From the Selected Works of Vaughan S Roberts

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Why did it take nearly one thousand years for Jesus to die? Both these volumes start from the curious fact that there were few artistic representations of Jesus’ death until the Church’s second millennium. Brock and Parker use this and other observations from art history to develop their narrative of Christianity whilst Kupfer has edited a collection of essays which explores different visual approaches to Christ’s Passion, particularly in the light of Mel Gibson’s controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* released in 2004. In essence, *Saving Paradise* argues that most artistic representations of Jesus during Christianity’s first millennium depict the Risen Christ in paradise and portrayals of his crucified body emerge at the start of the faith’s second millennium. This is a response to the Crusades – in order to justify killing on behalf of God as a form of discipleship, or as a means of following a perceived divine pattern that led to God the Father sacrificing God the Son. Brock and Parker trace this trajectory through the Reformation to the 17th century English Puritans who, they argue, used a similar theology of atonement to justify their treatment of Native Americans. They conclude those who believe God redeems through violence become violent themselves and that contemporary Christianity needs to urgently rediscover its earlier vision of paradise.

By contrast *The Passion Story* is a more diffuse volume because of its many contributors. In turn, this means there is a less clear cultural and historical narrative than in *Saving Paradise*. Nevertheless there are some stimulating contributions – in particular, I valued fresh insights from Miri Rubin’s chapter on ‘The Passion of Mary: The Virgin and the Jews in Medieval Culture’ and David Morgan’s ‘Images of the Passion and the History of Protestant Visual Piety in America’. To a general reader *The Passion Story* may have a slightly ‘dated’ feel, in the sense that the controversy over Gibson’s movie has dissipated, but to those with an interest in visual culture and film it still has a great deal to offer – at a price. So it would be excellent if this book could be brought out in paperback.

These two volumes highlight an observation made recently by philosopher and Templeton Prize winner Charles Taylor that certain theologies of atonement have contributed greatly to the marginalisation of Christianity in Western culture. It is clear that work must continue to be done in analysing how different understandings of atonement have developed and how they can address the changing nature of our contemporary world.