

Gustaf Aulén in South Africa – An Unlikely Conversation Partner

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This special issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* offers four articles about Gustaf Aulén's (1879–1977) theology. Three of them focus on his *Christus Victor*¹ and relate to South African realities in various ways. The fourth article is on Aulén's later engagement with God's law, *lex creationis*, typically work that is patterned in the Second World War climate.

The first article is written by Ernst M. Conradie, professor in systematic theology at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in greater Cape Town. He gives the trajectory of how Aulén has come to be read in South Africa. Three perspectives are given. First, he gives the background to this university that was a real misnomer and monstrosity, having been established as an apartheid institution in 1960, but later became a bulwark for justice and freedom. However, the exact story of why Aulén was introduced into the curriculum is not told, but it seems that there was a confluence of Alister McGrath, Karin Sporre, and myself in this respect. Conradie continues by writing about all the postgraduate students whom he has influenced and supervised into the Aulénian typology. It is quite an impressive list. Finally, he also deliberates on his own research and writing, which clearly show his intimate association with this Swedish oeuvre. He widens the circle as he, at this time, among other things, should be recognized as one of the leading scholars in eco-theology.

The second article stems from Demaine Solomons, one of the young scholars at the UWC, with a fresh doctorate. He proves to be deeply influenced by Aulén's thinking,² now a lecturer in systematic theology and social

1. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, Eugene, OR 2002, describing the three types of atonement: the classic, the Latin, and the subjective.

2. Demaine Solomons, *Reconciliation as a Controversial Symbol: An Analysis of a Theological*

ethics. The article clearly reflects the dissertation in various ways and makes use of the three types of Aulén as a way of making South African developments in church and society understandable in the longstanding quest for a more just and reconciled society.

One should also note that Solomons sees himself as a black theologian with a profound and natural allegiance to black theology as well as liberation theology. Having also been one of my students, I can reveal that he also has been influenced by another Lundensian theologian, namely Per Frostin (1943–1992), especially his work on liberation theology in Africa.³

In typical South African fashion, Solomons portrays the fate of reconciliation as a journey that constantly oscillates between the social realities of the wider society to serious concerns of the church in terms of biblical fundamentals and sharp theological thinking and back. When reading Solomons, I am struck by this constant flow and that gives me hope. South Africa is not about reconciliation and atonement being hidden in a church sanctuary, that could never be the case. Others have a lot to learn.

As a scholar at the same university, I cannot exactly say how Aulén appeared on the scene, except for the fact that reconciliation was on in South Africa soon after the first, democratic election and he had written something along the same line. Without rationalizing, I simply expected students to take to Aulén's text *Christus Victor*. And it worked! My article is a deliberate attempt to unsettle Aulén's whole oeuvre, not only *Christus Victor*.

Having known Aulén, also personally as a young student in Lund, I have come to lament the radical shift he made in his career, from *Christus Victor* to creation theology or theology of the law, so as to never return in a serious way to his masterpiece for further deliberations, for example in the post-Second World War era. Subsequently, I have asked some difficult questions regarding this shift in the form of a very preliminary deconstruction, thus not of his *Christus Victor* work per se, but of his total theological contribution. At the end of the article, I show how fruitful it could be to do further work on the desperate need for reparation in South Africa (a possible and impossible task) and how closely such a problem relates to theologies of the Aulén type. This work has just begun.

The last article is written by Jonas Jonson, bishop emeritus of Strängnäs – the same diocese as Aulén – and a scholar and author in his own right. He writes about a later phase of Aulén's life, from 1935 until the end of the Second World War. It is a striking, descriptive account of how Aulén,

Discourse in South Africa between 1968 and 2010, University of the Western Cape/Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam PhD thesis, 2018.

3. Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation*, Lund 1988.

reflecting people's growing despair of the country, consistently stuck to the first article of the creed, to *lex creationis*, and the need to defend the legal state (*rättsstaten*).

Several quotes clearly show that this law is closely linked to the love of God, a God who insists on his law because of his endless love. From my own perspective, I would ask whether such formulations in a small way may have remedied his omission of the specific atonement work of God, an omission of which he might have been acutely aware.

Be that as it may, Jonson's article confirms and even strengthens my conviction that we are witnessing a new era in his theology, where inspiration from *Christus Victor* is left aside.

Thanks to his biography on Aulén,⁴ Jonson is the one person who at this time has the full insight regarding Aulén's life and work.⁵

Jonson notes that when planning for the English publication of *Christus Victor* in 1931, Aulén (and he is known for this edition and none other) was approached by the translator and theologian monk Arthur Gabriel Hebert (1886–1963), who suggested that he could be Aulén's co-author in what, at all counts, then was a very small book. Aulén wanted to have none of it.⁶ We should thank him and God for that. *Christus Victor* is the proof of the fact that good theology, especially in short form, will always find its way, sooner or later, to readers hungry for ground-breaking truths, and this just happens, regardless of ecclesial, social, cultural, political, or geographical location. ▲

4. Jonas Jonson, *Gustaf Aulén: Biskop och motståndsmän*, Skellefteå 2011.

5. Forgive the pun: see my article on Aulén preferring Faith and Order rather than Life and Work of the ecumenical movement.

6. Jonson, *Gustaf Aulén*, 115.