

BOOK PANEL ON *ATONEMENT AND COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY* –
SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Catherine Cornille, Boston College
 Moderator: Brian Robinette, Boston College
 Presenters: John Thiel, Fairfield University
 Julia Feder, Creighton University
 Respondent: Klaus von Stosch, Bonn University

This book panel aimed to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of comparative theology for Christian systematic theology by reflecting on the newly published volume *Atonement and Comparative Theology. The Cross in Dialogue with Other Religions* (Fordham University Press, 2021). In this volume, Christian theologians with expertise in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism and African traditional religions reflect on how engagement with these traditions may shed new light on the Christian understanding of atonement.

Two systematic theologians, John Thiel and Julia Feder, reflected on what they, as non-comparative theologians had gained from reading the volume, while one of the contributors, Klaus Von Stosch, responded to their comments. After offering a critique of the classical juridical theories of atonement, John Thiel admitted his own tendency to bypass the horrors of suffering and the cross in favor of the promise of the resurrection. He proposed a way of approaching the various articles in terms of various types of aesthetic approaches to the other religion, some focusing on aesthetics of repair (particularly in relation to Judaism) and others on an aesthetics of reconstruction (particularly in relation to Buddhism). An important insight gained from his engagement with the comparative theologians was the importance of squarely facing the elements of death and suffering that are part of the Christian doctrine of atonement and a realization that this may be viewed as a flight from Jewishness and a flight from the realities of embodiment.

Julia Feder, for her part, focused on the distinction between the exemplary and the non-exemplary approaches to atonement in the various articles, and the dangers as well as benefits of focusing on either. She used the sex abuse crisis in the church, and in particular the experience of victims and the reaction of the hierarchy, to illustrate this. The exemplary approach to atonement runs the risk that victims quietly accept their suffering as identification with the suffering of Christ. On the other hand, it may also function as a model for those in positions of responsibility in the church to fully account for their own failures and to suffer the consequences of their sins. The exemplary model may thus account for the importance of penance, which Bede Bidlack also emphasizes in his Daoist approach to atonement.

In his reflections and response to the papers, Klaus von Stosch first emphasized the importance of not distinguishing between confessional and comparative theology, as he firmly identifies with both and believes that all comparative theology is or should be confessional. In response to John Thiel, he argues that the idea of resurrection without the cross does not allow for a genuine recognition of human suffering, in particular the suffering of the innocent child (as discussed in the brothers Karamazov). Only a God who is somehow affected by the suffering of the child would be able to

offer solace, consolation and hope, he argues. It is only through the experience of the suffering of God in the person of Jesus that one may eventually be reconciled with God in the experience of suffering here and now. His response to Julia Feder focused mainly on the relationship between the intentionality of the priest and his sacramental power and authority. Though the cross certainly does carry an exemplary function, most of the articles also emphasize the non-exemplary nature of the Christian understanding of atonement, which is inseparable from the Christian understanding of sin and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

The discussion following the presentations focused on various alternative ways of understanding of atonement through poetic images or through classical Thomistic approaches. The presentations and discussion that followed illustrate the richness of the concept of atonement and the impossibility of capturing or explaining it through one single theory or model. It expresses both the solidarity of God in the experience of suffering as well as the hope for eternal harmony and liberation from suffering, the seriousness of sin and dependence on divine deliverance, the experience in this life and beyond of oneness with God, as well as the necessity for retribution of innocent suffering. The volume demonstrates that other religions may shed new light on any or all of these aspects, and may continue to deepen the Christian understanding, without presuming to offer a full explanation or a final theory that would capture all of its complexity and theological and spiritual richness.

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