

EVOLUTION, SOCIOBIOLOGY, AND THE ATONEMENT

by *Patricia A. Williams*

Abstract. This essay views Christian doctrines of the atonement in the light of evolution and sociobiology. It argues that most of the doctrines are false because they use a false premise, the historicity of Adam and the Fall. However, two doctrines are not false on those grounds: Abelard's idea that Jesus' life is an example and Athanasius' concept that the atonement changes human nature. Employing evolution's and sociobiology's concepts of the egocentric and ethnocentric nature of humanity and the synergy between genes and environments to produce a "nature," this essay shows that these two doctrines can be amalgamated to make sense of the atonement in the late twentieth century.

Keywords: Abelard; Athanasius; atonement; evolution; human nature; sociobiology.

This essay is an attempt to revise Christian doctrines of the atonement by taking into account the scientific information now available about evolution and sociobiology. In order not to have to debate all of Christian theology at once, I will use the Chalcedon formulation of the incarnation and the Nicæan concept of the resurrection without calling them into question.

The argument of this essay has five sections. First, current knowledge of evolution excludes the possibility that Adam and Eve were historical persons and that there was a Fall from a state of innocence or perfection into a state of sin or degeneration. Therefore, atonement doctrines that depend on these things cannot be true. Second, the ahistoricity of the Fall does not entail the sinlessness of humankind. On the contrary, sociobiology has demonstrated that human nature is sinful, if by that is meant that it is predominantly egocentric or ethnocentric rather than being centered on God and neighbor.

Third, human nature is not constituted of human genes and their products but, rather, is the result of the synergistic interaction between

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genes and environments. Therefore, it is possible (albeit not easy) to alter human nature by changing environments.

Fourth, atonement in the Hebrew scriptures is an action performed by an ethnically select and ritually pure high priest in the temple who approaches God yearly in order to expiate his people's sins. In the Greek scriptures of the New Testament, this concept of atonement is transformed. Here, God dwells with sinners and resides continually both in the individual and the Christian community. It is God who approaches and purifies and atones.

Finally, when interpreted in the light of modern science, the Christian idea of atonement is primarily about a change that occurs in human nature. This change is not guaranteed, but it can occur if Christians grasp by faith two things: (1) the example set by the historical Jesus, which comes alive as they seek to imitate him, and (2) Christ's intimacy with them as foreshadowed in the incarnation and effected by the resurrection. These two things—example and intimacy—constitute changes in Christians' environment which, if sufficiently incorporated by faith, can change their nature, enabling them to surmount evolved egocentricity and ethnocentricity and to love God and their neighbors as themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The term *atonement* entered the English language around 1513 and is exactly what it appears to be: the combination of *at* and *one* and *-ment*. This concept of being-at-one included the ideas of reconciliation, expiation, and purification (Yerkes 1952, 178–82). Although historically the atonement has been connected with both Jesus' incarnation and his crucifixion, more accurately it is not a particular event in Jesus' life but the whole of it: his incarnation, mission, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. It is possible, even probable, that Jesus prepared his followers to interpret his life and death as atoning, for they did so immediately and thoroughly. Such an interpretation was congruent with cultural ideas in first-century Judaism (Sanders 1985, 324), based on the post-Maccabean concept of the beneficial effects of a martyr's death. In both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, the atonement is characterized by the technical term, *draw near* (Daly 1978, 274–76), an important point to which I will return.

If humanity's approaching or uniting with God poses a problem, it would appear *prima facie* that the central issue is the difference in kind between God (who is eternal, spiritual, and omnipotent) and human beings (who are mortal, material, and at the mercy of many forces more powerful than they). Theologically, this difference is expressed in terms of *substance*. A substance makes something what it is. God and humanity are different substances. How can two substances become one?

However, historically the problem has not been conceived in these terms. Indeed, Christian theology claims not only that such a unity is possible but also that it has been effected in the incarnation. The incarnate Christ has retained both divine and human substances while nonetheless being one person—a formulation affirmed in Act V of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. As Chalcedon noted in the same act in regard to Christ's humanity, he is "like us in all respects, apart from sin." Therefore, if Christ is united to God and people are not, the separation is effected not by difference of substance but by sin.

SIN, ADAM, AND THE FALL

The human origin of sin has been laid at Adam's door. Adam—who was created without sin, yet sinned and so brought death and woe to all of humanity—brought about the Fall of humankind from perfection into degeneration, from unity with God to separation from God. As a result of this attribution of the origin of sin to Adam, most of the Christian doctrines of the atonement have looked to Adam and the Fall to discover what needs to be repaired in order for atonement to be effected. Saint Paul was the first to try to construct clear answers. He offered two. First, Adam's sin was disobedience to God; atonement was achieved by Jesus, who was perfectly obedient to his Father (Rom. 5:19). Second, Adam's sin brought death upon human beings; atonement was achieved by Christ, who was raised from the dead; his rising will be followed by that of others (1 Cor. 15:22–34).¹

Later, the devil was invoked. According to Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine, Jesus paid the ransom owed to the devil, who had acquired rights to humanity because of Adam's sin. Chrysostom argued that Jesus propitiated God's wrath at Adam's sin, whereas Anselm thought that Jesus satisfactorily paid the debt owed to God's justice because Adam had sinned. Aquinas borrowed heavily from Anselm but added technical details regarding the necessity for full satisfaction for sin.² Both the Scotists and the nominalists took issue with these technical details. At the Reformation Luther and Calvin both maintained that Christ paid the penalty for Adam's sin.

Whatever one may think of the credibility of these doctrines today or of their moral quality, they all have one thing in common: they treat Adam as a historical figure whose historical deed infected all his progeny. However, we now have very good evidence that Adam was not a historical figure. We also have very good evidence that God did not create species separately two by two. Species evolved from one another. The case for the evolution of species was first made convincingly by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. After 1859 most biologists and millions of educated Christians accepted evolution.

Recently Daniel Dennett (1995) has presented the theory for contemporary people educated in the humanities, correcting many common misunderstandings. Given the plethora of excellent books on evolution, I will not argue the case for it here.

However, I will insist that a very common Christian view has no merit, given what we know of evolution. This is the view that somehow there was some innocent creature at the evolution of a species—maybe not even the species *Homo sapiens*—who committed the first sin, thereby causing the Fall of humanity from innocence into sinfulness. This not only seems utterly implausible—because evolution typically occurs in populations, not in individuals—but it also seems beside the point. Such a first sin would not infect the sinner's progeny because acquired characteristics are not inherited, and a sinful deed, or a tendency toward such deeds, would be an acquired characteristic.

Given our current scientific knowledge, Christian theology should reject all of the doctrines of the atonement that depend on Adam's historicity or the historicity of the Fall, for the doctrines are false. They all argue from a false premise, the historicity of Adam and the Fall, and therefore cannot logically reach deductively true conclusions. Rejection of these doctrines would leave two historical doctrines of the atonement still to be assessed. Abelard extolled Jesus' example to humankind; Athanasius believed Jesus' atonement changed human nature. Clearly Abelard has a point. Jesus is an example for many people. They do try to imitate him. However, this would make Jesus no different from Gandhi, so that claims of his divine nature, of his incarnation and resurrection, would become irrelevant. Athanasius' position seems less plausible, at least without some explanation of how a person's life and death—even a divine person's—could change human nature without either genetic inheritance (Jesus left no offspring) or the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Yet, despite these apparent obstacles, both of these doctrines have merit, as I shall show.

SIN AND SOCIOBIOLOGY

Superficially, it appears that the rejection of Adam's sin and of the Fall means the denial of inherent human sinfulness. Yes, many human actions are sinful, yet human nature itself is not infected. However, inherent human sinfulness is not quite so easy to deny when human nature is examined in the light of sociobiology. Sociobiology presents a powerful case for the natural sinfulness of all human beings, if sinfulness is defined as the New Testament defines it. The position of the New Testament is that all that is written in the Law (Torah) and the Prophets hangs upon two commandments: people are to love God, and they are to love their neighbors (Matt. 22:37–40). Neighbors include not only kin or friends

or members of one's community, but strangers—even despised strangers (Luke 10:30–37). Indeed, Jesus says that people who love merely those who already love them deserve no merit (Matt. 5:46).

Common observation and common sense as well suggest that people do not naturally love strangers and enemies but, instead, prefer their kin and their friends. Sociobiology supports this commonsense position. Sociobiology is the biological study of the social behavior of animals. The theoretical basis for sociobiology rests on basic evolutionary theory plus simple genetics. One true and scientifically obvious premise in the theory of evolution is that parents pass on copies of their genes to their offspring. Other things being equal, the more offspring parents can raise to reproductive age, the more likely they are to pass on their genes to future generations.

Moreover, organisms have two different methods available for passing on copies of their genes to future generations: they may pass on copies directly by producing offspring, or they may pass them on indirectly by helping other close relatives, for close relatives carry many copies of their genes. Looking at these two methods of passing on genes, sociobiology has hypothesized and then demonstrated in case after case over thirty years that animals look after their own survival and reproduction and the survival and reproduction of their close relatives, but they rarely help other organisms.³ There are exceptions, as there almost always are in biology, but the exceptions are few, and peculiar environmental circumstances usually explain why they occur. Sociobiology views human beings just as it views other animals. Human beings, too, naturally help themselves and their close relatives. Put in human terms, sociobiology finds people to be egocentric and ethnocentric. Rarely do they treat their nonrelated neighbors as themselves; even less rarely do they help their enemies.

As in other scientific fields, specialists who are in fundamental agreement on the broad issues differ on details. In human sociobiology, Richard Dawkins (1976) and Michael Ruse (1986) emphasize human egocentricity, whereas Pierre L. van den Berghe (1981) and Richard Alexander (1987) focus on ethnocentricity. E. O. Wilson (1978) finds both. Peter Singer (1981) and I (1995) also see both, but we add secular arguments to show that human beings are capable of periodic disinterested, unselfish behavior toward friends and strangers.

Human beings' fundamental, evolved orientation toward egocentricity and ethnocentricity is what separates them from the God who requires disinterested love. Adam's sin is no longer needed to explain the separation, for scientific sociobiology explains it better. It explains human egocentricity as structurally integral to individual survival, and it explains human nepotism and tribalism as structurally required for social survival in the environment in which *Homo sapiens* evolved.

Moreover, it highlights the existence of nepotism and tribalism, sins against disinterested love largely ignored by the ethnically proud “sons of Abraham” who wrote the Hebrew scriptures.

SOCIOBIOLOGY AND HUMAN NATURE

One of the most important biological discoveries of the late twentieth century has been that the once fierce debate between nature and nurture (or genes and environment) was radically wrongheaded. For decades scientists tried to decide how much influence genes exerted on an organism as opposed to how much influence the environment wielded.⁴ Then biologists discovered that they were asking the wrong question, for genes and environments work in synergy to produce their end products. Perhaps the most outstanding early example discovered of the synergy between genes and environments—long a standard textbook case—is the arrowleaf plant. It can grow both on land and under water. Under water its leaves are thin, flexible, and permeable to water. On land its leaves are broad, rigid, and covered with wax to prevent water loss (Ricklefs 1973, 59). The differences in the two mature plants are a result of the impact of the environment on the plants’ genes. Some genes are inhibited by the aquatic environment, others activated (or expressed) by it. In the aerial environment different genes are inhibited and expressed.

This profound influence of environments on gene expression is not limited to plants. Some caterpillars resemble what they eat: if they eat twigs, they resemble twigs; if flowers, flowers (Greene 1989, 643–46). Perhaps most fascinating is sex change in fish due to the impact of their social environment on genetic expression (Adler 1995, 266–67). In some species, when a dominant male fish in the group leaves or dies, a large or dominant female in the group becomes male. In other species sexual change can recur in response to changes in the social environment. A female becomes male when a dominant male in the group leaves or dies but then becomes female again if a larger male joins the group. “The frequency of gender changes depends on the stability of the social system” (Adler 1995, 267).

These examples underline two implications of evolution. First, species do not have essences—eternal, unchanging natures—as proposed by Aristotle and accepted by Western philosophy and theology until recently.⁵ Rather, species change; they evolve. Second, organisms do not have fixed natures, either; they are the interactive products of their genes and their environments. People are not exceptions to these generalizations. *Homo sapiens* evolved from primate ancestors. Human individuals are amazingly malleable to environmental influence. For example, if reared in a signing environment, the deaf learn to sign, not to speak. Doctors control the childhood genetic disease PKU by altering the affected children’s dietary

environment. Diabetes, a largely inherited disease, can be controlled environmentally by diet or insulin.⁶ If the fish's sex changes in response to its social environment, it is possible that human beings also can be changed by their social environments. And unlike fish, people can choose to change, can envision their own transformation, and then act to bring it about. This is one of the reasons that Saint Paul thinks hearing the gospel preached and avoiding one's previous pagan practices are so important in transforming the lives of Christian converts.

THE ATONEMENT IN JUDAISM AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

By the first century C.E., the Jewish concept of atonement had become complex, for it had accumulated ideas from its own long history as well as from pagan cultures. Primarily, however, the atonement was an expiatory sacrifice to wipe away sins, a sacrifice performed annually in the temple in Jerusalem, the only acceptable place for Jews to offer sacrifice to their God for more than five hundred years. The temple at Jerusalem was where God dwelled. God especially resided in the temple's inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies. Once a year, on the holiest day of the Jewish year, the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make expiation for the sins of the people. The high priest was a very special person. He had to be a descendent of Levi (Exodus 28) and preferably also of Zadock. Zadock was the Levitical priest who anointed Solomon king (1 Kings 1:39) and whom Solomon later made chief priest (1 Kings 2:35). Frederick J. Murphy explains the purpose of the atonement:

[The people's] sin defiled the sanctuary. The sanctuary was like a magnet that attracted the "dirt" caused by the sins of the people. . . . It was necessary to purge God's dwelling of the defilement caused by the sin of the people because eventually the buildup of defilement would make it impossible for God to remain there [in the Holy of Holies]. (Murphy 1991, 85–86)

Leviticus 16 describes the elaborate procedure. In brief, the high priest killed animals with which to make atonement for himself and the people; then he took the animals' blood into the Holy of Holies to sprinkle it on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. At the same time, he carried burning incense into the Holy of Holies so that the smoke of the incense would hide the mercy seat of God from his sight, for it was so holy that he risked death if he should look at it. Having made atonement with blood in the inner sanctuary, he then exited the Holy of Holies and also cleaned the outer altar with blood. It was here at the outer altar that priests performed the daily sacrifices.

Judaism developed an important technical term in connection with the Day of Atonement: *draw near* (Daly 1978, 274–76). To *draw near* was what the priest did when he entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of

Atonement. He approached God as nearly as anyone could, with care and with fear, at the risk of his own life.

This brief description of the rites and personages involved in the Day of Atonement demonstrates how far the God of the Jewish cult was from the people, even from the high priest. God dwelled in the temple. Only priests could perform sacrifices, and they could perform them only at the temple. The people brought their sacrifices to the priests at the temple, and they could observe the daily ritual but did not participate in it. As well, there was constant danger that God would leave the temple and thus void the covenant. God had to be treated with utmost care.

Two groups still known to history from first-century Judaism attempted to bring God closer to the people. The Pharisees, so unfortunately maligned by the authors of the Gospels, tried to live up to God's promise that the Jews would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6)⁷ by keeping the purity laws that applied only to priests as if the Pharisees' own tables were the Lord's (Renwick 1991, 21), thereby providing a holy place for God at the table of Pharisaic fellowship. They did not try to force anyone else to keep these laws, and they did not disapprove of laypeople who ignored them.

The second group was the Essenes, usually equated with the cult living at Qumran who left us the Dead Sea Scrolls. Unlike the Pharisees, the Essenes were largely a separatist group. Like them, they believed that, if only they could live sufficiently pure lives like those of priests, God would reign in their community.

Theologically, it was Saul the Pharisee who came to believe that maintaining the priestly purity laws was insufficient for access to God (Renwick 1991, 22–23). Saul was a good Pharisee. He kept the laws. By Jewish standards he was not a sinner; rather, he was "under the law blameless" (Phil. 3:6). Therefore, the Saul who became Saint Paul never used the language of conversion about his own religious experience; he did not need to be converted, for conversion entails repentance for sin. However, he did need to be transformed (Segal 1990, 16–20). To be transformed like Saint Paul was to alter radically the very meaning of *draw near*, which for Saint Paul suggests the intimacy of identity. Of his own experience, he exclaims, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20).

Saint Paul took very seriously this process of transformation in Christ. When he pleads with the people of the church in Rome to "be transformed" (Rom. 12:2), when he comments that he and those in the church in Corinth are "being changed into his [Christ's] likeness" (2 Cor. 3:18), he uses the Greek word *metamorphosis* where the New Revised Standard Version uses *transformed* and *changed*. It is the same word Saint

Mark uses of Jesus at the Transfiguration: “and he was transfigured [*metamorphosed*] before them” (Mark 9:2). Saint Paul’s sense of transformation in[to] Christ is a *drawing near* to the point of identity. It is truly an atonement.

Saint Paul’s sense of personal religious transformation is a radical departure both from the cultic atonement of first-century Judaism and from the efforts of the Pharisees and Essenes to adhere strictly to the Torah and thus keep God in their respective communities. Such a radical change required a substantiating theology, and I think Saint Paul was struggling toward such a theology in his incipient remarks, especially in Romans 5. These remarks were later to be developed into the doctrine of Original Sin, which says two things: there was a first sin, and that first sin made human nature inherently sinful. If the concept of inherent human sinfulness does not exist—as it did not and does not for the Jews (Wyschogrod 1986)⁸—it is possible for human beings to be sinless; and if people do sin, that sin can be expiated. Such sin is, as Murphy says, a kind of dirt that can be washed away, leaving sinners as pure as the day they were born.

But Saint Paul has found such reasoning inadequate. His sinlessness under the law is insufficient. Although he does not need forgiveness, he needs transformation—because his nature is sinful, and there is nothing he can do about it (“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” [Rom. 7:15]). How can such a thing be possible? Well, there were Adam and Eve and a serpent. They “brought death into the world and all our woe.” For a first-century Jew, this was a really good explanation, an explanation elaborated upon for centuries by Christians following Saint Paul following scripture.

I am suggesting that Saint Paul is right about the meaning of and logical reason for the atonement but wrong about origins, although he could not know that. Now we know more about ourselves and our origins than Saint Paul could. Evolution and sociobiology have taught us that he is right about human nature but wrong about why human nature is what it is. In contrast to Jewish belief, human nature is sinful—that is, egocentric and ethnocentric rather than God- and neighbor-centric. And the cure is not more laws and more jails, but radical transformation, metamorphosis.

Not only Saint Paul but the whole New Testament radically reassesses Jewish belief and practice. For example, in Acts 7 Stephen sees the temple differently, presenting it as no longer the house of God but an idol. He says: “But it was Solomon who built a house for him [God]. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands” (Acts 7:47–48). Expressions such as *made with hands* or *the works of hands*, used here of the Jewish temple, are “language typical of the Jewish polemic against idols” (Daly 1978, 229). No wonder his hearers stoned Stephen!

In Saint John's Gospel, God has departed from the temple, and things Jewish have been replaced by Christ. The Jewish jars for purification, for example, are filled with the wine/blood of Christ at the marriage in Cana (John 2:6–10). John's Gospel is replete with "a series of replacements associated with the feasts of Judaism" (Davies 1974, 295–96), culminating in John 10:34–38, where "Christ himself is the Sanctified One, the altar and Temple . . ." (Davies 1974, 295).

In the New Testament it is Christ who is altar and temple. A person has replaced places and things. Christ has replaced the Jewish cult.¹⁰ People do not *draw near* to Christ so much as he *draws near* to them. He enters the individual, and it is the individual who becomes God's dwelling place, God's new temple (1 Cor. 3:16). He also enters the Christian community, dwelling in it as in a temple (Davies 1974, 185–87). Sacrifice is ended; the Atonement no longer needs to be done annually, for it has been done once and for all (Heb. 9:25–26).

Saint Paul emphasizes that Jesus' atoning sacrifice was made while people were still sinners (Rom. 5:8–11). Christ reverses the direction of thought in the Hebrew Scriptures. In them the impurity of the people threatens the purity of the holy. In the New Testament, the presence of the holy purifies the people (1 Cor. 3:16–17). This reversal has been clarified by painstaking scholarship on the historical Jesus. The standard scholarly view is that Jesus forgave sins without resorting to the usual Jewish requirements for sacrifices for forgiveness of sin at the temple (Fredriksen 1995, 20). Unrepentant sinners seem to be accepted if they believe in Jesus (Sanders 1985, 271–72). Noting that table fellowship was both important and symbolic in the first century, Joachim Jeremias (1966, 204) concludes that Jesus' eating with sinners and outcasts indicated that they had been forgiven and that salvation had come to them while they were still outcasts and sinners. E. P. Sanders concludes that it is "certain or virtually certain" that "He [Jesus] promised the kingdom [of God] to the wicked" (1985, 326). "An appreciable part of Jesus' teaching consists of assurance that God loves each individual no matter what the person's shortcomings. . . . God's love of the outcast, even those not generally obedient to his will, is the theme of some of Jesus' greatest parables" (Sanders 1993, 194). Such a view might well scandalize the respectable, even today. Perhaps this is why this concept is somewhat muted in the New Testament and needed careful scholarly reconstruction. After all, the New Testament is a collection of documents composed by the post-Easter church as late as seventy years after Jesus' death, a church seeking a respectable niche in the Roman Empire.

The New Testament concept of the atonement, then, seems to do three things. First, it retains the pagan-Jewish cultic idea of the necessity of sacrifice for the expiation of sins, with Jesus as the sacrifice. In this essay I

have not emphasized this point, for the sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion and death is deeply entrenched in contemporary Christian culture, and neither evolution nor sociobiology has anything to add to or subtract from these beliefs. It is important to note, however, that pagans and Jews of the first century C.E. were so steeped in the cult and culture of sacrifice that, as Christians, it would have been impossible for them not to view the crucifixion of their Lord as sacrificial, especially given his words at the Last Supper asking that God remember his death (Jeremias 1966, 244–55). However, eliminating all interpretations of the atonement that use the Fall as historical does help decrease the emphasis on sacrifice and increase the importance of two other interrelated interpretations of the atonement, those of Abelard and Athanasius, discussed more fully below.

Second, the New Testament presentation of the atonement rejects the necessity for purity before a person can *draw near* to God. Indeed, it reverses this first-century C.E. Jewish idea. If Jesus is also God, as Chalcedon holds, and therefore his behavior mirrors God's own dispositions toward humankind, and if Jesus accepted outcasts and sinners without the signs of repentance acceptable in his day, and perhaps without repentance at all, then God accepts sinners now. The "at-one-ment" is God's to give, and God gives it with amazing grace.

Third, the atonement transforms human nature. Historically, it was common to interpret the atonement as a kind of transaction, a transaction involving Jesus Christ, God the Father or the devil or both, while people were relegated to the sidelines. The atonement was construed as something done on humanity's behalf, and perhaps as something altering humanity's situation, but not as something involving a metamorphosis of humankind. Athanasius, who believed the atonement transformed human nature, is a notable exception to this generalization, but how human nature could be transformed by the atonement has remained opaque.

SOCIOBIOLOGY AND THE ATONEMENT

Sociobiology makes it transparent. As I argued above, biologists now know that almost no organism or its behavior is the sole product of genes; rather, organisms and behaviors are the result of a synergy of genes and environments. Human beings are not an exception to this general rule. However, they are different from other animals in two significant respects: first, they are more flexible than other animals, so their environment has a powerful impact on who they are, and their environment is largely cultural; second, human beings make choices in ways that other animals do not.¹¹

Therefore, Abelard's answer that Jesus is an example to human beings is important. Jesus' life as example is part of Christian culture, part of the

environment. People can choose to imitate it and so be transformed. Many have. Yet for most Christians, Jesus exclusively as example cannot represent a complete concept of the atonement, for it does not set him fundamentally apart from Buddha or Joan of Arc or Gandhi or Mother Teresa—even if Jesus provides the best example. Christianity as a religion rests on statements such as “Jesus lives,” “Jesus is Lord,” and “Jesus has been raised from the dead,” and most Christians believe these things. An adequate doctrine of the atonement must take them into account.

Athanasius’ doctrine takes them into account. Today, his doctrine may be reinterpreted somewhat like this: a person’s environment is changed as the risen Christ *draws near* to that person. Christ’s intimate *drawing near* is a real event, grasped by faith, as Saint Paul never tires of reiterating, and if integrated into a person’s daily practices, it evokes purity of life. Because this intimacy must be grasped by faith and integrated into people’s daily practices, it must be chosen and cannot be forced. And although some people experience instantaneous conversions, the *choice* is not instantaneous but continuous as people interact with others, engage in their cultures, and integrate their own individual psyches.

Illuminated by sociobiology, therefore, the atonement is about an alteration in the environment that may transform human nature. Abelard thought that the alteration lay in the example of Jesus’ life and the effect of his example on people who chose to imitate it. Under a modern view, such an imitation, if radical enough, might be said to constitute a change in human nature. Indeed, it would tend to blur into Athanasius’ conception. A modern rendering of his position would include the change in a person’s environment constituted by the resurrected Christ, who interacts with a person in the present and thus can have a more profound effect on the human psyche than a mere example could. The two positions begin to blur under the probability that people who radically imitate Jesus’ example will find themselves interacting with the risen Christ. Under either view, then, it begins to be possible to speak of human metamorphosis by—Athanasius would say “into”—the divine.

Having an understanding of the historical Jesus helps clarify the temporal order in which such a metamorphosis occurs, if it does. Jesus kept table fellowship with outcasts and sinners while they were still sinners, suggesting their acceptability and salvation with him as sinners. He lived and died and was raised for humanity while it was still sinful. Therefore he effected the atonement—he was at one with people—before people were transformed. It is when people grasp this, grasp that fact that Christ is already intimately loving and forgiving them, that transformation begins, as it did with Saint Paul.

Having an understanding of sociobiology helps clarify the logical order in which such a transformation must occur. If sociobiology is right in its

assessment of human nature—if people are naturally egocentric and ethnocentric—God must act first, must rescue people while they are still sinners, for without such a rescue they will remain sinners. Christ must enter into the human environment, transforming that environment, for people to be metamorphosed into lovers of God and neighbor.¹² It is the atonement that transforms, not transformation that effects at-one-ment.

NOTES

1. For more detail on the logic of Saint Paul's arguments, see Dunn 1991.
2. For details, see Quinn 1989.
3. There is far too much information on sociobiology to treat it thoroughly in this essay. A notable general text is E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975). For a cogent discussion of egocentricity, ethnocentricity, and altruism, see Williams (1995). A thorough compendium on our primate relatives is Barbara B. Smuts, et al., eds., *Primate Societies* (1987). In addition, there are popular books and even movies on primate social behavior that highlight sociobiological relationships.
4. Timothy H. Goldsmith (1991, 31–36) offers a clarifying discussion.
5. For an excellent discussion, see Elliott Sober (1994).
6. For a biologist's discussion, see Goldsmith (1991); for an emphasis on personal unity despite human flexibility, see Mary Midgley (1978); for a discussion of human creativity and freedom because of (not in spite of) genetic dispositions, see Mary Maxwell (1984).
7. All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
8. Michael Wyschogrod's explanation is more complex than this brief comment suggests. The Talmud posits both a good inclination and an evil inclination in humanity. However, the evil inclination is the energy that lies behind normal sexuality and normal competition, and thus it is a part of God's good creation.
9. The expression is John Milton's (*Paradise Lost*, I:3).
10. See, especially, the Letter to the Hebrews, which is also where the expression *draw near* is so frequently transformed from its Jewish to its Christian use (Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 10:1; 10:19; 12:18).
11. For a discussion of this point, see Goldsmith (1991, 91–123) and Midgley (1994).
12. This essay is limited to a discussion of the Christian doctrines of the atonement. I intend no implication that people must be Christians to love God and neighbor or that all Christians do so. On the contrary, many Christians are driven by fear of hell, not by love, and work by Samuel P. and Pearl M. Oliner (1988) suggests that love of others can be taught in a secular environment.

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