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I present my own theory in the second half of the paper.

Girard and Atonement: An Incarnational Theory of Mimetic Participation

I. Introduction

Christians committed to peacemaking have long recognized that peace, nonviolence, and reconciliation are at the heart of the gospel. Yet, at the same time, the standard Western theories of the Atonement appear to paint a picture in which violence is at the core of the divine order of things. To elaborate, conservative and much traditional Roman Catholicism and Protestantism have promoted an understanding of the Atonement largely based on the Satisfaction and Penal theories of Atonement, or variations of them. The basic idea behind each of these theories is that the moral order of reality requires that God punish our sin--and hence render violence against us--by sending us to eternal Hell unless some substitute can be found to pay the penalty for sin. In the Satisfaction theory (first systematically developed by St. Anselm in the Eleventh Century) Christ adverts this purportedly righteous violence against us by paying our debt of obedience to God the Father through being perfectly obedient to the Father even the point of death on the Cross. On the other hand, in the Penal theory (first systematically advocated by the Protestant reformers), Christ adverts this violence by taking it upon himself--that is, by accepting the punishment we deserve. So, in both theories violence is in some sense necessary: in the Satisfaction theory violence is affirmed as an option that *must* be taken *unless* our debt of sin is paid, whereas in the Penal theory violence--whether directed at us or at Christ--is absolutely necessary to meet the demands of the moral order.

Given that the doctrine Atonement--that is the claim that through Jesus's life, death, and resurrection we are saved from sin and reconciled to God--is at the very core of the Christian gospel, it has become increasingly recognized in peacemaking and other circles that alternative understandings of the Atonement are badly needed.¹

¹ It is useful at this point to distinguish between the *doctrine* of the Atonement, an *understanding* of the Atonement, and a *theory* of the Atonement. Unlike the doctrine, an *understanding* attempts to provide an idea of what exactly Christ accomplished for us through the Atonement, and what it *means* for us to be saved from sin and reconciled with God. Often, understandings are expressed in terms of metaphors or images, such as that Christ's Atonement defeated the forces of Satan, as in the much discussed *Christus Victor* understanding. Finally, a theory of Atonement goes beyond an understanding in that it explains *how* Christ's life, death and resurrection save us from sin and reconcile us to God, and *why* it made sense for God to use this method. For example, a theory might explain *how* Christ's Atonement defeated Satan, instead of simply saying that it did.

One cannot simply avoid the issue by claiming that the Atonement is a mystery since how we understand Christ's Atonement is absolutely central to our understanding of the nature of salvation, and hence to the gospel message and its implications for our lives and the world.

In light of the ethically problematic image of God in the Penal and Satisfaction theories, and a lot of other purported difficulties with them, many Christians have looked for alternatives theories and understandings of Atonement.² For the last thousand years, the main alternative theory in the West has been the Moral Exemplar or Influence theory, a theory that has been the mainstay of liberal Christianity. According to this theory--originally advanced by the theologian/philosopher Peter Abelard (1079-1142)--the moral example of Christ's life and death saves us by revealing the depth of the God's love for us which in turn liberates us from false understandings and inspires us to love and good deeds; or, in another version, Christ's life and death save us by giving us a perfect moral example of love, humility, and obedience to follow.

Recently, cultural theorist René Girard has presented a theory of the Atonement that is essentially a highly original version of the Moral Exemplar theory, as I will explain below. Unlike most previous versions of this theory, Girard's Atonement theory is a natural outgrowth of a highly fruitful theory of culture, violence, and religion: namely, his own mimetic theory of culture that he has been developing for the last thirty years. Because of its link with a larger theory of culture, religion, and violence, and because it rests on an understanding of the gospels in which nonviolence is absolutely central, Christians committed to a nonviolent understanding of Christianity have become quite enthusiastic about his theory. As I shall show below, however, despite its sophistication, Girard's Atonement theory suffers from some of the critical defects of the standard Moral Exemplar theory, defects that largely form the basis for why conservative and many orthodox Christians have rejected the Moral Exemplar theory. Nonetheless, after explicating and critiquing Girard's theory, I will show in Part III below how Girard's more general theory of the mimetic basis of culture--which could be plausibly considered to form the heart of this cultural theory--is an exceptionally rich resource for the further development of an alternative, thoroughly nonviolent theory of the Atonement, which has deep roots both in scripture and in Church tradition, particularly that of the Eastern Orthodox and Greek Fathers. Indeed, this alternative theory, which I call the Incarnational theory and which I have worked-out elsewhere independent of Girardian thought, follows naturally from Girard's mimetic theory of culture when applied to the New Testament claims about Christ, as I will show below.

II. Girard's Theory of Desire, the Scapegoat, and Atonement

Girard's theory of Desire

According to Girard's mimetic theory of desire, all of our desires originate via the process of mimesis, commonly translated as imitation. Because it suggests a conscious copying, the word "imitation" here is somewhat misleading. Conscious copying is only one special case of what Girard considers mimesis or imitation. More generally, as Paul

² Among these purported additional difficulties with the Satisfaction and Penal theories are that they are contrary to scripture and that their key claims do not make sense, such as the claim that divine justice is satisfied by one person accepting the punishment of another.

Dumouchel notes, for Girard mimesis involves a "a disposition of agents to act in similar ways, without the agents intending to imitate each other" (1988, p. 7). Put differently, Girard's theory should be understood as claiming that *individuals obtain their desires by contagiously picking them up from--or patterning them after--other people, something that often occurs unconsciously*. Once we think about the mimetic basis of desire as being like contagion, we recognize something else about this theory: it implies that to a large extent our desires are not simply our own, but rather a sort of common property that gets passed around among the members of the community. So, another way of thinking about Girard's mimetic theory of desire (which will be useful later) is that we typically *participate* in the desires of the community, instead of merely generating or having them individualistically.

How does this theory account for the ultimate origin of desire, the generation of new desires, and the differences in desire among individuals? First, concerning the origin of desire, Girard does not claim that desire entirely and completely originates in mimesis. If he claimed this, then there would be no way of accounting for how desire among human beings as a whole began. Rather, as Richard Golson comments, "Girard does not challenge the existence of innate, instinctual impulses and drives necessary to the survival of the organism. Rather, he believes that these impulses and drives are channeled by the mimetic process" (1993, footnote, p. 1). Second, new desires can arise because we are *creative* in our imitation: we modify the imitated desire in accordance with our own needs, goals, situation, and personality traits, often at an unconscious level. So, imitation is typically not strict copying. Finally, each of us has a different conglomeration of desires both because we are creative in our imitation and because, given our environment and our innate characteristics, we do not imitate everyone or every desire, but only a select group of individuals and desires. The drug pusher in the city, for instance, imitates other drug pushers in his immediate environment, not the wealthy businessman across town.

Girard's Theory of the Scapegoat Mechanism

According to Girard, because of the mimetic nature of desire, acquisitive desire--that is, desire to possess or control an object--quickly results in rivalry and hence violence between individuals. For example, if one person desires an object, then others will imitate that desire and hence become that person's rival in trying to gain possession or control of the object. To control this violence, societies erect rules and taboos which attempt to create social distance between individuals so that they do not become each other rivals. For example, because of the social distances between them, princes do not tend to imitate commoners and vice versa, and hence they typically do not become each others rivals. These social mechanisms, however, do not work perfectly to inhibit mimetic rivalry, allowing this rivalry and the violence associated with it to reach crisis proportions. When this happens, order in society is restored by finding a scapegoat to which all the violence of the community gets re-directed, thereby re-uniting the community and bringing peace. Crucial to this whole process is that the scapegoat is portrayed as really guilty. Consequently, the order of society depends on concealing both the innocence of the victim and the scapegoat mechanism.

Girard's Theory of Atonement

Essentially two theories of Atonement are found in Girard and his followers, what I will call the *unmasking theory*

and the *imitation theory*, each of which is a version of the Moral Exemplar theory. Although Girard does not claim that these theories are complete, his writings and those of his followers suggest that they believe that they have captured a major component of how Christ's life, death, and resurrection save us from sin and reconcile us to God. According to the unmasking theory, Jesus's life and death, in conjunction with the gospel accounts, save us by unmasking the victimage mechanism. Indeed, James Alison, who develops Girard's thought in a theological context, claims that this unmasking is "identical with salvation or redemption," since once the unmasking has occurred it "impels us to the construction of a different social order, one built *from* the self-giving victim, rather than one built *by exclusion of* the victim" (p. 84).

Although Girard recognizes that other texts could be said to have partially unmasked the scapegoat mechanism--such as the anti-sacrificial texts by Empedocles (1987, p. 206) or Plato's account of the death of Socrates in the *Apology*--Girard claims that Jesus is "the only one capable of revealing the true nature of violence to the utmost" (1987, p. 209). The reason for this, Girard and his followers claim, is that Jesus, being the Son of God, was the only one entirely outside the cultural system which is founded on the scapegoat mechanism, and hence the only one not infected by human culture, which as stated above is based on *concealment* of this mechanism. Thus, they claim, full knowledge of this mechanism cannot be obtained by merely human means (Dumouchel, 1988, p. 18).

Against Girard, critics have argued that "the devaluation of sacrifice is neither the distinctive attribute of Christianity nor the major theme of Christ's teaching" and that "the Gospel's cannot lay exclusive claim to the revelation of the violent foundations of human society" (Scubla, p. 161). Although I am to some extent sympathetic with this sort of critique, here I want to focus my critique elsewhere. What I shall argue is that *even if* Christianity uniquely unmasks the scapegoat mechanism as Girard claims, this does not provide an adequate theory of the Atonement. As explained above (footnote 1), a theory of the Atonement must explain how Christ's life, death, and Resurrection save us from sin and reconcile us to God. The major problem with Girard's unmasking theory of Atonement is that the operative concept of salvation seems too weak, as we can see by asking what the affects of this unmasking might be for us individually and for society as a whole. As Scubla points out (op cit, pp. 172-73), in the worse case scenario, such unmasking will deprive us of the scapegoat mechanism and thus leave us with no means of resolving the mimetic crises of violence when they occur. In the best case scenario, by recognizing the mimetic origin of violence and the scapegoat mechanism, we will be able to develop an effective, democratic, non-scapegoating, means of keeping acquisitive mimetic desire in check.

At best, therefore, in Girard's unmasking theory, Christ's Atonement will have been necessary for the development of a non-violent, democratic society. This, however, seems far too weak of a notion of salvation to be compatible with the New Testament. When Paul the Apostle, for instance, says that through Christ's Atonement we are justified and given new life (e.g., Romans 5:9 and 8:3), or when John the Apostle tells us that the blood of Christ "cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7), it seems they have something much stronger in mind than Christ's death being necessary for the eventual development of a non-violent society. For one thing, Christ's Atonement was supposed to save those to whom the Apostles preached, not simply the beneficiaries of a non-violent society over two millennia later. In fact, if this is all Christ's Atonement does, then arguably the Buddha's teaching of strict non-

violence does better. After all, as John Kohler notes, Buddhism, unlike Christianity, has a perfect record of non-violence: "In the twenty-five hundred years since its beginning, Buddhism has spread throughout Asia and has made its way even to the other continents, claiming over four hundred million followers. During that time no wars have been fought and no blood shed in propagation of its teaching" (p. 192). Moreover, historically predominately Buddhist cultures have had a relative lack of war, revolution, or violence of any kind, much better than the Christianized West. (Kohler, p. 192). To do better than simply keeping violence at bay, therefore, Christ's Atonement must somehow give us a infusion of positive, non-rivalrous and non-violent, desire, an issue we will pick up later.

The other "imitation theory" of Atonement advocated by Girard and his followers is also a version of the Moral Exemplar theory, one in which Christ saves us by providing a perfect moral example for us to imitate. (Girard, 1987 p. 430; Adams, Rebecca, 1993, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: An Interview of Rene Girard." pp. 24-25). According to James Alison, for instance, through imitating Christ, the Apostles, and by implication all Christians, "learn to receive their identities as human beings through an entirely nonrivalrous, nonenvious, nongrasping, practice of life." (p. 168).

Since, like his unmasking theory, Girard's imitation theory is a version of the Moral Exemplar theory, it is open to the same objections, which are worth elaborating on at this point. The most common objection to the Moral Exemplar theory is that it is "subjective." Although authors who raise this objection do not explain what they mean by calling it subjective, they clearly could not mean it in the normal sense of subjective. Clearly, Christ acting as a moral exemplar can objectively change his followers for the better, so the effect of the Atonement under this theory is definitely "objective" in the normal sense of the word. Rather, as Alister McGrath (1992, p. 87) comments, what they mean by the Atonement being subjective under this theory is that the Atonement works by affecting a change in us, whereas in the so-called "objective" theories, the Atonement works by rendering a change in God--such as satisfying God's demand that we be punished for our sins, as in the Penal theory. Now, it seems to me that being "subjective" in this sense is a merit of an Atonement theory, and fits very nicely with the New Testaments stress on the ability of the Christ's death on the Cross to actually affect a change in us. To cite two of many examples, in Romans 6:1-14 and other places, Paul emphasizes that Christ's Atonement has freed us from our slavery to sin, and in 1 John 1:7, John claims that Christ's blood actually *cleanses* us from sin: that is, it somehow actually works to eliminate sin in our lives; it does not merely satisfy the demand that we be punished as in the Penal and Satisfaction theories. So, I would argue that the accusation that the Moral Exemplar theory is subjective is really no objection at all, but a merit of the theory.³

A more serious objection is that it is "Pelagian," meaning that it negates God's grace by suggesting that we

³ Actually, all major theories of Atonement have both subjective and objective elements, in the above sense of the terms, and thus the terms "subjective" and "objective" are doubly misleading. The differences between these type of theories really have to do with which element is logically primary. In the typical "objective" theories, the Atonement first changes God's attitude toward us, opening the door for the Holy Spirit to change us through the process of sanctification. In the typical "subjective" theories, the Atonement changes God's attitude by changing us: or, more precisely, since this change in us is not immediate, God's "new" attitude towards us is in response to the eschatological event of our full redemption through Christ's Atonement.

can save ourselves through our own effort to imitate Christ. Of course, there is some element of God's grace in the Moral Exemplar theory, since God had to provide Christ's moral example. As often presented, however, the element of grace tends to be no more than it would be in a *merely* prophetic religion, or in religions such as Theravada Buddhism: God must graciously provide the prophet for guidance, but the work of following the prophet is up to us; and in the case of Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha showed us the Noble Eightfold-Path to Nirvana, but it is our job to follow it. Related to this objection is that the Moral Exemplar theory does not take the depth of sin seriously enough. As the Apostle Paul (e.g., Romans 7), St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and anyone who has seriously struggled with sin, knows, sin cannot be eradicated merely by our own efforts, even the effort to follow the example set by Christ. Put differently, the structures of what Walter Wink (1992) calls the "Domination System," which are based on violence and oppression, have become too much a part of our psychic structures to be broken through mere conscious imitation. Girard himself is well-aware of this in the context of acquisitive mimetic desire, which for him seems to be the basis of sin:

"In reality, no purely intellectual process and no experience of a purely philosophical nature can secure the individual the slightest victory over [acquisitive] mimetic desire and its victimage delusions. Intellection can achieve only displacement and substitution, though these may give individuals the sense of having achieved such a victory. For there to be even the slightest degree of progress, the victimage delusion must be vanquished on the most intimate level of experience..." (1987, p. 399)

After this passage, Girard goes to claim that such victory over the acquisitive mimetic structures is "only truly accessible through an experience similar to what has traditionally been called *religious conversion*" (p. 400).

Now in actual practice those who subscribe to or are sympathetic towards the Moral Exemplar theory often emphasize the necessity of God's grace through the Holy Spirit in helping us imitate Christ and thereby undergo a "religious conversion" to a new set of desires. According to philosopher Phil Quinn, even Abelard, the originator of the Moral Exemplar theory, recognized the necessity of God's grace. Indeed, as Quinn shows, this idea of God's grace can be extended in the Moral Exemplar theory to completely eliminate its Pelagian element. Specifically, says Quinn, the love of Christ expressed on the Cross could have "a surplus of mysterious causal efficacy [to produce a similar love in us] that no merely human love possesses" (p. 296). Once one moves in this direction, however, the type of imitation involved goes from being mere conscious imitation to a form of non-conscious imitation--that is, *contagion or participation*--specially empowered by the Holy Spirit to be effective. This in turn naturally leads to the theory I will present below.

III. A New and Orthodox Theory

I will call the theory I present below the Incarnational theory. Although I have developed the Incarnational theory elsewhere independent of Girardian thought (1995, Unpublished manuscript), here I will develop a version of this theory starting with Girard's hypothesis of the mimetic origin of desire, and then show that it has a strong basis in

both scripture and Church tradition.

Before developing this theory, we will need to address two preliminaries. The first preliminary is to extend Girard's theory of mimesis. To do this, we note that in the broadest sense, there is no clear-cut distinction between "desire" and other *intentional states*: that is, states such as attitudes, orientations, perspectives, commitments, beliefs, and the like. When taken together as forming an inseparable whole with the agent's internalized system of mental, symbolic, and linguistic representation, the totality of these states could be called the agent's *subjectivity*. Given these definitions, the mimetic theory of the origin of desire can be naturally extended to what could be called a mimetic theory of the origin of intentional states or subjectivity--that is, the hypothesis that in general our subjectivity is not simply generated in ourselves, but to a large extent mimetically picked up from others. It is this extended theory that we will be invoking below. (It should be noted here that our use of the term "subjectivity" in this context should not be confused with the use of the term discussed earlier when speaking of theories of Atonement being "subjective" or "objective," nor should it be confused with how we will use the term below when we discuss Rebecca Adam's definition of love as "valuing the subjectivity of oneself and the other.")

The second preliminary is to understand mimesis as really involving both contagion and participation, as explained in section II above. Specifically, to imitate Christ's intentional states -- such as his desires -- is to contagiously pick them up, which in turn results in our participating in them. Further, to *participate* in Christ's intentional states implies that they are not something we simply imitate and then possess on our own, but rather something we share in only insofar as we remain connected to Christ and his body. (As Jesus says in John 15, a branch that is disconnected from the vine withers away.) Since the mechanism of this connection is mimesis (understood as contagion), we will often use the phrase "mimetic participation" to refer to this participatory connection with Christ.

Now, the Incarnational theory begins by postulating that salvation consists in an ongoing participation in the life of God as it exists in Christ, as indicated by Jesus's metaphor of the vine and branches (John 15:5), and many other New Testament passages, such as John 6:53-56, Colossians 3:4, 2 Peter 1:4, and Hebrews 3:14. Because of the Incarnation, this life is both fully divine and fully human; hence, because of its fully human component, we can participate in it. Now, our next key step is to postulate that the core of this sharing in the life of Christ consists in mimetically participating in Christ's subjectivity as expressed in his life, death and resurrection, a participation in which our own subjectivity is redemptively transformed as the intentional states in Christ are creatively individualized and integrated into our own. This mimetic participation takes place in several ways: through normal psychological channels, such as consciously imitating Christ or contagiously picking up his intentional states from other exemplary Christians; through reading and hearing the New Testament and related texts, by which we can absorb and digest their subjectivity--that is, the web of beliefs, attitudes, orientations, perspectives, and system of representation embodied in the texts; and finally, through a more direct "supernatural" operation of the Holy Spirit and God's grace in the Sacraments. Moreover, within this theory, the Holy Spirit is conceived of as supernaturally empowering the transmission of Christ's subjectivity within the normal psychological and linguistic channels mentioned above. Accordingly, because the natural and supernatural means are intermixed together and are continuous with one another, there is no dualistic opposition between the spiritual and the natural, or nature and

grace. Rather, they work together: if we merely rely on our own natural ability to partake of Christ's subjectivity, we will be unlikely to participate in it in any deep way, and similarly if we simply rely on a supernatural miracle, such as a religious conversion. As Philippians 2:12-13 suggests, salvation is a joint operation of natural and supernatural means.

Next, we need to elaborate on some particularly redemptive aspects of Christ's subjectivity. We will begin by examining some aspects of Christ's subjectivity that are particularly associated with his death. First, as the kenosis hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 reminds us, during his death on the Cross Jesus experientially entered into the depths of the human life-situation of vulnerability, dependence, death, suffering, brokenness, and alienation, even the depths of our alienation from God the Father as evidenced by his cry on the Cross "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" (Mark 16:34). Moreover, in some mysterious way on the Cross Jesus experienced the depths of human sin, the "shadow-side" of humanity: "He who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). Finally, according to the gospel accounts, during his life Jesus established a subjectivity that was in complete solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, and oppressed, a solidarity that he took to its experiential depths by dying as a criminal "outside the city gate" (Heb. 13:12).

Now, in many ways, this new subjectivity created in Jesus is radically at odds, and hence undercuts, the "fallen" subjectivity of humanity. To elaborate, most of us try to avoid confronting our own vulnerability, dependence, alienation, and brokenness. Indeed, thinkers as diverse as theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, (1941), Pulitzer Prize winning author Ernest Becker (1973), and psychologist M. Scott Peck (1983), have claimed that this unwillingness to confront our own vulnerability and other "threatening" aspects of our human condition is one of the prime roots of human sin, wickedness, sickness, and neurosis, along with the world-system of status, domination, and oppression. Instead of recognizing that we are vulnerable, dependent and insecure human beings, for example, we attempt to possess, dominate, and control people and things, to give ourselves the illusion of invulnerability, security, and status; and instead of acknowledging our own shadow, we project it on to others and then demonize them.

In fact, it has become a common thesis among thinkers in this century--for example, René Girard and Michel Foucault, in addition to the thinkers mentioned above--that the world-system of psychic and social domination, oppression, bondage, and its associated values, rests on expulsion, scapegoating, and marginalization of both aspects of our own psychic lives and the subjectivity of various individuals in society. Given that these thinkers are at least partly correct, it follows that the "fallen" human subjectivity characteristic of the world-system is largely based on the denial of the subjectivity established in Christ on the Cross. Consequently, mimetically participating in this new subjectivity established in Christ will tend, as yeast leavens a lump of bread, to undercut the entire world-system of psychic, spiritual, and social bondage both in our personal and social lives.

So far, we have suggested one way in which the mimetic participation in the new, fully human and fully divine, subjectivity of Christ during his life and death serves to deconstruct the world-system of social and psychic bondage and oppression, in which we all participate to some degree. This deconstructing of the world-system is, I suggest, at least part of how the Cross of Christ crucifies us to the world and the world to us, as Paul states in Galatians 6:14. Further, I suggest, to partake in the above aspects of Christ's subjectivity is part of what it means to

share in Christ's death (Rom. 6), and part of what underlies the New Testament emphasis on acknowledging our weakness, powerlessness, and vulnerability and its emphasis on confession of sin--that is, acknowledgment of our "shadow-side." But, salvation is more than being crucified to the world: it also involves sharing in the resurrection life of Christ. As Girard notes, simply to live in denial of the world-system with its concerns amounts to no more than a "living death" (1987, p. 400). Moreover, such a denial too easily simply leads to another false attempt to render the self invulnerable to the world, but this time by trying to become dead to worldly concerns, as the Stoics tried to do. Instead, the New Testament teaches engagement with the world, being in the world but not of the world.

To fully redeem us, therefore, the subjectivity created in Christ must include positive intentional states that promote human flourishing in full engagement with the world. Now *appropriative* desire--by which I mean the entire set of intentional states oriented towards possessing, controlling, and dominating persons and things in order to sustain the illusion regarding our true human condition--seems to be at the heart of human sin, and is at the root of much of the violence in society. Accordingly, these positive intentional states in Christ should, among other things, serve as an antidote to appropriative desire.⁴ Love, as understood in the sense of valuing the subjectivity of the oneself and others, an idea that Rebecca Adams has carefully developed in her essay in this collection, is one such intentional state that meets this condition. According to this idea, to value the subjectivity of another is to value them *as* separate centers of consciousness and will, who not only are presently in relationship with oneself, but who are rich with future possibilities of growth and interrelationship. In accordance with Christ's example on the Cross, this implies a commitment to treat others in faith and hope of what they are and could be, instead of trying to change their beliefs and behavior through brute force, or to manipulate and dominate them in any other way. Further, as Adams shows, when imitated, love in this sense not only unites people together into a non-rivalrous, reciprocally sharing community, but gains a creative, generative dynamic of its own which ultimately leads to maximal human flourishing: if I imitate your desiring of my subjectivity, then I will in turn desire my own subjectivity, your subjectivity, and that of others, and then the others will in turn do the same, and so on.⁵

The second positive intentional state we need is that of faith: we must trust that if we give ourselves completely over to God's care, and if we seek first the Kingdom of God, that our needs will ultimately be met and the "will of God" will ultimately be accomplished for ourselves and those around us, insofar as that is compatible with human free will. For, one of the prime reasons we want to possess and control things and people is that we fear that there is not enough human goods to go around to satisfy our needs; or, we try to control things and people--instead of valuing their subjectivity--because we fear that unless we do, "God's purposes" will not be accomplished

4 I use the term "appropriative" desire, coined by Rebecca Adams, instead of the term "acquisitive" desire used by Girard and his followers, because it is not always wrong to want to acquire things. It is not wrong, for instance, to marry someone in part to "acquire" the benefits of a loving relationship with that person. It is wrong, however, to treat others as a mere means to something such as money that is external to the development of their own subjectivity, or to treat them as an object to be controlled or possessed.

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Extending this idea of valuing the subjectivity of others to the rest of God's creation suggests that we need to see even material things in a different light: not as items to be possessed and controlled, but as gifts from God: that is, we need to view them sacramentally as embodiments of God's grace to us.

in them or the world. Given these fears, appropriative desire with its attempt to control people and things is virtually inevitable. Moreover, only in the context of faith is it possible to “lay down one’s life” for another, and still truly value one’s own subjectivity and hence love one’s own self: for without faith such “love” will simply amount to be valuing another’s subjectivity at the cost of doing violence to one’s own. (That is, one must have faith that by losing one’s life one will gain it (Matt. 10:39)).

Finally, we need to live in *hope* of God's providence in the historical process and the ultimate fulfillment of God's Kingdom of peace, justice, and righteousness. Instead of negating our present history, this hope gives it meaning and allows us to fully nurture and "value the subjectivity" of our world and its inhabitants as being rich with historically realizable possibilities for the reign of God's Kingdom and the fullness of human flourishing that it implies.

Given our life-situation, however, we must be able to continue to act in this faith, hope, and love discussed above in spite of severe uncertainty, doubt, fear, unjust persecution, and alienation from God and others. That is, we must be able to act in faith, hope, and love in spite of every type of temptation that arises out of our life-situation. Thus, if Christ is going to be the perfect mimetic source of the kind of faith, hope, and love we need, he must also experience every general type of temptation common to human beings. Moreover, in the face of those temptations he must continue to act in love, hope, and trust instead of succumbing to the attempt to "secure the self" through violence, injustice, or Stoicism, as is characteristic of fallen humanity. Indeed, this is just what the book of Hebrews states about Christ: it states that he experienced every kind of temptation common to humans and was yet without sin (Heb. 4:15), and it states that through his sufferings and temptations he was made perfect--that is, perfect as our Savior (Heb. 2:10; 5:9; 7:28). If Christ did not experience these temptations, then he would not have been the perfect mimetic source of love, trust, and hope, for he would not have modeled for us continuing to act in accordance with these virtues under the most serious temptations that we encounter.⁶

Moreover, I suggest, it is these fully divine and fully human intentional states of love, trust, and hope established in Christ that the Pauline epistles are implicitly referring to when they state that we should put on the "new self" and the “new creation” in Christ. To elaborate, the “old self” seems to be their way of referring to the old “sinful” subjectivity--that is, the set of sinful desires and its associated attitudes, orientations, and the like (e.g., see Col 3:9, Rom.6:6); hence, by parallelism it makes sense that the “new self” refers to a new, positive, subjectivity. Further, both Ephesians 4:24 and Col. 3:9-10 speak of this “new self” being created by God, and other passages imply that it only exists in Christ (Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). Taken together, these passages seem to imply that a new fully human and fully divine subjectivity was created by God in Christ and that the Christian life consists of partaking of this new subjectivity--i.e., we are to “put on the new self” (Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:9-10). Further,

6

The claim that, in general, an effective mimetic source of an intentional state needs to share our life-situation as much as possible is most clear in the case of conscious imitation, though it applies as well to imitation in the more general sense of contagion or participation. A poor person who shares her goods in spite of her poverty, for example, is a much better model of love for other poor people than a rich person who gives out of his abundance. And this is true even if her influence as a mimetic source is largely unconscious.

just as this old subjectivity was mimetically obtained from others, and ultimately the first humans (represented by Adam), the new subjectivity is mimetically obtained from Christ, the "second Adam." Thus, this theory makes sense of much of Paul's discussion of "original sin" in Romans 5 and elsewhere, especially of the parallelism he draws between the transmission of sin from Adam and the transmission of righteousness from Christ (see Romans 5, 1 Cor. 15:22, 45-49).⁷

Not only does the Incarnational theory make sense of on its own terms and shed light on the Biblical passages cited above, but it also gives us a deeper understanding of both Old and New Testament rituals which are intended to express our fundamental relationship to God. First, the Incarnational theory makes it possible to see a new yet very traditionally Jewish meaning in the Old Testament sacrificial ritual, a ritual that the book of Hebrews tells us is supposed to be a type or image of Christ's sacrifice. Essentially, this ritual involved the worshiper laying hands on the head of an animal (for example, a lamb or a bull), and then slaying the animal. The priest then took the blood and poured it on the altar as a sacrifice to God. Now, as many commentators have noted, the Old Testament never really tells us how such a sacrifice is supposed to provide Atonement, except for laying down the principle that the "life is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11-14). Given this principle, and the claim, advanced by many commentators, that laying on of hands is best interpreted as an act of identification with the one on whom hands are laid (Taylor,

7

Although I do not claim that the Incarnational theory is necessarily a complete theory of Atonement, I do claim that it can account for the various New Testament statements used in support of the traditional so-called "objective" theories: namely, statements such as that through Christ's Atonement we are justified, made righteous, reconciled to God, forgiven of sin, and freed from the wrath of God. To see this, first note that, as New Testament Scholar J.D. Dunn (1993) argues, for Paul being justified or made righteous did not primarily have to do with acquittal of guilt, but rather primarily with being in right relationship with God, and secondarily being in right relationship with other human beings. A right relationship with God and others in which we mutually value each other's subjectivity, however, can only occur in a context in which we are freed from bondage to our old, "fallen" subjectivity through Christ's Atonement. Further, as Taylor (1946) argues, in the New Testament reconciliation and forgiveness of sins should primarily be understood as a removal of any hindrance to full communion with God, which under the Incarnational theory is essentially our alienated and sinful subjectivity.

The Incarnational theory, therefore, would claim that Christ's Atonement justifies us, makes us righteous, reconciles us to God, and results in forgiveness of sin by providing us a new, fully redeemed subjectivity in Christ. Although this new subjectivity must still be worked-out in each individual's life, its existence in Christ means that the barrier to a right relationship with God and others has already been effectively removed in Christ, and hence the New Testament can speak of us as already being justified, made righteous, reconciled, and forgiven in Christ. Put in traditional terminology, *justification* (that is, the existence of a new subjectivity in Christ) proceeds *sanctification* (the full working-out of this subjectivity in our lives). This makes the Incarnational theory in some sense both an "objective" theory and a "subjective" theory of Atonement in the sense of these terms discussed in section II above: it is "objective" since the change in Christ is logically prior to a change in us, yet "subjective" in that this change in Christ is intimately linked with a change in us through mimetic participation.

Finally, along the same lines as above, the Incarnational theory would claim that Christ's Atonement saves us from "God's wrath" by saving us from our sinful subjectivity. Because this subjectivity distorts and perverts our relationship to God and others, God, out of love, is absolutely opposed to it. Hence, as George MacDonald states (1976, p. 162), God could be said to be opposed to us--our desires, aims, and attitudes--in so far as, and while, we are wedded to it. That is, we could be said to be under God's wrath. Or, one could understand the "wrath of God" as the inevitable destructive consequence of this fallen subjectivity, as Paul seems to in Romans 1:18-32 when he speaks of the wrath of God as involving a "giving over" of humans to their own desires--that is, their fallen subjectivity.

1937, pp. 53-4; Dunn, 1991, pp. 44-5), a straightforward Christian interpretation of the Hebrew sacrificial ritual follows. The animal can be seen as analogous to Christ, the offering of its blood can be seen as analogous to Christ's offering his life over to God and others in love, hope, and trust, and thus the laying on of hands can be seen as analogous to our identification with, and thus sharing in, that love, hope and trust expressed by Christ on the Cross--a sharing that results in our redemption.

Further, from this analysis it follows that we are saved by Christ's blood shed on the Cross, and that his blood cleanses us from sin (1 John 1:7), but not in the magical way commonly conceived. Rather, Christ's blood represents his life completely given over to God and others in love, hope trust, and self-sharing. Or, put in the terminology of the Incarnational theory, it represents his subjectivity completely oriented towards giving his life to God and others in faith, hope, love, and self-sharing. Thus, we are saved from sin by partaking of this life, or subjectivity, oriented towards God and others in perfect love. This is why Jesus says in John 6 that we must drink his blood in order to have eternal life.

This account also provides an insightful understanding of the Christian practice of communion. Under the Incarnational theory, taking communion by eating the bread and drinking the cup vividly symbolizes (or enacts) partaking of Christ's brokenness, life, and love poured out on the Cross--that is, in the language of the Incarnational theory, it symbolizes (or enacts) the partaking of the Christ's fully divine and fully human subjectivity which both entered into the depths of our brokenness and was at the same time given over in complete love to God and others. Further, just as we assimilate food and drink into our bodies, we symbolically enact the assimilation or integration of this subjectivity into our own by partaking of Christ's "body and blood."

Finally, the Incarnational theory provides an insightful understanding of the Christian practice of baptism. According to Paul's "model" of Atonement in Romans 6, it is through being baptized--that is, united--with Christ in his death that we break the power of sin and share in his resurrection life: "If we have been united with Christ in his death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5). According to the Incarnational theory, being united with Christ during his death involves sharing in Christ's subjectivity during his death, and hence, as explained above, becoming "crucified" to the world-system of status and psychic and spiritual bondage. Yet, at the same time, to partake of Christ's death is to also to share in the perfect love, hope, and trust that Christ exercised during his life and passion, a love, hope, and trust that in turn overcomes our alienation towards ourselves, others, and God, thereby resulting in resurrection life.⁸

⁸ Those familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and the many therapy programs its success has spawned, will note the similarity between the understanding of the process of transformation of subjectivity involved in sharing in Christ's death and Resurrection and the well-known Twelve Step program of AA. Specifically, the core of the Twelve Step program is to first admit one's own powerlessness, vulnerability, and dependence, and then to give oneself over to the transforming grace of "a higher power": that is, in the language of the Incarnational theory, to the transforming grace of the love and faith in Christ. Thus, AA and related therapy programs provide good evidence that something similar to the process of transformation described by the Incarnational theory actually works in practice. I also suspect that historically many religious transformations have followed the same pattern.

It should also be mentioned here that "sharing in Christ's death" is different for those who are marginalized and oppressed since they already largely recognize their vulnerability and dependence, so unlike the "rich" it is probably not as difficult for them to partake of the subjectivity of Christ in his death. (As Jesus says, it is particularly difficult for the rich--whether in money, talent, or position--to enter the Kingdom of God.) Nonetheless,

Next, it would be useful to compare this account of “salvation” with that of the great religious/philosophical systems of Asia, particularly Mahayana Buddhism, philosophical Taoism, and Neo-Confucianism. Each of these traditions have recognized that the root of the human problem is appropriative desire. Moreover, they have recognized that we cannot overcome this desire by our own efforts, but must somehow participate in a new source of positive desire, such as the Buddha Mind, the Tao, or the Great Ultimate. Although Therevada Buddhism--which Western scholars tend to agree most closely represents what the Buddha taught--teaches that we are to overcome appropriative desire by our own efforts, within several hundred years after the Buddha’s death the need for a source of positive desire, namely Love or Compassion, was recognized, resulting in the development of the Mahayana tradition, which today represents the vast majority of Buddhists. For Mahayana Buddhists, the source of this Love is ultimately the Buddha-Mind or Buddha-Nature, and it expresses itself through Bodhisattvas, fully enlightened beings full of Compassion who realize their oneness with the Buddha-nature. Buddhists then try to get in touch with this Buddha-Mind both through emulation of the Bodhisattvas and through existentially realizing their own identity with it through meditation.

In philosophical Taoism--i.e., the Taoism traditionally attributed to Lao Tzu and his successors--appropriative desire is also seen as the source of strife, disharmony, and human dissatisfaction. The heart of the Taoist solution is to effectively gain a new set of "desires" or intentional states based on the mimetic participation in nature--which is perceived as harmonious and non-appropriative. Over a thousand years later, the Taoist tradition and the Confucian tradition were conjoined to form what is called the *neo-Confucian synthesis*, which became the predominant philosophical system of thought in China until the communist revolution in the Twentieth Century. In both the so-called Rationalist and Idealist schools of this synthesis, the needed desire is *jen*, often translated as love or deep empathy towards others in which one attempts to value the other's subjectivity by, among other things, trying to see things from the other's perspective. Our job is to "clarify" our nature so that we can more fully participate in this *jen*, which is considered to be at the heart of the "Great Ultimate" and hence of the Cosmos and human nature (Fung, 1947, pp. 281-318).⁹

According to the Incarnational theory, the Christian gospel is in agreement with these other traditions in their affirmation of the need for a source of positive intentional states to supplant appropriative desire. From the perspective of the Incarnational theory, however, one key difference is that in Christianity these positive intentional

it is true that, unlike Jesus, the oppressed are often not in solidarity with the true "subjectivity of the oppressed," but rather end up adopting the subjectivity of the oppressors--such as implicitly viewing themselves as inferior or as chattel--and hence still partake of the world system of status, oppression, and domination, but from the other end. In addition, they often still try to solve their problems through their own strength or through violent means, and oppress those lower in status, such as oppressed men treating their wives as chattel.

9 At least with respect to the need for a positive source of desire, the above sort of analysis not only applies to the religions of Asia mentioned above, but also to some Western religions such as Judaism in which the Torah could be thought of as embodying God's desires. One could then understand much of Jewish practice as reflecting the idea that one can participate in God's desires as embodied in the Torah either: i) through the mediation of the community of faith in combination with the various “texts” the community has developed as commentaries and interpretations of the Torah; or ii) directly, as claimed in certain mystical or pietistic branches of Judaism.

states are part of the subjectivity of a particular historical individual (Jesus), a subjectivity that is in full acknowledgment and engagement with the world and the depths of our life-situation, and moreover in solidarity with the marginalized and scapegoats of society. The consequence of this is that, in partaking of Christ's subjectivity, we are called to fully engage with the world and our life-situation, and fully acknowledge all those things which we have repressed and scapegoated, both in our own psychic lives and in society. Only by doing this can we also fully partake of the faith, hope, and love that are in Christ.

Finally, it is useful to mention how the Incarnational theory can be seen as an elaboration of certain prominent themes regarding Atonement and salvation in Church history. First, as indicated above, the Incarnational theory can be thought of as extending and deepening the traditional Moral Exemplar theory in such a way as to eliminate the elements in the Moral Exemplar theory that more conservative Christians find problematic.¹⁰ Second, the Incarnational theory can be thought of as a new way of developing a basic idea of salvation that not only has ancient roots in the Greek Fathers such as Origen, Athanasius, and Irenaeus, but which has been further developed by Eastern Orthodox theologians through the centuries and has turned up here and there in Western Christianity, for example in the theology of the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, and in many contemporary theologians. The basic idea is that human nature was restored in Christ, and salvation consists in partaking of this new human nature in Christ.¹¹ The Incarnational theory further develops this basic idea by spelling-out what this new nature is in a unique way and by giving us some idea of how we can partake of it. Namely, under the Incarnational theory, this “unfallen” human nature in Christ is the fully divine yet fully human subjectivity developed in the Christ during his life and death, as discussed above. Thus, according to the Incarnational theory we are saved by mimetically partaking of the Incarnated subjectivity of God the Son, hence the name the *Incarnational theory*. Finally, this view of Atonement helps explicate *how* the Atonement defeats the forces of evil in the much discussed *Christus Victor* understanding of Atonement (see Aulén, 1951). Identifying these forces of evil with what theologian Walter Wink (1992) has called the “domination system”, Christ’s Atonement can be seen as defeating the forces of evil by providing a new subjectivity that both deconstructs this system and provides the new, positive, non-appropriative set

10 For example, unlike the traditional version of the Moral Exemplar theory, the Incarnational theory explicitly incorporates the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit in bringing about our participation in Christ’s subjectivity, and thus removes the Palegian element often associated with the Moral Exemplar theory. Further, in the Incarnational theory imitation is conceived in a deeper way as actually involving a participation in Christ’s subjectivity instead of merely involving following or being inspired by Christ’s example. This not only makes the Incarnational theory fit very well with scripture, but it also gives it an “objective” component lacking in the standard Moral Exemplar theory as explained in footnote 7.

11 As I argue elsewhere (1995, Unpublished Manuscript), however, the Eastern Orthodox development of this idea is deeply problematic from the perspective of Western modes of thought. (For a discussion of the history of the Eastern Orthodox view, see for instance, Demitru Staniloae, 1980, pp. 181-212. Among the many theologians who have suggested a view along the lines of this basic idea of Atonement are S. J. Grenz (1990, pp. 121-22) and Michael Ramsey, one of the great Anglican Archbishops of the Twentieth Century. (For an exposition of Ramsey's views in this regard, see Leech, 1986.) Further, I have been informed that something related to this idea of Atonement is part of Wesleyan thought on the subject. I do not, however, know of anyone in the West who has systematically worked-out this idea, at least in the way I have done.

of desires of faith, hope, and love of the kind we need for full engagement with the world.¹²

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