Appendix on Sin

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Introduction

Am I soft on sin? I have progressive Christian friends who will challenge me on this point. They will worry that I shortchange Christian teachings about the sin and redemption from sin through faith in Jesus Christ. These honest objections deserve an answer—but this issue constitutes "insider talk" among Christians. My books are written for secular readers and those belonging to other religious traditions, and so I consciously and carefully avoid insider talk of any kind.

First, let me admit that I see where this objection is coming from. I understand that I make some disconcerting arguments about Christian tradition. Some of this information disconcerted me too when I first came across it in the work of theological and biblical scholars.

Here's a list of the big ones: In *Confronting Religious Judgmentalism,* chapter five, I argue that the Adam and Eve story in Genesis is not primarily about human disobedience—disobedience to a divine rule that seems capricious and arbitrary from the outset. It's a myth about shame and the consequences of shame, one of the most potent, most toxic social emotions that we experience. In *Confronting Religious Violence,* chapters eight and nine, I argue Jesus did not die to assuage the wrath of God over the sin of Adam and Eve. That claim arises for the first time a thousand years after his death. It arises in response to liturgical changes mandated by the emperor Charlemagne, who wanted a more consistent "media message" from his state religion. Above all, I argue in *The Confrontational Wit of Jesus,* chapter 3, that Jesus himself insisted upon the radical nonviolence of God. Human suffering is never God's punishment for human sin. God loves all of us, absolutely all of us, no matter what: we are surrounded at all times by a loving and compassionate Presence. God smites no one—not in this life nor in the hereafter.

But if I don't believe in hell—and I don't—then how do I cope with various gospel statements about hell? Second, if I don't believe that Jesus died to save us from the wrath of God—and I don't—then how do I cope with sin-and-guilt as major themes in Christian thought? Finally, how do I cope with the enormous heritage of prayers and hymns about Jesus as the Lamb of God?

In answering these questions, I'll be telling a lot of stories. I'm doing so because I think stories bring complex theological issues to life far more successfully than the technicalities of highly abstract theological systematics. I think that the claim *Jesus died for your sins* summarizes a lot of the unnecessary guilt, self-doubt, and self-loathing that Christianity has imposed upon people. The message of Jesus was not "hate yourself." It was "love one another" and "return no one evil for evil." When Christianity gets into shaming people wholesale, it has lost touch with the saving grace that Jesus actually offered. Understanding and accepting that grace can cut some of the voltage to the hot buttons we all have, hot buttons that provoke us to bad behavior of all kinds. That's useful. It's not useful to browbeat people incessantly with the claim that they are terrible sinners.

And that reminds me of a story. Let me tell that story before I get into what Jesus said (and didn't say) about hell.

1955: The Bethel Baptists

When I was little, we lived n the first floor of a red brick two-flat. It was a long narrow building designed to fit on the long narrow lots of the Chicago's oldest neighborhoods—picture two classic bungalows stacked one atop the other.

At night, and on winter afternoons when dark came early, our living room was illuminated by a flashing neon sign mounted on the front corner of Bethel Baptist church across the street: Jesus Died For Our Sins. If I sat sideways on the scratchy green sofa, looking sideways at the window clad in its heavy wood-framed storm window, all I saw was rippled shades of pink. Day or night, that message beamed through the living room, back into the dining room, and down the short hall to the kitchen and bedrooms. Jesus Died For Our Sins. I don't remember being unable to read that sign. For all I know, it was the very first sentence I could read all by myself. Jesus Died For Our Sins, pink fluorescent letters, on and off, on and off.

What had they done? One day I asked my mother: Was this true? Had Jesus died for the Bethel Baptists?

"Don't pay any attention to that," she said. "They're Protestants."

I didn't know what "Protestant" meant, but I knew when my questions had crossed a line. On Sundays I'd see families arriving and departing from this small church across the street. They looked like ordinary people. But they were Protestants, and that's why Jesus had died. All that long time ago, because of Protestants. This was news worth pondering.

And so I did. Sitting quietly in church myself, well-trained in silent boredom through interminable Latin Masses every Sunday, and quicker but no less incomprehensible Masses on most weekdays, I continued to wonder. If Protestants had been Catholics, would Jesus have lived? At some point everybody dies, right? Or was Jesus like Santa Claus, somehow different? Could Santa die? It seemed improbable. And all those Easter hymns about Jesus coming to life again. Had nobody told the Bethel Baptists that Jesus was okay? Or was this something only Catholics were supposed to know?

I thought about asking my mother. But I never did. It was much too far across the line laid down when Mom said "Don't pay any attention to that." I felt sorry for the Bethel Baptists. I took to sitting on the sofa watching their sign flash on and off rather than, as before, watching that rippling array of blurry pink light if I sat just right, looking sideways at the glass. Mom took to drawing the drapes in the living room, telling me sternly to go play--a fairly serious warning. She could tell I was too close to that line again.

Jesus Died For Our Sins. Do we die *for* something? Or do we just die, as Grandma had just died, her ankles drooping down over the tops of her shoes, her fingers so puffy that Mom had to help her with buttons. Jesus didn't die like that. I knew that much. He was killed by mean men. I'd seen pictures of Roman soldiers wearing armor and funny little skirts and hats with stiff fringe on top and a metal strip over their noses. I wanted to tell the Bethel Baptists that Jesus was okay, that everything was okay, that God loves everybody. But Mom now kept the draped pulled most of the time. I took to playing in the dining room, on the floor between the table and windows where sun came in during the morning. I missed my Grandma.

My mother talked for the rest of her life about how my questions drove her crazy in the months after her mother died.

We moved to a new house when I was eight, by which time my anxiety about that sign had subsided. But in writing the Confronting Fundamentalism series, as I grappled anew with the concept of sin and with beliefs that Jesus died to avert God's punishing us for our sins, I went back to the old neighborhood to see if the church were still there. It was. The neon sign flashing "Jesus Died for Our Sins" had been taken down, but the bracket holding it in place was still bolted to the wall. "Bethel Baptist" had been inexpertly, incompletely sandblasted from the white stone lintel over the three front windows.

I sat in the car, a flood of memories pouring through long-dry ravines: the white-painted pantry with its laundry chute, the stained wooden coal bins in the basement, the lilacs in the backyard, the battleship–grey back porch, the dark green picket fence, the square concrete incinerator at the alley where every week my father, like everyone else, burned old newspapers and other paper trash and, in the fall, the fragrant leaves raked up from the yard. And that lurid pink neon sign, flashing on and off, proclaiming that Jesus Died for Our Sins, a sign you could read the whole length of our long narrow house.

I wondered who had taken it down and who had tried to erase "Bethel Baptist" from that small red-brick church. Was "Jesus Died for Our Sins" really the first sentence I could read by myself? I bet it was, just as it's the central teaching of Christianity in the eyes of far too many people: *Be Guilty, Be Very Guilty, You Are Guilty* flickers on and off, on and off, lurid and unrelenting in the middle of all to many dark nights for far too many weary souls.

Like the incompletely sand-blasted name "Bethel Baptist Church," that guilt-producing image of Jesus seems carved in stone as the public identity of Christianity. That's a misunderstanding that my Confronting Fundamentalism series tries to confront from a variety of angles.

What about "Hell"?

What the historical Jesus of Nazareth said about hell does not refer to what subsequent tradition imagined as hell, just as his promise of "everlasting life" does not refer to some five-star resort in the afterlife (see *The Confrontational Wit of Jesus,*

chapter 7). The God of infinite love will not torture anyone for an infinity. That is a vulgar misunderstanding, a vulgar misunderstanding that's remarkably useful politically as a tool for keeping populations subservient. The threat of eternal damnation is very nicely deconstructed by evangelical pastor Rob Bell in *Love Wins* (2012), a book that garnered scathing attacks from Religious Right bloggers even before it was published. If you want a fully-fledged evangelical rebuttal of the concept of everlasting punishment in hell, go read Bell. Especially read Bell if you grew up in an evangelical church.

From the wealth that Bell offers, let me select one nifty detail. In the gospels, the word translated as “hell” is usually “Gehenna.” That was the name of a ravine outside Jerusalem. In Hebrew scripture, Gehenna was considered accursed because that's where—supposedly—Canaanites sacrificed children to their god Moloch. By Jesus’s day, the ravine served as a garbage dump for the city. Sewers emptied into it. The nearby gate into the city was called the "Dung Gate" because what historians delicately call "night soil" was carried out to the Gehenna ravine through that gate. So here's what Jesus was saying: some choices lead us to the enduring, sustainable spiritual vitality that Jesus called "the kingdom of God." Other choices lead us to lives that are the moral equivalent of garbage and raw sewage.

As an image, "Garbage Dump Life" sounds just like Jesus. That was his sense of humor. Jesus preached to people whose religious and cultural world told them they were trash. They were trash because they were exploited and starving in a cultural context where wealth and power proved that someone had earned God's approval. They were worthless in the eyes of the world—and so of course they internalized that judgment. They *felt* worthless. They felt guilty. In ritual terms, many of them were also chronically "impure" because starving peasants did not have the money and the resources to sustain ritual purity practices and to offer the required animal sacrifices. As a result, they felt like trash: they were profoundly and inescapably shamed.

No, Jesus said, the trashy people are the ones who treat you like shit. But they are shit. They are headed straight for Gehenna.

More pointedly yet: the ancient allusion to child-sacrifice suggests that people who fail radically of compassion are something even worse than shit and trash. They are guilty of killing the innocent and the helpless.

Nonetheless, Gehenna the garbage ravine is the dominant image here. And Jesus's followers were drawn from the servant class who would have seen that ravine regularly as they carried their masters' pots of "night soil" through the Dung Gate.

Today we take it as commonplace knowledge that the wealth of the wealthy does not say a thing about their moral stature. But in Jesus's day, that was a new idea. In his day, and even among the Jews, suffering of any kind was considered punishment for wrong-doing. Part of Jesus's enduring influence on Western culture is deeply rooted in his revolutionary confrontation with such beliefs.

2004: The Man in the Yellow Backhoe

As a metaphor, "Gehenna" rings true to me. I've seen a garbage dump only once in my life, but that was enough. It was in Iowa City—not a huge garbage dump by any means. My daughter and I had to get rid of a desk, a huge cheap particle-board thing that other tenants had left behind in the storage locker she and friends had jointly rented in her name one summer. And on my credit card. So it fell to my daughter and me to get rid of this behemoth. Half a dozen undergraduates, working together, barely managed to load it into the panel truck I had rented. Then my daughter and I drove out to the dump. I paid the appropriate fee, and we circled around as directed to a spot in the middle of this bizarre terrain.

Then we had to get this desk out of the van. She pushed. I pulled. Our abrupt success knocked the breath out of me. The desk did *not* land on top of me, which felt like a minor miracle; but I was fairly convinced that I'd broken my ankle trying to fling myself sideways to avoid it. Clutching frazzled scraps of denial, I sat there a minute, taking in the scene around me. It was in fact a scene from hell, a portrait of the aftermath of consumerist excess, planned obsolescence, unsustainably organized cities, and just plain trash. From horizon to horizon, as far as I could see, the landscape was strewn with junk and rotting garbage. Even on the small scale of Iowa City, the garbage dump works beautifully as an image for all that's just plain *wrong* with the human condition.

On a high ridge of trash off to my right was perched a bright yellow frontloader. Sitting at its controls, looking down at me, was a very handsome young man. As our

eyes met, I realized that he was struggling to stifle his laughter. I smiled ruefully up at him. He grinned and laughed and waved us off: we had gotten the damned desk close enough to the required spot. I got up, brushed garbage from my jeans, and waved at him gratefully as I limped back to the driver's side door. My ankle was okay after all—sprained, nothing more.

My daughter and I were silent riding back into town. When she did speak up, it was to direct me to her favorite coffee shop. She came out with a gracious apology and a tall, sweet creamy drink concocted of coffee and chocolate. It was so laden with caffeine that I drove home six hours nonstop. I could hardly peel my hands from the steering wheel when I arrived--and I won't tell you how the rest of me felt when I tried to walk into the house.

In short, "headed for Gehenna" is not a threat of everlasting violence by an implacably hostile deity. And yet Gehenna can't be beat as a metaphor for human wrong-doing. Human greed, anger, and envy can provoke violence that turns the cultural landscape to death, trash, and destruction—and yet simple gestures of kindness and gratitude have remarkable power as antidotes.

So here's the question. What does Christianity have on offer as an antidote to sin if Jesus of Nazareth was not, in the end, offered up as human sacrifice to assuage the wrath of a brutal and vindictive God?

Sin and Forgiveness

As I explain in more detail in *Confronting Religious Judgmentalism,* chapter 5, and as Robin Stockitt explains at length in *Restoring the Shamed: Toward a Theology of Shame* (2012), the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden is commonly misread. It's a story about shame and the origins of shame. It's not a story about God as a divine giver-of-rules and humanity as a sinful breaker-of-rules.

I know that's how the story is often taught and retold. That's how I thought about the story myself until I read Stockitt. But that's not the point of the story.

The Adam-and-Eve story traces the origin of human wrong-doing to our habits of moral judgmentalism. We misdirect our critical thinking into toxic self-condemnation, a self-shaming or self-judgment that in turn provokes our wholesale condemnations of

those around us. Jesus "takes away the sin of the world" in this sense, and in this sense only: he offers healing or cleansing from our dark abiding sense of not-good-enough, not-included, not-beloved. If you read Robin Stockitt and Bob Bell side by side, you will have a comprehensive, engaging, thorough-going theological and biblical analysis of what Christianity means—and does *not* mean—by sin and by forgiveness or "redemption from sin."

Here I want to take a different, perhaps more accessible angle on the issue: I want to tell some stories about the meaning of forgiveness. I've spent years trying to figure out what is meant by "forgiveness" and why forgiveness is so central to spiritual enlightenment or spiritual transformation in my own tradition. There's probably nothing in the tradition that has been more baffling for me or more difficult personally.

But now and then in life I'd had moments when the truth of the matter began to glimmer in the distance. As that flickering light gradually came into focus for me, I began to realize that Jesus's teachings about forgiveness, refraining from revenge, and the nonviolence of God are not a whitewash over the fact of human evil. Nor are these teachings romantic nonsense. These teachings are addressed instead to the core psychological realities underlying human evil. They are in fact a more astute, more realistic account of sin than the infamous claim that "Jesus died for your sins."

The Moral Imagination and the Redeeming of the Lamb

In Christian thought and practice, our need to forgive and our need to be forgiven are interwoven with references to Jesus as "the lamb of God." If we're not careful, these references easily deteriorate into seeing Jesus as a sacrificial animal himself. And that's obscene.

The lamb is and has always been a emblem of innocence and vulnerability. That's its essential literary and cultural association. But in these qualities, lambs must be distinguished from sheep. Grown sheep, sheep a year old, were the sacrificial animals.

Grown sheep are large critters, 100 to even 400 lbs. They are stupid, because they have been domesticated for thousands of years. Because of the lanolin in their wool, they are apt to be greasy, smelly, and coated with greasy dirt. They have weird

rectangular pupils, eyes strange enough to suggest they might be hostile aliens rather than domestic livestock. On vacation in England once we blew out a tire on a bit of shale that had fallen onto the road. We pulled off into a small paddock surrounded on three sides by a hillside full of sheep. Several sheep sauntered down the slope to stare at us balefully. I'd never been eye to eye with a grown sheep. I almost took pictures, but I was afraid they'd disapprove.

Lambs are another matter altogether. They weigh only 5-8 pounds at birth, and they are hopelessly cute. They have a preternatural, almost rubbery ability to leap high into the air, all four legs off the ground simultaneously. In classic antiquity, the Jewish community was as sentimental about lambs as our culture is about puppies or kittens. If the ancient world had had YouTube, it would have been full of cute-lamb videos.

“Jesus, the Lamb of God” imagery seems to be everywhere in Christian worship, even when it's not Easter. One of the most prominent places is an ancient prayer, called in Latin the “Agnus Dei." It goes like this:

Agnus Dei,
Lamb of God
Qui tolis peccáta mundi:
who takes away the sin of the world:
Pray for us
miserére nobis

That's said once, then the whole thing is repeated. Then it's said a third time with one change: the last phrase is “grant us peace”—*dona nobis pacem.*

I grew up attending church services conducted entirely in Latin. On Sundays, almost the entire service was sung in Gregorian chant. It echoed gloriously under the high dome of our parish church. Something in me took wing as it did so, borne aloft by by the strange, haunting music and words I could sing as pure sound, without worrying what they meant.

And that's good, that was a blessing, because by far my very favorite lines of chant were the Agnus Dei. When the prayer is repeated, the music repeats, exactly, note for note. The third time around, the music changes only at the very end, on those last three words: *grant us peace.* The music modulates to a poignant, open-ended

yearning that could move a heart of stone. The traditional chant line expresses the human yearning for peace with an emotional intensity that mere words cannot begin to evoke. *Dona nobis pacem.* grant us peace.

But look at what is being said, right there, right before communion: it might look like atonement theology through and through. It might seem to say that by accepting horrific punishment in our place, Jesus the consummately innocent Lamb of God “took away the sin of the world" by diverting the wrath of God.

I loved the prayer as a song before I appreciated its potential theological implications. By the time I was good enough at church Latin to hear the meaning inescapably, I didn't care what the words said. At least for me, the meaning of the prayer was the deep yearning spoken by the music, a deep yearning that was answered, ritually speaking, by sharing in the bread and wine. Here's how we do it. Here's how we bring peace to the world: we set a banquet table in the wilderness of human suffering, a table to which everyone is welcome and nobody gets up hungry.

And so, what am I to do today with prayers like the Agnus Dei? What am I to do with all the complex, familiar imagery around Jesus as the Lamb of God—up to and including butter molds shaped like sheep on the Easter table dinner, or Easter baskets with chocolate lambs? And heaven help me, what am I to do with the lyrics of all too many hymns celebrating our rescue from the wrath of God? These are hymns that other people love as deeply as I love the ancient Gregorian chant. *What are we to do with the Lamb?*

A potent encounter with the arts can linger in the soul for decades. For a lifetime. That's why religion matters, or it's part of why religion matters: it is an art. And public worship is symbolic enactment of that art. And so of course public worship has major public consequences especially in a culture where the majority of people belong to the same religion. But as both a poet and a well-trained literary critic, I know for a fact that imagery is a complex and hence flexible use of language. Images can be corrupted and they can be reclaimed. But to do so, we need to understand the deep human realities to which the image refers.

Knowing this about an image is very much like knowing what a jazz musician must know about a snippet of tune: transformations are possible. But they are possible

if and only if you have that music in your soul. And so, if we are going to do something about “Lamb of God” talk, first we have to understand the psychological realities that give the image its heft. We have to find that image in our souls, in our own souls, here and now and not in the time of Charlemagne. The core psychological realities are all there in all of us, regardless of anyone's religious or secular allegiances.

So what gives with this “washed in the blood of the Lamb” stuff? Two things—two extraordinarily powerful psychological realities. The first is guilt and its shadow, punishment. The other is control needs and their shadow, which is tolerating or even endorsing violence against “the guilty ones” rather than face the fact of our own vulnerability. We are vulnerable at a cosmic level if in fact “God himself” is powerless to stop our enemies and control final outcomes.

Let's look at each of these psychological realities in turn.

The Dynamics of Guilt

Part of what sustains the Christian portrait of Jesus as the innocent Lamb is the undeniable psychological power of *guilt*.

We all know the power of honest guilt, by which I mean a mature awareness that yes indeed, I have screwed up, I done or said something I later regretted, or I should have regretted if I were a better person than I am. But maybe at the time I hardly noticed what I was doing to somebody else. Any decent and morally sensitive person carries a certain burden of good honest appropriate guilt. That kind of guilt isn't neurotic. It's proof that we are not actually jerks, despite how we might have acted in the moment.

But the shadow companion of any guilt is punishment. Some days we do deserve a quick slap upside the head—and some days, perhaps more than that. And so it is easier, perhaps, to imagine that God punished Jesus in our place rather than to grapple first-hand with the fact that God punishes nobody. If God punishes nobody, and I need to do something to assuage my guilt, then I should offer some appropriate restitution, whatever that might be, rather than scrape all of my sticky guiltiness onto the head of some scapegoat punished in my place.

And then, of course, there is an amorphous guilt that does not derive from anything I have done or failed to do in my own life. This is the generalized guilt that I have so much in a world where most people have so little. I have a warm and safe place to sleep, and enough to eat, and nobody dropping bombs on my neighborhood. I belong to the politically dominant ethnic group in my own society. The police never frisk people like me for the crime of walking down the street. Sales people fawn over grey-haired white women; they don't call security to follow me through the store.

Elsewhere, for other people, life is immeasurably different. Elsewhere, other people starve to death before their third birthday. Or they are sold into sexual slavery at age ten. Or they are buried alive in the rubble after bombings and die in the arms of their dead mothers. They didn't deserve that either. Neither do I deserve what I have. Having what we don't deserve—and knowing how much other people don't have—is enough to leave any sensible person feeling guilty, consciously or not.

As an isolated individual, there's nothing I can do about any of this. And so of course this nagging guilt leaves me feeling angry and frustrated and then, of course, guilty about that too. And all of this seems quite insane and neurotic, and so most of the time most of us keep it solidly submerged. We do not think about it. And of course that only serves to make this amorphous guilt and corrosive frustration all the more potent.

And so of course we want all this guilt taken off our shoulders. That's why it's appealing, perhaps unconsciously, to imagine that Jesus was some cosmic scapegoat punished in our place. We want to breathe easy: cue up the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Yes indeed.

The Reality of Sin

In saying all this, I am not denying the reality of both personal and collective sin. Nor am I denying the reality of punishment for sin. Our misbehavior brings its own painful consequences one way or another. That's what we mean by “sin." In the plainest, most rudimentary Christian teachings, sin is that which causes suffering to ourselves and to others. The word in Greek is *hamartia,* which literally means "missing the mark." *Hamartia* is an error in judgment. In Aristotle's *Poetics,* the tragic hero's

hamartia—his flawed judgment or flawed action—leads to his downfall despite the fact that the hero is basically a good person.

You can see the effect of these painful consequences by walking around any retirement community. Look closely at the lines etched into the faces. After a certain point, personality is written there for anyone to see. Abusive, manipulative, suspicious, or angry people do not turn into sweet and loving old folks at peace with themselves and the world around them. The toxicity of toxic people becomes visible on their faces. Their “punishment,” as Dante portrayed so vividly, consists in this: they are who they have chosen to be. The emotional pain entailed in that choice may be exquisite but, like alcoholics, they cannot be helped until they agree to be helped, until they realize that they need help and they want it.

What's true of us as individuals is true of us collectively as well. For instance, America's great national sin was slavery. More than a century later, this sin continues to take an astounding toll upon us. Our society continues to pay a terrible price for our willful destruction of human capital because racism continues to permeate our society. It does so in thousands of ways that remain invisible to most white people.

Here's the crucial point: whether we are talking about individual sin or collective sin, none of these painful consequences for moral failures can be counted as “divine punishment.” None of this is God's doing. It's all just plain cause-and-effect reality.

God's role in all this is simple: compassion and deep inner kindness are realities that are always available to everyone. It's simply there, waiting for us to be open to it, waiting for us to wake up to it. It's waiting for us to discover and to trust that we are beloved. We are cherished beyond our wildest imagining. God sees who we actually are, who we are deep inside our defenses no matter how thick those defenses have become over the years. And in the lyrics of an Eva Cassidy tune, God says to that core self, "you take my breath away."[1]

If we do not open to such realities, or to whatever extent that we intermittently open to it, (and no matter how we name it), our behavior will change. True compassion

[1] I think the definitive performance is by Tuck and Patti. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HZEwPb3VMY Thanks to Terry Nelson Johnson of Old St. Pat's Chicago for introducing me.

subverts narrow, self-seeking egotism. It does so in the same slow, patient way that a lifetime of suspicious angry frustration slowly etches permanent lines in a face.

Control Needs

This brings me to the second dimension of the cultural complex at work in claims that Jesus died for our sins: control needs. Control needs are serious stuff. Control is a potent need, a central need, something deeply rooted in all of us. Forced to choose, many people would accept the problems involved in imagining that God somehow wanted or needed the death of Jesus rather than admit that God was powerless to have stopped the Romans.

Some will be aghast at the very thought that God was powerless against Rome. God, powerless? How un-Godly! I take that as a theological measure of human control needs generally—in all of us.

Power-against-enemies was the very first line on the resume of any ancient-world theocratic god. Every nation had such a deity. Jesus was up against a theocratic heritage far more robust and widespread that theocratic heritage of Western "Christendom," because we have had two thousand years of living with Christianity's deconstruction of the God who helps us to kill our enemies.

Some Christians have always understood that Jesus was all about including the outcast, welcoming the stranger, feeding the destitute, and praying for our enemies rather than bombing them back to the Stone Age. But in Jesus's own day? A God powerless against Rome was a shamed God, a God shown up as a complete failure at godliness, a God shamed as profoundly as naked crucifixion was meant to shame those who dared to challenge Rome. That's what Jesus's first followers were up against. As a result, it's no wonder that amidst the wide range of "Christianities" at the time, there were varieties insisting that crucifixion was on the agenda from the outset. Yes sir, God has a plan here. God will win in the end, just wait. Jesus will be back and then those Romans will get theirs, by golly, they'll get theirs. Rivers will run red with their blood.

But the longer I persist in mindfulness meditation, and the more clearly I recognize that wherever I go, there I am, and there God is with me, the more easily I realize something else. I realize that the mere ego feels continuously assaulted by its

own doubts, by its own resentments, by its own jealousies and insecurities, by its own anxieties and frustrations. And the mere ego continuously responds to these assaults with yet more egotism. But blatant egotism is embarrassing to anyone who is even remotely self-aware. And so I try to shut down the voice of mere ego. I try to silence it with incessant overwork, with overscheduled busyness, with chronic lack of sleep and persistent exhaustion.

I call that my White Rabbit Syndrome. If I have to choose between being an egotistical jerk and being the White Rabbit, I'll clutch my smartphone and dash out the door. At least for me, Christian faith offers a saner, more mature alternative to my White Rabbit tendencies.

Reclaiming the Lamb of God

To call Jesus “the lamb of God” is not necessarily to allude to how Charlemagne changed the altar from a symbolic banquet table to a symbolic butcher block. It can be a poetic claim that Jesus was both morally innocent and politically vulnerable. As an astute social critic, he knew he would be crucified sooner or later if he continued to speak up. He refused to be silenced. He was "obedient to the Father" in this sense, and this sense only: he continued teaching that a God who loves inclusively calls us to inclusive love.

To call Jesus the "lamb of God" in a Jewish cultural context was to emphasize that Jesus had a particularly delightful intimacy with God. The quality of that relationship motivated Jesus to circumvent and deconstruct the collaborationist theocracy of his own day. That collaborationist theology blamed both poverty and disease upon sin: such people were being punished.

Nonsense, Jesus said: your sins are forgiven. God is not after you. God loves you; my rag-tag group of followers love you; the problem here is not God but a corrupt theocracy. The problem is here is the way in which the authentic wisdom of our wise and ancient faith has been co-opted by the colonial empire that dominates us.

The death of this Lamb thus testifies potently to a dangerous fact: God was helpless too. God could not control outcomes. He could not thwart the Romans. They

remained in power for centuries after Jesus, falling in time as empires inevitably fall—from their own arrogant greed, cruelty, and ruthless ambition.

As we all know, sometimes the bad guys win. Bad things happen to good people, anything from tsunamis to terrorist attacks. None of that is punishment by an all-powerful God who might have prevented this if he had wanted to. Neither is it a subsidiary part of some greater plan laid out by a God who is stunningly indifferent to the collateral damage his plans entail.

God is not control and God is not in control. God is love. God is compassion. Compassion is stronger than hate because ultimately hate self-destructs. Hate self-consumes; compassion is endlessly generative.

As evidence of that, consider this: the Romans are long gone. The followers of Jesus are still here, thousands of years later, still repeating that Jewish wisdom: all of us are made in the image of God. God's love is abounding and abiding with all of us. Come be a mensch. Come be humane. Hating others will destroy you spiritually, but that's an avoidable tragedy.

The promise of the faith is that compassion can raise up what sin and suffering appear to have destroyed. Compassion can raise up what violence and pain have laid low. Compassion is thus far more powerful than control, because control is always an illusion. Reality cannot be controlled. In the end, all of us will die. That's the ultimate frustration of our control needs. It's arguably the key anxiety behind much of our negative behavior.

What then does it mean to be saved by the blood of the Lamb? The horrific death Jesus suffered saves us from the illusion that God will smite sinners. We are saved from the illusion that we can fix the world by achieving better and stronger and more rigorous control over what threatens us—including, quite specifically, enemies and malefactors and the very fact of our own ultimate death. We are saved from the temptations of pathological projection: blaming our troubles on somebody else and going after them, or blaming the suffering of the poor on the poor and then impoverishing them further. We are freed from the compulsion to shed blood as an expression of our own outrage—or at least we are called to acknowledge that compulsion and overcome it.

After Jesus, those who suffer at our hands are always potential Christ images. Their plight always resonates to the plight of Jesus the Lamb of God. Jesus the Lamb of God was innocent, vulnerable, and cherished by a God who loves all of us--and who takes control of nothing.

The Nonviolence of God and Human Sin

I admitted at the outset here that some of my fellow Christians—people who are not themselves fundamentalist in any regard—will nonetheless dismiss my argument that Jesus preached the nonviolence of God, and thus they will dismiss all the ways in which my accepting this teaching permeates my critique of fundamentalism. They will do so because they feel that all such arguments fail to take seriously enough the fact of human wrong-doing. All of the explanations and reflections I have offered in this Appendix come down at last to a single claim: violence against others is morally wrong. We might try to justify our own violence on a limited or utilitarian basis (as in "just war theory") by insisting that our own violence will stop the violence perpetrated by our enemies against innocent populations. Or we might insist that when the prohibition against killing conflicts with the duty to protect others, the duty to protect others must prevail. These are complicated issues, but running through that complexity is a single clear line: it is wrong to kill others. It is wrong to inflict pain and suffering upon others.

And so it is also wrong, I argue, to impute or project violence onto God. I am taking human sin more seriously, I'd argue, when I say that we cannot claim that God himself sins but God's sins are somehow right, just, and virtuous because they are a pragmatic response to human wrong-doing. Such arguments implicate God in the tragic human cycle of escalating revenge and implacable hostility against those who attacked us generations ago.

As Rowan Williams argues in *Resurrection* (2002), every single one of us is born into a world that fails us and deforms us. It is a spectacularly toxic heritage. It is a heritage that traps us in endless cycles of violence and reciprocal violence, failure leading to greater failure leading to greater failure yet. Some of us grew up with more serious deficits than others, of course. But no matter how favorable the circumstances of our upbringing, all of us endlessly struggle to overcome the inescapable deficits that

we inherit as the human condition.

The only way to step out of that cycle is to recognize that none of us are totally innocent and none totally guilty. We all need to be forgiven, and we all need to forgive others. The key resurrection story, Williams argues, is Jesus's appearing suddenly inside the locked room where the male disciples are hiding out from the Roman authorities. The men fled after Jesus was arrested. Only the women stayed, standing witness as he died, refusing to accept the shame imputed to Jesus and to them by the fact of his crucifixion. But Jesus does not reproach the male disciples for abandoning him. He forgives them, and he charges them to forgive others. And that, Williams insists, is the deepest meaning of the resurrection: we ourselves are freed from the living death of shame and guilt. We are set free from the cold dark tomb of the flawed and suffering human condition.

The nonviolent, non-punitive, all-compassionate God interrupts the dynamic whereby our own burden of shame, self-doubt, and prior injury provokes us to attack others. God interrupts the deadly spiral of human wrong-doing by pointedly, transcendently refusing to condemn us. God invites us instead into a different dynamic: restraint, compassion, and forgiveness.

Is that unrealistic? I don't know. I believe it is what the gospels teach. I believe I have seen glimmerings of this reality in my own experience and in what I have observed about the experience of others. I have come to trust these teachings, a state of mind distinctly different from being unequivocally convinced that they are warranted by the evidence.

But I am in fact quite convinced that violence will never put an end to violence. There's excellent evidence that we cannot ultimately defeat our enemies by trying to kill them off, nor by trying to vanquish and control them. That is a fool's task.

Jesus offers an alternative. We can continue to confront them with the truth. We can continue to speak the truth and to defend the helpless.

That brings me to a thorny and immediate issue. I will never get to vote directly on going to war or not going to war or even whether or not to engage in some pre-emptive bombing run. But I do have to decide about forgiving others in my own life. And that's where the Christian vision of sin and forgiveness of sin gets pricey and dicey and very

tough to think about.

We need more stories.

1999: The Night the Phone Rang

One October, as I was fixing dinner, the phone rang. It was a girl calling my son, who would have been about seventeen at the time. They had dated for a while at some point in the prior school year: I recognized her voice.

She had been his first girlfriend. And then she broke up with him. I don't remember why. I doubt either one of them understood why: they were seventeen. He was brokenhearted; he moped for a while; then he seemed to get over it. Life moves on fairly quickly when you are seventeen.

But his life did stop for a moment that night: she was calling because it was Yom Kippur. She want to apologize for anything she might have said or done that had caused him pain. She asked for his forgiveness. She said he was a good person, and she knew that he was a good person, and she wanted him to know that she knew that. She hoped they could henceforth at least be comfortable with one another as classmates, as friends of a certain kind even if not as people dating one another.

I don't know what he said in reply. When I saw the look on his face change, I turned the burner off under the dinner I was cooking. I closed the kitchen door behind me. In those days before cordless phones, this was the only decent thing to do.

When he emerged from the kitchen to find me, he was overwhelmed by her courage and by her grace. As I got dinner going again, we talked about Yom Kippur. He knew about Yom Kippur mostly from his friends' complaints about fasting and interminable services at their synagogues.

So as I stirred whatever I was fixing, and he set the table and made a salad, we pondered what had just happened. We talked about being spiritually trapped in anger or in shame, in guilt or in self-hatred. That was a trap I knew. Everybody knows that trap, I suspect. And we pondered the moral power of honest apology--apology even amidst inescapable ambiguities about who was "wrong," or who was "at fault" and to what extent. If nobody was at fault, or if both of them had been at fault, how could apologizing to one another mean so much?

In the next week or two, we talked about that phone call repeatedly. Bit by bit he sorted through how he felt. Her apology had changed how he felt about himself after the end of the romance between them. She had never said or done anything egregiously mean-spirited. She had never been abusive in any way. The breakup wasn't her fault. She didn't need to apologize, he marveled--and yet her doing so had changed everything about how he felt about what had happened. And then he could reciprocate her apology. But that didn't mean he wanted to begin dating her again. How could that be?

I must say: introspective adolescents make terrific conversation partners for mothers inclined toward philosophical speculation. Maybe that's why college was so much fun for so many of us: only adolescents and philosophers will sit up all night talking, tinkering with ideas, puzzling over the most rudimentary questions about life.

Phone calls like the one that so startled my son are one of the Jewish equivalents to sitting zazen. Rather than inhaling and exhaling and maybe burning a little incense, Jews pick up the phone at some point during the High Holy Days and call somebody to apologize.

As spiritual disciplines go, such calls are much too difficult. I'd have trouble making it as a good Jew, and yet that's what Christians are supposed to be. Christianity started out as Judaism for Gentiles. Ouch.

And yet, consider this: as Buddhist Sharon Salzberg explains, the point of meditation is not succeeding but beginning again after each failure. The spiritual benefit of meditation, she explains, comes from that repeated practice in starting again. So also, the point of struggling to apologize sufficiently and forgive completely isn't that we will succeed in doing so. It's that the repeated effort changes us. It mutes resentment. It slows hair-trigger hostility. If I know I'll have to call someone next October to apologize, I might learn over time to bite my tongue and bide my time rather than blowing up in some immature and self-indulgent way. It would teach me to handle difficult situations with exquisite care, and that in turn would encourages in me such virtues as resilience, patience, humility, and above all compassion.

Which brings me to another story.

1982: Rolling Back Again

In the summer of 1982, when my twins were six months old, the girl twin could roll over from her stomach to her back, but not in the other way around. She spent all of July screaming and squirming and demanding to be put down on a blanket on the living room floor so she could practice this all-engrossing skill. She'd flip herself from her tummy onto her back: that much she could do. Then she'd wave her arms and legs in the air like a stranded turtle. She'd struggle and squirm and twist. And then she'd start screaming. As she worked herself up to full-throated hysteria, her squirming and twisting would turn to uncoordinated flailing.

When she started sounding hysterical, I'd flip her back onto her tummy. She would catch her breath for a moment. She'd lie on her stomach for two minutes or maybe three minutes. And it would all start over again.

Her two brothers watched her with a certain infuriating masculine detachment. *What is it with her??* July was an interminable month.

But at one point, sitting on the floor with her, flipping her onto her stomach over and over again, and with my free hand doing something to entertain her brothers, it dawned on me that perhaps God sees me in the same way. Maybe my moral failures are in some ways developmentally appropriate to my stage of spiritual development, and so God keeps flipping me back onto my stomach and letting me try again, confident--in the infinite patience of God's own mother-wisdom--that eventually I'll get this figured out. God knows that I'm trying. And trying is what matters. If we don't keep trying, we will never learn to roll over.

The question at hand, then, is whether I can respond with similar grace to the failures of those around me. Maybe my insufferable neighbor is working on her hostile whiney narcissism just as my daughter was working on rolling over. Maybe she is trying. Can I imagine that she is trying? What does it do for me if I imagine that she is trying?

It makes her quite a bit less insufferable, I confess.

As a goal of spiritual transformation, such generosity of spirit cuts a bit too close to comfort. I'm really tired of being patient with this woman. I'd much rather have a spiritual goal that is foggy and distant, grandiose and exalted. The demand that I be mature, compassionate, and appropriate with this bitch is much too real.

The fact is that I can enjoy get royally ticked off at people who thoroughly deserve it. I love it when I can feel indubitably and absolutely in the right and someone else is indubitably and absolutely in the wrong. I can take an insatiable delight at my own inner calumny. Seventy-percent cacao double-dark chocolate is not more satisfying.

And yet I have also discovered—discovered the hard way—that such unalloyed angry ranting is fabulously toxic. Just fabulously toxic, even if I never say a single word aloud.

Which leads me to yet another story.

My Quintessential Test-Cases

I have a friend, a really good friend, a friend-of-my-heart friend, whose husband bankrupted them repeatedly to purchase phone sex. I know someone else whose husband left her in financial ruin by draining their savings to buy expensive gifts for his mistress and to take her on fancy vacations. I'm sure you have your set of stories about equally awful marital betrayals. I think everybody knows some such story—perhaps first hand.

These people would be crazy to trust their ex-spouses. Utterly nuts. If "love your enemies" means they are supposed to hold onto some affection for these creeps, then that teaching is crazy too. If "forgiveness" means that what happened to them and to their kids is okay, or that it doesn't matter, or that they should forget what happened, then "forgiveness" is a fancy name for co-dependent pathology of the most pernicious sort. Whenever I hear anyone launch into a sermon on forgiveness, I hold up these survivors of divorce as test cases: what would "forgiveness" mean for them? What would it mean for survivors even more grievous kinds of loss and suffering?

What "forgiveness" means, I propose, is restraining ourselves from doing unto the guilty what they so richly deserve. "Forgiveness" means refusing to give way to violence. Above all, it means spiritual growth sufficient that we stop waking ourselves up in the middle of the night with long hostile rants running in our heads. Such anger is toxic. Those rants are immensely self-destructive. They are an effort to defend ourselves. They are an effort to hold toxic shame at bay. For a Christian, an alternative is focusing as often as we can upon the reality that we too are lambs of God: innocent, vulnerable,

cherished, and delighted-in.

Our enemies can remain our enemies, unworthy of trust, morally contemptible, sleazy no-good son-of-a-guns. In many situations, our enemies must remain our enemies: they are incapable of becoming anything else. And yet-—and yet—with God's grace we can refrain from actions and emotions that will slowly transform us into the same desperately toxic people our enemies are. We must not do unto them some version of what they have done unto us—not even in our mind's eye in the middle of the night.

None of this is easy. None of it is simple. Any religion ought to guide us wisely in grappling with such realties. the reality of sin. Christianity as I understand it does grappled with the reality of sin by addressing the source and well-spring of human evil: the deep temptation to defend our own fragile ego at the expense of someone else.