

TWO FOUNDATIONAL STORIES OF THE CROSS: HOW THEY AFFECT EVANGELISM

Mark D. Baker

A Japanese pastor asked Norman Kraus, a Mennonite missionary, “Why did Jesus have to die?” The pastor immediately clarified that he knew the answer – that Jesus had to die to pay the penalty for sins that God required – but that he did not find that explanation satisfying. Kraus pondered the question over the course of several months. He concluded that the traditional penal substitution explanation of the atonement was intelligible in a guilt-based society such as ours, which understood wrongs as an infraction against a legal or moral code. This guilt could be remedied through punishment. However, that same explanation would feel foreign and unintelligible in a shame-based society like Japan where both the wrong committed and the remedy are understood and felt in more relational ways. The wrongdoer is ridiculed or removed and hence feels alienation and shame, not guilt.¹

Recently a Japanese friend recounted to me how he became a Christian. He was a university student following the path he desired and the one expected of him. Yet his life lacked meaning and purpose. He had never gone to a church, but visited one hoping to find more meaning for his life. The warmth and acceptance he felt there drew him back. He continued to attend. Although the pastor explained to him the plan of salvation, how to become a Christian, it was hard to comprehend. The concepts of guilt and sin were foreign to him. The pastor, however, kept explaining it to him. Finally after a few months he did come to understand that he was a sinner, that Jesus died for his sins and that he could receive forgiveness. After listening to his story I asked my friend, “Wouldn’t it have been wonderful if the pastor would have described salvation

¹ Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 153-170; see also: C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciples’ Perspective* (Scottsdale, Penn: Herald, 1990).

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to you in a way that connected with concepts and experiences you would have readily understood—like shame and honor? How might things change if rather than trying to teach Japanese how to understand the cross and salvation using concepts and terminology of guilt and justice that are foreign to them we instead talked about the cross in terms of shame?”

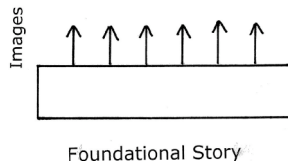
I tell these two stories not to say that talking about the cross in terms of freedom from guilt is wrong, but to communicate that it is more intelligible in some contexts than in others. To understand the concepts, however, is not the only issue. What if a person is not suffering a burden of guilt? I recently watched a number of video clips of people using a particular method of evangelism.² In contrast to the above stories the North American and European people in these videos readily understood the courtroom imagery the evangelists used and the talk of falling short of moral perfection, of guilt, and of punishment. They understood the concepts, but they were not feeling guilty. They were not looking for a solution to a problem they did not have. It impressed me that rather than sharing the gospel in a way that connected with people’s felt needs or pressing questions the evangelists used a strategy to create a sense of need. They worked at making the person feel guilty so that the evangelist could then present the person with the solution to that problem of guilt. Watching the videos left me with questions similar to the ones I asked my Japanese friend. Imagine how different it might be if rather than working to try to move people to a point where they feel guilty the evangelists instead asked questions that would help them present the gospel in a way that connected with needs and longings the people already have?

There are a number of things that can contribute to an articulation of the gospel and a practice of evangelism that lead to lack of understanding or lack of connection. A significant contributing factor is viewing the penal substitution model of atonement as being the one and only explanation of how the cross provides salvation. In the New Testament, legal language of justification is one of a number of images used to proclaim the saving significance of Jesus life, death and resurrection. Yet this one image has, in the form of penal substitution theory, become for many the foundational narrative of how the cross saves. When

² <http://www.wayofthemaster.com/watchwitnessing.shtml#> accessed 10/5/07

someone only has this one tool in their gospel toolbox it leads to situations like those we have just observed.

New Testament writers use a variety of images and motifs to proclaim the saving significance of the cross and resurrection, including: redemption, reconciliation, victory/triumph, justification, sacrifice, and ransom.³ They use different images for differing pastoral situations and for different audiences or contexts. Also, however, they use a diversity of images because no one image can capture the full meaning of the cross.



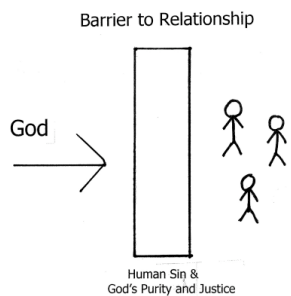
A foundational story is broader and deeper than an image. The various images, represented by arrows in the diagram, build off of, or find a place within the foundational story of how the cross and resurrection provide salvation. In essence, however, the penal substitution model has taken one image and sought to make it the foundational story. It is like taking one of the arrows from the diagram and turning it sideways as if it was foundational. It will not have the breadth to provide space for all the images. Although there will be room for the sideways arrow to support a few other images, they will end up communicating something very similar to the image used as foundation. One image does not have the depth of a true foundational narrative to support diverse imagery. No foundational narrative of atonement can fully capture the depth of the cross, but, in terms of the toolbox metaphor, we should work to have a foundation, or toolbox, that will provide us with a rich variety of images, or tools, we can use in evangelism.

It is a mistake to present the penal substitution model as the only explanation of the atonement in a way that pushes aside or distorts other images and models of the atonement. Some forms of the penal substitution model, especially as expressed at the popular level, contain a number of other problems

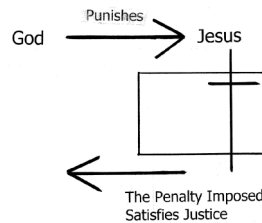
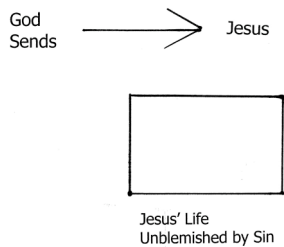
³For a more complete list and description see: John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).

that lead many to question whether penal substitution should be included in the toolbox at all. I will not argue that point in this article, but rather focus on proposing an alternative foundational narrative to penal substitution.⁴ First, however, I want to present the foundational narrative produced by the penal substitution model as it is commonly articulated at the popular level, and reflect on its fruits.

Penal Substitution as the Foundational Story of the Atonement

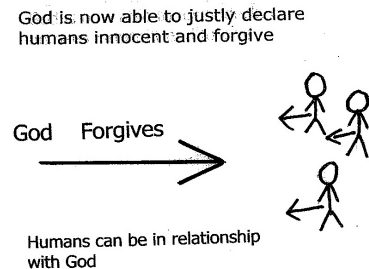


Humans are sinful and our sin is a barrier to a relationship with God because that would compromise God's purity and holiness. Because God is a just God and justice demands appropriate punishment for misdeeds God cannot simply pardon or forgive our sins.



God sends Jesus to earth to remedy this situation by living a sinless life and.... dying in our place. Because Jesus lived without sin he is able to offer to stand in our place and take the punishment we deserve—death. Through punishing Jesus on the cross God has imposed the penalty justice demands.

⁴For a description and assessment of penal substitution see: Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, especially chapter 5. An important point to clarify is that substitutionary atonement is a broader category than penal substitution. The critique in the early part of this paper focuses not on substitutionary atonement, but the specific type of substitutionary atonement called penal substitution.



Justice has been satisfied, and God is now able to justly declare us innocent and forgive humans. The barrier has been removed; humans now have the possibility of entering into relationship with God if they acknowledge their sin and ask for forgiveness recognizing this possibility has been graciously provided through Jesus' dying in their place.

dying in their place.

Assessment

Using simple diagrams like the ones in this article I have told this story to a number of groups, and asked them: What are positives and negatives of using this as the foundational story of how God provides salvation through Jesus' life, death and resurrection? What follows is a list of some of the responses I commonly receive.

Positives

- It takes sin seriously.
- It is clear and logical.
- It is short and easy to understand.
- It is effective in relieving guilt.

Negatives

- It does not include the resurrection.
- Jesus' life, how he lived, what he did and said, is not part of the story. All the story requires is that he did not sin.
- Salvation is not connected to life and ethics (just freedom from guilt and clean slate).
- It is very individualistic.
- It conflicts with some biblical images of God (for example: Luke 15; II Cor. 5:18).
- It is hard to fit in some biblical atonement imagery, such as victory over powers of death and evil; and with this as the foundational story all images end up being about guilt and individual legal standing (so for instance sacrifice understood

through the lens of this story becomes about payment and appeasement).

- It has a limited view of sin (individual moral transgression).
- It can lead people to separate members of the Trinity (and degenerate to the point of some people thinking that Jesus came to save us from God).
- It can lead to people viewing God as an angry figure who must be appeased
- It emphasizes retributive punishment over restorative justice and can support the myth of redemptive violence.⁵
- It is difficult to understand in some cultural contexts.
- Its logic is not always intelligible or credible even in N. American or European contexts

This is a significant list of negatives that play out in ways that limit and hinder evangelism. We must stop using this image as a foundational story and instead use a broader foundational story. We need to return New Testament legal language to its rightful place as one image among a constellation of images to proclaim the gospel. In that process we also would do well to take the New Testament legal metaphor out of the familiar setting of our judicial system and attempt to understand it through the lens of a Hebraic understanding of justice.⁶

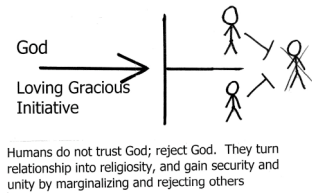
The Life of Jesus as the Foundational Story of the Atonement

I became a Mennonite in mid-life. One of the things that I have deeply appreciated learning and absorbing from Mennonites is the commitment to put Jesus at the center. We seek to have Jesus shape and inform our theology and our actions. Therefore in developing this alternative foundational narrative I sought to put Jesus' life at the center. Rather than developing a theory about the mechanics of how the cross and resurrection provide salvation, and then building

⁵ For an in-depth investigation and discussion of how changing legal and penal practices influenced understandings of the atonement and how articulations of the atonement influences perspectives on and practices of punishment see: Timothy Gorrige, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

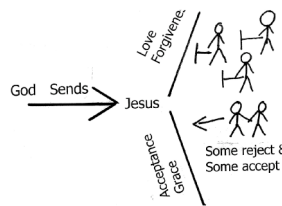
⁶ For an explanation of the Hebraic understanding of justice and discussion of implications for interpreting Pauline language of justification see: Mark D. Baker & J. Ross Wagner "Reading Romans in Hurricane-Ravaged Honduras: A Model of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Conversation," *Missiology* 32 (July 2004) 367-383, and the subsection "Justification through Jesus' Faithful Obedience" in Mark D. Baker, "Ten Ways the Cross Saves: Brief Explanations" at: <http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement>

a story to support that theory, I have sought to have Jesus' life inform the way we understand the cross and resurrection. I have intentionally used the term "foundational story" or "foundational narrative" to emphasize that this is not an image of salvation. I am not seeking to privilege one image over others. This story will support a wide variety of images that highlight and proclaim aspects of the narrative.



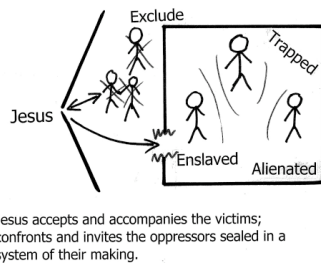
God, since Eden, has lovingly taken the initiative toward humans. Humans, however, have not trusted God and have rejected God's gracious initiative. They have sought security through religiosity rather than through a relationship with God, and they have grasped for status and security

through putting others down—often violently.



God sends his son Jesus to incarnationally continue communicating, through word and deed, love, forgiveness, acceptance and grace. In contrast to other humans Jesus maintains a relationship of trust and obedience with God the Father whom he calls Abba. Jesus invites conversion. He invites others to

trust and believe that God is a loving God who is for them, to repent and turn from their stance of rejection of God. Jesus invites and challenges them to then live according to the way of God as he is. Some accept and some reject Jesus and his loving invitation.

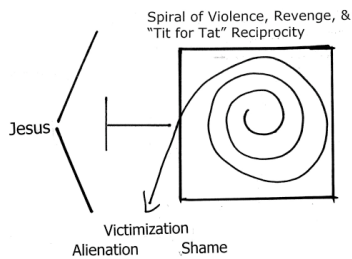


Although the acceptance and mercy offered are unconditional, there are consequences for rejecting the invitation. It leads to people building their security walls of exclusion even higher. An elementary school playground analogy might help us here. Being part of the "in" group—those with the most status

and privileges--requires dressing in certain ways, acting in certain ways, having a certain level of ability, and being friends with the right people. Imagine, however, if the most popular child comes out one day and says, "things are going to be different on the playground now. We are going to let everyone play--no

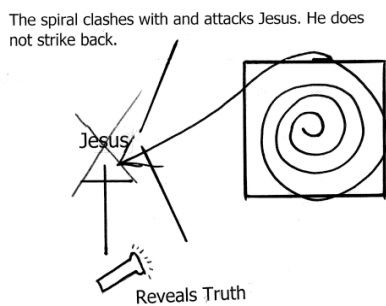
worries, even the nerds can join us.” What would happen if some said, “No, we don’t want to let others join in”? These excluders would have to work even harder to exclude and maintain their status. In the process they would become even more closed in. So it was with those who rejected Jesus. They closed themselves into a system of their creation. As they excluded others they lived under the pressure of, and became enslaved to, their rules and traditions. They lived with the God of accusation that they created. The walls that excluded outsiders and brought status to the insiders also created an environment of alienation lacking in freedom and authenticity.

Jesus confronts these systems and structures of exclusion through his actions and through his parables of judgment. He graciously continues, however, a stance of open invitation to a different reality even to the oppressors. Jesus reaches out to and embraces the victims—those who have been excluded and rejected.



Jesus continues reaching out in loving acceptance. People, however, continue to reject Jesus’ call to include all at the table. Instead they operate within a “tit for tat” system—always looking for the advantage and seeking payback and revenge. This spiral of violence and one-upmanship produces alienation, shame and

victimization.



Factions of society, usually in tension with each other, unify and attack Jesus. He does not, however, back off from stances that have incited the wrath of the people and powers that threaten him. He does not rescind his loving acceptance nor turn against the marginalized and excluded, but stands in solidarity with the

victimized to the point of death. I want to pause here for a moment. The gospel stories are so familiar to us we do not often stop to think it could have been much different. For instance, at the beginning of Luke 15 Jesus heard the Pharisees and scribes, with an air of superiority, critiquing him for eating with tax collectors and

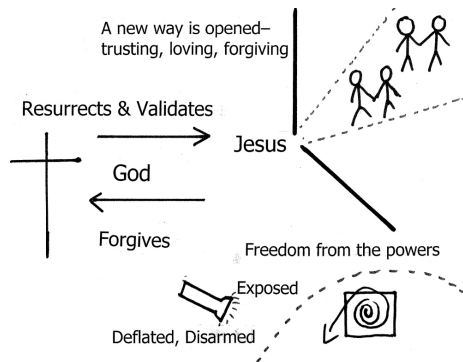
sinners. To save face at that moment Jesus could vow to change his ways, or offer some kind of excuse about why he had eaten with these people. Instead he invites the Pharisees and scribes to join him in tearing down barriers of exclusion and come to the table as well. When things got really tense and he is heading toward death he could have abandoned his commitments and practices to try to save his life. He did not. He is so uncompromisingly for the marginalized and identified so closely with the victimized that he suffers the ultimate act of exclusion and victimization—a shameful death on the cross. Jesus also does not adjust the way he acts, nor the way he talks about God and God’s Kingdom to fit more comfortably within the status quo of the day. At this moment of being thrashed by the violence at the vortex of this spiral of revenge, rejection and victimization Jesus does not reciprocate with violence. That stops the cycle of violence.

Jesus’ death on the cross has a substitutionary or representative character in a number of ways. For instance, Paul, in Romans 5 and 6, points to Jesus filling a representative role for all humanity similar to how we are united with Adam in sin and death. Looking at the concrete history of Jesus’ life displays other ways his death was substitutionary. Although he could have operated safely and securely within the system he stood in solidarity with the excluded, and not just to be a companion with them. Rather in both his life and death he willingly suffered shame and exclusion so that others would not have to. He also, however, suffered the judgment the excluders deserved to suffer. He bore the consequences of their actions—consequences he had warned them of.⁷ Although I have told this foundational narrative in a general way, one could more explicitly integrate it with Israel’s story, and portray how Jesus stands in for and represents Israel both in suffering the ultimate exile they deserve and in being obedient in a way they have been unable to.

At this point in the story, looking at Jesus on the cross, a number of things become clearer to us. It is an act of revelation that has saving import. The cross reveals the extent of human sin and alienation. Humans reject and kill God incarnate. Humans reject and kill a man who lived authentically as God created humans to live. If our fundamental problem is alienation from God, others, self

⁷ I have found Raymund Schwagger’s work especially helpful on this point: *Jesus and the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999).

and creation, then the cross displays in a way no other death does the depth of that alienation and estrangement. The cross displays graphically the end result of our “tit for tat” approach to life, and our seeking unity through victimizing others and finding a common enemy. The cross also displays the truth about the principalities and powers. They may masquerade as pro-human forces necessary for the smooth functioning of society, but the cross exposes them for what they are. The cross, through Jesus, also reveals the character of God—a God very different than the accusing and vengeful God many imagine. We see a God who loves us, who is committed to us and our salvation—even to the point of death.



The powers of sin and death are not only exposed, but, through the resurrection, triumphed over. Death does not have the last word. In the words of Jonathan Wilson, “In Christ as victor, we see God as . . . our liberator, who reveals our victimization and captivity, defeats our enemy, destroys our prison, shatters our chains to free

us and bring us home to live for eternity.”⁸ The resurrection is a victory, yet a victory in line with how Jesus lived and died. God does not respond to the offense of the cross by lashing out against the perpetrators. The resurrected Jesus did not go on a rampage seeking revenge, but followed through on the words of forgiveness he pronounced on the cross. Rather than shaming, scolding or disowning his disciples the risen Jesus embraced them and worked to restore relationships. Because of the resurrection we have much more than a declaration of forgiveness from God; we have the living forgiving presence of Jesus.

The resurrection validates. It is God’s seal of approval on the way Jesus lived and thus a call to us to live the same way. It is a call to conversion to trust the radically different God revealed on the cross and a call, in the security of that relationship with God, to follow Jesus’ example and live as authentic humans. The resurrection not only calls, but also enables. The victory, forgiveness and validation of the resurrection form a new community without walls of exclusion

⁸ Jonathan Wilson, *God So Loved the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 97.

where all are invited to the table. Through being united with Jesus, not only in his death, but in his resurrection we have the possibility through the living Spirit of Jesus of joining with others in this new way of life.

Assessment

When I have asked groups for their assessment of this foundational story in comparison to the previous story they generally agree that using Jesus' life as the foundational narrative avoids the negatives of the penal substitution foundational narrative without sacrificing the positives of that story. The exception often mentioned is that the second story is not as short or as easily packaged as the first. This observation is true, but that is because penal substitution is in essence an image turned into a foundational narrative. We would expect a true foundational narrative to have more depth and breadth and thus be longer. One would not generally tell the whole foundational narrative in an evangelistic conversation or presentation.⁹ Rather parts of the narrative would be used depending on the situation. As a foundational narrative it supports a wide variety of images, and the evangelist can select what is the most appropriate image for a particular group or person. For instance, biblical imagery such as legal/justification, redemption, ransom, sacrifice, adoption, and triumph over death/sin/evil can be used to highlight and proclaim parts of the narrative.¹⁰ Since the narrative has layers of meaning it also can inspire and serve as the basis for a wide variety of contemporary metaphors. For instance a book I recently edited contains eighteen contextualized presentations of the atonement.¹¹ The breadth and diversity of metaphors in the book would not be possible if we had used the penal substitution model as our foundational narrative. The presentations build on aspects of Jesus' life, death and resurrection found in this alternative narrative, but not found in the penal substitution story. Would using Jesus' life as the foundational story lead to different results than using the penal substitution

⁹ One can, however, use the whole story itself as the basis for a presentation. See for instance my "Atonement: A Beach Parable for Youth" in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of Atonement*, Mark D. Baker, ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 84-95.

¹⁰ To observe how many of these biblical images are explained in ways that build off this foundational narrative see Mark D. Baker, "Ten Ways the Cross Saves: Brief explanations" available at: <http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement>.

¹¹ Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*.

model as the foundational story? To begin to answer that question we will turn again to concrete examples.

We began this article by observing how the penal substitution model is difficult to understand in some cultural settings, and how it can fail to connect with people who are not feeling a burden of guilt. The contrast between the two narratives, however, is not that one addresses guilt and the other does not. The alternative story based on Jesus' life also provides resources for bringing freedom from guilt. For example, my wife Lynn, who is a hospital chaplain, at times encounters people heavily burdened by guilt. At their initiative people have shared, sometimes with hopeless resignation and other times scornfully, that God would not forgive them because they had done unforgivable things. Lynn has responded to that statement by using elements from the alternative narrative. She first asks was the worst thing humans could do to God. She then tells them that humans have already done it. They had killed Jesus, God's Son, God in human flesh. And how had God responded? God did not lash out with violence. On the cross Jesus offered words of forgiveness to the killers and the resurrected Jesus lovingly forgave those who had abandoned and deserted him. Lynn invites patients to look at the cross as concrete evidence that God would forgive them too—no matter what they have had done.

A colleague of mine, Jon Isaak, recently returned to Congo to teach a theology course. He observed that his students responsibly took notes and did their assignments, but often appeared unengaged. He perceived that they experienced a disconnect between the theology they received from the West and their daily life, including their experiences of the role of evil as an active power. When it came time in the course to talk about the cross and salvation Jon used Colossians 2:15 for his central text—a statement of Jesus triumphing over the principalities and powers at the cross. The students came to life as they connected atonement theology to their confrontation with evil spirits. From that moment the atmosphere in the classroom changed. Since the cross is central in Christianity it should not surprise us that once these students saw the connection between the cross and their daily lives they also began to see greater connections between other theological themes and their lived reality. It would have been very difficult for Jon to have done this if he operated with penal substitution as his foundational story. Because he used Jesus' life as his foundational story Jon was

still able to explore traditional topics like forgiveness of sins, but also to highlight the cross and resurrection as victory over the powers, and connect with the Congolese.

Finally, how might using this alternative narrative help in a shame oriented culture? Rather than having to first teach the person to think like a Westerner, this narrative would allow the evangelist to present the gospel through relating it to shame. If you have thought of the cross primarily in terms of guilt it may be hard to conceptualize how it relates to shame, how one might evangelize talking about shame rather than guilt. In order to help you imagine how to do that I invite you to read, in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, four examples of presentations of the gospel that proclaim freedom from shame through the cross and resurrection.¹²

Mariela, a Peruvian, carried a heavy burden of shame as she suffered rejection by the people in her community. She did not feel guilty; she was being shamed not for something she had done, but because of the actions of someone close to her. Earlier this year she read a story I wrote about how the reality of Jesus' life, death and resurrection had transformed Alba, a Honduran woman,—freeing her from enslaving shame.¹³ Through reading that story Mariela met Jesus in a new way that freed her from her burden of shame and transformed her view of God. She now passionately shares with others the good news of God's love. If I still used the penal substitution model as my foundational story I would likely not have thought about the relationship between the cross and freedom from shame—let alone have been able to write an evangelistic booklet about it.

These few examples do not exhaust the variety of images and metaphors that are supported by and flow from this alternative narrative. I hope, however, they do help you imagine the rich benefits of replacing the narrow and limited foundational narrative provided by penal substitution with a broader and deeper narrative rooted in Jesus' life that includes not just the cross, but the resurrection as well.

¹² Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of Atonement*, see especially chapters 12-15.

¹³ Marcos Baker, "Salvación por la cruz: imágenes para hoy" available at: <http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/esp/articulos> ; in English: Mark D. Baker, "Saving Significance of the Cross in a Honduran Barrio," *Mission Focus Annual Review* 14 (2006) 59-81.