Theologizing Science, Historicizing Divinity: Kenosis and Systems Theologies

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Abstract

Recognizing that complexity and emergence provide powerful models of physical and social behavior, some contemporary Christian theologians have adopted evolutionary and emergent views of God's relation to humanity and to the physical world. However theoretically astute these adaptations may be, they entail significant risks to organized religion in general and to traditional Western Christianity in particular. The dynamic nature of emergent systems coupled with a new model of personhood arising from both psychology and theology challenge the veracity and value of religious doctrine, dogma, and even programmatic codes of ethics. In this paper I examine kenosis, a fundamental concept in the Christian vision of the relationship between God, humans, and the natural world, initially to defend the cogency of systems theologies in general but ultimately to draw attention to, ironically, the a-doctrinal, a-dogmatic implications of one system theological perspective on God's relationship with Its creation.

Keywords: Emergent systems, Complexity theory, Christian theology, kenosis, Deep Incarnation, theological anthropology, phenomenology, personhood

1. Introduction

While the American lay press has focused on the acrimonious controversies between science and religion over the past several decades, theology and some disciplines in science have been building an unprecedented agreement, sometimes to disagree, about the nature of evolution, cosmological design, and divinity. A number of theologians have adopted current scientific views of creation, complex and emergent systems, and evolution, fashioning new theological perspectives that promise not only to help ease a tension between the disciplines that began shortly after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (Daniels, 2014), but to create a more pragmatic, personally meaningful faith. While there are many who object to these efforts, contemporary discussions of theosis, kenosis, Trinitarianism, Christology, and ethics all bear the marks of complexity theory and the concept of emergent systems.

Theologians have often been willing to incorporate scientific *concepts* in their systems – Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – c. 395) often utilized then-current scientific models in his theological works (Ludlow, 2009; Costache, 2013) – but contemporary theology does not incorporate specific scientific findings as much as it is based on more comprehensive, systemic scientific world views. In systems that are chaotic, complex, and/or emergent, the structuring relationships between the physical components change, fashioning entities that are simultaneously both greater than the sum of their parts and non-deterministic in at least some of their attributes and/or internal relationships. The emphasis is on evolution rather than congruence with static component characteristics and assumedly immutable laws of behavior.

Theologies based on system theory, "systems theologies" as I will call them, offer a welcome consilience of historically opposed perspectives on the nature and significance of the natural world and of humanity itself, but at the same time they pose significant challenges both to organized religion in general and especially to mainstream dogmatic Western Christianity. In this paper I will address those challenges after first examining several instances of the theologizing of scientific theories about evolution and complex emergent systems, focusing on a specific divine action crucial to the Christian mythos – the kenotic event of the Incarnation.

2. Kenosis and Theological Hermeneutics

The source text for kenosis is Paul's *Philippians* 2:5-7: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (NRSV). The phrase emptied himself, the act of kenosis, is crucial to understanding the relationship between the Son and the human Jesus.

The image of something emptying into something else makes very clear that something was transferred. Theologians want to understand what "emptying" is, why it happened, how it happened, and what we can do with that knowledge. For Christian theology specifically, the goal is to understand how the Son somehow melded with Jesus and what the Son offered humanity in that act. However, contemporary theologies such as process theology or emergentist theology have moved that discussion far beyond traditional issues such as salvation and into a more cosmologically, and I shall argue, a-doctrinal understanding of how the divine infuses the mundane.

Typically, kenosis is thought of as a one-time event between the Son and a human that possibly involved the Son giving up some of His divinity. However, the meaning of kenosis depends upon how it is interpreted in light of existing theology, and there are many different schools of theology with conflicting views of the relationship between God and the Son, God and Creation, and humanity's role in God's plan. How we understand the Son-Jesus kenosis depends upon (or has implications for) how we understand God's relation to creation in general as well as how we view humanity's spiritual and ethical relationship to God and, perhaps, to the entirety of its creation. Kenosis only makes sense (or we have to *make* it make sense) in the context of a larger system of concepts and interpretations, and current discussions of kenosis involve philosophy of science, sociology and anthropology, systems theory, and information theory in addition to traditional theology, adding complexity to the analysis of an event already problematic yet crucial to the Christian faith.

The incarnation and crucifixion are arguably the two moments in time when the divine nature, will, and plan was most physically, tangibly immanent in human history. So any explanation of the Son-Jesus relationship potentially affects how we understand the relationships between God and the material world and between God and humans. In terms of the Christian mythos, does the Son's entrance into the physical body of Jesus also mean the divine took residence in all physical creation at the same time, so the divine infused the mundane? In non-denominational terms, if divinity once fused with one human, can divinity fuse with others, perhaps even all of us at all times?

To believers in received Christian doctrine, that last question may seem at least heretical if not absurd. However, kenosis describes a relationship between divinity and humanity; it does not require (and many modern interpretations of kenosis do not assume) full congruence with Biblical or Creedal or Covenantal doctrine. The motivation behind contemporary debates over kenosis and/or its counterpart theosis (how humans can attain some measure of divinity) is often less doctrinal than pastoral in its broadest sense: if we can understand how the divine becomes human, or human becomes divine, we have the theological and experiential basis for a vital, practical, and (as it is sometimes called) an ecological faith. That faith need not be "Christian" in the sense that a practicing Protestant or Catholic would interpret the term. In fact, one could argue that Christianity needs kenosis but kenosis is independent of Christianity.

3. Scientific Theology, Theological Science

Anyone encountering systems theology is likely to wonder where the *theology* is (Cooper, 2013). Much of it is concerned with complexity and emergence, rather than with God or moral behavior. That means discussions in contemporary theology start more often with Heisenberg, Whitehead, or Peacocke than with Paul, Aquinas, or Luther. Kenosis is no exception. There are significant differences between the classical Newtonian physical world and the quantum world, between static linear systems and those that are self-organizing, emergent, and autopoietic; these have troubled philosophers of science for decades and now for theologians have become significant if sometimes also irksome (Clayton, 2006; van Huyssteen, 2006; Drees, 1999). The issues are well summed up in a position piece by John Polkinghorne that appeared in *Zygon* in 2006.

3.1 Chaos, Emergence, and Divine Action

John Polkinghorne looks at the intersection of physics and metaphysics and identifies ontological and epistemological differences in views of the universe, as a preamble to introducing God into the spatio-temporal universe (Polkinghorne, 2006).

He distinguishes between the block time of classical physics and classical theology, and the universe of becoming described by emergence/chaos science and open theology. On the block time hypothesis, the universe is closed causally. Past, present, and future are already established, constrained, and thus knowable. Thus in a classical theology based on block time, God can be omniscient and omnipotent: what is, is all there is to know, and it was knowable from the start. There's an interesting implication here, of course: unless God is somehow something other than the universe, God too is bounded and constrained by block time so Its omniscience and omnipotence is relative to that universe. This in turn, opens up another issue: if God is some thing other than the universe, how does God act in the universe? If God is absent from the universe, God can only act by intervening in that existing universe; if God is immanent, God can act within the known universe. The first solution means God's actions do not have to comply with the laws of the physical universe It abdicated – miracles are possible. On the second solution, God's action must be consistent with the universe It indwells.

But the matter is further complicated by the difference between the lawful behavior of Newtonian physics and the apparent indeterministic behavior of the quantum world. Polkinghorne distinguishes between two forms of unpredictability. There is the realist view, where physical processes are themselves causally open, and the future cannot be known because it must happen before we know what it is. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle does not reflect our inability to get to the reality of quantum behavior (an epistemic constraint), it simply IS how things work in that domain (an ontological given). Polkinghorne also takes the view often used in theology that chaotic systems elude determinism because of their dependence upon the entire context of the system, which cannot be known.

Polkinghorne believes that both chaotic systems and the universe in general are holistically guided by dynamic patterns of behavior, and 'causal' action is best understood as a dispersal of effects rather than as a linear, unique effect-event. He maintains that a universe of "active information" (980), where God causes the structure of things but not the specific events, makes room for both classical and open time and frees theology to accept determinism at one level and reject it at another. This is crucial for Polkinghorne (and many other theologians) because it at least makes plausible the claim that the universe has a providential creator who establishes the holistic (causal) patterns of behavior but does not guide each and every event. Such a creator would participate in "a true divine engagement with time, the gracious acceptance by the eternal God of a temporal pole within divine nature" (982). Polkinghorne distances himself from process theology (which takes this view but makes it a metaphysical necessity) by calling this acceptance "a free kenotic act of God in choosing to relate to temporal creation in this way" (982).

As one might expect, Polkinghorne's view has been challenged by both philosophers of science and by theologians. Nonetheless, many of its philosophical themes – different processes operating at different levels of creation, appeals to chaos and complexity and systems, a kenotic divine act – appear in the work of many other theologians who examine kenosis. For example, McCall (2010) argues that the kenotic pouring forth of God created an emergence-capable system from chaos. God kenotically entered into chaos, turning it into cosmos-*in-potentia*. God did not fashion chaos into anything *per se*, rather God enspirited it by imbuing chaos with the Word or, as McCall alternatively refers to it, the information necessary for it to become self-regulating, self-creating, and, possibly, indeterministically dynamic.

McCall recognizes that he could be describing a pantheistic position just as easily as the panentheistic position he wants, so he turns to *Genesis* 1:2 and the meaning of *rahap*, suggesting that God moved the waters by causing them to vibrate – that is, by giving them energy. McCall does not describe this energy in any detail, and at first glance this appears to be a reprise of the energy-essence distinction from Nazianzus and Palamas (Torrance, 2009). However, McCall's energy is not given to entities to fulfill their divinely preordained essence of attributes and behavior. Instead, the energy imparted here is not directly causal, it is enabling: it is structural and organizational potential, a non-deterministic telos that will be actualized over time through dynamic changes in the relationships both between individual material existences and between material existences and the divine itself. *Creatio continua* in other words: Genesis marks the start of development, not an event. Turning to other terms in *Genesis*, McCall points out that God evaluates, names and acts upon what appears in the early moments of creation. God is immanent, involved, creative and, most importantly for McCall, "reactive".

McCall believes this view ensures the theological view of evolutionary history as the unfolding of God's plan, but at the same time avoids determinism: God directs and guides, matter responds, God reacts.

The kenotic God pours Itself into potential relationships between created entities and energies and structures, a pouring from pitcher to trough in which the Word enables an evolving cosmos. There is no subtraction from God's divinity in this act (God does not "limit" Itself in any way), because God does not become anything else, God simply enspirits. The Son's kenosis into human form is, therefore, *another instance* of God's enspiration directed towards enabling human moral evolution, what McCall refers to as "others'-centeredness" [sic]. Creation is God's "self-offering" in which the Spirit is embedded into a created but henceforth creative environment, for the sake of the development and improvement of that environment.

The difficulty with McCall's proposal is that it is less a synthesis of science and Christian doctrine than an accommodation of the former to the latter. In his attempt to save unaltered the systematic theological view that Jesus was enspirited and is somehow unique, McCall ignores two implications of this view of kenosis: kenosis may be a continuous event, and kenosis may be experienced by all humanity. If God sets in motion a cosmos where one hominid can be enspirited, and if God is reactive to and interactive with all creation, then there's no logical reason why Jesus was unique. There may be doctrinal needs for uniqueness, one theological camp may require such uniqueness in its theological system, but nothing in the *meta-physics* of McCall's account makes it impossible for you or I to become enspirited.

3.2 Kenosis and Personhood

That is, with some reservations, the position that Kern and Friedenthal (2008) take. If we reduce Christ's kenosis to a singular instance in history, we embrace its theological significance at the expense of its practical significance. Practicing Christians try to emulate the human named Jesus, and the developmental and ethical aspects of Christianity rest on our ability to do more than sympathetically appreciate that human's action. It would be fruitful, they suggest, to examine Jesus as human first and then understand how that human became, or at least hosted, the divine Christ.

If one examines kenosis experientially (phenomenologically) and experimentally (as a function of neurophysiology), one realizes that *ek-stasis*, that sense of being outside of time and space, is common in the experience of people irrespective of faith, and especially common in the experience of people *of* faith. The authors suggest that Paul's use of "emptying" in his *Letters* does not mean emptying oneself *of* something (the traditional understanding of *kenon*), it means being without consciousness of something outside ourselves, being free or receptive to the external world without immediate and necessary reference to a self. Examining the neurophysiology of altered states of consciousness, the authors suggest that when the brain's self-monitoring locations are blocked we feel "nothing," either a sense of an empty void or a felt unity with what we see and hear and touch. It is the latter alternative Karo & Friedenthal pursue.

It is difficult to separate the ego-centric perception from the perception of things in the world: things are present to us as something-not-us. Believing this is caused by neural conditioning, that is, groups of neurons all firing together, the authors suggest that if we could rewire the brain to disregard its experiential history we might attain a kenotic state. That we do not is due to our social conditioning, which leaves us biased towards perceiving ourselves and the world around us in particular ways. It requires conscious effort to overcome our own limitations and to take other humans as important, divine and enspirited. Jesus, on the other hand, was able to attain this state because of his privileged, divine status.

Karo and Friedenthal suggest that the Eucharist is the pivot point for a specific Christian sense of "nothing" in that it promotes the shedding of ego and bias and limitations in favor of a fulfilling of ourselves by God. At the Last Supper, Jesus brought attention to two ideas: life was supposed to be lived with Christ within us; our actions must be other-centered (to invoke McCall). The rituals of Communion, therefore, simply remind us that though the world seems external and linearly temporal, the ceremony takes us out of our own ego-centric world to celebrate unity with someone who exemplifies self-lessness.

For Karo and Friedenthal, kenosis scales: there is at one end the pouring forth into (or giving over to another) that requires minimal participation or neural rewiring (e.g., a parent's care for its child), and at the other a more demanding *ek-stasis* in which we can attain divinity. When those of us not chosen to be sons and daughters of God participate in the Eucharist we accept into ourselves an historical personage, breaking the bonds of time and space and culture. Moreover, we do so in order to achieve something not for ourselves but for others and through a particular Other.

Here again the motivation to preserve traditional Christology obscures the fact that kenotic experience is, if not universally experienced, at least universally accessible. The authors assume that Jesus had to have received divine assistance in order to break free of his social conditioning, and thus one end of the scale of kenotic experience is *prima facie* beyond our reach. But that assumption rests on the doctrinal requirement that the divine Son only infused the human Jesus; some contemporary theologies – in particular Gregersen's Deep Incarnation to which we will now turn – suggest kenosis was not so limited an event. Although Gregersen is typically seen as a proponent of Eco-Christianity, his theology is at least epistemologically emergentist in its view of the Incarnation. More than an historical/meta-historical event, and more than the establishment of systems with divinely authorized rules of development, the Incarnation established the foundation of "personhood" in the fullest sensitive, intentional, and spiritual sense of the word.

Gregersen (2013) argues that the historical event of the Incarnation was more than the kenotic union of the Son and the human Jesus; it is continuous and pervasive. He rejects the traditional view that God somehow abdicates Its power in the kenotic act. He rejects any attempt to reduce emergence or kenosis to physical processes compatible with the methodology of scientific experimentation and confirmation. (In this he echoes the objections to reduction voiced from a philosophical perspective by Tracy, 2013, and from within emergence theory itself by Clayton, 2006). He even rejects Polkinghorne's idea that God chooses to limit Itself by allowing mundane determinism. Gregersen focuses instead on self-actualization as other-actualization: God kenotically reveals Its true nature in being other-focused, that is, in creating the world and its human inhabitants. The Incarnation was an emergent event in the cosmos-wide, kenosis-mediated, actualization of divine love: "…the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or 'deep' incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature" (Gregersen, 2001, p. 205).

For Gregersen, then, the Incarnation establishes within the as-perceived linear universe of humans a universal, supportive communion not just with Jesus, but with all humanity. Adding "as" to Luther's "in, with, and under," Gregersen suggests that the Incarnation was the realization of the divine in the world – *as* the world. "It is all about being together – God must appear *as* human in order to be real divine love" because we must understand that *as* divine love, *in* a real human, *in* a real world (Gregersen, 2013, p. 257). The Son did not enter Jesus' body as much as enter all of humanity in entering one instance of humanity; the Incarnation is a social, societal, and universal event.

If we assume our world is bounded by our skin, a dermal ontology as Gregersen calls it, then it makes sense that "incarnation" seems to us something that happened in a particular body. But Gregersen, following other theologians influenced by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and others, suggests that our fleshly existence is a stance in the world, a potency and possibility rather than a boundary. We think of ourselves as contained selves: "we" exist someplace between our toes and scalp. But we also feel "we" are affected by, and can affect, others in the world. We are both contained and communal. Although the research agendas and terminologies differ, much current research in psychology, linguistics, and anthropology suggests our containers are more porous than they may appear: our inner experience and sense of self is affected by other people's language and behavior just as their inner lives are affected by ours. A stance is a non-conscious receptivity to others and the world we share with them; it affects what we feel, how we behave, what we perceive and what we understand.

The Incarnation took place into that stance, into how humanity as a whole relates to the "world" it perceives as something external yet with which it is existentially, ultimately unified; it is the existential fulfillment of our communal personhood. In Jesus, God held the mirror up to our nature and to our purpose: to experience and to express the pervasively human capacity for receptivity to divinity's self-giving, through which our experience of "our self" becomes a fully diffused and distributed sense of 'self-as-loving-and-creative relationship' with the divine and with all creation.

4. Implications of Systems Theology

I think it is fair to say that from the laity's perspective Western organized religion and Christianity in particular are dogmatic and programmatic: the emphasis is on instilling behavior (whether for its own sake or to avoid damnation) that is congruent with received doctrine and beliefs. But as the previous discussion has shown, contemporary systems theology is focused on dynamic relationships and participation rather than on the acceptance of immutable truths and well delimited roles (whether ours or God's). However, the emphasis on system dynamics and emergence means that any theological position based on evolution and emergence has implicitly committed itself to an historicist position.

Our knowledge of the relationship between the divine and the mundane changes over time, as does our understanding of the significance of statements codified in creeds and covenants and commandments. Systems theology shifts the focus away from "knowing God" in a cognitive and discursive hermeneutical sense and towards "displaying God" or even "incarnating God" in a performative, participatory sense. But this is far more than simply a change of focus; it marks a fundamental redefinition of religious knowledge in general and of Christian religious devotion in particular.

4.1 Purposive Dynamics

Complexity and emergence are, first and foremost, scientific and agnostic conceptualizations of evolution: "God" (of any form or tradition) is an optional accessory to the scientific endeavor. Systems theologians often acknowledge this when they present their particular cases for their particular God and the theological tradition behind It. But the agnostic perspective of complexity and emergence levels the theological playing field and thereby makes *all* traditions and doctrines equally and merely optional. Systems theology, no matter how well a particular interpretation of chaos, complexity, or emergence accommodates a particular religious tradition, is inherently eclectic, requiring humility and healthy doubt in the truth of a particular creed while still preserving the possibility of a personal relationship with divinity (in whatever form and functions it assumes).

As soon as one adopts a view that relies upon evolution and emergence, one has committed to dynamism in religious sects, religious doctrine, and religious experience, both vertically and horizontally. There is no one true way, no one true faith, and no one true god. Nor can there be an historical uniformity of religious experience: one's great-grandchildren will not understand the way, experience the faith, or adore exactly the same god that one does today. However, emergence theology does not lead us inexorably down the slippery slope to absolute relativism.

Relativism happens: it is the way of all flesh; truth, justice, god are all ultimately vacuous concepts. Emergence theology, on the other hand, is based on empirically-credible models of physical and biological system evolution and for its own logical and functional integrity *requires* disparity and change. Disparity in relativism is a state, how it is. Disparity and dynamism in emergence is a telos – a purpose, goal, or end. Truth in a relativist cosmos simply does not exist so we can never find it; in an emergent cosmos, truth evolves and we have to run to catch up with it. Current directions in systems science and systems theology make knowledge, including all religious doctrine and dogma, a verb.

4.2 Participatory and Evolving Personhood

This dynamism places established, organized Christianity in an apparently precarious position: if emergence-based kenotic theology is correct, the act of self-actualization of the divine is inherently tradition- and doctrine-independent. That may sound heretical, but much of contemporary theology *is* heretical viewed against the received tradition dominated by the concepts of sin, salvation and atonement, and immutable commandments. Daly's view of sacrifice and sanctification (Daly, 2013), Delio's neo-Franciscan Christology (Delio, 2012), the EcoChristian movement (Munteanu, 2010), and recent discussions of a cosmological rather than personal theosis (Haynes, 2011; Kharlamov, 2008) all point in a direction that leads us away from compliance and towards contribution, away from doctrine and self-salvation and even codified ethics and towards an immediate, personal experience of the divine *as*, and *in*, the very same world Christianity generally eschews.

This new participatory sense of personhood – not the isolated self-referential ego but rather a distributed, relational locus of awareness – is not unique to Gregersen's theology. As Turner (2013) shows in his survey of correspondences between research in embodied cognition and theological anthropology, personhood is embodied and relational: who we are is constituted by our lived experiences with others, in our and their fleshly existences within social, cultural, and semiotic environments. The "social Trinity" is reflected in our own persons, where mirror neurons help us incorporate someone else's perceived actions into our own repertoire of abilities, and a felt sense of selfhood means we have already experienced empathically someone else's self. Taking it one step further, Spezio (2013) suggests that through simulation and empathy, acting within a communal cultural environment, we develop compassion and concern and love – and that love is not *of* someone as *object*, but rather an other-centric love, a love for *their* inherent humanity and personhood, which in turn fulfills ours.

When I attend to you and try to really understand you and feel you and, perhaps, aid you, I am making myself anew in your image.

What is "self-actualized" in that moment is not some potential in the kernel of a "self" I have carried with me from birth in my soul; it is a relation between "You" and "I", in this moment, whose foundation rests on our collective, communal participation in what it is to be human in the presence of other humans, in an evolving physical and biological and ideate environment (De Smedt and De Cruz, 2014). I am more than the sum of my physical parts, more than the sum of my encounters with things and beings in the world. Yet "I" – as anything more than a phenomenal sense of coherence – does not exist except as, and until, "I" participate in the dynamic world beyond my dermal shell. Current directions in theological anthropology and emergence theology make self a verb.

5. Conclusion

Science is inherently risky – experiments may confirm or deny existing knowledge, they may open up other possibilities that eventually either revise or conflict with our understanding of natural 'law'. A theology that rests in content, if not method, on experimentation, revision or possibly rejection, is obviously subject to change. In the absence of immutable, true doctrine, any religious practices arising from such theologies may require a new kind of devotion – one radically different from the typical devotion to texts, creeds, rituals, and position statements about divinity. For this devotion is not *to* anything. It is *through and for* everything, for all things and events are divinity actualized, and our every action is in miniature an act of kenotic Creation.

If Gregersen is right and kenosis is a stance, a posture, a leaning forward towards others and giving of one's self to them, then it is to this stance, to this action – and to nothing else – that one becomes devoted. Because this stance is realized in dynamic, other-centered relationships, "I" am nothing except my influence on, my participation in, the world around and within me. For I am actualized only in giving, to someone who appears not to be me, a gift – of "my" attention and time and effort and care – a gift that I do not possess to offer except in their relinquishing.

Western religious ideologies on the whole want their doctrines to have the necessity and universality of scientific natural law and yet be legitimized by their particular divine author. Systems theologies both support and challenge that agenda. While linking divine action to an emergent model of the physical world bolsters the divine-mundane relationship, the nature of that linkage challenges the possibility of necessity and universality. Whether the academic theological debate will eventually produce viable religious practices consistent with the theologized science that underpins it remains to be seen. With its radical visions of an historicized and dispersed divinity and of a performative and porous personhood, systems theology offers us an intriguing yet daunting perspective on what humankind *could* become. If the theologians are right, perhaps one day we will better understand Miranda's excitement and surprise when she looks upon the newly reconciled company before her at the end of *The Tempest* and says, "O brave new world / That has such people in't!"

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