so he imagines a God who, rather than saving humanity, humanity needs salvation from.

The logic that Anselm uses to make his argument assumes that humanity is in some fundamental way inescapably indebted to God. This is problematic because, as Hollis Phelps say in his essay "Overcoming Redemption," "to the extent that theology understands human beings as indebted, it remains complicit in the perpetuation of current class divisions based on debt."²⁵ Phelps argues that debt not only functions economically but ideologically, creating subjects who see themselves as indebted on a fundamental level, which contributes to sustaining class division.

A function of neoliberalism is that it creates subjects who understand themselves in relation to debt. However this relationship to debt is not the same for everyone. There is a division that arises between "those who profit from debt and those who do not," which results in a class division which operates on a fundamental subjective level because, "Debt functions biopolitically in neoliberalism, encompassing all aspects of life to shape the very being of the subject."²⁶

²³ Ibid., 149.

²⁴ See Johnathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of Angry God," <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html>.

²⁵ Phelps, "Overcoming Redemption."

²⁶ Ibid.

Following the work of Maurizio Lazzarato,²⁷ Phelps says that debt is a fundamental driver of the neoliberal economy. He goes on to argue that Anselm's satisfaction theory is complicit in the ideology of an indebted subject because of the way indebtedness is automatically assumed as part of the basic human condition. For Anselm, as discussed above, a human being is born indebted to God, and through sin that debt is magnified. The gift of grace that Jesus passes along to humanity amounts to the forgiveness of debt accrued by sin but it does not wipe out the original state of indebtedness. Moreover, it also magnifies the indebtedness of a person in a new, in that they now owe to God a debt of gratitude.

While the ransom theories of atonement also can be understood in terms of debt, this debt is not inescapable, and it is not fundamental to the human condition. Rather, it suggests that the state of being indebted is not part of God's plan, and it is not permanent. In Gregory's theory God liberates people from their indebtedness, but for Anselm God is the one to whom humanity is indebted to. Gregory's theory could potentially provide the ideological framework for challenging the all-encompassing sense of indebtedness created by neoliberalism but Anselm's theory is implicit in, suggesting that humanity is fundamentally in a state of indebtedness.

Conclusion

The logic of indebtedness, going all the way back to Anselm, is inherently individualistic and moralistic, and therefore incapable of allowing us to reckon with larger, structural problems like the impending ecological crisis or systematic racism. The logic of the devil, on the other hand, has often been utilized as a scapegoating mechanism, targeting and identifying marginalized people groups in order to demonize them. However, it may, perhaps, be possible for us to reclaim the figure of the devil, but in more structural terms.

Our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but with structural evils that threaten to destroy us. If there is any hope for salvation left, perhaps it will depend upon a reorientation away from individualistic and moralistic thinking, and towards a collective solidarity that is not afraid to call evil what it is. This solidarity cannot demonize those on the margins, but rather, must recognize the ways in which structural evil disproportionately effects certain people and sees their suffering as a universal problem, implicated in a universal need for collective action against the principalities of darkness that threaten to consume us.

Ryne Beddard is a PhD candidate in the Religious Studies department at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the author of "Lycantheopolitical: The Sovereign and the Werewolf, or Christ and Sirius Black", Resonance (May 2016).

²⁷ See Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the indebted Man* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).