The Sacrifice of the Life-Giving Death

The Atonement and Its Theological Presuppositions in Eastern Orthodox Soteriology

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Abstract

Whereas much Western theology tends to portray the sacrifice of Christ as an act of penal substitution, the patristic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church emphasizes an understanding of Christ's atoning work that is participatory rather than substitutionary, ontological rather than juridical, and cosmic rather than individual. These differences in emphasis arise from different understandings of such foundational doctrines as man's original created nature, the fall, and the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Since man was created in a dynamic condition in the image of God, called to attain to the likeness through deification in the energies of God, and as a microcosm whose vocation is to mediate grace to the entire created *cosmos* as the priest of creation, man's fall is understood in ontological rather than juridical categories. Death is not imposed upon man by God as a divine punishment; it is the consequence of failure in man's vocation and parasitically infects the entire creation. The sacrifices described by the Old Testament Law are not prescribed by God for His benefit, but for that of man, signifying the cleansing that will be accomplished by the true Lamb of God and calling man's mind back to obedience and spiritual worship. As a result, the atonement, a divine work which began with Christ's incarnation, finds its fulfillment in the sacrifice of His death, not as a surrogate to placate divine wrath, but as a blessed victory that overthrows the domain of death by death, freeing man from bondage to sin and death and removing the barriers which prevented the fulfillment of humanity's original vocation.

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Introduction

The tradition of holy Orthodoxy has never reduced its expression of the doctrines surrounding the mystery of salvation to a single formulation.[1] Generally, though, the ancient Fathers of the Church have seen in Christ's incarnation the fulfillment of three specific roles originally intended to be realized by mankind: that of priest, prophet, and king.[2] While the functions of prophet and king are commonly agreed upon across confessional lines, it is the understanding of the role of Christ as priest—as both the offerer and the offered—that has been the cause of much disagreement, especially since the Middle Ages. Many Western Christians advocate an understanding of Christ's atoning work focused around notions of penal substitution and satisfaction. Secluded from some of the influences that have shaped the course of Western theological thinking, the Christian East has long maintained a different view of the divine economy. For the early Christians and the Eastern Christians of today, man's fall was not from a condition of static perfection but from the path to *theosis* (*θέωσις*), or deification (*θεοποίησις*). The Orthodox patristic tradition does not understand the fall primarily in the categories of guilt and punishment but of mortality and corruption. Man is the cause of his own death by turning his back on life, by failing in his vocation. It is not an externally imposed divine judgment. Furthermore, the Jewish sacrificial system presented in the Old Testament had as its purpose the benefit of the Israelite people, not the appeasement of an

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1. Peter Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 93.

2. Ibid., 96.

angry God. Arising from different, patristic[3] understandings of man's original created state, the fall, and the Old Testament sacrificial system, the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church emphasizes a view of the atoning work of Christ that is participatory rather than substitutionary, ontological rather than juridical, and cosmic rather than individual.

Theological Anthropology: Nature and Vocation

As St. Athanasius of Alexandria observes, it is first necessary to examine the creation of the *cosmos* before progressing to its salvation because its "*renewal . . . has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning.*"[4] In other words, there is no disparity between the divine acts of creating and saving the world; they are a single work, accomplished by the same divine agent. Eastern Christians find the doctrine of creation more important for what it entails about the relationship between Creator and creation than about origins.[5] The place to begin a study of the atonement is thus with an examination of man's created nature and vocation.

Whereas Western theology tends to view man's created nature as a condition of static perfection and immortality in full communion with God, the tradition of the Eastern Church understands man's original nature and environment as dynamic.[6] God alone, according to St. Maximus the Confessor, is "unmoved and complete and impassible . . .

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3. While this paper will certainly incorporate key scriptural texts, the scope of this project will largely be restricted to an examination of some of the *patristic* sources that give rise to the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the atonement.

4. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 26.

5. Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63.

6. Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 65, 67.

everything that comes into existence is subject to movement, since it is not self-moved or self-powered."[7] St. John of Damascus notes that all things that are created are by nature mutable and subject to change because they find their origin in change.[8] Everything that has a natural beginning must also have a natural end.[9] Created existence is thus essentially impermanent as a result of "the law of [its] nature."[10] As St. Theophilus of Antioch explains, God created man neither mortal nor immortal. For if God had created man mortal, God would be the cause of his death. If He created man immortal, though, God would have created God. God created man in a middle position, then, neither mortal nor immortal, but capable of either through the free exercise of his capacity for self-determination.[11] Filaret of Moscow recapitulated this teaching in the 19th century, explaining, "All things are balanced upon the creative Word of God as on an adamantine bridge: above them is the abyss of the divine infinitude, below them the abyss of their own nothingness."[12] The soul of man is "mobile by nature," as St. Athanasius teaches.[13]

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7. St. Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 7: On the Beginning and End of Rational Creatures," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. and ed. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 50.

8. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," trans S.D.F. Salmond, in *Volume 9: Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 2.

9. Ibid., 19.

10. Ibid., 22.

11. St. Theophilus of Antioch, "Theophilus to Autolycus," trans. Marcus Dods, in *Volume 2: Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (entire)*, ed. James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 105.

12. As cited in Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 63.

13. St. Athanasius, "Against the Heathen," in *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 6.

It is capable of using its body as an instrument to tend towards either good or evil, "toward what is, or toward what is not."[14] It was for the sake of this doctrine that St. Irenaeus confronted the heresies of Gnosticism—with its teaching that each man was born into one of three static classes—with his insistence on the infantile and immature nature of the first created man.[15] Orthodox theology, therefore, rather than viewing man's original created state as a condition of static immortality, understands man's created nature to occupy a middle position between mortality and immortality and capable of dynamically attaining to either through the exercise of free choice.

Many of the Greek Fathers make an important distinction in human nature between the static and the dynamic and between the potential and the actual. St. Basil of Caesarea notices something interesting in the Genesis account of the creation of man. He observes that God says, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26, St. Athanasius Academy Septuagint [SAAS]), though the text later only reads, "So God made man; in the image of God He made him . . ." (Gen. 1:27, SAAS). As St. Basil elucidates, mankind is created with the image but is entrusted to "building" the likeness himself through his own free-choice. Man is an "artisan" with the power within himself to obtain to the likeness through his own activity. God gives man the required prerequisites but expects man to play a role in creating himself. In this way the reward for the work becomes man's own.[16] In another homily, St. Basil relates this concept to what St. Paul says about the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Rom.

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14. St. Athanasius, "Against the Heathen," 6.

15. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 65.

16. St. Basil the Great, "On the Origin of Humanity, Discourse 1: On that which Is According to the Image," in *On the Human Condition*, trans. and ed. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 43-45.

9:22; 2 Tim. 2:20-21): "When you hear 'vessel,' understand that each of us has been made for something useful. It is as in a big house, where some vessels are of gold, some of silver, some of earthenware, and some of wood. The free choice of each provides the likeness in the material."[17] Man plays a part in creating himself. His creation is not by God alone.[18] If God created man in a perfect condition and in full union with Himself, He would be guilty of coercion.[19] St. John of Damascus presents a similar exposition of the Genesis account in identifying the image as man's mind and free will and the likeness as acquired virtue.[20] St. Gregory of Nyssa illustrates the image of God as a mirror within each person that can be turned towards either the light or darkness. If a man turns this mirror toward God, he becomes filled with light, but if away, he confines himself to darkness.[21] St. Athanasius, while not necessarily distinguishing the likeness by name, provides an important interpretation of the image as a grace of God in man consisting of a participation in God's own life and immortality which, if cultivated, results in an eternal participation in God's life and immortality.[22] For many of the Greek Fathers, the image thus refers to the potentiality in man, that which allows him to set out on the way of

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17. St. Basil the Great, "Homily Explaining that God Is not the Cause of Evil," in *On the Human Condition*, trans. and ed. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 71-72.

18. Dumitru Staniloae, *Volume 2: The World, Creation, and Deification*, The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 44.

19. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 66.

20. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 31.

21. Nonna Verna Harrison, "The Human Person as Image and Likeness of God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 78.

22. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 28.

spiritual perfection, while the likeness refers to man's realization of that perfection.[23] The

image is therefore in some sense static while the likeness is dynamic.[24] The image refers

to those faculties within man that make union with God possible, while the likeness refers

to the process of acquiring perfection through synergistic cooperation with the Divine

will.[25] The Fathers emphasize that the image "develops into" the likeness.[26] The patristic

distinction between the image and likeness in man thus constitutes a distinction between

man's potential and his actualization and between his static faculties and his dynamic

vocation.

The dynamic actualization of the likeness of God in man is identified as what

many of the Greek Fathers call *theosis* (θέωσις) or deification (θεοποίησις). This

doctrine finds its clearest scriptural expression in the second epistle of St. Peter, which

reveals man's purpose of becoming a "[partaker] in the divine nature" (1:4, New King

James Version [NKJV]). As Lossky correctly warns, to interpret this clear description of

the human vocation metaphorically or figuratively would be immature, or worse,

irreverent.[27] Man is, according to St. Basil (as recorded by St. Gregory of Nazianzus), a

creature that "has been ordered to become God."[28] Deification is obtaining the "likeness

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23. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 51.

24. Harrison, "Image and Likeness," 78.

25. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 67.

26. Staniloae, *World, Creation, Deification*, 89.

27. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 67.

28. As cited in Georges Florovsky, *Volume 3: Creation and Redemption*, Collected Works (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1976), 74.

by grace."[29] It is man literally becoming a god by grace. God gives His own life, and man

participates in it, though without possessing it.[30] Many Western Christians may be

troubled by the rather bold terms used to express this doctrine. Eastern Christians,

however, would be quick to point out the text of Psalm 81 (LXX), which declares, "God

stood in the assembly of gods; / He judges in the midst of gods . . ." (v. 1, SAAS) in

reference to God standing among the congregation of His people. Later in the same

psalm, God proclaims, "You are gods, / And you are all sons of the Most High . . ." (v. 6,

SAAS). In the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus Himself quotes this psalm to call them

"gods" to whom the Word of the Lord came in the Old Testament (10:34-35, NKJV). The

language that the Eastern tradition uses to express this doctrine is the same language used

by the Holy Scriptures to speak of God's people. Ultimately, through being deified—

made a god by grace—man becomes more human too as he fulfills the vocation for

which he was created.[31]

An important distinction must be made in order to clarify the nature of man's

participation in God through deification: man participates in God's energies, not His

essence. The expression of this distinction can be found in most of the Greek Fathers,

even in the early centuries.[32] God's essence refers to His "otherness" or His "radical

transcendence," while His energies refer to His "nearness" or His "immanence and

omnipresence." God's energies are not to be confused with neoplatonic emanations or

viewed as an intermediary or "gift" that God bestows. God's energies are God Himself in

29. As cited in Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 76.

30. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 69.

31. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 74.

32. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 71.

His self-manifestation and in His activities in the world.[33] It may perhaps be said that the

energies of God are His "attributes," so long as these are not understood to be mere

theological concepts. The energies are revealed as all the names by which God is known:

Wisdom, Life, Power, Justice, Love, Being, etc.[34] St. John of Damascus bears witness to

this in noting that "inasmuch as He is the cause of all, He receives names from all His

effects."[35] St. Basil explains, "It is by His energies that we say we know our God; we do

not assert that we can come near to the essence itself, for His energies descend to us, but

His essence remains unapproachable."[36] It should be stressed that though the energies are

not an emanation or intermediary from God, they are also not a part of God. The

Godhead as simple and indivisible is without parts. Just as the essence refers to the whole

of the Godhead as He is known in Himself, the energies refer to the whole of the

Godhead as He is revealed to His creation. This distinction, then, is a way to

simultaneously express that God is entirely inaccessible and that He has made Himself

accessible to man.[37] It is also a way to clarify the union between God and man in *theosis*.

The result of deification is not pantheism.[38] It is also neither substantial union of essence,

as in the fellowship of the Holy Trinity, nor hypostatic union of person, as in Christ.

Deification is being made a partaker of God by grace, which is to say, by the Divine

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33. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 22.

34. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 80.

35. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 14.

36. As cited in Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 72.

37. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 22.

38. Ibid., 23.

energies.[39] Man's identity is not fused, confused, swallowed up, or annihilated.[40] In

theosis, man becomes "all that God is by nature, save only identity of nature."[41] Man

participates in God's energies but not his essence.

It is not only man's soul that is gifted with the image of God and called to the

likeness through deification, but it is also his body, through which he is capable of

deifying the entire material creation. Man is a microcosm and a mediator. That the body

of man, and not just the soul, is created in the image of God is explicitly witnessed to by

at least St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory Palamas.[42] St. John

of Damascus explains that man has a "bond of union" with "inanimate things" by virtue

of his material composition. Man is also united to "incorporeal" and "intelligent natures,"

primarily by virtue of his rational capacity. He is thus a "microcosm."[43] According to St.

Gregory of Nazianzus, God created both the heavens and the earth, and then the human

being as a participant who can unite the two together. As a microcosm, man is called to

be a mediator between the Uncreated and the created, not just for his own human nature,

but for the whole creation.[44] Man is called to be the "priest of creation," taking it into his

hands and offering it to God to bring it into communion with Him.[45] In this way the

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39. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 87.

40. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 23.

41. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 87.

42. Constantine Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought and Orthodox Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 44.

43. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 32.

44. Harrison, "Image and Likeness," 86.

45. Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 71.

world is both a gift from God to man and from man to God.[46] Man does not save himself

through creation, but creation is saved through man: "To the universe, man is the hope of

receiving grace and uniting with God, and also the danger of failure and fallenness."[47] St.

Maximus the Confessor explains that man unites within himself the whole of creation, so

that through uniting himself to God, man unites the whole of creation to God and deifies

it.[48] Man's soul is like yeast, mixed in with the flour of the physical creation as a

leavening agent.[49] This is why Orthodoxy has always retained such a high place in its

ecclesiology for monasticism, both coenobitic and eremitic. The hermit, whose spiritual

labor lies hidden from the observation of the world, is capable of uniting heaven and

earth even in his life of solitude. In this way, the hermit retains his importance not just for

the Church, and not even just for mankind, but for the entire created *cosmos*.[50] This

calling, though, is certainly not restricted to the lone monastic. It is the vocation of every

human person—created in the image of God—to attain to the divine likeness, to progress

in *theosis* and become a partaker of the divine nature, becoming a god by grace, and as a

microcosm, mediating this grace to all of created nature. The character of man's

existence is thus intrinsically cosmic, both in composition and consequence, and

dynamic.

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46. Staniloae, *World, Creation, Deification*, 13.

47. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction*, 46.

48. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 109.

49. Staniloae, *World, Creation, Deification*, 81.

50. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 18.

The Fall: Death and Corruptibility

Orthodoxy's view of created human nature as dynamic and called to a specific cosmic vocation leads it to an understanding of man's fall in Paradise that is also dynamic and generally devoid of juridical connotations. Since the Christian East's emphasis is on life as a journey, rather than on static pre- and post-fall states, man's fall is "like a wayfarer departing from the path, indeed the only path, that led to his right home."[51] The definition of sin—"missing the mark, being off the mark, an aberration from truth"—readily lends itself to this interpretation.[52] Man fell while still immature, while on the path to deification. The test—the commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—was given to man to make him aware of his own freedom and as a means to mature and advance in his calling.[53] Man's fall was a "mysterious failure of human destiny."[54] It was "metaphysical suicide."[55] The temptation was a temptation for Adam and Eve to make themselves gods apart from God, by doing it on their own.[56] The evil was in their attempt to transcend their condition in a false way.[57] Their failure can be described as "self-eroticism." Adam and Eve's choice was not between good and evil *per se*, but between God and themselves. Their original sin was a refusal to ascend towards God. Man limited himself to his own plane of existence, falling

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51. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 73-74.

52. John S. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin*, trans. George S. Gabriel (Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr Publications, 2002), 117.

53. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction*, 47.

54. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 105.

55. Ibid., 49.

56. Harrison, "Image and Likeness," 81.

57. Staniloae, *World, Creation, Deification*, 154.

in love with himself, producing a "de-spiritualization of human existence."[58] St.

Athanasius bears witness to this interpretation of the fall in his treatise *Against the*

Heathen:

> . . . they fell into lust of themselves, preferring what was their own to the contemplation of what belonged to God. Having then made themselves at home in these things, and not being willing to leave what was so near to them, they entangled their soul with bodily pleasures, vexed and turbid with all kind of lusts, while they wholly forgot the power they originally had from God.[59]

In this way, he continues, man's soul "strayed from the way, and has swerved from the

goal of truth . . . ."[60] A more contemporary Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemann,

explains that the fall was less about disobeying a commandment and more about man

ceasing to hunger for God.[61] Due to Eastern theology's emphasis on the dynamic and

vocational nature of man's first state, man's fall is not primarily about a breach of the

legal code or a fall from perfection but a departure from the path to perfection and a

failure to achieve *theosis*.

To the Christian East, death, which is seen as the chief consequence of the fall, is

not an externally imposed judgment of God upon mankind but is introduced by man as

the natural consequence of his sin—of failing in his vocation. The trend of Western

theology, by contrast, is to view death, and subsequently corruption, as a punishment

from God for transgressing the penal code. This Western understanding creates a sharp

divide between sin and death.[62] The Wisdom of Solomon makes it clear, though, that

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58. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 85-86.

59. St. Athanasius, "Against the Heathen," 5.

60. Ibid., 6.

61. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 75.

62. Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 22-23.

> God did not make death, / Neither does He have pleasure over the destruction of the living. / For He created all things that they might exist, / And the generations of the world so they might be preserved; / For there was no poison of death in them, / Nor was the reign of Hades on the earth. / For righteousness does not die. / But the ungodly summoned death by their words and works; / Although they thought death would be a friend, they were dissolved (1:13-16, SAAS).

Since man was called into being out of nothing, his nature is intrinsically impermanent. It is granted immortality and life, understood both temporally as continued existence and spiritually as communion with God who is Life, only through God's grace. St. Athanasius identifies the faculty of this grace in man as the image of God.[63] In the fall, man cut himself off from this grace and rejected the life which it imparted. St. Athanasius explains that "the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature; and as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again."[64] Man subjected himself to the "law of death," understood not as a juridical or penal law, but as a metaphysical principle of the *cosmos*.[65] As inertia is a "law of nature"—of the natural order—so the "law of death" could perhaps be spoken of as a law of the supernatural order. St. Irenaeus illustrates that just as when a man shuts his eyes to the temporal light, the source of the light is not the cause of the man's darkness, so when a man shuts his spiritual eyes to the eternal Light, the eternal Light is not the cause of that man's eternal darkness, but the man who shut his eyes is himself the cause.[66] St. Basil

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63. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 28.

64. Ibid., 29-30.

65. Ibid., 29.

66. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," in *Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 523.

also clarifies, "For to the extent that he withdrew from life, he likewise drew near to death. For God is life, and the privation of life is death. Therefore Adam prepared death for himself through his withdrawal from God . . . Thus God did not create death, but we brought it upon ourselves by a wicked intention."[67] Death is in a very real sense a *passive* punishment by God. It is, according to St. Gregory Palamas, the fulfillment of a warning rather than an active judgment, since God did not command, "Return to that from which thou wast taken," but said, "For dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return." He did not say, "Die on that day when thou shalt eat," but, "On the day when thou shalt eat, thou shalt die." Neither did He say, "Return thou to the earth," but, ". . . thou shalt return."[68] God does not externally impose death as a judgment for breaking the penal code, but He allows it to occur as the natural consequence of turning away from Himself. In fact, many of the Fathers—St. Irenaeus of Lyons and St. Gregory of Nazianzus in particular—view at least physical death as a *gift* from God, so that man's unnatural, evil mode of existence does not remain eternal.[69] Death, then, as the chief consequence of the fall, is not an active judgment externally imposed upon man from God for legal transgression; it is rather the natural consequence of man's rejection of Life, his failure in fulfilling his assigned vocation, allowed by a loving God at least in its physical form so that man's evil would not remain permanent.

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67. St. Basil, "Cause of Evil," 74-75.

68. Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 30-31.

69. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 457; St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 38: On the Nativity of Christ," in *Festal Orations*, trans. and ed. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 70; St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 45: On Holy Pascha," in *Festal Orations*, trans. and ed. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 168.

Because of man's subjection to death, his nature became disordered, and as a result, corruptible. Sin is, according to St. John of Damascus, a "deviation from what is natural into what is unnatural."[70] St. Basil compares bodily illness to the illness of the soul, because both are "a perversion of what is according to nature."[71] Evil is thus "a disorganization of the entire structure of being."[72] It is fundamentally parasitic. The elements of the fallen world are basically the same as those of the original created world. The difference is in their "principle of organization."[73] The structure of human nature is now "activated" in an essentially unnatural way.[74] It is only the likeness, not the image, in man that has been lost, but the image has lost its stability and is unable to properly actualize its potentiality.[75] This change introduces a "new mode of existence in evil."[76] Death is described as a parasite of disorder within which sin dwells.[77] As a result, death is seen in the Eastern Christian tradition as the "fountain of man's personal sins," whose power lies in the hands of the devil and man's voluntary submission to him.[78] Most Western translations of Romans 5:12, following the Augustinian tradition, read, "As sin came into the world through one man, and through sin, death, so death spread to all men

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70. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 94.

71. St. Basil the Great, "Cause of Evil," 73.

72. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 84.

73. Ibid., 90.

74. Staniloae, *World, Creation, Deification*, 90.

75. Ibid., 90-92.

76. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 132.

77. Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 164.

78. Ibid., 117.

because all men have sinned . . . ." The phrase $\dot{\epsilon}\phi'\ \hat{\dot{\omega}}$ if taken to mean "because" can be

neuter, which would result in the above translation, but it could also be masculine, in

which case it would refer to the directly preceding substantive, $\theta\dot{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\sigma\varsigma$ (death). If the

latter is the case, the verse would instead read, "As sin came into the world through one

man and death through sin, so death spread to all men; and *because of death*, all men

have sinned . . . ," an understanding acceptable to many of the Greek Fathers. Death

would therefore be the corrupting influence that makes personal sins inevitable.[79] Man

not only suffers death but also corruptibility, which is the result of the disorder produced

by the entrance of death and evil into the created world.

Since man's vocational calling extended beyond himself to encompass the entire

cosmos, his failure in fulfilling that vocation also extends into the created order. Just as

man's deification was a cosmic vocation, man's death becomes a "cosmic catastrophe."

Created nature, "poisoned by the fatal venom of human decomposition," "loses its

immortal center" and "dies in man."[80] Instead of creating unity by bringing the world into

communion with himself and with God, man produced divisions between himself and

nature, divisions between himself and other humans, and divisions within himself.

Anytime man sins, as microcosm and mediator, all of creation suffers as a result.[81] The

post-apostolic writer of *The Epistle to Barnabas* describes man as "earth suffering, for

Adam was formed out of the face of the earth."[82] Since man is created out of the earth,

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79. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 2nd edition (New York: Fordham, 1983), 144-145.

80. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 105-106.

81. Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," 94-95.

82. "The Epistle of Barnabas," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, trans. and ed. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 397.

anytime he suffers, the earth suffers as well. St. Paul in his epistle to the Romans goes so

far as to say that the creation "groans and labors" (8:22, NKJV). It too was subjected to

"futility" and held in "the bondage of corruption" until it too will be "delivered . . . into

the glorious liberty of the children of God" (8:20, 21, NKJV). Corresponding to man's

cosmic calling is the cosmic calamity of the fall; the effects of death and corruptibility are

not limited to man alone but extend into the created order.

Due to the nature of the fall, as interpreted in the Christian East, Orthodox

theology articulates a different understanding of mankind's inheritance from the first

made man. Man's nature is not "totally depraved," since the image of God in man,

though distorted, is not destroyed.[83] Disordered as it is, human nature is basically good,

though at odds with the environment, with others, and with God.[84] Furthermore, what

man inherits from Adam after the fall is not the guilt of the first sin but its consequences.

St. Augustine, who is indeed considered a saint by many in the Orthodox Church, though

whose writings are viewed to stand in need of some correction, used his interpretation of

Romans 5:12 in order to justify a doctrine of "original sin" that included "original guilt."

The last four words of this verse were translated into the Latin Vulgate as *in quo omnes*

peccaverunt (in whom [in Adam] all men have sinned), a manipulation which permitted

the West to propagate a doctrine of inherited guilt from Adam to his descendents. If all

men sinned in Adam—by being seminally in his "loins"—then all men are guilty for

Adam's sin, because all men were actually present in Adam when he sinned. The Greek

phrase $\dot{\epsilon}\phi'\,\hat{\omega}$, however, can only be translated as "because," and may be taken to refer to

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83. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 61.

84. Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," 94.

θάνατος (death).[85] Based on this faulty translation in the Vulgate text, Augustine was

able to assert that "all men are understood to have sinned in that first man, because all

men were in him when he sinned."[86] Augustine distinguishes this sin, which is

"contracted" from Adam—like a venereal disease—from that sin an individual personally

commits. Since carnal propagation is universal, so is the transmission of the sin and guilt

of Adam's first sin. The similarity of this doctrine to Manichaeism was so strong that it

provoked one of Augustine's opponents to charge that "anyone who defends [the doctrine

of] original evil is a thoroughgoing Manichean."[87] The Church's condemnation of

Pelagianism was not a full acceptance of Augustinianism, "which had in many ways gone

beyond even the Western theological tradition (not to mention the Eastern tradition)."[88]

To the Greek Fathers, especially St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St.

Athanasius, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Maximus the Confessor, the guilt of sin was

personal—of the person—rather than of human nature.[89] Mankind, as Adam's posterity,

does not inherit the guilt of Adam's sin but its consequences. St. Cyril of Alexandria, the

president of the third ecumenical council, explained that all men are sinners, not because

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85. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 144.

86. As cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 299.

87. As cited in Ibid., 300.

88. Ibid., 318.

89. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction*, 52. F.R. Tennant's work in *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* is relatively insignificant here. The most Tennant succeeds in illustrating is that many of these Fathers taught that the *effects* of the fall apply to human nature as a whole, an assertion supported by this paper. What Tennant fails to establish successfully, though he claims he does, is that these Fathers taught that the actual *guilt* of Adam's sin also extends to the human race. These Fathers certainly taught that mortality and corruptibility extend from Adam's sin into human nature, but they also affirmed, as does the Orthodox Church today, that the guilt of sin can only be personal.

they are "co-transgressors with Adam," but because they are all under the "law of sin"—

which he later identifies as corruptibility—as sharers of Adam's human nature.[90] In his

commentary on St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, St. Cyril describes Adam as a plant

whose roots have been injured. The race that springs up from him, as the shoots that

sprout from a tree, withers as a result of the damaged roots.[91] The Fathers bear witness

that it is not guilt that mankind inherits from Adam, but it is death and the disorder and

disease of his nature. Man's basic problem, then, is not how to be legally acquitted of

inherited guilt before a just God but how to be freed from death and the corruption of

nature that it gave rise to in Adam's failure.

Old Testament Sacrificial System: Cleansing and Instructional

Since many penal substitution theories of Christ's atoning work arise from a

particular understanding of the Jewish sacrifices described in the Old Testament, it is

important to clarify why these sacrifices were instituted and how they point to the

sacrifice of Christ. It is first necessary to determine who offered the sacrifices and to

whom they were offered. Many Western Christians may answer that they were offered by

the Israelites to God for the forgiveness of their sins. God Himself, however, in

instructing the Israelites as to how they will perform their sacrificial rituals, declared,

". . . the life of all flesh is in its blood, and I give it to you upon the altar to make

atonement for your souls . . ." (Lev. 17:11, SAAS). The blood of the sacrifices, then, is

not an offering from the Levitical priests to God but from God to the people of Israel. The

pagan nations were the ones who thought they were appeasing angered deities through

their sacrifices. According to the Wisdom of Solomon, God does not take pleasure in

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90. Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 34.

91. Ibid., 162.

death (1:13, SAAS). St. John Chrysostom observes that just as a man cannot do injury to

God by insulting Him, so a man cannot make God reveal Himself more gloriously by

praising Him. Those who glorify God reap the benefits to themselves, while those who

curse God reap destruction to themselves.[92] The sacrifices of the Old Testament should

be similarly understood; that is, not as offered by the Israelites to God for His benefit, but

as given by God to man for man's benefit. St. Irenaeus describes the sacrifices of the

Israelites in just this way when he writes, ". . . the prophets indicate in the fullest manner

that God stood in no need of their slavish obedience, but that it was upon their own

account that He enjoined certain observances in the law. And again, that God needed not

their oblation, but [merely demanded it], on account of man himself who offers it, the

Lord taught distinctly . . . ."[93] St. Athanasius, commenting on Isaiah 1:12 and Jeremiah

7:22, explains that sacrifices neither please God nor were required by Him.[94] One

anonymous post-apostolic Christian writer warns that the Jews, if they think they offer

sacrifices to God as if He stood in need of them, are as foolish as pagans, who offer

sacrifices to inanimate idols, "For the one who made the heaven and the earth and all that

is in them, and provides us all with what we need, cannot himself need any of the things

that he himself provides to those who imagine that they are giving to him."[95] The Greek

words employed in the Septuagint for "propitiation," *ἱλάσκομαι* and *ἐξιλάσκομαι*, are

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92. Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 97.

93. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 482.

94. St. Athanasius, "Letter XIX," in *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 545-546.

95. "The Epistle to Diognetus," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, trans. and ed. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 699.

used only once in the Old Testament with God as the accusative object. This exception is Zechariah 7:2, where the meaning, rather than sacrificially appeasing an angered deity, deals with seeking out the favor of God through prayer. No occurrence of either of these two words in the Old Testament text suggests that God is appeased through sacrifice or that the effects of such sacrifice are primarily upon God.[96] Sacrifices in the Old Testament should not be seen as oblations offered to God by men, as if God was offended or stood in need of anything, but as given to man by God for man's benefit.

The second issue that needs clarified, then, is why the Israelites were instructed in making sacrifices if they were not primarily for God's benefit. Since the Israelites—and not God—received the benefit of the sacrifices, they were not performed to appease God or for the purpose of penal substitution, but to signify the cleansing of the worshippers in order to "[render them] fit to receive God's favour."[97] This is why Moses sprinkled the Israelite people with the blood of a sacrifice (Ex. 24:8). The language surrounding sacrifice and atonement in the Old Testament, rather than suggesting the satisfaction of divine justice, focuses on cleansing: "Thus the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be clean" (Lev. 14:20, SAAS); "For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you from all your sins before the Lord. Thus you shall be clean" (Lev. 16:30, SAAS). This cleansing applies not only to the people of Israel, the worshippers, but also to their places of worship, which can become contaminated by sin: "Then he shall sprinkle some of the blood upon [the altar] with his finger seven times, cleanse and sanctify it because of the impurities of the children of Israel" (Lev. 16:19, SAAS); "You shall purify the altar when you perform a consecration on it . . ." (Ex. 29:36, SAAS).

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96. Leighton Pullan, *The Atonement* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1906), 67.

97. Ibid., 73.

These passages would make no sense if the purpose of sacrifice was to appease God's anger or offense. For, if that was truly the meaning of atonement, then it must be possible for inanimate objects to transgress the justice of God, since they—and not just the Israelite people—are spoken of as requiring atonement. Since the life of the creature is in its blood (Lev. 17:11), the sprinkling of the blood of a pure lamb on the people and their places of worship signifies the washing away or cleansing of impurity through the life of a pure being. The blood of the pure life covers over those whose lives are stained by impurity. It is only later, though, with the blood of the true Sacrifice, that the blood of the pure Life not only covers over the impure and cleanses from without, but actually enters into them because of the incarnation and cleanses them from within, infusing Its own pure Life (as the blood of the Eucharistic offering) into the life of the faithful (received in the sacrificial act of Holy Communion). Atonement, through the Old Testament sacrificial system, primarily signifies the cleansing of the worshippers and their place of worship, both of which can become contaminated through the stains of sin.

The second benefit man receives from the sacrifices of the Old Testament is to be found in their typological and instructional significance. St. Paul teaches that God gave the Law to Israel for man's instruction: ". . . before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (Gal. 3:23-25, NKJV). The typological significance of the Old Testament sacrifices as pointing to Christ is obvious, such as when St. John the Forerunner saw Jesus approaching and cried out, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, NKJV). The sacrificial victims

of the Old Testament foreshadowed the suffering Messiah, who freely and willingly

cleansed humanity from its sin. They were educational in another respect, though, as

well. According to St. Athanasius, the laws concerning sacrifice were commanded so

"that by means of them it might begin to instruct men and might withdraw them from

idols, and bring them near to God, teaching them for that present time."[98] It was only

after the Israelites forgot God and began worshipping senseless idols that God demanded

sacrifices, "so that with their mind, which at one time had meditated on those which are

not, they might turn to Him Who is truly God, and learn not, in the first place, to

sacrifice, but to turn away their faces from idols, and conform to what God

commanded."[99] Another purpose of the sacrifices, then, was to draw the people of Israel

back to the true knowledge of God and to typify that sacrifice of obedience and spiritual

worship truly commanded by God, pleasing and acceptable in His sight: "For if You

desired sacrifice, I would give it; / You will not be pleased with whole burnt offerings. /

A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit, / A broken and humbled heart God will not despise"

(Ps. 50:18-19 [LXX], SAAS). As St. Athanasius observes, the Law's commandments

regarding sacrifice are fulfilled in a spiritual manner, as the psalms sing: "Let my prayer

be set forth before You as incense, / The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice"

(Ps. 140:2 [LXX], SAAS); "Offer the sacrifice of righteousness, / And hope in the

LORD" (Ps. 4:6, SAAS); "Offer to God a sacrifice of praise, / And pay your vows to the

Most High" (Ps. 49:14 [LXX], SAAS).[100] St. Irenaeus points out, ". . . it is evident that

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98. St. Athanasius, "Letter XIX," 546.

99. Ibid., 546.

100. Ibid., 546.

God did not seek sacrifices and holocausts from them, but faith, and obedience, and righteousness, because of their salvation."[101] The sacrifices of the Old Testament are thus typological and educational, pointing to the Messianic Lamb of God and instructing man in the sacrifice of obedience and true spiritual worship.

The Atoning Work of Christ: Trampling Down Death by Death

Vocation and Salvation

The difference in perspective between East and West over the original created nature of man leads to divergent understandings about the meaning of salvation and its relations to the original created state. Generally, the West teaches a "three-act scheme of salvation," which begins with man's creation in a perfect condition and in a perfect relationship with God, followed by the fall, which is therefore understood to be a fall from a perfect state. The earthly mission of the Son of God ushers in a redemption which is chiefly understood to be a return to the original condition of static perfection. The Eastern Orthodox tradition, by contrast, maintains a "two-act scheme" consisting of man's creation in a "potential perfection" and culminating in his elevation through the energies of God—grace—into deification. The fall is not understood as a radically separate stage of humanity's existence but is seen to be the state of man having turned aside from the path.[102] Salvation is therefore the "negative" aspect of man's vocation in that it is the removal of the obstacles that prevented him from fulfilling his calling.[103] Lossky lucidly explains the Eastern position:

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101. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 484.

102. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 76-77.

103. Ibid., 77-79.

> Adam was directly called to deify himself. But after the Fall, two obstacles intervene to make this distance unbridgeable: sin itself, which makes human nature incapable of receiving grace, and death, the outcome of that fallenness which precipitates man into an anti-natural state where the will of man, contaminating the cosmos, gives to non-being a paradoxical and tragic reality. In this state man can no longer correspond to his vocation. . . . The last and fully positive end of man thereupon implies a negative aspect: salvation. . . . After the Fall, human history is a long shipwreck awaiting rescue: but the port of salvation is not the goal; it is the possibility for the shipwrecked to resume his journey whose sole goal is union with God.[104]

Salvation "[returns] to man the possibility of accomplishing his task;" it "[reopens] for him the path to deification."[105] Salvation, then, serves the purpose of removing the double barriers of sin and death to allow man to advance upon the positive road to *theosis*. Aghiorgoussis further explains that in the Christian East, "justification" is seen to correspond to the negative aspect of salvation—freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil—while "sanctification" speaks to the positive aspects of spiritual growth in Christ.[106] Orthodoxy's emphasis on the created condition of man as dynamic and called to perform a specific vocation thus influences its understanding of the meaning of salvation and how it relates to man's vocational calling.

Furthermore, Christ's earthly mission is understood by many Eastern theologians to accomplish more than just the negative work of salvation but also to bestow on man a blessing even higher than the grace of his original state. In man's path to deification, a third barrier needs to be overcome besides just sin and death: that of nature, the "infinite distance between the created and uncreated."[107] For St. Irenaeus and St. Athanasius, the

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104. Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian and Ihita Kescarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 83-84.

105. Ibid., 75.

106. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 92.

107. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 135.

incarnation is not just a "*restoration to*" but an "*advance upon*" man's original created state.[108] It is the "new Revelation, the new and further step" within which human nature is assumed into the Godhead Itself.[109] St. Maximus calls the incarnation a "wholly new way of being human."[110] If man was called to deification from the beginning, the Word of God must have intended from the beginning to become man, since man is a mere creature and requires a God-Man to obtain deification in union with God. Deification, and not just redemption, is thus the ultimate purpose of the incarnation.[111] The incarnation is not just a remedy for man's failure at his vocation but the initiation of the state of union between God and His creation for which it was originally created.[112] The incarnation advances man into a new period in history and raises him up to a new level in which his last state is higher than his first. As St. Isaac of Syria points out, since the incarnation is the most glorious blessing bestowed on man, it would be strange to identify its cause with the fall, a terrible event that should have never occurred. St. Maximus the Confessor arrives at a similar conclusion, as does Duns Scotus in the West.[113] Aside from removing the obstacles of sin and death, Christ's incarnation thus also removes the barrier of nature, and in so doing instantiates the very mode of human existence that man was called to actualize in the beginning.

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108. Archibald Robertson, Prolegomena to *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), lxxi.

109. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 95.

110. St. Maximus, "Ambiguum 7," 70.

111. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction*, 66-67.

112. Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 69.

113. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 70.

Participatory, not Substitutionary

The Orthodox tradition, while not necessarily denying notions of vicarious substitution, maintains an understanding of the atonement that more heavily emphasizes participation. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware explains, salvation is best spoken of in terms of "*sharing*, of solidarity and identification." In Christ, God participates in what man is in order to allow man to participate in what God is.[114] That this union is the very meaning of the doctrine of atonement is confirmed by the basic etymology of the English word: at-one-ment.[115] Christ, as both man and God, is the "meeting-point" between the created and Uncreated.[116] He is where "eternity enters into time" and "time penetrates into eternity."[117] As one Orthodox Christmas hymn chants, "Sharing wholly in our poverty, Thou hast made divine our earthly nature through Thy union with it and participation in it."[118] Another Christmas hymn reads, "Heaven and earth are united today, for Christ is born. Today has God come down to earth, and man gone up to heaven."[119] The "flesh-bearing God" has come to make "Spirit-bearing men."[120] Since man rendered himself unable to ascend to God, God has descended to man, healing, restoring, and elevating human nature through taking all of it into Himself.[121] God is not

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114. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 73-74.

115. Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," 105; Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988), 182.

116. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 74.

117. Lossky, *Introduction*, 85.

118. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 74.

119. Ibid., 70.

120. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 75.

121. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 68.

detached or indifferent, "[remaining] aloof in the heavens while we suffer and die."[122]

God as a parent rather steps down and assumes the existence of His wayward child.[123]

Christ not only accepts unfallen human nature but fallen human nature, not in assuming

sin or sinfulness, but in accepting life lived under the conditions of the fall. He

experiences not only the physical consequences of weariness and bodily pain but also

loneliness and alienation.[124] The Son of God fully assumes man's existence for the

purpose of raising up man to participation in Himself.

Salvation defined as participation suggests that the atoning work of Christ is not

limited to His death. The early Christian Fathers never viewed one isolated event in the

Divine economy—whether the life, death, or resurrection of Christ—as the single saving

act in exclusion to the rest.[125] Christ's redeeming and atoning activity cannot be separated

into parts but must be understood as one "organic whole."[126] This is especially the case in

the writings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. He explains that Christ passed through every stage

of human existence in order to sanctify each and to be an example for mankind in each

one. He was born as an infant to deify human birth and infancy, becoming a child and a

youth to sanctify those who are children and youths, and becoming a man in order to

elevate human experience as an adult to union with the Divine.[127] As St. Irenaeus

122. Anthony Coniaris, *Introducing the Orthodox Church: Its Faith and Life*, 18th printing (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 2007), 67.

123. Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, *God Made Man and Man Made God* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2010), 9.

124. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 75-76.

125. Pelikan, *Catholic Tradition*, 142.

126. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 99.

127. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 391.

summarizes, "He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God."[128]

Although no single event can be isolated from the rest of Christ's work, the climax of His incarnation and life is to be identified with His death.[129] In an unfallen world, the philanthropic condescension of the incarnation would have been enough to join the human and Divine natures, but the reality of evil, sin, and death requires a further act on the part of the God-Man. Christ must not just participate in the fullness of human life but also in the fullness of human death. God's deifying participation in human experience must be carried out to its farthest extreme. Since death has both a physical and a spiritual aspect, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is also participation both physical and spiritual. Not only does Christ experience the division of the soul from its body, the means of its physical life, but also the division of the soul from its God—the source of its spiritual life. In the depths of His suffering, while suspended on the wood of the cross, Christ—the incarnate God-Man—uttered the most mysterious and anguishing cry that has ever been heard, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*," "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34, NKJV). Christ "descended into Hell," as the Apostle's Creed teaches, into "*the place where God is not*," assuming the fullness of human alienation from the presence of God.[130] In the mystery of the crucifixion, Christ's participation in human experience culminates in the death of both body and soul.

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128. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 448.

129. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 99.

130. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 78-80.

This participatory understanding of Christ's work finds expression in the

Christian tradition as early as the second century with St. Irenaeus of Lyons, a student of

the venerable St. Polycarp who was himself a disciple of the Apostle St. John the

Evangelist and Theologian. St. Irenaeus asks, ". . . how shall man pass into God, unless

God has [first] passed into man?"[131] Christ did "through His transcendent love, become

what we are that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."[132] He "Himself

[united] man through Himself to God."[133] St. Irenaeus explains,

> For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the
> Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word,
> and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means
> could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been
> united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to
> incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had
> become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by
> incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption
> of sons?[134]

Christ "recapitulated" all things in Himself, making Himself to be the head of the Spirit

and giving the Spirit to be the head of man, thereby consummating all of creation within

His Body.[135]

The great soteriologist of the fourth century, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, also

characterizes Christ's work with the concept of participation. In his letter to Adelphius,

which explicitly mentions deification and connects it with the words of St. Peter, he

writes, ". . . He has become Man, that He might deify us in Himself, and He has been

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131. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 507.

132. Ibid., 526.

133. Ibid., 417.

134. Ibid., 448-449.

135. Ibid., 548.

born of a woman and begotten of a virgin, in order to transfer to Himself our erring

generation, and that we may become henceforth a holy race, and 'partakers of the Divine

Nature,' as blessed Peter wrote."[136] In a famous passage from *On the Incarnation*, St.

Athanasius proclaims,

> He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested
> Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the
> unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality. He
> Himself was unhurt by this, for He is impassible and incorruptible; but by His
> own impassibility He kept and healed the suffering men on whose account He
> thus endured.[137]

God's participation in man and man's participation in God thus stand at the heart of

Athanasian soteriology.

It is true that St. Athanasius does not neglect substitutionary language, but even

these passages have in view the idea of participation as their ultimate conclusion. He

writes, for example, in *On the Incarnation* that Christ took on a human body and

"surrendered His body to death in place of all."[138] St. Athanasius goes on to explain,

however, "This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back

to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and

by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as

utterly as straw from fire."[139] Christ's substitution, then, had as its ultimate fulfillment the

participation in man's corruption that opened the way for man's participation in Christ's

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136. St. Athanasius, "Letter LX," in *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed.
Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th
printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 576.

137. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 93.

138. Ibid., 34.

139. Ibid., 34.

incorruption. In other words, while St. Athanasius does not ignore notions of substitution,

he does not end his discussion there. Participation is always still in view as the central

meaning of Christ's incarnation. This is even clearer in the Alexandrian bishop's tenth

Paschal letter, in which he acknowledges that the Savior "suffered in our stead."[140] Later

in the same epistle, though, St. Athanasius explains,

> For He suffered to prepare freedom from suffering for those who suffer in Him,
> He descended that He might raise us up, He took on Him the trial of being born,
> that we might love Him who is unbegotten, He went down to corruption, that
> corruption might put on immortality, He became weak for us, that we might rise
> with power, He descended to death, that He might bestow on us immortality, and
> give life to the dead. Finally, He became man, that we who die as men might live
> again, and that death should no more reign over us . . . .[141]

Christ "suffered in our stead," but He descended to become what man is for no other

ultimate purpose than to allow man to ascend to become what God is. Though St.

Athanasius does not ignore or reject the concept of substitution, he does not use

substitutionary language without having in view participation as the central meaning of

the incarnation.

Perhaps the clearest and most beautiful expressions of Orthodoxy's participatory

emphasis can be found in the writings and orations of the fourth century St. Gregory of

Nazianzus, who is one of only three saints in the Eastern tradition honored with the title

of "Theologian." St. Gregory's simple formula, appearing in Letter 101, is, "What is not

assumed is not healed, but what is united to God, that is also saved."[142] This is why Christ

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140. St. Athanasius, "Letter X," in *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 529.

141. Ibid., 531.

142. As cited in Nonna Verna Harrison, Introduction to *Festal Orations*, trans. and ed. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 53.

had to be fully human, because all aspects of human existence had to be brought into

union with the Divine: "He bears the whole of me, along with all that is mine, in himself,

so that he may consume within himself the meaner element, as fire consumes wax or the

sun the ground mist, and so that I may share in what is his through the intermingling."[143]

Not shying away from the bold language with which the Eastern tradition speaks of

deified man, St. Gregory exhorts in a Paschal homily,

> Let us become like Christ, since Christ also became like us; let us become gods because of him, since he also because of us became human. He assumed what is worse that he might give what is better. He became poor that we through his poverty might become rich. He took the form of a slave, that we might regain freedom. He descended that we might be lifted up, he was tempted that we might be victorious, he was dishonoured to glorify us, he died to save us, he ascended to draw to himself us who lay below in the Fall of sin.[144]

In an oration for the Nativity of Christ, the Theologian explicitly refers to the meaning of

salvation as participation when he explains,

> He comes forth, God with what he has assumed, one from two opposites, flesh and spirit, the one deifying and the other deified. O the new mixture! O the paradoxical blending! He who is comes into being, and the uncreated is created, and the uncontained is contained, through the intervention of the rational soul, which mediates between the divinity and the coarseness of flesh. The one who enriches becomes poor; he is made poor in my flesh, that I might be enriched through his divinity. The full one empties himself; for he empties himself of his own glory for a short time, that I may participate in his fullness. . . . I participated in the [divine] image, and I did not keep it; he participates in my flesh both to save the image and to make the flesh immortal. He shares with us a second communion, much more paradoxical than the first; then he gave us a share in what is superior, now he shares in what is inferior. This is more godlike than the first; this, to those who can understand, is more exalted.[145]

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143. As cited in Harrison, Introduction, 53.

144. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 1: On Pascha and On His Slowness," in *Festal Orations*, trans. and ed. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 59.

145. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 38," 71.

The writings of St. Gregory of Nazianzus are so saturated with a participatory emphasis that substitutionary suffering finds no place in the great Theologian's thought.[146]

The sixth and seventh century teachings of St. Maximus the Confessor also confirm the notion of participation. The Word's plan, even from before the creation of the world, was to "mingle" with human nature in a hypostatic union, becoming a man in order to deify man's nature within Himself.[147] St. Maximus explains,

> By his gracious condescension God became man and is called man for the sake of man and by exchanging his condition for ours revealed the power that elevates man to God through his love for God and brings God down to man because of his love for man. By this blessed inversion, man is made God by divinization and God is made man by hominization.[148]

It is the condescension of God to man that makes possible man's elevation to God, God participating in man through "hominzation" so that man may participate in God through "divinization."

The language of St. John of Damascus, writing in the seventh and eighth centuries, is strongly reminiscent of the great Theologian's. Many of his formulas echo St. Gregory's, if they are not direct quotations. St. John of Damascus writes, "But He in His fullness took upon Himself me in my fullness, and was united whole to whole that He might in His grace bestow salvation on the whole man. For what has not been taken cannot be healed."[149] Using a common expression in Orthodox Christology, St. John also argues, "For that which is not assumed is not remedied. He, therefore, assumed the whole

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146. Harrison, Introduction, 54.

147. St. Maximus the Confessor, "Ad Thalassium 22: On Jesus Christ and the End of the Ages," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. and ed. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 115.

148. St. Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 7," 60.

149. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 50.

man, even the fairest part of him, which had become diseased, in order that He might

bestow salvation on the whole."[150] St. John of Damascus thus also bears witness to the

fact that in the Eastern tradition it is participation, and not substitution, that is identified

as the chief method of the atonement.

Ontological, not Juridical

Because of its teaching that the fall of man is to be primarily understood as man's

subjection to death, the Orthodox tradition emphasizes an understanding of the atonement

that is ontological rather than juridical. To many Western theologians after Anselm, and

especially since the time of Luther and the Protestant Reformation, man's primary

problem is his status before God.[151] In the fall, man transgressed the penal code and

offended the justice of an infinitely righteous God. Man's greatest need, therefore, is to

render satisfaction in order to return him to a favorable position before the Divine Judge.

The atonement becomes the means by which man's legal standing is changed, clearing

him of the charges of his iniquities, and releasing him from the condemnation instituted

by the infinitely righteous Judge. Salvation is "changing the divine disposition toward

man."[152] In the Christian East, however, man's primary problem is not how he can

change his legal status before the bar of Divine Justice but how he can actually become

righteous through deification after rejecting God's grace and submitting himself to death

and corruptibility. Man's greatest need is to be freed from the bondage of death and sin

and set back upon the path to deification. Arising from this view of the fall and of man's

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150. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 66.

151. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 92-93.

152. Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 21.

greatest need, the Eastern Orthodox tradition emphasizes an ontological rather than juridical understanding of the atonement.

Christ's participation in the experience of human death was the destruction of death's power. As St. Gregory of Nazianzus recognizes, "We needed a God made flesh and made dead, that we might live."[153] The mystery of the crucifixion was that Life Divine was put to death.[154] Christ's death was a true death in that His soul and body were divided. What was not divided, however, was the hypostatic union of the two natures in His person. Soul and body, separated in death, were still united through the Divinity of the Word, and in this "incorrupt death" death was overthrown.[155] Because Christ is God and Life Everlasting, the event of His death destroyed death.[156] Lossky explains that "the only way to conquer death was to allow it to penetrate God Himself where it could find no place."[157] Christ "allowed death to enter Him to consume it by contact with His divinity."[158] In the death of the God-Man, "death enters into divinity and there exhausts itself, for 'it does not find a place there.'"[159] The entrance of Christ into death destroys its power because "even death is filled with God."[160] As light enters into and illuminates darkness, in the death of the incarnate God, Life enters into and annihilates death.

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153. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 45," 189.

154. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 14.

155. Ibid., 136.

156. Ibid., 143.

157. Lossky, *Introduction*, 101.

158. Ibid., 75.

159. Ibid., 116.

160. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 83.

According to St. Clement of Alexandria, Christ "transformed sunset into sunrise and by his crucifixion turned death into life."[161] Christ's death is, in the words of the Liturgy of St. Basil, a "life-creating death."[162] The cross stands as the new tree of life.[163] The symbol of death is made a monument to death's defeat.[164] Christ's death was effective as an atonement, then, not because it was the death of the "Innocent One," but because it was the death of the "Incarnate Lord."[165] As the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane made clear, Christ was not a passive victim but a mighty conqueror.[166] St. Athanasius explains that God "has caused the grave to be trodden down by the Saviour's death, and furnished a way to the heavenly gates free from obstacles to those who are going up."[167] In another Paschal letter, he speaks of Christ's death as "[consecrating] our road up to heaven, and [making] it free."[168] As Christ's incarnation overcame the barrier of nature, Christ's death abolished the barrier of death and returned to man the possibility of fulfilling his divinely appointed vocation.

The destruction of death—the primary weapon of the devil—is also the decisive victory in a cosmic struggle between God and Satan. The writer of the epistle to the

161. As cited in Pelikan, *Catholic Tradition*, 146.

162. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 82.

163. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 136.

164. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

165. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 132.

166. Ibid., 101-102.

167. St. Athanasius, "Letter V," in *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 518.

168. St. Athanasius, "Letter XXII," in *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 549.

Hebrews explains, "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15, NKJV). According to the ancient Fathers, the parable of the strong man, who must first be bound before his house can be plundered (Matt. 12:29), speaks of Christ's mission to conquer the devil and free those who are held in his power by death. Christ is the offspring of Eve who crushes the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).[169] By destroying death, in which the power of the devil over man was located, Christ defeated the power of Satan.

These themes are regularly repeated in the liturgical tradition of the Eastern Church, which often incorporates images of struggle and triumph. The cross is the "tree, on which the Lord, like a prince, was wounded in battle . . . by the wicked dragon."[170] Death and the devil are often represented as a ravenous dragon which sought to devour Christ by the cross. Through Christ's death and resurrection, however, the dragon has been slain, and "by his life-giving death he has killed death, and all those who were in the bonds of Hades have been set free."[171] Quoting scriptural texts, the liturgical writers of the Christian East describe Christ as ascending on high while leading a host of captives, a picture of a King's triumphal procession after His victory.[172] One hymn, referring to Christ, chants, "They stripped me of my raiment and arrayed me in purple, they placed a

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169. Pelikan, *Catholic Tradition*, 149.

170. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Volume 2: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 138.

171. Ibid., 138.

172. Ibid., 139.

crown of thorns on my head and put a reed in my hand that I might break them as the potter's vessels."[173] The Troparion of Vespers for Good Friday proclaims, "When Thou didst descend into death, O Life Eternal, then Thou didst slay Hell by the flesh of Thy Divinity."[174] The liturgical practice of the Eastern Church, which is central to understanding its theology, often illustrates the sacrifice of Christ with such military metaphors.

The theme of Christ's death as a victory over the devil also finds frequent expression in the writings of the Fathers, both East and West. A poetic work attributed to Venantius is an especially vivid example. The risen Christ is "God ascending above the stars, having crushed the laws of hell." The author rejoices, "Hail, festive day, to be reverenced throughout the world, on which God has conquered hell, and gains the stars!"[175] The God-Man descends into hell as a mighty warrior,

> Thou dost enter the path of death, in giving the aid of salvation. The gloomy chains of the infernal law yielded, and chaos feared to be pressed by the presence of the light. Darkness perishes, put to flight by the brightness of Christ; the thick pall of eternal night falls. . . . But returning, O holy conqueror! Thou didst altogether fill the heaven! Tartarus lies depressed, nor retains its rights. The ruler of the lower regions, insatiably opening his hollow jaws, who has always been a spoiler, becomes a prey to Thee. Thou rescuest an innumerable people from the prison of death, and they follow in freedom to the place whither their leader approaches. The fierce monster in alarm vomits forth the multitude whom he had swallowed up, and the Lamb withdraws the sheep from the jaw of the wolf. Hence re-seeking the tomb from the lower regions, having resumed Thy flesh, as a warrior Thou carriest back ample trophies to the heavens. Those whom chaos held

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173. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 150.

174. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 142.

175. Venantius, "Poem of Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus, On Easter," in *Volume 7: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, 2 Clement, Early Liturgies*, ed. James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 329.

in punishment he has now restored; and those whom death might seek, a new life holds.[176]

A very early fragment attributed to Papias is equally as dramatic. It describes Satan's rebellion in heaven as a great war against Michael the archangel and his "legions." Incapable of remaining in the light of heaven, Satan and his hosts fell to earth where, after the creation of man, they sought to lead humanity astray by instructing them in evil. Michael and his army, the "guardians of the world," came to earth to help man by waging war against the devil. The struggle became so fierce that it eventually reached to heaven itself. It was then, Papias explains, that Christ stepped down out of heaven, like a mighty champion, and came to earth to do battle against the hosts of Satan. The sacrifice of the cross was the decisive moment of victory. The author of the fragment interprets the words of Christ, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18, NKJV), as looking ahead to the sacrificial death on the cross, the decisive victory against the forces of evil.[177] St. Irenaeus describes Christ as the conqueror, waging war against the adversary and destroying him.[178] The imagery of battle even finds its way into the writings of St. Athanasius. In one Paschal letter, he observes that in the Old Testament feasts were declared when enemy kings were overcome. St. Athanasius urges his readers, then, to celebrate the Paschal feast because "the devil, that tyrant against the whole world is slain" and "death and the kingdom of the devil is abolished."[179] St. Maximus explains

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176. Venantius, "On Easter," 330.

177. "Fragments of Papias," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, trans. and ed. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 763.

178. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 495, 548.

179. St. Athanasius, "Letter IV," in *Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Archibald Robertson, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, 4th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 516.

that "Christ, the *captain of our salvation* (Heb 2:10), turned death from a weapon to destroy human nature into a weapon to destroy sin."[180] In the words of St. John of Damascus, Christ was crucified "in order that nature which was overcome of old might overcome its former conqueror by the very weapons wherewith it had itself been overcome."[181] The writings of the Fathers throughout the centuries attest to the fact that the defeat of death, the chief weapon of the devil, is a victory over Satan himself.

The metaphorical language of "ransom" is also used within the Christian tradition, both East and West, to describe the sacrificial death of Christ; though whereas Western theology heavily emphasizes Christ's death as the ransom paid to the Father as the requirement for the satisfaction of His offended justice, Eastern Christianity has traditionally offered a different interpretation of the ransom metaphor due to its differing presuppositions. Because the subjection of man to death is understood as a passive punishment by God—the fulfillment of a warning, since death is the natural result of rejecting the source of life—it is not a judgment actively and externally levied upon man by God for transgressing the penal code. God, therefore, stands in no need of "satisfaction," a term introduced into Christian theology from Roman law by Tertullian, though not formally developed and applied to the work of Christ until the Western Middle Ages.[182] The term itself is foreign to the Greek Fathers.[183] St. Paul makes it clear

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180. St. Maximus the Confessor, "Ad Thalassium 61: On the Legacy of Adam's Transgression," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. and ed. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 140.

181. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 68.

182. Pelikan, *Catholic Tradition*, 147.

183. Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 97.

when he speaks of man's reconciliation to God that it was man himself who needed to be reconciled to God, not God to man (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18, 20). As St. John Chrysostom points out, it was not God who was hostile but man, "for God is never hostile."[184] The sacrifice of the cross does not presuppose God's hostility but His love towards a world that has gone astray (John 3:16). Nowhere do the writings of the New Testament suggest that God was at enmity with the world. God's wrath is directed towards unrighteousness and the unrepentant, not indiscriminately against all of mankind.[185] As Florovsky writes, "The Cross is not a symbol of Justice, but the symbol of Love Divine."[186] Juridical conceptions of the atonement can be nothing but "colorless anthropomorphisms"[187] because they assume an "uncharacteristic portraiture" of the Father.[188] It would be a mistake to assume that divine Justice restricted God's Love and Mercy.[189] Human sin does not create a division in the Godhead between the righteous Father, who demands the satisfaction of justice, and the loving Son, who wishes to accomplish the distribution of mercy and grace. Since death is not an actively imposed punishment, the ransom "paid" by Christ's death is not paid to an offended Father.

The ransom effected by Christ's death, then, is a metaphor that speaks of the necessary sacrifice required of the God-Man to accomplish humanity's salvation. St. Gregory of Nazianzus meditates on this in a famous passage worth quoting in its entirety:

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184. As cited in Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*, 97.

185. Ibid., 97.

186. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 103.

187. Ibid., 101.

188. Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," 98.

189. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 102.

Now then, we will examine an issue and doctrine overlooked by many but in my view very much to be examined. To whom was the blood poured out for us, and why was it poured out, that great and renowned blood of God, who is both high priest and victim? For we were held in bondage by the Evil One, sold under sin, and received pleasure in exchange for evil. But if the ransom is not given to anyone except the one holding us in bondage, I ask to whom this was paid, and for what cause? If to the Evil One, what an outrage! For the robber would receive not only a ransom from God, but God himself as a ransom, and a reward so greatly surpassing his own tyranny that for its sake he would rightly have spared us altogether. But if it was given to the Father, in the first place how? For we were not conquered by him. And secondly, on what principle would the blood of the Only-begotten delight the Father, who would not receive Isaac when he was offered by his father but switched the sacrifice, giving a ram in place of the reason-endowed victim? It is clear that the Father accepts him, though he neither asked for this nor needed it, because of the divine plan, and because the human being must be sanctified by the humanity of God, that God might himself set us free and conquer the tyrant by force and lead us back to himself by the mediation of the Son.[190]

Since a ransom is paid to the one who holds in bondage, St. Gregory explains, it could not have been paid to the Father since "we were not conquered by him"—He was not the one holding humanity in bondage. Neither is it fit, however, to suggest that the devil for his robbery received so great a ransom as God Himself. St. Gregory concludes that the Father accepted the death of Christ as a sacrifice, then, not because He needed it, but because the Divine economy of man's salvation required that "the human being . . . be sanctified by the humanity of God" and the tyranny of the devil thereby overthrown. The death of Christ was the necessary condition for man's salvation. The Anaphora of the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great therefore describes Christ's sacrifice as a ransom paid to death. St. Leo of Rome speaks of the death of the Deathless One as a debt paid to man's condition. Ultimately, the tradition of the Greek Fathers makes it clear that "*there is no identifiable party that demanded the sacrifice or ransom of Christ*."[191] Neither St. Paul

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190. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 45," 182.

191. Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," 98.

nor the other New Testament writers specify the recipient of the ransom.[192] In keeping

with the tradition of Christian antiquity, the sacrificial and redemptive language applied

to Christ's death must always be interpreted within the broader context of the defeat of

death and deification.[193] Viewed from the appropriate perspective, the sacrifice of

Christ's redeeming death as a ransom in understood by the Christian East to speak of the

necessary condition for the fulfillment of man's salvation.

Not even in the writings of St. Athanasius, which are often used by those Western

Christians seeking to find patristic support for a juridical construction of the atonement,

does one find a truly juridical doctrine. In his most famous work, *On the Incarnation*, St.

Athanasius expresses himself in language very similar to what one would find in later

Western satisfaction theories. He speaks of a "debt owing which must needs be paid . . .

on behalf of all . . . to settle man's account with death and free him from the primal

transgression."[194] Keeping in mind the earlier conclusion that whenever St. Athanasius

speaks of substitution he always has in sight participation as the final goal, and that

notions of sacrifice and redemption must always be interpreted within the broader context

of victory over death and deification (which they certainly are in the writings of the

Alexandrian bishop), one is able to gain a clearer insight into the meaning of these words.

It must first be pointed out to whom or to what man owes his "debt." St.

Athanasius is very clear that man's debt is to death, not to God. Earlier in the text, St.

Athanasius does note that "it was unthinkable that God, the Father of Truth, should go

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192. Daly, *Creation and Redemption*, 176.

193. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 160.

194. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 49.

back upon His word regarding death in order to ensure our continued existence."[195] This statement, combined with the passage about man's debt, may seem to imply the requirement of penal substitution to appease Divine justice, but the context strongly suggests otherwise. Immediately after this latter quotation, St. Athanasius explains that if man's problem was only a transgression against the Divine commandment, "repentance would have been well enough."[196] In other words, if the meaning of the fall consisted in a trespass of Divine justice, God would only have had to require man's repentance in order to restore communion. No sacrificial death would have been necessary in such a case. What makes the sacrificial death necessary is man's "subsequent corruption . . . proper to [his] nature" when "bereft of the grace which belonged to [him] as [a creature] in the Image of God."[197] Even in the writings of St. Athanasius, death is seen as a *passive* punishment upon man. God does not externally impose it, actively taking man's life away from him; rather, man is by nature "impermanent," made immortal only through the grace of God imparted by His image in man. When man willingly chose to disobey God, he separated himself from the grace that granted him continued life, subjecting himself to death as the natural outcome of his disobedience. Since man is the cause of his own death, and not God, it is impossible for it to be God who demands the sacrificial death of Christ, as if He stood in need of anything. The "debt" of which St. Athanasius speaks is "paid" to man's condition—it is the necessary condition for man's salvation, defined chiefly as the overthrow of death and corruptibility.

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195. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 32.

196. Ibid., 33.

197. Ibid., 33.

God is unable to go back on His word regarding the death of man because to do

so would be to violate His institution of man's freedom. It was, after all, because God

created man free that God gave man the commandment, according to St. Athanasius.[198]

Man had to be free either to love God or to reject Him. The very meaning of freedom is

found in the ability of the free agent to actualize possibilities. If God created man with

the free ability to reject the grace that gave man life, then God *must* honor man's freedom

by allowing the chosen results to actualize. Death, as the result of man's free decision,

had to be actualized. It had to have its due, anthropomorphically speaking. What this

means is that God, in His desire to save man, had to allow the "law of death" to be

fulfilled. Christ, in that He was man, submitted Himself to death so that death would have

its fill, but in that He was God, death was exhausted and thereby abolished.[199] Thus, in

the witness of St. Athanasius, Christ's death as a "vicarious sacrifice" must be understood

in "realistic rather than legal/forensic terms."[200] As Grensted admits, "It is not justifiable

to claim Athanasius as the precursor of the later Penal theories. There is no sign that he

anywhere regards death as penal suffering, and still less that he regards Christ's death as

vicarious punishment."[201]

This interpretation of St. Athanasius finds similar support from other patristic

sources. St. Irenaeus mentions that God had to redeem man through the incarnation

because "unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been

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198. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 28.

199. Ibid., 49.

200. George Dion Dragas, "St. Athanasius on Christ's Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 92.

201. L.W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1920), 80.

legitimately vanquished."[202] St. John of Damascus also suggests that the devil would have had a complaint against God of injustice if, after the devil conquered man, God would have merely exercised His omnipotent might to do away with death. As a result, "God in His pity and love for man wished to reveal fallen man himself as conqueror, and became man to restore like with like."[203] What both St. Irenaeus and St. John of Damascus hint at is the notion that it is man himself who must overcome his bondage to sin and death. This God accomplishes by the fact of the incarnation. It would be inconsistent or unjust for God to save man by simply annihilating man's fallen condition by His divine power. Florovsky explains, ". . . justice was accomplished, in that Salvation was wrought by condescension, in a '*kenosis*,' and not by omnipotent might."[204] According to the Christian tradition, God could not save man by merely abolishing death through His omnipotence; rather, He needed a plan in which man's salvation was accomplished in such a way that did not violate the reality of human freedom.

Since the sacrifice of Christ finds its primary significance in the defeat of death, the third-day resurrection of Christ is a crucial element of the atoning work.[205] As the crucifixion is the culmination of Christ's earthly incarnation, the resurrection is the culmination of the work of the cross. The resurrection, according to St. Gregory of Nyssa, is not just a consequence but the fruit of Christ's death on the cross.[206] It is accomplished

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202. St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 448.

203. St. John of Damascus, "Exposition," 66.

204. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 102.

205. See 1 Cor. 15 for a clear scriptural exposition of this point. In this passage, St. Paul identifies the connections between the sacrifice of the cross, the defeat of death and corruptibility, the resurrection of Christ, and the final resurrection.

206. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 146.

in the death of the incarnate Lord.[207] This is the "mystery of the Life-bearing and Life-bringing tomb."[208] The defeat of death achieved in the crucifixion is hidden until Easter morning, when Christ's victory is openly revealed to the world.[209] In the repose of the Creator after the work on the cross, "the work of redemption is identified with the work of creation,"[210] and the story of man's vocation is brought full-circle.

Cosmic, not Individual

Since man's original vocation was the deification of the created order, and the fall of man was the fall of the *cosmos*, the atoning work of Christ is also understood in the Christian East to be of cosmic significance. Man is certainly the object of salvation—not man in isolation from nature, though, but man united to it.[211] The cross, as the salvation of man, is also "a healing of creation" in the words of St. Athanasius.[212] It is a cleansing of the world through the cleansing of the microcosm by a baptism in blood.[213] St. Gregory of Nazianzus wonders at the significance of the salvation wrought by Christ: "a few drops of blood recreate the whole world and become for all human beings like a curdling agent for milk, binding and drawing us together into one."[214] Not only does the curdling agent unite all of man, but it also unites man with his world. A few drops of

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207. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 138.

208. Ibid., 14.

209. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 83.

210. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 151.

211. Staniloae, *World, Creation, Deification*, 1.

212. St. Athanasius, "Against the Heathen," 4.

213. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 133-134.

214. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 45," 189.

blood—the blood of one man, out of all those who have ever lived and failed at their vocation—recreate the entire *cosmos* through the recreation of the microcosm. The creation itself participates in the crucifixion which wrought its salvation. St. Athanasius speaks of the "sun and moon as witnesses" to the event by which "all creation has been redeemed."[215] The Gospel narratives themselves indicate that the heavens and the earth took part in the death of the Creator; the sun hid and the ground trembled before the mighty conflict between Life and death. When the resurrected Christ ascended on high, triumphant, He sat down at the right hand of God. In so doing, the God-Man exalted created nature above the angelic orders and introduced it into the very heart of the Godhead as "the first fruits of cosmic deification."[216]

Conclusion
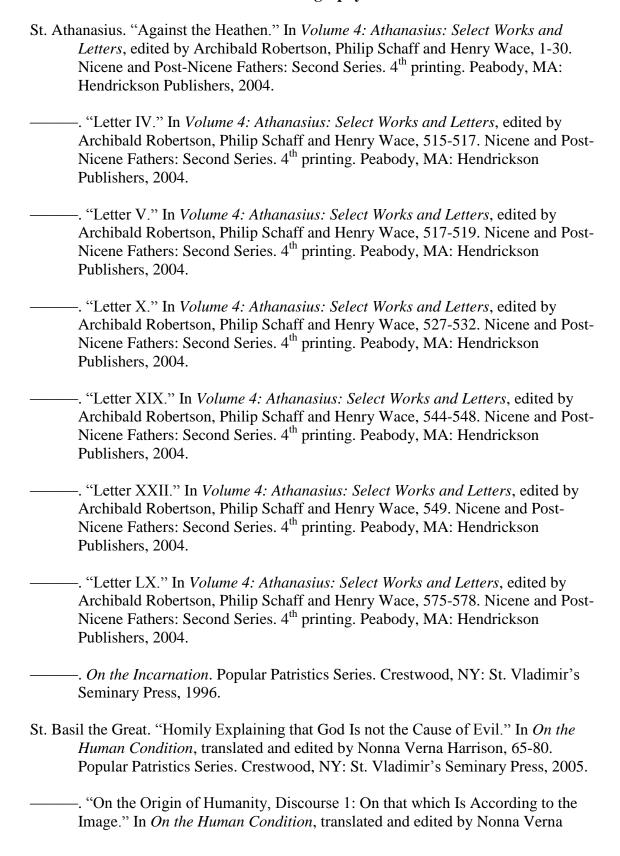
While no single expression can exhaust the mystery of the Divine economy for man's salvation due to the infinitude of the God who accomplished it, certain aspects can be emphasized. Secluded from the influences that have shaped the course of Western theology, the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church maintains different doctrines regarding man's created state, the fall, and the Old Testament sacrificial system, which result in an understanding of the atonement as participatory rather than substitutionary, ontological rather than juridical, and cosmic rather than individual. Death, the natural result of man's rejection of Life, is not imposed upon man by God but rather actualized by man himself, who was created in a free, middle state. Since death is not an external, active judgment by a God who stands in need of anything, the sacrifices required of the Jewish nation under the Law were primarily for the benefit of the Israelites themselves.

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215. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 70.

216. Lossky, *Introduction*, 75.

The salvation wrought by Christ is the defeat of death by death, freeing man from the law

of death and overcoming the evil tyrant. Redemption is not a ransom paid to the Father

for the satisfaction of Divine justice but refers to the necessary condition of Christ's

sacrificial death for the salvation of man. Because man's calling was a cosmic vocation,

his failure infected the rest of creation with the parasite of evil. Freed from the bondage

of sin and death, man's salvation is also that of the world. These emphases of the Eastern

patristic tradition provide a depth and complexity lacking in many contemporary Western

theories of Christ's atoning work. Christ is the High Priest, the offerer and the offered,

but He is also the Captain of salvation (Heb. 2:10), the Destroyer of death, the Conqueror

of the tyrant, and the Savior of the *world*. "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down

death by death, and upon those in the tomb"—and upon the entire created *cosmos*—

"bestowing life."

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