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Incarnation and Atonement: An Anselmian Response to Aulén's *Christus Victor*

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IN THE SPRING of 1930 Gustaf Aulén, then professor of systematic theology in the University of Lund, delivered the Olaus Petri lectures at Uppsala.¹ A year later these lectures appeared in English as *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*,² and for the past three decades they have played a considerable part in discussions of soteriology. In his introduction to the English edition Fr. A. G. Hebert, S.S.M., pointed out three potential benefits of Dr. Aulén's work. First and foremost, Aulén's exposition of the "classical" view of the atonement should help us to grasp the essential relation between the incarnation and the atonement—a crucial point at which other views had allegedly been defective. Secondly, it would lead us to the true understanding of the eucharistic liturgy as the sacramental "memorial" of the atonement, by removing those misconceptions of Christ's sacrifice which had led directly to serious misinterpretations of the eucharist. Thirdly, Aulén's study should bring new understanding of Luther's view of the work of Christ, as distinguished from the later teaching of protestant orthodoxy, with all that such new understanding might mean for our estimate of the Reformation, and so for the work of Christian reunion. Any one of these three suggestions would repay extensive study. In these comments, however, I propose to concentrate on the first point, which is obviously fundamental, and to ask whether Aulén's treatment of the atonement is really compatible with a sound Christology. More particularly, since he deliberately challenges comparison with St. Anselm, I intend to inquire whether *Cur Deus Homo* does not in fact do justice to an essential aspect of Christology which Aulén ignores.

Since Aulén makes a great deal of the "classical" quality of the view of the atonement which he adopts, our study of his thesis may fittingly take an historical turn. If he is right in his reading of Christian history, there must be some connexion between the "classical" theory of the atonement and the catholic doctrine of the incarnation as this was worked out in the age of the ecumenical councils—that is to say, in the age when the "classical" soteriology presumably stood pretty well unchallenged.

1. *Den kristna försoningstanken* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1930).

2. London: SPCK, 1931.

On the other hand, if his history is faulty and it turns out that the authors of the classical Christology were not aware of those implications of their work which Aulén and Hebert find so obvious, or perhaps even that the so-called "classical" view of the atonement is irreconcilable with the essential concerns of the catholic Christology, then even on his own terms the value of Aulén's study will be drastically reduced. Strange as he would think it, we may discover that he must give place to Anselm as a faithful interpreter of the incarnation and the atonement in their essential unity.

The "important and original contribution" of Aulén's book, according to Hebert,

is its strong delineation of the view of the Atonement which is summed up in such phrases as "Christus Victor," and "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself"—the view that sets the Incarnation in direct connection with the Atonement and proclaims that it is God Himself who in Christ has delivered mankind from the power of evil. As soon as the meaning of this view is grasped, the patristic teaching at once stands out as a strong, clear, and consistent whole, and it becomes impossible to doubt that it is this view which also dominates the New Testament; it has therefore every right to be called the typical Christian view, or, in Dr. Aulén's phrase, the "classic" idea of the Atonement. Evidently, too, it is to be distinguished from the view which grew up in the West on the basis of the forensic idea of sin as transgression of law, and which received its first clear formulation from Anselm; for that view regards the Atonement as not in the full sense God's work, but rather as the act whereby man in Christ makes reparation for man's sin . . .³

That this is a fair enough account of what Aulén is trying to say, even a brief survey of his little book will indicate. For instance, he writes in his introductory chapter on "The Problem and its Answers" that

the most marked difference between the "dramatic" type [i.e., the classical view] and the so-called "objective" type [e.g., the doctrine of Anselm] lies in the fact that it represents the work of Atonement or reconciliation as from first to last a work of God Himself, a *continuous* Divine work; while according to the other view, the act of Atonement has indeed its origin in God's will, but is, in its carrying-out, an offering made to God by Christ as man and on man's behalf, and may therefore be called a *discontinuous* Divine work.

Or again, expounding Augustine's teaching, he says that for the latter "the work of the Incarnate is the work of the Divine Love. This it is that overcomes the tyrants, and effects atonement between God and the world. It is one Divine work, the continuity of which is not interrupted by the idea of an offering made to God from man's side, from below."⁴ In these and a number of other passages, Aulén makes it plain that his primary concern is with the conception of the atonement, not as a work of man, but as the "*continuous* Divine work" of God incarnate.

It is true that in some places he complicates his analysis by suggesting that what he really finds wrong with the traditional "objective" or "Latin"

3. *Christus Victor*, pp. v-vi.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 21f., 62.

doctrine of the atonement is not the idea of human activity *per se* so much as the legalism of the complex of ideas, such as "satisfaction," in which the doctrine is expressed. So, for example, he insists that "the Latin doctrine of the Atonement is closely related to the legalism characteristic of the mediaeval outlook," and in attempting to distinguish the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews from the Latin view he recognizes that the notion of a sacrifice offered to God is common to both, but argues that in the former "the Sacrifice of Christ is not made part of a legal scheme, as is the case when the sacrificial idea is used in the Latin doctrine of the Atonement."⁵ On this showing we might suppose that it was its legalism that most urgently impelled Aulén to reject the Latin doctrine. But in fact it is something deeper, of which legalism is only a symptom, that really disturbs him. This something deeper he describes as a "cleavage between Incarnation and Atonement." For the "Latins," while God really became man, this truth is not organically connected with the doctrine of the atonement, which comes to be thought of quite simply as the act of man towards God. As Aulén puts it, in a summary of the teaching of the fathers and of Anselm respectively, "they show how God became incarnate that He might redeem; he teaches a human work of satisfaction, accomplished by Christ."⁶

Ultimately, then, Aulén's criterion for the assessment of theories of the atonement is a particular understanding of the incarnation and its purpose. True Christian faith confesses the eternal Word of God, "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, . . . and was made man," and the redemptive purpose was achieved only because the acts of the incarnate were really acts of God, in a sense which absolutely excludes the thought of an atoning work from man's side. It is true that there is a real twosidedness in the work of redemption as the "classical" view sees it, and this is exemplified in the way in which Hebrews "regards the Sacrifice of Christ both as God's own act of sacrifice and as a sacrifice offered to God." But this twosidedness must not be thought of in terms of "discontinuity." As Aulén puts it, in commenting on the form of the "classical" teaching characteristic of Athanasius, "the payment of the debt is God's own act, carried out by the Logos, while at the same time it is God who receives the payment." Or, as he says again in presenting his case against Anselm, "the crucial question is really this: Does Anselm treat the atoning work of Christ as the work of God Himself from start to finish?"⁷

It could be argued with some force that this is just what Anselm does, but Aulén does not think so, and in answering his own question in the negative he plainly reveals certain interesting Christological presuppositions. As he sees it, "Anselm *does not* . . . give up his basic assumption that the required satisfaction must be made by man." Indeed, Anselm's argument is solely concerned to show how this essential satisfaction must and can be

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 108, 94.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 104.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 73, 102.

made, and the outcome of the argument is the notion of Christ's atoning work as a human act. "It is indeed true," Aulén writes, "that Anselm and his successors treat the Atonement as in a sense God's work; God is the author of the plan, and He has sent His Son and ordered it so that the required satisfaction shall be made. Nevertheless, it is not in the full sense God's work of redemption." Then comes Aulén's famous symbol: "If the patristic idea of Incarnation and Redemption may be represented by a continuous line, leading obliquely downwards, the doctrine of Anselm will require a broken line; or, the line that leads downwards may be shown as crossed by a line leading from below upwards, to represent the satisfaction made to God by Christ as man." And finally Aulén argues: "The double-sidedness characteristic of the classic idea has disappeared. God is no longer regarded as *at once* the agent and the object of the reconciliation, but as *partly* the agent, as being the author of the plan, and *partly* the object, when the plan comes to be carried out."⁸

For the moment I am concerned, not with the adequacy of this account of Anselm's teaching, but with the broader issues which it raises. By now we should see pretty clearly how Aulén understands the incarnation, and this drives us to ask the critical question. It is agreed that there is a close correlation between the truths of the incarnation and the atonement; that the driving force of the Christological thinking of the early church was the concern to safeguard the reality of man's redemption in Christ; and that consequently the structure of the patristic Christology is a major clue to the fathers' understanding of the redemptive acts of God. Here then is the question. Does the classical Christology really point to the view of the atonement which Aulén puts forward as the fundamental motif of Christian soteriology? Or can it be that Aulén's doctrine of the atonement rests on a doctrine of the person of Christ which the fathers would have rejected—perhaps even did reject—as inadequate and erroneous?

II

The Christological issue is forcibly put by Sophronius of Jerusalem—the reason for introducing this particular father into the discussion will appear a bit further on—in his *Homily on the Annunciation of the Mother of God*. Sophronius mentions certain heretics ("wretches," he calls them) who "do not speak of the incarnation of the Word, or mention the union of the diverse essences (namely, the Godhead and the manhood), or proclaim his birth of the sacred virgin, who is truly Mother of God." Since, he goes on, all these truths are necessarily presupposed by the cross, the outcome of such heresy is a blasphemous misunderstanding of the cross, involving the notion of the suffering of the Godhead.⁹ Quite specifically, my question is this: Does Aulén's treatment of the incarnation and the atonement lay him open to the same kind of anti-Monophysite polemic?

9. *P.G.*, 87, 3224.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 104f.

Of course, there is no doubt of the kind of answer Aulén himself would give. With the fathers, he repudiates both Appollinarianism, according to which the Logos replaces the rational soul in Christ, and Monophysitism, according to which the human in Christ is absorbed into the divine. The "classical" view of the atonement, he tells us, "does not at all mean that we have here a Docetic Christology, which would do less than justice to the true manhood of Christ . . . *His true manhood receives full emphasis.*"¹⁰ Nonetheless, I am not sure that the great fathers and councils would agree that Aulén's emphasis on Christ's humanity was "full" enough. Let us pursue the question further.

It is hard to be as sure as Hebert seems to be that one has apprehended the patristic teaching as "a strong, clear, and consistent whole," but perhaps the story of the post-Chalcedonian struggle with Monophysitism in its various subtle forms will be as good a test case as any. More particularly, the prolonged controversy which ended when the sixth ecumenical council rounded out the work of the fourth has a significant lesson to teach us. In A.D. 681 the third council of Constantinople promulgated its dogmatic definition of the "two wills" in Christ. After asserting the two natures in the one *hypostasis* of Christ, in strict conformity to the formula of Chalcedon, the definition went on to state that each nature—the one manifested in truth in Christ's miracles, the other in his sufferings—wills and performs its own acts, in *koinōnia* with the other. From this the conclusion follows directly: "We confess two natural wills and operations [*physika thelēmata te kai energeias*], duly concurring for the salvation of the human race."¹¹ I suggest that this formula bears more directly on the assessment of Aulén's thesis than one might suspect at first glance.¹²

Obviously enough, the essence of the Monothelete dispute is the question of the reality of Christ's human will, but we need, here as elsewhere, to keep in mind the soteriological concern behind the Christological debate. The last sentence quoted above from the definitive conciliar formula gives succinct expression to the motive which had been operative on the catholic side from the beginning. In the *Synodical Epistle* addressed in A.D. 634 to Sergius of Constantinople by Sophronius of Jerusalem, which is generally regarded as the first major pronouncement on the Monothelete question, Sophronius had written: "It was God who allowed himself to suffer these things in the flesh, both saving us by his own sufferings and granting impassibility to us through them. . . . He himself willed to suffer and to act and to work humanly [*anthrōpinōs*] . . ."¹³ Fifteen years later the influential Lateran council of A.D. 649 spoke in its profession of faith of the "perfect God and perfect man, one and the selfsame Jesus Christ, our Lord and

10. Aulén, *op.cit.*, p. 186f.

11. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 23rd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1937), no. 292.

12. It may not be irrelevant to note that Aulén's summary of the Monothelete controversy in his *Dogmhistoria*, 4th ed. (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1946), p. 69, shows no concern with its soteriological implications.

13. *P.G.*, 87, 3173.

God," as "divinely and humanly [*divine et humane*] willing and working our salvation," while canon 11 of the same council describes him as "naturally the agent of our salvation, by way of both his natures."¹⁴ Moreover, Martin I, whose clarity and firmness were something of a compensation for the vagaries of the unhappy Honorius, elaborated the point in his opening speech at the first session of the council: "Through his human, that is, his created will and operation, he himself for our sake freely endured the things that are proper to human nature, that is to say, his saving sufferings, since he who is God above nature, willing humanly for our sakes, underwent hunger, thirst, contempt, sorrow and fear, and after all these things the trial of death, for our salvation." Similarly, in his speech at the fifth session he speaks of the incarnate as "humanly offering" his obedience for us to his God and Father.¹⁵ In view of its congruity with contemporary Eastern teaching, to say nothing of Martin's own acquaintance with and considerable use of the Greek fathers and his apparent total abstinence from intoxicating Latin words like *satisfactio*, it would be rash to treat this evidence as narrowly Western. On the contrary, our other evidence suggests that it expresses the common mind of the church of the day concerning the mystery of our redemption.

We may now go on to ask whether it is not Anselm's doctrine, rather than Aulén's critique, that is really at one with the Chalcedonian Christology as fully articulated in the fight against Monotheletism. The duality in Anselm's teaching faithfully reflects the ideas of the fathers, and it is no less compatible in his thought than in theirs with the ultimate unity of Christ's person and work. We may admit that not everyone is happy with the "juridical" language of Anselm's argument.¹⁶ The fact remains that his Christological presuppositions, with which his doctrine of the atonement is fully consistent, conform strictly to the patristic teaching. One could quote half of the *Cur Deus Homo* in support of this statement, but the following passage makes the point clearly enough for our purpose:

No one save God can make it [the necessary satisfaction] and no one save man ought to make it; [therefore] it is necessary for a God-Man to make it. Now we must inquire how there can be a God-Man. For the divine and human natures cannot be changed into each other, so that the divine becomes human or the human divine. Nor can they be so mingled that a third nature, neither fully divine nor fully human, is produced from the two . . . The Man-God we are seeking cannot be produced from divine and human nature, either by the conversion of one into the other or by the destructive commingling of both into a third, because these things cannot be done, and if they could they

14. Mansi, *Conciliorum omnium amplissima collectio* (Florence, 1764), 10, 1150; Denzinger, *op.cit.*, no. 264.

15. Mansi, *op.cit.*, 875; 1146.

16. Hebert, for example, speaks of the "forensic idea of sin as transgression of law." For warnings against such superficial constructions of Anselm's doctrine, see J. McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1954); R. D. Crouse, "The Augustinian Background of St. Anselm's Concept *Justitia*," *CJT*, 4 (1958), 111-119; E. R. Fairweather, "'Iustitia Dei' as the 'ratio' of the incarnation," *Spicilegium Beccense*, 1 (Paris: Vrin, 1959), 327-335.

would be of no avail for the end we seek. Moreover, even if these two complete natures are said to be united in some way, but still man is one person and God another, so that the same person is not both God and man, the two natures cannot do what needs to be done. For God will not do it, because he does not owe it, and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, for the God-Man to do this, the person who is to make this satisfaction must be both perfect God and perfect man, because none but true God can make it, and none but true man owes it. Thus, while it is necessary to find a God-Man in whom the integrity of both natures is preserved, it is no less necessary for these two complete natures to meet in one person, . . . for otherwise the same person could not be perfect God and perfect man.¹⁷

What is all this but the doctrine of Chalcedon and Leo the Great, of Sophronius and Martin, of the Lateran council and Constantinople III, and in very much the same terms? It is the divine Word who acts, but the Word has truly become flesh, and he acts *divine et humane*—in a divine and in a human manner. When Anselm so consistently and searchingly expounds the essence of man's redemption as a divine-human work, it is this patristic and conciliar vision of the divine humility in the incarnation that dominates his thinking.

From start to finish the argument is dominated by the action of God—of God who made man, of God who was made man to offer, in manhood, an acceptable satisfaction to the divine nature. There is duality, of course, in the sense that the satisfaction required and made is a human act, but there is an underlying unity in the fact that it is God's omnipotent love that makes an acceptable human act possible. Anselm is concerned at once to stress the truth that God alone can be man's Redeemer, and to show the real significance of his taking human nature and dying a human death.¹⁸

It may well be that Aulén's Christology so stresses the divine person of the Word as to make it impossible for him to take seriously the suggestion that Christ's human acts can have this kind of meaning. In that case he is right from his own standpoint in criticizing Anselm's teaching and the whole tradition which the latter represents. But in the light of the history of Christology he can hardly accuse Anselm of not taking the incarnation seriously, unless he is prepared to argue that it was the Monothelites, and not the ecumenical councils, that really knew what the incarnation was about. There is no reason to think that he consciously intends to take this line, but the logic of his critique of Anselm will hardly let him go anywhere else. Thus it seems clear that his appeal to the historic catholic Christology against the "Latin" theology of redemption must be dismissed.

III

Aulén's patristic argument may have turned out to be shaky, but it is still possible to argue that, whatever the fathers may have said, the New

17. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, II, 6-7. Translation from E. R. Fairweather (ed.), *A Scholastic Miscellany* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), p. 151f.

18. "Introduction to Anselm of Canterbury," *Ibid.*, p. 56f.

Testament is on his side. Aulén himself, of course, looks confidently to the New Testament teaching as the ultimate basis of his view of the atonement. A detailed investigation of biblical thought is beyond the scope of this brief study, but it may be useful, by way of an appendix to the main argument, to note one or two texts which seem to support the fathers and Anselm against Aulén on the point at issue.

One would like, above all, to see a full commentary from the latter on a familiar Pauline passage:

If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.¹⁹

Aulén does, as a matter of fact, comment indirectly on the passage in a remark on Irenaeus:

The redemptive work is accomplished *by* the Logos *through* the Manhood as His instrument; for it could be accomplished by no power but that of God Himself. When Irenaeus speaks in this connection of the "obedience" of Christ, he has no thought of a human offering made to God from man's side, but rather that the Divine will wholly dominated the human life of the Word of God, and found perfect expression in His work.²⁰

This is ingenious, but it is not accurate exegesis either of St. Irenaeus or of St. Paul. The latter's meaning, reproduced by the former, is quite clearly that the free gift of justification is won for sinners through the total human obedience of the righteous Christ. But if this is so then Aulén's argument is undermined at a crucial point in the New Testament itself.

One might also note the text of First Timothy: "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (I Tim. 2:5f.). Or one might refer to the emphasis of the Epistle to the Hebrews on the likeness of the High Priest to his brethren "in every respect" (Hebr. 2:17), as well as to its insistence on the real analogy between him who is a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek, and "every high priest chosen from among men" (Hebr. 5:1). But there is no need to labour the point. To put it simply, setting aside all subsidiary questions of the legitimacy of such categories as "propitiation" and "satisfaction" as ways of expressing the fundamental truth, the New Testament again and again presents us with the human obedience and self-oblation of Christ as the divinely ordained means of man's reconciliation with God.

Both the New Testament and the fathers, then, encourage us to repudiate the claim, made by Aulén and reiterated by Hebert, that the so-called

19. Rom. 5:17-19. While the word "man" is supplied by the translators from v. 15 in each reference to Christ, this is simply to clarify the only possible meaning of the text.

20. *Christus Victor*, p. 50.

“classical” view of the atonement is implied in the patristic conception of the incarnation and intimated in the New Testament itself. The human spontaneity, volition and action of the incarnate Word, which that view so drastically devalues, are essential to the biblical and patristic understanding of man’s redemption. In other words, the work of redemption must be symbolized by the downward line of the divine love in action, which elicits from its point of contact in human life an upward-springing line—the line of the sacrificial obedience of the manhood assumed by the Word. To forget that it all begins with the downward movement of the divine love, and that the whole redemptive action is the work of the divine Word, is no doubt to make room for human moralism and legalism, and here Aulén’s warning is permanently valid. But to forget that the atonement is actually consummated by the Godward movement of the human will of the God-Man is to lapse into that kind of partial denial of the incarnation against which the greatest teachers of the ancient church fought so long and so wisely. Our faith rests on the taking of true manhood into God in such a way that its human action is permeated by divine life, power and worth. No doubt Aulén is right in seeing in the whole story the triumph of God over the powers of evil, but he goes desperately wrong in failing to recognize that the very heart of this divine triumph is the conquest of sin by the perfect human obedience of the Word made flesh. John Henry Newman shared his “classical” sense of the divine victory, but he saw more clearly how the victory was won.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
 Which did in Adam fail,
 Should strive afresh against the foe,
 Should strive and should prevail;
 And that a higher gift than grace
 Should flesh and blood refine,
 God’s presence and his very Self,
 And essence all-divine.

Nothing less than this proclamation of the divine-human victory over the evils that enslave mankind is the full gospel that can clearly and powerfully summon God’s people to confess the faith of Christ crucified and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil. In the end, then, we must say frankly that Aulén’s “classical” theory is less than a truly evangelical theology of atonement.