

What is Salvation

Rita Nakashima Brock

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EAU CLAIRE, WI - Speaking to more than one hundred people gathered for a Kairos CoMotion celebration of progressive Christianity, Rita Nakashima Brock raised the question, "What is salvation if we don't have atonement?"

Brock reminded those gathered that the Atonement has been critiqued for a very long time. The first book written on the Atonement by Anselm in 1098 was critiqued in his own lifetime by Peter Abelard, who said, "Who will forgive God for killing his own son?" This question has been raised more recently in 19th century liberal theology and by feminist theologians. Brock said this moves us away from a concern for the reputation of God and toward what a theology of Atonement does to victimize human beings.

After reading from *Proverbs of Ashes* about her early days in Japan, growing up in a family of Pure Land Buddhists, Brock spoke of a religious practice that emphasizes atonement to the ordinary experiences of life and enlightenment by living every day. This is described by the thirteenth-century founder of Soto Zen, Dogen:

Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water.

Enlightenment does not divide you, just as the moon does not break the water. You cannot hinder enlightenment, just as a drop of water does not hinder the moon in the sky. The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. Each reflection, however long or short its duration, manifests the vastness of the dewdrop, and realizes the limitlessness of the moonlight in the sky. . . .

Brock went on to indicate that "enlightenment is the fundamental mode of activity embracing both body and mind, self and community." Enlightenment, then, is at the core of all life and becomes understandable through participation in the religious rituals and ethical practices of an interdependent community.

As a feminist Christian theologian, Brock began with Buddhist religious ideas because, "sometimes, we are able to hear and understand our own traditions in fresh new ways when they are related to other traditions." Brock asked her hearers to hold the thought that "everyday life was numinous" as she began to look at Western Christianity's other-worldliness with ideas of salvation as a post-mortem existence.

Brock sees a connection between Dogen's sensibility about enlightenment and early Christian understanding of Paradise that is different than the other-world afterlife Western Christianity began to emphasize in its second century.

"I believe Atonement theology is among the most misguided betrayals of Christianity ever perpetrated," Brock repeated for those who wanted a sound-bite to attack her from the religious right. For Brock we are "saved" by Incarnation and Resurrection, that life begets life. She began documenting this as an ancient Christian idea that has a rich potential for the revival of Christianity for its third millennium and for a life-affirming Christianity that encourages us to resist violence rather than give in to it.

Brock's study shows the earliest church affirmed that salvation was found in the world, not after death. It was Baptism that gave early Christians the spiritual power to experience paradise in this world that was created as a blessing. "This theology is so old and neglected that it feels new," said Brock

Brock led the audience on a journey of Christian Art, Literature and Theology as an affirmation of this world as spirit incarnated. Unfortunately the visuals used are not available to us and you will have to use your imagination for what follows.

Brock began this section by reminding us that visual images were vital to the early church and this is at odds for those raised in cultures influenced by the Enlightenment with its emphasis upon text, reason, and spoken word and the Protestant tradition of iconoclasm.

Catacomb art is the earliest Christian use of images available to us. They mostly come show scenes from the Hebrew Scriptures; at this time there was no New Testament. Most of them emphasize delivery from danger (Daniel, Susannah, Jonah). There are also many images of Eucharist Feasts (as distinguished from Last Suppers) and Jesus performing healings with a magic wand.

The one thing not seen in Christian art until 964 is Jesus dead. Brock raises the question, "If atonement is so important, why did the early Christians never show Jesus dead?"

Relatedly, it is not unusual to see Jesus with breasts in early Christian art. He is often portrayed as androgynous; after all he represents all of humanity.

It wasn't until after Constantine that Jesus' images became more and more regal, and less ordinary.

Brock noted that in the oldest known sequence of 13 images of Jesus' life it goes from Simon of Cyrene carrying Jesus' cross to the empty tomb. There is no image of the crucifixion. It is not missing or taken out, they just didn't show it.

When we first see Jesus seated in early Christian art we often presume that he is seated on an emperor's throne. It is, rather, the seat of Jupiter, who is above the emperor. We also see Mary, Jesus' mother, as the Queen of Heaven. The saints, both female and male, are shown as equivalents—same size and honor.

Death in early Christian art is not about Jesus, but is found in the story of the massacre of the Innocents where the mothers are portrayed as fighting the soldiers or pleading with Herod.

The first presentation of the cross was as a Cross of Transfiguration, not a Cross of Crucifixion. In the early church Transfiguration was considered as perhaps the most important moment in Jesus' life because it was here Paradise was seen as present and it happened in the middle of his life, not after it.

All of this lets us know that, for the early church, their worship took place in Paradise. Genesis says that God created the whole world as a blessing and then made the Garden of Eden. Augustine and others go on to claim that all the world bears the essential qualities of Paradise. The most common understanding of Paradise in the early church was that it was the whole earth.

Without the Holy Spirit one cannot see Paradise in the world around them. It was Baptism that gave the Spirit so Paradise could be seen in the world. Then it was a matter of living in the community as if you really believed that Paradise was in this world and you continue to practice moral value and spiritual virtue so the spirit in you could grow. They talked about people becoming divine.

Jesus divinity was a forerunner or a model for all our divinity. Irenaeus says, "God became human so that we might become divine." This is the ancient theological construct of "theosis". The church was the place where divinity happened. The Biblical text for this is in Luke, when Jesus says to the thief, "Today you shall be with me in Paradise." Today, not tomorrow.

Brock noted that the meaning of the death of Jesus was unstable for a long time. Jesus' Death was something that had once happened, was in the past, something mourned, but it was done. It was over, never to be repeated. So Jesus' Death was not eternal, he had defeated Death. Paul says in Romans 6 that Christ rose from the dead and will never die again. So, in all the talk of Paul about the Cross as a scandal, he is very clear that what we worship, as Christians, is the risen Christ. Jesus' death confirms that this is Paradise. In the early church the use of the cross symbolized resurrection. Until the 5th century Jesus did not appear on the cross. When he first appears on the cross he is clearly not dead.

The artistic evidence is that the early church made a clear distinction between Paradise and Heaven. Heaven was where God dwelt with the angels. Paradise was this earth. This important part of our earliest tradition has been discounted by subsequent teachings about the Atonement.

Further aspects of this appear in many ways. The Eucharist began as a celebration of the Resurrection. The Holy Spirit was not prayed down upon the elements, but into the whole community so they could be lifted up to be with the Risen Christ and his Table.

The Paradise people went to when they left this world was not separate from this world. It was not somewhere else, but mysteriously nearby. The departed lived just past a curtain that Satan could not go through. This place is a place of struggle. They didn't have an idealized view of Paradise like we tend to do. The church understood that Paradise in the world had Satan in it.

Baptism, then, was the struggle was to defeat your own interior demons, to gain control over your own behavior so you could be moral. And it was a struggle against the principalities and powers of this world against the forces of death and empire.

As a result, the church was pretty strict about Baptizing. Early on you couldn't be a gladiator, charioteer, brothel owner, or Roman official. The baptismal liturgy personified Satan as the goddess Roma. If you wanted to be baptized you had to change jobs. This is a clear choice about who is allowed to become divine. If you wanted to become baptized you made application to the Bishop and brought character references. If you weren't already on the right track you were sent away to change your life and come back. If accepted there were then two or three years of study before you could be baptized. Baptism was to create a whole new person—body, mind, and soul.

Early Christians believed the spiritual journey was not toward greater innocence and purity but toward a complex understanding of the forces of life, an understanding they called Wisdom or Sophia. It was known by its work for love, passion for justice, appreciation of beauty, discernment of the spirit in the world, and the embrace of this world as good and blessed. They did not believe that suffering was a good thing. They sought to alleviate it by taking care of each other. Paradise was present for them in this world, especially in the church, where great clouds of witnesses could pass through the curtain of death to return to bless them. The Garden Paradise was alive and was rich in the beauties of ethical and liturgical life. It was guarded by wisdom; the wisdom of those who had confronted and neutralized their own demons and were astute about the evils of domination, war, and power. Life granted by the rebirth of baptism encompassed death and overcame it.

An illustration of this is one of the interesting stories from the early church—the excommunication of the Christian emperor, Theodosius, by his bishop, Ambrose of Milan. Theodosius was the one who made Christianity the religion of the empire and said only Christians could serve in the Roman army. So if you served as a soldier you had to be a Christian and if you killed anybody you had to do penance because it was a sin to shed blood, even pagan blood. That's how absolute the presumption against violence was in the early church.

When Theodosius ordered a massacre of those who had killed one of his officials, Ambrose had the chutzpah, as it were, to actually excommunicate an emperor.

Brock concluded her presentation by shifting to those present. "Many of us who have religious convictions and values that motivate us to change the power structure of the world we live in, to create greater justice—we live in a delicate, shifting balance, as it

were, of beholding the moon in a pool of water at the same time we ask if that water is acid rain.

"The best progressive religion combines two impulses: The urge to understand and the urge to change the world for the better. Remember that the love of beauty, from the moment we opened ourselves to the world's pleasures and gifts enables us to love and receive the life-giving powers that surround us. At the same time we must engage the world with an astute and critical consciousness regarding our internal demons and the oppressive and destructive powers of the world.

"Whether our projects are a puddle an inch wide or a vast lake, the moon dances upon them like the blessings of God. The Spirit neither hinders nor breaks them but reminds us of the limitless numinosity of the movement of God in the dark oceans of mercy that hold together in our consciousness of this earth."

When people came to the Eucharist they came to a place of paradise in the midst of their dear, departed saints.

This is difficult for those with a Protestant background to grasp. Protestants defaced and desecrated, in the ugliest of ways, the religious art available to them. To understand how this art all around one brought one in contact with spirit was foreign to the Protestant sensibility.

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[Included in Brock's remarks was an invitation to the musicians among us to set the Paradise hymnody of Ephriam of Syria to music for our day.]

[If you are interested in another presentation by Rita Nakashima Brock on a similar theme you can go to

<http://www.everyvoice.org/lev/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=261>]

[*Saving Paradise* is the title of Rita's next book, written with Rebecca Parker. It is due out next year.]