

Matthew J. Distefano. *All Set Free: How God is Revealed in Jesus and Why That is Really Good News*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2015.

The seeming violence of traditional atonement theology has often presented a problem for Christians who want to hold to a Trinitarian faith and also want to take seriously the peacemaking teachings of Jesus. In this time of religiously affiliated violence, it is particularly pertinent to reconsider what the consequences of our beliefs might be. In this informed yet accessible study, Matthew J. Distefano grapples with an inherited understanding of God that seems disjointed. He calls upon René Girard's anthropological insights on mimetic theory as the basis for his project, and proposes that God, through Jesus' death, provides an alternative and nonviolent way of being for humanity.

The first move made by Distefano is to establish ground rules for discussing a complex and challenging set of questions. Here we sense the tone of this project, which is neither antagonistic nor dogmatic in its proposals but conversational and humbly hopeful. First, theological presuppositions must be critically engaged. Specifically, we need to critically engage our image of God. Second, we must actively recall the historical traditions of Christianity—from the formation of the creeds through to Augustine, Luther, and today—in order to give license to the work of critically engaging our understandings of God. Distefano stresses that this work has deep roots. Third, two specific theological frameworks, Calvinism and Arminianism, are contrasted and critiqued in order to provide a contextual model for this engagement.

Central to the author's project is the mimetic theory as developed by Girard. This theory understands social cohesion to be the result of spontaneous violence that unites groups, who would otherwise be rivals, against a common enemy. This 'victory' is then remembered in ritual in order to maintain social cohesion, or peace, even long after the initial violence took place (51). Adopting a Girardian lens, Distefano takes the passion narrative of Jesus to reveal the futility of this violent cycle, and to be salvific in proposing a new model—the forgiveness shown by Jesus—on which to base our behavior. This view of the atonement, and further, of the very nature of God, is in stark contrast to punitive, retributive, or otherwise

violent Christian theologies.

It is on this point, when contrasting his proposals with other dominant perspectives, that Distefano is at his weakest. While I would not go so far as to say that he gives traditions such as Calvinism unfair treatment, holding them up as a straw men in order to make his own points seem obviously superior, he does often turn to alternate perspectives in order to provide grounds for his arguments. This methodology is a cause for concern, in that it holds the potential for polarizing conversations or establishing camps of “us” and “them”.

However, this risk can be mitigated if the reader takes into account the book’s preface, where the author clearly states that this work is, more than anything else, a reconstruction of his own journey to answer the question, “If there is a God, is he/she violent?” (xii). Here the reader is given permission to enter into a sincere conversation with a fellow believer, struggling together to work at one of life’s most challenging questions, rather than being expected to defend one perspective or another.

Distefano claims that his intended audience is “Christians who have inevitably questioned the Western doctrine of hell, the faith in a violent and retributive god, and the politics of the church in the West,” adding that he is “also writing to non-Christians who avoid Jesus for these very same reasons” (xvi). I would add that his book represents a healthy blend of popular style and researched study. While *All Set Free: How God is Revealed in Jesus and Why That is Really Good News* would not make sense as a definitive resource on René Girard, nonviolent atonement, or its other varied interests, it never claims to be such a resource. What it does offer is a helpful, accessible introduction to these conversations with enough research to be reliable and enough honest personal reflection to be very engaging.

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