

Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013, ix + 270 pp. £65.00).

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Nicholas Lombardo has authored a well-written and unusually wide-ranging study that draws upon “philosophical analysis, scriptural exegesis, and theological evaluation” (1) to tackle a central Christian problem: how the crucifixion of Jesus happened in accordance with his Father’s will. This book is motivated by the concern that regnant accounts of Jesus’ death are inadequate – especially those derived from Anselm – because they imply that God wills moral evil, thus unwittingly foisting a draconian God onto Christians. A “divine child abuser,” in the more pointed formulation of other critics. Lombardo is taking a path of inquiry well-trodden by theologians and injecting a level of sophistication into that critique (see pp. 147-48, ft. 9 for a bibliography). For Lombardo (and these other critics) there is more at stake than a theory of atonement that is disputed in the classroom. Jesus’ death raises profound existential questions for his followers, foremost among them: “is God the Father with me as I take up my cross, or is he orchestrating my crucifixion (vii)?” Lombardo wishes to clear a space in which Jesus’ followers can confidently address God as their Father.

The Father's Will is an extended *apologia* for what Gustaf Aulén in his little theological classic dubbed the “*Christus Victor*” account of atonement.¹ According to Aulén, the traditional histories of the Christian doctrine of atonement at the beginning of the twentieth century focused one-sidedly on Anselm’s and Abelard’s accounts of Jesus’ death. Whatever notion of atonement could be found in earlier Christian authors, it was either put in “fantastic mythology dress,” or merely a crass anticipation of Anselm. Either way, the “real beginnings” of the doctrine of atonement lay with Anselm (Aulén 2003, 1, 8, 9-10). Aulén’s enduring contribution was to revive a third view of atonement, what he called the “dramatic” or “classical” view that was ostensibly dominant in the New Testament and patristic literature. This unheralded view was characterized by “Divine conflict and victory; Christ – Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself” (Ibid., 4). This is the account that Lombardo also wishes to revive, for according to it God the Father is more obviously good, “the

¹ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of The Idea of Atonement*, transl. A. G. Hebert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003). Originally published in London by SPCK in 1931, and re-issued several times thereafter.

author of our salvation, rather than a stern judge who must be placated" (vii). Lombardo calls this the "Devil's Ransom" interpretation of Jesus' death.

Lombardo's book can be fruitfully read in conjunction with Aulén's treatise since both share the same basic aim: to revive an interpretation of Jesus' death that has retreated from conventional theological and philosophical discourse. In their respective strategies, moreover, both are insistent that the three main views of atonement come with their own corresponding ideas of God and that it is here where a criterion is to be found that helps readers determine what theory to endorse. The sort of picture of God that Aulén associated with *Christus Victor* was decidedly untidy. This God was characterized by a whole series of contrasting opposites "which defy rational systematisation, while the other two [theories] find rational solutions of the antinomies along theological or psychological lines" (Aulén 2003, 155). Such tensions include: God is sovereign, but engaged in conflict; the hostile powers defeated by Christ are evil, but they are also executants of God's judgment; God is reconciler and reconciled; this God is both loving and wrathful. While the love prevails over the wrath, love has still condemned sin. The other theories try to resolve or reconcile these tensions "into a purely rational scheme" (Ibid., 155). I suspect that Lombardo's God does not fit into such a "purely rational scheme," but neither does his God seem to approximate Aulén's deity in which love and wrath coincide.

In brief, Lombardo's argument unfolds in three parts. The first ("Philosophical Prolegomena") consists of five chapters that establish "a grammar for talking about divine intention, willing and moral evil" (13). Chapters 1 and 2 analyze intention, willing and moral evil, and on their basis Lombardo provides in chapter 3 an account of double effect reasoning in which actions are justified because their positive effects are intended, whereas their deleterious effects are not. Chapter 4 applies the preceding discussion to the issue of self-sacrifice, seeking criteria by which to distinguish honorable self-sacrifice from suicide, thereby dismissing theories of atonement that point in the latter direction. In chapter 5, through a *via negativa*, Lombardo rules out interpretations of Jesus' death that undermine God's goodness because they imply God wills moral evil.

Part two ("New Testament Evidence") "looks to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ for insight into God's will" (14). Here Lombardo shifts into a *via positiva* mode of inquiry. In chapters 6 and 7 he examines Jesus' attitude toward his own death and what the New Testament as a whole says about the role of Jesus' death in the plan of salvation. Lombardo argues that Jesus forecast his own death and anticipated that it would advance his objectives. This death, moreover, was consistently presented as "somehow necessary" for the plan of salvation and "somehow encompassed by God's will and God's intentions, even while simultaneously distancing God from the evil actions of those who crucify his Son" (15).

Part three ("Theological Evaluation") assesses the three main accounts of Jesus' death in the Christian tradition, as they were categorized by Aulén. In chapter 8 Lombardo argues that Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* captures scriptural evidence well, but implies that God wills moral evil. In chapter 9, Abelard's position is assessed, and while he is deemed to avoid that implication, his account does not do justice to biblical evidence. Finally, in chapter 10, Lombardo turns to the *Christus Victor*

theory which, he contends, meets his two major concerns: it is in accord with the scriptural witness and does not insinuate that God wills moral evil. This is by far the longest chapter in the book, reaching nearly 60 pages.

Lombardo has produced a coherent work and offers any number of issues with which philosophers, biblical scholars, and historians of Christian theology could grapple. But he also invites his readers to skip ahead to the culminating chapters of his project where he squarely engages the theological tradition on Jesus' death (16-17). I am grateful for this invitation and eagerly accept it, for reasons both of space and expertise.

One of the central criticisms that Lombardo levels against Anselm relies on a distinction between the logical and ontological implications of our intentions. Logical implication: "When what we intend *by definition* implies other effects, then we must necessarily intend those other effects, too" (28, italics mine). For instance, if we intend to win a hockey game we also intend to score at least one goal. An ontological implication, however, lacks logical necessity. "Wanting to mow the lawn does not by definition imply wanting to cause oneself to perspire" (29). We can say that on a stiflingly hot day the perspiration was "foreseen" by Bill and that he "knowingly caused himself to perspire, but we would not say that Bill intended this outcome" (29). Precisely because the perspiration is foreseen, Lombardo thinks it is more accurate to say this effect was "nonintended," not "unintended" (29).

Toward the end of his study Lombardo applies this distinction to the doctrine of atonement. Anselm's theory logically implies that God wills the moral evil of the crucifixion:

In Anselm's theory, however, God's intentions in handing over his Son logically imply the intending of his death, and thus the willing of moral evil. God wills the heroic self-sacrifice of Christ for its own sake, as the chosen means to the end of making satisfaction. But because it is not possible to will heroic self-sacrifice for its own sake without also willing the occasion of that self-sacrifice, Anselm cannot avoid implying that God wills Christ's crucifixion – and thus moral evil (232).

The *Christus Victor* account of Jesus' death is saved from this failing:

In the devil's ransom interpretation, God's intentions in handing over his Son do not logically imply the intending of his death; they merely imply it ontologically. God intends to provoke evil so that it overreaches, and then to overcome death through Christ's resurrection. Yet neither the idea of provoking evil to weaken it, nor the idea of overcoming death, includes the idea of Christ's death. God does not intend his Son's crucifixion as a means to an end; it is the nonintended side effect of what he does intend (232).

Even if we accept the aforementioned distinction between ontological and logical implications and its application to these two theories of atonement, it is not clear to me that the argument does the work Lombardo wishes it to do. In Lombardo's illustration of an ontological implication, Bill the mower not only foresaw the

perspiration that would result from mowing on a hot summer day, he also “knowingly caused himself to perspire.” Thus even if Bill did not envision his perspiration as his primary goal for that hot afternoon, he still seems very much responsible for it. And so too with the application of this distinction to Jesus’ death in *Christus Victor*. Even if this death was not the goal, Jesus’ death was still foreseen: God was provoking the devil whom he knew to be a “murderer from the beginning” (Jn 8:44). It seems a thin victory to conclude that God “merely” implied Jesus’ death ontologically, when God nevertheless still foresaw it and effected it by provoking Jesus’ adversary. One could reasonably reply that the God of *Christus Victor* still shares at least some responsibility for Jesus’ death and, thus, that the old worries about a draconian deity resurface. I would have appreciated a more extended discussion of this difficult issue (231-235). There are other sentences toward the end of the book that I find more helpful – for instance, “that God incorporates evil choices into the economy of salvation without condoning them” (233). This seems right, and is perhaps broad enough even to exonerate Anselm’s God.

There are a number of strengths in this book. It is extraordinarily rare to find a scholar who moves effortlessly through contemporary philosophy, biblical studies, patristics, and constructive Christian theology. *The Father's Will* exemplifies interdisciplinary inquiry that succeeds in maintaining its focus. The tenth chapter (“The Devil’s Ransom Revisited,” 181-239) is a tour de force. Lombardo authors the best entrée into the early Christian *Christus Victor* interpretation of Jesus’ death that I know. He transports readers from the New Testament through a wide selection of patristic and early medieval authors, and offers an extended reading of the classic *Christus Victor* text, Gregory of Nyssa’s *Catechetical Oration*. He also discusses the criticisms of this view that emerged (most famously by Gregory of Nazianzus) and cogently argues that we do not have a wholesale dismissal of this view, but rather a targeted critique. What makes the chapter especially valuable in my eyes is Lombardo’s contextualization of this “doctrine” (he prefers “narrative”) into the larger life of early Christian communities. The defeat of the devil resonates in the literature on the martyrs, the baptismal liturgy, and is drawn out of literal and symbolic interpretations of important biblical texts.

If there is one quibble that an historian might express about this chapter, it is the suggestion that the first thousand years of Christianity were largely shaped by the devil’s ransom interpretation to the exclusion of the other two interpretations of Jesus’ death (181). Lombardo shares this view with many others working in the field today – it goes back to Gustaf Aulén himself.² But it is easy to overlook that there was also a good deal of Anselm before Anselm, and Abelard before Abelard, in the Christian tradition. Moreover, patristic authors frequently juxtaposed two (or three) theories without suggesting that they were competitors (e.g. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.15-17; Theodoret, *On Divine Providence* 10.26-36). There does not seem to be any awareness by these authors, who endorsed the salubrious *Christus Victor* account, that in simultaneously approving “proto-Anselmian” or “proto-Abelardian” views they were flirting with a less attractive portrait of God or a less scriptural

² Aulén says the classic view of atonement was “the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history,” *Christus Victor*, 6.

position on Jesus' death. After working through Lombardo's book, some readers might want an explanation for why such a pluralism was not found disturbing in Christian antiquity. Looking forward, perhaps this patristic pluralism might even turn out to be fruitful for the construction of a Christian doctrine of atonement in which the three main accounts are integrated into a larger narrative that strives to reflect and reinforce a fitting Christian portrait of God. Lombardo's book admirably moves us in this direction.