

THE ILL-MADE KNIGHT AND THE STAIN ON THE SOUL¹

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Abstract. One of the main tasks for an account of the Christian doctrine of the atonement is to explain how and in what ways the salvifically relevant work of Christ heals the damage wrought by human sin on our souls, our relationships with one another, and our relationship with God. One kind of damage often neglected in philosophical treatments of the atonement, but discussed at some length in Eleonore Stump's forthcoming *Atonement*, is what she, following St. Thomas Aquinas, calls the stain on the soul. The stain on the soul comprises the "moral leftovers" of serious evil, damage to the soul that goes beyond the guilt, shame, and separation from God brought about by sin and that lingers in a person even after she has repented and been forgiven. In this paper, I critically examine Stump's account of how the work of Christ deals with the problem of the stain on the soul. I offer reasons for thinking that if the stain is exactly as she describes it, then it is indelible; and then I explore possible ways forward for her account of the atonement.

I.

Eleonore Stump's *Atonement* is a masterful and historic contribution to the project of Christian soteriology. Among its many virtues is the fact that it manages to be richly novel and innovative while at the same time hewing close and doing justice to what has been most widely and traditionally affirmed about the salvific work of Christ. One of the most interesting and important novelties in the book is her treatment of what she, following Aquinas, calls *the problem of the stain on the soul*. In this paper, I will present that problem and Stump's solution to it, explain why I think her solution falls short, and then suggest an alternative way of addressing it. I believe that the suggestion I will sketch is, in broad outline at least, compatible with Stump's theory of the atonement; so I take myself to be recommending a supplement to what she says in her book, rather than rejecting any significant part of it.

A soteriology is a theory of the salvific significance of the work of Christ, which work comprises whatever aspects of his total earthly career that have salvific significance. More fully, it is a theory that identifies a salient problem (for human beings or God's creatures in general) from which salvation is necessary, provides some specific content to the notion of salvation, and provides an explanation of how some salient work of Christ contributes to salvation from that problem for those affected by it.

Christian philosophers and theologians have traditionally understood sin and its consequences to be the most salient problems afflicting creation. But the consequences of sin, according to traditional Christian doctrine, are legion. Some of the more important ones are the Fall of humanity, the breaking of creation, guilt before God, the cultivation of vice, enslavement to the flesh, suffering of various kinds and legacies of further sin and suffering in one's own life and the lives of others, enmity toward God, separation from God, spiritual death, and eternity in hell. *Salvation* has, accordingly, been variously construed

¹ This paper draws substantially on research done while funded by three different grants from the John Templeton Foundation: the Analytic Theology Project, the Experience Project, and a planning grant for a larger project on narrative conceptions of the self. I am grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for their generous support. Naturally, the views developed in this paper are my own and are not necessarily endorsed by the Foundation. I am also grateful to Kate McLean, Sam Newlands, and Michelle Panchuk for helpful comments and conversation about the ideas herein.

as Christ's defeating or in some other way rectifying some combination of these consequences. Offering a theory of *the atonement* as one's contribution to soteriology represents a choice to focus on the consequences of sin for our relationship with God as the problem, and to understand the salvific significance of some aspect of Christ's career — usually his suffering and death on the cross, but sometimes also some combination of his sinless life, resurrection, and ascension — mainly in terms of its contributions toward rectifying that relationship.

For most contemporary philosophers working on the atonement, it seems as if the problem and its solution can be captured roughly as follows: Sin makes us guilty before God; guilt is what separates us from God (at least temporarily, if not permanently); therefore, we need forgiveness from God, and the work of Christ is a vital part (and maybe the whole of) what makes that possible, fitting, or both. Stump does not deny any of this; but, in contrast to most contemporary philosophers, she does offer a view according to which this is far from the *whole* story about the nature of the rift in our relationship with God and about what Christ does to help repair it.

According to a fairly standard picture, we are separated from God mainly because (for some reason or other) God, being perfect, cannot or will not tolerate the presence of guilty creatures without some act of atonement (which act, of course, is done by Christ, thus removing or in some other way remedying our guilt and making it possible for us to re-enter the presence of God). In human relationships, however, remedying *guilt* by way of atoning acts and subsequent forgiveness may not be sufficient for full reconciliation and restoration of relationship.

When human beings sin in serious ways against one another, there remains even after repentance and forgiveness what Stump characterizes as a kind of morally lamentable “residue”. She acknowledges that it is hard to say exactly what this residue consists in; but, as she characterizes it, it seems mainly to include the following components: *memory* of having committed the sins in question; *experiential knowledge* of what it is like to both desire and commit that kind of sin; and *relational damage* arising partly out of the damage wrought upon one's psyche by one's sin, but also out of the fact that this sin is now part of one's own history and the history of one's relationship with her victims, and will typically be remembered as such by all parties involved.

So, for example, if you perpetrate serious abuse upon another person, however much you might repent and she might forgive you and absolve you of guilt, you or she or both will still *remember* you as the one who committed that abuse; you will remember what it is like to have both desired and then committed the abuse that you did; and all of this will morally diminish or taint both you and your present relationship, even if and after you have been forgiven by her. Moreover, even if you both manage to forget the abuse and all of its lingering effects upon your psyche, Stump points out that there will still be the *history*: you will still be one who *did that thing*; and this alone will morally diminish or taint both you and your relationship with her, even if and after you have been forgiven by her. These effects of that sin together comprise a stain on your soul.

The *problem* of the stain on the soul, then, is *almost* captured in Stump's own summary of it as follows:

Wrongdoing not only distorts the wrongdoer's intellect and will, but it also has other morally lamentable effects; for example, it has deleterious effects on memory and on the cognitive capacities underlying mindreading and empathy. Furthermore, wrongdoing leaves relational characteristics altered for the worse. Something sad can remain for the wrongdoer in his relations with those hurt by him, even if he is repentant, even if he is forgiven by his victims. (340–41) ²

But I think that this statement does not *fully* capture the problem, because what it omits is the fact (apparent in Stump's characterization of it, but never made fully explicit) that the stain on the soul — or some stains on the soul, anyway — linger also even after this-worldly therapies and other instruments and processes of psychological healing and restoration have run their course. If this were not so, then the problem of the stain on the soul would not be a problem from which we need *divine* salvation, and it would not properly figure very significantly into a theory of the atonement.

2 Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (OUP, 2018).

The problem of the stain on the soul is, in my view, both genuine and serious; and it is one that has been almost entirely neglected in contemporary discussions of the atonement. But how can it possibly be solved if the stain lingers even after repentance and forgiveness, if some instances of it resist this-worldly processes of healing and restoration, and if it is partly constituted by *history*, the immutable past? What more could even an omnipotent God do about the effects of our sin *after* we have repented, been forgiven by God and others, and undergone the best, most effective processes of healing that this world has to offer? Are divine instruments of psychological healing so very different? Can they change the past? If not, then what can be done? The stain would seem to be indelible.

II.

Stump's answer to the question of how the stain can be removed, and how the work of Christ accomplishes its removal, comes in the final third of the penultimate chapter of her book. She begins by addressing what may well be the thorniest aspect of the problem: the fact that even after repentance and forgiveness, our sins against one another, and *a fortiori* our sins against an eternal and omniscient deity, live on in memory in a way that can still damage or otherwise diminish the quality of our relationship.

Her solution, in short, is to point to the way in which the sting of a painful memory can sometimes be drawn. To illustrate, she imagines her familiar example-characters, Paula and Jerome, coping with some sin of Jerome's against Paula in the following way. Jerome repents and Paula forgives Jerome; she then tells him that they can "forget this" sin, and she expresses her willingness to be reconciled. In saying that they both can forget Jerome's sin, she does not intend to convey that the sin will literally be wiped from their memories; rather, her point is simply that "this past event, now a subject of pain to both of them because of its evil, will remain in their memories but without its ability to cause either of them pain." (373)

But how can Paula's declaration draw the sting of the painful memory? How can one make a memory no longer painful simply by fiat? Stump's answer comes in the following paragraph:

That a memory which was once painful to both Jerome and Paula can stay in their memories but lose its painful character stems from the fact that the harm which Jerome did Paula and now so regrets has become part of their ongoing joint story of mutual love and care. Their relationship is stronger because Jerome has come to Paula in repentance and Paula has accepted him as the repentant person he is. In his repentance and her acceptance of him, their relationship has not been restored to the same condition it had before he harmed her. His repentance cannot return either of them or their relationship to the relative innocence of the period before he hurt her. But his repentance and her willingness to be reconciled to him alter the relationship by making it more deeply rooted in each of them. Through his repentance and her reconciliation with him, the past hurt has been interwoven into a renewed commitment on the part of each of them to the other. This fact—that there is such a deepening of their relationship because of Jerome's hurting Paula but repenting it and Paula's accepting his repenting—does not mean that, retroactively, the very harm that Jerome did Paula is now not harm or that his harm should be welcome to her or that his harm is in some other way not the evil that it was. But this episode in their shared lives, in which Jerome did real and unwelcome harm to Paula, may nonetheless become precious to both of them because of what they have gone through together in it. (374)

In short, then: the sting is drawn by the combination of Jerome's repentance, Paula's expressed willingness to be reconciled, and the deepening of the relationship that comes in the wake of those things.

It is perhaps easy to imagine things working as they do in Stump's example when the sins in question are serious but not horrendous. Jerome spends the better part of a year drinking himself into oblivion, imposing heavy burdens upon Paula; finally there is a confrontation and Jerome is booted from the house and sent to rehab, after which Paula receives him back in something like the manner just described. Jerome badly and with much culpable negligence mismanages the finances for Paula's business; heavy losses are sustained and Paula fires Jerome, whereupon he sues her, all to the near destruction of their friendship; but later he repents, and Paula receives him back in the manner described. And so on. But can things also work in this way when grievous, horrendous wrongs are in view? Stump says yes: Referring

back to the sense, just described, in which Jerome’s sins against Paula, or the pain of a toddler’s frustratingly bad behavior, can be forgotten, Stump says:

This is the sense in which one can forget even great sins too if they are part of the history of human salvation. The acts are remembered, and so is their character as wrongful. But the remembered wrongful acts lose their power to produce pain in virtue of being wrongful, because they have become interwoven into a story of love that is worth prizing. And so there is a sense in which the sinfulness of those acts is forgotten. (374, emphasis in original)

Moreover, and crucially for Stump’s project, the “forgetting” here described can come about with no *actual* loss of memory; and so it is a forgetting that even an omniscient God can experience.

But even with such forgetting accomplished, more yet needs to be remedied to remove the stain on a person’s soul. For memory is not the only ingredient in the stain. There is also one’s history, and one’s experiential knowledge and its effects upon one’s personality and one’s ability to be close to others. At this juncture in her discussion, however, things start to move rather quickly. Shifting focus to Jerome’s reconciliation with God rather than Paula, and having effectively established that Christ’s atonement effects God’s forgetting of Jerome’s sins, Stump says that, if God forgets Jerome’s sins in the sense just described, those sins

will also be forgotten in this sense by Jerome and a fortiori by all the redeemed in heaven for whom Jerome’s wrongdoing is also visible. ... And so this last part of the stain on the soul from past sin, the shadows in memory and their connection to the empathic capacities, is healed also through the atonement of Christ... (375–76)³

One might worry that the historical component of Jerome’s sin still lingers — he is, after all, still the person who did those things, whatever they were, to Paula. But I take it that on Stump’s view this part of the stain, too, is healed by being rendered irrelevant. Presumably the idea is that simply being the person who committed the sins one has committed is not by itself a *stain*; rather, it contributes to the staining of one’s soul only by way of its effects. Once those effects have been healed and only the history remains, however, its staining power has been thoroughly neutralized.

III.

There is much that I like in Stump’s account of how the stains on our soul get removed. But it is not the way of contemporary philosophy to dwell at length on points of agreement, and so I turn now to objections. The upshot of my objections will not be that Stump has said the *wrong* thing about the healing of the stains on our soul. I think that everything I will say here is fully consistent with at least the broad contours of her account of the atonement. Rather, the upshot is that she has not said enough: there are stains on souls that her account thus far does not address. But, as I shall explain later, I think that there are ways of supplementing her account that will remedy this problem. To facilitate the discussion, I turn to an example from Arthurian legend.

The tale of Sir Lancelot, as told in T. H. White’s⁴ *The Ill-Made Knight*, is the story of a man with a stain on his soul. Early in his career, before his ruinous and tragic affair with Guinevere, Lancelot is a model of purity, chivalric heroism, fidelity to his king and God — the greatest knight in all the land, a man destined for noble deeds and, indeed, one who fully expects, partly by way of remaining always a virgin, to be able to work miracles. The fall of Sir Lancelot comes while he is away from Camelot — partly in an effort to flee the temptation of his growing love for Guinevere. On his travels, he meets and rescues Elaine of Corbenic, who repays his good deed by getting him drunk and then deceiving him into having sex with her by posing as Guinevere. This rape costs him his virginity and so, in his mind, also his honor, all of his prospects for ultimate greatness, and his hope for one day being able to work miracles. Moreover, as he

³ The “connection to empathetic capacities” that Stump mentions here are what I have been discussing under the description “experiential knowledge and its effects.”

⁴ T. H. White, *The Ill-Made Knight* (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1940).

sees it, he has now not only betrayed Arthur, his king and best friend (never mind that the woman was not in fact Guinevere; for he *thought* that she was), and Guinevere, his one true love (never mind that he did not do it consensually). Overwhelmed by grief and guilt and shame, he returns to Camelot, whereupon he soon consummates his affair with the actual Guinevere, thus setting in motion the events that ultimately lead to the breaking of the round table and the tragic end of Arthur's kingdom.

The end of *The Ill-Made Knight* gives us Sir Lancelot utterly broken by shame and guilt over his many sins. He is in important ways a model case for the problem of the stain on the soul as Stump has set it up, for his sins — not just the loss of his virginity, with their attendant experiential knowledge and memories, but his actual betrayal of and lies to Arthur, as well as the consequences of his non-voluntary “betrayal” of Guinevere — have literally driven him to serious mental illness and, even after his return to some semblance mental health, have left him deeply alienated from himself, his closest friend, his lover, and even his God. In the final pages we find Arthur badly in need of a miracle to save a fallen knight; and we see Lancelot, earlier a paragon of courage and honor, hiding away in a cell in abject fear of public failure, watching every other knight in the land try and fail to work the miracle. Eventually Lancelot is brought forth and persuaded to try. Fully expecting failure followed by public humiliation, Lancelot goes to the fallen knight and *does* work the miracle. God has blessed him; God has apparently forgiven him; God is apparently willing to be reconciled. Even so, we find Lancelot still plagued by the marks left on memory and other quarters of his psyche by his many sins.

The case of Sir Lancelot is, as I have said, in some important ways a model illustration of a man whose soul is stained in the ways that Stump describes. But in some ways he is not. For it is not only *his* sins that have left the stain. The precipitating factor for the fall of Sir Lancelot — the event that moved him from being a faithful friend and servant of God actively resisting hard temptation to being a betrayer, an adulterer, and someone estranged from God and the people he loved — was an act to which he did not consent. Admittedly, as the story is told, Lancelot was not wholly without agency in the loss of his virginity; but he was mostly so, insofar as he was drunk, deceived, and partly under the influence of sorcery. We would not hesitate nowadays to say that Lancelot was victimized in this event; and yet it is among the most important events contributing to the stain on his soul.

Here, then is the first problem: As the idea of a stain on the soul is described — lingering, morally undesirable leftovers of great moral evil within the psyche, leftovers that come in the form of what is now unwelcome experiential knowledge and the memories thereof, together with a history whose consequences impair our relationships and even alienate us from ourselves — such stains are *not* caused by our sins alone. Look closely at the case of Lancelot. He remembers first intending, and acting on the intention, to betray Arthur with Guinevere because he was deceived by someone posing as Guinevere; the loss of his virginity that looms so large in his conception of himself and his vocation and that has left him at least partly estranged from God happened because he was deceived; his further sins — including his actual betrayal of Arthur — came not just in the wake of but partly *as a result of* this initial thing that happened to him; and so on. Things that happen to us can stain our souls no less than things that we do.

The story of Sir Lancelot as described here is, of course, probably fictional. It is also dependent in significant ways upon ideas about men, women, God, human sexuality and its significance, and so on that many will find quaint at best, and in many ways positively problematic. But I hope it is evident that none of this matters for the main points I want to make. For it is similar enough in its details to plenty of true stories; and even quaint, false and otherwise problematic beliefs can contribute in salient ways to the feelings, attitudes, and memories that enter into the stains on our souls. Trauma of all sorts, including traumas in which we have no agency whatsoever, can produce precisely the same kinds of effects that are supposed to comprise the stain on the soul — including (importantly) unshakeable feelings of guilt and shame, together with the alienation from self and others that they cause.

The problem, though, is that stains left by trauma rather than by sin do not at all seem to be the sorts of stains that will *inevitably* vanish and be forgotten by us simply in response to God's letting us know that God has forgotten it, or is willing to forget it. Why think that a victim of horrific abuse whose soul has been stained thereby will suddenly “forget” (in the relevant sense of having the sting drawn from her

memories) the abusive events that have left her feeling guilty, ashamed, and alienated from self, other people, and God in response to God's own willingness to forget about it? Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, why think that a divine "let's forget about this" response is an *appropriate* (or even morally *acceptable*) way of dealing with the stains left by victimization?

A very natural reply, at this juncture, might be that these questions of mine have rhetorical force only because I am leaving out most of Stump's story about how God gets, through Christ's atoning work, to the stage of "forgetting" human sins. The most important part of that story (so I would say, anyway) involves Christ's empathetic engagement with every individual human being and their particular sins while dying on the cross. According to Stump, this is the way in which Christ "bears our sins", and, on Stump's account, this is a large part of what is behind the cry of dereliction from the cross. Christ's psyche is somehow joined with the minds of everyone else so that he bears all of the psychological effects of our sins even without having actually committed any sin himself. He gets the experiential knowledge; he gets the feelings evoked by now unwanted memories; he knows the alienation; he knows what it is like to have the relevant history. And it is easy to imagine that knowing that we've been thus empathetically engaged would matter to those who have trauma-inflicted stains upon their souls.

Easy to imagine, yes; but would it *inevitably* matter? That is harder to accept, and this for two reasons. First, there is no clear connection between Christ's empathetic engagement with our experiential history and our no longer being pained (or guilty, or ashamed, or anything else) by it. Although it is certainly easy to imagine that one might feel a kind of comfort in knowing that Christ has felt all that we have felt, even in our worst moments as perpetrators or victims, it is just as easy to imagine that one might simply think "Well, I'm sorry for you too, then; but that doesn't really help *me* at all." So that is one reason for doubting that this aspect of Stump's story can do the work my imagined objector is suggesting it might do.⁵

But there is a second reason, which is also the second problem that I want to raise for Stump's account. Victims of serious evil do not always blame *only* their human perpetrators. Some blame God simply for standing by and watching. Some victims of what Michelle Panchuk calls "religious trauma" might blame God for putting into the hands of their perpetrators certain tools — for example, passages of scripture that seem to encourage submission to abuse — that contributed to their victimization.⁶ Some might even count God to be among the perpetrators. It makes no difference whether some or all of these "blaming God" beliefs and feelings are false or perhaps even unwarranted (as might be the case, depending on their content, given the traditional view that God is perfectly good and loving and has perfectly good reasons for all that God does and allows). They are there nonetheless and contribute to people's alienation from God. And here it seems that a "let's forget about this" response on the part of God is exactly the *wrong* approach to dealing with the stains left by their traumas, and pointing to Christ's empathetic engagement with their trauma will (insofar as they partly blame Christ as one of the causes) be of no psychological help whatsoever.

We might sum up the two objections I have raised against Stump's solution to the problem of the stain on the soul as follows: Stump focuses on stains left by *a person's own sins*; and her solution places *us* in the position of the person who, by rights, ought to be seeking and taking the first steps toward reconciliation. It is by virtue of the fact that we, rather than God, are in the latter position that the divine "we can forget about this" comes as such sweet grace and comfort. But in fact the psychological components of what she is calling the stain on the soul can be caused by things other than one's own sins; and, though I do not believe that God can sin or otherwise be in the wrong, and though I hesitate to speak of divine duties toward human beings, it nonetheless seems to be a mistake to locate us so firmly in the position of the one who, by rights, ought to be taking the first steps toward reconciliation. My smallest children sometimes

5 For this point I am indebted to Michelle Panchuk (although she raised it not specifically in connection with Stump's theory of the atonement, but rather in connection with ideas I was developing in Michael Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (OUP, 2018)).

6 See Michelle Panchuk, "The Shattered Spiritual Self and the Sacred: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Trauma, Worship, and Deconversion", *Res Philosophica* 95 (2018).

get angry with and temporarily alienated from me for reasons that have much more to do with their own lack of understanding than any wrongdoing on my part. Maybe in some of those cases I have no duty to take the first steps toward putting things right between us. But, given their lack of understanding and its inevitability in light of their cognitive capacities, it does seem rather cold and unloving not to take those first steps, or to expect that my own willingness to forget about the whole thing would come anywhere close to doing the job.

IV.

What, then, can be done about these other stains on our souls?

I said earlier that the project of soteriology is to develop a theory about the restorative significance (in relation to some salient affliction) for human beings and the rest of creation of the salvific work of Christ, which work includes some or all of his life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. Within this project, Christ's death has been interpreted as a gambit, a vicarious punishment, a substitutionary punishment, a straightforward non-substitutionary punishment (of sin, or death, or human sinful nature), an expiatory sacrifice, a communicative sacrifice, a ransom payment, a divine apology, an act of identification with humanity, a great example of obedience and love, and much more; and this is to say nothing yet of other aspects of Christ's earthly career. So, again, it is important to bear in mind that casting one's soteriological theory specifically as a theory of (the) *atonement* is already to make a decision that might well be contested.

As Stump herself points out, however, understanding Christ's work as contributing to atonement does not preclude understanding it in other ways as well; and, to my mind, a promising way forward in light of the objections I have just raised is first to acknowledge that the *atonement* function of Christ's work is not the whole story about how the stains on our souls are addressed in the context of the divine-human relationship, and then to supply some further story about what the work of Christ accomplishes for us *beyond* atonement. My own view (following Marilyn McCord Adams⁷) is that at least part of this further story must be that Christ's work somehow both *defeats* the badness of the evils — particularly the horrendous evils — in which we participate as victims and perpetrators, and *redeems* for us the parts of our lives that have been touched by those evils.⁸ Constraints of time and space permit only a sketch of what I have in mind. I leave the fuller details for another time.

Theories of the atonement generally start from the idea that there is a rift caused by sin in God's relationship with human beings, and they maintain that the atoning work of Christ is, fundamentally, God's gracious way of repairing that rift *as it appears from God's side of the relationship*. Christ's atoning work is God's way of addressing God's grievances against us. But if what I have said in earlier sections of this paper is correct, what we learn from reflection on the problem of the stain on the soul is that God's grievances against us are not all there is to that rift. Instead — in some cases, at least — the rift is partly also caused and maintained by grievances that human beings have against God and also by, as it were, "grievances" that human beings have against themselves. These latter grievances are often not considered in soteriological theorizing, largely (I suspect) because they are considered to be unjustified, irrational, or both. But I think that they deserve to be taken seriously, I think that they *are* taken seriously by God,

7 Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God", in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (OUP, 1990); Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (CUP, 2006).

8 Adams characterizes horrendous evils as "evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole." (Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God", 26.) On her view, defeating something bad is not the same as compensating someone for it, or seeing to it that the badness is outweighed. Instead, it is a matter of the bad thing's being "included in some good enough whole to which it bears a relation of organic (rather than merely additive) unity"; and an instance of evil or suffering is defeated *within the context of someone's life* if their life "is a good whole to which [that instance of evil or suffering] bears the relevant organic unity." (Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God", 28).

and I think that part of the function of Christ's work is to address them. But they are not addressed by *atonement*, for the simple reason that they are neither grievances for which *we* need to atone nor, given divine sinlessness, are they grievances for which God needs to atone.⁹

As I have argued elsewhere, one way in which God deals with human grievances against God is via the scriptural authorization of lament and protest. But the work of Christ also has a role to play. Here is what I said there, drawing on ideas in Marilyn McCord Adams's work,¹⁰ about how it might play such a role:

In the early 1990s, in a manuscript that was never subsequently published, Jesse Hobbs argued that the atonement was, at least in part, a kind of divine apology for all of the evils in the world. [footnote omitted] This sort of view is untenable on the assumption that God is morally perfect; for, presumably, a morally perfect being would never do anything for which genuine apology is appropriate. But a morally perfect being might well sorrow over the pain inflicted on uncomprehending creatures by the pursuit of good ends that are ultimately beyond their ken; and such a being might take steps to validate the complaints that arise out of it, to take dramatic steps to identify not only with human victims of horrendous evil but also with the perpetrators, and to secure for people a blessed life at the end of all things — all with the aim of *defeating*, rather than merely compensating, the badness of the evils they have suffered. ... Identifying through his own suffering with victims puts God in a kind of solidarity with victims; and identifying in his own suffering with perpetrators allows victims to see in the work of Christ both a divine acknowledgment that God has participated somehow as perpetrator of horrors and that the badness of these horrors, and of participation in them, merits some kind of condemnation. This kind of acknowledgment falls short of apology or penance, since it includes no actual admission of guilt; so it is an acknowledgment that can in principle be given by a morally perfect being. And it is the sort of acknowledgement, too, that can fit within a variety of different stories about what else, exactly, happens in and is accomplished by the work of Christ.¹¹

I think that this is all true, as far as it goes; but what is omitted from what I said there is an explanation of the *connection* between the defeat of the evils in which we have participated and the removal of the stains on our souls. It is at just this point that I think talk of redemption needs to enter the picture.

The idea of redemption can be woven into our discussion in the following way. Stains claim for themselves territory on the things that bear them. Removing a stain is a matter of reclaiming its territory — redeeming it from the presence that has taken it over. When we sin in serious ways, or when we are victimized, we might think of the moral leftovers that Stump takes to comprise the stain on the soul not via imagery of a *blemish* on an otherwise pristine surface but rather via imagery of a colonizing presence. The latter imagery is no less scriptural than the former; and I like it in the present context because I think it more readily facilitates the kind of supplemental story I would like to sketch about how the work of Christ might address the stains left by victimization, shame and self-blame, and the like.

Over the past several decades, there has been growing appreciation in developmental and personality psychology of the vital role played by narrative in shaping our *sense of self*, our representation to ourselves of *who we are*.¹² Facts about who we are (as contrasted, say, with facts about *what* we are, or about what person we are identical with) include, most importantly, facts about our core values, personality traits and dispositions, our salient social roles, and the trajectory of our lives and the significance (for us) of the events within it. Empirical research suggests, furthermore, that there is a bi-directional causal link between our

9 Cf. Ch 9 of Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*.

10 See Adams, *Christ and Horrors*. See also Marilyn McCord Adams, "In Praise of Blasphemy!", *Philosophia* 30 (2003), esp. note 4 on 48–49.

11 Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*, 177–78.

12 Cf. Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories", *Review of General Psychology* 5 (2001); Dan P. McAdams, "Personal Narrative and the Life Story", in *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, ed. Oliver John, Richard Robins, and Lawrence Pervin (Guilford Press, 2008); Kate C. McLean and Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22 (2013); Tilmann Habermas and Christin Köber, "Autobiographical Reasoning Is Constitutive for Narrative Identity", in *Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, ed. McLean, Kate C. and Moin Syed (OUP, 2015); Habermas and Köber, "Autobiographical Reasoning Is Constitutive for Narrative Identity"; and Jefferson Singer, "Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespan: An Introduction", *Journal of Personality* 72 (2004).

narrative representations of who we are and who we *in fact* are, or become.¹³ In other words, our narrative representations of ourselves are not only shaped by the relevant real-world facts (most saliently by way of autobiographical memory) but they also contribute to *shaping* those facts over time. For example, there is evidence that recovery and growth in the wake of trauma are often facilitated by learning how to fit one's traumatic experiences into a broader life-narrative that has a redemptive arc.¹⁴ Some, in fact, go so far as to say not only that narrative shapes our *sense* of self and *impacts* who we are at any given time, but that it *constitutes* us as persons and thus *defines* who we are.¹⁵ This is an interesting and suggestive idea; but I will not here recommend or develop it, in large part because I am not yet sure how best to understand it.

Importantly, too, there is good reason to think that the narratives that shape — or, as some would have it, constitute — our sense of self are substantially co-authored by our families and peers, and that family narratives and the self-defining memories from which they are built play a particularly important role in shaping who we take ourselves to be.¹⁶ If this is true, and if everything else I have just said about self-shaping narratives is true, then the stories that others tell about us play an important role, too, in shaping not only who we take ourselves to be, but also who we in fact are.

Reflecting on all of this in connection with familiar scripturally grounded claims to the effect that, in Christ, we have been reborn, adopted into a new family, given a new life and a new identity in Christ, and so on suggests a further way in which the work of Christ contributes to the defeat of the evils in which we have participated and the redemption of territory claimed within our souls by sin (both ours and other people's) and its consequences. Serious sin and its consequences, as well as victimization, trauma, and their consequences, make a tremendous impact on our self-defining memories and threaten to consume the narratives that shape our sense of self. But, as the New Testament scriptures richly illustrate, the work of Christ provides tremendous resources for embedding our sins and traumas in new, redemptive narratives of our lives; and it constitutes a new source of “family stories” and memories that are vividly called to mind by the Lord's Supper and other liturgies of the church, and are available for use in the co-authoring of our sense of self. To the extent that these new narratives of our lives can be overall beautiful and good, and to the extent that they can play a role in making us into (even if not fully constituting us as) who they say that we are, we would seem to have here a promising story about how the work of Christ and his solidarity with both victims and perpetrators might defeat, or contribute to defeating, the evils — even the horrors — in which we have participated. So likewise, to the extent that the work of Christ contributes (in the way just described) to making it the case that sin and its consequences for us (as either perpetrators or victims) no longer dominate the story of who we are, we would seem to have here a promising story about how the work of Christ *redeems us* from sin, reclaiming the territory within us — territory in our histories, our memories, our relationships and relational capacities, and much more — that has been colonized by sin and its consequences.¹⁷

13 Cf. Kate C. McLean, Monisha Pasupathi, and Jennifer Pals, “Selves Creating Stories Creating Selves: A Process Model of Self-Development”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 11 (2007).

14 McAdams 2001, Kate C. McLean, *The Co-Authored Self: Family Stories and the Construction of Personal Identity* (OUP, 2015). 27–29. Note, however, that research also indicates that narrative meaning-making may not *always* be a healthy process in which to engage, and that in people with certain kinds of abuse-histories it is linked with greater incidence of PTSD. (McLean, *The Co-Authored Self*, 79. Cf. Andrea Follmer Greenhoot et al., “Making Sense of Traumatic Memories: Memory Qualities and Psychological Symptoms in Emerging Adults with and without Abuse Histories”, *Memory* 21 (2013).) To what extent these latter findings might force qualifications on what I say below about how Christocentric meaning-making might help to address the problem of the stain on the soul is not yet evident to me.

15 See, e.g., Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1996); Marya Schechtman, *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life* (OUP, 2014) and *the Unity of a Life* (OUP, 2014).

16 Cf. McLean, *The Co-Authored Self*.

17 It is instructive to recall, at this juncture, the following part of Stump's answer to the question of how the sting can be drawn from Paula and Jerome's painful memory of his offense against her: “That a memory which was once painful to both Jerome and Paula can stay in their memories but lose its painful character stems from the fact that the harm which Jerome did Paula and now so regrets has become part of their ongoing joint story of mutual love and care.” (*Atonement*, 374) It is not clear just how much Stump wants to lean here on the relevance of the *story* of Paula and Jerome's relationship, but I take the fact that she clearly

I acknowledge, of course, that I have come nowhere close to delivering on the promise I claim for the line of thinking I have just sketched. Among other things, I have yet to explain whether the mechanisms of defeat and redemption that I have just described depend on our consciously reflecting on and appropriating *in this life* the narrative resources that Christ's work provides (I think it doesn't), and what precise relationship the available Christocentric narrative of who someone is might bear on the actual facts about who she is (I am, as of yet, uncertain). Filling in such details and delivering on the promise is a project that must be left for another time. But if the promise can be delivered on, it provides the kind of supplement to Stump's theory that I think is needed to fully address the problem of the stain on the soul.

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sees the story as being of some relevance as a small bit of evidence that the supplement I am sketching here should be viewed as a welcome and friendly amendment to Stump's overall project.