CHAPTER ONE

TRANSACTIONS OF SATISFACTION
AND VISIONS OF THE OTHERWORLD

The Satisfaction Theory of Atonement

In the early centuries of the Christian Church, the predominant view of the atonement was the Ransom Theory. Proponents of the theory argued that the primary aspect of Christ's atonement was his ransoming of the souls of human beings back from the Devil who had gained victory over them in the Fall, when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Working in tandem with this theory was the Early Church's liturgical emphasis on baptism and exorcism, both of which corresponded to the spiritual warfare focus of the Ransom Theory. As the church moved into the early middle ages, a shift took place in the liturgy, moving to a greater emphasis on penitential and eucharistic rites, both of which involved the concept of making satisfaction. Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109), the author of Cur Deus Homo, the first treatise to present a full view of the atonement, reflected this trend when he proposed that the atonement was primarily about Christ making satisfaction to God for the sins of humanity. This both imitated and bolstered the increasing emphasis on making satisfaction that was evident in the sacrament of penance in particular.

In his Satisfaction Theory, Anselm argued that the sin of the Fall had dishonored God, and that God's honor, like that of a feudal overlord's, needed to be restored. Much of the Cur Deus Homo was devoted to prov-

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ing why the only one who could restore this honor was a person who was both God and man and therefore could only be Jesus Christ. Christ as God-Man restored God’s honor by making satisfaction through his death. Anselm did not go into great detail about how this satisfaction should be appropriated. Thomas Aquinas, however, did, and he taught that Christians took on the benefits of Christ’s sacrificial atonement when they participated in the sacraments. This was particularly true of the sacrament of penance. Indulgences made it possible for people to pay money to the Church and receive years off their time in purgatory, through purchasing the resources of the Treasury of Merit. Testators left instructions in their wills specifying the amount of money to be paid for masses to be said and alms to be distributed for the benefit of their own and their families’ souls. There was thus an economy, combining the earthly and heavenly currencies, in which the cost of one’s sins could be paid through sacramental transactions that made satisfaction.

As part of their function in verifying the unverifiable, the didactic visions supported the Satisfaction Theory and its penitential, transactional implications. This was especially true of the visitations of ghosts from both purgatory and hell, and visits of visionaries to purgatory and hell. These visions bolstered beliefs related to the Satisfaction Theory which otherwise had to be taken entirely by faith, namely the care for the souls of the dead and the importance of preparing for one’s own death through moral living and of paying penalties for one’s sin now rather than later.

Whereas today morality is often defined in terms of its earthly, visible results, medieval morality—at least in popular piety—referenced otherworldly, invisible, and eternal consequences. The medieval sacra-

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5 For example, in 1426, William Hanningfield of Essex and Suffolk left money in his will for his lands to be sold to establish two priests to sing masses for forty years for “the soules of me, the fursorne William, Agnes, Iohan, Cisily myn wyfes, William…and for all the soules that I am bounde to do for…[and] be dispended in dedes of almes by the discrecion of myn Executours.” (Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., The Fifty Earliest English Wills of the Court of Probate, London, A.D. 1387–1439. Early English Text Society, Original Series 78 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1882], p. 70).

6 For a very different approach to medieval views of the atonement, see Jane McAvoy’s feminist theology of atonement as satisfaction using six medieval women mystics: Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, Margery Kempe, Hadewijch of Brabant, and Catherine of Siena (The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement [Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000]).