

The Drama of Jesus and the Non-Violent Image
of God:
Raymund Schwager's Approach to the
Problem of Divine Violence

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Abstract: After a brief biographical introduction, this essay traces Schwager's approach to the problematic of divine violence, a prevalent theme in the Old Testament. By relating this notion to Jesus' non-violent teaching and conduct on the one hand, and to his judgement sayings on the other, Schwager interprets the tension as "drama". What renders his theology "dramatic" is the pathos of God as reflected in the biblical text. When read through the dramatic lens, it reveals a non-violent God who in Christ turns unconditionally to sinful humanity to effect a radical deliverance from human entanglement with "sacred violence". The article concludes with a reflection on the heuristic value of the dramatic view, pointing to the cruciality of the non-violent image of God for a faith that works its own way into a violent world through God's action in history.

RAYMUND SCHWAGER WAS BORN IN 1935 as the second of seven children into a Swiss farming family. After primary and secondary school, he joined the Society of Jesus in 1955. He studied philosophy in Pulach, Germany, (1957-1960) and theology in Lyon-Fourviere, France, (1963-1967). He was ordained a priest in 1966 and completed his doctorate in Fribourg (Switzerland) with a thesis on *Das Dramatische Kirchenverständnis bei Ignatius of Loyola* in 1969.

In 1977 Raymund Schwager became Professor of Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the Leopold Franzens University in Innsbruck, Austria. He was Dean from 1985-1987 and again from 1999-2003. He was also a co-founder of the Colloquium on Violence & Religion (1991), its first president (1991-1995) and, since

1999, an honorary life-member of its advisory board. In 1998 he was awarded the Tyrolean State-Prize for Academic Achievement.

Although highly skeptical of intellectual fashions, Schwager's work was nonetheless that of a bridge builder. One of his aims was to be engaged at all levels of academic discourse and to achieve an ethically responsible dialogue between the disciplines. His "Dramatic Theology" along with the initiative that gave birth to the comprehensive Research Program "Religion – Violence – Communication – World Order" gained him international recognition. His unexpected death in February 2004 came as a shock to all who knew him personally and through his published work.¹ Raymund Schwager is remembered by his colleagues and students not only as a gifted teacher, deeply spiritual theologian and far-sighted thinker, but also as an ever-available pastor and lovable Jesuit priest.²

What pervades Schwager's theology is his awe before the mystery of grace. God, who is absolutely free from sacred violence, turns in Christ unconditionally toward sinful humanity to bring about a radical deliverance. It is a privilege to offer this essay on the third anniversary of Professor Schwager's passing.

THEOLOGY AS DRAMA

The centre of Schwager's theology, concerning method and content, is without doubt "the drama of Jesus". His is a deeply spiritual theology, lived and grounded in the experience of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola.³ Guided by the Old Testament, Schwager detects a particularly privileged entry point into the "problematic of God" in the history of the Jewish people, whose faith tradition was radically

1. Among his numerous writings in books and articles Schwager's most important works in English translation are: *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (original German: *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock?* [1978]) transl. by M. L. Assad (New York NY: Crossroad, 2000); *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation. Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (original German: *Jesus im Heilsdrama. Entwurf einer biblischen Erlösungslehre* [1990]) trans. J. G. Williams & P. Haddon (New York NY: Crossroad, 1999). His last work in German on original sin, *Erbsünde und Heilsdrama: im Kontext vom Evolution, Gentechnologie und Apokalyptik* (1997), has been published posthumously as *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation* (London: Gracewing, 2006).

2. My own acquaintance with Professor Schwager is a mediated one. I became first aware of his work during post-graduate studies. Later, having chosen him as one of the reference authors for my doctoral thesis, I had the privilege of reading most of his publications in the original language. Regrettably, a visit planned for the summer of 2004 occurred four months too late for a personal interview.

3. Roman Siebenrock, "Theologie aus unmittelbarer Gotteserfahrung – oder von der gefährlichen Faszination der Sünde für die Theologie", in Józef Niewiadomski and Wolfgang Palaver (eds.), *Vom Fluch und Segen der Sündenböcke*, Beiträge Zur Mimetischen Theorie vol. 1 (Thaur: Kultur Verlag, 1995) 69-91, 72.

transformed through violence experienced as well as committed.⁴ They were both victims of violence as well as perpetrators, something to which the drama of Jesus testifies with particular poignancy. Thus both testaments provide Schwager with the contours of a single drama that is being played out between God and humankind.

In his *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock?* Schwager presents a new biblical hermeneutic based on the categories of René Girard,⁵ in which he spells out the problematisation of violence in the Old Testament. YHWH was believed to be the perpetrator of violence par excellence. Yet, step-by-step, this perception was being undone by the progressive presentation of a non-violent image of God. In a word, divine violence is an illusion. This undoing, Schwager argues, is centrally inscribed in the “drama of Jesus”, which he explores in terms of its history through the message of a radically non-violent God.

Like von Balthasar, Schwager sees the drama enacted within the process of salvation history as a field of tension between uncreated and created freedom. God acts, but humans fail to respond. There are no spectators, only actors who determine how the drama will unfold. Future events are therefore by no means fixed. They emerge in response to the proclamation of the kingdom or reign of God.⁶

Thus the thematic of “God’s action in history” is important for Schwager’s theology. What renders it “dramatic” is the pathos of God as expressed in the biblical text, most significantly in the tension between God’s goodness and the severity of his justice. But this dominant theme in the Old Testament gives rise in the New Testament to a particular hermeneutical problem: how to relate the ostensible severity of Jesus’ judgement sayings to his non-violent teaching and conduct and to the post-Easter gathering of the new community?

In addressing such issues, the dramatic view becomes for Schwager a necessary mediator between systematic theology and historical-critical exegesis as it allows him to “gather larger groups of texts under key words and to coordinate them on the model of conflictual action”.⁷ The dramatic view also forestalls any reading of the biblical text as a series of disjointed episodes that would miss the *one* story the text wants to tell.

4. Józef Niewiadomski, “Das Drama Jesu: Raymund Schwager's Kurzformel des Glaubens”, in *Vom Fluch und Segen der Sündenböcke*, 31-47.

5. Schwager encountered the work and person of René Girard in the early 1970s. From then on Schwager commits his own theological project to a critical application of Girard’s theory.

6. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 10-12. The terms “kingdom of God” and “reign of God” are used synonymously with Schwager’s term “the basilea”.

7. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 16.

Applied to the account of the life of Jesus Christ, it produces a drama in five acts as we shall see later.⁸

THE PROBLEMATIC OF DIVINE VIOLENCE

One of the foremost questions in Schwager's theology is why divine violence should play such an explicit role in the Old Testament.⁹ From Genesis to Malachi, over one thousand passages speak of divine violence. No other theme occurs more frequently. Schwager distinguishes four categories: (a) irrational and incomprehensible outbreaks of divine violence; (b) personal revenge for evil acts committed by humans; (c) venting anger on evildoers by handing them to others for cruel treatment; (d) punishment of the wicked by letting their deeds recoil on them.¹⁰ Because modern Old Testament theology does not know how to deal satisfactorily with this phenomenon, Schwager turns to Girard for answers.¹¹

Girard's mimetic theory describes the anthropological phenomenon that human desire is at the same time imitative and acquisitive, and thus highly conflict prone. Since the mimetic impulse in humans lacks an instinctual "brake", spontaneous conflicts among a primitive group easily turn into unstoppable violence, which is experienced as "sacred violence". Hence, the language of vengeance and retribution resonates deeply with the human psyche, easily evoking an archaic image of the divine or the "primitive sacred". On this view, any reading of biblical texts that speak of arbitrary outbreaks of "divine" violence must be correlated with spontaneous occurrences of human violence. To the mind of the primitive community, even when the true God begins to be revealed, this will be first understood in terms of the "sacred", presuming unpredictable violence.

But what of the repeated references to divine retribution and vengeance which occur in the writings of both Testaments? According to Schwager, when passages in which "YHWH appears as a consuming fire and as an angry and avenging god" are correlated with the idea of sacred violence, it can be shown that the humans who "aroused" God's

8. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 29-158.

9. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?* 66.

10. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 61-62.

11. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 67. Schwager admits that not all such events may be classified in this way. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is one such example. Since the prophetic books speak a different language on the question of God's violence (while YHWH may be threatening avenging action against human misconduct, the prophets only record human violence against each other), Schwager concludes that these stories may be remnants of an older mythical tradition.

anger are also the ones who committed acts of violence.¹² In other words, in all such cases divine violence and vengeance represent the experience of the sacred in the context of “mimetic violence”.

As Girard has pointed out, ancient communal identity was deeply rooted in the sacred system of revenge and retribution. On the basis of a study by R. Verdier,¹³ Schwager has asked whether the interpretation of the Christian doctrine of redemption can rightly be situated within a framework of divine retribution or whether it actually breaches the system. Indeed, retribution is embedded in Israel’s legal structure. However, Israel did not trace the doctrine of retribution to a mythical past but to the giving of the covenant. Accordingly, Israel’s common perception of divinity was of YHWH as its redeemer. Divine and everlasting love overflowed with compassion towards the covenanted people. Even if divine retribution should bring devastation to land and livelihood, Israel’s faith in the goodness of YHWH was paramount. Schwager seeks to explain this obvious tension by suggesting that where the biblical text retains the language of retaliatory injury, we may be dealing with a linguistic relic. As the idea of retribution belongs to the very core of the sacred order and has thus shaped the language, as an archaic remnant it may be open to new meaning, if indeed, as Schwager holds, the system of vengeance is actually breached in the New Testament.

From this point of view, we detect in the biblical language of vengeance and retribution outcrops of an archaic substrate. It evokes a mythic “sacred order” which in more literal interpretations has been accepted as instances of revelation of the true God. However, the God of the sacrifices is not a wrathful deity, nor were the sacrificers particularly wrathful in performing the act. Rather, they slaughtered the sacrifice in a dignified manner and in so doing evoked an unconscious channelling of their own violence. The prophets first thematised this violence when they criticised the temple cult and denounced as religious fiction the expectation that peace and security would issue from sacrificial practice. They began to point to the oppressive social order. Against this, they invoked the “wrath” of the God of the Exodus whose promises still stood. For Schwager, therefore, the wrath of God is not a mere projection of a violent human imagination but a necessary stage in revelation history, which is transcended in the drama of Jesus. Before we turn to this argument, let us seek to understand more clearly Schwager’s position on some of the tensions involved.

12. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 67.

13. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 17.

THE DIALECTIC OF JUSTICE AND MERCY

Neither the Old nor the New Testament offers an obvious solution to the tension between God's mercy and God's justice. On the face of it, both Testaments present an image of God that is merciful as well as wrathful. Contrary to popular views, Schwager suggests that it would be more consistent with the biblical text to posit a fundamentally more severe image of God in the New Testament than in the Old. Many Old Testament passages show God as punishing and vengeful. But its severest judgements often meant "early and violent death". Only in the New Testament do we encounter the threat of *eternal* punishment. From this perspective, the retributive justice of the New Testament is far more severe than anything in the Old Testament.¹⁴

At this point it is noteworthy that the New Testament nowhere portrays God as a cruel tyrant who demands the suffering and death of an innocent victim in order that the guilty party may escape his anger. Rather, in Christ, God himself entered the drama of history in order to take upon Godself the consequences of human sin and unbelief. God suffers exposure to the destructive actions directed against God. God accepts death not in order to gather grapes for the vine-press of divine vengeance, but to offer forgiveness to all. By inhabiting death, God removes its sting.

For Schwager, the justice of God is always a figure of God's goodness, that is, the positive outgoingness of God's supreme holiness, which is profoundly dissatisfied with the present state of the beloved creature. "Divine wrath" can therefore be understood only in the context of humanity's violent history in which the reality of God confronts and negates all human efforts of self-salvation. Genuine salvation, then, is only thinkable against the background of God's justice, which in the Christ-drama confronts humanity with its true condition in order to open up the possibility of healing from within.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA

Jesus – The Divine Image

According to Christian understanding, Jesus Christ is the guarantor of the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, in accord with a constant Johannine theme, his words and actions are the direct revelation of the Father.¹⁵ As the self-revelation of God, Christ is the interpretive key to the drama. In him the divine author's intent is to be

14. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 3.

15. Cf. particularly John 8:54; 10:15, 30, 38; 12:50; 14:6, 9-13, 20; 15:9-11; 15:23; 17:1-5, 24-25.

found. Thus all events of revelation history ought to be interpreted “backwards” from the Christ-event.¹⁶

The centrality of Jesus in the God-drama (in whom all other actors and actions find their coherence) produces several consequences for the interpretation of both Testaments. If Jesus is the *sole* hermeneutic key through whom the whole drama becomes intelligible, it is arguable that the Old Testament (even though as a whole it is “the word of God”) must consist of texts that mingle revelation with human projections. In other words, an intelligent reading of the biblical text requires that it be interpreted in the light of the words and actions of Jesus Christ who claims to speak and act completely in concert with the author.¹⁷ At the same time, Jesus’ claim to be the self-revelation of God can only be sustained if it can be shown that he presents an unchanging and non-conflictual image of God. Otherwise his claim would be open to question. However, there is a tension in that Jesus introduces “countless small shifts in meaning” from within the faith tradition of Israel. These add up to his representation of God in a new way.¹⁸ This new image will come into sharper focus as we follow Schwager through the acts of the drama.

DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS

Act 1 – The Message of the Kingdom

Jesus’ proclamation that the “kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15) inaugurated a new move on God’s part. The God of Israel was about to reign. The intimacy between Jesus and the God he invoked as “my Father” is, according to Schwager, the most plausible basis of his proclamation. Everything flowed from his “Abba-experience”.¹⁹ Jesus’ proclamation of the imminent reign of God was authenticated by many signs: the blind received their sight, the lame walked, the dead were raised and the poor were given good news (Isa 61:1-2; Luke 4:16-21; 7:22). Physical healings were accompanied by a radical overthrow of evil powers when they had taken possession of human beings (Luke 11:20). These two factors, healing of the sick and the overcoming of evil powers, were the sign that the long-expected time had arrived. However, Jesus was concerned not with miraculous events as such, but with the “spark

16. See Raymund Schwager, *Der Wunderbare Tausch: Zur Geschichte und Deutung der Erlösungslehre* (München: Kösel Verlag, 1986) 8-30.

17. Raymund Schwager, “Biblische Texte als Mischtexte: Das Hermeneutisch-Spirituelle Programm der Entmischung”, *Katechetische Blätter* 19 (1994) 698-703; “Mischtexte” are texts which contain both divine revelation and human projections.

18. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 112.

19. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 30.

of faith” he sought to ignite in his hearers. Their response would determine how the drama would unfold in detail.

For Schwager the central issue is God’s decisive turning towards sinful humanity. This, rather than the fulfilment of Israel’s eschatological vision, was the good news. Those who on the basis of rabbinic interpretation of the Law of Moses had been excluded from the community were now invited into intimate table fellowship. In this context, Jesus was criticised for “eating with tax-collectors and sinners” (Matt 9:11 and parallels). But he insisted that the time for the forgiveness of their sins had arrived. Yet God’s turning towards sinners in a new way was not an end in itself. For it was the will of the Father to create a new community to be characterised by love, forgiveness, and the healing of the ravages of sin and death. This new community was to be gathered around the central figure in the drama, Jesus himself.²⁰ He sought out weak, lost and alienated human beings in order to integrate them into a new community in which violence was no longer the determining factor. In short, God was acting in and through Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God.

Yet there are questions. Józef Niewiadomski observes, in reference to the kingdom Jesus announces, that “the undeniable presence of violence (in the words of Jesus) not only poses ethical challenges, but also remains a theological thorn in the flesh of the message itself”.²¹ How can the “violent words” of Jesus be related to God’s “*unconditional*” turning towards sinners? Certainly, Jesus aimed to provoke an appropriate reaction from his hearers. What if they refuse or if they – because of their entanglement with sin – are too “sick” to respond? And, given Jesus’ command of unconditional love of enemies, what will happen to his enemies? Are they also liberated from the diabolical circle of mendacity and violence? Will they, because of their rejection of Jesus, be excluded from the new community he calls into being?

These are crucial questions. In his efforts to answer them, Schwager ventures outside the circle of scholarly consensus – predictably evoking considerable criticism.

Act 2 – The Rejection of the Message and Judgement

The “big (and) unsettling problem” in any theology of redemption is the relationship between Jesus’ offer of salvation and his threats of judgement and hell-fire to those who refuse it. In the light of the first Act, Schwager asks whether this undeniable harshness is attributable to

20. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 36-44.

21. Niewiadomski, “Das Drama Jesu”, 33-34.

God or to the human decision of “rejection”. Jesus is intent on provoking a decision on the part of his hearers. In this regard, Athanasius Polag discerns two levels of communication at work.²² One level relates to the proclaimer and his message, the other to the situation of rejection. Following Polag’s distinction, Schwager considers that these two levels should not be confused. The offer of salvation belongs to the realm of God’s will, which Jesus obeys by offering forgiveness whether the sinner was prepared to accept it or not. By contrast, the judgement sayings are to be situated in the realm of rejection and alienation. They are inevitable negative consequences of human decisions. The judgement sayings are thus put in perspective. The offer of grace does not presuppose repentance, but seeks to kindle it. If its potential recipients reject it, they alone bear the consequences of their choices. In short, the judgement is not from God but results from human decisions.²³ The judgement sayings, then, reveal not the harshness of God but an inner dimension of rejection. On the one hand, they unveil the consequences of opposition to the reign of God, on the other they point to the dramatic situation in which the kingdom of God finds itself – unconditionally promised by God, yet rejected by those who were to be its recipients.²⁴

Even though Jesus faced rejection early in his career, from a variety of Jewish groups, including the Pharisees, he continued to present the unconditional offer of salvation. Only when Jesus perceives the “unyielding rejection” does he begin to speak of judgement. Since the offer was at least initially made to God’s chosen people, the “house of Israel”, its acceptance or rejection is not a private affair. It is an event in salvation history.²⁵

While Jesus laments over Jerusalem in its rejection of his message (Matt 23:37), the most explicit example of rejection is found in the parable of the “wicked wine growers” (Mark 12:1-12 and parallels). It expresses open violence, first towards the emissaries of the vineyard owner, and then towards his son. Schwager considers that this pattern is the hermeneutic key to “the entire Scriptures”.²⁶ It describes humanity’s “systematic obstinacy” towards the messengers of God, beginning with Cain and throughout all of Israel’s history. While the reign of God meant salvation to those who embraced it, it also meant judgement on the entire history of human rebellion against God. Schwager sums it up this way: “The imminent expectation in the basileia message

22. Athanasius Polag, *Die Christologie der Logienquellen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), cited in *Jesus in the Drama*, 54.

23. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 55-57.

24. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 58.

25. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 57.

26. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 59.

corresponds to an *imminent expectation of judgement*, which draws in the whole of past history".²⁷

Jesus pronounces a number of "woes" against the Pharisees (Matt 23:13-36). These were provoked, in Schwager's explanation, by their self-deception as presented, for example, in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14). On this reading, such an attitude has its roots in the mechanism of expulsion that blinded them to their own violence. In short, Jesus' "woe" sayings are not to be interpreted as curses but as the cry of grief that still hopes to move their hearts.

As Jesus encounters a fundamental opposition between social and cultural dynamics of the world and the values of the kingdom, what results is a situation of judgement upon the world and its ways. Yet sin tends to intensify. Every decision against the offer of salvation produces a further hardening of heart,²⁸ a deeper self-deception and defensiveness. Imprisonment in the diabolical circle of envious rivalry and violent expulsion makes the offer of salvation unacceptable.

Yet the judgement on the unmerciful wine-growers is not to be understood as contradictory to the offer of salvation. It can only be understood in the context of God's radical call to conversion: divine judgement always remains entreaty; it aims at a change of heart. The judgement sayings of Jesus, therefore, are not verdicts pronounced against people as punishment but the announcement of unavoidable consequences of human decisions, rebellion and obduracy. They are integral to the call for repentance and conversion to the will of God, thus highlighting the critical nature of the salvation message.

Yet a major ambiguity remains. As far as results go, it seems to make little difference whether an "angry" God condemns people or whether a "kind" God looks on as people condemn themselves. More significantly from Schwager's perspective, if judgements pronounced on others always rebound on the one who judges, does this not also apply to Jesus?²⁹ At this point of aporia, the crucial connection is made between the judgement and suffering of Christ, as the next Act of the drama shows.

Act 3 – The Messenger is Judged

The third Act dramatises the heightening conflict between Jesus and his adversaries. It culminates in his arrest, trial and execution. It is driven entirely by the envious initiative of his opponents to get rid of him. Jesus himself appears as the one "acted upon". What underlies the

27. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 60 (original emphasis).

28. For example, see Ex 5-11; Isa 6:8-13; Matt 7:24-27; 12:43-45.

29. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 81.

action taken against Jesus is the familiar Girardian mechanism of expulsion. It issues in lies and violence, and temporally unites otherwise hostile parties in their designs against an innocent victim. Following the court hearing, mob violence emerges as a factor (Matt 26:67-68; Mark 14:65). The Romans are coopted by playing on their political fears of messianic movements. What may look like an accidental banding together of various groups turns out to be, from a dramatic point of view, a specific moment in history when Jews and Gentiles are gathered against Jesus (Ps 2:1). Even the disciples are affected by the mimetic pressure of rejection that is at work.

Instead of a gathering of his flock, Jesus faced a gathering of another kind: the forces of the world were aligning against him. Structurally, this universal gathering of all against one is, in the categories of Girard, an instance of the scapegoat mechanism. Jesus is scapegoated because of the sins of others.³⁰ However, there is a difference in the peculiar mechanism at work. The gathering against Jesus was not an arbitrary and spontaneous confluence of hostile powers. As proclaimer of the reign of God, Jesus had awakened the very forces that were now to strike back at him.³¹ Note the relevance at this point of the accusation of blasphemy (Mark 14:64 and parallels). It raises indirectly the question of who in this instance speaks truly of God, the accusers or the accused.

The whole drama turns, then, on different images of God. Is God, the all-merciful Father whom Jesus proclaims, or is God the rival, the antipathetic God, who wills the death of blasphemous adversaries?³²

What is crucial for the revelation of the true character of God is the total absence of resistance on Jesus' part. He does not seek to prevent his death. He is not simply overpowered, but refuses to meet his opponents' violence with more violence. His mission was not against his enemies but for them: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:24). Jesus mirrors the Father's image, not the projection of human vengefulness. He makes God known as the source of mercy and forgiveness.³³

However, up to this point Schwager has not accounted for Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane. Here Jesus submits himself to the will of the Father and the path to the cross. Christian tradition has always interpreted it as a divinely appointed necessity. But if this is so, then Jesus was not so much a victim of his enemies but of the God who demanded his death. It is therefore vital for Schwager's analysis to show

30. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 93.

31. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 93.

32. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 87.

33. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 101-113.

in which way the death of Jesus was “necessary” and how it was “the Father’s will”. In other words, the role of the heavenly Father in the drama has yet to be elucidated, and the meaning of atonement clarified. The following dense passage is a good indication of Schwager’s explanation at this point.

He [Jesus] allowed himself to be drawn into the process of self-judgement of his adversaries, in order, through participation in their lot, to open up for them from the inside another way out of their diabolical circle and hence a new path to salvation. He...turned around the intensified evil and gave it back as love redoubled. He made himself a gift to those who judged him and burdened him with their guilt. His atoning deed was not reimbursement for sins, so that the heavenly Father would forgive, but an act in the place of those who should have welcomed the kingdom, but who from the beginning rejected it.³⁴

In his total identification with sinful humanity, even with his executioners, Jesus experienced death as caused by human sin and thus shared the destiny of all human beings. It was not a question of the heavenly Father forgiving only after substitution for sinners, but of how Jesus replaces the warped image of God with the reality of divine love and mercy. He is so identified with sinners even as they reject him that their hostile rivalry is exploded. It occasions an even greater outpouring of self-giving love.

In other words, the death of Jesus was indeed the Father’s will, not in order to punish Jesus in place of sinners, but as a means of reaching into human hearts. The Son’s death was “necessary” in accomplishing the reign of God, although the conditions which prompted this “necessity” were dictated by fallen humanity. While God allows himself to be the subject of attack as a divine scapegoat, divine merciful love is not changed into something else by the violence and resentment of humankind.

Because God’s love keeps on being love unto the end, Christ’s love is a love that transcends conventional morality: no morality, no examination of conscience and no psychological analysis will disclose human resentment against God. Only when contrasted to God’s love – totally free from rivalry and violence – as revealed in Jesus Christ does our secret enmity come to light.³⁵ Act 3 closes with the critical point in the revelation of God’s saving intention, the death and burial of the Jesus, for the Cross reveals both our hidden malaise and its remedy.

34. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 117-118.

35. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 197.

Act 4 – The Judgement of the Father

Turning to the Easter-event, this is for Schwager to be understood as a judgement. According to 1 Pet 2:23, Jesus entrusted himself to the righteous judge to adjudicate between his claims and those of his opponents. The resurrection is not only the Father's judgement in favor of the Son. It is also a judgement in favor of sinners unwittingly caught up in a diabolical circle of destruction. In responding to the murder of the Son, the Father did not resort to retribution and vengeance, but sent the resurrected Son back with the message of peace (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 26). This is the kernel of the Good News.

In the Easter-event, God had acted in a "new" fashion once again, raising Jesus from the dead, the one who had been condemned under the law as a blasphemer and as an apparent failure in his mission. However, in this act the Father answered the prayer of the Son for the forgiveness of his executioners and for those who had previously rejected his message (Luke 23:24). There occurs what Schwager terms "the redoubling of...[the] readiness to forgive".³⁶ God's saving action is extended to all those who had already hardened their hearts against the Son. Consequently, the Old Testament formulation "the stone that builders rejected became the head of the corner" emerges as the hermeneutical key for the Gospel (Ps 118:22; Matt 21:42). As Schwager sums up:

A rightly understood doctrine of the atoning death of Jesus is therefore, even when seen from the viewpoint of Easter, not in opposition to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. On the contrary, it is precisely the peace of Easter which shows how the Father of Jesus willingly forgives, even in the face of people's hardened hearts.³⁷

Since the Father at no point is reduced to the level of answering violence with violence, Jesus was destined to inevitable defeat in the world of violence. Nonetheless, he represents the non-violent image of the Father in the face of human violence. The post-resurrection appearances are not marked with a display of divine power and messianic violence; rather, they take place with a certain discretion. For in raising his Son from death and defeat, God is not ending human history, but enabling it to move forward in a new way.

³⁶. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 136.

³⁷. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 136.

Act 5 – The New Gathering of the People

Schwager locates the beginning of Act 5 in the pneumatic experience of the post-resurrection community at Pentecost. This event marks a quite extraordinary transition from fear and apprehension (Matt 28:17; Mark 16:8; John 20:24-29) to a confident and courageous testimony on the part of the disciples (Acts 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31). The fearless emergence of these early witnesses in the drama is the result of a new inner reality. Schwager summarises as follows:

They had always perceived the message of Jesus from without, and even with the appearances of the risen one they encountered something which appeared to them at first strange, as it clearly proved by their reaction of shock, fear and doubt. Very different were the pneumatic experiences, which went together with the stepping of the disciples into the open...[these] must have reached the inmost being of each person and thereby have created that new certainty which made possible a confrontation with the world.³⁸

The community of those Jesus had first gathered collapsed at the time of his arrest. But now it is revived, evidencing a fresh momentum in the power of the Holy Spirit as dramatic continuation of what had begun in Act 1. Yet there is an element of newness in response to the decisive events of the cross, the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit. This new experience of the Spirit was understood by the community as emanating from the Father whose way of acting is not the manifestation of divine power that overpowers the enemies of God. Rather, in the light of the resurrection and Pentecost, a new image of God and with it a new sense of history has appeared where this-worldly success was no longer decisive, while conflicts, persecutions and defeats took on a new meaning.

The disciples' experience of the Holy Spirit continued the drama on a different plane. Despite their previous weakness, they were now removed from the pre-Easter fear that previously had caused them to side, at least indirectly, with Jesus' enemies. Saving grace was at work now *in* them, despite their previous participation in the ongoing rejection and condemnation of Jesus in the world.³⁹ They were empowered to live differently, in sharing Jesus' fate and in rejecting the way of violence despite its mimetic pull.

In this new community, former social, language, gender and religious barriers were overcome (Acts 2:46; 4:32; Gal 3:28). As Schwager explains

³⁸ Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 142.

³⁹ Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 156-57.

it, all this was made possible because Jesus “let himself be drawn into the dark world of his adversaries”. Yet, despite the violence he suffered, he remained faithful to the Father. Therefore, these “deep godless realms of the human heart” may now become the place where the Spirit can “reach and touch people”.⁴⁰ However, this new gathering of God’s people is only a sign of the final eschatological gathering, not the final gathering itself.

THE HEURISTIC VALUE OF DRAMATIC THEOLOGY God’s Image and Action in History

Dramatic theology sees God’s actions always as actions in history. The temporal unfolding of the drama of salvation precludes a merely existential understanding of God’s action. A definite “hour” characterises the Christ-event. Jesus’ offer of forgiveness, his re-interpretation of the law and his relation to the temple cult, all belong just as much to this “hour” as his healing ministry, the overcoming of demonic forces, and the initial gathering of the people of God. In other words, the presence of Jesus is the presence of God actualised in this one historical person. Schwager writes: “Jesus gave expression to his heavenly Father as a God who turns in a new way towards sinners”.⁴¹

On this view, we can argue that the image of God as evidenced in the salvific work of Jesus is structured on the notion of “victim”. At the crucifixion, Jesus became the victim of his executioners – or, more generally speaking, of human violence and sin. But in his dying moment “by the power of the eternal Spirit” (Heb 9:14), he surrendered and entrusted his Spirit to the Father (Luke 23:46). Yet, his dying was not simply something he endured as part of our common human lot. Jesus’ death was an act of deliberate surrender.⁴² At this point, he yields himself totally to the Father and gives up any possibility of self-determination. His total self-abandonment is the condition for a sovereign action of the Father, who raises him from the dead.⁴³ By turning his violent death into a deliberate surrender, Jesus became the Scapegoat and the Lamb of God in one and the same act. When the sinful deeds of his enemies drove him to the extreme, they wrung from his being nothing but limitless self-giving love. By killing him, they

40. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 144.

41. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 38.

42. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 188. See the words of Jesus, “Therefore the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment I received from my Father” (John 10:17-18).

43. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 189.

unwittingly generated the possibility of their own transformation due to his identification with them. In other words, the death of Jesus has nothing to do with the sacrificial cult of the Old Testament. Rather, the cross is the dramatic and violent unleashing of malicious resentment from the human heart and its overcoming through love. Jesus' cry from the cross was not the cry of an innocent victim for justice, but a prayer for his persecutors: "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

If this is the true image of God, the question arises how this image may be subjectively appropriated as the "restored image" by those for whom Jesus died. Here we recall Schwager's emphasis on Christ's identification with others "in so far as they are victims". In each person there is a domain of individual responsibility that is "holy", "inviolable", and "original". It admits of no substitute. It may never be simply replaced or marginalised even by a divinely ordained "substitute".⁴⁴ God's respect for this inner sanctum of liberty is unconditional. Nonetheless, it is not without effect. As the Easter event shows, God's love will not abandon sinful humanity to its own fate. On the cross, Jesus submitted to the abuse of human freedom (sin). As the embodiment of divine goodness, he involved himself to the end for the sake of our deliverance. Through the resurrection, Jesus, the Victim, re-enters the world of human self-will and violence as the way beyond it. The prison doors are opened from within, thus offering human freedom the way out. In this Victim we find the image of God as one with victimised humanity.

However, the fallen human creature is not only a victim of sin but also its active agent. Out of limitless goodness God acted objectively in Christ to deliver both victim and perpetrator alike from sin.⁴⁵ In Christ, the Victim, the objective work of God and the subjective experience of salvation come together. Schwager writes,

Through his identification with his opponents he also infiltrated their world in which their evil will had imprisoned itself and by his transforming power opened it up once again from its new depth to the heavenly Father.⁴⁶

Here we may suggest an extension of Schwager's thought. God uses the victim image, the image of the crucified (which resulted from the

⁴⁴ Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 194.

⁴⁵ Yet Schwager is careful not to blur the distinction between responsible human agency and victimhood. Even after the redeeming action of God in Christ, personal conversion is necessary. To make effective what has been achieved on man's behalf, a deliberate act of consent and appropriation is necessary at the human level.

⁴⁶ Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 189.

founding mechanism of archaic religion), as a symbol of divine self-communication. By acting in the Son, God is so identified with human beings as to become the victim of their sin. In Christ God is made vulnerable to the destructive powers. Jesus tastes death not because the justice of the Father wills the death of the Son, but because he so gives himself as to exhaust the power of sin, to undermine universal victimage and its death-dealing consequences. This objective aspect of salvation is subjectively appropriated through the victimal symbol of the old order: God "infiltrates" human existence in the guise of a familiar sign. Through the grace of the Spirit, the human heart recognises this sign; and when it receives it, it collaborates with God in a grace-enabled act so as to be conformed to Christ. Thus the human person begins to act in "pacific imitation" of Christ. The divine image actualised in human liberty is reconstituted in accord with the Creator's original intention. In other words, this new image of God is actualised in history through acts of faith and obedient "imitation" of the One who is at once the form and goal of authentic human existence.

Let us take this reflection one step further. If original sin is to be equated with humanity's presumptuous and limitless striving towards independence, self-sufficiency, god-likeness and the idolatrous worship of self, and if Jesus was charged with blasphemy for making himself "equal with God" (John 5:18; cf. Matt 26:64-66 and parallels), we can argue that the perverted state of the human heart was projected onto him. He was understood to be not only usurping a divine status, but as realising in himself what others were secretly desirous of being. In a word, the secret agenda of human desire in its envious hostility towards God was brought to light. Nonetheless, God continues to allow for the full working out of human liberty. Created in God's image, humanity's transcendent longing, however perverted, still reflects its true calling. Its fulfillment, however, is not to be found along a path directed to grasping self-assertion. It is realisable only in the way of filial obedience and humble conformity to the self-giving love of the Father and the Son.

In this context, Sebastian Moore offers an important insight of the radical transformation that the crucifixion of Jesus evokes in the human heart. If humanity is to enter into full participation of the life of God, human desire has to experience an unprecedented crisis: "the total desolation and emptying of the soul which alone ready it for the influx of God".⁴⁷ The human heart has to be emptied of its "infinity of desire", and to remove this obstacle God himself must become powerless, even dead. In God's death, rivalistic desire undergoes the "crisis of death",⁴⁸

47. Sebastian Moore, *The Inner Loneliness* (New York: Cross Road, 1984) 3.

48. Moore, *The Inner Loneliness*, 81, 89.

that is, the collapse of the perverted image of God, which is the precursor to its restoration. Schwager would certainly agree with Moore's affirmation that the cross needs to be "understood as the act of a lover",⁴⁹ and that such an understanding is only possible after the resurrection in the experience of a new desire that emanates from an encounter with God as surrendering love. Now individuals and communities may be liberated from the cycle of accusation and its consequent polarisation. But this liberation is conditioned by the call to faith: enemies can be reconciled and victims can receive justice only in the "imitative" identification with the true image, the non-violent suffering Servant and the peace-bestowing risen Christ. Just as their encounter with the risen Christ was "contagious" for the first disciples, so it is for all those who give themselves to him in this "imitation". They experience God in a new way as the One who accompanies them with Goodness and Love in person, a relational experience that decisively affects their relationship with other human beings and the rest of creation, having become mediators of a new way of being.

The dramatic model thus provides a new reading of God's working in salvation as triumphant reversal of humanity's violent history. This history is re-lived in the history of Israel and eventually condensed in the drama of Jesus. His brief earthly existence is recapitulated and made present once more in history through Spirit-empowered proclamation of the kingdom, the transformation of human desire experienced in discipleship, and in the celebration of the Eucharistic meal.⁵⁰

DRAMATIC SOTERIOLOGY AND GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

From a Christian perspective, sin and salvation apply to humanity as a whole. The universal co-responsibility that such a view implies is quite incomprehensible in contemporary Western culture, which thinks in "systems" and sees life predominantly as a physico-chemical process. Nonetheless, the question of co-guilt and co-responsibility cannot be avoided simply because contemporary society has created the possibility of global self-annihilation.⁵¹ It is here that we encounter humanity's double-bind. On the one hand, the possibility of self-destruction makes denial of global responsibility impossible. On the other hand, the universal sweep of this burden may well be beyond human capacity: contemporary society by relinquishing its spiritual faculties takes the possibility of self-annihilation beyond its mere violent form, a condition that only increases the need for universal responsibility. In the absence

49. Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose are One* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 90.

50. Schwager, *Erbsünde*, 74.

51. Schwager, *Erbsünde*, 144.

of global solutions, it can only lead to resignation, apathy, and loss of hope. According to Schwager, this is precisely the context in which a dramatic soteriology shows its heuristic value.

The early stages of salvation history (for example, the story of Abraham) centred on such salvific goods as territory and off-spring, which were, analogically speaking, also important in the animal kingdom. From there, the drama of God's action in history leads from ever new experiences and deeper disappointments to a "radical transformation of the original image of God and thus to a new understanding of the original promise".⁵² But in each case, every new beginning receives its true meaning only in retrospect. Through the basilea message Jesus unleashed an uncontrollable self-reflexive process that rebounded upon him. Yet, its hostility did not throw God's plan of salvation off course. Instead, Jesus used the backlash to live his own message with total integrity. Even in the ultimate crisis he entrusted himself entirely to the Father, who raised him from the dead and elevated him to his "right hand". At Pentecost, the Spirit was given so that the work of Jesus, done in the same power, may be implemented and given meaning retrospectively while revealing in the process its universal scope. Only faith in the all-encompassing work of God in history can free humanity from being overwhelmed by the colossal crisis which seems to rebound upon it at this time as a form of (self)-judgement.

Far from suggesting an irresponsible stance of quietist passivity, Schwager urges us to believe that this God who raised Jesus from the dead is able to bring unimaginably new beginnings out of our worst failures. Even if anti-christlike dominance systems resembling "apocalyptic animals" were to rule the planet (which Schwager thinks is entirely possible), they will self-destruct in the long term. Since Christ wrought a complete salvation, even deadly conflicts cannot nullify his promise of eternal life.

52. Schwager, *Erbsünde*, 149.