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How the sovereignty of God challenges carceral logic and motivates us to work for prison abolition through transformative justice

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"No Gods, No Masters" is the quintessential anarchist slogan. Rejecting hierarchy in all its forms, the idea that there is ontological subordination at the heart of reality seems irreconcilable with a politics of equality and freedom. For those of us who remain theists, the sovereignty of God can be a point of tension, tempting us to reject a classical view of God's providential omnipotence and omniscience for fear that it diminishes human freedom. I am concerned by the way the sovereignty of God has become anathema in liberatory politics and I am unconvinced by the ways in which some contemporary theological strands try and reconcile God's sovereignty with human freedom, either by rejecting God's transcendence and arguing that God is realized only within human experience or by re-imaging God's metaphysics in such a way that God is differentiated from the physical world as a being co-eternal with the building blocks of creation. In

both cases these theological moves are made because people believe that God's sovereignty is in conflict with freedom. I disagree. God's ability to realize God's will in the world is the foundation of freedom. As such, I also believe an affirmation of the sovereignty of God offers a healthy foundation for faith in liberation from the carceral system through transformative justice work.

I became acutely aware of the significance of my faith in God's sovereignty while reading David Bentley Hart's That All Shall be Saved and some it's critical reviews . The book consists of four reflections that undergird Hart's confidence in universal salvation: the moral meaning of creation out of nothing; eschatelogical2 judgment; what it means to be a person in community; and what it means to be free. The four reflections lead him to affirm universal salvation. Ultimately, his argument relies on faith in both the sovereignty of God and God's goodness. If we are not universally saved, then God is not sovereign and good. Criticisms of the book often argue that human freedom makes it impossible to be confident in universal salvation. This reveals the assumption that God's will, and consequently God's sovereignty, is in conflict with our freedom.

It may seem odd that I would reference a treatise on universal salvation as the starting point for a reflection on God's sovereignty and the carceral system. However, thoughts related to the possibility and process of salvation are inextricably related to our understanding of justice. While I affirm the existence of a life to come, salvation is not a completely disembodied process unrelated to the enactment of justice in the world right now. The Greek word δικαιοσ — used in Paul's letters when he talks about how God saves us from sin — contains both the connotation of becoming "righteous" and bringing about justice. Justification and righteousness, the work of salvation, is fundamentally about putting things in right-relationship in all areas of life. It is to "make right" when harm is done. This is the work of justice, and ostensibly the work of our "justice

existence of prisons is not just a regrettable necessity in the approximation of justice. They represent a failure of justice and are an affront to the sovereign goodness of God. We are encouraged to work against them in faith that all parties to injustice shall, according to God's will, be free and able to realize the distinct and singular way they participate in loving relationships within creation.

To say that God is sovereign does not mean that God is a puppeteer. It is also not to collapse God's transcendence into creation entirely. We have been given "the gift of distance" (another phrase from Hart, which is also prevalent in Simone Weil's thought) that gives creation the ability to make choices and have a will that is discrete and personal. These choices can bring us closer to our desire to love and be loved in return, or they can work against that desire. This is true of our own choices and the choices of others. Our own choices can work against our desire for love and other's choices can hinder our ability to love and be loved (and vice-versa). We generally make poor choices for three reasons: ignorance, parochialism, and delusion. In the simplest terms this means that we either don't know what is loving, we error in believing love is limited (we can't act in a way that is loving for everyone), or we are deluded into thinking something is loving that isn't. God's work and God's will (God's being and activity are one) is to help us learn how to love and free us from aspects of reality that imprison us by constraining and motivating us to engage in toxic unloving behaviors. This is best done, not in exile, but in the context of relationships. This is also the work of transformative justice. If God is really the source and aim of all creation — in other words, if we are sure that all creation is capable of loving relationships and desires them — then we can be assured that the tireless work of transformative justice will bear fruit in every person. From this perspective, the existence of prisons is never an aspect of justice because God's work (and ours) is the work of eliminating imprisonment in all its forms.

Consequently, shifting our understanding of God's sovereignty from being opposed to freedom to being the source of human freedom provides us with confidence in liberation through transformative justice work and the abolition of prisons. It assures us that no one willfully and freely chooses harm, no one is damnable, and no work for justice can rely on the existence of prisons. It reminds us that the

system." What I am trying to say is that the eschatelogical justice that God enacts in salvation (or damnation, if one believes that is a component of justice) should be congruent with the way we work for justice. Consequently, what we believe God does to justify will relate to what we believe justice looks like in our world now.

Our understanding of justice is not just related to what God will try to do, but what God is capable of doing. For those who deny God's sovereignty, God might not be able to bring about justification for all (put all in right-relationship). This means that if God is going to provide justice at all, God needs a way to accomplish justification for some. That way has been traditionally conceived as creating a place to put the "bad" people (eternal hell) or removing the problem (annihilation.) In the physical world we do this through imprisonment and the death penalty. If God is just in sending people to hell, why aren't we just in sending them to prison? From this perspective, prision and the death penalty become integral to the work of justice. At worst carceral justice is understood as punitive. Harm or sin incurs a debt that must be "paid for" through retribution. This is where we get the euphemism, "paying one's debt to society."

Yet, one needn't take a punitive view of justice to affirm the need for incarceration. Instead, imprisonment could be an unfortunate necessity in order to provide safety for victims. Maybe those people could be good, but they choose not to. God has to do something with them to protect the innocent. If they change, they could be brought back into respectable society, but there are no guarantees. All the work of rehabilitation might be in vain. Within this perspective, perhaps the existence of people in hell (or prison) is just because it is the best way to protect the innocent and restrain those who would do harm. For those who are annihilationists, when someone becomes a "lost cause," eliminating the problem is the best way to enact justice. This isn't all that different from a divinely ordained death-penalty.

Don't get me wrong, while I affirm God's sovereignty, I am sympathetic to its critics. In modern western theology, the sovereign God has been conceived as a puppeteer in a mechanical universe. At its most extreme, God's sovereignty is an external force that coercively orders the world and eventually, violently, eliminates aspects that are predestined for destruction (in accordance with God's "good" plan of course). This understanding of God's sovereignty has undergirded oppression and can also be analogous to our penal-justice system. Even if one doesn't take the extreme predestinarian view, God is still understood as an external force that can coercively override our free will or systematically micro-manage creation. Likewise, prison and policing relies on the ability and right of the powerful to enact their will through threats of violent retribution in order to maintain civil order. Just as a denial of God's total sovereignty can inadvertently affirm the carceral state, when God's sovereignty is understood as a forgein force controlling the world, it legitimizes state violence as the analogous path to peace and justice at the expense of those who are "out of order." God's sovereignty and goodness is expressed in lifting up the righteous and damning the depraved, in opposition to the depraved's will.

The problem with all of these views lies in both the conceptions of God's sovereignty and human freedom. The practical consequence is that they inadvertently give credence to a violent, punitive carceral system, weakening the resolve to work for abolition. All views that believe God's sovereignty opposes human freedom leaves room for the need to deal with bad guys through extended, perhaps eternal, isolation and imprisonment. In order to fully understand how Christ opposes incarceration one must also have confidence in the sovereignty and goodness of God and understand human freedom to be founded on (not challenged by) those two truths.

Hart's meditation on human freedom in That All Shall be Saved was, for me, the most profound and least understood

by his critics. Freedom can be understood philosophically as negative freedom (the freedom from control) and positive freedom (the freedom to do what one wants). When considering God's sovereignty, we often emphasize negative freedom, believing that God's omniscience and omnipotence amount to coercion. But God's sovereignty does not seek to control us: it seeks to make us free to pursue what we really want. God is not a totally distinct entity that controls our will, God is the source and aim of our will. Instead, we experience coercion in the ways in which we control one another or create systems that operate as powers that influence our behaviors in undesirable ways. Conversely, God — if we are truly speaking of God — uses God's power and knowledge to liberate our wills from human and systemic oppression. A proper understanding of God's sovereignty would lead us to believe that people who do harm to themselves and others are doing it because they are not fully free. Consequently, God's sovereignty provides the hope that (if we had it) we would use positive freedom well.

If we are truly speaking of God then we are speaking of reality that works to free our wills and provides us with confidence that we would use freedom well. This is the "moral meaning" (to use Hart's phrase) of creation from nothing. If God is our source and our aim and God is infinite love (as early Christian theologians have claimed), then our will experiences the fullest of free expression in loving relationships — in beautifully diverse, infinite concrete forms of loving. When we fail to love it is not because our wills are free, it is because they lack freedom. When we do harm, the solution is not found in restraining our will, but in discerning the ways in which we are oppressed. When we understand that the freest version of ourselves would exist in loving community, we realize that any justice lies in understanding what has prevented us from acting in accordance with this aim. It is also to become aware of what our deepest motivations and desires really are. Only then can we say that our wills are free.