Atoning Transactions

Robert Merrihew Adams

I agree with much in John Hick's provocative and forcefully argued paper – and not just with the points on which he notes agreement with traditional views. I agree with him that theological doctrines ought not to be seen as immutable, and that Christian conceptions of the significance of the life and death of Jesus, and its relation to human salvation, need to be thought through in radically new ways. Specifically, I agree that there are incongruities in penal satisfaction theories of the atonement; that the Biblical portrait of God is of one who can and does forgive freely; and that we should, therefore, abandon the idea that the death of Christ was necessary for God's forgiving us. I reject the conception of the death of Christ as 'propitiating' God or, more broadly, affecting God's attitude towards sinners. And theories of Christ's death as a price paid to the Devil, or a victory over the Devil, are not more satisfying. Nevertheless, I believe there is great value in some of the ideas that Professor Hick criticizes. I shall focus particularly on the classic Protestant idea of the *justification* of the sinner by imputation of the righteousness of Christ, and the conception of atonement, or reconciliation, as a *transaction* between God and us.

'There is', as Hick says, 'a genuine problem of guilt.' Even if it is not, as I grant, the sole or even the uniquely pre-eminent problem posing a need for salvation, it is surely a permanent part of the significance of the Christian religion that it offers a way, or ways, of dealing with guilt. How we conceive of this problem makes an important difference to thinking about the atonement. If we think of it as the problem of how a pure and holy God can tolerate an association with guilty sinners, we shall be drawn towards propitiatory theories of the atonement as making it morally possible for God to forgive. But I believe this is a mistaken understanding of the problem of guilt, because an unforgiving fastidiousness about the moral character of one's friends is not a virtue, and therefore is surely no part of the holiness of God. In saying this I do not mean to imply that Biblical religion is mistaken in seeing something terrifying in the moral demand of the holy, but that is another story.

There remains another problem of guilt, a problem about our relation to ourselves. It is morally important that we be able to affirm our own lives as morally valuable. But how can we do that, in moral seriousness, in view of the guilt that each of us finds in our lives? Perhaps someone will reply that most of us are not guilty enough for that to be a reasonable concern; that sincere repentance, and a normal hope of spiritual progress, provide sufficient grounds for moral self-acceptance, even in the face of an average measure of guilt. This healthy-minded reply brings with it, however, what Christian theologians have regarded as the liabilities of 'works righteousness'. Christianity offers release from the burden of guilt even to those whose guilt is so great that it would *not* be neurotic for them to despair of being able to do enough good in the future to make up for it. And do we *know* that we will not stumble into such guilt ourselves? Christian humility urges diffidence on this point. If we hang our moral self-acceptance on a confidence that our own good deeds will outweigh our bad deeds, that will be a standing temptation to spiritual pride and self-righteousness.

In this context I think there is much to be said for the doctrine, so important to the Protestant Reformers, that we are justified, not by our own righteousness, but by the righteousness of Christ. Here I am thinking of 'justification' or acquittal more in terms of restoration of honour than of remission of punishment. God is unconditionally free to remit punishments, as I have said. Something more may be required, however, if the sinner's life is to be seen again as morally valuable. Something more, suggested by Christian traditions, is our incorporation into the redemptive activity of God in Christ. My life may be seen as having – and indeed may have – a secure moral and spiritual value, not in isolation, but as embraced in a spiritual totality that includes the exemplary righteousness of Christ. In that sense the righteousness of Christ is imputed to me, and justifies my life.

Are there other relations to the divine that can justify, in the sense of restoring honour to the greatest sinner? I see no compelling reason to deny that there are. But that is no reason why Christians should not find justification, in this sense, in their union with Christ.

This union, and also the divine forgiveness that it presupposes, are conceived by Christians primarily in terms of personal interactions. I am not sure just how much John Hick means to be denying in criticizing *transactional* conceptions of atonement. Certainly I have no interest in defending commercial exchange as a model here. But I do think there is something important and valuable in the idea of

atonement as involving a transaction in the broad sense of an interaction that happens *between* us and God, and not only a transformation that happens in us – though the latter is, of course, an essential part of Christian accounts of salvation. This is indeed the main point that I want to make in these comments, and what I have said about the 'justification' of the sinner is to be understood as an instance of the sort of significance that can arise from a transformation of the relationship between God and us through transactions involving Christ.

Here I presuppose, as Christian traditions generally do, conceptions of God and our relation to God that are primarily, though not exclusively, personal. Personal relationships have a narrative structure, as much recent theology reminds us. They are not merely illustrated, but largely constituted, by events that make memorable stories. And these events are transactions, in a broad sense, between persons. More than one type of transaction might figure in atonement, or reconciliation with God. I shall mention two, neither of which presupposes that anything needed to be done to make God more willing or more able to forgive.

The death of Jesus occurred in a context of *conflict* – religious controversy between Jesus and other Jewish leaders, and political conflict between Romans and Jews, oppressors and oppressed. Apart from that context his Crucifixion is not historically intelligible. How must we understand that story of conflict if we see Jesus as Christians always have, at a minimum, as God's representative in that situation? It appears, then, as an episode in a conflict to which God is a party, a quarrel between God and the people of God, and between God and the oppressors of the people of God. That is a theme that runs at least as deep in the Bible as the idea of a battle between God and the Devil, and it may provide for us a more intelligible context for thinking about atonement. God has a quarrel with us because we are sinners; and if that sounds too pious, perhaps we can also admit that we sometimes have complaints against God.

How does God wage this conflict? In the story of Jesus, God's representative certainly engages in controversy and expresses anger, but does not kill. Rather he is killed, but raised again by God's power. These events do not end the conflict between God and us. If they really happened, they change its character, however. Any transaction that profoundly engages the parties changes the character of the relationship between them. And the relationship between God and us is all the more profoundly changed if Jesus was indeed God incarnate.

Let us consider the matter also in relation to a transaction that is still repeated, the Christian sacrament of *the Lord's Supper*. I do not think we can attain historical certainty about what Jesus said at his last meal with his disciples, or about his interpretation of his death. But the history of the sacrament, beginning with the New Testament, makes dramatically clear that as far back as we can trace their thought, his followers saw his death as a *giving* of himself to them, a gift that they could go on receiving. This is a different meaning of Christ's death, but one that can be superimposed on the meaning that I sketched in terms of conflict. Surely a death with this meaning, if it is the death of the Christ, or of God incarnate, changes the relationship between God and us.

We may classify theories of the 'work' of Christ by the object on which they represent Christ as acting: on God, on the Devil, or on us. With John Hick, I reject the first two and accept the third. But I add a fourth: Christ acts on (or acts in such a way as to reconstitute) the *relationship* between God and us. It is because of their effects on relationships, I am suggesting, that interpersonal transactions are important as models for understanding the work of Christ – though 'effect' may be a somewhat misleading term here. The relation between the transaction or interpersonal interaction and the relationship is not typically a causal one. Rather, the relationship *consists* in large part in the occurrence of interactions. It is not simply a *sum* of interactions (and other constituents), however. For some interactions are much more significant than others for the character of the relationship. From a Christian point of view, the actions and sufferings of Christ have such significance in the highest degree for the relationship between God and us.

We may add that the significance of personal interactions for relationships commonly depends on their *symbolic* content at least as much as on their causal consequences. That is important for interpreting the image of *sacrifice* as applied in the New Testament and in Christian tradition to the life and death of Christ – a sacrifice being first of all an act of worship, and as such understood in terms of what it symbolizes. In characterizing the contribution of interpersonal transactions as largely symbolic, I do not mean to imply that it is merely subjective. I believe that the symbolic content of words and other actions is commonly as objective as any other fact about social relationships, and the significance of Christ's life and death and resurrection in relation to me is not simply a matter of what *I* take it to mean.