Protest Theism, Aquinas and suffering

Introduction

In Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* (1947) the protagonist, Dr Rieux, faces an onslaught of meaningless suffering caused by a sudden outburst of the plague in the Algerian town of Oran. In this context he challenges the religious worldview, expressed by the Jesuit priest Fr. Paneloux who encourages him to accept or even love what we cannot understand. Having witnessed the agony and cruel death of a child Rieux retorts that he refuses to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture. In an earlier essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus had outlined in a more philosophical vein the modern attitude toward meaninglessness and absurdity. Our only sensible response is revolt. Indeed, it is this very revolt that can generate meaning in our lives. Camus is trenchant: we should refuse to be reconciled; we should refuse to hope. It is little wonder that Camus chooses Sisyphus as the symbol of the modern person: Sisyphus had defied the gods by refusing to return to Hades out of sheer love for this world. As a result, the gods condemn him to push a bolder endlessly up a hill, from which it rolls down again, in a never-ending cycle of absurdity and defiance. It is in his defiance that Sisyphus finds meaning. Sisyphus rejects hope; he lives without consolations, without illusions. There is to be no reconciliation.[1]

There is undoubtedly a certain freshness, honesty and integrity about Camus's proposal. His essay genuinely captures the spirit of a post-Christian age. Critical questions can nonetheless be raised: if the gods do not exist, what is the point of revolt, which, according to Camus, "gives life its value"[2]? Can it not be argued, however, that this very revolt also implicitly affirms the existence of God? Revolt can only be a source of meaning if there is somebody to revolt against. It involves persons. We do not *revolt* against natural disasters or afflictions. We may grieve over their disastrous impact, and we try to *remedy* them or fight them, but attempting to do so is not the sole prerogative of the post-religious. Christians do so as well, and no less.

There is perhaps a certain intellectual fittingness that Camus draws on literary examples from Antiquity (such as Sisyphus or Oedipus) to describe the modern condition.

[1] A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 54-62; *The Plague* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960). See Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "Albert Camus, Simone Weil and the Absurd" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 343-54.
[2] *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

Christianity had explicitly rejected the notion of Fate, which shaped the Ancient outlook on suffering.[3] Christians, on the other hand, traditionally detected the providential hand of God in all things, including afflictions. In a post-Christian world this view appears to have become indefensible, if not incomprehensible altogether, and this not just in the eyes of those who reject the Christian faith. Indeed, the eloquent critique by Camus and others does not merely express the attitude of the non-religious, modern person toward suffering. Significantly, several Christian theologians in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century have adopted similar views and have espoused a kind of protest-theism. They refuse to see any links between suffering and the broader Christian narrative of salvation. Suffering simply happens, and it is theologically deeply problematic, if not pathological, to valorise it, or to claim that it is somehow desired by God.

From a historical perspective these views may seem surprising, given the centrality the cross occupies in both the New Testament and ensuing tradition. The cross, however, also falls under this critique, and is likewise being emptied of the saving meaning it traditionally had. According to Edward Schillebeeckx, for instance, we have been saved "despite the Cross."[4] In his view, to argue that the cross is somehow an integral part of God's saving plan—that God wills it to do away with sin—evokes the spectre of a cruel, vindictive God who subjects his mercy to his justice. These preliminary remarks sketch the context against which I would like to re-engage with the soteriology of Thomas Aquinas.

When we talk about evil, we usually distinguish between moral evil, or sin, and natural evil—a distinction inspired by St Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio* (Bk I, 1 and Bk III, 9). A strict distinction between these two kinds of evil is, of course, not possible (as the present-day ecological crisis vividly reminds us). Aquinas usually calls the two kinds of evil *malum poenae* (which is affliction, or evil suffered) and *malum culpae* (which is evil done, or sin).[5] In what follows I will mainly focus on the issue of natural evil, and particularly those kinds of afflictions we cannot remedy. I will give first a general philosophical account; secondly, I will offer a more "Christian-existential" response.

(A) Philosophical considerations

[3] See E. Gilson's chapter "The Middle Ages and Nature" from *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 364-82.
[4] E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ. The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: T&T Clark: 2018), 717-24.
[5] See *Summa Theologiae [ST]* I, q. 49, a. 2 and q. 48, a. 5; in *ST* I, q. 19, a. 9 he writes that God "in no way wills the evil of sin (…) the evil of natural defect, or of punishment, he does will, by willing the good to which such evils are attached." All quotations and translations from the *ST* and *Summa contra Gentiles* are taken from www.dhspriory.org/thomas

When Aquinas offers a range of theoretical insights to account for the existence of evil his main concern is to show that the presence of evil does not contradict Christian faith in providence.[6] This is, as he sees it, the main purpose of the *Book of Job* on which he wrote a commentary in 1261-1265. As he writes in the Prologue to that work (which coincided with the redaction of Book III of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which also deals with providence): "The affliction of just men is what seems particularly to impugn divine providence in human affairs. (…) That the just are afflicted without cause seems to undermine totally the foundation of providence." [7]

Providence extends beyond care for human beings. God's primary object of care is the order of the universe, rather than simply humankind per se: among created things, what God cares for most is the order of the universe "because the good order of the universe best reflects the divine goodness, which is the ultimate end of the divine will."[8] In an age of ecological crisis, this sobering insight, profoundly anti-modernist, may perhaps find a renewed resonance. At any rate, this perspective enables Aquinas to argue that divine providence, concerned as it is with a more universal order, can allow instances of particular evil.

One of the implications of Aquinas's characteristically positive appraisal of creation is, ironically, the view that goodness is the cause of evil. This applies primarily to natural evil, which God desires indirectly for the sake of the good of the universe, as we will see. There is also a connection between sin *(malum culpae)* and goodness—obviously not in the sense that it is desired, even indirectly, by God, but rather in terms of human teleology. Because Aquinas believes that every agent acts for the sake of goodness, we pursue evil only indirectly. To use his stock example: the adulterer commits sin, of course, but he pursues, not

[6] Aquinas was, of course, familiar with the question: "If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and all-good, then why is there evil?" The atheist critique questions the plausibility of the very existence of God considering suffering and evil. For Aquinas, as a Dominican writing in the aftermath of the Cathar heresy that partly inspired the founding of the Order to which he belonged, the issue is subtly different: given the unquestionable acceptance of God's existence, how can we give a plausible, non-dualist account of suffering and evil? See for instance *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 71, 12: "By these considerations, the occasion of erring is also taken away from the Manicheans who maintained two agent principles, good and evil, as though evil could have no place under the providence of a good God."

[7] *Commentary on the Book of Job*, Prologue. I use the translation by B.Th. Becket Mullady in *The Works of St Thomas Aquinas*. Vol. 32 (Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute, 2016), 8.

[8] *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 64.10.

the evil of adultery per se, but the sexual pleasure which accompanies it; and pleasure is something good.[9]

Natural evil also finds its source in goodness. Aquinas has the theological courage to argue that God is, at least indirectly, the cause of natural evil.[10] This may seem to erode his robust defence of divine providence but, as I suggested, the opposite is the case: Aquinas's standpoint simply follows from his rejection of metaphysical dualism: because evil is not on the same metaphysical level as Goodness, Aquinas must argue that natural evil finds its ultimate source in God. Modern theologians who argue that (natural) evil 'just happens' would, I suspect, in Aquinas's view be veering toward a dualist worldview, in which God's providence and goodness is no longer the all-encompassing principle.

Even if natural evil finds its origin in God, God cannot be said to be directly responsible for it. Aquinas explains this by appealing to the traditional notion that evil is *privatio boni*, the absence of goodness. This too has a surprising implication: because everything that God has made is good, evil (as the privation of goodness) can itself be a pointer toward goodness—the goodness that should be there but is absent. When Aquinas discusses the popular objection that the existence of evil precludes belief in a good, omnipotent God ("If God exists, whence comes evil?") he writes: "But it could be argued to the contrary: 'If evil exists, God exists.' For there would be no evil if the order of good were taken away, since its privation is evil. But this order would not exist if there were no God."[11]

Our philosophical diet is more phenomenological than metaphysical. We can perhaps translate Aquinas's provoking statement in terms of what Edward Schillebeeckx called "negative contrast experiences."[12] Whenever we cry out, in the face of suffering, "This is not how it should be!" our very revolt implicitly affirms the overall goodness of the world. This acknowledgement, therefore, in turn, implies that revolt or moral indignation cannot have the *final* word from a Christian point of view. Our revolt or indignation only makes sense in light of an implicit affirmation of the thesis that goodness overrides evil in this world.

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[9] Such a positive metaphysical outlook has, incidentally, an interesting implication from a theological point of view, for it makes accounting for malice, in which we pursue evil for the sake of evil, extremely difficult, if not impossible. Aquinas grapples with the topic of malice in detail in *De Malo* q. 3, a. 12.

[10] *ST* I, q. 49, a. 2: "the evil which consists in the corruption of some things is reduced to God as the cause. And this appears as regards both natural things and voluntary things. (…) Now, the order of the universe requires (…) that there should be some things that can, and do sometimes, fail. And thus God, by causing in things the good of the order of the universe, consequently and as it were by accident, causes the corruption of things. (…) And so God is the author of the evil which is penalty, but not of the evil which is fault…" See also *ST* I, q. 19, a. 9.

[11] *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 71. 10

[12] See Kathleen McManus, "Suffering in the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx," *Theological studies* 60 (1999): 476-91.

Given the negative nature of evil (as absence of goodness) we cannot fathom its mystery. Because evil finds its indirect origin in God, the mystery of evil is a reflection of God's own mystery. In the twentieth century Karl Rahner has explicitly argued this point: in our suffering we encounter the mystery of God in a concrete, existential way. Aquinas does not phrase it in a manner as explicit as this. In *ST* I, q. 25, however, he does consider the question whether God could have made our universe better than it is. He initially responds by saying that this is impossible, for it then would no longer be our universe. When pushed on the issue he does concede that "God could make other things, or add something to the present creation; and then there would be another and better universe."[13] Thus, insofar as Aquinas is concerned, we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. And he offers no explanation as to why this is the case. For Aquinas, too, the mystery of evil points indirectly to the mystery of God.

(B) A Christian-existential response

On a more existential-religious level it is perhaps just as well that we cannot ultimately account for suffering in the world. The reason is that a rationally coherent insight into how good and evil are being dished out to us would destroy the gratuity of the loving relationship between humanity and God. In other words, in a world in which the just always and invariably receive their rewards, and the not-so-good theirs, we would almost inevitably fall into the temptation of instrumentalising our relationship with God. This is a key theme in the Book of Job, in which Satan claims that Job's devotion to God is calculated: Job's devotion to God is not for nothing (cf. Job 1:9). As Aquinas writes, commenting on this passage:

> So it is clear that the good things which we do are not referred to earthly prosperity as a reward; otherwise it would not be a perverse intention if someone were to serve God because of temporal prosperity. The contrary is likewise true. Temporal adversity is not the proper punishment for sins, and this question will be the theme dealt with in the entire book.[14]

[13] *ST* I, q. 25, a. 6 ad 3.
[14] *On Job*, Ch. 1, lect. 2 (p. 20 in Mullady's edition).

This is an important insight: the absurdity and seemingly randomness of afflictions keep us from instrumentalising our relationship with God. This theme would be developed in greater detail by some of mystics, including Aquinas's later fellow-Dominican, Meister Eckhart, who encouraged us to live, and love God "without a why," and not for the benefits that might accrue from it.

These considerations still do not get to the heart of the matter for they lack a Christocentric dimension. The notion that suffering can be a way of becoming more Christ-like, as it is a participation in his passion, only makes sense if we accept that the passion of Christ is redemptive or salvific in the first place. As hinted at earlier, some twentieth century theologians have questioned the saving significance of Christ's passion; and others have even gone so far as claiming that Aquinas himself contributed to a vindictive, penal notion of salvation. Probably echoing Gustave Aulen's study *Christus Victor* (published first in 1931), Gerald O'Collins, for instance, argued that Aquinas's soteriology contributed to the development of "a monstrous version of redemption: Christ as the penal substitute propitiating the divine anger."[15] Although he does not name Aquinas explicitly Edward Schillebeeckx writes in a similar vein:

> Many existing theories of our redemption through Jesus Christ deprive Jesus, his message and career of their subversive power, and even worse, sacralise violence to be a reality within God. God is said to call for a bloody sacrifice which stills or calms his sense of justice.[16]

Schillebeeckx concludes therefore that we have been saved "despite the Cross."[17] Christ's execution is the result of the machinations of evil which simply happen to crush an innocent man whose life exemplified a deep solidarity with the outcasts and the downtrodden.

There appear to be two issues. First, there is the notion that Christ's passion is said to appease the demands of divine justice, placating the divine anger. This evokes the spectre of an angry deity who subjects his mercy to the demands of retributive justice. Even if we do not subscribe to such a problematic notion of a vindictive god, a second issue remains: should we attribute any saving meaning at all to Christ's suffering?

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[15] G. O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 207.
[16] E. Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of* God (London: SCM, 1990), 190.
[17] E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 717-24.

I will start by considering the issue of justice and mercy. In this context it is useful to consider Aquinas's observations on *Psalm 50*. It is one of the great penitential psalms of the canon, prayed on Ash Wednesday, and it commences by imploring God's mercy: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy (*Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam),* and according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my iniquity." Mercy (*misericordia*), so Aquinas claims in the *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, "is especially attributed to God." Of course, mercy involves, strictly speaking, an affect or emotion: when we take pity we are sorrowful or sad at heart, as the etymology of the Latin word suggests (*miserum cor*). In that sense, namely as an emotion, we cannot attribute sorrow to God, and only in a metaphorical sense. So how, then, can Aquinas attribute mercy to God in the *proper* sense? He writes:

> A person is said to be merciful (*misericors*), as being, so to speak, sorrowful at heart (*miserum cor*); being affected with sorrow at the misery of another as though it were his own. Hence it follows that he endeavors to dispel the misery of this other, as if it were his; and this is the effect of mercy. To sorrow, therefore, over the misery of others belongs not to God; but it does most properly belong to him to dispel that misery.[18]

Hence, God can be said to be merciful insofar as he is concerned with removing our misery. Seen in this light, the Incarnation itself is an act of mercy, as Aquinas reminds us in his *Commentary on Psalm 50.* The fact that Aquinas singles out mercy as one of the central attributes of God allows us to question the claim that Aquinas contributed to a vindictive notion of God.[19] A brief consideration as to how divine mercy relates to justice (in *ST* I, q. 21) will strengthen this argument. Aquinas discusses an objection that states that God's mercy appears to clash with his justice: "God cannot remit what appertains to his justice." In his reply Aquinas makes an important observation:

> God acts mercifully, not indeed by going against his justice, but by doing something more than justice; thus a man who pays another two hundred denarii, though owing him only one hundred, does nothing against justice, but acts liberally or mercifully. The case is the same with one who pardons an offence committed against him, for in

[18] *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3.
[19] G. O'Collins, *Christology*, 207; Brandon Peterson, "Paving the Way? Penalty and Atonement in Aquinas's Soteriology" in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 (3) (2013): 265-283.

> remitting it he may be said to bestow a gift. (…) Hence it is clear that mercy does not destroy justice, but in a sense is the fullness thereof.[20]

These comments remind us of the fact that a different kind of justice operates amongst friends than amongst people who are not on friendly terms. The reference to the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20) is no coincidence. In that story, God bestows an equal reward on all workers, even though some started labouring much later than others. This may clash with our natural sense of justice; it is, however, simply an illustration of God's superabundant generosity.

All acts of divine justice are predicated upon God's prior generosity, goodness, and mercy, if only because there is no proportion between God and creatures. Divine justice is squarely founded upon divine mercy from whom we have received everything in the first place, including our very existence.[21] Furthermore, the utter indebtedness of the creature to God who is sovereign over all explains why every sin is ultimately a sin against God. As David confesses in the Psalm 50:4 *Tibi soli peccavi*: "Against Thou alone I have sinned." Thus, when we commit sin we are not necessarily hurting other people, nor are we only damaging ourselves. We infringe upon the good order of creation that God established. In sinning we may be committing injustices and inflicting deep hurt on our fellow-human beings; but ultimately, and more profoundly, it destroys our relationship with God. As creatures we stand in a relationship of radical dependency on God. In sinning, then, we deny this relationship of dependency; we turn away from God and set ourselves up as 'autonomous' beings, that is, beings who are a law unto themselves and who, in the words of Evelyn Waugh in *Brideshead Revisited*, "set up a rival good to God."

The fact that every sin is a sin against God has, of course, a positive implication. For if every sin is against God, it is also from God that we can ultimately obtain forgiveness and be healed. This is no mere theory; there is life-giving consolation in this. There are many instances in which the victims of the ravages of sin cannot or will not forgive the perpetrators

[20] *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3 ad 2.
[21] *ST* I, q. 21, a. 4: "Now the work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy; and is founded thereupon. For nothing is due to creatures, except for something pre-existing in them, or foreknown. Again, if this is due to a creature, it must be due on account of something that precedes. And since we cannot go on to infinity, we must come to something that depends only on the goodness of the divine will – which is the ultimate end. (…) So in every work of God, viewed at its primary source, there appears mercy. In all that follows, the power of mercy remains, and works indeed with even greater force; as the influence of the first cause is more intense than that of second causes."

their crimes. In those circumstances the guilty can turn to God who is willing to forgive and bring healing through Christ.

It is no coincidence that I speak of healing here. Time and again Aquinas characterises sin in terms of a sickness of the soul.[22] This too is revealing, for it once again illustrates that vindictiveness is alien to Aquinas's notion of God. A judge may punish; a doctor, however, heals. Sin is a sickness of the soul in need of healing. In mortally sinning we forfeit our loving orientation toward God, and we end up in a shadow existence.[23] Grave sin is like a dark cloud which casts its shadow over the soul, blocking the light of charity or love for God. It is from this shadow existence that we can be redeemed by inscribing our lives into that of Christ.

Aquinas does not subscribe to a forensic theory of salvation. Reconciliation with God therefore requires a process of transformation that will reorient our lives towards the light of God. Now, Aquinas (and the tradition before him) accepts that suffering may offer an occasion for disciplining our at times unruly desires. Penitential practices (including Lenten ones) are predicated on this. This espousal of penance Aquinas calls *poena satisfactoria*, sometimes (mis)translated as "satisfactory punishment" rather than as "satisfactory affliction or pain."[24] It is exactly the terminology of "satisfactory punishment [affliction]" that has wrong-footed some scholars and has led them to claim that Aquinas paves the way for a penal interpretation of Christ's saving work.[25] More particularly, they argue that by introducing the notion of *poena satisfactoria* Aquinas muddled the clear distinction Anselm had maintained between punishment (*poena*) and making satisfaction, thereby anticipating a (supposedly Calvinist) notion of penal substitution. This claim seems misguided to me. First, *poena* can indeed be translated as punishment, but it can also simply mean affliction or pain. Hence, it does not necessarily have a penal connotation. More importantly, by introducing *poena satisfactoria* Aquinas actually lessens the penal aspects of traditional soteriology rather than reinforcing it. In order to see this we need to remember that the distinction between *malum poenae* (evil suffered) and *malum culpae* (the evil of sin; moral evil) is derived from

[22] See R. Van Nieuwenhove, "Bearing the marks of Christ's Passion: Aquinas's Soteriology" in R. Van Nieuwenhove & J. Wawrykow (eds), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005), 277-302, especially 282-7.
[23] *ST* I-II, q. 86, a. 1 ad 3.
[24] See for instance *ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 7. In the response Aquinas also mentions *medicinas poenales*—and it does not make sense to translate this as "medicinal punishments." A doctor who prescribes "bitter potions to his patients that he may restore them to health" (which is how Aquinas illustrates *medicinas poenales*) does not inflict punishment, nor is he acting in a vindictive manner.
[25] See B. Peterson, "Paving the Way…"

Augustine's *On Free Choice* 3.9[26], and that according to Augustine, *all* afflictions or *poenae* (sickness, death,…) are punishments for sin from God, including original sin. Insofar as Aquinas accepts this[27] he qualifies the penal aspect: some afflictions may find acquire a satisfactory dimension if we freely espouse them. Aquinas generally uses the word *poena* to refer to anything that goes against our will. Insofar, however, as we freely espouse it, it loses the strong penal dimension. Hence he writes:

> Now when punishment [affliction] (*poena*) is satisfactory, it loses somewhat of the nature of punishment [affliction] (*de ratione poenae*): for the nature of punishment is to be against the will; and although satisfactory punishment, absolutely speaking, is against the will, nevertheless in this particular case and for this particular purpose, it is voluntary. Consequently, it is voluntary simply, but involuntary in a certain respect.[28]

Nobody enjoys doing penance but we still freely embrace it. In one sense it is in accordance with our will; in another sense it goes against it. Hence, if we are willing to do penance the stain of sin is removed—we begin to dwell back in the light of God's grace.[29] It should be reiterated that language of making satisfaction is an integral part of penance for Aquinas. We engage in penance, not because it is demanded from us by a vindictive God to placate him but because we ourselves freely desire to do so in order to restore the broken relationship with God. When we have gravely hurt or offended somebody we will want "to make it up to that person," as colloquial English has it, even if the person herself does not demand such a manifestation of sorrow and repentance. Penance transforms us and restores the relationship. Similarly, it does not change God who has no need of inflicting punishments to satisfy his alleged wrath.

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[26] Bonaventure writes in II *Sent*. d. 35, a. 1, q. 2 (quoting Augustine, *De Lib. Arbitr.* 3. 9): "Malum culpae est affectio voluntaria, malum vero poenae est affectio involuntaria." Modern editions of Augustine's texts have: "Non enim peccatum et supplicium peccati naturae sunt quaedam, sed adfectiones naturarum, illa voluntaria, ista poenalis."

[27] In *De Malo* q. 5, a. 4 & 5 he qualifies the Augustinian legacy by arguing that natural afflictions are merely "concomitant punishments" for original sin rather than direct punishments, and he affirms that there is a natural dimension to death and other ills given our corporeal nature.

[28] *ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 6.

[29] We must still engage in actual "satisfactory punishment" to heal our soul and to restore the equality of justice (cf. *ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 6, ad 3). It is because of his very sorrow over his sin that David wants to make satisfaction (*ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 6 ad 2: "The virtuous man does not deserve punishment [affliction] simply, but he may deserve it as satisfactory: because his very virtue demands that he should do satisfaction for his offenses against God or man.")

The personalist and penitential aspect (as distinct from penal) aspect of Aquinas's soteriology is further illustrated by Aquinas's adoption of the theme of "making satisfaction." From his earliest theological synthesis Aquinas describes making satisfaction in terms of restoring a relationship (*restitutio amicitiae*) with God through penance.[30] He draws on two sources to develop his theology of making satisfaction: the first one is from a work that Aquinas attributes to Augustine although it is actually by Gennadius of Marseilles (d. 496); the second is by Anselm of Canterbury.[31] According to Gennadius's definition, satisfaction is penance, whereby the causes of sin are being removed, and we are strengthened against their enticements in the future.[32] In short, Aquinas characterises satisfaction as a medicine which heals past sins and preserves us from future ones.[33]

Aquinas's discussion of the theme of "sacrifice" illustrates the same point. Consider Aquinas's comments on Psalm 50:18-19:

> "If you had desired sacrifice, I would indeed have given it;
> With burnt offerings you will not be delighted.
> A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit;
> A contrite and humbled heart (*cor contritum et humiliatum*)
> O God, you will not despise."

God takes no delight in burnt offerings; what God desires is a humble and contrite heart. Humility is a virtue that reminds us of our createdness, of the fact that we have been made from earth (*humus*) and to earth we will return. It is a virtue that governs the way we relate to God rather than to other people.

When Aquinas comments on these verses he quotes Augustine's *De Civ. Dei*, Bk X, where Augustine had argued that it would be foolish to assume that God needs our sacrifices. Augustine is insistent that sacrifices do not change God; they transform us. It is we ourselves,

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[30] IV *Sent*. d. 15, q. 1, a. 3 sol. 1. I have used the English translation by Beth Mortensen et al. in *Saint Thomas Aquinas. Commentary on the Sentences, Book IV, Distinctions 14-25* (Wyoming: Aquinas Institute, 2017).
[31] IV *Sent*. d. 15, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 3, obj. 1 & 5.
[32] According to Anselm's definition, satisfaction refers to paying the honour due to God. Aquinas harmonises the two definitions by understanding Anselm's one as referring to past offences, and Gennadius's one to preserving us from future faults. We pay due honour to God when we remove the offense, which Aquinas understands in terms of a restoration of friendship. See IV *Sent*. d. 15, q. 1, a. 3 sol. 1: "the removal of an offense is the restoration of friendship; and so if there is something that blocks the restoring of friendship, satisfaction cannot even exist between men."
[33] IV *Sent*. d. 15, q. 1, a. 3 qc. 1, Sed contra 2.

not God, who benefit from the worship that is offered to God. The purpose of past and present offerings is that "we may cleave to God and seek the good of our neighbour for the same end. Thus the visible sacrifice is the sacrament, the sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice." He concludes that in offering our sacrifices "we shall be aware that visible sacrifice must be offered only to him, to whom we ourselves ought to be an invisible sacrifice in our hearts."[34] The visible sacrifice in all its multifarious expressions (e.g., liturgical, moral-practical, ascetical) is the manifestation of the invisible sacrifice, which is a radical centring of our heart and mind on God, a theocentric focus in everything we do. Ultimately, sacrifice refers to a gift of self to God, establishing a communion with God and our fellow-human beings. This self-gift derives its meaning and value from the self-gift of Christ.

Following Augustine, Aquinas argues that an external sacrifice symbolises an internal spiritual sacrifice, whereby the soul offers itself up to God.[35] We can offer external things (our possessions), bodily goods (fasting, martyrdom) and goods of the soul (e.g., devotion, prayer).[36] These external sacrifices manifest an internal gift of self through devotion to God. Now Augustine's dictum that the external sacrifice is the sacrament, or sacred sign of the internal sacrifice also applies to Christ's sacrifice. This means that Christ's sufferings *as such* are not pleasing to God but rather the love and obedience they exemplify.

This is the reason why Christ's saving work is a source of merit: merit should not be primarily understood in terms of a reward for a deed you perform. In Aquinas's understanding, merit depends mainly on the love or charity with which you perform the praiseworthy act: charity is the root of merit. Our acts are meritorious insofar as they are founded upon charity or love for God. The primary reason why somebody gives something freely—the way God bestows his gifts—is friendship. Therefore, it is our friendship or love for God (charity) that creates the context in which we can merit from God.[37] This is of central importance in understanding Aquinas's notion that through suffering we can become Christ-like, itself inspired by *The Letter to the Colossians* 1:24 (where the author writes that he rejoices in his suffering, and has to supplement in his flesh the suffering of Christ for the sake of the Church) and other "Pauline" writings. The possibility to regard our afflictions as a means of entering into the passion of Christ is predicated on an intimate loving union

[34] *De Civ. Dei,* X, 19 translated by H. Bettenson as *St Augustine. The City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996).
[35] *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 2. Every virtuous act assumes the character of sacrifice through being done in order that we might cling to God in holy fellowship *(ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 3 ad 1).
[36] *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 3 ad 12.
[37] See IV *Sent.*, d. 15, q. 1, a. 3 qc 4.

between Christ as Head, and the members of his body, the Church. This intimate union works both ways: Christ identifies with our suffering in radical solidarity, and we can see our own sufferings as a participation in Christ's. Thus, suffering itself can become a kind of communion with Christ. As Michael Dodds has argued, this radical union surpasses mere compassion.[38] When we see others suffer we feel, hopefully, a profound sympathy; but when these others are actually another self, or part of ourselves (such as our children) their suffering is almost literally ours. Through charity or friendship between God and humanity, a most intimate solidarity in suffering is established between Christ and his followers.

Christ's passion, then, is meritorious because it manifests his perfect love for God, which can then be shared with the faithful who are members of the one body, of which Christ is the Head.[39] Aquinas therefore emphasises the intimate union between Christ and his members. This emphasis excludes a substitutionary notion of salvation. If there is a corporate dimension to Adam's Fall, so there is—even more—a collective dimension to the merits of Christ that are being shared:

> Grace was bestowed upon Christ, not only as an individual, but inasmuch as he is the Head of the Church, so that it might overflow into his members; and therefore Christ's works are referred to himself and to his members in the same way as the works of any other man in a state of grace are referred to himself.[40]

But even if we accept that Christ restores the relationship and friendship between sinful humanity and God we are still left with the question: Is it not deeply problematic to attribute saving efficacy to the death of an innocent man? Can God truly be said to have wanted the suffering of his Son? At one level Aquinas would agree that God does not want innocent people to perish; and he is quite in agreement to call the execution of Christ the gravest of sins.[41] Here Aquinas and some of the contemporary theologians I mentioned are at one. But Aquinas can, if you like, "situate" the horrible crime of the Son's execution in a broader perspective of divine providence. Schillebeeckx and other theologians cannot. For them the death of Christ was simply the result of Christ's theocentric mission which evoked, perhaps predictably, deadly resistance from worldly and even religious authorities.

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[38] M. Dodds, "Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love" *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 330.
[39] *Comm. John* no. 1976; *ST* III, q. 48. a. 1.
[40] *ST* III, q. 48, a. 1.
[41] *ST* III, q. 47, a. 4.

Now it is correct to say that the gospels attribute the passion of Christ to the intrigues of this-worldly powers; but they *also* suggest that the Father gives up his Son on our behalf, and that there was a sense in which Christ had to die.[42] In Luke 24:26 the resurrected Christ himself admonishes his disciples on the way to Emmaus: "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and so enter into his glory?" Similarly, in the gospel of John we find repeated assertions that the Son "must" suffer on the cross, which is his moment of glorification. "Such is the command I received from my Father…" Christ says in John 10:18 (quoted in III, q. 47, a. 2 ad 1), while in Philippians 2:8 we read that Christ was "obedient (to his Father) even unto death" (quoted in Sed Contra of III, q. 47, a. 2). And in the gospel of Mark we find a hurried rush towards the cross. In describing the cross merely in terms of this-worldly abhorrence of the purity of Christ, Schillebeeckx and others therefore have to ignore some considerable Scriptural evidence that suggests that these evil machinations do not fall outside of the remit of divine providence. Aquinas can do justice to both elements, that is: he can affirm that the passion of Christ was a most heinous crime but he can *also* assert that it does not fall outside the scope of the divine plan. The reason he can make these two seemingly contradictory assertions is that he operates with a more sophisticated notion as to how divine causality and creaturely activity relate to one another.

In Aquinas's view divine causality and creaturely activity do not operate on the same level and are, therefore, not in competition with one another. God causes at a transcendental level, so to speak: God is the condition of possibility of creaturely activity. This creaturely activity can occur necessarily or in a contingent manner but in either case it is subject to divine providence.

This is not a new insight. Scholars have long since recognised that we cannot make sense of Aquinas's Five Ways unless we understand them as pointing towards a vertical or transcendental notion of divine causality. In other words, when Aquinas considers arguments from motion, causality, contingency and necessity, and so forth, he is not claiming that God is a first cause operating on the same level as creaturely causality (as in a Deist understanding). Rather, he is suggesting that the existence of the world as we know it cannot be explained in purely inner-worldly terms. Attempting to explain the ultimate cause of the world in scientific or philosophical terms is merely question-begging, for these scientific laws are obviously part of the *explanandum*. In short, the very existence of the world—why there is anything at all rather than nothing—constitutes a philosophical question that requires a

[42] As H.U. von Balthasar observed in *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark,1990), p. 89ff.

theological answer, namely: God as the transcendental cause of all created beings and activity.

Given this broader understanding of divine causality it is not incoherent for Aquinas to claim that the passion of Christ was the result of profoundly evil opposition to his mission *and* also wanted by God as the chosen means of salvation. Given the end—namely the salvation of humankind—it was "necessary" that Christ suffer for our sake. This "necessity" is not stringent: it is rather a case of being more "fitting" (*convenienter*), for without it the end cannot be attained in a most suitable manner. Hypothetically, God could have chosen a different way of redeeming humankind.[43] The death Christ suffered on the cross, however, manifested the radical nature of Christ's love for, and solidarity with, humankind in a supreme manner.

It is required, however, that we avail of the salvation that Christ effected. If Christ is the doctor who prepared the medicine necessary for our salvation we still need to take it by partaking in the sacraments, such as baptism, penance, and Eucharist. In *ST* III, q. 73, a. 4 Aquinas considers three different names for the sacrament of the Eucharist or the Last Supper. When one considers it from the perspective of the past, it can be called a *sacrifice* as it commemorates and re-enacts our Lord's passion; in relation to the present it refers to union with Christ and the other faithful, which is why it is called *communion*. Quoting John of Damascus he writes that through the sacrament we communicate with Christ, partaking of his flesh and Godhead, and thereby we commune with Christ and one another. Finally, with regard to the future it is called *Eucharist* or good grace as we receive God's grace and indeed Christ himself who is filled with grace. The whole sacramental economy converges on the Eucharist: the sacrifices of the Hebrew people prefigured, and the Eucharist commemorates and re-enacts, the sacrifice of Christ. Indeed, as Aquinas writes: "The Eucharist is the perfect sacrament of our Lord's passion, containing Christ crucified."[44]

The sacraments are the material extension, so to speak, of the Incarnation. Given the fact that we are corporeal beings, drawn towards material things (for better or for worse), and given the fact that we acquire knowledge of the intelligible or spiritual through sensible things it is fitting that God chose modest material things, such as bread, water and wine, as the instruments of our sanctification.[45] Their corporeal nature is like a veil through which we

[43] *ST* III, q. 46, a. 2; see also *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2.
[44] *ST* III, q. 73, a. 5, ad 2.
[45] *ST* III, q. 60, a. 4.

can discern a spiritual reality—not unlike the Scriptures in which a profound spiritual meaning can reside within the literal meaning of the text, as Aquinas reminds us.[46]

Summary

Aquinas offers a number of theoretical responses to the mystery of evil. He adopts, for instance, the traditional notion of evil as privation of goodness, and he appeals to the argument that from a more universal perspective particular evils may actually be good. More important is his Christian-theological approach, which invites us to see the adversities we inevitably encounter throughout our lives in the light of the passion of Christ. Aquinas's views compare favourably, in my view, with today's "protest-(a)theism." Aquinas's understanding of providence is richer and more comprehensive than that of modern-day protest-theists who implicitly deny the all-encompassing nature of divine providence, thereby perhaps lapsing back into an ancient notion of Fate, if not dualist (Manichean) tendencies. In other words, Aquinas's notion of providence can assist us in discerning the mystery of divine mercy behind the veil of the world and its inevitable, meaningless sufferings. In the words of Simone Weil:

> Those who have the privilege of mystical contemplation, having experienced the mercy of God, *suppose* that, God being mercy, the created world is a work of mercy. But as for obtaining evidence of this mercy directly from nature, it would be necessary to become blind, deaf, and without pity in order to believe such a thing possible. (…) That is why mysticism is the only source of virtue for humanity. Because when men do not believe that there is infinite mercy behind the curtain of the world, or when they think that this mercy is on front of the curtain, they become cruel.[47]

Such a dialectical approach which does not deny the reality of affliction and yet discerns the mystery of divine mercy within it, is predicated on a number of things. First, it presupposes a belief that affliction does not fall outside the remit of divine providence; secondly, this perspective is only viable in light of the cross and the saving meaning it has. I have suggested

[46] *ST* III, q. 60, a. 4.
[47] S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1992), 100.

that the denial of the centrality of the passion of Christ for our salvation sits uneasily with both the gospel accounts and the ensuing tradition. As I argued, acknowledging the centrality of the cross of Christ does not mean that we therefore are committed to espousing a penal, substitutionary notion of salvation in which Christ's sacrifice meets the demands of a vindictive, angry god. This view is utterly alien to Aquinas: his comments on divine mercy, as well as his stance that both "making satisfaction" and "sacrifice" must be seen in the context of penance, through which our friendship with God is restored, exclude this interpretation. Thus, the passion of Christ does not appease or change God. Like penance, it changes us when we become part of his Body. Accepting the saving significance of the cross does not have to imply either that we somehow legitimise senseless suffering or acquiesce in it. It may assist us, however, in realising that in the midst of our afflictions we can encounter Christ and become incorporated into him. This should not be construed in a *prescriptive* manner. We shouldn't say: "This is how you should relate to your suffering!" (i.e., by interpreting it in the light of Christ's passion). It is, rather, *descriptive*, and simply points to how some Christians, as a matter of fact, relate to their (inevitable) suffering. Whether or not we adopt this outlook is a personal decision, and not something we should impose on others. Nonetheless, the stories of witnesses matter. In emptying the passion of Christ of saving significance, some modern theologians prove themselves unfaithful to both the Scriptural witness and the tradition; what is worse, in doing so they are in danger of depriving believers of a ray of meaning in their deepest darkness. In my view, Aquinas's soteriology offers a more sophisticated and rich alternative.