An epidemic of moral injury

Christians have an opportunity to transform a faith that has fueled genocide, slavery, war, and kleptocracy.

by Rita Nakashima Brock in the September 8, 2021 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century *series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the 12th in the new series.*

COVID-19 arrived just as I began contemplating what to write for this series, and I kept changing my mind about what to say in the face of so much suffering. But on January 6, I knew. That afternoon, as I exited my dentist's office in Washington, DC, a black pickup truck roared past, loaded with White men in MAGA caps who shouted

something that was drowned out by the truck's blaring horn. Annoyed by the shrill spectacle, I checked my phone for news and discovered that a siege was in progress at the Capitol just three miles away.

I made my way to the Metro train, where an automated message announced a 6 p.m. curfew. After skipping several trains packed with boisterous, unmasked people in MAGA gear, I boarded a train car that held few people, all masked. Exiting at my stop a half hour later, I hurried past a group of men in MAGA caps loitering near the turnstiles. I arrived home five minutes before the curfew descended upon Alexandria, Virginia, which had sent its police force to the Capitol.

As I watched news reports of the siege deep into the night, I had the unsettling thought that I was watching a national apocalypse unfold. Thoughts about apocalypse had been on my mind as the pandemic surged and George Floyd's murder captured global attention, igniting the largest social movement in US history. I had resisted apocalyptic thinking, however, because of the way far-right evangelicals use natural disasters and tragedies as dire denunciations of any challenge to their White male supremacy.

That cold night returned me to my thoughts of apocalypse—not as a sign of divine judgment and destruction but as an unveiling of transcendent moral truth precipitated by a devastating crisis, a profound and powerful intervention that interrupts the momentum of malevolent forces and offers hope for change.

In response to the attempted insurrection at the Capitol, many recited the familiar incantation, "This is not who we are." But that claim masks the unholy collusion of White supremacy, male dominance, and violence that is inscribed in the Constitution by the slave-owning White men who ratified it. For centuries, their descendants, their government representatives, their laws and militias, and their churches have exploited and done violence against minoritized people who believe in democracy and seek to create justice for all.

The legacies and lives of most Americans are lashed with terror and sorrow, and the struggle is not over. What we are left to contemplate now is our response to this apocalypse, this dangerous opportunity to transform a Christian faith that came out of the Western European cauldron of holy war and has repeatedly fueled genocide, slavery, war, and kleptocracy.

The current moment invites us to think theologically in a way that heals trauma and restores humanity to a life-affirming, this-worldly faith that supports earthly flourishing. For me, this way of thinking begins with understanding the compelling power of moral injury trauma. In turning to moral injury trauma, I am not offering an excuse for terrorism or a justification to absolve people of taking responsibility for their crimes. Understanding the harm we have inflicted and accepting its consequences are necessary to our humanity.

But the God of the insurrectionists, like our current criminal justice system, chooses to punish and kill perpetrators of harm rather than to rehabilitate them. If we cannot see the humanity in those who cannot see it in others or in themselves, our future will be as our history has long been, full of violence and injustice.

White nationalist Christianity is a fractious, militant, antidemocratic faith that embraces war as a sign of end times and a means of salvation. Its foundation is atonement theology, which first emerged in ninth-century Western Europe as propaganda to punish enemies of the Carolingian Empire and to force them into submission. In service to the empire, Carolingian bishops imposed a changed Eucharist on conquered peoples. Instead of a feast of abundant life, hosted by the risen Christ and shared in the church “planted as the paradise in this world,” the bishops implemented a crucifixion-focused mass that included preaching a terror of hell based on the claim that all humanity was sinful.

The priest enacted the killing of Jesus on the altar in the breaking of the bread so participants could consume it. If they partook of his body without first confessing all their sins—including their sins against the empire—and being absolved, they would condemn themselves to hell. Attendance at mass dropped to the point people were commanded to attend it at least once a year. It was regularly performed before battle, as Western Europe crusaded for 500 years against Jews, Muslims, Asians, and Africans, as well as Eastern Christians, dissident Christian sects, and unbelievers, making Christians more lethal against other Christians than any of their religious enemies.

Substitutionary atonement, articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in 1098, became the theological justification for the mass. His friend Pope Urban II launched the first crusade in 1095, promising that those who fought, killed, and died for Christ would earn debt relief for their survivors, avoid purgatory, and gain immediate entrance into heaven. Anselm insisted that the only reason for the existence of Jesus Christ

was to pay the debt humanity owed to God, who was supremely offended by human sinfulness and who required a perfect sacrifice to restore his honor. And he advised stirring up fear of hell as a daily devotional practice to keep the faithful in line.

Atonement theology was preached throughout Europe to recruit crusaders. Killing or being killed for Christ became a form of pious devotion to God.

Anselm's critic Peter Abelard opposed the first crusade and challenged substitutionary theory on ethical grounds: "Who will forgive God for killing his own son?" Abelard's alternative version of the atonement makes Jesus a moral exemplar who accepts undeserved suffering on humanity's behalf. His theory roots redemption not in fear of hell but in trauma bonds, selfless love, and the sanctification of brokenhearted sorrow.

Both theories of atonement, however, require killing as the necessary transaction that restores sinners to God.

In the 16th century, European colonizers sailed on ships to the Americas, driven by atonement-based theologies, messianic expectations of the end of the world, and a quest for wealth from the environs of paradise lost. In the cargo holds they carried the nightmares of moral injuries caused by half a millennium of warfare in Europe and by the massive travails of the 14th century, when Europe was stricken by recurring cycles of plague, climate change, and famine—and by religious upheavals that stirred up apocalyptic fevers and undermined church authority.

Humanistic ideas of the Renaissance challenged the imperial papal church, and warring sects aligned with emerging new empires, which sent colonizers out to the world to enhance their fortunes. After the indigenous people they enslaved in the Americas began to die of disease and violence in large numbers, the colonizers' cargo holds carried enslaved Africans, whom they believed could be redeemed by suffering and captivity.

The Protestants who landed on the northern Atlantic coast at the start of the 17th century had rejected the authority of the official church and isolated themselves in a "purified" Christianity pared down to a segregated elect, defined by the atonement in theology, piety, and worship. In re-creating their nostalgic ideal of a New Testament church in the New World, the New England Puritans sought to hasten the destruction of evil and the arrival of a new heaven and earth.

They interpreted suffering, especially the horrors of the 1675 King Philip's War against the Wampanoag, as a sign of divine love. They believed God used the war to pull them back into greater piety, pointing an "arrow at their hearts" (a phrase from Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"). And in 1637, when the Puritans burned a Pequot village to the ground, Puritan leader William Bradford called the rising smoke a "sweet sacrifice to God."

Atonement theologies have always left me nonplussed. For the first six years of my life, I was raised in a Japanese Buddhist family. Then I spent the next seven years in Fort Riley, Kansas, and observed Baptist revivals every August in rural Mississippi on visits to my White stepfather's family, where the atonement took center stage. I watched family members "get saved," but after they were baptized in the Tombigbee River, I saw no change in their behavior. I read the Bible cover to cover when I was around ten, and I found its God cruel. My childhood experiences convinced me that becoming a Christian was not worth leaving behind my Japanese family.

Jesus only made sense to me in college after I became a social activist and learned a language for the racism that I had experienced in the United States. In an Old Testament class, I realized that Jesus, as a prophet in the lineage of Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, connected me with many people who had struggled for justice and peace in a strange and foreign land. I decided to major in religion, fascinated by the intersections of theology, psychology, and ethics. In 1988, I published my doctoral thesis, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, which was rooted in my feminist concern about child abuse writ large in the patriarchal family dynamics of atonement theology.

For decades, feminists have critiqued both Anselm and Abelard, observing how atonement theology's sanctification of violence, suffering, and self-sacrifice traps women and children in domestic violence and requires victims of harm to be complicit with evil. Womanist theologian Delores Williams notes that Black women were raped as sexual surrogates for White women, raised their children for them, and did backbreaking work alongside Black men. She suggests that surrogacy is exploitation, being a surrogate is dehumanizing, and centuries of Black suffering have done nothing to end slavery or change the hearts of White supremacists. When asked once what she was willing to die for, her response was to note that as a Black woman, any answer to that question would result in some racist being quite willing to oblige her by killing her.

In 2009, I encountered the concept of moral injury. This helped me understand what fuels the emotional power of atonement theology. Moral injury emerges from memories of traumatizing experiences that we cannot integrate into our existing faith or meaning system. It means our relationship to a reliable world that makes moral sense is ruptured because we or others have failed our core moral expectations, and it results in self-isolation and painful moral emotions such as outrage, guilt, shame, mistrust, and despair.

Atonement theology constructs salvation as a moral injury cycle that ensnares people rather than freeing them from it. It stirs up fear and dread of eternal punishment; elicits guilt, shame, sorrow, and remorse for sinfulness; requires confession and repentance to receive forgiveness; and offers redemption through a crucified innocent victim whose murder sinners caused—a morally confusing substitution that requires gratitude for violence and relief for escaping punishment. Final redemption remains in suspension until after the ultimate deadline of death.

The arc from judgment, sorrow, and fear to repentance, absolution, relief, and redemption can become an addicting, emotionally destabilizing cycle that requires the sin-sick soul to revisit traumatic violence to get the euphoric high from the release of inner emotional pain. The pain-euphoria cycle is a destabilizing, entrapping process between victims and perpetrators—one that is confused with love. In intimate violence, abusers terrorize their victims with threats of harm or actual violence, and as their victims recoil, they ensnare them with remorse and kindness. Abuse can trap victims in a constant state of fear, distrustful of every temptation or doubt that might compromise the protections of purity and obedience.

I would suggest that those most sealed in atonement faith are hooked by this abusive pattern and its closed emotional systems.

Following the devastations of 2020 and the inauspicious beginning of 2021, we face a massive epidemic of moral injury—not only in health-care and frontline workers, but also in ordinary people who have endured isolation and constant anxiety, feared for their family and friends, and faced uncountable losses without even the ordinary comfort of mourning rituals. Many religious and government leaders have faced traumas and moral injuries of their own during the pandemic, the uprisings following the murder of George Floyd, the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes and gun violence, and the Capitol siege.

We are at risk of a moral injury epidemic because human beings are neurologically hardwired to need love, which is our basis for being moral and for being at peace with ourselves and the world. Another way to say “neurologically hardwired” is to affirm that we are born moral because we are made in the image of God, the Spirit that links us profoundly and completely to each other, our bodies, and all of creation. Because being moral is crucial to maintaining important relationships and being part of a community, recovery from moral injury is not an individual achievement. It is a relational process that restores our sense of worthiness to be loved, sustains our families and communities, and nurtures creativity, curiosity, and a love of beauty and life.

Recovery from moral injury requires great emotional courage. We must risk trusting others to receive our testimonies and confessions without judgment, and we must be prepared to hear stories of atrocities with compassionate hearts and quiet minds, without reacting with horror, disgust, or dismay. In transforming memory from inner tormenter to external witness through writing or speaking, we discover that we are not just our trauma or our moral confusions, that there is more to us than solitary suffering. Then we can integrate moral injury experiences into our lives and our communities as sources of information, resilience, and wisdom.

Williams rejected the idea of self-sacrifice and proposed a different question for Christian faith: What are we willing to love wholeheartedly and commit our lives to? That is the question I believe our current apocalypse poses for Christians. Many accept atonement theology because of its ubiquity and the pervasive claim that one cannot be a Christian without believing it, but they may blend various versions and minimize aspects that bother them, such as hell or a wrathful God. I cannot count the number of times I have had church friends say, after a discussion of *Saving Paradise*, which I coauthored with Rebecca Ann Parker, “I never liked the atonement, but I didn’t think I had a choice other than to accept it.”

Christians have choices. If what we believe about God is at the expense of the rest of humanity or the earth, it is too small, fearful, and miserly to make room for much love or to enable us to build a future together.

A millennium ago, the values of imperialism, warfare, and hostility to the other became defining features of Christian identity, disrupting the domestic tranquility of churches and confusing trauma pain with love. We must find the courage to face and feel the moral truth of that cruel history, which was enacted on our blood-soaked

soil. If we elide our historical legacies of violence done in the name of God, deny that it is Christian history, and insist that the rioters at the Capitol were not “real” Christians, the fullness of life will not be possible—for fullness must include profound grief for all that has been lost and cannot be repaired.

Life-affirming alternatives permeate our history, despite repeated attempts to eliminate dissident communities that disputed the atonement. I learned the depth of that dissident Christian struggle to hold on to an alternative faith in the six years of research I did for *Saving Paradise*. In the book, Parker and I describe how early Christians worshiped in sanctuaries filled with images of life in paradise: the four blue rivers of Eden, golden Easter dawns, verdant canopies of trees, flocks of sheep and birds, Mary as the Queen of Heaven, and Jesus, diverse in age, race, and gender. This art focuses on incarnation of the Spirit in life, and the ancestors are shown as living presences in their resurrected glory. The mission of the church is to support people in resisting evil, heal the sick and brokenhearted, transform sin into moral accountability and courage, feed the hungry, and bless the earth as a great gift of God.

This project changed my mind. Before *Saving Paradise*, I considered myself a feminist theologian trying to change a patriarchal, otherworldly Christianity. After writing the book, I discovered that I stood in a long legacy of life-affirming, this-worldly, orthodox Christian theologians in my understanding of the Spirit in creation and divinity in humanity.

Lately, I find my roots in Buddhism an increasingly important influence in my thinking about what ends suffering and empowers love. I suggest we think of theology as something we enact together, rather than as what we believe individually. Enacting theology requires art and rituals of many kinds. We need those that hold us as we lament for all that cannot be saved; those that nurture moral discernment, seek accountability, and nourish effective critique and protest and change; those that enable us to love our bodies and our lives fiercely in all their imperfect complexities and intricate interdependencies; and those that recommit us to this earth as holy ground from which springs all life and its beautiful, fierce, dangerous, terrifying, fecund, desolate, joyous, playful, lusty, and wondrous sacred powers.

Living in the aftermath of 2020, I invite us to think of this time as a chance to heal moral injury by focusing on nurturing trustworthy relationships that can weave our communities together as we support each other in recovering from so much

suffering. We have no life but this life, no world but this world, and no future for flourishing but this struggle together, guided by our birthright, the Spirit of love. Apocalypse is heaven come to earth to reveal truth. If we pray “on earth as it is in heaven,” we need to mean it and to live it out—on this earth.