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Article review

David Brown's *Divine Humanity*

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The contributions of this fine book[1] are many but I will concentrate on three, before turning to several more critical remarks.

First, and most obviously, the book does the invaluable service of surveying developments in kenotic christology in the nineteenth century while situating them nicely in their different contexts of origin and with reference to lines of mutual influence: continental, Scottish and British trends are all canvassed rather masterfully. Some attention, in lesser detail, is also given to the way these christological trends are extended in the twentieth century to accounts of the Trinity and God's relation to the world generally: kenosis, the self-emptying or self-limiting action of God, in the incarnation, is now viewed as a primary indication of who God is and how God works, from creation to salvation.

The broad sweep of this history, when combined with Brown's analysis of the important cultural and theological shifts which prompted it, seems to carry the whole of modern theology along with it. On more than one occasion, indeed, Brown suggests we are all kenotic theologians now, whether we like it or not. Kenosis is currently the received opinion, the consensus view. This air of historical inevitability is backed by a diagnosis of good historical reasons for the shift. Modern psychology and modern biblical criticism require the full admission by theologians of a single human consciousness in Jesus, who must be seen to have developed and struggled in much the way any human being would over the course of his or her life. Beyond anything available to theologians in the early or medieval periods, resources to make good theological sense of that fact are to be found in the modern willingness to allow for change in God. God need not appear in power in the incarnation and therefore God need not overpower the humanity of Christ. Hence kenosis.

Conveyed too through the historical survey is the generally conservative character of the effort by kenotic theologians here. Even if the claim of divine passibility is a fairly recent historical development and so too therefore kenosis, the affirmation of kenosis is often part of an attempt to remain

[1] David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis and the Construction of a Christian Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).

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faithful to the intent of earlier theological pronouncements. In the same way that those pronouncements were, a kenotic account of the incarnation is designed to show, that is, the way in which God may be 'essentially involved' in the fully human life of Christ, a life which retains its own human integrity. That same basic intent might have had the backing of a theological consensus from the time of the early church, but missing were the theological means to pull it off, and the cultural constraints to keep theologians from doing a disservice to the humanity of Christ in the process. No biblical criticism or modern attention to human psychology had yet developed, in short, to keep theologians' feet to the fire in the latter respect. Rather than see divinity suffer any abeyance or reduction of its own powers – which they deemed impossible – theologians were often more than willing to evacuate the humanity of Christ by attributing divine powers – for example, omniscience and impassibility – to it. In light of arguments like this, a continuous theological tradition, stemming from the early church and moving into the present today, may seem to be 'trending' in a kenotic direction, and appropriately so.

Whether one is convinced of the centrality of kenotic christology for such faithfulness or not – and I am not, as will become clear in a bit – the general way that Brown tries to make room for the validity of theological novelty in the first chapter of the book has a lot going for it, and this I believe is the second major contribution of the book. One can be forthright in the acknowledgement of that novelty; one needn't look for direct antecedents of a later view in scripture or earlier church tradition. In this way, Brown – and I agree with him here – is quite willing to admit that the original meaning of Philippians 2 may have little to do with either a classical or a kenotic christology. Those are genuinely later developments, bowing to theological and cultural pressures which are post-biblical, and which find support biblically not through the weight of a single passage but more from a sense of the direction in which the Bible as a whole points. Similarly, one shouldn't look for direct anticipations of later kenotic views in Chalcedonian christologies; such a search makes no sense if the latter deem impossible any genuine change in God. But none of the differences which prevent direct anticipation need rule out in principle a continuity of 'deeper principles' or 'underlying intentions'.

The third major achievement of the book – at least as important as the historical survey and its theological implications – is Brown's own constructive account of a kenotic christology: he follows Martensen's idea of two parallel strands to the life of God, but adds a new analogy to account for what distinguishes the kenotic one. It seems to me that Brown's new analogy in and of itself does a great deal to temper the tendencies of kenotic

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christologies to overvalue self-sacrifice and self-loss, while prohibiting (again because following Martensen) the simple extension of anything as strong as that to all God's ways and works. A general pattern may span God's own trinitarian life and the way God works as creator and incarnate redeemer, but the 'projection of self into the wholly other' (in Brown's terms) – kenosis in a strict sense – which characterises the incarnation is restricted to it.

His primary analogy is an artistic one. The incarnation is the culmination of the sort of creative love of an artistic kind that God demonstrates for the world generally. Like the respectful relationship of a painter, sculptor or author to his or her materials, God doesn't so much condescend from a height to what is deemed of lower value than itself as draw alongside what is merely different from itself in a relationship as close to equality as possible in the effort to elicit from those materials their own full potential. A good artist identifies with his or her materials, gets 'inside them', so to speak, just as a good novelist or author of a play sees the world from within the perspective of his or her characters. God's love too sees us from within our own point of view in terms which are in keeping with our own particular needs and circumstances and in light of what would fulfil us as the particular creatures we are with the potentials distinctive to us. Rather than imposing a plan upon the materials with which God works from the top down, God, like a good artist, gives them the space to realise their potentials, working with them and allowing them to speak for themselves. It is this respect for materials which brings with it a kind of vulnerability to them in furthering the realisation of their own potentials.

Developing this artistic analogy in terms of method acting for the specific case of incarnation enables Brown to avoid not just metaphors of condescension but ones of loss, otherwise so typical of kenotic christologies. God's becoming incarnate is something like method acting in which one projects oneself into the mindset and circumstances of the character one is to play to such an extent that one becomes that character, fully and completely. The emphasis is not so much on self-abandonment here as on total self-identification with another. God identifies Godself so totally with a particular human being, in such complete commitment to it, that 'God's every thought and action now takes human form'. God, like a method actor, projects Godself into the life of another, where the point is not so much self-loss as the 'acquisition of an added dimension through total, absorbed commitment to the other' (p. 253). Although God continues apart from the incarnation to lead a non-kenotic existence on the usual terms, God also now knows what it is to experience human life from the inside, so to speak. Through such self-identification, God, for example, now feels our pain in ways otherwise impossible for a disembodied, omniscient being.

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The point once again is a positive one: God enters into our condition not to wallow in that suffering by modelling some form of salutary self-sacrifice – as some kenotic christologies unfortunately suggest – but for the purpose of leading us beyond that suffering. 'The point is surely twofold: first, that God was able to experience suffering from a truly human perspective rather than just from his own; and second, that through such suffering he demonstrated how life could be given a meaning even in the face of such apparent meaninglessness' (p. 208). By sharing that pain through complete self-identification with the human plight, God shows us how to bear it. '[his] experience of the world would remain radically different from ours unless [God] has somehow entered into the human condition. In virtue of having done so, [he] can then come alongside the sufferer, and offer grace from the inside, as it were, showing how the situation might, potentially at least, be transformed, or at the very least, be endured' (pp. 208–9). This is a God we can identify with in our own struggles. By virtue of God's identifying with us, we are enabled to identify ourselves with the fully human way God works in Christ, and thereby make the most of our own lives.

Now while all to the good, as I've been suggesting, these alterations to the usual metaphorical associations of kenosis leave me wondering whether the term hasn't been broadened beyond recognition. (And this is my first critical comment.) Are we still talking about kenosis if that no longer involves any suggestion of the relinquishment of a higher position for the sake of the lower – no condescension, that is, within a hierarchical framing of the relation between God and creatures? And no significant forms of self-emptying divestiture or self-sacrifice – if what's at issue here is simply God's gaining the experience to speak to us from our own standpoint? What exactly marks off a kenotic christology from others? What is its bottom line? Is, for example, any inclusion of the idea of divine change within a christology sufficient to make it kenotic? Or is such an appeal kenotic only when employed to explain the possibility of Christ's full humanity? Sometimes it seems that the exercise of non-coercive divine power within the life of Christ is the marker of a kenotic christology, but few if any classical christologies, including my own, would countenance such an idea. Omnipotence is not viewed as a coercive power to begin with; and therefore non-coercive divine power cannot be the emptying or relinquishment of divine power. (This means, I'll go on to suggest, the diagnosis and solution to whatever prompts docetic trends in classical christology must take another tack: coercive divine power is not what prompts docetism and non-coercive divine power is not the solution.) What kenosis means is notoriously slippery, as Brown's recounting of the history of kenotic christologies again

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confirms, sometimes suggesting the loss of certain divine powers during the incarnation, sometimes their simple abeyance, sometimes their modification so more compatible with the leading of a human life, sometimes none of the above when God's powers apart from the incarnation are already viewed as limited in much the way human powers are. I guess I had been hoping for greater analytic clarity from Brown.

My suspicion indeed at times is that the idea of kenosis is broadened to intimate its historical inevitability. Thus, any theologian who recognises a single human consciousness in Jesus, or maintains that divinity appeared in an appropriately human way in Christ, is by that very fact allied with a kenotic position whatever his or her own explicit self-understanding. To the extent Brown is using his historical materials to make either point (which may be an uncharitable reading on my part), he would be eliding what kenotic theologians are trying to explain with their explanation itself. In other words, while I'd agree that the starting points of kenotic christology are widely shared among contemporary theologians – Christ has a fully human consciousness, divinity appears in keeping with a fully human existence in Christ – whether they require a kenotic theology to be fully grasped is another matter altogether. Brown mentions in passing in the first chapter that there may be alternatives to kenotic theologies in contemporary theological efforts to do justice to what biblical criticism and modern psychology underline about the full humanity of Christ, but he tends to presume throughout that there are no serious contenders (aside from a couple of swift dismissals of the two-minds approach of Swinburne and Morris, and perhaps because of what he now views as his own failed attempt at a two-natures account in an earlier book).

My own view is that classical christology, with some minor and major modifications of a non-kenotic sort, has the resources to explain many of the same things that kenotic theologies are trying to explain. Classical christology in my understanding of it is reluctant to talk about changes to divine powers primarily for soteriological reasons: human beings are saved by drawing on those divine powers (for example, the power of eternal life); limiting such powers, to account for the meaning or conditions of possibility of incarnation, would therefore be counterproductive. And there is no need to limit such powers in order to respect the full humanity of Christ. If the problem with some classical christologies is their claim of an immediate infusion of divine powers into Christ, the easy solution (and found, indeed, in other classical christologies) is simply to say that those powers have a gradual effect in keeping with the historical character of human life: human beings grow and change and therefore the effects of divine power on Jesus'

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own humanity are gradual. The point of the incarnation indeed is to assume what needs to be transformed, not displace it; suffering, turmoil, temptation, death and so on need to be felt in Jesus' life before they can be overcome. The fact that their effects are gradual needn't mean those divine powers themselves are held in abeyance, somehow inoperative – what would be the point of that? Jesus has divine powers at full throttle so to speak; what they bring about, however, is historical change, human effects which develop over time. In similar fashion, the effects of divine omnipotence are a developing world of time and change; there is no more difficulty in the case of incarnation than in creation. In neither case does the gradual unrolling of what God brings about through God's own creative agency, so as to be in keeping with the specific natures of what God chooses to create, suggest any lessening of God's own power.

Of course, in contrast to creation generally, divine powers become a human being's own powers in Christ, and Christ's human life (if classical christologies are to be believed) eventually feels the full effects of that fact upon his resurrection. Whether the process is gradual or immediate would seem to make little difference, then, if the full efficacy of divine power in Jesus' life amounts to something superhuman or simply inhuman. But classical christologies have effective ways, to my mind, of showing how full enjoyment of divine power by Christ's humanity respects its human character, without lessening it in any way. Full enjoyment, first of all, often simply means the full realisation of that humanity, the perfecting of human characteristics themselves: for example, human goodness. What's achieved isn't superhuman, one could say, simply the means are, in order, for example, to remedy the incapacitating effects of sin on human life. In the second place, when human life is indeed elevated beyond itself, to immortality, say, it remains itself, fully finite; through unity with God in Christ it is enabled to draw upon powers of another, which are never strictly speaking its own, considered in and of itself. Human nature remains finite while enjoying God's own eternal life for its own in unity with it; it is not itself expanded so to speak, but joined with divinity which remains what it is not.

If classical christologies have the tendency to allow the divinity of Christ to push out or evacuate his humanity, the problem has more to do with the way divinity is attributed to Christ and where one looks for divinity in Christ's own life. And in this classical christologies would fail to follow through on the implications of their own most basic claims. On my understanding of those basic claims, Christ is divine because God has given rise to a fully human life which remains God's own. God is the one living this human life for that reason – because this strictly human life remains God's own in unity

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with it, because this is God's own life in virtue of God's being one with the humanity of Christ in assuming it to itself – and not because Jesus has a divine subjectivity or centre of consciousness and agency something like a human one, just better, to replace or supplement his human one. What makes Christ divine is that activity of God by which God remains united with what God is not, lying behind and giving shape to the whole human existence of Christ; Christ is not divine because one can isolate within his life certain divine powers or capacities comparable to human ones and existing alongside his human ones – although often classical christologies suggest something like that. Instead, what reveals the divinity of Jesus' human life is the way the whole of that life is being made over according to a divine pattern, rather than any discrete divine aspects one can pick out within it. Divinity is apparent in Jesus' life not from any particular superhuman characteristics or activities which might well suggest that in those respects Jesus is no longer human; divine power appears, instead, in and through every human act and power of Christ insofar as they have saving effects. Jesus saves us from death, for example, by dying in just the way any human being would. His death isn't any different, exhibiting in itself any extraordinary powers; it is a simply human death in that sense. What's different about it is the fact that it saves – its unusual effects – and that is what prompts one to say God that is at work there – in those simply human events – with power.

The fundamental problem, then, lurking behind the docetic tendencies of classical christology which kenotic theologies lament, would be the temptation to look for Christ's divinity in a divine nature comparable to his human one. As Schleiermacher argued, I believe effectively, the transcendence of God means that God doesn't have a nature like that to be put in any simple relations of comparison and contrast with human nature, along some single, shared continuum (and this would hold whatever one means more specifically by nature – properties, entities, or powers and capacities). God does not, for example, have a mind in any way like a human mind, just bigger and better, knowing everything completely, rather than some things and only partially. Only when anthropomorphised in that way do divine attributes threaten to push out or render redundant Christ's human capacities and characteristics. Although Christ is divine (for the reasons mentioned above), one should therefore say that the only nature Christ has, strictly speaking, is a human one.

By misdiagnosing the problem with classical christologies, kenotic ones merely repeat it. They too think of the divine nature along a continuum with a human nature; and that is what sets up a competitive relation between such natures – the more there is of the one, the less of the other. Rather than

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have the divine nature overwhelm Christ's human one, kenotic christologies would rather see constraints put on the divine nature so that Christ can lead a fully human life. The better choice clearly, especially given modern developments in biblical criticism and human psychology, but a choice hamstrung by the very same set of assumptions shared with its opponents. In classical christologies the temptation to evacuate the humanity of Christ has nothing fundamentally to do, in short, with affirmations of divine impassibility or coercive divine power; it is rooted, instead, in ideas with which kenotic theologians agree.

Kathryn Tanner
Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, Connecticut, 06511, USA
kathryn.tanner@yale.edu

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