CrossMark

Religious Studies (2021) **57**, 148–156 © Cambridge University Press 2019
doi:10.1017/S0034412519000507

Is the atonement necessary or fitting?

ANNE JEFFREY

Department of Philosophy, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97273, Waco, TX 76798, USA
e-mail: anne_jeffrey@baylor.edu

Abstract: **In her impressive *Atonement*, Eleonore Stump claims that her novel Marian theory of the atonement meets a desideratum for a successful theory that Aquinas's theory does not, namely, showing that Christ's passion and death are essential to the solution to the problem of human sin. Here I suggest reasons to side with Aquinas, who says that Christ's suffering and death are not necessary, but merely a fitting way of solving the problem. If the fittingness of Christ's passion and death is a good enough justification for it, we lose a motivation for adopting the Marian theory over the Thomistic one.**

In Christianity, the atonement is the event by which Jesus Christ saves human beings from sin. Eleonore Stump's impressive *Atonement* characterizes the problem which the atonement solves more specifically as the 'absence of unity or oneness between God and human beings' (Stump (2018), 15). Her book offers a detailed, carefully worked-out, unified answer to the questions 'What is the nature of the atonement, and how does it solve this problem?'

What emerges is the Marian theory of the atonement. Stump does not attempt to recapitulate historical views for a contemporary audience, though she does integrate ideas and arguments from figures in the Christian tradition. Rather, the new Marian theory draws together new insights from psychology and philosophy to offer an interpretation of the atonement on which Christ's life, passion and death remedy the guilt, shame, and stain of human sin and so enable us to be united with God.

Readers familiar with Stump's influential body of work adeptly interpreting and defending Aquinas may be surprised to see that she finds Aquinas's theory of the atonement wanting in important respects, and so strikes out on her own in constructing the Marian theory. She explains that, while she presupposes many of Aquinas's theological and metaphysical views, she is 'not either presupposing or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

defending Aquinas's interpretation', for her Marian theory latches onto and seeks to explain elements of the doctrine that Aquinas's interpretation leaves untouched (*ibid.*, 14). Yet, we can categorize the Marian theory as in the broadly Thomistic camp for two reasons. First, the Marian theory locates the main obstacle to solving the problem of human sin in human beings, as Aquinas's interpretation does, rather than in God, as Anselm's interpretation does. Second, much of Aquinas's world-view serves as the foundation on which Stump builds the Marian theory.

To what extent does the Marian theory expand on Aquinas's views, and to what extend does it disagree with them on the matter of the atonement? Stump embraces Aquinas's moral psychology, his account of love, his interpretation of key biblical passages, and his general account of the divine attributes. But she asserts that the Marian theory uniquely meets all the desiderata for a theory of the atonement and Aquinas's theory does not. Whether this entails outright disagreement with Aquinas depends on how Aquinas's account fails to meet the desiderata. If Aquinas's theory fails a desideratum by leaving an issue altogether unaddressed, then possibly the Marian theory simply develops one specification of the Thomistic interpretation. If Aquinas's theory involves some claim that *undermines* the theory's ability to meet a desideratum that the Marian theory meets, then clearly Stump will be in disagreement with Aquinas on at least that point.

Stump's chief complaint against Aquinas's interpretation of the atonement has to do with its failure to link Christ's passion and death with the remedy for human sin in the appropriate way. In her view, the Thomistic interpretation does not meet the desideratum of being 'able to explain why the passion and death of Christ are especially significant for the work of atonement while also explaining the significance of the details of Christ's life in that work' (*ibid.*, 379). I will call this the Significance Desideratum for convenience.

In these short comments, I wish to explore how we might view the difference between the Marian theory and Aquinas's interpretation using the Significance Desideratum. I will suggest that the Marian theory is either not a genuine competitor to Aquinas's theory or it does not clearly beat Aquinas's theory. The argument goes roughly as follows. First, there is a narrow and a capacious interpretation of Stump's desideratum. On the Narrow Reading, Aquinas's theory is not capable of meeting the desideratum and so the Marian theory, which does, is in competition with it rather than a species of it. Yet the defender of Aquinas's theory has good cause to question the very desideratum on which the Marian theory will come out ahead. On the capacious interpretation of the desideratum, Aquinas's theory can meet the desideratum in principle, but then a major motivation for adopting the Marian theory is lost. So, we end up needing either further reasons for adopting the Marian specification of Aquinas's interpretation of the atonement or further reasons for accepting the desideratum for a theory of the atonement that Stump assumes and Aquinas rejects.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Two readings of the Significance Desideratum

In the first chapter of *Atonement*, Stump neatly and succinctly characterizes the two dominant kinds of interpretation of the atonement: Anselmian and Thomistic. Each kind of interpretation faces 'perplexities and concerns; and at best, they also seem incomplete as solutions to the problem of human sin' (*ibid.*, 23). Stump illustrates the need for a relatively fresh take on the doctrine in part by cataloguing the major problems with extant interpretations; this sheds light on criteria for a successful theory of the atonement.

The Significance Desideratum emerges in light of Stump's concerns with Aquinas's theory of the atonement. Her chief complaint against Aquinas's theory targets his insistence that 'simpliciter and absolutely, it was possible for God to deliver human beings otherwise than by the passion of Christ' (Aquinas (1265–1274) [1981] [henceforth *Summa Theologica*], III.46.2 quoted in Stump (2018), 30). In virtue of holding such a position, she contends, his interpretation 'fails to connect [the solution for human sin] in any direct and satisfactory way to Christ's passion and death' (Stump (2018), 31). More specifically, she argues:

> If God is able and willing to forgive human beings or deliver them from their sinfulness without the payment of any debt or penalty, and if the problem of human sinfulness is solved by God's giving of grace, then it is hard to see what relation there is between Christ's passion and death and the giving of grace. At any rate, it seems clear that, on the Thomistic account, Christ's atoning work is not necessary for the giving of grace . . . In fact, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, on the Thomistic kind of interpretation, Christ's passion and death are irrelevant to the remedy for the problem of human sinfulness. (*ibid.*)

In other words, because Aquinas denies the metaphysical necessity of Christ's passion and death for saving humans from sin, his solution does not give Christ's passion and death proper place in the solution to the problem of human sin. A successful theory of the atonement, though, should explain the significance of Christ's passion and death for the remedy for sin such that these are connected in a 'direct and satisfactory way'. So Aquinas's theory falls short.

The Significance Desideratum admits of at least two readings, depending on how we understand what is required for an 'especially significant' or 'direct and satisfactory' connection between Christ's death and passion on the one hand and the solution to the problem of human sin on the other. On one reading, Christ's passion and death must be *necessary* to solving the problem of human sin in order to clear the bar of being especially significant for that work. Call this the Narrow Reading.

We see evidence for the Narrow Reading in various places throughout the book. First, it renders Stump's early argument against Aquinas's view valid without any further, unstated assumptions:

(1) Aquinas's theory holds that Christ's passion and death are not necessary for the giving of grace for the salvation of humans from sin.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(2) A successful theory of the atonement must show that Christ's passion and death are 'especially significant' for the work of salvation of humans from sin.
(3) Christ's passion and death are not 'especially significant' for the work of salvation of humans from sin unless they are necessary for the salvation of humans from sin. (Narrow Reading)
(4) Aquinas's theory is not a successful theory of the atonement.

Another place where the discussion lends credence to the Narrow Reading is in chapter 4. There, Stump begins by reminding us that the main issue for the Thomistic kind of interpretation is that 'it can appear that Christ's passion and death are not only gratuitous but even inefficacious', that is, not necessary and not effective (*ibid.*, 115). On the Marian theory, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit serves as part of the solution to the problem of the distance sin puts between us and God. She says that to discharge the burden of proof the Marian theory must show why 'the passion and death of Christ are *required* for the kind of union that involves the indwelling of the Holy Spirit' (*ibid.*, 118, my emphasis).

Additionally, by the final chapter, Stump makes clear that the Marian interpretation holds an advantage over others precisely because it posits the necessity of Christ's passion and death for the solution to the problem of human sin. In this connection she writes: 'The fact that, on the Marian interpretation, the passion and death of Christ are essential in one spiritual or metaphysical respect but not necessary in some psychological respects gives this interpretation the ability to handle the problem of exclusivism' (*ibid.*, 380). The problem of exclusivism to which Stump here refers receives treatment two chapters prior: traditional Christian doctrine holds Christ is the only way to salvation, and yet the practical implication of this would be that a loving God would keep people from union with God in virtue of not having beliefs about doctrines they may never have even encountered or heard of (*ibid.*, 282–283). The Marian theory manages to affirm the traditional Christian claim without the unfortunate practical implication. It upholds the claim because it says that Christ's passion and death is *metaphysically necessary* for salvation. It avoids the unfortunate implication by saying that one can know the person of Christ without knowing him under that description or having any explicit beliefs about Christ's salvific work. Thus, the Marian interpretation fares better than others on this score partly in virtue of asserting the metaphysical necessity of Christ's passion and death.

We have above three reasons to take the Narrow Reading of the Significance Desideratum, though there is more textual evidence than we have space here to discuss. The Narrow Reading puts Stump's view at odds with Aquinas on the atonement. For Aquinas denies (*ibid.*, 3) the metaphysical necessity, explicitly (and repeatedly) asserting that Christ *need not* have suffered and died on the cross in order to accomplish what the atonement accomplishes, namely, forgiveness of human sin and union of humans with God. Instead, Aquinas claims that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christ's passion and death were a *fitting* remedy for the human predicament. If a successful theory of the atonement must show Christ's passion and death to be necessary for salvation from sin, then Aquinas disqualifies his theory from success on Stump's criteria by outright denying that necessity relation.

On a Capacious Reading of the desideratum, however, we might think that a theory shows Christ's passion and death to be 'especially significant' for solving the problem of human sin just in case it identifies *some* viable justificatory relation between Christ's passion and death and the solution. This reading opens up the possibility that Stump is taking a slightly different direction than Aquinas does explicitly, but that there is no deep disagreement between them. For Aquinas's theory arguably offers such a justificatory relation – fittingness.

Fittingness justification

To evaluate the philosophical viability of the Capacious Reading, we first need an idea of how something besides metaphysical necessity for an end could serve as a justification for Christ's passion and death. Generally, when something justifies an action or event, the justification makes it the case that that that action or event should be done or occur. A justification answers the question 'why?' in its normative sense. Imagine there is a drought in Colorado and so trees in forests are quite likely to catch fire. We might call the fact that a fire ban will reduce the likelihood of forest fires a justification for the state's action of instituting a fire ban.

Necessary means to ends commonly come to mind when we think of examples of justification. A necessity justification is partly a necessity relation: a relation that holds when an action or event cannot come to be or cannot be what it is without the object that justifies it. In the case of the fire ban, reduction of the likelihood of fire in Colorado by some factor cannot be accomplished, let's say, without the state-wide ban. We should add something more to the description of necessity justification, though, to capture its normative aspect. The relation of one thing being a *sine qua non* for another thing holds between 53's being prime and the truth that 53 is not divisible by any numbers besides itself and one. But it would sound odd to say that the truth that 53 is indivisible by any numbers besides itself and one shows that 53 *should* be prime. In the Colorado fire ban example, what makes the fact that a ban will reduce the likelihood of forest fire a necessity *justification* is the further fact that the object being justified – the reduction of likelihood of a forest fire – is good. Schematically, when an action or event A is necessary for an outcome O and O is either very good or its absence would be a great evil, then O serves as a necessary justification of A.

Another way a justification can work, however, is via fittingness. In a fittingness justification, one object serves as justification for an event or action not due to its necessity for some other good or absence of an evil, but rather because of some sort of moral aesthetic quality of the relation itself and normative valence of one or other of the relata. For instance, suppose there are two possible ways to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

accomplish the good of expressing care for a mendicant: offering regular money to her and offering a business card and connection to help her gain employment. Suppose the latter action is not strictly necessary for the good outcome of the beneficiary gaining X number of dollars per month. Still we can say that the outcome justifies the giving of the business card and employment help because this action is better than giving money, although they accomplish the same good outcome. Perhaps the manner of accomplishing the outcome in the case of helping with employment lends the mendicant more dignity or has the added benefit of creating a lasting relationship, and so has one of these goods as a by-product. That would make the justification a kind of fittingness justification.

Fittingness, as I mentioned, carries with it a moral-aesthetic connotation. To take an example from a biblical text, consider the woman who anoints Jesus with alabaster perfume during a meal at the house of Simon in Bethany (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8). At this time, Jesus is very close to his death. While there were undoubtedly myriad ways to show Jesus love and devotion, and to honour him, this woman chooses to do so quite expensively. What she does is not necessary for honouring and loving Jesus, and in fact, onlookers complain that it is gratuitous or wasteful, as the expensive perfume could have been sold and money given to the poor. Jesus memorably replies, 'Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a *beautiful* thing to me' (Matthew 26:10, my emphasis). In fact, it seems that because what she does is not necessary for accomplishing the good of love and honour Jesus finds the action so valuable. He goes on to say that the anointing has the additional effect of anointing him for burial. Though the woman's action is extravagant, and not necessary for either the good of preparing Jesus for burial (this could have been done in private) or honouring and loving him, the action is normatively justified on account of its accomplishing goods in a beautiful way.

Aquinas's fittingness theory versus the Marian theory

Aquinas defines the fittingness justification, in contrast with what I called a necessity-justification relation, as follows: 'Something is said to be necessary for some end in two ways; in one way, without which something could not be, just as food is necessary for the conservation of human life; in another way, through which the end is obtained more agreeably and fittingly' (*Summa Theologica*, III.46). He argues that while Christ's life, passion, and death are not strictly necessary to repair human nature because 'God through his omnipotent force was able to repair human nature in multiple other ways', they were necessary in the sense that they were necessary to do so more agreeably or fittingly. This is so in part because they simultaneously accomplish so many other wonderful goods that God merely willing repair of humans through forgiveness, for instance, would not. Though God would do no injustice in freeing humans from sin without punishment or penalty, God's freeing us through suffering punishment in God's own

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

son displays simultaneous mercy and that the system of justice is ultimately good, able to be used to prevail against those who would exploit it. And that narrative has an intangible moral beauty.

On the Capacious Reading, the fittingness justification can indeed make sense of the special significance of Christ's passion and death. The problem with the Capacious Reading is that it undermines what Stump has called the 'major problem' with Aquinas's view, or at least renders it a *merely apparent* problem. Thus, we are left with less reason to think that we need a fresh start in a theory of the atonement, and the Marian interpretation seems not to be a competitor but rather a species of Aquinas's interpretation.

If we adopt the Narrow Reading on which Aquinas's theory competes with the Marian theory, taking seriously the idea of a fittingness justification calls into question whether the Marian theory comes out ahead. For if fittingness serves as a justification relation that does not reduce to necessity, then why, without further argument, would we assume that Christ's passion and death must be necessary for solving the problem of human sin for those events to be normatively justified? Some of the most sublimely good things – from the gift of lipstick to prisoners of a concentration camp to the pouring of perfume on Jesus's feet – are not necessary but rather fitting. If this is right, then it would hardly be surprising if this is the sense in which Christ's passion and death bear significance for solving the problem of human sin.

Worries about fittingness and the atonement

At least two considerations might militate against the fittingness kind of justification in Aquinas's model. First, as Stump contends, it makes Christ's passion and death a gratuitous means of accomplishing salvation, and a gruesome one at that. Aquinas says as much: 'Christ's Passion was not only a sufficient but a superabundant atonement for the sins of the human race' (*Summa Theologica*, III.48.2). Second, 'if Christ's passion and death are gratuitous, then it is unjust on God's part to require that Christ suffer and die' (Stump (2018), 30).

While Aquinas does not take the first issue to be a problem for his view, we might. Sometimes it is fine to take the hard road when the easy road to one's end lies open. For instance, I might drive my son home via a route that leads by the bay, but adds ten minutes to our trip, just to see the sun setting over the water. This decision to take the less efficient route hardly seems open to criticism. But if we up the stakes or the degree of inefficiency, pain, or difficulty of taking the hard road, we can find decisive reasons against taking the hard road when the easy road lies open. Suppose I am driving my son to the hospital because he is injured and in severe pain; in that case, shouldn't I take only the time necessary to arrive at our destination? With the atonement, we might think the stakes are so high or the suffering of Christ is so severe that there is something inappropriate about Christ's humiliating death if it could have been avoided and the end of salvation still achieved.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The second objection is related to this first one. On Aquinas's view, Christ's suffering and death were not imposed on him unwillingly by another, but instead chosen as the means of salvation by the Godhead of which Christ is a part. So God the Father does not violate a demand of justice by commanding Christ to suffer and die when doing so is unnecessary. For one, it becomes (contingently) necessary by God's choosing this means in the beginning and thus foreknowing that it will occur. For another, Christ not only submits to this choice but is an active agent in it in the beginning in the Second Person of the Trinity.

It is easy to come up with examples where taking the hard road is objectionable when a person's doing so imposes some externality on others – for instance, taking the bayside route when it results in more agony for my son. It is more difficult to criticize a person who herself freely chooses the hard road but inflicts difficulty or pain only on herself, and does so to achieve some other good end. In fact, we admire the parent who runs a marathon pushing their child with special needs in a jogger so she can enjoy the race, the host who spends a day in the kitchen preparing a beautiful meal for guests even if he can afford to take them to a gourmet local restaurant or they would be happy with a less elaborate meal, the friend who donates a kidney to a loved one though there may be other matches in the offing and dialysis available in the interim. Perhaps Christ's eventual willingness to suffer and die makes the atonement more like these cases than that of my taking my son to the hospital via the longer bay route.

The other thing to say in reply to the second objection is that Christ's suffering and death were precisely orchestrated to do no violence to his divine nature while allowing him to identify with all human suffering to bring about further good. Aquinas argues that some sufferings would have been inappropriate for Christ to endure because certain bodily defects are 'repugnant to the perfections of knowledge and grace' (*Summa Theologica*, III.14.4). These include defects or pains generated by sinful behaviour, like incapacitation or a hangover from binge drinking. But Christ does take on the sufferings that can be identified as universal in the human experience: 'friends abandoning him, in His reputation, from the blasphemies hurled at Him; in His honour and glory, from the mockeries and insults heaped upon Him; in things, for He was despoiled of His garments; in His soul, from sadness, weariness, and fear; in His body, from wounds and scourgings' (*ibid.*, III.46.5). In doing so, Christ inspires hope in those undergoing any of these classes of human sufferings, can join in solidarity with the suffering, and demonstrates his love for humans by experiencing the greatest pain possible (*ibid.*, III.46.6). Aquinas also identifies further ends accomplished by death on a cross, specifically – from the symbolic power afforded by the structure of the cross (here he follows Augustine) to the narrative cohesion of sin coming into the world by fruit from a tree and being conquered by death on a tree – and by death in the time and place of Christ's death (*ibid.*, III.46.4, 9, 10).

In the end, we might do better to think of the Thomistic theory of the atonement as taking for granted the beauty of the narrative of Christ's life, passion, and death,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and then retrospectively shedding light on connections, symbolism, metaphysical, social, and psychological truths that contribute to its beauty. It is not a story whose moral is that things must have unfolded this way. Rather it is a story in part so moving because of the underlying indeterminism and the elegance of what God chose to do in the light of the realities and possibilities that lay before him.[1]

References

Aquinas, T. (1265–1274) [1981] *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols, Fathers of the English Dominican Province (trs) (Westminster MD: Christian Classics).
Stump, E. (2018) *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Note

1. I am grateful to Alicia Finch, Gideon Jeffrey, Allison Krile Thornton, Mark Murphy, and Meghan Page for discussion of the ideas in these comments.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000507 Published online by Cambridge University Press