

Resurrection and Ascension; Silence and the Eschatological Imagination

For the better part of the last half-year, I have been toting around James Alison's book, *The Joy of Being Wrong*. I must tell you that my wife is thoroughly pleased to see me really trying to absorb a text with this title. "Finally," she says, "you are coming to terms with who and how you are, and finding joy in it." I doubt that she would be dissuaded from her opinion if I tried to explain that I was, in fact, simply grappling with this particular appropriation of Girardian theory, hoping to gain a better appreciation of how the doctrine of Original Sin, eschatology, and theological anthropology as a whole are illuminated anew through Alison's interpretative application of Girard.

Well, if she's wouldn't be interested, perhaps you will be. And so I hope and intend to share some remarks regarding James Alison's theology – principally expressed in his books *The Joy of Being Wrong* and *Raising Abel* – and what the mimetic focus of his theology has to say about violence and its transformation.

To begin: allow me to briefly state the major problematic with which I wrestled as I pondered Alison's interpretation of Original Sin in the *Joy of Being Wrong*: As I considered the 'Original' part of 'Original Sin', it seemed to me that the way Alison treats the matter, that moment or process by which human being came into being – i.e., the process of hominization – is inextricably connected to the sin Alison describes as original. That is, human being is, it appears, predicated upon the occurrence of sin. It is in this sin that human being emerges from what was not yet human.

Of course, this conclusion is not, in the end, a full account of the origins of human being – there is an all-important eschatological dimension to Alison's conception of 'Original' that disallows us from settling on a sin-dependent description of human origins. The eschatological dimension is made all the clearer when considered in light of his book, *Raising Abel*.

If, however, we cannot say that this *sin – violence* – is what makes us human, then the resulting question is, "What does make us human?"

Part One: The Scene of Origin

Alison presents a thoroughly evolutionary process of hominization that takes for granted the development of primates from lower to higher, and ultimately into humans, "however dimly recognizable"¹ these humans might be at first.

¹ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998) 253.

Alison states that the conception of this process of hominization must include two integral conditions:

1. the condition of radical continuity between that which is proto-human and that which is human; and
2. the condition of rupture, where something significant occurs such that those creatures which exist after this moment of becoming are no longer the same as those that were part of the process leading up to this critical moment.²

This is something like *the butterfly is the caterpillar, and yet it is not*.

For Alison, the continuity exists in the form of imitation – even unto acquisitive mimesis in higher primates – whereby the members of a group are made to become more and more similar, to the point of “setting community or group members against each other.”³

The rupture occurs when the instinctual constraints that kept these creatures in the proto-human order are broken – that is, when the animal instincts come off. Acquisitive mimesis now becomes antagonistic, or conflictual, mimesis as the group forms against one of its own members in a collective murder.⁴ The victimized member, who is now present to the group as cadaver becomes the mythical foundation of the new order of peace. From the cadaver, “the increasingly human primate is able to transform the increasing violence in the crucial phases of its biological and cultural evolution into a force of culture development.”⁵ For Alison, the stages of this rupture took place simultaneously over a long period of time with an enormous amount of difficulty.⁶ At the center of this process of hominization, though, is the rupture in continuity that is the victimage mechanism.⁷

From this account of human origins, one might well conclude that the essential, critical step in the process of hominization is the move from acquisitive, instinct-constrained mimesis to antagonistic, conflictual mimesis.

When we look to the evolutionary moment when human being emerged, it appears that violence in the form of collective murder is what makes us human.

Part Two: The Christian Scene of Origin

² *Ibid.* 244, 255.

³ *Ibid.* 15.

⁴ *Ibid.* 255, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.* 15.

⁶ *Ibid.* 35.

⁷ *Ibid.* 15.

Alison does not assent to the seemingly logical conclusion we just reached: “I think,” says Alison, “that human origins were revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ. Resurrection is the paradigm of where I understand humanity to be.”⁸

This is, at first, peculiar. Clearly, the Resurrection of Christ is not the first chronological event of humanity. What Alison recognizes, however, is that the Resurrection of Christ is that event in the light of which we may come to see what happened at the first chronological moment, what has been happening since then, and why this is *not* what makes humans, human. In other words, Alison argues that what makes us human is an eschatological matter, not simply a matter of chronological origin. It is a matter of the fullness of time, rather than the beginning of time alone.

Why does the Resurrection matter? Why is it the turning point from distorted, conflictual mimesis to restored, pacific, creative beneficent mimesis? It is so because the Resurrection of the crucified victim subverts the logic of the victimage mechanism that has always and everywhere been relied upon as “vital for the production and maintenance of peace.”⁹ Christ, the victim, comes back to his own not as vengeance, but as forgiveness. The logic of history, which reproduces and perpetuates the illusion of the persecutors, is undone. The Resurrection proclaims the truth that, “God is not involved” in the illusion of peace that victimization brings about.¹⁰ God’s peace is offered as the victim who brings forgiveness. The evolutionary story of human origins is thus not identical with the story of God’s creation.

In response to our original question of ‘what makes us human?’, Alison ultimately proposes that being authentically human has nothing at all to do with violence. In fact, violence is the antithesis of what we were created to be. Violence results from grasping and exclusion; we are meant for humble reception of the gratuitous gift of life. To be human is to be mimetically called into being through the creative, peaceful desire of God that now meets us as forgiveness, leads us to repentance, and offers us full participation in divine life.

Part Three: What Difference Does This Make?

The Resurrection brings us back to the scene of the crime, and return we must for only there can our crime be undone. Alison suggests that Jesus’ Resurrection and subsequent Ascension break us from the limited and limiting desire for our own self-produced peace through victimization, as Jesus raises our eyes and hearts to what is above.¹¹ In the risen, then ascended, crucified victim, we encounter something and someone totally other than what and who could ever fit into our closed system of victimization. This encounter with he who offers the last things and ultimate meaning of

⁸ *Ibid.* 67.

⁹ *Ibid.* 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 98.

¹¹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996) 15f.

our lives introduces the *hope* that ruptures the system supporting our previous way of being unto violence.¹²

In the fullness of time, Jesus undoes our crime and reveals the truth of who we are by showing us the end for which we are intended. Our crime is undone not essentially by other words, not by other actions, not by a different scenario, but, I would like to suggest – as an elaboration of Alison’s thought – by silence. A letting be. A resistance to act, to make something, to try to be something. We are unmade and remade by a submission that requires a full and conscious activity not to speak, not to act, not to force meaning. When the instinctual constraints fall away, the great temptation is to assert meaning, to force language, to determine custom and culture. The path of pacific mimesis, however, is to humbly receive what is gratuitously given. It is a discipline to resist grasping, molding, shaping and bending our reality to suit our purposes and our wishes. Anything we might construct will become an idol and will, sooner or later, deconstruct us. But to stand before the awesome mystery of God who gives all things without cost, without obligation, is to be who we are created to be without trying to be anything at all. This true originary moment comes to be in the Resurrection.

At the scene of the crime, where we first spoke, entered into ritual, constructed a culture, determined a reality, set the ground rules for future life, established the standard by which success and failure would henceforth be measured¹³ – at this scene we find the silent victim who was not erased by our violence, but has, unbelievably, revealed the utter depth, the utter richness of life. He embodies and offers forgiveness. The unanticipated words he speaks, “Peace be with you” (Lk 24:36; Jn 20:19, 20:26), are words that move us beyond words. His Peace is not the illusory peace that is achieved by us, accomplished by us, determined by us... it is a Peace that means: *just be*. It is as if he says,

Just be here as I am here. Just be. *Be still, and know that I am God*. I am not complicit with the violence you perpetuate. I am not part of the illusions you have fabricated. Let the scene of your crime be now the scene of your re-creation. Let this be the fulfillment of your creation, that which gathers up all that you have been, all that you could have been, and makes it whole in what you are now. Accept freely and simply what I give freely and abundantly. Enter my life with all your effort pointed towards not exerting effort to be anything. Give all you are to just being here in this silence. Do not grasp, but open your hands and receive.

All this – this Peace ushered in as forgiveness embodied – becomes the new seed of our imagination.¹⁴

Our imaginations are the horizons of the possibility for our lives; therefore, the reformation and transformation of our imaginations is of the utmost importance. We are all afflicted with imperfect and ultimately wrongheaded conceptions of God. Our gods are always in some way violent.¹⁵ If a god is in some way violent, then that god is a god of death, because all that which is tinged with death at all will ultimately collapse into

¹² *Ibid.* 170-174.

¹³ See Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* 35, 255 and *Raising Able* 22f.

¹⁴ Alison, *Raising Abel* 28, 38, 41-56, 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 41-44.

death once and for all. What we discover in the Resurrection is the utter aliveness of God. Jesus embodies the utter aliveness that does not oppose death, but subverts it. Death becomes life in the Risen Christ. This, and this alone, can transform our imaginations because this, and this alone, is that which reveals who God truly is, and who God is for us. This horizon is limitless; it is absolute. *In Him there is no darkness at all, the night and the day are both alike* (see 1 John 1:5, Psalm 139).¹⁶

In the light – that is, the utter aliveness – of the Resurrection, we come to see that what we have been was only ultimately pointed towards death. The meaning-making that originated around the cadaver – the body of our victim – served a limited sort of horizon. The limit was the extent of our powers to make things real. This power cannot make us last beyond our biological life. This power is thus subject to death and, therefore, is the power of death taken hold of us. Original Sin is the power of death, but this power is only observable when we have moved out of it. We can only see the illusion that this power was when we are no longer defined by it, when we move beyond this artificial horizon – that is, when we move around the other side of this horizon to see that there is more, much more, immeasurably more.¹⁷

What Alison calls the “Intelligence of the Victim”¹⁸ points us back to the place and the moment when we made and continue to make some other person or people the foundation of our concocted peace. As Alison writes in *Raising Abel*,

Jesus’ resurrection did not only reveal that this man was, in fact, innocent; it did not only reveal that Jesus was right about God. It did much more: it revealed the whole mechanism by which innocent victims are created by people who think that by creating such victims they are working God’s most holy will. That is to say, it left wide open the murderous and mendacious nature of all human religion, even in its best and purest form.¹⁹

Peace built upon exclusion is no peace at all. We have been conditioned to think that because we are not *them*, then we are who we are. Because *they* have been expelled, we can continue to be who we want to be. Because *they* are evil, we are good. Because we are good, we are to be cherished above all. Because we are cherished above all, all are potentially expendable.

But the intelligence of the victim is the subversion of this distorted worldview. As it turns out, it is not the conquerors, the oppressors, the strong who are right; rather, it is more the ones who are expelled who live in the right. Why? Because the ones expelled are *not* evil – no one is evil because God is not in any way evil, in no way violent. When we accuse others of being intrinsically evil, intrinsically violent, irredeemably other and worthy of ostracization, then we say that ours is a god who condemns some and uplifts others. However, “There is no human, from the day we were

¹⁶ C.f. *Ibid.* 45.

¹⁷ See Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* 222; c.f. 282-283; *Raising Abel* 68, fn. 1 on p.83.

¹⁸ See Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* 139f.

¹⁹ Alison, *Raising Able* 27.

first called beyond being anthropoids into becoming humans and when we settled for something less, who is not called to be part of that beneficent creative mimesis.”²⁰

God is not a conflicted stream, God is an utterly consistent stream of aliveness. God brings to life, and spreads life mimetically. The violence that is mimetically spread now is not of God, it is our own (un)creation.

Part Four: Sitting in Silence

Blaise Pascal once famously declared that, "All of man's trouble stems from his inability to sit quietly in a room alone."²¹ In line with Alison, I suspect that it is not so much that we can't be alone, it is that we cannot be quiet. If we don't speak in the silence, we have to talk about the silence. We think of it as good, or empty, or meaningful, or simple, or elegant, or exalted. We must name it, or speak into it, and thereby control it. We claim it. We give it meaning. We categorize it. Might we imagine at that frenzied moment of the first murder that there was a momentary pause, an inner or perhaps an outer silence that could have been embraced and perpetuated? Was it that silence that was rejected, because we had to say something, be something, claim something? In the locked rooms into which the Resurrected Christ walks, the Peace of silence offers to create us anew by allowing us to put all our energy into not grasping after meaning, appropriating identity, calling this *this* and that *that*.

At the originary scene, we grasped after appropriated identities and thus crippled our imaginative capacity, for our imaginations were trained to set themselves on objects we could perceive, and the limit of our imaginations was the cadaver, and thus death; what makes us human, though, is not the crippled condition of our imaginations, but the deep capacity to set our imaginations beyond all objects. Because of the Resurrection and Ascension of the crucified victim, we can set our imaginations on the utter aliveness of God.²² With these eschatological imaginations set on a story that has not already been told,²³ we are transformed by the desire of God, who desires only life, not violence or victims.

Whereas we were clearly unwilling to rest and be in the silence before the Resurrection of the crucified victim, we humans now have the blessed opportunity to sit in this silence once more and allow ourselves to be grafted unto the utter aliveness of God. By fixing our eyes and our minds²⁴ on what is revealed in the rising and ascending of Christ, we permit our imaginations to be transformed by the limitlessness of the life that beckons us. We allow ourselves to be carried beyond the false destinations of meaning we have setup – all those victimized cadavers of history upon whom we have hoisted our inadequacies and insecurities – and towards the story of life that has not yet been told. As Sarah Coakley will say in her forthcoming first volume of systematic theology: “[W]hat is blanked out in the regular, patient attempt to attend to God in prayer is *any* sense of

²⁰ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* 288-289.

²¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York: Penguin, 1995) 37.

²² Alison, *Raising Abel* 67.

²³ See *Ibid.* 28.

²⁴ See *Ibid.* 15f and Col. 3:2.

human grasp; and what comes to replace such an ambition, over time, is the elusive, but nonetheless ineluctable, sense of *being grasped*.²⁵ “[I]t is exactly our hope in God’s creative vivaciousness which allows us *not* to grasp onto our story, but to allow God to create, by means of us, something much richer and more extraordinary than we could imagine that we are about.”²⁶ In the silence that is cultivated by and cultivates the discipline of not-grasping, the desire of God *for us* forms our desire.

And as we float on the gratuity of God’s desire, we might ask:

Can Adam and Eve stand at the foot of the tree, and not reach up and take?

Can Cain stand above Abel and not assert his own identity at his brother’s expense?

Can the peoples of the world gather at Babel and not build a monument to our own illusory greatness?

What might this story so retold be like?

If I ventured to posit an answer to this question, I would prove my wife right by being utterly wrong – and I would find no joy at all in that. All we know now is where and how this story starts; we only know the beginning of what makes us human, not the end of the road of human being. As Alison says, “[T]here is no beginning to create this new story, this new identity, except starting from how I was brought to the end of myself, sifted like wheat, and had my heart, formed by the deceits and violences of this world, broken open.”²⁷ (Abel 93). We must go to the core of our distortion, our perversion of desire and there meet the risen victim. To be human is not to escape our ugliness, but face it and, in that dark place, humbly receive the light of Christ.

Peace be with you.

²⁵ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, publication forthcoming) Prelude: 24.

²⁶ Alison, *Raising Abel* 172.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 93.