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Salvation, Honour and Shame

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“Does there now need to be a re-examination of the theology of salvation, in the light of the experience of survivors of abuse who did not sin but were sinned against?”

Posed by Fr Jim Corkery SJ, this question was elaborated by him in a July 2021 podcast, in preparation for a 2022 NBSCCC conference on the theology of safeguarding.¹ Summarising what he understands to be the church’s current teaching, Fr Corkery points to the problem of an understanding of salvation as happening only *after* death, in return for the avoidance of sin in this life.

How, he asks, can this understanding be of any *saving* help *now*, to those who have not sinned but have been sinned against? Did not Jesus directly confront the sufferings of those he encountered in the Gospel accounts, reassuring them that God was a saving presence *now*, in *this* life?

SALVATION AND ATONEMENT IN THE CATECHISM

Almost certainly Fr Corkery is re-examining the theology underlying Article 615 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

“By his obedience unto death, Jesus accomplished the substitution of the suffering Servant, who ‘makes himself an offering for sin’. Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.”

By its use of the terms *substitution* and *satisfaction* here, the CCC is echoing in its presentation of redemption, salvation and atonement not only St Anselm of Canterbury, writing in the 1090s CE², but the derivative 1500s Reformation theology of *substitutionary*

1 See the ‘July’ podcast at National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland – National Conference 2022, <https://www.safeguarding.ie/national-conference-2022>

2 *Cur Deus Homo?*, c. 1097 CE, St Anselm of Canterbury

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atonement that commonly underpins Protestant evangelicalism today. In essence this theology implies that the Son of God was required by God the Father to suffer crucifixion to ‘make up for’ (atone for) a debt of honour that the rest of us owe but cannot pay to the Father by means of our own sufferings in this life.

A SCANDALOUS THEOLOGY?

Has Fr Corkery bravely raised a theological issue that ordinarily Irish clergy prefer to avoid? Does this pattern of avoidance also carry meaning – as evidence of *shame* at any need to ‘go there’? Reverting to the original meaning of *scandal* as a stumbling block to faith, is there scandal in proposing that God the Father cannot himself forgive our debts as readily as he calls us to forgive the debts of others? Does this suspicion of theological scandal help to explain the Irish church’s currently less than vibrant state – along with corporate shame over the sequence of other scandals that has beset the clerical church for decades, especially those that gave rise to the creation of Ireland’s *National Board for the Safeguarding of Children in the Catholic Church*?

I raise this issue of ‘corporate shame’ deliberately. Two decades before hearing Fr Corkery on the subject, I became convinced as a teacher of history that, given the obvious origins of so much human violence in both shame and shaming, the historical ‘Jesus event’ is best understood as a response to our human preoccupation with honour and shame – the dimension of awareness and anxiety that is more constant for us even than our awareness of the air we breathe.³

Put simply, the pattern I speak of is that we humans are all too typically ashamed to find ourselves, apparently, *without* honour - a discovery we make at adolescence. Resolving this problem is then understood as somehow winning the recognition of our peer group. Out of this understanding then comes that striving for recognition that was as all-absorbing for the young Alexander of Macedon and the young Julius Caesar as it is for the young people (of whatever gender) who thumb their smartphones for evidence of their own ‘status’ or ‘popularity’ or ‘following’ or ‘influence’ today.

A THEOLOGY OF DIVINE COMPASSION FOR OUR SUSCEPTIBILITY TO SHAME?

Having concluded decades ago that the Incarnation cannot have been unrelated to this universal preoccupation, my own Trinitarian theology is now an understanding of the main events of the New

3 *Scattering the Proud*, Sean O’Conaill, 1999 – summarised at www.seanoconaill.com

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Testament as a recognition of this human issue – and as an offering to all of us of the same solution.

In brief, just as the Passion and Crucifixion narratives demonstrate the unreliability and fickleness of all human judgement (including the awarding of *celebrity* as well as its opposite, *condemnation*), so does the Resurrection argue that there is another far higher, and far more reliable, ‘court of judgement’. Subsequently the Pentecost account in Acts is reassurance that the ‘Advocate for the Defence’, the Holy Spirit, will mediate that judgement in whatever ‘tribulations’ follow for those who now adhere, above all, to that higher court – as promised by Jesus in John 16: 33.

Who can read the New Testament today and believe that, for those who wrote those texts, ‘salvation’ had been deferred until *after* this earthly life has ended? That was certainly not the case for St Paul, for whom the new life available to all ‘in Christ’ was *already* a ‘new creation’ (2 Cor 5: 17).

SALVATION AND ATONEMENT FOR THE EARLY CHURCH

As is well known also, the atonement theory proposed by St Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo?* at the apex of the church’s political influence in the 1090s differs greatly from that of (for example) St Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who lived in the first century of Roman imperial adoption of the Christian creed.

For Augustine, Jesus had been the innocent bait in a trap set by the Trinity for Satan, the ‘adversary’.⁴ For the early church that great adversary had been unmasked and defeated by Jesus’s Resurrection. Baptism for the adult Christian then was an awakening into awareness of a new reality and new historical horizon – in which the tyranny of pagan Rome – and the fear that Satan could win – was ‘passing away’.

It followed that, in this understanding, the redeeming ‘ransom’ paid by Jesus’s self-giving had been paid to Satan, the enslaver – *not* to God the Father. Most importantly, the same father had implicitly been the giver of this gift of the Son, and so was *also redeemer* – *not* a withholder of divine favour until an afterlife.

Understanding *atonement* as movement towards reconciliation between God and ourselves, there is surely no doubt that for the early church the God who had so dramatically vindicated Jesus had been the first to move, and was not forever waiting to be persuaded to do so.

4 See e.g. ‘Augustine’s Trope of the Crucifixion as a Trap for the Devil and its Survival in the English Middle Ages’, D. Scott-Macnab, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/54198127.pdf>

REPENTING SHAME

From the beatitudes alone it is clear that for Jesus the call to *repentance* was not merely for the greedy to rethink their greed. For the ‘poor in spirit’ it was also a call to rethink any shame they had mistakenly felt over their own poverty and powerlessness, and any doubt they may have entertained over the power of the God of Israel in the face of Roman tyranny (See e.g. Luke 13: 2).

Remembering the origins of that Roman empire in the ‘heroic’ violence of Julius Caesar, Jesus’s victory on the cross was for those earliest Christians also a ‘remodelling’ of heroism and of honour. If crucifixion had ‘missed the mark’ in failing to shame Jesus, it could no longer be shameful to suffer a similar fate for calling him Lord, in preference to Caesar.

Yet Christian monarchs could also be misled into covetousness, tyranny and murder, as the history of the next two-thousand years was to prove. We live now in the disillusionment caused by multiple revelations of the fallibility and bitter rivalries of nominally Christian emperors, monarchs and clergy – culminating in the last century – and struggle to see a way through. Rational secularism is for many the only sensible way to think – and all ‘meta-narratives’, including the Creed, are, for them, dangerous and unbelievable.

THE CRISIS OF SECULARISM

Yet who can doubt in 2021 that the secularising project of the Enlightenment is itself in deep crisis? Growing alarm at the scale and pace of climate change, and at its destabilising impact upon human society on all continents, can be found everywhere, especially in younger generations. The problem at base is obviously also moral and spiritual – the indifference of moneyed elites and the dispiriting lack of integrity in too many of those who rely upon those elites to keep them in power.

When it comes to addressing climate change, the easiest step is to know, rationally, what radical lifestyle changes are needed. By far the most difficult problem is to *differ in practice* - to move ourselves and everyone else to make that radical change – when so many in the West especially are in denial of the need for it, and in denial also that they have any duty of care for a wider human family than their own.

What is it, then, that has defeated every secular bid for global liberty, equality and fraternity since 1789? Why has secularism not yet addressed and explained its own most obvious scandals – especially that of a rampant capitalist inequality that is often more cruel, and now potentially far more deadly, than any in pre-modern history?

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Why has every rational programme for Utopia since 1789 been sabotaged by the power struggles of ideological ‘brothers’. Even if the obvious common task is to fill sandbags to stem another great flood are we not likely to fall to arguing over the ideal size of the sandbags?

REINTERPRETING ‘DO NOT COVET’

The problem seems to be that shame arises easily from mere comparison. To be without the symbols of success that attend great wealth today – e.g. the private executive jet or ocean-going yacht – is still, for too many, both shaming and unbearable. Less costly yearnings drive mass ‘consumerism’ and the global market. The vastly expensive military technology possessed by a superpower is so obviously a goad for Islamist ‘asymmetric warfare’ that the power of technological sophistication to shame less affluent cultures, and therefore to motivate a countervailing terrorism, is too obvious to miss.

The market’s trust in competition as the engine of progress is therefore challenged by competition’s equal power to destabilise not only the world’s climate but all possibility of world peace, as the contrasts of wealth and power become more stark.

There is therefore an obvious need to dissociate honour from accumulation and armament, a need that makes needless ostentatious wealth dishonourable for the first time in human history.

In this context the biblical injunctions against *coveting* become newly relevant. Reinterpreted by René Girard as mimetic or ‘copied’ desire, covetousness is not the ‘avarice’ that the Catechism now substitutes for that word in its account of the ‘seven deadly sins’. It is instead a fetishisation of particular objects of desire – such as that executive jet or the Rolex watch – or even the Oval office – for the supposed boost in status and honour that attaches to their possession.

Consumerism and violence are therefore driven also by the honour/shame dynamic that fuels covetousness – so the honouring of ‘doing with little’ instead now becomes imperative for both environmental and civic purposes. Who in the 1960s could have predicted that this particular ‘blessing’ of the poor would be historically validated so soon, and for the best of secular reasons?

That Jesus was sexually abstinent has been singled out by historical Catholicism as the ‘signature’ characteristic to be imitated by those called to be ‘in persona Christi’. That he did not *covet* – in that sense of wanting the kingdoms desired by other kings or even the status of a High Priest of the Temple – has been

far less remarked, even by moral theologians and bishops. Who cannot now see that, to take just one example, Henry II of England was more covetous in his invasion of Ireland in 1171 than he was piously called to improve the morals of us Irish? The global scandal of hypocritical Christian imperialism was enabled – over centuries – by that shortfall in clerical moral perception and moral outrage, to the ongoing embarrassment of the church.

JESUS AND THE CULT OF THE SUPERHERO – AND ‘PERFECT SACRIFICE’

Who can doubt that the current obsession with cinematic superheroes, and the money made by supplying this obsession, prove that shame over our human vulnerability – our natural naked weakness – is a core issue for younger generations who know little or nothing of the Gospels? It is a short step to noticing that identical dissatisfaction in Genesis 3: 1-6, born simply of a comparison between human ignorance and divine omniscience. Put simply, Genesis proposes that if we can do nothing more than imagine a being far greater than ourselves, we can then become ashamed to be the inferior being we then seem to be in our own eyes.

What if the Jesus story is a direct confrontation of this problem – not only a frank divine denial that it is shameful to be vulnerable but an invitation to attach honour to that state instead? In that inversion it would instead be shameful to seek invulnerability, and honourable to seek its opposite.

That, surely, is again in 2021 an option open to the Irish church at its weakest – following seventeen centuries of clerical pursuit of, and of clinging to, power. The higher it climbed in the scale of social and political patronage and prestige (c. 313-1100 CE) the more the clerical institution had to lose in terms of social prestige – and the more likely it was to hide internal ‘inconsistencies’. There again the fear of shame determined everything – even the inevitability of ultimate disgrace – and God our Father had also to be ‘retheologised’ in the 1090s as more fastidious about his own honour than gracious in forgiveness. Was it any wonder that in the centuries that followed every ‘gentleman’ was expected to demand *satisfaction* for impugned *honour* - if necessary by sword or pistol at dawn – and that churchmen had the hardest of times putting an end to that practice?

How many theologians have noticed that, nowadays, cinematic superheroes can be ranked by youthful aficionados in terms of the perfection of their capacity for self-sacrifice? See this, for example:

“Superheroes are a strange breed. This is not just because of the whole ‘dressing up in odd-looking costumes to go fight criminals’

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deal, but because of their sheer sense of self-sacrifice. These are people who not only believe that with their great power comes a great responsibility to take care of others, but they are even willing to die in the process if their death helps save others. With such a willingness to die for the greater good, you better believe that comic book writers are keen to work that idea into as many stories as possible. This is why it seems like you never get to the end of a major comic book crossover without at least one superhero sacrificing his or her life to save humanity. Sometimes it is just to save a single person.”⁵

If this enthusiast for cinematic sacrifice can come so close to idealising the heroism of Jesus also – in his courageous opposition to hypocritical religious elitism – why is the meaning of the sacrifice of the cross so often unvisited nowadays by our own homilists? Has that also to do with embarrassment over a medieval theology of the cross that implies a need for the appeasement of the Father – through bloodletting – for lost honour?

What if instead the purpose of the Father and the cross was to reveal that the greatest good of all is the realisation that honour is not bestowed by febrile popular acclaim – another term for *social mediation* – but by a supra-human authority bent on liberating us from this delusion? What if the greatest superhero sacrifice of all was made by someone rejected by all and therefore totally unreliant upon any other human for vindication – with the aim of freeing us from all fear of social rejection if *we differ*? What if that is the meaning of the Incarnation in our time – not to have us forever brooding on our responsibility for the crucifixion but to have us believing in the possibility of Resurrection as firmly as did Jesus – if we arm ourselves with nothing more than this truth?

Surely it was above all in overcoming the natural and aboriginal human fear of shame, and in redefining honour as obedience above all to the Great Commandments, that Jesus triumphed, glorifying the Father? Did he not say that himself, in John 16: 33, in his claim to have overcome ‘the world’?

5 ‘The 20 Most Heartbreaking Superhero Sacrifices, Ranked’ - <https://www.cbr.com/most-heroic-superhero-sacrifices-ranked/> – World Wide Web, 7th Sept., 2021