

Article

Narrative and Atonement: The Ministry of Reconciliation in the Work of James H. Cone

Jonathan C. Rutledge 

Institute for Quantitative Social Science, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA;
jonathan_rutledge@fas.harvard.edu

Abstract: Contemporary analytic theological discussions of atonement do not attend extensively to questions of how narrative might relate to the atoning work of Christ. Liberation theologians, on the other hand, utilize narrative in their scholarly method regularly and often employ it when discussing atonement or reconciliation. This essay argues that analytic theologians should consider the notion of narrative (and narrative *identity*) as a mechanism of atonement in the broad sense of the term introduced when William Tyndale coined ‘atonement’ to translate 2 Corinthians 5. I then offer some psychological grounds for thinking that reframing one’s self-narrative in terms of a transcendent narrative is often conducive to human flourishing, and I consider the work of James H. Cone as an instance of such transcendent narrative reframing at work.

Keywords: atonement; suffering; narrative; identity; James Cone; liberation theology; analytic theology; defeat of evil; cognitive science of religion



Citation: Rutledge, Jonathan C. 2022. Narrative and Atonement: The Ministry of Reconciliation in the Work of James H. Cone. *Religions* 13: 985. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100985>

Academic Editor: Joshua C. Thurow

Received: 11 August 2022

Accepted: 17 October 2022

Published: 19 October 2022

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1. Introduction

Due to a preoccupation with model building, analytic theological discussions of atonement tend to home in on questions of the *mechanisms* of atonement.¹ And while the mechanisms posited range widely—e.g., penal substitution, vicarious penitence, *Christus Victor*, moral exemplarism²—relatively little attention has been given to how incorporating the narratives of scripture into one’s own self-narrative can serve as a mechanism of atonement.³

This dearth of attention to narrative in analytic theological accounts of atonement may seem surprising given that, as (Finley and Seachris 2021) have pointed out, narrative has been prevalent throughout much of contemporary theology—e.g., black theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, queer theology, and, of course, *narrative* theology (See Finley and Seachris (2021)). Nevertheless, there is a regrettable lack of substantial engagement with such theologians from within the analytic tradition, a lack that this paper hopes partially to address.⁴

To that end, I offer a framework within which we can better understand how narrative might be woven into a mechanism of atonement. In particular, I argue that if we allow ‘atonement’ to be used in a broad enough sense—specifically, a sense fitting well with the word’s historical origin—then much contemporary work in the aforementioned types of liberation theology can be seen to be atonement work in this narrative sense.

I begin in Section 1 by spelling out a bit of what I mean by a narrative *identity*. My reason for emphasizing identity, as opposed to narrative in general, is just the intuition that union with God involves union between persons, and who I am, narratively speaking, determines in part my ability to love and be loved by God (i.e., a form of union).⁵ In other words, I expect that the stories we tell and believe about ourselves and our relationship to the divine make a relevant difference to our ability to be united to God and to thrive in that union. As a result, if it is possible to change those self-narratives—i.e., to reframe our

narrative identities—and if such changes would enable greater ultimate union between human agents and God, then bringing about such changes amounts to atoning work.

After summing up my notion of narrative identity and gesturing at some recent interdisciplinary psychology literature indicating how the incorporation of transcendent, religious narratives into one's self-narrative correlates with increased virtue and meaning-making capacities, we turn directly (in Section 3) to questions of atonement. There, I distinguish two senses of 'atonement'—a broad and a narrow sense—and offer a way to connect the broad sense of atonement with narrative identity as a possible mechanism of atonement via the theological notion of *participation* with God in the ministry of reconciliation. Next, in Section 4, I look at the work of James H. Cone as a paradigm example of narrative identity at work as a mechanism of atonement, and lastly (in Section 5), I discuss some objections or misunderstandings.

2. Narrative Identity

In philosophical discussions of 'identity', one finds several concepts going by the same name. Among that cluster of identity concepts, the notion of *numerical* identity often serves as the relation of interest to philosophers, and analytic theologians have largely followed suit in focusing on it.⁶ Despite this, I mention the notion of numerical identity only to set it aside since it will not be a topic of discussion for my purposes here.

Instead of numerical identity, I am interested in *narrative* identity, which is a notion of identity that resists straightforward definition. Despite this difficulty in precisely defining narrative identity, I am satisfied for our purposes to explicate it broadly and get the intuitive idea on the table before discussing how *changing* one's narrative identity might serve as a possible mechanism of atonement. So, before discussing such changes in narrative identity—a process helpfully discussed in contemporary personality and developmental psychology—we should begin by setting out approximately what narrative identity is.

As a first step in articulating the concept, let us begin by saying that narrative identity is constituted by what I call a *characterization self*.⁷ By 'characterization self', I mean that collection of things which includes those beliefs (dispositional and occurrent), properties, values, desires, virtues, and vices that are salient enough to figure into a significant explanation of one's actions and—to some extent—experiences.⁸ In other words, a characterization self is a set of the sorts of characteristics of persons from which one would normally draw when articulating *why* they did something or experienced some event in a particular way. It is these sorts of things that one might appeal to in explaining, for instance, why Theodore and Caspian (my two toddlers) lobbied for getting groceries at Trader Joe's instead of Aldi or why they experienced a mix of confusion and sadness when the cashier at Trader Joe's failed to produce seasonally appropriate children's stickers. Their sadness reflected their belief that Trader Joe's always has stickers and cares deeply for their happiness, along with further descriptions of Theodore and Caspian (e.g., that they care deeply for stickers and have little patience for grocery store chains that fail to meet their sticker-based expectations). This collection of beliefs, values, and dispositions characterizing my children might reasonably be understood as part of their characterization selves. And as the foregoing example shows, making use of one's characterization self is a normal part of our daily deliberations and attempts to make sense of the world.

However, having a characterization self is not the same thing as having a narrative identity, for one could simply produce a *list* of those beliefs, properties, values, etc., that make up one's characterization self without spinning that list in any narrational way. But, importantly, for our purposes and for whatever evolutionary reason,⁹ human beings are storytellers (See Cf. [McAdams and McLean \(2013\)](#)). They attend to characterization selves (e.g., their own self and other selves) to understand how others feel about them, and they weave the elements of such selves into narratively structured representations.¹⁰ That is, human beings take the material provided by a characterization self and form it into a story that includes certain points of emphasis and interpretations of the events being related (e.g., how various events might causally impact one another).

But not just any fact about a person—i.e., not just any belief or value held by a person—belongs to their characterization self, for, as I earlier defined that self, only things *salient enough to figure into significant explanations* of that person's actions and experiences belong to the characterization self. Clearly delineating what counts as a "salient enough" characteristic or a "significant" explanation is, obviously, part of what makes precisely defining this sort of identity so difficult.

For one helpful way of addressing the difficulty of spelling out what counts as "salient enough" or "significant", one might appeal to Quine's notion of a web of beliefs or Stump's Quine-inspired idea of a web of desires where those beliefs or desires at the center of the webs of different individuals are those beliefs or desires constitutive of their characterization selves (See Cf. [Stump \(2010\)](#); [Quine and Ullian \(1978\)](#)). Moreover, as one moves from beliefs or desires at the center of a web to those near the periphery, one passes over several beliefs or desires that may or may not belong to the characterization self, and as one continues outward, one moves into the realm of clearly peripheral, incidental beliefs and desires—e.g., a belief that I had cinnamon raisin toast for breakfast or a desire to write 1000 words on a given afternoon—on which few explanations of one's actions or experiences hinge. When it comes to the beliefs or desires most central to who we are (e.g., a cluster of religious beliefs or desires to see one's family thrive), however, their presence or lack thereof makes a far greater impact on the explanations of an agent's actions or experiences, and this fact illuminates why they belong to the characterization self.

With the foregoing in mind, we can now understand narrative identity, roughly, as that part of the characterization self from which one and others draw when offering narratively structured explanations for some person's actions or experiences of the world.¹¹ And in virtue of this, narrative identities "provide a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning . . . [by synthesizing] episodic memories with envisioned goals" (See [McAdams and McLean \(2013, p. 233\)](#)). In other words, narrative identities provide the materials for an overarching story, a narrative, that allows us to make meaning out of our past experiences and the futures for which we hope (See Cf. [Hibshman \(2021\)](#)).

Given their centrality in helping us to make meaning of our lives, narrative identities play such a powerful and influential role in how we encounter the world that when they are lost or challenged—e.g., due to trauma or tragedy—our self-narratives can change and not always for the better. Given our context of thinking about narrative identity as a potential mechanism of atonement—something which ought to help individuals flourish insofar as such flourishing is necessary for a more intimate union with God—it is important for us to pause and reflect on what sorts of narratives offer the best outcomes for those undergoing a change in narrative identity. That is, we should ask, "What sorts of narratives best help human agents to thrive?" and "In what ways do these narratives do so?" These sorts of questions, however, are best answered with the aid of empirical work from the psychological sciences.

In the last few decades, psychological work on the impact of weaving religion and spirituality into one's self-narratives has been rapidly growing. These studies have looked at how religious and spiritual overtones in one's self-narratives (i.e., the autobiographical stories we tell about ourselves) tend to affect one's positive meaning-making through suffering or correlate positively with various moral virtues (plausibly) constitutive of human flourishing.

One prominent example of such work, albeit without consistently explicit religious overtones, is due to Dan McAdams, who has observed that redemptive narratives in an American context are positively correlated with (action in accordance with) virtue as well as striving (See [McAdams \(2006\)](#)). Specifically, the redemptive narratives McAdams found in persons characterized by the American identity were positively correlated with a high degree of generativity (i.e., an altruistic care for others). Similar findings have also been reported by ([Maclean et al. 2004](#)) and ([King et al. 2014](#)), except that they detected statistically significant correlations between increased *religiosity* in self-narratives and generativity as well (See [Maclean et al. \(2004\)](#); [King et al. \(2014\)](#)). In the case of ([King et al. 2014](#)), a perspec-

tive of finding joy despite suffering and disappointment surfaced during interviews with adolescent spiritual exemplars, and such joy was explicitly connected with the commitment to an overarching religious self-narrative.

To bring home the many correlations observed between religious self-narratives and virtue development in recent developmental and personality psychology, one team of scholars states that in addition to the studies mentioned above,

Multiple studies have established a connection between R/S [religiosity/spirituality] and virtue. For example, R/S in adult samples are correlated with *both* self- and other-reported honesty (Saroglou et al. 2005), forgiveness (McCullough and Worthington 1999), and generativity (Dillon et al. 2003). (See Schnitker et al. (2019, p. 282))

And in addition to the above connections to honesty, forgiveness, and generativity, psychologists have recently pointed to the practice of framing one's everyday pursuits in terms of the sacred, resulting in "sanctified goals" (See Mahoney and Pargament (2005)). This practice is much more common among those possessed of a religious, transcendent self-narrative and allows for a potentially deeper and more positive meaning to be drawn out of one's experiences when guided by such narratives.¹² In other words, having a religious and transcendent self-narrative seems to predict an increase in an individual's degree of virtue and ability to make meaning out of one's life experiences.¹³

A caveat on these findings: the above is a very positive construal of the psychological studies conducted to observe the influence of religious self-narratives on human flourishing. No doubt, the early success of such experiments gives us only provisional evidence that religious self-narratives increase one's likelihood of flourishing, and no doubt, there are limits and exception cases to such correlations. Moreover, it is always worth recalling that such correlations may not be causes; that is, it may not be that having a religious self-narrative causally brings about increased flourishing. Perhaps, some other variable in the background is the relevant cause. Still, given such findings as they currently stand, it is worth reflecting on their theological implications.

Let us, then, connect these psychological findings with the questions of atonement with which we are concerned in this essay. One might, after all, think atonement is fundamentally about some sort of normative obstacle to union with God that has little or nothing fundamentally to do with human psychology. If this is your position, then the answer you would give to the question, "How are these psychological studies connected to atonement?", would be this: there is no connection. Clearly such an answer will not fit with the project here; so, it is necessary to explain more explicitly how I understand these psychological studies and doctrines of atonement to be connected.

If you find yourself inclined to think of atonement in all and only such non-psychological ways (i.e., if you find yourself thinking, as in the aforementioned case, that there is no relevance of psychology to questions of atonement), then it is worth reconsidering the linguistic history of atonement that, to my mind, is in part responsible for confusing doctrines of atonement with, e.g., nothing more than the cross. You are being led astray, or so I argue in the next section, if you reduce atonement to solely non-psychological factors. Or, to put things less strongly, there is a clear sense of 'atonement' for which such psychological considerations are clearly pertinent.

Before drawing together the threads of narrative, transcendence, and atonement, then, we must first think carefully about what atonement is. Let us turn to a brief historical refresher on the origins of the word 'atonement' before suggesting where, in that mélange of atonement considerations, the reframing of one's self-narrative might fit.

3. Atonement and the Ministry of Reconciliation

As mentioned at the outset, the word 'atonement' admits of a wide range of uses in theology, both scholarly and popular. This is not too surprising, of course, given the origin of the word itself in English. The word 'atonement' was a neologism introduced by William

Tyndale in the 1500s to translate *yom kippur* in Leviticus 23:28 (i.e., Hebrew for ‘the Day of Atonement’) and the Greek *katallagēs* of 2 Corinthians 5:18–19.

What is important to notice at this starting point for the English word ‘atonement’ is that the concepts of atonement operative in these two passages are importantly different from one another despite going by the same name. While both contexts are clearly operating on the assumption that something must be done to reunify, or reconcile, the world (or the people of Israel) with God, the former context—of Levitical sacrifice—brings about that reunification by addressing a narrower, normative obstacle to union with the divine: namely, the presence and repugnance of sin in the community that needs to be cleansed by expiatory sacrifice.¹⁴ In the latter case—2 Corinthians 5:18–19—the atonement or ministry of reconciliation in which we humans participate presupposes that Christ has *already* dealt with the narrower, normative issue by his own expiatory sacrifice (cf. 2 Cor 5:15). Thus, as members of the Christian covenant community (i.e., as those who have received the benefits of Christ’s atoning sacrifice), we are encouraged by Paul to participate in the continued work of healing creation. Among the tasks included in such work are the tasks of sanctification and the defeat of evil.

The tasks of sanctification and the defeat of evil are not interchangeable. Sanctification deals with issues of one’s character, of the degree to which one exhibits (and grows in exhibiting) the virtue of charity in one’s everyday dealings. This is not irrelevant to the task of defeating evil, for surely one ought to be virtuously motivated to engage in such evil-defeating work. But the defeat of evil requires far more than the production in oneself of a more perfect character. It also requires that one strive to alleviate suffering where one can, to be a champion for the underprivileged and the oppressed, and to promote the finding of positive meaning in experiences that might otherwise have seemed incapable of bearing such positivity. It is this last aspect of atonement as the defeat of evil that is relevant to our discussion.

What is it to defeat an evil? In her *Christ and Horrors*, Marilyn McCord Adams distinguishes three stages of the defeat of evil accomplished by the work of Christ (See Adams (2006, pp. 66–79)). *Stage I* of evil-defeat consists of God bridging various obstacles to the possibility of human agents connecting their sufferings with an organic whole (e.g., a narrative) from which they might derive positive meaning for those sufferings. This project of divine bridgebuilding involves God coming as a human being (i.e., Incarnation), sharing our nature so that the ontological difference between God and humanity might not prevent our identifying with God, and participating in our sufferings such that God might *identify* with humans in their vulnerability to and experiences of horrendous evil. And God’s decision to experience the limits and liabilities of human existence sets the stage for divine solidarity with us.

Stage II of evil-defeat, however, is what is most important for our purposes here. According to Adams, that stage consists in those human agents who have suffered horrendous evils having their meaning-making capacities restored in a way that enables them to derive positive meaning from their sufferings (i.e., derive positive meaning via the divine–human activities laid out in the *Stage I* defeat). This restoration, moreover, is made possible in her account by the “miracles of life after death and psycho-spiritual healing”.¹⁵ In other words, as Adams understands *Stage II* defeat (and, incidentally, *Stage III* defeat as well), it is primarily a divine operation, depending as it does on the work of the Holy Spirit and the supernaturally performed resurrection of the dead.

Stage II defeat, contrary to the impression given by Adams, does not fall solely within the purview of divine agents. Of course, such defeat would not be *possible* without the divine contribution (for, otherwise, *Stage II* defeat would be a semi-Pelagianism endeavor). But acknowledging the necessity of divine action in restoring the positive meaning-making capacities of those who have suffered horrendous evils does not commit us to denying human involvement (or cooperation) in healing those capacities. Indeed, there is scriptural precedent for this.

As theologian Haley Goranson Jacob argues, the Apostle Paul's theology of glory in the letter to the Romans is a paradigm expression of his expectation that the Christian church would participate in Christ's loving stewardship of all creation. She writes,

Believers are “conformed to the image of [God's] Son” on the basis of their adoption into God's family (Rom 8:14–16) and thus their participation in the Messiah's Sonship (Rom 8:29c) . . . Conformity to the Son is glorification, the fulfillment of God's purposes for calling his children (Rom 8:28–30). Believers are glorified in part in the present (Rom 8:30c) through their participation with God in bringing redemption to creation (Rom 8:18–28). (See [Jacob \(2018, p. 266\)](#))

This notion that Christians *participate* with Christ “in bringing redemption to creation” is quite common in Paul once one reads with an eye to that theme. For instance, anyone who is inclined to think that Christ dealt *once and for all* with sin and suffering on the cross would be puzzled to read Paul's claim in 2 Corinthians 5:18–20 (NRSV):

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry [Gk: *diakonian*] of reconciliation [Gk: *katallagēs*]; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message [Gk: *logon*] of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Notice that the word translated here as ‘ministry’ could be aptly translated as ‘service’. Indeed, translating it so brings out the fact that, in Paul's mind, there remain *things for Christians to do* if the end of reconciliation—which is, incidentally, the end of atonement as well—is to be fully realized.

Now, Paul leaves much of the detail about *how* one is to reconcile the world with God open here, and—in particular, for our purposes—he says nothing explicitly about reframing one's self-narrative in terms of a transcendent Christian narrative. Nevertheless, if one attends to what Paul does *in the writing of his letters*, a Pauline emphasis on reframing old narratives becomes clear.

In his letter to the Romans, for instance, Paul emphasizes that our old self (cf. Romans 6:6, “*ho palaios hēmōn anthrōpos*”) was crucified with Christ, baptized into his death, and raised to walk in newness of life. Indeed, for the recipients of the letter, awareness of how their own lives resonated with the narrative of Christ's atoning work in this way was itself supposed to help them live into their Christian identities. Tethering their old selves to that which has been put to death in Christ's story (cf. 1 Cor. 6:6) attached deeper meaning to their actions, whether good or ill, within the Christian community.¹⁶

This sort of activity by Paul is one of meaning-making. Paul is attempting to help those to whom he writes complete the *telos* of Christ's atoning work by enabling them to make positive sense out their new lives and experiences (even experiences of suffering, as seen in 2 Corinthians 12). And it is here, in this expectation that human agents participate in the ministry of reconciliation, that we find a way to understand narrative/narrative identity as a mechanism for atonement in the broad sense of ‘atonement’. Let us, then, turn to an example of this mechanism in action in the theology of James H. Cone.

4. Cone's Liberative Theology

I began this essay by noting that there has been a regrettable and substantial lack of engagement with the work of liberation theology, feminist theology, and so on in analytic theological circles. It is not entirely clear to me why this is, but one suspicion I have is that part of the explanation for the lack of engagement is due to a further lack of understanding concerning where such theologies fit into more familiar “traditional” theological categories.¹⁷ In addition, liberation theology has a feel of being more concrete and ground-level than the work of many analytic theologians, and perhaps, the thought is that work in analytic theology cannot easily engage with such concrete matters qua analytic theology. These are mere conjectures on my part, but whatever the explanation

really amounts to, I hope at least to show here that there is clearly space within the analytic discussion to engage seriously with and learn from the liberation tradition, and, importantly, part of the reason is that it is firmly placed with the broad doctrine of atonement aimed at fully reconciling humanity and God.¹⁸

Let us, then, turn to some writings of the late James H. Cone, whose scholarly theological work commenced in 1968, that is, the same year that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.¹⁹ As the title of his first monograph—*Black Theology and Black Power* (Cone [1970] 2020)—suggests, Cone’s scholarship was deeply shaped not only by Martin Luther King Jr., but also by Malcolm X. And Cone’s deft hand is evident when one witnesses his facility in putting modern theology (e.g., Bonhoeffer, Tillich, or Nygren) into conversation with these and other paradigmatic figures of black theology (e.g., W. E. B. Du Bois).

To understand how Cone envisioned theology, it is worth quoting him directly. Consider the opening lines of his *A Black Theology of Revelation* (Cone [1970] 2020),

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. *It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ . . .* There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed.²⁰

Notice from the start how Cone’s definition of Christian theology deviates from the fairly standard descriptions of general theology: namely, the study of God and all things in relation to God.²¹ Whatever theology is, Cone emphasizes that *Christian* theology must necessarily identify (and “unreservedly” so) with the oppressed in society.

Not only is Christian theology to identify with the oppressed, but also included in its proclamation is this:

God’s liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers. The resurrection conveys hope in God . . . [and it is the] task of Christian theology . . . to analyze the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will risk all for earthly freedom . . . Whatever theology says about God and the world must arise out of its sole reason for existence as a discipline: to assist the oppressed in their liberation.²² Its language is always language about human liberation, proclaiming the end of bondage and interpreting the religious dimensions of revolutionary struggle.²³

In other words, Cone emphasizes that in addition to identifying with the oppressed, the theological task includes bringing freedom to the oppressed by leveraging “the meaning of hope in God” as a connection point with their experience. And this word ‘freedom’, for Cone, denotes not the sort of freedom one might seek in responding to arguments for causal determinism, but rather, it denotes an active participation in the liberation of oppressed humanity. In other words, to conduct theology for Cone requires that one be free and be setting others free.²⁴

To draw in the threads of narrative identity, one might say that, according to Cone, providing a narrative of hope and God’s solidarity with the oppressed is among the highest of callings for Christian theologians.²⁵ That is, Cone would have Christian theologians assist in the process of liberation—i.e., come to know or understand the narrative identity of various oppressed persons—and point to the gospels, the stories of the Hebrew bible, and the apostolic letters to find points of resonance between the narrative identities of the oppressed and the narratives of scripture. Or to put it in Marilyn McCord Adams’s terms, Cone suggests that the central task of Christian theology is none other than participation in *Stage II* defeat: that is, the restoration or increase in positive meaning-making capacities in human agents.

Let us, then, turn directly to a few instances of Cone practicing this very task. Witness, for instance, the opening words of another of Cone's monographs, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Cone 2011),

The paradox of a crucified savior lies at the heart of the Christian story . . . That Jesus died this way required special explanation. It made no rational or even spiritual sense to say that hope came out of "a place called Golgotha . . . a place of the skull" . . . That God could "make a way out of no way" in Jesus' cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk . . . Christ crucified manifested God's loving and liberating presence *in* the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that *ultimately*, in God's eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the "troubles of this world," no matter how great and painful their suffering. (See Cone (2011, pp. 1–2)).

In the pages following this opening, Cone describes some of the history of white supremacy in the US from the antebellum period to the mid-twentieth century. And, specifically, he brings out various resonances between black experiences of lynching throughout that history and the crucifixion that "gave [black people] an identity far more meaningful than the harm that white supremacy could do to them".²⁶ To this end, Cone writes,

In that era, the lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbols in the African American community—symbols that represented both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope.²⁷

While the lynching tree symbolized white power and "black death," the cross symbolized divine power and "black life"—God overcoming the power of sin and death.²⁸

And these narratives of the black experience imbued with transcendent and religious meaning were by no means rare phenomena. For as Cone makes evident, such narratives informed, and still inform, many cultural expressions, such as gospel music and the blues.²⁹ "Protestant evangelical hymns did not sound or feel the same when blacks and whites sang them because their life experiences [and narratives] were so different".³⁰ Witness the difference in meaning, for instance, with the line "Nobody knows the trouble I see; nobody knows but Jesus" when uttered by anyone for whom the prospect of lynching is a reality not unlike the prospect of the cross in Golgotha for Jesus. In other words, it is through such transcendent narratives grounded in the Christian story of the cross and subsequent resurrection that positive meaning-making and hope were made available to many members of the black community, members looking not so much to escape suffering but rather to face it without fear of losing themselves. This is what it means to participate in the ministry of reconciliation and to participate in the work of Christ's atonement ordered towards the new creation.

5. Objections and Replies

Much more could be said in expounding the notion that narrative might serve as a mechanism of atonement in Christian theology, but I judge that the foregoing suffices to get the idea off the ground. Nevertheless, there are bound to be worries in the background of the account; so, I round off the discussion here with some reflections on objections or concerns.

Objection/Concern 1. In this account, "the suffering of Christ is integral to our redemption" insofar as it provides a narrative identification with which is required for our positive meaning-making capacities to thrive.³¹ But in making identification with the abuse and suffering of Christ central, there is a danger that in a religious context, those who are abused and oppressed might become more vulnerable than those outside of such a context. For Christ did not free himself from his abusers but submitted to them.

Likewise, those identifying with Christ may be inclined to follow that example to their own detriment.

This is indeed a very important worry, for “the church [and its members are] called to be the balm for insecure attachments, and the refuge for the traumatized. Anything less than this should rightly provoke our indignation”.³² Fortunately, I think my account implies the opposite response in cases of abuse to the one posited by this objection.

First, it is important to note that sometimes reframing one’s self-narrative in the ways suggested earlier can be psychologically beneficial, and sometimes, it may not be. All that the above account of the broad sense of atonement is committed to is this: it is *sometimes* the case that reframing one’s experiences of suffering in light of the narrative of Christ’s life is psychologically beneficial in a way that promotes greater union between humans and God. But human psyches are many and varied, even if general observations about how they function can be made legitimately on the basis of empirical studies. Thus, if, for some person, reframing their experiences of suffering in ways that resonate with Christ’s life would not increase their psychological thriving in ways conducive to greater union with God, then my account does not promote it. The process of narrative identification I have articulated is *instrumentally* valuable, and as such, its value is parasitic on the end at which it aims. Thus, if achieving the end of union with God is undermined in a specific case, the purported means to that end is likewise undermined.

Second, this is not an exemplarist account of atonement (even if there are reasonable exemplarist models with which it is consistent). More specifically, in this account there is no command or expectation that for *every* action Christ took one must do likewise. Of course, we would do well to follow Christ’s example in many things, but there are relevant differences between mere humans and Jesus that make a *generalized* rule to do whatever Christ did obviously problematic. Rather, my account simply suggests that when someone reflects on their sufferings they ought to consider the ways in which Christ’s own sufferings promote solidarity between the two of them as well as the possibility of hope for ultimate victory over suffering.

*Objection/Concern 2. While this discussion appeals to a collective approach to narrative as a means of atonement, the psychological space in which the employment of these narratives takes place is focused much more on individuals. What is the relation between these collective narratives and the individuals engaged in the reframing practices discussed?*³³

Narrative identities, as I understand them, involve participation in various collective narratives, on the part of both the individual and other people (i.e., when considering social identities). For instance, in the case of Cone, part of what he is doing in articulating the black experience through a Christian lens is providing a narrative reframing by which someone else might find deeper meaning in their own experiences. That is, if they find that his articulation rings true with their own experience, they are already on their way to adopting a similar collective narrative to their own. And, moreover, they find such meaning by participating along with Cone (and others who find his articulation of these two collective narratives insightful for their own experience) in that collective narrative. Two points of reconciliation seem to be happening, then: one which is social and the other which is individual. In the social case, as more individuals adopt the reframing of a given narrative—e.g., of the black experience—that narrative representation (one of hope in this case) becomes a more standard interpretation of the group. And as that interpretation is standardized, the individual benefits of that redemptive narrative accrue; that is, the individuals who adopt the reframed narrative increase their likelihood of flourishing and finding positive meaning in their own experiences. There is more that could be said, but this is at least a rough and ready idea of how the individual and the collective relate given the posited mechanism.³⁴

Objection/Concern 3. I am a bit confused about what it is for something to count as a mechanism of atonement. Eating chocolate, for instance, might help me to become more unified with others³⁵, but does this make it a mechanism of atonement? Suppose

eating chocolate also played a role in enhancing my capacity for positive meaning-making. Would it count as a mechanism of atonement then?

The answer to this question depends on whether one has in mind a narrow or broad sense of atonement. The narrow sense of atonement in which most traditional accounts of the atonement reside tends to emphasize that no account of atonement is adequate if the atoning work of Christ is insufficiently relevant to the explanation of atonement given. This adequacy constraint on such models of atonement, then, might be employed similarly here. If so, then we could say that only when the narratives under consideration are sufficiently connected with Christ's life or sacrifice are they properly called *atoning* narratives. And consequently, if one wants to engage in the *atoning* and narrative-reframing work I have described above, then one's narrative must draw upon the well of Christ's life story.³⁶

But given that this account is intended to fit within a *broad* sense of atonement, I am unconvinced that an explicit connection with Christ's life and work is strictly necessary (even if it could be beneficial).

There is a robust theological tradition that understands all good things as coming from God (cf. James 1:17, Augustine (See [Augustine \(1887\)](#)), Aquinas (See [Aquinas \(2017\)](#), I q. 6 a. 4), etc.), and such a tradition provides resources for thinking about all sorts of things as atoning mechanisms in the broad sense. As the broad sense of atonement has in mind the full reconciliation of all things with God (i.e., leading creation into the state God ultimately intends for it), then whenever one engages in some sort of good activity—e.g., such as the sharing of chocolate with friends—*under the guise of* putting the world to rights as God intends, then I see no reason to deny that atoning work is taking place. This, of course, is a different sort of mechanism to the narrative one I have suggested here, but it can be a mechanism of atonement in the broad sense nonetheless. And it *is* connected to the atoning work of Christ, strictly speaking, insofar as it aims at the same ultimate thing as Christ's life and sacrifice did: namely, restored union between humanity and God.

6. Concluding Thoughts

There have been many goals of this essay, but chief among them was this: to illustrate how narrative or narrative identity might fit as a mechanism of atonement. Very little in the atonement literature of analytic theology engages with narratives, especially as they might relate to atonement. Nevertheless, I hope to have established that the lack of attention narrative identity has received is clearly not a reflection of its insignificance for atonement or unimportance.

But, of course, suggesting that narrative might function as a mechanism of atonement requires more than solely armchair theorizing, for both narrative identities and the reframing of one's self-narrative around a transcendent good are psychological phenomena. Such phenomena will only be plausible as mechanisms of atonement insofar as they are tethered to the psychological findings that help us determine (1) what narratives in fact restore meaning-making capacities and (2) how human agents move from one narrative framework (or identity) to another. And while I rehearsed some of the psychological literature addressing the former question (i.e., questions concerning the types of transcendent, religious narratives most predictive of flourishing), the latter question of changing one's narrative identity remains.

One thing we know undoubtedly is that our self-narratives change. As we age, our narratives tend to become ever more complex, and our experiences equip us with conceptual machinery by which we can develop nuanced interpretations of our remembered past and future selves (See [McAdams and McLean \(2013\)](#), pp. 236–37). Unfortunately, contemporary personality and developmental psychology are still young disciplines³⁷, and much more empirical research needs to be carried out on the question of how we change our self-narratives as well as the degree of intentional control we have over such change. But that such change takes place and that we plausibly have indirect control over that change (in virtue of the sorts of narratives to which we are introduced or those we seek out)

is clear. Thus, insofar as the defeat of evil is tied to restoring and enhancing our positive meaning-making capacities, authoring transcendent narratives involving the experiences of those who have suffered is grounded in a simultaneously bodily and psychological mechanism of atonement.

For those inclined to think of atonement in terms of more traditional models, it is, then, fitting to include one final quotation from Cone, who briefly describes Martin Luther King Jr.'s own thought about such models. He writes,

How could the death of a Jew nearly two thousand years ago save blacks in the United States? In the history of Western theology, there were various classical theories of how Jesus' death brought redemption to humanity—none of them officially endorsed by the Christian church. King studied them in seminary. But in the end King did not turn to them for answers. For him, the cross represented the depth of God's love for suffering humanity, and an answer to the deadly cycle of violence and hatred.³⁸

Because King saw atonement as something relevant and ongoing in the present, the classical atonement theories appeared of little relevance to his immediate cultural context. Instead, he turned to a scriptural narrative of divine love and non-violence in the hope of bringing about cultural and spiritual reconciliation. And while many might resist King's sentiments by insisting that there is no such thing as the broad sense of atonement *sans* the narrow sense captured more readily by classical theories, I hope to have shown that no narrow account of the atonement can be said to be the Christian account of atonement without also including the broad, reconciling sense of atonement described here.³⁹

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ By 'mechanism', I refer to the primary *means* by which atonement is achieved according to a given model of the work of Christ. Accordingly, mechanisms provide the most significant constituent in an explanation of how Christ's sacrifice connects with the union between humanity and God.
- ² For an admirably clear survey of many atonement models, including those listed here, see (Crisp 2020). For the best version of a moral exemplarist account that I am aware of, see (Page and Thornton forthcoming).
- ³ One notable exception with which much of the current essay shares an affinity is (Rea 2019).
- ⁴ As always, there are notable and commendable exceptions: (1) Yadav (2020) or, from the same edited collection, (2) Tobin and Moon (2020), and (3) Wolterstorff (2018), chp. 13, Justice and Injustice in Christian Liturgies.
- ⁵ For important ways in which one's experiences might shape one's narrative identity in ways that might make union between God and a human agent more difficult to fully achieve, see (Panchuk 2018). For another excellent source for understanding how changing one's narratives affects one's thriving, see (Nelson 2001).
- ⁶ Alongside other reasons for this, I suspect the interest in questions of resurrection among Christian analytic theologians is a motivating reason for many scholars to focus on numerical identity. For instance, answering the question of whether my resurrected self is identical to me has preoccupied the attention of several metaphysicians, and answering it in terms of numerical identity is certainly natural for many of us. See (Rutledge 2021b) for my preferred hylomorphic animalist position on such questions. For a thorough survey of such a view, see (Thornton 2016).
- ⁷ This language is borrowed from Marya Schechtman's discussion of the characterization question (cf. Schechtman 1996, pp. 73–92), to which narrative identities are, in her view, the appropriate sort of answer.
- ⁸ Notice that I have excluded experiences and actions from one's narrative identity here. Witt (2020) offers an inconsistent triad for any view that fails to exclude experiences and actions from the collection of things making up one's narrative identity. Excluding such things from one's collection of characteristics avoids inconsistency with the added caveat that narrative becomes unnecessary for one to have a narrative identity. I address the place of narrative in *my* understanding of narrative identity presently.

- 9 For some helpful suggestions, cf. (Barrett and King 2021, chp. 4).
- 10 I borrow the term ‘narratively structured representations’, and much of my understanding of narrative identity, from Rea (forthcoming).
- 11 Technically, there will be multiple characterization selves, including, as Michael Rea terms them, “autobiographical identities” or selves and “social identities” or selves (“The Metaphysics of the Narrative Self”, Section 3). Autobiographical selves (what I often call ‘self-narratives’), then, are made of the characterization selves we attribute to ourselves, whereas social selves are made of the characterization selves others attribute to us.
- 12 I hasten to add that it is not as if there is some sort of guarantee that religious self-narratives lead to this feature or that non-religious ones cannot share it. The point observed here is merely one of observed statistical likelihoods where religious narratives seem more positively correlated with increased positive meaning-making capacities and various virtues than non-religious narratives are. There are also darker sides to religious narratives (e.g., perfectionist tendencies or insufficient degrees of self-regard presented as invitations to humility) that must be accounted for as well.
- 13 For fascinating and important work on the connection between religious narratives and mental disorder that I do not have space to get into here, see the continuing work of Finley (forthcoming).
- 14 I borrow the ‘normative’ and ‘psychological’ obstacle language on display here from Murphy (2021). For my own thoughts on how to address the narrow problem of atonement, see my *Forgiveness and Atonement: Christ’s Restorative Sacrifice* (Rutledge 2022).
- 15 Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, p. 77.
- 16 For a fuller biblical case regarding the practice of tying one’s self-understanding to Christ’s, see (Eastman 2017) as well as (Lincicum 2020, pp. 225–38).
- 17 One reviewer has suggested that a more straightforward explanation for the lack of engagement considered here is that liberation theology is widely considered heretical. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has a discussion of liberation theology in this vein—“Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’”—although he does not paint with such a broad brush as to declare *all* liberation theology out of bounds for orthodoxy. He allows, clearly, that some forms might fit within orthodoxy, and, as I hope to show here, some tenets and insights from liberation theology are not only orthodox but importantly, and unfortunately, lacking in many contemporary analytic discussions of doctrine.
- 18 Yet another suggestion from a reviewer for why analytic theologians have been less interested in liberation theology is that it is often seen as bound up with new-Marxist/Critical Theory/New Left perspectives that fit better within a Continental perspective. Given analytic inclinations, then, analytic theologians are likely to be suspicious of the value of engaging with liberation theology. I am sure for some analytic theologians, this too is a reasonably plausible explanation, but, again, I hope my discussion can alleviate either this suspicion or the supposed grounds for this suspicion (at least, insofar as an analytic thinks the reflections of liberation theology cannot inform one’s analytic reflections in soteriology). In another context, I have suggested that the *analytic* side of analytic theology can be combined with a variety of disciplines and endeavors that are typically thought of in non-analytic ways (e.g., Continental, Postmodern, Neo-Marxist, etc.) and, specifically, that analytic feminists have carried out important work in locating precisely how this should be done. For my argument, see (Rutledge 2020). For the inspiration of my article, see (Cudd 2006).
- 19 Cone’s first published paper was (Cone 1968).
- 20 Cone ([1970] 2020, p. 1); italics in the original.
- 21 For my own elaboration of this definition of theology, see (Rutledge 2021a).
- 22 This sentence in Cone flags something that is obviously contentious. Is assisting the oppressed in their liberation really the *sole* reason for theology’s existence? This question can be understood in many and various ways consistent with Cone’s understanding of the referent of ‘the oppressed’, and one might understand ‘reason’ to connote an efficient cause or a *telos*. I do not know what interpretation would be most faithful to Cone’s original intent; so, I opt for what *seems* to me one reasonable option (e.g., “highest of callings for Christian theologians” above) that avoids distracting from my main goal of this part of the essay (i.e., seeing how Cone engages in the project of Stage II defeat with respect to his understanding of the black experience).
- 23 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 3–4.
- 24 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 108–10.
- 25 Perhaps worth noting is that this sort of hopeful narrative reframing of events is deeply biblical as well. Apocalyptic literature, such as the book of Revelation, does precisely this sort of thing. For an accessible and helpful entryway into how Revelation reframes the suffering of Christians at the hands of the Romans, see (Bauckham 1993).
- 26 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 22.
- 27 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 3.
- 28 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 18.
- 29 Cf. McCaulley (2020) for further reflections on relevant, contemporary cultural expressions of black experience.
- 30 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 23.
- 31 For helpful reflections on this sort of concern, see (Pogin 2020, p. 167).

- ³² Cockayne et al. (2022), chapters 2 and 3; I argue against any obligation to forgive due to considerations such as those found in *Objection 1* where forgiving one's wrongdoer might be bad for the one wronged. In such a case, I think forgiveness would also be unloving.
- ³³ Thanks to a reviewer for highlighting the need to bring this point to the surface.
- ³⁴ See Holstein and Gubrium (2000) for an interesting take on these individual and social identity dynamics.
- ³⁵ Boothby et al. (2004), for instance, suggest that chocolate eating in a community increases the pleasure of eating chocolate.
- ³⁶ Ballard (2021) argues that practices such as thanksgiving, confession, giving testimonies, and contemplating the afterlife, require the sort of narrativizing I suggest. This article, then, adds that there is another practical theological commitment to narrativism: namely, that atonement requires it.
- ³⁷ Barrett (2022), Chapter 2: "What is Psych Science?" claims that the whole of contemporary "psychological science is about the same age as the automobile" (16, in May 2021 MS). In other words, psych science begins (very roughly) toward the end of the nineteenth century. And contemporary developmental and personality psychology as sub-disciplines are younger still.
- ³⁸ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, pp. 84–85.
- ³⁹ I'm grateful for helpful feedback from several members of Notre Dame's *Center for Philosophy of Religion*, including Josh Barthuly, Laura Frances Callahan, Amber Griffioen Jane Heath, Dave Lincicum, Katie O'Dell, Mike Rea, Alli Thornton, Dar Triffon Reshef, Brian Williams, and Shlomo Zuckier. I'd also like to thank Harvey Cawdron, Marilie Coetsee, Kate Finley, Meghan Page, Michelle Panchuk, Kathryn Pogin, and Mark Satta for pushing me to be clearer about several different threads in the paper.

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