

Atonement and Moral Apocalypticism:

William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*

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I

In this essay I shall be discussing William Styron's depiction of a theologically significant incident in his recent novel *Sophie's Choice* (London: Corgi Books, 1979). Since our discussion will approach this novel from a theological, as opposed to a purely literary, standpoint, it behoves us to begin by specifying the theological context of the argument that we hope to develop in this essay. This essay is concerned with the doctrine of the Atonement. More specifically: we shall argue that Styron's narration of the episode which gives his book its title provides a basis for a criticism of all purely 'subjective' interpretations of the Atonement. The adherent of a purely 'subjective' conception of the Atonement emphasizes the manner in which the believer makes the work of Christ his own — the saving significance of Christ's work is reckoned by the 'subjectivist' to lie in the ways in which individuals *appropriate* that work. That is to say, Christ's saving work takes the form of a 'subjective' process; it is, in the words of Donald Baillie (a notable modern proponent of the 'subjective' conception), a "reconciling of us to God through a persuasion in our hearts that is . . . a realizing of His eternal love".¹

'Subjective' understandings of the Atonement have come to prevail in recent years. This is mainly because 'objective' conceptions are invariably bound up with incarnational christologies, and incarnational christologies no longer totally dominate the theological consensus. Instead, so-called 'functional' christologies tend increasingly to be in vogue, and since a 'subjective' understanding of the Atonement accords better with a 'functional' christology than it does with a fully incarnational (or 'ontological') christology, there has been a recognizable drift away from 'objective' conceptions of the Atonement.² My purpose in this essay, however, will be to show, *via* an examination of this aspect of Styron's novel, that those theologians who seek to eschew an 'objective' interpretation of the Atonement in favour of a 'subjective' one only succeed in entering a whole minefield of problems: 'subjective' conceptions are so inherently problematic that our only real hope for an adequate Christian soteriology seems to lie in the direction of an 'objective' doctrine of the Atonement.

Styron's novel, *Sophie's Choice*, contains an account of a man who sought to reconcile himself to God — by bringing himself to commit a most evil deed. Sophie Zawistowska, the heroine of the novel, was arrested in Poland during the Second World War, and has been deported to Auschwitz, along with her children Jan and Eva. Arriving at Auschwitz railway station they are faced with the dreaded 'selection' procedure, some to be consigned immediately to the gas chambers, others to slavery. The 'selection' is conducted by an SS doctor, Jemand von Niemand:

'Du bist eine Polack', said the doctor. *'Bist du auch eine Kommunisten?'* . . . instead of keeping her mouth shut she said, *'Ich bin Polnisch! In Krakow geboren!'* Then she blurted helplessly, 'I'm not Jewish! Or my children — they're not Jewish either'. And added, 'They are racially pure. They speak German'. Finally she announced, 'I'm a Christian. I'm a devout Catholic'.

. . . she heard Dr Jemand von Niemand say, 'So you're not a Communist. You're a believer'. *'Ja, mein Hauptmann. I believe in Christ'*. . . 'So you believe in Christ the Redeemer?' the doctor said. . . 'Did he not say, 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me?' He turned back to her, with the twitchy methodicalness of a drunk.

Sophie . . . was about to attempt a reply when the doctor said, 'You may keep one of your children'.

'Bitte?' said Sophie.

'You may keep one of your children', he repeated. 'The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?'

. . . Her thought processes dwindled, ceased. Then she felt her legs crumple. 'I can't choose! I can't choose!' She began to scream . . .

The doctor was aware of unwanted attention. 'Shut up!' he ordered. 'Hurry now and choose. Choose, god dammit, or I'll send them both over there. Quick!'

'Don't make me choose', she heard herself plead in a whisper, 'I can't choose'.

'Send them both over there, then', the doctor said to the aide, *'nach links'*.

'Mama!' She heard Eva's . . . cry at the instant that she thrust the child away from her and rose from the concrete with a clumsy stumbling motion. 'Take the baby!' she called out. 'Take my little girl!'

At this point the aide — with a careful gentleness that Sophie would try without success to forget — tugged at Eva's

hand and led her away into the waiting legion of the damned. She would forever retain a dim impression that the child had continued to look, beseeching. (pp 641-3)

This, then, is Sophie's choice. Words are totally inadequate to the task of representing to us the truth of the unspeakable darkness and shame of von Niemand's deed. The nature of this deed is such that it begs us to affirm the hard words of Professor Ulrich Simon (whose father perished in Auschwitz):

I do not myself believe that there can be forgiveness for Auschwitz. . . . Not only the monstrosity, but also the impersonal 'nothingness' of the evil render this remission immoral and impossible.³

Any attempt to comprehend rationally the enormity of what went on in Auschwitz is bound to be futile – as George Steiner points out, the world of the extermination camps is a world that is "extra-territorial to reason".⁴ The opacity to reason which characterizes the deeds of those who ran these camps precludes the possibility of making a straightforward moral evaluation of individuals like Dr von Niemand. The great merit of Styron's work is that he does not attempt such a moral appraisal of von Niemand: Styron seems to be implicitly aware that we do not possess a vocabulary that is capable of plumbing the depths of such barbarism. Instead, Styron provides a penetrating analysis of the motives that Dr von Niemand may have had for forcing this gruesome choice on Sophie:

And what, in the private misery of his heart, I think he most intensely lusted to do was to inflict upon Sophie, or someone like her – some tender and perishable Christian – a totally unpardonable sin. It is precisely because he had yearned with such pain to commit this terrible sin that I believe that the doctor was exceptional, perhaps unique, among his fellow automata: if he was not a good man or a bad man, *he still retained a potential capacity for goodness, as well as evil, and his strivings were essentially religious.* (pp 643-4. Italics added.)

Later Sophie found out from one of the other inmates of the camp, who knew the doctor from her youth in Berlin, that Dr von Niemand was "a steadfast churchgoer and that he had always planned to enter the ministry. A mercenary father forced him into medicine" (p 644). Styron then goes on to say:

I have always assumed that when he encountered Sophie, Dr Jemand von Niemand was undergoing the crisis of his life: cracking apart like bamboo, disintegrating at the very moment that he was reaching out for spiritual salvation. (p 646)

The doctor's crisis had been precipitated by the nature of the ter-

rible work he had to do in the 'selections'. He "began to drink, to acquire sloppy eating habits, even to miss God. *Wo, wo ist der lebende Gott? Where is the God of my fathers?*" (*ibid.*) The doctor found the answer on the day he encountered Sophie and her children:

. . . the revelation made him radiant with hope. It had to do with the matter of sin, or rather, it had to do with the absence of sin, and his own realization that the absence of sin and the absence of God were inseparably intertwined. No sin! He had suffered boredom and anxiety even revulsion, but no sense of sin from the bestial crimes he had been party to, nor had he felt that in sending thousands of the wretched innocent to oblivion he had transgressed against divine law. All of his depravity had been enacted in a vacuum of sinless and business-like godlessness, while his soul thirsted for beatitude. (*ibid.*)

Dr von Niemand, then, had to find a way of restoring his faith in God. To do this he found that it was necessary to –

. . . affirm his capacity for evil, by committing the most intolerable sin that he was able to conceive. . . . Goodness could come later. But first a great sin. One whose glory lay in its subtle magnanimity – a choice. (pp 646-7)

Styron's novel is a remarkable study in the psychology of morals. The perceptive characterization of Dr von Niemand, showing as it does a man who has to regain his sense of being a sinner as a precondition of *experiencing* a reconciliation with God, has important implications not only for the doctrine of the Atonement, but also for the Christian understanding of sin. It has long been normative in the Christian tradition to characterize sin in terms of our refusal to accept a divine bestowal of grace or as a rupture in the relationship between God and man that is of man's own doing. Thus, in a notable contemporary treatise on sin, it is asserted that:

Grace is proffered in some way to each man, since God wishes all men to be saved. At any rate, each man is assumed in the order of grace and destined to a supernatural end. That is why, in our world, sin always possesses a supernatural character; even when, on account of its content, sin might be called natural, it remains supernatural, inasmuch as *it is a negative answer to a supernatural bestowal of grace.*⁵

Without seeking to impugn his claim that sin has a supernatural dimension, we have (I think) no alternative but to regard as too simplistic Schoonenberg's understanding of sin as "a negative answer to a supernatural bestowal of grace". In the case of Jemand von Niemand we have (*pace* Schoonenberg) a person who sins not

so much because he gives “a negative answer to a supernatural bestowal of grace”, but because he believes that the very *experience* of such a negative answer is a necessary prerequisite of being redeemed by God. The SS doctor craves God’s proffer of grace, but at the same time he believes that he can justify the receipt of this supernatural grace only if he first descends to the depths of human sinfulness. Schoonenberg’s characterization of sin, it seems, overlooks the possibility that someone like von Niemand might actually regard sin as the essential pre-condition of the bestowal of divine grace. A penetrating literary treatment of human wrong-doing like *Sophie’s Choice* serves as a reminder to philosophers and theologians that we have to acknowledge the heterogeneity of human motivation if we are to formulate an adequate conception of sin and sinfulness.

The theologian writing on the subject of sin and evil cannot really afford to ignore the writings of the great dramatists and novelists – the works of a Sophocles or a Dostoyevsky may be able to teach us more about this subject than many a scholarly treatise. If the theologian fails to do justice to the complexity and particularity of human motivation, then his or her characterization of sin and human sinfulness will fail to show us the truth of what we are, both as we are in ourselves, and as we are in relation to others and to God.

Sophie’s Choice, however, is more than just a reminder to theologians that it is possible for the experience of sin and the experience of salvation to go together very closely; close enough, in the case of Dr von Niemand, for them to be inextricably bound up with each other. For Styron’s depiction of von Niemand’s horrific quest for atonement is of crucial significance for our interpretation of the salvation wrought by God in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I I I

A purely ‘subjective’ conception of the Atonement can never really be adequate to the *awfulness* of the evil perpetrated by the von Niemand of this world. The tormentor of Sophie Zawistowska is a man who, in a way that is all too human, seeks the *experience* of redemption by first expending his capacity for evil. As long as we subscribe to a merely ‘subjective’ doctrine of the Atonement, i.e. a conception which lays stress on *the individual’s personally distinctive way of appropriating the work of Christ*, then we will have to concede the possibility that some individuals will appropriate this saving work in perverse and even cruel ways. Such individuals may do the most terrible things simply in order to undergo some form of catharsis, or inner purgation, which (they hope) will

free them once and for all for the experience of forgiveness. They seek the moral apocalypse that will cleanse their souls.

Our task in this essay will be to ask what, from a theological standpoint, can be said about this moral apocalypticism, which leads its exponents to believe that man can attain to his salvation precisely by succumbing to the depraved impulses that lurk in the depths of human nature. Our answer to this question will not take the form of an attempt to articulate a sustained perception: this is not possible, because we possess no more than a few glimpses, from several different angles, of the belief and practice of the moral apocalypticist. Rather, the force of our argument will be cumulative, in that it is hoped that each succeeding vision will contribute to an overall conception of the essence of moral apocalypticism.

First, the moral apocalypticist conceives of salvation in essentially *individual* terms: he is concerned, above all, with the conquest of evil in his own soul. In so doing, he goes against one of the fundamental tenets of the Gospel message, namely, that man's salvation consists in the creation of a universal community of saints, that deliverance from the power of evil can only be achieved in solidarity and fellowship with our fellow human beings. To quote from the following summary of evidence in the New Testament, provided by Edward Schillebeeckx in the second volume of his magisterial work on Christology:

. . . at the heart of the New Testament lies the recognition that we are redeemed for brotherly love. . . . to quote three passages: 'We have passed from death to life because we love the brethren' (I John 3: 14); 'that we should believe in his son Jesus Christ and love one another' (I John 3: 23); 'he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked' (I John 2: 6). Redemption is freedom for self-surrender in love for fellowmen; that is abiding in God . . . love of one's neighbour, is the public manifestation of the state of being redeemed.⁶

Von Niemand, whose understanding of redemption relegates the saving work of Christ to an essentially private sphere, is unable to appreciate that love for our fellowmen and women is the inescapable concomitant of Christian salvation. Lacking this appreciation, he imposes a tragic choice on Sophie in the vain hope that this tragedy will somehow give him the key to his own salvation. What he fails to see is that Sophie's tragedy is *his* tragedy; that in failing to acknowledge the humanity of his innocent victims he abrogates his own humanity; that in dealing out death to them he is really signalling the death of his own capacity to love. He is blind to the

truth, which lies at the heart of the Christian faith, that the death of our own capacity to love is death *simpliciter*).⁷ If von Niemand had instead realized that Christ's saving work frees us to love our own brothers and sisters, he would not have sought his salvation in a cataclysmic experience produced by a wilful descent into the mire of human viciousness and savagery.

Second, the moral apocalypticist seems to assume (even if only unconsciously) that he must undergo experiences of a certain type as a pre-condition of being delivered from evil. He believes – implicitly or explicitly – that he needs to have experiences of a specific kind as a pre-condition of being delivered from evil. He thinks that he must subject himself to these experiences as part of a cathartic process associated with the possession of salvation. The crux of the moral apocalypticist's position is that he believes that salvation is something to be grasped, it is something that can be possessed *if only* he can find 'the precious metal that lies in the dirt'. Salvation, on the moral apocalypticist's view, is basically something that can be striven for, something that men can quest for in the way that they look for gold or oil. This grasping after salvation is a consequence of a deeper failure on the part of the moral apocalypticist: namely, his refusal or his inability to commit the future into the hands of God. He fails to realize that it is the prerogative of God, and God alone, to determine our way to salvation. Instead, the moral apocalypticist tries to usurp this divine prerogative by forcing a crisis – in a place and at a time of his *own* choosing – in which the issue of salvation can be totally and finally resolved. In this respect he is like Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, who seeks "to practise more than heavenly power permits".⁸ The moral apocalypticist is not unqualifiedly Faustian, however: Faustus forms a pact with the Devil in order that he might become like God, whereas the moral apocalypticist has no real desire to become like God – on the contrary, he casts his lot with the Devil in the hope that God will fight the Devil for possession of his soul. But Dr von Niemand is nonetheless like Faustus in that he is:

"a man who tried to do what only God can do, a man who refused to leave to God what ought to be left to him".⁹

The Faustian character, according to Phillips, lacks the religious virtue of patience. He cannot wait on God. He fails to perceive that God's way for us may not coincide with the way that we choose for ourselves. The von Niemand of this world are impatient to the point of wanting the question of salvation to be resolved in an instant, of wanting to bypass the ordinary but still arduous routes that an individual might have to traverse in order to meet his or her salvation. In his impatience the moral apocalypticist

tries to make salvation a matter of policy or strategy. Why does the moral apocalypticist lack the religious virtue of patience? The most likely answer here, it seems, is that he fails to commit his future into the hands of God because he cannot accept that deliverance from the power of evil is a free and undeserved gift from God. Moral apocalypticism is contrary to the central tenets of the Christian faith, in that Christianity sees faith as a gratuitous gift from God, and not as something that a man can mechanically attain for himself by having experiences of a certain sort. As Ernst Käsemann vividly puts it, for Christians: “. . . faith is a door to salvation history which has not been pushed open by them but wonderfully open to them”.¹⁰ A man does not have to expend the capacity for sin within himself before he can be redeemed. The view that sin is a capacity that has to be expended before salvation can be attained rests on the mistaken assumption that sin is something quantifiable, something which can be spent. It overlooks the truth, fundamental to soteriology, that though sin manifests itself in exterior actions, it is essentially a *power*, a power which can be overcome only through the sovereign grace of God. Some men and women *may* have to experience the devastating forces within themselves before they are redeemed, but then others may not. There is no sanction, either in the Gospel message or the ecclesiastical tradition, for the absolute prescription: ‘to be saved, first plunge yourself into the abyss of sin’.

Third, and this point is bound up with the notion of sin as an expendable capacity, the moral apocalypticist appears to have a legalistic conception of God’s ways of dealing with the world. Thus, for example, Dr von Niemand believes that he must transgress against divine law prior to experiencing divine forgiveness. ‘Only the sick need a physician’, he seems to say, ‘let me therefore transgress so that I may need the divine physician’. The essence of this position is that the sinner has first to plunge into the morass before God will deign to extricate him or her. At this juncture the moral apocalypticist may wish to advert to certain strands of Pauline theology as a way of securing the theological foundations of his apocalypticism. In particular, he may draw our attention to the following verse from Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*:

Law came in to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. (5: 20)

W G Kummel has given this verse the following explication:

. . . the law is also counted among those powers which hold man in the world and try to hinder his turning to God. . . . Paul dares not only to describe this state of affairs. . . . but to trace it to God’s will, because he can understand all events ulti-

mately as arising from God's saving intention and as in harmony with his plan of salvation. . . . Thus, in accordance with God's will, it is only by means of the law that man actually becomes a transgressor and thus guilty, "that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world guilty before God" (Romans 3: 19). But therewith also is created the pre-condition for the intervention of divine grace: "where sin abounded, grace was more abundant. . . ." (Romans 5: 20)¹¹

According to Paul, therefore, it is part of God's plan of salvation to have more transgression in order that there can be more grace. But, and herein lies the rub, is it not possible to say that exactly the same Pauline principle can be discerned in von Niemand's decision to transgress so that he might become the recipient of God's mercy and forgiveness? It would not of course be possible for von Niemand (or anybody else, for that matter) to advance this as some sort of theological justification for his cruel deed. But is it not somehow still the case that the von Niemand of this world lend substance to Paul's affirmation that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more"? Simply attempting to answer this question will involve us in the complexities of Pauline exegesis, in problems surrounding the legalistic and juridical conceptual framework used by Paul to articulate his soteriology, and perhaps even in the question of theodicy. I have talked about von Niemand's deed in the context of Paul's affirmation in Romans 5: 20 simply to bring to mind the haunting possibility that, perhaps unbeknownst even to himself, Dr von Niemand, the thwarted would-be minister of Christ, may in fact have clung to a view of salvation that possessed a somewhat Pauline resonance.

But we need not entertain this possibility for too long. For if we did impute to von Niemand a notion of divine salvation that was roughly consonant with Paul's, then we (and Dr von Niemand – if he did in fact possess this notion) would have failed to grasp an essential feature of Paul's conception of God's salvific plan for mankind, namely, the *eschatological* perspective from which Paul talks of this plan. As Rudolf Bultmann makes clear, Paul articulates his soteriology from the standpoint of ". . . the decisive eschatological event in which the time of salvation, 'the acceptable time' (2 Cor 6: 1), has dawned. . . ." ¹² And precisely because (for Paul) this eschatological event has dawned, Bultmann continues, "grace may be spoken of [by Paul] as a personified power which works against the power of sin and takes over its lost command: 'but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin (had) reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 5: 20f)". ¹³ In *Sophie's Choice* Styron shows von Niemand to

have in mind, even if only unconsciously, some sort of divine salvific plan. The plan which von Niemand entertains is, however, totally lacking in any kind of eschatological perspective, and cannot therefore be likened to Paul's salvation-scheme. For if von Niemand's salvation-scheme had possessed a properly Pauline eschatological perspective, then the SS doctor would surely have realized that the time of salvation has indeed dawned in the life, teaching and fate of Jesus of Nazareth, and that he would not therefore need to embark on his quest for a moral apocalypse.

There is another reason why we should not impute to the moral apocalypticist a salvation-scheme that accords with Paul's own understanding of God's plan for man's salvation. In Paul's scheme of things, it is *God* who uses evil to make real the love of Christ, whereas in Styron's story it is a *man* (i.e. von Niemand), who in a vain attempt to bring the love of Christ into his own life, so uses evil. Consequently, any endeavour to ground the moral apocalypticist's salvation-scheme in Paul's soteriology is bound to end in failure – someone like von Niemand may be able to cobble together fragmentary insights from Paul, but the guiding principle of the apostle's soteriology (viz. that God, and God alone, is the architect of our salvation) is totally absent from the moral apocalypticist's understanding of divine salvation. This, however, is only to be expected: the moral apocalypticist, we have argued, is an implicitly Faustian character, and thus he will not let God be God, he will not place his destiny in the hands of his Maker and Saviour. In a moment I shall return to the moral apocalypticist's failure to incorporate an eschatological perspective in his reflection on God's saving activity. For the time being I want to make the point that the moral apocalypticist's belief that he can acquire his entitlement to divine forgiveness is against the essential spirit of the Christian faith. According to this faith, the vicious circle of disordered passion and self-deception (i.e. sin) cannot be broken in this legalistic way – divine grace is not manifested in legal conditions, rather it introduces man into an altogether new order, an order of love, where legal conditions do not obtain. This of course is an essentially Pauline view, and it is reflected in the following passage from John Oman's classic work, *Grace and Personality*:

We are justified because by faith we enter the world of a gracious God, out of which the old hard legal requirements, with the old hard boundaries of our personality and self-regarding claim of rights, have disappeared, a world which is the household of our Father where order and power and ultimate reality are of love and not of law.

In that world atonement . . . is a new word with new and

healing moral conditions, where legal ideas of meeting God's judgment fall away from us.¹⁴

The tragedy of Sophie and her innocent child is that in Auschwitz they met a man with just such "legal ideas of meeting God's judgment".

Fourth, and this is a point to which we have already made some reference, the moral apocalypticist has a view of divine reality and salvation that lacks an eschatological dimension. Thus, in *Sophie's Choice*, we are told that von Niemand's realization that "the absence of sin and the absence of God were inescapably intertwined" came to him as a "revelation that made him radiant with hope".¹⁵ The SS doctor, it seems, had arrived at the conclusion that he was in a position to understand divine mercy and salvation. But what he had discovered was nothing more than a form of knowledge, a gnosis – albeit a knowledge sufficient to enable him to try to force the hand of God by tormenting Sophie. In theological terms, what the moral apocalypticist does is to displace the God who is to come for the God who is; he allows *knowledge* of the God who is to supplant *hope* in the God who is to come. Hope, or what Paul Ricoeur calls the "passion for the possible", is open to the radically new, and the person who has this hope will not succumb to the moral apocalypticist's essentially manipulative outlook on salvation history. Such an outlook, which seeks to force salvation history to a culminating-point in the here and now, is alien to the individual who has real hope: the man or woman who has this hope will be able to trust in the future of God without averting his gaze from the reality of the present. The moral apocalypticist needs to make a sustained study of Christ's temptation in the desert. In the climax of Christ's ordeal in the wilderness he is challenged by Satan to hurl himself from the pinnacle of the temple – in the words of Donald MacKinnon, Christ is asked "to put the question of his status to the test, to yield to a fundamental impatience, the end either total victory or nothingness".¹⁶ Christ was able to resist the lure of this primal impatience because he had yielded his destiny to the God of the future. The patience that issues in the enunciation of the words, 'Thy will be done', is a costly patience; and the cost may not be restricted to the forfeiture of victory – it may even involve the surrender of one's own life (as indeed was the case with Christ). From such patience is born real hope, the radical hope which is often a 'hope against hope' and which enables us stammeringly to affirm that evil will not have the last word in human history because God has given us the victory in and through his Son Jesus Christ. The sad truth of the matter, of course, is that von Niemand is in a situation where it is simply not possible to have hope – the very nature of

his job as one of Hitler's 'angels of death' precludes the possibility of having such hope. It was one of the profound ironies of concentration camp life, an irony attested to over and over again in the remarkable accounts provided by the survivors of these camps, that invariably the only people with hope in places like Auschwitz were the inmates: the administrators and guards, finding themselves in circumstances where their most depraved instincts could be given untrammelled expression, led loveless lives in which hope simply could not function as a significant category of experience. Hope is a modality of love, and where there is no love there can be no hope. And where there is no hope there can be no faith in the God of the future; and where there is no faith in the God of the future there can be no surrendering of our own future into the hands of God, no trust in the mystery of God. This is perhaps why von Niemand snatched so desperately at the chance to engineer his own salvation. His faith – for he *is* a religious man – lacks an eschatological dimension, and hence resides in the 'already' of the God who is instead of the 'not yet' of the God who is to come. Without an understanding of the God of the future, the God of the Resurrection, the God who brings about the death of death, the reality of the present becomes the only available horizon for human thought and action. And since the reality of the present, as experienced in a place like Auschwitz, is a reality characterized by death and dominated by the power of evil, man's attempt to secure his salvation within the horizon of the present is doomed to failure – he will find salvation only when the God of the future transforms the reality of the present by defeating death and depriving evil of its power. Without the God of the future there can be no genuinely Christian transformation of 'the terror of history' (to use a phrase of Mircea Eliade's). Only this God, by virtue of his saving deed on the cross of Christ, can bring about our *irreversible* deliverance from the power of evil.¹⁷

Fifth, because the moral apocalypticist lacks an eschatological faith he cannot possess a faith beyond all assurance and protection. The SS doctor is in the classic position of all failed believers – he cannot understand the silence of God. In the face of God's continuing silence, von Niemand can only lament: "Where is the God of my fathers?" (p 646). He finds the sense of abandonment generated by the absence of God too much to endure, and the harrowing choice he forces on Sophie is a manifestation of this inability to live without the reassuring and consoling presence of the God of his fathers. Von Niemand hears the scream in the night, the intermittent buzz and sizzle of the electrified fence in the distance as yet another broken victim casts himself against it in search of oblivion; he sees and smells the smoke that rises from the

chimneys of the crematoria: all these speak to him with the most shattering eloquence, but God, the God of his fathers, is silent. In Auschwitz the natural and the divine economy are being overturned, and the religious man, von Niemand, is a despairing participant in this process. Von Niemand comes to share the rueful insight reflected in these words of Goethe's Faust:

I come at last to recognize my measure,
And know the sterile desert in my breast.¹⁸

Confronted by the external hell of camp life and the internal hell of 'the sterile desert' in his breast, von Niemand finds that he cannot wait on God. In his impatience, he chooses the easier legalistic alternative of committing a ghastly crime so that God will *speak* in judgment against him, and in the hope that out of this judgment will flow the waters of grace. The mystery of God is reduced by him to the moralizing role of judge; for von Niemand there is no God of Job, no God who speaks 'out of the whirlwind'. Instead of turning in hope (real hope) to this God, the God who is heard through the categories of the concealed, the unexplained, and the arbitrary, he tries to wrest a *guarantee* from this consoling, moralizing deity. There are remarkable affinities (but also a crucial difference) between the story of Job and the story of von Niemand. Where Job is concerned, God and Satan strike a wager which involves the use of suffering as a means of putting Job's faith to the test. The story's perspective is thoroughly theocentric. By contrast, the perspective in the story of von Niemand is essentially anthropocentric — in effect, von Niemand makes a wager with Satan to use (Sophie's) suffering as a means of putting the God of salvation to the test. Job begins by thinking that he knows the ways of the God of his fathers, but gradually his experience of undeserved suffering compels him to tread the path of unknowing. He arrives at a faith that is beyond all purely personal concerns. Von Niemand, on the other hand, begins by experiencing the silence of God, and thus his starting-point is really the end-point of Job's pilgrimage. The SS doctor cannot endure this silence, and so he craves a gnosis which will show him once again the ways of the God of his fathers. He seeks to make a transition from a state of unknowing to a state in which he can be justified, consoled and comforted. In seeking the faith of his fathers he loses the opportunity of acquiring a genuine faith and of undergoing a true *metanoia*. While Job spurns the consoling platitudes of his comforters, and learns to love God's creation as it is, von Niemand is unable to achieve anything more than a loveless attempt at justification. The God von Niemand seeks is an idol. What he does to Sophie is not only a crime against humanity; it is also a blasphemy against the

true God. Both Job and von Niemand long for certainty. Job learns to live with the unknowable God who comes in the shape of a whirlwind. Von Niemand, unable to trust in the God of the future, never manages to overcome his nostalgic longing for a protecting father figure.

I V

For all these reasons I believe that we have to conclude that the position of the moral apocalypticist is deeply at variance with the central affirmations of the Christian faith. This is so because the moral apocalypticist, is so far as he is a man of faith, and to the extent that he subscribes to a doctrine of the Atonement, is committed to a purely 'subjective' conception of the Atonement – he longs for a new insight, a reordering of his passions which he construes as the overcoming of the evil that resides in his will. That is to say, he looks for a personal experience which vouchsafes to him the bestowal of divine salvation. He will not let God be God; he wants God to be the author of man's salvation, yes, but at the same time he wants the book of salvation to be written according to a plot that is really of man's own devising. The upshot of this is that only an 'objective' understanding of the Atonement can do justice to the fundamental truth of the Christian faith that the grace of God which liberates mankind from the power of sin is a free and sovereign grace. As a result of God's saving deed on the cross of Christ, man is *irreversibly* delivered from the power of evil.¹⁹ There is, therefore, no need for man to plunge himself into the abyss of sin in the delusionary expectation that by so doing he can deserve God's forgiveness. The salvation proffered to mankind by God through Jesus Christ does not depend on our capacity to recognize the way things have been, are and will be.²⁰ If salvation is independent of our human cognitive mechanisms, then we can only wait on the hidden God who makes salvation possible for us. As St Augustine said so wisely:

. . . since man cannot rise of his own free will . . . let us hold with steadfast faith the right hand of God stretched out to us from above, even our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us wait for him with certain hope, and long for him with burning charity.²¹

It is precisely this certain hope and burning charity which the moral apocalypticist lacks.

1 *God was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p 198. It should be stressed that we are not seeking to question the intrinsic coherence or plausibility of 'subjective' conceptions as such. Rather we shall be attempting to show that 'subjective' conceptions cannot stand on their own, that in addition to the "persuasion in our hearts" that Baillie talks about,

Christ's saving work must be said to possess a dimension that is independent of the manner in which we appropriate this work. In other words: the saving efficacy of Christ's work can be guaranteed only if the Atonement is conceived 'objectively', and not merely 'subjectively'.

- 2 The question whether it is possible to justify this shift away from 'objective' conceptions of the Atonement is precisely the question that lies at the heart of the well-known Lampe-MacKinnon debate on the Resurrection. Cf. G.W.H. Lampe and D M MacKinnon, *The Resurrection: a Dialogue* (London: Mowbray, 1966) For arguments in favour of detaching the doctrine of the Atonement from an incarnational christology, cf. Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1974), chap 4; and John A T Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM, 1973), pp 230ff.
- 3 *A Theology of Auschwitz* (London: SPCK, 1978), p 71
- 4 *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–66* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p 203
- 5 Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1965), p 21. Italics added
- 6 *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1980), p 203
- 7 Eberhard Jungel, *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), *passim*
- 8 *Doctor Faustus*, in Christopher Marlowe, *Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Dent, 1976), quoted in D Z Phillips, *Through a Darkening Glass: Philosophy, Literature, and Culture Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p 90. I am deeply indebted to Phillips' masterly essay, 'Knowledge, Patience and Faust', *op cit*, pp 89–112, for several insights into the nature of the Faustian complex. It was Rowan Williams who drew my attention to the importance of Phillips' essay.
- 9 Phillips, *op cit*, p 90
- 10 *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1980), p 104
- 11 *The Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1974), pp 184–5
- 12 *Theology of the New Testament: Vol I* (London: SCM, 1952), p 290. Paul, of course, equates God's deed of salvation with the event of Christ's obedience on the cross. Cf Philippians 2: 8; and Romans 5: 15-21
- 13 *loc cit*.
- 14 *Grace and Personality* (Cambridge: University Press, 1919), p 206
- 15 Von Niemand's realization represents a negation of the Pauline view that the ways of God are beyond all understanding (Philippians 4: 7)
- 16 *Creon and Antigone: Ethical Problems of Nuclear Warfare* (London: The Menard Press, 1982), p 26
- 17 Cf Käsemann, *op cit* p 139, where Christ is described as being "... in person the irreversible 'for us' of God". My understanding of the God of the future is deeply indebted to the writings of Paul Ricoeur. Cf especially the essays in Parts IV and V of his collection *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974). Ricoeur has, by the way, acknowledged his indebtedness to Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. It should be noted that the distinction between the God of the future and the God who is, is not meant to be absolute – we use it simply to draw attention to the moral apocalypticist's rather one-sided affirmation of the God who is, which results in a failure on his part to recognize the importance of the God who is to come.
- 18 Goethe, *Faust/Part One*, trans. P Wayne (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p 91 Quoted in Phillips' *op cit*. p 111, which contains a splendid interpretation of this passage.
- 19 Cf the quotation of Käsemann's cited in footnote 17 above.

- 20 On the fundamental dichotomy between salvation and our capacity to *comprehend* the true nature of this salvation, cf Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), p 93. The principal theme in our essay has been the denial that man can be the author of his own salvation, and that our understanding of the Atonement cannot therefore be merely 'subjective'. Simone Weil has shown exactly why it is that a purely 'subjective' interpretation of the Atonement will never be really adequate to the true nature of our salvation:
- A hurtful act is the transference to others of the degradation which we bear in ourselves. This is why we are inclined to commit such acts as a way of deliverance. *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, p 65).
- 21 'On Free Will', in J H S Burleigh (trans), *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p 169

William Warburton: An Eighteenth Century

Bishop Fallen among Post-Structuralists

John Milbank

It is hard to imagine a professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, reading, with mounting excitement, the latest work by one of the present episcopal bench of the Church of England. One should of course be less surprised to discover that a book by one of their 18th century forebears has been a stimulus on the recent French philosophical scene. The work in question is *The Divine Legation of Moses*; written by William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester and literary controversialist in 1738. It was first set upon by Frenchmen in 1744, when the section of the work dealing with the origin of language was removed from its original theological context and translated by Leonard des Malpeines as the *Essai sur les Hieroglyphes des Egyptiens*. Warburton's subsequent influence on thought concerning language has been compared to that of Saussure in our own day, it is felt at many places in the *Encyclopédie*, and in the writings of Condillac and Rousseau. With the revival of interest in the problematic of the origin of language in the climate of Post-Structuralism, Malpeines edition was republished in Paris in 1977, smothered with critical commentary by Patrick Tort and Jacques Derrida.¹ For the latter Warburton has proved a significant influence.