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Atonement: an overview

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Abstract: The doctrine of the atonement is the distinctive doctrine of Christianity. Over the course of many centuries of reflection, highly diverse interpretations of the doctrine have been proposed. In the context of this history of interpretation, Eleonore Stump considers the doctrine afresh with philosophical care in her book *Atonement*. This article is an overview of the book.

The doctrine that Christ has saved human beings from their sins, with all that that salvation entails, is the distinctive doctrine of Christianity. Over the course of many centuries of reflection on the doctrine, highly diverse understandings have been proposed, many of which have also raised strong positive or negative emotions in those who have contemplated them. In this book, in the context of this history of interpretation, I consider this theological doctrine with philosophical care. The book is therefore an exercise in philosophical theology. Just as philosophy of biology or philosophy of physics begins with the data of the relevant science and employs philosophical methods on that data, so philosophical theology takes as data theological views accepted within a certain religious tradition and examines those views philosophically.

The result of that methodology in this book is a relatively novel interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement; taken as a whole, the interpretation I argue for as most coherent and satisfactory is not one that has been in evidence much or at all within the history of Christian theology. And so the question arises whether innovation in theology through philosophical examination ought to be rejected as inappropriate.

This is a question that has been addressed by others in the history of Christian thought already, and for good reason. Some major doctrines of Christianity were codified centuries after the death of Christ, so that it must be possible for there to be some innovative development in orthodox Christian theological doctrine in consequence of philosophical and theological reflection. Aquinas himself maintains both

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that all theological knowledge was given to the apostles and also that there is progression in the understanding of theological truths over the course of years (*ST*, II-II, 174.6 and 176.1.1; *In Eph.* I, lec. 3).[1] On his way of conceiving the issue, all theological wisdom was given to the apostles, but at least some of that wisdom was in bud. On his view, the task of subsequent generations is to contribute to unfolding that bud. My project falls within this understanding of one of the tasks of philosophical theology.

Of course, even if this view of Aquinas's is right, there is still a question of the criteria by which one distinguishes the development of doctrine from the invention of heresy or something worse. John Henry Newman, who was concerned with this question, wrote a book attempting to spell out such criteria (Newman (2017)). Newman's criteria have not been persuasive to many people (see McInroy (2018)[2]); but his general approach, which emphasizes continuity with creedal statements and consistency with other doctrines accepted as orthodox, seems to me intelligible and sensible. By those lights, what is innovative in the interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement that I argue for in this book meets Newman's tests. In addition, as I make explicit, fidelity to biblical narratives is also a criterion for acceptable interpretations of the doctrine of the atonement. Although there are contested interpretations of virtually all the biblical texts central to the doctrine, I show that the interpretation of the doctrine I argue for is compatible with at least one reasonable interpretation of each of the most central of these texts.

Finally, the account of the atonement I argue for is squarely within the Thomist tradition; that is, it rejects nothing in the Thomist tradition but only develops it where it is incomplete. It is true that I reject the Anselmian interpretation of the doctrine in all its varieties, and it may seem to some readers that this rejection is sufficient to render my account worrisome in its novelty, since the Anselmian interpretation has been dominant for some centuries. But here it is worth noticing that Anselm himself rejected with dispatch virtually the whole of the Patristic tradition of interpretation of the doctrine. Without much worry over novelty, Anselm himself overturned interpretations that had been dominant for centuries. One might say, then, that in rejecting Anselmian interpretations of the doctrine, I am not so much introducing novelty as rejecting the novelty Anselm himself introduced.

For all these reasons, then, although my interpretation is innovative, it still counts as orthodox or as derived from claims that are uncontestedly orthodox.

The central question of the book is just the nature of the atonement. That is, on the doctrine of the atonement, what is it that is accomplished by the passion and death of Christ (or the life, passion, and death of Christ)?

Whatever exactly it is, it is supposed to include a solution to the problem of the post-Fall human condition, with its guilt and shame. I outline the problems of guilt and shame and of the human liability to moral wrongdoing. And because it is not possible to examine the doctrine of the atonement without relying on some account of ethics and value theory, I describe the ethics and value theory

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presupposed in the remainder of the book, namely, the ethics and value theory of Aquinas. In its normative ethics, the Thomistic theory is built around the virtues; but it is a decidedly non-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and it privileges relationship and the second-personal among the things it values most. Its most central virtue is love, and all the rest of its normative ethical theory rests on this virtue. I argue that Aquinas's account of love also explains the nature of guilt and shame and the distinction between them. In addition, I show the implications of that account of love for an understanding of forgiveness, of satisfaction or penance, and of another evaluative notion important for the doctrine of the atonement, namely, the notion of the stain on the soul.

In all its varieties, the Anselmian kind of interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement supposes that God is required by his honour or justice or some other element of his goodness to receive reparation, penance, satisfaction, or penalty to make up for human wrongdoing as a condition for forgiving sinful human beings and accepting reconciliation with them. On the Anselmian kind of interpretation, God does forgive human beings and does accept reconciliation with them – but only because Christ makes amends to God for human sin. God's forgiveness and reconciliation with human beings are therefore dependent on God's receiving reparation from Christ for human wrongdoing. Using the Thomistic account of love, I make a detailed argument that the Anselmian kind of interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement, in all its varieties, is irremediably flawed and cannot be salvaged.

With the Anselmian kind of interpretation bracketed, I turn to the issue of the goal of the atonement, namely, the union of love between God and human beings. Because there is mind and will in God, it is possible for God to be not just present at a space but also present with and to an embodied human person occupying that space. In addition, the assumption of a human nature in the incarnation ensures that an eternal God is never without the ability to empathize with human persons and to be present with them in the way that empathy and mind-reading enable. Most significantly, in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God can be more powerfully present in love to a human person than any human being could be. For a union in love between God and a human person, however, something more is needed than God's presence to that human person; and I argue that, on Christian doctrine, the final goal for the atonement is actually a union which is a mutual indwelling between God and human beings in grace.

Sustained philosophical examination of experiences that could explain the cry of dereliction from the cross pushes towards an interpretation of the cry according to which during the crucifixion the psyches of all human beings pour into the human mind of Christ, which is open to them in his suffering and dying. This openness on Christ's part to all human psyches is his contribution to what is needed on God's side for mutual indwelling between God and human persons.

What is needed on the human side for mutual indwelling is a person's surrender to God and God's love. Once a person's will is in this state of surrender, the Holy

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Spirit comes to indwell in that person, so that the circuit begun by Christ on the cross is completed and there is mutual indwelling. In order to illuminate the role of Christ's passion and death in helping to bring a person to this surrender, I examine the biblical narratives of the temptations of Christ. Detailed reflection on these stories shows that Christ's passion and death are a most promising way for God to help a human person to the surrender which is the necessary condition for the Holy Spirit to indwell in a person.

Christ's passion and death therefore have a dual role in helping to bring about union in love between God and a human person. On the cross, Christ unilaterally enables human indwelling in God for all human beings; and, in his passion and death, Christ also provides the best aid for human beings to open to God's indwelling in them.

Once there is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a person, the whole process of justification and sanctification can get started. In justification, God infuses operative grace into the will, which is then moved to faith. Faith includes a second-order state of will in which a person repudiates his own evil and longs for God and God's goodness. With that global second-order will in place, the process of sanctification commences. In the process of elucidating justification and sanctification, I show that they are both essentially relational and second-personal, and so is their goal.

Furthermore, the process of bringing a person to union with God ultimately has not just these two parts but one more. In addition to justification and sanctification, there is also perseverance. On Christian theology, both the rite of the Eucharist and the experience of suffering have the power to support perseverance throughout the life of a person in grace. In consequence, there is a connection between theodicy and the doctrine of the atonement that is as intelligible as it is powerful.

Because the atonement is meant to solve the problems of shame and guilt, I then test the interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement that I have argued for by considering its implications for shame and guilt. I canvass shame in its major varieties and show that each of these kinds of shame has a defeat in the atonement of Christ, on the interpretation I have argued for. I also consider guilt in all its elements and argue that, on this interpretation of the doctrine, the atonement can also remedy all human guilt.

I conclude by examining the way in which this interpretation of the doctrine fits with well-known biblical texts about the atonement of Christ, especially those texts that have seemed to privilege the Anselmian kind of interpretation. The most notable of such texts are those having to do with sacrifice, but I also consider briefly some of the endlessly debated passages in the Epistle to the Romans and one of the passages on the suffering servant in Isaiah. I show the way in which these much-discussed biblical texts are compatible with the interpretation of the doctrine I have argued for. The book ends with a final reflection on the implications of the biblical line that God is love.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Thomas Joseph White for these references.
2. I am grateful to Benjamin J. King for calling my attention to the literature critical of Newman's criteria and to this essay in particular.

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