

Aulén Deconstructed

On Inconsistencies in His Theology of Atonement and Lex Creationis

HANS S.A. ENGDAHL

Hans S.A. Engdahl is extraordinary professor emeritus of theology at the University of the Western Cape.

hans.engdahl@gmail.com

Introduction

Gustaf Aulén's (1879–1977) *Christus Victor* is today a famous piece of work, a classic in the dome of systematic or dogmatic theology. There are, however, signs of things not being quite right. I have previously referred to John de Gruchy's infamous question to me at the University of Cape Town in 2002, when he was busy writing his book *Reconciliation, Restoring Justice*: "Hans, do you know if Aulén's *Christus Victor* had any impact on Swedish society?" I then passed on the question to Göran Bexell, at the time professor of ethics in Lund, and he answered without hesitation: "I don't think so."¹

One could argue that de Gruchy's question was utterly South African and as such could not land in the Swedish geography in a decent way. However, I think the question was and is valid.

Secondly, in a recent biography, Jonas Jonson writes:

The belief that God reconciled the world to himself and the idea of Christ's victory over the powers of evil gave courage to many in the resistance against totalitarian systems. But now it was as if his theological

1. See Hans S.A. Engdahl, "More than Justice: The Impact of *Christus Victor* on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 86 (2010), 160–170. Maybe this article exemplifies what I try to say here: *Christus Victor* is already used in the socio-political domain.

reflection in this perspective, at least for the time being, had reached the end of the road. He [Aulén] continued preaching the gospel of the cross as an imperishable hope, but from the middle of the 1930s law came much more to the fore than gospel in his lectures. The threat of imminent war changed his perspective; he broadened his views and widened his circle of professional relations. He did not any longer speak only to the people of the church; now he wanted to stand side by side with all those who struggled for justice to prevail, regardless of faith. He became a theologian of creation, who constantly dug deeper and deeper into understanding God's lawful but violated order of all life. He admitted that an advanced shift had taken place in his theological outlook, but emphasized that the continuity was unbroken. In actual fact, he had radically shifted from one emphasis to another in his theological thinking.²

Jonson goes no further in his biography.

Aulén was a scholar, a professor of dogmatics in Lund, who thrived at being just that. He was not overtly worried about what was going on in society. But in the early 1930s, he emerged as one of the bishops in the Church of Sweden (Strängnäs), coinciding with the up-march of the Nazis in Germany. He had become a public figure and he seized the moment: henceforth he would speak, unceasingly, against the abuse of power of any kind (read: Nazism or Communism), and for the importance of defending justice (*rätten*). He would do this, tirelessly and even monotonously so, most of the time without mentioning these powers by name.

The thing is clear, Aulén made an impact on the wider society in this way, in Sweden, in the Nordic countries, in the world even. He made an impact, but this had nothing to do with what he had said in *Christus Victor*.³

When dealing with the world at large, the point of departure is not natural law, *lex naturalis*, that could play into the concepts of natural–supernatural, but the law laid down by God, under which we all live. It is based on a doctrine of creation (*skapelsetro*) and it could be called *lex creationis*. What does this law entail? It must be conditioned by the commandment of love and ultimately even the worldly kingdom is under the Word of

2. Jonas Jonson, *Gustaf Aulén: Biskop och motståndsmän*, Skellefteå 2011, 201. All translations from Swedish are my own, unless anything else is stated.

3. Martin Lind writes in his dissertation on the church and Nazism an excursus about Aulén (“Gustaf Aulén’s critique of Nazism”) and I cannot find one reference to *Christus Victor* or the subject matter in *Christus Victor*. Martin Lind, *Kristendom och nazism: Frågan om kristendom och nazism belyst av olika ställningstaganden i Tyskland och Sverige 1933–1945*, Lund 1975, 163–174.

God.⁴ All this means that the church certainly has a role to play *vis-à-vis* the state. Aulén argued that “the word that the church would not be involved in politics must never be taken to mean that the church would be forced to give up its mandate to represent the divine law over against abuse of power from the side of ‘the worldly kingdom’”. In an era where demonic powers and senseless violence were the order of the day, Aulén insisted that there was and always will be “a power of love and righteousness, for which Christ fought and died”.⁵

The church has a task to carry out that goes way beyond party politics: “The political task of the church consists of this critical watching over how the law of God is implemented in society.”⁶

As can be seen, perspectives of atonement or reconciliation do not occur. There is talk about “power of love”, but still under the law of God. All that can be said is said from the level of *lex creationis*.

This paper will deal with exactly this: how Aulén, who had written this text on the atonement,⁷ which indeed also had a bearing on the world (see 2 Corinthians 5:19), leaves this text behind and in his public ministry instead opts for that which is under the law and creation, a domain where we all find ourselves regardless of faith and conviction. A good reason for dealing with this dilemma is that whereas almost anyone of good will and courage could have said what he said about justice and the law as bulwarks against the abuse of power, very few could have expanded on the various atonement motifs. Or differently put, what Aulén is remembered for, and rightly so, is *Christus Victor*, which he seemed to ignore in his momentous, public life as a bishop. It had, as Bexell so rightly assessed, no apparent impact on Swedish society.

In the rest of this article, I will do the following: revisit *Christus Victor* briefly, point out some of Aulén’s antipathies, as well as some of his captivities. I will then deconstruct not *Christus Victor* as such, but Aulén’s total oeuvre, his “theological life”, by way of disclosure, displacement, and dispersal.⁸ Finally, I will indicate how *Christus Victor* would have had an

4. Lind, *Kristendom och nazism*, 167, 169.

5. Cited in Lind, *Kristendom och nazism*, 173–174.

6. Cited in Lind, *Kristendom och nazism*, 173.

7. Atonement and reconciliation are used interchangeably in this article.

8. I have used Jacques Derrida’s (1930–2004) deconstruction of the social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) with the following pattern: “The first stage is *disclosure*. In trying to understand a certain text it is necessary to see it in relation to other (texts), to see in which field of force it is to be found. [...] The second stage is *displacement*. It is now a widening of the frames of reference that takes place, and a simplistic ‘either-or’ situation is avoided. A new perspective is brought in and that changes the situation completely. [...] A theory from outside (top-down) could also be brought in. [...] Instead of finding the answer, the solution, deconstruction ends up in *dispersal*. This is not necessarily negative or saying that

important role to play in a post-Second World War as well as in a post-apartheid scenario.⁹

Christus Victor Revisited

Rereading *Christus Victor*, I again realize that it is a remarkable work, a masterpiece, and one whole system. One could argue that everything that needs to be said, is said.

Aulén is right in saying that the classic idea of atonement, as it above all was emerging in the early church, had been “so grievously misinterpreted and neglected; and I have tried to show how important is the place which it has actually held in the history of Christian thought”. One should probably remember that in the early twentieth century, scholars could claim some kind of objectivity and ability to be descriptive. Nevertheless, it sounds a bit pathetic to hear Aulén say the following: “I have not had any intention of writing an *apologia* for the classic idea; and if my exposition has shaped itself into something like a vindication of it, I would plead that it is because the facts themselves point that way.”¹⁰

The facts are there, but there is also a driver who determines which facts are worthy of being part of a text. The truth is rather that Aulén at an early stage deliberately sought justification for what has come to be called the classic idea of atonement. My reading of him is like this: He places quite some importance on the early church fathers and may in this regard be influenced by Anglican theology. The less philosophical Irenaeus of Lyon

nobody cares. For example, in the strict adherence to Derrida’s theory of writing, dispersal means universalization of trace, as foundational to our being or to the existence of all that is.” Hans S.A. Engdahl, *Theology in Conflict – Readings in Afrikaner Theology: The Theologies of F.J.M. Potgieter and B.J. Marais*, Frankfurt 2006, 24. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, MD 1976, 99; Christopher Johnson, *Derrida: The Scene of Writing*, London 1997, 51–56. Derrida’s deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss is devastating as he proves that the indigenous people, the Nambikwara, are not “innocent” people (naturalists), but people who generate evil from their midst as any other group (naming and protection of names as first and second violence were already a fact when Lévi-Strauss arrived). Derrida also proves that written language is before oral language (as a structuralist Lévi-Strauss claimed orality as the original language). But here, his deconstruction is at work and he merely establishes a new phase, namely that of displacement. Neither is right, nor wrong. See Johnson, *Derrida*, 33; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, III.

9. In this article, I am only going to give one example from South Africa (restitution). However, it should be added that I have taught (together with Antjie Krog) a post-graduate course on “The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Its Theological Perspectives”, for six consecutive years between 2005 and 2012 at the University of the Western Cape. Well over fifty students have been part of this course, a couple of them have proceeded with their PhD theses on themes clearly related to this course. *Christus Victor* was required reading.

10. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, London 1965, 158.

(c. 130–202) is ideal. Aulén is quite aware of what he is doing when he says that it is sometimes useful to read history backwards, “and see how the subsequent development illuminates the preceding stages”. In my opinion, he has at an early stage decided that Irenaeus is his man: “We may, then, feel satisfied that we have found in Irenaeus our true starting-point.”¹¹

Aulén does not only keep incarnation and atonement together, as well as salvation and redemption, he consistently keeps together God of creation and God of redemption. God has entered this world of sin and death deliberately in order to deal with its crisis. And here a quote from Irenaeus comes in handy: “The same hand of God that formed us in the beginning, and forms us in our mother’s womb, in these latter days sought us when we were lost, gaining His lost sheep and laying it on His shoulders and bringing it back with joy to the flock of life.”¹²

Irenaeus’ holistic grasp of our existence in talking about *recapitulatio* cuts through the maze of most theology through the generations. It is about restoring and perfecting the creation that God once embarked upon, the good creation, created with excellent, good intentions. This *recapitulatio* continues with the Spirit and the church and is strongly eschatological. An enmity developed between humans and God so there was a real need for “an Atonement, a *reconciliatio*”. This “punishment of corruption”, which humans deliberately had brought on their heads, “is now abolished by God Himself”.¹³ It is natural for Irenaeus to talk about sin, death, and the devil in one breath. Aulén sticks to this usage, but many – not least within mainstream Protestant theology of his time, Barth being only one of many – would never concur. It was outdated, too dualistic. But he demonstrates convincingly, I argue, that such usage was not more outdated than Christian belief itself. The drama according to Irenaeus is unfolding:

[God] had pity on men, and flung back on the author of enmities the enmity by which he had purposed to make man an enemy to God; He took away His enmity against men, and flung it back and cast it upon the serpent. So the Scripture says: I will put enmity between thee and the serpent, and between thy seed and the seed of the woman; he shall bruise thy head and thou shalt watch for his heel. This enmity the Lord recapitulated in Himself, being made man, born of a woman, and bruising the serpent’s head.¹⁴

11. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 16–17.

12. Cited in Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 21.

13. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 20, 24.

14. Cited in Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 24.

The fact is that Aulén constructs his own understanding of the atonement, and once that is done he judges everything on basis of such an understanding. My contention is that he has done this with Irenaeus as a starting point. But in order to gain full validity he needs two reference points. These are Martin Luther (1483–1546) and the New Testament.

Aulén states that Luther sharpens the classic atonement motif further by taking into account not only sin, death, and the devil, but also law and God's wrath as humans' adversaries. While Irenaeus has shown convincingly that sin, death, and the devil are actual, objective realities intimately intertwined, Luther goes on to show that God's rule also leads to enmity to the human. Aulén is not afraid of pointing to the dualism of God in Luther's understanding, while he is eager to demonstrate that the love of God is the winning side and in his intervention through Christ it is shown that love, not wrath, is prevailing.

Luther's discussion of law is challenging. He could here claim to be supported by Paul, who held that "the Law is at once good and evil; from one point of view, altogether good; from another, altogether evil. It is good, as an expression of God's will and commandment; yet it is also a 'tyrant', for it provokes to sin and increases sin."¹⁵

Observance of the law tempts the human to go the Pelagian way, leading to no salvation. Again, Luther's talk about God's wrath is to say what God is now, not at the end of times. It is also a tyrant, "even the most awful and terrible of all the tyrants. It is a tyrant in that it stands opposed to the Divine Love."¹⁶ One could say that Luther here sharpens the drama of the atonement in that it is God's work that is at stake. In his commentary on the Galatians, he claims that in the end it is the grace and mercy of Christ that prevail:

The curse, which is the wrath of God against the whole world, was in conflict with the blessing – that is to say, with God's eternal grace and mercy in Christ. The curse conflicts with the blessing, and would condemn it and altogether annihilate it, but it cannot. For the blessing is divine and eternal, therefore the curse must yield. For if the blessing in Christ could yield, then God Himself would have been overcome. But that is impossible.¹⁷

15. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 112.

16. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 114.

17. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 114.

There is a sense in which one has to accept dualism as a reality, not as two eternal principles, but as a temporary, albeit longstanding arrangement, where sin, death, and the devil seem to prevail forever. Aulén's footnote about dualism is decisive, but Luther sharpens this dualism even further in that he claims that there is dualism in God. This argument makes sense if it is true that God ultimately is in charge. If that is the case, God already somehow has to answer to and be responsible for the evils that are prevalent now, as God could be said to be ultimately responsible for allowing evil to develop in the first place. What one would need to add, however, is how the human responds to this dramatic intervention by God. For a response is necessary. Differently put, an anthropology is needed that can match the stark words of Luther.

The other guide in assessing Irenaeus is the New Testament. Aulén touches upon the quest for the historical Jesus and wisely selects a few examples that serve his purpose. Paul comes in conveniently and "confirms" to Aulén what Luther will say 1,500 years later. Aulén also refers to a very interesting comment by Anton Fridrichsen (1888–1953), the Norwegian New Testament scholar based in Uppsala. He shows the inevitable: there is dualism. Starting from the exorcisms of Jesus dealing with unclean spirits, Fridrichsen concludes that these are all subject to Satan. There are two dominions, that of Satan and that of God's kingdom. And the drama is unfolding:

It took the form of the realization, both that his death was inevitable, and that it would mean deliverance and victory; Satan's triumph would be his undoing. [...] The strange paradox that he, who was the stronger than Satan, should succumb to the power of evil and thereby break it – this paradox was involved in his situation as the Son of Man in lowliness, but having his high vocation, and all the while an instrument of God's will.¹⁸

References to Luther and the New Testament rather well support Aulén's case, and, no doubt, they both strengthen the Irenaean model of atonement. Differently put, Aulén uses Irenaeus' typology as a frame also for the other two types of atonement.

18. Anton Fridrichsen, "The Conflict of Jesus with the Unclean Spirits", *Theology* 22 (1931), 129–130. Not without significance, Fridrichsen (p. 122) adds the following, and this is in 1929 (when the original article was published in Swedish): "The Synoptic Gospels show Jesus to us not only as prophet, miracle worker, and teacher, but also as exorcist. In the earliest tradition the exorcisms play a great part, but the attention paid to them by modern exegesis stands in no reasonable relation to the importance which the Primitive Church assigned to this side of Jesus' activity."

Aulén also has a discussion about rational thinking and allowing for faith to be a paradox. Whereas no one is able to complete an argument without being rational, at least to some extent, it is another matter to allow for contradictions and difficulties that do not easily go away.¹⁹ Theology could be seen as being littered with such contradictions and difficulties. It is certainly a gift of reason to be able to say where the limit for the rational goes.

I find it difficult to refute Aulén's caption of the classic type, as well as his criticism of the Latin type in terms of rationality, not thereby stating that the Latin type would be of no significance. The classic type describes an unbroken line of divine intervention into this world, "God reconciling the world unto himself", while the Latin type describes a broken line in order to fulfil all justice: Christ would have to cover all humanity's guilt from us up to God in order to achieve atonement or reconciliation.

Aulén was being outright rational: "The classic idea shows a continuity in the Divine action and a discontinuity in the order of justice; the Latin type, a legal consistency and a discontinuity in Divine operation."²⁰ Is this the final word? I do not think so. Even if the classic version would enjoy the pride of place in the atonement pantheon, there is still a need to come down to the empirical level to be able to talk about justice, guilt, and so forth.

Antipathies

Here, I want to draw the attention to Aulén's tendency to create antipathies. He consistently plays down what is legal. In terms of atonement he keeps away from that notion; otherwise, there is risk of contamination: there might be an attempt to measure the guilt and sin that have been committed. The simple conclusion is that there must be a way by which one could deal with precisely legal matters and matters of justice without jeopardizing the ultimate reconciliation being God's making not ours.²¹

Secondly, there is also a sense in which ethical aspects are seen as of no help. At the same time, the world cries for ethical leadership. Again, there are ways to deal with the "ethical" without risking the theological content.²²

Then there is the third type of atonement: the subjective. It is downplayed as a rather hopeless idea largely built on individual, human understandings of how to reconcile with God.²³ One should perhaps not underestimate the

19. Aulén wants to demonstrate that the Latin doctrine of atonement is built on rationality. Luther would never accept it, as he "is sure that God's work in Christ of atonement, forgiveness, justification, bears the signature *contra rationem et legem*". Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 121.

20. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 91.

21. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 89.

22. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 91–92.

23. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 134–135.

fact that even having Christ as the ultimate role model could trigger off reactions that go beyond mere human abilities. I therefore sound a hesitation as to the statement that divine inspiration or intervention is out of question. In addition, I miss the role of the subjective perspective in Aulén. There seems to be none. Somewhere it has to be articulated that atonement is conclusive: it deals with the cosmic aspect, with the church as the body of Christ, with the world, with society, with human communities, and also with individuals. There is always a subjective insight that is valid.

Captivities

What is even more a matter of concern is that Aulén suffered from various kinds of captivities, in fact there are four of them.

First, as a good Lutheran, he stuck without hesitation to Luther's concept of the two kingdoms. The concept could make sense as there will always be a differentiation between God and the world. It also makes sense to safeguard the gospel as an offer to people to receive gifts of God out of grace, while the kingdom of this world would be constituted through various obligations. But there is a tension here. The gospel is preached to people living in this world, concerned with justice, truth, and forgiveness. The one has to do with the other, but they are not the same.

I now contend that there is a captivity here on the part of Aulén. Once he is the bishop, and he is faced with demonic powers in the upcoming Second World War, he straight away adopts a particular stance *vis-à-vis* the kingdom of this world. And what he, i.e. the church, can say is on the level of law and creation. And he sticks to that. What about the dire need for peace and reconciliation? What about atonement? As it seems, all these things were carefully hidden within the classic type of atonement and also kept strictly within the kingdom of God.

This is Aulén's captivity of primary importance. Allegiance to this concept effectively shut out any sense of *Christus Victor*.

Secondly, there is the captivity of *De servo arbitrio*, on the enslaved will of the human.²⁴ Free will is at stake. Augustine (354–430) created a precedence in his dealing with Pelagius (c. 360–418) – whom he indeed had to deal with somehow – that makes it very difficult to talk about the free will in its widest sense without running into Pelagian thinking about how to influence one's salvation through own initiatives. So here, Aulén is in good company. One should, however, recall that the Eastern Church has had far less problems with this, and Origen (184–253), for example, finds it easy to

24. See, for example, Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, Grand Rapids, MI 1990.

reckon with free will as a reality without tampering with any issue regarding Christ's atonement.²⁵

One can also see how difficult it is to relate the classic type to areas of human concern, where human endeavour would be the main criteria for a life at all. One will have to work out a scheme by which human contributions are taken seriously without mixing them up with divine initiatives towards reconciliation. And we have not even mentioned the tendency towards predestination yet. What is disturbing with the classic view is this passivity that one senses when standing in awe of the dramatic things that are brought about by God for us. There is something in the equation that is missing – and, again, it is not about questioning the divine intervention as such, but rather I lack a euphoric conviction that just because there is a God-given guarantee for atonement, I should be actively involved towards the same in my own circle, and that active involvement should be now, spontaneously now.

The third captivity is no less real. Aulén was bishop in a state church, the Church of Sweden. It meant, for example, that during the Second World War, he could not be an independent actor of the church in relation to the state. The particular case in point is the so-called Midsummer crisis of 1941, when the German Nazi government demanded from Sweden to use her territory for transportation of weaponry, other equipment, and troops through Sweden, also from Norway to Finland. A compromise was reached so as to minimize the risk of being drawn into the war – German troops and goods were indeed allowed through the country. Such a concession, though understandable, does not rhyme well with words about standing up against demonic powers at all costs. But Aulén never, not even once, deviated from the official Swedish line in terms of the war. He remained, as all the other bishops, an obedient servant of the state (church).²⁶

Finally, and perhaps unexpectedly, there is also captivity in the wider world of ecumenism. Aulén was during a number of years as an academic and as church leader a prominent member of the Faith and Order movement, from 1948 an integral part of the World Council of Churches. Looking at his long life-span and his theological achievements it stands clear to me that Faith and Order was another captivity. And yet, he was perhaps at his happiest when he freely could converse, at meetings, with other colleagues on matters of faith and order. It strikes me that Aulén was a close

25. Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, Oxford 1966, 120, says the following regarding Origen's urge for freedom: "Perhaps it is this insistence on freedom in God which most deeply marks Origen's theology with a Biblical stamp."

26. Jonson, *Gustaf Aulén*, 264; Klas Åmark, *Att bo granne med ondskan: Sveriges förhållande till nazismen, Nazityskland och Förintelsen*, Stockholm 2011, 122–143.

associate of Archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) at the Stockholm Conference on Life and Work in 1925. However, he did not seem too happy there, did not seem to have a very meaningful role. Life and Work was not for him. He was merely beating about the bush. Had Söderblom lived into the 1940s, he might have influenced Aulén in his direction without taking the theological mastery out of him. They might have colluded on the commonalities of Life and Work as well as Faith and Order.

The attentive reader must have noticed that I have here been fairly hard on Aulén. I have in fact devoted myself to digging into Aulén's work as an act of *disclosure* and have been struck by some inconsistencies that are there. Some of them I have now laid bare.

Actual Deconstruction

The next step is to throw it all open. For example, I might ask the question, what is the use of a classic type of atonement, if it has no meaning in ordinary life? Having disclosed things, it is now a matter of *displacement*. According to Jonas Jonson, Aulén claimed that his life's oeuvre was consistent: "He admitted that an advanced shift had taken place in his theological outlook [from *Christus Victor* to creation law], but emphasized that *the continuity was unbroken*."²⁷

He may have had good reasons for thinking that he was consistent. Others might see that he was a victim of the state church, of the intellectual climate created by the war in neutral Sweden and of a Lutheran two-pronged view of what is done before God and before humans. Displacement means dissolving this continuity. Various pieces of theology fly around in all directions. And yet, even a theological legacy has an inner logic and is conducive to various fields of force, going well beyond that of one particular theologian.

One such field of force is the quest for meaning and relevance. If it is true that *Christus Victor* is a superb piece of work, with a powerful, even dramatic message in the midst of it – then it should be possible to place it in such a way that it shines so that people can see it.

What is here required is an innovation of sorts. We need to come up with a new theory, or at least be able to re-contextualize things so as to achieve meaning and relevance, even active response. The new theory is the crown of Aulén's legacy, i.e. *Christus Victor*. What has to be given to the world is that reconciliation is possible, against all odds, and the fact that this doctrine of atonement and reconciliation is so saturated with theology must not hinder us from placing it in the midst of the world. We are challenged

27. Jonson, *Gustaf Aulén*, 201. My italics.

to the bone because of the fact that “God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself”.

Furthermore, one could state that instead of going from the one to the other, saying that the continuity is unbroken, that “one is deeply involved with the other”. Shifting to the legal state (*rättsstaten*) is not an innocent move; it will somehow do harm to the doctrine of atonement, one reason being that the law, albeit *lex creationis*, lacks saving capacity.

The shift as it is somehow did harm to *Christus Victor*, made it impotent, almost useless, facing extreme warfare. Instead the new hope for the world (the new theory) has to be directed into this extreme warfare of the Second World War, just the model of *Christus Victor* with its three dimensions.²⁸

But it is not about *Christus Victor* replacing *lex creationis*. On the contrary, it is about “widening the frames of reference, the loosing of the rigid systems of oppositions”.²⁹ Instead of “the continuity is unbroken”, from one to the other, one would have wished to see a consequent *Christus Victor* moment in all the talks against the warmongers (no names mentioned) of the Second World War.

Post-Second World War and Post-Apartheid Scenarios

Finally, I want to show how a “liberated” *Christus Victor* could engage in two different scenarios, that of post-Second World War and post-apartheid South Africa.

From the position of a post-Cold War perspective (from 1989–1990 onwards) it is in fact possible to look back towards the Second World War for possible scenarios of reconciliation and forgiveness. While churches in this post-war time scrutinized their consciences as to their continued divisions, others had the courage to think reconciliation and, one would say, against the hard realities. In the midst of all this it is possible to recall Hannah Arendt’s (1906–1975) theory of political forgiveness: “Political forgiveness is the epitome of natality, freeing both victim and victimizer from the paralyzing consequences of past deeds: it is ‘the exact opposite of vengeance... the only reaction that does not merely re-act, but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it’.”³⁰

28. What is offered to the world (of politics, of war, even the Second World War) is only the paradigm given to the eunuch at Gaza on his way back to Ethiopia: the suffering servant of Deutero-Isaiah as the risen one as interpreted by the apostle Philip. Acts 8:26–39.

29. Johnson, *Derrida*, 53.

30. Catherine Guisan, “Political Forgiveness, Promise, and the ‘Understanding Heart’ in Hannah Arendt’s Theory”, in Bas van Stokkom, Neelke Doorn & Paul van Tongeren (eds.), *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts*, Cambridge 2012, 144.

Aulén belongs to another era, even though Arendt's text is as early as 1958; however, the discussion here is not far from *Christus Victor*.³¹ Catherine Guisan argues that:

Since the end of the Cold War forgiving and reconciliation have become part and parcel of academic and political discourse. This is new. Scholars draw from Arendt to support their narratives of political reconciliation although some argue against forgiveness and for resentment that preserves the victim's dignity and animates protests against injustice. [...] Shin Chiba argues that "even her (Arendt's) notion of political forgiveness does not seem to make sense, unless it presumes a certain quality, an attitude, or an ethos of agape, such as contrition, repentance, kindness, altruism..." There is little discussion of kindness, contrition, or altruism, however, in Arendt: forgiving is not a moral or spiritual affect, but a singular act that liberates doer and sufferer from the "relentless automatism of the action process" for the sake of both.³²

Arendt talks about forgiveness (and as a presupposition of any reconciliation) as a "singular act". Would that not resonate with Aulén? Is that not the classic theory at its best? This is fine. God really did bring about reconciliation in one, single, unprecedented act. This is also the dilemma. Where are we as humanity in all this? It is unclear where Arendt would find an answer, and the query from Chiba, who feels compelled to talk about "a certain quality, an attitude, or an ethos of agape", makes sense. The classic aspect is well served with contributions from the Latin version, in terms of justice and morality.

This brings us back to the post-apartheid scenario.³³ I will then go straight away to the, unspoken or not, need for *satisfactio*, compensation, reparations. But here is an *aporia*.³⁴ I suggest that this unresolved crisis will open up all three themes of *Christus Victor*.

31. I here speak in very general terms. Arendt differentiates between forgiveness and reconciliation in that "whereas these two human capacities manifest themselves through singular acts directed toward specific actors, reconciliation consists in the upending search for 'understanding', a coming to terms with one's fate that prompts action instead of resignation. To understand is the attempt to make oneself at home in the world, to seek meaning: it is an open-ended exercise with no final conclusion." Guisan, "Political Forgiveness", 148.

32. Guisan, "Political Forgiveness", 145.

33. I would also argue that the very fact that we today are able to talk about a post-apartheid scenario should still take us by surprise. See Hans S.A. Engdahl, *Miraklet: Sydafrikas väg till försoning och fred*, Stockholm 1996.

34. ἀπορία means difficulty of passing, difficulty, lack of resources.

One essential part of reconciliation is that of reparations. How do you atone for somebody who has been killed? How do you assess reparations in the case of genocide? Having the South African TRC in mind, Mark Sanders comments as follows:

We are faced with an aporia: on the one hand, no monetary price can be attached to the suffering of victims: on the other hand, there must be reparation in acknowledgement of those who have suffered and who continue to suffer. [...] The aporia can be intensified: there must be reparation: there can never be (adequate) reparation.³⁵

Sanders is at pains to demonstrate that the need for reparations is not just another expression of how to overcome racial injustice. It is much more radical than that: “Such a situation calls for decision – of the type described by Derrida in ‘Force of Law’, where responsibility lies in deciding in a ‘night of non-knowledge’, and where justice is irreducible to the application of a law, or any other calculus.”³⁶

The TRC report contained seven volumes. “Volume 7, almost 1,000 pages in extent, lists the name of each victim recognized by the commission, along with a brief account of the human rights violations that he or she suffered.” This is “*the* text for reparation”.³⁷ A poem of Antjie Krog appears at the head of this volume. I quote the first lines:

because of you
this country no longer lies
between us but within.

Originally placed in her book on the TRC, clearly representing a white woman of Afrikaner descent, the poem here comes to represent all human beings.³⁸ Again, we are reminded that life is *aporia* and cannot be fulfilled by us humans in a simple, straightforward way. But all should be involved. Sanders concludes: “There is a more powerful reason, however, to embark on the course of reparation and responsibility that I have outlined: like mourning and condolence, it may foster bonds of responsibility-in-complicity.”³⁹

35. Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission*, Johannesburg 2007, 115–116.

36. Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 116. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’”, *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990), 921–1045.

37. Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 114, 145.

38. Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 135. Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*, London 1999.

39. Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 145.

It is now possible to draw up a scenario of how Aulén's three models can be understood in the light of this *aporia*. I will not do that here, but merely give a few hints regarding the classic and the Latin model. For, from a general, Christian point of view there is a call that something can and must be done.

The Latin model makes clear that sin and guilt are facts that can be measured and are part of the forensic reality. The ten commandments are valid before God as well as humans (*coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*). Christ, in his humanity, is called to take on the whole burden of sin and guilt of the world. In order to at least be able to take into account, to get some perspective on what is at stake, without ever being able to make a proper assessment, the broken line in God's salvific act could be justified.⁴⁰

But behind it all, the classic model is looming. It has, it could be argued, the Latin model as a supposition. But now it is about God's definite, once and for all act in Jesus Christ. I have talked about this model as leading to passivity. This need not be the case. Two examples from the early church indicate that Paul's words "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" could be taken literally. If God gave everything to have this problem solved, humans could follow suit and do the same. What I mean is, that from early on there were Christians who were prepared to give their entire life to the Lord. The ascetic movement, the importance of which could hardly be exaggerated, invited many to give everything, all their lives to God. To them, the classic model would not make them feel like on-lookers, they could whole-heartedly take this declaration to their hearts. Secondly, the same could be said of those becoming martyrs. Again, one could hardly overestimate the importance of the martyr church during the first three centuries, or at any other time, like our own.⁴¹

In other words, on the basis of *Christus Victor*, there are ways to respond to the *aporia* of not least the post-apartheid situation in South Africa. Things can, are, and will be done.⁴²

Even when one allows oneself to dissect a text to the extent that I have done here, the text remains intact as it is. And it is a great text, standing the test of times. ▲

40. One could here also actualize Karl Jaspers' (1883–1969) words: "There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge." Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, Westport, CT 1978, 32.

41. As part of the early church, Origen may serve as a good example of both. His notion of *apokatástasis*, "the restitution of all and everything", speaks in this direction, as does his acute awareness of martyrdom. See Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works*, Mahwah, NJ 1979.

42. See Sharlene Swartz, *Another Country: Everyday Social Restitution*, Cape Town 2017.

SUMMARY

The contention is that *Christus Victor* is a complete piece of work, which reflects the various aspects of God's liberating act in Jesus Christ, but which, indeed, is ready to be exposed in the public arena. First, I revisit parts of *Christus Victor*, especially the church father Irenaeus, representing an early understanding of the atonement. Here, Aulén sees contours of what he calls the classic model of the atonement, favouring this model, clearly at the expense of the Latin and the subjective models. But all three models have meaning and his point of departure from Irenaeus gives a solid base. Secondly, *Christus Victor* may not be left in isolation. When Aulén says towards the end of the Second World War that *the continuity is unbroken* between his work on the atonement and his later public discourse on *lex creationis*, God's law of creation, I protest. This cannot be. I then make use of tools of deconstruction, taken from Derrida, as follows: *disclosure*, *displacement*, bringing in a *new theory*, and *dispersal*. Breaking up what was deemed as a watertight continuity, I declared *Christus Victor* to be the new theory (new in the sense that almost all who are not in the inner circle of church and theology never heard about it), which now must come out on top. Thirdly, two examples are given of how the model of atonement operates in the public arena: on political forgiveness (Hannah Arendt) and on reparations (Mark Sanders); the former relating to a post-Second World War setting, the latter to post-apartheid South Africa.