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Articulating the atonement: Methodology and metaphor in atonement theology

William J. O. Hartley

Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, Durham, UK
Email: william.j.hartley@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

Doctrines of the atonement have tended either to elevate the status of one biblical metaphor or to gather together various metaphors into a unified concept or chorus of equal metaphors. The purpose of this article is to shed light on how the biblical metaphors function, using by way of reference the contrasting interpretations of Charles Hodge and Joel Green, who tend towards opposing theories of language based on naïve realism and idealism respectively. Drawing on the work of Colin Gunton, I recommend a mediating approach based on a critical realist theory of language which aims to steer a middle course between rationalism and relativism. Such an approach, which values the epistemic and revelatory potential of metaphors, is facilitated by a more integrative theological method with respect to scripture, reason, tradition and experience.

Keywords: atonement; Joel Green; Colin Gunton; Charles Hodge; metaphor; method

Doctrines of the atonement have tended either to elevate one biblical metaphor to a primary role, or to gather together various metaphors into a unified concept or chorus of equally valid descriptions of the atonement.[1] In articulating this controversial doctrine there are an array of possible methodological moves that make such a diversity of presentations somewhat inevitable, with hermeneutical decisions at the heart. At a more basic level, prior commitments to different theories of language, and the nature of metaphors in particular, can be shown to directly determine some of these hermeneutical decisions. The purpose of this article is to shed light on how we should understand the biblical metaphors to function, using by way of reference the interpretations of two theologians who tend towards opposing theories of language. I will argue that, on the one hand, Charles Hodge (1797–1878), a major proponent of what is nowadays termed penal substitution, reached his interpretation through a theory of language based on naïve realism that finds no epistemological value in metaphors. On the other hand, Joel Green, an advocate of a 'kaleidoscope model' of the atonement, employs a more idealist theory of language open to charges of relativism, embracing a theoretically unlimited range of equal metaphors. Finally, I will advocate for the

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[1]For a unified approach, see e.g. Alan J. Spence, *The Promise of Peace: A Unified Theory of Atonement* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

priority and revelatory value of the biblical metaphors specifically, based on a critical realist theory of language and drawing on the work of Colin Gunton (1941–2003).

Charles Hodge and naïve realism

For Hodge, speaking of Jesus' death as having a penal nature properly describes the God-willed 'design' of his sufferings on the cross as a means to the satisfaction of justice.[2] The vicarious nature of Jesus' death is also an essential concept, where vicarious 'includes of the idea of substitution'.[3] These two dimensions together form what Hodge asserts is a general biblical principle of vicarious suffering. While Hodge concedes that the atonement also witnesses to the holiness of God, he insists the 'primary object is to answer the demands of divine justice'.[4] He argues that such justice consists 'of the nature of a satisfaction, consisting in vicarious punishment, or in the infliction of the penalty of the law on Jesus Christ as the substitute of the sinner'.[5]

Hodge describes several ways in which he claims the New Testament writers 'represent the death of Christ as a vicarious punishment of our sins'.[6] He argues that vicarious suffering is the biblical principle behind the phrase 'to bear our sins', as found in Hebrews 9:28, John 1:29, 1 John 3:5, 1 Peter 2:24, and other allusions to the suffering servant theme found in Isaiah 53. This conclusion arises from the assumption that whatever this phrase meant in Israel's history 'must be the idea which the sacred writers meant to convey'.[7] Hodge also notes scriptural passages that make reference to Christ as a 'ransom' and his work as a 'redemption'. Although he admits that these words are often used with the general idea of deliverance in mind (especially in relation to the Exodus), their 'primary and proper meaning' is 'to deliver by the payment of a ransom'.[8] This primary meaning is attested to in scripture, where the ransom price paid for deliverance is expressly stated (frequently in terms of blood) in such passages as Ephesians 1:7, 1 Corinthians 6:20, 1 Peter 1:18–19 and Galatians 3:13. Here, Hodge explains how this language should be interpreted:

> The simple question is, what idea would this language naturally excite in the minds of men accustomed to regard their sacrifices as ransoms, and familiar with the mode of deliverance which these expressions properly describe? It is impossible that this mode of representation should fail of exciting the idea of deliverance on the ground of a satisfaction. This Christ and his Apostles knew; and this idea, therefore, they must have intended to convey.[9]

Hodge's most developed argument focuses on the way in which the New Testament writers illustrate the significance of Christ's death with allusions to the Old Testament sacrificial system in such passages as John 1:36 ('Lamb of God'), Romans 3:25 ('propitiation') and Romans 8:3 ('for sin').[10] Hodge argues that these are no mere allusions but should be

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taken literally. Given the familiarity with sacrificial rites and terminology of the audience of the New Testament writers, Hodge finds it unimaginable that the apostles could mean anything other than that 'Christ was really a sacrifice in their sense of the term, that his death saves us from the penalty of the law in the same way as the sacrifices of the old dispensation saved the Jews from the consequences of the transgression of the law of Moses'.[11]

Given such an assiduous use of sacrificial terms, Hodge believes that the apostles would have been deceitful to allow such language had they intended for it be used metaphorically.[12] Rather, basic to Hodge's hermeneutical approach is that these authors 'say what they mean, and mean what they knew their readers would understand them to say'.[13] Moreover, Hodge argues that this sacrificial system was prefigurative of the manner and efficacy of Christ's death, which was really sacrificial, finally concluding that it was 'in the Jewish sense of the term, that he is called a sacrifice for sin'.[14]

From this brief sketch we note two principles informing Hodge's interpretation. First, since the New Testament writers must have been understood by their audience, 'the business of an interpreter is to ascertain the sense in which the cotemporaries [*sic*] of the sacred writers employed the terms these writers used, and the mode in which they would naturally conceive the doctrines they presented'.[15] The second hermeneutical rule is that we are 'never at liberty to assume that the sacred writers really meant something different from the obvious import of their language, on the ground of their having accommodated themselves to the opinions of those to whom they wrote'.[16] Thus, while Hodge appears to concede that the process of articulating a doctrine may have involved a degree of accommodation of language, such language would still have had a fixed meaning based on authorial intention, and the task of the interpreter is to elucidate this meaning.

Hodge's methodology

Early in his career Hodge moved to Germany, where he primarily studied biblical languages and exegesis, being particularly influenced by his teachers August Tholuck and Ernst Hengstenberg. From Hengstenberg he would inherit the methodological principle of deriving doctrine directly from exegesis. Hodge's mature methodology would thus involve mastery of the original languages of scripture to inform accurate exegesis,[17] with biblical exegesis forming the basis of biblical and systematic theology.[18] In this way, Hodge 'considered theology as an "induction" from the beliefs of the Bible and not something based on philosophy'.[19] Indeed, his theology has been shown to evince certain principles of the Scottish common sense realism in which he was educated, especially informing his view of theology as a science which may partake in the Baconian inductive method.[20]

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[11]Hodge, *Nature*, p. 160.

[12]Ibid. N.b., nowhere does Hodge speak of a 'literal' sacrifice either; it is simply 'real', not 'metaphorical', because for Hodge, what is metaphorical cannot be real.

[13]Ibid., p. 150.

[14]Ibid., p. 162.

[15]Ibid., p. 149.

[16]Ibid., p. 150.

[17]There is 'no solid foundation' for theology other than the 'original text of Scripture fairly interpreted'. Charles Hodge, 'A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans', *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 5/3 (1833), p. 382.

[18]Annette G. Aubert, *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 164. Cf. A. A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880), p. 323.

[19]Aubert, *Roots*, p. 164.

[20]Peter Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1997), p. 79.

Employing Bacon's inductive method Hodge was able to establish an apparently more objective approach to scripture than the influential German school of mediating theology. In Annette Aubert's estimation, 'Hodge aimed to establish a basis for theology that yields certainty. For him theology must stand on objective ground, not the ground of Schleiermacher's and the mediating theologians' approach to theology.'[21] The concern of Hodge therefore appears to be that all the 'facts' of theology are already present in the divine revelation of scripture,[22] yet the German mediating theologians built on 'truths' ascertained independently of scripture, and which impose artificial limits on how scripture is to be interpreted: 'the theologian, who addresses himself to the study of theology, as the philosopher to the investigation of truth, has placed himself in a false position; his state of mind will necessarily be wrong, and his results, in all probability, erroneous and unstable, destitute of their proper authority for himself or others'.[23]

Hodge's appropriation of philosophy is thus instrumental, aiding the task of theology founded on biblical exegesis. He can speak of the role of philosophy in creating a system of 'collecting and classifying the aphorisms of the Bible',[24] later asserting that 'the true method of theology is, therefore, the inductive, which assumes that the Bible contains all the facts or truths which form the contents of theology, just as the facts of nature are the contents of the natural sciences'.[25] Nevertheless, Aubert has shown that Hodge's theological method 'is not exclusively "Baconian"; rather, it is characterized by the notion of the Holy Spirit's elucidation of scripture' and for Hodge, 'theology is not a "rational science," since it is determined by the illumination of the Spirit, and its inferences are not based on reason'.[26] In this way, it would seem Hodge considers theology rational but not rationally determined, in the sense that the Holy Spirit elucidates the doctrines of faith beyond the reach of reason.

Here we meet a more nuanced element of Hodge's theological method, as he is careful to distinguish between a Kantian notion of independent reason and the rational capacity of the regenerated mind guided by the Holy Spirit in elucidating truth – the latter establishing a framework in which religious experience qualifies reason. Thus, while Hodge can assert that 'God requires nothing irrational of his rational creatures',[27] he will also claim that 'religious experience as a guide to the knowledge of the truth … has an authority second only to the Word of God'.[28] In keeping with the principles of Reformed theology, Hodge believed in the noetic effects of sin such that the intellect was blinded and depraved through the fall, in need of regeneration.[29] Thus, following Calvin, he made the distinction between unregenerate and regenerate reason. For Hodge scripture 'constantly represents regeneration as necessary for spiritual discernment',[30] since the Holy Spirit is the 'source of all right knowledge'.[31]

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[21]Aubert, *Roots*, 177.

[22]Commenting on the development of Reformation theology, Hodge speaks disparagingly of the 'addition of any foreign elements' to the 'teachings of the Scriptures'. Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994 [1835]), p. 143.

[23]Charles Hodge, 'Suggestions of Theological Students', *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 5/1 (1833), p. 101.

[24]Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994 [1857]), p. 140.

[25]Hodge, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 17.

[26]Aubert, *Roots*, p. 187.

[27]Hodge, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 55.

[28]Ibid., 2:523.

[29]Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994 [1856]), p. 149, commenting on Eph 4:17 and the unity of the soul.

[30]Ibid., p. 152.

[31]Ibid., p. 52.

Aubert sums up Hodge's view of reason well when she states that, in keeping with Reformed theology forged in a pre-Kantian world, 'Hodge emphasized the practical and instrumental characteristics of reason – that is, he argued that reason must be renewed by the Holy Spirit, with biblical revelation remaining as the basis of faith'.[32] In this way, reason and experience are clearly subordinate to scripture, but both also have roles to play inasmuch as they are informed and guided by the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, we can see that Hodge sees reason as a tool by which to extract the objective divine truths found in scripture. Reason is neither to be viewed as a direct, independent source of truth in the manner of mediating theologians, nor is it sufficient on its own to elucidate the full richness and meaning of God's revelation in the Bible, for which the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is necessary to enlighten human reason. Such an underlying methodology provides the framework for a theory of language which I will later argue bears the marks of 'naïve realism', with important implications for hermeneutics. In Hodge's case, his underlying theory of language treats metaphor as unable to convey truth – hence his judgment that the language used in the biblical record to describe the significance of Jesus' death must not be metaphorical. Furthermore, the rationality of God's Word is such that, through inductive scientific methods as applied to biblical interpretation, a single, universal principle for describing Jesus' death can be discerned: vicarious satisfaction. Before discussing further the relationship between naïve realism and hermeneutics we first turn our attention to an approach to biblical metaphors based on its antithesis: an idealist theory of language.

Joel Green and the risk of relativism

Green argues that over-emphasising the death of Jesus can create a disconnect between Jesus' earthly ministry and death, so that 'what is significant about Jesus' life is [merely] that he did not sin' and 'there is no sense that Jesus' life led to his death', his life thus being 'disengaged from his historical reality'.[33] Instead, Green claims that the value of Jesus' death was rooted in his earthly ministry – a theological meaning 'that is fully congruous with and, indeed, grows out of, [Jesus'] life'.[34] For Green, the connection between Jesus' understanding of his ministry and death are most clearly shown by the ransom saying (Mark 10:45) and at the Last Supper, both central to a gospel tradition that informed later writers of the New Testament.

In the context of the ransom saying we find Jesus describing the nature of his mission and death in terms of status: one's status before God is dependent on 'drinking the cup' or 'being baptised with the baptism' Jesus is baptised with, both traditional metaphors from the Old Testament. In this way Jesus rejects the prevailing social ethics of gaining status and power, insisting instead on fulfilment of divine purpose as the determining factor and ethical basis for his way of life. In the context of such teaching, 'the ransom saying functions both as an example that confirms the ethic [Jesus] has just proposed and as Jesus' self-disclosure of the life goal given him by God'.[35] Here Jesus brings together two images: one from the contemporary context (the emancipation of slaves) and one from Israel's scriptures (the ransoming of Israel from the Exodus

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[32]Aubert, *Roots*, p. 189.

[33]Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), p. 149.

[34]Joel B. Green, 'The Death of Jesus and the Ways of God', *Interpretation* 52/1 (1998), p. 30.

[35]Ibid., p. 31; Cf. J. T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 31.

narrative).[36] Green emphasises that 'the promise of these two overlapping images lies in their capacity to remind us that metaphors like ransom can hold many meanings, not all of which are realized in a given context'.[37]

Jesus' teaching at the Last Supper shows similar features. He again draws on concepts from Israel's history, this time to explain not so much what it will *achieve* (a ransom), but what it will signify and *reveal*. Addressing Israel's expectation for deliverance, Jesus speaks in terms of Israel's historical identity as the covenant people of God (Exod 24:8): Jesus' death will become the inaugural event of a covenant renewal (Jer 31:31–3) that will conclude the present exile (Zech 9:9–11).[38] Green sums up this second self-interpretation of Jesus' death as one focusing on Jesus' attempt to reform Israel and his claim to be 'God's envoy and thus the legitimate interpreter of the divine purpose'.[39] On this self-understanding of his death, Jesus' 'impending crucifixion is itself an *inter-pretative act* by which the will of God is to be *disclosed*'.[40]

In terms of hermeneutical principles, Green argues that faithful interpretation of scripture must consider both the wider message of the New Testament as well as the context of each author's writing, 'inquiring into how those writers have engaged in the task of theology and ethics'.[41] His conclusion centres around the apostles' use of varying contextual metaphors as an aid to mission. Green attributes the preponderance of metaphors to their capacity to both 'reveal and conceal', so that 'no one metaphor will capture the reality of the atonement'.[42] The diverse range of imagery in the New Testament is necessary to convey the universal truth of the atonement in pastorally and culture-specific ways, and 'given the nature of metaphor, it is unthinkable that one soteriological model could express all of the truth'.[43]

Green cites several instances of the apostles employing metaphors in varying ways that prove more complementary than competitive. John's Gospel portrays Jesus' death both in terms of sacrifice (particularly through the image of the Passover Lamb) and also of 'the lifting up of the Son of Man' on the cross, in which the lifting up describes both the manner of Jesus' death *and* its revelatory function as Jesus is thereby exalted. Paul also uses a large and diverse range of imagery to describe the significance of Jesus' death. In 2 Corinthians 5:14–6:2 reconciliation is the central image (vv. 18–20), along with the concepts of vicarious substitution (vv. 14–15), representation (vv. 14, 21), interchange/sacrifice (v. 21), forgiveness (v. 19), new creation (vv. 16–17) and, implicitly, justification (vv. 19, 21).[44] Green attributes this variety of language to the context of this letter, in which Paul exhorts the Corinthians to change their behaviour in line with the message of reconciliation (v. 19), which he connects to the sacrificial death of Jesus.

Green contends that Paul is particularly interested in 'the intersection of the objective reality of the cross as saving event and the subjective means by which he comprehends and communicates that reality', the latter referring to 'the context-specific

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[36]Green, 'Ways of God', p. 32.

[37]Ibid., citing Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 87–129.

[38]Green, 'Ways of God', p. 32.

[39]Ibid., p. 33.

[40]Ibid., pp. 33–4; emphasis added.

[41]Green and Baker, *Recovering*, p. 110.

[42]Carroll and Green, *Early Christianity*, p. 262.

[43]Ibid., p. 266.

[44]Green and Baker, *Recovering*, p. 58.

ways in which Paul has chosen to articulate the nature of his atonement theology'.[45] His conclusion is that, with Paul, 'language takes shape within an ongoing conversation, as language is adopted and adapted that both fits the particular circumstances to which Paul addresses himself and toils to reconfigure experienced reality so that it accounts more fully for what God has done in Christ'.[46]

Green's preferred analogy for understanding the development of atonement theology is the gradual production of a quilt. The first stage began with Jesus' self-interpretation of his death, itself the mutual interpretation of two stories: the first being 'pieces of patchwork from the story of Israel and its traditions',[47] and the second being Jesus' understanding of his own ministry and mission. This concept of atonement in the early gospel tradition simply centres on 'the efficacy of Jesus' death in redemption' but 'its content remains amorphous'.[48] Later reflections of the New Testament authors shaped this conceptual content in a second stage by developing images as they added to the same 'interpretive quilt', handed over by Jesus incomplete: 'We may perceive creativity and innovation on Jesus' part in drawing together material stamped with the divine purpose and with suffering and repulsive death, while leaving room for Jesus' followers to add even more material, more colors, more square to the cloth.'[49]

Green specifically rejects Hodge's doctrine of the atonement, in part because 'Hodge … presents one model as though it were *the* explanation of the atonement for all times and places. This creates significant missiological problems. It implies both that we have no need to develop a different model, and, indeed, that we would be wrong to try.'[50] The particularities of new contexts therefore have no bearing on what is a fixed concept of atonement. In contrast, the interpretative process described by Green not only allows for, but indeed mandates, new models for new contexts. What is characteristic of Green's theology is that this multilayered interpretative process has never ceased for the church, and the present articulation of the significance of Jesus' death continues to be 'worked out in particular contexts' in an ongoing process of 'contingency'.[51] Theoretically, the interpretative content of the saving significance of Jesus' death can never be satisfactorily completed as our contexts are ever-changing, and 'this explains not only the presence of but also the mandate for multiple models of understanding and communicating the cross of Christ'.[52] Communicating the atonement today therefore involves not only an understanding of the historical context of Jesus' death and the significance of the biblical metaphors; it also involves an understanding of our contemporary contexts and culture. Consequently, it becomes imperative that we first understand and critically evaluate any culture to understand its particular needs so our proclamation of the gospel is articulated in ways that address those needs. We need to articulate the doctrine of the atonement in evolving language that bridges the world of scripture to the world in which we live and preach the gospel today.

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[45]Ibid., p. 65.

[46]Ibid., p. 66.

[47]Ibid., p. 45.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid., pp. 45–6; cf. Green, 'Ways of God', p. 35.

[50]Green and Baker, *Recovering*, p. 148.

[51]Joel B. Green, 'Kaleidoscopic View', in James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (eds), *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), p. 171.

[52]Ibid.

Green's methodology

Green offers some guidance on the challenge of articulation by drawing on the insights of sociologist Robert Wuthnow.[53] Wuthnow notes how great works of art and literature are recognised as such because they are relatable, which he attributes to their being inspired from the immediate social environment. However, 'they also remain autonomous enough from their social environment to acquire a broader, even universal and timeless appeal'.[54] In this way effective articulation is a careful balance involving the immediate social environment and more universal themes. Regarding the doctrine of the atonement, this balance reflects the tension between the universal purpose of God witnessed to in scripture, and the particular historical contingencies of a cultural context. A key consideration in bridging the distant world of scripture and the world today is to avoid being so context-specific that our linguistic concepts are too rooted in the here and now: 'our forms of communication [should] be shaped within but not wholly determined by that environment'.[55] This, Green contends, is precisely the weak point in Hodge's championing of penal substitution founded on Western notions of retributive justice, which set the biblical metaphors of sacrifice, ransom and redemption within 'a framework that is alien to the world of Scripture' where they consequently 'operate with different meanings'.[56]

In contrast to Hodge's more conceptual doctrine, whereby mission becomes a 'technique' of passing on a universal principle contained in a 'frozen tradition', Green speaks of theology as more of a 'craft' in which we 'apprentice' ourselves to the biblical authors and pass on the 'living tradition' of atonement theology.[57] This emphasis on theology as a craft is meant to convey the idea of a certain flexibility in design tailored to particular contexts, just as an artisan might fashion a number of variations of a chair depending on its end use. In other words, there is no predetermined final form, although the finished product may be judged unsuccessful if it does not achieve its intended primary function as a 'chair'. For Green, the quilt analogy describes such a craft (albeit the product is an article of the creed and is produced communally) and involves sociologically derived universal principles of articulation justified by the open nature of metaphors, each of which is never sufficient in isolation to convey the full significance of Jesus' death. However, it is not clear in Green's interpretation what the criteria are for judging a new metaphor successful in its function of referring to the same objective reality, a feature that has been criticised as at risk of relativising the truth of the atonement.[58]

Along with a strong pastoral and missiological emphasis, Green's methodology is therefore marked by a strong reliance on insights from sociology and an openness to what can be thought of as non-theological (in the sense of non-revelatory) epistemology, a feature that provides fertile ground for a potentially idealist understanding of metaphor associated with the aforementioned warning of relativism (see 'Redeeming metaphor' below for a fuller discussion on an idealist view of language). While it would be inaccurate to characterise Green's interpretation itself in such terms, his methodological approach in the hands of a less discerning interpreter might open the door to such charges, since it places revelation in a more deferential relationship with reason

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[53]Green and Baker, *Recovering*, pp. 210–4.
[54]Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 3.
[55]Green and Baker, *Recovering*, p. 214.
[56]Ibid., p. 150; cf. pp. 54–5, 95, 169–70.
[57]Ibid., pp. 214–6.
[58]See Gregory A. Boyd's response in Green, 'Kaleidoscopic View', pp. 187–8.

compared to Hodge. Green's interpretation would thus be strengthened by an under-standing of metaphor that safeguards against idealism and relativism while defending the priority of biblical revelation and the unique value of the biblical metaphors. In order to guard against the shortcomings of either of the two contrasting paradigms adumbrated above, we will now consider a mediating approach based on a critical realist understanding of metaphor.

Articulating the atonement through a critical realist theory of language

Common to all doctrines of the atonement that build on one foundational idea or meta-phor (or a single, unified theory) is the tendency to reduce the meaning of the atone-ment to a single concept, a process that should be seen as a kind of rationalism, 'one of whose symptoms is a refusal to accept concepts, particularly those adjudged "anthropo-morphic", for what they say and an attempt to change them into something else'.[59] Whatever meaning might be found in the 'particular' is thereby elevated to the 'univer-sal' as one metaphor attempts to claim too much knowledge about the reality of the atonement and either supplants or absorbs the others, or alternatively a plurality of individual metaphors lose their distinct and authoritative voices. What, then, does it mean to accept the anthropomorphic metaphors related to the atonement for *what they say*, rather than abstracting a universal meaning from either one or all of them in unison? Any answer will necessitate redeeming metaphor from misuse in theology, along with an examination of our epistemological foundations.

While Green's approach should be commended for allowing metaphors space to breathe by recognising their irreducible nature, there is yet a degree of rationalism at work that results in a potentially deleterious outcome. By effectively reducing the doctrine to a kind of progressive theory of revelation, such that new metaphors are invited to help articulate the universal nature of the atonement in new contexts, it can be argued that too much is given over to the 'particular'. Although a connection to the historical death of Jesus is retained, its scriptural moorings are loosened, exposing the doctrine to the danger of relativism.

If we follow Hodge's approach of reducing the doctrine of the atonement to one bib-lical principle, we must make an *epistemic journey* to the world of the Bible to begin to understand its meaning and context in terms of Old Testament sacrifice, making under-standing the significance of Jesus' death a difficult and complex journey. In short, we must first inhabit, intellectually, the worldview of the Bible if we are to grasp any of the truth of the atonement. Such an approach is liable to charges of fideism or 'intel-lectual sectarianism',[60] inasmuch as all people in all places are asked to accept the same timeless and universal principle of vicarious satisfaction derived from a reduction of the biblical data. Instead, theology must surely find a way of allowing scripture to speak authoritatively as the particular and contexualised Word of God, while also being able to articulate its universal significance in intellectually accessible and universal terms, without reducing the biblical data or collapsing into rationalism. To build a the-ology both founded on scripture and rational, while avoiding the risk of rationalism, such an approach will require what Gunton refers to as a theological epistemology with 'non-foundationalist foundations' that finds 'moments of truth in both of the con-tentions, namely that particularity and universality each have their place in a reasoned

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[59]Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p. 15.
[60]Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 134.

approach to truth'.[61] In what follows we shall see how a critical realist understanding of the biblical metaphors provides an ideal candidate for such foundations.

Redeeming metaphor

Whether we take the view that language itself is originally metaphorical, with linguistic rules and conventions arriving later, or that language is inherently a 'rule-governed mechanism', with metaphors constituting a 'breakdown' of said mechanism,[62] it is clear that metaphors retain an elusive quality, such that Umberto Eco notes that little of substance has been added to the two or three fundamental concepts established by Aristotle, for whom metaphors concerned the transference of a name from one context to another.[63] However, it is the epistemological value of metaphors that holds theological promise. Metaphors have been described as a 'calculated category-mistake',[64] since through their use one is 'literally speaking, *lying* – as everybody knows'.[65] Yet this does not preclude their ability to convey meaning, or, rather, a metaphor 'nudges us into noting things'.[66] This leads to a question of necessity: is such value ornamental (i.e. a purely rhetorical device), but ultimately dispensable because it is reducible or replaceable by more literal language, or does it have its own intrinsic value?

In a classic example of scepticism, Hobbes contrasts metaphors with 'words proper'[67] and describes their use as an 'abuse of speech', arguing that when we 'use words metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for … [we] thereby deceive others'.[68] Gunton notes that this distrust of metaphor as an abuse of language reached a climax in the Age of Reason which saw the development of two classes of discourse – truthful argument and ornamental rhetoric: 'On such an account, metaphor is disqualified from being a means of our rational interaction with the world: *unless it ceases to be metaphor, it cannot tell the truth.*'[69]

Consequently, only non-metaphorical and literal language was in some way thought to mirror reality in what has come to be termed naïve realism.[70] Writing on naïve realism in seventeenth-century science, Mary Hesse claims that it makes the assumption 'that the hidden entities and processes of nature that are to be discovered by science are of the same kinds as observable entities and processes, and hence describable in the same descriptive vocabulary and satisfying the same laws'.[71] Here may be heard faint echoes of Hodge's attempt to devise a scientific theology based on Baconian scientific method, especially where he states that the theologian 'cannot invent facts … he cannot imagine laws or causes which control the facts which he observes. He must gather the laws from the facts, or they have no more scientific value than the fancies of a poet.'[72]

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[61]Ibid.

[62]Eco, *Semiotics*, p. 88.

[63]Ibid., p. 88; see Aristotle, *Poetics* 1457b 7–8.

[64]Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1976), p. 73.

[65]Eco, *Semiotics*, p. 89.

[66]Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 91.

[67]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: A&C Black, 2006 [1651]), p. 39.

[68]Ibid., p. 28.

[69]Gunton, *Actuality,* p. 30.

[70]Soskice, *Metaphor*, pp. 118–19.

[71]Mary Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (London: Macmillan Press, 1974), pp. 285–6.

[72]Charles Hodge, 'The Vicarious Sacrifice', *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 38/2 (1866), p. 185.

We have evidence here of a corresponding theological naïve realism, part of an implicit theory of language that informs Hodge's hermeneutical principle that meaning is only to be found in the 'obvious import' of the language used in scripture.[73] Consequently, it is no surprise that Hodge should consider the references to Jesus' death as a sacrifice as 'real' descriptions, not metaphorical: 'For who will maintain [that the authors] designedly led their readers into error; that inspired men were intentional deceivers while propounding the method of salvation'?[74] Rather, Hodge takes the New Testament writers at face value, so that references to sacrifice are intended to teach that Jesus was 'really a sacrifice', saving us 'from the penalty of the law in the same way as the sacrifices of the old dispensation saved the Jews from the consequences of the transgression of the law of Moses'.[75] Here the meaning of the sacrificial metaphors associated with Jesus' death are interpreted by the *prior* understanding of sacrifice under Mosaic law, and with no hint that the nature of Jesus' sacrifice might shed light in the other direction.

By rejecting the possibility of any epistemic value in metaphors (part of a wider aim to close off the influence of any supposedly non-theological epistemology), Hodge's theological method suffers from not being informed by post-seventeenth-century developments in the philosophy of science whereby metaphors would come to be seen as having an instrumental role in scientific discovery. It is for this reason hard to counter the charge that his method is constructed on the foundations of fideism. From at least the nineteenth century onwards, rather than being a pariah of language, metaphors have proven nothing if not essential for describing and understanding the world – for discovery. In a world of modern science, naïve realism turns out to be no longer tenable, as the traditional mirroring view of language has proved insufficient for describing 'the elusiveness of the relation of language and the world'.[76] Broadly speaking, two accounts of how language relates to the world have emerged.

First, the 'idealist' view holds that 'the objects of scientific knowledge are models, ideals of natural order etc. Such objects are artificial constructs … the natural world becomes a construction of the human mind, or in its modern versions, of the scientific community.'[77] In this view metaphors and models are now so important as to be regarded as at times indispensable, but they do not ultimately depict external reality;[78] they have a heuristic function but *no external reference*. There may be some resemblances here to Schleiermacher's theology, in which reason is subordinate to feeling, with theology becoming 'the articulation of the content of experience',[79] although a tendency towards idealism finds its fullest expression in Feuerbach's doctrine of God as anthropomorphic abstraction. Gunton claims that 'the implausibility of an attempt to account for *all* language in [the idealist] way is suggested by the fact that the sciences do appear to have advanced our knowledge of what the world actually is'.[80] Nevertheless, as theologians seek shared rational ground for their own use of metaphors, both Gunton and Soskice note the tendency of some, such as Sallie McFague, to acknowledge a realist use of metaphor in science only to resort to idealism in the

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[73]Hodge, *Nature*, p. 150.
[74]Ibid., p. 160.
[75]Ibid.
[76]Gunton, *Actuality*, p. 33.
[77]Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975), p. 25.
[78]Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 120.
[79]Gunton, *Actuality*, p. 12.
[80]Ibid., p. 33.

task of theology.[81] It is not clear how Green's account of the atonement defends itself from a similar charge.

Second, in 'critical realist' accounts of the relationship between language and the world, scientific terms and metaphors do not act as 'logical ciphers' in the manner of naïve realism, but do nevertheless act 'as terms which putatively refer to possibly real entities, relations, and states of affairs'.[82] On such an account metaphors are both indispensable in their heuristic function *and also have external reference* – they are held to be reality-depicting. Consequently, the indispensable nature of metaphors is all the more significant as certain metaphors become the *only* means by which we can both discover and describe more of reality; such metaphors convey new meaning.

Exactly how language depicts reality is a complex area of debate, with some arguing that the creation of metaphors precedes the making of scientific discoveries.[83] However, Gunton draws attention to an alternative interpretation advocated by Richard Boyd, whereby 'new language and discovery happen together, with metaphor serving as the *vehicle* of discovery'.[84] Such an interpretation relies on a so-called 'incremental' theory of metaphor in which 'the combination of parts in a metaphor can produce new and unique agents of meaning'.[85] When applied to scientific discovery this quality of metaphors provides what Boyd refers to as 'epistemic access' to the world, so that metaphors provide scientists with the instrumentation 'to accomplish the task of *accommodation of language to the causal structure of the world*'.[86]

On this basis, we find metaphors to be redeemed from their status as an abuse of language to being a bearer of truth, integral to a critical realism that 'accommodates figurative speech which is reality depicting without claiming to be directly descriptive'.[87] Indeed, it is precisely their indirectness that Gunton sees as their strength, recalling that we yet 'know in part' (1 Cor 13:12) and claiming that 'metaphor is a primary vehicle of human rationality and superior to the pure concept'.[88]

Articulating the atonement

If the argument so far – that metaphors can and do convey truth and also refer to an objective reality – has been persuasive, the task remains to sketch how a critical realist theory of language can improve our understanding and articulation of the atonement. In particular, can it be used to ameliorate the concerns of potential relativism in Green's account while also recognising the particular value of the metaphors revealed in scripture?

Gunton argues that there is a plausible analogy between the role of metaphors in accommodating language to the causal structures of the world in natural science and the role of metaphors used in scripture to describe the new reality confronted by the first Christians after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The biblical metaphors of

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[81]Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (London: SCM Press, 1987), cited by Gunton, *Actuality*, p. 41. Cf. Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 104.

[82]Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 120.

[83]Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Religiöse Rede von Gott* (Munich: Kaiser, 1981), pp. 230–5; cited by Gunton, *Actuality*, pp. 30–1.

[84]Gunton, *Actuality*, p. 31.

[85]Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 31.

[86]Richard Boyd, 'Metaphor and Theory Change: What is "Metaphor" a Metaphor for?', in Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 483.

[87]Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 148.

[88]Gunton, *Actuality*, p. 39.

atonement enable the early Christian community to express the significance of their personal experience centred on the cross, each metaphor referring to the same objective reality but describing a distinctive and particular type of experience, resulting in a complementary collection of metaphors. Language previously used in religious, legal, commercial or military contexts 'is used to identify a divine action towards the world in which God is actively present remaking broken relationships. That is a causal fixing of reference in the sense that reference is made to God by means of a narration of historical happenings and their outcome.'[89]

However, Gunton notes that we must account for the relation of such language to the real world, lest such fixing of reference by narration be accused of '*merely* telling stories' and of failing to depict an objective reality.[90] The critical realist understanding of metaphor provides just such an account, especially when considered within the framework of a theological method that recognises the contribution of experience. Janet Soskice notes that, even in its scientific applications, critical realism relies on experience, community and an interpretative tradition, because 'ultimately it is in experience that reference is grounded'.[91] Especially in the theological use of metaphor, 'Community is essential because each speaker is a member of a particular community of interest, which provides the context for referential claims.'[92] One might read this as speaking of the church as an interpretive community, with the role of the wider church being to discern over time the value of new metaphors and validate their referential claims, thus guarding against a theoretical endless proliferation of metaphors and their potential relativisation. Furthermore, integrating insights such as that which Hilary Putnam refers to as the 'linguistic division of labour' (the notion that 'speakers defer to experts for the fixing of reference'),[93] we can identify the contribution of tradition within theological method, if we consider tradition to rest on certain authoritative 'experts' in the form of creeds and councils. From a methodological point of view, the communal experience of the church, along with the wisdom of tradition, is instrumental to holding metaphors of atonement to account and grounding their referential claims.

Nevertheless, although the teaching of, for example, the ecumenical creeds and Reformation-era confessions (an authoritative reference for Hodge) is essential, we must remember their authority is derivative, since the experience of such authorities is not normative in the same way as that of the New Testament authors. Such a stricture on tradition and experience not only guards against the tendency of traditionalism to stifle the voice of scripture, but also guards against the excesses of more liberal theological methods, whereby too much authority risks being given over to particular contemporary experiences as a basis for new metaphors. In conclusion, a critical realist understanding of metaphor allows for the validity of new metaphors in order to convey some new aspect of the objective truth of the atonement, while also enabling us to recognise the priority of the biblical metaphors which have been previously validated by the experience of the early church.

Having now shown how a critical realist understanding of metaphor aids our articulation of the atonement by enabling us to dismiss the ideas that metaphors are either abuses of language (naïve realism) or not reality-depicting (idealism), we finish with

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[89]Ibid., p. 46.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 149.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Hilary Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013 [1978]), p. 114.

two important implications of the epistemic and revelatory value of the key biblical metaphors, as noted by Gunton.

First, a critical realist theory of language makes sense of the mutual interpretation of the key biblical metaphors, since each offers its own particular view of the same objective reality, in other words, each offers only indirect epistemic access to reality. It is hard to speak of one metaphor of the atonement without finding ourselves qualifying our statements with reference to other metaphors, as acknowledged even by critics of Gunton, with Henri Blocher noting that in passages such as Romans 3:24–6 the metaphors 'seem to flow naturally into one another'.[94] This interrelationship between metaphors demonstrates the necessity of not resolving the meaning of the atonement to one central metaphor, or creating a unified theory, thereby losing the particular insights of a number of indispensable metaphors.

Second, Gunton notes how a critical realist understanding of metaphor allows a deeper understanding of the atonement, as it causes us to reflect on the full significance of the biblical metaphors in particular. Based on the revelatory value of metaphors outlined above, we may note the theological implications of how the primary subject of a metaphor also elucidates the secondary subject – a reading backwards of the metaphor. When Shakespeare writes 'all the world's a stage', the metaphor works both ways, equally shedding light on how the stage represents the world in dramatics. Similarly, the biblical metaphors of atonement have a profound revelatory function, ultimately pointing to what real love is (cf. 1 John 4:10).

In this way, Gunton suggests we should not see the biblical metaphors as 'projections from standard to theological use', but rather take their *theological use as normative*, letting them '[alter] the meaning of the word in its everyday employment … Here is *real* sacrifice, victory and justice, so that what we thought the words meant is shown to be inadequate and in need of reshaping by that to which the language refers.'[95] In Jesus' death we have not just a sacrifice, but a *self*-sacrifice. Through his sacrificial death Jesus conquers death itself (2 Tim 1:10; Acts 2:24), yet Gunton shows that such a victory is not simply a divine victory, as portrayed in Gustaf Aulén's classic account,[96] but 'at once human and divine – a divine victory only because it is a human one'.[97] In this way, 'a real victory is the kind of thing that happens when Jesus goes to the cross', a way of living we can follow rather than a military outcome, so that 'those who tread the way of the cross are committed to a kind of living in the world that reproduces this form of victory under the conditions in which we live'.[98] Through the whole process of atonement, God is revealed as 'one who bears the power of the demonic rather than punishes those who have fallen into its power', thus revealing the nature of true justice as more relational, personal and merciful than any abstract notion of legal justice.[99]

A general appeal to metaphors is sometimes seen as a way of deconstructing penal substitutionary interpretations, ultimately resulting in the relativisation of the biblical metaphors.[100] Blocher claims that Gunton, in particular, 'distrusts conceptual clarity'

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[94]Henri Blocher, 'Biblical Metaphors and the Doctrine of the Atonement', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/4 (2004), p. 640.

[95]Gunton, *Actuality*, pp. 50–2.

[96]Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 2010 [1931]), p. 4.

[97]Gunton, *Actuality*, p. 59.

[98]Ibid., p. 79.

[99]Ibid., p. 84.

[100]Blocher, 'Biblical Metaphors', p. 630.

and that 'the guiding light on his hermeneutical path shines from his prior insights … It is not derived to any significant degree from the metaphors of scripture.'[101] This misrepresents Gunton's approach, for he 'distrusts conceptual clarity' only in the sense that he warns that the pure concept tends towards rationalism. As Emil Brunner observed some time ago, not only are the individual metaphors inadequate in isolation, but 'even when they are all combined they do not constitute a clear intellectual unity'; instead they simply 'form the foundation upon which we base our understanding of the meaning of the Cross', which is ultimately a 'mystery'.[102]

The hermeneutical principle in Gunton's approach is not derived from scripture, because in order to allow the metaphors to speak as revelatory agents of God's Word we must first understand how such universal features of language function. To do otherwise would be to treat the revelation of scripture in 'docetic' terms, as wholly divine, rather than as a divinely-inspired-yet-human text. It is in this sense that I argue that Gunton has succeeded in finding a theological epistemology based on 'non-foundationalist foundations', in which scripture remains the basis of theology, but its interpretation is achieved through a more integrative theological method incorporating a carefully qualified relationship between revelation and reason, building on a critical realist theory of language.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown that interpretations of the atonement in the manner of Hodge show evidence of operating within a framework of naïve realism in which biblical metaphors are read non-metaphorically as though they had a direct reference to reality. For Hodge this way of reading leads to a rationalising of the biblical metaphors under the universal principle of vicarious suffering. At the other extreme the most 'inclusive' interpretations, such as that presented by Green, in which all the biblical metaphors are accepted equally (and the creation of additional metaphors encouraged), have been characterised as coming close to an idealist theory of language in which metaphors act as important heuristic devices, but ultimately may not have an objective reference to reality. A third approach, based on a critical realist theory of language, allows us to give a carefully qualified defence of the priority of the metaphors employed by the apostles in scripture and explain how they do correspond, however indirectly, to the same objective reality associated with the death of Jesus. In such an approach, each metaphor has something distinctive and indispensable to say about the meaning of Jesus' death, safeguarding against any accusations of relativism. Furthermore, the revelatory quality of metaphors causes us to reflect on how biblical metaphors, because they form part of God's revealed Word, will affect Christians' understanding of the meaning of these same metaphors in the context of everyday life.

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[101]Ibid., p. 633.

[102]Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014 [1952]), p. 287.