Christ’s Faith, Doubt, and the Cry of Dereliction

Introduction

According to the accounts of the Passion in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Christ cries out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”\(^1\) The line is puzzling for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the one uttering it is a divine person. Given the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation, one would expect (the one) God, whether he is Father, Son, or Spirit, to be fully in fellowship with God.\(^2\) The line is also troubling. After all, Christ is all-good and would seem to be as close to God as one with a human nature could possibly be. Nevertheless, he claims to have been forsaken by God. How could that be?

There are many ways this line has been understood within biblical scholarship and among philosophers.\(^3\) Eleonore Stump offers one such interpretation. In short, she argues that Christ takes on the sins of the world during the Passion and has a “simulacrum” of the stains of humankind on his soul.\(^4\) Christ’s close connection with sinful human beings and the ugliness of sin make it the case that Christ cannot enjoy closeness with God. The result is his sense that God has left him.

Supposing that Stump is right in her account of the cry of dereliction, an interesting puzzle arises about Christ’s faith at the time of the cry. Does Christ lack faith in God? Does he lack faith that God is with him and loves him? In this paper, I explore Christ’s faith at the time of

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1 Mt. 27:46 and Mk. 15:34
2 The Chalcedonian (orthodox) understanding of the Incarnation is that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, is a divine person with both a fully human nature and a fully divine nature.
3 It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the rich biblical commentary on the cry of dereliction passages.
the cry of dereliction and offer an account of his faith that leaves room for the doubt that the words of the cry manifest.\(^5\) This account of Christ’s faith has implications for a more general account of faith.

I. A Preliminary

Before I turn to the task of examining Christ’s faith at the time of the cry of dereliction, one preliminary is in order. Here, I lay out in greater detail Stump’s interpretation of the cry of dereliction, which is a backdrop for the account of Christ’s faith that I develop below.

According to Stump, Christ’s cry of dereliction reveals distance between the Incarnate Christ and God. Distance is opposed to union, but perfect union is what we would expect Christ to have with God, given the orthodox account of the Incarnation. At this point, two questions arise: 1) What is ‘union’?; and 2) Why doesn’t Christ have it (or think he has it) with God at the time of the cry of dereliction?

Union is the sort of bond facilitated by closeness and significant personal presence. Closeness, roughly, is the mutual sharing of thoughts and feelings with another.\(^6\) Significant personal presence includes closeness plus shared attention. Shared attention is a complicated phenomenon, but Stump uses an example to illustrate the notion of shared attention that her argument presupposes: “When a mother looks intently into the eyes of her baby who is also

\(^5\) Some might object to my project at the outset because they rule out the possibility of Christ having faith at all. Thomas Aquinas and others in the Catholic tradition have maintained that Christ enjoyed the beatific vision during his earthly life and, consequently, lived by sight and not by faith. One no longer has faith once one knows. Nevertheless, I think there is good scripturally-supported reason to think that Christ had faith, even if in a limited domain. For example, he knew (and did not have faith) that he was the Son of God, but it is plausible that he had faith that God was a loving Father. For an insightful treatment of the possibility of Christ’s having faith, see Gerald O’Collins and Daniel Kendall, “The Faith of Jesus,” Theological Studies 53 (1992): pp.403-423.

looking intently into hers, there is a kind of shared attention between them. Each of them, mother and baby, is aware of the other and of the other’s awareness of her and of the other’s awareness of her awareness of the other, and so on.” In case a person is sharing attention and is close to another in the way described above, then that person has significant personal presence with another. As Stump notes, “The absence of either of...[these conditions] is sufficient for distance between persons.”

Stump suggests that Christ’s mind-reading connection with human beings hinders his ability to share attention with God, thus resulting in distance, or lack of union. The experience of mind-reading, at least as the scientific community currently understands it, involves the mirror neuron system. In short, one’s mirror neurons fire both when one does a particular kind of action and when one witnesses someone else doing the same kind of action. The result is that when one is observing another in action, one experiences, albeit in an off-line kind of way, the same internal states as the one performing the action. One intuitively knows “something about what another person is doing and with what motive and emotion he is doing it.”

Suppose that I visit my friend Anne, who has a serious drug addiction. She is miserably depressed and believes that she will never be able to kick the habit, yet she wants me to drive her to a rehabilitation facility. When I am with Anne, I can have a mind-reading connection with her and ‘know’ her hopeless thoughts and feelings and, in a way, experience them myself. This is different, however, from having the same beliefs and desires as Anne has them. For

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7 Stump (2012), p.3.
instance, I do not think that I will never be able to kick a drug addiction, and I do not desire that I be driven to a rehabilitation facility.

In the case of Christ on the cross, Stump argues that it could be that he has some sort of connection with the psyches of every human being as the bearer of all human sin. Because of this mind-reading connection, he has the ‘off-line’, yet still very traumatic, experience of what it is to do all of the very worst human acts ever committed. Christ doesn’t believe that he has committed these evil acts or have evil desires of his own, yet he has “in his psyche the simulacrum of all the stains of all the evil ever thought or done.”13 Christ’s overwhelming, “shattering” experience of all the evil ever thought or done may have been enough for him to lose his ability to connect with God and to feel that God is the one who has abandoned him, even though it is the connection with every human psyche that is the cause of his lack of connection with God.14 Stump writes, “[I]t is possible for Christ to feel that it is God who has gone from him even while it is the overwhelming of his mind by the connection with the evil in human minds that deprives him of his ability to share attention with God.”15

II. Faith and Belief

Let us suppose that Stump’s interpretation of the cry of dereliction is plausible and maybe even true. On this interpretation, when Christ cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, he reveals an inability to connect with God. He does not believe that God is

with him.\textsuperscript{16} He may not believe that God loves him or is exercising fatherly care for him. Thus, a question about Christ’s faith in that dark moment arises. Has he lost his faith in God? Has he lost faith that God is with him, loves him, and offers tender fatherly care?

On one mainstream account of faith, belief that p is necessary for faith that p. Take two representative descriptions that characterize ‘faith’ in precisely this way. The \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} offers the following description of ‘faith’: “Belief in and acceptance of the doctrines of religion.” Augustine characterizes faith with respect to everyday affairs and religious matters in a similar way:

“[F]aith \textit{believes}; … [F]aith refers to things past and present and future. For we \textit{believe} that Christ died; this is a past event. We \textit{believe} that he sitteth at the Father’s right hand; this is present. We \textit{believe} that he will come as our judge; this is future. Again, faith has to do with our own affairs and with those of others. For everyone \textit{believes}, both about himself and other persons—and about things as well—that at some time he began to exist and that he has not existed forever. Thus, not only about men, but even about angels, we \textit{believe} many things that have a bearing on religion.”\textsuperscript{17}

A standard view of ‘faith’, then, is that belief is partly, if not wholly, constitutive of faith. In other words, one cannot have faith that p without believing p. Daniel Howard-Snyder summarizes the view this way: “Necessarily, S has faith that p only if S believes that p.”\textsuperscript{18} The following case illustrates the point: Anne calls Bill to ask him to pick her up from the airport at a specified time. After the conversation, Anne \textit{believes} that Bill will pick her up; so, she has faith that Bill will pick her up from the airport. Conversely, perhaps Anne is aware that Bill is

\textsuperscript{16} As I note later, \textit{not believing} is not equivalent to \textit{disbelieving}. \textit{Not believing} is neutral with respect to belief, i.e., one neither believes nor disbelieves that p.


\textsuperscript{18} Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Does Faith Entail Belief?” \textit{Faith and Philosophy} 33, no.2 (April 2016), p.147.
chronically forgetful of his appointments. She might then lack faith that Bill will pick her up from the airport just because she does not believe that Bill will pick her up.

The view that \textit{faith that }p \textit{ requires belief that }p \textit{ may be applied to the case of Christ.}^{19} When Christ cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, he at once claims to be disconnected from God because of something that (he perceives) God has done, and he asks God why God has separated himself from him.\textsuperscript{20} A person with faith in God and faith that God is closely connected to one in a relationship of love \textit{believes} in God and that God is closely connected to one in a relationship of love, according to the ‘faith requires belief’ view. Yet, Christ on the cross, perhaps because of the reasons I outlined above, does not have such beliefs. At the very least, Christ does not believe that God is close to him or exercising fatherly care in the midst of his suffering. Given the ‘faith requires belief’ view, then, Christ lacks faith in God, i.e., he does not have faith that God is a loving Father, and he lacks faith that God is close to him. In short, Christ has lost his faith.

Faith is some kind of attitude that is connected with a range of behavioral dispositions. Because of this, when we say that someone has lost faith in some domain (or lost faith that something is the case) that individual will also likely fail to manifest a range of attitudinal and behavioral responses that the individual \textit{would} manifest were she still faithful. To see this, let’s return to the case of Anne and Bill above.

\textbf{Case 1:} In advance of her arrival at the airport, Anne loses faith that Bill will pick her up from the airport.

\textsuperscript{19} For the sake of simplicity, I hereafter refer to this standard view of faith, i.e., \textit{faith that }p \textit{ requires belief that }p, \textit{ as the ‘faith requires belief’ view.}

\textsuperscript{20} Given the language Christ uses in the cry of dereliction, namely, that God has forsaken him, it seems that Christ thinks that the act of forsaking is coming from God; God is the agent doing the forsaking.
Possible consequent behavior:
*Anne makes arrangements with another friend to pick her up.*

Case 2: Anne has arrived at the airport. She has traveled a great distance in response to Bill’s invitation for her to visit. Bill is Anne’s best friend, and she is counting on him to pick her up. She has been waiting 30 minutes for Bill’s arrival. Bill has not answered Anne’s calls or text messages in which she reminded him to pick her up. Finally, she gets a message from Bill saying that he is busy, can’t pick her up, and is not available to visit. Anne loses faith in Bill.

Possible consequent behavior:
*Anne makes arrangements with another friend to pick her up. Anne is deeply hurt and feels betrayed by Bill.*

In both cases, Anne might lack faith that Bill is a reliable friend. In the first case, Bill’s failure to pick her up is less damaging. In the second case, however, Anne and Bill have mutual closeness and trust in one another as friends. Bill’s failure to pick her up and spend time with her severely damages their relationship, perhaps beyond repair. Anne loses trust in Bill as a friend. She lacks faith that Bill is the person she thought he was. It might be reasonable in the near future for Anne to cut off her relationship with Bill, to ignore his calls and messages, to find new friends, and not to pick Bill up from the airport if he ever were to ask.\(^2\)\(^1\) The point here is that in either case, Anne’s lack of faith in Bill will bring about certain attitudes and behaviors in Anne.

The case of Christ is similar. If Christ truly lacked faith in God or that God is close to him and loves him, then we might expect Christ to manifest (or fail to manifest) a range of attitudinal and behavioral dispositions similar to the aforementioned case of Anne and Bill. We might expect him, if he truly were God (the Son), to stop communicating with God (the Father) and remove himself from the cross (which would be contrary to the Father’s will and, therefore,

\(^2\)\(^1\) Of course, this is to set aside the possibility of Bill’s asking for forgiveness and Anne forgiving him.
an act of disobedience). These behaviors, or expected effects, of one who has lost faith in another are nowhere found in the Passion narrative of any of the Gospels, however. Instead, what we find Christ actually doing is the following:

1. Immediately prior to the cry of dereliction, Jesus [Christ] forgives those who condemned and crucified him, and he consoles a crucified convicted criminal.

   Luke 23:34: Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

   Luke 23:43: [Jesus] said to him [one of the criminals], “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

2. Immediately after the cry of dereliction, Jesus remains on the cross and dies.

   Matthew 27:50: And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

   Mark 15:37: And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.

In the Gospel of Luke, Christ communicates with God again and reveals complete obedience, surrender, and continued friendship:

   Luke 23:46: Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!”

3. The immediate effect of Christ’s behavior on bystanders after he dies is worth noting because it reveals what they thought about him. If he had truly lost his faith in God, then we would not expect several witnesses to his passion and death to make a claim that he is the Son of God. We would not expect witnesses to be deeply moved by Christ’s faith.

   Matthew 27:54: “When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, “ Truly this was the Son of God!”

   Mark 15:39: “And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, “ Truly this man was the Son of God!”
Contrary to what we might expect in one who does not have faith that God is with him, Christ acts as a person with faith in God and faith that God is with him. There are at least two interesting conclusions to be drawn from the case of Christ here. The first is that the (extended) ‘event’ of the cry of dereliction, which I take to include the events occurring immediately before, during, and immediately after the cry (as listed above in #1-3), is a *reductio ad absurdum* for the view that faith requires belief. Christ’s cry means that he does not *believe* that God is with him. Nevertheless, he manifests attitudes and behaviors consistent with one who still has faith that God is with him. Thus, belief is not necessary for faith. Second, since Christ apparently *does* have faith in God and that God is with him in a relationship of love even in his darkest hour, some alternative account of faith is needed, one that is compatible with being in doubt.

III. An Account of Faith

One preliminary point is in order before I offer an alternative account of faith. So far, I have been speaking clumsily about faith in two senses: *faith in* and *faith that*. These senses are arguably distinct, but both are salient for understanding the cry of dereliction. The first, *faith in*, is the sense of faith that pertains to trust in another, even if only in limited domains. W Walter has faith in Paul as a careful researcher and as a wine connoisseur, which means that he trusts that he will “do or be thus-and-so”. In this case, Walter may trust in or rely on Paul to pick out a good bottle of wine, in case he has faith in Paul as a wine connoisseur. This sense of faith is different from *faith that*, which is *propositional faith*. Propositional faith is expressed in the

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following way: “S has faith that p,” where ‘p’ stands for some proposition.24 “Walter has faith that Paul will show up to the party on time” is an example of propositional faith. While faith in may seem to collapse into propositional faith, Howard-Snyder offers an example to show the distinction: “I have faith that Anne’s baby will survive his impending hazardous birth, but I do not have faith in him, as anything, since I am not disposed to rely on him in any way at all.”25

I bring up this distinction between faith in and propositional faith mainly to set aside faith in. My focus in developing an account of faith pertains to propositional faith, although it may be the case that the account developed here could be adapted as an account of faith in.

For the purposes of this paper, I adopt an account of faith developed by Howard-Snyder. Below, I summarize the account. In the final section, I develop one aspect of his account as it pertains to the cry of dereliction.

According to Howard-Snyder, faith is a propositional attitude. One has propositional faith if and only if one has:

1. A positive conative orientation toward p
2. A positive cognitive orientation toward p
3. Resilience in the face of contrary evidence

The first disposition that one must have in the case of propositional faith is a positive conative orientation toward p.26 This is a “being-for-it” requirement.27 If someone is for p, they care that p and would be disappointed if it were to turn out that ¬p. This care and disappointment show that, to one degree or another, one has a desire for the proposition that p to be true. If Al is for the U.S. women’s basketball team winning the Olympic gold medal, then

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he cares that they win and would be disappointed if they were to lose. He sees their winning as a good, and he wants them to win. One cannot have faith that p, in this case that the U.S. women’s basketball team win the Olympic gold medal, if one does not have a positive conative orientation toward p.

A positive cognitive orientation toward p is also necessary for propositional faith. This positive cognitive orientation might be all-out belief that p, or it might be some other cognitive stance short of belief, such as assuming that p, trusting that p, accepting that p, etc. The following case illustrates the point:

Suppose that Meg is planning to attend her friend’s wedding. A year ago, she borrowed a book from her friend’s sister, Nancy, who lives out of town. Meg did not contact her friend or Nancy to find out whether Nancy will be at the wedding. Meg’s experience with her friend’s closely-knit family makes it seem most likely to her that Nancy will be there, so she brings the book to the wedding reception in order to return it to Nancy.

Does Meg believe that Nancy will be there? It seems that the clear answer is ‘no’. She was not in contact with her friend or Nancy, so she does not have enough information to all-out believe that Nancy will be at the wedding. Nevertheless, she has some positive cognitive orientation toward Nancy’s being there. Perhaps she assumes that Nancy will be there without believing that Nancy will be there.

The final point about propositional faith is that one with such faith is resilient in the face of (some degree of) contrary evidence. This doesn’t mean that one clings to faith that p contra mundum, but it does mean that one maintains faith within reason even in the face of new counter-evidence.\(^{28}\) One’s positive cognitive stance should be responsive to evidence, but given

the range of possibilities for positive cognitive stances mentioned above, there are more and less certain positive cognitive stances that one may take up. For instance, counter-evidence may move one from all-out belief that p to merely assuming or trusting that p.

IV. Faith and Reliance

In this final section, I focus on the second requirement for propositional faith, namely, the agent’s positive cognitive stance toward p. While an agent may fulfill this requirement by believing that p, it seems to be the case that people with propositional faith can have some positive cognitive stance that is less than believing that p. This appears to be the case for Christ at the time of the cry of dereliction. What might his positive cognitive stance have been? I suggest here that reliance is a plausible candidate for what Christ’s cognitive orientation may have been at the time of the cry of dereliction.

First, an account of reliance is in order. What is reliance, and in what ways is it distinct from belief? Facundo Alonso offers an account of reliance in his recent work. Reliance, in short, is a cognitive stance that aims at providing sensible cognitive guidance. Belief, likewise, is a cognitive stance, but it aims at truth, not necessarily sensible cognitive guidance. The function of belief is to represent the world as it really is, i.e., to represent it truly. Beliefs are shaped and revised in response to evidence. Accordingly, “[t]ruth...is the ‘norm’ or ‘standard of correctness’ for belief.” Consider that I might have the belief, formed from a windowless

office, that it is raining outside. That belief may be true or false, as determined by whether or not it is, in fact, raining outside. I might change my belief that it is raining outside when I look out a window and notice that it is not raining. In other words, belief is (or ought to be) responsive to and regulated by evidence.\textsuperscript{33}

Reliance is not constitutively truth-tracking in the way that belief is. Truth isn’t one of its aims; practical, sensible guidance is. In the case above, Meg doesn’t have enough information to believe that Nancy will show up (or not). So, she neither believes nor disbelieves that Nancy will be there. Nevertheless, Meg relies on her being there and, as a result, brings along the book to return to Nancy. Whether or not it is true that Nancy shows up at the wedding has no bearing on Meg’s deliberating, planning, and acting.

Since the aim of reliance is pragmatic, how might one measure the reasonability of reliance? According to Alonso, reliance is rightly placed, or \textit{reasonable}, in case it “cognitively guides one’s reasoning in a sensible way”.\textsuperscript{34} One’s reasoning is sensibly guided by a disposition to rely on p in case it is guided in accord with one’s values and ends. In the case of Meg and Nancy, Meg does not have much, if any, evidence to believe that Nancy will show up at the wedding, but she relies on Nancy’s being there and brings the book to return to her. Her reliance on Nancy’s being there is reasonable for Meg because Meg values being a responsible book borrower and that’s what she thinks being a responsible book borrower demands.

The reasonability criteria of reliance differ from those of belief. One’s \textit{belief} is reasonable insofar as it correlates with and is directly responsive to evidence and, ultimately, represents (in some way) the way the world really is. Reliance, in one respect, is responsive to

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  \item \textsuperscript{33} Alonso (2014), p.169.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Alonso (2014), p.170.
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evidence, too. If Meg were to learn that Nancy is not coming to the wedding, then she wouldn’t (or shouldn’t) rely on Nancy’s coming to the wedding. In fact, she’d form (or ought to form) a belief that Nancy is not coming. While one can rely on p when one believes that p, i.e., Meg can rely on Nancy’s coming even when she believes Nancy is coming, one cannot rely on p when one disbelieves p. It is worth noting that not believing p is distinct from disbelieving p. When Meg has insufficient evidence or neutral evidence with regard to Nancy’s coming, she simply does not believe that Nancy is coming. She neither believes it nor disbelieves it. She might be in doubt about Nancy’s coming. In this case, she may rely on Nancy’s coming or not rely on Nancy’s coming, according to the norm of sensible guidance.

Reliance may be the sort of cognitive stance that Christ had at the time of the cry of dereliction. I suggest this is the case for several reasons:

First, Christ neither believed nor disbelieved that God was with him, loved him, etc. He cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, which might look like disbelief that God was with him. Nevertheless, we’d expect from Christ some behavior other than what he actually exhibited, if he truly disbelieved. Because he is neutral with respect to believing whether God was with him, he is in doubt about it. Because he does not disbelieve that God was with him yet continues to act in faith, reliance could be the right sort of cognitive stance to fulfill the requirements of faith outlined above.

Second, Christ’s values and ends are clear throughout the gospel accounts. Among other things, he values his sonship and overall relationship with God. Because these are his values and his intended end is to maximally realize this relationship, he considers the best means to
that end. So, even though he is in doubt, he relies on God. He lets his actions be guided by his reliance on God’s being with him as a loving Father.

Third, reliance is a cognitive orientation that can be under the control of the will.\textsuperscript{35} In this case, it can link up with the conative aspect of faith. Given Christ’s values and his intended end, i.e., what he wants and/or sees as desirable and good, he can choose to rely on God, even if he doesn’t have enough evidence to believe that God is with him. Other cognitive stances, like belief or assuming, are not able to be controlled directly by the will. At the time of the cry of dereliction, then, Christ relies on God’s being with him and loving him, even though he does not believe it (and also does not disbelieve it—he is in doubt). His reliance is enough to satisfy the cognitive component of faith.

Concluding Remarks

Christ’s cry of dereliction is a locution of doubt. With the ugliness of all the sins of the world weighing upon his psyche, Christ does not believe that God is with him or loves him. If faith requires that one believe, then it would seem that Christ lost his faith just before dying on the cross. What I have argued is that Christ did not lose his faith, by showing that the typical ‘faith requires belief’ view is inadequate. His remaining on the cross, his final commendation of his spirit to God, and his witness to others demonstrate his faith in God until the very end. In fact, he is a paradigmatic case of a person with faith. He was resilient in the face of struggle; he continued to have faith, even when he neither believed nor disbelieved that God was with him. Faith does not require belief, but, rather, some positive cognitive stance. In the case of Christ

on the cross, I suggested ‘reliance’ as one such positive cognitive stance. Reliance on God in the face of doubt provided Christ with sensible guidance that allowed him to act in a way that was in accordance with his values and end as obedient son.
Bibliography


