

**To become ‘the People of the Cross’:  
Climate Change, Violence and some Meanings of Creation in Our Times**

**Ireland Yearly Meeting (Quakers) Annual Lecture 2015**

**Based on the extemporary delivery by Alastair McIntosh  
at Dromantine, County Down, 10 April 2015**

*It is not our light – we receive it (QFP). And there you have it. The sense that we receive the Light, that it is not ours, that it is not at all the sum of our deepest feelings and thoughts, but comes to us unbeckoned, showing us our darkness and bringing us to new life: if we have thrown away the not ours – then have we not thrown away everything?*

- Rob Foxcroft, *The Best Dispensation that Ever Was: an Open Letter to Friends*, 2014.

The theme of this year’s Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland, is *Knowing God’s Creation*. The opening reflection that I have just read out was written and sent to me by a Friend in Scotland; somebody whose acquaintance I have thus far known only by correspondence. To me, our Friend’s words bear within them a foundational question that will run through my lecture tonight. Namely: *How, in our tradition, do we think that we know anything of that of God?*

“I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths,” begins an old, poetic translation of Proverbs 4:11-12, the constellating text for Ireland Yearly Meeting this year. In Quaker testimony, built on three-and-a-half centuries of experience born of patient waiting, such paths are lit by a light that shines from within, the Inward Light.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century Robert Barclay was pretty much the only systematic theologian ever to come out of us, a bunch of *unsystematic* theologians! He remarked that John 1:9 is often thought of as “the Quaker text” because it encapsulates our mystical theology. It speaks, as many of you will be aware, of “the true light which lights up all people who come into the world.”

In the original New Testament Greek of that wording, *panta anthrōpon* literally means “all people”. That, in a full sense of *pan* that really does mean “all”, and not just a narrow spiritual elite. As such, the text comprised the keystone of Barclay’s then-heretical belief in what he called “universal atonement”. It was a direct challenge to the Calvinist doctrine of “limited atonement” where, at that time in Scotland, salvation was being held to be conferred upon only a pre-destined Elect.

From John 1:9 derives our tradition of seeking out “the light” as “that of God in all.” Following on from that position, and taking our cue from John 15:15, we call each other “Friends” and thus, the Religious Society of Friends.

Now, I'm sorry to jump in at the deep end, but time is short. Some of you, especially those coming from outside, might have come expecting a lecture on the science of climate change. My task, however, is not to replicate this evening what I've spoken to on other occasions, such as with Cork Meeting or under the enabling ecumenical auspices of Eco-Congregation Ireland. Tonight I want to take the mainstream science of climate change for granted and focus exclusively on the underlying spirituality of its implications. Specifically, I want to link this in our Quaker Peace Testimony.

While I will assume that my primary audience in this hall comprises Friends, I warmly welcome the company of other friends who are parishioners, clergy and religious from a spectrum of other denominations. We're all in this together. There are many different paths towards the Truth. As a Quaker with a love of inter-denominational and interfaith appreciation, I, for one, find joy in exchanging with others. This very much includes my own challenging but rich and warm Presbyterian upbringing on the Isle of Lewis. Looking back to my youth, when Voluntary Service Overseas sent me to work in Papua New Guinea, it also includes a wealth of Roman Catholic social teaching, not to mention a backdrop of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Taoist and indigenous people's insights.

What does it mean to "do theology"? To write it, or to speak it, and to act it out in the unfolding of fresh realities? For me, it means to take the pressing issues our lives and times and to hold them in a deeper and transfigurative light. Such transformation subverts the banal framing of reality so often found in politicians, economists, and newspapers. It is "subversion" as *sub-versa* which means, "to change direction from underneath."

As such, the test of all theology should be that it liberates. Good Catholic theology liberates. Good Protestant theology. Good Orthodox theology of the elder Christian traditions that I am coming to love so much of the east. And of course, good interfaith theology that reflects the shining of the Inward Light through diverse cultural prisms. "I have other sheep that are not of this fold" (John 10:16).

I am a Quaker "by conviction" because I find that good Quaker theology is a theology of liberation. Tonight, I want to attempt to "do theology" – as Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru would say. I feel led to do it in terms of our relationship with the Creation, specifically as prompted by the pressing issues of climate change, violence, and the imperative, within our Religious Society, to re-evaluate our relationship to understandings of Christ and the experience of the Cross. That's a tall order and, perhaps, uncomfortable: but here goes, and here's a roadmap of how I'd invite you to walk with me through it.

- 1) The hubris of consumerism and the hubris of war.
- 2) Our experiential basis for accepting spiritual reality.
- 3) The problem with God as a problem in itself.
- 4) Violence and perception of "the People of the Cross".
- 5) The problem of the credibility of the Cross today.
- 6) Nonviolence and the double passion of the Cross.
- 7) *Je suis* ... some meanings of Creation in our times.

## 1) The hubris of consumerism and the hybris of war

The release of greenhouse gases that drive global warming and consequent climate change is the product of population and the *per capita* level of material consumption. The equation is not just about population, as some would make out. It is equally about consumption. One could argue that it is actually more about consumption, because while a poor family might have six babies, a rich one could have easily sixty times the level of material consumption. Also, worldwide, population rates are falling. The birth rate in the Republic of Ireland is currently 2.01 per woman, which is just below the replacement rate allowing for child mortality. In contrast, this year's economic growth rate in Ireland is projected to be 3.5%. Were that to be sustained for twenty years, it would double the size of the economy. Both population and consumption levels therefore matter in terms of planetary impact, but *consumerism* is the cutting edge of the problem.

I define consumerism as *consumption in excess of what is necessary to live in dignified sufficiency*.

In one of my books, *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, I have argued that *hubris* – vanity or excessive pride - drives the consumerism that underpins climate change. Behind *hubris* is a closely related Greek word, *hybris*, which means “violence”. Put simply: *hubris* leads to *hybris*, and *hybris*, to further *hubris*. Such is the spiral of violence in which we are caught up. Because *hubris* and *hybris* are intertwined, both bear upon our Quaker Peace Testimony; namely, “We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons.”

With that testimony comes the imperative to resist evil and the evils of our times. We do so in ways that find outward practical expression, but which are shaped and moved by the spiritual illumination of the Inward Light.

The relationship between *hubris* and *hybris* was magnificently mapped out two-and-a-half millennia ago by Plato in *The Republic*. Here, the old philosopher – *philo-Sophia* – the “lover of the goddess of wisdom” - portrays Socrates as setting out his vision of philosopher kings. One bright morning the deceptively simple sage heads off down to the Athenian port of Peiraeus to make his prayers for the festival of the goddess and to enjoy the pageant. There, he meets a cluster of young city slickers, and a debate strikes up about the ideal society. Socrates is asked for his opinion. He portrays the rustic idyll. He'd have people living in frugal but dignified sufficiency in small communities. Most production would be for local consumption. Their days would be spent working the land and practicing crafts that would satisfy the fundamental human needs for food, clothing and shelter. They would spend time with their children, eat a vegetarian (but not vegan) diet, and drink wine in moderation. In their spare time in evenings they would “crown their heads with garlands, and sing hymns to the gods.”

“So,” continues Socrates, “they will live with one another in happiness, not begetting children above their means, and guarding against the danger of poverty and war.” They will live such lives in harmony with one another and with their neighbours, living to a ripe old age, “and at death leave their children to live as they have done.”

With those words, Plato anticipated our modern concept of *sustainable development*. This was defined by the Brundtland Report of the United Nations in 1987 as: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

So far so good, except that Socrates’ proposal was an affront to Glaucon, a city Sloane who then takes centre stage. He demands a burgeoning city. This, “if they are not to be miserable,” will provide for all “the ordinary dishes and dessert of modern life” (as A.D. Lindsay’s translation from the Ancient Greek has it). The citizens’ houses will be filled with gold, ivory, ornate furnishings and paintings. Their larders, stacked with every gastronomic extravagance. A dazzling hierarchy of servants will answer every need, right the way down to both wet and dry nurses to handle the children.

Socrates listens, but to his ear this is “a city which is suffering from inflammation,” one where the people “overpass the bounds of necessity and plunge into reckless pursuit of wealth.” Such affluence, he tells his young friend, would require plundering wealth from neighbouring communities. As they’d do the same back, they’d be perpetually at war. In a devil-may-care spirit Glaucon brashly takes the point, at which the wily old sage surmises:

“And we need not say at present whether the effects of war are good or bad. Let us only notice that we have found the origin of war in those passions which are most responsible for all the evils that come upon cities and the men that dwell in them.” (*The Republic*, II:372-374)

## 2) Our experiential basis for accepting spiritual reality

What we have seen in Plato’s *Republic* – albeit simplified to a dichotomy for argument’s sake – is a foreshadowing of the choices with which humanity is faced today.

On the one hand, Glaucon’s narcissism yearns opulence. This, even though Socrates gets him to admit that the hubris of such “inflammation” will invoke war’s hybris. Such is a recurring Platonic theme. The *Critias*, the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* variously show that such a way of life displeases the gods and ends in ecological apocalypse with massive loss of human lives.

On the other hand, the Platonic Socrates yearned only for the riches of frugal sufficiency. Its culmination was that spare time and surplus energy would let them “crown their heads with garlands, and sing hymns to the gods.” We might read this as a metaphor for the joyously expressed spiritual life in communion with others.

In effect, Plato argues that, without spiritual purpose, the Devil makes work for idle hands. As I once heard Mary Roslin of Glasgow Local Meeting saying: “It is perilous to neglect your spiritual life.” Jeremiah (2:12) portrays God express the problem of idolatry as follows: “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” Why is the worship

of false gods a problem? Because, said a great English theologian: “I can’t get no satisfaction/ ‘Cause I try and I try and I try and I try.” And why not? Because, as a modern tribute band to *Genesis* puts it, you can’t go “... buying the stairway to Heaven.” Only by “the true light,” the Inward Light that shines from a place beyond ego, can we walk the proverbial “way of wisdom.”

*Quaker Faith and Practice* translates thus the Welsh Friend, Waldo Williams, who wrote in 1956: “It is not our light – we receive it” (26:64). It comes, as Rob Foxcoft’s reflection with which I opened this evening says, *unbeckoned*, a gift of grace to which the hubris-inflamed psyche is blind.

The lesser self, the ego, *worships* (or “gives worth to the ship of”) its own small light. We dim spiritual reality to a tolerable brightness. Challenged by the otherness of the divine, it can be tempting to overshoot the honest doubt of *agnosticism* (“not knowing”), and plump for the full-scale rejection that is *atheism* (“without God”).

Quaker faith is primarily based on experience, on waiting for the leadings of the (Holy) Spirit. The Spirit is the lens by which Friends discern faith, including what is gleaned from reading scriptures such as the gospels or the books of other faiths. Direct spiritual experience that impacts upon consciousness is therefore paramount. In the Welsh passage from which I have already quoted, Waldo Williams asks:

“How do we know that we are not deceiving ourselves? In the end, we have nothing but our own experience to rely upon. In the end, even the one who accepts the most traditional religion has nothing but his own experience to rely on.”

Strikingly, these words, translated, comprise the very last lines prior to the appendices in the current edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice* (5<sup>th</sup> edn., p. 630).

We therefore speak of being Quakers “by conviction”. Friends give more weight to the empirical, to experience built up and tested by discernment and consensual validation with others, than to creeds, dogmas and even scriptures. For all its dogmatic rationalism, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of a rich body of research into psychic, spiritual and mystical experience. The foundation stone was William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, delivered as the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University between 1901 and 1902. Friends should be aware that Professor James drew heavily from data gathered by a young Quaker-born psychologist, Edwin Diller Starbuck, who lived until 1947.

Such research shows that rationality does not have to point towards atheism. It cannot “prove” spiritual reality, but it can give circumstantial support for the reality of *numinous* experience – that which “nods towards” the divine. A marker of this was that to celebrate the centenary of James’ Gifford Lectures an outstanding literature review - *The Varieties of Anomalous Experience* – was published by the American Psychological Association. Also, at the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the United Kingdom, the fastest-growing emergent field of study has been *Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group*. One of its leading lights, Professor Peter Fenwick of the Oxford Radcliffe Infirmary, publishes his hospice studies of spiritual experiences surrounding death in quality peer-reviewed medical journals. *Network*

*Review*, the journal of The Scientific and Medical Network, brings together many such physicians and physicists who consider that, in the words from *Hamlet*, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Far from being passé, our Quaker history of experiential (or “experimental”) religion is cutting edge.

What kind of experiences are we talking about? Most Friends will recall the passage where George Fox glimpsed “the paradise of God” and “the Creation was opened to me ... beyond what I could ever put in words.” I do not need to labour the point. Most of you would not be here tonight if you were not already in tune with such numinous, indeed, mystical experiences. Neither is this a tradition locked in the past. Just this month, John Lampen, who will be known to some of you for his reconciliation work here in Ulster, wrote a “Reflection” piece for *The Friend* (3 April, p. 12). It describes a near-death experience that he underwent many years ago. He recalls how the nurse who was caring for him burst into tears as he “died”, adding that it “may be the loveliest compliment I was ever given.”

He testifies: “I can hardly describe the feeling of reassurance, peace and warmth which enveloped me, despite a great deal of pain.” He concludes, “Death (for me) was welcoming, not fearsome; and the return to life was indeed a gift, but also – as Jesus’ followers found at the first Easter – a tough assignment” (3 April 2015, p. 12).

### **3) The problem with God as a problem in itself**

The etymology of *belief* suggests a meaning of “holding dear”, but the British Quaker Survey shows clearly that a sense of God is held less dear today than used to be the case. In 2003, 72% of Friends said that they believed in God, but by 2013, this had fallen to 57%. The proportion of identification as Christian fell from 46% in 2003 to just 37% in 2013. By 2013, the proportion of those who understood themselves as seeking God’s will in Meeting for Worship had declined to just 20%, and 15% professed to having no belief in God at all. Here in Ireland the figures are probably less pronounced but with the same underlying trend.

Does it matter if we detach from our roots? I think it does. The emerging term, “nontheist Friends”, covers a multitude of positions, as recent correspondence in *The Friend* shows. However, while the honest doubt of *agnosticism* (or “not knowing”) is one thing, militant *atheism* (or God rejection) is quite another within a Religious Society, especially one that themes its Yearly Meeting as Knowing God’s Creation.

When we refer to the divine as God, Goddess, Allah, Brahman or whatever we recognise its personification. That’s partly a consequence of our heritage, but it’s also reasonable, not to mention, based on experience. Given that each of us as human beings are personified, it is reasonable to imagine that the divine, as the ground of our being, might be even more personified than we are, that divine love is greater than ours and the Creator, greater than the created. In the story of Moses and the burning bush, God’s name for God’s own self was “I am” – echoed by Jesus in the “I am” passages of John’s gospel. God is Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a living presence. We confuse philosophical categories of reality if we muddle it up with amorphous and impersonal concepts of energy drawn from physics.

At the heart of the debate about God is the spiritual psychology of relatedness and otherness. At a mystical level, there is no absolute other. We're all Buddha Nature or, as 2 Peter 1:4 puts it, "partakers of the divine nature." The Greek translated as partakers (or participants) is *koinōnoi*, and that word shares the same root from which, via the Latin, we derive the term "community".

Healthy community allows a life that is both very individual and very collective. It's about the "me", but held within a matrix of relationship that comprises the "we". If the "me" is not to succumb to narcissistic hubris, it must accept the otherness of others; what Thomas Merton called "the sanctuary of another's subjectivity." That is why Rob Foxcroft asks: "If we have thrown away the *not ours* – then have we not thrown away everything?"

We need otherness if we are to enter into the mystery of love. In a theology of life as love made manifest, there can be no "my spirituality". No trumping of the "we" by "me". Spirituality is not another possession that we accumulate, or even a lifestyle truth. Coming from the Buddhist tradition Chögyam Trungpa wrote a book called *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. He wrote in the Introduction:

"Walking the spiritual path properly is a very subtle process; it is not something to jump into naively. There are numerous sidetracks which lead to a distorted, ego-centred version of spirituality; we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques. This fundamental distortion may be referred to as *spiritual materialism*."

While our religion as the socially organised expression of a shared spiritual path will give comfort, we must not make of it a comfort doll. To be a Quaker stands us in the lineage of those whose meetings were for *sufferings*. Their faith meant being spiritually *exercised*. It was a choice of life, not a lifestyle choice. It must not be captured for reflected glory - "Oh, so you're a *Quaker!*" – while playing loose with the promptings of the Spirit or the Peace Testimony. A prophetic movement is a *living* tradition, not a seventeenth century fossil to be added to our collection. That's a demanding common task. As the German mystic Thomas à Kempis said: "Jesus has many to love his heavenly kingdom, but few to carry his cross."

The problem of Quakerism-lite can be painfully real. We want to hold the door open, but not to have it shut behind us. Once, immediately after giving ministry, I experienced somebody jump up and say: "I hate it when people speak about God in meeting!" There are good reasons why some might have an allergy to God. Honest doubt, spiritual abuse, aversion to the perversion of religion by the violent. But you don't go to a coffee shop if you hate the smell of coffee. Our efforts to be inclusive have attracted many refugees from other churches, but sometimes the burden of their expectations, baggage and projections puts us under strain.

It's one thing to invite guests, but quite another to have them take over the guest house. An organisation, like an organism, needs to have an immune system to stay healthy. We're not called to be all things to all comers. While open to new light, we can't dim down the Inward Light to suit the lowest common comfort level. To do so

would diminish the very ethos by which our ethic of inclusion is extended. After all, in how many other denominations of any faith can a complete stranger walk in off the street, and be welcome to stand up and offer ministry during a Meeting for Worship? Great freedom comes with great responsibility – the “ability to respond” – and in our tradition, to respond to, and only to, the promptings of the Holy Spirit from within.

In last year’s Swarthmore Lecture which is widely held to have been prophetic, Ben Dandelion raised similar uncomfortable points.

The challenge is that for too long we have presented Quakerism, not in terms of “This is who we are, you are welcome to come along,” but rather as “Hallo, who are you and what would you like Quakerism to be for you?” We have wanted to help those damaged by previous affiliations but have not helped them to reconcile themselves to their past experiences. Sometimes the damaged are damaging, as in the way that words like “God” or “sin” or “perfection” can be treated as toxic and marginalised within our common vocabulary. Those of us who still use the term “God” can find ourselves challenged by the “pushed buttons” of those coming from elsewhere, whether previous churches or no church at all.... We should make more effort to make peace with our former affiliations ... [to avoid] a spiritual “dumbing down” – a theology of apology or absence that compounds the problem.... Rekindling our spiritual essence is crucial to spiritual authenticity. (pp. 57-58)

We may think of ourselves as post-modern, post-theistic or post-Christian, and debate these points as if our meetings are the university at prayer. The trouble is, the wider world out there might choose to see us not in such a nuanced way. The world is full of hubris, that backing to hybris, and that, knocking on our own back doors.

Some of us may think that we’re no longer Christian, that we don’t need the Cross. That doesn’t mean it’s off the world’s agenda or that our work for peace can be so effective in its absence. The gospel story of the Gadarene (or Gerasene) demoniac speaks at many levels. At its heart is a man driven crazy by a plurality of “devils” called Legion. The pigs, into which his “demons” were evicted, were not the food of kosher Jews but of the occupying Romans, the legionnaires. Mark’s gospel was written at a time when the Gadara had suffered reprisals that, according to Josephus, were several times more sweeping than the one-in-ten collective executions known as decimation.

To do liberation theology, one reads the text in context – both then and now. In the light of recent world happenings, what strikes me is that Legion saw Jesus coming, *from afar*.

The Greek word is *makrothen*. It means, “a very great distance.”

If we want to call ourselves *Quakers*, we’d better watch out. This is not the place for half measures. Legion might spot us coming, *from afar*.

We stand convicted, by all our convictions, including lack of convictions. It can be a frightening summons, this Peace Testimony.

#### 4) Violence and perception of “the People of the Cross”

In February the self-styled “Islamic” State beheaded twenty-one Coptic (or Egyptian) Christians on a lonely Mediterranean beach.

Their chilling video announced “a message signed with blood to the Nation of the Cross” and, more widely, to “the People of the Cross.”

We might not see ourselves coming, but Legion does. Worse, Legion sees us playing by the rules of Legion’s game and that lets Legion mock us with the faith that we have compromised.

I speak collectively, not of individuals: but consider our position as seen through Arab eyes. Historically, we in this room who have “British” stamped on our passports have colonised Arabic countries more deeply than any other part of the world, except Ireland.

George W. Bush launched his “war on terror” in Afghanistan as a “crusade”. Initially, the war in Afghanistan was codenamed *Operation Infinite Justice* – an attribute that blasphemously usurped the place of God. Tony Blair reportedly felt these wars to be a duty of his faith.

Fast forward to 2009, and it was revealed that Donald Rumsfeld’s top secret daily defence briefings on Iraq to president Bush were decorated with Bible verses. A year later, ABC News broke the story that Trijicon rifle sights – widely used by both the US and British forces – had Bible references coded into their etched-on model numbers.

Fast forward to four weeks ago, Friday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2015. At a highly militarised service in St Paul’s Cathedral to commemorate the Afghanistan war, military helicopters riding shotgun overhead, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in the presence of the Queen and the British high establishment, blessed a cross that soldiers had welded together out of the brass casings of used artillery shells.

Shells that had probably been fired to kill.

We can but ponder how this spoke to armed jihadists.

To give the Archbishop his due, his Easter sermon this week spoke of how he’d met with the Coptic Orthodox bishop in England. The position of Bishop Angaelos, like other under-reported spiritual voices from the region, is that violence cannot be redeemed by more violence. Going in with all guns blazing doesn’t make Christian communities any more secure. Instead, we must practice *Christianity*. We must follow the example of some of the families of the murdered, and forgive and pray for the perpetrators of such crimes.

The massacre of 147 Christian Kenyans at Garissa University had taken place just three days before Easter. Referring to both massacres, Archbishop Welby made a remarkable statement. He said, “Christians must resist without violence the

persecution they suffer and support persecuted communities, with love and goodness and generosity.”

When people say that they reject the Cross, ask: *which Cross?* That which was idolatrously co-opted by Legion under Constantine’s so-called Holy Roman Empire? Or, the Cross to which we’ve hardly yet awoken?

The fact is that Jesus never taught “just war” theory. Jesus taught full-on *nonviolence*. Pontius Pilate asked him at his trial: “Are you a king, then?” The Prince of Peace replied: “King is your word,” and he spoke unto Pilate of nonviolence, saying: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it was, my followers would fight to save me” (John 18:36-37).

We pray to God - *Thy kingdom come* - not for that of Caesar, who was held to be divine. That’s why Legion sees us coming, *from afar*.

### **5) The problem of the credibility of the Cross today**

The problem with talking about the Cross, especially capitalised, is that it has become, for most people, *incredible*. That, in the sense of “not credible”. I myself came from what was once a fairly uninterested slightly bewildered position to reappraise it, only out of the necessity of seeking a deeper and more effective understanding of nonviolence. Bear with me, therefore.

Consider the difficulty that spiritual seekers who are dubious about God or Christianity might feel about the Cross. Imagine – they go into a mainstream church, and come out with the question: “What’s all this song and dance about a dead man on a cross? Is this a necrophilic cult?”

What would be your answer? For those of you who are here from other denominations, what would be your church’s answer? It’s not easy, is it! The Christian view of the Cross has evolved through history.

Very broadly, we can divide it into first and second millennium soteriology (or theories of salvation). The central question is *Why did Jesus die?* Across both millennia, mainstream doctrine has hinged on “ransom passage” of Mark 10:45 and Matthew 20:28. This portrays Christ as “the Son of Man” having come to give his life “as a ransom for many.” Paul, in 1 Timothy 2:6, words it as “a ransom for all.”

The crux of the matter has been this. If we are the “saved”, and Christ, the ransom price: then who might be *the ransomer of souls?*

The dominant thrust of soteriology from the first millennium, the era of the undivided church (before the split between east and west in 1054), is that the Devil was the ransomer of souls. Christ descended into Hell and freed the imprisoned souls. He constrained the Devil’s power, and this supernatural victory is nowadays known as the *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement.

I did say, “bear with me”!

Come the second millennium, and the western Church was strongly in the grip of feudal power. Anselm of Aosta, whose family roots were in the feudal mores of old Lombardy, was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093 by the son of William the Conqueror. He reasoned that under an omnipotent God, *Christus Victor* theory gave too much power to the Devil. If Satan wasn't to be the ransomer of souls, then who else in town might be qualified to take the job?

There was only one other candidate. Yours faithfully, God.

In *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man) Anselm reasoned that God's honour as the cosmic feudal superior, so to speak, had been dishonoured by human sin. This had to be "satisfied" or made good. God, in his love, therefore sent his son to carry out the penitential act on our behalf and restore the father's honour to its rightful place.

This "satisfaction theory" of the atonement remains at the heart of mainstream western (Catholic and Protestant, but not Orthodox) theology to this day. When the Protestant Reformation came about in the sixteenth century, John Calvin, with his lawyer's, mind ratcheted it up a few notches further with his "penal substitution theory". This added emphasis to the sense of punishment. Calvin said that God had been left "armed for vengeance" in the face of Adam's and subsequent human sin. However, out of his goodness he sent Christ to stand in our place in the dock, and to suffer the punishment on our behalf. The mind boggles at such psychodynamics of the Holy Family.

Leaving aside less influential theories such as the "moral influence" of the Cross, that is broadly where we stand today. But also, we stand today at the crossroads of a new millennium. It is time to ask whether the Cross and presently dominant theories of "salvation" – whatever that implies – are still fit for purpose.

Some Christians hold a "cessationist" view of the Holy Spirit. This means that they believe its work in the world finished once the canon of the Bible and the creeds with their associated doctrines were "complete". However, Quakers share with most of the wider Church a "continuationist" view. This understands the Spirit to be present in our world, in our Meetings for Worship, and in our individual lives as dynamic force that inspires and drives forward through time an ongoing spiritual evolution, or revelation. Such a view permits what the Iona Community calls, "new ways to touch the hearts of all."

## **6) Nonviolence and the double passion of the Cross**

When I popped the question about theories of the Cross, as one does, over lunch one day to my proudly Huguenot-descended French mother in law, she went to her shelf and took down a little book by a French Catholic priest, Abbé Pierre. It was called *Mon Dieu, Pourquoi?* (Why, God?).

Together we translated a passage that rang very true to my own experience, having lived for the past decade in Govan, which is a hard-pressed part of Glasgow. The

Abbé wrote that, all his life, he had struggled with the said ransom passages. However:

It has been while living for a long time amongst drug addicts that another explanation came to me. The addict is, in effect, at the same time his own executioner and the victim. He is both the ransomer and the hostage. Based on this observation, I realised that it is the same with all human beings. Because we are disconnected from our authentic divine source, we have become our own executioners. We are slaves to our disordered desires, to our egotism.

Using the website *BibleHub*, I checked out the original Greek that the gospels use for “ransom”. It is *lútron* – “to loose” – and that, in the sense of setting loose a captive’s bonds. By saying that he came to be a ransom, Jesus was describing an act of solidarity in with those who suffer in the cause of freedom. The theology of “ransom”, far from being profoundly conservative, is actually liberation theology.

Here we might see an opening of the way because, here, the Cross emerges as a supreme symbol of nonviolence. Jesus died because he taught and showed a way of liberation. As theologians like Walter Wink shows in *Engaging the Powers*, or Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan in *The Last Week* (which unpacks Mark’s gospel as a confrontation with religious and Roman imperial control), the Cross was a consequence of Jesus’ nonviolent revolution. But also, its testimony. It broke the retributive the spiral of violence. It shines out a love that never can be killed, to which “resurrection” is intrinsic, because the essence of it comes from outside space and time.

That is the divine humanity we miss if we neglect the Cross. Jesus was an activist for human liberation. The Cross is *Christus victor*, not in the sense of hammering the Devil, but in the sense of showing that, in the end, the hubris that drives hybris is hollow. It can’t give no satisfaction as compared with a love that never lets us go.

“I have come,” said Christ in Luke’s gospel, “to set fire to the world and wish it were already kindled.” Many of us were taught that this means the fire of Hell. Now, we glimpse a very different fire. The fire of the Spirit. The fire of love. The fire that burns off only those encrustations of ego that were never really “us” in the first place.

Here we see a double “passion” of the Cross. Both the passion that is *suffering*, and the passion that is *ardent love*. Such a view possible only from a greatly widened viewpoint. As an old lobster fisherman from the Isle of Harris told me: “My God, Alastair, *inhabiteth* eternity.”

## 7) *Je suis ... some meanings of Creation in our times*

This fire is the “true light” that enlightens all the people of the world. “I am the light of the world ... the light of life,” said Jesus (John 8:12). We must reclaim such passages from narrow and excluding interpretations. The “I am” is divine “I am”. In my experience, it’s also Buddha Nature. Also Tao. As Krishna puts it in the Hindu gospel, the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:4, 23):

“All this visible universe comes from my invisible Being. All beings have their rest in me... Even those who in faith worship other gods, because of their love, they worship me ...”

The Buddha was a prince. Krishna is a god. For me, what makes the four gospels so powerful is that Jesus was from humble origins, an activist for social and spiritual transformation who loved getting out into nature, and who suffered a consequence that many of our activist colleagues have suffered. That’s why God shines through his being. That’s why I can buy the theology of a simultaneous God-human nature, an understanding that is strong in Orthodox theology (such as the work of Olivier Clément and Paul Evdokimov), but relatively weak in the western branches of the Church. At the end of the day, only the Inward Light endures.

Here in the Celtic world these insights are nothing new. The Celtic mystics shared the understanding of the underlying undivided church, from before the east-west split. For example, John Scottus Eriugena, one of your many great Irish theologians who evangelised continental Europe, wrote in the 9<sup>th</sup> century: “God is said to love, because he is the cause of all love and he is diffused through all things, and he gathers all things into one and it turns back to him in an ineffable return.”

There you have it. Ineffable return. Perpetual resurrection through the ability to let go, to allow the breaking of our inner captive bonds. As the late Hindu-Catholic theologian and Gifford Lecturer, Raimon Panikkar, puts it in his *Nine Sutras on Peace*: “Only forgiveness breaks the bonds of karma.”

Friends, in the aftermath of the massacre of the French cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo in January, many people expressed solidarity by sending out Tweets and wearing T-shirts that said: *Je suis Charlie*.

It was a slogan to which I felt ambivalent, for I am not in sympathy with cartoons that lampoon vulnerable and disadvantaged minorities.

That said, I will leave with you with this thought.

Could we take what the “Islamic” State intended as a mockery, and turn it round?

As Quakers and others here whose faith is love: must we merely shiver in the face of extreme hybris? Or, like Bishop Angaelos and his companions, *dare we quake?*

Dare we try and live up to the accolade?

*Je suis ... the People of the Cross.*

**Alastair McIntosh** is a member of Glasgow Meeting. His work the theology of climate change is currently part of his honorary remit at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, with the AHRC research programme: *Caring for the Future Through Ancestral Time: Engaging the Cultural and Spiritual Presence of the Past to Promote a Sustainable Future*.