THE SOTERIOLOGY OF SEBASTIAN MOORE: ANSELM REVISITED

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I

The works of Sebastian Moore have a curious half-existence in the theological world. I would not be surprised if many of you had not heard his name before, though papers by him regularly appear in such places as Concilium and Downside Review. His books live in that peculiar boundary between spirituality and theology, apparently meant for a popular though educated audience but with frequent ponderous and obscure passages which demand total concentration. One will search his books in vain for compendious footnotes and bibliographies or even an index. Similarly, one can search in vain for any extended serious theological consideration of his ideas outside a relatively closed circle of fellow travellers -- his books, for example, have never been reviewed in Theological Studies. However, despite this comparative neglect, I would suggest that he has a valuable contribution to make to theology and especially to the topic of our conference -- the Idea of Salvation.

I would like to begin with a presentation of the general framework of Moore's thought -- his theory of our basic desires, our generic guilt, and their relationship to God. Secondly, I will present his understanding of how Jesus saves us from the human situation of generic guilt by his death and resurrection. Thirdly, I wish to present a parallel between the model that Moore proposes and the classical atonement theology of Anselm. My basic source will be Moore's book The Fire and the Rose are One (1980) with supplementary material from Let This Mind be in You (1985) and various papers that have appeared in volumes of the Lonergan Workshop.

II

Moore's starting point is an understanding of what he regards as our basic human desire, namely, that:
we all desire to be desired by the one we desire.\(^3\)

We all have a basic felt sense of our own desirability, our own significance. In fact, Moore claims that our felt sense of our own desirability is proportional to the expansiveness of our desires -- our sense of desirability is our desire-ability, i.e., our ability to desire! This phrase, 'that we desire to be desired by the one we desire', becomes a basic axiom in Moore's thought. With it he explains two facts about human existence.

The first fact is our obvious narcissism, our obsession with ourselves. Here Moore draws on the work of Ernst Becker in his work *The Denial of Death*:

>The achievement of Ernst Becker is to have highlighted with painful clarity this essential need of the human being to feel significant, worth-full, worthy, someone.

Further, quoting Becker, he writes:

>'All that religious and psychoanalytic genius has to tell us converges on the terror of admitting what one is doing to win his self-esteem.' In other words, I attach far more importance to myself than I dare to admit to you.\(^4\)

Our felt sense of significance becomes a question for which we demand an answer -- am I really significant? do I really have value? We see its power in the clinging of a child to its parents, in the awkward questioning of the adolescent, in the re-evaluations of a mid-life crisis, and in the ultimate threat to our significance that confronts us in death.

The second fact is the intersubjective nature of our personhood. The question that our feelings of significance pose cannot be answered by ourselves. They demand other subjects. Any answer that I could give on my own would be problematic -- am I significant enough to affirm my own significance? No, I must experience myself as the recipient of another's desire, I must be in contact with other persons. I thus desire to be desired by another, to have my being affirmed by another. And not just any other, but by a significant other, a desired other: I desire to be desired by the one I desire:
I make the crucial discovery that my need to feel significant gets a far fuller, more intense satisfaction when I feel a new attraction for another person. The person who is beginning to be in love has a more intense feeling of personal worth, of status, of really being someone, than ever before. The next discovery is that the new feeling of being attracted, and of being in consequence more worthwhile to myself, contains the intense desire that the other person have an attraction towards me. Should this turn out to be the case, my need to feel significant will receive a further satisfaction, the most intense and delicious satisfaction we ever experience.\

Such an experience is in fact mutually satisfying, a fact which leads Moore to reject any ultimate opposition between personal fulfilment and other-centredness. "Our personal fulfilment is in the life-enhancement of another. Short of this, we are not fulfilled."

Since for Moore our sense of our desirability is our desire-ability, it is clear that the above analysis assumes an initial sense of our own desirability. For Moore, this initial sense of desirability is the psychological correlate of the metaphysical fact that we exist as the object of God's desire: we exist because God wills us to be. This initial desire leads to our deepest quest, not only the desire to be desired, but the desire to be desired to be:

If our self-absorption and passionate pursuit of meaningfulness are at root our inner dialogue with our unknown origin; if our experience with each other shows that self-absorption finds its meaning and release in knowing that I am significant for someone else; might it not be that my self-absorption is ultimately to find its meaning and release in knowing that I am significant for the unknown reality that is my origin?

This argument leads Moore to speak of a 'natural love of God', a disputed element in the Thomist tradition. Here it is not the love of a known object, but a love which leads to a restless searching for its object, forever asking 'do I count in your eyes?' It is a love which is never quite sure of the one to whom the question is addressed, but which is always dissatisfied with the partial answers of those about us who can never address the issue of our very being.
This account of our relationship with God is, however, only partial. Besides the God who is the object of my basic desire, there is also the God who is a threat to my existence, my specifically finite existence. God's transcendence forever beckons me to further acts of self-transcendence, calling me to become more than I am and thereby appearing to threaten my very existence. What grows out of this perceived threat is resentment, 'disaffection with creaturehood' which Moore calls generic or original guilt and which he equates with original sin. (Recall the serpent's temptation -- you shall be like gods!) Such disaffection is not a necessarily explicit rejection of an explicitly understood God. It is a very simple thing:

... all the ordinary human feelings of doubt and dissatisfaction and disaffection with one's lot bring about that 'ugliness of the other' which we experience in all guilt. In this case it is the original other, so its ugliness reflects the original guilt. This guilt is the crippling in us of that in-love-ness with the all-powerful mystery which belongs to our very constitution as self-aware ... beings. It is an original cosmic love-affair gone sour. It is the all-embracing mystery experienced not as presence but as pressure.

Put simply, we might say that ordinary guilt is feeling bad about what I have done. Generic guilt is feeling bad about what I am.

As I have indicated above, this approach forms the basis of Moore's understanding of original sin. It is not possible in this short paper to give a full exposition of his theology of original sin which fully integrates an evolutionary world view. Indeed he claims:

it has taken Darwin for us to realise that not to believe in original sin is not to believe in evolution.

However, what I would like to stress in Moore's work is the unity between his understanding of original sin and soteriology. For whether he knows it or not, Moore is working out the following heuristic device: Original sin is what Jesus saves us from. To shed light on salvation is to shed light on original sin and vice versa. It is this unity which I think places Moore ahead of other writers in the area of soteriology.
I have now completed my first task, to outline the general framework of Moore's thought. I would now like to turn attention to the second task, viz., how Moore conceives Jesus' saving work.

Here it is important to note a decisive change in Moore's thought between his earlier work, The Crucified is no Stranger (1977) and in his later writings. In the earlier book Moore focuses on the relationship between the Crucified and the crucifier as the basis of his soteriology. While it is a work of rich insights, Moore is forced to conclude that this approach fails:

While the Saviour was in the original event, there were no saved, but only the crucifiers representing the awful way all of us who constantly need salvation behave. Without the saved there creeps in that fatal ambiguity which, in face of the legitimate question 'How did Jesus save us?' answers: 'That's up to you. Just let the story work on you.'

In Fire and The Rose Moore adopts a different approach: 'the sinner-protagonist must enter the story as sinner and exit from it saved!' He thus focuses his attention on an Imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the disciples in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus, 'the magnificently spoilt child of God ... who unequivocally believes in the spoiling and the spoiler', is free from the crippling sense of guilt that dogs human existence. His freedom is contagious for it simply fails to recognise the many human barriers we place in the way of love; the gospel narratives speak powerfully of the effect of the freedom. The disciples were at the centre of this activity, experiencing the release of their own desirability to the maximum extent possible through human contact. Jesus brought God to them, made God alive to them, and the God they were now experiencing in the company of Jesus was incomparably more real than the God of traditional religion. It was as though they saw through the hallowed symbols to the burning reality itself.
Good Friday, however, brought an end to all that: '... if Jesus fails, if this movement piles up against the stone wall of this world, then God is finished.' For Moore, the crucifixion is nothing less than the death of God for the disciples. In the days after the crucifixion the disciples would have lead a devastated existence:

Those dark days would be a much more radical desolation than what we call the Dark Night of the Soul. The person who enters the Dark Night of the Soul does not look back on such a heaven-on-earth as did the followers of Jesus. For them, God had involved himself so much in the life and movement of Jesus that the failure of the movement was much more like the death of God than his mere absence.

This experience of the 'death of God' has a two-fold effect. First, it destroys the God who is a threat to our existence. His transcendence can no longer be seen as 'infinite power over against human weakness' but only as infinite love willing to be poured out for us. This removes the weight of our generic guilt, allowing us to recognise the burden of the distance between us and God as one of our own making, a guilt-projection 'onto the withdrawn-from other'. Secondly, it destroys the God who is object of our desire. Only a God who is experienced as alive can be experienced as dead and his death leaves us bereft of the possibility of fulfilling our basic need -- the desire to be desired to be.

This is the situation in which the disciples found themselves on Easter Saturday. It is in that state that they experienced the rebirth of God, the rebirth of their desires, in the resurrection of Jesus. In the resurrection Jesus does for them what only God could do -- he restores them to life free from the guilt of 'original sin'. For Moore the resurrection involves a displacement of the divinity from God to Jesus which becomes central to later affirmations of the divinity of Jesus. It is the ultimate 'consolation without a cause' spoken of in Ignatian spirituality. The effect on the disciples of this event is clear, when we consider the transformation that occurred in their lives and in the lives of those around them.

How does all this affect us? It is not simply a matter of appropriating a story but appropriating a fact. The death of God-in-Jesus is an historical event with real historical consequences. It has a
once-and-for-all character which challenges us to believe and once believed it transforms us as it did the disciples. But how does this appropriation take place? Moore gives no clear answer to this question except to indicate that the changes that need to occur must reach down to our very psyche. Here it might be appropriate to refer to two elements of the Christian tradition. First, the sacrament of baptism is spoken of not just as entry into the Church, but as entry into the death of Jesus so that we might also rise with him. This reality is powerfully conveyed in the symbolism of full immersion. Secondly, we might recall traditional Catholic teaching on the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist. Perhaps the cultic re-presentation of the death of Jesus is an important element in bringing about the psychic change that Moore sees as the full fruit of salvation. Note that the Council of Trent talks about the 'fruits of that bloody sacrifice' of the cross being 'received most abundantly through this unbloody one' of the Eucharist. This powerful combination of story, symbol and real event, a true myth and a real symbol, may be the elements Moore needs in bringing about an appropriation of Jesus' gift of salvation for us here and now.

IV

Finally, I would like to draw some parallels between the model of salvation present in Moore's work and the classical soteriological model worked out by Anselm. Anselm's model is well known. In sin we offer insult to God. The measure of the insult is taken from the one insulted who is God, so that sin is an infinite insult. This demands reparation. Such reparation must come from us but to have infinite worth it must also come from God. In his death, Jesus, who is both human and divine, offers reparation on our behalf, a reparation which has infinite value, since he is also God. In this way Anselm explains 'cur homo deus' -- why a man God. The shortcomings of this model have often been discussed, notably, in recent times, by Rahner. As Rahner points out, the model fails to indicate why the death of Jesus is necessary since any act of obedience on the part of Jesus would also have infinite value. However, Rahner still accepts the model in its broad outline. I would also like to mention an element added to Anselm's model by later writers, the idea of the death of Jesus as appeasing the anger of God.
How does this relate to Moore's model? As we have seen, Moore talks of our guilt-projection onto the withdrawn-from other. Clearly, talk about the anger of God can be understood in terms of this guilt-projection. In a similar way we could see Anselm's model as a whole as arising out of a projection of our own guilt and anger and needs. Through the glasses of our original self-disesteem God appears as an infinite threat. This threat can only be removed by the death of God. This can be achieved in Jesus who, as human, can die and, as God, can appease our anger. Thus the death of Jesus is necessary to appease our anger; it is, as Paul says, God working in Jesus reconciling Himself to the world. Jesus dies for us. In this account it is clear why it is the death of Jesus and only the death of Jesus which offers satisfaction. In this regard it is interesting to recall Trent once again when it speaks of sacrifice 'as the nature of man requires'.

Notes

1. Sebastian Moore is a Benedictine monk, formerly resident at Downside Abbey. He currently teaches theology at Boston College in the USA. His main work, of those not mentioned in this paper, is God Is a New Language (1967). He is a regular contributor to Lonergan Workshop volumes.

2. At the time of presentation of this paper the only reference to Moore's work I had found was in Pheme Perkins' book Resurrection (New York 1984). She draws on an unpublished thesis done on Moore's work. Since that time Denis Edwards' What Are They Saying about Salvation? (Mahwah, New Jersey 1986) has appeared. This work devotes a chapter to Moore's approach to soteriology.


5. Ibid., p.8. Moore's analysis here could perhaps be made more rigorous by reference to, say, Scheler's notion of fellow feeling.

6. Ibid., p.9.
7. This correlation of the psychological and the ontological is not Moore's but my own interpretation of Moore's position. My interpretation is influenced by Karl Rahner's understanding of grace as involving a conscious correlate to the ontological change as brought about by grace, cf. 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace', Theological Investigations, Vol. 1 (London 1961), pp.297ff.

8. Ibid., p.13.

9. This links into the Augustinian tradition of the restless heart which finds no peace until it rests in God, cf. Confessions, Bk 1, Ch. 1.

10. Reference could be made to Max Scheler's notion of ressentiment.

11. For a fuller discussion of original sin and an analysis of the mythical content of Genesis 3, see Moore's 'Original Sin, Sex, Resurrection and Trinity' in Lonergan Workshop, Vol. 4 (Chico 1983), pp.85ff. Also of interest is Let This Mind be in You (London, 1985), pp.84ff.

12. Ibid., p.65.

13. 'Original Sin, Sex, Resurrection and Trinity', p.88.

14. This heuristic device lies, I believe, at the heart of most contemporary discussion of soteriology. One's conception of salvation has bearing on one's conception of original sin and vice versa. Moore exploits the link more thoroughly than most though the device remains basically implicit. One can also see the device operative in the great Augustinian-Pelagian debate.

15. Fire and The Rose, p.141.

16. Ibid., p.122.

17. Ibid., p.80.

18. Ibid, p.80f.


21. DS1743.


23. 2 Cor 5:19.

24. DS1739. Here, as above, Trent is not being used to settle the matter but simply to throw some light on the phenomena under discussion.