

DIVINE UNION WITH AND WITHOUT THE GOSPEL: A PROBABILISTIC PROBLEM OF PLURALISM

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As fire sets other things on fire, so God's love enables human spirits to blaze in love too, by consuming in them what is ruined in self-willed loneliness and leaving the loveliness that is left in them to flourish in beauty which is like God's own (Stump 2018, Ch. 12, p. 28).

In the final words of her concluding reflection of her rich and varied book on the Atonement, Eleonore Stump says that on the view explained and defended over the course of the book “the atonement of Christ is the unquenchable love of God offered to all the suffering, the self-alienated, and the evil, so that in their own beauty they might be at peace with themselves and with others and at home in the love of God.” This concise statement identifies the atonement with a mode of God's love. It is the love of God offered. It is offered to the broken. It is offered to them for a specific reason: *so that* they might rest in a multifaceted self- and other-directed peace. Here, then, the *telos* of the atonement is peace; peace with God, peace with our fellow human beings, with creation as such, and, finally, with ourselves. A main thesis prior to this is that God's forgiveness is (and I *think* this is the is of identity or constitution) a mode of God's love as directed to fallen human creatures. Forgiveness has the power to alleviate guilt and shame, which are sources of anxiety and clearly barriers to peace. God's love, then, aims at bringing the peace package just mentioned. Since love aims at the good of the beloved as well as union with the beloved, peace should be identified as one of the chief goods God aims at for humans. And since God has made us for himself, our hearts are restless until they rest in him. Thus, peace and union with God are necessarily coextensive.

I. WHAT IS THE WORK OF THE PASSION WITHIN THE PLAN OF ATONEMENT?

A prominent part of the answer to this question is that it is a sort of instrumental cause of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is this indwelling that affects the human psyche most directly, bringing about not just a *state* of peace but the *sense* of peace, what we might call *being at peace*. This is a feeling that few of us have very often, as far as I can tell. For me, it exists only in fairly fleeting moments, usually involving my children, nature, or my children in nature. A paradigm case of my being at peace, then, is the family gathered around a campfire, watching my older daughter reading to the younger children. Each listener will have their own example, and you know well what I'm talking about. We feel its absence palpably amidst the blooming, buzzing confusion of the hectic workweek. We desire this great good greatly. So it is no surprise then that our having it is a central object of God's love, for God's love aims at our good.

It is this good, together with its compliment the indwelling of human minds in the mind of Christ, that would justify God in allowing Jesus to suffer on the Cross, if in so suffering he brought us to the surrender that throws open the doors of the psyche in warm welcome of the Holy Spirit. Since the Passion is not logically necessary for this to happen, the rule of inference at must be something like Anselm's maxim: *potuit, deuit, ergo fecit*. I will take the possibility for granted and focus on the appropriateness, what makes the Passion “meet” for the occasion of drawing people to God's love in a posture of surrender.

II. "AND I, IF I BE LIFTED UP FROM THE EARTH, WILL DRAW ALL MEN UNTO ME."

This is a crucially important subject to look at closely for two reasons. First, the satisfaction of the guiding desiderata of Stump's project are all structured together in a way that points directly to the Passion's ability to trigger the surrender that leads to the indwelling of the Spirit that replaces the sense of shame and guilt with that of peace (my focus here is on the phenomenological aspects of guilt, shame, and peace, not the juridical notions, important as they may be). And this is, in turn, important because it is plausibly a great enough good to justify (perhaps together with other related goods) the suffering of Christ and even the sufferings with which Christ was identifying.

Now, Stump says that "the work of Christ [by which she means primarily the passion] is actually most needed in eliciting that person's surrender to God's love and grace" (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 1) and that it is the "best means for facilitating human surrender to God" (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 2). One option for understanding these phrases that is *not* on the table for Stump is Abelard's "Moral Influence" view. Stump defines Abelardianism thusly:

Christ's passion and death mediate human salvation *only* by serving as an exemplar of right conduct (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, n3, emphasis added).

I think the word "only" is doing most of the work here, for Christ's life *is* clearly an exemplar of right conduct. Furthermore, the exemplar *calls to us*, as it were. In Christ's passion there is an ideal of surrender that evokes our own surrender. There is a spiritual magnetism that is more than merely a subsisting good example, it has genuine causal influence. There is in this view, I suggest, the makings of a narrative-based, non-heretical, quasi-Abelardianism whereby the chief efficacy of the passion is its power to evoke in us the mindset required for surrender to God's love. The answer to *Cur Deus homo?* is in its unique effectiveness to bring us into the life of God.

This is my gloss on Stump's claim that the passion is "best means for facilitating human surrender to God." It is a means for facilitation because of its role in "eliciting that person's surrender to God's love and grace." This surrender is what enables the indwelling of the of the Holy Spirit in the believer. The other direction of indwelling—the indwelling of the human psyche in the mind of Christ—is accomplished unilaterally by Christ. This asymmetry is important for my concerns concerning possible pluralistic problems. For to elicit any kind of reaction at all, one must be aware of it.

In the book, Stump gives considerable attention to two events in the life of Christ that don't usually draw much careful analysis: the cry of dereliction and the temptations of Jesus. Both events are fairly enigmatic without much context in Scripture, yet Stump magnificently draws fascinating connections between these events and the broader story of the mission of Christ's life on Earth. Nevertheless, the way in which Jesus' temptations serve the larger picture remains quite tenuous in my mind. For though the interpretations are consistent with the text and consonant with tradition, they remain only optional ways of seeing them.

However, it strikes me that the real story is the story itself, the *plot*, if you will; what Dorothy Sayers called the "drama in the dogma": God the creator of the universe and the bestower of all good gifts on those little gods called humans is betrayed by them. As they turn their backs on him, they fall into further and further discord with one another and within their own souls. Rather than wiping them out or turning his back on them, God does the opposite: he joins them. He experiences, in the way God can, the suffering and humiliation of fallen humanity—"He became sin on our behalf." As Stump says "If there is any aid to quell the resistance of a broken and lonely human heart, isn't real suffering and humiliation on the part of God himself a *very good* way to do so?" (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 29, emphasis added). I agree with this deeply, but to have ones resistance quelled by the story of God's own suffering and humiliation, they must be *aware* of that story.

A modest digression will treat an interesting feature of her claim just above and lead right back in to the main point. Just a bit earlier, as I noted above, she says it is the "*best* means for facilitating human surrender to God" (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 2, emphasis added). And afterwards, she goes on to say it is

the “*most suitable* remedy, the one *most likely* to work, for a heart that needs to melt” (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 30, emphasis added). Then later on it is called “*a most promising way*” (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 45, twice). So, does Stump need the thesis that it is the *best*? Is there good reason to believe it *is* the best? The answer in need of most defense would be that God *needs* to use the best method *and* he did so. The answer easiest to support would be that God only needs to use a *sufficiently good* method and that the life of Jesus was sufficiently good. A hybrid option is that God didn’t need to use the best method, but that he did anyway. The question here isn’t yet the issue of exclusivism vs inclusivism, whether *each person* must be saved in the best way, but, rather, whether the best *way* to do it must be offered. As I say, I would like to hear from Eleonore more and more explicitly about her dispositions here.

One might worry about it being the best method because one might worry about there *being* a best method. Maybe there are infinitely many options all equally good or incommensurable. One might worry about it being the best (or even sufficiently good) because of all the violence involved. I have these worries myself, though they don’t, for me add up to any doubt.

Here are two related problems. The first is that though it *does* strike me as the greatest story ever told, I wish I could defend this claim better. I think of features of stories that make them great, and things come to mind like this: Someone great does something kind to someone in need who can’t help them. Well, by this standard, the Gospel is superlative. That than which no greater can be conceived makes an act of supreme kindness for a people who can do literally nothing for him. Can a further case be made along similar lines, a cumulative case?

The second problem is that the Gospel *doesn’t* strike some people as the greatest story ever told. Some think it is a *terrible* story. Bertrand Russell expresses this sentiment in *Why I am Not a Christian*, some contemporary theologians see it awash with violence in an objectionable way, some just see it as inferior to more exciting stories and are unable to connect with it. Fueling this last issue is the expansion of blockbuster movies with fantastic CGI special effects. When the Passion *is* made into a gripping movie, as in Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, it can be almost unwatchable for many.

Therefore, as a master of narrative analysis, I would love to hear what advice Stump has to artists and expositors to translate the drama of the dogma into terms that are able to grip the modern viewer. Or is this culture simply unable to do it? Must we somehow work first to bring the culture around in some way before there is even a chance of the bulk of westerners being able to narratively connect with the Gospel. The extended quote from Newman on p. 39 which I found incredibly evocative and considered holding up as a model is “florid” and “melodramatic.” Thus it seems we may need a battery of artists and expositors writing from a variety of aesthetic perspectives. How do we philosophers do our part in inspiring this radical return to wonder at the Gospel?

One thing I think I learned from the book that helped me a lot came only after repeated readings. I confess that at first I found it odd how much time was spent meditating upon what previously seemed to me relatively obscure events such as the temptations of Christ, his Gethsemane trial, and his cry of dereliction. I think now that my puzzlement was the result of trying, and failing, to see any *logical* or *doctrinal* connections between these events and other events of his life as well as his mission as a whole. Even though I’m not fully convinced of the particulars of Eleonore’s interpretations of the related texts, what I was drawn into was the Christ phenomenology, Jesus mental life, what it was like for him to go through these events. Merely by raising and delving so deeply into the question of *what it was like* for Jesus to face these temptations, to struggle with the knowledge of what he must face or to suffer in a way to illicit the cry of dereliction, merely raising and delving into these questions so deeply drew me into the inner life of Christ and I think I learned that even though none of these particulars might have been a *necessary* part of the mission, they were the drama that did *in fact* unfold, they were *his* story, history of the highest drama. Their connection is not in the first instance *theological* but rather they are concentrated points in the narrative of a particular life, a life of a man with a human mind [or “range of consciousness”] feeling particular things. In trying to figure out why there was so much focus on these discreet details, I was recalled to the man whose life they were the details of.

One thing Stump does that helps one focus on the power of the details is to ask us to consider, for certain details, how the effect of the story would have been different if those details were different. The key lesson here has been that Jesus—Jesus himself, not primarily something he teaches or even a teaching about him—is the answer. But if Jesus is the answer, what of those who have never heard of him? If the drama of his life is the best way to draw the sinner to repentance, do the unevangelized have to settle for second best?

Stump has no truck with either Pelagianism on the one hand nor exclusivism on the other. She notes one historically prominent way of reconciling the centrality of Christ with non-exclusivism (at least in the Catholic tradition). The way in question is to have a *de re* connection to God in the absence of *de dicto* knowledge. She notes, quite correctly, that people with no biblical knowledge at all can have a profound connection with God. She refers to Aquinas as holding the view that “some pagans before the time of Christ might have had implicit faith in Christ in virtue of trusting God to be a rewarder of those who seek him” (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 44). Aquinas phrases implicit faith as “believing in Divine providence, since they believed that God would deliver mankind in whatever way was pleasing to Him” (ST II-II, Q2, Art 7, ad 3).

However, this by itself doesn’t reconcile inclusivism with the centrality of Jesus. I suggested above that an implication of Stump’s view was that the contingent historical details of the Passion matter. Of the perhaps infinite varieties of particularized realizations of the general plan of salvation, only a rather narrow range allow for the kind of evocative story necessary to open the sinner to the holy spirit’s work in bringing peace to the psyche by re-organizing it—in cooperation with the human will—around the good. If this is so, then there are two problems with Stump’s attempt to reconcile this with non-exclusivism. The first is the one just hinted at: the life of Jesus is nowhere contained in believing God to be a rewarder of those who seek him and certainly not in the belief that God would deliver in whatever way was pleasing to him. I’m not doubting that the phrase “whatever way was pleasing to him” could plausibly—at least for an eternalist—constitute a definite description picking out the actual life of Jesus. My point is that the *de re* route by definition has no ability to tap into the narrative power of the life of Jesus to evoke the love response.

The non-Christian Jewish response presents a special problem. Stump quotes some very moving lines of poetry by Yehuda Halevi that she points out clearly “manifest a knowledge and love of God” (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 45). Here again we have the original problem but also a further problem. Stump notes “there is no reason for supposing that Halevi had any developed theological beliefs about Christ” but that doesn’t go far enough. There is every reason to believe that insofar as he was aware of the details of the life of Jesus, he was *not* relevantly moved by the it. Indeed, he might have found it (and many have found it) objectionable on the whole, even blasphemous. [Here I must pause and recognize that some in the Christian tradition have used Jewish rejection of Jesus’ messianic claims as an excuse for violence against Jews. To what extent is debatable, but *whenever* it happens, it is *wholly* un-Christian and worthy of condemnation by all.] To put it coarsely, it’s not obvious that a *de re* connection to God can be reliably counted upon to outweigh *de dicto* rejection.

Before moving on to what Stump has to say to a version of these objections, I want to register some concern about the following inference. She writes “Furthermore, as the second person of the Trinity, Christ is God; and so love of what really is God is also love of Christ” (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 45). The validity of this inference is far from clear to me. “Christ is God” is made true by the hypostatic union of the human nature with the divine nature, but the second person of the trinity is not essentially hypostatically united to a human nature. This is not a conclusive objection, but it does make me hesitate to endorse the inference.

But regardless of the details of the *de re* approach, Stump avows that “One can grant the line that there is no greater love than that shown by God in Christ’s passion and death and still hold that in many other ways, explicitly or subtly and beneath the level of consciousness, God makes a person feel God’s love enough to help a person yield to it” (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 45). The question, though, is whether all these ways are equally effective, and whether the love of God is consistent with differing effectiveness.

[B]eauty can start the motion whose endpoint of rest is love of God (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 45)

Stump's anti-exclusivist position is the common one that "A person *can* come to Christ without accepting specifically Christian theological claims" (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 46). But this doesn't say anything with respect to *how likely* it is. If any means other than the passion of Christ is second best, then we have a sort of "exclusivism by degrees." Think of the ordinary doctrine of exclusivism as simply the terminus of a spectrum. Now move just down the scale to nearly-complete-exclusivism: a very low but non-zero probability that one can be saved without de dicto Christian belief. Further down the scale there is a significant chance but still much lower than via de dicto belief. Then there is the balancing point of its being equally likely either way. At this end of the spectrum, knowledge of the Gospel seems irrelevant (literally statistically irrelevant), but any other location on the spectrum partakes of some degree or other of exclusivism. Excluding the view that hearing the Gospel

In Stump's estimation, exclusivism is "incompatible with the love of God" (Stump 2018, Ch. 8, p. 44). I couldn't agree more. But I'm hard pressed to see how *any* degree of exclusivism is compatible with the love of God. How could a loving God allow any historical contingency such as place or time of birth to affect the probability of one's eternal destiny? Is there any way to address this without making the Gospel irrelevant (statistically)?

Note well that even if the passion is necessary for the indwelling of human psyches in the mind of Christ so that there is no one for whom Christ's passion and death do not play an essential in their union with God, the probabilistic problem of pluralism remains. For the question I'm raising isn't whether the passion of Christ is necessary for our salvation (whether we are aware of it). The question I'm raising isn't one of what is or isn't *necessary* but one concerning *relative sufficiency*. Excluding the cases in which hearing the Gospel is a *disadvantage*, we may illustrate the problem in the following spectrum.

Let S = One is saved. Let B = One explicitly believes the Gospel. The locution "Pr(x|y)" is read as "The probability of x given y".

$$\Pr(S|\sim B) = \Pr(S|B) - \Pr(S|\sim B) = .75(\Pr(S|B)) - \Pr(S|\sim B) = .5(\Pr(S|B)) - \Pr(S|\sim B) = .25(\Pr(S|B)) - \Pr(S|\sim B) = 0$$

On the far right, we have the fully exclusivist view that one *cannot* be saved without explicitly believing the Gospel. On the far left, we have the radically inclusivist view that it doesn't matter (statistically) whether or not one explicitly believes the Gospel. In between, we have a continuum of intermediary positions. So now consider the position just a tiny bit to the left of full exclusivism: that $\Pr(S|\sim B) = .01$. This is, technically, a species of inclusivism, since it allows for the *possibility* of someone being saved without explicit belief in the Gospel. Nevertheless, it is very nearly as hateful as full exclusivism. Indeed, the natural position is that it is 99% as bad!

Now start from the left side. Where the two probabilities are exactly equal, we have the radically inclusivist thesis that explicit belief in the Gospel is statistically irrelevant to salvation. Now go a very little bit to the right: the view that $\Pr(S|\sim B) = .99(\Pr(S|B))$. That is very nearly as hateful as the view that explicit belief in the Gospel is irrelevant. Indeed, the natural position is that it is 99% as hateful!

Both ends of the spectrum seem obviously unacceptable. Yet the middle ground hardly seems a golden mean. The idea that explicit belief doubles one's chances at salvation seems to place far too much benefit on the chance event of one's hearing the Gospel. Or, conversely, it confers far too much of a disadvantage on those who, by pure chance, live at a time or a place where they don't even hear the Gospel. So it doesn't appear that there is anywhere on the spectrum that one can both honor the efficacy of the Gospel story, as Stump clearly does, and also avoid a hateful exclusivism.

Stump's position (see Ch 5 on the cry of dereliction) is that on the Cross, Christ takes in the psyche of every person (or perhaps takes "in" "them" in some hard-to-comprehend way), so that all men dwell in him. This makes the Passion *metaphysically* relevant (and gives it "accidental necessity"), but Stump has been at great pains in the book to justify the Passion because of its *motivational* relevance, the "drama in the dogma" that draws people to repentance. But this can only be effectual in those who are aware of the story. The Greatest Story Ever Told motivates only those to whom it is told.

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