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Theologies of the Cross

Denney and Forsyth

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Europe's long nineteenth century was marked by extraordinary social, intellectual, and political transformation. The Church was not impervious to such, and the best of its theologians critically embraced the new mood. Among these were two Scots, P. T. Forsyth (1848–1921) and James Denney (1856–1917), who in their own ways were determined to unleash the reserve of the ancient evangelical faith with a modern pronunciation.

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Forsyth was a high-Victorian Congregational minister and theologian turned Edwardian college principal.¹ He was born and educated in Aberdeen, and at the close of the academic session in 1872, undertook a semester of study with Albrecht Ritschl and Carl Stumpf in Göttingen before returning to Britain to train for the Congregational ministry at New College, London. He exercised pastoral charges—in decreasingly eccentric and increasingly public modes—at Springwood, Shipley (1876–9), at St Thomas' Square, Hackney, London (1879–85), at Cheetham Hill, Manchester (1885–8), at Clarendon Park, Leicester (1888–94), and at Emmanuel Church, Cambridge (1894–1901).

In 1901, Forsyth was called to the principalship of Hackney College, London. The years of his principalship were marked by a growing and prolific public ministry at home and abroad, and by an extraordinary fertility in terms of his maturing theology and literary output. In 1905, he served as Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales. In 1907, he delivered the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale (subsequently published as *Positive Preaching and [the] Modern Mind*), and during the following year addressed the Third International Congregational Council in Edinburgh, where he gave the Congregational Lectures on 'The Person and Place of Jesus Christ'.

While visiting London in October 1910, Denney stayed with Forsyth. Writing to his sister around the same time, Denney described his host as 'an extremely

¹ For a fuller biography, see Bradley (1952) and Goroncy (2013a: 1–66). Substantive bibliographies are available in Benedetto (1993) and McCurdy (1995).

clever though rather tantalising man' (Moffatt 1921: 154). By all accounts he was. He was known also for his antithetical and idiosyncratic writing style, about which Denney commented:

Forsyth's book [*Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*] interested me very much, but the peculiarity of his style is such that only people who agree with him strongly are likely to read him through. It is immensely clever at some points at which it is not enough to be clever. It is like hitting Goliath between the eyes with a pebble which does not sink into his skull, but only makes him see clearer.

(Denney 1920: 97)

And about Forsyth's *Missions in State and Church*, Denney wrote:

I found [it] very difficult to read. If this is how one feels who is heartily at one with the writer, how must it strike an unsympathetic reader? He has more true and important things to say, in my opinion, than any one at present writing on theology; but if these papers were preached, as most of them seem to have been, I am sure most of the audiences, while willing enough to take hold of them, must have been sadly perplexed to find the handle. (1920: 118–19)

Denney suggested that perhaps Forsyth's most powerful words are spared for diagnoses of the moral condition of both Church and society at large, diagnoses which Forsyth offered in light of humanity's indifference to God's holiness, the inexorability of God's love, and the transforming judgement in God's forgiving grace. Forsyth, Denney declared, 'takes care not to be personal, nor to say what implies censure of individuals, but he feels free to be scornful of much on which a whole generation has nursed its self-complacency' (Denney 1907a: 57).

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Denney was a New Testament scholar, theologian, and influential churchman.² Born in Paisley, he spent his childhood at nearby Greenock and, in 1879, completed his undergraduate studies at Glasgow University. He proceeded to study theology at the Free Church College where he was exposed to some of the most acute minds of his generation, including A. B. Bruce, J. S. Candlish, and T. M. Lindsay. Upon completing his studies in 1883, Denney was appointed Missioner at East Hill Street Mission of St John's (Free Church, Glasgow) and then, from 1886, served for eleven years as a well-loved parish minister of East Free Church in Broughty Ferry. Within months of his induction, he married Mary Carmichael Brown who introduced him to the writings of C. H. Spurgeon who,

² For a fuller biography and bibliography, see Gordon (2006).

‘perhaps as much as any one...led him to the great decision of his life – the decision to preach the Atoning Death of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Denney 1920: xvi).

In 1897, Denney returned to his old alma mater, serving first as Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, and then, from 1900, as Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, and, from 1915, as Principal, a post he held until his death in 1917. During these final decades, Denney’s theology reached its full maturity and his literary output proved most prodigious.

Denney’s work attracted widespread acclaim from both students and academic colleagues. J. K. Mozley, for example, wrote:

As a New Testament scholar and commentator [Denney] was in the first rank; as an expounder of the doctrine of the Atonement he was Dale’s superior in exact understanding of the text of the Gospels and Epistles; and if he lacked Forsyth’s distinctive vision of the *theologia crucis*, as that in which the revelation of God in Christ was summed up and its moral meaning secured, he possessed a clarity both of thought and style which made his writings far easier to understand.

(1951: 130–1)

On numerous occasions, Forsyth also offered appreciative appraisals of Denney’s work. While Forsyth admitted, in 1906, to ‘have not read Denney with such care’ (Mackintosh 1943: 211), he later confessed that ‘Denney became a court of reference in my silent thought. No man was so needful for the conscience of the Church and the public... There is nobody left now to be the theological prophet and lead in the moral reconstruction of belief’ (Forsyth 1920: n.p.). On another occasion, Forsyth judged that Denney ‘has more important things to say than anyone at present writing theology’ (Hunter 1962: 9). And again: ‘Denney is the greatest thinker we have upon our side’ (Moffatt 1921: 153). Forsyth’s praise notwithstanding, the assessment of one commentator is quite fair: ‘It is probably safe to say that in so far as Dr. Denney’s actual opinions are concerned, they will have little influence on the future of theology. He was not a great pathfinder. But his work will always command respect for its apologetic value in his own generation’ (Anon. 1919: 428).

Our two subjects were concerned to bridge the gulf that modernity had opened up between the universities and the churches. Denney’s commitment to ‘do the work of an evangelist’ (Denney 1920: 176) meant that he had no interest in theological fads, insisting that ‘the propagation and...the scientific construction of the Christian religion...should never be divorced’ (Denney 1902: 283). His habits, like those of Forsyth, arose from the conviction that responsible theology ‘must pay attention to the world God has placed us in’. For, as Forsyth asserted, ‘it is this age that we are set to serve, change, and raise. It is not another in which we do not live. We must deal with our own conditions’ (1945: 357; cf. Denney 1903: 20). Their interests therefore were unconfined to explicitly ecclesiastical and

theological concerns. But regardless of the subject, they shared a conviction that the cross is the locus of God's self-justification and self-discovery, realities which are confirmed in the evangelical experience of forgiveness and which are oriented towards the transformation of the human person and of the wider public.

Forsyth on the Cross

All Forsyth's major theological concerns are examined *sub specie crucis*. He insists that the development of any meaningful stauology (theology of the cross) calls for more than merely cataloguing biblical texts or seeking to contain the atonement's meanings by recourse to metaphors. It calls for situating interpretations of the cross within the frame of a universal, coherent, and moral ontology, more basic and more unflinching than is its physicalist counterpart. This ontology, which is the expansion of an 'eternal moral personality' (1962: 19), engages human persons through the organ of the conscience and directs creation towards the end for which God creates all things; namely, the realization of divine holiness everywhere, God's self-realization in the other. While Denney avers that 'the only source of redemption' lay in God's interest in 'all sinners' (1902: 95), for Forsyth, *the* source is God's own 'insatiable holiness' (1962: 30). 'The first charge on a Redeemer', therefore, 'is satisfaction to that holiness' (1957: 4). It is this demand *by God upon God*—the sense that God owed it to God's self to self-propitiate and to find God's self 'on a world scale amid the extremest conditions created by human sin' (1923: 299)—that necessitates God's reconciling work in the cross.

Here, God's entire human life *must* confront and bring to naught God's antithesis—sin—lest all things, and God, be placed at risk: 'Holy love must heal itself. The personality of God, being holy, must recover and assert itself in the sanctification of the whole universe, and by its own resources make itself good in its infinite harmony everywhere in and between all souls' (1923: 298–99). The Kantian 'must' spoken here reaches its most rhetorically-powerful articulation in Forsyth's expression 'Die sin must or God' (1916: 151). There is an almost aesthetic quality in Forsyth's stauology: the cross is not only where God finds God's self in the world, but also where God feels so found. It is also a stauology characterized by a relentless theocentrism: the cross is first and foremost God's answer to God's self, God's definitive response to the first petition of the Lord's Prayer—'hallowed be thy name'. What is at stake, Forsyth claims, is the entire fabric of reality. More critically, unless God's antithesis be brought to naught, the threat of God's own being being erased remains a terrifying possibility. Whether this implied dualism is a provisional or ontological one is never resolved in Forsyth's writing. What is resolved is that such a situation is unmarked by permanence.

In a rare footnote, Forsyth reveals the source of his thinking here to be Hegel's *Religionsphilosophie* wherein Hegel speaks of God's 'going out... into finitude' and of manifesting God's self 'in finitude' (Hegel 1895: 38). Christ, as Hegel has it, has taken upon himself 'something foreign to God'—'finitude in all its forms, and which at its furthest extreme is represented by Evil'—'in order to slay it by His death' (1895: 92–3). The 'Universal puts itself into antithesis with itself' in order to return to itself through an act which abolishes the 'rigidity of the antithesis' (1895: 87, 111). Hegel informs Forsyth's unyielding conviction that God alone can satisfy the moral order God never disturbed and pay the cost God never incurred. In the holiness of the cross, the living God, who is 'the dying God' (Forsyth 2013: 136), finds God's self. By taking this route, Forsyth avoids an unacceptable and rarely-resolved schism in much Protestant theology—the rift between Christology and theology proper. There is no redemption by proxy.

Following Calvin, Forsyth locates his stauology in the territory of moral action, the reconciling achievement of the cross lying in Christ's perfect and suffering obedience: '[God] could be satisfied and rejoiced only by the hallowing of His name, by perfect and obedient answer to His holy heart from amid conditions of pain, death, and judgement' (1910b: 205–6). The obedience unveiled in the divine economy is an unbroken prolongation of that which marks the triune life *in tempore* and *in aeternitate*, and so constitutes Christ's whole personality as God's Son. There is nothing in the Father's perfect Word that is not answering the Father in their history together with the world as it is drawn out by the Spirit. The cross's value, moreover, lay in it being not only the act of God performed *ab extra* upon humanity, but also in it being that act of God done *ab intra*—from the side of and within the limitations of the human situation. Here, God's voluntary self-humiliation finds a most gratifying and creative voice in Forsyth's modified kenoticism, a doctrine which attracts no support in Denney but which 'more than any other single notion points to the deepest sense of the mystery of the incarnation' (MacKinnon 1972: 297). Forsyth argues for a complementary two-act movement of *kenosis* (emptying) and *plerosis* (filling) in Christ's life. Regarding the latter, the cross is where Christ comes to his fullness, where God finds God's self. Forsyth also anticipates and responds to objections of the doctrine by defining *kenosis* in terms of the self-limitation, self-contraction, or self-compression of the divine attributes. This idea bears witness to God's true *omnipotence* while underscoring Christ's *moral achievement*: omnipotence because God would not be truly omnipotent if God did not have 'the power to limit Himself... to bend and die' (1957: 33), and a moral achievement because the nature of confession that holiness seeks must come from the side of the creature. Such a move is also a fruit of Forsyth's aversion to Chalcedonianism on grounds that it capitulates to Hellenistic ideas, a move which exposes him, unfairly, to the charge of promoting a low or merely instrumental view of the incarnation, or even of advancing a form of Eutychianism.

Here Forsyth is particularly indebted to Anselm's conviction that there is a requirement that atonement also arrives 'from sin's side', as it were. Given humanity's moral quagmire, however, the undoing of the effects of sustained blasphemy 'from the sinner's side' remains impossible, let alone that done 'on the scale of the race', as Forsyth insists is called for (1987: 108–9). Reconciliation therefore is, from first to last, wholly grace: 'Procured grace is a contradiction in terms. The atonement did not procure grace, it flowed from grace' (1910a: 78). Neither is God reconciled by any third party: 'God came, He did not send' (1918: 263). Forsyth is not uncritical of Anselm, however. While preserving Anselm's view that for God to simply forgive would be dishonourable, Forsyth believes that by highlighting (feudal) honour rather than holiness, Anselm 'put theology on a false track' (1910b: 223), sponsoring a compounding of sin rather than sin's full abrogation. Moreover, he contends that Anselm failed to appreciate the *personal* nature of Christ's sacrifice, its concern with obedience. And Anselm's Christ, he believes, acts entirely over our heads, without any real reference to the human nature wherein the benefit is to take effect, and so leaves human subjects mere beneficiaries. Middle Age soteriology, Forsyth insists, requires the ethical advances of Protestant orthodoxy which place the making of satisfaction in the moral and personal realm of the conscience.

Unsurprisingly, Forsyth, along with Denney, welcomes—with some caution—many of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century assaults on penal theories of the atonement, and shows some sympathy for the achievements of the German mediating theologians, particularly those of Isaak Dorner, and for the 'new' Christologies proposed by R. C. Moberly and J. McLeod Campbell. He does not, however, follow the fashion of rejecting wholesale the penal and substitutionary elements within the atonement. He wants to retain these for their 'positive worth' while shifting away from the '*quid pro quos*' and 'dubious ethics of substitution' that characterize such and which tend to vacate the action of genuine personality and to promote 'mere distributive equity' (1901: 67; 1887: 126; 1957: 4). Whether or not he wholly succeeds in this effort remains an open question. But one way that Forsyth does achieve this retention at key junctures is to rework atonement theologies old and new into a threefold cord of triumph, satisfaction, and regeneration. According to Forsyth, this corresponds to Christ's threefold confession of God's holiness: '[Triumph] emphasises the finality of our Lord's victory over the evil power or devil; . . . [Satisfaction], the finality of His satisfaction, expiation, or atonement presented to the holy power of God; and . . . [Regeneration] the finality of His sanctifying or new-creative influence on the soul of [persons]' (1910b: 199). Positively, Forsyth might say, through its confession of God's holiness, the cross reveals, establishes, and puts into historic action the changeless grace of God. Negatively, the revelation and establishment of holiness takes place through the revelation of sin's sinfulness and of sin's judgement. Creatively, Christ's cross constitutes out of the wreck of the old a new humanity in communion with God.

Regarding this latter object, Forsyth contends that one of the grounds for divine satisfaction is the atonement's anticipation and effect upon creatures called to share in God's holiness. One reason for Forsyth's hesitation about penal theories is their fundamentally backward vista. Within their own terms of reference, penal models leave human beings pardoned criminals but not participants in God's new work. Conversely, cruciform justice transforms not only human subjects but also the structures they occupy. This too is part of Christ's one work of reconciliation and is not its mere sequel. Put otherwise, Holy Love does not overcome its antithesis by merely destroying it. Rather, Holy Love achieves its telos through the recreation of those persons for whom sin has become a way of being and the transformation of those structures that befit such. It is because judgement has a particularly teleological, liberating, and creative character to it that it is to be anticipated in hope rather than recoiled from in dread.

Denney on the Cross

Denney's presentation of Christ owes an uncompromising debt to the witness of the New Testament, and particularly to St Paul. From the Apostle, Denney learns that Christ—and not merely a word about him—is the content of the Christian community's *kerygma*, the *sine qua non* of his atoning action explicated as both propitiation and divine gift. In the Bible, Denney argues, 'the Cross dominates everything. It interprets everything. It puts all things in their true relations to each other' (1902: 315).

Alan Sell describes Denney as 'a man of one theme' (1987: 195), and few would doubt that Denney's work on the atonement 'represents his major contribution as a theologian, a contribution by which his reputation must stand or fall' (Marshall 1969: 225). Christian speech is not exhausted in Denney's theology by attention to the Easter activities, however. Both he and Forsyth gave much attention to the Jesus of the Gospels, underscoring how those acquainted with Christ in his ministry are transfigured by his personality and 'initiated . . . into the mystery of His Passion' (1902: 294). This is the pattern by which the Spirit continues to make the 'present and eternal' Christ known 'here and now', for 'the historical Christ does not belong to the past' (1917: 9).

Although Denney reads Christ's entire life as the revelation of God and of God's kingdom, he insists that to truly preach Christ is to represent his death as 'the main part' (1908a: 398). Here Denney takes aim at the Christian Platonists, and at B. F. Westcott and J. M. Wilson who, in his estimation, 'concentrate attention on the Incarnation as something which can be appreciated entirely independent' of the atonement (1902: 320–1). Denney rejects this move for three reasons: first, it represents an unwelcome shift from the New Testament's 'centre of gravity': 'Not Bethlehem, but Calvary, is the focus of revelation, and any construction of Christianity which ignores or denies this distorts Christianity by putting it out of

focus' (1902: 324, 325). Second, Denney, like Forsyth, expresses concern that the theological conditions that sponsor a focus on incarnation over that of atonement grant undue attention to speculative rather than moral problems, a dislike bred from the Idealism he first encountered in Edward Caird's class at Glasgow University, and which he sees pressed intemperately in Ritschl's chasm between religion and metaphysics. Third, Denney believes that the 'obtrusion of the Incarnation at the cost of the Atonement' (1902: 327) promotes neo-Hegelian sentimentality.

One might argue that Denney's response to the work of Westcott and Wilson restricts the risky shape that love takes in the divine economy, and that neither the genesis nor the history of Jesus' life need be played off against its terminus. Denney's attempt to clarify his position by stating that Christ's 'life is part of His death' (1903: 109) is unlikely to satisfy many readers. But it would be a misjudgement to conclude that Denney is not alert to the force of at least some of the main counter-arguments. He states, for example, that 'when the death [of Christ] is separated from the life it loses moral character' (1903: 109). But he stops short of offering any exhaustive alternative, an indication of a Bible scholar's reluctance to traverse ground the Bible itself does not ply but where a systematician might be more confident—or foolhardy?—to tread.

No objection can be mounted, however, that for Denney the reconciliation secured in the cross is 'the diamond pivot on which the whole system of Christian truth revolves' and that 'to displace it or tamper with it is to reduce the New Testament to an intellectual chaos' (1895: 109). Contra Julius Kaftan and other neo-Ritschlians, Denney insists that 'reconciliation is not something which is doing; it is something which is done' (1902: 146)—'if we cannot say, Here *is* the reconciliation, receive it, – then for [humanity's] actual state we have no Gospel at all' (1907b: 214). So as stoutly Protestant as he was, Denney used to say that he envied the Roman Catholic priest his crucifix: 'I would like to go into every church in the land', he said, 'and, holding up the crucifix, cry to the congregation "God loves like that"' (Taylor 1962: 10).

Denney shares Forsyth's concern to safeguard against any suggestion that in Jesus the Son propitiated an angry Father; or that there is an eternal contradiction in the divine life; or that the Father is ever anything but well-pleased with the Son. He makes plain, however, that reconciliation both presupposes and overcomes a 'state of estrangement' between God and humanity: 'There is something in God as well as something in [the human person] which has to be dealt with before there can be peace' (1907b: 211). Regrettably, Denney, unlike Forsyth, avoids explaining exactly what this 'something in God' is, and so threatens to open the door to a God who is in some way conditioned by the work of the cross. Christ's death is, Denney says, 'The condition of [humanity's] entering again into fellowship with [God]' (1902: 174). Still, Denney's stauology offers an alternative to the neo-Hegelian Idealism that so dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theology wherein sin is judged to be something that creation, and presumably God, must in

some sense come to be reconciled with. Denney judges that such schemes reduce God's propitiating work to empty semantics and insists, with Forsyth, that 'God is irreconcilable to evil' (1903: 82). The confession of God's holiness made in the atonement is, therefore, 'necessary', not only for the creature but also for God (1903: 94; 1917: 162). But if, as Denney insists, God in God's Son enters into the 'derangement', 'disturbance', 'violence', and 'whole responsibility of the situation created by sin' (1903: 54, 91), then the concern need not be God's being reconciled with sin but rather God's being fully identified with sin, so that the death of God in the death of Christ means sin's end. To recognize the *moral contradiction* expressed in a text like 2 Corinthians 5:21 (a favourite for both Denney and Forsyth) is to recognize the secret of Holy Love that recoils not from propitiatory judgement, apart from which the Gospel is robbed of its 'nerve' (1907b: 222).³

In St Paul's thought, Denney surmises, the death of Christ relates to three main realities: the love of God, the love of Christ, and the sinfulness of human beings. The cross demonstrates the unsurpassable character of the divine love, makes public the Son's loving obedience towards the Father with whom he loves the world, and 'is a death for sin, whatever else may be said of it'. Here, Denney's commitment to the idea of substitutionary atonement comes to the fore: 'there was no possibility of Christ's dealing with sin effectually except by taking *our* responsibility in it on himself – that is, except by dying for it' (1902: 126). According to Denney, it is Christ's 'purgation of sins' that constitutes 'the evangelical truth which is covered by the word "substitute", and which is not covered by the word "representative"' (1902: 236). Denney's reservations vis-à-vis the grammar of 'representative' appear to rest on 'a confusion between a representative and a delegate' (Caird 1979: 198), and betray some amnesia about his best instincts that faithful witness to the atonement calls for a multiplicity of metaphors. It is made more problematic too because he interprets the idea of Christ's being made a substitute for humanity *solely* as a human work rather than a gift of God. In Denney's view, Christ dies as humanity's substitute alone, and only becomes humanity's representative after the sinner's conversion.

The propitiatory elements in God's atoning work must not, for Denney, be divorced from its ethical or moral elements, which build on the foundation of the former, lest God's work in Christ be reduced to 'a piece of pure mythology' (1902: 127). Christ's death evokes, empowers, and draws people 'into a moral fellowship' with God, and there calls for Christ's action to be 'reproduced somehow in their own life' (1903: 100, 102).⁴ 'The forensic theory of atonement . . . is not unrelated

³ This emphasis on Christ's death as a moral reality may be difficult to reconcile with Denney's claim that Christ did not suffer the punishment of a guilty conscience. Jesus' unfamiliarity with what makes any death 'dreadful', the shadow of a bad conscience, raises questions about Jesus' full identification with sinners in their death, and what it can mean, therefore, for Christ to 'enter by dying into the experiences which death is for sinners' (1917: 279–80).

⁴ Cf. Denney (1897b: 426). At times, Denney overstates his case. E.g. Denney (1911: 2, 275).

to the ethico-mystical; it is not parallel to it; it is not a mistaken *ad hominem* or rather *ad Pharisaeum* mode of thought which ought to be displaced by the other; it has the essential eternal truth in it by which *and by which alone* the experiences are generated in which the strength of the other is supposed to lie' (1902: 184).

Denney is uninterested in 'what can be said in defence of Christianity *remoto Christo* or *quasi nihil sciatur de Christo*' (1917: 65). Evident here is not only some distance that Denney wants to mark between himself and Anselm, but also his resistance towards those absurd reductions of staurology to a single atonement model or unambiguous dogmatic articulation. Here he shares also Forsyth's concern to underscore the regenerative effects of the atonement. Neither cares much for any antithesis between objective and subjective aspects in discussing the atonement, nor to champion any 'incompatibility between a *divine* necessity and a necessity *for us*' (1903: 90; italics in original). The recovery of the 'for us' is, Denney believes, the real mithridate to historical scepticism. He suggests, for example, that Tertullian's legal categories be employed to interpret Christ's work 'on the analogy of human experience in the moral world', and that when reading Athanasius 'room has to be made . . . for ideas more capable of verification in human experience' (1917: 40, 51). At this point he criticizes Anselm—the representative of that 'crude and immoral *redemptiones* of the Middle Ages'—for formulating a theology of satisfaction from rational necessities that belong to 'the world of metaphysics' rather than of 'spiritual experience' (1917: 51, 75).

A younger Denney had preached that 'grace . . . gives life only because it supplies a new motive in the knowledge of God's love as revealed in the death of Jesus Christ' (1885: 7). But by 1893, his 'Ritschlian appreciation of Anselm and Abelard' is converted towards a more rigorous defence of substitution that, in Denney's judgement, does not 'ignore the serious element in the situation which the atonement is designed to meet'. As he expresses to W. Robertson Nicoll:

[Hastings Rashdall's] *line* of interpretation has been taken as far as it will go now, and has yielded all it can yield; . . . it is time to rediscover the fact that the Apostles in their doctrine of atonement were dealing with something which never comes within Rashdall's (nor Ritschl's) view – namely, God's condemnation of sin as a terrifically real and serious thing. It may seem irreverent to say so, but the 'höchste einzigartige Heldenaufopferung' theory of the atonement seems to me simply to ignore the serious element in the situation which the atonement is designed to meet. A martyrdom in plain English, no matter how holy and loving the martyr, is an irrelevance . . . There is a fascinating way of presenting Abelardism, but as a fisher-evangelist, a friend of mine, once said to me, to preach it is like fishing with a barbless hook: your bait is taken, but you don't catch men. (1920: 1–2)

Still, those staurologies that minimize or overlook moral reproductions of Christ's atoning work in the believer's life are judged wholly inadequate. With Forsyth, Denney believes this to be one of the main achievements of the Protestant Reformations.

There is, to be sure, a change in emphasis, methodology, atmosphere, and grammar in Denney's later thinking on the atonement. So Gordon:

Concepts [Denney] considered abstract, contractual or mechanical were displaced by others more relational, ethical and personal, and latterly his preferred metaphors were those which conveyed the truths of sin as essentially broken relationship and the cross as the effectual and final revelation of divine sin-bearing love. (2006: 222)

This conviction is most evident in *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* wherein Denney welcomes Anselm's 'truly heroic effort to present the truth of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation in a scientific and systematic form' (1917: 64) and by so doing insists that the ends for God's creation of humanity, namely communion, are necessarily placed at the forefront of *Cur Deus Homo?*—'the truest and greatest book on the Atonement that has ever been written' (1903: 83, 84). He also welcomes Abelard's stress on the loving character of God's cruciform revelation and its appeal 'for love' (1917: 82), thereby rescuing atonement theology from the metaphysicians. He welcomes too Thomas' presentation of the atonement as 'something not alien to those who are to be saved, but capable of a moral appropriation' (1917: 87)—an emphasis that, in Denney's estimation, marks a genuine advance on Anselm's theology and further develops the Abelardian emphasis on communion. Osiander's (and, later, Newman's) efforts to interpret the doctrine of justification by faith "'mystically," not legally' (1917: 106) is also appraised positively, as is much in Grotius' governmental treatment of the atonement because it provokes a 'more searching study of such ideas as law and punishment', and assists to 'remove the ban of individualism, and to revive the idea of the Kingdom of God by its emphasis on the idea of a common good' (1917: 113). Denney welcomes too the Socinian insistence that divine forgiveness is free and unconditioned by an inner need for satisfaction, even while criticizing the Socinian rejection of the notion that '*in Christ God somehow takes part with sinners against Himself*' (1917: 100; italics in original); and he welcomes the more recent work undertaken by McLeod Campbell and Horace Bushnell, the latter for his exposition of Christ's love as vicarious self-giving 'in the whole circumstances of our stricken life', and the former for his insistence on the way that Christ takes upon himself the responsibility of human persons to God in 'the calamity, the burden, and the ruin of their sin' (1917: 256, 258).⁵ Certainly, the younger Denney's focus on the atonement's objective, propitiatory, and substitutionary elements is expanded in his more mature writings to include a greater emphasis on those

⁵ This was a return to an earlier interest for Denney. In his lecture on 'The Passion of the Son', part of his series of lectures on the Apostles' Creed delivered during his charge at Broughty Ferry (Denney 1888), Denney examined the notion of vicarious penitential feeling as articulated in Bushnell's *The Vicarious Sacrifice Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation* and Mason's *The Faith of the Gospel*, a subject revisited in his farewell sermon to that same congregation. See Denney (1897a: 4).

theories more amenable to relational and existential accounts. As Denney would express it in a late lecture:

The death of Christ is a fact or reality with many aspects, many constituents, many relations, intentions and powers in it, and its reconciling virtue may be dependent on them all... Truths are often dependent on each other for their virtue, even when the interdependence is not perceived; and no doctrine has suffered more than the doctrine of the atonement from exclusive emphasis being laid on this or that element of truth which really ceases to be effective when its connection with others is ignored. (n.d.: 6)

It has been suggested that too absent from both Denney's and Forsyth's accounts of the cross is explicit witness to the work of the Holy Spirit. Denney, who wrote the article on 'Holy Spirit' for Hastings' *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (1906), admits that the Holy Spirit is 'a very vague term' and is 'practically indistinguishable' from an experience of Christ, 'an experience of power, life, and joy' resulting from faith (1917: 308, 309, 310).⁶ Moreover, there is, in Denney's words, 'no justification... for representing the Spirit as a third person in the same sense as God and Christ' (1917: 311; cf. 1908a: 400–1). Somewhat unsurprisingly, therefore, Denney suffered from the accusation that he was implicitly binitarian in his theology.⁷ Forsyth also faced the charge that his theology was pneumatologically undersupplied.⁸ In Denney's defence, Taylor suggests that in Denney's theology the Spirit is prevalent without being explicit (1962: 119–32). In Forsyth's defence, the hazards of identifying Spirit with Hegel's and Romanticism's *Geist*, and that with history itself, were never far away. Indeed, Forsyth explicitly warns of those who are 'full of *Geist*... but not full of the Holy Ghost' (1914: 640). In truth, our two subjects insist on the closest possible relation between cross and Spirit, consistently identify the Spirit's sanctifying work closely with Christology, emphasize that it is by the Spirit that we make our theories of atonement, and that the Spirit guides God's people in the exegesis, proclamation, and hearing of Scripture. Both were, after all, sons of Calvin.

Conclusion

While both of our subjects received a favourable hearing in their day, interest in Forsyth's thought has endured in ways that that in Denney's has not. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the most important is that it was Forsyth's theology by and large—and particularly what he had to say about the cross—that

⁶ See Denney (1906: 738).

⁷ See Darlow (1925: 360–5).

⁸ See Gunton (1995: 54); Sykes (1995: 13–14); Terry (2007: 102).

better spoke to a world whose confidence in progress had been buried in the 'chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful . . . abode of madness' (Owen 1967: 431)—the no man's lands of Flanders and France. Forsyth, in ways manifestly more pronounced than Denney, insists that what the death of God in Jesus reveals is that salvation is not necessarily experienced as salvation. He sees that if little else, the Gospels remind us of the ineradicability of the tragic from Christianity, and that while the Church might speak of victory it remains victory achieved at dreadful and unjustifiable cost. An astute reader of Forsyth, Donald MacKinnon reminds us that in the Gospels, 'Christ's ministry ends in sheer disaster' (1979: 83). The tragedy is not resolved; and life's ambiguity is not overcome. Here Jesus' identity with God really is put at risk—and with it God's relationship with creation. This is part of the cross's great paradox—that no longer can transcendence and tragedy be thought of apart from each other. The temptation is to muffle Christ's cry of dereliction, to domesticate the scandal called 'cross', to proclaim that the resurrection somehow makes it all less tragic—as if the end somehow is the sheer manipulation of a process writ large with conflict, as if the truth of the human and divine dilemma is a cruel mirage, as if grace were not really grace all the way down, as if the cross were something other than the foundations of a consciously-godless world 'being hammered out' to their acrimonious end (MacKinnon 1979: 20), as if the very 'abysses of existence' were not being 'sounded and the ultimate contradictions of life plumbed and explored' (MacKinnon 1968: 104) in this one raw human history called Jesus. At no point is the gulf between the New Testament and Christian Platonism more wide, and the implications for Christian theology and its reading of history more grave. On this note, Forsyth's *The Justification of God*, first published in 1916, is among the most compelling of theological responses to the Second World War, and indeed to the litany of creation's horrors since.⁹

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⁹ As one reviewer noted, 'It has taken a second World War to bring to light the significance of what P. T. Forsyth saw clearly as the issues whilst the first . . . was still raging. This is in itself evidence enough of his prophetic insight, and spiritual sensitivity' (Gummer 1948: 349).

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