

Atonement and Salvation in Christianity and the Perspective of Philosophical Monism

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God as The One

The image, idea, and intuition of God as the ultimate One, or Singularity, is foundational in both Christianity and Judaism. The Shema announces this fact in every Jewish service of worship.

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is One."

The Shema has always been regarded as the confession of belief in the One God. Due to the ambiguity of the possible ways to translate the Hebrew passage, there are several possible renderings:

"Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God! Adonai is One!" and,

"Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God – Adonai alone."

Many commentaries have been written about the subtle differences between the translations. The former of these translations suggests an interpretation more in keeping with philosophical monism.

The term "monism" was introduced in the 18th century by Christian von Wolff in his work *Logic* (1728), to designate types of philosophical thought in which the attempt was made to eliminate the dichotomy of body and mind and explain all phenomena by one unifying principle, or as manifestations of a single substance. Logically, if one thinks of God as infinite, then nothing exists outside of this infinity, for it is logically impossible for it to do so. Many thinkers, however, did not wish to go this far, so Christian orthodoxy has historically made a mental separation between God's essence and his energies. They emphasize that we mere humans can know God through his energies only and cannot know God's essence.

Nevertheless, we continue to intuit a greater Oneness and we long to be reunited with it. Benedict Groeschel in his book *Spiritual Passages* describes it thus:

A general look at great spiritual persons reveals the variety of ways in which they have perceived God. The terminology used here to describe this perception of God is based on an analysis of divine being rooted in the scholastic tradition and going back to Greek philosophy. This philosophical tradition may be more useful in studying the types of response to God than one drawn from Sacred Scripture, for the Bible tends to evaluate persons simply in relationship to their positive, partial, or negative response to God, thus categorizing them as the saints, the lukewarm, or the lost. Western philosophy suggests that human beings know and seek God as the *One*, the *True*, the *Good*, and the *Beautiful*. If you analyze yourself or those you know well in terms of the spiritual life, you will notice that most people fit rather well into one or perhaps two categories.

Our intuition toward monism, God as the One, grows stronger in our day and age as quantum physics expounds the reality of the quantum field that underpins all matter. Matter as separate “things” gives way in this understanding to a greater, all-pervasive, unifying field. Only with conscious observation, does the field become a separate “thing”. Before the observation, it merely exists as quantum possibilities. And the field of quantum possibilities begins to sound more and more like what we have called “God” when we think of deity as all-pervasive spirit—God as “intelligent infinity” and the ground of all being. As the apostle Paul expounded on Mars Hill, God, for both believers and unbelievers, is the One in whom we live and breathe and have our being.

Diversity Amidst Unity

Nevertheless, as much as we intuit the unity of all reality, we must acknowledge that separation exists at the same time. We long toward the reunion with being, consciousness, and bliss in God, but we recognize the fact that we are not there yet, and there must be some meaning to all of this separateness and less-than-blissfulness we experience in everyday affairs. The Christian epic of atonement seeks to address the problems that our felt-separation from God entails.

The ultimate image of separation from God in the Jewish and Christian narrative is the angelic rebellion. This leads to the notion of Satan and his demonic assistants. If they are the most separate, they will be the most difficult to reunite.

Much Biblical imagery clearly emphasizes separation of evil from God. For those in the midst of suffering at the hands of evil, such separation is much to be desired. However, is there an ultimate reunification? Those writers who emphasize the separation imagery of scripture say, “no, separation is eternal.” But a quieter thread of Christianity allows room for such reconciliation, appreciating perhaps the logical incongruity of there ever being any kind of ultimate separation in the One, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Infinity cannot ultimately be divided, these lovers of God insist. This includes numerous church Fathers. So there have always been faithful believers who have made a place in their hearts and logic for even Satan to be reconciled. How that might happen remains mysterious. But God is good, always. All is One ultimately, and separation is temporary. The Satanic hard-won power hierarchy must eventually be abandoned, and their self-serving power mongering must give way to an opening of their hearts to love if they are going to progress toward the infinite creator. For, at the core, the Infinite Creator, is more about love than about power. Love tends to bring things together. Power tends to separate.

Atonement Amidst the Above Metaphysic

One of the major themes of Christianity is that of “atonement.” The Collins Dictionary defines atonement as follows:

1. Satisfaction, reparation, or expiation given for an injury or wrong
2. In Christian theology: The reconciliation of man with God through the life, sufferings, and sacrificial death of Christ

Emphasizing the reconciling of alienation from one another that occurs when a wrong is forgiven, more non-dual authors point out that atonement can be thought of as “at-one-ment”—a making of one where before there was division.

It is important to note at this point that Time, itself, is a form of separation. In the state of infinity, the separations we think of as time cannot exist, and all existence is in the eternal Now. The eternal Now is where all reconciliation will ultimately take place. Contemplation of the eternal Now is more familiar to Eastern ways of thought. We in the West find it a bit difficult. In the eternal Now, which is the state of time within the infinity of God, apparently separations do not occur in the same way that they occur within our time-bound sphere. Things are much more fluid and unified.

The typical thought forms of Christianity tend to not live outside of time in the eternal Now. They grub around in the earthiness and mire of our present-day incarnation where separation is rampant. So, for Christianity, there is a tendency to emphasize the problem of separation and the need to reconcile with God and fellow humans. This does not mean that Christianity is without its timelessness, unitive elements, however. As Jesus said to his disciples in his high priestly prayer of John 14, “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (See also John 1:1-5, Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:9-12) So we see that Christianity is both time-bound *and* non-dual with regard to its forms of thought. It is less emphasizing of the non-dual than Eastern thought, but it has its timeless, transcendent elements.

What to Do About Separation Even if it is Not the Ultimate Truth

Are you separated from God? Well, no, if you think of your consciousness unified with God’s in the eternal Now. All reality must find its ground of being in God. So we are not ultimately separated. Nothing can separate itself from Infinity.

Nevertheless, we often FEEL separated from God here in third density. It is designed to be that way. There is the problem of a veil that prevents our seeing the unity of all things. Those who experience mystical states or near-death experiences often experience this unity directly. Yet, even Jesus, who experienced his union with God more than most, felt forsaken and separated on the cross.

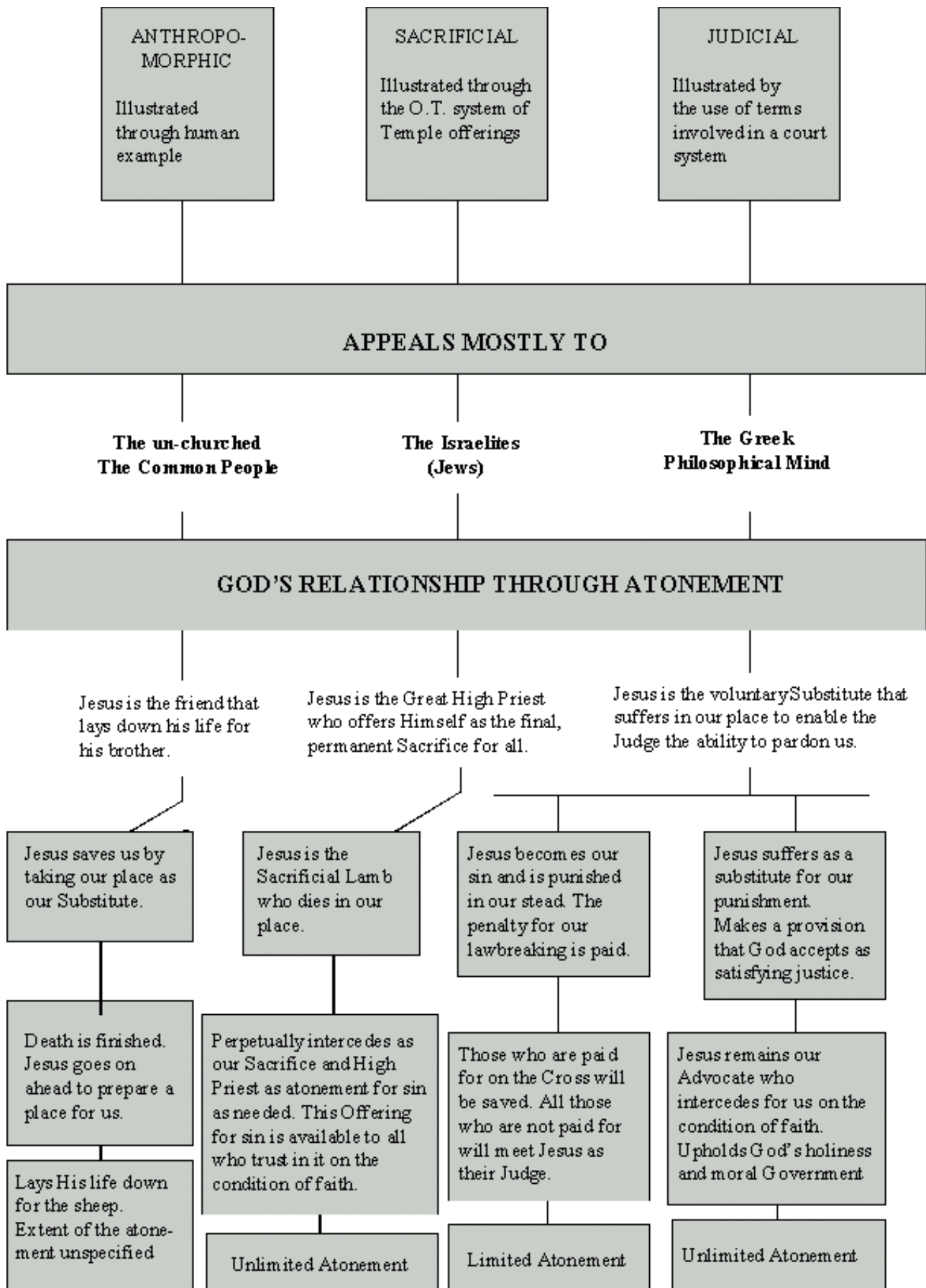
So, what do we do about the problem of FELT separation from God? After all, that is where we live.

From this side of the veil, Christianity offers the idea of atonement as a pathway toward overcoming the third dimensional *felt* separation from God. In atonement, we come to view ourselves in a place of need, either from a) wrong actions that create shame or guilt, often called, “sin”, or b) from inability to rescue our own selves and overcome our lack, which, surprisingly, is also called, “sin.” *Sine* is the Latin word for “without”. “To sin”, most broadly, means “to be without an appropriate good”, or if you prefer, “in need”. When we cry out in the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner,” we are not, therefore, declaring ourselves to be a “bad actor.” We are saying that we are “a person in need.” And one of our greatest needs is to FEEL connected to our Source in God.

How does the person and story of Christ participate in bringing us back into a felt connection to God from whom we are separated by the veil? This is the place of the various theories of atonement in Christian theology and teaching. We do well to look at the multiple forms this takes since many of us may not realize that the broad faith we call Christian can have such diversity of viewpoint and still be considered orthodox. Seeing each of these side by side suggests that Christendom has viewed these as *models* and not *absolutes*. We will review these then look at how the perspective of the monism may shade the understanding one or another of the theories.

Atonement Theories of the Western Church

The following diagram illustrates how the various atonement viewpoints address the cultural viewpoints prevalent in Jesus' epoch.



1. The Ransom Theory

In Mark 10:45 Jesus says that he came to give his life "as a ransom for many." This is one of the oldest atonement theories, and during the first thousand years of Christianity, it was the most common explanation for why Jesus had to suffer and die.

The early Christian scholar Origen gave one of the first detailed descriptions of this theory. He said that the disobedience of Adam and Eve caused God to abandon humankind to the Devil, who then exerted his power over us. Later, when God decided to reconcile with us, he agreed to pay Satan a ransom for our release. The agreed-upon payment was Jesus' death on the cross. After the crucifixion, Satan kept his part of the bargain by releasing us from his power. But then God pulled a trick on him by resurrecting Jesus.

The Ransom Theory is also called the Bargain Theory and the Classical Theory. It was the primary atonement theory for more than a thousand years, from the first century to the eleventh century, and is still accepted by some Christians.

The Ransom Theory and Monism

Does the story of Christ help release us from the evil angels' influence over a person or humankind? There is nothing about monism that says we do not have spiritual adversaries. Further, the name and story of Christ seems to provide a power and freedom over the types of human experiences that might be termed "demonic." However, the person who subscribes to monistic philosophy might take a more respectful attitude toward all created entities, even demons, since they believe that even Satan will ultimately find reconciliation with God through the process of reunification of all things.

¹⁹ For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19-20 (RSV))

They might see Satan as ultimately misguided rather than unreconcilably evil.

2. The Satisfaction Theory

The eleventh-century scholar Saint Anselm did not like the Ransom Theory. He believed that an outlaw like the Devil had no right to exert power over humankind, and therefore God did not need to pay him anything for our release.

To replace the Ransom Theory, Anselm put forward another explanation known as the Satisfaction Theory (or Debt Theory). According to this theory, humankind owes a debt to God because we dishonored him through our disobedience and sin. But his need for universal justice, prevents him from simply forgiving us. To resolve the matter, Jesus volunteered to pay our debt for us by suffering and dying on the cross. God accepted this act of love as a full atonement, and thus satisfied, he then forgave us and offered us salvation.

Some people still wonder why God did not just forgive us outright. Another criticism of this theory is that it puts Jesus in the role of a sacrificial lamb. It further depicts God the Father as unforgiving, and

involved in ritual sacrifice mentality. In ancient times lambs and other animals were often sacrificed to pagan gods as a way to appease them. It was thought that the death of an animal could serve as a substitute payment for a person's sins. Similarly, in the Satisfaction Theory, the suffering and death of Jesus serves as a substitute payment for humankind's sins.

The Satisfaction Theory and Monism

The satisfaction theory's use of the idea of debt is akin to the notion of karma. Although, the word karma is not from Christianity, the idea that one will suffer consequences for their errant actions fits the Judeo-Christian notion that "whatsoever a man sows, that also shall he reap."

⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. ⁸ For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Galatians 6:7-8 (RSV))

That Jesus' work on the cross somehow aids us with this burden of eternal karma is a hope of many Christians. And it would be just like the God imagined by the monists to find creative ways to lovingly bias the laws of karma toward grace and forgiveness and reunification rather than ultimate separation or legalistic righteousness.

This model for the transfer of karmic responsibility is embraced by much of Christianity. The Christian good news is that by trusting Christ with our sin burdens and trusting in God's love for us, Christ takes our karmic burden upon himself. This was done voluntarily and is illustrated dramatically in the crucifixion story. It may not be that God the Father needed satisfaction in order to be so self-giving. That paints God in a very non-redemptive light. But the crucifixion narrative has certainly been an impactful one through the centuries, and the models of karma transfer and burden bearing of one for another fits with monist thinking. Could Jesus have taken on the karmic burden without such suffering? Perhaps. But without the story element of death, burial, and resurrection, humankind would have had a much more difficult time getting the message.

3. The Moral Exemplar Theory

According to this theory, Jesus helps us obtain salvation by giving us a perfect moral example of how to live. He hoped that his teachings and his example would inspire us to lift ourselves out of sin and enter into true communion with God.

This theory, which is also called the Moral Influence Theory, is usually attributed to the medieval scholar Peter Abelard. Many Christians have found it attractive and helpful. But some people wonder how it explains the crucifixion, since Jesus could have given us his teachings, and also provided a perfect moral example, without dying on the cross. One possible answer is that his death, though not strictly necessary, helped to draw attention to his life and therefore made his mission more effective.

This theory denies that Christ died to satisfy any principle of divine justice, but teaches instead that His death was designed to greatly impress mankind with a sense of God's love, resulting in softening their hearts and leading them to repentance. Thus, the Atonement is not directed towards God with the purpose

of maintaining His justice, but towards man with the purpose of persuading him to right action.

3. The Moral Exemplar Theory and Monism

One non-Christian monistic philosopher imagined the Jesus experience this way.

The master known as Jesus saw a [disturbing] pattern emerge [in his culture] during the short time of his actual ministry. It was the pattern of a warlike people, the Jews, who wished to become again a great kingdom as it had been at one time.

He wished for his people a realization. He wished them to realize and truly know that their identity, their nationhood, and their kingdom was eternity itself. He wished them to lay down those weapons which make kingdoms of Earth and pick up instead those tools of peace and love which might create the growing and life-giving knowledge of a greater life, a greater kingdom than this Earthly one. Thirdly, this entity wished by his death to be remembered as one who intended to die of love for those who killed him.

He wished to be remembered as one who loved. He wished to be a symbol of that greater kingdom which was the true kingdom of his people and all people. His instructions about bread and wine were that ... it would be food not of this Earth, not filling the hunger of this illusory plane, but, rather, he hoped that it might be seen as the true manna which is infinite and which feeds an infinite hunger—the thirst for truth and right action.

Indeed, the master known as Jesus had a stark vision of the nature of this illusion [of earthly] experience. The brevity of life within the physical body was a melancholy fact to him. The master wished therefore to imbue the suffering, the martyrdom of brief lives with a deep and abiding sense of the value and worth of the sacrifice of living a life.

The discipleship which Jesus the Christ hoped to inspire, was a discipleship of sacrifice, the sacrifice of attachment to treasure, the sacrifice of the overwhelming attachment which most entities feel to doubt, despair, darkness of mind and disconsolation. He hoped by rising again, to give hope to those whom he knew and loved. He hoped that those whom he had left behind would share the excitement of eternity.

(http://www.llresearch.org/transcripts/issues/1987/1987_0913.aspx)

We see in these reflections, a fairly complete description of a Moral Influence view of atonement with an emphasis on love. The crucifixion is there to teach us that there is meaning in suffering and to encourage us in loving sacrificially. The resurrection is there to give us hope in death and for the eternal realm. We see the tendency of the monist to consider our present reality as illusory and the true reality as our eternal etheric home, reunited with the consciousness of God.

4. The Penal-Substitution Theory

The basic idea of this theory is that Jesus suffered and died to take upon himself the punishment that we ourselves deserve. Although God was not willing to forgive us outright, he was willing to accept

the punishment of Jesus as a substitute for our own punishment. Thus, in this theory Jesus takes the role of an innocent scapegoat who is punished for the sins of others.

On one occasion God punished humankind by sending a flood that killed everyone on the earth except a few people on Noah's boat. But according to the Penal-Substitution theory, when humankind later needed to be punished again, God allowed Jesus to take the punishment for us.

Some of the underlying assumptions of this theory can be found in the letters of Saint Paul. The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century took those assumptions and developed them into the modern form of the theory. In some ways it resembles the Satisfaction Theory, since Jesus' act of taking our punishment for us is basically equivalent to paying our debt for us.

The Penal-Substitution Theory is accepted by many modern Protestants. Most of them also believe that Jesus' sacrifice brought the possibility of forgiveness to everyone, including people who have lived since the crucifixion and people who will be born in the future. This is known as universal atonement. But some Christians believe that Jesus died only for the "elect", a small minority who are predestined to be saved. This is called definite (or limited) atonement.

The Penal-Substitution Theory and Monism

Most monist thinkers do not like the idea of punishment. Karma is understood as a rebalancing, a developmental process, and a movement toward reunification with God. Punishment as an end in itself does not have a place.

5. The Governmental Theory

According to this theory, God acts as a governor (or overseer) of all life on the earth. But he became very displeased with the way people were behaving, and he wanted to show us that we deserve severe punishment. To demonstrate just how severe, he sent Jesus to suffer and die.

Thus, the crucifixion was meant to be a demonstration of the punishment that we all deserve. By giving us this demonstration, God hoped that we would realize the seriousness of our sins and reform ourselves. He could have actually punished us, and would have been justified in doing so, but decided to merely give us a warning, and let us have another chance.

This view was formulated by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and is subsequently found in Arminianism, Charles Finney, the New England Theology of Jonathan Edwards (the younger), and Methodism.

One problem with this theory is the fact that many people have lived and died without ever hearing about Jesus or the crucifixion, and therefore were never aware of God's warning. Further many people who are aware of it, appear to disregard it.

The Governmental Theory and the Law of One

So, no sense of governmental administration or punishment is seen in the monistic sources consulted.

6. The Christus Victor Theory

In 1931 Gustaf Aulen published the book *Christus Victor*, in which he argued that Jesus came to earth to defeat the evil forces that had gained control over us. To win our salvation, Jesus needed to overcome both Satan and death. The name *Christus Victor*, which means "Christ the Victor", refers to his successful accomplishment of this task.

In some ways this theory is similar to the Ransom Theory, for it assumes that humankind had come under the control of the Devil after the sins of Adam and Eve caused God to abandon us. But in this theory, instead of God paying Satan a ransom for our release, Jesus freed us by directly defeating the Evil One. And his resurrection proved that death can also be conquered.

In his book Aulen argues that this was the original belief of the earliest Christians. It is also the basic belief of many modern Eastern Orthodox Christians, and in recent years it has become popular among some evangelical Christians.

The Christus Victor Theory and Monism

The metaphor of victory is used in some monistic writings, but the victory is over our fear of death or separation and not over Satan per se. Wherever there is death, there is also resurrection says the Christian story. Jesus's example of love moves humankind more toward readiness to be reunited with God, even amidst life's darkest times. Individually, Jesus inspires us to love, and that faith-filled love overcomes the efforts of Satan or any early adversary as well.

Some Important Nuances

Eastern Christianity

Eastern Orthodoxy and Eastern Catholicism have a substantively different theory of salvation than is typical in the west. This is sometimes cited as a core difference between Eastern and Western Christianity. In contrast to other forms of Christianity, the Eastern Orthodox tend to use the word "expiation" with regard to what is accomplished in a sacrificial act. In Orthodox theology, expiation is an act of offering that seeks to change the one making the offering. The Greek word that is translated expiation means "to make acceptable and enable one to draw close to God". Thus the Orthodox emphasis would be that Christ died, not to appease an angry and vindictive Father, or to avert the wrath of God, but to change people so that they may become more like God

In Christian theology, particularly in Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy and Eastern Catholic theology, theosis, meaning divinization, or deification, or making divine, is the process within a believer that emulates the life example of Jesus Christ. It involves following the gospel of Christ in one's daily life toward the end of becoming more Christlike. According to this doctrine, the holy life of God, given in Jesus Christ to the believer through the Holy Spirit, is experienced through the struggles of this life initially. This grows into an increased experience of God, and it is later consummated in the resurrection of the believer when the power of sin and death will lose hold over the believer forever. This is seen at to occur at the end of the current age.

Evangelical Understandings

Evangelicals tend to divide salvation into three phases: Justification, Sanctification, and Glorification. We begin the journey by receiving a free gift of being put right with God. Because it is a gift, it is not based on our merits or strivings; it is based upon the gift-giving and accepting heart of Christ illustrated in his willing sacrifice on the cross. The emphasis on the free gift nature of justification obviates our need to hold onto guilt or shame and invites us to open our heart, let go of our woundedness, and, like children, receive God's unconditional love. This is justification. It requires no transformation effort on our part—just a free will invitation to God to do God's work. God does the transformation.

Sanctification is the more effortful following of God and Christ through the subsequent years following justification. It is growth in the life of God. This involves, among other things, service to others and the manifestation of Christ-love within us.

Glorification is the transformation that occurs in the Christ follower at the end of the age or second coming of Christ. A renewed body is anticipated that will be like the one Jesus used following his resurrection. This body has what we would now call paranormal abilities.

An Archetypal Recapitulation Theory

Those who understand the archetypal psychology of Carl Jung will be pleased to know that Christianity includes an archetypal dimension in some understandings of atonement. This is implied in many of them but more overtly expressed in Irenaeus' recapitulation theory.

St. Paul in Romans 6 teaches what are often called *identification truths*. He says that when a person is baptized or converted or justified, they go through a change internally. One identifies with Christ on the cross, in essence saying, "That is me." They spend three days in the tomb while under the waters of baptism. Then, a believer becomes identified with the resurrected Christ, saying once again, "That is me." These are what some teachers have called *positional truths*. In other words, they are true by spiritual fiat and not because of anything of which you might be personally conscious. It is part of who you *are*, just as a person who is adopted into a family is part of that family, no matter what they look like on the outside. The adoptee's "position" and identity is that of a family member.

In archetypal psychology, one might convey the same idea by saying that an archetypal shift occurred. Archetypes underpin our subjective sense of identity. The Pauline "new self" arrives first as an archetype, and it may take it some time to work its new patterns into our lives so that they are perceptible to our ego-selves. But the newly "downloaded" programs are "booted" and running in the background. As a result of this identification with Christ, the activity of the programs eventually will find its way to the surface and transform a person.

The church father, Irenaeus, (125 to 202 A.D.) promulgated an archetypal appreciation of atonement in what is called the Recapitulation Theory. He, like Paul, sees Christ as the new Adam, who systematically undoes the errors and limitations of the old Adam archetype. Thus, where Adam was disobedient concerning God's edict concerning the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Christ was obedient

even to death on the tree of the cross. Whereas our body was born to decay, the resurrection body will transcend those limitations. Irenaeus drew similar comparisons between Eve and Mary, contrasting the faithlessness of the former with the faithfulness of the latter. In addition to reversing the wrongs done by Adam, Irenaeus thinks of Christ as “recapitulating” or “summing up” human life. To redeem fallen humanity during this age, God implants the Christ archetypal story into the collective soul of humankind. Christ is the second universal kind of human. *This is the archetypal seed that is hidden in the ground of our being.*

The method of growth and transformation is subtly different in this understanding. Transformation of outward character happens when a person starts ***being who they already are***. The true self is viewed as the Christ archetype within us, not our old, more limited ego-way of being. Spiritual development becomes the process of fully manifesting what we already are rather than striving or pretending to be something you are not. Blocks may need to be removed for the manifestation to occur, but this subtle shift of thought has great psychological significance.

Paul overtly tells us to be who we already are in Romans when he says,

You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.--*Romans 6*

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, ...death no longer has mastery over him. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.--*Romans 6*

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.--*Romans 13*

It is easy at this point to see how Monistic thought would dovetail with the recapitulation theory. If our basic identity is oneness with God, and if separation is an illusion caused by the veil, re-identifying with who we already are makes perfect sense.

A Multiplicity of Mechanisms

It is very likely that God, in his planning for salvation and unification of all things, used a multiplicity of images, mechanisms, and stories in order to appeal to the diverse needs and understandings of humankind. God is tricky like that. We underappreciate God’s complex sophistication by insisting that just one way of understanding is true.

Conclusion

So are you saved? Are you reconciled to God? Has God’s atoning work taken place in your life? Or do you live outside of time and consider such questions irrelevant to your unitive thought forms? Whichever way it is that you perceive the gospel, may it continue to be Good News for you!