The Doctrine of Atonement in Communal Contexts

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Abstract

The atonement is one of the most crucial of all the Christian doctrines, explaining the death of Christ and its significance to the Christian community. However, the atonement like any other Christian doctrine is only as meaningful as the metaphors employed to communicate this teaching. The majority of the world lives in shame and honor cultures where their concepts of sin and salvation differ from those of Christians. This paper aims at presenting a biblical paradigm for communicating this pivotal doctrine to communal contexts in a manner that makes the gospel translatable to such settings without losing its significance and power.

Introduction

The occasion was the presentation of the charter for the new Adventist University of Africa in Nairobi, Kenya. At the ceremony a government official from the ministry of education remarked to one of our professors present that he hoped this Christian institute of higher education would be able to correct the anomaly he and others had observed. He stated that before the arrival of Christianity when the villagers warred there were certain war protocols which were observed. No warrior slew more than two persons on a single day. When he returned to the village he accepted no praise as a great fighter because someone's wife or mother would be mourning somewhere. During such conflicts women and children were permitted to go across battle lines to their farms and the streams without fear of molestation. He lamented the

fact that presently, after the arrival of Christianity, the situation was a lot different. Ethnic cleansing and genocides were rife, and various forms of barbarity were common. Innocent women were raped, and children were either killed or turned into child soldiers. His prayer was that the advent of this institution would bring a reversal of this trend, so that Christianity's gospel of peace would bring transformation to the local situation.

While it is universally evident that Christianity cannot be blamed for such a tragic scenario because history records the life-transforming influence, progress and civilization it has produced, situations such as have been depicted are usually referred to as unintended consequences of the gospel propagation. However, what this account illustrates is an expectation that better understanding and communication of the gospel will result in transformation. Such a transformation should affect the values, morality, and totality of communal living wherever the message of the cross is presented. Unfortunately, this is often not the case.[1] I personally do not think that such expectations are out of place; after all, the Apostle Paul and the other writers of Scripture declared the same (see Rom 1:16; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:16-25; Jn 1:12, 13).

The questions this paper seeks to answer are: "What metaphors or narratives can better communicate the concepts of the atonement in group-conscious societies in order for the doctrine to be more meaningful?" And "How can a better understanding of the atonement facilitate life transformation in communal contexts?" In pursuance of the four components of the atonement that resonate with communal religious contexts these will be examined, namely: sin, shame, sacrifice, and salvation.

It is necessary to state at this point that it is not the aim of this paper to offer a critique of the historic or contemporary theories of atonement, nor is its intent to advance a new model, rather its objective is to draw attention to the primary notions and concepts of the atonement as they exist in Christianity which do not carry the same significance in non-Western contexts, therefore if the significance of the atonement must be conveyed in such settings fresh approaches will be required. However, preliminary explanation of terms found in this study is important, so for the purpose of this paper I will define the following key terms: atonement and communal contexts.

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[1] Scott McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement: Living Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 1.

No concept in the Christian religion is as fundamental and far-reaching in significance as the atonement. The word itself was first used in 1526 by William Tyndale in one of his early versions of the English Bible applying it to the Greek word meaning "reconciliation," atonement literally meant "making at one."[2] Atonement at its most foundational level denotes union with God and communion with one another.[3] The expression has the connotation of a breach in the divine-human relationship, which in ancient Israel could only be repaired through a specific act—the ritual of sacrifice, and for Christians, the death of Christ. Richard Sherman observes, however, that while the atonement points to what God did for humanity, it does not exactly connote how He did it.[4] Perceptively he states, "The question that logically precedes "What is atonement? must be "What is the problem of humanity's alienation or estrangement or separation for which Christ's atonement is the solution?"[5] This shall be a subject for some consideration later in the paper. For now, it shall suffice to state that the term atonement, which stands at the heart of Christianity, denotes reconciliation between God and an estranged world.[6]

Communal, or group contexts, as the term is employed in this paper refers to societies, basically non-Western, that are characterized by similar worldview concepts. Features of such a worldview include some or a majority of the following characteristics supplied by Paul Hiebert: 1. They are born into extended families in which they live their entire lives, 2. Their identities are based on birth and the place a person occupies in the group, 3. Children are taught to think in terms of "we," and "them," 4. At all times harmony needs to be maintained and confrontations avoided, 5. When norms are violated it leads to a sense of shame and loss of face for individuals and for the group.[7] Asian, African, Latin American, and East European countries can identify keenly with

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[2] Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Idea of the Atonement* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 3-4.

[3] Scott McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement: Living Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 17.

[4] Richard Sherman, *King, Priest and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of the Atonement* (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2004), 10.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Colin E. Gunton. *Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 2.

[7] Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 21.

communal values, where kinship and group ties are stronger than individual will. African theologian John Mbiti expressed this concept innate to the African worldview in the now famous maxim, "I am because we are; and since we are therefore I am."[8]

In these contexts the central concepts in the atonement discourse such as sin, shame, sacrifice and salvation are understood and interpreted in ways that differ from Western contexts. Western societies are typically more individualistic than group-conscious societies, and tend to be guilt oriented.

Having explained these foundational expressions, the following section shall explore what the concepts sin, shame, sacrifice and salvation mean in the atonement, and to communal contexts. To begin, what does sin mean to the atonement and how is it perceived in communal contexts?

Sin

A person's view of sin has a defining relationship to the atonement theory subscribed to.[9] For as Scott McKnight states, "The way we define the problem shapes the way we define the solution."[10] Varied definitions of sin exist in scholarship today. Examples of these are: "Sin is the arrogant desire to be the god of our own lives."[11] Similarly McKnight avers, "'Sin in the Bible is the choice 'to go it alone,' to be 'free' in the sense of independence, to achieve (like God) absolute freedom."[12] The condition of alienation or separation is the essence of sin.[13] John Goldingay lists a number of symbolic expressions to describe sin. He declares, "sin means failure, rebellion, transgression, trespass, turning from the right road, stain, infidelity."[14] The Bible itself provides a wide range of words and expressions that explain what sin is. All of this serves

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[8] J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1969), 108-109

[9] McKnight, 22.

[10] Ibid.

[11] George R. Knight, *The Cross of Christ: God's Work for Us* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), 28.

[12] McKnight, 23.

[13] Curtis Chang, "He Shared Our Ache," in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement*, ed. Mark D. Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 174.

[14] John Goldingay, ed. "Your Iniquities Have Made a Separation between You and God," in *Atonement Today: A Symposium at St John's College, Nottingham* (London: SPCK, 1995), 39.

to illustrate the multi-faceted nature and guises of sin, which can develop along different lines.[15]

Missionaries more than most people recognize the different perceptions of sin especially in communal contexts. While trying to explain the need of salvation, a missionary serving in Japan told his audience that they all—teacher and students—were sinners, but his students politely disagreed. Apparently the Japanese word for sin, *sumi* had a different connotation from the biblical understanding. He discovered that to the Japanese the sinner was someone who had broken one of the five Buddhist moral precepts by committing a terrible offense such as rape or murder, was caught, and being led handcuffed to a prison.[16] Indeed it is said that there is no word for the biblical concept of sin in the Japanese language.[17]

Evidently, in communal contexts, sin has a different definition. In such shame-based cultures sin is thought about primarily in social rather than private contexts.[18] For instance in Papua New Guinea a missionary observed that the Bahinemo people felt no guilt about things like polygamy, betel-nut chewing or smoking, whereas they were deeply troubled by issues that caused discord in the village such as disobedience to husbands and parents, refusing hospitality to someone or ignoring an expected interclan payment.[19]

In Polynesia, as in several other group-oriented societies, sin is regarded as the violation of a taboo, and is an act punishable by supernatural sanction.[20] In such contexts social and theological sins are often intertwined, and their violation could result in a misdemeanor, or a

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[15] Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2011), 248.

[16] Bruce l. Bauer, "Avoiding Comfortable Syncretism by Doing Critical Contextualization," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 1: 2 (2005), 20-21.

[17] David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 206-207.

[18] Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 97.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 206.

crime.[21] Sanctions were also prescribed for the violation of other norms regarded as sins—such sins could be personal or corporate.[22]

How then can one convict persons living in communal contexts of sin and its gravity when the concept differs from one context to another?[23] We need to begin with the realization that every society has a moral code or expectations by which people should live.[24] Also, sin has a corporate dimension to it, for as the Old Testament reveals personal sin can affect the community as a whole (see Josh 7).[25] This is largely due to the fact that sin is both personal and relational.[26] However, while a contextual understanding of sin is helpful a useful caveat to remember is that, "every culture has its own hamartiological blind spots."[27]

With regards to the atonement we must remember that it was sin that made the atonement necessary. John Goldingay sublimely states:

> God's act of atonement in Christ was designed to deal with the deep and incurable sinfulness of humanity which expresses itself in rebellion against God's authority, infidelity which issues in the breakdown of the relationship, disloyalty which has interrupted a friendship, ingratitude which has imperiled love, stain which has rendered humanity repulsive, perversity which has landed us in exile, offensiveness which has put us in debt, lawlessness which has made us guilty, and failure which leaves us far short of our destiny.[28]

Shame

The entrance of sin into God's pristine creation was immediately visible and terrible. Prior to the sin event the couple had been described in Scripture as "naked but not ashamed" (Gen 2: 25). However, one of the primary effects of the rude entry of sin was the first pair's sense of

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[21] Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 202.

[22] Ibid., 203.

[23] Baker and Green, 248.

[24] R. Daniel Shaw, and Charles E. Van Engen, *Communicating God's Word in a Complex World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 137.

[25] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 213.

[26] Tennent, 97.

[27] Ibid.

[28] John Goldingay, ed. "Your Iniquities Have Made a Separation," in *Atonement Today*, 53.

shame that led them to hide from the presence of the Creator (Gen 3:8). As a result of their shame the visit of the Lord was terrifying rather than gratifying.

Non-Western communal societies are largely recognized as shame-based cultures while Western cultures are regarded as guilt-based. This categorization of societies, into shame, and guilt-based cultures, was first done by anthropologist Ruth Benedict.[29] In group-oriented communities shame plays a more important role than guilt, consequently; when people fail they feel a powerful sense of shame in letting down their group, ancestors, and their gods.[30] Any action perceived by the community to cause a reduction in worth, corporate, or private, was regarded as shameful.[31] For shame to be relieved the individual had to do whatever the group expected, even if it entailed self-inflicted punishment, banishment, or death.[32] It is believed that the shame and honor concept is found in varying degrees all around the world, however, it is considered more dominant in Asia.[33]

Although the concept of shame and honor in the Bible has received a lot of negative criticism in recent years it is still evident that it played a prominent role in biblical times. Jerome Neyrey in his study of honor and shame in the Gospel of Matthew describes how this issue played a prominent role in the sayings and interaction of Jesus with His society.[34] Arguing from the perspective of the significance of shame and honor in the African context, Andrew Mbuvi states that shame aptly "describes the condition of the rejected people of God, who, because of their sin,[35] find themselves without the presence of God and fellowship."

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[29] Tennent, 79.

[30] Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 111.

[31] Tennent, 79.

[32] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 212.

[33] Tennent, 80.

[34] Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 67.

[35] Andrew M. Mbuvi, "African Theology from the Perspective of Honor and Shame." In *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World* ed. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 279-295.

Sacrifice

Another important component of the atonement is sacrifice. Right from Eden the first sacrifice is connoted by the provision of the skin covering in exchange for the fig leaves of our sinful progenitors (Gen 3:21). The importance of sacrifice was taught to Cain and Abel, although Cain seemed to completely miss the point. Atonement and sacrifice in the Old Testament were inextricably connected. The Hebrew word, *kipper*, which occurred over 90 times in the Old Testament, indicated that atonement was always for sin.[36] On the subject of sacrifice Adventist author George Knight observes that nowhere in the Old Testament is the explicit meaning of sacrifices provided. A few of the salient points he makes regarding the sacrificial system found in the Bible are: 1. Substitutionary sacrifices are foundational symbols of symbols of salvation from post-fall scriptural history, 2. The sacrificial system in the Old Testament system was essentially substitutionary, 3. They were powerful object lessons on the results of sin, and the cost of its remedy.[37] To sum up, sacrifices in general in biblical cultus represented a way of making gifts, bringing about restoration, served as a channel for violence, and were a means for maintaining order in a community.[38]

Sacrifices also play a significant role in communal contexts. Seen from a narrow perspective they are regarded as simply prompted by two motives, as a gift or bribe to obligate the intervention of the supernatural being, or as a means by the suppliant to demonstrate faith in the divine.[39] Sacrifices however, have a broader scope. They are also viewed as a central principle used to interpret reality, and restore order in the cosmos when things go wrong.[40] In different contexts sacrifices take on various meanings because of the breadth and depth of their rich metaphors and meanings. Up to seven metaphors can be employed to describe this concept in communal contexts:[41] 1. homage—a gift from a subordinate to a superior, 2. Gift-taking—mutual exchange of gifts to maintain intimate

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[36] Fiddes, 64.

[37] Knight, 46-48

[38] John Goldingay, ed. "Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ," in *Atonement Today*, 12, 16-17.

[39] James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, *Anthropology: The Cultural Perspective* (Prospects Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1980), 260.

[40] Bruce Bradshaw, *Change Across Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academc, 2002), 204.

[41] This section is entirely dependent on the seminal work done by Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 203-208.

relationships, 3. Restitution—punishment or compensation for suffering and damage caused by sin, 4. Communion—eating and drinking together, signifying intimate relationship, 5. Regeneration—a process of restoration believed to take place through death and resurrection, 6. Obligation—in order to get a greater benefit in return, 7. Communication—to send messages to the dead in the spirit world. Evidently, sacrifices meant a lot to people in group-oriented cultures and were regarded as sacred and significant, and anything other than a casual affair.[42]

Salvation

The final component of the atonement that shall now be examined is the concept of salvation. Although the atonement was necessitated by sin, it resulted in salvation. Far too often salvation has been regarded with strictly metaphysical implications, yet a careful survey of both Testaments of Scripture may suggest differently. If the atonement was the solution to the sin problem, then salvation, the result of the atonement, signified the restoration of all that sin had affected. Salvation therefore should be regarded as multifaceted, representing the flip side to all that sin caused. The significance of the atonement has been represented through five constellations of images borrowed from the public life in ancient Palestine and the Greco-Roman world: the court of law, commercial dealings, personal relationships, worship, and the battleground.[43]

Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou note that in contrast to Western views of salvation, in group cultures, salvation has these distinct differences: 1. It is not a future hope, 2. It is not an exclusively spiritual matter, 3. It is not primarily an individual concern.[44] Salvation for the African is not merely an eschatological expectation, but must also be rooted in the existential domain.[45] Another important dimension of salvation that is important to communal cultures is victory over evil spiritual forces. Because these societies are predominantly animist and characteristically live in terror of

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[42] Ibid., 230.

[43] Mark and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 123. See also Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 99. Boersma provides five metaphors: sacrifice, slave trade, financial exchange, healing, reconciliation, military battle.

[44] Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, 224.

[45] Cyril Okorocha, "Religious Conversion in Africa: Its Missiological Implications," *Mission* 9: 2 (1992), 171.

malicious spirits, it is welcome news to know that Christ's victory has a liberating quality from the bondage of satanic forces.[46]

Practical Application

While the foregoing discourse may be informative, the crucial issue is how can the application of this understanding be employed to convey the significance of the atonement to people in group-oriented societies to facilitate committed discipleship? While it is evident that many aspects of communal worldviews are similar it needs to be stated that each cultural context nevertheless possesses unique features. The implication of this is that in applying the lessons that follow one will also need to wrestle with how to incarnate the biblical text within each specific mission context. No easy path lies ahead for such a person.

The success of this endeavor will depend upon finding the right metaphor with which to convey the rich and varied scope of the atonement. This is one of the primary duties of theology, which always seeks an interaction and conversation with the culture in which it develops.[47] We must remember that views of the atonement were all products of mission-mindedness—attempts at articulating the nature of the faith in sensible ways to those living in mission outposts of the ancient world.[48] It is also helpful to note that in Scripture the language employed for sin is not metaphysical but metaphorical.[49] Additionally, it should not be ignored that Paul in his epistles applies diverse metaphors of the atonement depending on his context. He applies a kaleidoscope of metaphors in order to explain the significance of Christ's atonement to the various audiences based on their local scenarios.[50]

It may be wise in communal contexts to begin where the people are by applying principles from God's word in reinforcing elements in their culture that are good and demonstrating why others are not. Also, since such communities stress compliance to legal codes a lower standard should not be used for dealing with sin, remembering that sin causes

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[46] Allan B. Howell, "Through the Kaleidoscope: Animism, Contextualization and the Atonement," *International Journal of Frontier Mission* 26: 3 (2009), 139.

[47] Boersna, 110.

[48] Baker and Green, 140.

[49] Derek R. Nelson, *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark International, 2011), 18.

[50] Joel B. Green, "Kaleidoscopic Response," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), 170-171.

alienation. Narratives need to be employed heuristically for communicating the gospel and teaching the atonement.

Shame and honor narratives from both the Old and New Testaments should be explored for teaching the alienation sin causes, and the reconciliation the atonement achieves in communities. For instance, in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians he informs the converts of their new status as members of God's commonwealth (Eph 2:19, 20). At one time they were "separated," "alienated," "without," but through the atoning sacrifice of Christ the barriers, and dividing walls had been broken—they now belonged. While this may not have much significance for some in Western contexts who value their privacy, for many in communal contexts the stigma of alienation taken away is a very relieving concept. (For those who lived in East and West Berlin before the wall was leveled this metaphor of broken walls will have profound appreciation). One more dimension the atonement can be applied to in a shame and honor context, according to Herbert Hoefer, is where Christ is seen as identifying with the people in order to take away their shame (Heb 12:2) by His sacrifice on the cross.[51]

An atonement metaphor that needs to be emphasized, and amplified more in animistic group contexts is that of Christus Victor.[52] Unfortunately, a religious movement that often passes unnoticed below the radar of many scholars is folk religion. It is believed that up to 75% of Muslim men practice folk Islam, while up to 95% of their women practice an animistic form of the religion.[53] Buddhism and Hinduism are no better. Riddled with animistic and esoteric practices, the quest for power and an overwhelming sense of insecurity is prevalent among its worshipers. Christianity is not exempt from folk practices either. The practice of veneration of the dead, and the use of lucky charms, are examples of such. All of these suggest that fear of evil spirits and the sense of insecurity that leads to the search for various agencies of protection needs to be addressed employing Christ's victory over the demonic hosts at the cross (Col 2:15).[54] It is noteworthy that the expression utilized by Paul to the Colossian church in this verse,

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[51] Herbert Hoefer, "Proclaiming a Theologyless Christ," *International Journal for Frontier Missiology* 22: 3 (2005), 99.

[52] Alan B. Howell, "Through the Kaleidoscope: Animism, Contextualization and the Atonement," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26: 3 (2009), 137.

[53] Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 22-23.

[54] Hoefer, 99.

translated as, "expose," "disgrace," or "mock,"[55] resonates with a shame and honor motif, and therefore will be more meaningful to people from communal contexts. The essential meaning of salvation, to Gregory Boyd, is that those who trust in Christ are incorporated in Him and therefore share in His cosmic victory over the forces of evil.[56]

The atonement also reminds us that one of the results of Christ's death was freedom from the fear of death (Heb 2:14)—a bondage many are living in today—both in group, and non-group cultures. I have found the metaphor of Paul to the Colossian church, "hidden in God" (Col 3:2) a very powerful teaching tool to provide security and assurance in Christ. New Testament scholar Clinton Arnold affirms this view stating that it expresses the security of God's people as they trust Him and face their enemies.[57]

One more helpful metaphor to employ in communal cultures is that of sacrifice. It is telling that to a group for whom regular ritual sacrifices were a norm the writer of Hebrews devotes time and space in his epistle to present Jesus as the perfect sacrifice (Heb 7-10). The writer, however, does not stop there. Although Jesus' task is accomplished, for the believer it is continuing, we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices unto the Lord (Rom 12:1-2). So the sacrificial system continues, but recalibrated. No longer with gory animal sacrifices, but with the sweet smelling savor of committed lives under Christ's dominion, devoted to His service and worship. Steve Walton presents six applications of sacrificial language and terminology for NT Christians which can be emphasized in group contexts where sacrifices play a significant role.[58] These are: "praise of God" (1Pet 2:9:Heb 13:15), "witness" (1Pet 2:9; Rom 15:16), "prayer" (Rev 5:8; 8:3), "giving" (Phil 2:17, 25), "laying down one's life for the gospel" (Phil 2:17), and "the consecration of the life to God's will" (Rom 12:1).[59] When persons in group-oriented

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[55] Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1992), 105.

[56] Gregory A. Boyd, "Christus Victor View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), 33.

[57] Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Tubingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1998), 307.

[58] Steve Walton, "Sacrifice and Priesthood in Relation to the Christian Life and Church in the New Testament," in *Sacrifice in the Bible* edited by Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 136-156.

[59] Ibid., 138-140.

contexts are made to realize that their spiritual sacrifice is expressed in these forms it will result in passionate worship, devoted service, and zealous commitment for the cause of God.

Unfortunately, one of the ironies of contemporary Christianity has been its attempt to desacralize and demystify religion, thus creating for itself a unique niche as the only world religion that has ever attempted such a feat. While this could be attributed to rationalism, a by-product of the Enlightenment, and secular philosophy, it has led to sense of ennui among youth, and vacuity in the faith of those from group cultures where rituals play a significant role. At the same time, animism has experienced resurgence, Islamic boundaries have expanded, and a fascination for Eastern religions in the West has burgeoned. Recognizing the holistic nature of worship and religious devotion in non-Western cultures theologians and missiologists will need to reexamine both discipleship and teaching models in communal contexts. Again there will be no easy answers for this, nevertheless, the role of devotional rituals and spirituality will need to be reconsidered.

As we contemplate how to communicate the import of the atonement in group-conscious settings it is refreshing to note that Daniel Shaw and Charles Van Engen reveal in their book, *Communicating God's Word in a Complex World*, that around the world there exist countless narratives from different ages suggestive of the idea of an atonement. One such creation narrative from a tribe in the north coast of the island of New Guinea describes the creation of a perfect world that became defiled by human desire and resulted in the separation of brothers, with the promise of return with a solution, while the other brother continues his struggle to survive.[60]

Finally, it is important to underscore the fact that the purpose of the atonement was not merely to bring reconciliation between God and humanity, but was also to create a new community, a society (*ecclesia*) where God's will is lived out and given freedom to transform all of life.[61] I daresay that such a community planted in the soil of group-oriented cultures will take seriously concepts innate to the doctrine of the atonement and in resonance with these contexts, elements such as, the enormity of sin, the relevance of shame and honor, the significance of sacrifice, along with the existential and eternal facets of salvation.

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[60] Shaw and Van Engen, 201.

[61] McKnight, 119.

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