

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“On Atonement”**  
**The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins**  
**September 20, 2009**

**Introduction**

Friday at sundown was the beginning of the Jewish High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and ending on the 28<sup>th</sup> with Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement.

According to Jewish tradition, God inscribes each person’s fate for the coming year into a book on Rosh Hashanah and waits until Yom Kippur to seal the verdict. During the Days of Awe, a practicing Jew tries to amend his or her behavior and seek forgiveness for wrongs done against God and against human beings. The evening and day of Yom Kippur are set aside for public and private petitions and confessions of guilt. It is also a fasting day. At the end of Yom Kippur, one considers one’s self absolved by God. (Wikipedia)

Some Christians have adapted this tradition. Those with an interest in eschatology, a study of the end of times, believe that the Day of Atonement will be the final day to repent, and at some future day will come on the eve of the Last Judgment. Those who take the Bible literally look to Leviticus and Revelation for how these last days will be.

This morning I choose not to get caught up in the literal interpretations of these Scriptures, but to look at the different traditions and how they may apply to us. I will question some of the traditions, but would first like to honor the importance of Atonement in the Jewish tradition. It is a most revered and solemn day in the Jewish calendar. It is not to be taken lightly. Yom Kippur is honored by many secular as well as religious Jews. It is a legal holiday in the modern state of Israel. There are no radio or television broadcasts, airports are shut down, there is no public transportation, and all shops and businesses are closed.

It is considered “bad form” to eat in public on Yom Kippur or to drive a motor vehicle. There is no legal prohibition but it is frowned upon if one does, except in emergencies. Over the last decades bicycle-riding on the empty streets has become a new tradition among secular Israeli youngsters on the eve of Yom Kippur.

1973 was different. An air raid siren was sounded on the afternoon of Yom Kippur and radio broadcasts were resumed to alert the public to the surprise attack on Israel by Egypt and Syria that launched the Yom Kippur War.

Before sunset on Yom Kippur eve the worshippers normally gather in the synagogue. The Ark of the Covenant is opened and the Torah scrolls are removed. A very interesting chant follows—the Kol Nidre prayer in Aramaic. It means “all vows” and it goes like this:

All personal vows we are likely to make, all personal oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.

The leader of the congregation and the congregation then say together three times: “May all the people of Israel be forgiven, including all the strangers who live in their midst, for all the people are in fault.” The Torah scrolls are then replaced, and the customary evening service begins.

**Sacrifice**

In the Jewish tradition there are different meanings to atonement. I will mention: sacrifice, repentance, suffering and scapegoating. The first is sacrifice. This is the easiest to avoid. We now see sacrifice as a primitive ritual no longer necessary to please God or humans. Many religions continue to tell the stories of sacrifice, but no longer slaughter the goat or push it over the cliff, as the Jews once did. Hindus continue to bring food and flowers to the temple to set before the likeness of their particular gods.

In Chinese culture there is a similar but different view of sacrifice. In ancient Chinese thought there are two worlds—Heaven and Earth. Heaven was the abode of the ancestors, and earth by mere mortals. There was thought to be communication between the two worlds by the use of sacrifice. Humans would supply the needs of the ancestors through their burnt offerings. As the smoke rose to the sky, the sacrifice was completed. The

ancestors communicated with the earthlings through omens in nature: thunder, lightning, movements of the stars or the patterns of birds in flight, eyes trembling or ears buzzing.

Confucius changed the Chinese world view and ethics. He saw earthlings as more important than the heavenly ancestors and the spirit world. He said: "When you are not yet able to serve people, how can you serve the spirits? Concerning death he said, "You do not yet understand life. How can you understand death? Confucius did not eliminate heaven from his worldview, but he did turn the tide to a more earthly concern. I will return to Confucius and his advice later.

### **Suffering and Repentance**

Fortunately, most religions, including the Jews, have moved beyond sacrifice to appease an angry God. The second approach by the Jews was suffering as a way to win God's favor or reconcile. We might think this is the message of Job, but it is not. The message of Job is much too complicated than this. The central message of the storyteller is that one can have faith even though one suffers. The heart of Job's message is that materialism is not the goal in life, but rather justice is the heart of morality and ultimate happiness.

There are other examples in Judaism that suffering is a way to atonement. In Potok's classic, "The Chosen," God is seen as silent. In another example of one facing diversity, Ruben's father tells him, "No one knows he is fortunate until he become unfortunate. That is the way the world is."

One could argue this is the essence of Jewish theology. There is no group in history that has suffered unnecessarily as much as the Jews. But they are not the only group that have faced this issue. As Alice Eckardt writes:

Evil and suffering have always been, and doubtless always will be, subjects of great concern not only to their victims but to any system of thought that postulates a good creator or a purposeful universe. (p. 1, "Suffering: Challenge of Faith, Challenge to God")

Since the tradition of Isaac the Jews have viewed suffering as an important aspect of Jewish thought. Many have explained this suffering as a way of atonement for the sins of the past, for separation from God, and his laws.

In Jewish tradition atonement is both individual and communal. Individuals are encouraged to repent, confess their sins, and right their relations with their neighbors. Individual wrongs are also seen in the context of community. Guilt is shared by all. Jesus, the Jewish prophet, said: "Even what ye have done unto the least of these, ye have done unto me." (Mt. 25:40). Many Jewish scholars and teachers justified their suffering as a way of God to transform the world. According to Christianity this was the aim of Jesus the Messiah, who paid the ultimate sacrifice for all the world.

For the Jews, this all changed after the Holocaust. Many Jews, most notably Elie Wiesel, questioned this rationale. Alice Eckardt writes:

The problem with explanations is that all too often they put the burden on the sufferers. Either it is their fault. . .Or it much be endured because it somehow fits into the divine scheme. . . Thus justification is provided and an ethic of suffering is created. Yet we instinctively sense that something is not only wrong but evil is created in that process though we desperately want to believe that such suffering ultimately serves some good purpose. Are we still satisfied to rely on such hope? Elie Wiesel's answer is primarily "No." (p. 1)

### **Scapegoating**

Another view of atonement in Judaism is scapegoating. This is another form of sacrifice. The goat, seen as the holder of the sins of everyone, is sent off to die in the Yom Kippur tradition. Thus the name scapegoat. This concept was then applied to the Jews by others. Though the Jews left the tradition of scapegoating behind, they became the scapegoat of many, and they still do. Let's call scapegoating what it is: evil. The goal of religion should be to identify scapegoating, and for us to fight it at every turn, whether it is the scapegoating of homosexuals, women, blacks or Jews among us.

Religions often use outsiders as their scapegoat and rationalize their suffering. My colleague Joan Kahn compares Jewish theology with Christian beliefs. She writes:

Jewish literature has pathos, and at the same time a kind of humor. Even at the darkest moments Jews laugh, frequently at themselves.” She concludes: “I rarely see that in Christian literature.” (“Scapegoats, Shlemiels and Atonement.”

### **Christian Atonement**

Even though religions have promoted suffering and scapegoating as a way to please God, I encourage us to look for a different view of atonement. Here I will turn to Universalist theology to help me make my case.

In the Christian tradition atonement took on a whole new meaning. Atonement in It concerns the reconciliation of an enraged God with a rebellious and sinful humanity through atonement. Jesus became the focal point of this reconciliation. In Calvinist theology taken from the theology of Paul more than Jesus there existed a vicarious (or substitute) atonement through Christ for those who believed. Unlike in Jewish theology, where atonement was for everyone, in Christianity it was for the elect few.

### **Universalism**

In the Universalist tradition, there is a rejection of the need for a vicarious atonement between God and man. Hosea Ballou was a Universalist at the end 18<sup>th</sup> century who bridged the theology of Unitarianism and Universalism. He rejected the notion that human sin requires an infinite sacrifice in Christ to reconcile man with God. He saw God as infinite but human sin was not. The key to his theology as all Universalist theology is that God is a benevolent deity, not an enraged vengeful God that we find in some Judaism and Christianity.

Ballou, according to David Robinson, “redefined sin as a limited, immediate evil but an ultimate good, a tool of God, that although divisive in the short run, helps to create the final unity of human and God that is the cornerstone of the Divine wisdom.” (p. 63). I quote from Ballou’s work, “Treatise on Atonement”:

God saw fit, in his plan of divine wisdom to make the creature subject to vanity; to give him a mortal constitution; to fix in his nature those faculties which would, in their operation, oppose the spirit of the heavenly nature. . .But perhaps the objector will say this denies the liberty of the will, and makes God the author of sin, To which I reply. . . .that God may be the innocent and holy cause of that, which, in a limited sense, is sin; but as it respects the meaning of God, it is intended for good. (p. 24-25)

Ballou borrowed some of his theology from Petitpierre’s work, “On the Divine Goodness.” It was an optimistic approach which argued that God’s ultimate plan for the universe was “to render mankind universally happy.” Ballou also promoted a concept of free will which limited God’s omnipotence. The key point especially for today’s sermon is that Ballou believed that the death of Jesus did not assuage God’s anger as was promoted in Calvinist theology, but instead was a demonstration of a loving God.

### **Conclusions**

This became the essence of both Universalist and Unitarian theology. It led Joan Kahn to conclude:

As Unitarian Universalists we cannot deal with our prejudices until and unless we are willing to own them as parts of our own traditions, until we understand how we respond to the problem of sin, evil and suffering, and how we atone.

Neither accepting nor blaming help in the matter of atonement. . . .How do we atone? How do we express atonement in our art forms? . . . we humans are capable of doing outrageous evil. But we don’t have to. Everyone is as important as everyone else. Everyone is connected to everyone and everything else. Everyone is entitled to respect.” (p. 19)

This view is much more in tune with the ideas of Confucius as referred to earlier. The final goal of Confucius, and his way of atonement was the improvement of humanity. According to Confucius, the way to improve humanity is to transcend our egos, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism and chauvinistic nationalism, isolationism and self reliance. I wish Confucianism was alive and well today in America.

Atonement is still an important goal for all humans. Let's look at the word "atonement." It means literally to be at one, to reconcile, to harmonize, to restore from opposition to a friendly relation. Should this not be the goal of religion? To help us reconcile with our neighbor. This was the religion of Jesus. Vicarious atonement is the religion of others about Jesus. Like Confucius, Jesus preached a Kingdom of God on earth more than in heaven.

Personal reconciliation was at the heart of Jesus' message. He asked his followers to acknowledge their wrongs and ask them for forgiveness. In Mark we find Jesus' advice, authentic according to the Jesus Seminar, about prayer. He said, "And when you stand up to pray, if you are holding anything against anyone, forgive them, so your Father in heaven may forgive your misdeeds." In the Lord's Prayer we find that we should ask for forgiveness of our debts or transgressions to the extent that we have forgiven those in debt to us.

Probably the best support for my thesis this morning is the most important commandment according to Jesus which is taken from ancient Judaism. When asked by the Pharisees "which is the greatest commandment" he answered, "You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. This commandment is first and foremost. And the second is like it: "You are to love your neighbor as yourself." So according to this commandment, which is also thought to be authentic, Jesus equates Loving God with loving your neighbor. What a wonderful concept. It is this belief that has led many UUs to call themselves UU Christians.

Oftentimes UUs are criticized for overlooking the importance of evil. It is my belief that if we emphasize atonement, being at one with our neighbors, and with nature, then we are at one with God, we can admit that evil exists, and it is our responsibility to overcome it.

Yes, evil exists. It is seen in men who abuse women and children everyday and in a lab worker who decides to take a woman's life. Evil exists as we scapegoat individuals or groups in our society. Evil exists when we hurt others. Atonement is fighting evil with good. It is also about overcoming our separation from others—our relatives, our friends, and even our enemies.

UU author, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. reminds us in his writings that there is enough love in the world for everybody if we will just look for it, take responsibility for our own behavior, and stop taking ourselves so seriously. (Joan Kahn, p. 19). Joan Kahn concludes:

If sin is about fragmentation and separation, atonement cannot be about blaming or accusing, neither can it be about sitting back and accepting injustice--any injustice. Atonement for Unitarian Universalists must be about at-one-ment, at-one-ment with ourselves, with each other, with the universe, with love, with respect—individually and collectively, and with a sense of humor. (p. 19)

So may it be. Amen. Blessed Be.