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Anthony Bartlett's Concept of Abyssal Compassion and the Possibility of a Truly Nonviolent Atonement

David Eagle

Introduction

Many theologians have recently argued that atonement theories related to the Anselmian tradition introduce violent conflict into the very nature of God, which effectively destroys God's unity—a unity that is self-giving love. Mennonite theology, with its emphasis on a theology of peace, shares similar concerns. J. Denny Weaver takes issue with the dominance of the Anselmian satisfaction theory, particularly because of its inherent violence.¹ In *The Nonviolent Atonement*, he articulates a view that “charts a path of nonviolent atonement through territory strewn with images and assumptions of violence.”² He argues for narrative Christus Victor as a superior and inherently nonviolent atonement motif. However, I challenge Weaver's claim. I contend that Mennonite theologians would find better resources for articulating a nonviolent approach in the work of Anthony Bartlett in his recent book, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement*. Below I will raise questions about Weaver's work and attempt to explain how Bartlett's paradigm offers a better approach.

I question Weaver's campaigning for narrative Christus Victor for two reasons. First, much of the historical foundation of his work has been disputed. The justification for championing his view stems from the claim that it belongs to a pre-Constantinian church that had not yet acquiesced to the social order. Hans Boersma objects to Weaver's assertion that “the theology of Anselm is a theology specific to a church that has separated ethics from salvation and the saving work of Jesus.”³ Instead, Boersma points to the roots of the Anselmian tradition in the pre-Nicean tradition.⁴ Also, James Reimer has questioned Weaver's contention that the church post-Nicea acquiesced to the social order and abandoned its distinctive character, and instead claims that classic Trinitarian orthodoxy stands in continuity with the New Testament tradition.⁵ Secondly, and more devastatingly, Anthony Bartlett argues that Christus Victor still displays the traces of a divided, and hence violent, God.⁶ A summary of Bartlett's critique will follow below.

Gustav Aulén explains the essence of a Christus Victor approach this way: “Christ fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”⁷

The popularity of Christus Victor arises from the fact that—as opposed to the Anselmian tradition where Jesus is the object of the Father’s wrath (therefore introducing a divide in the Trinity)—evil becomes the object of the wrath of God. Weaver feels that Christus Victor meets the criteria for a nonviolent approach to the atonement that must “underscore that violence originates with humans and not with God.”⁸

Although Weaver goes to considerable lengths to avoid involving God in the origin of violence, his insistence on Christus Victor causes him to advocate an approach where violence does indeed originate with God. For, as Bartlett points out, a careful reading of Aulén’s work reveals that rather than locating the divide between the persons of the Trinity, he locates it between God’s wrath and mercy in God’s inner psyche, thus bringing violent conflict into God’s nature. For Aulén the evil powers are the “executants of God’s judgment on sin”;⁹ they were created as an expression of God’s wrath and judgment upon human sin. Thus, in Christus Victor, God’s wrath is overcome by God’s mercy in Christ. As Bartlett explains, “the victory that is won [over God’s wrath] by the divine ‘blessings in Christ’ is altogether God’s own act of victory, for even at this point the dualistic outlook is maintained.”¹⁰

Christus Victor thus removes Jesus as the object of God’s wrath, but further complicates matters by locating the conflict between divine wrath and divine love in the “internal, ‘psychic’ division of God.”¹¹ God’s own internal character becomes differentiated and thus marred by the violence of two natures vying for supremacy. Christ’s death has now in effect completed a transaction in the Godhead, where the wrathful “part” is overcome by the merciful “part.” But if God’s own self needs to be overcome, how can God’s essential unity be maintained? Along with Bartlett, I take exception to Weaver’s claim that Christus Victor is inherently nonviolent. Instead, it subtly enshrines violent conflict within God’s own nature, effectively “neutralizing the full human, transformative impact of the cross.”¹²

In *Cross Purposes* Bartlett carefully locates the origin of violence in humanity and preserves God’s unity as love. He provides a superior paradigm

that presents the message of the cross completely pruned of violence, while still upholding a robust notion of God's wrath. His work fits within the approach popularized by René Girard and followed by Raymund Schwager, James Alison, Robert Hamerton-Kelly,¹³ and others. Girard's work has been criticized as being overly negative about the foundations of human culture. John Milbank, for instance, says that Girard's "metanarrative...[assumes] every culture is automatically sacrificial and 'bad'" and that "criticism cannot really be used to promote an alternative practice."¹⁴ Weaver, contrasting his approach with Girard's, states that "Narrative Christus Victor has more focus on the entire scope of Jesus' mission to make the reign of God visible, which obviously includes the rejection of violence, but is not limited to it."¹⁵

Bartlett, aware of Milbank and Weaver's critique, employs a deconstructive approach to temper the all-encompassing and negative tenor of Girard's metanarrative, and is wary of Girard's claim to have found the truth about the origin of human society. Bartlett blends aspects of Girard's thought with a postmodern twist to envision the atonement that completely rejects violence while giving a positive impetus towards alternative practice.

Bartlett departs from both the Anselmian tradition and supporters of Christus Victor with the "moral influence theory" first articulated by Peter Abelard.¹⁶ This theory presents Jesus as a model for humanity to emulate; the way of the cross exerts a "moral influence" on people who encounter its message. The cross challenges us to live a life patterned after the life of Jesus. However, this theory is criticized for lacking "objective" content, and many argue that in moral influence nothing changes with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, beyond merely the presence of a new historical figure to emulate.

The huge problem with Abelard's formulation, as seen from an objectivist or metaphysical standpoint, is that it contains no guarantees, no necessary reasoning that would compel intellectual assent, or at least provide a fixed universe in which atonement can be demonstrated.¹⁷

However, those arguing for the necessity of an objective grounding to the atonement cannot satisfactorily deal with the division that their own explanations often create, either in the persons of the Trinity or in the Godhead. Bartlett circumvents the criticism of moral influence by proposing a radical re-reading that gives it a non-metaphysical grounding, or if metaphysics must be retained, to do so in a way that avoids "the metaphysics of presence."

Bartlett and Deconstruction

Bartlett draws upon the work of Jacques Derrida, often captured by the term “deconstruction,” to provide the foundation (!) on which to build a non-metaphysical, non-transactional view of the atonement.¹⁸ This is difficult, because, while Bartlett needs to counter the claim that atonement must have “objective” ground, he needs enough terra firma on which to argue that the cross has in fact changed the fabric of reality.

Deconstruction aims its entire arsenal at objectivity or “the metaphysics of presence.”¹⁹ The metaphysics of presence believes the present is a static entity that can be accurately described, quantified, objectified, and put on display in a museum case for interested visitors to peruse. Credit is due to Augustine for the invention (or at least the popularization) of this notion.²⁰ Looking at time, he concluded “that neither future nor past exists.” Instead, “it would be exact to say: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come.”²¹ The present is all that can exist. The past lives in present memory, the future in present expectation. It follows, then, that the present is a fixed entity. This leads necessarily to the idea that a subject (or self, or text²²) exists and can be described, because it can be fixed in the present.²³

Foremost among the problems here is that we cannot accurately describe the present. If I say, “Today is Monday, 10:50 a.m., and I am in the library,” I have tried to describe the present, but the present moment has slipped away—maybe my watch rolls over to 10:51 a.m. The present is inhabited by the ceaseless movement of time, so what is described as present no longer exists. Thus, my attempt to describe it has created a situation that does not quite exist.²⁴ This simple example shows it is impossible to describe the present, to “stop the flow of time.” Instead, we are left repeating the present, changing it into something different by trying to describe it.

Augustine asserts that only the present exists, and the future and the past are found only in memory. However, the present cannot exist without the past or the future. If neither of those exists, then neither does the present. The present then is liminal²⁵—the space we inhabit is always slipping beyond our grasp in the flux between the past and the future, and can never be stopped, nailed down, and perfectly described. Deconstruction argues that the present can only be re-presented²⁶ in a way that subtly changes what is

being described into something else. This act of re-presentation changes the present into something other than what it is:

What is is not what it is, identical and identical to itself, unless it adds to itself the possibility of being repeated [represented] as such. And its identity is hollowed out by that addition, withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it.²⁷

Deconstruction has ample reason to destabilize the notion of presence. At the root of upsetting the metaphysics of presence is a concern for the abuse of power. “Deconstruction means to be the delimitation of totalization in all of its forms.”²⁸

Proponents argue that whenever the metaphysics of presence steps up, claiming to have the Answer,²⁹ it ends up looking like Hitler’s Final Solution. Too often, when the present becomes a fixed and static entity, an oppressive totalitarianism is birthed. Instead, deconstruction wants to inhabit a liminal space, and to work at justice today instead of chasing fundamentalist dreams. It wants to blow the love of God wide open instead of “reducing it to a determinate set of beliefs and practices.”³⁰ Deconstruction is always opening, never closing.

Deconstruction is thus wary of Augustine’s gift of presence to the Western philosophical tradition. His definition of time is undermined by the “trace”³¹—the ceaseless transition from past to future, the presence of the past and future in the present without which the latter could not exist. It recognizes that the present is irrevocably liminal. The trace marks the place where identity and difference, presence and absence, constantly cross. The metaphysics of presence is deconstructed “and loses its protective barrier”; it is “forced to acknowledge the groundless play, the abyss, the absence inhabiting every claim to presence.”³²

Thus, if objectivity is both suspect and impossible to attain, then those who criticize the moral influence theory for lacking objective content have a problem. No explanation of the atonement can be objective, because every attempt to describe what Jesus’ death accomplished is a re-presentation of a past event. Every atonement theory borrows from current perspectives, past history, and future anticipation in trying to explain the significance of the cross. Every theory re-presents and therefore changes the original event. To further complicate matters, to speak of the original event is impossible. Even the

Biblical record re-presents it from the perspectives of various authors. Moral influence may lack objective content, but so does every other effort to define in objective terms the significance of Jesus' death. Proponents of moral influence have the advantage of being honest about their theory's lack of objective content. Opponents who insist that their own particular theories do have objective content enslave the cross to the metaphysics of presence. Instead, the cross is God's descent into our liminal space that disrupts all attempts to fix the present. The incarnation proclaims that God does not inhabit a Platonic heaven but prefers to inhabit the trace, allowing for repetition and re-presentation.

One difficulty in understanding Bartlett's work arises because much of his critique of objectivity lies behind the scenes. But in a rare passage, he speaks of the impact of deconstruction on understanding the atonement:

The meaning of Christ's death that I have presented is found to become directly involved in a very contemporary conversation broached from a very different direction [deconstruction], and the effect is both challenging and exciting.³³

Thus, for him, deconstruction, with its arsenal aimed at all attempts to fix the present, both anticipates and illuminates the cross, fundamentally a disturbing force in human history.

Bartlett, along with Derrida, is concerned about "the little people" inevitably crushed by hegemonic, unquestioned assumptions about reality. In this sense Bartlett's work shares a close kinship with Jesus' ministry. Jesus, too, was concerned with loosening the stranglehold of tradition (read "presence") and with re-awakening it to the sufferings of the least of human society. As John Caputo aptly puts it:

[D]econstruction helps religion examine its conscience, counseling and chastening religion about its tendency to confuse faith with knowledge, which results in the dangerous and absolutizing triumphalism of religion, which is what spills blood. . . . Religion so instructed, deconstructed and reconstructed, closely hewn to its messianic and prophetic sources and to the God who said the He does not delight in ritual sacrifice but in justice, religion as a powerful prophetic force which has a dream of justice for all God's children—that is the religion that emerges from an hour on the couch with deconstruction.³⁴

Bartlett's search for a non-metaphysical explanation of the cross is important because the power of the cross is contained precisely in how it upsets those "seeking to provide a fixed universe in which atonement can be demonstrated."³⁵ After an hour on the couch with deconstruction, we should realize that the attempt to objectively ground the atonement fundamentally contradicts its message.

Abyssal Compassion

Once Bartlett responds to detractors of the moral influence theory, he articulates a paradigm for the atonement, a modified form of moral influence that he terms "abyssal compassion."³⁶ I contend that abyssal compassion can do what Weaver failed to do with narrative *Christus Victor*; that is, provide a nonviolent understanding of the cross, circumvent the necessity for objective content to the atonement, and bring the wrath and love of God into a coherent whole.

The concept of abyssal compassion seeks to encompass two main ideas. "Abyssal" signifies that atonement takes place in the abyss of the human situation—humanity's captivity to selfish desire and retaliatory violence against which God's wrath is revealed. "Compassion" signals that God's reconciliation erupts into our world from the depths of Jesus' self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. This eruption brings the possibility of transformation into the world.

Bartlett's concept fits within the broader atonement tradition. As with most views of the atonement, it seeks to describe how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus both names and redeems the human situation; and it also identifies how Jesus' passion offers humanity new and transformed ways of living.³⁷ Michael Gorman puts these two components together into biblical terms:

Christ's death ended the reign of certain alien and hostile powers, thereby effecting liberation from them and from this age (Gal 1.4) and inaugurating the new age or new creation. The powers whose reign has ended include especially sin and death (Rom. 6.9-10) but also the old self. . . . Paradoxically, Christ's death brings life; its purpose and effect are not restricted to the forgiveness of sins but include a fundamental renewing and reorienting of life.³⁸

So, in a sense, abyssal compassion is nothing new. It stands firmly within the New Testament atonement tradition. But in another sense it is new, as it

seeks to present an understanding that is nonviolent and non-metaphysical, while retaining the Biblical notion of God's wrath and allowing the cross to bring new possibilities into the world. Bartlett effectively walks a very fine line here. He seeks to respond to his own critique of Anselm and Christus Victor, Milbank, Weaver's critique of Girard, and the common complaint that the moral influence theory lacks objective content.

A starting place for more fully understanding Bartlett is to explain what he means by the "abyss." Luke's Gospel records the story of Simeon, who immediately upon seeing the newborn Jesus and proclaiming him as the advent of God's redemptive action in the world, speaks these words to Mary:

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2:34, 35)

The moment of joy at the Messiah's birth is also filled with the stark revelation that the world is a violent place. Jesus' way of life, modeled by self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love, reveals a world fundamentally opposed to it and filled with violence and hatred. The crucifixion—the sword through Mary's soul—is prefigured in Simeon's dark speech, and Mary must have wondered what anguish this baby boy would bring. The crucifixion is emblematic of the human situation—that even while yearning for redemption from suffering, oppression, and death, humanity cannot resist violence as a means to redemption. Even when God enters our world and models a restored and redeemed way of living in the life of Jesus Christ, he is violently destroyed. Humans are wrapped up in the selfish desire to violently differentiate themselves from the other. Selfish desire inevitably turns to violence (whether physical, emotional, suicidal, or addictive). This claim warrants an example taken from the Western context.

Consumer capitalism, the basic economic structure of the West, uses desire and competition as basic principles. People work to make money to buy things that other people work to make in order to make money and buy things. The entire consumerist machine strives to make us want more, all under a promise of fulfillment and happiness. "The consumer culture does awaken suffering—the suffering of our yearning, our self-contempt, our envy—but only

in order to promise that its nostrums will put our sufferings back to sleep.”³⁹ But our sufferings do not sleep; they only create more desire. This cycle of selfish desire—whether for me, my family, or my country—ultimately leads to all sorts of violence, both physical and emotional, personal and corporate, creating a long litany of violent acts. We rape the earth in search of natural resources; we fight wars to protect our access to these resources; we commodify relationships, leaving broken families and abandoned children. We work countless hours and end up killing our souls. We numb the pain of our suffering with a wide array of addictions that in turn create cycles of abuse and death. On this point the Girardian critique stands.

While Girard’s theories may not explain the origin and foundation of human society, Bartlett believes they do reveal the endless cycle of desire and violence in which our world is trapped. He describes this cycle as the abyss. And from it the cross speaks; the cross is the voice of God that reveals the abyss. This voice is first and always an affirmative word, for even in the abyss God invites humanity into relationship.⁴⁰ The voice of God also speaks words of condemnation. Here Bartlett develops his provocative ideas about God’s wrath.

For him, Jesus on the cross reveals the impossibility of humans redeeming themselves from the abyss. Humanity is in such a mess that it kills God, the very expression of self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. The human race murders compassion and love, and places itself beyond its own redemptive power. The cross speaks an emphatic “No” against humanity’s propensity towards selfish desire and retaliatory violence as a solution to conflict. The cross holds up an unforgiving mirror to humanity and reveals its rebellion and depravity. Deeper than that, the cross brings God’s wrath upon humanity. Paul’s oft-quoted words, “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18), are relevant as long as the wickedness and godlessness of humanity is defined in a particular way. Bartlett quotes Robert Hamerton-Kelly about the precise object of God’s wrath, defined as:

the divine non-resistance to human evil. It is God’s unwillingness to intervene in the process of action and consequence in the human world by which we set up and operate the system of sacred violence, and so paradoxically a sign of love as the refusal to

abridge our freedom and a respect for our choices even when they are catastrophic. . . . The Cross reveals this paradoxical wrath as God's acceptance for our free choice to destroy ourselves and each other, inasmuch as it is the supreme instance of this human resistance against the good.⁴¹

God's wrath is not a hatred of ontological stain that mars humanity, nor is it represented by evil. Rather, it is the divine decision not to intervene in the cycle of desire and violence even when that cycle winds up crucifying God. The "No" of God's wrath brings destruction as the consequence of humanity's choice to resist the good. As Jesus hangs dead on the cross, humanity is forced to deal with the full weight of that "No"—"God is dead. And we have killed him."⁴² Humanity has denied and rejected its only hope for redemption. Here are the darkest recesses of the abyss.

However, this "No to humanity" is uttered within a larger "Yes," to echo a Barthian theme. The cross is first and foremost an affirmative word, and Bartlett is keen to develop a view of the atonement that is first and foremost positive: "It is in this context that the death of Christ needs urgently to be revisited, developing an understanding of salvation 'in the abyss'."⁴³ For as Good Friday reveals the profound dis-redemption of humanity, we also see in it that the word of the God-man on the cross is a loving invitation from God to relationship. The abyss, to Bartlett, is not only a negative image, and contra Girard, the cross does more than simply reveal the abyss. Rather,

This is the immense novelty [of the gospel]: the eruption of a moment of love from the deepest, darkest place of human abandonment, including the ultimate point of death that somehow does not/cannot extinguish it.⁴⁴

Here the cross issues a deconstructive word in the abandonment of the abyss that brings about redemption in it. The affirmative and eruptive word of the cross gives birth to the hope and power that humanity can be carried out of its captivity to selfishness and violence into a new transformed future governed by non-retaliatory love and self-giving compassion. "Only a free, unfounded act of compassion may evoke a genuine human transformation."⁴⁵ The cross creates the possibility that a human life marked by selfishness and violence might find a pattern to imitate and be transformed into one patterned by

compassion, love, forgiveness, and non-retaliation. As James Dunn says, "Jesus' death was [the beginning of] the end of humankind under the power of sin and death [read: selfish desire and violence], the destruction of man and woman as sinner."⁴⁶ But the end of this power paradoxically takes place in the presence with us of the God who, on the cross, feels the absence of God. And even as God reveals through the cross the abyss of humanity's existence, we find in the abyss "the freedom to love."⁴⁷

[T]he Christ of the Gospels fully and explicitly exposes the abyss, abandons himself in it in order both to reveal and to redeem it. From this flow the progressive deconstruction of all sacred and metaphysical order, proposing in its stead a terrifying freedom of abyssal love. The cross is both the source and the pathway of this love. It is the fulcrum of the human universe to change it into something we can hardly imagine, and yet do dimly intuit, an abyss of love.⁴⁸

The word of the cross is more than one of death and suffering. The resurrection plays a key role in injecting the cross with hope and providing impetus for positive social change:

Without diminishing the significance of the cross, we can say that for Paul it was a prologue or a prelude to resurrection and exaltation, as long as we understand this prelude to be essential and definitive rather than merely introductory. Without the resurrection and exaltation, this cross is only human weakness and folly.⁴⁹

Bartlett has a novel approach to connecting Jesus' death and resurrection. He draws heavily from Kierkegaard's notion of repetition and develops the significance of the resurrection for an understanding of atonement:

There is repetition in the life of the Crucified. Somehow the nonretaliatory victim is found to live again, and to live again in terms of nonretaliation. Like Job his life is given back double and more. However, this return to life is not at the cost of masking original violence; on the contrary, it is doubly disclosed, first in facticity and second, and primordially, by its undoing in compassion. The gospel name for this is resurrection. There is no getting to the bottom of resurrection; but that is the whole point! Resurrection

is the eternal or bottomless affirmation of nonretaliation, or forgiveness, for all violence. . . . Resurrection is not a transcendent miracle vindicating Christ against human history; rather it arises in and from that history. . . . There is no limit to Christ's forgiveness, his gift of himself in the darkness of human violence and abandonment. And the very quality of this "no limit" resists, subverts, overturns the hitherto irresistible damnation of death. Where before a death inevitably ends in the rictus of the corpse, the song of violence triumphant, in the cross, the event of the Crucified, it is changed endlessly into a glimpse of compassion and life begun over.⁵⁰

For Bartlett, death and sin go hand in hand. Sin—defined as selfish desire and retaliatory violence—is stopping the flux, nailing down the present, and closing the door to self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. Death is the ultimate price of sin, for in death all hope for the future is destroyed. Prior to the resurrection, humanity's enslavement to selfish desire and violence inevitably ended in death. However, the cross and resurrection introduce a Derridean trace of love in death, and open up a liminal space in the midst of human history. They provide the memory of a new past/future inhabiting the sin-infected, static present—the past of a crucified Jesus and the future of a resurrected Jesus. They disrupt fixed reality—a world dominated by death—and open up the world to the free flow of compassion.⁵¹

Conclusion

Bartlett's concept of abyssal compassion can be summarized this way. In Jesus, God fully enters into our world. Through him we see a picture of a God governed by self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. The world cannot tolerate God as revealed in Jesus' life because it is enslaved to sin. God's wrath is revealed against sin in the unwillingness to put a stop to human violence, thus abandoning humanity to destruction. This is the abyss in which we are trapped. Through Jesus, God issues a direct challenge to the human propensity towards selfish desire and violence. Humanity kills God, because it cannot resist resorting to violence to deal with conflict. God submits and refuses to take revenge, instead uttering words of compassion and forgiveness. By suffering and dying on the cross for and with humanity, Jesus begins to

open a way through the abyss through “the point of crisis to which we are inevitably pushed.”⁵²

God both subverts humanity’s irresistible tendency towards selfishness and violence in resurrection and destroys death’s stranglehold over the world. The experience of the condemning and liberating word of the cross introduces the possibility for change. It opens up the chance for humans once captive to selfishness and violence to begin a new life patterned by the cross. By demonstrating the possibility of transformation, others too will be confronted by it. Some will embrace a life of non-retaliatory love and self-giving compassion. By embracing a new way of living and embodying transformed behavior and newness of life, people will give witness to this new, alternate reality now at work in the world.

Bartlett’s view deserves serious attention as a cogent explanation of the saving significance of the cross in nonviolent terms. His attempt is superior to Weaver’s because he avoids resorting to speculative arguments about pre- and post-Constantinian theology and because he distances himself from *Christus Victor* terminology that introduces violent conflict into God’s very nature. Bartlett’s approach also takes seriously Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence, and offers a view of the significance of the cross that is rooted in the postmodern context. Mennonite theologians would do well to grapple with the concept of abyssal compassion as a truly nonviolent atonement.

Notes

¹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

⁵ A. James Reimer, “Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology,” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

⁶ Weaver says his understanding of *Christus Victor* differs in important ways from that of Gustav Aulén; thus he appends the word *narrative*. Does Bartlett’s critique then still apply? It would appear that Weaver has *added to* Aulén’s presentation, rather than modifying it. Thus, Bartlett’s critique stands.

⁷ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*, trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 4.

⁸ Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, 49.

⁹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 111. For the Church Fathers the powers are sin, death, and the devil, to which Luther adds the law and God's wrath. See Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 108.

¹⁰ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 114.

¹¹ Anthony Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 93.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996); Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence, Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

¹⁴ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

¹⁵ Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, 49.

¹⁶ Peter Abelard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans," in *A Scholastic Miscellany. Library of Christian Classics* (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Westminster Press, 1956).

¹⁷ Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 88.

¹⁸ John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) is the best compact introduction to Derrida's thought as it relates to religion.

¹⁹ Metaphysics of Presence: In a linguistic sense, it "simply means the delusion that words are objects and that they have stable meaning, instead of the absence and indeterminacy recognized by deconstruction" (Robert J. Belton, *Words of Art* [Online] (1996 [cited 21 December 2001]); available from <http://www.arts.ouc.bc.ca/fina/glossary/>. This definition can be expanded to include not only words but systems, beliefs, institutions, ideas, practices, etc.

²⁰ Presence: "The fact or condition of being present – i.e., of being at hand or before one, of actually existing. In postmodern contexts, presence is caught up in the discussion of determinacy in the sense that there must be something lurking behind a sign in order to guarantee that it will signify. In that sense, a determinist would believe in some sort of presence (if only metaphorically). In contrast, deconstruction would argue that there is no such metaphysical guarantee" (*Ibid.*).

²¹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 235.

²² Text: "[I]n postmodernist contexts a 'text' is indeterminate, open-ended, and endlessly subject to reinterpretation as audiences change. As such, 'text' can refer to any expression, consciously artistic or otherwise, which can be read, whether it is written or visual. Even social formations can be seen as a text open to interpretation" (Belton, *Words of Art*).

²³ In this line of thinking, God, being the Ultimate Subject, exists absolutely, is pure presence. If God was not pure presence, then God could slip into the past and a part of God would cease to exist. This notion has led to a static picture of God. God is immutable, changeless, and predictable.

²⁴ This is essentially Kierkegaard's idea of repetition. By repeating something, we subtly alter its characteristics, turning it into something that no longer accurately or completely describes it.

Kierkegaard explores this concept in narrative form in *Repetition, An Essay in Experimental Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).

²⁵ Liminal: “[T]he processes that go on within people when they are separated from their stable worlds and core values, then placed in an in-between world” (Alan Roxburgh and Mike Regele, *Crossing the Bridge: Church Leadership in a Time of Change* (Costa Mesa: Percept Group, Inc., 2000), 64.

²⁶ The hyphenation in “re-presented” tries to capture the sense that when describing reality we are attempting to nail down the present. However, it keeps slipping away and we are left forever re-presenting the past.

²⁷ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern a/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 48.

²⁸ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 126.

²⁹ Anyone who claims to have the Answer claims to have a corner on the truth and to be the authoritative interpreter of reality.

³⁰ John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, in *Thinking in Action*, ed. Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2001), 108.

³¹ Trace: The connection of past and future elements to things present. The trace is the part of the past and future that inhabits the present, without which the present would cease to exist. The trace is absent from the present; instead it is merely suggested. It undermines our attempts to pin down the present. The trace is the constant movement from past to present to future, without which time would have no meaning. For instance, the sweatshirt I’m wearing is inhabited by the trace of such things as “cotton fields” and “the garment industry.” These two elements are not present in it, but without them it would not exist. Similarly, as I write this article it is inhabited by the future trace of “being defended” or “published in a journal.” Without this future trace, the notion of this article would have no meaning (Belton, *Words of Art*).

³² John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 35.

³³ Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 23.

³⁴ Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 159-60.

³⁵ Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 88.

³⁶ Bartlett explicitly identifies *abyssal compassion* as his understanding of atonement.

³⁷ Bartlett provides a parallel description. “The most proper human possibility of impossibility is transformed by compassion into an-archic, eschatological possibility” (*Cross Purposes*, 249). Atonement is how human impossibility is transformed into possibility by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

³⁸ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 86.

³⁹ Douglas Frank, *Untitled Manuscript* (Unpublished Manuscript, 2000), 156-57.

⁴⁰ See Luke 23:39-43.

⁴¹ Hamerton-Kelly as quoted in Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 206, footnote 53.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” (Section 125), in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking, 1954).

⁴³ Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 36.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁶ James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 223.

⁴⁷ Frank, *Untitled Manuscript*, 162.

⁴⁸ Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 41.

⁴⁹ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 87.

⁵⁰ Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 153-54.

⁵¹ “Only a God ‘weak in power but strong in love’ can be strong enough to take on all the world’s pain and die on a cross. Trust in such a God can give human beings the strength to risk following on the path of compassion and vulnerability, to think what it means to live lives whose first priority is love. In a broken and complex world we Christians may sometimes find ourselves driven to force and even violence in spite of our best intentions, but we need to acknowledge that to choose such alternatives is always to admit a failure of imagination, a concession to weakness, always to have betrayed the image of the power of love we have encountered in the powerless Jesus on the cross.” William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 21.

⁵² Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 223.

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