

Those who are not shocked when they first come across quantum theory cannot possibly have understood it.

This is the physicist Neils Bohr on quantum theory. In contrast to this, I'm not sure I've ever understood theories of atonement and am still shocked by the story of the Passion. Each year, as Lent unfolds, and we reach its grim climax in the Passion and death of Christ and the equally shocking denouement of the Resurrection, I find myself relieved that we can get back to 'normal', to the humdrum passage of the rest of the year's liturgy – as if any of it is less shocking. Indeed, it is as if the stark contrast here between death and life is the interpretative key to the rest of scripture and therefore too much to handle. Let's get back to telling the story all over again – perhaps it will make better sense next time. And it never does. Like Quantum Theory, it's perhaps never there to make sense according to our 'normal' or desired view of reality – one thing leading to another – dum-dum-dum – forever and ever. No, this is a stark intrusion into our desired hope that history – that life – just flows on. In this sense, death has no more lost its sting than life. Indeed, it begins to appear they are the same but we can no more see them as such at the same time as we can see both 'the position and momentum of a particle' at one and the same time. (Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty), and none of this theorising – all the many attempts to take the edge off the horror of the crucifixion as a sacrificial act – can lessen the shock. Like the mystery of God and, perhaps also like Quantum Theory, to say one understands is to say one does not.

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