

## Article

# The Doctrine of Exemplarism: A Symbolic Attempt to Escape the Pelagian Heresy <sup>§</sup>

Liran Shia Gordon The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel; [liran.gordon@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:liran.gordon@mail.huji.ac.il)<sup>§</sup> To the sacrifice of Shajar and Yosef Malachi, who fell to protect the fabric that binds the living.

**Abstract:** Heresies are intrinsically intertwined with the evolution and inner growth of the very religions that denounce them. They serve as theological junctures, challenging and thus refining the orthodoxy of religious beliefs. The Pelagian heresy touches on one of the central tenets of Christian theology: the question of salvation. Pelagianism posits that human beings retain freedom of the will and, more specifically, the capacity to earn salvation through their own merits rather than relying solely on the grace of God in Christ. This stands in contrast to the predominant Christian view that Original Sin fundamentally impaired man's will and intellect. A central tenet of Christianity is that through His suffering and death on the Cross, Christ atoned for humanity's Original Sin and paved the way for our redemption. But what exactly made this redemption possible through the suffering and death on the Cross? Unlike many of the answers offered, Abelard's explanation, also referred to as exemplarism, resonates with modern sensibilities: Christ set an example to imitate, and through this imitation, man learns humility and love. However, this stance faced criticism and was condemned by Bernard of Clairvaux as having Pelagian tendencies because it suggests that Christ's redemptive work might not inherently require Christ's divine nature. This study will attempt to defend the exemplaristic approach while ensuring Christ's essential role and addressing criticisms against the Pelagian heresy. This discussion is further enriched by an examination of the Eucharist, illuminating the theological tension between symbolic and realistic interpretations of religious rites.

**Keywords:** Pelagianism; satisfaction; sin; heresy; exemplarism; symbolism; atonement; Aquinas; Abelard; Anselm



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According to the Christian worldview, there is a fundamental link between Original Sin, and the coming of Christ, the second man—the incarnated Logos—who, in his death and resurrection on the Cross, redeems Man from the consequences of Original Sin, and through it offers humanity a path to salvation. Given this profound significance of Christ's crucifixion, one naturally wonders what precisely it is about this act that makes it indispensable for man's redemption. Several answers have been proposed, all of which agree on Christ's redeeming role, but, following different understandings of the nature of the Fall and its punishment, differ in their explanations. In this study we will examine central medieval solutions that were proposed to explain Christ's redeeming work. Following significant problems that are associated with these doctrines, primarily regarding the need to "set the balance", we will support a fresh examination of the view known as *exemplarism*. Exemplarism argues that Christ's life and death on the Cross offer us a model for imitation thanks to which man can overcome his pride and sin and no additional payment or action is demanded. The *Imitatio Christi* teaches man humility and love through which an opening is made to let God in. By dying on the Cross, Christ offers humanity a way out of our self-absorbed prison. By accepting Christ, who died for humanity, God returns to the center of Man's life. This solution provides a reasonable psychological-symbolic account of how Man can overcome his bent egoistic constitution (*homo incurvatus in se*—Man bending inwardly upon himself). However, this exemplaristic model was understood as a form of

Pelagianism, i.e., as the ability to attain redemption without God's assistance. The present study will conclude with an attempt to defend the exemplaristic approach.

Historically, the concept of Pelagianism is rooted in Augustine's critique of the teachings of the Briton ascetic, Pelagius. However, the debate extends far beyond its Christian origins, illuminating a deeper tension between theology and philosophy. While there is a clear distinction between Pelagius's teachings and Augustine's subsequent interpretation, the essence of the discussion reaches beyond these historical details.<sup>1</sup> Accusations against philosophers like Descartes and Kant suggest that the scope of the Pelagianism debate encompasses more than just heretical tendencies; it delves into broader questions of human nature, autonomy, and the inherent inclination toward sin.<sup>2</sup> The ensuing discourse on the nature of evil and humanity's propensity for sin serves as a deeper exploration of human autonomy. Consequently, Pelagianism challenges not just individual heretical viewpoints but also calls into question the primacy and relevance of specific "historical" theologies.

In defining its understanding of human nature, Christianity had to determine the manner in which evil exists and Man's proclivity for it. In so doing, Christianity chooses a middle position between two opposing attitudes: the Socratic and the Gnostic. A common attitude toward philosophy applauds it for its rationality, its ability to transcend prejudices and to view Man as a rational being who can naturally understand and distinguish between right and wrong. The Socratic school contended that Man does not desire evil and that it is the result of bad judgment. Evil cannot be willingly desired, Socrates argued, for it is irrational to prefer the bad to the good. Evil is simply the result of ignorance. Moving from this philosophical backdrop, the Christian perspective, as articulated by Paul, paints a contrast. He offers a more intricate vision of the human subject: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). Christianity, drawing from Paul's perspective, portrays Man's flawed condition as a consequence of Original Sin.

The Christian narrative presents a distinct understanding of evil and redemption. According to this perspective, the world was created without evil, and its emergence is attributed to a primordial rupture caused by sinning, whether human or angelic. This evil, the Christian tradition asserts, arises from a privation or bending of reality, existing only in a secondary manner. Central to Christian belief is the idea that humanity, being responsible for its Fall and subsequent distortion of reality, is offered a path to redemption by God. Out of His boundless benevolence, God sent His beloved Son to endure suffering and death, providing humankind with a means to redemption.

In contrast, the Gnostic view posits that evil is intrinsic to the very fabric of existence. Rooted in Gnostic mythology is the notion that the human soul is imprisoned within its material body, which is subjugated to the principle of evil. This evil, as a unique and inherent principle of reality, cannot be obliterated or rectified. Aligning with the Platonic idea of the soul being trapped in the body, Gnostic teachings provided followers with the knowledge to liberate the soul from its confines, enabling its return to an original, untainted state.

These contrasting narratives offer two fundamentally different explanations for the existence of evil and the paths to redemption. Each perspective furnishes individuals with a distinct symbolic framework to comprehend and rationalize the human condition, equipping them with a redemptive logic to alleviate their existential plight.

Building on the Christian narrative of redemption, it is essential to delve into the underlying causes of the Fall, which necessitated such a divine intervention. Central to this understanding is the sin of pride. Within the Christian tradition, pride is accorded significant importance as the precursor to sin. Saint Augustine, a seminal figure in Christian theology, accentuated this concept, emphasizing the perils of self-elevation and distancing from God. As he aptly put it, "the beginning of all sin is pride." (Augustine 1984, XII, vi, p. 477). To grasp the depth of this assertion, Augustine's own words provide a comprehensive insight:

For they would not have arrived at the evil act if an evil will [*voluntas mala*] had not preceded it. Now, could anything but pride [*superbia*] have been the start of the evil will? For ‘pride is the start of every kind of sin.’ And what is pride except a longing for a perverse kind of exaltation? For it is a perverse kind of exaltation to abandon [*deserto*] the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed, and to become, as it were, based on oneself, and so remain. This happens when a man is too pleased with himself: and a man is self-complacent when he deserts that changeless Good in which, rather than in himself, he ought to have found his satisfaction. This desertion [*defectus*] is voluntary. . . the evil act, the transgression of eating the forbidden fruit, was committed only when those who did it were already evil. (ibid., XIII. xiii. pp. 571–72)

In the biblical story, the serpent responds to Eve’s fear, telling her that by eating the fruit, they would become equal to God, knowing good and evil.<sup>3</sup> Augustine explains that the serpent’s words could convince Eve only because she already possessed in her “heart a love of her own independence and proud presumption of self”. (Augustinus 1982, p. 162). Evil, Jenson explains, could enter creation not through an evil act but rather through evil will (Jenson 2006, p. 18). Aquinas, for reasons concerning the heresy of Manichaeism, held that “[a]s soon as the serpent had spoken his words of persuasion, her mind was puffed up, the result being that she believed the demon to have spoken truly”.<sup>4</sup> As to the effect of pride, Jenson explains that “for Augustine, sin is pride, it is not merely pride, but the willful re-direction of attention and love from God to the human self apart from God which results in alienation from God and the fracturing of human society.” (Jenson 2006, p. 7). Due to the Fall Man’s will is turned inward. Instead of finding satisfaction in the changeless and supremely perfect good God, Man finds satisfaction in himself (see ibid., pp. 25–26). It is this curving inward, rejecting external satisfaction, that results in the feeling of guilt. As Paul Ricoeur explains, “Guilt cannot, in fact, express itself except in the indirect language of ‘captivity’ and ‘infection’”. (Ricoeur 1967, p. 152). This transition externalizes a weak inner constitution into an objectified measure that can be recouped by payment.

The symbolic structure of sin and the Fall brings about guilt and captivity, which pave the way to the need for redemption. The early fathers, particularly Origen, objectified our guilt into “real” captivity in the hands of the devil, for by accepting the devil’s words, we have submitted our will to him. The *ransom doctrine* held that by accepting the devil’s authority concerning the forbidden fruit, Man voluntarily submitted himself to the will of the devil. As a result, the devil holds all humans in bondage. According to this view, Man is redeemed at the cost of Christ’s blood.

This early doctrine was ill suited for the theological challenges. Abelard presents several objections to this view, of which the important one claims that “the devil could not grant that immortality which he promised man”,<sup>5</sup> and consequently, the devil has no rights over man. As a result, there “is no need for God to ransom human sinners from the devil”. (Quinn 2009, p. 352). God may have delivered Man to suffer under the devil, who acts as our jailer, but that does not mean that the redeeming price belongs to the tormentor.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the ransom doctrine implies a limitation in God. Anselm writes, using the mouth of the “unbelievers” that “in what captivity, or in what prison or in whose power were you held, from which God could not set you free without ransoming you by so many exertions and, in the end, by his own blood?” Furthermore, “they” continue, if God could not have acted, then he becomes powerless, and if does not will to, then his goodness or wisdom are questionable: “If God could not save sinners except by condemning a just man, where is his omnipotence? If, on the other hand, he was capable of doing so, but did not will it, how shall we defend his wisdom and justice?” (Anselm 1998, p. 275).

But perhaps the most important criticism concerns the logic in which God needs or even finds delight in such a sacrifice. Anselm writes: “For it is a surprising supposition that God takes delight in, or is in need of, the blood of an innocent man, so as to be unwilling or unable to spare the guilty except in the event that the innocent has been killed”. (ibid., p. 282). Abelard raises a similar objection:

[w]hat need was there, I say, that the Son of God, for our redemption, should take upon him our flesh and endure such numerous fastings, insults, scourgings and spittings, and finally that most bitter and disgraceful death upon the Cross, enduring even the Cross of punishment with the wicked? . . . For how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!<sup>7</sup>

By questioning the necessity of such intense suffering and the crucifixion of an innocent being, Abelard challenges the conventional perspective that depicts God as demanding the suffering of His own Son. Such a portrayal, Abelard implies, conflicts with the conception of a benevolent and just deity. This critique forms a foundational argument against traditional atonement theories, suggesting that there must be deeper, more morally coherent explanations for Christ's sacrifice beyond mere appeasement of divine wrath or payment.

The ransom doctrine not only misrepresents the juridical situation but also presents an absurd idea, that "God demanded payment from himself, having arbitrarily set the price at the death of his Son". (Williams 2004, p. 264). Abelard powerfully challenges the traditional understanding of Christ's blood sacrifice, compelling a reevaluation of the fundamental reasons for Christ's death.

In attempting to present an alternative explanation, Anselm defines sin as "nothing other than not to give God what is owed to him". The sin remains so long as the sinner does not repay what is owed. The sinner "ought to pay back more than he took, in proportion to the insult which he has inflicted". By paying back what is owed and offering a compensation, the debt is removed, and God is satisfied. This is the doctrine of *satisfaction*, "which every sinner is obliged to give to God" (Anselm 1998, p. 283). From Anselm's point of view, without satisfaction, it is morally wrong to forgive or reconcile with the wrongdoer. Satisfaction, according to Anselm, is a *sine qua non* condition for forgiveness, without which forgiveness is impossible. Anselm's reasoning in connection with satisfaction uses objectified juridical reasoning. Man's sin against God created a debt that is impossible to repay by finite means, as it requires an infinite atonement due to the infinite nature of the insult against an infinite God. Therefore, the only way this infinite debt can be repaid is through the sacrifice of an infinite being. Thus, Christ, being infinite as both God and man, sacrifices himself on behalf of humanity to reestablish the balance and provide the demanded satisfaction. In summary, Anselm views sin as a debt to God that requires repayment or satisfaction, which, due to its infinite magnitude, can only be fulfilled through the infinite sacrifice of Christ.

Anselm's explanation involves significant problems. The satisfaction model focuses on the payment of the debt, which aims to repair the alienation of humans from God, but it does not explain how this rectifies human nature. No real atonement is made. Humanity's nature remains unchanged and is not elevated or brought closer to God. Moreover, setting aside the accounting analogy, Anselm's model seems to miss the essence of atonement. On one side, Anselm asserts that it is unjust for God to forgive humanity unless they answer for and compensate for their wrongdoing. Yet, paradoxically, it is not humanity that provides the satisfaction; it is God Himself. In this scenario, God both demands the payment and provides the solution. This reasoning can be likened to a parent who, upon discovering that their child wronged another child, steps in to apologize and make amends on behalf of their unrepentant child. The parent, representing God in this analogy, takes responsibility and even commends the child, representing humanity, in an effort to teach a lesson. While the act of making amends is essential, the way it is done here raises questions about genuine rehabilitation and true atonement. In such a scenario, the likely outcome is a frustrated parent, an unrepentant child, and a superficial sense of justice. The child's behavior remains uncorrected, and there's no personal growth or understanding. The resolution, in this case, feels like a mere accounting maneuver that creates an illusion of a settled dispute.

While Anselm's model presents a certain understanding of atonement that, to some, may seem lacking in its ability to foster genuine reconciliation and personal growth, other theologians have ventured to offer alternative explanations. One such perspective comes from Abelard, who reimagines Christ's sacrifice not as a debt settlement but in a more transformative light.

In his Commentary on Romans 3, Abelard offers a new explanation to evaluate Christ's death not as a payment but rather as a teaching moment. He explains that "Christ's life and death work to remove our sins by inspiring us to do penance and good acts, [and this] contains no objective transaction". (Swinburne 1989, p. 162) Rather than viewing Christ's sacrifice as a debt paid, Abelard posits that Christ's life and death serve as an example to imitate, a view known as *exemplarism*. Delving deeper into this perspective, Abelard writes: "through this unique act of grace manifested to us—in that his Son has taken upon himself our nature and persevered therein in teaching us by word and example even unto death—he has more fully bound us to himself by love; with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him. . . . everyone becomes more righteous. . . after the Passion of Christ than before, since a realized gift inspires greater love than one which is only hoped for. Wherefore, our redemption through Christ's suffering is that deeper affection [*dilectio*] in us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also wins for us the true liberty of sons of God, so that we do all things out of love rather than fear".<sup>8</sup>

Exemplarism contends that in his life and death on the Cross, Christ offered us a model to emulate whereby man can overcome his pride and sin. The *Imitatio Christi* teaches man humility and love through which an opening is forged to let God in. In dying for us on the Cross, Christ offers us a way out of our self-absorbed prison. By accepting God who died for us, God becomes the center of our life. This solution provides a reasonable psychological account for how Man can overcome his inward directed egoistic constitution.

Exemplarism seems to offer an elegant explanation that explains Christ's redeeming work: "The efficacy of Christ's death is now quite definitely and explicitly explained by its subjective influence upon the mind of the sinner. The voluntary death of the innocent Son of God on man's behalf moves the sinner to gratitude and answering love—and so to consciousness of sin, repentance, amendment" (Hastings Rashdall 1919, p. 358). Abelard is sensitive to the idea that our fallenness is rooted in our subjectivity. Consequently, our captivity and redemption should not be understood through an objectification that is blind to the impact of sin on man's subjectivity. Our captivity is self-made, and consequently, our ability to liberate ourselves must be attained through an internal process whereby we come to acknowledge our tendency to self-bending, which must precede any making of amends.

What we moderns might find elegant and appealing in exemplarism, is the root of the criticism that Abelard was accused of by his contemporaries. The problem is not that Christ's life and death were understood as a model and example. The problem with exemplarism, so it was argued, is that by reducing Christ's redeeming work solely to an example, it does not suffice to explain his atoning work. St. Bernard of Clairvaux was the person responsible for condemning Abelard's position as holding a Pelagian tendency. In *Tractatus ad Innocentium II Pontificem contra quaedam capitula errorum Abaelardi*, he explains that the exemplarism of Abelard seems to subscribe to Pelagianism. Bernard's reading of Abelard was that "by His life and teaching He [Christ] handed down to men a pattern of life, [and] that by His suffering and death He set up a standard of love". Thus, Bernard argued, it follows from Abelard's position that Christ only teaches "righteousness and not bestow[s] it; reveal[s] love and not infuse[s] it".<sup>9</sup>

While the debate continues over whether Abelard's position can truly be classified as exemplarist or, as suggested by Quinn and Williams, is more multifaceted, St. Bernard pinpoints a glaring vulnerability in the exemplarist doctrine. The crux of the issue is this: if the sole purpose of Christ's Passion is to serve as a teaching example, it raises the troubling implication that any less divine teacher could impart the same lesson. This, in turn, suggests that Christ's crucifixion might be superfluous. Further extrapolating from

this line of thought, it is implied that humanity could rectify its fallen state without needing any divine intervention whatsoever. Quinn writes:

If it were true that Christ confers on us no more than the benefit of a good example we can freely follow or reject, then it would seem that whether we are justified in the sight of God is something wholly within our power to determine. (Quinn 2009, p. 258)

Quinn suggests that Abelard's perspective leans towards Pelagianism. The primary critique against exemplarism is that it diminishes the significance of Christ's Passion, which in turn renders his unique role as unnecessary. If God's act of redemption is not anchored in Christ's Passion, then why did Christ, as God's son, have to die on the Cross for us? (Williams 2004, p. 262.) If the crucifixion does not hold distinct value or if such a sacrifice could be offered by another, it does not represent a special gift from God deserving of our deep gratitude and love. Bernard's criticism of Abelard asserts that, although Christ's Passion can serve as a model for us, it is more than just an example. There's a unique worth in it that only Christ could bestow.

Following the discussion above, it is understandable why on the one hand, theologians rejected the ransom doctrine, while on the other hand, insisted that Christ's crucifixion consisted of a *sine qua non* deed that the exemplaristic model lacks. As the discourse evolves, we will soon see how figures like Aquinas took these theological debates further, offering nuanced perspectives that diverged from both the ransom and exemplaristic models.

Aquinas, building on Anselm's framework, offers a distinct interpretation of Christ's crucifixion. While he adopts the "satisfaction" terminology central to Anselm's model, he provides a nuanced redefinition of its essence. Aquinas' account reshapes the essential reasoning behind the satisfaction model. Instead of focusing on God as the injured party, he centers on the psychological stain on the offender's soul and the steps needed for its recovery. Contrary to Anselm, who believes that God must mete out justice, Aquinas envisions a merciful God who bestows forgiveness on his children through his boundless grace and love. While Anselmian reasoning defers the act of forgiveness until God receives compensation from the wrongdoer, Aquinas contends that such prior forgiveness is not only feasible but also morally commendable.

In Anselm's understanding of satisfaction, sin results in God's alienation from Man and the punishment of the former. As a result, the restoration of Man is carried out only on God's side. On the other hand, Aquinas holds that sin results in the alienation of Man from God, and so God might assist Man to come closer to God, but it is Man who has to close the gap (Stump 2009, p. 271). While Anselm perceives satisfaction as a process where God takes the initiative to bridge the gap caused by sin, Aquinas emphasizes the responsibility of Man to actively seek reconciliation, even as God offers assistance.

Aquinas explains that the distance that opens up between Man and God is not the result of God's anger or the forgiveness required on his behalf, but rather the result of sin, which corrupted Man's soul. The sin damages the psychological well-being of Man, leading to alienation from God. Throughout its stages, atonement is a process through which man restores his inner balance and realigns himself in relation to the world and God. Contrary to Anselmian Satisfaction, which focuses solely on those who suffered the wrongdoing and the demand to compensate them, Aquinas understands compensation not merely as a payment that settles a debt but as a means through which the offender finds a way to rehabilitate his damaged soul. Therefore, as Stump explains, Aquinas approaches satisfaction not in terms of the victim being satisfied with the compensation, but in terms of the wrongdoer feeling he has given enough.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Anselm's satisfaction, which is formal and quantitative, Aquinas's satisfaction is not about external or internal punishment imposed on the offender. Instead, it is based on the offender's genuine desire to make amends for his deed.<sup>11</sup> This desire to make amends presupposes the offender's ability to acknowledge what he has done, understand its ramifications, and possess the will to make amends.<sup>12</sup> While Aquinas emphasizes this personal transformation and inner reconciliation

of the wrongdoer, he also acknowledges that Christ's Passion plays a pivotal role in this process, making satisfaction for sin. Aquinas sees the transformation of the sinner as a direct effect of Christ's sacrificial act, rather than its cause. Satisfaction is thus attained when the offender feels he has done and given all that he could to amend his wrongdoing. In essence, while traditional interpretations often frame atonement in terms of settling a debt or appeasing a wronged party, Aquinas uniquely centers the process on the personal transformation and inner reconciliation of the wrongdoer, emphasizing genuine remorse and self-driven amends, all rooted in the redemptive power of Christ's Passion. Having understood Aquinas's perspective on atonement and the role of sin, we can now delve into a specific aspect of his theology: How does the Passion and crucifixion of Christ play into this understanding?

At the heart of Aquinas's theology, especially when discussing satisfaction, is the pivotal role of Christ's sacrifice. How then, within this framework, does Aquinas perceive Christ's Passion and crucifixion as addressing mankind's sins? What is the sense that the Passion and crucifixion of Christ make amends for men's sins in Aquinas' version of satisfaction? Stump explains that Christ's crucifixion is vicarious satisfaction; it is "an offer of union in love made to each human sufferer of the depredations of others". In such vicarious satisfaction, one can freely take upon oneself the punishment of another "insofar as they are in some way one".<sup>13</sup> According to Aquinas, Christ's death on the Cross offers a union with God through Christ's love "with respect to the satisfaction being made. . ." (Stump 2009, p. 269) Christ's crucifixion is not understood as a payment of a debt but as a unifying bridge between Man and God. Stump summarizes:

Christ's atonement does not *compensate* for human evil, as it does in the Anselmian interpretation. Christ's atonement *defeats* human evil, by weaving it into union in love with God in a way that removes guilt and shame from wrongdoers and satisfies fully for the suffering of their victims if they will receive what Christ offers them. (Stump 2009, p. 271)

Man is incapable of bringing himself to undo what he has done. As part of the penance process, satisfaction is seen as a medication for sin that aims to restore the friendship between the wrongdoer and the one wronged.<sup>14</sup> "The function of satisfaction for Aquinas, then, is not to placate a wrathful God but instead to restore a sinner to a state of harmony with God" (Ibid., pp. 271–72). Thomas, Stump explains, accepts the view that God could absolve and overlook our debt of sin<sup>15</sup> without satisfaction, and that such a disregard would not be considered unjust. However, God demands satisfaction not for himself but rather because there is no better way to heal human nature than by satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> By sending Christ, God ensures that Man understands his wrongdoing: "it is possible for the satisfaction to be made by a substitute, provided that the wrongdoer allies himself with the substitute in willing to undo as far as possible the damage he has done" (Stump 2009, p. 273). The fact that Man's awareness of his wrongdoing is through another does not take away anything from the actual product of the satisfaction, i.e., the restoration of the harmony between man and God.

Stump's reading of Aquinas's doctrine of satisfaction seems to be a version of exemplarism where Christ's Passion needs to be understood not as a payment of a debt, i.e., as an actual transaction that only Christ as the Son of God could pay, but rather as a wake-up call for assistance. In this, God himself reminds Man of his wrongdoing that will pave the road to the harmonization of Man's relationship to God. While this reading of satisfaction resonates with Abelard's exemplarism, it seems to be of a different strand. Whereas Abelard explains that Christ enkindled our soul and bound us to him with love, Aquinas puts more emphasis on an awareness of the wrongdoing and participation in an attempt to correct the harm that was done. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Aquinas also believes that Christ himself offered satisfaction for our sins, an integral aspect of his soteriology. This offering by Christ underpins the rectification process in Aquinas's model. Whereas Abelard places more focus on Christ, who teaches us how to regain our initial humility, the

rectification that is offered by Aquinas' model is based on understanding our wrongdoing and our affirmation of an internal commitment to pay willingly for our sins. And yet the question remains: how does Aquinas' emphasis on recognizing one's wrongdoing and the commitment to atonement reconcile with the broader theological understanding of Christ's sacrifice and its implications for humanity's relationship with God?

Stump is well aware that her interpretation of satisfaction brings her close to Abelard and the cliff of Pelagianism: "It might occur to someone at this point to protest that in explaining Aquinas's account I have in effect changed it from an orthodox view of the Atonement into something perilously close to Abelard's theory of the Atonement, a theory repudiated by the medieval church" (Ibid., p. 271). In many respects, she defended her position using a method similar to how Abelard's scholars attempted to exonerate him. Quinn and Williams explain that Abelard repeatedly stated that no salvation could be attained without grace: "thanks to God, that is, not the law, not our own powers, not any merits, but a divine benefit of grace conferred on us through Jesus, that is, the savior of the world" (Quinn 2009, p. 258; Williams 2004, pp. 266–67). It is for this reason that Williams says that "Now if we define Pelagianism as the view that it is possible for human beings to act rightly even without divine grace, Abelard is clearly not a Pelagian" (Williams 2004, p. 269). Despite significant differences,<sup>17</sup> Stump similarly protects herself, insisting that redemption can be attained only through God's grace that is bestowed by the sacraments (Stump 2009, p. 289).

St. Bernard's critique of Abelard's exemplaristic view underscores the need for an objective component in the redemption process. He argues that without this tangible element, redemption could mistakenly be perceived as achievable purely through human effort, sidelining the vital role of divine intervention and thus gravitating towards Pelagianism. But Bernard's concerns are not limited to Abelard's model alone. They tap into a broader theological discourse that has the Eucharist at its heart. As a cornerstone of Christian ritual, the Eucharist has sparked intense debate: Is it a genuine embodiment of Christ's body and blood or merely a symbolic representation? This controversy parallels the exemplaristic argument. The main criticism against the symbolic interpretation is its potential to dilute Christ's unique and indispensable role in salvation. If the Eucharist is just a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, then theoretically, any symbol could suffice, undermining the profound significance of Christ's own sacrifice for humanity.

Berengar of Tours (999–1088), a pioneering theologian heralded as an early rationalist, found the notion of Christ's true presence in the Eucharist, with a substantial transformation occurring post-consecration, to be "mad".<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the belief in an inherent transformation, Berengar posited that the change was symbolic, contingent upon the faith and comprehension of the recipients.<sup>19</sup> His stance, however, was swiftly deemed heretical. Interestingly, such "heretical" views have historically served as catalysts for theological evolution. Even two centuries post-Berengar, the weight of his argument was palpable. Aquinas, the architect behind the doctrine of transubstantiation that later became a central Catholic tenet, grappled with Berengar's perspective in his treatise, "Whether the body of Christ be in this sacrament in very truth, or merely as in a figure or sign." he writes:

Some men accordingly, not paying heed to these things, have contended that Christ's body and blood are not in this sacrament except as in a sign, a thing to be rejected as heretical, since it is contrary to Christ's words. Hence Berengarius, who had been the first deviser of this heresy, was afterwards forced to withdraw his error, and to acknowledge the truth of the faith.<sup>20</sup>

Following (and adapting) Aristotle's metaphysics, Aquinas maintained that a real substantial change—where the essence or nature of a thing transforms—takes place. Though this transformation is hidden to the senses, it becomes visible to the intellect, fortified by faith: "There is no deception in this sacrament; for the accidents which are discerned by the senses are truly present. However, the intellect, whose proper object is substance as is said in *De Anima* iii, is preserved by faith from deception".<sup>21</sup> Whereas Berengar's



rationalism argued that the judgment of the senses could not be rejected, Aquinas utilized Aristotelian metaphysics to distinguish between substantive and accidental knowledge. While limiting the importance of the judgment of the senses, he bolstered the judgment of the intellect. This approach not only mitigated the discord between faith and human experience but also reinforced the assertion that faith and reason harmoniously coexist. This sentiment is eloquently echoed in Aquinas's Eucharistic Hymn *Adoro te*, where he poetically underscores the synergy of faith's insights with the intellect's discernment:

Visus, tactus, gustus in te fallitur	Sight, touch, taste are all deceived in their judgment of you
Sed auditu solo tuto creditor	But hearing suffices firmly to believe

We hold that the accusation of Pelagianism can be circumvented by two different strategies that answer the need to add to "Christ the Teacher" some "additional something" that safeguards the need for Christ's coming. The first strategy, the *realistic*, is applicable to the men of faith. The second, the *symbolic*, is indifferent to the question of faith; that is, the reasoning employed addresses Bernard's critique in a manner that transcends the question of faith.

The realistic alternative holds that the accusation of Pelagianism can be answered simply by saying that Christ's role was not limited to his Passion and crucifixion. It can be argued that whereas Christ's redeeming work does not carry with it an extra element besides Christ's teaching, other deeds, particularly the Eucharistic meal, cannot be given by anyone else but Christ. There is a broad spectrum of interpretations of the meaning of the Eucharist. The classic realistic view holds that in the Eucharistic sacrament, the substance of the bread and wine are transformed into the substance of Christ's body and blood. This *real* transformation also postulates that by eating and drinking the Eucharist, something *real* happens to the believer.<sup>22</sup> The repetition of this celebration is ultimately rooted in the Last Supper and Christ's actual act. In itself, it is a real non-symbolic event that could only be brought about by Christ alone. In this respect, without Christ's action in the Last Supper, no Eucharist could be given. Without the Eucharist, the believers would not come into communion; i.e., there would be no Church. Understanding that the unique role of Christ in the Last Supper, is that it cannot be executed by any other man, sufficiently grounds the necessity of the coming of Christ and so rebuts any accusations of Pelagianism. It can be argued that Christ's work has both a realistic part that cannot be undertaken by anyone but him, and an exemplaristic part—that can. When one considers the Last Supper from a traditional perspective, the bread and the wine that are given are real acts in the world that, for the first time, form a communion whereby the participants are assimilated into Christ's body.

While the aforementioned view anchors the necessity of Christ's unique role in the Eucharistic event as a rebuttal to Pelagianism, this argument largely resonates with those grounded in faith. For those outside this belief system or for a more inclusive understanding, a symbolic approach to the Eucharist offers a different lens. A symbolic approach can offer a solution that is indifferent to the question of faith. Christ's Eucharistic act can be understood regardless of whether it "really" occurred or whether something "real" takes place in the Eucharist, i.e., whether or not the bread and the wine are truly transformed into Christ's flesh and blood. The Eucharist is not understood in terms of its reality or causality but rather as part of a hermeneutical structure within which it functions and grants meaning. It says nothing about whether a substantial transformation takes place. No causality or reality is involved.

The Eucharistic act of Christ in the Last Supper can be perceived in two contrasting yet profound ways. On one hand, it stands as a tangible event where the bread and wine underwent an actual transformation, signifying an ongoing, real communion with Christ's body spanning two millennia. This perspective asserts the indispensability of Christ in the act, without which the Eucharist remains mere bread and wine, and believers would lack the communion that forms the Church. On the other hand, there is an interpretative, symbolic lens. Just as a mere napkin, when attributed to Van Gogh, transcends its commonplace

identity to become “Van Gogh’s napkin”, the Eucharist, when seen in Christ’s light, becomes more than bread and wine. It becomes emblematic, carrying profound meaning even without a substantial transformation. Within this framework, salvation is intrinsically tied to Christ, not through a tangible transformation, but through the attribution and meaning Christ brings to the Eucharist. The Pelagian accusation against the symbolic interpretation is thus solved: there is no salvation without Christ, for salvation can only be understood, in this framework, as being under Christ.

The manifestation of the truth of the Eucharist as part of a greater hermeneutical perspective is expressed beautifully in the words of John Zizioulas:

In the eucharistic assembly God’s Word reaches man and creation not from outside, as in the Old Testament, but as “flesh”—from inside our own existence, as part of creation. For this reason, the Word of God does not dwell in the human mind as rational knowledge or in the human soul as a mystical inner experience, but as communion within a community. And it is most important to note that in this way of understanding Christ as truth, Christ Himself becomes revealed as truth not in a community, but as a community. So truth is not just something “expressed” or “heard”, a propositional or a logical truth; but something which is, i.e., an ontological truth: the community itself becoming the truth. (Zizioulas 1985, p. 115)

While the theological discourse on exemplarism emphasizes the abstract implications of Christ’s crucifixion as a guiding model for believers, it also opens up the avenue to discuss more tangible ways in which believers actively participate in this divine sacrifice. The Eucharist, a sacred ritual in Christianity, offers one such tangible means. Through the act of partaking in the Eucharist, believers not only remember and commemorate Christ’s sacrifice but also physically and symbolically immerse themselves in its implications. This act of communion, where abstract theological principles meet tangible ritual practice, showcases the depth and complexity of Christian belief and participation. The interpretations of the Eucharist, whether realistic or symbolic, revolve around this core idea of participation, echoing the themes of exemplarism and extending them into the realm of lived religious experience.

In the first realistic reading, where the sanctified bread is transformed into Christ’s flesh, the believer *really* participates in the Word of God “from inside our own existence”. Through this participation, he becomes a part of God, his Church, and its historical mission. In the symbolic reading, which consists of the exemplaristic doctrine, the participant willingly “eats” and absorbs the symbolic structure that accompanies Christ. In the words of Louis-Marie Chauvet, “the symbolic order is the mediation through which subjects build themselves while building the real into a ‘world,’ their familiar ‘world’ where they can live”. (Chauvet 1995, p. 86). In this way, God’s truth does not become realized in the realization of the Church’s deeds, but it radiates as a living hermeneutical and symbolic structure according to which we perceive things. The truth that is given internally is not depicted in the second reading as something “extra” that is added to our flesh but rather as a hermeneutical prospect that ties us to the world in a “Christian” manner. This opening up to the world in a “Christian” manner encompasses our actions and thoughts, through which the world is transformed symbolically into a “Christian” world. Evangelization is not a product of a supernatural act that radically transforms reality itself but instead results from the continuous actions of a community that is guided by Christian hermeneutics. In this living hermeneutical community, Christ functions as its keystone, its alpha and omega, without which the structure will not hold together. It is for this reason that Christian theologians can argue whether, in the Eucharist, we are speaking of consubstantiation or transubstantiation, or any of the alternative understandings that have been proposed over the years, but cannot debate whether Christ, as the son of God, “died for us”. This “died for us” forms, together with other essential elements, Christ as the keystone symbol to follow and imitate, without which there is no **Christianity**.

One last thought, related to the discussion, yet also digressing, invites us to re-examine the topic from a new perspective. The parallel drawn between Christ's death and the Eucharist underscores both similarities and differences, particularly highlighting the singularity of Christ's death as opposed to the indefinitely repeatable Eucharistic event in religious rites. The realistic interpretation in both instances emphasizes Christ's unique role in absolving our debt to God and establishing the Church and underlines his singularity. Conversely, when understood symbolically or exemplaristically, Christ functions through the repeated practice of religious rites. This paper proposes a solution that maintains this dual aspect: Christ as the singular keystone of Christianity and as a figure to be imitated and symbolically consumed in religious observances.

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## Notes

- 1 Ali Bonner, for instance, holds that Pelagius did not deviate from the Christian doctrine. "Pelagianism", she explains, never really existed, not in Pelagius nor in his "follower". Even Augustine stated in his *On the Deeds of Pelagius (De gestis Pelagii)* that "he did not care whether or not Pelagius taught the tenets that he attributed to Pelagius". This did not prevent him from assembling a list of fourteen Pelagian tenets, that only in one of them, the ninth ("God's grace is given in accord with our merits, and for this reason grace itself is located in the human will, whether one becomes worthy or unworthy"), a trace of Pelagianism can be found. See (Bonner 2018, p. 25).
- 2 The following articles present a defence of Descartes and Kant as not holding Pelagian tendency. See (Lennon 2013; Mariña 1997).
- 3 See Chrysostom as cited by Denery: "He knows that your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good from evil"—puffed up as she was with the hope of being equal to God and evidently dreaming of greatness". (Chrysostom 1985, chp. 16 (9), p. 212). For further discussion, see (Denery 2015, chp. 1).
- 4 Aquinas, ST II-II, q. 163, a. 1, ad 4.
- 5 Translation in (Quinn 2009, p. 352). From (Abaelardus 1969, p. 115).
- 6 To whom was the price of blood paid so that we might be bought back, if not to him in whose power we were—i.e., as has been said, to God himself, who had entrusted us to his tormentor? For it is not tormentors but their masters who collect or receive the price for captives. And in what way did he release those captives on payment of that price, given that he himself previously demanded or instituted that price for the release of his captives? In Buytaert 1969, p. 117, trans (From Williams 2004, p. 264).
- 7 Buytaert, pp. 116–17; trans. In Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement: "Nothing Unintelligible, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral about It"" , 352–53.
- 8 Buytaert, pp. 117–18, trans. from (Quinn 2009, p. 353).
- 9 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Tractatus ad Innocentium II Pontificem contra quaedam capitula errorum Abaelardi*, quoted in Grensted, *A Short History*, p. 106. Trans. in (Quinn 2009, p. 357).
- 10 Stump, 102. See ST III q. 85 a. 3.
- 11 Aquinas, ST III q. 90 a. 2.
- 12 Aquinas, ST III q. 84 a. 5.
- 13 Aquinas, ST I-II q. 87 a. 8.
- 14 Aquinas, ST III, q. 85, a. 3 and q. 86, a. 2.
- 15 (Aquinas 1947), ST III, q. 22, a. 3.
- 16 (Aquinas 1947), ST III, q. 46, a. 3.
- 17 Whereas Stump sees the Eucharist as a medicine that needs to be taken repeatedly, Abelard contends that "it is not necessary for God to offer us new grace for each good work". For if this were the case it would follow that "human damnation will be the inevitable result of God's refusal to stuff the salvific grace-pill down our throats". (Quinn, 361) Concluding the matter, Williams explains that "it is simply a divine offer of a good that we already have the power to accept. As long as the good remains on offer and our power to accept it is intact, there is clearly no need for God to keep repeating himself". (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 273).
- 18 "Erat autem Burgundus in sententia, immo vecordia vulgi, Paschasii atque Lanfranci, minime superesse in altari post consecrationem substantiam panis atque vini". Berengar, *Scr. C. synodum*, quoted in *De corp.* 375.156–159 (412D). See also A J Macdonald, *Berengar and the Reform of Sacramental Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green), 256.
- 19 See *ibid.*, 261.
- 20 (Aquinas 1947), ST III, q. 75, a. 1, answer.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., q. 75, a. 5, ad. 2.

<sup>22</sup> This real causation produced by the Eucharist is referred to by Chauvet as the instrument understanding of the sacraments. See (Chauvet 2001, xiv).

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