Rethinking Redemption

Dominic Kirkham investigates theories of 'atonement' and the palaeontological challenge to 'original sin'.

When I was a seminarian, some fifty years ago, pursuing my theological studies in anticipation of ordination, the course of studies spanned, in what sometimes seemed never-ending tedium, six years. Towards the end of the course in the fifth year we were introduced to one of the key modules: the Atonement or Redemption. Presumably, it was left late so that students could first mature in their studies and become conversant with scripture, church history, and other theological prerequisites for the understanding of this core doctrine. In view of the seemingly endless controversy that surrounds the expression of the doctrine, this was perhaps not a bad thing.

The nub of the issue is simple enough to state: what was/is the significance of the death of a man by crucifixion which took place outside Jerusalem sometime in the fourth decade of the Common Era? If the question is simple enough the answers are anything but. First up was Saint Paul writing a letter in explanation to the Romans. There he refers in a key text to 'the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith' (Rom 3: 24 – 25). The meaning of this text hinges on the word 'expiation'. Indeed, is this the right translation of the Greek word *hilasterion* or should it be 'propitiation'?

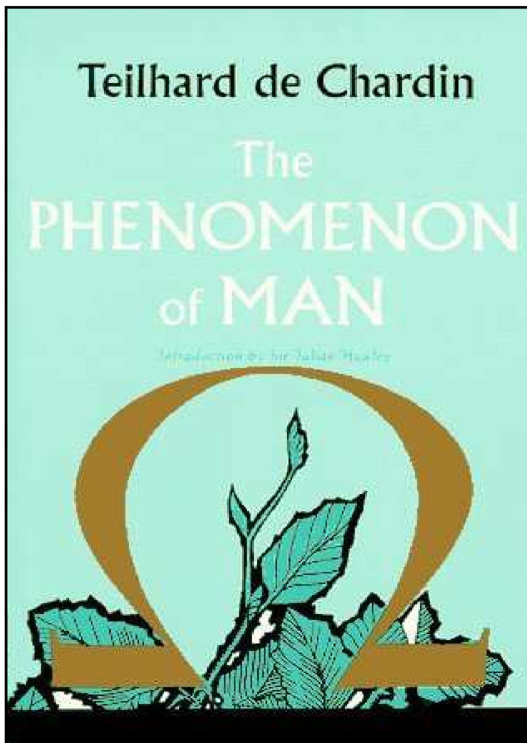
If it's propitiation, then this means the turning away of wrath, but if it's expiation this means the taking away of sin. The text does not suggest that Christ placates God's wrath so much as that God puts forward Christ for the remission of sin. But, these subtleties aside, it is exactly in this former sense that atonement came to be understood for centuries to come. It is most graphically expressed in that wonderful eleventh century Easter hymn, *Victimae paschali laudes* ('Bring, all ye dear-bought nations, bring') which praises:

> That guiltless Son, who bought your peace
> and made his Father's anger cease.

In the early centuries of the church this grand soteriological drama of salvation became understood as a cosmic battle in which God and Satan fought over the human race. That tradition envisaged redemption as the emancipation of humans from the devil's power in which Christ's body was used as a kind of bait, by which the devil was caught like a mouse in a trap (cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate.* 13,19). In some versions God offered Jesus as a ransom to the devil.

It was that tradition which Anselm of Canterbury disowned in his great work *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man).* His answer was set in a new cultural context, that of feudalism and the societal-political world in which Anselm lived. Now redemption was presented as the restoration of the order of creation that had become distorted by sin. So the controversy and diversity of opinions rumbled on, through the Reformation, down to modern times. In each period theology reflects, even if inadvertently, some of the cultural tensions of the time in an ongoing process of elaboration.

While I myself was studying the doctrine(s) of Atonement at the seminary, one was aware of a significant if rather enigmatic figure, a Jesuit, hovering on the margins of theological speculation but never quite recognised: Teilhard de Chardin. The story of this mystical palaeontologist, his enforced silence and posthumous fame is now well known. But not quite as well-known as many think, as it is only quite recently that the documents at the heart of this drama have become known (cf. 'Let his fire burn', *The Tablet,* 7th June 2018). These documents from 1925 are the 'six propositions' to which Teilhard had been made to assent. It was only at the sixth proposition, which affirmed the whole human race is descended from Adam, that he demurred. By doing so, he was referring to an earlier patristic tradition which used Adamic imagery *allegorically* to portray the shared human condition, and thus distancing himself from the view that linked original sin to a single event.



From this perspective Teilhard saw paradise, not as a place of past perfection but as an image for future spiritual unification (his so-called 'Omega Point'). Redemption could now be viewed as part of the grand drama of evolution, the motivating force of which was embodied in Christ. Though all this seemed to skip ambiguously between many disciplines and would be contained in his writings, notably *The Phenomenon of Man* (begun in 1925), he would have no control over its interpretation, as these were not published until after his death in 1955. In the meantime, he had to endure the patronising disdain of his religious superiors, who were rather dismissive of what one called his constant 'rhapsodising'.

In Teilhard's vast theodrama of cosmogenesis no mention is made of Adam or Original Sin. This omission outraged religious traditionalists, who denounced the work as heretical and a new form of Pelagianism. Reactions from the scientific world, which didn't quite know what to make of it all, were no more positive. In one particularly scathing review the biologist Sir Peter Medawar dismissed the whole thing as, 'tipsy, euphoristic prose poetry which is one of the more tiresome manifestations of the French spirit.' But the work still became a publishing sensation.

The timing of its appearance, together with his other works, in the late 1950s, also proved propitious, in so far as it contributed to the great theological tsunami which was building up in the Catholic Church that would lead to the Vatican Council. Not only did his writings chime with the sense of optimism and radicalism that characterised the 1960s but, in an intangible sort of way, they would contribute to the mind-set of many participants in the Vatican Council and shape some of its key documents, such as *The Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes,* 1965). These sought to break out from the attitude of suspicion and fear that had characterised much of the previous hundred years and engage more positively with the spirit of the times. This new spirit of optimism was certainly my memory of conferences run by the Teilhard de Chardin Association, which I joined in 1968, and was again one of those intangible influences that led to my pursuing a religious vocation.

It was at this time that I was becoming increasingly disturbed by the status of those archaic humans who had preceded *Homo sapiens*, particularly the Neanderthals. As the eminent palaeontologist Chris Stringer wrote in his book *In Search of the Neanderthals:* 'No other group of prehistoric people carries such a weight of scientific and popular preconceptions, or has had its name so associated with the lingering traits of savagery, stupidity and animal strength.' Evidence revealed, as at the Shanidar cave in Iraq, that here was a people who buried their dead, scattered flowers on the bodies in some sort of ritual, hunted with skill and decorated their own bodies, as well as caring for the infirm. Here in fact was a sensitive people like us, but how did they relate to us? What was their place, if any, in the grand theodrama of redemption, or were they just to be cast aside?

At the time I still accepted a primal human couple as having some form of historical reality with *Homo sapiens* having a distinct status. But what if humans had mated with Neanderthals from the outset? This would surely have implications for that primal state of 'sanctity and justice', in which it was claimed that Adam had been created.

Homo Sapiens and Neanderthal interbred

Evidence for some kind of interaction mounted. Then in 2008, Svante Paabo and his team of geneticists at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, pulled off the master stroke of teasing DNA out of millennia-old Neanderthal bones in sufficient quantities to compare with the modern human genome. The conclusion was that early humans had interbred with Neanderthals and that every one of us, but not Africans, carries between two and four per cent of their genes. What the historical evidence was implying was that if there was interbreeding or hybridisation then, by definition, we were not dealing with two species but one broader, diverse human population.

The theological implications of all this for any grand theodrama of redemption are profound. It was with the imagery of a counterpoint between the First and Second Adam that St Paul had constructed his doctrine of salvation when writing to the Romans: the original sin that led to universal death offset by the sacrifice of the new Adam. But now we know that there was no First Adam, no primal couple.

So we return to the original starting point of this reflection: the man who died on a cross outside Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. What must we say of him? A new perspective of redemption, which immersed the significance of Jesus in the ongoing social needs and politics of the day, came to characterise the Liberation Theology that emerged in Latin America after the Vatican Council.

Among the many distinguished voices the Jesuit Jon Sobrino (why are they always Jesuits?) stands out in demanding a new view of salvation, which is not just about orthodoxy (belief) but ortho-praxis: 'Following Jesus means taking the love that God manifested on the cross and making it *real* in history' (*Christology at the Crossroads,* p. 227). Paradoxically, Sobrino notes, 'it was "religion" that killed the Son'. The cross points to 'the end of people's subjugation by other human beings in the name of religion' (p. 209). In other words, redemption is not about what someone did for us but what *we* are doing for others. The history of Golgotha is now being lived out in the world of the poor and their search for humanisation. (cf. *The Eye of the Needle: No Salvation outside the Poor.*)

Amongst contemporary theologians there have been many such voices – most of them silenced and crushed in the interest of the centralised power of Rome, like the charismatic bishop Dom Hélder Câmara. These voices argue that where love, peace and justice take place on Earth there is already the beginning of the final eschatological state, an 'identification without total identity' between redemptive salvation and political liberation. This narrative of commemorative solidarity with Christ is ongoing.

But to draw this reflection to a close, I would like to end with reference to the philosopher of 'post-Christianity', Don Cupitt, who over many works has argued for a respect for the extraordinary 'ordinariness' of life and an ethics of 'solarity'. This latter is the core of his vision of a redeemed world, and of what he calls 'solar living' – that constant outpouring of generosity and giving, like the sun which is the benign source of life for all. For Cupitt this was characterised above all in the life and teaching of Jesus, the Son of Man.

The second edition of Dominic Kirkham's book *From Monk to Modernity* is due out shortly in the USA.