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Paul Fiddes

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Jesus as the Pattern of Love in Atonement

Paul Fiddes

This article discusses the interpretation of the Christian doctrine of atonement which is usually called the 'moral influence' theory. A close analysis will suggest that this theory is better called 'persuasive love', since the revelation of God's love in the death of Christ is central to this approach to reconciliation between God and human beings. The idea has taken different forms over the years since the medieval theologian Peter Abelard (1079–1142) first clearly articulated it. Versions that lay stress on the subjective aspect maintain that a supreme example of love calls for imitation by those who see it, while more objective versions insist that divine love has the power actually to *create* a responsive love in human persons. Discussion of the theory is thus often confused by a failure to explore what 'influence' or 'persuasion' might mean, and 'moral influence' is often reduced – either by exponents or critics – to the prompting of an imitation of the moral character of Christ by those who behold the self-giving of Christ on the cross. This is open to the criticism that human beings, sinful as they are, do not possess the moral capacity to imitate Christ until they have been transformed by a divine act of redemption. Even accounts of atonement that set out a process of persuasive love which is more than example have, however, been subject to the criticism that these are liable to encourage abuse of the powerless, a passivity that cannot overcome evil, and an individualism that does not address structural sin in society. These critiques can only be answered when the power of love is properly understood as the work of a God who protests against suffering. Moreover, the objectivity of persuasive love is most clearly seen when it is placed in the context of a Christology where the pattern of Christ's love is identified with the patterns of love in the triune God.

Keywords: Atonement, Salvation, Persuasion, Jesus Christ, Trinity, Love, Holy Spirit, Sin, Abelard, Liberation

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1 Atonement as persuasive love

1.1 Abelard's model of atonement

In an often-quoted passage from his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Abelard writes:

> Nevertheless it seems to us that in this we are justified in the blood of Christ and reconciled to God, that it was through this matchless grace shown to us that his Son received our nature, and in that nature, teaching us both by word and example, persevered to the death and bound us to himself even more through love, so that when we have been kindled by so great a benefit of divine grace, true charity might fear to endure nothing for his sake. (on Rom 3:26, *answer*; Abelard 2011: 167–168)

The different versions of the theory of 'persuasive love' correspond to the diversity of meaning which might be given to Abelard's key word, 'kindled'. This can sustain a spectrum of meanings, in which the love of God demonstrated in the cross might be an 'example', or a creative influence, or a generative power. Evidence for all three of these meanings can be found in Abelard's writings. Indeed, his approach embraces the whole range, and cannot be reduced to any one of them (Fiddes 1989: 140–158).

1.1.1 Love as an example

An 'example' would give an occasion for imitation, an opportunity for the observer to kindle love in himself or herself. This is expressed in the Victorian hymn 'There is a green hill far away' by Cecil Francis Alexander (1848): 'O dearly, dearly has he loved / and we must love him too'. Abelard appears to foster this approach with his phrase 'teaching us by word and *example*, persevered to the death', and he also writes that Christ shows humans the love of God 'to teach us how much we *ought* to love him who did not spare his own Son for us' (on Rom 3:25; Abelard 2011: 163, emphasis added). The severe criticism of Abelard in his own time by Bernard of Clairvaux assumes that this is the entirety of Abelard's thought on atonement. Writing to Pope Innocent II, Bernard is the first of a long line to accuse Abelard of holding a merely exemplary view:

> He holds and argues that it must be reduced just to this, that by his life and teaching [Jesus] handed down to men a pattern of life, that by his suffering and death he set up a standard of love. Did he then teach righteousness and not bestow it; reveal love and not infuse it? (Letters 190; Grensted 1962: 106)

To these rhetorical questions Abelard was in fact, like Bernard, offering a 'no'. Abelard thinks, as will be seen in the exploration below, of the spectrum of what 'enkindles' means, that Christ did 'infuse' love in us precisely through revealing it. While Abelard is certainly interested in what Bernard calls the 'pattern' of Christ's life, this cannot in his mind be

reduced to an example to be copied. Abelard was one of a new generation of theologians in the second half of the twelfth century who had developed a deep curiosity about the life of Jesus as a human being (Evans 1980: 154–156). Anselm had already raised the question ‘why did God become man?’, and his successors laid even more stress on the ‘man’ part of the query. Abelard, for instance, wants to know why Christ spent so long living on earth among human beings before his death (on Rom 3:27; Abelard 2011: 169–170). He can find no adequate motivation for the particular path of salvation God had freely chosen in either of the two popular main theories of the time – the honouring of the ‘right’ to possess human beings which the devil had supposedly acquired through human sinning, or the satisfaction of God’s honour. Moreover, both of these accounts seemed to him to impose a necessity upon God from outside God’s own self, as if God had to find some way of solving a presenting problem.

If Abelard is directly attacking Anselm’s views, he is not entirely fair to them, since Anselm also denied that God was under the constraint of any external necessity. But Abelard makes a shrewd point that, if humankind owed a debt to God’s honour which had to be satisfied, the death of Christ would only have made matters worse since he was murdered by human beings (on Rom 3:26; Abelard 2011: 166–167). This is rather more than the mere debating tactic it appears to be on the surface, since it reveals Abelard’s interest in the actual human circumstances of the life and death of Christ that can be lost in technical theory. Abelard concludes, in direct opposition to Anselm:

> How very cruel and unjust it seems that someone should require the blood of an innocent person as a ransom, or that in any way it might please him that an innocent person be slain, still less that God should have so accepted the death of his Son that through it he was reconciled to the whole world. (on Rom 3:26, *question*; Abelard 2011: 167)

There is only one possible motivation that Abelard can find for the Son of God to redeem humanity through the particular means of ‘so many great fasts, reproaches, lashings, spitting, and finally the most violent and shameful death’ (Abelard 2011: 166): the sheer love of God.

Though others, such as Origen, had said this before (Origen 2001: 293–294, on Rom 4:10), Abelard’s originality is in the rigour and concentration with which he works out the idea. He affirms that when God revealed himself in the life of Jesus and reconciled humanity to himself by his death he did not have to satisfy any prior conditions, such as the demands of Satan or his own justice. He was simply satisfying his own nature of love. The very essence of God is love, and so the original act of creation and the new act of redemption were only ‘necessary’ in the sense that they fulfilled his own being. Since it is the essence of love to be ecstatic, moving beyond and diffusing itself, creation and redemption are fitting for God as a logical working out or ‘intrinsic necessity’ of his

nature (*Theologia Scholarium*; Abelard 1885: 1101b). As God was moved to create human beings in the first place because he is love, planting within them his image which is chiefly characterized by love (*Expositio in Hexaemeron*; Abelard 1885: 765a), so he was moved by love to restore them when they broke the bond of love that joined them to him. In the phrase of one interpreter of Abelard, this is 'the logic of divine love' (Weingart 1970: 66–78). Since, in Abelard's view, it is humankind that needs to be reconciled to God while God himself does not need to be reconciled to anyone, the love of God is the means as well as the motive of redemption. The need is for human beings to be changed, and Abelard believes that the love of God revealed and present in Christ will create that change.

Abelard's interest in the human life of Christ, and in the pattern which his teaching and works provide for us, is thoroughly characteristic of his time. Bernard and Anselm, among others, call upon the Christian disciple to imitate the example of Christ. Peter Damian exhorts the monk to follow 'Christ the poor man', and the discipline of imitation rises to a pitch in the slightly later work of Thomas à Kempis, who urges all to 'conform themselves to the crucified' (*Imitation of Christ*, 2:12; Thomas à Kempis 1886: 118). However, alongside the setting forth of a pattern by Christ, these theologians affirm more objective redemptive work – usually the satisfaction of God's honour or the meeting of the devil's rights. Bernard's mystical heart, however, is really in another kind of objective act of Christ; commenting on the text from the Song of Songs (1:3) that 'thy name is as oil poured forth', Bernard explains that 'the plenitude of his divinity was poured forth when he dwelt in bodily form upon earth' (*Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 15; Bernard of Clairvaux 1959: 84). He believes that God revealed his love by pouring divine life into human nature as a whole, changing it once and for all. This is why he accuses of Abelard of forgetting that love was not only revealed but 'also' infused. However, one might well ask how in practice human nature could have been universally transformed by a single act of transfusion. How a single past event is connected with salvation in the present moment is a fundamental question to be explored; Abelard's thinking presents an answer, even if he himself failed to see entirely what it is. His intention is nevertheless to affirm that the pattern of the life and death of Christ is no mere example but exhibits a love that re-creates. This introduces a second meaning of the word 'kindled' in his thought.

1.1.2 Love as a creative influence

The phrase 'creative influence' here refers to Abelard's perception that the love expressed in the cross has a direct effect on the observer, awakening and inciting love to be exercised by him or her. This becomes even less like a mere example if the cross is a revelation of the love of God, and if revelation is not just a message but the self-disclosure of God's own being, since God is thus present and encountering the other in order to 'kindle' love.

Abelard writes, '[d]ispelling our shadows with light, he showed us, both by his words and example, the fullness of all virtues, and repaired our nature' (Abelard, *Sermons* 3; Abelard 1885: 396b). As he moves from 'showed' to 'repaired', Abelard is trying to express his insight that the love disclosed is at the same time the love which transforms. Similarly, in the famous passage quoted at the beginning of this article – often taken as summarizing his thought – he moves from the phrase 'teaching us by word and example' to speaking of Christ's 'binding' us with love through his death, so that we have been 'kindled by so great a benefit of divine grace' (on Rom 3:26, *answer*; Abelard 2011: 167–168). Abelard is not simply saying that the revelation of love saves us, but that love as it is revealed saves us. Since in Abelard's view it is humankind that needs to be reconciled to God while God himself does not need to be reconciled to anyone, the love of God is the means as well as the motive of redemption. The need is for human beings to be changed, and Abelard believes that the love of God, revealed and present in Christ, will create that change. Indeed, Abelard indicates that the transforming effect of the love of God is so potent that

> [e]ach one is made more righteous after the Passion of Christ than before; that is, he loves God more, because the completed benefit kindles him in love more than a hoped-for benefit. Therefore, our redemption is that supreme love in us through the Passion of Christ, which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but gains for us the true liberty of the sons of God, so that we may complete all things by his love rather than by fear. (on Rom 3:26; Abelard 2011: 168)

It is clear from such expressions as 'made righteous', 'kindles' (or 'incites'), 'frees us', and 'gains for us' that Abelard believes the revelation of God's love to have a redemptive impact which exceeds the prompting of an emotional response. One way in which Abelard appears to explain how a disclosure of love can have this transformative effect is to turn to the power of a story. Writing to Heloise, Abelard urges her to imagine herself to be one of the bystanders on the path of Christ's passion:

> Are you not moved to tears of remorse by the only begotten Son of God, who for you and for all mankind, in his innocence was seized by the hands of impious men, dragged along and scourged, blindfolded, mocked at, buffeted, spat upon, crowned with thorns, finally hanged between thieves on the Cross […] Keep him in mind. Look at him going to be crucified for your sake, carrying his own cross. Be one of the crowd, one of the women who wept and lamented over him […] In your mind be always present at his tomb, weep and wail with the faithful women […] prepare with them the perfumes for his burial. (Letter 4; Abelard 1974: 151)

The setting of this passage in the life of Abelard and Heloise, one of the most famous love stories of the Middle Ages, is no mere incidental piece of biography. Following the catastrophic outcome of their secret marriage and the shameful revenge inflicted upon Abelard, the lovers had both retreated to the enclosed religious life. Thirteen years later,

Heloise – by then an esteemed abbess – was prompted to write to Abelard after reading his *History of My Misfortunes*. In the astonishing series of letters that followed, Heloise passionately recalls their former love ('queens and great ladies envied me my joys and my bed', Abelard 2011: 115), reveals a heart still torn apart with longing for Abelard, and rebukes him for failing to write to her with comfort and spiritual counsel. Heloise is imaginatively re-living the story of their love, and in telling it (in detail) to herself she feels both grief and grievance. Abelard thus takes up the human experience of telling a story and the human gift of memory, and applies it to the narrative of the cross; Heloise is to enter into that story with the same imagination, for '[i]t was he who truly loved you, not I'. With psychological discernment, Abelard points out that their human love was actually marred by her fear of him (Abelard 1974: 154); so in his commentary on Romans he finds that the love shown in Christ is a new motivation for obedience to God, replacing the fear promoted by law (Abelard 2011: 168).

Holding the picture of Christ, teacher and sufferer, in the imagination could have a merely emotional effect. Abelard trembles on the edge of this when he expects Heloise to be moved to tears, and much medieval devotion is over-subjective, especially when it invites the onlooker to pity Christ. But Abelard clearly has an intuitive perception of a psychological mechanism at work which depends upon the impact of an objective event, especially a revelatory event, and in which a deep change takes place in the mind.

1.1.3 Love as a generative power

Love as a creative influence blurs over in Abelard's thinking into a third kind of persuasion, a generative power within the person responding. This is not just an external influence awakening love but the persuasion of love as an inner force. Overall, the theory of 'persuasive love' depends on change being created in human life through the response of a person to the love of God, but here that love is understood to be infused, operating within the very personality, at the depths of conscious and unconscious life. Exactly how this gift of an inner power is connected with the historic event of the cross then becomes a question to be answered. Abelard may not succeed in doing this, but it is clear that he wants to affirm it, writing that 'our redemption is that supreme *love in us* through the Passion of Christ, which […] frees us from slavery to sin' (Abelard 2011: 168; emphasis added).

While Bernard writes of love being 'infused' (from *infundo*), Abelard prefers the equivalent phrase 'poured out into' (from *diffundo*), following the statement of the apostle Paul that 'the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit' (Rom 5:5). Abelard quotes this text in the context of his affirmation that redemption is 'love in us', and that 'Christ has come to increase this true liberty of love' among human persons (Abelard 2011: 168). Again, following Paul, Abelard understands this pouring of love into the inner being as the internal working of the Holy Spirit: 'Christ […] sent the Holy Spirit; that is, he poured out his

pure love into us by which we love him sincerely for his own sake' (*Sermons* 5; Abelard 1885: 423c; cf. Abelard 2011: 272, on Rom 8:15). This identification of the Holy Spirit with love underlines that Abelard is not simply urging believers to copy the love of Christ by their own efforts; it emphasizes his attempt to talk about the creative power of God's love to generate love within them. Abelard understands love to be the special characteristic of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, and it is the Spirit who reactivates the love of human beings for their creator.

Abelard is following predecessors in understanding regeneration to be the work of the Spirit, originating in the redemptive work of Christ. Athanasius, for instance, writes that '[b]eing creatures by nature, [human persons] would never have become sons if they had not received the Spirit from Him who is true son by nature' (*Contra Arianos*, 2.59). The Spirit was also normally associated with the growth of love within a Christian disciple. Abelard's insight is to make the 'pouring out' of love by the Spirit the very means of redemption itself. Like his predecessors too, he faces the challenge of making clear how one historic moment, even a pattern of life displayed at one time, can be decisive for the work of the Spirit in salvation here and now. As Athanasius asserts in the passage quoted above, this is 'from him [Christ]'; but the causative link – between the present acts of God to restore and adopt human beings into his family, and what is claimed to be the special activity of God in one human person in the past – must be clarified (see section 2.2 below). This is certainly what Abelard intends, as he writes: '"To the showing of his justice" [Rom 3:25] – that is his love – which justifies us in his sight' (Abelard 1956: 279). For Abelard, the showing forth of the love of God in the life of Christ is at the same time the pouring forth of love into the one who beholds it, and so the putting of that person 'in the right' with God.

1.2 Objectivity and subjectivity in atonement

While Abelard's approach to atonement is often dismissed as 'merely subjective', the ideas of love as creative influence and generative power clearly have an objective aspect to them, as having a reality which cannot be exhausted into human response. The descriptions 'objective' and 'subjective' have usually been employed in thinking about the nature of the atonement, and they are a convenient piece of shorthand (Fiddes 1989: 26–31).

In the first place, an interpretation of the atonement may be said to be 'subjective' when it describes salvation as a process in present human experience. It is 'objective' when it locates salvation in a past event, outside our experience and feelings. Therefore, no theory of atonement can be entirely subjective or objective, but rather there will be a shifting balance between the two elements in different understandings of atonement. The more that salvation in the present is believed to be dependent on a past event, the more

objective it becomes, and the greater is the danger of regarding present experience as a mere appendix to a completed act. But, conversely, the heavier the stress laid upon present experience, the greater the danger becomes of regarding salvation as a merely subjective matter of human feelings. The question then is not whether a view of atonement is objective or subjective; it is how well it integrates the two elements. All theories of atonement, however culturally determined they have been, have at least tried to bring the elements of past and present, event and process, together.

A second set of 'subjective' and 'objective' elements is the polarity of act and response. If the first set puts the past and the present in tension, the second relates the divine and the human. Objectively, salvation is an act of God; since human beings are trapped in a predicament from which they cannot extricate themselves, God must take the initiative in providing a release. The apostle Paul sums up the matter when he says, 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8). Subjectively, salvation must include the human response since it needs two to make a meeting. It would be a mistake, however, simply to identify the past event of salvation with the divine act and the present process with the human response. While God has certainly acted in the past event of the cross, God goes on acting in the process of salvation, taking the initiative in entering the lives of human beings and luring them into response. On the other hand, at the heart of the past event is the human response of Jesus, in open obedience to the Father, fulfilling human destiny where other persons have failed.

The movement between action and response leads to a third and even more profound polarity between objectivity and subjectivity in salvation. Traditional, strongly 'objective' doctrines of atonement have proposed some change in God resulting from the atoning work of Christ. More 'subjective' accounts have laid the stress upon the power of the cross to produce a change in human attitudes. It seems clear that salvation requires a change in human minds and emotions, described in biblical language as 'repentance'. Human attitudes of pride, fear, and anxiety create blockages between God and humankind, and God as a saviour sets out to remove these in a sacrificial way. But some views of atonement have suggested that in effect there are blockages to reconciliation in God's own nature. While affirming that there is no reluctance on God's part to forgive and accept, it has been suggested that God's justice requires to be satisfied before God can put forgiving love into effect. Because human beings are guilty sinners, it is maintained, a debt has to be paid to justice before they can be forgiven. Highly 'objective' views of atonement have thus conceived of a change in God in the sense that God's righteous wrath, or the demand of God's law, is 'satisfied' through some kind of propitiating act. More 'subjective' views of atonement, such as Abelard's, insist that the only problem lies in human hearts and minds: while God is always willing to accept us, the problem is how to remove the hindrances to acceptance in *us*, and how to persuade people to respond to God's offer of forgiveness.

There is, however, another way of conceiving of an objective ‘change’ in God which does not depend on the idea of ‘satisfying’ God. If God’s suffering with the world is considered seriously, it must involve change of some kind since suffering is always a movement from one state of being to another (Fiddes 1988: 46–76; see Suffering). If God suffers in empathy with the world, even if this is not exactly the same as human suffering, there will be some change in God’s experience of the world according to the kind of response God receives. This clarifies how one particular moment of response, that of Christ himself, could be more intense and critical for God than others. Without thinking of God’s changing from wrath to love, if God did enter into the human predicament in a decisive way in the cross of Jesus then God must have been exposed to something ‘new’ in the divine experience of the world, and even in God’s experience of God’s self.

No understanding of the atoning work of Christ is going to integrate subjective and objective dimensions in a completely satisfactory way. Theories of atonement are, after all, conceptual tools with which humans try to grasp a mystery in the divine-human relationship. Some theories will begin at the objective end of the spectrum of understanding with some kind of transaction or ‘satisfaction’, and then add the subjective appendix of human response. Others will tip the balance the other way, beginning at the subjective end with the present human response to God and then affirming an objective focus in which the cross of Jesus somehow enables this response. Abelard’s approach is of this second kind: the love of God in the pattern of Jesus’ life, climaxing in the cross, is a creative influence and a generative power in the human personality.

1.3 Objectivity and subjectivity in Abelard

A significant question is whether Abelard is able sufficiently to articulate the objective dimension of atonement, in its three aspects of being an action of God, a past event, and change in God. First, he has no problem in affirming transformative love as an act of God. Second, he asserts that this love is ‘poured out’ into human hearts here and now from a specific event in history, though he gives no clear explanation as to how this might be. Regarding the third aspect, however, he struggles to explain how this event might have made a difference to God in God’s relation to the world. This seems to be indicated by the fact that, in his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, while firmly propounding his own theory of redeeming love, Abelard supplements it with several of the traditional metaphors for the atoning work of Christ. Notably there is reference to the removal of ‘penalty’ or ‘punishment’ (on Rom 4:25, Rom 5:19, *questions*, Rom 8:3; Abelard 2011: 204, 227, 266), but there is also passing reference to sacrifice, expiation, price, and the defeat of Satan (on Rom 1:1, Rom 3:12, 3:26, 4:11, 4:25, 5:10–11; Abelard 2011: 99, 154, 163, 180–181, 204, 207–208; cf. *Sermons* 9; Abelard 1885: 446d). It is difficult to estimate the significance of this supplementation, especially the reference to a penalty to which human

beings are liable, and here there have been several kinds of interpretation of Abelard, all raising the issue of what might be called ‘objectivity’.

In a recent exegesis of Abelard, he is presented as having a double theory of atonement in which ‘Christ has the dual role of exciting to charity *and* freeing from punishment’ (Burns 1975: 290, emphasis added; so Williams 2004: 265–269; cf. Quinn 1993: 289–291, but see below). Abelard’s use, alongside his theory of kindling love, of the metaphor of ‘sweeping away a penalty for sins’ on the cross (on Rom 4:25; Abelard 2011: 204) has been systematized into the need for a dual atonement, which Thomas Williams names as ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’. The dominion of sin, Williams observes, has the dual aspects of making the sinner liable to punishment and producing an inclination to obey disordered desires (see Abelard on Rom 5:19, *question*; Rom 4:25; Abelard 2011: 215). Correspondingly, Williams proposes, there is a dual redemption, consisting in an objective transaction of ‘substitutionary punishment’ and a subjective movement of ‘inspiration by love’ (Williams 2004: 261–263). However, as with Burns earlier, penal substitution is narrowly specified in terms of the removal of the eternal punishment due to humans through the sin of Adam. Williams, we notice, understands Abelard to be connecting justification of the sinner here and now with God’s bestowal of love, rather than with penal substitution. Justification is ‘our being made righteous through charity’ (Williams 2004: 269, in line with Abelard’s phrase, ‘justified through the love we have in him’, on Rom 5:9; Abelard 2011: 207). Moreover, both Williams and Burns see problems with the ‘transactional’ aspect they find in Abelard’s supposedly dual presentation. Burns observes that the relation between the temporal punishment of Christ and the eternal punishment of guilty human beings ‘goes unexplored’ (Burns 1975: 290), and Williams claims not to ‘see any straightforward sense in which Abelard can hold that Christ bore the punishment for our sins’ (Williams 2004: 267).

Nevertheless, Williams insists there must be an objective dimension, since humans cannot respond to God with an answering love unless there is some ‘benefit’ in the cross of Jesus for which to be grateful (Williams 2004: 262). He does not consider whether this benefit might be precisely the outpouring of God’s transformative love in the cross, and whether the kindling of love within believers might be called objective. Philip Quinn also maintains that Abelard includes an aspect of ‘penal substitution’ alongside the ‘love that transforms motive and character in redeemed humans’ (Quinn 1993: 292). As evidence he quotes Abelard’s discussion of Rom 4:25, using his own translation of the passage:

> In two ways [Christ] is said to have died for our faults: first, because the faults for which he died were ours, and we committed the sins for which he bore the punishment; secondly that by dying he might remove our sins, that, is, the punishment of our sins, introducing us into paradise at the price of his own death, and might, by the display of grace such that

> he himself said, ‘Greater love no man hath,’ draw our mind away from the will to sin and enkindle in them the highest love of himself. (Quinn 1993: 290)

However, Quinn does not build any case for a ‘dual role’ of Christ in atonement. Far from systematizing the different aspects he sees Abelard as presenting, he is sympathetic to L. W. Grensted’s remark that Abelard’s heart is really in the thought with which he concludes in this passage, that ‘the grace displayed in Christ’s dying might work an inner transformation in us by which are minds are drawn away from sin’ (Quinn 1993: 291, citing Grensted 1962: 109). Quinn thus admits the presence of an element of substitution but stresses that ‘the central motif’ of Abelard’s account, or the ‘dominant motif to which others are subordinated’ (1993: 285, 292) is that of transformative love. This, he underlines, is not Pelagian (obtaining salvation through our own efforts) because the love of God is ‘a benefit of grace conferred on us through Christ’ (1993: 294). Abelard has included an aspect of penal substitution for the sake of completeness in discussion, but it is ‘subordinated to the theme of the transformative power of divine love’ (1993: 296). What Abelard has to contribute to our thinking about the atonement, Quinn affirms, is

> the idea that divine love, made manifest throughout the life of Christ, but especially in his suffering and dying, has the power to transform human sinners, if they cooperate, in ways that fit them for everlasting life in intimate union with God. (Quinn 1993: 295)

Richard Weingart, in his thorough study of Abelard, had already taken a similar line, avowedly following the much earlier account of Robert Taylor who had denied that Abelard’s theory of divine love was merely exemplarist (Weingart 1970: 126; Taylor 1935: 213). Weingart, unlike Quinn, takes up the language of subjectivity and objectivity, and insists that Abelard’s often-quoted account of Rom 3:26 is not ‘subjective’. The whole tone of the passage is set by the theme that God is moved by love to take the initiative in transforming men’ (Weingart 1970: 131). Weingart takes notice of the fact that Abelard, alongside his theory of transformative love, ‘employs so many of the traditional metaphors for, and descriptions of, Christ’s atoning work that are arbitrarily labelled “objective”’ (1970: 131). However, he insists that Abelard’s diversity of expressions all simply underline that his approach is ‘theocentric’; he is using them to articulate, in different ways, ‘the infusion of divine love in the unregenerate hearts of sinners’ (1970: 14, cf. 150). Weingart takes seriously Abelard’s protest against the notion of offering satisfaction to God, judging (unlike Quinn) that Abelard always denies Christ’s work to be one of appeasement or substitution (1970: 150). While Abelard uses the language of ‘the price of his own death’ (for example on Rom 4:25, above), he maintains that this is simply about ‘bearing the cost of man’s salvation in love’, and that Abelard ‘uses the commercial metaphors of ‘purchase’ and ‘price’ without implying any theory constructed in a commercial mode’ (1970: 146). If Quinn, citing Weingart, subordinates penal substitution to transformative love (Quinn 1993: 293), Weingart himself effectively assumes it into the loving action of God. Alister McGrath

rightly concludes from reading Weingart that Abelard does not hold an ‘exemplarist’ theory of atonement, but McGrath then on that basis appears to discount all accounts of persuasive love as being non-Abelardian and an Enlightenment invention (McGrath 1985: 208–212).

It appears, then, that systematic notions of a ‘dual’ model of atonement in Abelard cannot be sustained, noting the qualifications of both Burns and Williams themselves and agreeing with Weingart and Quinn that the model of transformative love is normative in Abelard (Fiddes 1989: 140–145). This model has in itself both subjective and objective aspects, being a subjective response entirely reliant on an objective divine action of ‘pouring out love’ into the human personality. Abelard evidently finds it difficult to explain both how this event is objectively associated with the historic cross of Jesus and how God is affected by it. The second part of this article will outline an ‘Abelardian’ approach that does deal with these issues. In a strictly historical assessment of Abelard, Abelard seems to be less consistent than either Weingart or Quinn propose. He appears to be making a passing appeal to the metaphor of transferred penalty (which Burns argues is actually an innovation in Abelard compared with Anselm; Burns 1975: 304), as well as other images such as sacrifice, in searching for a way of reinforcing objectivity in God’s work of salvation. He attempts consistency – for example, when he quotes the word *propriator* from the Vulgate translation (on Rom 3:25; Abelard 2011: 163), he says nothing about appeasement of God’s wrath, and in his comment on Rom 4:25 it is possible to understand him as saying that the penalty for sin is removed by God when, and because, love is kindled in the human heart and the will is deflected back to God. But there remains an untidiness about his thought. He appears to be appealing to metaphors which might give objectivity to the work of salvation, but he is not able to integrate them into his main idea of the power of divine love. Nor does he use them to show how God’s act of love in the cross might be an occasion for ‘change’ in the life of God and God’s relation to the world.

An appeal to the suffering of God out of love in the cross of Jesus would certainly strengthen the objectivity of Abelard’s account. God, it may be said, undergoes the bitter depths of human experience in the cross. God shows his love by enduring to the uttermost the estrangement of his own creation. Although one may affirm that God has always suffered with creation, here God goes to the furthest point on the journey of identification and so experiences something ‘new’ in relation to the world, and in this sense is changed (Moltmann 1977: 62–63; Fiddes 1988: 7–10). But Abelard, like others of his time, is not able to give this answer. He is working with the presupposition that the divine nature cannot suffer or change in any way, so that it is only the human nature of Jesus which literally suffers in the cross. Following the tradition of ‘two nature Christology’, Abelard explains that when God assumed humanity the divine and human natures were united in one person, so it is permissible to interchange the titles and characteristics given to

God and man in Christ. Thus one can certainly say that ‘the Lord of glory was crucified’; but this must be interpreted as ‘the man or body assumed by him was fastened to the stake’ (*Expositio symboli apostolorum*; Abelard 1885: 625a).

Abelard, for all his celebration of the freedom of God to love, restricts divine freedom at this point. God is not free to endure suffering and death, because the divine essence must be always impassible and immutable. While some modern theologians have continued this classical tradition (e.g. Creel 1986; Weinandy 2000), others have contested it. They have either affirmed that God has the freedom to choose to be conditioned by the world (Barth 1936–1977: 303: [vol. II/1]) and so to be open to suffering befalling God (Fiddes 2001: 181, 188–190; Pinnock 2001: 86–92), or that God’s own nature as love necessarily means God must endure the suffering implicated in loving the world as it is (Oord 2022: 160–116). Some have wanted to retain impassibility but have re-defined it as God’s not being passive to external forces, while actively choosing one manner of suffering or another in response to the world (Sarot 1992; Gavrilyuk 2004; Lister 2012). Any of these approaches, questioning a strict application of classical metaphysics, would give a greater objectivity to God’s demonstration of love in the cross of Christ.

1.4 Persuasive love and other theories of atonement

The basic orientation of Abelard’s thought – subjective with an objective focus – enables other images of atonement to be employed in a similar way, and in a manner which corresponds more closely with the scriptural texts from which they have been derived. Abelard himself fails to link traditional images with persuasive love and so tends to leave images of sacrifice, victory over Satan, and transferred penalty as a mere supplement to his major theory of love. But a model of persuasive love can be argued to be consistent with scripture, not only because of the many references there to the love of God manifest in Christ (especially John 14–18; 1 John 3–5) but also because it places images of atonement more firmly in their biblical context, as opposed to the way they are often read in terms of the culture of the interpreter.

For instance, when stress is placed on the objective dimension of the image of sacrifice, the death of Christ is understood as propitiating or appeasing an offended God. It is difficult to reconcile this with scriptural texts which present a Hebrew understanding of the atoning sacrifice as a means of expiation for sin, or a wiping out of sin from the community through the infusion of new life represented by blood. Atonement is thus something that God does for people, not what people do to God. In the Levitical law God is portrayed as declaring: ‘The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you for making atonement for your lives […] for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement’ (Lev 17:11). Sacrifice is also understood in Hebrew religion as a gift made to God and as a means of communion with God (Lev 3; 7). When used in the context of a persuasive love of

God, these original meanings of sacrifice are recalled. The sacrificial death of Christ can be understood as inciting a love for God in the hearts of sinners which thereby prompts them to make the sacrifice of Christ their own (Rom 12:1; cf. Heb 13:15). Turning from an attitude of rebellion against God to living a life suffused with a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving underlines the dimensions of sacrifice as a gift-offering and as communion with God. This also picks up the atoning element of sacrifice: sin is not an object but a human lack of trust in God, and it is this attitude which is transformed, and so sin is expiated, by the recreation of love and obedience towards God (Heb 10:12–18).

Perhaps the strongest stress on objectivity has been in understanding the death of Christ as a satisfying of God's offended honour (Anselm 1998: 282–289) or as a substitutionary punishment which satisfies the demand of God's law (Calvin 1961: 507–508 [vol. 1]). This kind of theory necessarily relegates a human response to God's work to a kind of appendix, adding a second phase of gratitude to justification of the sinner, rather than response being part of the redemptive process. Yet the problem is sin in human experience, and reconciliation must mean a healing of relationships in which both parties are involved (see further discussion in Reconciliation). The New Testament insight that Christ has 'carried our sins' (1 Pet 2:24; cf. Gal 3:13; 1 John 2:2) has been changed in this framework from Christ's willing identification with the predicament of human life, separated from God and enduring the impact of alienation, into a transaction which reflects the culture of later times. Later 'satisfaction' theories arise either from the assumption of medieval feudal obligations (Anselm) or from the absolute demands attributed to law by those in the sixteenth century who wanted to curb the power of human princes by making law ultimate (Calvin). If we adopt the pattern of God's persuasive love, then we understand that the death of Christ incites us to an attitude of penitence, moved by the cry of Christ on the cross ('my God, why have you forsaken me?') which is, in effect, a confession on behalf of humanity that God is just in saying 'no' to those who say 'no' to God (Forsyth 1938: 150, 164; cf. Campbell 1873: 118). Thus justice is 'satisfied', not by inflicting a substitute penalty, but by the return of repentant sinners to a loving God, making the confession of Christ their own, asking for and receiving forgiveness. Again, a subjective response has only been made possible by an objective act.

A favourite image of atonement among the church fathers was that of the victory of Christ (*Christus victor*), decisively conquering all the hostile powers that spoil human life at the cost of great suffering. The pattern is of a victory won through weakness, and triumph won from the jaws of defeat. Stressing objectivity, the fathers understood the victory as a decisive defeat of Satan in a final battle between two cosmic champions. But scripture shows an awareness of a much wider range of hostile powers to be overcome, including Paul's identification of the enemies of 'sin, law and death' within human existence (Rom 7:7–25), and the 'principalities and powers' which appear to be structures in society as much as cosmic forces (Col 1:16; 2:15; Rom 8:38; Eph 6:12). Moreover, scripture

witnesses to an ongoing threat of evil in the world which does not quite fit with a cosmic battle won in the past. A stress on the persuasive love of God, by contrast, understands the death of Christ as an objective victory in the sense that it enables a victory here and now in human lives over all hostile powers that prevent the flourishing of life. These might be sins inhering in the individual person, in the common mind of communities, or in social structures. God is always offering victory over forces that spoil life; the problem is human cooperation with the divine purposes, and the love of God disclosed in the cross has the power to move human wills to work with God. Surveying the power structures of his time (Rom 13:1–7), Paul enjoins, '[o]we nothing to anybody except love' (Rom 13:8).

1.5 Successors to Abelard

Those who have aimed to follow Abelard's approach of persuasive love have rarely reflected the whole range of what persuasion means, including example, creative influence, and generative power. This is also a spectrum from subjective to objective aspects, and there has been a tendency to neglect or at least underplay the objectivity within the theory. This can be seen happening already in an early appreciative comment on Abelard by Peter Lombard, who writes:

> So great a pledge of love having been given us, we are both moved and kindled to love God who did such great things for us; and by this we are justified, that is, being loosed from our sins we are made just. The death of Christ therefore justifies us, inasmuch as through it charity is stirred up in our hearts. (Sentence 3, Dist. 19.1; Rashdall 1919: 371)

This summary of Abelard certainly reflects not just the example but the creative influence of God's love. However, to say that love is 'stirred up in our hearts' implies that the justifying love is already there, where Abelard is anxious to underline that it is 'poured into' our hearts. Much more inclined to the subjectivity of an example is Faustus Socinus, who maintains that

> Jesus Christ is our saviour because he announced to us the way of eternal salvation, confirmed, and in his own person, both by the example of his life and by rising from the dead, clearly showed it, and will give that eternal life to us who have faith in him. (Socinus 1656: 121)

God's love revealed in the cross would be, he argues, 'diminished and obscured' if God were pressing the right to receive a penalty for sin (Socinus 1990: 251). Socinus' stress on an example of love, though not his theology generally, continues in the work of a series of German Protestant theologians in the age of Enlightenment such as G. S. Steinbart, I. G. Tollner, and G. F. Seiler (see McGrath 1985: 210–211), culminating in the thought of Immanuel Kant. He declares (in 1793) that one 'must steadfastly cling to the prototype of humanity and follow this prototype's example in loyal emulation', adding that a person who

does this, ‘and he alone, is entitled to consider himself not an unworthy object of divine pleasure’ (Kant 1998: 81). Kant also thinks that there is a need for divine grace and pardon to make up the deficiency between the disposition of a person for moral perfection and actual achievement of it. Thus the divine judgment in reckoning man righteous on account of his disposition towards good is always ‘a decree of grace’ (Kant 1998: 92). However, this does not, in Kant’s view, undermine a view of atonement based on moral example but complements it (against McGrath 1985: 213–217).

Schleiermacher goes beyond Kant’s moral example and describes a creative influence, or what he calls the ‘sphere of living influence’ which is the ‘creative activity’ of Christ. By this activity Christ ‘assumes us into fellowship with Him’ through ‘a creative production in us of the will to assume him into ourselves, or rather […] our assent to the influence of his activity’. Such influence on individual consciousnesses, by which the redeemer assumes believers into the power of his own consciousness of God, only happens within the corporate life of the Christian community (Schleiermacher 1928: 425–426, 429–430). Without naming Abelard, Schleiermacher echoes him in identifying divine love and wisdom as the key elements of the ‘self-impartation’ of God in the incarnation, operative in redemptive influence on human lives (1928: 723–733). Schleiermacher does not, nevertheless, entirely express the spectrum of persuasive love from subjective to objective, since he cannot – by his own confession – adequately account for the influence of Christ in the community. He rejects the view that this happens entirely by following the teaching and example of Christ (a view he dismisses as ‘empirical’), but can only resort to calling the redemptive activity of Christ ‘mystical’ (1928: 429–431).

A key exponent of Abelard’s understanding of atonement in English-speaking theology was the Anglican theologian Hastings Rashdall. He wrote of Abelard that

> The efficacy of Christ’s death is now quite definitely and explicitly explained by its subjective influence upon the mind of the sinner. The voluntary death of the innocent Son of God on man’s behalf moves the sinner to gratitude and answering love – and so to consciousness of sin, repentance, amendment. (Rashdall 1919: 358)

His favourite quotation from Abelard is that the purpose and cause of the incarnation ‘was that He might illuminate the world by His Wisdom and excite it to the Love of Himself’ (1919: 358, 362). Unlike Kant, he moves beyond an example to the objectivity of moral influence, and even at one point hints at generative power, writing ‘it was the love exhibited by Christ in submitting to that death which has really moved the heart, touched the conscience, and regenerated the life of believers’ (1919: 360). However, like Schleiermacher, he generally occupies the middle of the spectrum from subjective to objective, edging towards the objective end. He does not in fact recognize his view of moral influence as being ‘objective’ at all, dismissing ‘any of those always difficult and

sometimes repulsive theories of substitutive or expiative or objective efficacy' (1919: 361–362), but the way he treats the power of love to 'move' the sinner has something undeniably objective about it.

Appealing explicitly to Abelard, the American congregational theologian Horace Bushnell rejects the notions of an 'example', and even an 'influence' as inadequate for understanding the redemptive love of God in Christ, and prefers the phrase 'moral power', creating a transformation in people's life and character:

> In Christ, accordingly, we find this higher power so magnified – a power that we may call the Moral Power of God […] Christ, by his incarnate life and passion, becomes that higher kind of power – executing, in that manner, or by virtue of that kind of power, the internal new creation, for which […] he came into the world. (Bushnell 1877: 169)

Bushnell is clearly moving towards the objective end of the spectrum of persuasive love. He thinks that 'influence' is too weak a word, as it does not contain the idea of 'vicarious sacrifice', meaning Christ 'bore our sins on his feeling, became inserted into their bad lot by his sympathy as a friend, yielded up himself and his life, even, to an effort of restoring mercy' (1877: 46). Love, asserts Bushnell, is 'an essentially vicarious principle', although he thinks that the moral power of Christ derives from revealing justice as well as love (1877: 46, 170–171). Bushnell wavers, however, as to how this moral power becomes active in the human personality. In one place he seems to conceive it as operating directly, writing that 'we consciously want some vehicle of God to the soul, that is able to copy God into it. Something is wanted that shall go before and beget, in us, the disposition to copy an example' (1877: 169–170). However, in considering the Johannine saying of Jesus that 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 13:32), he writes:

> he will be the regenerator of souls, not by action upon them, but by what he is *to sight*. There shall be that in him, that quality of good and glory, which, being *fixedly beheld*, shall [be…] as a power of immortal healing. (Bushnell 1877: 173–174, emphasis added)

Successors to Abelard seem unable, then, to embrace the entire spectrum of persuasive love from the subjective to the objective, while Abelard himself attempts to do so with mixed success. Embracing this spectrum is not possible without a more thorough integration of the doctrine of persuasive love into the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, a coherence described below.

2 The pattern of persuasive love

2.1 Problems with persuasion

Before developing a contemporary theology of persuasive love, it is appropriate to consider some of the objections that have been raised against it in modern times. Responding to these is helpful in seeing how Abelard's own presentation might be modified and extended, while still keeping to his basic model of transformative love.

2.1.1 The issue of sin

It has been said that an atonement based on persuasive love – and so on the repentance of the sinner – does not take sin seriously, either as an offence against God's justice which needs to be dealt with (so, variously Aulén 1931: 165, 170–172, and Stott 1986: 220), or as the cause of a psychological weight of guilt in human life (Tillich 1978: 172; Young 1982: 27). However, in reply to the first point, the gravity of sin is surely recognized more fully when it is located and dealt with in the actual human life in which it does so much damage, rather than in some kind of external satisfaction of God, or even in an external event of the prevailing of God's love over God's own wrath. So Eleonore Stump proposes that receiving God's unconditional love and forgiveness of sins enables individuals to will the good of the other, so putting them in the position to make amends, or give 'satisfaction' to those people we have sinned against (Stump 2020: 101–112). This is precisely what 'satisfies' God, whereas, if God needs satisfaction of honour or justice before forgiving us, this would minimize our efforts to reconcile with those against whom we have sinned (2020: 25–27). Stump has an apparently Abelardian approach to atonement, arguing that the 'obstacle to a remedy for human sinfulness [lies] in human beings themselves' (2020: 22–23), and that the passion and death of Jesus 'melts' human hearts, eliciting the surrender of the will to the love and grace of God through his 'vulnerability' which 'gently disarms a human person's resistance to love' (2020: 288). This is a clear affirmation of the persuasive power of love. Stump herself, however, denies that she is Abelardian, understanding the theory 'attributed' to Abelard as being that Christ mediates salvation as an 'exemplar of right conduct' (Stump 2020: 167, 233, 342), and identifying her approach with Aquinas (2020: 176–197).

With regard to the psychological problems of guilt and shame, Stump argues that these are resolved by the way that the cross stirs us to love: shame is healed by the honour we receive from God who, on the cross, 'shares all that is in a person's psyche, including the shame', and guilt is solved because in making amends to others we are also making amends to God (2020: 361–363). Stump's reference to God's 'sharing' in our shame resonates with the understanding of atonement in Paul Tillich's theology. He criticizes the inadequacy of a moral influence theory to deal with the psychological problem of guilt, since what is needed by a guilty person is the assurance that God has actually 'participated' in human estrangement. Rejecting, like Abelard, notions of satisfying God, Tillich declares that

> the suffering of God […] is the power which overcomes creaturely self-destruction by participation and transformation. Not substitution, but free participation, is the character of the divine suffering. (Tillich 1978: 172, 176)

However, a conviction that God suffers with human beings in a situation of estrangement is quite compatible with Abelard's theory of persuasive love when it is understood to be more than exemplarism, and an affirmation of divine participation would strengthen the objectivity of his approach (as discussed above in section 1.3).

2.1.2 Issues of abuse and passivity

Feminist theologians have argued that Abelard's theory is as open to accusations of divinely sanctioned abuse as are satisfaction theories (for conceptual and methodological background, see Christian Feminist Theological Ethics). Abelard, it is said, is proposing that only an innocent, suffering victim, for whose suffering we are responsible, can persuade us to believe in God's mercy and to repent. This involves several implications that are inimical to the safety of women and the liberation of the oppressed, either in conceiving the relation directly between Christ and God the Father, or when a parallel is drawn between Christ and victims in the contemporary world in order to see how salvation might work out here and now. The accusation is levelled, first, that the suffering of victims – especially that of women – is being exploited as a means for more powerful people to repent and so become more righteous (Brown and Parker 1989: 11–12). Second, it is said that suffering is being glorified as a means of redemption: indeed, love is apparently being bound up necessarily with suffering in a romanticism of suffering (Brock and Parker 2012: 298–299). Third, it is objected that self-sacrifice and submission replace powerful action to remove the causes of suffering and liberate sufferers, while persuasive love does not in fact have enough force to sweep away structural sin in society (Brock and Parker 2012: 297; Ray 1998: 58; Weaver 2001: 105–107, 131–132). Fourth, it is suggested that, on the analogy of human relation as sinners to the suffering Christ, an emotional bond is being encouraged between victim and victimizers which prevents re-creation and sanctions continued abuse (Brock and Parker 2012: 296). Finally, persuasive love seems to be a purely individualistic view of redemption which does not touch the problem of sinful communities and sin as an institutional force in society which needs opposing directly (Brock and Parker 2012: 302–304; Green and Baker 2000: 139–140).

This appears to be a heavy charge sheet against a theory of persuasive love, although the above discussion of modifying Abelard without losing his essential idea does provide some pointers to defending it (see sections 1.3–1.4). Rather than holding to a romanticism of suffering, several theologians have maintained that suffering is not essential to the nature of love, but that, in a world characterized by suffering, love must inevitably involve suffering. The theory does not entail a sanctioning or glorifying of suffering; it is perfectly

compatible with a theory of ‘persuasive, suffering love’ to deny that God intended suffering in creation, and to assert that God ‘protests against’ suffering by assuming it (Moltmann 1974: 225–227; Fiddes 1988: 88–90). It is not that Christ dies in order to show God’s love according to some divine plan in which God causes Christ to suffer, but that, when human sinful authorities crucified Christ, God identified God’s own self with the mission, sufferings, and death of Christ to such an extent that the cross became a disclosure of divine love (Hopkins 1994: 52–62).

With regard to the problem of individualism, the insight of Brock – that love has an erotic power to make connections and relationships within a community and to prompt responsible action on behalf of others (Brock 1988: 25–26; cf. Brock and Parker 2012: 304) – is not at all a refutation of Abelard’s theory but an extension of the basic idea of persuasive love. Drawing attention to the letters between Abelard and Heloise, Brock and Parker have criticized Abelard’s own later condemnation of his erotic love for Heloise, along with his failure to make an effective community life, and his lack of responsible action towards Heloise in not providing her with the support for which she asks (Brock and Parker 2012: 299–305). However, it is quite another step to conclude that all these behaviours are characteristic elements of Abelard’s theory of atonement, and necessarily stem from it. As Stump has argued (though without reference to Abelard), transformative love can produce good will towards others (Stump 2020: 47–49, 200–203), and so both responsible actions and an effect beyond the individual. Brock herself, in her view of ‘erotic power’, has shown that love can have an effect in interpersonal as well as individual relations.

The objection that the liberation of others may require human beings to use coercive force and not just persuasion (Cone 1977: 212) does not in itself undermine the view that God in atonement and in all other divine activity in the cosmos and in history only acts persuasively. No strict equivalence can be drawn between divine and human actions, since God’s persuasion is bound to be more effective than human persuasion, God having infinite opportunities for taking an initiative and enticing response from created beings than humans do. God’s persuasive love should, however, control the means that people use to achieve justice and liberation for others, and will prompt them to use force only when absolutely necessary, as a last resort. Colleen Carpenter Cullinan has pointed out, commending Abelard in a book on ‘women, suffering and Christ’, that we often fail to believe in the strength of love, and assume ‘that true power lies only in violence’ (Cullinan 2004: 27). With regard to understanding God’s act of atonement, while the theory of *Christus victor* is often preferred to ‘persuasive love’ by those concerned for liberation (Weaver 2001: 130–132, 147–149), it is when we consider the power of persuasive love that we can see how to translate a ‘victory’ of Christ at the cross into a victory over all hostile powers here and now in human lives (see section 1.4).

The element of unlikeness, alongside parallels, between God's act of atonement and human ethical activity also applies in the case of 'emotional bonding'. The fact that Christ, who is the victim of human sin, is bonded to us in love does not imply that we must be similarly emotionally bound to those who victimize us. Nor does it follow that reliance on the suffering love of Christ will necessarily lead us to exploit the suffering love of other victims. Julia Meszaros has argued that self-sacrifice can be compatible with the flourishing of the self when it enhances intersubjective relations, but this very intersubjectivity means that it is always illegitimate to sacrifice 'the true subjectivity of the self […] for that of another', or to demand that others sacrifice it (Meszaros 2013: 71–73).

2.2 Means of persuasion

Some versions of atonement as 'persuasive love' lose objectivity when they describe how the love disclosed in the cross of Jesus is to be experienced here and now (see section 1.5). But there is a range of ways in which to comprehend the creative power of the cross of Jesus, moving from the mid-point of the subjective-objective spectrum to the more objective end.

First there is the power of disclosure of what it means to be truly human. John Macquarrie has suggested that there are moments in human history that 'open up new possibilities of existence' (Macquarrie 1977: 324). When something genuinely new is exhibited in a human life, it is not just an example to be copied, but provokes a repetition of itself in the future; it is not only capable of repetition but calls out to be re-enacted (Macquarrie 1977: 324–325; cf. Bushnell 1877: 211). The love displayed in the life of Christ was such an event, with his acceptance of the outcasts and marginalized in society, brought to a climax in his self-sacrificial death. Such a new thing in the world excites a response of love, and thus Christ is the 'pioneer of our salvation' (Heb 2:10; 10:19; 12:2). The objectivity of the event is deepened, further, by being captured in a story. Like Abelard's telling of the story of the cross to Heloise, this is not just words to be heard, but an opportunity to enter into the story for oneself; indeed, a story actively draws the hearer into its world.

Entering the story, a person then suffers an impact upon the self from beyond itself; as Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out, in a moment of reflection the self can be broken of its self-will and its evasions of the truth, and the hammer blow is delivered from outside itself by the disclosure of the cross. This is, Niebuhr underlines (echoing Abelard), the 'wisdom' and the 'power' of God. As the self seeks inauthentic ways to deal with its anxiety, it needs to be turned towards the way of trust in God. The Pauline confession that 'I am crucified with Christ' can thus be understood as '[m]y ego is shattered by the crucifixion of Christ' (Niebuhr 1943: 59–64, 103–115).

The persuasive power of the event is even more intense when its power of disclosure is understood as revelation. The revelation of God is not the sending of a message but

the unveiling of God's very being, which means that God is present, encountering the one who receives the revelation. As Karl Barth puts it, revelation is 'the person of God speaking' (Barth 1936–1977: 304 [vol. I/1]). God acts both in the original event and in its repetitions as the story is told, so that, as Macquarrie perceives, 'the event is an event of grace, working in those whom it addresses and making possible their response of faith' (Macquarrie 1977: 325). The event is creative because God is present in it, embodied in the personality of Christ, to enable human response. Moreover, if God once suffered with humanity in the cross, experiencing human alienation to the utmost degree, it can be said that God has experienced something new and is now approaching human persons with this experience at the heart of God's own being. Such an encounter with God is bound to affect a human personality. The link between the cross in the past and healing of broken lives in the present is no less than God, and persuasive love is a persuasive presence.

Finally, this persuasion is more than subjective, because it is embodied in the community of the church which tells the story of Christ, which has lived through the ages under the cross, and which links believers now with the earliest discipleship. Schleiermacher's insight was that, if God was present in Christ, and if this presence actually had the power to form human personalities, then Christ must bring about a new kind of 'corporate life' between himself, those who are seized by his influence, and each individual with the other. Through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, believers encounter the risen Christ who is at work in the world and who summons them to discipleship there with him. Abelard comments that Christ bids persons to his table as if inviting us 'to suffer together with me' (*Sermons* 32; Abelard 1885: 575a). Moreover, the elements of bread, wine, and water in the sacraments focus the presence of God which is to be found in the whole physical creation; though God-in-Christ gives himself to persons in an intensified way in the sacraments, and though they provide a special place of encounter with the person of Christ crucified and risen, this gift and meeting can be repeated in the life of the world outside the church.

The objectivity of persuasion, and the link between this influence of love and the historic event of the cross, is thus to be found in a mutual indwelling between the redeemed person and God. Eleonore Stump has pointed out that the goal of love is 'union with the beloved', and so the aim of the cross is 'union with God in this life' (Stump 2020: 11). Her key idea is that union and indwelling are made possible through the event of the cross because there Christ 'mindreads' all human psyches in his deep empathy with all human beings (2020: 166). But it is not necessary to develop such a speculative idea; engagement here and now with a God in whose experience is the cross is sufficient to re-create human attitudes and responses to God and others, as becomes clear when considering what it means to participate in God.

2.3 Participating in the triune God

The presence of Christ, conforming persons to himself, is intimately bound up with the cross, whether he is met in the community of the church or the community of the wider world. The transforming presence of Christ is not simply illustrated by the cross; it also comes from the cross, in that it is the God who experienced the cross in Christ who is present to human persons. This encounter with the God of persuasive love is properly understood, in the Christian tradition, as participation in the triune God. To meet God means to be summoned to enter more deeply into the interweaving of loving relationships which is God's own life. To talk of God as Trinity is not to make a picture of God that can be painted on canvas, etched in glass or sculpted in stone, or even visualized in the mind. God can never be the object of thought or analysis like other objects in the world. When the word 'God' has been used in this article, it stands not for a superior divine being but for the triune God, and the function of this language is not to describe God but to enable participation in God.

Here it is essential to realize that when the church fathers spoke about 'persons' in God (*hypostases*) they meant distinct realities that can only be understood in their relation to each other. Augustine went further, and suggested that the 'person' of the Father *was* a relation (*de Trinitate* 5.6), and Aquinas later maintained that relations in God 'subsisted', that they were as 'substantial' as anything else we can say about God (*Summa Theologiae* 1a.29.4). To these tentative explorations into understanding 'person' in God as no more and no less than a relationship we can add the insights of Karl Barth that 'with regard to the being of God, the word 'event' or 'act' is final' (Barth 1936–1977: 263 [vol. II/1]), and that God is 'the one who loves in freedom' (1936–1977: 301, 307 [vol. II/1]). It follows, building on these insights, that to speak of God as three persons is not to visualize three subjects but to witness to the experience of being drawn into an event – into relations of love that are greater and more inexhaustible than our own. These relations have a 'pattern' which is not an example of love to be imitated and reduplicated in the world but a rhythm, a movement of love, in which we participate and which shape our own life. God persuades us by embracing us in 'acts' of love.

In praying to the Father, people find that their words are fitting into a movement of relationship that is already there before them, like that of a conversation between a son and a father; so, as the apostle Paul says, we offer our 'yes' to God through the 'Amen' which Christ speaks as the faithful Son to the Father (2 Cor 1:20–21). There is a movement of loving response into which people can lean and by which they are influenced. In giving themselves away to others, persons find themselves leaning upon a different movement – that of a self-giving and mission that is far deeper than their own. 'As the Father has sent me', Jesus tells his disciples, 'so I am sending you' (John 20:21). So Christians share in the 'sending' of the Son by a Father who 'so loved the world that

he gave his son' (John 3:16; Moltmann 1977: 53–56). The ancient doctrine of 'eternal generation' expresses the conviction that this is an eternal movement of mission (*missio* means sending). At the centre of these movements is the cross of Jesus, and in suffering persons find themselves supported by a movement of suffering love which is more terrible than their own. Since what is being talked about are movements of mutual giving and receiving of love, in a God who cannot be compared with anything in the world, there will be found a need to refer to these relations with female metaphors of 'mother' and 'daughter' as well as accustomed male images of 'father' and 'son'. This diversity of gender also gives full scope to people's actual experience of being immersed into, and influenced by, these patterns of love.

Understanding the atonement as persuasive love thus can only be seen as truly objective, as well as subjective, when it is placed in the context of a doctrine of the triune God. It is not a free-standing idea but connects with other doctrines. It is just as inseparable from a doctrine of creation. In creating a reality other than God's self, God with humility 'makes room' within God's interweaving relations of love for created persons to dwell (cf. Moltmann 1981: 111–114). As Karl Barth insists, Christians cannot discern behind the intention of God to make a covenant of love with created beings; they cannot envisage any other kind of God than the one that God has freely willed to be (Barth 1936–1977: II/2, 6). The very language of Trinity assumes a relation with creation, as God 'sends out' the Son for the purpose of creating and then redeeming a creation that has slipped from the purposes of God (Rahner 1975: 21–24). It is a pure abstraction to attempt to think of a self-enclosed Trinity of love, as if God could be satisfied with God's own inner relations, without exercising an outward-going love. Correspondingly, the movements of love in God cannot be known except through relations with others in the world, whether human others or other created beings and things. God's relations of love are always deeper, richer, and more persistent than those of human persons, but they can only be experienced through human relations, since all beings dwell in God.

Creation and redemption are thus intertwined: redemption is a new creation. The very process of creation is one of persuasive love, as God lures all created things towards goals that will make for the flourishing of life. Even though all creation (not just the known universe) participates in God, this does not mean that everything participates in the same way. Beings can refuse or resist the persuasion of God's love and yet still be held within God. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has suggested, the only place that someone can say 'no' to God is within the 'yes' of the Son to the Father, and God feels the pain of this rejection (Balthasar 1994: 329). This is nothing other than the suffering of the cross. Redemption consists in learning to say 'yes' with Christ, and so being drawn deeper into communion.

2.4 Love and the Spirit

Abelard, like the apostle Paul, found that he needed the language of ‘Spirit’ in order to express the generation of human love by the love revealed in the cross of Christ – to be, it could be said, truly objective. Yet he found it difficult to explain how this love was ‘poured out’ as Spirit from the historic event of the death of Christ (Fiddes 1989: 153–155). He even at times simply views the work of the Spirit as preparing the human mind to receive the revelation of God’s love in Christ (*Expositio in Hexaemeron*, Abelard 1885: 770d–771a).

How love, Spirit, and crucifixion belong together becomes more comprehensible from the perspective of participation in the pattern of love in God, at the centre of which is the experience of the cross. The ‘bonding’ of love in God cannot be confined to the Spirit; not even Augustine thought that, despite calling the Spirit the ‘mutual love’ and ‘communion’ of the Father and the Son (*de Trinitate* 5.12, 27–29). If encounter with God is understood as participation in the rhythm of relationships within God, then each of these distinct relationships must be creating ‘communion’ (*koinonia*). Yet experience of God does lead Christians to associate ‘fellowship’ in a particular way with the person of the Spirit; the Spirit, for example, prays within believers ‘with groans that cannot be articulated’ (Rom 8:14–16). The Spirit is that movement in love in God that is always ‘opening up’ relations to a greater depth and to a new future (cf. Jenson 1997: 158). Whether these are relations in God or in created beings, the Spirit is the disturber and the awakener. This is the Spirit that the gospel writers describe as resting upon Jesus and bestowed by Jesus on his disciples (Mark 1:10; John 20:22). Moreover, there is a dimension of human participation in God that is not satisfied by talk of a father-son (or ‘mother-daughter’) relationship. Another metaphor – a ‘breathing’, like the gentle movement of air in our bodies or the strong wind blowing outside us – is needed to evoke those depths of personal experience which are more to do with moods, intuitions, non-verbal communication, and empathy.

All human language about God is analogy, corresponding to the truth and yet falling short of it. But images taken from everyday human relations can conceptualize human experience of God’s activity. Using traditional images of atonement which are read through the lens of persuasive love, believers can conceptualize their experience of being enabled to love, and therefore to sacrifice, to repent, and to win victories over hostile forces. Yet in all these processes there remains something mysterious, something to do with the depth of personality for which only the range of impressionistic images which the scriptural writers supply for the Spirit will suffice – a breeze blowing gently, a gale uprooting everything in its path, a breath stirring, oil trickling, fire warming and fire burning, water refreshing and water in which one is totally immersed, wings beating and wings brooding (e.g. Gen 1:2, 2:7; Isa 4:4, 40:7, 44:3, 61:1; Ezek 37:9; Luke 1:35, 3:22; Acts 2:2–3; 1 Cor 12:13).

2.5 The pattern of love in Christ

The word ‘pattern’ can be adapted from Bernard of Clairvaux’s use of it (meaning a mere example) when it is understood to mean a network of relations within God, an interweaving of movements of love in which human persons participate. An understanding of atonement as persuasive love, however, also needs a Christology which accords with this vision of the triune God. It was, after all, the ‘pattern of life’ of Christ to which Bernard was referring.

Traditionally, a Christology in which Christ is said to have two natures – divine and human – in one person has been invoked in order to support doctrines of atonement in which God remains immune from suffering. In theories that are over-objective at the expense of subjectivity, Christ as a whole person, divine and human, identified with the Son or Logos of God, performs some kind of transaction involving suffering death. Typically this involves Christ being a propitiatory sacrifice, a victim of Satan who turns the tables and becomes a victor, or the one who endures a penalty for sin in place of humanity. But in these theories it is in his human nature that the divine Son suffers, not in his divine nature which remains impassible. By contrast, a view of atonement as persuasive love depends for its objective force on the unlimited involvement of God in suffering. There is, then, no need for a two-nature Christology to shield God from vulnerability. The language of ‘two natures’ in the Chalcedonian formula is an accommodation to philosophical concepts of the time, and it may be argued that it would be better to focus on the repeated Chalcedonian doxological assertion of the person of Christ as ‘one and the same Son’ (Stevenson 1973: 337).

This is essentially the proposal of Wolfhart Pannenberg, who affirms that the human son, Jesus, shows that he is the ‘same’ as the eternal Son through his human characteristics of dedication to the will of God, his self-sacrifice for God, and openness to the world and the future. Pannenberg proposes that in the ‘function of his message’, and the activity related to the message, Jesus relates to God the Father in such a complete way that he is ‘indirectly’ one with the eternal Son of God within the Trinity (Pannenberg 1968: 334–335). This community of activity with the Father is also a union of being since, Pannenberg avers with reference to Hegel, ‘the truth of personality is to win it through this submerging, being submerged in the other’ so that ‘personal community is essential community’ (1968: 336). Further, the particular sonship of Jesus is the fulfilment of all human personality, since all human beings can become sons and daughters of God through Jesus (1968: 337). In less skilled hands than Pannenberg’s, this approach might lapse into the error of affirming ‘two sons’ loosely joined together, which was typical of the heresy known as ‘Nestorianism’ (though not of Nestorius himself). To avoid this peril, and to follow up the idea of a ‘pattern of love’, it would be better to think of ‘one sonship’, or one movement of love which is like the relation of a son to a father, in both the life of Jesus and the rhythm of the Trinity.

It is through the particular human sonship of Jesus of Nazareth, expressed in his words, actions, and suffering, that human persons are drawn more deeply into the communion of God's being. The relationships in which Jesus lived were perfectly one with the dynamic of God's relations of love in a way that human relationships are not and never will be. The church fathers spoke of the Son as *homo-ousios* (one in being) with the Father. Playing on these words, John Hick declares that he was *homo-agape* (one in love) with God, with a numerical identity of love and not simply a generic sameness (Hick 1977: 156–159, 164). Taking this affirmation in a direction that Hick does not, one can say that the Christian claim is that the human 'movement' of the life of Jesus fits more exactly into the movements in God than all other finite lives, but that all life shares to some extent in this same dynamic.

All the speech of Christ, all the ways he saw the world, and all his acts fit exactly into the movement in the Trinity that is recognized as being like a son relating to a father. The relation of the human person Christ to the one whom he calls his heavenly father can be mapped exactly onto the relation in God which is like that between a son (or daughter) and a father (or mother). His accepting love for those whom respectable society rejected, his prayer of loving trust, saying 'abba, Father', his hearing of a father's speech to him at the baptism and transfiguration, saying 'this is my beloved son', and his cry of love-in-desolation, 'my God why have you forsaken me?', all of these fit into the pre-existing movements of the Trinity which are like speech, suffering, and generous love. The sonship of this human son is the same as a divine sonship, or a relation like that between a son and a father. Because the pattern of Jesus' life and death exactly corresponds to the rhythm of love in God, after the resurrection of Jesus the human son Jesus of Nazareth cannot be separated from the son-like (or daughter-like) movement of relation in God; one cannot be thought of or experienced without the other.

This explains why the pattern of love in the life and death of Christ has a persuasive contemporary force which is more than a subjective arousing of emotion. Through his resurrection from the dead, this pattern of Jesus is now inseparable from the rhythms of the triune God which embrace and influence human persons; the infinite movements of divine love which are the persuasive force in creation are for ever marked by the love manifested in the ministry and cross of Jesus in time and history. As persons encounter and participate in God, they are thus shaped by the pattern of love which was embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. This Christology is not merely functional, concerned only with how Jesus acts and not how he was, but is for eternity. As Pannenberg insists, a communion of activity with God is also a communion of being; a person who is exactly one with the acts of God 'belongs inseparably to the essence of God' (Pannenberg 1968: 336).

Christians confess that, by a mystery of the desire and grace of God (theologically it may be called 'election'), the pattern of Christ's human life fits more exactly than any other into

the relational movements of the triune life; thus, communion with Christ opens up the way for all created beings to participate in God. But this is therefore an inclusive uniqueness. When it is recognized, similar patterns can be seen in all other bodily life. Wherever in the world people give themselves to others or sacrifice themselves for others, these actions will also match the movement in God which is like a son going forth on mission in response to the generosity of a father. Further, wherever there is the movement of a measure of music, or of a stroke of a brush, or of a blow of a chisel, or an arrangement of words in poetry which echo God's glory, the maker and the audience find they are sharing in an outflow of expressive love from a source of infinite creativity. Since all these actions share in the patterns of love in God, the body of Christ can be discerned in them. All become vehicles of the persuasive love of God which creates response in the human personality and so achieves healing in the lives of human beings who have drifted from the love of God – bringing reconciliation between themselves and God, and reconciliation with each other.

Attributions

In this article, Sections 1.1 to 1.3 re-use and revise some material from Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation. The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), pp. 26–28, 140–158, by kind permission of the publisher.

3 Appendix: The theme of persuasive love in literature

The approach to atonement in Abelard has made its impact on imaginative literature – poems and novels. More than theological accounts, they offer the persuasive power of a story into which readers and hearers are drawn, and at the same time they become a place of revelation as God encounters readers through the text. Not being theology, they have no need to explain the objectivity of the love revealed in the cross, but simply display it.

The medieval period was characterized by a revolution of feeling, by a new interest in the human figure of Jesus, and by an imaginative thinking about the human life of Jesus which found focus in his suffering and death. In lyrics and in devotional prose, such as that of Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich, the bleeding wounds of Jesus are a continual topic for devotion. They are not an occasion for arousing guilt but rather an expression of divine love and pity which in turn awakens pity and love in those who contemplate the wounds. As Abelard urged Heloise, observers are thus drawn imaginatively into the scene of the passion. This is far from an exemplarist view of the passion, or merely copying the love of Jesus; there is confidence that the revelation of the love of God in the cross will actually

create love in hard and sinful human hearts. This is well expressed in a fourteenth-century lyric:

> Jesus Christ, my lover sweet,
> Who died upon the cross's tree,
> With all my heart I you beseech
> For your wounds two, and three
> That your love may be made fast
> In my heart and transfixed [*fitched*] there be
> As was the spear into your heart
> When you suffered death for me.
> (Davies 1971: 117, cf. 98, 109, 120; present author's translation)

Just as Abelard laid stress on the transformative power of repentant love within the human personality, the appeal of Christ – suffering in his human nature – was envisaged by poets and devotional writers as producing repentance and a radical change of life.

In the work of the poets an imaginative re-using of the traditional images of atonement can be seen, re-imagining them from the viewpoint of the power of love, as is suggested in section 1.4 above (for a previous attempt to discern this happening in literature, see Fiddes 2007: 742–759). For example, the victory of Christ over hostile powers is united with the feelings of courtly love to portray Christ as the lover-knight who suffers and dies to win the love of his lady. The focus is not on the enemy but on the resistant lady, the human soul whose heart has to be softened and whose love has to be won through conflict with her enemies or in jousting for her honour, as in the devotional manual the *Ancrene Wisse* (Shepherd 1959: 21–22). The whole martial metaphor of the passion as found in the *Christus victor* tradition can now be expanded into an allegory of love in which the human nature of Christ is compared to the armour that the lover-knight wears, with the cross as the palfrey that he rides. In William Langland's poem 'Piers Ploughman', Piers stands for every human person, and is also identified with the Christ who wears Piers' armour. Earlier writers had interpreted the cry at the cross, 'I thirst' as a cry of love, longing for the human souls whom Christ desires. Langland keeps the cry back for a scene before the gates of hell, as the victorious Christ, about to release the dead from imprisonment, declares:

> I, that am lorde of life, love is my drink
> And for that drink today I died upon earth. (B XVIII.363–364; Skeat 1869: 339)

So Langland refers the cry to a thirst induced by fighting, evoking the image of the lover-knight. Christ assumes the arms of human nature, and fights on the cross, parched with love for human souls.

Similarly, the image of sacrifice, especially associated with the Eucharist, is reimagined as a pouring-out of love to be absorbed into the body of the worshippers and society (see

Sacrifice and the Eucharist). Just as in the sacrificial system of the Hebrew Bible the blood of the sacrificed animal does not propitiate God but releases a life-force which purifies and renews the tainted life of the community (Lev 17:11), so love is infused into human life to refresh and revive. The Anglican poet George Herbert avoids any notion of appeasing God, and writes in *The Agonie*:

> Love is that liquour sweet and most divine,
> Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine. (Wilcox 2011: 119)

So too the modern Catholic poet David Jones portrays the sacrificial blood of Christ poured out in the eucharist as not only 'effluxing' the cross, but 'freeing the waters' to irrigate the parched wasteland of human existence (Jones 1952: 224–226, 240). Significantly, this Christ is a lover – 'he that was her [Mary's] son is now her lover' – and in fact is a lover-knight adventuring for her and all our sakes, 'riding the Axile Tree' (1952: 224, 243).

In the work of several poets, the demands of the law are not envisaged as leading to the satisfaction of God's justice by transferring a penalty to Christ, but instead are viewed under the horizon of love. For Langland, love modifies ('shapes') the strict requirements of the law:

> Right so is love a ledere · and the lawe shapeth,
> Upon man for his mysdedes · the merciment he taxeth.
> [In the same way love is a leader, and shapes the law;
> it asks for mercy upon man for his misdeeds.] (B.I.157–160; Skeat 1869: 18)

John Donne does reflect the Calvinist theology of Christ's death as a penal substitution, but he shows himself more interested in the emotion evoked by the metaphor than by the mechanism of satisfaction itself. His telling of the story of the passion in fact brings law and love together in a variety of ways which exceed any strict transaction between Christ and his Father. In 'Holy Sonnet 12' he finds that Christ, the lamb slain from the beginning of the world, has made two wills, the first being the covenant of law and the second a covenant of 'all-healing grace'. There is no suggestion that the demands of the first are satisfied by the second, but rather, in the mood of Langland's 'shaping' of the law by love:

> Thy lawes abridgement, and thy last command
> Is all but love; Oh let that last Will stand! (Gardner 1969: 12)

It is in William Blake that the starkest confrontation of the divine law with love is found, and at the same time Blake integrates love with the theme of a victory won over hostile powers. His poetry contains a full flowering of the earlier tradition that the pity of Jesus for humanity

lies at the centre of the passion. In the Lamb of God is seen the man who truly lives by the divine image which is 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love', the human form divine:

> For Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
> Is God, our Father dear,
> And Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
> Is Man, his child and care. ('The Divine Image'; Keynes 1966: 117)

For Blake, the passion of Jesus discloses the power of pity and forgiveness, which can enable the true and eternal Self in a human being to divest itself of the false self, or the state of selfhood which is named Satan. This is a re-visioning of the story of the cross, where Jesus does indeed come into conflict with Satan, but the Satan is nothing other than a 'spectrous' self, characterized by egocentricity, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness. It is in this state that the human person has allowed cold reason to usurp the place of imagination, love, and desire. It is this Satan, and not the true Jehovah, who imposes law, and who demands reparation and satisfaction through blood ('The Ghost of Abel'; Keynes 1966: 780).

In Night 8 of his poem 'Vala', Blake thus re-tells the drama of the crucifixion. Jesus, the Lamb of God, appears clothed in Luvah's 'robes of blood'. 'Luvah' is a symbol for the dimension of the human psyche which is love. Jesus has 'assumed the dark Satanic nature in the Virgin's womb', and has now come 'in the State called Satan […] to put off Satan eternally'. Satan condemns Jesus by the law – 'as it is written, he was numbered among the transgressors' – but Satan is overcome when Jerusalem (the human person as potentially redeemed) '*saw* the Body dead upon the Cross' (emphasis added).

> Los said to Enitharmon, 'Pitying I saw'.
> Pitying, the Lamb of God descended thro' Jerusalem's gates
> To put off mystery. (*Vala* 8, 259–261; Keynes 1966: 347)

Beholding is enough: Jesus overcomes Satan, not by Satan's own tools of force and restriction, but by exercising forgiveness in divine pity (*Vala* 8: 241, 263, 274, 285–286, 331; Keynes 1966: 347–349). Thus the Daughters of Beulah praise Jesus as the one who awakes those who sleep in error, because he is 'the pitying one' whose 'pity is from the foundation of the World' (*Vala* 8: 237, 242–243).

In Patrick White's novel, *Voss*, the power of a story of suffering love is fleshed out. Voss, an explorer trying to cross the Australian continent for the first time, faces his death at the hands of natives who have captured him in the desert, and he finds that the ancient story of the cross of Christ provides a form for what would otherwise be a mere collection of accidents. An ancient story and image, which he had previously discarded as an

irrelevance and a weakness in the business of taming a continent, now enables him to make something of his death:

> '*O Jesus*,' he cried, '*rette mich nur! Du Lieber*'.
> Of this too, mortally frightened, of the arms or sticks reaching down from the eternal tree, and tears of blood, and candle-wax. Of the great legend becoming truth. (White 1957: 415, original emphasis)

In the context of 'rette mich' (save me!), 'du lieber' must be taken in its full sense of 'loving one', or 'lover'. It is not that the 'great legend' gives him some kind of message by which he can find a moral in his suffering. Rather it gives him a pattern by which he can find himself in what would otherwise be a meaningless end to his journey. The Southern Cross in the night sky, the stars like nails, the spear which the natives thrust into the sides of the horses, his own flowing blood, these are all things to which he can relate with the help of this story with its pattern of love, of 'arms reaching down' despite his resistance.

Poets and novelists are less likely than theologians to find problems with understanding the power of God's love to lie in divine suffering, and here they exceed Abelard. Dinah, the woman Methodist preacher in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), feels that:

> infinite love is suffering too – yea in the fulness of knowledge it suffers, it yearns, it mourns; and that is a blind self-seeking which wants to be freed from the sorrow wherewith the whole creation groaneth and travaileth […] sorrow is then a part of love, and love does not seek to throw it off […] Is there not pleading in heaven? Is not the Man of Sorrows there in that crucified body wherewith he ascended? And is he not one with the Infinite Love itself as our love is one with our sorrows? (Eliot 1992: 317)

Voss' hesitancy and Dinah's confidence allude to a view of atonement which emerges constantly in the work of poets and novelists, that the passion of Christ somehow has power to transform human minds and attitudes to God and to fellow human beings.

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