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Abstract

Suffering, Tragedy, Vulnerability

A Triangulated Examination of the Divine–Human Relationship
in Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rowan Williams, and Sarah Coakley

Boram Cha

The present thesis puts the trinitarianism, christology, and anthropology of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s kenotic theology, Rowan Williams’s tragic theology, and Sarah Coakley’s ascetic theology into critical and triangulated conversation: in order to argue that suffering and death is ontologized at the same level as love and life in God in the kenotic trinitarianism of Balthasar; that the tragic is given an ontological value in the tragic imagination of Williams; and that vulnerability is essentialized in the ascetic spirituality of Coakley. I will argue that, on the whole, their arguments tend to put a positive light on the darkness of suffering as that which proves to be christologically meaningful, and portray the divine–human relationship competitively in a shared proclivity for emphasizing Jesus’s cry of dereliction on the cross (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”).

A concern that moves the tripartite chapters forwards is to examine how these three respected thinkers are inclined more or less to conceive the divine–human encounter and the God–world relation *competitively*, and to show how that unfortunate conception serves to sacralize suffering, tragedy, and vulnerability in their accounts of divine–human relationship. In this context, I will consent to Coakley’s critique that the classical understanding of *non-competitive* divine–human relation is undermined in Balthasar’s kenotic theo-dramatics; and I will argue that although a non-competitive account is formally affirmed and espoused by Williams as well as Coakley, it is effectively operative neither in Williams’s tragic imagination nor in Coakley’s kneeling practice. What a non-competitive account of divine–human relations means is gradually fleshed out, with recurrent references to Kathryn Tanner, over the course of the thesis. It is given fuller expression in the final chapter’s examination of the coincidence of divine–human goodness implied in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, albeit without intending to delve into specialist knowledge.

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A Triangulated Examination of the Divine–Human Relationship
in Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rowan Williams, and Sarah Coakley

Boram Cha

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in such a way that I was reassured,
he led me in, into those mysteries.”*

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*“By the grace of God I am what I am,
and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”*

Feast of Christ the King, 2019

Introduction

The present thesis puts the trinitarianism, christology, and anthropology of Hans Urs von Balthasar's kenotic theology, Rowan Williams's tragic theology, and Sarah Coakley's ascetic theology into critical and triangulated conversation: in order to argue that suffering and death is ontologized at the same level as love and life in God in the kenotic trinitarianism of Balthasar; that the tragic is given an ontological value in the tragic imagination of Williams; and that vulnerability is essentialized in the ascetic spirituality of Coakley. I will argue that, on the whole, their arguments tend to put a positive light on the darkness of suffering as that which proves to be christologically meaningful, and portray the divine-human relationship competitively in a shared proclivity for emphasizing Jesus's cry of dereliction on the cross ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?").

A concern that moves the tripartite chapters forwards is to examine how these three respected thinkers are inclined more or less to conceive the divine-human encounter and the God-world relation *competitively*, and to show how that unfortunate conception serves to sacralize suffering, tragedy, and vulnerability in their accounts of divine-human relationship. In this context, I will consent to Coakley's critique that the classical understanding of *non-competitive* divine-human relation is undermined in Balthasar's kenotic theo-dramatics; and I will argue that although a non-competitive account is formally affirmed and espoused by Williams as well as Coakley in principle, it is effectively operative neither in Williams's tragic imagination nor in Coakley's kneeling theology in practice. What a non-competitive account of divine-human relations means is gradually fleshed out, with recurrent references to Kathryn Tanner, over the course of the thesis. It is given fuller expression in the final chapter's examination of the coincidence of divine-human goodness implied in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, albeit without intending to delve into specialist knowledge. Alongside creation *ex nihilo*, the classical ideas of divine immutability, evil as the privation of good, and the non-reciprocal relationship of God and the world function as points of reference throughout the thesis for critically examining the theologies of the scholar-priest trio. And I will show at relevant points how the trio more or less inherits the post-Holocaust trend to regard Jesus's cry of dereliction as a focal point of theological constructions of Christian life, the life of Christ, and the life of the Trinity in one way or another.

The first chapter on Hans Urs von Balthasar begins with a critical engagement of one of the most controverted issues in the recent Anglo-European scene of systematic theology: whether suffering and death is real in the Trinity. It has been widely appreciated that Balthasar's theology successfully redefines and complexifies divine immutability first by expelling a unilateral and static Being, and then by reconceiving intra-trinitarian life as a dynamic event of kenotic love in which the triune God,

as a genuine “theo-dramatic” actor, grounds, receives, and redeems the tragedy of human suffering, sin, and evil. In recent years, however, there have been several accounts that attempt to counter that appreciative acknowledgement. While engaging with the appreciations, I will subscribe and attempt to make a contribution to the critiques.

In order to do so, I will devote a good amount of this chapter to critical examination of Balthasar’s notions of “super-temporal” suffering, death, and wound in God. I will pay particular attention to the Johannine – in both senses of the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John – kenotic image of the “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,” which Balthasar heavily draws upon to visualize the notions of the historical suffering, death, and wound of Christ eternalized into the Trinity. I will argue that God is portrayed as a mythic deity which is characterized by an *eternal event of the negation of negativity of death into life* in Balthasar’s trinitarian–christological doctrine of God.

In the last section of this chapter, no less significantly, I will seek to argue, first, that Balthasar’s locating of sin and evil of the world within the Trinity is at odds with the classical teachings of the “unreal” relation of the world to God and evil as privation of good; second, that his theodicean attempt to explain and make sense of the origin and destination of sin and evil is contrary to Rowan Williams’s deliberate emphasis on the recognition of sheer particularity, temporality, and inexplicability of human tragedy; and, third, that Balthasar assumes that any kind of suffering can be distilled into a christological meaningfulness; this assumption does *injustice* to the irreducible particularity and diversity of human suffering and puts a divinely positive light on the darkness of suffering; this Balthasarian tendency thus ends up mollifying the tragic reality of human suffering, sin, and evil, rather than taking it most seriously, as Balthasar claims to do.

In the process of the examination and argumentation in this chapter, I will try to set out a ground for triangulating the complicated relations of the trio. I will first introduce and subscribe to Coakley’s fundamental critique, on the ground of classical theistic commitment to *non-competitive* relation of God and the world, that Balthasar gives *competitive* accounts of divine–human otherness and difference in his kenotic theo-dramatics. While Williams shares with Coakley the emphasis on that traditional idea of non-competition, however, he refrains from any noticeable critique of Balthasar and rather endeavours to exonerate him, with high appreciation of his theology of otherness and difference, from a critique that he incorporates suffering into the life of God. However, Williams’s fundamental positions—his commitments to the classical ideas of non-contrastive divine transcendence–immanence, the non-competitive divine–human relation, God as the source of being and goodness, evil as nonsubstance, and his resistance against any kind of diminishing or evading tragic particularity by explaining and making sense of suffering, primarily by eternalizing suffering vis-à-vis God—do not accord, at significant levels, with Balthasar’s theo-dramatic understandings of the divine actor, the location of sin and evil at the heart of God, and eternalized suffering in God.

Those discrepancies between Williams's own theological convictions and his appreciation of Balthasar will further stand out in the second chapter, throughout which Balthasar's substantial resonances with and influences on Williams's tragic reading of the Gospel of John are highlighted. In the Introduction I will initially review some of the lines of the debate over whether Williams's emphasis on the tragic ends up ontologizing the tragic. In the first section I will seek to show that a theme of tragic irony in the Gospel of John plays a long-lasting role in constructing Williams's tragic imagination, which is connected to his consistent emphasis on the *difficult* pattern of human learning and transformation through failure and complicity, which is developed in the critical engagement with Donald Mackinnon and Gillian Rose. I will seek then to argue in the second section that his understanding of the Johannine irony falls short of its comic aspects, which would otherwise enable him to pay due regard to salient aspects of John's narratives and characters of Samaritans, Mary Magdalene, and the Beloved Disciple, who do not necessarily learn and grow from suffering tragic failure and its consequent devastating catastrophes. I will conclude that, at the level of how Williams really reads the text, his emphasis on the tragic tips over into giving an ontological value to the tragic by significantly compromising and undermining his fundamental commitments to the classical ideas of non-competitive divine-human relation and evil as privation of good.

In the last section of this chapter the theological problems associated with Jesus's cry of dereliction and abandonment are raised. Williams and Balthasar are interwoven in the process of examining the cry of dereliction. I will attempt to show that Williams, following the lead of Balthasar, finishes up undercutting Johannine christology by associating it with the cry of dereliction which is in fact redacted in the Gospel of John to Jesus's cry of accomplishment. And I will strive to argue that in both Williams and Balthasar, the dubious Johannine appropriation of dereliction gives rise to an extreme paradox of abandonment and unity, dereliction and love that throws an abusive shadow over christology and the Christian life. Moreover, I will contend that Williams's attempt to maximize his tragic imagination by associating the cry of dereliction with the divine identity comes close to suggesting a mythic image of God onto which the human tragic predicament of self-interest and its corrective ethics of self-dispossession is projected, and thereby close to ontologizing the tragic in the Trinity. To conclude, in the hope of making a contribution to the debate over whether Rowan Williams manages to underscore the tragic reality of the world without ontologically radicalizing it, I will claim that he is inclined to ontologize the tragic in relation both to creation *and* the Trinity.

The third chapter on Sarah Coakley will begin by recalling her charges against Balthasar's theodramatics for assuming a *competitive* account of the God-world relation, and for incorporating *vulnerability* into the divine life of the Trinity. What I shall do in the final chapter may look like handing the issues of *competition* and *vulnerability* back to Coakley. In order to do so, I will make critical engagements first with the paradox of human vulnerability and divine omnipotence/empowerment—human vulnerability to divine omnipotence paradoxically produces

divine empowerment—and then with the translation of created dependence on God into ascetical vulnerability to God.

First of all, as preliminary tasks, I will situate her theological appropriation of vulnerability first in wider contemporary academia and then in a theological scene. I will briefly point out markedly differing, yet oft-conflated, conceptualizations of vulnerability between Judith Butler and Sarah Coakley. And I make clear that Coakley’s paradox of power-in-vulnerability aims to save the virtue of vulnerability from, on the one hand, feminism’s repugnancy to vulnerability and, on the other, Balthasar’s trinitarian glamorization of vulnerability at the same time.

After having clarified Coakley’s conceptualization of vulnerability, in the first section I will seek critically to examine the formulation of the paradox of human vulnerability and divine omnipotence/empowerment by means of John Barclay’s understanding of divine grace in Philippians 2. To elaborate, Coakley establishes, heavily drawing upon the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2, a spiritual paradox of human prayerful vulnerability to divine power and its production of divine empowerment. In other words, this paradox is patterned upon the chronology of suffering vulnerability to God and gaining empowerment by God in which suffering vulnerability is given *priority* and *productivity*. According to Barclay, however, the divine gift of grace *empowers* human agency *prior to* any human good will and act, and it is the *prior* empowerment of the divine gift that is *productive* of human transformation and growth in Paul’s theology of gift. No less importantly, I will also strive to argue that Coakley’s paradox of *vulnerable* human receptivity to *gentle* divine power is inclined to create a *competitive* account of divine–human relation as if the more vulnerable we are to God, the more gentle God is to us.

In the next three sections, I will delve more into the theological rationales of why Coakley translates created dependency on God into ascetic vulnerability to God *in the first place*, the trail-blazing question which Linn Tonstad has raised. I will attempt to show that, in order to figure out what created dependence on God means, Coakley (doubtfully) dispenses with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and instead (strangely) taps into the ascetical darkness of dereliction, most notably articulated by John of the Cross. I will try to show first that this “ascetical turn” from creation to dereliction gives a suggestive account for her translation of created dependence on God into dark vulnerability to God, which essentializes human vulnerability because it is directed *to* God; and second, that the absence of creation *ex nihilo* results in the significant lack of the ontological element of divine and created *goodness* in her ascetic theology. That is, the translation of dependence on God into vulnerability to God fails to acknowledge the divine goodness as the source of empowering created goodness in human agency. It leads me to argue that creation *ex nihilo* offers a more robust ground for accounting for created dependency on God because the coincidence and resonance of divine gift and human reception in terms of goodness holds intact a non-competitive divine–human relation, which Coakley enthusiastically signs up for. In doing so, I hope to show that a non-

competitive divine–human relation is consistently affirmed, yet significantly downplayed in the kneeling theology of Sarah Coakley.

Finally, I will present David Burrell’s exposition of John of the Cross as a counterexample of a creation-centred interpretation of John of the Cross against Coakley’s dereliction-centred account, which has a great affinity with Rowan Williams’s interpretation. This case study may show that, at least, a kneeling theology does not necessarily emphasize the fertility of suffering tormented darkness.

Having said that, I would like to admit the limitation of this thesis: it does not exhaustively cover the breadth and depth of the thoughts of all three thinkers in their entirety, though it does reach its word limit. This limitation of course leads to the possibility of my oversight of some potentially relevant point or some significant shifts over the course of the development of ideas that should ideally, if time and word count permitted, be taken into consideration.

Where the trio’s heavy reliance upon biblical expositions force me to draw upon some New Testament scholarship—the Revelation of John (in Balthasar), the Gospel of John (in Balthasar and Williams), and Philippians and Romans (in Coakley)—I intend neither to make a contribution to biblical scholarship nor exhaustively to engage with the fields of biblical scholarship.

Chapter I. Kenosis and Suffering in the Kenotic Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Introduction: The Event of Love in God as Balthasar's Middle Way

Hans Urs von Balthasar presents his “theo-drama” as a delicate task to steer a middle course between the traditional idea of divine immutability and the modern conception of a suffering God. He begins with the identification of the two extremes to be avoided. According to Balthasar, the divine actor in the theo-drama is neither to remain a spectator as in philosophy nor to be part of the world stage as in mythology. A God in accordance with biblical witness and theological integrity avoids both the philosophical and mythological misconceptions:

Man’s “concepts of God” always swing between two extremes. At one extreme, there is the mythological view in which God (or the gods) is embroiled in the world drama, which, with its own laws of operation, thus constitutes a third level of reality above God and man; at the other extreme, God is seen as dwelling in philosophical sublimity above the vicissitudes of the world, which prevent him from entering the dramatic action. On the basis of biblical revelation, we can say right at the outset that God has involved himself with the creation of the world, particularly in the creation of finite free beings, without thereby succumbing to some superordinate fate. Thus the God of theo-dramatic action is neither “mutable” (as in the mythological view) nor “immutable” (in the terms of philosophy).¹

Balthasar matches the two extreme ends of philosophy and mythology with, respectively, the theologies of Karl Rahner and Jürgen Moltmann in terms of the relation of the Trinity and the world. He maintains that “a way must be found to see the immanent Trinity as the ground of the world process (including the crucifixion) in such a way that it is neither a formal process of self-communication in God, as in Rahner, nor entangled in the world process, as in Moltmann.”²

Balthasar seeks to “avoid the two opposed and incompatible extremes”³ by establishing a trinitarian theology which does not “regard the Trinity one-sidedly as the ‘play’ of an absolute ‘blessedness’ that abstracts from concrete pain and lacks the “‘seriousness’ of separation and death.”⁴

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Volume 2: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 9 (henceforth abbreviated as *TD* 2).

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Volume 4: *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 322–23 (henceforth abbreviated as *TD* 4).

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), viii (henceforth abbreviated as *MP*). See also *TD* 4, 319–28; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Volume 3: *The Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 506–9 (henceforth abbreviated as *TD* 3).

⁴ *TD* 4, 325.

There is only one way to approach the trinitarian life in God. . . . We must feel our way back into the mystery of the absolute, employing a negative theology that excludes from God all intramundane experience and suffering, while at the same time presupposing that the possibility of such experience and suffering—up to and including its christological and trinitarian implications—is grounded in God. To think in such a way is to walk on a knife edge: it avoids all the fashionable talk of “the pain of God” and yet is bound to say that something happens in God that not only justifies the possibility and actual occurrence of all suffering in the world but also justifies God’s sharing in the latter, in which he goes to the length of vicariously taking on man’s God-lessness.⁵

The “possibility” or potentiality of the occurrence of suffering in the world, for Balthasar, is grounded in the Trinity. But to locate the possibility of suffering in God does not fall into an error of making God caught up with the world, unlike a mythological conception of divine mutability, and rather enables us to conceive of a genuine way of divine involvement with the world, unlike a purely philosophical notion of divine immutability.

Such a trinitarian theology is established, first and foremost, by affirming its intrinsic relation to the Son’s separation and death on the cross. For Balthasar, “the only way . . . is that which relates the event of the Kenosis of the Son of God to what one can, by analogy, designate as the eternal ‘event’ of the divine processions.”⁶ In other words, the temporal event of kenosis on the cross has to do with the eternal event of kenosis in the Trinity: the kenosis in salvation history by the economic Trinity is the “expression” and “manifestation” of the kenosis in the divine processions within the immanent Trinity; and the latter grounds, encompasses, and transcends the former—the latter enables, embraces, and outstrips; makes it possible, assumes, and surpasses; and undergirds, includes, and overcomes the former.

What undergirds this argument is that for Balthasar himself and his proponents, his trinitarian–christological doctrine of God, without introducing a change into God, speaks of an “event of love” that *grounds (gift)* earthly tragedy, *receives (reception)* it into, and *redeems (redemption)* it in God. For instance, Paul Fiddes encapsulates this position as follows: “If God is open ‘in advance’ to receiving the impact of human sinning then there is no question of change in the strict sense; God is, as it were, immutably ready to receive new experiences, even the experience of estrangement and desolation.”⁷ Steffen Lösel also summarizes using cruciform–trinitarian terms: “The divine Son’s death on the cross of Golgotha is anticipated and surpassed by an eternal death of Father and Son in the Holy Spirit—a death enacted out of mutual love. Hence, the Son’s death on the cross does not constitute a transformation for God which would be imposed upon God from contingent, historical

⁵ TD 4, 324.

⁶ MP, viii.

⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, “Salvation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 176–96 (180).

events.”⁸ The event of overcoming tragedy in Balthasar’s God, therefore, not only safeguards divine immutability but also proves eternally “enriching” as “an ever-more increasing event of Trinitarian exchanges.”⁹ Jennifer Newsome Martin, one of my primary interlocutors in this chapter, who gives one of the most recent and sophisticated appreciative accounts of Balthasar, encapsulates how Balthasar successfully envisages the event of divine love without compromising divine immutability.

Though Balthasar wants to claim some kind of event in God, he does not wish to suggest that there was a substantial change in God as such. In sum, Balthasar wishes to retain the traditional language of immutability, but also to complexify it with a Trinitarian and kenotic inflection borrowed directly from Bulgakov.¹⁰

Because both Bulgakov and Balthasar hold that this eternal self-donation is essential to the life of the Trinity, it becomes a defensible premise that the Incarnation and death of Christ on the cross do not represent a change in God from earth to heaven, time to eternity, but is rather *a continuation of the substantial modality of self-giving love at the core of divine being*, which is ordered toward human salvation.¹¹

For Balthasar, as Mark McIntosh notes, “the divine reliability, or . . . the divine immutability, is grounded . . . in the activity of the trinitarian processions of self-giving love.”¹² And the trinitarian event of love in God defines how the event of love in the world should be in that it makes “all modalities of love [in the world] even the modality of suffering-separation and self-destitution motivated and anchored in the love exchange of the Trinitarian persons in the one God.”¹³ The suffering of Christ on the cross is a “modality” of the Son’s eternal love towards the Father which has eternally, *in advance of all temporality*, contained risk, suffering, and even death. Hence, the fact that God is “affected” by the suffering of Christ does not introduce something new and represent a “change” in God.

⁸ Steffen Lösel, “Unapocalyptic Theology: History and Eschatology in Balthasar’s Theo-Drama,” *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2001): 201–25 (201–2).

⁹ Guy Mansini, “Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 64, no. 4 (October 2000): 499–519 (508). I regret that my attention was attracted to the following relevant articles with the themes of divine “enrichment” and divine “reception” in Balthasar after I had finalized the main body of this chapter: Joshua R. Brotherton, “Trinitarian Suffering and Divine Receptivity after Balthasar,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 82, no. 2 (April 2018): 189–234; Paul O’Callaghan, “Can God be Enriched? On the Metaphysical Underpinnings of von Balthasar’s Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (May 2019): 175–94; and Jacob Lett, “Divine Roominess: Spatial and Music Analogies in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Robert Jensen,” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 28, no. 3 (August 2019).

¹⁰ Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 185.

¹¹ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 190; italics mine.

¹² Mark McIntosh, “von Balthasar,” in *The Blackwell Companion of Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 388–402 (396).

¹³ Matthew Lewis Sutton, “Does God Suffer? Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Holy Saturday,” in *On Suffering: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Narrative and Suffering*, ed. Nate Hinerman and Matthew Lewis Sutton (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012), 172–83 (178–79).

For Balthasar and his proponents, it redefines and revises what the classical idea of divine immutability means in a sophisticated way by putting a remarkably relevant spin on the idea, without introducing an improper change in God. And it is believed to make a distinctive contribution to the development of the traditional idea rather than undercut the tradition. Balthasar insists that the intra-trinitarian *modality of love* guarantees God's immutability and eternal blessedness simultaneously with an economic reception of sin and evil into God.

We shall never know how to express the abyss-like depths of the Father's self-giving, that Father who, in an eternal "super-kenosis", makes himself "destitute" of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity, the Son. Everything that can be thought and imagined where God is concerned is, *in advance*, included and transcended in this self-destitution which constitutes the person of the Father, and, at the same time, those of the Son and the Spirit. God as the "gulf" (Eckhart: Un-Grund) of absolute Love contains *in advance, eternally, all the modalities of love*, of compassion, and even of a "separation" motivated by love and founded on the infinite distinction between the hypostases—modalities which may manifest themselves in the course of a history of salvation involving sinful humankind. God, then, has no need to 'change' when he makes a reality of the wonders of his charity.¹⁴

Thus, Balthasar intends to make plain that "we are not saying that the eternal separation in God is, in itself, 'tragic' or that the Spirit's bridging of the distinction is the sublation of tragedy, that is, 'comedy'."¹⁵ The eternal event or modality of love within the Trinity eternally manages to prevent itself from becoming a mythological dynamic of tragedy and comedy happening on the *same* plane and thereby proves its (not "absolute," but still) "eternal blessedness," namely, "the all-embracing reality within which 'tragedy' is played out."¹⁶ Balthasar's theo-dramatic interplay of God and the world proves itself as successfully envisaging a God who grounds, receives, and outstrips the entirety of historical tragedy of suffering and death without losing divine blessedness.

The whole claim suggests that God *is* an event of love that justifies, grounds, embraces (by super-suffering and super-death in the Trinity), and transcends, outstrips, overcomes (by the unity, love, and life of the Trinity) the reality of tragedy—suffering, sin, and evil—in the finite, fallen world. It exhibits a serious soteriological concern in an intrinsically interconnected language of trinitarianism and christology with an equally heavy concern for theodicy to account for the origin and destination of suffering and evil. And it is not allowed merely to say that the event of love is *in* God alongside something other than love, for God is not a "structured" being. Rather, as Balthasar himself stresses, God *is* the event of love that grounds, receives, and redeems human tragedy. I aim to elaborate in

¹⁴ *MP*, viii–ix; italics mine.

¹⁵ *TD* 4, 327

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Volume 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 246 (henceforth abbreviated as *TD* 5). He warns his readers that he oversteps here "the limit of what we mean by 'tragedy'" and that it sounds "baffling . . . to the finite mind."

what follows how this kind of conceptualization of God may claim to preserve divine immutability in a highly revised sense *at the cost of mutating God into a mythological deity*.

The Threefold Movement of the Theo-Dramatic Kenosis of God

In order to engage critically with Balthasar's new way of conceiving of God in relation to the suffering of the world, I would like briefly to illustrate the three facets of the kenotic movement: procession, creation, and mission. He here and there articulates an entire picture of the threefold mode of divine kenosis at a single stroke throughout his trilogy. Balthasar heavily draws on Sergei Bulgakov's conception of divine kenosis, divesting his "fundamental conviction of its sophiological presuppositions,"¹⁷ in negotiating a middle course and presenting a new way of interweaving the Trinity and the cross. A comprehensive passage helps his readers to gain a helpful outline to show what the whole flow of "the primal divine drama"¹⁸ looks like.

The ultimate presupposition of the Kenosis is the "selflessness" of the Persons (when considered as pure relationships) in the inner-Trinitarian life of love. There is, next, a fundamental Kenosis given with the creation as such, since God from all eternity takes on responsibility for its flourishing (not least in regard to human freedom), and in his providence, foreseeing sin, includes the Cross (as foundation of the creation) in his "account". "The Cross of Christ is inscribed in the creation of the world since its basis was laid." Finally, in the actual world, marked as it is by sin, "his redemptive Passion begins with his Incarnation itself. And since the will to undertake the redemptive Kenosis is itself indivisibly trinitarian." God the Father and the Holy Spirit are for Bulgakov involved in the Kenosis in the most serious sense: the Father as he who sends and abandons, the Spirit as he who unites only through separation and absence. All this is true of the "economic Trinity" who, according to Bulgakov, must be distinguished from the "immanent" Trinity.¹⁹

Balthasar intends to build a complete picture of the immanent life (procession) and the economic life (creation and mission) of the Trinity, upon the notion of kenosis. I will outline its threefold aspect of procession, creation, and mission but in the order of procession, mission, and creation for making clear a crucial trinitarian–christological (procession–mission) link.

¹⁷ *MP*, 35; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume 7: *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 213 (henceforth abbreviated as *GL 7*).

¹⁸ *TD 4*, 325.

¹⁹ *MP*, 35. See also *GL 7*, 213–14; *TD 4*, 323, 325–26; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, Volume 2: *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 177–78 (henceforth abbreviated as *TL 2*).

Trinitarian Kenosis: The Procession of the Son

For Balthasar, the first kenosis occurs in the divine procession of the Son from the Father's self-donative life. The "Ur-Kenosis" as the Father's generation of the Son is, as Martin highlights, "a fundamental organizing principle of his entire theological work."²⁰ "A first, intra-Trinitarian *kenosis*" is "none other than God's positive 'self-expropriation' in the act of handing over the entire divine being in the processions."²¹ The place of the Father's "self-emptying is precisely the place of his holiest divinity, of love's highest freedom."²² For Balthasar, it is important to acknowledge that an eternal, absolute, infinite difference or distance between the Father and the Son is essential to the ur-kenotic procession.

The Father's self-utterance in the generation of the Son is an initial "kenosis" within the Godhead that underpins all subsequent kenosis. . . . He *is* this movement of self-giving that holds nothing back. This divine act that brings forth the Son, that is, the second way of participating in (and of *being*) the identical Godhead, involves the positing of an absolute, infinite "distance".²³

The Father gives himself to the Son, the uncreated, consubstantial Other, in the receptivity of the Son. "The Father strips himself, without remainder, of his Godhead and hands it over to the Son."²⁴ The "original self-surrender" of the Father's handing himself over to the Son creates "an absolute, infinite "distance"" between the One and the Other; thus the Son is "the infinitely Other" of the Father. By his own ecstatic act, the Father "must go to the very extreme of self-lessness"; thus, there is a sacred void of God-lessness, "a unique and incomprehensible 'separation' of God from himself" in-between the Father and the Son.²⁵

Balthasar emphatically notes that "this first kenosis expands to a kenosis involving the whole Trinity."²⁶ In the loving response to the Father's loving kenotic act to give the Son "the gift of consubstantial divinity"²⁷ the Son empties himself in filial thanksgiving to the Father. "The Son's answer to the gift of Godhead (of equal substance with the Father) can only be eternal thanksgiving to the Father, the Source—a thanksgiving as selfless and unreserved as the Father's original self-surrender."²⁸ And the trinitarian theology of eternal difference concomitantly defines the role of the

²⁰ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 176.

²¹ *TL* 2, 177–78.

²² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 259.

²³ *TD* 4, 323.

²⁴ *TD* 4, 323.

²⁵ *TD* 4, 325.

²⁶ *TD* 4, 331.

²⁷ *TD* 4, 326.

²⁸ *TD* 4, 324.

Spirit. It is the Spirit as “the free, superabundant love” who unifies the infinite distance or separation. The Spirit bonds the Father and the Son as a superabundant love and an “intradivine liberality.”²⁹ The Spirit as “the essence of love . . . maintains the infinite difference between them, seals it and, since he is the one Spirit of them both, bridges it.”³⁰ Thereby, “the Christian God, in his identity, is able to be the ‘One’, the ‘Other’ and the ‘Unifying’”³¹—in the intra-trinitarian life, the Father, the One, generates the Son, the Other, by his free love; the Son as the Other who proceeds from the Father is the image of the Father; and the Spirit as a freely unifying and identifying love bonds the One and the Other. “Within God’s identity, there is an Other, who at the same time is the image of the Father and thus archetype of all that can be created, and there is a Spirit, who is the free, superabundant love of the ‘One’ and of the ‘Other’.”³² In the inner life of the triune God, “each *hypostasis* is itself insofar as it ‘lets’ the others ‘be’ in equal concreteness.”³³

The Son could not be consubstantial with the Father except by self-expropriation; and the “We”, that is, the Spirit, must also be God if he is to be the “personal” seal of that self-expropriation that is identical in Father and Son. For the Spirit does not want anything “for himself” but, as his revelation in the world shows, wants simply to be the pure manifestation and communication of the love between Father and Son.³⁴

The supreme love and freedom and the infinite distance are interrelated in the intra-divine life. “The immanent Trinity must be understood to be that eternal, absolute self-surrender whereby God is seen to be, in himself, absolute love.”³⁵ Divine love grounded on absolute freedom only makes sense on the premise of incomprehensible distance. “Love, which is the highest level of union, only takes root in the growing independence of the lovers.”³⁶ The gift of the Father’s self-giving is truly grounded in divine freedom and love. This kenotic love is the principle of the self-emptying or self-ecstatic act. The Father manifests his own self-fulfilment and self-realization of divinity through his selfless emptying and surrendering in the innermost sense of the kenotic act.

It is the supreme expression of the limitless plenitude of the divine being, a plenitude that could never be exhausted by one hypostasis but that requires the reciprocal ecstasy of the “Persons” in order to unfold itself as absolute love and, in doing so, as absolute truth.³⁷

²⁹ *TL* 2, 181.

³⁰ *TD* 4, 324.

³¹ *TD* 3, 531.

³² *TL* 2, 180–81.

³³ *TD* 5, 75.

³⁴ *TD* 4, 331. See also *TD* 2, 256.

³⁵ *TD* 4, 323.

³⁶ Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 64.

³⁷ *TL* 2, 179–80.

The divine love and truth of the Trinity hinges on the reciprocal ecstasy of the three persons, and the mutual ecstatic act of kenosis pivots on the primal kenosis of the Father. Therefore, Balthasar writes, after all, “division in God can ‘essentially be nothing other than absolute relation’”³⁸ rather than an estrangement or alienation of God from God. Hence, the distance in the inner life of God is always distance-in-relation. The infinite difference is always “equi-primordially unity and nonunity.”³⁹ One might summarize, “Trinity is the mystery of infinite nearness and infinite distance.”⁴⁰

Redemptive Kenosis: The Mission of the Son

The understanding of the person of Jesus as being sent (*missio*) by the Father in the Gospel of John sets the scene for the second phase of the threefold kenosis and for Balthasar’s mission christology. This redemptive kenosis as the mission of Jesus comprises his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Christ’s mission is an economic extension of his filial kenotic obedience to the primal self-emptying love of the Father in the immanent Trinity: “the Son’s *mission* is the economic form of his eternal procession from the Father.”⁴¹ As Martin rightly articulates, the “principle, namely that the mode of self-emptying present in Christ’s incarnation and death on the cross is expressive of the mutual self-emptying of the persons of the immanent Trinity, is at the center, not the periphery, of Balthasar’s theocentric, Trinitarian eschatology.”⁴²

The Trinity and the cross are intrinsically and profoundly connected with each other in Balthasar’s theology.⁴³ One would say that “to render the history of redemption transparent in relation to this primal process [of the intra-trinitarian kenosis] is probably the deepest concern of the whole Balthasar’s theology.”⁴⁴ As discussed, the self-emptying love between the Father and the Son posits “an absolute, infinite distance” between them and even “a unique and incomprehensible ‘separation’ of God from himself.”⁴⁵ This inner-trinitarian infinite distance corresponds to and resonates with the

³⁸ *TL* 2, 185.

³⁹ *TL* 2, 185.

⁴⁰ John O’Donnell, *Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 108.

⁴¹ *TD* 3, 201.

⁴² Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 175.

⁴³ Antoni Šeperić makes an interesting observation on Balthasar’s logic of the immanent and economic lives of the Trinity: “Every single element and every action on the side of the incarnate Son must also correspond—like a finely tuned instrument—to elements and movements in the dynamics of the immanent Trinity, so that the death of the Son, so to say, becomes a model of the super-death in the Trinity. Of course, as soon as you allowed for the inner dictates of an intra-systemic logical coherence of a theological method to play the tune, then one inference calls for another, and very soon this super-death demands a sort of super-kenosis within the Trinity, allows for postulation of some super-time within the Trinity, etc.” Antoni Šeperić, “Theological Discourse in the Vicious Circle of Apathy,” in *Theology—Descent into the Vicious Circles of Death on the Fortieth Anniversary of Jürgen Moltmann’s The Crucified God*, ed. Zoran Grozdanov, foreword by Miroslav Volf (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 87–116 (101).

⁴⁴ Medard Kehl, “Introduction,” in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 7–24 (9).

⁴⁵ *TD* 4, 325.

dreadful distance on the cross between the crucified Son and the Father abandoning his Son (which is *in fact* absent in the Gospel of John). In other words, the event of the kenotic love in the immanent Trinity undergirds the kenotic action of Christ on the cross, and the infinite distance in the trinitarian kenotic life makes possible the separation of the Son from the Father on the cross. And the inner-trinitarian distance is fully revealed only from the incarnate Son's forsakenness and abandonment by the Father.

All external scenes of Jesus' life and sufferings are to be understood as a direct revelation of the interior life and intentions of God. This is the fundamental meaning of biblical symbolism and allegory, . . . All of this [silence, mocking, nailing, piercing of Jesus around crucifixion] is a direct portrayal and exegesis of God (John 1:18).⁴⁶

"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1.18). In accordance with his Johannine conviction, all the ghastly appearances of Jesus's suffering exhibit an unobscured transparency in relation to the eternal life of God. All the gruesome "external" particularities associated with the crucifixion of Jesus is somehow *internal or transparent*, if not internalized into, to the life of the immanent Trinity. All the horrendous particularities of the evil violence that inflicted his suffering and death are to be understood as "a *direct* revelation of the *interior* life and *intentions* of God," as "a *direct* portrayal and exegesis of God."⁴⁷

To lay a christological foundation for the ultimate reconciliation between God and the world, Balthasar attempts to delve into the further implications of the kenotic incarnation of Christ. For Balthasar, "to 'take on manhood' means in fact to assume its concrete destiny with all that entails—suffering, death, hell—in solidarity with every human being."⁴⁸ "The Son of God took human nature in its fallen condition, and with it, therefore, the worm in its entrails—mortality, fallenness, self-estrangement, death—which sin introduced into the world."⁴⁹ What is of particular importance in his own account of penal substitution is that he goes so far as to claim that the sublime kenotic act of Christ on the cross is profoundly involved in the overwhelming actuality of sin—the Son's cry of dereliction and abandonment by the Father.⁵⁰ As Matthew Levering aptly indicates, "Balthasar's ideas

⁴⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, trans. by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 58.

⁴⁷ Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat*, 58; italics mine.

⁴⁸ *MP*, 20.

⁴⁹ *MP*, 22.

⁵⁰ Bruce McCormack complains that Balthasar's idea of God-abandonment falls short of the Spirit abandoning the Son. "Von Balthasar does not say anything about the Spirit's role in this drama. In fact, even when he speaks of the handing-over as a Trinitarian event, his focus is entirely upon the Father and the Son; the Father hands over the Son and the Son hands himself over. No mention is made of the Spirit. But it would seem to me that no death in God-abandonment can occur unless the Son is finally abandoned by both Father and Spirit." Bruce L. McCormack,

about Trinitarian *diastasis*, inner-Trinitarian faith, and Trinitarian metaphysics depend largely upon his interpretation of Christ's consciousness on the Cross. Were this thread withdrawn from his theology, much else would have to be revised."⁵¹

It should be noted that for Balthasar the suffering and death of Jesus does not terminate in the physical realm but reaches out beyond it to his spiritual realm. In other words, the suffering of Jesus's crucifixion represents the entirety of death in the sense that he suffers in terms of body and spirit. And it is Jesus's cry of dereliction and abandonment that lays bare his spiritual death. His suffering and death cover a spiritual realm precisely because the incarnate Son of the Father is forsaken and abandoned in the world by the very Father who sent (*missio*) him to the world. The incarnate Son's self-surrender caused for himself a plunge into the total devastation of Godlessness in the unbridgeable distance between himself and the Father. "Jesus does not only accept the (to be sure, accursed) mortal destiny of Adam. He also, quite expressly, carries the sin of the human race and, with those sins, the 'second death' of God-abandonment."⁵² He suffers "the second death" as forsakenness, abandonment, and dereliction by his own Father: the anxiety of total helplessness, terror of being cut off from the divine origin, and the agony of utter absence of power to recover the desperate tragedy.

The abandonment of the Son by the Father nearly always accompanies Balthasar's reference to the cross event of Jesus. He even consistently conveys the impression that the suffering and death of Jesus has much more to do with his dereliction and forsakenness by God than with the sinful exercise of imperial, religious power. And that God-forsakenness of the Son is grounded in and made possible by the eternal forsakenness of the pre-existent Son in the inner life of the Trinity. It means that the dreadful distance between the Father and the crucified Son on the cross has an intrinsic connection to the eternal, absolute distance between the divine persons within the immanent Trinity. "Without this personal distance in the *circumincessio* of the Persons it would be impossible to understand either the creature's distance from God or the Son's 'economic' distance from the Father—a distance that goes to the limit of forsakenness."⁵³ In Balthasar's trinitarian-christological logic, as *eternal* trinitarian vulnerability does not introduce a change in receiving temporal vulnerability, Christ's separation from the Father is, as Fiddes notes, "grounded in the infinite differences between the triune persons and their eternal self-emptying. If the life of relations in the Trinity already has this gulf of love at its heart, we can begin to understand how God allows death itself to enter that space. In free will, God allows God's own *otherness* to become a painful

"'With Loud Cries and Tears': The Humanity of the Son in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 37–68 (55).

⁵¹ Matthew Levering, "Balthasar on Christ's Consciousness on the Cross," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 65, no. 4 (October 2001): 567–81 (580).

⁵² *MP*, 90.

⁵³ *TD* 5, 98.

alienation.”⁵⁴ It is the divine and eternal distance between the Father and the Son in the triune life that corresponds to, grounds, and makes possible the unfathomable distance between Jesus and the Father in the event of suffering and death. The horrendous separation of Christ from God is intrinsically trinitarian.

Now having provided a basic summary of the contents of the primordial intra-trinitarian kenosis of procession and of the christological kenosis of mission in Balthasar’s theology, there is an opportunity to highlight one particular aspect of it. That is to say, he intends to redefine the divine nature as unity and love in the way of dialectical dynamics rather than in a sublimely abstract way. As Cyrus Olsen notes, “the characterization of the unity of divine nature as ‘diastasis’ indicates von Balthasar’s attempt to preserve ‘unity’, usually understood in static terms, while preserving ‘difference’, usually understood in dynamic terms.”⁵⁵ This dialectical movement of unity in separation in God stands on a twofold premise. To unite “otherness” and “unity” in the Godhead is possible precisely because the Christian God is triune. The Father’s begetting of the Son as the infinite, absolute, eternal “other” is concurrent with the Spirit’s unifying love. Hence, as Gerard O’Hanlon, among many others, claims, “If God were simply one he would become ensnared in the world-process through the incarnation and cross. But because God is triune, with both poles of difference and unity guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, the difference between Father and Son can accommodate all created differences including that extreme distance shown on the cross which becomes a revelation of the closest togetherness of Father and Son.”⁵⁶ In other words, the dialectical movement of unity-in-separation in the inner life of God is possible because the distance and separation between the Father and the Son is always *surpassed and transcended* by the unifying love of the Spirit as the incarnate Son’s diremption from the Father is overcome by the resurrection in the economic life of God. As Aristotle Papanikolaou elucidates, in Balthasar

“Otherness” is constituted in and through “distance”, which is the precondition for real communion. It is only in communion that the “other” is constituted. . . . It is also the point of true trinitarian revelation, insofar as the Resurrection reveals that even such an extreme distance between the Father and Son can never result in a separation.⁵⁷

It is clear that Balthasar does not shy away from placing infinite distance within the inner life of the Trinity. Suffering and death, while eternally present in the Trinity, is always surpassed by the resurrection, as the infinite distance eternally present is always unified in the Trinity by the love of the

⁵⁴ Fiddes, “Salvation,” 187.

⁵⁵ Cyrus Olsen, “Exitus–Reditus in H.U. von Balthasar,” *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 4 (July 2011): 643–58 (653).

⁵⁶ Gerard F. O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 27.

⁵⁷ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis, and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (January 2003): 41–65 (51).

Spirit. For Balthasar, the infinite distance is affirmed as a precondition of a profound manifestation of divine unity and love. Accordingly, the dialectical event of “unity-in-distance in God” is expanded into an event of “love-in-suffering in God” and even an event of “life-in-death in God.” As a result, he conceives of God as being-in-becoming in, I will argue, an *eternal event of negation of negativity in the divine life—the eternal purgation of distance, suffering, and death into unity, love, and life.*

Creative Kenosis: The Creation of the World

The kenotic movements of the inner life of the triune God progress to the world. The creation of the world is the economic kenotic act which follows the processive kenosis in the immanent Trinity. The “primal kenosis makes possible all other kenotic movements of God into the world; they are simply its consequences.”⁵⁸ The triune God creates a reality outside and becomes correlated with it in an overflowing and radiating love. As Papanikolaou articulates, “Creation as the ‘other’ is a product of and intended for the loving communion with God. The ‘otherness’ of creation for Balthasar is not creation in itself, but the unique presence of created beings constituted in loving communion with God.”⁵⁹ In the creative kenotic act of God, the world is created under “the archetype of all that can be created,”⁶⁰ that is, the Son who is the uncreated, consubstantial other of the Father in the infinite distance of love between them. The world is a created other, which mirrors “the archetypal otherness within God.”⁶¹ “The infinite distance between the world and God is grounded in the other, prototypical distance between God and God.”⁶² In other words, in the gift of creation, the world is created as a contingent, subsequent “other” in the trinitarian image of the archetypal Other, and reflects the otherness-in-sameness, distance-in-relation, and hiatus-in-love in the likeness of the triune God.

In the trinitarian dogma, God is one, good, true and beautiful because he is essentially Love, and Love supposes the one, the other, and their unity. And if it is necessary to suppose the Other, the Word, the Son, in God, then the otherness of the creation is not a fall, a disgrace, but an image of God, even as it is not God.⁶³

The creation of the world as a contingent other of God resulted from the non-necessary, creative, loving act of God, which is in a series of the divine kenosis based on absolute love and freedom. As a result of such creation, the world retains a relationship of distance-in-communion with God. Graham Ward appreciatively maintains that in the thought of Balthasar distance and space is good in that it

⁵⁸ *TD* 4, 331.

⁵⁹ Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis, and Abuse,” 51.

⁶⁰ *TL* 2, 181.

⁶¹ *TL* 2, 181.

⁶² *TL* 2, 266.

⁶³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 118.

intensifies desire and power for communion and unity: “hiatus fosters desire by opening the space for creativity, the stage for action, the yearning for unity; it fosters a spiritual *dunamis*, a theological *kinesis*, which is kenotic. There cannot be true kenosis without hiatus, without true difference.”⁶⁴

I have dealt so far with the threefold kenotic event in both the immanent and economic Trinity. In short, the processive kenosis is the Father’s self-emptying in the generation of the Son within the immanent Trinity. It undergirds all subsequent kenosis because it is the primal kenosis which establishes the divine prototype of the possibility of all kenotic events. The creative and the redemptive kenosis correspond, respectively, to the kenotic acts of creation and salvation of the world within the economic Trinity. Now in what follows I would like to embark on critical engagements with Balthasar’s expositions of the threefold kenotic event of the Trinity.

The God–World Relation in Theo-Drama

Divine Immutability and Scripture

First of all, it is helpful to examine one of his critical points of departure towards a middle way of kenotic trinitarianism. This initial examination may throw a critical light on the extent to which the starting point of his theology is justified.

As noted in the beginning, Balthasar is convinced that the idea of divine immutability, if philosophically confined, makes God indifferent to the world and hinders God from involving himself with the world. Divine immutability “prevent[s] him from entering the dramatic action,”⁶⁵ thereby disallowing a genuine theo-dramatic action of God. Thus, Balthasar believes, “the God of theo-dramatic action” is not “‘immutable’ (in the terms of philosophy).”⁶⁶ As Jennifer Martin rightly observes, for Balthasar, the philosophical idea of divine immutability does not account for “the biblical record.”⁶⁷ This construal functions as one of the explicit motivating factors in constructing his own distinctive interconnection of the Trinity and the cross. A strictly philosophical idea of God’s immutability is, for Balthasar, “denied, or so it seemed, by numerous Old Testament passages,”⁶⁸ and in “the theo-drama into which the world *and* God have their ultimate input. . . . God cannot function

⁶⁴ Graham Ward, “Kenosis: Death, Discourse and Resurrection,” in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 15–68 (44).

⁶⁵ *TD* 2, 9.

⁶⁶ *TD* 2, 9.

⁶⁷ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 184.

⁶⁸ *MP*, vii. Abraham Joshua Heschel may be one of the most prominent thinkers who promotes a dichotomy between the divine Pathos of a covenantal God proclaimed by the Hebrew prophets and the indifferent divinity of a sublime Being speculated by the Greek philosophers. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001; originally published 1962), esp. 288–93, 333.

here as a mere Spectator, allegedly immutable and not susceptible to influence.”⁶⁹ Balthasar therefore embarks on revising the traditional idea of divine immutability into an idea of the theo-dramatic God’s immutability that does justice to the biblical descriptions of God and thereby does not evoke an abstracted image of God “dwelling in philosophical sublimity above the vicissitudes of the world.”⁷⁰

Balthasar seems to allude here to one of the fashionable suspicions in post-Holocaust theology that the idea of divine immutability is not compatible with the biblical witness but rather influenced by ancient Hellenistic philosophy in the early stage of theological development. This claim is, however, not without critical reappraisals, although it has been quite prevalent and influential. A brief survey of the critiques, I believe, may call into question the point of departure of Balthasar towards the quest for a middle way. For instance, Frances Young points out, “It is often supposed that Hebraic understanding lost out in the assimilation of the Bible to Greek philosophy, but increasingly this seems to be a false estimate of what was going on in the formation of Christian doctrine.”⁷¹ Lewis Ayres also takes a dim view of the tendency to regard classical theology as indebted to “Greek metaphysics” and, subsequently, as the “‘Platonizing’ of Christianity.” According to Ayres, the tendency is built on a false dichotomy between “‘dynamic’” biblical themes and “‘static’ ontological categories,”⁷² which is certainly discernible in Balthasar. Paul Gavrilyuk carries out an extensive research on this suspicious trend. “Contrary to a widespread misconception,” he articulates, “there was nothing in the Hellenistic world amounting to a universally endorsed ‘axiom of divine impassibility’.”⁷³ Rather, he maintains, “the ontological distinction between the creator and creation,” which implies divine immutability and impassibility, is “the scriptural vision” rather than a thought of Hellenistic philosophy.⁷⁴ Gavrilyuk even suggests that “The Theory of Theology’s Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy must be once and for all buried with honours, as one of the most enduring and illuminating mistakes among the interpretations of the development of Christian doctrine.”⁷⁵ Similarly,

⁶⁹ TD 4, 318

⁷⁰ TD 2, 9.

⁷¹ Frances M. Young, “*Creatio ex Nihilo*: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation” (1991), in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2016), 139–51 (139). It is worth noting that the ideas of divine impassibility and divine creation *ex nihilo* are intrinsically related to each other in the sense that both stress an ontological difference between creator and creature. By the same reason, as the idea of divine impassibility has been challenged as formulated in reaction to Hellenistic philosophy, the same charge has been made to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Sarah Coakley doubts that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is substantially grounded in “Scripture alone” and so dispenses with the doctrine in pursuit of a Christian understanding of created dependence on divine power. I will deal with Coakley’s hasty evaluation of and unfortunate departure from the tradition of creation *ex nihilo* in detail in “Creation *ex Nihilo* and Scripture” in the third chapter.

⁷² Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 388–90.

⁷³ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 172.

⁷⁴ Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 159. See also Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “God’s Participation in Human Suffering in the Early Christian Theology of Martyrdom,” in *“Godhead Here in Hiding”: Incarnation and the History of Human Suffering*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and Frederik Glorieux (Leuven: Peters, 2012), 297–305 (297).

⁷⁵ Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 46.

Gilles Emery makes clear that those who succumb to this dubious trend such as Balthasar cannot avoid breaking up with tradition: “If one abandons the affirmation of divine immutability and impassability” in line with “widespread intellectual discomfort with the traditional doctrine of divine immutability, . . . a rupture with tradition is inevitable.”⁷⁶ Emery’s statement may undermine Gerard O’Hanlon’s favourable evaluation that Balthasar blazed the trail for speaking of God without losing the respect for “the classical tradition” as well as the sensitivity to “the modern *Zeitgeist*.”⁷⁷

Interestingly, Rowan Williams, one of those who are most notably appreciative of the theology of Balthasar, is intent on noting that it is erroneous to assume that the ancient ideas of unchangeability, invulnerability, impassibility, and immutability as the divine attributes, “so very unpopular today,”⁷⁸ are, as some contemporary theologians suggest, the consequences of “a radical departure from a scriptural God”⁷⁹ and “the triumph of classical philosophy over the Bible.”⁸⁰ Rather, Williams argues, the classical ideas are created by interweaving “a radically unchallengeable, unchangeable and invulnerable reality behind all appearances” with “the narratives of a God independent, free and engaged with human history” in the encounter between ancient philosophy and the Hebrew Bible.⁸¹ In other words, the classical ideas of divine immutability and impassibility are the products of the philosophical reformulation of God as “the source of law and covenant” in the Bible into “the source . . . of the meanings that are to be ascribed to, or perceived in, every action and relation.”⁸² Williams therefore highlights that the traditional ideas manifest the most profound truth of God: “God is the action that makes and sustains everything” or “the act and energy that keeps it in being.”⁸³

⁷⁶ Gilles Emery, “The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language concerning the ‘Suffering God,’” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 27–76 (34–36). The issue of Balthasar’s rupture from tradition has been discussed with regard to his understanding of Thomas Aquinas. “Once the doctrines of divine immutability and impassibility have been jettisoned, it is no wonder that the only way to read Aquinas is as unbiblical and unchristian, or as offering only the Aristotelian or Parmenidean God.” Fergus Kerr, “The Varieties of Interpreting Aquinas,” in *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation*, ed. Fergus Kerr (London: SCM, 2003), 27–40 (39). See also Fergus Kerr, “Thomas Aquinas: Conflicting Interpretations in Recent Anglophone Literature,” in *Aquinas as Authority: A Collection of Studies Presented at the Second Conference of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, December 14–16, 2000*, ed. Paul van Geest, Harm J.M.J. Goris, and Carlo Leget (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 165–86 (169); and footnote 161 in the present chapter.

⁷⁷ Gerard F. O’Hanlon, “A Response to Kevin Duffy on von Balthasar and the Immutability of God,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (May 2013): 179–84 (179–80).

⁷⁸ Rowan Williams, “God,” in *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. David F. Ford, Ben Quash, and Janet Martin Soskice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 75–89 (79).

⁷⁹ Williams, “God,” 79.

⁸⁰ Rowan Williams, “Early Christianity & Today: Some Shared Questions” (The Sir Thomas Gresham Annual Lecture and 2008 Gresham Special Lecture, St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, June 4, 2008).

<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/early-christianity-today-some-shared-questions>.

⁸¹ Williams, “Early Christianity & Today.”

⁸² Williams, “God,” 79.

⁸³ Rowan Williams, “Christology,” in *The Vocation of Anglican Theology*, ed. Ralph McMichael (London: SCM, 2014), 77–110 (83).

Seen in this light, Balthasar's quest for a theo-dramatic conception of God may falter *from the outset* upon an *unnecessary* and *untenable* dichotomy between scriptural images of God's involvement with the world and classical ideas of God's immutability from the world. This critical question may encourage a rethinking of Balthasar's theo-dramatic doctrine of God from the starting point, taking on board the following advice: "future discussion of impassibility must go beyond any simplistic contrast between Greek metaphysical notions and biblical categories."⁸⁴

The Contrast between Divine Transcendence and Immanence

The above critical examination leads us to the closely related, subsequent examination as to how Balthasar understands the relation of divine transcendence and immanence with respect to divine-human interaction. Balthasar is deeply troubled by thinking that such an immutably transcendent God is detached from, indifferent to, and uninvolved in the suffering of the world and thus falls short of taking worldly pain and suffering seriously. In other words, he is inclined to construe divine transcendence and immanence in a *contrastive* way: the more God transcends the world, the less God is immanent. As Herbert McCabe makes plain what "the involvement of God" is, however, "it does not follow that, if God is not affected by, say, human suffering, he is indifferent to it."⁸⁵ According to the traditional doctrine of creation, divine involvement with the world is not to be construed as mutually exclusive from divine immutability against the world. In a critical assessment of Balthasar's theological assumption, Thomas Weinandy shows the relevance of a non-contrastive account: "God's immutability and impassibility do not make him less loving toward humankind, but actually guarantee that his love contains all its various attributes fully and perfectly in act."⁸⁶ In other words, "God both transcends the created order and is present to and immanently acts within the created order."⁸⁷ *The radical transcendence of God guarantees rather than undermines profound divine immanence.* If absolutely transcendent, and hence immutable and invulnerable, God is able to be radically immanent in the mutability and vulnerability of the created world. In this regard, the idea of divine immutability is a *non-contrastive* expression of the divine-human relation—the "real" relation of God to the world and the "unreal" relation of the world to God. In other words, the divine giving of the gift of every goodness to the world remains unscathed by the finitude and sinfulness of the world because of the ontological difference between God and what is not God. The non-contrastive account of divine transcendence and immanence stands out in bold relief in particular from the perspective of the creator-creature relation as divine gift and human dependence in terms of *goodness*. God is a

⁸⁴ James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, "Introduction: Divine Impassibility in Contemporary Theology," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 1–26 (6–7).

⁸⁵ Herbert McCabe, "The Involvement of God" (1985), in *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 2005; originally published 1987), 39–51 (45).

⁸⁶ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 163, n. 31.

⁸⁷ Thomas G. Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," *Ars Disputandi* 2, no. 1 (2002): 1–13 (5).

transcendent giver, the source of every gift of goodness to the created world; the creator who is, from the beginning, all the way down, immanent in the world by creating, sustaining, and fulfilling the created world.⁸⁸

Rowan Williams, again, in accordance with his compatibilist view of scriptural imagination and philosophical formulation in relation to the doctrine of God, underscores that the transcendent attributes of God as the ultimate source do not point to detachment or disengagement of God from the world, “a God uninvolved in creation’s life—as the polemic of revisionist theologies so often suggests.”⁸⁹ On the contrary, they give a ground for the free and loving, unchanging and unswerving gift of divine grace towards the world. “For the early Christians, ... God was, indeed, wholly independent of the world, and therefore free of any conditioning, pressure or manipulation, and also, for that very reason, free to engage with what was created.”⁹⁰ In other words, God’s transcendence purports to celebrate “the primacy of God’s action”⁹¹ towards the world, that is to say, “the primacy of liberty and of love, love which, because it is free, is capable of engaging with what is completely different from itself,”⁹² and to safeguard it against having recourse to and being exploited by the world. Frances Young also notes that this is what “the patristic theology of God’s involvement in suffering” quite clearly shows. She notes that the traditional idea of God’s *apatheia* purports to uphold the changelessness of the goodness of God: “When the Fathers used it [*apatheia*] to affirm God’s transcendent otherness, it was always held as consonant with the affirmation of God’s goodness, justice, love, and providential care—indeed, guaranteed the constancy of these.”⁹³

Williams shows a similar concern in his understanding of evil as nothing and God as not a thing. While evil has no ontological value, God is not one of the created beings on the same ontological level who shares space or place with fellow created agents in the finite world. It requires us to disqualify a *spatializing* language of both God and evil and to use “‘de-spatializing’ talk about

⁸⁸ Ian McFarland notes that creation *ex nihilo* accounts for the Thomistic account of non-contrastive divine transcendence and immanence: “The logic of creation from nothing dictates that although creatures are by definition (namely, as entities that are from God but not God) other than God, God is ‘Not other’ than creatures.” Ian A. McFarland, “The Gift of the *Non aliud*: Creation from Nothing as a Metaphysics of Abundance,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 1 (January 2019): 44–58 (47). For the same insight of Nicholas of Cusa’s *non aliud*, see Rowan Williams, *Christ: The Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), xiv. The relation of the creator’s gift and its reception by the creature will be discussed in detail in “Created Dependence on God: From the View of Creation *ex nihilo*” in the last chapter of this thesis.

⁸⁹ Williams, “God,” 82.

⁹⁰ Williams, “Early Christianity & Today.”

⁹¹ Williams, “God,” 82.

⁹² Williams, “Early Christianity & Today.”

⁹³ Frances M. Young, “*Apathōs Epāthen*: Patristic Reflection on God’s Suffering, and the Cross,” in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79–94 (89).

both God and evil.”⁹⁴ God is not one of the competitive inhabitants contending for space with spatial beings in the finite world; the absolute transcendence of God as self-subsistent and infinite Being is involved with the contingent and finite beings in a *non-competitive* manner, in divine gratuity, plenitude, and initiative; God is so “miraculously generous in creation and salvation”⁹⁵ that created agents work out with the “overflowing fullness”⁹⁶ of God in the process of time and space; God is fundamentally understood as outpouring gratuity and infinite generosity, as “the noncompetitive other whose freedom makes us free.”⁹⁷

To sum up, absolute divine transcendence upholds rather than undercuts radical divine immanence, and corresponds to rather than is discrepant from scriptural images of God. And these insights call into question the fundamental assumptions of Balthasar’s theo-dramatics such as a dichotomy between bible and philosophy and a contrastive account of divine transcendence and immanence.

Kenosis, Otherness, and Competition: Balthasar, Williams, and Coakley

What is to be particularly emphasized here is that Balthasar’s contrastive account of divine transcendence and immanence carries a further significant theological, spiritual implication: it may give rise to a subsequent *competitive* account of the God–world or the divine–human relation. This competitive connotation comes into view in Balthasar’s kenosis-centred account of the divine–human relation: the kenotic gift of God to the world is given as always entailing *the dispossession and diminishment of God’s freedom*. Viewed from the perspective of non-competitive relation of God and the world, apart from, yet closely related to, the debate over divine immutability vis-à-vis the world in Balthasar’s theology, his kenotic account of theo-dramatic *otherness* and *difference* between God and the world assumes a *competition*. This charge is levelled by Sarah Coakley.

Before expanding on Coakley’s critique of Balthasar’s competitive account of kenotic relation of God and the world, it is worth first noting that it is widely acknowledged that the contemporary retrieval of the non-contrastive account of the creator’s transcendence and immanence, and the concomitant non-competitive account of creator and creature, is primarily indebted to the works of Kathryn Tanner.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 79–105 (101). An earlier version of this essay appears in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), 105–22.

⁹⁵ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

⁹⁶ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

⁹⁷ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

⁹⁸ Especially, Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); and *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001). Tanner’s retrieval may be considered as one of the most ground-breaking theological insights in the late twentieth century in that it gives enormous “clarity” and “precision,” in Rowan Williams’s words, to the subject of the creator–creature

A non-competitive relation between creatures and God means that the creature does not decrease so that God may increase. The glorification of God does not come at the expense of creatures. The more full the creature is with gifts the more the creature should look in gratitude to the fullness of the gift-giver. The fuller the giver the greater the bounty to others.⁹⁹

According to Tanner, God is “the giver of all good gifts, their fount, luminous source, fecund treasury and store house. Like an ‘overflowing radiance,’ God ‘sends forth upon all things . . . the rays of its undivided Goodness’; ‘the divine Goodness . . . maintains . . . and protects and feasts them with its good things’.”¹⁰⁰ The non-competitive relation makes sense and comes into play “only if God is the fecund provider of all that the creature is in itself; the creature in its giftedness, in its goodness, does not compete with God’s gift-fullness and goodness because God is the giver of all that the creature is for the good.”¹⁰¹ Only on this assumption is it possible to say that “the creature does not decrease so that God may increase.”¹⁰² Therefore, otherness and difference between God and the world does not stand over against each other: God *non-competitively* relates to the world.¹⁰³

Now let me expand on the concepts of otherness and difference in Balthasar. In evaluating Balthasar’s theology of difference and otherness, Williams situates it in the intellectual context of “all the fascination in postmodernity with difference.”¹⁰⁴ And he highly appreciates Balthasar’s theology for proposing a new way of theology to the twentieth century intellectual scene. For it goes beyond “the twin threats” of the Hegelian model of “an eternal return to the same,” on the one hand, and Derridean model of the “absolutizing of the other” to seek “a rhetoric of unconditional difference, an unspeakable otherness,” on the other.¹⁰⁵ Williams wants to keep his fingers crossed that Balthasar’s idea of trinitarian identity-in-otherness can negotiate a way beyond “the sterile opposition of undifferentiated presence/identity on the one hand and unthinkable *différance* on the other,”¹⁰⁶ beyond “the threatened stand-off between a philosophy of unproblematic identity and an anti-metaphysics” of

relation, which is the most fundamental theological subject, and subsequently serves to remove unnecessary misunderstanding and complexity. Moreover, Williams expresses his indebtedness to Kathryn Tanner for helping him more clearly to recognize how a non-competitive relation of divine agency and human agency accounts for the hypostatic union of Christ.

⁹⁹ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 2–3.

¹⁰⁰ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 1.

¹⁰¹ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 3.

¹⁰² Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 2–3.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Christ: The Heart of Creation*, xv.

¹⁰⁴ Rowan Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose” (1991), in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: 2007), 53–76 (55).

¹⁰⁵ Rowan Williams, “Balthasar and Differences” (1998), in *Wrestling with Angels*, 77–85 (78–79).

¹⁰⁶ Williams, “Balthasar and Differences,” 82.

“the sacred unsayable other”¹⁰⁷ (although it would fail if his trinitarian relational distinctions turn out to be “a system of co-ordination and subordination,” particularly in terms of sexual difference¹⁰⁸). Balthasar is, hence, for Williams, an extraordinary theologian who has something to say to the “cultural cul-de-sac and stand-offs”¹⁰⁹ of the contemporary intellectual scene.

In contrast to Williams, however, Coakley has a fundamental reservation about Balthasar’s accounts of the otherness and difference within God as well as between God and the world. She critically attends to the idea of divine kenosis in Balthasar’s trinitarian theology. She argues that the notion of divine kenosis itself in Balthasar may be called into question due to its *competitive* connotation. Upon the foundation of the classical theistic view of non-competitive divine–human relation, she gives a contrasting view, first of all, of the notion of kenosis from Balthasar. Although both alike heavily draw upon the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2:6–11, which is the biblical text that most explicitly introduces the idea of kenosis, in constructing their own model of kenotic theology, they actually have contrasting views on its exegesis.

It is well known that the Christ Hymn is, according to Markus Bockmuehl, “one of the most over-interpreted texts of the New Testament.”¹¹⁰ “Perhaps no other Pauline pericope has been the subject of such sustained critical attention over the past thirty years of New Testament study.”¹¹¹ However, the famous text raises “crucial difficulties”: “Does the hymn intend a moral *imitatio Christi*, or not? Does it predicate the pre-existence of Christ, or not? Which of more than twenty possible approaches offers the correct meaning of ἀρπαγμός [“as something to be exploited” (NRSV) in Philippians 2:6]?”¹¹² Balthasar and Coakley differ markedly in their exegesis of Philippians 2. Balthasar claims that “the subject of the kenosis that is described there [in Phil 2:6–11], is not the Son who has already become man, but the pre-existent Son.”¹¹³ It is thus “the kenosis of God . . . as is clearly said at Phil 2.7”;¹¹⁴ for Balthasar, therefore, it is exegetically necessary to go on to speak of an intra-trinitarian kenosis.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, “Balthasar and Differences,” 79.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, “Balthasar and Differences,” 82. Williams may be disappointed to see that Linn Tonstad does not resonate with his high hope for Balthasar as regards sexual difference. Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 27–29, 46–48.

¹⁰⁹ Williams, “Balthasar and Differences,” 82.

¹¹⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, “‘The Form of God’ (Phil. 2:6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 48, no. 1 (April 1997): 1–23 (1).

¹¹¹ Markus Bockmuehl, “A Commentator’s Approach to the ‘Effective History’ of Philippians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18, no. 60 (April 1996): 57–88 (75).

¹¹² Bockmuehl, “A Commentator’s Approach to the ‘Effective History’ of Philippians,” 75.

¹¹³ *GL* 7, 212.

¹¹⁴ *GL* 7, 216.

In contrast to Balthasar, Coakley aligns herself, in line with James Dunn,¹¹⁵ with the view that “Philippians 2 is not talking about Christ’s divine pre-existence”¹¹⁶ but about the self-sacrifice of the incarnate Son on the cross. She thus concurs with the view of seeing kenosis as “Jesus’ ‘self-sacrifice’ *en route* to the cross” while recoiling from seeing it as “an actual loss of divine power.”¹¹⁷ In other words, she speaks of “nonkenotic divinity, kenotic humanity”¹¹⁸ rather than “kenotic divinity, thereby, kenotic humanity” as does Balthasar. The difference in conceiving of kenosis between these two kenotic theologians are not, as Papanikolaou claims, “negligible,”¹¹⁹ but crucial.¹²⁰

This initial exegetical difference leads her to raise crucial critiques of his conception of divine kenosis. She observes that Balthasar consequently allows for the idea of kenosis to reach out to define the relations of the triune persons within the Godhead beyond the incarnation of the Son.

For Balthasar, . . . the idea of kenotic self-surrender is too pervasive and important a characteristic of divine love to circumscribe its significance in christology alone; it is eternally true of the perichoretic and reciprocal interrelations of the persons of the Trinity, not something newly impressed on the divine by the events of the incarnation. And thus it colors all the divine acts *ad extra*.¹²¹

She views that in Balthasar, the eternal kenotic distance and separation between the Father and the Son in “the mutual disposition of self-giving within the Godhead”¹²² establishes “a dialectical break in the divine life,”¹²³ partly due to “the postmodern obsession with ‘difference’, with acknowledging radical otherness even within God.”¹²⁴ She thus sees his kenotic theology as a “theology of hiatus,”¹²⁵

¹¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1989; first edition 1980), 98–128. See also Simon J. Gathercole, “New Testament Christology in Recent British Scholarship: A Sketch of Distinctives and Debates,” in *Jesus and Paul: Global Perspectives in Honor of James D. G. Dunn for His 70th Birthday*, ed. B. J. Oropeza, C. K. Robertson, and Douglas C. Mohrmann (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 102–13 (105–6).

¹¹⁶ Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 192–210 (194). In this article, Coakley attempts to show how the conception of trinitarian kenosis falls victim to a competitive understanding of divine and human agency, and proposes a christological understanding of kenosis, which is dealt with in “*Kenosis* and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing” (1996), in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 3–39.

¹¹⁷ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 194.

¹¹⁸ Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 32.

¹¹⁹ Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis, and Abuse,” 46. Jennifer Martin contends that a merely christological account of kenosis like Coakley’s needs to adopt “a specifically Balthasarian brand of kenosis” in order to exhaust the benefits of trinitarian kenotic relationality for theological anthropology. Jennifer Newsome Martin, “The ‘Whence’ and the ‘Whither’ of Balthasar’s Gendered Theology: Rehabilitating Kenosis for Feminist Theology,” *Modern Theology* 13, no. 2 (2014): 211–34 (233–34).

¹²⁰ Tina Beattie rightly acknowledges the difference between them. Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 182; 161–62.

¹²¹ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 199.

¹²² Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 199.

¹²³ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 200.

¹²⁴ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 200.

and observes that he posits “the dialectical gap in the divine” or “fracture or ‘hiatus’ *within* the divine”¹²⁶ “only as bridgeable by the Holy Spirit.”¹²⁷ And so “it is left to the Spirit to span the ‘unimaginable gulf’ between despair and hope in the Son’s diremption from the Father in the cross. That is why an understanding of kenosis focused on Christ’s death must necessarily be conceived trinitarianly for Balthasar.”¹²⁸ And she has a misgiving about this starting point of his theo-dramatic theology, such as hiatus, distance, space, room, break, or fracture, in order to speak of genuine unity and love. We should hesitate to follow the process of his trinitarian otherness in its very first phase, according to Coakley, because *making space*, giving up for the other in order to make a relation, connotes a *competitive* account of otherness. She throws a question of what kind of “other” is established in this competitive account of making other. “It is, arguably, in the dialectical break between ‘God’ and ‘God’, between divine absence and divine presence, that ‘kenotic’ space is made for the recognition of the ‘other’ *as* other. But who is this ‘other’, precisely?”¹²⁹ “Why is it important to leave such ‘room’?”¹³⁰

I want to concur with Coakley by observing that Balthasar’s account of intra-divine kenosis is permeated with the competitive language of “making room,” such as “the Son’s humility, which makes room for, and expresses, the whole sublimity of the Father’s love.”¹³¹ In other words, his theology of intra-divine distance and fracture comes very close to suggesting a competitive conceptualization of the “other.” And I also would like to note that the same holds true for his description of the christological kenosis of mission, on the ground that the immanent trinitarian drama of “procession” corresponds to the christological drama of “mission.” For Balthasar, Christ’s filial exercise of “the freedom of love” for the Father’s will entails “the lack of freedom (obedience)” to do “my own will” (“not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me”: John 6:38); “the obedient making way of the Son for the Father”¹³² stands over against the Father’s will “throughout”¹³³ the earthly mission of the Son; in other words, the more the Father’s will comes up, the more the Son’s will goes down; the more the Son’s will governs, the more the Father’s will resigns. For Balthasar, an absolute obedience of the Son to the Father in John’s Gospel entails “renunciation of acting in his [Christ’s] own power”¹³⁴ or his “absolute powerlessness.”¹³⁵ The kenotic self-renunciation of Christ,

¹²⁵ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 199.

¹²⁶ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 208.

¹²⁷ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 209.

¹²⁸ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 200.

¹²⁹ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 208.

¹³⁰ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 200.

¹³¹ *TD* 4, 450

¹³² *GL* 7, 248.

¹³³ *GL* 7, 323.

¹³⁴ *GL* 7, 244.

“total renunciation of his own will” in the Gospel of John, for Balthasar, ends up suggesting a competitive understanding of the relation of the Father’s will and the Son’s will.¹³⁶

Finally, the same competitive account holds true for the final phase of kenosis, kenosis as creation. Coakley observes that many contemporary proponents of trinitarian kenosis in line with Balthasar’s kenotic theology err in claiming that God empties divine freedom or loses divine power so that human freedom can be exercised by taking over the space from which God has already withdrawn for us: the more diminishment occurs on the divine side, the more enrichment happens on the human side. This is a *competitive* or incompatibilist view of the divine–human relation which means that the divine and the world compete with each other for a space on the same plane.

What is of particular importance for Coakley is that “the strong commitment to an ‘incompatibilist’ view of freedom . . . combined with the ‘competitive’ view of divine–human relations”¹³⁷ such as Balthasar’s, carries a significant problem for accounts of gender. The picture of (divine) emptying and (human) occupying gives an assumed significance to the “libertarian” notion of freedom as “an act of total independence from restriction, conditioning, or the admission of dependence,”¹³⁸ to “freedom from constraint, relationship, dependence.”¹³⁹ In other words, in this framework of divine and human agency, divine freedom is assumed to be an impediment to human freedom, and human freedom is to be self-dependent and free from the divine impediment and restrictions entailed by such dependence. This notion of libertarian freedom, which was developed particularly in Enlightenment philosophy and is permeated with secular ideas of freedom,¹⁴⁰ carries

¹³⁵ *GL* 7, 245.

¹³⁶ *GL* 7, 323. Stephen Holmes extensively deals with the monothelite controversy around Luke 22:24 (“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done”) and John 6:38 in the following articles: Stephen R. Holmes, “Christology, Scripture, Divine Action and Hermeneutics,” in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 156–70; and “Three Versus One? Some Problems of Social Trinitarianism,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009): 77–89. He argues that nearly all modern commentators (mis)read Luke 22:24 along with John 6:38 as though they should suggest that “there is a single will in Jesus Christ, which will is being brought into conformity to the will of the Father” (“Christology, Scripture, Divine Action and Hermeneutics,” 161). Holmes discerns a similar way of reading in the contemporary social trinitarian theologians who say that “the incarnate Son acknowledges the presence and reality of his own desire and volition, but chooses to accede instead to the volition of the Father” (“Three Versus One?,” 88). This reading seems very similar to Balthasar’s reading of John 6:38 mentioned above. Holmes claims that the Church Fathers who “endlessly discussed” (“Three Versus One?,” 88) this issue do not support this reading; rather, they are in common with the argument that in Christ there are “two wills, divine and human, and so of two actions, divine and human, that stand in perfect conformity” (“Christology, Scripture, Divine Action and Hermeneutics,” 166). It is worth noting that, in my view, this patristic view carries *non-competitive* connotations of the relation of Christ’s divinity and humanity.

¹³⁷ Sarah Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake? Three Kenotic Models in Patristic Exegesis,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 247–64 (264).

¹³⁸ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 205.

¹³⁹ Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?,” 264. See also Sarah Coakley, “Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 494–525 (516–17).

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Insole traces this pervasive modern philosophical as well as theological trend of a competitive account of divine and human agency back to Kant’s rejection of pre-modern or Aquinas’s “concurrence” account of

“overtone of a valorized ‘masculinism’”¹⁴¹ in the sense that it deeply reminds of “the male child’s repudiation of the power of the mother, . . . an intrinsically ‘male’ fantasy—a rejection and repression of the maternal,”¹⁴² and a “rejection of the mother (and everything she symbolizes: dependency, relationship, affectivity, bodiliness, emergent sexuality).”¹⁴³ What underlies this conceptualization of competitive relation is “a normative ‘masculine’ self who gains independence by setting himself apart from that which gave him life and indeed continues to sustain him”¹⁴⁴ and thereby pursues “the possession of ‘libertarian’ freedom, that is, a sovereign self-possession and autonomy that is capable of rising above the weaknesses and distractions of human desires and human tragedy.”¹⁴⁵ To conclude Coakley’s critique, Balthasar’s dramatic divine–human interplay ends up suggesting that because the created freedom only acts within “the ‘space’ granted to humans by God to exercise freedom,”¹⁴⁶ the creator’s freedom is involved competitively with the creature’s freedom.

I find Coakley’s critiques tenable. Balthasar highlights that “selflessness of the divine persons, as of pure relations in the love within the Godhead, as the basis of everything” is “the basis of a first form of kenosis, that lies in creation (especially in the creation of man who is free), for the creator here *gives up a part of his freedom* to the creature, in the act of creating.”¹⁴⁷ To put it differently, for Balthasar, God should empty his freedom in order to create free beings. If one should empty its own territory or “make space” in order to relate to and give benefit to another, it implies that they compete for space on the same layer with each other. As Gilles Emery points out in relation to the kenotic theology of Balthasar, however, “the creation is not a ‘restriction’ of God who would limit himself or give place to the creature through effacing himself (kenosis).”¹⁴⁸

divine action and human freedom derived from creation *ex nihilo*, the rejection of which serves to give birth to his late critical philosophy. “God does not act, but withdraws so as to allow us to act without ‘interference.’ . . . In this sense, divine and human action are a zero-sum game: the more divine action there is, the less space there is for humans. . . . Strikingly, this is a premise shared by both atheists and many contemporary believers, and cuts across ecumenical and confessional lines. . . . the view that when humans act God must withdraw is also Kant’s view. . . . In fact, Kant’s thinking this might well be a large part of why it is such a widespread cultural assumption, given the pervasiveness of Kant’s influence on how we think about freedom.” Christopher J. Insole, *The Intolerable God: Kant’s Theological Journey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 120.

¹⁴¹ Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?” 264.

¹⁴² Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 205.

¹⁴³ Sarah Coakley, “Analytic Philosophy of Religion in Feminist Perspective: Some Questions” (1997), in *Powers and Submissions*, 98–105 (100).

¹⁴⁴ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 205.

¹⁴⁵ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 25–26.

¹⁴⁶ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 205.

¹⁴⁷ *GL* 7, 214; italics mine.

¹⁴⁸ Emery, “The Immutability of the God of Love,” 71.

To conclude, Balthasar's spatializing language of "making room" runs the risk of speaking of the threefold kenosis—the intra-trinitarian Father–Son relation, the relation of the Father and the incarnate Son, and the divine–human relationship—as *competitive*.¹⁴⁹

The Suffering and Death of Christ in the Trinity

I have attempted to argue above that Balthasar is inclined to understand divine involvement with the world as *contrastive* with divine transcendence, and to think that the divine kenotic relation with the world entails the divine making room for the world to occupy, which implies a *competitive* relation of God and the world. And I have added that a competitively kenotic account of divine creation is related to kenotic relations such as the trinitarian personal relations (procession) as well as the incarnate Son's relation to the Father (mission). Now I will examine how Balthasar's conceptualizations of super-temporal suffering, death, and sacrifice are defended and contested, and then attempt to subscribe and contribute to critiques by arguing that his christological–trinitarianism proposes *little* ontological difference between the historical death of Christ and eternal death in God.

Suffering and Death Latent and Implicit in God

It may be relevant to begin my argument by noting Coakley's further evaluation of Balthasar's trinitarian–christological relation of kenosis. She levels against the post-Holocaust theologies of Balthasar, Barth, and Moltmann the charge that they "incorporate 'vulnerability' into the trinitarian understanding of God."¹⁵⁰ According to her criticism, the (male) post-war theologians err on the side of "a new *valorization* of Christic 'vulnerability', an admission of divine self-limitation and exposure in the face of human cruelty."¹⁵¹ "Rather than deflecting human weakness, this trend has embraced

¹⁴⁹ It is very interesting and important to notice, however, that Coakley as well as Williams make frequent and significant references to the competitive language of *human* "making room" and "granting space" for *God*. On either side, it implies competition insofar as "room" or "space" must be made in order for a relation to take "place." I will indicate this implication in the thoughts of Williams and Coakley in "Ontologizing the Tragic" in the second chapter and, more critically, in "The Competition between Divine Coerciveness and Human Vulnerability" in the third chapter.

¹⁵⁰ Sarah Coakley, "Prologue: Powers and Submissions," in *Powers and Submissions*, xii–xx (xix). Coakley has moved to this acute critique of the three theologians, shifting away from a rather neutral previous evaluation of them: they construe the Trinity "*from reflection on the death of Christ: the Spirit as the uniting bond between Father and Son*," which combines Western substitutionary soteriology, the Lutheran *theologia crucis*, the Augustinian representation of the Spirit as the "bond of love," and Hegelian dialectics. Sarah Coakley, "Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity," in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, ed. Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 29–56 (34–35). In this essay, as an alternative to this type of approach, Coakley proposes a Pauline, incorporative, Spirit-prioritizing model of the Trinity. I will treat it in "Ascetic Cruciformity to the Suffering of Christ in Romans 8" in the last chapter of the present thesis.

¹⁵¹ Coakley, "Prologue: Powers and Submissions," xiv.

it—even into the trinitarian heart of God. Submission has become paradoxically *identified* with divine ‘power’.”¹⁵² To put it differently, Balthasar construes kenosis as reaching out to the divine realm in which there is a hiatus and fracture engendered within kenotic trinitarian relations into which human weakness, vulnerability, and suffering is incorporated. Thereby, Coakley argues, Balthasar ends up establishing “a pedestalized place of suffering”¹⁵³ in a trinitarian–christological manner.¹⁵⁴

Most of Balthasar’s proponents would stand in opposition to Coakley. Rowan Williams has long been intent on exonerating Balthasar from his charge that Moltmann propounds a dubious idea that “God undertakes an identification with suffering humanity in order to be more adequately divine.”¹⁵⁵ While Williams looks with deep suspicion at Moltmann’s idea of a suffering God, he repeatedly tries to make clear that Balthasar’s theology of the triune life of God differs from a suffering God who is caught up with the world process. Williams urges us to make a nuanced distinction between Moltmann and Balthasar in that he believes Balthasar rightly shows a God who freely and “triumphantly” embraces what is not divine; Balthasar’s trinitarianism is not compatible with “some kind of privileging of human vulnerability over impassibility, as if, *pace* the German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, God can only become truly or fully God by incorporating human suffering into divine activity.”¹⁵⁶ For Williams, it is clear that Balthasar does not fall into the trap of the entanglement of God with human vulnerability and suffering. Many of the supporters for Balthasar share Williams’s claim in the pursuit of salvaging Balthasar from the accusation of introducing suffering into God. For instance, Thomas Dalzell asserts that “Balthasar does not reconcile worldly suffering and trinitarian love by divinizing the tragic and introducing it into God’s immanent life. In fact, that is the very thing he rejects in Moltmann.”¹⁵⁷

An argument that plays a pivotal role in defending Balthasar is that the salvation history unfolded in the economic life of the Trinity is “latent” in the immanent life of the Trinity. In other words, the sanguine sacrifice of Christ’s crucifixion is “implicit,” not ontologically real, in the Trinity. This argument is well explained in a passage where Williams favourably encapsulates Jennifer Martin’s supportive account of the Bulgakovian–Balthasarian speculation about kenotic trinitarianism:

It is not that there is a heavenly sacrificial economy which can be uncovered by speculation but that the irreducibly human suffering of Christ is to be understood as *the transcription in the finite order of what eternal gift means*: “the economic is latent in the immanent” (191), but this is decisively different from saying that the immanent is

¹⁵² Coakley, “Prologue: Powers and Submissions,” xiv–xv.

¹⁵³ Coakley, “Prologue: Powers and Submissions,” xx.

¹⁵⁴ Coakley refers to *Mysterium Paschale* and *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*.

¹⁵⁵ Rowan Williams, “Balthasar and the Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37–50 (39).

¹⁵⁶ Williams, “Balthasar and the Trinity,” 37.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas G. Dalzell, review of *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, by Karen E. Kilby, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (August 2013): 298–99 (299).

simply a version of the economic, or that the suffering of Christ effects a change in God, or is felt in God as strictly divine suffering. Moltmann's account of the cross and the Trinity is not at all what Balthasar intends to affirm.¹⁵⁸

In other words, the divine life of the Trinity exhibits the divine economy of perfect gift, and the suffering and death of Christ is a sacrificial manifestation of the divine economy of gift in the finitude of this world. The sacrificial suffering of Christ does not eternally transpire in the trinitarian economy of gift but is latent. The suffering of Jesus's crucifixion is the economic manifestation in the sinful world of the eternal kenosis of the Trinity's immanent life, and this trinitarian relation does not suggest the placement of divine suffering in the intra-trinitarian life.¹⁵⁹

Francesca Murphy seems to be in line with Williams. According to Murphy, Balthasar's controverted language of "there is something in God that can develop into suffering" bears witness to a "positive analogy" of suffering or tragedy for God but at the same time to a "negation" of the analogy; it is because that language only means that the eternal love in the Trinity is "analogous" to "suffering"; that "there is something in God that can develop into suffering" means that the trinitarian love is "*reciprocal*." "The persons of the Trinity 'suffer' one another in the sense that each 'lets the other be'"; yet, she claims, "there is here no glorification of eternal, tragic suffering within God." The suffering and tragedy associated with creation and salvation history is "implicit" in the eternal relation of love between the divine persons. For Murphy, "the creative and historical missions of Son and Spirit are eternally 'latent' in their divine processions."¹⁶⁰ She seeks to articulate how these are "latent" and "implicit" by means of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Rowan Williams, review of *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought*, by Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (October 2017): 689–91 (690; italics mine).

¹⁵⁹ This line of argument has become a basic framework of defending Balthasar's notion of eternal suffering. For instance, Simon Oliver states, owing to D. C. Schindler: "Crucially, in maintaining that Christ's kenosis on the cross is the economic outworking of God's eternal kenosis, Balthasar is *not* suggesting that there is an eternal suffering in God. Rather, within a sinful world, the cross is the way in which eternal love manifests itself. It is the way in which the eternal love of God, which has always flowed to creation, is maintained in its self-giving in the face of sin." Simon Oliver, "Trinity, Motion and Creation *ex nihilo*," in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, ed. David Burrell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 133–51 (143, n. 35).

¹⁶⁰ All the quotations in this paragraph come from Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 329.

¹⁶¹ Murphy's attempt to put Balthasar in amity with Thomas seems at odds with the general view of their relationship. For instance, Matthew Levering argues, "The relationship of Hans Urs von Balthasar's thought to Aquinas's is a complex one, but in the areas of Trinitarian theology, Christology, and soteriology there is a marked divergence." Matthew Levering, "The Paschal Mystery and Sapiential Theology of the Trinity," in *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 110–43 (132–33, n. 108). See also Matthew Levering, "Does the Paschal Mystery Reveal the Trinity?," in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 78–91 (79, n. 5). Fergus Kerr also observes critically that what "did *not* interest Aquinas . . . are, Balthasar contends, precisely what Christian theology is about"; and from the view of Balthasar, Thomas's "predominantly philosophical methodology prevents him from doing Christian theology properly. . . . Balthasar chooses Barth over Aquinas." Kerr, "The Varieties of Interpreting Aquinas," 32. See also Kerr, "Thomas Aquinas: Conflicting Interpretations in Recent Anglophone Literature," 169; and footnote 76 in the present chapter.

For von Balthasar, as for Thomas, the *ratio* or pattern of the eternal processions of Son and Spirit contain in themselves the *ratio* or patterns of *creation*. They are analogous to them. The *ratio* of human tragedy is the “risk” which the Father takes in giving the whole of himself away in begetting the Son. . . . Like Thomas, von Balthasar treats the *rationes* or patterns of the divine *processions*—the begetting of the Son and the breathing of the Spirit—as the *rationes* or patterns of creation and salvation history.¹⁶²

That is, the pattern of suffering and tragedy in the finite world is “latent” and “implicit” in the “risk” run within the divine relations.

Yet Murphy seems to fail to raise a question as to whether it is licit to posit a reality of “risk” (in the Father’s love) and a possibility of unreciprocatedness (in the Son’s response). To put it differently, to speak of a trinitarian “risk” cannot avoid assuming an incorporation of finitude *and* sinfulness into the immanent life of God in the first place. And the transgression of finitude and sinfulness into the Trinity is reinforced by speaking of forming and maintaining the trinitarian “risk” as “suffering.” It is thus reasonable to pose the question, following Linn Tonstad, “Why would we assume that the need to sacrifice oneself for an other, generated by the injustices and limitations of human existence, applies to the relation between God and God?”¹⁶³ Celia Deane–Drummond also indicates that the Father’s primal generation of the Son does not need to imply “a drastic separation”¹⁶⁴ where the Father’s freedom runs the “risk” of the Son’s ungratefulness. She argues that Balthasar “has introduced *unnecessary* complications on the premise that God has to experience in Godself something like human experiences of sin, suffering and death”¹⁶⁵ as a consequence of envisaging the trinitarian relation only within *a risk of misrecognition*, a seed of tragedy. If there is no rivalry and hostility between the divine persons in the first place, it is hardly legitimate to write as though the triune love within the Godhead runs the risk of rejection in eternity.¹⁶⁶

This is also the case with sacrifice and death in the Trinity. Balthasar cites Adrienne von Speyr:

“If death is understood to mean the sacrifice of life, then the *original image* of that sacrifice is in God as the gift of life flowing between Father and Son in the Spirit. . . . In the world, death is a limitation, a conclusion, an end. In God, death is always the beginning of new life.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, 329.

¹⁶³ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 38; Linn Marie Tonstad, “Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death: Cross, Kenosis, and Hierarchy in the *Theo-Drama*,” *Modern Theology* 26, no. 4 (October 2010): 603–31 (611–12).

¹⁶⁴ Celia Deane–Drummond, “The Breadth of Glory: A Trinitarian Eschatology for the Earth through Critical Engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (January 2010): 46–64 (51).

¹⁶⁵ Deane–Drummond, “The Breadth of Glory,” 51; italics mine.

¹⁶⁶ A similar question can be posed about Rowan Williams’s theology of trinitarian “self-dispossession.” See “The Trinitarian Metaphysics of Self-Dispossession and the Human Ethics of Self-Dispossession” in the next chapter.

¹⁶⁷ *TD* 5, 251; italics mine.

“Life is only genuinely alive insofar as it . . . grows beyond itself, lets go of itself. It is rich only insofar as it can be poor, insofar as it loves. . . . Death will not allow itself to be pushed to the very end of life; it belongs right at the center, not in mere knowledge, but in action. Death characterizes our breakthrough into a life that is ever greater. It is through this positive death that we amass life.” This is based on a *trinitarian prototype*: “. . . God is love, . . . the absolute unity of riches and poverty, . . . life and death.” Absolute love is only realized where there is this surrender of what is one’s own, where this *separation* is taken seriously. . . . Only in this context can true love, and its suffering, prove fruitful.¹⁶⁸

Insofar as death means “the sacrifice of life” or, as we shall see soon, “the good death,” “the original image” or “prototype” of sacrificial death lies in God; it is the sacrificial death in God that makes concretely possible the good death of Jesus as a manifestation of love.

Balthasar does not recoil from claiming that “the original image” of “the sacrifice of life” is in God. “In the Christian context,” he maintains, “sacrifice, suffering, the Cross and death are only the reflection of tremendous realities in the Father, in heaven, in eternal life.”¹⁶⁹ The “original image” of “the sacrifice of life” that is in God corresponds to what he calls “super-death” in God that grounds every “good death” in the world. Balthasar gives an account of “super-death” in association with “good death” or “sacrifice of life” which is perfectly embodied in the death of Jesus and which his followers are called to imitate.

In giving himself, the Father does not give something (or even everything) that he *has* but all that he *is*—for in God there is only being, not having. . . . This total self-giving, to which the Son and the Spirit respond by an equal self-giving, is a kind of “death”, a first, radical “kenosis”, as one might say. It is a kind of “super-death” that is a component of all love and that forms the basis in creation for all instances of “the good death”, from self-forgetfulness in favor of the beloved right up to that highest love by which a man “gives his life for his friends”.¹⁷⁰

In other words, “the good death” means the “love” at the cost of “death,” self-negating and self-sacrificial love for the other up to the point of death; and it is “super-death” or eternal good death in the Trinity, that constitutes the foundation of love up to death in the finite world—the “best death,” namely, the highest embodiment and greatest manifestation of super-death.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ *TD* 5, 84–85, quoting Ferdinand Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1973); italics mine.

¹⁶⁹ *TD* 5, 511.

¹⁷⁰ *TD* 5, 84.

¹⁷¹ Antonio López takes a minimal position as to the construal of the super-death in God in support for Balthasar. He interprets it as an eternal foundation in God for “the readiness to die, which always takes place within the horizon of the resurrection and thus of eternal life (Jn 10:17),” which grounds and makes possible the good death of Jesus as well as his followers’ rather than as introducing “negativity in the absolute.” In other words, the super-death in God must not be construed “literally” or “ontologically” but as a “sacrificial readiness to die,” as “something in God that can develop into suffering” should be understood as a “relational risk to unreciprocation.” Antonio López, “Eternal Happening: God as an Event of Love,” *Communio* 32 (Summer 2005): 214–45 (239, n. 65). What I will argue in what follows is counter to his position.

If an “original image” of separation, suffering, and death in God are merely “latent” and “implicit” *without any ontological value* as Martin, Williams, and Murphy contend, how can that be a “prototype” that grounds and makes possible human suffering and death? It seems that a divine prototype of sacrifice lies at the heart of God as at least something beyond merely being latent or implicit, if not the ontologically most profound prototype and original image; or that the divine love proves its fruitfulness through suffering in the Godhead.

What should be pointed out is that the relationship of the best death of Christ and the super-death in the Trinity is accounted for in terms of the immanent–economic forms of the Trinity, of the eternal being and historical act of the Trinity, or of the trinitarian–christological relation, which an *analogical dissimilarity* is hardly squeezed in between. In the trinitarian relations *ad intra* and *ad extra*, the primordial super-death within the Trinity functions at an ontological level that is intrinsically related to the reality of Jesus’s death on the cross, rather than, as Jennifer Martin argues, at an “analogical but non-ontological”¹⁷² level. Therefore, it would be reasonable to interpret the super-death in God, in accordance with Linn Tonstad, as “the introduction of the possibility and even,

¹⁷² Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 218. There has been an important debate over whether the characteristic of theological terms such as (absolute, eternal, infinite) distance and suffering in the Trinity is analogical or metaphorical in Balthasar’s theology. As O’Hanlon states, it may be “where von Balthasar’s claim will stand or fall.” O’Hanlon, “A Response to Kevin Duffy on von Balthasar and the Immutability of God,” 182. A prevalent position of some early supporters seems that those negative modalities of God are spoken of not in an analogical sense but in a metaphorical sense. For instance, O’Hanlon contends in the above-mentioned essay that Balthasar “is hesitant . . . to ascribe analogical status to divine suffering” (183). Blankenhorn demurs O’Hanlon’s position: “Is the attribution of suffering to God simply metaphorical language used to bring out the intensity of divine love? Such is the interpretation of Gerard O’Hanlon and Thomas Dalzell. But Balthasar himself does not describe God’s suffering as metaphorical.” Bernhard Blankenhorn, “Balthasar’s Method of Divine Naming,” *Nova et Vetera* 1:2 (2003): 245–68 (257). Blankenhorn continues to argue, together with some other critical commentators, that Balthasar “posits suffering as a properly analogous divine attribute” (258). Kevin Duffy elaborates on this critique in “Change, Suffering, and Surprise in God: Von Balthasar’s Use of Metaphor,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (November 2011): 370–87. Beáta Tóth has a similar misgiving about Balthasar’s account of temporality and super-temporality in “Eternity in Time—Time in Eternity: Temporality and the Human Self in the Eschaton,” *Irish Theological* 84, no. 4 (September 2019): 373–391. It is also worth noting that Rowan Williams repeatedly underlines that the “literal” (not “rhetorical”) use of terms relating to the pain and suffering of God, which has been fashionable in post-war theologies, is unacceptable because it ontologizes and mystifies suffering and does not make sense of God as the source of being.

It is interesting to see that some recent supporters are inclined to withdraw their early defence and to concede an analogical trait of Balthasar’s terms, yet still seek to support Balthasar by denying that they are spoken of at the ontological level. In tune with the early defence of Balthasar, for instance, Michele Schumacher argues that the ever-greater difference or dissimilarity between God and the world in the Fourth Lateran Council holds true for the relationship between kenotic suffering in God and the kenotic suffering of Christ in the thought of Balthasar. Thus, “something like suffering in God” does not mean a lack, but rather expresses “the infinite superabundance of divine love” which embraces all worldly suffering. Michele M. Schumacher, *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr & Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 344.

According to Martin, more clearly, the absolute, infinite, eternal distance is, as above, “analogical but non-ontological” and thus “ought not be taken over-literally in a manner that would compromise the unity of the divine nature; rather, Balthasar’s understanding of inter-Trinitarian distance is the condition of the possibility for love.” Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 218. Martin’s defence deserves critique: If an absolute distance in the Godhead is analogical to real distance in the world, how can it be not ontological at all? How can a “non-ontologically” “eternal,” “infinite,” “absolute” distance in the Godhead “ground” and “make possible” the distance of the world? What is the difference between taking them “over-literally,” which is illicit, and “literally,” which is acceptable?

as it were, pre-reality of death into God,” and thereby “‘something like’ death and sacrifice belongs to the very being of God.”¹⁷³ This argument will be substantiated in “The Temporal Wound of Christ and the Eternal Wound in the Trinity” in the present chapter.

Christ Suffering “Passibly” in the Divine Nature

The eternal distance, suffering, and death in God is intrinsically related to Jesus’s suffering on the cross. “With respect to traditional divine immutability,” as Martin mentions, “Balthasar resists the claim that the Incarnation of the second hypostasis did not in any way affect the immanent Trinity (or, for that matter, the divine nature of Christ).”¹⁷⁴ Likewise, Gerard O’Hanlon helpfully articulates how and why Balthasar seeks to revise the Chalcedonian christology and thereby the idea of divine immutability.

From his repeated emphasis on the ontological, personal identity of the Logos as the subject who unites the two distinct natures in Christ, he will refuse to limit the change and suffering which Christ experiences to his human nature alone. This is the advance on Chalcedon and its traditional interpretation which Balthasar proposes. The tendency to consider the human nature of Christ as an *instrumentum conjunctum* which does not affect the divine person he sees as Nestorian in character. And so he is anxious to insist on a more than merely logical *communicatio idiomatum*, to accept that the formula “one of the Trinity has suffered” does indeed mean that God has “suffered”, albeit mysteriously.¹⁷⁵

Like O’Hanlon, Cyril O’Regan rightly articulates how Balthasar complexifies the idea of divine impassibility from the perspective of the “enhypostatic” suffering of Christ:

One implication to which Balthasar draws attention as having particular pertinence to the issue of divine passibility is that suffering in Christ is not without remainder a function of Christ’s human nature. Or more technically speaking, Christ’s suffering is enhypostatic. . . . [The] recognition of the enhypostatic character of suffering would put a block on complacent assertions of divine impassibility, which sometimes function within a metaphysical economy in which impassibility is simply the binary opposite of passibility, the content of which is provided by the observation of the world of change.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Tonstad, “Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death,” 604.

¹⁷⁴ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 185.

¹⁷⁵ O’Hanlon, *Immutability of God*, 43.

¹⁷⁶ Cyril O’Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar’s Response to Philosophical Modernity*, Volume 1: Hegel (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 2014), 306–7, quoted in Rodney Howsare, “Why Hegel? A Reading of Cyril O’Regan’s *The Anatomy of Misremembering*, Volume 1,” *Nova et Vetera* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 983–92 (991–92).

Kilby sheds light on how divine impassibility is uttered without being “the binary opposite of passibility.” She argues, “to maintain that God is impassive and beyond change is, arguably, to maintain that certain categories cannot be used to speak of God at all, rather than to paint a kind of picture of what God is like. It is a grammatical rather than a descriptive affirmation. And it would therefore be equally inappropriate, from such a traditional position, to describe God as static as it would be to describe God as moved. If this is right then contemporary

The suffering of the Son incarnate is not confined in his human nature but affects his divine nature; it is “enhypostatic.”

O’Hanlon’s and O’Regan’s readings are authorized by Balthasar’s interpretation of the convoluted twelfth anathema of Cyril of Alexandria, Balthasar quotes, “If any one does not confess that the Word of God suffered in the flesh and was crucified in the flesh and in the flesh tasted death and became the first-born from among the dead . . . [Balthasar omits: although He is as God Life and lifegiving] *anathema sit*.” He interprets Cyril’s anathema as follows:

If it is possible for one Person in God to accept suffering, to the extent of God-forsakenness, and to deem it his own, then evidently it is not something foreign to God, something that does not affect him. It must be something profoundly appropriate to his divine Person, for—to say it once again—his being sent (*missio*) by the Father is a modality of his proceeding (*processio*) from the Father.¹⁷⁷

Christ’s suffering of crucifixion to the degree of dereliction, namely, a total death of Christ in the realm of body and spirit, for Balthasar, is not something disparate and alien to God but, contrastively, “profoundly appropriate to his *divine* Person” which is essentially associated with the divine life of the Trinity. It is worth noting that his commitment to Christ’s suffering in his *divine* nature is closely related to his overarching emphasis on the Son’s alienation from and abandonment by God as the second death in spirit which corresponds to the eternal, infinite distance between the Father and the Son in the Trinity.

Although a detailed examination on the history of dispute over the controverted anathema is beyond the scope of this present chapter, however, it is worth noting that many patristic studies may make one hesitate to concur with Balthasar’s interpretation of Cyril who goes so far as to deem suffering as “something profoundly appropriate” to God beyond the suffering of the Son in his flesh as an incarnate existence. As Donald Fairbairn articulates in relation to the anathema, according to Cyril of Alexandria, “the Word suffered impassibly” and it means that “He dies ‘according to the flesh,’ in his humanity, rather than in his divine nature per se.”¹⁷⁸ If this is the case, it could be said that Balthasar

theologians are not so much affirming what earlier theologians rejected, as breaking a grammatical rule to which earlier theologians believed they were constrained to adhere.” Karen E. Kilby, “Evil and the Limits of Theology,” *New Blackfriars* 84, no. 983 (January 2003): 13–29 (28–29, n. 18). Kathryn Tanner also makes clear that the “grammatical” feature of divine immutability and impassibility is ascribed to divine transcendence itself: “Divine transcendence is not a doctrinal affirmation in any ordinary sense but a grammatical remark about theological language: it signals a general linguistic disturbance, the failure of all predicative attribution, in language about God. Following one common way of making this point, one could say that God is not a kind of thing: God is beyond every genus. For that reason, talk about God systematically violates the usual canons of sense making.” Kathryn Tanner, “Creation *Ex Nihilo* as Mixed Metaphor,” *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (April 2013): 138–55 (138).

¹⁷⁷ TD 3, 226.

¹⁷⁸ Donald Fairbairn, “Cyril of Alexandria,” in *The T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 457–60 (459). See also Brian E. Daley, “The Word and His Flesh: Human Weakness and the Identity of Jesus in Greek Patristic Christology,” in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, ed.

intends, as O’Hanlon has mentioned, to correct the “Nestorian in character,” yet ends up straining to breaking point the theology of Cyril which was in fact developed over the dispute with Nestorius.¹⁷⁹

Let me elaborate upon contemporary research on the christology of Cyril. According to Paul Gavrilyuk, for Cyril it is “theologically legitimate” to say that “God was crucified . . . as long as it was added that the subject was God-in-the-flesh, and not God outside of the framework of the incarnation.”¹⁸⁰ In other words, the Word “was unable to experience suffering in his ‘naked divinity’, but only in and through the flesh,”¹⁸¹ only within the confines of the incarnation. Thomas Weinandy also contends that it is a misreading to deem Cyril’s anathema as asserting that Jesus suffers in his divine nature. “For Cyril what is truly at issue is not that the Son of God suffers as God in a divine manner, but that the Son of God suffers as man in a human manner. . . . The person of the Son, within his existence as God, is impassible. Within his existence as man, the Son is passible. While not fully comprehensible, this is the rational, intelligible, and coherent logic that the mystery of the Incarnation demands.”¹⁸² Seen in the light of Cyril’s incarnational soteriology, Balthasar’s vision of the *mysterium Paschale* seems to lie upon “the false premise that the Son of God must suffer within his divine nature in order for the suffering to be theologically and soteriologically significant.”¹⁸³

Balthasar’s questionable interpretation of Cyril leads him to speak of the suffering of Christ as “something profoundly appropriate to his divine Person.” In doing so, he moves to make suffering *eternally internal* to God. Gavrilyuk outlines the theological consequences of such a predication of suffering to the divine nature: “If divine identity was somehow defined by the event of crucifixion in

Nonna Verna Harrison and David G. Hunter (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 171–90; J. Warren Smith, “Suffering Impassibly: Christ’s Passion in Cyril of Alexandria,” in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, 191–212.

¹⁷⁹ If Kallistos Ware rightly evaluates the christology of Sergei Bulgakov, Balthasar should have admitted that he goes beyond Cyril of Alexandria. “Here Bulgakov goes beyond Cyril of Alexandria, who states . . . that Christ suffered only in his human and not in his divine nature. Yet according to the definition of faith endorsed by the Council of Chalcedon, the two natures of Christ are united ‘without division and without separation.’ This means, Bulgakov argues, that the suffering of Christ in his human nature must inevitably have implications also for his divine nature.” Kallistos Ware, “The Impassible Suffers,” in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, 213–33 (227).

¹⁸⁰ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “*Theopatheia*: Nestorius’s Main Charge against Cyril of Alexandria,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no. 2 (2003): 190–207 (201).

¹⁸¹ Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 171.

¹⁸² Thomas G. Weinandy, “Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation,” in *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 23–54 (49–50). See also Weinandy, “The Incarnation—The Impassible Suffers,” in *Does God Suffer?*, 172–213. John McGuckin also makes the incarnation-centred soteriology of Cyril clear: “In all incarnational language Cyril says . . . suffering, death, sorrow, and suchlike, are inapplicable to ‘God-in-himself’, but no longer inapplicable to God-made-man, in so far as he has appropriated, along with a human body, all that goes to make up a human life, that is soul, intellect, emotion, fragility, even mortality.” John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy; Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 191. Kathryn Tanner also proposes a soteriology of the incarnation on the basis of Cyril of Alexandria: “The saving power of the cross is a product of the incarnation, as its effects are actualized over time in and through Jesus’ actual dying. . . . The cross saves because in it sin and death have been assumed by the one, the Word, who cannot be conquered by them. . . . The cross is a sacrifice but only in the same sense that Jesus’ whole life is a sacrifice of love. Following Cyril of Alexandria, the sacrifice here is a sacrifice of incarnation.” Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 28–29.

¹⁸³ Weinandy, “Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation,” 50.

such a way as to suggest that it was God's very nature to suffer in human fashion, then the assumption of the flesh would become quite unnecessary. For in this case the flesh would merely duplicate in its imperfect way the suffering that the Word had already undergone in his own nature."¹⁸⁴ In other words, the claim that the divine nature is affected by the human event backfires into undermining the salvific significance of the incarnation by making it somewhat redundant or superfluous. The soteriological import of the incarnation is profoundly undercut by internalizing suffering into God and thereby eternalizing and divinizing it.

One may wonder here if Balthasar has a proclivity, without doing justice to soteriological significance of the *incarnation*, for transposing questions traditionally answered within a christological framework into a trinitarian one. For instance, the *trinitarian reception* of all historical tragedy of suffering into the eternal distance within God guarantees the redemptive and salvific efficacy of his theo-dramatic doctrine of the Trinity. This aspect of trinitarian reception takes over the role of a patristic christological–soteriological formulation, “that which is not assumed is not healed.” The patristic principle of orthodox christology argues that the eternal Son of God saves and deifies fallen, sinful humanity by assuming it into his divine nature through the incarnation.¹⁸⁵ In other words, it mainly concerns the salvific efficacy of the incarnation—as discussed in Cyril of Alexandria's christology—which does not require speculations of the divine suffering of Christ, not to mention trinitarian suffering. This soteriological principle of the incarnation is, according to David Bentley Hart, “the essence of the miracle of the incarnation, for patristic theology as a whole, and indeed is the good news Christians proclaim.”¹⁸⁶ Unlike this patristic emphasis on the incarnation, Balthasar intends to deal with the problem of humanity's salvation within a set of highly speculative trinitarian claims without pondering upon the soteriological meaningfulness of the incarnation.¹⁸⁷ And it may cause “unnecessary complications”¹⁸⁸ of trinitarian suffering and death. What I now intend to do in what follows is to shed light on his trinitarian thought by closely examining the crucial trinitarian–christological image of “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world.”

¹⁸⁴ Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 174–75.

¹⁸⁵ For an extensively detailed survey and analysis of the patristic principle, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Thomas G. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993); and Benjamin Myers, “The Patristic Atonement Model,” in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 71–87 (74–76). See also Stephen R. Holmes, “Asymmetrical Assumption: Why Lutheran Christology Does Not Lead to Kenoticism or Divine Passibility,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 72, no. 4 (2019): 357–74.

¹⁸⁶ David Bentley Hart, “No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility” (2002), in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 45–69 (66).

¹⁸⁷ This observation might have something to do with Holmes's critical remark that “social trinitarianism uses the doctrine of the Trinity to answer questions the fathers answered by Christology” (“Three Versus One?,” 88). It is interesting to see that Jeffrey Dukeman considers Balthasar as a “significant” social trinitarian theologian who “represents a hierarchical social trinitarian trajectory” whereas Miroslav Volf represents an egalitarian type of social trinitarianism in *Mutual Hierarchy: A New Approach to Social Trinitarianism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019), xiii–xiv.

¹⁸⁸ Deane–Drummond, “The Breadth of Glory,” 51.

Visualizing Eternal Suffering and Death of God: “The Lamb Slain”

“The Lamb Slain” as a Pivotal Johannine Image

I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter that in order both to bypass a mythological idea of God (a God mired in the world) and a philosophical idea of God (a God sublimely hovering over the world), Balthasar presents an idea of God who is eternally vulnerable to, and in advance of, the sin and evil of the world, an idea which he believes does not introduce an ontological change in God.

What most vividly visualizes Balthasar’s idea of an eternally vulnerable triune God without recourse to the introduction of change is the christological–soteriological image of a sacrificial Lamb in eternity, “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,” which resonates with, corresponds to, and is expressed by an earthly sacrificial death in Christ. As Michele Schumacher clearly states, by the image of “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,” Balthasar intends to show that “the kenotic or self-emptying love of God is logically prior to sin, God having already reckoned with misdirected created freedom in his plan of redemption before the creation of the world.”¹⁸⁹ The Lamb of God is slain “before the foundation of the world,” before the beginning of finitude such as temporality; Christ is crucified in eternity; there is no before and after in the vulnerability, suffering, and death of Christ; in other words, Christ’s historical suffering eternally transpires, before the beginning of the world, within the absolute distance between the Father and the Son in the intra-divine life. The eternal woundedness or vulnerability is not a temporal event in the aftermath of Jesus’s historical crucifixion, but eternally intrinsic to God.

The image of the Lamb slain in timelessness is never a peripheral image but a regulating symbol that “provide[s] a vantage point from which to survey the form and content of the theodramatic action”¹⁹⁰ in Balthasar’s theology. The image of the glorified Lamb slain represents a profound depth of God’s theo-dramatic relation to the world. It is indeed that, for Balthasar, “the Lamb is God’s mode of involvement in, and commitment to, the world.”¹⁹¹ The theodramatic relation of God to the world which is limned by the image of the Lamb slain is, for him, as Martin encapsulates, “a relation of beautiful, gracious, perfectly sacrificial love”¹⁹² for the world.

In doing so, according to Martin, Balthasar “nearly fully appropriates Bulgakov’s apocalyptic and kenotic theology of the Lamb as though slain,”¹⁹³ “functioning as shorthand for the kenotic

¹⁸⁹ Michele M. Schumacher, “The Concept of Representation in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Theological Studies* 60, no. 1 (1999): 53–71 (56).

¹⁹⁰ *TD* 4, 45.

¹⁹¹ *TD* 4, 52. See also *TD* 5, 151, 246.

¹⁹² Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 179.

¹⁹³ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 100. Sergius Bulgakov prefigures Balthasar’s trinitarianism of the Lamb slain: “The Son, the Lamb of God, is pre-eternally ‘sacrificed’ in the creation of the world. . . . This pre-eternal sacrifice is the foundation of the cross of Golgotha.” Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 129, 338. Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Barth also offer similar theological exegeses to Balthasar of

Trinitarianism at the heart of their shared dramatic soteriology.”¹⁹⁴ The image profoundly represents what the trinitarian kenotic love for the world really is in a way markedly different from an image of a static, immutable, impassible, unaffected, thereby undramatic God, without making God mired in temporal process. In this regard, the image of the Lamb slain “before the foundation of the world” is a symbol on which the theological project of Balthasar’s *via media*¹⁹⁵ between a theology dominated by sublime philosophical concepts and a theology permeated with mythological images very much depends.

According to Balthasar, the theological combination of the Lamb in the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John, namely, “the Johannine theology of the ‘Lamb of God’ (Jn 1.29, 36): the Lamb, ‘slain before the foundation of the world’ (Rev 13.8),” indicates that “the Cross of Christ is inscribed in the creation of the world from the beginning.”¹⁹⁶ And he intends to develop a theological understanding of a *unified* Johannine vision of suffering as glorification in relation to crucifixion in the Gospel of John as well as the Lamb slain in the Apocalypse of John. As Martin accurately articulates, Balthasar intends to “privilege textually the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse”¹⁹⁷ in his theological enterprise. “An attraction to the Johannine—characterized broadly as that which is visionary, mystical, Trinitarian, and paschal”¹⁹⁸—permeates Balthasar’s trinitarian—christological theology. The definitively Johannine—in both the Fourth Gospel and the Revelation—image of the Lamb slain “provides an iconic shorthand of the enduring gift of love that is at the same time a freely kenotic gifting of the Father and a freely kenotic being given by the Son, a being given that is pure self-abandonment, the hypostatic figuration of kenosis itself.”¹⁹⁹

The Twofold “Johannine” Image

I would like to address some preliminary questions about Balthasar’s theological exegesis of the

“the Lamb slain” in the Book of Revelation. “The cross is at the centre of the Trinity. This is brought out by tradition, when it takes up the Book of Revelation’s image of ‘the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world’ (Rev. 5.12). Before the world was, the sacrifice was already in God. No Trinity is conceivable without the Lamb, without the sacrifice of love, without the crucified Son. For he is the slaughtered Lamb glorified in eternity.” Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), 83. “The rejection which all men incurred, the wrath of God under which all men lie, the death which all men must die, God in His love for men transfers from all eternity to Him in whom He loves and elects them, and whom He elects at their head and in their place. God from all eternity ordains this obedient One in order that He might bear the suffering which the disobedient have deserved and which for the sake of God’s righteousness must necessarily be borne. . . . For this reason, He is the Lamb slain, and the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. For this reason, the *crucified* Jesus is the ‘image of the invisible God.’” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 2: *The Doctrine of God*, Part 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (London: T&T Clark International, 1957), 123.

¹⁹⁴ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 207.

¹⁹⁵ *MP*, 34.

¹⁹⁶ *GL* 7, 214.

¹⁹⁷ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 162.

¹⁹⁸ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 162.

¹⁹⁹ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 179. See also *GL* 7, 208, 226, 511.

Lamb slain. I will first pose a question about the legitimacy of his admixture of the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John as the same Johannine literature. And then I will question both his assumed interpretation of Revelation 13.8, “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,” and his kenotic understanding of the Gospel of John. I hope that these questions serve more clearly to show Balthasar’s theological tendency towards ennobling suffering.

Balthasar seems to assume both the Fourth Gospel and the Revelation are written by the same John. And he thinks that the Johannine admixture consolidates a vision of glorified death in the Gospel of John and an image of the Lamb slain which visualizes the suffering of Christ’s love as the centre of Johannine mission christology. He believes that the two Johannine texts bear strong witness to his Christian commitment to *a kenotic paradox of simultaneity of suffering and glory*—humiliation as glorification, powerlessness as powerfulness, poverty as fullness. Martin presumes Balthasar’s Johannine admixture of the Gospel and Revelation, and then appreciates the kenotic paradox of the simultaneity of suffering as glorification. However, while it is understandable to see a coincidence of the image of the paschal Lamb in the Gospel and in Revelation, any similarities are not enough to prove identity of authorship, at least not according to the basic consensus of contemporary biblical scholarship on the difference between John the Evangelist and John of Patmos. To quote some recent remarks on Johannine literature: “As was already recognized in the third century CE, Revelation does not share the same distinctive style, vocabulary, and theological outlook as the Gospel and Letters [of John].”²⁰⁰ The Revelation of John rather shows “a very different understanding of the end of time and the role of Jesus Christ than the Gospel and Letters of John”; it is “thus usually regarded as coming from a different author and situation and is interpreted as something quite distinct from the Gospel and Letters.”²⁰¹ From this understanding of the marked difference between the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John, the admixed Johannine image of the Lamb slain should be called into question.

The Revelation of John: Slain “before the Foundation of the World”

I would like to express a reservation about the phrase, “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world.” It seems that some biblical scholars accept the translation, “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world.” This translation has theological support: “The Cross was no afterthought, but was predetermined before all ages in the comprehensive and loving purpose of God, and that same Lamb who was slain has invaded and conquered history.”²⁰² This is in line with some other

²⁰⁰ Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–4 (2).

²⁰¹ Sherri Brown and Francis J. Moloney, *Interpreting the Gospel and the Letters of John: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 3. See also Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018; first edition 2001), 47–48: “Since Revelation does not link itself with John the apostle, we do well to identify him as an early Christian named John, without assuming that he was one of the twelve disciples.”

²⁰² Norman Hillyer, “The Lamb’ in the Apocalypse,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 39 (1967): 228–36 (230–31).

scholars.²⁰³ Yet this interpretation resembles Balthasar’s theological exegesis only at first sight. Balthasar means much more by “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world” than simply that the redemptive purpose of God through the cross is eternally present in God. He rather intends to envisage the reality of the super-historical wound, suffering, and death “on God’s throne”²⁰⁴ or at the heart of the intra-divine life.

No less significantly, it should be noted that while “the ‘Lamb slain before the foundation of the world’ (Apocalypse 13, 8)”²⁰⁵ may be found in older translations, it is now repudiated by many biblical scholars who prefer to interpret it as “written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb.”²⁰⁶ The reasons why this interpretation is preferred is that theologically, it more comfortably tallies with the historical particularity of Jesus’s crucifixion; and exegetically, with the similar Revelation 17:8. Peter Williamson maintains: “Since we know that the death of Jesus occurred once for all at a particular time and place (see Heb 9:26; 10:10), the translation of the NABRE [New American Bible Revised Edition] and most other modern versions is preferable. This interpretation is confirmed by Rev 17:8, which speaks of names written in the book of life from the foundation of the world without any suggestion that the Lamb was slaughtered at that time.”²⁰⁷ In an extensive commentary on Revelation 13:8, David Aune also avers that “it is logically and theologically impossible to make sense of the statement that the Lamb ‘was slaughtered *before* the creation of the world’.”²⁰⁸ Seen in this light, it seems that one of the most significant symbols in Balthasar’s theodramatics is built upon a quite disputed and fragile exegetical foundation in the first place.

The Gospel of John: Kenotic Paradox of Mission Christology

Now I would like to pay critical attention to the kenotic paradox that Balthasar makes of the mission

²⁰³ For instance, George R. Beasley-Murray claims, “The sacrifice of the Lamb of God lay hidden latent in the heart of God from all eternity, and expresses the very nature of God”; see *The Book of Revelation* (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1974), 214. Ian Boxall also writes, “The slaughter of the Lamb, and its salvific effects, are not some late afterthought, but were central to God’s plan from the beginning”; see *The Revelation of Saint John* (London: Continuum, 2006), 191.

²⁰⁴ *TD* 3, 513.

²⁰⁵ *MP*, 34.

²⁰⁶ Revelation 13:8 in New Jerusalem Bible: “And all people of the world will worship it [the beast], that is, everybody whose name has not been written down since the foundation of the world in the sacrificial Lamb’s book of life”; in New Revised Standard Version: “And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.”

²⁰⁷ Peter S. Williamson, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 229. This interpretation is supported exegetically by a good deal of research as follows: Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 503–4; Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 129; Bruce J. Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 217; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 149; and Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1919), 638.

²⁰⁸ David E. Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Volume 52B: *Revelation 6–16* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 746–49 (747).

and cross christology of the Fourth Gospel—the kenotic paradox of suffering as glorification in the Gospel of John.

It is commonly acknowledged that the *missio*, the being sent of the Son, characterizes John’s christology: “In the Gospel of John, the Father’s act of sending is a distinct mark of Jesus’ Sonship; he is not just the Son—he is the *sent* Son. The Johannine notion of believing means *believing in Jesus as uniquely sent by God*.”²⁰⁹ As Martin rightly observes, “There is indeed an operative Johannine hermeneutic across the board”²¹⁰ in Balthasar’s theology, and, in particular, he is a truly “Johannine theologian”²¹¹ charged with a “deeply Johannine disposition—especially with respect to the *missio* Christology of the Son’s ‘coming-from-God’ as *One Sent* by the Father.”²¹² For him, the idea of mission is not only “most definitely present”²¹³ and “adequately rooted in the Synoptics,”²¹⁴ but also most notably “at the center of John’s Christology and expresses both the trinitarian and the soteriological dimensions of the mind of Jesus.”²¹⁵ It also provides the point of connection between the earthly mission of Jesus in the Gospels and the christological hymns in the Letters, particularly the Christ Hymn in the Letter to the Philippians. The mission christology is, indeed, as Karen Kilby observes, “something Balthasar takes to stand out particularly clearly in the Gospel of John, but also to be attested in the synoptic gospels and indeed throughout the New Testament.”²¹⁶ Most of all, it constitutes the centre of Balthasar’s christological reflections in that “it alone can illuminate the paradox of Jesus’ simultaneous sublimity and lowliness,”²¹⁷ a truly Johannine paradox of “the simultaneity of poverty and glory.”²¹⁸ “The pairing in the Gospel of John of suffering with exaltation, death with resurrection,”²¹⁹ eventually is placed as a fulcrum of Balthasar’s mission christology.

Let me expound on this crucial theme. Balthasar notes that the simultaneity of humiliation and glorification that underlies Johannine christology is expressive of the mutual love between the Father and the Son pre-existent and incarnate. This intra-trinitarian love is defined as self-gift, but he

²⁰⁹ Adesola Akala, *The Son–Father Relationship and Christological Symbolism in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 182.

²¹⁰ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 162.

²¹¹ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 149.

²¹² Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 23.

²¹³ *TD* 3, 151.

²¹⁴ *TD* 3, 515.

²¹⁵ *TD* 3, 151.

²¹⁶ Karen E. Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 95. See also Donald MacKinnon, “Some Reflections on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Christology with Special Reference to *Theodramatik* II/2 and III,” in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 164–74 (168); and Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 44–54.

²¹⁷ *TD* 3, 515.

²¹⁸ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 23.

²¹⁹ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 131.

goes so far as to highlight that the love of self-gift should be understood as always self-giving *up* or *away*,²²⁰ that is, self-renouncing and self-negating obedience, which is dramatically embodied in the absolute obedience of Jesus's crucifixion. Christ's embodiment of the trinitarian love of self-gift is a christological and, indeed, trinitarian paradox of powerlessness and powerfulness: "the proclamation of the absolute power of God in the absolute powerlessness of the crucified."²²¹ The truly kenotic paradox that demonstrates "the embodiment and summing up of the entire lifework of Jesus"²²² is constituted by "the unity of omnipotence and powerlessness: omnipotence, since he can give all; powerlessness, since nothing is as truly powerful as the gift."²²³ And we are called to participate in the christological paradox of kenotic obedience through practising the "incomparable self-abandonment" of the cross, namely, "the full significance of the requirements Jesus makes of *hatred of self*, or *denial of self*, of the abandoning of all things, of the daily bearing of the cross, and of *the losing of one's soul in order to gain it*."²²⁴ The "absolute self-giving is beyond 'power' [divine omnipotence] and 'powerlessness' [Christ's impotence on the cross]: its ability to 'let be' embraces both. . . . In this way it is quite possible to reconcile God's unchangeability and God's involvement in history."²²⁵ In other words, the simultaneity of omnipotence and impotence, for Balthasar, plays a decisive role in proving that his theological project of *via media* is tenable.

Such a christology characterized with the paradox of loss and gain, powerlessness and omnipotence is one of the most profound themes that penetrates Balthasar's christological hermeneutic of the *whole* New Testament. For Balthasar, what is "common to the whole New Testament" is that "the 'majesty' and 'ruling authority' of the Father takes effect in the 'lowliness' of the obedient and serving Son."²²⁶ What is disclosed in the Synoptics and the Letters is that Christ "manifests the glory of divine power in lowliness, defencelessness and a self-surrender that goes to the lengths of the eucharistic Cross."²²⁷ It reveals a *kenotic* movement or pattern of death through resurrection, powerfulness *through* powerlessness, glorification *through* humiliation, and vindication *through* dereliction, that is, "the dynamic transition whereby the former makes way for the latter."²²⁸ For Balthasar, it is the liturgical hymn of "kenosis—as the surrender of the 'form of God'"²²⁹—in Philippians that encapsulates the kenotic paradox of suffering and glory. He regularly underscores that

²²⁰ Kilby, *Balthasar*, 99.

²²¹ *GL* 7, 306.

²²² *GL* 7, 149.

²²³ *TD* 4, 325–26.

²²⁴ *GL* 7, 150; italics mine.

²²⁵ *TD* 5, 74–75.

²²⁶ *GL* 7, 246.

²²⁷ *TD* 4, 450.

²²⁸ *GL* 7, 493.

²²⁹ *TD* 5, 214.

the kenotic paradox of impotence and omnipotence, the paradox of “his humiliation, but also already the glorious exaltation which followed this,”²³⁰ is constitutive of the New Testament “as a whole.” What should be noted is that he emphasizes that the Gospel of John narrates how the Pauline kenotic love of the Son for the Father is unfolded through the humiliation and glorification of the Son sent by the Father. The Pauline christology of kenosis seamlessly accords with and is even “further developed”²³¹ in the Gospel of John.

Why is it the case, for Balthasar, that the idea of Christ’s kenotic action is advanced in the Fourth Gospel? This paradox of kenotic transition gains its fulfilled narrative in the Fourth Gospel, for the timeline of suffering and glory is wholly collapsed into a unified event of crucifixion: “in John the raising up upon the Cross and the raising up into glory are one single event, just as for Paul no one is raised up apart from the one who was crucified.”²³² Balthasar is intent on claiming that John is “indeed materially identical with the ‘kenosis’ mentioned in the Philippians hymn”;²³³ furthermore, it is in the “specifically Johannine” passion narrative that “the kenosis has reached its fulfilment.”²³⁴ Balthasar maintains (in the final volume on the *glory* of the Lord) that “the final interpretation of *doxa* [δόξα; glory] in the New Testament”²³⁵ is given in the Gospel of John. In other words, “the *kabod*-momentum of the Cross of Jesus,” namely, “*kabod*-glory, the entire horizon of the meaning of the cipher δόξα in the New Testament,”²³⁶ is fulfilled in “the Johannine interpretation of the entire event of the Incarnation as the trinitarian δόξα that surpasses and rounds off all splendour.”²³⁷ For Balthasar, as Martin accurately summarizes, “the kenoticism of the cross opens up upon and is itself a kind of glory; this union of suffering and exaltation is, of course, deeply Johannine.”²³⁸ His own version of Johannine theology is kenotic at its heart. “The Johannine principle that suffering and glory are of a piece, forming a single reality,”²³⁹ brings to perfection the passion narratives of “the kenotic self-sacrifice of the death of Christ.”²⁴⁰ “This Johannine register undergirds all of Balthasar’s theology, including its cosmic scope.”²⁴¹ The kenotic pattern of suffering as glorification “provides the ballast for this Johannine theologian.”²⁴²

²³⁰ *TD* 5, 294.

²³¹ *GL* 7, 298.

²³² *GL* 7, 228.

²³³ *GL* 7, 249, n. 5.

²³⁴ *GL* 7, 226.

²³⁵ *GL* 7, 244.

²³⁶ *GL* 7, 260.

²³⁷ *GL* 7, 318.

²³⁸ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 195.

²³⁹ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 179.

²⁴⁰ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 24.

²⁴¹ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 217, n. 80.

²⁴² Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 149.

One of the governing tenets of Balthasar's theology is a kenotic paradox of unity through abandonment, intimacy through alienation, joy through pain, delight through sorrow, life through death, glorification through humiliation, love through suffering, illumination through darkness, powerfulness through powerlessness, and so on. For Balthasar, Jesus is paradoxically glorified and exalted through the descent into the moment of death as humiliation and lowliness. *The kenotically paradoxical chronology of suffering and glory* reaches its culmination in the Gospel of John in that it is "the Passion that John sees simultaneously as the glorification."²⁴³ Balthasar is consistent in contending that "it is precisely the 'powerfulness' in the *doxa* of God that shines forth from the complete powerlessness."²⁴⁴ As Martin reminds her readers here and there, "the Johannine character of the synonymy of poverty and glory,"²⁴⁵ of seeing suffering and glory as "a single reality,"²⁴⁶ plays an overarching role in formulating his christology and trinitarianism, and thus his conception of the Christian life. Balthasar is convinced that the Johannine expression of the cross as glorification achieves the highest formulation of the kenotic paradox of suffering and glory—Jesus is paradoxically glorified and exalted through the kenotic descent into the moment of death as humiliation and lowliness within the framework of the kenotic paradox of gain, vindication, affirmation, recovery, possession, and powerfulness in and through loss, denial, emptying, negation, abasement, dispossession, relinquishment, diminishment, and powerlessness. Balthasar regularly draws upon a kenotic paradox of omnipotence and impotence which is interpreted as a manifestation of genuine power and joy at the voluntary lowliness of absolute powerlessness and agony.²⁴⁷

Despite a highly debated issue over whether "a theology of the cross can be assigned also to the Gospel of John,"²⁴⁸ given its pervading theme of "glory," it may be acceptable to claim that the Fourth Gospel contains a theology of the cross "as the foundation and center of a theological system, giving it its narrative and substantive shape."²⁴⁹ It may seem at first not entirely fair to take exception to Balthasar's Johannine paradox of suffering and glory as a culmination of kenosis. Yet one cannot avoid raising a significant question about his heavy consolidation of the idea of kenosis and Johannine christology and his subsequent understanding of Johannine christology as a culmination of kenotic paradox of suffering and glory. The Johannine narration of cross as glorification requires a careful discernment that would otherwise fall prey to *glorifying death* itself. Balthasar seems to falter upon

²⁴³ *TD* 4, 235–36.

²⁴⁴ *GL* 7, 244.

²⁴⁵ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 202.

²⁴⁶ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 179.

²⁴⁷ See "The Paradox of Dereliction and Intimacy" in the next chapter.

²⁴⁸ Michael Wolter, "The Theology of the Cross and the Quest for a Doctrinal Norm," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan*, ed. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 263–85 (270–71).

²⁴⁹ Udo Schnelle, "Cross and Resurrection in the Gospel of John," in *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, ed. Craig R. Koester & Remind Bieringer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 127–51 (133).

his interpretations of Johannine christology in terms of kenosis and hence of “crucifixion as glorification” as the most heightened form of kenotic paradox, for kenosis cannot account for the Johannine portrayal of the passion of Jesus.

First of all, it is crucial to acknowledge that the association itself of Johannine christology and Pauline kenotic christology seems untenable when it is taken into consideration that, according to many Johannine scholars, the idea of kenosis does not throw into relief or even have any place at all in the Fourth Gospel. For instance, Gordon Fee discerningly points out, “In John the ‘kenotic’ dimension of Jesus’ earthly life is generally missing.”²⁵⁰ Indeed, “because John’s emphasis is laid on revelation and redemption through Jesus, the Son of God, he intentionally highlights the reality of the divine in the earthly Jesus, . . . the eternal Son as the one who revealed the Father most truly and perfectly.”²⁵¹ It is thus important to give enough heed to the Johannine distinctiveness that the divine light and glory underlie and undergird Jesus’s incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension in Johannine mission christology. “In the Fourth Gospel,” Sandra Schneiders perceptively comments, “Jesus’ death is not presented, as it is in the Synoptics, as a *kenosis*, the nadir of his earthly life, a human condemnation from which God vindicated him through resurrection.”²⁵² In other words, one may need a perspective that is not necessarily limited in a kenotic paradox when contemplating the Johannine passion narrative. Seen in this light, it is reasonable to say that Balthasar may put a questionable kenotic spin on the interpretation of Johannine christology.

Let me elaborate upon the misunderstanding of Johannine theology of cross as kenosis. It is in fact frequently warned against by some prominent Johannine scholars. For instance, John Ashton discerningly points out that the Fourth Evangelist “fails to exploit the notion of crucifixion in a Pauline or Marcan fashion”²⁵³ in which the suffering of crucifixion is narrated as a prerequisite to the resurrection and the glorification which follows from the utmost depth of suffering and abandonment. Francis Moloney also articulates how the Johannine logic of death and glorification markedly differs from the cry of dereliction in Mark and the kenotic movement in Paul.

In the Gospel of Mark . . . He is arrested, tried and hammered to a cross from which he cries out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (15:34). . . . It is not until after he has been ignominiously done to death that things begin to happen. . . . [In the Christ Hymn in the Philippians] he comes to his lowest moment. . . . It is as a *consequence* of this humility and humiliation that God highly exalted him. . . . For both Mark and Paul the experience of the Cross is the *lowest moment* in Jesus’ human experience, and his exaltation is the *consequence* (διὸ καὶ . . .) of this unconditional

²⁵⁰ Gordon D. Fee, “The New Testament and Kenosis Christology,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, 25–44 (40).

²⁵¹ Fee, “The New Testament and Kenosis Christology,” 41, 42.

²⁵² Sandra M. Schneiders, “Touching the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin in John 20,” in *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, 153–76 (155).

²⁵³ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; first edition 1991), 467.

commitment to the will of God. This is not the case in the Fourth Gospel. From its earliest pages Jesus begins to speak of his oncoming death as a “lifting up,” an exaltation.²⁵⁴

Unlike Philippians 2:9, where the ὑψωσις [being exalted] is *the result* (διὸ καὶ) of Jesus’ death on the cross (v. 8c), for John, Jesus’ ὑψωσις takes place *on the cross*. . . . It is a crucial part of the Gospel’s theological understanding of the death of Jesus as a physical “lifting up” that is also his “exaltation.”²⁵⁵

For Moloney, the Johannine logic of death as glorification, in stark contrast to Mark and Paul, does not exhibit any kenotic movement from powerlessness to powerfulness, abandonment to unity, lowliness to exaltation, humiliation to glorification, and so forth. The Fourth Evangelist does not narrate glorification and exaltation as a result and consequence of obedient suffering and death in a kenotic pattern.

Ernst Käsemann also makes clear that glorification is not described as a fruit of obedience in the Fourth Evangelist’s christology, but that glory underlies obedience throughout from the outset.

In John, the obedience of the earthly Jesus is not, as in Phil. 2.9, rewarded with his exaltation, but rather is finished and brought to a close by his return to the Father. Obedience is the form and concretion of Jesus’ glory during the period of his incarnation.²⁵⁶

Jesus’ death, in the Fourth Gospel as in Phil. 2.6ff., is the completion of his incarnation. But in distinction from Phil. 2.9, the exaltation in John does not appear as a divine reward for the earthly obedience rendered, and one should avoid contrasting earthly obedience with exaltation. . . . The glory of Jesus is not the result of his obedience, so that, as in other New Testament writings, his glory could be defined from the perspective of his obedience. On the contrary, obedience is the result of Jesus’ glory and the attestation of his glory in the situation of the earthly conflict.²⁵⁷

“In John,” for Käsemann, as Paul Anderson encapsulates, “there is no movement from humiliation to exaltation, as eschatology has ceded place to protology; that which was from the beginning is revealed in the cosmic mission of Jesus as the Christ.”²⁵⁸ “The combination of humiliation and glory is,”

²⁵⁴ Francis J. Moloney, “The Love Theme in the Gospel of John,” in *Johannine Studies 1975–2017* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 117–34 (126–27). See also Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012; originally published 2002), 325–31; Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 117–18.

²⁵⁵ Francis J. Moloney, “The Parables of Enoch and the Johannine Son of Man,” in *Johannine Studies 1975–2017*, 233–60 (252–53).

²⁵⁶ Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017; originally published 1968), 10–11.

²⁵⁷ Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, 18–19.

²⁵⁸ Paul N. Anderson, “Foreword: John 17—The Original Intention of Jesus for the Church,” in Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, xi–xxxviii (xxii).

therefore, for Käsemann, “*not paradoxical as such.*”²⁵⁹ It would be thus erroneous to claim that in the Fourth Gospel there is a kenotic movement of glorification through humiliation and even a culmination and fulfilment of such a kenotic paradox. The Fourth Gospel lacks the kenotic “paradox, that the power of the resurrection can be experienced only in the shadow of the cross, and that the reality of the resurrection now implies a position under the cross.”²⁶⁰ Accordingly, this *non-kenotic* understanding of Johannine christology of mission and cross accounts for the theological rationale of *the Johannine absence of Jesus’s cry of dereliction*, the lack of Jesus’s agony and anguish of the abandonment, *one of the most dominant themes undergirding the whole structure of Balthasar’s theology* (which will be critically discussed together with Rowan Williams’s great reliance upon it in the next chapter). John’s passion narrative leaves little or no room for an agonized, humiliated, broken cry of abandonment that is said tragically and paradoxically to prove his unity with the Father.

His crucifixion is, some argue, *ironically*, rather than paradoxically, a triumph. In other words, cross as glorification in John is thus to be understood in terms of subtle *irony* rather than *kenotic paradox* (the meaning of Johannine—tragic and comic—irony will be fleshed out in the next chapter).

John, then, subverts the meaning of the cross from being a symbol of defeat, shame and death to becoming a symbol of victory, glorification and life.²⁶¹

In the arrest, the trial, and the crucifixion itself Jesus seizes his death in kingly command over all who pretend to capture him and judge him. Rather than cry out for a God who has forsaken, the crucified Jesus in John is already on his way to the Father. Thus the scandalous irony of history is itself ironized.²⁶²

The tragic irony that Jesus is rejected to death by his own people is re-ironized into triumph. The *via* to humiliation of the cross is ironically subverted into the *via* to glorification.

John Ashton’s statements help us to see how ironic subversion markedly differs from the kenotic paradox. According to Ashton, the Fourth Evangelist teaches us that “the Christian believer is not expected to see the crucifixion as a kind of exaltation or glorification but to see past the physical reality of Jesus’ death to its true significance: the reascent of the Son of Man to his true home in heaven.”²⁶³ And this non-kenotic Johannine theology of the cross, for Ashton, offers a broader picture of Johannine mission christology:

Jesus enters the world with a mission from the Father and leaves it when his mission is completed. By an extraordinary involution his mission is simply to reveal to mankind his origin and his destiny, his entry and his departure. From this perspective the true

²⁵⁹ Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, 13; italics mine.

²⁶⁰ Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, 52.

²⁶¹ Cornelis Bennema, *Excavating John’s Gospel: A Commentary for Today* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 207–8.

²⁶² Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), 113–14.

²⁶³ Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 471.

significance of his death has nothing to do with the manner of it. No doubt one could say of him that “nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it”, but this is only because it satisfactorily rounds off his mission, allowing him to say, for the first and only time: “It is accomplished.” . . . The notion of death is always present; nevertheless the pain and the shame of Jesus’ actual death have been filtered out of the term itself—much as in the English vulgarism “pass away”. Jesus has not gone “the way of all flesh” in the traditional Jewish understanding of the term: there is no trace in the Fourth Gospel of any “descent into hell”.²⁶⁴

The careful distinction of ironic subversion and kenotic paradox in understanding the Gospel of John not only accounts for why it lacks the cry of dereliction and redacts it into the cry of triumph (which will be revisited in “The Cry of Accomplishment in the Gospel of John” in the next chapter) but also prevents us from falling into Balthasar’s tendency towards seeing “cross as glorification” as glorifying the cross in terms of kenotic paradox. In an integrative study of Johannine studies over forty years, for instance, Williams Loader aptly notes a modern tendency to read John’s Gospel in “the Pauline sense of the cross as the paradox of glory in suffering,”²⁶⁵ which clearly underlies Balthasar’s christology. “The common misinterpretation which applies exaltation and glorification to the cross” in reading John’s passion story, Loader continues, misleads into thinking that

the crucifixion itself is interpreted as a great Pauline paradox of glorification and exaltation. The result is startling, provocative and immensely challenging: glory in shame, exaltation in humiliation.²⁶⁶

In other words, a *kenotic* misreading of the Johannine cross as glorification is prone to ending up *glorifying suffering and death*. It may account for the critique that “Balthasar and those who follow him often talk as though the cross is in itself beautiful.”²⁶⁷ To interpret the Gospel of John in terms of the culmination of kenotic paradox is not only untenable but is also prone to intensify a propensity for *sacralizing and glamorizing suffering*.

The Temporal Wound of Christ and the Eternal Wound in the Trinity

Now I would like to draw attention to more theological aspects of the Lamb slain which touch on the heart of Balthasar’s christological trinitarianism—yet these assume a dubious identification of the authorship of two Johannine texts, a questionable translation of “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,” and a suspicious elevation of the Gospel of John as a fulfilment of kenotic paradox

²⁶⁴ Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 467–68.

²⁶⁵ Williams Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 224.

²⁶⁶ Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 247.

²⁶⁷ David Brown, “Glory and Beauty in the World and in God: A Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1–14 (9).

which it lacks. I hope that this investigation sheds new light on the issue of super-temporal suffering and death in the Trinity.

The image of the Lamb slain plays a profound role as a governing symbol that offers a “vantage point” regarding Balthasar’s theo-dramatization of God–world interplay precisely because the Lamb as slain “before the foundation of the world” exhibits “the eternal aspect of the historic and bloody sacrifice of the Cross.”²⁶⁸ The historical suffering and death of Christ is exalted or glorified in the divine realm of super-temporality as the temporal passion of Christ is exalted and glorified in the eternal life of God in a Johannine—in both the Fourth Evangelist and the Revelationist—sense.

He who really *was* “dead”, yet now lives “for evermore” (Rev 1:18), takes his pierced heart with him to heaven; on God’s throne he is “the Lamb as it were slain”. . . . Here [John 17:17–19], just as in the image of the Lamb who, in the midst of the heavenly glory, is “slain”, we find that the aspect of the Passion’s “exaltation” is coextensive with the disciples’ suffering (and hence with all world history), which can only be explained by the fact that the Passion is, in its internal dimensions, supratemporal and thereby can indwell all moments of historical time. . . . *Supratemporal suffering* is within the realm of him who has been taken up into the divine super-time (“all-time”).²⁶⁹

The temporal wound of Christ is transfigured into a supratemporal wound of Christ enthroned in the divine realm. The exaltation of Christ attributes eternity to Christ’s suffering, and that supratemporal suffering in God *receives* all temporal suffering into its eternally open wound. It is “the eternal contents of the providence that governs the world”²⁷⁰ that the Lamb slain “in timelessness,”²⁷¹ namely, “the ‘Lamb slain before the foundation of the world’ upon the throne of God (Rev 5.6, 9, 12; 13.8),”²⁷² unveils. Balthasar intends to identify “an enduring supratemporal condition of the ‘Lamb’ as . . . a condition of the Son’s existence co-extensive with all creation and thus affecting, in some manner, his divine being.”²⁷³ In other words, the mutually affectable relation of divine and human agency in theo-drama, the theo-dramatic assertion of Christ’s suffering in his divine nature, and the salvific efficacy to encompass the entirety of suffering of the temporal world in his soteriology—all the three crucial trinitarian–christological–soteriological concepts are captured in the supra-historical existence of the Lamb slain. Hans Küng encapsulates what Balthasar envisions from the image of the Lamb slain in eternity as follows:

²⁶⁸ *MP*, 34.

²⁶⁹ *TD* 5, 151; italics mine. It should be noted that there is not “something like” suffering in God here but only “supratemporal suffering” in God.

²⁷⁰ *GL* 7, 175.

²⁷¹ *GL* 7, 149.

²⁷² *GL* 7, 138.

²⁷³ *MP*, 34–35.

an eternalization of the historical event of the crucifixion, not only into the future, but also back into the past, to the dawn of creation and even into the eternal divine being of God, as described within the framework of trinitarian speculation.²⁷⁴

“The image of the Lamb who, in the midst of the heavenly glory, is slain”²⁷⁵, for Balthasar, eternally manifests the kenotic paradox of suffering and death as glory and exaltation which lies at the centre of the Johannine truth of the unreserved kenotic self-surrender of Christ to open up the whole sublimity of the Father’s love.²⁷⁶ It is a wound at the pierced heart of the Lamb slain that lays bare the eternal truth of the Son’s relational love for the world.

It is of great importance that the wound is eternally open or unhealed; the wound “remains *always open*”²⁷⁷ in the inner life of the Trinity. Christ’s “mortal wounds are eternally open”²⁷⁸, diametrically opposed to “the pseudo-miracle of the healing of the beast’s mortal wound”²⁷⁹ [in Revelation]. The infinite distance in the mode of super-suffering and super-death *eternally remains open to receive (divine reception)* the historical suffering and death in the entirety for a redemptive purpose. The eternal openness of the glorified wound of the Lamb slain offers a vivid picture of how the super-suffering in the Trinity encompasses the totality of historical wounds. In other words, the eternally open wound of the Lamb slain manifests “a totally unexpected picture of God’s internal, trinitarian defenselessness”²⁸⁰ and “the truth of the defenseless nature of the divine, trinitarian love.”²⁸¹ Balthasar eloquently portrays that “the eternal love pours out its blood from wounds which transcend all inner worldly hurts.”²⁸² The suffering of Christ is eternalized so as to bear and redeem the entirety of historical suffering. Therefore, for Balthasar, the eternal suffering and death of Jesus with an eternally open wound accounts for the redemptive efficacy of the super-temporal suffering of the exalted Christ in the divine realm. Balthasar’s soteriology is underpinned by the transfiguration of Christ’s suffering and death into the eternal Trinity.

It should be here noted that although Balthasar’s proponents wish to salvage him from an identification with Moltmann, nonetheless, it is hard to find any clue in Balthasar’s theological speculations about “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world” to suggest an *ontological difference* between the historical wound and suffering of the Lamb slain in history and the eternal wound and suffering of the Lamb slain exalted into the eternal divine life; between the temporal death

²⁷⁴ Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel’s Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology*, trans. by J. R. Stephenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 544.

²⁷⁵ TD 5, 151.

²⁷⁶ TD 4, 450.

²⁷⁷ TD 4, 451.

²⁷⁸ TD 4, 337.

²⁷⁹ TD 4, 451.

²⁸⁰ TD 4, 450.

²⁸¹ TD 4, 451.

²⁸² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1975), 52.

of the economic life of the Trinity and the eternal death of the immanent life of the Trinity; between the death *ad extra* and the death *ad intra*. Rather, the wound, suffering, and death in eternity are that which is elevated, heightened, exalted, glorified, and divinized out of the temporal realm. Both are, at least, *ontologically univocal* (rather than merely latent or implicit in a metaphorical or analogical language). It thus seems that the temporal wound, suffering, and death eternalized into the Trinity are present, as the divine receptivity and assumption of the entire temporal tragedy, *at the trinitarianly equal ontological level* to, *not* ontologically inferior to, the eternal unity, love, and life, as the divine redemption of what is received and assumed.²⁸³

This critical evaluation calls into question the contention that “for Balthasar it is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that—by positing eternal differentiation within the divine life—allows for this ‘tragic’ rupture to occur *without entailing a kind of tragic division within God* that would have somehow to be overcome, a collapse of divine integrity into contradiction and opposition.”²⁸⁴ Rowan Williams presumes that the suffering and death in God is latent and implicit. But, as I have discussed so far, the prototype and original image of wound, suffering, and sacrifice in the Trinity is not ontologically null and invalid, merely implicit and latent. The temporal tragic wound, suffering, and death is divinized and eternalized in “the same alignment”²⁸⁵ as the eternally blessed unity, love, and life of the Trinity. The eternal event of the negation of tragedy in God thus occurs *collinearly* with the unity, love, and life of God. The God of Balthasar is eternal Becoming from “the ever-dying God” into “the ever-living God,”²⁸⁶ *an eternal event of repetition that eternally negates the negativity of separation into unity, pain into joy, suffering into love, death into life, darkness into light, and tragedy into comedy. “God is love . . . , the absolute unity of . . . life and death.”*²⁸⁷ It is a God who is conceived of mythologically.²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Kevin Duffy also maintains that “the darkness and suffering of Good Friday and Holy Saturday would be *coextensive* with the fully actualized divine nature in such a way that God would be reduced to the very thing von Balthasar wants to avoid, a tragic and mythological deity, described in anthropomorphic terms.” Duffy, “Change, Suffering, and Surprise in God,” 371; italics mine.

²⁸⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 123; italics mine.

²⁸⁵ I would say that I push a little beyond Kilby’s argument. She writes “similar alignment” rather than “the same alignment,” “because Balthasar does not—quite—bring suffering into the Trinity. But he does speak of something in the Trinity which can develop into suffering, of a ‘suprasuffering’ in God.” Kilby, *Balthasar*, 120. I have attempted so far to make clear that there is an aspect of “bringing suffering into the Trinity” in Balthasar’s trinitarian–christological interconnection in relation to the crucial image of the Lamb slain.

²⁸⁶ Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 400, n. 76.

²⁸⁷ *TD* 5, 84–85.

²⁸⁸ Kilby concludes that “in Balthasar’s hands the effort to grapple in full theological seriousness with tragedy seems in great danger of finally flipping over into something like a divinizing of the tragic.” Kilby, *Balthasar*, 121.

Sin and Evil in Relation to God: Balthasar, Williams, and Coakley

Locating Sin and Evil in God: The “Real” Relation of the World to God

I have discussed above the dimensions of suffering and death which are particularly associated with a trinitarian–christological–soteriological interconnection in Balthasar’s thought. There is, at least, one more dimension of suffering which is to be taken into consideration: a dimension of suffering which is related to a trinitarian–*hamartiological*–soteriological interconnection.

It is worth remembering that the infinite trinitarian separation between the Father and the Son is not only associated with the suffering and abandonment of Jesus in salvation history but also, through his suffering which encompasses the entirety of temporal human suffering and sin, with *all the fallen and sinful reality of the world*; that is, it is not only that “all the contingent ‘abasements’ of God in the economy of salvation are forever included and outstripped in the eternal event of Love”²⁸⁹ but also that the infinite difference in the Trinity *grounds, receives, and redeems* the suffering and death, sin and evil of the created world; the eternal hiatus within the Trinity “grounds and surpasses all we mean by separation, pain, and alienation in the world and all we can envisage in terms of loving self-giving, interpersonal relationship, and blessedness.”²⁹⁰

For Balthasar, there is nothing outside of the intra-trinitarian life. “Since the world cannot have any other *locus* but within the distinction between the Hypostases (there is nothing outside God . . .), the problems associated with it—its sinful alienation from God—can only be solved at this *locus*.”²⁹¹ The original locus of temporal suffering and death thus also could be traced in the triune life, namely, in the eternal suffering and death in the Godhead. “He posits an ‘infinite distance’ between the Father and the Son as the ground for the possibility of creation, a distance that also allows for the possibility for sin. Searching for the source of suffering, he finds it in God’s own self.”²⁹² The eternal suffering and death *is* the “prototype” of suffering and death which *gives* the possibility of occurrence to the historical suffering and death in its entirety (*divine gift*), *receives* the reality and pain of the earthly suffering and death back into the heart of the Trinity (*divine reception*), and then *redeems* them within the Trinity by surpassing and outstripping them (*divine redemption*).

Particularly, by *divine reception*, the divine actor, who is not “a mere Spectator,” is genuinely involved with the suffering of the world; he compassionately embraces the pain of the creatures into his heart and eternally remembers it. And God heals and redeems all the received separation, suffering, and death of sin and evil by purging, overcoming, and transcending them through the unity, love, and life of the Trinity and the resurrection life of the exalted Son. In other words, the separation of the

²⁸⁹ *MP*, ix.

²⁹⁰ *TD* 4, 325.

²⁹¹ *TD* 4, 333.

²⁹² Blankenhorn, “Balthasar’s Method of Divine Naming,” 255.

world is embraced into the eternal distance within the Trinity and overcome by the absolute unity within the Trinity; sin and evil are encompassed into the infinite distance within the triune relations and outstripped by the eternal life of the Trinity. As Papanikolaou articulates, “The infinite distance between the Father and the Son in the kenotic event of love is always an infinite nearness that is able to contain and overcome within itself the ‘separation’ caused by sinful humanity.”²⁹³

It is the “drama” of the emptying of the Father’s heart, in the generation of the Son, that contains and surpasses all possible drama between God and a [sic] world. For any world only has its place within that distinction between Father and Son that is maintained and bridged by the Holy Spirit. The drama of the Trinity lasts forever: . . . Everything temporal takes place within the embrace of the eternal action and as its consequence (hence *opera trinitatis ad extra communia*).²⁹⁴

The earthly reality of something bad in the world finds its original place at the heart of the Trinity. The absolute, infinite, eternal distance in the Godhead encompasses all kinds of—and its entire range and degree of—temporal distance and separation possible within the world of finitude and sinfulness; the eternal distance within the Trinity grounds, contains, and transcends “the distance of sin.”²⁹⁵ In other words, the eternal distance embraces and outstrips every kind of worldly distance and diremption of finitude and sinfulness that is made by every sort of violence, oppression, brutality, invasion, and terror; every kind of darkness, pain, suffering, and death, remembered and forgotten, of victims, survivors, and perpetrators in the world at all times and places. The trinitarian distance thereby grounds and enables sin, suffering, and death, all of which have to do with evil somehow; contains and embraces them; and then overcomes and transcends them. It seems that Balthasar proposes *a trinitarian etiology of sin and evil*.

Considered in this light, it is quite clear that Balthasar’s transcendent location of sin and evil seems markedly to differ from the patristic commitments to evil as the privation or absence of good, as “nonbeing in the sense of being the corruption, perversion, and destruction of the good,”²⁹⁶ the “unreal” relation of the world to God; and God as good *per se*, which does not require locating a locus of sin and evil in the eternal life of God at all.²⁹⁷ As Rowan Williams avers, according to the Augustinian understanding of evil, evil is “no-thing.”²⁹⁸ Evil is the privation or lack of good,

²⁹³ Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis, and Abuse,” 51.

²⁹⁴ *TD* 4, 327.

²⁹⁵ *TD* 4, 323.

²⁹⁶ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “An Overview of Patristic Theodicies,” in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, 1–6 (4).

²⁹⁷ My argument here finds great affinity with Karen Kilby’s evaluation that the *privatio boni* tradition is “quietly set aside” in Balthasar’s trinitarian treatment of sin and evil. Karen E. Kilby, “Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the Status of Suffering in Christian Theology,” *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1081 (May 2018): 298–311 (306–7).

²⁹⁸ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

constituted by “imperfect, corrupt or nonsensical pictures of the divine.”²⁹⁹ It is “a privation *of*—the harmonious outworking of finite agency united with infinite creativity.”³⁰⁰ David Bentley Hart also highlights that the God who creates the world as good *ex nihilo* is the God who is the source of goodness, thus casting evil as the *privatio boni*: “Evil possesses no proper substance or nature of its own, [existing] only as a *privatio boni*. . . . All suffering, sadness, and death . . . is the consequence of the depravities of rational creatures, not of God’s intentions.”³⁰¹ In the tradition of evil as *privatio boni*, thus, “suffering, death, and evil in themselves have any ultimate value or spiritual meaning at all. They are cosmic contingencies, ontological shadows, intrinsically devoid of substance or purpose.”³⁰² As Herbert McCabe avers, “in sin . . . there is no *manifestation* of God’s goodness at all.”³⁰³ God is being and goodness itself, and evil is nonsubstance, destitute of any substance of goodness. In accordance with the doctrines of God as the source and giver of every goodness and evil as the privation of good, God has a “real” relation to the world, but not vice versa. There is “the non-reciprocity of the creator–creature relation, which is not real on the side of the creator”³⁰⁴; God creates and sustains what is not God by giving the gift of every goodness but is not ontologically affected by the virtual reality of sin and evil of what is not God. “God is implicated neither as substance nor as direct cause in the existence or effects of evil.”³⁰⁵ The non-reciprocity of God and the world does not represent a God who is unsympathetic and uninvolved with the world but rather provides “the ground of the creatures’ worth”³⁰⁶ because of the unaffected superabundance of divine gift. In other words, “*because of* (not *in spite of*) the non-reciprocal character of the relation of creator and creature, the creature has integrity.”³⁰⁷

Seen in this light, the classical doctrines of God the Good and evil as privation of good do not quite accord with an attempt to place in God an origin and destination of sin and evil. In contrast to the classical commitments, according to Balthasar’s middle way, the tragic reality of the world has a “real” relation with God in that God is affected by the sinful and evil occurrences of the world. The

²⁹⁹ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 83.

³⁰⁰ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 104.

³⁰¹ David Bentley Hart, “The Devil’s March: *Creatio ex nihilo*, the Problem of Evil, and a Few Dostoyevskian Meditations,” in *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 297–318 (298, 299). See also David Bentley Hart, “God, Creation, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *Creatio ex Nihilo*” (2015), in *The Hidden and the Manifest*, 338–50; David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 63–91.

³⁰² Hart, “The Devil’s March,” 300.

³⁰³ Herbert McCabe, “Evil,” in *God Matters*, 25–38 (38).

³⁰⁴ John Webster, “Trinity and Creation” (2010), in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, Volume 1: *God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 83–98 (93).

³⁰⁵ Hart, “The Devil’s March,” 299.

³⁰⁶ Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” 93.

³⁰⁷ John Webster, “‘Love is also a Lover of Life’: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness” (2013), in *God without Measure*, 99–113 (110–11).

“real” reciprocity between God and the world in “non-unilateral” theo-dramatic “interplay” and mutual “input” shows, Balthasar claims, how God seriously considers and is genuinely involved in the tragic reality of suffering and evil.³⁰⁸ As Balthasar makes clear,

there must be an interplay, in the liberation of man, between the *gratia sola*, on the one hand, and man’s creaturely freedom, on the other—a freedom that has not been eradicated by sin. . . . This is the theo-drama into which the world *and* God have their ultimate input; here absolute freedom enters into created freedom, interacts with created freedom and acts *as* created freedom. God cannot function here as a mere Spectator, allegedly immutable and not susceptible to influence.³⁰⁹

For Balthasar, as Jennifer Martin notes, “in order to be sufficiently dramatic, there must be the possibility for a genuine interplay between the freedom of God and that of human beings.”³¹⁰

Guy Mansini rightly observes that Balthasar is eager to accept the creature’s finite freedom seriously and thus wants to address “a question regarding finite freedom in a world created by absolute freedom. In such a world, is finite freedom *really real*? And does it count for anything if it has no *impact on absolute freedom*?”³¹¹ “If creation is *really* to count and add something to God, if created freedom is to be in *real* dialogue with God, if the event of the Cross is *really* to matter to the interior life of God,”³¹² for Balthasar, there must be a “real” interplay between God and the world in which the theo-dramatic interplay *affects the interior life of God*.

The outcome of the “real” interplay, though it sounds attractive, is that, as Kilby evaluates, “Balthasar quite explicitly rejects the possibility of a conceiving of God in a purely positive way.”³¹³ The divine actor is to be conceived of as acting in a “real” interplay with created beings so that the radical ontological difference between creator and creature is fundamentally obscured. Here the fundamental commitment of classical theism to the “unreal” relation of God to the world is compromised at the root level. If the relation of created beings to God is understood as “real,” God is envisaged as being on a similar, not unfathomably “ever-greatly” dissimilar, ontological horizon with the created world. Once God is conceived like this, it seems then inevitably to follow that the idea of divine immutability comes to be construed as referring to a God who is *improperly indifferent, unsympathetic, uninvolved* with the world which has *the commensurable ontological value* with God, namely, an illegitimately sublime God who remains aloof without running the dramatic risk of change and suffering.

³⁰⁸ TD 4, 325.

³⁰⁹ TD 4, 318.

³¹⁰ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 185.

³¹¹ Mansini, “Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity,” 502; italics mine.

³¹² Mansini, “Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity,” 508; italics mine.

³¹³ Kilby, “Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the Status of Suffering in Christian Theology,” 306.

Explaining Sin and Evil: A Theodicean Approach

I have just discussed that Balthasar stays away from the classical commitments to sin and evil as non-substance and to the non-reciprocity of God and the world. In doing so, he does not only place the origin and destination of sin and evil in the inner life of the Trinity but also gives a *theodicean* account at the most profound trinitarian level in order to *make sense* and *explain* how the reality of suffering and evil can be accounted for by the trinitarian relations of God.³¹⁴ I would like to put his theodicean account of sin and evil under the critical reflection of Rowan Williams's acute recognition of the tragic reality of human suffering and his subsequent disapproval of *explanatory*, *theodiced*, and *eternalized* attitudes on suffering. Williams offers an acute recognition of how the human tragedy of suffering should be theologically spoken in a non-encompassing manner, which is, in my view, ironically enough, remarkably at odds with Balthasar's tendency to locate sin and evil at the heart of God.

Williams underlines here and there that “the task of attention to perspectives that remain irreducibly different”³¹⁵ in relation to human suffering and tragedy does not necessarily end up with a postmodern stand-off such as a Derridean void of difference and otherness as unspeakability and silence. The tragic reality of the finite, fallen human world replete with “irreducibly different” suffering should be reckoned with, mourned, and lived by the suffering particulars' self-narration and attentiveness to others' narration, namely, the process of “listening,” the “converse, exchange, sociality” of “biography” and “testimony”; the journey with others which entails “a self-dispossession and recovery of the self through the other.”³¹⁶

From this understanding of the humility and possibility of communication of sheer difference of human suffering, Williams, ironically, provides a perceptive recognition of how a Balthasarian kind of fundamental, ultimate explanation of the *locus*—origin and destination—of sin and evil may, in effect, end up undermining the seriousness of the tragic reality of this finite, sinful world which it claims to take seriously by its attempt to make sense and explain it. For Williams, an all-encompassing style of theological discourse on suffering is no less than the domestication of suffering and thus an unqualified dismissal of tragedy. He has long argued that, echoing Donald MacKinnon, to attempt to acquire a comprehensive explanation of the irreducible particularity of suffering is to seize God's point of view. “If the world is our creation, or even if the world is masterable as a system of

³¹⁴ See Jacob H. Friesenhahn, *The Trinity and Theodicy: The Trinitarian Theology of von Balthasar and the Problem of Evil* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

³¹⁵ Rowan Williams, “Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil” (1991), in *Wrestling with Angels*, 255–74 (272). In this essay, Williams levels the charge that Adams's language of “proportionality” of (negative) horrendous evil and (positive) divine goodness fails to take seriously the particularity of the experience of suffering, leading her to describe divine love as a positive experience that aesthetically overwhelms the negative experience of suffering in only a reactive or responsive mode. He finally takes a dim view of theodicy as an attempt to evade the tragic by taking God's eye view, minimizing the magnitude of suffering, and trivializing the sheer particularity of suffering.

³¹⁶ Williams, “Redeeming Sorrow,” 272.

necessities, the idea of irreparable and uncontrollable *loss* ceases to make sense: there are no tragedies.”³¹⁷ But we are not the ones who create the world: “We do not and cannot know how our choices affect our world, and we cannot keep ourselves or others safe from the contingencies of the world or the results of our actions; we are equally liable (like Job’s friends) to refuse to know our ignorance.”³¹⁸ “We do not know what we can or cannot bear until we have risked the impossible and intolerable in our own lives.”³¹⁹ We do not know the loss and calamity that our tragic failure might cost ourselves and the world outside. This not-knowing of loss gives rise to another not-knowing of cost that we are confronted with. “There is an ultimate costliness which, of ourselves, we cannot bear.”³²⁰ The tragic not-knowing eventually leads to the Christic risk-taking life without calculating the cost of loss, Williams’s most venerated, encouraged form of life to be lived out. The loss and cost is that which we cannot make sense, explain, and calculate but only take on and reckon with.

Williams thus insists that “we cannot think away particulars into comprehensive explanatory systems; the world is such that attention to particularity is demanded of us.”³²¹ “All explanation of suffering,” therefore, according to Williams, “is an attempt to forget it as suffering, and so a quest for untruthfulness.”³²² Such an attempt to explain suffering itself is hence another tragic failure not to accept our limitedness, and an “evasion of the world”³²³ by the “evasions of the temporal”³²⁴ that is nothing less than “evasion of the tragic.”³²⁵ An attempt to portray the picture of a God who is expected to function to give “the possibility of exhaustive explanation and justification” of the world as a whole, “so to provide for us an ideal *locus standi*, a perspective transcending or reconciling discontinuity into system, is clearly an idol.”³²⁶ He therefore acquaints us with “the knowledge of suffering as without explanation”³²⁷ and suggests that “a good theology and a candid religious philosophy”³²⁸ relies first and foremost on acknowledging the unexplainable knowledge of

³¹⁷ Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Ontology” (1989), in *On Christian Theology*, 148–66 (154–55). This essay, which was originally given at a conference on Donald MacKinnon in 1986, includes a detailed exposition of the tragic as a fundamental difficulty of life in the finite and limited world, which does not allow us a *teleological* consolation of suffering.

³¹⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 119. See also Rowan Williams, “Afterword: Knowing the Unknowable,” in *Knowing the Unknowable: Science and Religions on God and the Universe*, ed. John Bowker (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 257–62.

³¹⁹ Rowan Williams, “To Give and Not to Count the Cost” (1977), in *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 7–12 (9).

³²⁰ Williams, “To Give and Not to Count the Cost,” 11.

³²¹ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 155.

³²² Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 155.

³²³ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 155.

³²⁴ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 161.

³²⁵ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 162.

³²⁶ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 155–56.

³²⁷ Williams, “Redeeming Sorrows,” 272.

³²⁸ Williams, “Redeeming Sorrows,” 271.

suffering.³²⁹ He consistently places a great stress on the historical particularity and its subsequent sheer diversity of suffering which is at odds with Balthasar's strong direction towards eternalizing suffering and locating the origin and destination of sin and evil at the heart of God. Such Williamsian attitude obliges us to be faithful to speaking attentively to, listening to, and conversing with fellow sufferers rather than sympathetic to a theodicean resolution. In other words, it leads us to a "conversational solidarity" with fellow human sufferers without submitting to "absolute otherness" and thereby renouncing the possibility of understanding the "other" or having recourse to an "explanation" of suffering.

In accordance with his attentiveness to the irreducibility of particular suffering, furthermore, Williams is also very much concerned about a modern tendency towards making the historical cross event of Jesus into a super-temporal event. He questions "How can the *specific* agony of Jesus be God's doorway into all human suffering without losing its historical distinctness?"³³⁰ To super-temporalize the death of Jesus, for Williams, cannot avoid eroding the historical particularity of the cross event "by weakening the force of the recognition that Jesus' suffering is humanly inflicted."³³¹ In reliance on such truthful insights of Williams, Balthasar's trinitarian explanation of the whence and whither of sin and evil vis-à-vis God is in effect tantamount to evading the tragic reality of suffering, or perhaps comes close to suggesting that God becomes an "endlessly resourceful manager of suffering and change"³³² rather than the God who confronts suffering with the profound "seriousness"

³²⁹ Karen Kilby notes that there is "a systematic inexplicability" of evil in the theology of Thomas Aquinas: "Evil is a privation of good, but it is difficult to work out within these schemes where the privation as such comes from." The inexplicability, for Kilby, can be construed as "deliberate and up-front" rather than regrettable inability "because the thing in question is inexplicable." Kilby, "Evil and the Limits of Theology," 25. Kathryn Tanner's approach to sin and evil comes into line with Kilby's: "To say that sin is an exception to the premise of God as creator is therefore to say that sin is ultimately *without* explanation: . . . if a good God is the ultimate explanatory principle . . . , is not this inexplicable character of the coming to be of sin what one should expect." Kathryn Tanner, "Human Freedom, Human Sin, and God the Creator," in *The God who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 111–36 (133).

It is important to note that Dionysius is in line with Augustine and Thomas as regards the inexplicability of evil. Eric Perl encapsulates the Dionysian understanding of evil as "causeless non-being" as follows: "Dionysius's inability, or rather refusal, to assign a cause to evil, then, marks not the failure but the success of his treatment of the problem. To explain evil, to attribute a cause to it, would necessarily be to explain it away, to deny that evil is genuinely evil at all. For to explain something is to show how it is in some way good. . . . Only by *not* explaining evil, by insisting rather on its radical causelessness, its unintelligibility, can we take evil seriously as evil. This is why most "theodicies" fail precisely insofar as they succeed. To the extent that they satisfactorily account for or make sense of evil, they tacitly or expressly deny that it is evil and show that it is in fact good. Dionysius' treatment of evil, on the other hand, succeeds by failing, recognizing that the sheer negativity that is evil must be uncaused and hence inexplicable, for otherwise it would not be negativity and would not be evil." Perl continues to remark that a theodicy fails because by rationalizing and justifying evil, it takes away our proper affection at evil—outrage—from us. Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 63–64. See also Christian Schäfer, *Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite: An Introduction to the Structure and the Content of the Treatise On The Divine Names* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 137–53.

³³⁰ Rowan Williams, "Incarnation and the Renewal of Community" (1989), in *On Christian Theology*, 225–38 (235).

³³¹ Williams, "Trinity and Ontology," 160–61.

³³² Williams, "God," 76.

of separation and death,”³³³ as he claims to do.³³⁴ And his *explanation*, even in a *trinitarian* manner, of sin and evil makes sin and evil *something divine and good, something positive and meaningful* rather than something inexplicably negative and insubstantial. One may be then inclined to concur with Karen Kilby who highlights that for Balthasar, “ultimately suffering and loss are given a positive valuation: they are eternalized, and take on an ultimate ontological status.”³³⁵

Finding Divine Meaning in Every Suffering

The aforementioned critical reflection of Balthasar’s theodicean account of suffering may draw our attention to an early reservation about Balthasar made by Johann Baptist Metz. Metz is discerningly critical of a group of post-war theologians such as Balthasar—in company with Barth, Jüngel, Bonhoeffer, and Moltmann in the realm of Protestant theology—who developed theologies of “the suffering God, suffering between God and God, and suffering in God”³³⁶ in order to make God genuinely immanent in and intimate with the tragic reality of the world.

What I see in these worthy attempts is *too much* of a response, soothing the eschatological questioning of God. . . . And do not these ways of responding underestimate the negative mystery of human suffering that will not allow itself to be harmonized under any other name? . . . How is the discourse about a suffering God in the end anything more than a sublime duplication of human suffering and human powerlessness? How does the discourse about suffering in God or about suffering between God and God not lead to an eternalization of suffering? Do not God and humanity end up subsumed under a quasimystical universalization of suffering that finally cuts off the counterimpulse resisting injustice? . . . Finally, I have always wondered whether or not there is in this discourse about a suffering God something like a secret aestheticization of suffering at work. A suffering which makes us scream or finally leaves us wretchedly silent knows no majesty; it is nothing exalted, nothing noble. . . . It is not so much a song of love, but rather much more a frightening symptom of no longer being able to love. It is a suffering that leads to nothingness, if it is not a suffering unto God.³³⁷

³³³ TD 4, 325.

³³⁴ Karen Kilby points out that Balthasar is inclined to overstep the mark of human humility of finitude which has “no right to overcome their incomprehension of evil by introducing pain, separation, and death (or something like them) into their talk of God, no right to the intellectual resolution that comes from knowing of some happening in God that ‘justifies the possibility and actual occurrence of all suffering in the world’ [TD 4, 324].” Kilby, *Balthasar*, 120, n. 66. Matthew Levering is sympathetic to Kilby’s concerns. Matthew Levering, *The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction to His Trilogy*, foreword by Cyril O’Regan (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 213–14.

³³⁵ Kilby, *Balthasar*, 120.

³³⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, “Theology as Theodicy?” (1990), in *A Passion for God: The Mystical–Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 54–71 (69).

³³⁷ Metz, “Theology as Theodicy?,” 69–70.

Here Metz shows very discerning insights into the hitherto fashionable “suffering God” trend. For Metz, Balthasar is, “in the realm of Catholic theology, above all,” the theologian who acquires the most reconciliatory vision of human suffering by universalizing, eternalizing, and aestheticizing suffering. Balthasar’s theologizing of God vis-à-vis suffering is thereby inclined to mystify and sacralize the reality of suffering.

Balthasar’s tendency of putting a divinely positive meaning to suffering and loss may be noticeable in some of his writings.

I think that the proclamation of the Cross can help men accept sufferings that often seem intolerable, to accept them, not because a God suffers in solidarity with them—how would that relieve them?—but because a divine suffering encompasses all these sufferings in order to transform them into prayer, into a dialogue in the midst of abandonment, thereby conferring on all human tragedies a meaning they would not have in themselves, a meaning that is in the end redemptive for the salvation of the world.³³⁸ Christianity is the only world view able to attribute a positive meaning to *suffering*, all suffering. . . . Suffering that is unavoidable, that, humanly speaking, is hopeless, and even death itself have a positive meaning. Even suffering, *particularly* suffering, is a precious gift that the one suffering can hand on to others; it helps, it purifies, it atones, it communicates divine graces. The sufferings of a mother can bring a wayward son back to the right path; the sufferings of someone with cancer or leprosy, if offered to God, can be a capital for God to use, bearing fruit in the most unexpected places. Suffering, accepted with thankfulness and handed on, participates in the great fruitfulness of everything that streams from God’s joy and returns to him by circuitous paths.³³⁹

As Riyako Hikota underlines, “his main interest seems to be how we can find meaning in the suffering that is already here and inescapable.”³⁴⁰ Balthasar gives the strong impression of rendering suffering as *divinely positive, ultimately good, and universally meaningful*. Every kind of suffering can prove itself a “gift” of “grace” that comes into fruition if those who suffer prayerfully capitalize upon them with gratitude; this ultimate fruitfulness of suffering participates in the divine fruitfulness which is revealed by a paradox of life through death, joy through agony, and love through suffering; this is unique in Christianity. Here he seems to come very close to, as Kilby indicates, “a masochistic distortion of Christianity.”³⁴¹ It is not because he relishes suffering for its own sake (nobody does so),

³³⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christ the Redeemer,” in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr, *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 15–42 (39).

³³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Sermons through the Liturgical Year* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 30. For a similar kind of critique of one of Balthasar’s biographical notes, see Kilby, *Balthasar*, 118–19.

³⁴⁰ Riyako Cecilia Hikota, *And Still We Wait: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Holy Saturday and Christian Discipleship* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 144. Hikota claims that Balthasar’s primary concern for suffering bears little relation to offering “practical solutions” to suffering. She even concedes that Balthasar views political theology and feminist concerns with disfavour and that it runs the risk of falling prey to supporting the defence of the *status quo*. However, Hikota believes that in spite of these limits and pitfalls, Balthasar’s theology can satisfy the main interest of finding meaning in suffering.

³⁴¹ Kilby, *Balthasar*, 119. This critical remark enables me to concur with those who criticize Balthasar for rendering love as tied with suffering in severely unqualified (e.g. self-deprecating, abusive, and masochistic) ways. See Kathryn

but because he believes every suffering somehow *teleologically* arrives at the goodness of meaning in christological fashion.

This critical point is fleshed out in Kevin Taylor's critiques of how Balthasar wrongly both maximizes and minimizes suffering in accentuating a "tragic" aspect of Christianity by seeing Jesus as the ultimate and supreme tragic hero. Taylor detects a double misperception of suffering in Balthasar's tragic christology. He argues that, for Balthasar,

All afflictions are, on some level, meaningful, as they participate in and point to Christ's ever greater suffering. This valorizes our losses, making them meaningful above the cacophony of the immediate, mundane and quotidian. It also minimizes human suffering, since the worst has already come. . . . Suffering is minimized through the knowledge that all suffering is ultimately transitory and yet meaningful in its participation in Christ's greater suffering.³⁴²

Behind his misapprehension lies a certain problematic assumption of suffering: "he assumes a certain static nature to suffering, that it is inherently meaningful and ennobling"—a gravely naïve and perilous mistake. Taylor contends that, like Rowan Williams, suffering is, in reality, more diverse, mysterious, ambiguous, and opaque than Balthasar envisages. Many modern literatures, which Balthasar neglects, bear witness to the alarming diversity of suffering, among which there is a variety of suffering that is simply so empty, absurd, and meaningless that "it is difficult to find the *telos* of suffering."³⁴³ This critique leads to his concluding remark:

In the end, Balthasar makes both too much and too little of tragic drama and the tragic tradition. By making tragedy so foundational to his understanding of the Cross, he has elevated tragic suffering in a peculiar way. Not all suffering can be read in such a heightened, meaningful way; not all sufferers are comforted by knowing that Christ is the poorer man. On the other hand, he has also minimized the tragic tradition by disregarding its complexities and rich variety.³⁴⁴

To put it succinctly, Balthasar's idea of Christ's consummation of the tragic does *injustice* to the tragic aspect of human reality by both maximizing and minimizing it: he is too hasty to posit all human suffering as destined for a kind of christological meaningfulness, one that undercuts the perplexing diversity of human suffering, and which cannot be categorized and relieved this way.

Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 212; Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 39; Blankenhorn, "Balthasar's Method of Divine Naming," 253; Jason Fout, *Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Theological Exegesis of Scripture* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 120–43. Anna Mercedes contests a pathological understanding of masochism in relation to Christian spirituality. She argues that for "the suffering self," which emerged in early Christianity against a soul/mind-prioritized Greco–Roman understanding of the self, a masochistic approach can be "empowering." Mercedes, "Beyond 'Power-With': Martyrs and Masochists," in *Power For*, 108.

³⁴² Kevin Taylor, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the 'Tragic Hero,'" in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 133–48 (144).

³⁴³ Taylor, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero," 146.

³⁴⁴ Taylor, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero," 147.

Taylor consequently argues against Balthasar's tendency towards putting a *teleologically* positive light on suffering that "there needs to be a reticence against imposing meaning upon others and their diverse experiences, a too quick Christological reading of tragedy's immense diversities."³⁴⁵

It is worth, I believe, noting that such a Balthasarian spiritual enthusiasm for anticipating and finding meaning in all kinds of suffering by prayer may be discernible in some of the writings of Sarah Coakley. In a reflection on Easter in a series of Holy Week meditations, subsuming the non-kenotic passion narrative of the Gospel of John to *the kenotic paradox of painful loss and joyful gain*, she acquaints us with the following principle: "You must learn to *practise death*. . . . What it means is that only by handing ourselves over, as Christ was 'handed over' by his betrayers in the Passion, into a seeming *loss* of selfhood [our false, conscious, striving self], . . . will we find our true selves, the living Christlike selves that God longs us to be in his Son. . . . To be a Christian is to 'practise death' in this way."³⁴⁶ In a reflection on Jesus's cry of accomplishment in the Gospel of John in the same series of meditations, she interprets Jesus's glorious accomplishment on the cross as "the piercing light of divine meaning"³⁴⁷ that is already thrown on what follows from the suffering of the cross.

For our own worst experiences of pain, suffering or grief so often have this quality of irreducible meaninglessness. If we could fit them mentally into some box bound for glory they would not have the power over us that they do. . . . It seems impossible to believe that God has allowed me to undergo *this* agony, loss, burden, illness, to be the perfect anvil on which is being hammered out my salvation, my own "glory." . . . What John's Passion story, rightly understood, is saying . . . is that in the God/Man Jesus, the inescapable and meaningless suffering of my particular life [*my* private grief, *my* unshakable guilt, *my* rocky marriage, *my* repetitive stupidity, *my* addiction, *my* bad lot of fate or genes] *intersects* with the transcendent power of salvation and is lifted up, "handed over," to be shot through with Christ's glory. Here, and only here, not in some fantasy land, I learn the real way of peace and joy. Here and only here, do I walk the way of Jesus, through death to new life.³⁴⁸

Here in Coakley's reading of John's passion narrative the suffering and glory of the Johannine Christ is intersected with human suffering and glory. And it allows her to read the human reality of suffering with irreducible diversity in a "too quick Christological" way.³⁴⁹ She is not reticent about a

³⁴⁵ Taylor, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero," 146.

³⁴⁶ Sarah Coakley, *The Cross and the Transformation of Desire: The Drama of Love and Betrayal* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2014), 26–27.

³⁴⁷ Coakley, *The Cross and the Transformation of Desire*, 24.

³⁴⁸ Coakley, *The Cross and the Transformation of Desire*, 24–25.

³⁴⁹ Graham Ward distinguishes a meaningless suffering and a christologically meaningful suffering: "there is a suffering which is rendered meaningless because it has no part in redemption. This is a suffering which rejects and fights against redemption. It has no truth, no existence in Augustine's ontology of goodness, because it is privative—it deprives and strips creation of its orders of being, its treasures of wisdom. Suffering which is a consequence and promulgation of sin can find no place in the *pleroma*. And only *pleroma* gives space, provides a dwelling. But there is a suffering which is meaningful because it is a continuation, a fleshing out, and a completing

teleological kenotic pattern moving from “meaninglessness” to “glory” and says that there is already glorious meaning in the meaninglessness of agony and loss. Every kind of suffering is eventually christologically recoverable and redeemable; all human sufferings of loss and failure are destined to a christologically glorious transformation into rebirth, conversion into recovery, growth into renewal as exemplified by the collapsed and rebuilt self-identity of Peter. Yet we, in certain circumstances, do not know, and perhaps could not know, even by endless mourning and prayer, what meaning is veiled behind my (and your) suffering, or even whether there is any meaning at all. That is, the ungraspable diversity of human suffering cannot be completely overlaid with or mysteriously transfigured into a christologically redeemable suffering. Such a synchronization of human suffering into a christological suffering is thus inclined to oversimplify many different kinds of particular suffering into a possibly transformable kind of suffering, concomitantly marginalizing a kind of suffering of which it is “difficult to find the *telos*.”³⁵⁰ No less significantly, a homogenization of human suffering into a meaningfully transformable suffering is tantamount to portraying suffering as intelligible and thereby as something good. It may then make one anticipate his or her own (and others’) suffering as something to be christologically glorified in the end, even in advance of undergoing it in reality. As Rowan Williams eloquently articulates, however,

The resolution of the sheer resistant particularity of suffering, past and present, into comfortable *teleological* patterns is bound to blunt the edge of particularity, and so to lie; and this lying resolution contains that kind of failure in attention that is itself a moral deficiency, a fearful self-protection. It is just this that fuels the fantasy that we can choose how the world and myself shall be.³⁵¹

Williams’s acute recognition of the non-negotiable particularity of suffering makes conspicuous the Balthasarian–Coakleyan tendency towards doing injustice to the irreducible particularity and diversity of suffering, and simultaneously to christening every kind of suffering.

Nonetheless, unfortunately, what I will argue in the next chapter where the tragic theology of Rowan Williams is treated intimates that Williams himself ends up coming close to synchronizing human tragedy into a sort of teleological pattern of maturation from failure to rehabilitation: the Petrine pattern of growth upon the tragic moment of failure is essentialized, and the comic moment of recovery is made teleological. If this is the case, all three scholars tend to put a positive light on the darkness of suffering as that which proves to be teleologically meaningful.

of the suffering of Christ.” Graham Ward, “Suffering and Incarnation,” in *Suffering Religion*, ed. Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson (London: Routledge, 2002), 163–80 (173). This essay is a slightly revised version of the original essay “Suffering and Incarnation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, edited by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 192–208.

³⁵⁰ Taylor, “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero,” 146.

³⁵¹ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 155; italics mine.

Chapter 2. Tragedy and Dereliction in the Tragic Theology of Rowan Williams

I have tried to show in the previous chapter that Hans Urs von Balthasar's crucial tenets—such as his theo-dramatic understandings of God as the divine actor, his location of the origin and destination of sin and evil in God, and of suffering eternalized in God—are at variance with Rowan Williams's underlying positions—such as the non-contrastive relation of divine transcendence–immanence, the non-competitive divine–human relation, God as the source of goodness, evil as an insubstantial privation, and the resolute rejection of any attempt to explain suffering and thereby evade its tragic particularity, although Williams makes favourable and appreciative evaluations of Balthasar at several important points. For instance, recently, he draws upon Balthasar's trinitarian–christological, tragic exegesis of the Gospel of John in order to construct a theological imagination that can bear the weight of the tragic sense of human life and maturity. In this chapter I will examine his tragic account of the Fourth Gospel in broader contexts of his theological and anthropological understandings.

This examination comes to engage with the debate over whether Williams manages to emphasize the tragic without falling into the error of ontologically radicalizing it both in relation to creation and to the Trinity. I will argue in the first two sections that, while he achieves it at the level of formal affirmation and intention, at the level of how he reads the Gospel in practice, he is inclined to allow an ontological value to the tragic while rendering the created goodness nihil. And I will show in the last section that he intends to maximize Christian tragic imagination by associating the cry of dereliction with the divine identity so as to create an ethics of unconsolated human self-dispossession based on the self-dispossession of the trinitarian desire. I will then argue that the creation of the trinitarian ethics of self-dispossession entails mythological projection of human tragic predicament onto the divine life and thereby the ontologization of the tragic. In short, I will argue in this chapter that Rowan Williams comes close to ontologically radicalizing the tragic vis-à-vis creation and the Trinity.

Introduction: Williams and the Tragic

David Bentley Hart diagnoses, “In the Christian West, in recent decades, how well a theologian appears to appreciate the ‘tragic depths’ of the story of atonement (or, at least, how grave a theologian’s voice becomes at certain appropriate junctures in that story) has become for many an index of his ‘seriousness.’ Theology has acquired a taste for tragedy, perhaps commendably at the end

of an unbearably tragic century.”¹ Rowan Williams has long been acknowledged as a theologian who has a propensity “for accommodating a tragic sensibility in Christian theology”² and cultivating “a much stronger feeling for the catastrophe and unavoidable tragedy of human life.”³ Rebekah Howes poignantly articulates Williams’s theological ethos and its anthropological significance as follows:

The language of the negative; difficulty, loss, uncertainty, vulnerability, contradiction, litter the terrain of Williams’ interventions, writings and speeches. If we mask the experience of difficulty, e.g. in a consumer rhetoric of choice or in the fantasies of a mended world, we are on dangerous ground. Difficulty is the very substance of our making sense of ourselves as subjects in continually risky and unsettling negotiations.⁴

In his theology, indeed, “conflict and tragedy were at the heart of Christian living and they simply could not be avoided.”⁵ An undertow of giving much weight to suffering and tragedy runs through Rowan Williams’s understanding of the Christian life.

Mike Higton, one of the most sympathetic commentators of Williams’s theological projects, indicates that the theology of Williams is “too unrelentingly *agonized*”⁶ to “ever relax in the Sabbath rest of God’s love.”⁷ Subsequently, it runs “the risk of muting the note of joy, of thankfulness, of release and rescue”⁸ and “the risk of proposing a kind of spiritual heroism.”⁹ Benjamin Myers is also concerned with Williams’s tragic sense of life. For Myers, Williams’s thought is pervaded with “the imperative of patience, of sheer human endurance in the face of meaningless catastrophe. Patience beyond hope that is the moral vision of tragedy, and it is a vision that has gripped the theological imagination of Rowan Williams.”¹⁰

The cost of Williams’ achievement is a sort of pervasive ontological sadness: to see all things coloured by a tragedy older than the world. It is no momentary sorrow, but a

¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 373. He refers to Balthasar, Eberhard Jüngel, Donald MacKinnon, and Nicholas Lash. He concludes that “simply said, tragic theology lacks theological depth” (374).

² Ben Quash, “Four Biblical Characters: In Search of a Tragedy,” in *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, 15–33 (18).

³ John Milbank, “Extended Interview,” interview by Deryl Davis, *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, February 21, 2003, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2003/02/21/february-21-2003-john-milbank-extended-interview/12980>.

⁴ Rebekah Howes, “In the Shadow of Gillian Rose: Truth as Education in the Hegelian Philosophy of Rowan Williams,” *Political Theology* 19, no. 1 (2018): 20–34 (33).

⁵ Mark Chapman, “The Evolution of Anglican Theology, 1910–2000,” in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism*, Volume 4: *Global Western Anglicanism, c.1910–present*, ed. Jeremy Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25–49 (47).

⁶ Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM, 2011), 35.

⁷ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 36.

⁸ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 35.

⁹ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 36.

¹⁰ Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 21.

deep conviction that life must always remain unconsolated, the best we can hope for is to be stripped bare, exposed, and forgiven under the stark relentless light of reality.¹¹

From this evaluation, he suggests, the theology of Williams can be best understood as “a theology of preparation,” which “resembles nothing so much as the forty days of Lent: a theology of slowness and discipline, abstinence and privation, the ‘luminous sorrow’ of the great fast.”¹² These evaluations of his propensity for the tragic suggest that Williams’s thought carries undercurrents and overtones of the Gethsemanic, as well as Promethean, mournful endurance of the sorrowful reality of failure, suffering, and catastrophe. Despite these critical comments, Higton and Myers want ultimately to give the green light to his “difficult Gospel”¹³ and “Lenten theology”¹⁴ in that it serves to transform “the poison of a ruthless and decadent self-centredness” predominant in “western societies today,”¹⁵ as well as the addiction to “saccharine . . . in a culture of quick gratifications.”¹⁶

Some of the more critical theologians level the charge that Williams is inclined to sacralize the moment of loss and suffering by conceiving of divine presence as responding to and resonating with the tragic moment itself rather than as a ground of hope to heal and mend it. God blends in with and is immanent in the tragic horizon of historical conflicts without leaving much to the *goodness* that God has created, achieved, and will complete, the created *goodness* which has been restored and fulfilled. For instance, Matheson Russell offers critical observations on Williams’s thought as the essentialization of pain and death and the unintelligibility of eschatological hope. He argues that Williams positively renders human—historical, political, ethical, cultural, spiritual—tension and conflict as the condition of the self’s transformation on every level and aspect, and exclusively construes divine grace as the unceasing movement of self-transformation in the ineluctable tension and conflict. For Williams, Russell claims, human tension and conflict is readily accepted as “the sphere of divine grace,” and “the divine life *pro nobis* is entirely equated with *self-transcending* movement.”¹⁷ In doing so, “the negation, the diremption, the scattering, the judgment, is itself the moment of grace.”¹⁸ That is to say, if created strife is inexorably attached to divine grace, created finitude and conflict is too readily affirmed as the condition of divine grace, and divine grace is deemed as confined in the horizon of the created world. Subsequently, according to Russell, Williams makes no room for the eschatological proclamation of the “end to violence, injustice, and death,” of

¹¹ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 116.

¹² Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 117.

¹³ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 117.

¹⁴ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 36.

¹⁵ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 117.

¹⁶ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 36.

¹⁷ Matheson Russell, “Dispossession and Negotiation: Rowan Williams on Hegel and Political Theology,” in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 85–114 (93).

¹⁸ Russell, “Dispossession and Negotiation,” 93.

“no more death, no more mourning, crying or pain,” which break through the finite world, while adding too much significance to suffering and loss. He therefore concludes that “Williams essentializes the moment of negativity, pain, and death, replacing the finality of the cross with an endless reiteration of its procedure,” and this unavoidably dark and painful movement of transformation leaves the language of “an *eschatological rest*” and hope unintelligible.¹⁹

These critical evaluations may trace back to a debate between Rowan Williams and John Milbank over tragedy and peace.²⁰ Milbank highlights that “when we defend pathos we tend to make pity and suffering ontologically ultimate.”²¹ He thus seeks to establish the ontological priority of peace and avoid the essentialization of violence and tragedy. “Against Williams’ ‘tragic’ emphasis,” Milbank stresses “the ‘absurdity’ of faith, its non-resignation to loss and scarcity.”²² He indicates that Williams’s tragic inclination falls short of *the faith grounded in creation’s goodness and ontological peace* that enables us to refuse to prioritize suffering and loss ontologically. Milbank argues, without impatiently overlooking the tragic implication of the created temporal limitedness about which Williams is gravely concerned, faith in creation’s goodness and in eschatological restoration cuts across the Williamsian character of “taking time” in the entire painstaking process of difficult learning: “Faith in creation, in resurrection is,” he insists, “faith in the deeper power of love over the apparent power of destruction.”²³ For Milbank, therefore, “to surpass the tragic, to make the Christian gesture of faith beyond (but not without) renunciation, is not to embark on a premature celebration. On the contrary, it is to refuse to cease to suffer, to become resigned to a loss.”²⁴ In short, Milbank has misgivings that the capacity for faith in creation, resurrection, and final recovery over the tragic is truncated in Williams.

Williams seeks to defend himself by saying that he opposes the “ontological necessity of the tragic” and “eschatological un-mending,” and pays great attention to the tragic dimension of the contingent and finite world with an acute vigilance against Milbank’s allegedly untimely, premature vision of peace. Williams contends that Milbank’s claim leaves us “with little account of how it is

¹⁹ Russell, “Dispossession and Negotiation,” 107. Others lay similar charges that there is a lack of eschatological fulfilment breaking through the finite moment of the presence in Williams’s thought. David Brown very briefly points out a danger in Williams’s insistence on pertinacious truthfulness and responsibility: “individuals will be thereby deprived of all hope.” David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis Explored and Defended* (London: SCM, 2011), 124. And David Newton is also critically aware that Williams “underemphasizes the place of abundance, peace and eschatological rest.” David Newton, “The Demanding Call and the Difficult Question: Stanley Hauerwas and Rowan Williams in Conversation,” *Theology* 119, no. 4 (2016): 268–75 (271).

²⁰ The debate occurred in *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 861 (June 1992), the special issue dedicated to the first edition of John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

²¹ John Milbank, “The Force of Identity,” in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 194–216 (208).

²² John Milbank, “Enclaves, or, Where is the Church?,” *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 861 (June 1992): 341–52 (351).

²³ Milbank, “Enclaves,” 352.

²⁴ Milbank, “Enclaves,” 352.

learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forward, discerned and risked.”²⁵ The facile priority of peace misleads us to turn a blind eye on finitude and fallibility and on its tragic reality of competition and rivalry, loss and deficiency, failure and fracture. “We are always already, in history, shaped by privation, living at the expense of each other.”²⁶ If the Christian language of peace thus has to do with this finite world, we should be “historically aware of how it is constructed in events of determination which involve conflict and exclusion of some kind.”²⁷ To speak of the ontological priority of peace would otherwise become “vacuous or fictive” or “a return to primordial harmonics, purely innocent difference.”²⁸ For Williams, Christian life is, first and foremost, to venture to go on a difficult journey of learning in the contingent vulnerability of the created world, which “is surely pregnant with the risk of tragedy.”²⁹ Thus, the realization and fulfilment of the good “is necessarily bound up with taking time.”³⁰ What is required of us is thus not to celebrate a “timeless model of ecclesial virtue” but to cultivate risky attentiveness to “the tragic implications of contingency itself,” which is embedded in the difficulty of learning. In particular, the costly attentiveness to difficulty in tragedy, Williams notes, is not to make an allusion to “an inevitability, a non-contingency, about evil”³¹ and “a myth of necessary violence.”³² Therefore, for Williams, we must pay heed not to muddle right attention to difficult learning with a false attempt to necessitate, sacralize, and perpetuate the tragic. In sum, whilst Milbank places a premium upon the priority of ontological peace, Williams highlights that the peace is eschatologically suspended and achieved in the tragic reality of history.

Brett Gray lends credence to Williams against Milbank’s criticism. He contends that in Williams’s theology there is indeed “eschatological amelioration of the tragic”³³ which forecloses “ontological radicalization”³⁴ of the tragic.

He [Williams] seems, in his openness to the tragic, to radicalize the violently conflictual in the very way Hart and Milbank feared tragedy might. . . . Williams makes the claim that an affirmation of conflict’s inevitability does *not* translate into conflict’s ontological radicalization; it is not a “metaphysical statement about the inevitability of mutual exclusion and strife”. “Conflict” . . . is the ineluctable product of the resistances the world offers us.³⁵

²⁵ Rowan Williams, “Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision,” *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 861 (June 1992): 319–26 (321).

²⁶ Williams, “Saving Time,” 322.

²⁷ Williams, “Saving Time,” 322.

²⁸ Williams, “Saving Time,” 322.

²⁹ Williams, “Saving Time,” 323.

³⁰ Williams, “Saving Time,” 323.

³¹ Williams, “Saving Time,” 321.

³² Williams, “Saving Time,” 322.

³³ Brett Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 130.

³⁴ Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 124.

³⁵ Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 124.

Gray affirms that Williams manages to make a nuanced difference between the contingent inevitability, intractability, or necessity of conflict and the metaphysical necessity or ontological radicalization of conflict.

Gray's defence of Williams seems legitimate. Williams endeavours to prove that the insistence on contingent necessity of the tragic does not fall into a metaphysical inscription of the tragic. In other words, the ineluctability of tragic conflict is not intrinsically related to the created order and its goodness; tragic failure and suffering occur only as historical particulars. Williams claims that he is not saying that "there can be no healing or mending eschatologically, or that conflict and exclusion have either a sacred or a necessarily liberative character."³⁶ He tries to assure his readers that he does not intend to insist on "some fundamental metaphysical priority or necessity to failure and suffering, . . . the kind of metaphysical inscription of 'necessary' guilt, failure, or pain."³⁷ Williams maintains that the tragic in the world has to do not with metaphysical, ontological necessity, but with contingent necessity, ineluctability, and inevitability.

What I will argue in what follows is that, however, the fact that Williams asserts this at the level of principle and affirmation does not necessarily guarantee that he actually constructs his tragic imagination accordingly. I will conclude the current section of this chapter with the argument that his tragic imagination ends up coming close to an ontologization of the tragic, at the level of his tragic reading of the passion narrative of the Gospel of John, in particular, by compromising his affirmation of the classical principles of non-competitive divine-human relation and of evil as the privation of good.

Johannine Tragic Irony and the Petrine Pattern of Growth

Tragic Irony in the Gospel of John

In one of his most recent works, *The Tragic Imagination* (2016), Rowan Williams attempts to elucidate his own accounts of how Christian narrative embraces tragic imagination into and sustains it at its heart as the hope of recovery and growth.³⁸ He singles out the book of Job among the Hebrew

³⁶ Williams, "Saving Time," 322.

³⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 119, 121.

³⁸ Richard Gaskin, *Tragedy and Redress in Western Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2018), raises systematic suspicions about the claims that Williams makes in *The Tragic Imagination*. Gaskin argues that Williams proposes contradictory claims. On the one hand, Williams endorses at several points the view that tragedy offers its readers "linguistic redress" as an aspect of *audience or reader response* (not as a character in narratives)—"the tragic portrayal of suffering can compensate *us*, the users of language, for our painful lot in this world: it can give us linguistic redress"—but, on the other hand, "officially he is opposed to finding an explanatory and compensatory structure in tragedy." Williams is just content with acknowledging that our coming to be capable of speaking and thinking of tragedy merely as a moment of transformative possibility to move us from resignation to recognition; he

Scriptures and the Fourth Gospel among the Christian Scriptures in order to prove how tragedy and tragic imagination are closely related in Jewish–Christian traditions. He, in tune with Balthasar, considers the Gospel of John as a Christian narrative to incorporate the tragic dimensions of human and divine realities into its core. In doing so, the tragic *irony* in John is brought into sharp focus and plays a decisive role in constructing Williams’s tragic imagination.

Such a Christian tragic sensibility has been a dominating tendency from the initial stage of Williams’s theological career. In *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (1982), for example, Williams states that “as we learn the truth of its tragic character, we learn also that tragedy is interwoven with hope” unless we “treat the resurrection as ‘canceling’ the crucifixion, *replacing* humiliation with ‘glory’.”³⁹ This tendency may trace back to at least his pre-ordinand, doctoral studies period. In “The Spirit of the Age to Come” (1974), Williams evinces great enthusiasm to embrace the tragic knowledge within the Christian narratives. Such Christianity might be built on “a confrontation of ‘the extreme verge’ . . . in full seriousness, with no attempt to minimize the ultimacy, in human terms, of tragic frustration and collision.”⁴⁰ For Williams, the inevitability and ineluctability of the tragic conflict is one of the contingent features of the fallen world. And the incarnation of the Son falls victim to the unremitting, intractable tragic wounds of the fallen world.

The Incarnation itself is a necessarily tragic event, for God *enters into* the humanity whose mode of being is God-less-ness. “In the original sin of the old Adam, the Spirit of God left man and death overtook him. The new Adam took this abandonment upon Himself” [Sergei Bulgakov]. If such a picture is a tenable exegesis of the dereliction, if the juxtaposition of the Cross and the Trinity is indeed, as I suppose it to be, at the centre of Christian belief, then it should be clear that tragedy is inseparable not merely from the historical facts of the life and death of Jesus, as Mackinnon has reminded us, but from the very fact of the Incarnation.⁴¹

For Williams, “the Incarnation itself,” “the very fact of the Incarnation,” is *necessarily* tragic. The tragic condition of the created world is so necessarily antithetical to the incarnation that “the Incarnation itself is a necessarily tragic event.” From beginning to end, the reality of Christ is embarked on, lived out, and wrapped up as tragic. It may be not irrelevant to note that Williams’s death-driven theory of the incarnation is very akin to Balthasar’s claim that the incarnation of the Son is bound to his death from the very beginning: “In the Incarnation of the eternal Son, death is already

refuses to recognize that being able to speak and think itself of tragedy, in effect, functions as a *compensation and consolation*. In short, he is actually talking about a linguistic consolation, yet officially denying it. According to Gaskin, “The result is obfuscation, for you cannot have it both ways” (268).

³⁹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd: 2002; first edition 1982), 35, 92.

⁴⁰ Rowan Williams, “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” *Sobornost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* 6, no. 9 (Summer 1974): 613–26 (618). In this essay he suggests “an awareness of present reality as divided, fragmented, liable to internal struggle and frustration, an awareness, in fact of the *tragic*” (616), from which the cultivation of hope emerges by the work of the Spirit.

⁴¹ Williams, “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” 619.

taken up as the expression of God’s love for the creature.”⁴² The crucifixion of Jesus is thus intrinsic to the purpose of the incarnation of the Son. “The Incarnation has accordingly no other ultimate purpose than the Cross. . . . To speak of Incarnation is already to speak of the Cross.”⁴³

Williams is “convinced” that one is “wrong” if seeking to establish “the incompatibility of Christianity with the tragic experience, or ‘tragic knowledge’.”⁴⁴ He senses a similarly wrong attempt in “the perennial tendency to separate and in some way oppose Cross and Resurrection”⁴⁵ in Christian theology. It is the commitment “the Cross reveals to us the tragedy”⁴⁶ that consistently plays an overarching role in constructing his theology throughout his works. He regularly expresses a deep concern that “any tendency for the resurrection narratives to become triumphalist vindications of the Church’s faith, devoid of their own edge of challenge and disturbance,”⁴⁷ would give rise to facile euphoria, naïve optimism, or complacent triumphalism. He is intent on reacquainting us with the meaning of Jesus’s suffering and agony in death in order to overcome such a false triumphalism and happy ending, and to challenge us to learn an authentic understanding of the resurrection. Williams often summons Jesus’s cry of dereliction in order to legitimize and substantialize his tragic account of the cross of Christ.

The tragic account of the story of Christ is primarily based on his reading of the passion narratives of Christ. Particularly crucial is the Gospel of John. He underlines that “the famous ‘irony’ of the Fourth Gospel—is not this, especially in the Passion narratives, essentially tragic also?”⁴⁸ This question is deeply reminiscent of Donald MacKinnon’s emphasis on tragic irony in the Gospel of John: “John tells the story of Christ’s passion with the fullest possible use of tragic irony; his story ends in a cry of triumph, τετέλεσται [‘It is accomplished’]; but it is a triumph purchased at the price of

⁴² Han Urs Von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 107.

⁴³ *GL* 7, 212. A tragic account of the incarnation with a maximalist spin of death may be challenged before rubbing off on other doctrines by a critical insight as summarized by Kathryn Tanner: “Death, in and of itself, is an impediment to the mission and not in any obvious way its positive culmination. . . . Rejection and death stand in the way of the mission and must be overcome in a resurrected life that moves through and beyond death. . . . The cross is simply the culmination of the sinful world’s rejection of Jesus’ mission.” Tanner, “Death and Sacrifice,” in *Christ the Key*, 247–73 (251); this chapter was originally published as “Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal,” *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 1 (2004): 35–56. Edward Schillebeeckx also contends that “in Jesus’ death, in and of itself, i.e. in terms of what human beings did to him, there is only negativity. . . . Purely as the death of Jesus, this dying cannot have any redemptive or liberating force; on the contrary, death is the enemy of life.” Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*, Volume 10: *Church: The Human Story of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 125. These critical remarks shed light on how we can rethink the relationship of the incarnation or *missio*, the earthly mission, and the crucifixion of Jesus in the framework of God’s good will and the world’s sinful rejection. It may enable us to avoid a pious mistake of dramatically glorifying the crucifixion by offering too much recognition to the violent force of the cross into the heart of the *missio* of Christ—a crucial tenet that constitutes a starting point of Balthasar’s christological trinitarianism.

⁴⁴ Williams, “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” 619.

⁴⁵ Williams, “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” 619.

⁴⁶ Williams, “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” 619.

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (London: Fount, 2000), 137–38.

⁴⁸ Williams, “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” 618.

appalling catastrophe.”⁴⁹ The Johannine tragic irony makes MacKinnon consider John’s Gospel as the most notably tragic Gospel, and the same holds true for Williams.

It is revealing to see that there is a striking consistency between “The Spirit of the Age to Come” (1974) and *The Tragic Imagination* (2016) in terms of interest in interweaving Christianity and tragedy primarily in terms of Johannine tragic irony. It is the purpose of *The Tragic Imagination* “to grant the full weight of its negativity and ask if Christian discourse can sustain that”⁵⁰ against the separation of Christian experience and tragic knowledge. And he draws heavily upon the Fourth Gospel, in particular, the theme of tragic irony in order to exemplify the Christian narrative that retains a tragic representation at its heart. In “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” he makes a brief reference to Johannine irony in the passion narratives, but, in *The Tragic Imagination*, he expatiates on the tragic irony in and beyond the passion narrative of the Fourth Gospel. It is the “irony” of John’s Gospel that Williams deploys to substantiate his tragic exegesis. Considered from the strong consistency between the two works across over forty years, it seems that the theme of tragic irony in the Gospel of John plays a consistent role in constructing his tragic construal of Christian life.

Tragic Irony as Misrecognition and Rejection

It is commonly acknowledged that “the Gospel of John begins with the irony of nonrecognition.”⁵¹ According to Williams, the Fourth Gospel brings into sharpest focus “a monumental tragic irony in the very grammar of this [passion] narrative, which tells of the most dramatic possible schism between self and truth, and the maximal degree of misrecognition.”⁵² He seems right in lending heavy weight to the tragic irony in the Fourth Gospel, because irony is not only one of the most crucial literary devices but also one of the undergirding theological perspectives in the Gospel of John. As George MacRae stresses, “It is in irony that John expresses his own insight into the meaning of Christ

⁴⁹ Donald MacKinnon, “Order and Evil in the Gospel,” in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, ed. George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 90–96 (91). In this article, MacKinnon drops a hint of *whose* theology comes in for his critique of naïvely optimistic theology: “It is fashionable nowadays to speak of *Christ as victor* as if the agony and disillusion, the sheer monstrous reality of physical and spiritual suffering which he bore were a mere charade. The idiom of a superficial cosmic optimism, often expressing itself ritually in patterns of liturgical symbolism, is currently fashionable, as if a world that knows, as ours does, extremities of terror as well as hope, could be consoled by a remote metaphysical chatter” (92; italics mine).

⁵⁰ Rowan Williams, “Tragedy and Redemption: A Response to Edith Hall,” *Prospect*, December 19, 2016, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/tragedy-and-redemption-a-response-to-edith-hall-rowan-williams>. Edith Hall criticizes that Williams does not do justice to the sheer varieties and particularities of tragedy. “Rowan Williams’s Tragic Mistake: How Can Rowan Williams Reconcile His Christianity with the Greek Tragic Vision?,” *Prospect*, December 2016: 72–74; www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/rowan-williams-tragic-mistake. David Aers and Sarah Beckwith point out that Williams even assumes a “transhistorical tragic imagination.” “The Fortunes of Tragedy,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 49, no. 1 (January 2019): 1–5 (2). They doubt that this questionable assumption has something to do with a surprising lack of medieval tragedy in *The Tragic Imagination*.

⁵¹ Kevin Taylor, *Christ the Tragedy of God: A Theological Exploration of Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 2019), 139.

⁵² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 119.

for the world. Indeed . . . in the Fourth Gospel theology *is* irony.”⁵³ The theme of tragic irony is closely associated with the death of Jesus. For instance, as Udo Schnelle notes, in John’s Gospel, “the entire narrative is theologically directed toward the passion, a narrative marked by John’s subtle irony: The reason why Jesus must die is that he raised someone [Lazarus] from the dead!”⁵⁴ It is a Johannine tragic irony that an action of love gives rise to the passion of death.

Williams observes that “John’s narrative is systematically underlining the tension between what is conventionally claimed as known or knowable and the presence of truth itself.”⁵⁵ And he pays particular attention to tragic irony—misrecognition, misunderstanding, ignorance, refusal, and rejection—and its consequential catastrophes such as the death of Jesus and the dissolution of the disciples. His attention is substantiated by the observations that “misunderstanding is the trait most consistently displayed by Johannine characters”⁵⁶ and that “in the Gospel of John, characters consistently misunderstand the mission and message (identity, origin) of Jesus. Whereas this is a component elsewhere in the Synoptic tradition, it is a driving motif in Fourth Gospel characterization.”⁵⁷

What makes the irony tragic in the fullest sense is that, as Williams rightly interprets the Prologue of the Gospel, Jesus’s *own* people reject him. It is indeed a tragic irony that his own people deny and abandon him: “This agency is unrecognizable to creation in general and to those in particular who have been most directly touched by it. ‘He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him’ (John 1.11)”;⁵⁸ and “Human action and speaking deny their context and foundation, and the source of life (1.4) is inexorably pushed towards death.”⁵⁹ Paul Duke aptly observes that “perhaps the most obvious of John’s ironic incongruities is summarized in 1:11, ‘He came to his own and his own received him not.’ The people of God are visited by the Logos of God and they spurn him. This tragic irony fans the fiery polemic against ‘the Jews’ which burns throughout this Gospel with progressive intensity. Fundamentally, then, there is irony in John’s most basic assertion that ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (1:14).”⁶⁰ As Donald MacKinnon avers, the Prologue of John’s Gospel, which says that “when that Word so came among his own he was rejected, . . . forms the introduction to a book which with good reason has been called the ‘gospel

⁵³ George W. MacRae, “Theology and Irony in the Fourth Gospel” (1973), in *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives*, ed. Mark W. G. Stibbe (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 103–13 (105–6).

⁵⁴ Schnelle, “Cross and Resurrection in the Gospel of John,” 138.

⁵⁵ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 120.

⁵⁶ Christopher W. Skinner, “Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization: Reading John’s Characters through the Lens of the Prologue,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 111–127 (112).

⁵⁷ Christopher W. Skinner, “Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John: Reflections on the *Status Quaestionis*,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, xvii–xxxii (xxx).

⁵⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 119.

⁵⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 120.

⁶⁰ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 111.

of rejection’.”⁶¹ In short, the Fourth Gospel exhibits an interconnected twofold tragedy: the unavoidable reality of the tragic denouement of Christ and the inevitable failure of his own people. It may be indeed said with safety that John’s narrative embraces an enormous tragic irony as Williams observes.

According to Williams, furthermore, the tragic irony of John’s Gospel does not lie simply in people’s ironic rejection of Jesus, but also in the fact that Jesus is the one who *provokes* the world’s misrecognition and its consequent catastrophe:

The Gospel of John is “tragic” not simply in the sense that it tells a story of catastrophe (though it does) but that it dramatizes the interwoven contingency and necessity of pain or failure in the sharpest way imaginable. The world is such that personalized and substantive divine goodness cannot be secure against ignorance and misrecognition; worse still, it is the very fact that personalized divine goodness is present that triggers misrecognition.⁶²

The tragic irony of John’s Gospel, for Williams, lies in the notion of “misrecognition triggered” and “conflict created” by the Son sent by the Father to the world. Williams describes this Johannine tragic irony elsewhere as follows: “Jesus’ mission in this Gospel is described very clearly as the process of bringing that radical, radiant beauty to light in this world in such a way that only the most resolutely self-justifying and the most terminally terrified will want to resist.”⁶³

It is worth noting that this aspect of Johannine tragic irony—hatred-provoking love, darkness-kindling light—that Williams is paying particular attention to also plays an important role in comprising a tragic element of Balthasar’s Johannine christology. Balthasar writes, “God’s love, which sends the Light, the Word, into the world, brings hatred to the surface.”⁶⁴ As Jennifer Martin indicates, Balthasar takes seriously in reading John’s Gospel that “the very presence of Jesus . . . provokes forces of evil and opposition to come out into the open.”⁶⁵ For him, this Johannine tragic irony is “the fundamental theodramatic law of world history: the greater the revelation of divine (ground-less) love, the more it elicits a groundless (Jn 15:25) hatred from man.”⁶⁶

The Petrine Pattern of Growth from Failure to Renewal

Williams is concerned to pay serious attention to the tragic failure of miscomprehension and misrecognition such as ignorance, refusal, and rejection of the incarnate truth, and to the cost of the

⁶¹ MacKinnon, “Order and Evil in the Gospel,” 90.

⁶² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 121.

⁶³ Rowan Williams, *What is Christianity?* (London: SPCK, 2015), 27.

⁶⁴ TD 5, 202.

⁶⁵ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 169.

⁶⁶ TD 4, 338.

tragic failure: Peter's betrayal as an individual failure, the disintegration of the follower's community as a communal failure, and Jesus's death as the catastrophic cost of the failures. The passion narratives of the four Gospels, for Williams, bear considerable witness to the tragic reality of failure and the cost of Christian life. Particularly, the passion narrative of John's Gospel is "a story of extreme rupture and dissolution in the common life: Jesus dies abandoned by most of those closest to him, the community, the 'city' he has created is dissolved by this betrayal, and he dies in agony of body and spirit."⁶⁷ And only from the patient admittance of failure and loss, its cost and catastrophe, its tragic calamity, is it possible to be recreated into Jesus's resurrection, Peter's rehabilitation, and the disciples' reintegration. Only the mournful confrontation with the tragic past creates a possibility of growth from loss to recovery, and failure to renewal.

The pattern of growth underlies much of Williams's works. His tragic imagination of human growth and maturation is primarily centred around the tragic failure of the disciples which is most dramatically represented by Johannine tragic irony. According to Williams, the narratives of tragic failure and cost is most dramatically epitomized, first and foremost, by the failure of Peter, his denial and betrayal. "Peter's exemplary wrongness . . . at the moment of his denial," for Williams, defines "how we think about the hearers and followers of Jesus."⁶⁸ He is above all determined to say that Peter is "the one who repeatedly misses the point of what is witnessed, the one who most unequivocally gets it wrong time after time."⁶⁹ And the tragic failure of Peter represents the collapse of community, the dissolution of the disciples. The communal identity disintegrates in the face of the impending death of the founder. Peter's failure represents the realized fallibility of all the historical disciples *in their entirety*.

The possibility of growth, recreation, and reconstruction is also, according to Williams, envisaged in synchronization with Peter's pattern of rehabilitation from failure as emerging only from a painstaking reckoning with the tragic. "Peter stands for *all the human characters* whom Jesus confronts—the apostles, the witnesses, the Church, ourselves. He is us; brought to nothing by his inability to hear and receive the transfiguring presence of God in the helpless and condemned Jesus, but called afresh out of his own chaos to the task of finding words for the mystery."⁷⁰ There is no way to avoid the pattern of loss and recovery in the light of a universal scriptural witness to Peter's betrayal and the disciples' dissolution. A self's confrontation with the past of tragic failure may give rise to the restoration of the failed, repentant self. Only embracing past failure with great honesty generates authentic self-transformation.

⁶⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 125.

⁶⁸ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SCM, 2014), 73.

⁶⁹ Rowan Williams, "Beginning with the Incarnation" (1989), in *On Christian Theology*, 79–92 (83).

⁷⁰ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, 73–74; italics mine.

In this sense, the *universal* pattern of growth can be called a *Petrine pattern that moves from tragic failure to comic rehabilitation*. Williams's reading of the passion narratives strongly emphasizes Peter's betrayal and so serves considerably to shape his theology in the framework of his tragic imagination. I quote Williams at length:

Being religious in a Christian way is irretrievably bound up with the themes of judgement and repentance—or, to put it less negatively, with conversion and transformation. There is a basic “shape” to being Christian, determined by the fact that its identifying narrative is one of *peripeteia*, reversal and renewal. If the paschal story is, as a matter of bare fact, the bedrock of Christian self-identification, that which is drawn upon to explain what the whole project is about, there is no escaping *the pattern there defined of loss and recovery*. Faith begins in a death: the literal death of Jesus for sedition and/or blasphemy, which is also the “death” of the bonds between him and his followers, and the “death” of whatever hope or faith had become possible in his presence prior to Good Friday; so that what becomes possible in his renewed presence after Good Friday has the character of a wholly creative, *ex nihilo*, summons to or enabling of, hope and trust and action. To say this, I should add, doesn't commit us to speculation about the psychology of the Eleven on Good Friday or Easter Eve: it merely recognizes that the New Testament narrative presents us with *Christian* faith as that which the resurrection creates, in that *all the discernible strands of the gospel tradition insist upon the dissolution of the apostolic band before the crucifixion, and preserve the tradition of Peter's betrayal* [italics mine]. Thus Easter faith is what there is beyond that faith and hope that exists prior to or apart from the cross of Jesus; what there is left after the judgement implied by the cross upon human imagining of the work of God aside from the *ex nihilo* gift of the risen Christ. In the face of the cross, there is a revelation of a fundamental lack of reality in our faith and hope, and we are left with no firm place to stand. The “shape” of Christian faith is the anchoring of our confidence beyond what we do or possess, in the reality of a God who freely gives to those needy enough to ask; a life lived “away” from a centre in our own innate resourcefulness or meaningfulness, and so a life equipped for question and provisionality in respect of all our moral or spiritual achievement: a life of *repentance in hope*.⁷¹

Williams notes in reading John's Gospel that Jewish-Christian “traditions involve representations of the past as fundamental to their identity.”⁷² And he writes that “the Gospel of John dramatizes the connection between ignorance and refusal of the truth, loss of identity and capacity to speak, awareness of unmanageable contingency and the emergent possibility of new speech.”⁷³ Here the past first and foremost entails loss as failure. In the above passage, the virtues of faith and hope, which point towards positive future possibilities of transformation, recovery, and renewal, are only “created out of” loss, judgement, and repentance, out of the complete disintegration of self-identity, out of the *annihilation* of the tragically failed Petrine self, and thus *ex nihilo*. The faith that the New Testament narratives of Christ's passion-resurrection acquaints us with is, for Williams, reliant upon the reality

⁷¹ Williams, “Beginning with the Incarnation,” 83.

⁷² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 115.

⁷³ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 121.

of tragic failure. In other words, “the *ex nihilo* gift of the risen Christ” is the gift of a “new creation” *ex nihilo* because the gift of resurrection only emerges *ex* loss and failure.

Medi Volpe helpfully lays the finger on this significant characteristic of Williams’s christological–anthropological commitment. She observes, for Williams, the tragic pattern of loss and discovery is “impossible to avoid” because it is disclosed in the paschal story, the central narratives of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and of the betrayal and recovery of Peter.⁷⁴ The pattern of loss and recovery has a christological significance, and thereby it is incumbent upon the followers of Christ. The way of human pain and growth is placed, for Williams, as a fulcrum of the Christian way of life: it is “the pattern of loss and recovery that characterize [*sic*] Christian life for Williams.”⁷⁵ The human self is genuinely transformed, rediscovered, and expanded by the risky and costly loss and disintegration of self. The pattern of loss and recovery as a “theological *habitus*”⁷⁶ of Williams thus penetrates through his christology and anthropology. And this is profoundly related to his tragic imagination because this pattern assumes the ineluctability of failure and loss prior to the possibility of growth and maturity. As Volpe clearly articulates, “the theme of tragedy in Williams’ theology implies that one suffers concrete loss, which may take the form of bereavement or failure.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Williams’s “understanding of loss [*is*] central to the transformation of desire at the heart of the Christian life.”⁷⁸

To elaborate, Williams’s tragic pattern of loss and recovery substantially relies upon his tragic account of the failure of Peter, to whom the death of Jesus means a death of what he has accumulated in terms of self-identity, a difficult learning of how to “lose what they believe to be crucial to their identity.”⁷⁹ His failure is tantamount to the loss of his Lord, his identity, his community, his belief, and his time—past, present, and future. “His” faith begins in such a death, such a loss. Henceforth, the resurrection of Jesus is a recovery of what he failed and lost. The death and resurrection of Jesus makes a judgement upon his failure and loss and brings about his conversion and transformation. This is how Peter (including other Peter-like characters and all congenial readers) lives “a life of *repentance in hope*” in mourning his failure, and how he learns to grow, to become mature, to be

⁷⁴ Medi Ann Volpe, “‘Taking Time’ and ‘Making Sense’: Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15, no. 3 (July 2013): 345–60 (356).

⁷⁵ Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 136.

⁷⁶ Volpe, “‘Taking Time’ and ‘Making Sense,’” 358.

⁷⁷ Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 136.

⁷⁸ Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 96.

⁷⁹ Rowan Williams, “Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics” (1989), in *On Christian Theology*, 265–75 (269). Alongside “Beginning with the Incarnation,” this essay serves to illustrate a basic framework of Williams’s theological tragic imagination. He suggests a way of seeing “the reality and inevitability of conflict” (273) as that which we grow through by reckoning with it.

transformed in difficulty. As Williams notes in *The Wound of Knowledge*, healing is presented as being achieved *only* “by anguish, darkness and stripping,” through “deepening our hurt.”⁸⁰

If growth is transformation into recovery, and renewal is always engendered on the condition of repentance of failure, it is then natural for Christian life to focus on cultivating the practice of repentance and mourning involved with self-critique. When Williams construes “theology as a way of life,” that life therefore means a life of contrition, repentance, and conversion. “Theology is, thus, called to repeated conversion”⁸¹ in “the receptive and contemplative dimension.”⁸² It is a way of life with “self-scrutiny, . . . penitence, self-examination, silence and the invitation to shared discernment” in “individual self-examination” and “shared reflection” in order to “check and question the temptations to self-reliance and complacency.”⁸³ Therefore, “theology is bound up with the practice of repentance.”⁸⁴ Likewise, for Williams, “the basis of dogma”⁸⁵ is the difficult learning of growth and maturation in the unescapable “pattern of loss and recovery”: mourning in the present of our past and present tragic failure in anticipation of the possibility of future recovery.

Williams’s pattern of loss and recovery is also closely related with his doctrines of revelation and the Eucharist. For Williams, revelatory value “emerges from a questioning attention to our present life in the light of a particular past—a past seen as ‘generative.’”⁸⁶ Thus, “liberating men and women from the dominance of past patterns,”⁸⁷ “a liberation from servile, distorted, destructive patterns in the past, a liberation from anxious dread of God’s judgement”⁸⁸ arises out of working out the past. Revelation has “essentially to do with what is *generative* in our experience—events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life.”⁸⁹ In other words, the recovery and renewal from loss and failure has a revelatory value.⁹⁰

⁸⁰ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1990; first edition 1979), 20–21; italics mine.

⁸¹ Rowan Williams, “Theology as a Way of Life,” in *The Practice of the Presence of God: Theology as a Way of Life*, ed. Martin Laird and Sheelah Treflé Hidden (London: Routledge, 2017), 11–16 (16).

⁸² Williams, “Theology as a Way of Life,” 13.

⁸³ Williams, “Theology as a Way of Life,” 15.

⁸⁴ Williams, “Theology as a Way of Life,” 12.

⁸⁵ Williams, “Beginning with the Incarnation,” 82. In this essay, Williams claims that repentance, by the judgement of Christ, in hope is “the true basis of dogma” (89). It can thus be said that for Williams, a tragic pattern of transformation constitutes a basis of Christian dogma.

⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Revelation” (1986), in *On Christian Theology*, 131–47 (134). Williams is worried that “theology . . . is perennially liable to be seduced by the prospect of bypassing how it *learns* its own language” (131) and is thus concerned about the process of revelation in which theology learns the meaning of its language.

⁸⁷ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” 139.

⁸⁸ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” 138.

⁸⁹ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” 134.

⁹⁰ Darren Sarisky and Jason Fout, however, raise a question of Williams’s understanding of revelation in “Trinity and Revelation.” In particular, they share a criticism that he puts too much emphasis on the human side or “subjunctive mode” in the divine–human relationship. Darren Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Exploration* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 169–70, 236; and Jason Fout, “The Many Moods of Revelation,” in *The Vocation of*

Williams understands the significance of the Eucharistic representation of the passion narratives as communal performance of the narratives from the perspective of re-working the self from the past. Regarding the passion narratives, he notes that “we are dealing with texts that emerge in communities which are in any case acutely aware of working against the background of a past which they must reckon with and make sense of.”⁹¹ And the communal, dramatic representation of the passion narrative contributes to a community’s “constantly re-imagining itself and its past.”⁹² The Eucharist, the communal performance of Christian narrative in parallel with public performance of Attic tragedy, is enacted upon Peter’s pattern of growth from failure of misrecognition and denial, through remembrance and repentance, transformation and conversion, into restoration and recovery. The community of the disciples with renewed memories is invited in the Eucharist to transform memory into hope in the renewed encounter with the risen stranger; this also invites the world to the same hope of transformation. In order to do this, the restored disciples need to be aware of their particular pasts of betraying and of being forgiven so that they are equipped with penitential, vigilant, self-critical awareness.

Complicity and Mourning in Time: Donald MacKinnon and Gillian Rose

Williams’s difficult pattern of growth lies in a chronology that moves from the tragic failure of the *past*, through repentance in the *present*, to the hope of renewal in the *future*. He configures the modes of time as the mourning of the present in the pattern of past loss and failure, and then future recovery and renewal, only in which human flourishing is achieved. The future relies on the present when the past is to be reckoned with. The recognition of the past means “the acknowledgement that our present possibilities are shaped by our past, that limit remains inescapable.”⁹³ To reckon with the past is to come to terms with our collusion to deny and betray Jesus with the disciples at the Last Supper, our bitter complicity in the cross, our pain-tortured agony of regret, remorse, self-accusation, and guilt. The possibility of renewal in the future, “a future in which the unaltered memory of hurt comes to be

Theology Today: A Festschrift for David Ford, ed. Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers, and Simeon Zahl (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 48–60 (55).

⁹¹ Rowan Williams, “The Discipline of Scripture” (1990), in *On Christian Theology*, 44–59 (53). In this essay, Williams privileges a “diachronic” or “dramatic” way of reading Scripture over a “synchronic” way. The latter tends to overlook a movement in time and ends up harvesting “premature unities and harmonies” (47), whereas the former reads the text as “a sequence of changes, a pattern of transformations” in a “single time-continuum” (45), inviting the readers to face tensions between the stories within the text, and thereby encouraging a more *difficult* unity in the text without evading the differences in multiplicity.

⁹² Rowan Williams, “Theological Integrity” (1991), in *On Christian Theology*, 3–15 (7). Williams claims that “religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God *declines the attempt to take God’s point of view* (i.e. a ‘total perspective’)” (6) primarily by practising the *dispossession* of (Freudian) fantasy. See “The Freudian Projection of Self-Interest onto God” and “The Triune Metaphysics of Self-Dispossession and the Human Ethics of Self-Dispossession” in the present chapter.

⁹³ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 165.

lived with in unpredictable ways, without wholly destructive consequences”⁹⁴ is predicated upon the present recognition of the past failure of “mistrust and violence” in rejecting the self-identity given by God.

Thus, for Williams, “our being-in-time” is constructed within the framework of present mourning and future hope. The time that the death and resurrection of Christ shows is “a time that can be seen as *given*, as an opportunity for growth or healing, since no disaster is finally and decisively destructive.”⁹⁵ Williams states, “the resurrection promise has something to do with the roots of our mistrust and violence in our unwillingness or inability to receive our human identity from God as a gift, at every juncture in our experience.”⁹⁶ In line with the death and resurrection of Christ, “the theological assurance about the future that is proclaimed in Christian discourse”⁹⁷ defines Christian hope for renewal and growth. Such a Christian hope thus has nothing to do with facile optimism ignoring the ineluctably tragic reality: “It is not a conviction that there is or must be a happy ending to any particular human story. . . . Rather it is an assurance that time is always there for restoration.”⁹⁸

Because we assume the analogy between our time and the narrative time of Scripture, and Scriptural time moves toward the specific time of renewal and liberation in Jesus, we in our own conflicts can maintain hope. We are not spared the cost of conflict or promised a final theological resolution; rather we are assured of the possibility of “re-producing” the meaning that is Christ crucified and risen, . . . Church—not by the effort to reconcile at all costs, but by carrying the burdens of conflict.⁹⁹

As Williams is always determined to stress, there is no “consolation” in the sense that neither practical “compensation” nor all-comprehending “explanation” are guaranteed for human being in time. But, our time, like Peter, goes from failure and loss to recovery and renewal together with the time of Christ from death to resurrection. The future restoration and growth of self-identity emerges from our painstaking admittance and mourning of our failure and its cost. The tension between mourning and flourishing, the eschatological tension between “not yet” and “already,” or “the broken middle” in Gillian Rose’s terms, is not expected to be resolved. It is to be reckoned with. In this sense, “memory . . . can be the ground of hope, and there is no authentic hope without memory.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 118.

⁹⁵ Rowan Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics” (1997), in *On Christian Theology*, 239–64 (249). In this essay, Williams conceives interiority as a sense of self not in terms of space, but of time. He maintains that, following Augustine, the self is not something hidden, a kernel that is unearthed by peeling away external husks; it is rather “an integrity one struggles to bring into existence” (240), something revealed in “the ordinary difficulty of conversation and negotiation” (240). A sense of true self arises in a difficult process of dialogue and exchange.

⁹⁶ Williams, “Resurrection and Peace,” 273.

⁹⁷ Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany,” 249.

⁹⁸ Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany,” 249.

⁹⁹ Williams, “The Discipline of Scripture,” 58.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *Resurrection*, 25.

Williams proposes that threefold temporal pattern of transformation—particularly mourning our past in “the unaltered memory” of our complicity in Jesus’s death—as a point of departure from the “unfruitfulness” of Donald MacKinnon’s tragic knowledge. Williams states that a “deep concern not to soften or underplay the element of the tragic in human—including Christian—life”¹⁰¹ lies at the heart of MacKinnon’s theology: “MacKinnon’s relentless insistence on attention to the costliness of historical action and the unconsolated nature of historical pain remains the most disturbing and important lesson he has to teach.”¹⁰² But Williams complains that MacKinnon’s concern is liable to remain merely “passive” so that it does not develop into action, protest, and transformation. His accounts of the tragic and its incorporation into the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation is nothing other than (with a reference to Karl Marx—perhaps the eleventh thesis in *Theses on Feuerbach*)¹⁰³ a mere change in “interpretation” rather than a genuine change of the world. He presses the charge against MacKinnon that his “interpretation” of “Christ as an exemplar of unresisting suffering” and “Christ as the enactment of divine *solidarity* in suffering” remains a mere change of words and falls behind his own expectation that it is “a shocking and unmerciful judgement upon human and specially ecclesiastical power relation.”¹⁰⁴ Williams poses a telling question: “What does this judgement *change*, other than ways of seeing and speaking?”¹⁰⁵ Also, he casts suspicion on “his scheme of stressing interpretation at the expense of change.”¹⁰⁶ The seemingly robust interpretation of Christ in terms of suffering is no more than an interpretative change. Williams eventually avers that “any emphasis on the acceptance and interpretative transformation of moral or spiritual defeat is dangerously open to an ideological use that amounts to a commendation of passivity. What is absent from the ‘tragic’ orientation is a proper seriousness about the imperative to transformative *action*, and thus to protest.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, the language of suffering in MacKinnon’s theology does not give rise to any potentiality of transformation and rather slips into an adulation of passive powerlessness.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Rowan Williams, “Foreword,” in *Kenotic Ecclesiology: Select Writings of Donald M. MacKinnon*, ed. John C. McDowell, Scott A. Kirkland, and Ashley John Moyses (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), ix–xi (x).

¹⁰² Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 165.

¹⁰³ “Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point however is to *change* it.’ . . . Marx wants an interpretation of the world which is consciously and purposively linked to, or part of, an attempt to change the world.” Gavin Kitching, *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* (London: Routledge, 2015; originally published 1988), 29.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 162.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 162.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 164.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 162.

¹⁰⁸ This critique has an affinity with his reservation about the christology of Maurice Wiles. Williams states that what “alters the possibilities in a situation” is made possible “by (at least) reconstituting our sense of ourselves, our responsibility, our guilt or complicity, our hope.” And the language of Christian doctrine includes resources for self-critique within itself. Rowan Williams, “Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism” (1993), in *Wrestling with Angels*, 275–99 (288).

What then makes it possible, for Williams, to bring about transformation? It is the recognition of our own complicity in the tragic suffering and pain of the world. He offers a very lucid example:

How do you learn to confront the fact, say, of racism in British society? Not by information, not by words. They produce the kind of pain we cannot handle, and we take refuge in ideological denial of the facts of power in Britain. To confront both the suffering of the victims of racism and my own *de facto* involvement in and responsibility for this, without fantasizing and self-lacerating guilt, requires specific encounter and the possibility of its continuance; not reconciliation, but a kind of commitment without evasion. The “reading” of our situation in certain terms rests on existing small-scale transformations—and also, of course, assists in the creation of further transformation.¹⁰⁹

It is through reckoning with our complicity in such suffering and pain that “judgement” comes into life as responsibility, and into fruition as change and transformation. The mourning of the present towards the reintegration of the future is predicated upon the memory of past complicity.

The way in which we recognize our own complicity in contemporary “crosses” is effected by the acute awareness of our complicity in the “cross” of Jesus, which is exposed in the narrative of Jesus’s death. And gravely to perceive what happened between us and Jesus at the last supper and on the cross is mediated by encountering the Holy Spirit. Hence what emerges from this is, for Williams, “a serious doctrine of the Spirit as the divine condition for truthful ‘coming to judgement’ in the Church’s life.”¹¹⁰ Williams calls for attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, something he accuses MacKinnon and other contemporary theologians of neglecting.

The encounter of the Spirit with Christ is potentially an encounter with our own complicity in the cross, and so with the crosses of our own making in the present and past; it should, then, if it is what it claims to be, form a central strand in Christian protest and the articulation of such protest in transforming *action*.¹¹¹

Our encounter with the Spirit is an event that is viewed from the cross and points out the cross. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit interlocked with our complicity creates not only the transforming action beyond a passive change of mere words, but also, at the same time, generates contrition and humility that safeguards the transforming action from degenerating into facile optimism and its authoritarian guarantee. To recognize our own failure, complicity in Jesus’s death in encountering the Holy Spirit gives birth to the action that can change the world. A radical, exhaustive awareness of the self as betrayer and/or crucifier is a prerequisite for transforming the world.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 164.

¹¹⁰ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 165.

¹¹¹ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 165.

¹¹² Williams is intent on emphasizing the Spirit’s role to reminding us of our tragic failure. “In John’s Gospel, Jesus predicts the coming of the ‘Spirit of Truth’ (14.26, 16.13–15) who will recall the history of Jesus and present it afresh to the disciples” (*The Tragic Imagination*, 121). This retelling of the Spirit is, for Williams, a primordial tragic

And it should be noted that Williams maintains, above all, the Fourth Gospel dramatizes such a genuine possibility from tragic failure to comic recovery in that it purports “not to reverse this history or explain it but to mourn appropriately and in so doing find a place to stand that is not wholly paralysed by the memory of atrocity.”¹¹³ For Williams, John’s Gospel tells us that to recognize our complicity in the crucifixion, our failure of rejecting Jesus, and the atrocity that that failure brings about makes it possible for us to be transformed into genuine disciples. He writes: “The inner rejection of one’s own identity as God’s creature and the object of God’s love, the violence done to human truth *within* the self, becomes visible and utterable in the form of complicity in rejecting Jesus. The inner-readiness to come to judgement and to recognize the possibility of truth and meaning becomes visible and utterable in the form of discipleship, abiding in the community created by God’s love.”¹¹⁴ He continues to write: “You may recognize your complicity in the rejection of Jesus and at the same time accept the possibility of a different role offered by the continuing merciful presence of God in the post-Easter Jesus.”¹¹⁵ Through our innermost willingness to judge our innermost failure we are drawn together in the community of God’s abiding love and merciful presence.

Our attention is then to be drawn to what brings about the innermost willingness to admit complicity: *mourning*. For Williams, under the influence of Gillian Rose, to weep deeply is the innermost locus where comic possibility arises out of facing up to tragic loss.¹¹⁶ Mourning is the lamentation of contrition that flows from the innermost depth of our spirit where the terror and fear of our failure and limitation resides. Mourning thus has something to do with “the conviction that only in hell could the goodness of the good news be heard for what it was.”¹¹⁷ Only through “the descent into the hell” of terror and fear of failure is our *complicity* in the suffering and death of Christ transformed into our *conformity* to the suffering and death of Christ. Awareness and embrace of our complicity and guilt in mourning and weeping are represented as assuring a “comic” possibility for the other as well as myself, and so the complicity and guilt are transformed into “redeemed complicity” and “charitably

imagination, in that the Spirit recalls the brutal reality of tragic failure and its consequent catastrophe. Eventually, the role of the Johannine *paraklētōs*, the Helper, boils down to helping us mourn appropriately without being paralysed by the past without consolation. According to a commentary for general readers like myself, however, the Johannine Helper is “an advocate and a witness, but also consoles the disciples. He encourages them to remember Jesus’ work and leads them into the whole truth.” *The Oxford Bible Commentary: The Gospels*, ed. John Muddiman and John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 224. One might then wonder if Williams is inclined to leave little room for the Spirit’s *consolatory presence* in his pneumatology.

¹¹³ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 121.

¹¹⁴ Rowan Williams, “The Judgement of the World” (1989), in *On Christian Theology*, 29–43 (32).

¹¹⁵ Williams, “The Judgement of the World,” 33.

¹¹⁶ It is commonly acknowledged that Gillian Rose is one of the most important thinkers exerting an influence on the formation of Williams’s theological thought. Graham Ward even states that “Williams’s study is not without its pathos; the repeated return to the work of Gillian Rose suggests a play of shadows from an ongoing bereavement. But the eloquence can mask.” Graham Ward, “Extremities,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 2 (April 2018): 235–42 (241). See also Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 93, n. 120.

¹¹⁷ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 160–61.

assumed guilt.”¹¹⁸ This is “the importance of the word ‘mourning’: pain can be lamented, perhaps even lamented in a way that transforms something in the viewing or hearing subject.”¹¹⁹

Hinged upon mourning are the possibilities of thinking, speaking, and listening to pain and loss, and of recovering and reintegrating individual and communal identity without being utterly paralyzed, immobilized, and overwhelmed by tragic catastrophe. The renewal of the failure of our misrecognition, the redefinition of the cost of our complicity emerges from the mourning.

Only in the working out of this misrecognition can recognition occur: the narrating of the ultimate catastrophe in which truth is displayed as the victim of the world we know is the precondition of seeing that the world we know is indeed lethally contingent. It is in the light of this revelation that we learn to mourn without reservation, but also to be attentive to what is now making it possible to tell the story of catastrophe.¹²⁰

It is only through seeing our misrecognition and its cost that renewal and growth is made possible, and the mediate seeing is practised as repentant mourning. In short, mourning is the only place through which comic possibility is produced from tragic imagination.

Particularly, following the philosophy of Gillian Rose, Williams adopts the difference between “aberrated mourning, . . . a mourning that leads to speechlessness and impotence,” and “inaugurated mourning, . . . a mourning that is ‘the recovery of strength by moving from refusal of loss to acknowledgment and acceptance’.”¹²¹ Aberrated mourning is a mourning so “distracted from the proper business of mourning” and “fixed in itself and for itself” that it ends up being “a lament for the way in which the world crushes meaning.”¹²² It becomes a helpless place “where existence is itself construed as a kind of loss and fall, with grace located in an impossible historical or metaphysical elsewhere.”¹²³ Then “if extreme loss is not to be ‘mourned’ in Rose’s sense, what are we to do but avert our gaze in one way or another?”¹²⁴ The possibility of redemptive meaning emerges only from the “inaugurated mourning of suffering and loss. It begins in “silence—words give way to a speechlessness that may signify dependence or grace”¹²⁵—and ends up with strength and speech. Only this right form of mourning “leaves open the way to *forgiveness*.”¹²⁶ The moment of the inaugurated

¹¹⁸ Rowan Williams, “‘The Sadness of the King’: Gillian Rose, Hegel, and the Pathos of Reason,” *Telos* 173 (Winter 2015): 21–36 (33).

¹¹⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 95.

¹²⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 121.

¹²¹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 145.

¹²² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 146.

¹²³ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 76, n. 32.

¹²⁴ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 156.

¹²⁵ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 76, n. 32.

¹²⁶ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 75, n. 32.

mourning is “a moment in the formation of a genuinely thinking subjectivity.”¹²⁷ In other words, “a self-awareness that is not enslaved to fictions about the self . . . understands the speaking and thinking self as *what it is that holds the memory of loss and trauma without collapsing*.”¹²⁸ Mourning is a truthful way of reckoning with “the broken middle,”¹²⁹ the memory of our own past failure and its cost without being drowned in it. It constitutes one of the most relevant and contributory aspects for human transformation and growth in the sense that it offers a truly rigorous moral imperative that is a way of reconstructing a truthful self mired neither in melancholia nor in euphoria.

Mourning has always something to do with “a particular way of repeating the memory of loss and anguish,”¹³⁰ which can be collectively ascribed to “the disciples in the Upper Room at the Last Supper (destined collectively and individually to betray Jesus).”¹³¹ Williams poignantly expresses our collective complicity as follows:

There is therefore no avoiding the fact of our complicity in the death of Jesus. Like the apostles we evade and refuse and deny and escape when the cross becomes a serious possibility. Terror or involvement, fear or failure—of hurting as well as being hurt—the dread of having our powerlessness nakedly spelled out for us: all this is the common coin of most of our lives. . . . Only thus can we translate our *complicity* in the death of Christ into a *communion* in the death of Christ, a baptism into the death of Christ: by not refusing, by not escaping, by forgetting our realism and our reasonableness, by letting the heart speak freely, by exposing ourselves, by making ourselves vulnerable.¹³²

In appropriate mourning, our collective complicity in Jesus’s death, one of the “false and trivializing kinds of solidarity, the collusive togetherness that can be the foundation of corporate violence and

¹²⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 143.

¹²⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 143.

¹²⁹ Kate Schick offers a helpful overview of Rose’s vision of the un-mended middle: “Rose is against positive and emphatic notions of progress. However, a fragile and aporetic notion of progress does have a clear place in her thought: she maintains that we should not give up working towards comprehension of the brokenness in which we find ourselves, in the hope that we might learn. This knowledge is not directed towards ‘mending’ the broken middle. Although Rose is against tragic resignation that does not engage in the struggle to know or understand, she is also against utopian visions of a holy or mended middle. She argues that the middle must always be negotiated—with fear and trembling, in Kierkegaardian language—and that this requires a continual working through. This working through is *inaugurated mourning*, which struggles both to know and to be known.” Kate Schick, *Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 7–8.

John Milbank sometimes gives a critical appraisal of Rose’s “broken middle.” The ethics of Rose, according to Milbank, appears as a “chastened, tragic, and less jocular gloss, a form of postmodern impossibilism, the new opium of the intellectual, . . . a Hegelian variant on hopelessness.” John Milbank, “On the Paraethical: Gillian Rose and Political Nihilism,” *Telos* 173 (2015): 69–86 (78). Clare Greer sums up Milbank’s critique of Rose as follows: “It is important to note that . . . in Rose the middle is *perpetually* broken, and this indicates that the unity proposed in the idea of the ‘broken middle’ is an endless deferral.” Clare Greer, “The Problem of the Middle in Gillian Rose’s Reading of Hegel: Political Consequences for the Theology of John Milbank,” in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. A. P. Smith and D. Whistler (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 189–208 (206).

¹³⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

¹³¹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 125.

¹³² Williams, “To Give and Not to Count the Cost,” 9.

expulsion,”¹³³ is transformed into a renewed community. “Mourning, in the form of repentance, is tightly interwoven with the process by which solidarity is reconstituted through the dramatic action: our solidarity in betrayal with the disciples at the Last Supper becomes a solidarity with those reconnected with each other in the post-resurrection encounters like the Emmaus story.”¹³⁴ The collective complicity in the death of cross is transformed into a communal fraternity of renewed selves through mourning located in the middle of the Last Supper and Easter.

The communal performance of the Christian passion narrative is, therefore, “the liturgy of mourning.”¹³⁵ The Eucharist, first and foremost, does and should inculcate our past complicity and reacquaint us with our past failure to truthfulness and faithfulness without termination. To celebrate the Eucharist means to bring us to the Upper Room or “the charcoal fire in the courtyard of Annas the high priest” collectively to mourn our complicity in Jesus’s death, to breathe new life into our memory of past infidelity, and to resuscitate, resurrect, and revivify the incalculable atrocity of the cost of our past failure.

Not Wiping Away but Weeping Endlessly

The Petrine pattern of growth means that everyone is invited to mourn his or her own failure in an act of mourning that has no end: “We continue to expose ourselves to hearing because we shall never have heard enough; having heard, we typically revert to un-hearing and un-seeing, and so must repeat the story of divine constancy and human infidelity.”¹³⁶ Thus, “self-discovery” only emerges from “the process of self-criticism and self-questioning.”¹³⁷ We weep relentlessly because, invoking Rose, “every moment of recognition is also a new moment of salutary error to the extent that it is the taking of a position.”¹³⁸ For Williams, “any hope for healing (not cure) or redemption—not escape from or simple cancellation of—tragic brokenness begins in the painful but salutary recognition of our ongoing complicity in its nexus.”¹³⁹ It can be said that his emphasis on the ascetical practice of endless repenting and mourning serves to provide a firm place for establishing a possibly genuine theological ethic.

¹³³ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

¹³⁴ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 126.

¹³⁵ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

¹³⁶ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 125.

¹³⁷ Rowan Williams, “Making Moral Decisions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; first edition 2001), 3–15 (13).

¹³⁸ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 61.

¹³⁹ Giles Waller, “*Felix Culpa?* On Rowan Williams’ *The Tragic Imagination*,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 2 (April 2018): 243–51 (251).

Williams concludes a challenging sermon with a declaration of the extreme weight of mourning: “He [Christ] will not wipe the tears from our eyes until we have learned to weep.”¹⁴⁰ And the learning process of mourning is endless. The painstaking journey of difficult learning is and should be a labourious process that ceaselessly remains unconsolated. We are to remain unconsolated and to mourn endlessly that which would otherwise, for Williams, fall into anti-tragic fantasy of self-consolation and illusory compensation. Christ does not only wipe the tears from our eyes but also makes us tearful and calls us to weep because it holds true that we are always crucifiers vis-à-vis Christ the crucified, and the process of learning in the light of our complicity in murdering him never ends. It is not that Christ teaches and gives us what he has “already” done for us by the life of his resurrection, by the gift of the Spirit, but that he keeps reminding us that the end does “not yet” come.

Speaking in terms of eschatological tension between “already” and “not yet,” however, it seems to me that whereas Williams thinks highly of how we endure and mourn our failure and pain in the mode of “not yet,” he touches too lightly on how what Christ has “already” achieved *pro nobis* works in the present realities of our lives, how the eschatological potential of Christ’s achievements breaks through and cuts across our present tragic woe and calamity. Christ trickles down with and in our tears rather than wipes them away. For Williams, the presence of Christ coincides and resonates with the moment of mourning itself rather than mends and ameliorates it.¹⁴¹ In doing so, he gives the impression that wiping and consolation is immature whereas only weeping and mourning is mature, as if wiping and weeping, and consolation and mourning are not mutually nurturing of human life. What Christ had already done for and given to us may enable us not only to learn to continue to weep but also to learn to cease to weep, not only to cultivate an authentic attitude to what makes us weep but also to contemplate how the eschatological wiping-the-tears is present and thereby ameliorates our brokenness.

And in that regard one might wonder if Williams’s visions of Christ as well as of God which echo the tragic horizon of brokenness fail fully to acknowledge the creative initiative and power of divine agency which plays a decisive role in restoring and reconstructing a lost, collapsed self-identity into a renewed, recreated agency. Williams creates the impression of highlighting that human recovery relies originally and primarily upon how a catastrophically failed self reckons with failure

¹⁴⁰ Williams, “To Give and Not to Count the Cost,” 12.

¹⁴¹ Accordingly, as Vincent Lloyd contends, Williams, in his theological appropriation of Gillian Rose, conceives of God as only emerging from, being found, in the broken middle: “God does not mend the middle but echoes its brokenness. We cannot think or speak about God except as absence, an absence which reminds us of our imperfection and encourages us not to give up the work of witness.” In short, for Williams, the difficulty of learning and recognition emerges only from reckoning with the broken middle that God *echoes* rather than *ameliorates*. Vincent Lloyd, “On the Use of Gillian Rose,” *The Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 5 (September 2007): 697–706 (704). Yet, in Lloyd’s view, Williams’s understanding of Rose’s ethics is “incomplete” (698) and “limited” (704) because, for Lloyd, he fails to pay due regard to Rose’s ethical attention to the theological virtues of faith and love in the vision of her philosophy. “What has happened to Rose’s deep engagement with the theological virtues, particularly with faith and love? . . . She says much more practically—about faith and love. Williams has focused his theological recovery of Rose on metaphysics and not on ethics, and particularly not on the theological virtues” (705–6) of faith and love.

and loss *without* giving due explanation as to how a *tragically devastated* self is *able* to recognize the divine gift of renewal and forgiveness in the first place, what difference divine agency makes *in advance of and for* human agency and how *divine initiative empowerment enables* us to accept divine forgiveness and to see a new horizon of relationship.¹⁴² A careful reading of the dramatic scene of Peter's rehabilitation in the Gospel of John, however, informs us that Peter in fact seems to be in "aberrated mourning" rather than "inaugurated mourning" and that it is *the initiative of divine gift* that actually *inaugurates* his recovery and reinvigoration.

The Resurrection scene at the Sea of Galilee does what ancient tragedies could not do. It forces Peter to confront the Lord, whom he has denied knowing after all of his earlier professions of loyalty. Peter's subsequent rehabilitation and position in the church owe nothing to his own character or merits. They are simply and only a gift of the risen Lord.¹⁴³

This *non-tragic* reading of Petrine renewal and growth gives a good account of the divine-human encounter by understanding human transformation with a proper consideration of the priority and efficacy of divine agency which empowers human agency and intensifies its effectiveness, the theme which I will treat in detail later. In other words, Williams paints too agonized a picture of the Petrine pattern of growth, perhaps by paying insufficient attention to the role of divine gift while simultaneously making the rehabilitation of a devastated self primarily reliant upon the human act of mourning. Moreover, as I will argue in what follows, the difficult pattern of growth that Williams describes fails to make room for an *un-Petrine* pattern of maturation and transformation.

Johannine Comic Irony and the Un-Petrine Pattern of Growth

Comic Irony as Recognition and Reception

I have discussed in the beginning that Williams pays special attention to Johannine tragic irony: the people for whom the Son came down to the world fails to recognize and receive him; rather, the more love is revealed, the more hatred is provoked. This tragic aspect of irony seems at first exhaustively to do justice to what the Johannine irony unfolds *unless* one pays due regard to other aspects of Johannine irony—the comic irony of recognition and reception. In fact, a lot can be said about "the abundance of possible comic elements in the Gospel."¹⁴⁴ I believe that a brief examination of

¹⁴² See "The Priority and Efficacy of the Divine Gift in Philippians 2: John Barclay on Pauline Divine Gift" in the next chapter.

¹⁴³ PHEME PERKINS, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 99.

¹⁴⁴ JO-ANN A. BRANT, "The Fourth Gospel as Narrative and Drama," in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, 186–202 (194).

Johannine comic irony raises meaningful questions about, and throws critical light on, Williams's exhaustive attention to the *tragic* irony of John's Gospel.

In one of the most influential works on the theme of irony in John's Gospel, Paul Duke makes a very significant point with regard to this issue, which seems to enable us to see a limit of Williams's "tragic" vision of the Johannine irony.

Jesus' rejection by his own is not confined to Israel itself, however. More broadly, the world was made through him yet does not know him (1:10). More narrowly, Jesus' own brothers do not believe in him (7:5); and his disciples defect (6:66) or deny their discipleship (18:17, 25, 27), or satanically turn on him (13:2). So at more than one tragic level his own do not receive him. Yet there is an accompanying comedy, for if his own reject him, some surprising outsiders come forward to receive him (an irony noted in the Synoptics). "The Jews" who have spurned their Christ and consequently their heritage are quickly replaced by a willing company of Samaritans, Galileans, and Greeks—many of them women. Jesus loses many of "his own," but their rejection of him ironically opens wide the door for the world to go after him (12:19–23). The gathered councils of Israel condemn their one hope to death (11:47–53), and in lifting him up to die, draw the scattered children of God to receive him indeed (1:12; 12:32).¹⁴⁵

Duke suggests that there is a twofold irony. Just as it is an irony that Jesus's own people reject Jesus, it is also an irony that the most unlikely people receive him. If the former is called a tragic irony of *rejection*, the latter is called a comic irony of *reception*. The "accompanying" comic irony—which is not followed from loss and failure and its mourning, and thus not captured in the Petrine pattern of failure and recovery—should be brought into focus unless one is inclined to only see the tragic aspect of irony.

Let me elaborate on how the twofold irony of John is narrated in the Gospel of John. A geographical symbolism in the Gospel provides evidence in support of the importance of comic irony. According to Wayne Meeks, Jerusalem stands for "the place of judgment and rejection," and Galilee and Samaria signify "the places of acceptance and discipleship."¹⁴⁶ The "itinerary" of the Fourth Gospel serves to reveal theological purpose. Jesus "stayed" when he was "received" by those who became his disciples in Galilee, Transjordan, and Samaria, whilst he was unable to "stay" in Judea where he was rejected. Taking into account many different Johannine statements, for Meeks, the "'staying' with or in the disciples (5:38; 14:17; 15:1–18; I John 2:14; 3:24; 4:12, 15, 16; 2:27; 3:9, 15, 17; especially John 8:35 and 12:34)" is "hardly an accidental use of language."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 111–12.

¹⁴⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, "Galilee and Judea in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85, no. 2 (June 1966): 159–69 (169).

¹⁴⁷ Meeks, "Galilee and Judea in the Fourth Gospel," 167–68.

Jerome Neyrey aligns himself with this reading. He highlights that Galilee and Judea are “code names for welcome or rejection”¹⁴⁸ and stand for “binary opposite[s]: ‘love–hate’ or ‘friendly–hostile’ or ‘remain–not remain.’”¹⁴⁹ And he renders this symbolic meaning rather suitably for my argument: “It has been observed that while Jesus is described as ‘remaining’ in various towns in Galilee and even Samaria, he never ‘remains’ in Jerusalem. . . . Thus, if ‘remaining’ indicates loyalty and adherence to Jesus, then the Gospel tells us that this happens in ‘Galilee,’ wherever that might be. But it does not happen in “‘Judea.’ . . . in ‘Galilee’ Jesus is accepted, gains disciples, and remains: in ‘Judea’ he is harassed, put on trial, and killed. He does not remain in ‘Judea.’”¹⁵⁰

Mary Coloe also substantiates the Johannine geographical symbolism: “Here in Samaria Jesus is recognized not simply in terms of Jewish or Samaritan messianic hopes but in terms of his divine purpose for all people: ‘God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the *world* might be saved through him’ (3.17). The Samaritans come to believe that he is ‘the saviour of the world’ (4.42).”¹⁵¹ Here Coloe makes a significantly important point: “Such faith is the aim of the Gospel’s ideological discourse (20.30–31), and such faith is only possible because of the openness, theological insight and words of this woman of Samaria (cf. 4.42).”¹⁵² In other words, the Fourth Evangelist may want to draw the reader’s attention to the *ironic faith* of outsiders rather than to the ironic failure of insiders to whom Williams seems to pay a great deal of attention.

The Un-Petrine Pattern of Growth: Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple

A pattern of growth that differs markedly from the tragic pattern of Peter’s failure and recovery emerges in the Gospel of John from a discussion of the creation of the new family, which includes Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple. This observation raises a further question of Williams’s tragic imagination.

According to Williams, recognition and reception are produced and gained (in the future) only after repenting and mourning (in the present) the tragic failure of misrecognition and complicity (in the past). His pattern of growth indicates that comic recognition and restoration are only achieved after working out tragic failure and loss. Human growth is patterned by a painstaking movement from failure and loss to renewal and recovery. However, this tragic pattern of growth does not account for the pattern of Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple, which communicates little about the time-sequence from rejection to reception. In John’s narrative, they are not the characters who fail to

¹⁴⁸ Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 81.

¹⁴⁹ Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, 66.

¹⁵⁰ Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, 66.

¹⁵¹ Mary L. Coloe, “The Woman of Samaria: Her Characterization, Narrative, and Theological Significance,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, 182–96 (196).

¹⁵² Coloe, “The Woman of Samaria,” 196.

recognize Jesus and come to realize their own blindness to misrecognition only through the catastrophic loss and suffering that tragic failure engenders. In order to show that there are some salient characters in John's Gospel who are *not* necessarily regarded as being caught up with tragic complicity in Jesus's death, it may be helpful to summarize some of the latest scholarship on Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple

First, some Johannine scholars represent the character of Mary Magdalene as an example of discipleship in the Fourth Gospel. "A careful investigation into the techniques used to characterize MM [Mary Magdalene] in the Fourth Gospel reveals that not only is she a major character (despite her late arrival in the narrative), but also a positively paradigmatic one. . . . The reader recognizes Mary as one who exhibits attributes that are presented as desirable throughout the narrative. She is a proactive character who seeks Jesus. She is obedient to the will of Jesus, and, therefore, God."¹⁵³ It might therefore be said that "she exemplifies aspects of true discipleship"¹⁵⁴ in the Gospel of John.

It seems that the picture of Mary Magdalene's discipleship, which exemplifies a crucial strand of Johannine discipleship, does not accord well with the tragic pattern of failure and renewal to which Williams almost exclusively attends.¹⁵⁵ Williams contends that "the Eucharist . . . identifies the worshippers with the unfaithful apostles at table with Jesus,"¹⁵⁶ and it is bound to confine the meaning of Christ's passion and resurrection only within the boundary of the guilty consciousness of failed disciples represented by Peter's betrayal. It does not make enough room for imagining what Christ's table means to Mary Magdalene in John's Gospel. It is not the case that the incarnation of divine goodness "triggers misrecognition" in Mary or that the recognition of Mary occurs only in the working out of her tragic denial or betrayal. The picture of how Mary grows does not necessarily match the Petrine pattern of misrecognition and recognition, failure and restoration.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Jaime Clark-Soles, "Mary Magdalene: Beginning at the End," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 626–40 (638). See also Sandra M. Schneiders, "John 20:11–18: The Encounter of the Easter Jesus with Mary Magdalene—A Transformative Feminist Reading," in *What is John?: Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 155–68.

¹⁵⁴ Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 336.

¹⁵⁵ I do not intend to allude to a controversial issue over the rivalry between Peter and Mary Magdalene in terms of the paschal privilege or priority, or to mount a feminist critique of a tendency to undervalue the Easter appearance to Mary Magdalene.

¹⁵⁶ Williams, "Theological Integrity," 10.

¹⁵⁷ It is interesting to see that in *Resurrection* Williams in fact makes a passing reference to the difference of Mary's loss and grief from Peter's misrecognition and betrayal, which is tragically complicit with the death of Jesus. Williams expounds how the strangeness of the crucified and resurrected Christ is differently portrayed in the stories of "Peter as a betrayer" as well as "Mary simply as a lost and grieving human being" (xii). He acknowledges that "Mary does *not* belong to the apostolic band who deserted Jesus in his passion" (39), and "the theme of betrayal and illusion permeating the Peter stories" (39) is invisible in Mary's story. She belongs to "only the most basic and naked sense of loss, need, void, prior even to the sense of guilt or failure" (39). Joy Ann McDougall appreciates Williams's distinguishing Mary from Peter in her essay "Rising with Mary: Re-visioning a Feminist Theology of the Cross and Resurrection," *Theology Today* 69, no. 2 (July 2012): 166–76 (174–75). Nonetheless, Williams makes too much of

Now I would like to turn my attention to another exceptional character in John's Gospel, the Beloved Disciple, who may hardly prove complicit in Jesus's death. He plays a crucial role in constructing the Fourth Evangelist's narrative, in particular in the stark contrast with the failure of Peter. The contrasts between them are widely acknowledged. For instance, Mark Stibbe maintains that "the conduct of the BD [Beloved Disciple] is paradigmatic and exemplary, whilst that of Peter is clearly misguided and coloured by pathos."¹⁵⁸ James Resseguie propounds:

Unlike Peter, he does not stumble over Jesus' word or misinterpret his actions. . . . He sees the glory in the flesh and wants the reader also to adopt this point of view. . . . He seldom speaks in the narrative in contrast to Peter. . . . Yet his actions speak louder than his own (tagged) speech. He faithfully follows and remains with Jesus from beginning to end (1:35–40; 21:20–23). He has a special relationship with Jesus that is underscored at the beginning and end of the Gospel's second half (13:23; 21:20). He not only follows Jesus into the courtyard also (18:15–16). He is the only male disciple to witness Jesus' death on the cross and the first of a new spiritual family (19:26–27).¹⁵⁹

To put it differently, in contrast to Peter, the Beloved Disciple shows great theological integrity of action and contemplation, to which Williams often attaches profound significance; he remains faithful and loyal to Jesus from the beginning up to the point of his death. He plays a decisive role in reconstructing "*familia Dei*,"¹⁶⁰ God's new family under the feet of Jesus: "As a trustworthy witness and interpreter of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he is in a position to compensate for the loss of the crucified Jesus and to take under his protection the believing followers of Jesus, who are symbolized by the Mother of Jesus."¹⁶¹

Christopher Skinner highlights that, as "the Johannine disciple *par excellence*, . . . the Beloved Disciple is the ideal character with whom the implied audience should identify and after whom the implied audience should pattern its behaviour."¹⁶² The Beloved Disciple, a figure who is neglected in Williams's Johannine exegesis of what Christian life should be, "represents true discipleship."¹⁶³ As aptly highlighted,

Peter's tragedy and builds a Christian pattern of maturation upon it while paying little attention to whatever significant difference that doing justice to the differing story of Mary could make.

¹⁵⁸ Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 99.

¹⁵⁹ James L. Resseguie, "The Beloved Disciple: The Ideal Point of View," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 537–49 (549).

¹⁶⁰ Jean Zumstein, "The Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple: How a New Family is Established Under the Cross," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 641–45 (642). D. Francois Tolmie sheds light on a missional meaning of the new spiritual family in "The Women by the Cross: Creating Contrasts," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 618–25.

¹⁶¹ Zumstein, "The Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple," 645.

¹⁶² Skinner, "Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization," 112, n. 7.

¹⁶³ Barnabas Lindars, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 22–23. I have no intention to engage with controversies as to whether the relationship between the Beloved Disciple and Peter exhibits rivalry/cooperation, superiority/inferiority, or equality/subordination, and whether it reflects the relationship between the Johannine community and the

the tragedy of Peter's flawed character is highlighted by the Fourth Evangelist. The presence of the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel highlights Peter's failures by demonstrating what is possible for a disciple of Jesus.¹⁶⁴

The royal lifting up of Jesus on the cross, the foundation of a new family of God, and the gift of the Spirit (19:17–37) have been marked by the presence of the Beloved Disciple (cf. 19:25–27)—and the absence of Simon Peter!¹⁶⁵

Considered in this light, Williams's tragic imagination seems inclined to make too much of the tragic failure of Peter while doing injustice to other equally or more salient narratives without recourse to tragic failure in John's Gospel. And it is worth remembering that it is not the dramatic pattern of Peter so much as the life of the Beloved Disciple that the reader of John's Gospel is invited to be inspired by and called to emulate.

To conclude, the Beloved Disciple exemplifies a genuine human encounter with Jesus around the cross in the Fourth Gospel, and Mary Magdalene reveals aspects of recognition and faith. And the author invites the readers to encounter the contemplative presence and tranquil loyalty of the exemplary characters at least as much as the characters with the tragic failure and dramatic rehabilitation. Therefore, it is untenable and unconvincing to construe that the divine–human encounter and human growth are centred upon tragically triggered misrecognition and painfully attained recognition unless one may covertly marginalize the stories of Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple and prioritize the story of Peter (as well as his male colleagues and political–religious oppressors and perpetrators). In other words, it is possible to anticipate a pattern of human growth and maturation that is not predicated upon the precondition of the lethal failure and tragic breakdown of misrecognition. Otherwise, something tragic becomes *essentially constitutive* of Christian life.

Apostolic communities under the Petrine tradition. And what I have argued of the Beloved Disciple does not necessarily undervalue the importance of Peter's dramatic discipleship. I may concur with Bradford Blaine who claims that "Peter's discipleship is noisy and provocative. BD is a more mysterious and ethereal character, subsisting quietly on his faith *in* Jesus and the love *of* Jesus" (3). "Whereas BD achieves distinction in the Gospel for being a recipient of Jesus' love and for possessing an unimpeachable, if rather meditative, faith, thereby showing the reader what a loving relationship with Jesus *looks* like, Peter demonstrates how discipleship is *crafted*" (183). Bradford B. Blaine, Jr., *Peter in the Gospel of John: The Making of an Authentic Disciple* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Markus Bockmuehl also emphasizes Peter's dramatically crafted discipleship and its lasting importance. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Remembered Peter: In Ancient Reception and Modern Debate* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). See also Markus Bockmuehl, *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory: The New Testament Apostle in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

¹⁶⁴ Perkins, *Peter*, 99.

¹⁶⁵ Francis J. Moloney, *The Resurrection of the Messiah: A Narrative Commentary on the Resurrection Accounts in the Four Gospels* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 122.

Ontologizing the Tragic

Rowan Williams places exhaustive attention on the failure of the tragic characters who build up the intensity of tragic catastrophe and thereby leaves little room for the other salient narratives which are not characterized by tragic failure. *No one* is exempted from tragic complicity in the death of Jesus and thereby from the pattern of growth from failure to recovery through the responsibly mournful life with pangs of guilt. In the theological exposition of John 9, Williams equates “us” with the “religious experts” who are fatally oblivious to “mechanisms which allow them to use violence to protect their safe and self-justified positions; mechanisms that allow scapegoating, that seek security at the expense of others.”¹⁶⁶ And, immediately, the evaluation of the religious experts translates into “a vision of yourself—a failing, ignorant, frightened self.”¹⁶⁷ Williams identifies himself and urges us to identify ourselves with no one other than Peter, his accomplices, and the perpetrators. That every single one fails and is thus complicit with its catastrophe without exception shows, for Williams, following Balthasar, the state of the world as a place not only “radically divided from God by sin”¹⁶⁸ but also “a ‘godless’ space” that “has chosen to shut out divine life, . . . violently closing itself off from the divine and thus violently rejecting divine life when it is embodied in the world.”¹⁶⁹

These sound tragic, but Williams asserts that careful treatment of finitude and sinfulness can avoid an ontological radicalization or metaphysical inscription of the tragic.

It is not the finite as such that is “tragic”; finitude *as we experience it* is alienated from its natural orientation. . . . And this alienation has to do with the corruption of our desire and the consequent distorting of our knowing (a familiar Augustinian link). In such a world, finite agents will experience the difference of God as distance, the otherness of God as threat and rivalry. . . . In other words, the “spatialization” of infinite difference is the consequence of sin; and this is the condition in the midst of which the divine saviour acts and suffers. As the Johannine text suggests, his embodiment of divine grace is experienced as the disruption of the ordered religious and political world and rejected as such, rejected as precisely a rival claimant to human territory. . . . He embodies the difference between Father and Son as it is refracted and distorted through the medium of the sinful world. That is to say, *in a world like this*, the continuity-in-difference of the divine life appears under the form of disastrous and painful distance, as the divine Word identifies with the alienated state of humanity. The divine continuity-in-difference can be uttered in this world only as the narrative of darkness and distance overcome.¹⁷⁰

This crucial passage sheds light on how Williams understands what the divine–human relation is like in the sinful world and how we are bound to speak of it. And this also gives a hint at the logic by

¹⁶⁶ Williams, *What is Christianity?*, 26.

¹⁶⁷ Williams, *What is Christianity?*, 27.

¹⁶⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 123.

¹⁶⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 122.

¹⁷⁰ Rowan Williams, “‘Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed’: A Response to Comments on *The Tragic Imagination*,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 2 (April 2018): 280–88 (283–84).

which he understands and defends the relation of human tragedy in the world and super-tragedy in God in the theology of Balthasar.

Williams believes that he manages to “avoid treating ‘the tragic’ as in itself some kind of metaphysical category, or speaking of a tragic world view.”¹⁷¹ The created finitude *as such* is not tragic, which would be otherwise a metaphysical or ontological inscription of the tragic. The finitude *as such* which still preserves the created goodness sourced from the divine goodness should not be identified with sinfulness. Although the *sinful, fallen* condition of the *finite* world, a “finite world where distorted desire has definitively taken root,”¹⁷² is prone to fall into the corruption of desire and the distortion of knowledge by failing to recognize the finite’s radical dependence on God, it is the sinfulness and fallenness of the finite world, not the finitude *as such*, that is liable to such a tragic failure. It is tragic that created agents *sinfully* misrecognize the creator–creature difference of gift and dependence as a *spatialized* distance of competition and rivalry that threatens the world of the finite. In a sinful world like this, the divine–human relation and salvation history cannot help but be spoken of as the negation of negativity, a reversal of competition, yet it does not mean that the life of God *as such* is spoken of as overcoming tragedy.

However, considered in the light of what I have argued before—his exhaustive attention to Johannine tragic irony and the Petrine pattern of growth, and a contrasting inattention to un-Petrine narratives—, Williams gives the impression that he fails to retain the precarious difference between finitude and sinfulness at the level of *how he really reads the Johannine text* while seeming to manage this at the level of formal affirmation and intention. At the level of affirmation and intention, Williams is intent on elaborating the classical theistic commitments to the divine superabundant gift of goodness in the relation of absolute non-competition with the finite world, and to insubstantial evil as the privation of goodness (both, as I have argued, are obscured and undermined in the theology of Balthasar).¹⁷³ In what follows, however, I will attempt to argue that the repeated affirmations of the non-competitive account of the divine–human relation and the understanding of evil as the privation of good are dangerously leached away from his reading of the Gospel of John, as tragic imagination jostles for the perspective from which the Gospel is to be read.

Let me discuss how Williams conceives of God and evil. As I have already briefly examined in the previous chapter, Williams signs up for the traditional understandings of God as the ultimate source of good and of evil as privation of good. According to Williams, an Augustinian understanding of God and evil disqualifies a *spatializing* language of both God and evil. It only allows us to use “de-

¹⁷¹ Williams, “‘Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed,’” 284.

¹⁷² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 112.

¹⁷³ See “Sin and Evil in Relation to God: Balthasar, Williams, and Coakley” in the previous chapter.

spatializing’ talk about both God and evil.”¹⁷⁴ God is to be spoken of in “de-spatialized” ways because God as Being sustains and benefits all finite beings at a fundamentally different ontological level, without sharing and jostling with them for the same space; evil is also to be conceived of in a “de-spatialized” way because evil has nothing to do with divine goodness and thereby is of no ontological value, “no-thing, no-space.”¹⁷⁵

As regards evil as *privatio boni*, Williams explains the “privation of good” as *spatializing* the non-spatially gratuitous God. In the finite world, if I may repeat, “finite agents will experience the difference of God as distance, the otherness of God as threat and rivalry. . . . The ‘spatialization’ of infinite difference is the consequence of sin; and this is the condition in the midst of which the divine saviour acts and suffers.”¹⁷⁶ Williams is keen on pressing home the full force of tragic reality of the world as inevitably *spatializing* God. Indeed, “the world is tragic, in the sense that our fallen perceptions of the world are so flawed that we are constantly, and inevitably (since the Fall), involved in mistaken and conflicted accounts of our true interests.”¹⁷⁷ The world is persistently and inexorably deprived of good. Nonetheless, evil has no ontological value at all. Williams insists that such a tragic recognition is not tantamount to accepting “a definition of tragic conflict as a *necessary* feature of created order”¹⁷⁸ and thereby ontologically radicalizing the tragic. In other words, “this frustration is contingent on a history, not intrinsic to the nature of their good.”¹⁷⁹ Although created agency is encompassed by “unwelcome choices, greater and lesser evils, therefore, we are not encouraged to see these choices as intrinsic to our condition.”¹⁸⁰ In other words, “it is not a generalized malfunction that constitutes evil but the specific departure from harmony”¹⁸¹ with divine grace. The refusal of being attentive and accordant to such a non-competitively superabundant God amounts to an evil, yet it is “insubstantial” as the “privation of good” without having any ontological value; evil is the loss and frustration of our temporal attention and adjustment to the generous gift of God, yet it is the insubstantial *privatio boni*, rather than contingently substantial; evil, therefore, is not allowed to be spoken of as participating in the goodness of divine being at all, as having something to do with the life of God who created the world *ex nihilo*; evil shares *no* ontological value or meaning in relation to God the source of being and goodness.

As regards God, according to Williams, while evil is nothing, God is not a thing which shares space or place with created agents in the finite world; it means that God is not one of the competitive

¹⁷⁴ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 101.

¹⁷⁵ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

¹⁷⁶ Williams, “Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed’,” 283–84.

¹⁷⁷ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 100.

¹⁷⁸ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 100.

¹⁷⁹ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 100.

¹⁸⁰ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 105.

¹⁸¹ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 104.

inhabitants contending for space with spatial beings in the finite world; God as self-subsistent and infinite being is involved with the contingent and finite beings in a non-competitive manner, in divine gratuity, plenitude, and initiative; God is so “miraculously generous in creation and in salvation”¹⁸² that created agents are in complete dependence upon the “overflowing fullness”¹⁸³ of God in the process of time and space; God is fundamentally understood as outpouring gratuity and infinite generosity, as “the noncompetitive other whose freedom makes us free.”¹⁸⁴

It is worth quoting Williams’s fascinating elaborations on the fundamental importance of the non-competitive relation of God and the world at length:

If God is truly the source, the ground and the context of every limited, finite state of affairs, if God is the action or agency that makes everything else active, then God cannot be spoken of as one item in a list of the forces active in the world. God’s action cannot be added to the action of some other agent in order to make a more effective force. And this also means that God’s action is never in *competition* with any particular activity inside the universe. . . . divine and created action could never stand alongside each other as rivals (so that the more there is of one, the less there would be of the other). God makes the world to be *itself*, to have an integrity and completeness and goodness that is—by God’s gift—its own. At the same time, God makes the world to be open to a relation with God’s own infinite life that can enlarge and transfigure the created order without destroying it. . . . The fullness and flourishing of creation is not something that has to be won at the Creator’s expense; the outpouring of God’s life into the world to fulfil the world’s potential for joy and reconciliation does not entail an amputation of the full reality of the world’s life.¹⁸⁵

Williams presses home the full importance of creation up to the point of a universal economy of divine life. Williams elucidates elsewhere:

God creates a kind of belonging without analogues in the “natural” world. . . . God has chosen to belong with us; and if we refuse to belong with him, he is still to be found with us in our self-rejection or self-exclusion, since he cannot define his position as another sort of “ordinary” belonging with its conditions and limitations.¹⁸⁶

In other words, as Susannah Ticciati clearly outlines, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* that Williams elucidates is “a relationship between God and creation in which God is the whole context and presupposition of creation, such that creation has no independent standpoint from which it can

¹⁸² Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

¹⁸³ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

¹⁸⁴ Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 102.

¹⁸⁵ Williams, *Christ: The Heart of Creation*, xii–xiii.

¹⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, “The Cross in the 21st Century,” in *Seven Words for Three Hours*, ed. Edmund Newell (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2005), 27–36 (32).

struggle against God, even in its rebellion.”¹⁸⁷ Viewed from his classical theistic understanding of creation, to be a creature is to be radically dependent on such a creator, and to be attentive to and appreciative of the fundamental reality of utter dependence on the exhaustive economy of divine gift.

Williams makes an important christological point about the embodiment of the non-spatial otherness of God, that the non-spatial God is incarnated into the spatial world, and that we can only encounter God as an incarnate, spatialized life in the finite world. Here lies a “difficulty of faith” which, for Williams, the Gospel of John most clearly shows.

Our selfhood is made real in the face of the other—a divine other whose divine otherness is identical in this world with the historical, material givenness of a particular life and death. The tough paradox of Johannine faith is that, for the purpose of our growth into life, the transcendent reality which does not and cannot occupy a shared space with us is only accessible and functional as another portion of the world, a fleshly human life. The difficulty of faith is not simply to realize in ourselves a capacity long since given but long since overgrown. It is to apprehend the “place” in the historical world occupied by this human life as a place where in principle any mortal can stand—or perhaps to apprehend the place where any mortal stands as capable of being identical with the place of Jesus.¹⁸⁸

Williams rightly observes that the Johannine theology squares with the classical theistic emphasis on God’s benevolent unceasing outpouring of gift to the world. And he is also right to stress that the incarnation of the infinite God in the finite world as narrated in the Fourth Gospel mounts a tough challenge for us to choose whether we receive it as an ultimate expression of the divine initiative of gift-giving in a visible and tangible form, or reject it as an unprecedentedly threatening infiltration into our territory.

What I want to note is, however, that the Johannine theological intention in accordance with classical theistic commitment seems too hastily to ossify into a tragic vision of the world.

In classical Christian theology, Jesus’s humanity has its particular, unique historical identity simply because it has been taken as the vehicle in history in which the eternal outpouring of God’s life is embodied. What makes Jesus who he is is the bestowal of divine life in the world. But the world is a world that has chosen to shut out divine life, and it is what *it* is as a “godless” space, violently closing itself off from the divine and thus violently rejecting divine life when it is embodied in the world.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Susannah Ticciati, “Transforming the Grammar of Human Jealousy: Israel’s Jealousy in Roman 9–11,” in *The Vocation of Theology Today*, 77–91 (85). Here she is referring to Rowan Williams, “On Being Creatures” (1989), in *On Christian Theology*, 63–78. For her extensive and appreciative treatment of Williams’s elucidation of the non-competitive creator–creature relation, see also Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 58–66, in which she highlights the resonance of Williams with Kathryn Tanner’s articulation of non-competitively creative divine and human agency.

¹⁸⁸ Rowan Williams, “Anglican Approaches to St. John’s Gospel,” in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 68–81 (80).

¹⁸⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 122.

On the basis of what I have argued about how Williams reads the Gospel of John, there is no one who comes to recognize Jesus as the embodiment of the infinite God who is a non-competitively outpouring source of life. No one is exonerated from the tragic failure of rejecting the Son of God as a competitive rival. He avers that the Fourth Gospel displays “the bare fact that human agency *all around Jesus* is in revolt against the embodiment of life”¹⁹⁰ and that “Peter stands for *all the human characters* whom Jesus confronts.”¹⁹¹ In doing so, he comes very close to an Augustinian reservation about tragedy, namely, that “it evades the goodness of creation by ontologizing evil as substantively real,”¹⁹² rather than affirming the goodness as substantial and thereby unmasking evil as insubstantial. While a picture of good recognition and reception is given *no* room in his reading of John, a tragic picture of sinful misrecognition and rejection seems to take *all* over. If the world is conceived of as—not simply originally sinful but beyond it—entirely rejecting and standing over against God, and catastrophically revolting against and antagonistic towards God without remainder, with violence or in complicity and collusion with it, it comes very close to making sin and evil somehow *substantial* and making the ontological value of created goodness almost *nihil* by allowing sinful failure and horrendous catastrophe to squeeze out the ontological goodness of creation (if the world cannot be left a vacuum). To conclude in connection with the debate over the place of tragedy in the thought of Williams, his tragic reading of John’s passion story then comes very close to an “ontological radicalization of the tragic.”¹⁹³

Such an overwhelmingly tragic picture may create a theory of the resurrection as “*new creation ex nihilo*”—“the *ex nihilo* gift of the risen Christ”¹⁹⁴ is the gift of “*new creation*” *ex nihilo* because the gift of resurrection only emerges out of complete loss and failure¹⁹⁵—yet at the cost of sacrificing *un-Petrine* narratives of comic irony of reception and simultaneously Procrusteanizing the unfathomable breadth of encountering Christ’s grace by the tragic wisdoms. The exhaustive dominance of the tragically sinful failure of Peter mutes the potentiality of the creation’s goodness which life-giving encounter with Christ actualizes in primordial correspondence to the divine

¹⁹⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 120; italics mine.

¹⁹¹ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, 73–74; italics mine.

¹⁹² David S. Cunningham, “Tragedy without Evasion: Attending [to] Performances,” in *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, 213–32 (218). Cunningham argues that such an Augustinian critique is circumvented by attending to the nature of tragedy, that it is written to be *performed*.

¹⁹³ Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 124.

¹⁹⁴ Williams, “Beginning with the Incarnation,” 83.

¹⁹⁵ Susannah Ticciati gives a relevant analysis. She suggests that in the theology of Karl Barth the resurrection of Christ is to be spoken of as “creation out of death” rather than “creation out of nothing.” “The one true reality established by the resurrection is the gift of life as it presupposes the death of sinners. There is no creation *ex nihilo*, strictly speaking; there is only creation *ex morte*.” Susannah Ticciati, “How New is New Creation? Resurrection and Creation *ex nihilo*,” in *Eternal God, Eternal Life: Theological Investigations into the Concept of Immortality*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 89–114 (107).

goodness.¹⁹⁶ There are noteworthy narratives in the Gospel of John in which God is recognized as the one who superabundantly gives the gift of life to finite beings and thereby empowers them to be dependent on and receptive and to God (yet, alluding to Sarah Coakley, not necessarily to be vulnerable and submissive to God).¹⁹⁷

The Cry of Dereliction and Self-Dispossession

Matthew Bates suggests that for theologians paying great attention to the cry of dereliction, “the storm-center of theological interest is the idea that the Father could have temporarily forsaken or abandoned the Son, and all the theological possibilities, problems, and implications that this terrifying God-abandonment might entail.”¹⁹⁸ This is the case in Rowan Williams’s theology as well as in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s. The focused attention on the agony of abandonment, “a *locus classicus* for modern Trinitarian theology,”¹⁹⁹ plays a crucial role in the theologies of both. Both have a shared tendency towards taking Jesus’s cry of dereliction as intelligible and comprehensible and as a solid *foundation*—rather than as an inscrutable *conundrum*—upon which an entire structure of systematic theology can be built and whole narratives of salvation history unfold.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ David Hart notes that contemporary tragic theology is “thoroughly unbiblical—worse, it veils the true biblical narrative (and its provocations) behind the glamorous but ultimately empty allure of an alien and sacrificial spectacle.” Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 374.

¹⁹⁷ One may want to stress that Williamsian tragic anthropology does not necessarily exhaust the breadth of Anglican anthropology and spirituality which is often deemed to be best represented by him. Anglican theologian A. M. Allchin, whom under Williams did a doctoral study, highlights that “the Christian tradition is thus full of an affirmation of God’s nearness to humankind, and of our unrealised potential for God. The basic affirmation that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is the Christ, are affirmations about the possibilities of man, about the intimacy of relationship between human and divine, no less than about the mystery of God.” A. M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988), 63 (Kathryn Tanner alludes to the affinities of this work in “Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal,” 35, n. 2). “In affirming the possibility of humankind to love and know God, the capacity of the human person for union and participation in the divine glory and presence, and in affirming that this possibility is the only true and ultimate fulfilment of the deepest longing of the human heart and mind, the Anglican spiritual tradition is asserting nothing that is not universally Christian.” A. M. Allchin, “Anglican Spirituality,” in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes, John Booty, and Jonathan Knight, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1998; first edition 1988), 351–64 (362).

¹⁹⁸ Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 127.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Joseph White, “Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology,” *Nova et Vetera* 6, no. 2 (2008): 377–402 (377). See also Thomas Joseph White, “Jesus’ Cry on the Cross and His Beatific Vision,” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 3 (2007): 555–82 (555).

²⁰⁰ G. K. Chesterton poignantly expresses the unintelligibility of Christ’s cry of dereliction. He is neither fascinated with a dark paradox of love and dereliction, nor with even attempts to build a theological system on it. For Chesterton, the agony of Christ is *neither intelligible nor imitative*: “There were solitudes beyond where none shall follow. . . . And if there be any sound that can produce a silence, we may surely be silent about the end and the extremity” G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936; originally published 1925), 243. According to Adam Johnson, the christology of John of the Cross supports the unfathomability and inimitability of Jesus’s cry of dereliction because the dark night of Jesus on the cross is the *unique* experience of his *atonement* ministry that reconciles creator and creature. It leads Johnson to take exception to Balthasar who understands John identifies

Williams acknowledges that the cry of dereliction is “the theme which other theologians of the twentieth century have put very much at the heart of their thought—I think particularly of the Roman Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar here—but it’s a theme which has its roots in quite a lot of specifically Russian reflection on the Incarnation and the Trinity, . . . a tradition of reflection on the relation between the Cross and the Trinity which is pervasive in Russian thought since the middle of the nineteenth century.”²⁰¹ Balthasar makes the cry of dereliction a pivotal point on which the *whole* biblical statements and its theological reflection hinge: “Scripture clearly says that . . . God (the Father) gave up his Son out of love for the world and that all the Son’s suffering, up to and including his being forsaken by God, is to be attributed to this same love. All soteriology must therefore start from this point.”²⁰² And Williams seems to inherit “dereliction theologies”²⁰³ following the lead of Balthasar and Russian thought. His tragic imagination is, I will show, intensified by the tragic paradox of the Son’s cry of abandonment by the Father: when the incarnate Son was crucified and abandoned by his own people, he was even abandoned by his own Father. He has placed great emphasis on Jesus’s cry of dereliction from early on in his *oeuvre*.

Sooner or later, any theology, certainly any Christology, and certainly, I would maintain, any theology of the Spirit, must face the problem of the exegesis of Christ’s cry of dereliction on the Cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”²⁰⁴

we are, in the New Testament, invited to see God manifest in weakness, suffering and death is indisputable; what I do not understand is why this should prevent us from speaking of the hiddenness of God in Christ. To say that God is revealed in the death of Jesus, revealed in his cry of dereliction, revealed in Gethsemane, all this is straining language to breaking point; because what we are affirming is that God is revealed by his *absence*, revealed in the condition of ‘Godlessness’. . . . To say that God is revealed in the humanity of Jesus is to say that God is revealed in the Godlessness of man, in the hiddenness of God in a world of chaos, anguish and senselessness.²⁰⁵

Williams avers that the doctrines of God, Christ, and the Spirit must deal with Jesus’s cry of dereliction. And he seems quite confident to say that there is a single, unified christology of the *whole*

the crucified Jesus’s *bellish* darkness as human darkness of *purgation*. Adam Johnson, “The Crucified Bridegroom: Christ’s Atoning Death in St. John of the Cross and Spiritual Formation Today,” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 21, no. 4 (2012): 392–408 (398–99). Johnson’s important remark also draws our critical attention to Coakley’s understanding of John’s christology as lacking an *atoning* emphasis: “John expounds no ‘theory’ of Christ’s redemption or atonement with any clarity.” Sarah Coakley, “Redeeming Human Nature according to John of the Cross: An Early Modern Confrontation with ‘Darkness’” (Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Theology, St. John’s College, University of Durham April 4–6, 2016), 7–8.

²⁰¹ Rowan Williams, “Metropolitan Anthony: Christ as God and Man,” *One in Christ* 48, no. 2 (2014): 286–97 (290–91).

²⁰² *TD IV*, 319.

²⁰³ Rowan Williams, “Barth on the Triune God” (1979), in *Wrestling with Angels*, 106–49 (136).

²⁰⁴ Williams, “The Spirit of the Age to Come,” 618.

²⁰⁵ Rowan Williams, “Person’ and ‘Personality’ in Christology,” *The Downside Review* 94:317 (1976): 253–60 (259).

Gospels which comes down to “the hiddenness of God in Christ” in which God is paradoxically revealed. He is intent on establishing a paradox that God is revealed in Jesus suffering the loss and absence of God. And the paradox of absence and presence, dereliction and revelation is “the inescapable element of paradox and strain in our talking about the death of Christ”²⁰⁶ that shatters human language about God. And Williams has evinced strong interest in articulating what it means to speak of the abandonment of God the Son in relation to God the Father in Balthasar’s trinitarian–christological theology.

What does it mean to identify, as the definite embodiment of God in human history, someone who declares himself abandoned by God? This is the question that motivates Hans Urs von Balthasar’s entire theological vision; but it is particularly central to what he has to say about the trinitarian life of God. Throughout Balthasar’s major writings, especially in his trinitarian thinking, there is a consistent stress on the governing priority of Jesus’ crucifixion.²⁰⁷

On the basis of what I have shown above, the present section of this chapter will draw attention to how Williams maximizes his tragic imagination on the basis of Jesus’s cry of dereliction. After showing that Williams’s appropriation of Balthasar’s dereliction theology plays a crucial role in envisioning his tragic imagination, I will first argue that the tragic imagination of Williams (as well as of Balthasar) fails to prove its credibility in both biblical and theological aspects because his tragic imagination that presses home the full force of the cry of dereliction begins with John’s Gospel and ends up betraying it by inducing into it the cry of dereliction which it textually and theologically lacks. Considering that much has been thought of dereliction and abandonment by Williams as well as Balthasar, by the same reason, much will have been *unthought*. More importantly, I will then seek to show that the concept of divine self-dispossession at which Williams’s construal of the cry of dereliction finally arrives exhibits a mythic image of God onto which the human predicament of self-interest and mutual conflict is projected in exchange for laying an intra-trinitarian foundation for a robust ethics of self-dispossession.

The Paradox of Dereliction and Intimacy in the Gospel of John

Williams willingly adopts Kevin Taylor’s definition of Balthasar’s understanding of Jesus as “the ultimate tragic hero.”²⁰⁸ According to Williams’s exposition of Balthasar’s tragic exegesis of the passion narrative of Jesus, what makes Jesus “the ultimate tragic hero” is his abandonment by his own Father. Jesus collides with God the Father, and, furthermore, “a multiple necessity”²⁰⁹ operates within

²⁰⁶ Williams, “Person’ and ‘Personality’ in Christology,” 259.

²⁰⁷ Williams, “Balthasar and the Trinity,” 37.

²⁰⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 122.

²⁰⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 122.

the collision between the historical Jesus and the heavenly Father. In the moment of Jesus's suffering by the world's violent hostility, "the Father is necessarily absent and impotent, . . . since that suffering is precisely the Father's will."²¹⁰ The Father's divine intervention necessarily means the retraction of the soteriological purpose by the Father himself. Thus the incarnate Son also cannot avoid suffering death, because his identity is the embodiment of the Father's will. To put aside the suffering necessarily means the denial of his Father's will, his own mission identity, and his own person. This tragic necessity paradoxically discloses a profound truth. Jesus's voluntary acceptance of suffering validates the Father-given identity and his unswervingly loving obedience to the Father's will. It thus means that it is the very cry of abandonment that substantiates the faithfulness to his mission and the obedience to the Father's will. The fact that Jesus cries the *abandonment* by the Father paradoxically reveals the *non-abandoned* union of the Son with the Father.

When, on the cross, he cries, "Why have you forsaken me?", he is in effect declaring that he himself has not abandoned his mission, not violated the logic of "being God" in a world like this; that is why he is there, dying in agony.²¹¹

If he has not abandoned his Father and his will is one with the Father's will, this cry of agony is a kind of witness to the unbroken unity of God as Father and God as Jesus Christ: only in the particularities of this human catastrophe, the rejection and killing of Jesus, can we see how such a union is real.²¹²

For Williams as well as Balthasar, fascinatingly, the cry of abandonment reveals the tragically paradoxical truth of unity in that his *love up to abandonment in death* proves his non-abandonment of the Father's will that ends up with the revelation of union with the Father. "There could, for Balthasar (and for any theologian), be no more extreme a statement of the tragic than this."²¹³ The tragic cry unleashes the most possible tragic necessity in the world and, in that regard, reveals the most *paradoxical* divine truth about the Trinity and the cross.²¹⁴ Williams says that this is the meaning of Jesus as "the supreme tragic hero"²¹⁵ in the trinitarian christology of Balthasar.

Williams encapsulates that, "for Balthasar, John's Gospel is the narrative articulation of all this"²¹⁶ (*without* acknowledging Taylor's critical evaluations, which are noted in the previous chapter, of how Balthasar wrongly both maximizes and minimizes human suffering by, respectively, categorizing all kinds of suffering as christologically meaningful but ignoring the irreducible diversity and particularity of suffering). As I have already shown in the previous chapter, Balthasar construes

²¹⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 122.

²¹¹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 122.

²¹² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 123.

²¹³ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 123.

²¹⁴ See "The Gospel of John: Kenotic Paradox of Mission Christology" in the first chapter.

²¹⁵ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 123.

²¹⁶ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 123.

the Gospel of John (questionably and dangerously) as a text in which the kenotic paradox of suffering and glory, abandonment and unity reaches a culmination. For Williams, in line with Balthasar, “the Gospel of John is ‘tragic’”²¹⁷ due to the tragic irony embedded in the incarnation and mission of Jesus.

And Williams draws upon Balthasar’s tragic reading of the Gospel of John, “one of the key texts for the theology of the Swiss Catholic thinker”²¹⁸ with the “often stunningly powerful focus on the unconsolated dereliction of the crucified.”²¹⁹ In doing so, he repeatedly pays emphasis on the tragic paschal paradox of abandonment and union, dereliction and intimacy, suffering and love; love, intimacy, and unity between the Father and the Son (and thereby His adopted children) is always manifest as suffering, absence, and abandonment, and the latter paradoxically proves and reveals the former *in the end*. Intimacy and love inexorably leads to abandonment and suffering, and that abandonment and suffering verifies and discloses that intimacy and love; intimate and unity in its fullest actualization and enjoyment is revealed only as gruesome outburst of otherness and difference. The Son’s pain of desertion and abandonment by the Father paradoxically validates and unveils the Son’s joy of unity and intimacy with the Father; the extremity of pain and agony in the Son paradoxically manifests the sublimity of his unity, love, and faithfulness in relation to God and its radical joy and delight. “Only one who has known the genuine intimacy of love, can be genuinely abandoned,”²²⁰ and only one who endures the suffering of abandonment “can guarantee the unity of essence. . . . Only in this context can true love, and its suffering, prove fruitful.”²²¹ His quotations from Adrienne von Speyr articulates that paradox of abandonment and unity: “Abandonment by the Father attests his nearness. . . . In his nearness the Father shows that he has forsaken the Son, and by forsaking him he shows that he is near to him.”²²² For Balthasar, therefore, “the deepest experience of abandonment by God, which is to be vicariously real in the Passion presupposes an equally deep experience of being united to God and of life derived from the Father.”²²³ The most profound theological paradox of Williams as well as Balthasar are generated from the most striking head-on collision of something extremely positive and something extremely negative. “We have, then, no concrete language for the unity of God but this story of risk and consummation, of unity forged through absence and death between God as source (Father) and the created life of Jesus of Nazareth (as son).”²²⁴ It is a tragic paradox that underlies Williams’ christology, discipleship, and spirituality on the basis of Balthasar’s theology of dereliction.

²¹⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 122.

²¹⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 121.

²¹⁹ Williams, “Balthasar and Differences,” 84.

²²⁰ *GL* 7, 216.

²²¹ *TD* 5, 85.

²²² *TD* 5, 263.

²²³ *GL* 7, 216.

²²⁴ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 159–60.

One cannot help here but raise questions which may concern the logic of the tragic paradox. Giles Emery has a misgiving about Balthasar: “Only sin *separates* one from God. How, then, could the supreme act of the charity of Christ effectuate such a separation?”²²⁵ Interestingly, a similar question is raised against Williams as to “*why* the Father’s love for the world in the Son has to

²²⁵ Emery, “The Immutability of the God of Love,” 51–52. It is interesting to see that some contemporary Thomists’s interpretations of Jesus’s cross event are dotted with critiques of Balthasar. To speak in overall, they suggest that the union of Christ and the Father is to be maintained throughout the whole career of Christ without creating the need to resort to the tragedy of the Son’s cry of abandonment by the Father.

Matthew Levering shows that Aquinas explains, though without recourse to the notion of the Son’s abandonment by the Father, how Christ experiences the fullness of the sinner’s anguished despair: “Does Aquinas underestimate the ‘cry of dereliction,’ so emphasized by Hans Urs von Balthasar and others? . . . Rather, Christ on the Cross intimately (in his human knowing) knows God, and therefore knows exactly what we sinners are rejecting and devaluing. By so knowing, Christ knows the depths of our loss in a way that no person, lacking such knowledge, could ever know it.” Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 77–78.

Thomas Joseph White also critically observes that Balthasar renders the cry of dereliction as “a mode of separation in the Trinity itself,” whilst Moltmann, Bulgakov, and Jüngel see it as “an indication of suffering transpiring within the divine nature itself.” He even demurs the minimal view of considering the cry as “an indication of spiritual darkness in the soul of Christ” on the basis of Aquinas’s doctrine of the beatific vision and Psalm 22, which records “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” in the first verse, but which concludes with praise and thanksgiving to God, as a crucial backdrop to the cry (with the support of Justin, Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Hilary). White concludes that “the final cry of Christ on the cross cannot be interpreted as a cry of either despair or of spiritual separation from God” (310), and, rather, “theologically speaking, if it *need not* be seen as an act of abandoning God through hopelessness, Christ’s cry to God *must* be considered as a cry of hope to God for deliverance” (315–16). Thomas Joseph White, “Did God Abandon Jesus? The Dereliction on the Cross,” in *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 308–39.

Simon Francis Gaine suggests on the basis of Aquinas’s doctrine of the *visio beatifica* and Psalm 22 that Christ “remained entirely fixed on his Father in prayer, as he cried out, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Ps. 21/22.1)” (188). He further argues that “a beatific Christ presents us with a convincing picture of our Saviour, which should leave the Catholic theologian in no doubt that a vision of the Father in his human mind on earth is a true part of the theological explanation of his extraordinary knowledge. For the Catholic theologian, the Christ’s earthly possession of the beatific vision should be a moral certainty” (200). Gaine rules Balthasar out of being such a Catholic theologian. He grieves over the dramatic contemporary decline of the once-dominant teaching of Christ’s earthly beatific vision in the theology. Simon Francis Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). For a pneumatological account of the beatific vision of Christ against its contemporary opponents, see Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 172–86 (esp. 173, n. 8). White and Gaine also might find Aaron Riches’s position agreeable yet slightly unsatisfactory. Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 208.

White and Gaine’s view of the relation of the Marcan cry to Psalm 22 is supported by a good deal of contemporary biblical research which inclines to interpret the Marcan cry of dereliction as close to a cry of praise and thanksgiving, for example, Stephen Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology* (London: Continuum, 2006), 31–32, 130. Holly Carey also claims that it is possible for Mark’s implied readers in the first century to see a more positive intertextuality between Mark and Psalm 22; see *Jesus’ Cry from the Cross: Towards a First-Century Understanding of the Intertextual Relationship between Psalm 22 and the Narrative of Mark’s Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2009). Larry Hurtado endorses his supervisee’s argument. See also Kelly M. Kapic, “Psalm 22: Forsakenness and the God who Sings,” in *Theological Commentary*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 41–56. Unlike those mentioned above, Francesca Aran Murphy focuses on the fact that Mark cites only one verse of the cry of dereliction from Psalm 22. Francesca Aran Murphy, “Profiling Christ: The Psalms of Abandonment,” in *Heaven on Earth? Theological Interpretation in Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 173–87 (185).

manifest as abandonment.”²²⁶ John Yocum offers a detailed criticism of the dereliction-centred descriptions of the Father and the Son and our adoptive relations.

If, however, the gospel is an invitation to share in the life of the Trinity, an adoption by the Spirit to a share in the Son’s relationship with the Father, how does one express that to someone who has known the wrath of a father against an innocent child? How does one convincingly portray rejection as a form of love? If the gospel is the announcement that we are made children of God in Christ, such a picture of the relation between Father and Son hardly makes this good news: we are made the children of a Father prepared to abandon his Son—though perhaps only temporarily—even as he suffers innocently and obediently. Perhaps the message of the death and resurrection of Christ might more effectively and faithfully be cast as the triumph of the unshakeable and invincible union of Father, Son and Spirit, even in the face of death, a triune love that is “stronger than death” and stronger than human sin.²²⁷

With regard to this issue, it is worth paying attention to the fact that Williams has endorsed Dorothee Sölle’s critique of the Son’s abandonment by the Father as a “theological sadism.”²²⁸ Williams contends that the non-intervention of Father in the crucifixion of Jesus does not necessarily mean “the Father’s desertion or even annihilation of the Son”²²⁹ or “the Father’s giving-up of the Son.”²³⁰ He rather subscribes to Sölle’s vigilance that, in her own words, “any attempt to look upon suffering as caused directly or indirectly by God stands in danger of regarding him as sadistic.”²³¹ And it seems hard safely to distinguish the Son’s abandonment by the Father in Williams’s (as well as in Balthasar’s) portrayal from the “theological sadism” that depicts “suffering as caused directly or indirectly by God.”

Unfaded Love and Unbroken Unity in the Gospel of John

Balthasar insists that Jesus’s cry of dereliction in the Gospel of Mark takes priority over the cries in other Gospels. He asserts, “*The* great word on the Cross, which is the only word narrated in Mark and

²²⁶ Andrew Moody, “The Hidden Center: Trinity and Incarnation in the Negative (and Positive) Theology of Rowan Williams,” in *On Rowan Williams*, 25–46 (35).

²²⁷ John Yocum, “A Cry of Dereliction?: Reconsidering a Recent Theological commonplace,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 1 (January 2005): 72–80 (74). He also poses an exegetical question of the place of the speculation on the cry of dereliction with a particular reference to Balthasar. “Is the true significance of the cross and resurrection so enigmatically enclosed in one verse? It is at least worth asking whether this approach does not take us down paths that lead us not further in, but further away from the heart of the work of Christ as presented in the New Testament. We ought to be wary when Balthasar tells us that in dealing with the Passion, we have to go beyond exegesis” (80).

²²⁸ Rowan Williams, “Word and Spirit” (1980), in *On Christian Theology*, 107–27 (121).

²²⁹ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” 161.

²³⁰ Williams, “Word and Spirit,” 121.

²³¹ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1975), 26.

Matthew, is the cry to the lost God”²³²; “Primacy must go to the cry of abandonment—in Mark the single cry from the Cross. . . . Besides this fundamental word, the other words from the Cross could, without any essential narrowing of their bearing, be understood as interpretations of that actual situation of judgment (both objective and subjective) which the events render distinct enough.”²³³ It can be therefore said that that Balthasar strongly evinces, as Walter Moberly articulates, “a pronounced contemporary tendency to take only the cry of dereliction in Matthew and Mark with full imaginative and theological seriousness (a tendency which in effect restricts and inhibits the full canonical witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus).”²³⁴ Having said that, one may not want to be content merely with the acknowledgement that what I have argued above—Balthasar’s extreme paradox and “theological sadism” (perhaps as well as masochism)—results from his opting for Mark’s cry of *abandonment* at the expense of John’s cry of *accomplishment* in constructing his trinitarian–christology. If we endorse Williams’s way of reading Balthasar’s Jesus as “the ultimate tragic hero” in the Gospel of John, it is in fact that Balthasar reads dereliction and abandonment into the Gospel of John which textually and theologically lacks it. And Williams has no reservations about Balthasar’s illicit exegesis and rather draws upon his reading in reconciling the passion narrative of Christ with tragedy.

There are a plenty of studies to tell what theologically distinctive imports the textual lack of the cry of dereliction in John’s narrative does have. It can show us that to envisage Jesus as “the ultimate tragic hero” does not simply exhaust the Johannine christology but rather jeopardizes it. George Parsenios highlights “the transformation of the tragic” in John’s transformation of the meaning of cross: “We must expect the Fourth Gospel to ‘bend’ its tragic models, much as it has done in depicting the death of Jesus. For, while tragic characters endure a slow process of dying into death, the Johannine Jesus gradually rises into his glorification and ascends into the ascension.”²³⁵ In other words, “the tragic is transformed in the Fourth Gospel.”²³⁶ For instance, the Jesus whom John depicts is, according to John Behr, an “exalted vision of Christ,” such that there is no record of the event of transfiguration in the Gospel of John, “in a manner indeed very different than the other Gospels . . . ,

²³² *GL* 7, 226.

²³³ *MP*, 125.

²³⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59. Moberly also warns of a biased superiority in the moral imagination of tragic anthropology, which one might find reminiscent of the agonized spirituality and tragic imagination of Williams. “One should not so romanticize the process of moral and spiritual struggle that the Lukan depiction of Jesus as one who maintains apparent serenity and trust amidst suffering is downgraded; as though an anguished and in some ways vacillating struggle for faith is intrinsically superior to a steadily trusting faith; or as though a steadily trusting faith did not involve its own kind of moral and spiritual struggle” (60). See also R. W. L. Moberly, “Proclaiming Christ Crucified: Some Reflections on the Use and Abuse of The Gospels,” in *From Eden to Golgotha: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 83–104.

²³⁵ George L. Parsenios, “‘No Longer in the World’ (John 17:11): The Transformation of the Tragic in the Fourth Gospel,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 1 (2005): 1–21 (21).

²³⁶ Parsenios, “‘No Longer in the World’ (John 17:11),” 20.

for on every page we see the transfigured Lord” from the beginning to the end. Hence, “we hear the crucified one crying out not, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34), but, rather, with stately majesty, affirming” the accomplishment of his life and the handing over of the Spirit.²³⁷ In other words, John’s Jesus remains in divine glory, unity, knowledge, and sovereignty (not agony, anguish, powerlessness, and forsakenness) throughout the violent revolt against him. As many Johannine scholars acknowledge, in the Fourth Evangelist’s passion narrative of Jesus, he does not dispossess or renounce his power, dignity, or freedom; rather Jesus “sublimely”²³⁸ presents himself in a “literally majestic”²³⁹ way, in “autonomy” and “initiative,”²⁴⁰ in divine “sovereignty”²⁴¹ in the court of trial and the site of execution (as in his public ministry) by his unshrinking *power*, undisturbed *knowledge*, and undisrupted *union* in relation to God the Father. The sovereign glory of Jesus, *without dreadful intensity of agony and distress*, in his arrest, trial, and death reveals his identity in John’s Gospel. “Jesus remains serenely confident and totally dominates the proceedings from his arrest right through to his final cry of triumph from the cross, ‘It is finished’ (19:30).”²⁴² Therefore, “there is no agony in the garden or cry of abandonment from the cross. Rather, Jesus is in full control of himself.”²⁴³ Seen in this light, it makes sense that the Fourth Evangelist “never once uses *paschō*, ‘suffer’, of Jesus”²⁴⁴ in the passion narrative. Although Johannine passion narrative lacks Jesus’s cry of dereliction, it may not necessarily mean that it runs the risk of encouraging a euphoric piety, a triumphalist vindication, or a facile optimism; rather, it narrates a christological–trinitarian manifestation of undisturbed *love* and uninterrupted *unity* between the heavenly Father and the incarnate Son.

This Johannine narration of passion requires extraordinary discretion from theologians such as Balthasar and Williams who are inclined to lavish emphasis upon God-abandonment and its paradoxical fertility of unity and joy and build upon it a *unified* New Testament theology of cross. While Balthasar insists that Jesus’s absolute love for the Father takes the risk of bringing about a fracture and rupture in his unity with the Father, which is expressive of and grounded in an infinite inner-trinitarian distance, this tragic form of love as enduring suffering does not square with a

²³⁷ John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 131. See also John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), 40–43.

²³⁸ D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 47.

²³⁹ John Ashton, *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 186.

²⁴⁰ Ruth B. Edwards, *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2014; first edition 2003), 89.

²⁴¹ Richard J. Cassidy, *John’s Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 29.

²⁴² Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; first edition 1989), 273.

²⁴³ Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 228–29. See also Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 315.

²⁴⁴ Edwards, *Discovering John*, 88.

Johannine vision of an unbroken relation of love and unity between the Father and the Son. As Raymond Brown notes, John's Jesus does not cry out of dereliction precisely "because the Father is always with him (16:32)."²⁴⁵ The Johannine absence of the disintegrated identity of Jesus and its lack of "spiritual death" depend upon the uninterrupted unity of the Father and the incarnate Son which reflects the eternal unity within the Trinity—in stark opposition to Balthasar's speculation of the Son's abandonment by the Father, which in turn reflects the eternal abandonment within the Trinity.

Matthew Levering finds a good example of interpreting Johannine christology from Thomas Aquinas. Thomas's depiction of John's Christ as "absolute gift," according to Levering, differs markedly from the Christ that Balthasar, one of the paschal mystery theologians who "see the cross as a sign of intra-divine abandonment,"²⁴⁶ envisages as absolute giving-away with the agony of dereliction. "Christ, whose Paschal Mystery is God's gift of himself to us, thus reveals that 'eternal life' (God himself) is absolute self-giving—a self-giving that is, unlike human self-giving, without risk, suffering, or loss, in other words a self-giving that is glory."²⁴⁷ Perhaps a trinitarian theory constructed upon a Johannine paschal mystery, if any, fails to generate a christological trinitarianism suggesting that "all external scenes of Jesus' life and sufferings [silence, mocking, nailing, piercing] . . . [are] a direct portrayal and exegesis of God (John 1:18)."²⁴⁸

No less significantly, in John, the Spirit is not akin to a Balthasarian Spirit who mends the separation between the Father and the Son into unity. Rather, the Spirit teaches the unbroken unity and shared glory of the Father and the Son throughout towards the post-Easter Johannine community, and empowers the community to bear witness to the truth of the unity by the gift of the power of the Easter Spirit.²⁴⁹ "Jesus has asked his Father to preserve the unity of his own, and all those who will hear his word through their ministry, so that the world might know that God has sent his Son, and that God loves the world, just as he loves his Son."²⁵⁰ The manifestation of the primordial unity in God and between God manifests to the world an unfailing divine love for the world. In John, christology, ecclesiology, and missiology are inherently interrelated in terms of love and unity.

²⁴⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week: Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 70.

²⁴⁶ Levering, "Does the Paschal Mystery Reveal the Trinity?," 90; and Matthew Levering, "The Paschal Mystery as Revelatory of the Trinity in Aquinas," in *Scripture and Metaphysics*, 132–43 (142). See also Matthew Levering, "Reading John with St Thomas Aquinas," in *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum (London: T&T Clark International: 2005), 99–126.

²⁴⁷ Levering, "Does the Paschal Mystery Reveal the Trinity?," 90.

²⁴⁸ Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat*, 58.

²⁴⁹ Jörg Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John*, trans. by Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 256–58.

²⁵⁰ Francis J. Moloney, "The Johannine Passion and the Christian Community," in *Johannine Studies 1975–2017*, 467–503 (482).

The Cry of Dereliction in the Divine Identity

Let me now attract critical attention to how Williams presses home the cry of dereliction in constructing his Christian tragic imagination. He intends to accommodate Balthasar's tragic speculations into the heart of his own tragic vision of theological truths. Williams thinks that Balthasar's tragic exposition of Johannine christology serves to identify two anti-tragic perspectives that he seeks to avoid. Christian theology, on the one hand, neither encourages us to see that "suffering is cancelled or even compensated by the hope of ultimate reconciliation,"²⁵¹ and, on the other hand, nor enervates us in "absolute tragedy." Rather, "it affirms the possibility of mourning—the articulation of loss, the 'telling' of pain."²⁵² For Williams to reckon with loss without absolutizing it is, in fact, by no means new to his readers. For instance, the following statement has already anticipated (though not absolutely) his tragic imagination: "Christian language states that failure is both real and not final, and offers the possibility of a corporate or individual self-perception that can cope with honesty about the past and thus imagine a future in which all of that past can be held together."²⁵³

Steering between the equally false anti-tragic conceptions, Williams suggests that the tragic presentation turns out to be a tragic imagination enclosed by a comic affirmation. "The tragic imagination is always framed and informed by the comic,"²⁵⁴ and, he maintains, the comic enables us to "imagine the dismantling of self-perception without total disaster,"²⁵⁵ without "the terror that loss is necessarily the end of meaning or of hope."²⁵⁶ Not to absolutize loss by virtue of the comic, for Williams, of course, should not give any indication of diminishing or alleviating the weight of suffering and loss in an impatient anticipation of triumph and reconciliation. The comedy is not a countervailing force against the tragedy so that comedy and tragedy do not cancel out each other. It rather solidifies the reason "*why loss is terrible*,"²⁵⁷ because to say that suffering and loss is not final implies that it has unavoidably to be thought, spoken, and endured in the meantime. One might want to say this is a kind of tragic comedy, the comedy only through a tragedy, and the other might rather say a comic tragedy, the tragedy within a comedy. In either case, what is decisively important is, for Williams, to face the ineradicable importance of suffering and loss in the recognition of the hope and possibility of transformation and reconstruction. To put it briefly, the tragic imagination challenges us neither to terminate at "*dyscatastrophe*" in melancholy, nor to pass over to "*eucatastrophe*" in euphoria. It is to dwell in the "broken middle" with hope without optimism.

²⁵¹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 124.

²⁵² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 124.

²⁵³ Williams, "Resurrection and Peace," 273.

²⁵⁴ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 154.

²⁵⁵ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 154.

²⁵⁶ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 154.

²⁵⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 154.

In Williams's discourse on tragic representation, the relation and roles of tragedy and comedy are interconnected with Jesus's death and resurrection. He attends to a metaphor of the body of Christ, a broken and recovered body, in order to unfold a deeper implication of the death and resurrection of Christ. For Williams, "Tragedy points towards a comedy that imagines a restored body where the wounds are not ignored or belittled or explained away, healed rather than cured."²⁵⁸ To think and speak of suffering and loss in full measure is accompanied with imagining a broken body because the metaphor of body indicates a concrete reality of relation. "Damage matters; . . . damage matters because *what is damaged* or lost or wounded matters, and matters lastingly and ineradicably."²⁵⁹ The metaphor of body offers "a way of imagining a body whose wounds we both contemplate and recognize, the gravity of whose wounds we are forced to acknowledge."²⁶⁰ However, for Williams, the reason why it is important to imagine a wounded body does not merely lie in its vulnerability but also in its capacity for restoration, a restored body, with ineffaceable marks of the wounds. The body with its vulnerability and capacity "will never be other than fragile, threatened by the ignorance of the watching ego, yet never emptied of possibility."²⁶¹

As Williams explicitly notes, to talk about the broken and restored body is "a nakedly theological metaphor, evoking the wounded and resurrected body of Jesus in the Christian gospels."²⁶² The injured body is risen as a restored body, yet still bearing the marks of suffering and memories of loss. A body stands, in the Jewish community around Torah, for "an order of relation grounded in the divine," and the body of Christ reveals "the intense mutual dependency and mutual recognition ascribed to the Christian community."²⁶³ Therefore, to imagine a wounded and healed body is to think of the most wretched rupture of the communal relation and of a possibility of its final reintegration. The Christian narratives of Jesus's broken and restored body enable us to see, without absolutizing and essentializing the tragic, a possibility of restoration, retaining a deep concern for an enduring, grievous process of self-reformulation.

And the loss and recovery of the body of Christ also has significant communal, political implications. Individual and civic identities are disintegrated and reconstructed by the public performance of tragedy in the cities of ancient Greece. This pattern of Attic tragedy holds true for Christian narrative and performance. The identities of Christians and their communities are questioned and reshaped on the most profound level by communal practice of the Eucharist. "As 'Athens' emerges from tragic narrative in the Greek theatre, so 'the Church' emerges from the

²⁵⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 157.

²⁵⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 157.

²⁶⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

²⁶¹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

²⁶² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

²⁶³ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

narrative enacted in the Christian sacrament.”²⁶⁴ Williams draws a significant parallel between the dissolution and reconstruction of the Christian “church” and the disintegration and reintegration of the Attic “city.” In this sense, for Williams, Athens has certainly to do with Jerusalem.

Finally, Williams advances his speculation about Jesus’s cry of dereliction further in his treatment of the broken body of Christ. In the conclusion of the final chapter of *The Tragic Imagination*, perhaps one of the most explicitly theological parts of the whole, he offers a more comprehensive and fuller account of the cry of dereliction. Williams argues that Christ’s cry of dereliction on the cross represents not only the catastrophic breaking of the created world but also a schism and fracture in divine identity or apparently so. The Son’s abandonment by the Father maximizes the importance of loss and disintegration in the tragic presentation of the Eucharist:

The structure of the Eucharist echoes what has been said about the tragic liturgy of the ancient city. It represents a story of extreme rupture and dissolution in the common life. . . . What is represented is an apparent rupture in the divine action—the abandonment *by God* of God’s human embodiment (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”), and so the apparent schism in divine self-consistency or fidelity. . . . Like classical tragedy, this is a narrative which presses to the extreme the possibility of a radical fragmentation of “lawful” common life.²⁶⁵

Williams draws upon the Father’s abandonment of the Son for achieving his primary purpose of reconciling tragic imagination with the Christian narrative. Tragic schism in the world does not end at “the most dramatic possible schism between self and truth” in human misunderstanding, but goes so far as to entail “an apparent rupture in the divine action”²⁶⁶ and “the apparent schism in divine self-consistency or fidelity.” For Williams, “the dereliction of Christ on the cross”²⁶⁷ exhibits the vulnerability of the divine identity. And the apparent loss of and fracture in the divine identity indicates that the divine identity enters the human realm of tragic representation.

The divine itself [is] in some way wounded, emptied, evacuated of power or evident meaning, in the face of human atrocity. Divine identity no less than human, in this context, comes into our speech and imagining as entailing the enduring of loss.²⁶⁸

Derived from the cry of dereliction—the abandonment of the Son by the Father—is the vulnerability and loss of divine identity. The divine identity, divine action, divine self-consistency is spoken of as being wounded “in the face of human atrocity.”

²⁶⁴ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 126.

²⁶⁵ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 125–26.

²⁶⁶ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 126.

²⁶⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

²⁶⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

This inevitably mythic projection of loss into the divine is explored, in Jewish and Christian speculative thinking, as a way of clarifying that the divine is not an inflated version of routine human ego-identity but exists simply as “bestowal”, as an unconstrained giving.²⁶⁹

Although he is not keen on elaborating on what this puzzling sentence means, it seems quite clear that he purports to envisage a picture of God that can foreclose any possibility of a self-promoting attempt to project an egoistic self to the divine life: the divine should not be manipulated as a false projection of the egoistic human self. This picture of the fractured divine who endures loss establishes the solid theological foundation for ethical truth: “the character of divine self-dispossession as the human vocation.”²⁷⁰ The broken body of Jesus in the cry of loss, absence, and abandonment indicates the wounded divine, and this tragic vulnerability of divine identity in the fallen world makes us aware that divine self-dispossession is revealed in the death of Jesus, and that our human vocation is transformed into the self-dispossession of the divine life in recognition of the inevitable failure and loss in the world. It can be said then that at the end of Williams’s tragic imagination *a trinitarian ethics of self-dispossession* emerges. And an examination of how Williams elaborates the ethics of self-dispossession based on divine self-dispossession, I believe, may shed new light on what he intends to achieve by establishing a tragic imagination, namely, the ethics of self-dispossession.

The Freudian Projection of Self-Interest onto God

Rowan Williams has long raised a critical issue behind all our theology and practice: “If we believe in a source of energy, forgiveness and love independent of ourselves, how exactly do we prevent it from becoming a belief that weakens our responsibility and imprisons us in fantasy?”²⁷¹ As Myers indicates, “a dread of self-deceptive fantasy is, in fact, the secret engine of Williams’ work.”²⁷² Williams is intent on protecting the essence of Christian theology and practice from a post-modern suspicion of ‘infantile’ Christianity, in particular, “the Freudian charge that Christianity is an inflation of infantile beliefs about the omnipotent father who can solve all problems and heal all wounds.”²⁷³ In this sense, a concern to make a serious response to the Freudian charge—“a post-Freudian apologetic”²⁷⁴—underlies Williams’s theology.

Let me elaborate on Williams’s understanding of the Freudian suspicion and his theological response to it. Robert Jenson has once passingly—but revealingly—remarked that Rowan Williams is

²⁶⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

²⁷⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

²⁷¹ Rowan Williams, “Analysing Atheism: Unbelief and the World of Faiths,” in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012), 281–91 (285).

²⁷² Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 107.

²⁷³ Williams, “Barth on the Triune God,” 141.

²⁷⁴ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 112.

“far too obsessive to be truly helpful in the life of faith” and thereby “concerned to enforce theology’s function as *critique*, and especially as *self-critique*.”²⁷⁵ We are always tempted, according to Williams, to self-consolation, -fortification and -gratification, “deeply dangerous for anyone who wants to grow up as a human being.”²⁷⁶ The self-aggrandizing tendency has, of course, for Williams, nothing to do with genuine Christian understandings of God, self, and the world. It is rather an opposite of Christian faith, as it were, an egoistic tendency.²⁷⁷ Such a self-serving desire may be grounded in particular, according to Williams, by fabricating a self-legitimizing image of God as an almighty Father. “The

²⁷⁵ Robert Jenson, review of *On Christian Theology*, by Rowan Williams, *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 11, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 367–69 (368). I would suggest that a further question should be raised as to *which self* is summoned under Williams’s critique. When he is talking about self-dispossession, his self-critique is concerned with the self who is full of self-interest and willing to fortify and even extend it into the other’s life; thereby the self under his critique is the self who is required to dispossess and efface the repletion of ego, an *imperialistic self* who has a misdirected desire for self-expansion: such an egoistic self is to be rebuked for its propensity for self-promotion and self-expansion, and urged to dispossess, renounce, and abrogate it. The painfully risky, costly, and difficult acts of self-diminishment and self-dispossession make it possible to be transformed and converted into a *responsible self* who attends to others.

If this is the case, Williams’s tendency greatly to emphasize the inflated self and its dispossession gives the impression that he is oblivious to another aspect of human misdirection which is no less significant than self-promotion. As Oliver O’Donovan notes, “a false self-humiliation” does not differ from “a false self-promotion” in the degree of sin: “There is truth in the suggestion that the two faults meet up behind the curtain, that modest invisibility is not all that different from boastful self-promotion.” The two faults are discouraged by the teaching of Jesus: “The reality that exposes all false pretensions [namely, Jesus] catches up with us, not only to throw us down from heights of importance we have arrogated to ourselves, but to dig us up from bunkers of insignificance we have hollowed out for ourselves.” Oliver O’Donovan, “Know Thyself! The Return of Self-Love,” in *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honor of Oliver O’Donovan*, ed. Robert Song and Brent Waters (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 268–84 (278). In other words, on the one hand, self-fortification is false, and thereby self-diminishment is required so that the self is transformed and developed into a responsible self; on the other hand, there is a case in which self-humiliation is false and thereby self-affirmation, instead of self-diminishment, is required for the same virtues of maturation. O’Donovan emphasizes that the words and deeds of Jesus are a source of rectifying not only false self-promotion but also wrong self-humiliation, and his life and death reveals not only self-humility but also self-affirmation. To anticipate *the non-competitive gift of divine goodness and its coincidence with created goodness*, which will be elaborated on in “The Non-Competitive Relation of Divine Gift and Human Reception” in the next chapter, I would say that the divine gift of goodness illuminates and activates created goodness from within, while concomitantly undoing the privation or absence of goodness and energizing the redirection of the human freedom of will and act into God, i.e., renouncing self-promoting desire or disapproving self-humiliating tendency.

In the light of O’Donovan’s reflection, one may say, whilst Williams makes too much of false self-promotion and correspondingly requires the corrective rebuke of self-diminishment, he thinks too little of false self-belittlement and leaves too little room for a corresponding corrective kindness of self-affirmation. There might be a case, in certain circumstances, in which it is a difficult, risky (yet delightful instead of painful) business to determine to protect, affirm, trust, and value oneself against self-disparagement as much as it is so to determine to empty, efface, and renounce oneself. For instance, Kathryn Tanner puts a particular emphasis on Christian grounds for “non-idolatrous self-esteem,” and this might be relevant to my reservation about Williams’s critique of the self inflated with self-interest, and to his attention to the language of self-diminishment. Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 228–46.

²⁷⁶ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2007), 15.

²⁷⁷ He enumerates three “polar opposites” to the fruits of the Christian faith. All of them are fundamentally related to a self-centred absorption of the world: “*emotional infantilism*” indicates the “perspective that puts my immediate needs and the gratification of my immediate passions at the centre”; “*exploitative selfishness*” means the “desire to draw the whole human and non-human environment into the great hungry stomach of my ego, or of our collective human ego”; and “*an attitude of calculation and suspicion in human relationships*” points to the “cynical and corrosive outlook that assumes other individuals, other groups, other nations and the world at large are all there to be used as means to our own ends.” Williams, *What is Christianity?*, 33.

God who, as ‘omnipotent Father’ in the Freudian sense, can intervene to save and console from without,” Williams avers, “is illusory, a mask of God.”²⁷⁸ As the idea of a suffering God is, as discussed earlier, a “projection” of human experience of suffering into God, this idea of God as an all-powerful father is a “projection about some all-powerful character who can just do what he decides and get what he wants straight away.”²⁷⁹ It is “the phantasm projected by ‘la toute-puissance du desir’: the omnipotent father, that is to say, is the substitute for the failed omnipotence of the self.”²⁸⁰ The fantasized image of God who “has a psychology like ours, only bigger”²⁸¹ only serves to give me a complete assurance of “unconditioned space or time to develop and discover what I am to be.”²⁸² This is nothing but fabricating a self-inflating image of God, that is, a God who “has no ‘resistance’, and is, ultimately, only at the service of my development,”²⁸³ my self-interest.

The Triune Metaphysics of Self-Dispossession and the Human Ethics of Self-Dispossession

For Williams, ““what constitutes an adult human relationship to God””²⁸⁴ is, then, first and foremost, to *dispossess* oneself of such an infantilized image of God onto which self-fortifying desire is projected. Williams emphatically stresses that to be responsible in the tragic world entails, above all things, a practice of self-dispossession, the dispossession of selfish interest, including the relinquishment of a distorted idea of all-powerful God as “an authority figure who could sort out all our problems, who is always there on hand to help us out of situations where we would otherwise have to take responsibility.”²⁸⁵ The act of self-dispossession is a human horizon where the freedom of God acts and works. The freedom of God “becomes transforming for human beings and human communities in their readiness for dispossession, for the loss of the God who is defined as belonging to us and our interests,”²⁸⁶ for “surrendering various comforting falsehoods that might let me think myself strong and safe.”²⁸⁷ The human action of self-dispossession thus “makes room” for the divine action of grace.²⁸⁸

²⁷⁸ Williams, “Word and Spirit,” 122.

²⁷⁹ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 19

²⁸⁰ Williams, “Barth on the Triune God,” 141.

²⁸¹ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 44

²⁸² Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany,” 243.

²⁸³ Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany,” 243.

²⁸⁴ Williams, “Barth on the Triune God,” 141.

²⁸⁵ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 15.

²⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, “The Finality of Christ,” in *On Christian Theology*, 93–106 (104).

²⁸⁷ Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 45.

²⁸⁸ As already discussed in the first section of the present chapter, Williams rightly warns that spatializing talk about God slips into a danger of conceiving of God as a competitive item of the world. Yet his frequent language of “making room” for and “giving place” to God leave the impression that he is inclined to speak of God as an agent who meets in competition with human beings for space on a psychic or a spiritual level. If God the creator does not

Williams's understanding of the dispossession of self-interest does not stop at renouncing a perverted image of God but goes so far as to constitute a governing tenet of Christian ethics and politics. He suggests that Christian imagination of humankind promotes a deepened understanding of political practice and public life of human mutuality. "Central to what Christian theology sets before us is mutuality."²⁸⁹ It goes deeper than a secular polity that "simply" seeks an administration "in the name of self-interest," "maximal security and prosperity," "mutually beneficial arrangements of any specific state," and "the negotiation of practical goods and balanced self-interests."²⁹⁰ Williams's Augustinian understanding of politics notes that a deeper moral vision of Christian discourse offers "a *redefinition* of the public itself."²⁹¹ For Williams, the value which the public sphere should seek does not lie simply in how to enhance mutual benefit or to negotiate a settlement between mutual self-interests. The way Christianity can make a transformative contribution to the public sphere is to critically remind us of "some fundamental truth about what humanity is *for*"²⁹²: human public "wellbeing" involves the capacity to deepen "questions of all sorts of emotional and self-directed impulses" and "developing habits of honest self-examination."²⁹³ The religious enactment makes it possible to throw a robust question to the contemporary secular society. In continual self-questioning and self-suspicion, the self, individual and corporate, is called to patiently recognize mutual dependence and responsibility for the other and to venture the dispossession of a satisfied self-identity towards the renewal and transformation of the self. The calibration, arrangement, calculation and negotiation of self-interest in the public sphere can be made only after the establishment of authentic human mutuality based on continual self-criticism. Significantly, this Christian vision of self-dispossession throws an important challenge to secular politics which is prone to rely too much on false self-autonomy and sufficiency: "How does secularism 'dispossess' itself?"²⁹⁴

The dispossession of self-gratifying selfhood plays a crucial role in constructing theological ethics as well as politics. A true Christian ethics is predicated upon divine dispossession, as is so a genuine Christian politics. As to the question of how "ethics ceases to be about securing claims,"

occupy space and compete with us for space, however, why does the created being have to renounce its space so as to allow God to occupy the withdrawn space? As Williams rightly emphasizes, if God is ontologically different from the world, "miraculously" outpours *the goodness of grace* in gratuity, plenitude, generosity, and initiative, if God is fundamentally understood as "the noncompetitive other *whose freedom makes us free*" rather than a competitive inhabitant like us *whose freedom can be wielded only insofar as the other's freedom is yielded in advance*, then the spatial language of "making room" makes little sense. The *non-competition* and *goodness* in relation to the relationship of divine and human agency will be dealt with in detail in "The Non-Competitive Relation of Divine Gift and Human Reception" in the next chapter.

²⁸⁹ Rowan Williams, "Theology and Economics: Two Different Worlds?," in *Faith in the Public Square*, 225–34 (228).

²⁹⁰ Rowan Williams, "Secularism, Faith and Freedom," in *Faith in the Public Square*, 23–36 (25, 30, 35).

²⁹¹ Rowan Williams, "Politics and the Soul: Reading the City of God," in *On Augustine*, 107–29 (111).

²⁹² Rowan Williams, "Knowing Our Limits," in *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice*, ed. Rowan Williams and Larry Elliott (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 19–34 (22).

²⁹³ Williams, "Knowing Our Limits," 31.

²⁹⁴ Williams, "Has Secularism Failed?," 20.

Williams suggests that the critical question that should be asked is “does it speak of the God whose nature is self-dispossession for the sake of the life of the other? . . . of the divine relinquishment of ‘interest’ and claim as embodied in the life and death of Jesus?”²⁹⁵ In the tragic finitude of the competition and conflict of the world, Christians are forced to make a moral decision and able to learn “the candid knowledge of powerlessness, in grief, not in complacency” when they act on the tragic horizon. For Williams, the knowledge of powerlessness in grief “models the divine dispossession”²⁹⁶ so that it gives glory to God. Thus, an ethics of self-dispossession “makes place” and “gives space” for the other, rather than possessing the other and securing its own claims.

Geoffrey Wainwright rightly observes that Rowan Williams’s trinitarian thought is “noetically based on, and ontologically grounded in, the kenotic ‘self-dispossession’ of the persons”²⁹⁷ And, according to Williams, the ground for the self-dispossession in Christian politics and ethics is found in divine self-dispossession—in relation to the triune life of God as well as God’s relation to the history of the world. Williams’ appreciative accounts, following Rose, of Hegel’s philosophy of divine self-dispossession gives a good example of this. Williams writes, for Hegel, history recognizes itself as the dispossession and recovery only if it contains “the narrative of divine dispossession.”²⁹⁸ Williams suggests that the logic of the divine dispossession in relation to the world history is found in “a history of God-in-relation to a historical community,”²⁹⁹ “a history that can be told as the narrative of the absolute’s self-loss and self-recovery.”³⁰⁰ In other words, “the supreme disinterestedness of the divine, which, by definition, has no ‘positional’ corner to defend, articulates itself in the interest of a human community.”³⁰¹

Hegel’s genius lies, Williams tells us, in his reading the Judaeo-Christian narratives in the framework of the divine self-dispossession. In other words, “the concrete articulation of divine (founding, creating) action is *in* what is other to the divine,” that is, in the life of Israel as the historical nation that bears the divine covenant and in the life of Jesus as the historical being who carries the divine meaning. And the divine action is articulated in creating the Church. The non-interest of God is embodied in the divine self-dispossession for the sake of the Church. If the Church is created out of history in the articulation of the divine self-dispossession, what remains is the question of how it can avoid the danger of “sectional interest and proprietorial models of power or

²⁹⁵ Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany,” 263.

²⁹⁶ Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany,” 263.

²⁹⁷ Geoffrey Wainwright, “Rowan Williams on Christian Doctrine,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no. 1 (February 2003): 73–81 (80).

²⁹⁸ Rowan Williams, “Logic and Spirit in Hegel” (1998), in *Wrestling with Angels*, 35–52 (46).

²⁹⁹ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 71.

³⁰⁰ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 71.

³⁰¹ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 72.

knowledge.”³⁰² The answer lies in the Church’s willingness and capability of embodying the non-interest of God, that is, “the ‘interest’ of a God without interest or favouritism.”³⁰³ It is the interest of a disinterested God for the sake of the other.

Here Williams speaks of a theological politics with the help of Rose’s theo-political insights. For Williams, Rose sees the non-interest of God, or the interest of God for the sake of the other, as “the universal saving generosity of divine action,” as “surrendering the no-place of an abstract absolute being, enacting the indiscriminate love or inclusive compassion that eventuates from divine life in a historical process.”³⁰⁴ Although God’s people are a human community who is prone to violence and conflict in favour of self-interest, nonetheless, they endeavour to understand “their fundamental task as embodying the ‘non-interest’ of God,” as “dispossessed of its own self-definition, as an ‘interested’ or sectional presence in the world.”³⁰⁵ It leads us to see why the identities of Israel, Jesus and the Church are tied up with dispossession that is envisaged as “exile,” “the cross” and “the ‘resident alien’” respectively. Those narratives about “God and God’s people” hold out for “speaking of divine displacement” and create “a discourse about fundamental ontology and a discourse about politics” at the same time.³⁰⁶ In other words, the theological integration of metaphysics and politics comes from self-displacement of God “realising its ‘interest’ in its other.”³⁰⁷ Therefore, “the most fundamental reality that is (in some sense) thinkable requires to be spoken of in terms of dispossession or, to use the overtly theological word, *kenosis*.”³⁰⁸

To sum up, Williams makes a theologically inextricable connection of divine self-dispossession and human self-dispossession. Divine self-dispossession is a transcendent, ontological ground and model for human self-dispossession as individuals and collectives; the human self-dispossession is reflective of and predicated upon the divine self-dispossession and its historical embodiment in the limit of the created world.

Yet one may want to raise a question as to whether the inextricable connection of divine self-dispossession and human self-dispossession trivializes the profound difference between the divine self and the human self. It is, of course, entirely legitimate for Williams to construe God as the transcendent source of the world and to urge us to be rightly dependent upon and receptive to God’s transforming and purifying transcendence. As he sums up an Augustinian understanding of divine action and human action, “the work of grace is to make us dependent in the right way, dissatisfied

³⁰² Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 72.

³⁰³ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 72.

³⁰⁴ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 72.

³⁰⁵ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 72.

³⁰⁶ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 73.

³⁰⁷ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 72.

³⁰⁸ Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 72.

with anything less than the horizon of God's own selflessness and seeking to remain open to that selfless agency as it transforms our relation with the world and each other."³⁰⁹ However, when he repeatedly speaks of the trinitarian relation in terms of the dispossession of self-interest, so as to make it into a divine archetype of human ethics and politics, it seems to strain the concept of divine selflessness to breaking point. It is precisely because, as Williams is aware, the divine self is radically different from the human self in that it has no correlation with selfishness in the first place.

Let me elaborate upon my argument. The sinful error of indulging self-interest looms large in human selfhood and it makes self-dispossession inevitable whilst the divine self, according to Williams, has no self-interest that is meant to be dispossessed. If the divine self is devoid of self-interest in the first place, it would be reasonable to say that in God's selfhood there is no self-interest to be dispossessed, thus there is no drama of repentance and no risk of purgation of self. It is questionable, therefore, to draw an inherent link between the divine and the human in terms of self-dispossession. Whilst the human "un-selfing" is the repentant effacement of "the superficial interests of the ego," the divine gift-giving—within the Trinity and in relation to the world—has nothing to do with such an egoistic interest and its dispossession. When human receptiveness and gift-giving to others is to be defined readily as the dispossession of a sinful self-interest, the divine reception and gift-giving is to be defined as completely devoid of such a painful relinquishment of false selfhood. In other words, if the ultimate non-interest of God means that, "by definition," God has no interest and claim to defend against the other, if "God's nature as one who is beyond all partisanship, all self-interest, whose whole being is selflessness,"³¹⁰ it would be a misconception to say that such a disinterested God relinquishes or dispossesses something for the sake of the other. If there is nothing at all to relinquish in God from the outset, it does not make sense of speaking of God's loss of interest. Rather, it may be more reasonable to say that the act of divine gift-giving, or, in Williams' terms, the overpouring of the universal generosity and indiscriminate love of God is given to the other *without* the mediation of a negative movement of relinquishment and abrogation of self-interest.

My argument may be substantiated by a critical examination of Williams's understanding of the Church's mission as dispossession. In a lecture on mission and spirituality, he brings the importance of dispossession into focus in his discussion of mission. Williams attempts to understand mission as building communion in the finite world from the perspectives of the ministry of Jesus and the divine life of the Trinity. He argues that the mission of Jesus is shaped in and directed towards "the divine act of living in communion."³¹¹ The presence of Jesus as communion embodies "the presence of the

³⁰⁹ Rowan Williams, "Augustinian Love," in *On Augustine*, 191–206 (205).

³¹⁰ Rowan Williams, "No-one Can Be Forgotten in God's Kingdom," *Anvil* 25:2 (2008): 117–28 (123).

³¹¹ Rowan Williams, "Doing the Works of God," in *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 253–66 (256, 263). This essay was originally addressed as the first of the two lectures of "Mission and Spirituality" at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University in 1991.

trinitarian life” as communion and thus undercuts the human struggle for possession in the hostile reality of competition and contention. The mission of the Church is therefore to live and communicate the mission of Jesus perfectly revealing the triune communion. “If we want to speak adequately of mission, we have to speak of the trinity, of God’s life as communion. To engage in mission is to be touched by the life of the trinity.”³¹² The mission of the Church is “to embody God’s longing for life in communion here as a reflection of the perfect mutuality of the divine life in eternity.”³¹³ Williams writes “Nikolai Fyodorov in nineteenth-century Russia famously said that ‘the doctrine of the Trinity is our social programme’; we could equally well say that the bare fact of the Church is our social programme. The divine life moves towards communion, and it rules and judges the entirety of our lives, soul and body.”³¹⁴ Here he seems to understand mission as an ecclesial practice to embody the idea of a social Trinity.

As the mission of Jesus undermines a sinful reality of competitive possession, according to Williams, the life of the Trinity challenges rapacious hostility and sectional division. To live and embody the trinitarian life as communion requires the practice of a spirituality. It is a spirituality of dispossession that is required to be transformed as “radically oriented towards and involved in the life of others.”³¹⁵ It involves a refusal of self-protection, mutual hostility, self-achievement and possession, doctrinal and institutional possession, ecclesial egotism and self-interest to the exclusion of the other. We can properly understand the languages about the communion of the Trinity only in “the practice of dispossession, an authentically self-forgetting practice that allows and nourishes the otherness of others.”³¹⁶ Thus, for Williams, “mission does indeed involve a particular sort of dispossession.”³¹⁷

In another lecture on mission, Williams also relates dispossession to mission: “Mission says: we have been given a way of living together, sharing a common purpose or project as human beings, that centres upon the imperative of *dispossession*: each part of the corporate whole has to let go of any definition of its interest or welfare that is exclusive to it alone.”³¹⁸ Mission has, first and foremost, something to do with the act of dispossession, “letting go of egoistic self-interest.” Williams goes so far as to seek to speculate on the divine giving-away in the Son’s procession from God and the Father’s *missio* of the Son and then to connect the divine self-gift with the Church’s mission in the framework of dispossession: “Mission is thus also fundamentally a matter of *dispossession*: God’s sending of Jesus, like the eternal coming-forth of the Word, is a giving-away, a holding nothing back: all the Father has is given to Jesus (John 16:10), all the divine authority is shared with Jesus (Matthew

³¹² Williams, “Doing the Works of God,” 257.

³¹³ Williams, “Doing the Works of God,” 263.

³¹⁴ Williams, “Doing the Works of God,” 258.

³¹⁵ Williams, “Doing the Works of God,” 265.

³¹⁶ Williams, “Doing the Works of God,” 264.

³¹⁷ Williams, “Doing the Works of God,” 263.

³¹⁸ Rowan Williams, *Mission and Christology* (Brynmawr: Welsh Members Council, Church Mission Society, 1994), 9.

28:18);”³¹⁹ In the response to the Father’s self-gift Jesus gives back to the Father and puts himself at the disposal of the Father’s will for communion; and the mission of the Church is to embody Jesus’ giving-away-back to the Father in order to channel God’s life to the world.

However, taking into consideration that the divine life “by definition” has non-interest, if the practice of dispossession is understood as a refusal against and a subversion of competitive hostility and rapacious possession in the world of a sectional economy, it seems illegitimate to portray the divine mutual self-gift engendered in the life without competition and rivalry as a divine self-dispossession. The mutual self-giving of the Father and the Son does not involve dispossession because every person of the Trinity has no definition of exclusive self-interest in the first place. Human self-dispossession may be to do with expulsion and banishment of something false without exception whilst the mutual self-gift in the trinitarian life and the Father’s *missio* of the Son to the world is to do with donation and bestowal of something good without reservation. The divine relation within the Trinity does not entail “the labour, the patience and the pain of the negative”³²⁰ of dispossessing self-interest, giving up self-justification, emptying self-promotion, effacing self-gratification, which a failed Petrine being may entail in the course of his growth. The self-dispossession of God thus makes little sense insofar as dispossession is intrinsically conceived as associated with the loss and renunciation of sinful misdirected desire. God is, of course, able to purify us to deconstruct self-gratifying identity, transform us to dispossess self-interest, and commands us not to make inroads into other for self-aggrandizement. However, God’s inner life in itself does not present an idealized pattern of human self-dispossession; rather, the divine gift-giving act within the Trinity is the pure donation that has nothing to do with the language of self-diminishment such as self-dispossession and self-renunciation understood as emptying human self-interest. Even if one insists on using the language of dispossession, it should be only conceived as the divine action of giving the gift of love and life without remainder, without self-loss; otherwise, it errs on the side of correlating the divine and the human in suggesting that divine self-dispossession is akin to a self-negating act of human self-dispossession—in exchange for acquiring an unshakable intra-trinitarian ground for the robust, confident ethics of self-dispossession.

To speak of divine self-loss and self-dispossession, in effect, carries another unfortunate implication. Williams’s repeated emphasis on divine self-dispossession runs the risk of slipping into a kind of implicit theological projection and retrojection: to project the human problem of self-interest onto the triune relations in order to conceive of the triune relation as an idealized relation to overcome the creaturely predicament, and then to retroject the divine self-dispossession back onto the human

³¹⁹ Williams, “Doing the Works of God,” 257.

³²⁰ Williams, “Theological Integrity,” 11.

predicament.³²¹ The triune life of God is portrayed back from the reflections and critiques of human finitude, sin, risk, and need, and then the God portrayed in such a way is again offered to the human world of finitude and sin as a divine “correction”³²² and resolution. And, if this sort of projection and retrojection is implicitly operative in Williams himself, it does not only diminish the weights of Williams’s critiques of both pathological Freudian projection and Moltmann’s theological projection but is also tantamount to somehow mythologizing the triune relation of self-giving into something like painful human labour—for the benefit of making human self-dispossession something intrinsically reflective of the divine life, something divinely significant.

Williams himself then may perhaps give ammunition to the error of conflating the pattern of God’s life with the human pattern of growth through loss. For if his implicit projection is the case, it may allude to a tragic pattern of loss and recovery even in the divine life. For instance, Devon Abts summarizes Williams’s spirituality of contemplation as follows: “contemplation is a kind of kenotic imitation of the divine ethic: through self-forgetting and self-emptying prayer, the creature enters into the pattern of God’s life, “a pattern moving through loss and disorder to life.””³²³ She perceives that in Williams’s thought the pattern of divine life is no less than a pattern of loss and recovery. However, if we enter into “a pattern moving through loss and disorder to life,” we, in fact, practice a pattern of human transformation rather than participate in a pattern of God’s life. The pattern of growth moving through loss to recovery is actually epitomized by Peter’s pattern of failure and rehabilitation.

It would be worth noticing that Williams actually believes there is an unavoidable place of mythological language of loss in God because of a profound entanglement of the incarnate Son in the tragic reality of the world. Although Williams is repeatedly antipathetic to a Moltmannian mythic inclination towards aligning God with and in the tragedy of the world and is reticent about endorsing

³²¹ This is a mere repetition of what Karen Kilby has already articulated—the logic of double movement of initial-upward projection and reverse-downward projection: “we first project our best ideas about human community onto the Trinity, and then claim to have discovered in the Trinity a new map for structuring human communities” in “Trinity, Tradition, and Politics,” in *Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology: An International Symposium*, ed. Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 73–86 (75). And, then, she argues, “what is projected onto God is immediately reflected back onto the world, and this reverse projection is said to be what is in fact *important* about the doctrine” in “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81 (November 2000): 432–45 (442). See also Karen Kilby, “Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12:1 (January 2010): 65–77 (66).

³²² Linn Tonstad has coined the term “corrective projectionism” in *God and Difference*, 13. “Corrective projectionism identifies,” she argues, “certain problems of human existence (e.g., delusions of autonomy, selfishness, self-possession, consumerism) and then generates a trinitarian theology that shows how the constitutive relationships of the trinity uniquely critique and overcome such human problems. In this way, corrective projectionism imports the very problems of human existence it intends to overcome.” It is worth noting that Tonstad mentions that Rowan Williams and Sarah Coakley share a tendency towards the corrective projectionism. She maintains that, for Williams, like “Coakley,” “divine relations must exhibit (in order to overcome) the same potential problems as human relationships do” (124, n. 39).

³²³ Devon Abts, “The Repentance of Language: Geoffrey Hill, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Poetic Integrity,” in *Innocence Uncovered: Literary and Theological Perspective*, ed. Elizabeth S. Dodd and Carl E. Findley III (London: Routledge, 2017), 76–95 (84–85). She quotes this phrase of Williams from “Theological Integrity,” 11.

an overtly mythological projection of tragedy into the divine life,³²⁴ nonetheless he is sympathetic to Bulgakov's "potent mythology" in which "the potential tragedy of mutual annihilation [of the Father and the Son]" is "overcome in the joy of the Spirit."³²⁵ And he admits "covert mythology" in theological speech as long as it does not transgress "limitation-terms" vis-à-vis God such as God's "coming to know, having the ability to do or not to do, remembering, forgetting, failing or succeeding."³²⁶ In this connection, to return to my earlier discussion of Williams's maximization of tragic imagination by means of Jesus' cry of dereliction, his depictions of the wounded and broken divine itself seem to come close to exceeding the "limitation-terms." It is important to note that what Williams makes clear there is that "the divine is not an inflated version of routine human ego-identity."³²⁷ Here his insistent concern to safeguard against the Freudian charge of infantile projection of egoistic desire into the divine becomes clear. It seems that a "virtuous" mythic projection is allowed to foreclose an idolatrous projection of an egoistic self-interest to the divine life. And its ethical import is accentuated in that the divine who bears loss and endures suffering lays the solid theological foundation for robust ethical truth: "the character of divine self-dispossession as the human vocation."³²⁸

The Eternal Deflections of Divine Desire as Divine Self-Dispossession

I have argued above that an implicit projection is at work in the concept of divine self-dispossession. In what follows I will seek to show that such a theological–ethical concept of divine self-dispossession is illustrated in his doctrine of divine desire in the Trinity.

In "The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure" (2002), Williams presents an apophatic–ascetic trinitarianism which interweaves Vladimir Lossky and John of the Cross: "a negative theology of the trinitarian life that derives its negative character ... from the character of the relations enacted in the story of Jesus and thus also in the lives and life-patterns of believers."³²⁹ He interprets Lossky's apophatic vision of the Trinity against the backdrop of John's ascetic vision of the cry of dereliction, and then sets out to build Christian spirituality and discipleship

³²⁴ Williams, "Metropolitan Anthony," 292–93.

³²⁵ Rowan Williams, *A Margin of Silence: The Holy Spirit in Russian Orthodox Theology* (Québec: Éditions de Lys Vert, 2008), 23.

³²⁶ Rowan Williams, "The Christian Experience and the Christian God," *The Furrow* 35, no. 11 (November 1984): 675–82 (681).

³²⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

³²⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 158.

³²⁹ Rowan Williams, "The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115–35 (133).

upon a dereliction-centred trinitarian life.³³⁰ According to Williams, Lossky’s vision of the inner life of the Trinity can be construed as a ceaseless movement of divine desire eternally deflected, eternally ecstatic love, without termination and thereby without consolation and satisfaction.³³¹ “In the life of God, love is always deflected from the ‘object’ that would close or satisfy, that would simply be the absent other imagined as the goal of desire; the other is always engaged beyond, engaged with another otherness.”³³² The trinitarian life of “the radicality of divine difference” is no less than “the endlessness of self-bestowal, which never reaches a terminus, never exhausts the otherness of the other.”³³³ And he concludes the essay with a robust trinitarian anthropology that the Christian life is defined as a ceaseless journey towards the transformation of human life into triune life such that we are invited to “live coherently in the pattern of divine life.”³³⁴ Christian life is “the process of ‘finding our way’ within the life of the three divine agencies or subsistents.”³³⁵

³³⁰ Lossky may unauthorize Williams’s direct alignment of himself with John of the Cross. Lossky in fact puts substantial difference between the Western spirituality of “the dark night of the Soul” and his own Eastern spirituality in chapter 11 of his *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), which is the very part that Williams interweaves with John of the Cross’s ascetic in “The Deflections of Desire.” Whilst Williams is keen on emphasizing the state of agony, aridity, and darkness as a point of encounter with divine love, Lossky avers that “grace will make itself known as joy, peace, inner warmth and light,” and that “dryness is a state of illness which must not last; it is never thought of by the mystical and ascetical writers of the Eastern tradition as a necessary and a normal stage in the way of union” (225–26). He continues to note that “both the heroic attitude of the great saints of Western Christendom, a prey to the sorrow of a tragic separation from God, and the dark night of the soul considered as a way, as a spiritual necessity, are unknown in the spirituality of the Eastern Church. The two traditions have separated on a mysterious doctrinal point, relating to the Holy Spirit, who is the source of holiness. Two different dogmatic conceptions correspond to two different experiences, to two ways of sanctification which scarcely resemble one another. Since the separation, the ways which lead to sanctity are not the same in the West as in the East. The one proves its fidelity to Christ in the solitude and abandonment of the night of Gethsemane, the other gains certainty of union with God in the light of the Transfiguration” (226–27).

It is worth noting that Andrew Louth makes reference to the remark of Lossky in his *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; first edition 1981), 174–85 (182–85). Louth quotes Mme Myrrha Lot-Borodine’s “contrast between a passionate, tortured devotion to the sufferings of our Lord’s sacred humanity in the West and a more austere, serene devotion to the royal Victor in the Byzantine East—the contrast between the crucified Christ in Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece and the figures in an icon by Andrei Rublyov” (182). Louth then seeks to give nuance to the contrast. Although I do not intend to contribute to the evaluation of the contrast in the present thesis, a refinement of the contrast may be possible if the ascetical mysticism of John of the Cross is reinterpreted not from the darkness of dereliction (Rowan Williams and Sarah Coakley) but from the faith in the gift of creator, as David Burrell, to whom I will be returning in the next chapter, suggests.

³³¹ It is worth noting that Aristotle Papanikolaou argues that the primary role of apophaticism in Lossky’s trinitarian thought actually hinders from properly speaking of the trinitarian persons as *ekstasis*, freedom and love: “How can one know that God exists as trinitarian persons as freedom and love if God in Godself is shrouded in the apophaticism of the *hyper*-essence?” Papanikolaou’s question may call into question Williams’s attempt to describe Lossky’s apophatic Trinity as ecstatic freedom and love. Moreover, “To affirm, as Lossky does, that one cannot speak of God on the realm of theologia, that God in Godself is shrouded in apophaticism is,” Papanikolaou observes, “ironically, to continue to make primary ‘essence’ language in God-talk.” Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas on Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (July 2003): 357–85 (375, 376, 377).

³³² Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 121.

³³³ Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 134.

³³⁴ Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 135.

³³⁵ Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 134.

Whilst Williams's depiction of the trinitarian relation as *interminable* deflections of divine desire has a virtue of trinitarianly ruling out "a simple *terminus* of piety,"³³⁶ this divine life of the trinitarian desire bears resemblance to that which Williams portrays as a genuine human attitude in the face of the tragedy of the world—risk-taking life with patient endurance without counting cost and seeking consolation. "If tragedy means a total lack of completion and consolation" in the thought of Williams, as Benjamin Myers highlights, "then it is hard to avoid concluding that there is something very like a tragedy going on forever between the persons of the Trinity" in his "doctrine of divine desire—the doctrine of the Trinity."³³⁷ (It is interesting to see that Myer's misgiving about Williams resonates with Kevin Taylor's critique of Balthasar's trinitarianism of kenotic distance that "there is even something like tragedy and tragic risk within the spaces between the Triune Persons."³³⁸) In other words, Williams's portrayal of the nature of the trinitarian relation looks very much like human relation that comes to grips with its tragic finitude and sinfulness. And it seems to me that, as in what I have argued with regard to divine self-dispossession, Williams's robust trinitarian asceticism proposes a vision with profound relevance for human life in the tragic world—yet at the cost of projecting the human tragic predicament onto the intra-trinitarian life, that is to say, coming close to ontologizing the tragic as that which the triune persons grapple with.

It is helpful here to recall the conclusion that I have reached in the first section of the present chapter. I have argued there that Williams's tragic reading of the Gospel of John comes close to ontologically radicalizing the tragic by making the ontological worth of created goodness nihil, by allowing the tragic antagonism to drive out the potentiality of the created goodness. I have argued here in the second section that Williams's trinitarian anthropology of self-dispossession leaves the strong impression of ontologizing the tragic by elevating the human tragic predicament of self-interest and self-gratification to the backdrop of divine relation which the triune persons must reckon with. To conclude, he is inclined to ontologize the tragic in the realms of the creation as well as of the Trinity.

³³⁶ Williams, "The Deflections of Desire," 128; italics mine.

³³⁷ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 112.

³³⁸ Taylor, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero," 137–38, n. 16.

Chapter 3. Vulnerability and Competition in the Ascetic Theology of Sarah Coakley

I have discussed in the first chapter that Sarah Coakley levels the charges against Balthasar that his kenotic theo-dramatics assumes *competitive* accounts of the intra-trinitarian relation as well as the God-world relation, and incorporates *vulnerability* into the life of the Trinity.¹ What I shall do in the present chapter is to critically examine the ascetic theology of Coakley in the light of the *competition* and *vulnerability*. In doing so, I hope to complete a triangulated examination and establish that the three prominent figures are inclined to put divinely positive light on the darkness of suffering, tragedy, and vulnerability respectively in the complicated relations of Williams and Coakley with Balthasar.

In this chapter I will engage first with the spiritual paradox of human vulnerability and divine omnipotence/empowerment—human vulnerability to divine omnipotence is paradoxically productive of divine empowerment—and then with the translation of created dependence on God into ascetical vulnerability to God. I will argue, with the help of John Barclay, that Coakley’s paradox of power-in-vulnerability is inclined to give undue priority and fertility to human practices of vulnerability to God coloured with painful darkness while paying little attention to the prior empowerment of the divine gift that produces human transformation; and that such an ascetical paradox of power-in-vulnerability ends up exhibiting a *competitive* implication for the divine-human relation—something which Coakley herself argues against.

Then I will try to shed light on Linn Tonstad’s pioneering question of why Coakley considers “created dependence on God” as “ascetic vulnerability to God” in the first place. I will call into question the fact that she dispenses with creation *ex nihilo* and instead taps into “mystical dereliction” in order to understand what *created* dependence on God means. Finally, I will offer, with the help of David Burrell, a creation-centred account of John of the Cross’s ascetical programme as an alternative to Coakley’s dereliction-centred account.

Before going on to examine the paradox of power-in-vulnerability, however, I believe it is helpful to situate her theological appropriation of “vulnerability” in a wider contemporary academic context by comparing it with Judith Butler’s concept of vulnerability and in a theological scene by referring to her evaluations of Balthasar and feminist theology.

¹ See “Kenosis, Otherness, and Competition: Balthasar, Williams, and Coakley” in the first chapter.

Introduction: Situating Coakley's Idea of Vulnerability

In Comparison with Judith Butler

As many scholars note, the concept of vulnerability has played a crucial role across a variety of disciplines in recent years. It is extraordinarily “elastic”—“it refers to the corporeal, emotional, psychological and affective. It is both universal and particular, constant and yet temporally and contextually varied. The term readily accepts all variety of adjectival modifiers.”² The concept of vulnerability comes to acquire a theologically heightened meaning and import in the thought of Sarah Coakley. She makes a theological contribution to the rich elasticity of “this—already polyform—‘vulnerable turn’”³ made in wider contemporary academia by adding creature’s vulnerability to God in prayer. Even so, Coakley’s theological notion of vulnerability differs markedly from other disciplines, which we are required to heed. I would like to shed preliminary light on the significant, yet little attended feature of vulnerability in Coakley in a very brief comparison with, for instance, the concept of vulnerability in the ethics of Judith Butler, which has recently kindled fierce interest in how vulnerability calls forth ethical obligation in human relations.⁴

Coakley’s spiritual paradox bears a striking resemblance to Butler’s ethical paradox: power emerges from within powerlessness. And, like Coakley, Butler also deems it very unsatisfactory that certain movements of feminist theories have harboured “skepticism about vulnerability,”⁵ and argued that “there is no clear way to derive an ethics, much less a politics, from that notion.”⁶ It may be thus hardly a surprise to see people succumbing to the temptation to muddle Coakley and Butler up and to treat both concepts as interchangeable.⁷ In fact, however, the two ideas occur on fundamentally different levels which are not supposed to be mixed up.

According to Butler, the aforementioned types of feminist thinkers fail to consider what human dependency means to the most radical degree. The human body is, according to Butler, from beginning to end, open to and dependent on the world of unknown and unpredictable others—

² Alyson Cole, “All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique,” in *The Politics of Vulnerability*, ed. Estelle Ferrarese (New York: Routledge, 2018), 110–27 (113).

³ Estelle Ferrarese, “Vulnerability and Critical Theory,” *Brill Research Perspectives in Critical Theory* 1, no. 2 (2016): 1–88 (3).

⁴ Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, “Introduction: What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?,” in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–29 (2–3).

⁵ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 123.

⁶ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 123.

⁷ For instance, Eleonora Hof, “Towards a Theology of Vulnerability: An Analysis and Critique of White Strategies of Ignorance and Invulnerability,” in *Salvation in the World: The Crossroads of Public Theology*, ed. Stephan van Erp, Christopher Cimorelli, and Christiane Alpers (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 242–55.

individuals and collectives, plus the seen and unseen infrastructures of the world. And “there is no way to dissociate dependency from aggression once and for all.”⁸ What we share is, for Butler, the general, ontological condition of our bodies’ fragility and vulnerability. This condition is intrinsically embedded within human life itself: “common human vulnerability . . . emerges with life itself”⁹ and entails “a primary vulnerability to others . . . that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human.”¹⁰ “Given over from the start to the world of others” is “a primary and unwilled physical proximity with others,”¹¹ a “fundamental dependency on anonymous others”¹² which thus cannot be “argued against” or “willed away” in the “name of autonomy.”¹³ Butler’s conception of vulnerability thus has to do with inter-human relations and is to be understood in the assumption of shared corporeality, in its vulnerability to violence, and in ethical and political possibilities that arise from the corporeal vulnerability of universal human interdependence.

In contrast at a fundamental level, however, the theological vulnerability that Coakley proposes is associated with a created relation of human dependence on the divine gift, a human relation with God who does not share the human finitude of vulnerability, corporeality, and mortality by any means. To put it differently, while Butler’s conceptualization of vulnerability occurs within the inter-human relations of corporeal interdependence embedded in the risk of domination and violence, thereby assuming bodily vulnerability to pain and suffering in the world, Coakley conceives of vulnerability in the relation of human dependence on divine gift. This incommensurable difference makes all the difference to subsequent discussions. It is thus natural to see that the paradoxes of vulnerability and power in Butler and Coakley differ markedly at a decisive point.

According to Butler, the universal, mutual corporeal vulnerability is an ineradicable “givenness” of human life and existence which together are recognized as an “ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives.”¹⁴ The human condition of vulnerability can offer a transformative vision for self-dispossession, and a global vision for ethical and political practices.

I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. . . . I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. I cannot think the

⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 151.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York; London: Verso, 2004), 31.

¹⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiv.

¹¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26. An almost verbatim repetition is in *Undoing Gender*, 21.

¹² Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.

¹³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.

¹⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 27.

question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the Other; if I do, I have taken myself out of the relational bind that frames the problem of responsibility from the start.¹⁵

In recognition that “the social conditions of our very formation”¹⁶ are “not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well,”¹⁷ “the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others.”¹⁸ And human ethical responsibility emerges from “staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself.”¹⁹ To recognize the precariousness of life that “we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another”²⁰ engenders an ethical demand and responsibility—“to risk ourselves precisely . . . when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.”²¹ We are able to “think vulnerability and agency together.”²² In other words, recognition of common corporeal vulnerability leads to creating an ethical agency. It is because we are invited to cross over from self-enclosed vulnerability into “the vulnerability that others suffer through military incursions, occupations, suddenly declared wars, and police brutality,”²³ that we begin “the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself.”²⁴ For Butler, the ontology of vulnerability concerns “theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility,”²⁵ which leads not to melancholia or powerlessness, but to a genuine basis of ethical demand and political responsibility.

From this insight into the human condition, Butler contends that “sometimes deliberately exposing the body to possible harm is part of the very meaning of political resistance.”²⁶ As she makes clear in the recent essay “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” her formulation of vulnerability and resistance indicates that to gather and assemble in the public domain unavoidably runs the risk of detention, arrest, and even death.²⁷ “Vulnerability can emerge within resistance,”

¹⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46. An almost verbatim repetition is found in Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 84.

¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

¹⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24. An almost verbatim repetition is in *Undoing Gender*, 19.

¹⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

¹⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.

²⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.

²¹ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 136.

²² Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 139.

²³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 23.

²⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

²⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22.

²⁶ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 126.

²⁷ Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12–27 (26). She states that “for trans people in many places in the world and women who seek to walk the street at night in safety, the moment of actively

Butler notes, because we are “neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region”²⁸ of human interdependence in which human receptivity, being acted upon, human responsiveness, and acting or affecting are inseparable and indistinguishable from one another. When we act upon what is not us, we cannot avoid being acted upon by it. Therefore, rejecting an ordinary notion that “vulnerability is the opposite of resistance,” Butler affirms that vulnerability understood as “a deliberate exposure to power” and to the violence of injustice is inextricably connected with “political resistance as an embodied enactment.”²⁹

It is clear that Butler’s conception of vulnerability shares a good amount of vocabulary with and strikingly resembles Coakley’s. However, what they mean are markedly at odds with each other. Human vulnerability is, for Coakley, put into practice towards the divine power, and the right practice of vulnerability paradoxically produces divine empowerment for resistance against injustice, whereas Butler’s vulnerability is related to the human condition of corporeal vulnerability and an exercise of public power. If there is a paradox in Butler’s ethics of vulnerability, it is that vulnerability to violence unavoidably emerges within resistance against it, and that the recognition of ineradicable human vulnerability leads to practices that can bring about a politically responsible community.

One may call into question if Butler envisages corporeal human interdependence and ethical obligation only in the situation of violence. If one may take into consideration that Butler’s ethical–political conceptualization of vulnerability faces criticism such as “emphasizing shared vulnerability puts human existence always on the brink of loss and always under threat,”³⁰ it may be hardly strange to ask what risk Coakley runs in the spiritual–ethical affirmation of vulnerability to God. This question is magnified in recognition of the fact that she renders dependence on God as vulnerability to God. Vulnerability is not merely affirmed but *essentialized* as the most fundamental reality of the creature’s relation with the creator, I will argue, at the cost of dismissing the created goodness and its relationship with divine goodness.

In the Context of Balthasar and Feminism

When it comes to the contemporary theological scene, Sarah Coakley’s theological conceptualization of vulnerability as towards God can be evaluated as a robust attempt to salvage both divine omnipotence and human vulnerability, two controverted concepts which have called forth important debates. Coakley makes critical points of departure from Hans Urs von Balthasar and some feminist strands in order to achieve the twofold task. According to her, on the one hand, Balthasar mistakenly

appearing on the street involves a deliberate risk of exposure to force. Under certain conditions, continuing to exist, to move, and to breathe are forms of resistance.”

²⁸ Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 25–26.

²⁹ Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 22.

³⁰ Rosalyn Diprose, “Corporeal Interdependence: From Vulnerability to Dwelling in Ethical Community,” *SubStance* 42, no. 3 (2013): 185–204 (189).

equates vulnerability with divine omnipotence itself; on the other, contemporary feminism errs on the side of safeguarding female autonomy in making vulnerability essentially antithetical to Christian virtue. She contends that a special kind of human *vulnerability* to divine *omnipotence* generates divine *empowerment*, and it thereby proves itself to be a genuine conceptualization of both vulnerability and omnipotence without falling into false attempts to divinize and exorcise vulnerability respectively.

On the one hand, interestingly, in contrast to Rowan Williams who is enthusiastic to spare Balthasar from the critique of importing vulnerability and suffering into the triune life of God, Coakley expresses a deep reservation about the trinitarian thought of Balthasar in favour of the classical idea of divine omnipotence. It is helpful to be reminded that she impugns the view of divine kenosis as the loss of divine freedom and power, that is, divine sacrifice, divine self-limitation, and divine self-emptying in order to give space for human freedom and power, for such a view is likely to fall into a competitive account of divine–human relations as if the more the creator gives up freedom, the more the creature occupies freedom.³¹ Coakley further criticizes that Balthasar’s post-war theology tends to “embrace human weakness into the trinitarian heart of God” and “incorporate vulnerability into the trinitarian understanding of God,” to “identify submission with divine power.”³²

On the ground of biblical and theological exposition of the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:5–11, thus, in contrast to Balthasar’s trinitarian kenosis, Coakley aligns herself with the view of kenosis that “the whole matter of kenosis is, from the start, not a matter of speculating about divine characteristics and the effect on them of the incarnation, but rather a *moral* matter of Jesus’ ‘self-sacrifice’ *en route* to the cross.”³³ After drawing this clear distinction, Coakley places the christological vulnerability at the heart of spirituality precisely because “Jesus’ ‘vulnerability’ is a primary narrative given”³⁴ to us. And “the frailty, vulnerability and ‘self-effacement’ of these

³¹ See “Kenosis, Otherness, and Competition: Balthasar, Williams, and Coakley” in the first chapter.

³² Coakley, “Prologue: Powers and Submissions,” xiv–xv, xix–xx.

³³ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 194. However, this position is somewhat compromised when the matter of kenosis becomes closer to a kind of “speculating about divine characteristics.” She places emphasis on “a movement of *divine* reflexivity, a sort of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays” (Sarah Coakley, “Can God be Experienced as Trinity?,” *The Modern Churchman* 28 [1986]: 11–23 [21]); this kenotic reflexivity plays a fundamental role in establishing the prayer-based model of the Trinity. Even she alludes to “kenotic reflexivity between the divine persons,” that is, between the “mutual relations of submission and response that might subliminally summon gender associations” that establish *difference* within the triune relations. This “kenotic reflexivity” serves as a starting point for her criticism of Kathryn Tanner’s non-competitive model of the Trinity, that it sanitises, erases, and obliterates differences of mutuality—the exchange of give and return. Sarah Coakley, “Why Gift? Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 2 (May 2008): 224–35 (232).

Tonstad makes a similar point: “Coakley makes clear that *divinity* is not kenotic, although it is gentle (*Powers and Submission*, 38). However, in ‘Providence and the Evolutionary Phenomenon of “Cooperation”: A Systematic Proposal,’ in *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 187, Coakley equates divine kenosis with ‘effusive pouring out’ and with ‘self-hid[ing],’ which she considers peculiarly appropriate to divinity.” Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 125, n. 52.

³⁴ Coakley, “*Kenosis* and Subversion,” 25.

narratives [Gethsemane and Golgotha] is what shows us ‘perfect humanity’.”³⁵ His perfect humanity is revealed in his vulnerability on the way to and on the cross. As the passion narratives of Jesus unfolds to us “the pattern of cross and resurrection,” human vulnerability to God is fertile of divine empowerment rather than ending up endorsing vulnerability itself. The right kind of spiritual vulnerability to God is not vulnerable to leaking into condoning abusive kinds of vulnerability but rather creates divine empowerment that encourages resistance against injustice. This paradox of vulnerability and power shows the profoundly deep understanding of the interconnection between spirituality and ethics because the ethics of empowerment for resistance does not support self-autonomy but comes from the deepest space in the human soul where a genuine divine–human encounter takes place.

As regards feminist theologians, on the other hand, Coakley is content to uphold the notions of human vulnerability and divine omnipotence, which many feminist theologians found problematic. She notes that human vulnerability to God is completely different from any vulnerability to other human individuals and social powers. “Submission to God and silence before God—being unlike any other submission or any other silence—was that which empowered one to speak against injustice and abuse and was the ground of true freedom (in God) rather than its suppression.”³⁶ She thus attempts to add correction to feminists who are vigilant about a possibility of the abuse of vulnerability to fall victim to patriarchal ideology. She underscores that kenosis is “vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of it [feminism], a manifestation which does not eschew, but embraces, the spiritual paradoxes of ‘losing one’s life in order to save it’.”³⁷ She insists that human vulnerability to God not only forecloses “the possibility of the mimetic *feminist* abuse of power”³⁸ (which Coakley may observe in “earlier second-wave feminist theologies” with “self-assertion and activist moral zeal, not receptive surrender”³⁹), but is also “fully compatible with the rightful goals of a distinctively Christian feminism.”⁴⁰ As Janice Rees encapsulates, for Coakley, “the potential for Christian feminism may lie precisely in the rediscovery of vulnerability – in the paradoxical power of the emptied Christ who overcomes the world.”⁴¹ Sarah Brubaker states that for Coakley

³⁵ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 30.

³⁶ Sarah Coakley, “How My Mind Has Changed: Prayer as Crucible,” *The Christian Century* 128, no. 6 (March 2011): 32–40 (36).

³⁷ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 4, 33.

³⁸ Coakley, “Prologue: Powers and Submissions,” xvii.

³⁹ Amy Carr, “Divine Grace and the Question of Free Will: A Feminist ‘Stumbling Block?’,” in *Christian Doctrines for Global Gender Justice*, ed. Jenny Daggars and Grace Ji-Sun Kim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 135–53 (139–40).

⁴⁰ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 343.

⁴¹ Janice Rees, “Sarah Coakley: Systematic Theology and the Future of Feminism,” *Pacifica* 24, no. 3 (2011): 300–14 (313).

feminism is not unfiltered liberal feminism. For Coakley the desideratum of theology is not autonomy or self-mastery, even for those to whom it has been unjustly denied. Rather, theology's desire, and humanity's desire, is for God. And desiring God means practicing un mastery, relinquishing control, and emptying oneself—all theological themes that, Coakley acknowledges, can make other feminist scholars nervous.⁴²

Even for those who have been already displaced and rendered defenceless within the human world, such as refugees and minorities, the virtues of dispossession and vulnerability remain intact at the level of the divine–human relation; even if they are suffering as the most dispossessed in the realm of inter-human politics, it does not alter the theological truth of the human dependence on God, namely, human vulnerability to God.⁴³ And she is convinced that self-effacement and self-renunciation before divine power eventually proves fruitful and productive of divine empowerment; this is a central spiritual paradox of power-in-vulnerability embedded in the christological paradox of resurrection-in-death of Jesus. Therefore, Coakley contends that “the profound paradox of an inalienable surrender (‘submission’) to God . . . must remain the secret ground of even feminist ‘empowerment’.”⁴⁴

⁴² Sarah Morice Brubaker, “The Indispensable Sarah Coakley: Theology through Prayer,” *The Christian Century* 133, no. 24 (November 2016): 24–27 (25). Kathryn Tanner seems to achieve a similar aim without “making other feminist scholar nervous.” “Especially instructive in Tanner’s vision of God is that she cuts the knot that feminists usually tie between a radically transcendent God and a divine economy of domination. Since God’s agency operates on a different plane of causality than that of humankind, dependence on this transcendent God does not undermine the creature’s agency; rather, in the divine economy of grace, the more the creature depends on God, the more empowerment she receives for her good. While this divine–human relationship certainly has a hierarchical structure, it is one founded entirely on God’s gracious and ceaseless self–giving, so that dependence on God becomes a source of abundant life.” Joy Ann McDougall, “Feminist Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 671–88 (682).

⁴³ If one fails to pay sufficient heed to the fact that Coakley situates the notion of kenotic vulnerability not in inter-human relationship but divine–human relation, it leads to a too straightforward or flat critique of that notion such as “a highly problematic notion given that women are already diminished of personhood to sacrifice.” Ally Moder, “Women, Personhood, and the Male God: A Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Concepts of God in View of Domestic Abuse,” *Feminist Theology* 28, no. 1 (2019): 85–103 (90).

It is possible, however, to call into question Coakley’s tendency towards *individualizing* and *interiorizing* the notion of kenosis. For instance, Janice McRandal is concerned that Coakley’s “appeals to transformative spiritual practices nearly always give the impression of an isolated self.” Janice McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference: A Contribution to Feminist Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 170. Joann Wolski Conn would take exception to Coakley’s spiritualizing of kenosis. She contends that “ascetical *kenosis* (self-emptying) is not that associated with contemplative prayer (stilling of mental faculties), but *kenosis* is of loving service, emptying the ego before the other.” Joann Wolski Conn, “Spiritual Darkness in Women’s Lives,” in *Light Burdens, Heavy Blessings: Challenges of Church and Culture in the Post Vatican II Era*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon, Moni McIntyre, and Mary Ellen Sheehan (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2000), 165–70 (168). In relation to a broader context of Coakley’s formulation of power-in-vulnerability based on Christ’s resurrection-in-death, it would be also worthwhile noting that Ched Myers calls into question that “the true antecedent to “taking up the cross” is “self-denial.”” He asks, “Is this, as often argued by bourgeois exegesis, indication of a spiritualizing tendency already within the text, as if Mark defines the cross as personal asceticism? Emphatically not” Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 246.

⁴⁴ Coakley, “Prologue: Powers and Submissions,” x.

The Paradox of Human Vulnerability and Divine Omnipotence/Empowerment

The Prioritization and Fertilization of Human Vulnerability to God

Sarah Coakley, upon the basis of kenotic paradox of vulnerability and power, seeks to establish a “kneeling theology,” namely, “a theology founded in intentional practices of ‘un-mastery’.”⁴⁵ The kneeling theology that she pursues purports to present a new direction for contemporary systematic theology in that it attempts to intersect theologizing and praying through “theological insights available *only* through practices”⁴⁶ of prayerful vulnerability to God, “the very act of contemplation—repeated, lived, embodied, suffered.”⁴⁷ The validity of her kneeling theology as a discourse and a practice towards transformation and resistance thus lies in the validity of the spiritual paradox of vulnerability and power/empowerment—our vulnerability to God’s power produces God’s empowerment of us. In this section I will contest the logic of this spiritual paradox. I will first show that the paradox is inclined to give precedence and assigns a productive role to human vulnerability to God which is characterized as pain, darkness, and suffering; and then I will argue that this formulation makes it hard fully to acknowledge the priority and efficacy of divine grace, which John Barclay elucidates in his Pauline scholarship. And I will finally argue that Coakley’s paradox of vulnerability and power gives the strong impression of making a *competitive* account of the divine–human relation.

The central christological premise that underpins a great deal of Coakley’s argument is that Jesus underwent despair and agony on the cross; that his weakness and defencelessness reveals a perfect humanity of self-emptying; and that his kenotic self-renunciation produces divine empowerment. This “vision of Christological *kenōsis* uniting human ‘vulnerability’ with authentic divine power,”⁴⁸ which is based on theological exegesis of Philippians 2, carries “imitative spiritual significance” for the “spiritual flourishing”⁴⁹ of believers. They are invited to imitate the kenotic life of the incarnate Son by “the ‘spiritual’ extension of Christic *kenōsis*.”⁵⁰ Coakley sees kenosis as grounding the life of Christ as well as Christian life as its extension. Here the relation of christology and anthropology is understood as an archetype of kenosis and its spiritual extension respectively.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 66.

⁴⁶ Sarah Coakley, “‘Deepening Practices’: Perspectives from Ascetical Theology on Belief and Practice, Desire and Gender” (2002), in *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 101–27 (117).

⁴⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 43.

⁴⁸ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 18.

⁴⁹ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 18.

⁵⁰ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 34. See also Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 56.

⁵¹ The relation of christology and discipleship in terms of the *extension of kenosis* seems quite evident and indisputable at first glance. Yet a critical question comes into view in the recognition that the *directions* of kenosis in

And she is determined to argue that the human willingness to embrace kenotic vulnerability to God, which is primarily enacted in contemplative prayer, neither cultivates false submissiveness nor condones false servility to the sinful structure of human oppression; rather it *produces* divine empowerment for the resistance against false human power to coerce submission and vulnerability. Therefore, there is no need to be astonished by the fact that the logic of the kenotic paradox of vulnerability and power gives the impression to *prioritize* human vulnerability because, for Coakley, it is believed to lay a foundation for “a *productive* ‘theology of the cross.’”⁵² Human vulnerability can be encouragingly *prioritized* inasmuch as it is *fertile* of empowerment. “The expansion and ‘empowerment’ of the self (cognitively, affectively, spirituality, politically, and sexually) are,” as Linn Tonstad points out, “the result of such sacrificial submission.”⁵³ To be vulnerable to divine power, in effect, proves itself as empowering: Christ’s “posture of human vulnerability and defencelessness” is “a defencelessness which is supremely powerful: both demanding submission, and representing it in perfect form.”⁵⁴ And, for Coakley, this kenotic paradox is a theological formulation of the christological paradox of “‘losing one’s life in order to save it’”⁵⁵ revealed in the central narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In this pattern of loss and gain, loss is presented as the condition of producing gain, and gain as the result of the quality of the loss. This pattern, which has great affinity with the tragic pattern of Rowan Williams which I articulated in the foregoing chapter, for Coakley makes the case both for the life of Christ and Christian life. It is truly a genuine spiritual paradox in the sense that, according to Coakley, as Christ’s kenosis clearly unfolds in us, the pain of human vulnerability to God produces the gain of divine empowerment.⁵⁶

Christ and us are discrepant with each other. A relation of “extension” cannot be established unless Christ’s and our kenosis are oriented in the same direction. However, while the kenosis of Christ is not something required by his sin at all, in contrast, human kenosis is always the self-purgative renunciation of the sinful human self. Linn Tonstad has already put her finger on this mistake that Coakley makes about intertwining christology and anthropology in terms of kenosis: “Christ did not suffer his own idolatries and sins from which he had to be purged; as Coakley recognizes, he suffered the consequences of the idolatries and sins of others. So his human kenosis cannot be the kenosis into which the pray-er is shaped.” Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 110–11. And as Karen Kilby observes, human action of redirecting “misdirected desire” is to be called “repentance” rather than an embodiment of christological kenosis. Karen E. Kilby, “The Seductions of Kenosis,” in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. Karen E. Kilby and Rachel Davies (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, forthcoming).

⁵² Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 37; italics mine.

⁵³ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 113–14.

⁵⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 258.

⁵⁵ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 4, 33.

⁵⁶ One may find interesting some parallels between “vulnerability” and “sacrifice” in Coakley’s theological–spiritual anthropology of cultivating a vision of kenotic selfhood: 1) human dependence on God translates into *vulnerability* to God and *sacrifice* for God because divine gift intersects with the radicality of human sin; 2) vulnerability and sacrifice are strictly separated as *to and for God* and *to and for the world*, and the former is endorsed and encouraged (as a wilful and purposeful kenotic enactment of the cross of Christ and the binding of Isaac respectively) while the latter is rejected and rebuked; 3) some forms of contemporary feminist theology are taken to fail to recognize the profound difference between the *right* type of vulnerability and sacrifice and the *wrong* ones.

The following paragraph encapsulates Coakley’s spiritualized understanding of sacrifice: “sacrifice is the necessary purgation of false desire (leading to life, not death) that occurs when the divine gift hits the timeline of human sin and asks of us nothing less than complete and ecstatic commitment to the divine. . . . sacrifice is as much a *feminist*

To elaborate on the paradox of power and vulnerability, it is first helpful to make clear that there is a double movement of power and vulnerability: the *gentle* entry of divine “omnipotence” into the human dependent through her receptive “vulnerability” and its *reproductive* exit as divine “empowerment” of the recipient towards “resistance” against false powers; divine omnipotence is power to be conceived inwardly and divine empowerment is power to be born outwardly; the former has more to do with the spirituality of the human reception, the latter more with the ethics of the human action. In the in-and-out movement of the reception and procreation of divine power, human prayer submissively and vulnerably strips oneself in order to receive or conceive the non-coercive divine omnipotence, and make the divine power unreservedly and gently penetrate the human soul in the hope that the divine omnipotence creates or procreates the empowerment of the human soul towards protest against false forceful human submission and vulnerability.

For Coakley, as Tonstad points out, “the human being’s free practice of contemplation also conditions the movement of God in significant ways. The self-erasing human being in this way comes to stand at the very center of her theological project.”⁵⁷ The human recipient is so nakedly and defencelessly open to divine omnipotence in order to “make space” for divine power that the space of nakedness and defencelessness accommodates divine omnipotence; or the human being “vulnerably” receives the divine gift of power so that divine power manifests itself in the already renounced space of human vulnerability and thereby empowers the human being from within the emptied space. In other words, Coakley proposes a profound transition of power–submission relation from divine–human relations to human–human relations—at the cost of depending on the spatial, competitive language of “making room”: human submission to divine power is flipped over to divine empowerment against human power to enforce submission. Vulnerability is *anticipatively* affirmed, encouraged, and practised in contemplation as a cardinal—spiritual and ethical—virtue on the basis of the hope of its future outcome of empowerment.

Spirituality and ethics intersect with each other in her spiritual paradox. And the intersection relies on the claim that human vulnerability in effect is fertile. For Coakley, prayerful vulnerability to the divine omnipotence paradoxically brings about divine empowerment that enables the prayer to act rightly for the world—and thus eliminates many different kinds of concerns and suspicions such as a primary emphasis on human vulnerability which can leak across into condoning or even glamorizing

mode of transformation as it is a death knell to patriarchy; yet patriarchal sacrifice, its dark mimic, ever hovers as a seductive and demonic alternative. The one, sacrifice-for-God, brings freedom, union, and peace; the other, sacrifice-for-the-world, re-establishes the law of patriarchal violence, possessiveness, and abuse. Again, the one, sacrifice-for-God, “interrupts” the fixed repressive gender binary of patriarchy; the other, sacrifice-for-the-world, re-establishes the violence of mandatory “hetero-normativity” and male dominance. The problem of continuing political vigilance, not to say of intense spiritual discernment, is clearly not to be gainsaid. But the rejection of “sacrifice,” *tout court*, is too high a price to pay.” Sarah Coakley, “In Defense of Sacrifice: Gender, Selfhood, and the Binding of Isaac,” in *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 17–38 (31; 23).

⁵⁷ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 99.

“societal ‘submissiveness’, disassociated introversion, apolitical anaesthesia, or the silencing of ‘woman’,”⁵⁸ as well as “enforced female submission to priestly authority, or to undeserved and unnecessary physical and mental suffering,”⁵⁹ and “an invitation to be battered.”⁶⁰ In contrast to this false vulnerability, she insists that there is good vulnerability that is paradoxically “profoundly transformative, ‘empowering’ in a mysterious ‘Christic’ sense”;⁶¹ in other words, it creates “the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God”⁶² and ultimately produces divine empowerment that makes possible “personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry.”⁶³ “The silence of contemplation is of a particular, *sui generis*, form: it is not the silence of *being silenced*. Rather, it is the voluntary silence of attention, transformation, mysterious interconnection, and (in violent, abusive, or oppressive contexts) rightful and divinely empowered *resistance*: it is a special ‘power-in-vulnerability.’ . . . Contemplation engenders courage to *give voice*, but in a changed, prophetic key.”⁶⁴ She later calls what divine empowerment produces, I suggest, as “the extraordinary ripple effect of prayer in the Spirit” that carries “social and cosmic significance” and “political import” as well as personal significance.⁶⁵ The spiritual, ascetical practice of prayerful vulnerability to God promises a wider societal, communal contribution by producing divine empowerment. It is the practised kenotic vulnerability of human agency that is fruitful of the divine empowerment that carries such spreading effects of resistance and transformation.

What should be noted is that the vulnerability to God is, quite naturally, characterized as pain and suffering. She thus puts great weight on the fertility and productivity of pain and suffering by making them the condition and means of producing power and its transformative potential. Human vulnerability to God, for Coakley, as Tonstad remarks, “continually, inextricably, and intrinsically involves suffering.”⁶⁶ Coakley goes so far as to say that it is “the productive suffering of self-disclosure”⁶⁷ or “a productive or empowering form of ‘pain’.”⁶⁸ And the productive result of spiritual pain and suffering is affirmed in anticipation and proven in retrospect. What John of the Cross acquaints us with is that, according to Coakley, “physical and spiritual pain are inexorably welded

⁵⁸ Coakley, “Prologue: Powers and Submissions,” xvii.

⁵⁹ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 36.

⁶⁰ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 35.

⁶¹ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 35.

⁶² Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 36.

⁶³ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 38; italics mine.

⁶⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 84–85.

⁶⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 114.

⁶⁶ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 114.

⁶⁷ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 36.

⁶⁸ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 37.

together” and the “subjective experience,” whatever happens to him “neurologically or physiologically,” is of “a progressive transformation into God, even if only retrospectively understood.”⁶⁹ For Coakley, therefore, diagnosing the process of suffering and pain is *suspended until the bitter end*. It is unknown to us till the very end whether it turns out to be a spiritual fruit with a neurological/physiological pain or ends up with a merely pathological disorder.

In sum, Coakley’s kneeling theology of the spiritual paradox is built on the *priority* and *fertility* of *painful* vulnerability to divine power. In contrast to her tendency towards prioritizing the human practice of vulnerability to God, I will attempt to show that Paul’s theology of the divine–human relation firmly underlines the priority and efficacy of the empowering divine gift.

The Priority and Efficacy of the Divine Gift in Philippians 2: John Barclay on Pauline Divine Gift

In contrast to Coakley’s great appropriation of kenosis and its paradox in Philippians 2, John Barclay seems *invertedly* to emphasize the divine grace that *precedes* and *empowers* human labour in the theology of Paul’s Philippians 2. In other words, it is not that divine empowerment is something produced by and after human practice, but that the former *precedes* and *produces* the latter. Barclay offers a surprisingly decisive theological exegesis of Philippians 2:12–14: “With fear and trembling work out your own salvation, for God is the one who works in you, both to will and to work for what is pleasing.” Interestingly, these revealing verses follow right from the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2:5–11, which Coakley draws upon in establishing her paradox of power-in-vulnerability. According to Barclay, these significant verses show that Paul understands the relationship between God and believers as always and already graced; and what it means to be *graced* is that human will and action are empowered by the divine grace that has a priority over it. He claims that this understanding of grace as empowerment dominates Pauline literature beyond Philippians.

John Barclay makes plain that in the context of the whole letter of Philippians, “‘salvation’ is a phenomenon which begins and ends with the initiative of God.”⁷⁰ And then he asks the following question regarding the importance of the initiative of divine grace: “Does God’s work ‘in you’ merely *provoke* or also *empower* or even constitute their ‘working out’ of their own salvation?”⁷¹ Despite acknowledging a difficulty to leave no ambiguity in establishing absolute clarity between divine and human agency in the verses, Barclay is convinced that divine grace does not simply provoke, invite,

⁶⁹ Sarah Coakley, “Palliative or Intensification? Pain and Christian Contemplation in the Spirituality of the Sixteenth-Century Carmelites,” in *Pain and Its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 77–100 (91).

⁷⁰ John M. G. Barclay, “By the Grace of God I Am What I Am?: Grace and Agency in Philo and Paul,” in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, ed. John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 140–57 (152).

⁷¹ Barclay, “By the Grace of God I Am What I Am,” 152.

or attract human will and action towards God, but that it even *empowers, energizes, and enables* the human relationship with God at its utmost centre or depth.

According to Barclay, Paul understands grace as “toward me,” “with me,” “through me,” and “in me.”⁷² And Barclay notes that, echoing Käsemann, “it is inadequate to think of grace as ‘gift’ unless we also recognize its character as divine power.”⁷³ In other words, divine *grace* pervasively and penetratingly works as divine *empowerment* in relation to a believer. Barclay notes that in Philippians 2:12–14, alongside many verses in other Pauline texts, Paul “places divine grace *anterior* to human action, while affirming the *continuation* of that grace in human activity.”⁷⁴ Pauline literature shows that divine grace not only *creates and initiates* the human will and action from the start, but also *sustains and perfects* human agency by the priority and efficacy of grace.⁷⁵ “The notion of divine energy or empowerment is,” he goes so far as to say, “a common motif in Pauline theology”⁷⁶ in Philippians and beyond. He suggests that, what is of “potentially huge significance” in Philippians 2:12–14 is that “strikingly the divine work affects both the will and the action of believers: if even *the will to act* is attributed to God . . . , human agency *is entangled with divine agency from the roots up*.”⁷⁷ He notes that Paul’s “theology concerns the subversive and redemptive power of divine grace in Christ, which creates and empowers new communities of social (and therefore broadly political) significance.”⁷⁸

⁷² John M. G. Barclay, “Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ,” in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 372–89 (383).

⁷³ John M. G. Barclay, “Under Grace: The Christ-Gift and the Construction of a Christian *Habitus*,” in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 59–76 (62).

⁷⁴ Barclay, “Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ,” 383.

⁷⁵ It is interesting to see that the divine grace creating, sustaining, and perfecting human agency bears resemblance to the divine power of God the creator to create (*ex nihilo*), sustain, and perfect the world.

⁷⁶ Barclay, “Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ,” 379.

⁷⁷ Barclay, “‘By the Grace of God I Am What I Am,’” 152; and “Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ,” 379. It is worth noting that Thomas Aquinas shows a similar understanding of divine agency as “noncompetitive causality”—“principal agent” in his exposition of Philippians 2:13: “man is moved by God to will [inwardly] and to perform outwardly in a manner consistent with free will. Therefore, willing and performing depends on man as freely acting; but on God not on man, as initial mover” (*In ad Rom.*, 777). Michael Waldstein, “The Trinitarian Spousal and Ecclesial Logic of Justification,” in *Reading Romans with St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 274–87 (284–85). Paul Murray as well points out that Aquinas’s exposition of Philippians 2:13 shares much with Barclay’s in his paper “St Thomas Aquinas and the Potential Catholic Integration of a Dynamic Occasionalist Understanding into the Theology of Grace” given at “Reading Paul Today: Grace and Gift for Protestant and Catholic Theology—A Research Symposium in Conversation with John M. G. Barclay’s *Paul and the Gift*,” held at Ushaw College, Durham on June 22, 2018.

⁷⁸ John M. G. Barclay, “Why Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 363–87 (383).

The vocabulary that best grasps the priority and efficacy⁷⁹ of divine grace and its consequential divine–human relationship in Paul is, for Barclay, revealingly, “empowerment.” In *Paul and the Gift* Barclay calls the divine–human relation marked by this divine empowerment as “energism”:⁸⁰ the divine gift and the Christ-gift empower, energize, and enable human agency in the most radical manner; there is “a pattern of ‘energism’ in Pauline agency”⁸¹ that suggests a thoroughgoing entanglement of divine–human agency: “Believers are energized by the Spirit to work, actively and strenuously, recognizing that whatever real ‘good’ ensues can be credited only to God.”⁸² It is thus natural to see that Barclay, as well as Kathryn Tanner, acknowledges that, theologically speaking, what is “generative”⁸³ of all good things is the Christ-gift, and what is “productive”⁸⁴ of all good things is divine gift. In short, divine grace *empowers* or *energizes* human will and action in the most profound and radical way.

The Pauline pattern of energism is, for Barclay, admitted to the category of *non-competitive* relation. He maintains that, in a non-competitive conception of divine and human agency, surprisingly and properly quoting Kathryn Tanner, God is conceived of as “*non-contrastive transcendence*” which radically guarantees “an extreme of divine involvement with the world—a divine involvement in the form of a productive agency extending to everything that is in an equally direct manner.”⁸⁵ Accordingly, human agency lies in “absolute dependence on divine agency”—*dependence not as vulnerability but empowerment*. In this relationship “God’s sovereignty . . . grounds and enables” human will; “it is God who *effects* it, who constitutes its effectiveness as an agent.”⁸⁶ In other words, the divine and human agencies thus stand “in direct, and not inverse proportion”⁸⁷ in stark contrast to a competitive relationship.

The radical priority and efficacy of divine grace in Paul, for Barclay, creates and enables the possibility and importance of human effort, practice, or *askesis* rather than obscures and diminishes human agency. In Paul’s mind, for Barclay, “divine grace calls forth, or takes effect in, human

⁷⁹ When Barclay speaks about “the efficacy of grace in the will and work of believers” in Philippians 2:12–13, the efficacy means “the present, causative agency of God within the agency of believers.” John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 569.

⁸⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 442. The new nomenclature has already appeared in his previous articles such as “By the Grace of God,” 156, n. 39; and “Grace and the Transformation of Agency,” 388, n. 38. Nathan Eubank also pays special attention to the “energism” in his paper “Divine Generosity as the Condition of Human Merit” presented at “Reading Paul Today—A Research Symposium in Conversation with John M. G. Barclay’s *Paul and the Gift*.”

⁸¹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 442.

⁸² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 129.

⁸³ Barclay, “Under Grace,” 73.

⁸⁴ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 46.

⁸⁵ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 46, cited in John M. G. Barclay, “Introduction,” in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, 1–8 (7).

⁸⁶ Barclay, “Introduction,” 7.

⁸⁷ Barclay, “Introduction,” 7.

labour.”⁸⁸ The practice of the body to attend to God and live the newness of life lies “only ever in a responsive mode”⁸⁹ to the Christ-gift, the power of the resurrection life of Christ. The divine grace demands and requires believers under grace to live the newness of life: “The new *habitus* of the believer—the new perceptions, goals, dispositions, and values—can become effective only in practice”;⁹⁰ ethics of practice and the theology of the Christ-gift are inextricably connected to each other.⁹¹ But divine empowerment is given as a gift to enable the new *habitus*, not a reward for achieving it, and human practice is elicited as a response to the divine gift, and not as a precondition of receiving it. In other words, this responsive aspect, *not necessarily painfully vulnerable*, to the divine gift creates a responsible self who is created and empowered by the resurrection life of Christ without making divine empowerment conditional on human reception.

Viewed in the light of the Pauline emphasis on the priority and productivity of divine grace which John Barclay highlights, Sarah Coakley’s formulation of the spiritual paradox of vulnerability and empowerment leaves the strong impression of giving *precedence* and *productivity* to human practice of cultivating vulnerability and perfecting self-renunciation. The focused attention on the prioritized and fertilized suffering of self-dispossession is inclined to imply that human agency *operates in advance* of divine grace, as an ascetic self who possesses a fair amount of power enough to activate self-dispossession *in advance of and in the quest for* divine empowerment. And the self who proves already to be fairly capable of renouncing oneself ironically *operates outside* the economy of divine gift, insofar as human action of self-dispossession takes precedence over divine grace.

Conversely, Barclay underscores Paul’s emphasis on the priority and efficacy of divine grace, revealing that divine empowerment of the divine gift and the resurrection life of the Christ-gift precedes and empowers human will and action. “The self who participates in Christ is,” Barclay notes, “not merely relocated but reconstituted by its absorption within the *noncoercive* power of grace,”⁹² within (quoting Tanner again) the “context of God’s superabundant gift-giving.”⁹³ Divine agency works as the gift-giving of all goodness to unveil, elicit, empower, and intensify created goodness from within its primordial origination from and correspondence to divine goodness. The true human freedom as created dependence on divine power then does not necessarily translate into a receptive submissiveness and vulnerability to the divine giver. If one would take into serious and full

⁸⁸ Barclay, “By the Grace of God I Am What I Am,” 151; “Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ,” 377.

⁸⁹ Barclay, “Under Grace,” 76.

⁹⁰ Barclay, “Under Grace,” 75.

⁹¹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 439–41.

⁹² Barclay, “By the Grace of God I Am What I Am,” 156 (italics mine); “Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ,” 384.

⁹³ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 71, cited in Barclay, “Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ,” 389, n. 39.

consideration the non-competitively empowering nature of divine gift-giving and human dependence on it, it would not at all be necessary and convincing to render created dependence on divine gift as dark vulnerability and painful submission.

The Competition between Divine Coerciveness and Human Vulnerability

The *non-competitive* divine–human relation which Barclay emphasizes with the help of Kathryn Tanner offers us grounds further to critically engage with Sarah Coakley’s propensity for emphasizing the human practice of vulnerability to God. I will argue below that the paradoxical formulation of *vulnerable* human receptivity to *gentle* divine omnipotence carries a *competitive* implication for the divine–human relation.

I have shown in the first chapter that Coakley, on the classical theistic basis of the non-competitive divine–human relation, subjects Hans Urs von Balthasar to a serious criticism that his understanding of divine kenosis implies a competitive relation within God and between God and the world. She explicitly takes up classical theistic views of non-contrastive divine transcendence and immanence as meaning God’s non-competitive involvement with the world. She claims herself to be committed to “the so called ‘classical’ vision of divine interaction with the world.”⁹⁴ She therefore stipulates that she agrees with “*theistic* compatibilists”⁹⁵ and subscribes to non-competitive accounts of the divine–human relation. Her commitment to the classical idea of a non-competitive divine–human relation has been consistently expressed, including in her recent work on a theistic theory of evolution. Her critical repudiation of a competitive account of God in relation to the world enables her to reject a competitive account of divine providence and evolutionary process that wrongly suggests that “God *competes* with the evolutionary process as a (very big) bit player in the temporal unfolding of ‘natural selection.’”⁹⁶ In contrast, Coakley avers, God is “‘that-without-which-there-would-be-nothing-at-all.’”⁹⁷ Accordingly, “God is that-without-which-there-would-be-no-evolution-at-all; God is the atemporal undergird and sustainer of the whole process of apparent contingency or ‘randomness’.”⁹⁸

For God, by definition, cannot be an extra item in the universe (a very big one) to be known, and so controlled, by human intellect, will, or imagination. God is, rather, that without which there would be nothing at all; God is the source and sustainer of all being ...⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 206.

⁹⁵ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 206.

⁹⁶ Coakley, “Providence and the Evolutionary Phenomenon of ‘Cooperation,’” 186.

⁹⁷ Sarah Coakley, “Creaturehood before God: Male and Female” (1990), in *Powers and Submissions*, 55–68 (56).

⁹⁸ Coakley, “Providence and the Evolutionary Phenomenon of ‘Cooperation,’” 186.

⁹⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 44–45. She continues to say that God is, “as such, the dizzying mystery encountered in the act of contemplation as precisely the ‘blinking’ of the human ambition to knowledge, control,

According to Coakley, in tune with such a classical idea of non-competitive divine–human relation, the false competitive construal of divine agency in relation to created agency gives rise to a fatal misunderstanding of human freedom “to think falsely of God as making human *autonomy* competitively constrained by divine action.”¹⁰⁰ According to the non-competitive or compatibilist view for which Coakley herself signs up, we are invited to think rightly that “I am most *truly* ‘free’ when I am aligned with God’s providential and determining will for me.”¹⁰¹ In other words, divine agency non-competitively works in relation to human agency, and, in effect, divine agency operates in a way of increasing and intensifying, not decreasing and diminishing, human agency—*insofar as* the human will is “aligned with” the divine will.

A God who accounts for non-competition is thus not “a God who must *get out of the way* in order that ‘freedom’ be enacted,” but “God as nurturing and sustaining us *into* freedom”¹⁰² or “God as matrix—as sustaining conditioner of all that we are and do,”¹⁰³ as the creator and giver of the economy of freedom on which we are utterly dependent. She quotes, interestingly, Kathryn Tanner: “[Human] relations with God are utterly non-competitive because God, from beyond this created plane of reality, brings about the *whole* plane of creaturely being and activity in its goodness”¹⁰⁴ in an asymmetrical relation of our utter dependence on divine gift. Finite beings are created, nurtured, and sustained in the goodness of the economy of divine power and freedom. Therefore, divine power and freedom do not have to be emptied in order for human power and freedom to increase, for divine agency initiates, nurtures, and fulfils human agency utterly dependence on the divine gift of goodness. It is clear that Coakley’s “‘classical’ vision of divine interaction with the world”¹⁰⁵ implies a non-competitive divine–human relation. And I believe that here she offers a right picture of a non-competitive relation between God and the world.

However, Coakley, in fact, as Linn Tonstad aptly points out, “construes the God–world relation in *dangerously competitive ways* for someone committed to *classical transcendence*.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, although Coakley claims to sign up for a classical account of a non-competitive divine–human

and mastery. To know God is unlike any other knowledge; indeed, it is more truly to *be* known, and so transformed” (45). I concur with Coakley’s understanding of theism with “appropriately apophatic sensibilities” (45), but she gives the impression of paying undue heed to a distinction between such apophatic sensibilities and “affliction and torment” “because of the soul’s baseness and impurity” (*The Dark Night* 2.5.2), and of thereby conflating them.

¹⁰⁰ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 188.

¹⁰¹ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 206.

¹⁰² Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 206.

¹⁰³ Coakley, “Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” 100.

¹⁰⁴ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 4, cited in Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?,” 262.

¹⁰⁵ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 206.

¹⁰⁶ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 99; italics mine. “Coakley fails to recognize that the difference between God and creation is not a binary difference. Binaries entail the definition of one term by the exclusion of the other” (107).

relation, I will corroborate below, her actual description of this relation in fact ends up undermining this in practice.

The paradoxical pairing of human vulnerability and divine omnipotence/empowerment is, for Coakley, given as an answer to the following question: “How can we best approach the healing resources of a non-abusive divine power?”¹⁰⁷ How can, for Coakley, divine omnipotence cooperate with human receptivity *non-coercively*? The coupling of human vulnerability and divine omnipotence is, for Coakley, intended not only to salvage a virtue of *human vulnerability*, unlike many feminist theologians, as an authentic mode of human receptivity to God, but also simultaneously to retrieve an idea of *divine omnipotence*, unlike many post-war, feminist, process, and new kenoticist theologians, as a genuine mode of divine power rather than a “forceful obliteration,”¹⁰⁸ a coercive masculinist power dominating the created realm. In other words, the genuine richness and benefits of a non-abusive, non-bullying, and non-coercive divine power is best approached by human vulnerability, by patiently enduring the pain of *allowing room* for the divine power, “by *creating the ‘space’* in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself.”¹⁰⁹ It is in “the special ‘self-effacement’ of this gentle *space-making*”¹¹⁰ that the divine power manifests to us tenderly and gently. And the christological unity of “non-bullying divine ‘power’ *with ‘self-effaced’* humanity,”¹¹¹ “the unique intersection of vulnerable, ‘non-grasping’ humanity and authentic divine power”¹¹² brings about the paradoxical outcome of divine empowerment. In other words, on the one hand, divine *omnipotence* is affirmed insofar as the power non-coercively and non-abusively penetrates the human recipient through her vulnerable openness in painful endurance, and, on the other hand, human *vulnerability* is affirmed in the anticipation that vulnerability actually ends up producing divine empowerment rather than valorizing weakness and suffering. It is the human vulnerability that can “invite and channel”¹¹³ non-abusive divine omnipotence into the human soul. Divine omnipotence and human vulnerability interdependently affirm each other in terms of non-coerciveness and vulnerability.

It is worth first pointing out that Coakley, like Rowan Williams, on the one hand, is committed to the ontological difference of God and the world, and, on the other, is keen on making use of the *spatializing* language of “making room” for God in the divine–human relation.¹¹⁴ Taking into

¹⁰⁷ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 34.

¹⁰⁸ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 16.

¹⁰⁹ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 5; italics mine.

¹¹⁰ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 35; italics mine.

¹¹¹ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 31.

¹¹² Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 38.

¹¹³ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 34.

¹¹⁴ See “Kenosis, Otherness, and Competition: Balthasar, Williams, and Coakley” in the first chapter and “Ontologizing the Tragic” in the second chapter.

consideration Williams's concern that that the ontological difference rules out *spatializing* talk about God that slips into a danger of conceiving of God as a competitive item of the world, however, the language of "making room" for and "giving space" to God creates the strong impression of speaking of God as an agent who meets, at a psychic, noetic or spiritual level, in competition with human beings for space.¹¹⁵ If God the creator is ontologically different from the created world and thus does not occupy space and compete with us for space at any level, if God outpours the goodness of grace in superabundance and gratuity, however, why does the created being have to renounce its space so as to allow God to occupy the withdrawn space? If the created being is supposed to dispossess space for God in order to allow God in, such a self-dispossession is *endlessly unachievable* precisely because, I suggest, the space that is to be dispossessed is *as infinite as God in a spatial sense*. The Coakleyan ascetic self's relentless pursuit of *perfection* of purgation and purification thus *endlessly falls short* of the infinite degree of self-withdrawal and the indwelling of God is *indefinitely prolonged*. It may account for the reason why the Christian life of transformation and purification in Coakley (as well as Williams) sometimes looks agonizing, perhaps demanding "Promethean submissiveness,"¹¹⁶ or why the two Anglian theologians are inclined to identify the moment of pain and suffering itself as the presence of divine grace rather than to cultivate the wisdom to discern the two things that should not be conflated.

Such a spirituality of self-effacement, which is not only prioritized and fertilized but also endlessly repeated and agonized, carries a significant implication. If a Coakleyan ascetic self should interminably persist in such a painstaking work of "learned, and embodied, strategies of dispossession to the divine,"¹¹⁷ ironically, it lapses back into what she intends to overcome, the self-empowering self, by negatively returning to and fortifying herself. Consequently, although Coakley proleptically defends her own ascetic self-renunciation by saying that it falls into neither "a Pelagian 'works righteousness'"¹¹⁸ nor "narcissistic self-cultivation,"¹¹⁹ the rhetoric of self-dispossession turns out to assume a *pre-possession* of self-renouncing power from the beginning. An image of a *potent self* is thereby, ironically, smuggled into Christian life through the rhetoric of *self-impotence*.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ The reservation about the language of "making room for God" is dotted through Tonstad's *God and Difference*, esp. 13, 37, 84–86, 111, 150, 159–61, 170–71, 222–24, 232–33.

¹¹⁶ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 109.

¹¹⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 66.

¹¹⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 92.

¹¹⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 19, n. 6.

¹²⁰ This critique may resonate with Hegel's critique of a self-willed ethical action which Judith Butler articulates as follows: "The renunciation of the self as the origin of its own actions must be performed repeatedly and can never finally be achieved, if only because the *demonstration* of renunciation is itself a self-willed action. This self-willed action thus rhetorically confounds precisely what it is supposed to show. The self becomes an incessant performer of renunciation, whereby the performance, as an action, contradicts the postulation of *inaction* that it is meant to signify. Paradoxically, performance becomes the *occasion* for a grand and endless action that effectively augments and individuates the self it seeks to deny. . . . This intermingling of pleasure and pain results from a renunciation of the self which can never quite accomplish that renunciation, which, as an incessant accomplishing, carries with it the

The smuggling of an image of an already powerful ascetic self into Christian life is closely related to her construal of the relationship of the (*non*)*coerciveness* of divine gift and the *vulnerability* of human receptivity. It seems at first glance that Coakley understands divine power itself as non-coercive in relation to the human recipient: the omnipotence of God is already and always there as gentle and tender, but we can only allow it in if we vulnerably strip ourselves towards God precisely because of our already and always radically sinful misdirection of desire. Yet she creates the strong impression that what makes divine omnipotence appear as gentle is, in effect, human vulnerability to God—rather than *the inherent goodness of the divine power*, its correspondence to and coincidence with *created goodness* in the human recipient, and thereby its nourishment and empowerment of the human capacity to respond to and be cultivated into the divine life.

What profoundly obfuscates Coakley’s description of the divine–human encounter is, I argue, that she nearly always gives special attention to the *sinfulness* of radically misdirected human desire and the *imperative* of vulnerable, submissive receptivity to God *without* giving due explanation as to how *such a fundamentally misdirected desire* is able to recognize divine goodness, to participate in the life of God, and to redirect desire for God in the first place. If one is inspired to enter into a relation with God, it is the *prior* work of the divine gift of grace to facilitate and actualize created goodness, and to empower and initiate human desire, or will and action into *intending* to align herself with God, that now should be recognized, discussed, and appreciated as breaking through and cutting across the radicality of human sinfulness. Such an understanding of divine gift as working in advance of and positively energizing human agency may serve to conceive of the divine–human encounter non-competitively, without necessarily translating created dependence on and receptivity to God into vulnerability and submission to God.

Coakley gives the recurring impression that it is human vulnerability to God that makes divine omnipotence appear as non-coercive; the manifestation of divine power as non-coercive is reliant upon whether a human recipient is wilfully vulnerable to it; it is the practice of vulnerability to God that “engenders divine power not as [coercive] ‘force’ but as [non-coercive] Christo-form ‘authority’”¹²¹; the created receiver is first required to be vulnerably receptive so that the manifestation of divine power is received as gentle. In other words, the non-coerciveness of the divine power-gift is indispensably, if not intrinsically, married to the vulnerability of human reception; divine omnipotence is unknown as gentle to us *unless* we are *perfectly* naked and defenceless before

pleasurable assertion of self. [It] does not translate into self-congratulation or simple narcissism. Rather, it appears as negative narcissism, an engaged preoccupation with what is most debased and defiled about it.” Judith Butler, “Stubborn Attachment, Bodily Subjection: Rereading Hegel on the Unhappy Consciousness,” in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 31–62 (49–50). Without looking into Hegel’s meticulous critique of a self-willed ethical action, Molly Farneth questionably claims that Hegel’s idea of *Entäußerung* (“self-emptying”) exhibits “a similar valence” to Coakley’s idea of sacrificial kenosis because they converge on the emphasis on “the power to empty (*die Kraft der Entäußerung*).” Molly Farneth, “The Power to Empty Oneself: Hegel, Kenosis, and Intellectual Virtue,” *Political Theology* 18, no. 2 (2017): 157–71 (159, 168–69).

¹²¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 343.

God. It thus comes close to implying that the relation of human reception and divine omnipotence exhibits a *competitive* characteristic in terms of coerciveness and submissiveness, abusiveness and defencelessness, and bullying and vulnerability respectively on the divine and the human sides: the more human reception to God is submissive, defenceless, and vulnerable, the more the divine gift of power is non-bullyingly present; the more the human reception is relinquishing, renouncing, and dispossessing, the more divine gift is gently, tenderly, and lovingly given; created dependence or human receptivity ought to take on nakedness and defencelessness so that the creator's gift of power is non-coercively conceived. The divine gift is *non-coercive*, -assaultive, and -suppressive "*insofar as*"¹²² the human reception is *all-submissive*, -dispossessive, and -vulnerable, only in the condition of which divine omnipotence is experienced as empowerment.

An implication of this competitive account of the divine–human encounter in terms of vulnerability and coerciveness may also be reflective of her gradual increase of hospitality to the language of divine *battering*. As one commentator acutely points out, for Coakley's account of *gentle* divine omnipotence, "the adjective 'gentle' is key, for the encounter which takes place here is '*not an invitation to be battered*'; . . . [God] neither shouts nor forces."¹²³ Yet, elsewhere and later, the gentleness or *non-force* of divine power is somewhat withdrawn from her description of the divine–human encounter. She is gradually inclined to gloss over the gentleness of the divine–human encounter and accordingly accentuates something *forceful* and *coercive*. She ends up endorsing the need of "*being battered*" as per John Donne's sonnet, "Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God." In defence of Donne against a critique that his trinitarian theology of love narrates "the blatantly violent interpretation of transcendence"¹²⁴—"the [male] transcendent God battering from the outside, invited to take the poet by force: this is the model of Christian love—which uses the language of rape and seduction"¹²⁵—Coakley espouses Donne's "battering human desire" by divine desire on the basis of his "tragic sense of *disjunction* between human and divine loves."¹²⁶ She seems to jettison her original view that the dark contemplation of divine love poetically portrayed in that sonnet is "willed delight, not rape or battery."¹²⁷ She rather later turns to assert that "the 'battering' needed is precisely to 'divorce' *him* from his 'enemy'. 'Chastity' is thus impossible without *drastic divine intervention*"¹²⁸

¹²² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 56.

¹²³ Travis Ryan Pickell, "Gentle Space-Making: Christian Silent Prayer, Mindfulness, and Kenotic Identity Formation," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2019): 66–77 (71, n. 22). He quotes Coakley from "*Kenōsis* and Subversion," 35; italics mine.

¹²⁴ Mary Grey, "The Core of Our Desire: Re-Imaging the Trinity," *Theology* 93 (1990): 363–72 (365).

¹²⁵ Grey, "The Core of Our Desire," 365, cited in Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 297.

¹²⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 295.

¹²⁷ Sarah Coakley, "'Batter My Heart . . . '? On Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity" (1994), *Graven Images* 2 (1995): 74–83 (83).

¹²⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 298; italics mine.

in the light of Donne's "truly Augustinian sense of his own bondage of the will,"¹²⁹ his Augustinian "tragic sense of sinful disjunction between human and divine desires,"¹³⁰ or, more simply, his Augustinian sense of "the radicality of sin."¹³¹ "Only divine force will overthrow *that* force,"¹³² Coakley highlights, so as to realign the perverted human desire with divine desire. The purgation of sinful desire, the resetting of misalignment owing to sinful misdirection of human desire, is only engendered by the *battering force* of "drastic divine intervention." As she reveals her theology of grace based upon a strong hamartiology, "to bring different desires into true 'alignment' in God cannot be done without painful spiritual purgation and transformation, without the power of grace, without a dizzying adventure into the ecstasy of divine unknowing."¹³³

Here divine grace *and* its giving becomes grim and even gruesome. The power of divine grace invested with the pain of human purgation is bitterly intervening, a *battering* "force" exerted *over* sinful human desire. Here she even goes so far as to overturn a significant understanding of "divine power not as 'force'."¹³⁴ This account of the divine grace of power as force is deeply reminiscent of a parenting force inflicting punishment on an aberrant juvenile body, connoting an abusive parent and an abused child: a parent who does not spare the whipping to discipline a child who was recalcitrantly misdirected, and a child who tamely submits to and joyfully suffers the pain of battering until the *perfect completion* of the redirection, realignment, and transformation of desire. Seen in this light, the paradox of power-in-vulnerability comes dangerously close to suggesting that *vulnerable human submission to the violent divine force* is little more than masochism—although she claims to deny any implication of "masochism"¹³⁵ in her asceticism. To conclude, Coakley rightly puts divine agency and human agency in a non-competitive relation in terms of human freedom at a formal level, but she construes the freedom as self-vulnerability, -diminishment, and -loss of the human recipient. Discourse about a non-competitive divine-human relation consequently ends up suggesting a competitive relation which severely undermines her professed classical theistic understanding of a non-competitive God-world relation.

The Non-Competitive Relation of Divine and Created Goodness: A Preliminary Reflection

The intrinsic goodness of the divine gift of grace and its resonance with created goodness is underplayed in the name of ascetic vulnerability and submission to God in the asceticism of Sarah

¹²⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 298.

¹³⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 299.

¹³¹ Coakley, "Batter My Heart . . . ?," 82–83.

¹³² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 298.

¹³³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 300.

¹³⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 343.

¹³⁵ Coakley, *The Cross and the Transformation of Desire*, 25.

Coakley. This Sisyphean picture of the ascetic self who is forcefully chastened and broken down until perfection may account for why Coakley's spirituality of kenotic vulnerability to God often comes across as inexorably anguished or inextricably purgatorial.

What is of critical importance is that, in the process of developing "a contemporary trinitarian *ontology of desire*"—"a vision of God's trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires" that concerns "how God the 'Father', in and through the Spirit, both stirs up, and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, into the likeness of his Son"¹³⁶—she is left reticent about the question of how a crucial difference can be spoken of between "misdirected desire (sin and blindness)"¹³⁷—"the fallen and flawed capacity for idolatry, the tragic misdirecting of desire"¹³⁸—and the primordial *goodness* of desire in created beings. She puts forth little effort to make a due distinction between the *sinful* desire that is to be purged and the created goodness that God "sources" and "builds up" in the primordial and ultimate correspondence and resonance of divine goodness and created goodness. Instead she remains devoted to the perpetual practice of self-renunciation while being almost oblivious to the divine-human interaction of goodness—the infinite goodness that non-competitively creates and empowers, redeems and heals, and fulfils and restores finite goodness in the fundamental relationship of creator and creature. She conceives of human desire as almost only tragically misdirected and thus deems it to be only vulnerably chastened into the perfection of purgation in the suffering of darkness whilst paying virtually no attention to the created goodness that appreciates God's gift of the all-exceeding divine goodness that echoes, elicits, and energizes the created capacity to recognize God as the fountain of every goodness, which is created in the creative gift of God the Father, restored in the redeeming gift of God the Son, and rekindled in the empowering gift of God the Spirit.

To put it differently, viewed from a classical perspective of creator-creature relation, while Coakley's trinitarian *ontology* of desire is so concerned with the tragic epistemic disjunction of human desire from divine desire, it does not justice to *ontological* affirmations of created goodness which participates in the absolute goodness of God, affirmations such as: the "positive ontological value and sense" of "what things are in themselves and what they are capable of by nature"¹³⁹; and the creator's creative and perfective donation of gift, "God's initial donation of being,"¹⁴⁰ and "God's maintaining

¹³⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 6.

¹³⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 26.

¹³⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 20. She promises that "the basic view of sin in this systematics is of misdirected desire—desire missing its goal (*hamartanein* in the Greek). The implications of this view of sin will be given fuller attention in volumes II and III of this systematics" (59, n. 10).

¹³⁹ Rudi Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The "Divine Science" of the Summa Theologiae* (London: Routledge, 2006), 123.

¹⁴⁰ Webster, "Love is also a Lover of Life," 111.

and governing presence to the creature”¹⁴¹—the affirmations which may safeguard her from not losing sight of the divine providential guidance that “preserves things in the good they have (*conservatio in bono*), and it moves things towards the good (*motio ad bonum*).”¹⁴² As John Webster underscores:

God is the most perfect agent. Therefore, things created by him obtain perfection from him. . . . Indeed, it is part of the fullness of perfection to be able to communicate to another being the perfection which one possesses. . . . Omnipotent power creates and perfects creaturely capacity and movement. . . . As the highest good God makes “what is best”; the creatures of such a God therefore share in the self-communicative, active goodness of their creator. “God so communicates his goodness to created beings that one thing which receives it can transfer it to another.”¹⁴³

Therefore, divine “perfect power communicates perfection.”¹⁴⁴ If one is intent on making a focused discourse on the ascetical perfection of a creature’s misdirected desire, it is to justify the divine goodness and its fundamental resonance with created goodness.

Created Dependence on God as Ascetic Vulnerability to God

I have examined so far Sarah Coakley’s spiritual–ethical paradox of human vulnerability and divine omnipotence/empowerment. A fundamental question, however, has been left unraised so far. It is whether there is an inevitable rationale for Coakley to construe human dependence on divine power as painful vulnerability to divine power in the first place, especially if, as Kathryn Tanner states, “omnipotence is not viewed as a coercive power to begin with.”¹⁴⁵ Although an overarching concept of kenotic vulnerability in her kneeling theology has attracted a fair amount of critical attention, this fundamental question about translating *created dependence on God* to *ascetic vulnerability to God* has been left almost untouched until Linn Tonstad put a finger on it.¹⁴⁶ Although many scholars have

¹⁴¹ Webster, “‘Love is also a Lover of Life,’” 111.

¹⁴² Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 128.

¹⁴³ Webster, “‘Love is also a Lover of Life,’” 112. He draws upon Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.69.15–16.

¹⁴⁴ Webster, “‘Love is also a Lover of Life,’” 112.

¹⁴⁵ Kathryn Tanner, “David Brown’s Divine Humanity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 1 (February 2015): 106–13 (109).

¹⁴⁶ Anne-Louise Eriksson’s study is an exception. She argues from a feminist perspective that Coakley should have understood kenosis as dependence rather than as vulnerability: “Must *kenōsis* necessarily be understood as a relinquishing of power that leads to submission; could it be seen instead as an acceptance of dependency?” Yet Eriksson understands Coakley’s notion of kenosis at a directly societal level and fails to recognize that Coakley speaks of kenosis as that which takes place in an interiorized and individualized fashion. Anne-Louise Eriksson, “‘Behold, I am the Lord’s handmaiden, not the lords!’” On Sarah Coakley’s Powers and Submissions,” *Svenske Teologiske Kvartalskrift* 85 (2009): 70–74 (73). This issue contains the papers given at the Sarah Coakley symposium held at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University on April 15 2009. She reiterates the same point in “The Other on the Cross,” in *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity. A Festschrift for Werner G. Jeanron*, ed. Ulrich Schmiedel and James M. Matarazzo, Jr. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 173–80 (176).

engaged with Coakley's notion of vulnerability, as Tonstad rightly observes, "the theologically dubious character of construing dependence on God *as* vulnerability"¹⁴⁷ to God has not come into sight so far in the debate.¹⁴⁸

The Departure from Creation ex nihilo towards the Cry of Dereliction

Sarah Coakley translates creaturely dependence on God the creator into contemplative vulnerability to God. However, what should be noted is that, as Tonstad acutely indicates, she "*never explains her decision* partially to conflate dependence with vulnerability in the divine–human relation."¹⁴⁹ While Coakley is strangely reticent about the rationale of the conflation, she is consistently keen on construing created dependence on God as dark, painful vulnerability to God. In spite of the reticence, I believe a significant hint is dropped in the essay "Creaturehood before God: Male and Female" (1990). Coakley rightly maintains that "at the heart of any Christian doctrine of creaturehood must surely lie . . . the notion of a radical, and qualitatively distinct, *dependence* of the creature on God."¹⁵⁰ Yet she is *immediately* frustrated at the observation that "the Christian tradition presents no single normative understanding of what it means to be a creature; indeed it is not even clear to me that there exists a *uniquely* 'Christian' standpoint on creatureliness."¹⁵¹ Her frustration is magnified in the evaluation that "even creation *ex nihilo* is difficult to justify from Scripture alone."¹⁵² This rigid (and, as I will argue, questionable) evaluation explains to those who are perplexed as to why, to begin with, she sweeps aside the doctrine of creation—which teaches how the creature is ontologically different from the creator and is thus radically dependent on the divine economy of overflowing, gratuitous gift—while she is seeking to work out what created dependence on God means.

¹⁴⁷ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 122, n. 9; 99, 109–10.

¹⁴⁸ In chronological order: Papanikolaou, "Person, Kenosis, and Abuse"; Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 566–95; Ruth Groenhout, "Kenosis and Feminist Theory," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, 291–312; Mark L. Yenson, "Battered Hearts and the Trinity of Compassion: Women, the Cross and *Kenōsis*," *The Way* 45, no. 1 (January 2006): 51–66; Anna Mercedes, "A Christian Politics of Vulnerability," in *The Sleeping Giant Has Awoken: The New Politics of Religion in the United States*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins and Neal Magee (London: Continuum, 2008), 41–54; Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving*; Carolyn A. Chau, "What Could Possibly be Given?: Towards an Exploration of Kenosis as Forgiveness—Continuing the Conversation between Coakley, Hampson, and Papanikolaou," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1 (January 2012): 1–24; Martin, "The 'Whence' and the 'Whither' of Balthasar's Gendered Theology"; Annie Selak, "Orthodoxy, Orthopraxis, and Orthopathy: Evaluating the Feminist Kenosis Debate," *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (October 2017): 529–48; Shelli M. Poe, "Locating Prayerful Submission for Feminist Ecumenism: Holy Saturday or Incarnate Life?," *Feminist Theology* 26, no. 2 (2018): 171–84; and Michelle Voss Roberts, "Kenotic Gestures: Comparative Aesthetics and the Feminist Debate on *Kenōsis*," *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 3, nos. 1–2 (2019): 198–218.

¹⁴⁹ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 110; italics mine.

¹⁵⁰ Coakley, "Creaturehood before God," 55.

¹⁵¹ Coakley, "Creaturehood before God," 55.

¹⁵² Coakley, "Creaturehood before God," 55.

Where does she turn, then, after putting aside the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*? When she notes that “an ‘absolute dependence’ is indeed at the heart of true human creatureliness *and* the contemplative quest,”¹⁵³ created dependence on God is defined as “the dark night of the soul” in contemplative prayer, a “radical, absolute—and so intellectually ungraspable—creaturely dependence”¹⁵⁴; it is “the unique sense of creaturely dependence that silent prayer inculcates.”¹⁵⁵ For Coakley, radical created dependence on the God who creates what God is not, namely, “that without which they would not be in being at all,”¹⁵⁶ is no less than the epistemic or spiritual vulnerability of painful darkness that results from the ungraspability of divine transcendence. She notes that “what is experienced as noetic blankness is theologically explained as ‘that-without-which-there-would-be-nothing-at-all.’”¹⁵⁷ In other words, she equates the dark experiential vulnerability of contemplative practice with what it means to be a creature absolutely dependent upon the creator’s all-encompassing gift.

She thus detours from tapping into the tradition of creation *ex nihilo* and instead makes an ascetic–christological turn to a vulnerable experience of the darkness of Christ’s cry of dereliction in the pursuit of uncovering what absolute created dependence on God means. She sees “Christ’s agony in the garden, or his submission to divine will on the cross” as “the hallmark and pattern of achieved human freedom.”¹⁵⁸ The agony and anguish of Christ epitomizes created dependence on God.

Through prayer God can be recognised both as the creative power on whom all depend for their existence, and also as the one who in the dereliction of Christ’s cross is disclosed as enduring in patient weakness, and coming perilously close to defeat. The Spirit who prays in us and is known in prayer is indeed Lord and Lifegiver, but also one who cries “Abba, Father” with us in doubt and darkness and in the sharing of Christ’s sufferings.¹⁵⁹

Surprisingly, she seems to venture to portray a ‘suffering God’ “enduring in patient weakness, and coming perilously close to defeat,” which is also reminiscent of a mythic image of God in Williams’s tragic imagination of Jesus’s cry of dereliction. At least, for Coakley, the image of God the creator who gives an economy of divine gift of power to initiate, uphold, and fulfil the created order quite bluntly squares with “the haunting image of a God exposed in Christ crucified, of divine presence

¹⁵³ Coakley, “Creaturehood before God,” 68.

¹⁵⁴ Coakley, “Creaturehood before God,” 56.

¹⁵⁵ Coakley, “Creaturehood before God,” 56.

¹⁵⁶ Sarah Coakley, “God as Trinity: An Approach through Prayer,” in *We Believe in God: A Report by The Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England* (London: Church House, 1987), 104–21 (107–8).

¹⁵⁷ Coakley, “Creaturehood before God,” 56.

¹⁵⁸ Coakley, “Providence and the Evolutionary Phenomenon of ‘Cooperation’,” 188.

¹⁵⁹ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 121.

mediated precisely through weakness and dereliction.”¹⁶⁰ It is the ascetical suffering of the darkness of Christlike dereliction that is bound up with the divine gift of God the creator. She thus renders created dependence on God as a kind of *cruciform dependence* on God in the vulnerability of dereliction, the darkness of agony such as

a profound sense of the mind’s *darkening*, and of a disconcerting reorientation of the senses. . . . The willingness to endure a form of naked dispossession before God; the willingness to surrender control (not to any human power, but solely to God’s power); the willingness to accept the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God in prayer; the willingness at the same time to accept disconcerting bombardments from the realm of the “unconscious”: all these are the ascetic tests of contemplation without which no epistemic or spiritual deepening can start to occur.¹⁶¹

It should be noted that she is not speaking simply about a cruciform spirituality but a spirituality of dereliction,¹⁶² as do Williams and Balthasar. She highlights that Christ’s experience of “darkness, obscurity and distraction” under “the all-too-human states of anxiety, weakness and ignorance occasionally displayed by Jesus in the gospel narratives”¹⁶³ is our “*experiential* basis for trinitarian reflection.”¹⁶⁴ Coakley suggests that genuine contemplative prayer is anticipated to be extended into “genuinely Christlike dereliction.”¹⁶⁵ And the spirituality of dereliction is, as a universal feature of created dependence on God, for “anyone who regularly spends even a very short time in a quiet

¹⁶⁰ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 119.

¹⁶¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 19.

¹⁶² According to Bernard McGinn, there are “three forms of negation in Christian mysticism: the negativity of apophasis, that is, the ‘unsaying’ of all forms of human speech in relation to God; the negativity of detachment, i.e., the cutting away of attachments to self and world in order to be open to God; and the negativity of dereliction and suffering in which anguish and even damnation become the way to God” (100); and he goes on to articulate the mystical dereliction as follows: “For those who then and now have dedicated their lives to seeking the unknown and hidden God, no trial may seem worse than the loss of God, save possibly the conviction that the hidden God has from all eternity decided to forbid his presence to those who most love him. . . . Many students of mysticism have been acquainted with this aspect of mystical consciousness [mystical dereliction] through John of the Cross’s powerful descriptions of the ‘Dark Night of the Spirit’” (114). Bernard McGinn, “*Vere tu es Deus absconditus*: The Hidden God in Luther and Some Mystics,” in *Silence and the Word*, 94–114. For further historical and theological analysis of the mystical dereliction along with the three forms of negativity, see McGinn’s other works: *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Volume 4: *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 286–89; “The Venture of Mysticism in the New Millennium,” *New Theology Review* (May 2008): 70–79 (75–76); “Three Forms of Negativity in Christian Mysticism,” in *Knowing the Unknowable: Science and Religions on God and the Universe*, 99–121 (esp. 102, 111–16); and “Suffering, Dereliction, and Affliction in Christian Mysticism,” in *Suffering and the Christian Life* (forthcoming).

Sarah Coakley seeks to expand McGinn’s threefold typology of the meanings of negative theology by adding a fourth one: “*the distinctively modern expression of God’s presence-as-absence*” or “*radical divine absence*” as observable in Simone Weil and R. S. Thomas. Sarah Coakley, “Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280–312 (281, n. 3); and Sarah Coakley, “Introduction: Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite,” *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4 (October 2008): 531–40 (539–40, n. 30).

¹⁶³ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 14.

¹⁶⁴ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 107.

¹⁶⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 179.

waiting upon God,” as well beyond the contemplative elite as it is for Christ.¹⁶⁶ Here she is very keen to radically democratize the experience of dereliction of the cross, in accordance with the principle of the “spiritual extension of christological kenosis.” She therefore excavates from the experiential perspective of the darkness and pain of Christlike dereliction what it means to be a created being who is radically and absolutely dependent on God.

Thus it might be hardly a surprise to find out that Coakley significantly draws upon John of the Cross’ reflection on Christ’s cry of dereliction on the cross in *The Dark Night* (especially 2.10.7). Coakley makes frequent reference to “the dark night of the soul” of John of the Cross when she establishes the ascetical christology of the dark cruciform vulnerability of dereliction. The more we become vulnerable and submissive to divine omnipotence, the more divine power is gently present and operative in us, according to Coakley’s paradox of vulnerability and empowerment. And the degree of agony of the human vulnerability and submission to God is to be nothing but Christlike dereliction.

The God whom Christians meet in this prayer is also one who appears, sometimes for very long periods, to desert us; or worse still (as in St John of the Cross’s “Night of the Spirit”) to press upon us with apparently negative pressure, causing disturbance, deep uneasiness, the highlighting of sin and even the fear of insanity. Such are the death-throes of the domineering ego. But only in the light thrown on the activity of the Trinity by the story of Christ is this endurable. *If we are being “conformed to the image of (the) Son” (Rom. 8.29), it is precisely aridity and disturbance that we should expect. Only through suffering comes glorification (Rom. 8.17).* If we take our cue from the agony in the garden, or from the dereliction of the cross, the authentic cry of “Abba” (Mark 14.33–6) indicates that the most powerful and active presence of God is mysteriously compatible with all too human experiences of anxiety and desolation.¹⁶⁷

God is, mysteriously, most powerfully and actively present in the agony and dereliction of Christ so that divine omnipotence is, paradoxically, most profoundly operative in our vulnerability of Christlike dereliction to God. I will propose David Burrell’s creation-centred exposition of John as an alternative reading to Coakley’s.

Ascetic Cruciformity to the Suffering of Christ in Romans 8

Before elaborating upon what Coakley neglects—namely, how creation *ex nihilo* envisages the divine economy of the creator’s gift and created dependence on it—it is worth examining, briefly, Coakley’s *ascetical spin* on christology and trinitarianism in the theological exegesis of, again, Paul.

One of the main characteristics of Coakley’s kneeling theology is that theological exegeses of Pauline texts, in particular Philippians 2 and Romans 8, play crucial roles. As noted, she develops the

¹⁶⁶ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 107–8.

¹⁶⁷ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 109–10; italics mine.

spiritual paradox of power-in-vulnerability drawing upon the kenotic christology of Philippians 2. And she proposes “a contemporary trinitarian *ontology* of desire”¹⁶⁸ on the basis of the prayer-based, Spirit-prioritizing, incorporative model of the Trinity in heavy reliance on Romans 8. As she confesses, the contemplative model of prayer’s incorporation into the Trinity through lifelong purgation “owes its first allegiance to Paul, and supremely to Romans 8”¹⁶⁹—although one may complain that her contemplation-centred interpretation of Romans 8 “may seemingly arise from Coakley’s anachronistic reading of Paul through her own contemplative practices projected back from later periods of the church’s life or by valorizing distinct subgroups in the church (e.g. mystics).”¹⁷⁰

To encapsulate “the gracious logic of the prayer of incorporation à la Romans 8,”¹⁷¹ according to Coakley, human prayer is put under “the pressure towards a truer and deeper perception of the unity of Spirit, Father, and (cruciform) Son.”¹⁷² She is incorporated into the divine life—God the Father invites and attracts human desire, chastens and purges it; God the Spirit prompts and interrupts human desire, *conforms it into the image or likeness of God the Son* by “means of unleashing divine power *in* human vulnerability.”¹⁷³ In Coakley’s reading of Roman 8, therefore, “what the ‘Trinity’ *is* is the graced ways of God with the creation, alluring and conforming that creation into the life of the ‘Son’.”¹⁷⁴

Coakley in fact has laid ascetical weight on the theme of “being conformed to the likeness of the Son” in Romans 8 and its association with a dereliction-centred interpretation of John of the Cross. For instance, she avers, if I may repeat, “the God whom Christians meet in this prayer is also one who appears, sometimes for very long periods, to desert us; . . . (as in St John of the Cross’s “Night of the Spirit”). . . . If we are being “conformed to the image of (the) Son’ (Rom. 8.29), it is precisely aridity and disturbance that we should expect. Only through suffering comes glorification

¹⁶⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 6.

¹⁶⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 122.

¹⁷⁰ James Kay, “The Place of Prayer in Theological Method: A Conversation with Sarah Coakley,” in *Schools of Faith: Essays on Theology, Ethics and Education in Honour of Iain R. Torrance*, ed. David Fergusson and Bruce McCormack (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 117–27 (122). He asks, “When Paul reflects in Romans 8 *about* prayer, is it really *contemplative* prayer upon which he is reflecting?” He further contends that although Coakley’s theology mostly concerns *lex orandi*—“the axiom *legen credenda lex statuate supplicandi*” (“let the law of prayer establish the law of belief”)—she disregards its original contextual “criteria of liturgical universality and uniformity” by “restricting or transposing the *lex orandi* largely to [individual] contemplative prayer.” From the perspective of a “contextual criterion of a congregational practice . . . , Coakley’s claim that this genre of prayer could be unquestionably granted ‘absolute centrality’ over others in theological method” is called into question (118, 124). Kay’s critical comment would correspond to the general tendency of Coakley’s ascetic theology towards individualization and interiorization which I have mentioned earlier.

¹⁷¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 323–24.

¹⁷² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 14.

¹⁷³ Sarah Coakley, “Praying the Trinity: A Neglected Tradition?” (the second of her unpublished six Hulsean Lectures entitled as “Three Personed God: A Feminist Exploration in *Théologie Totale*” at Cambridge in 1992, chiefly from which *God, Sexuality, and the Self* developed), cited in Jason Byassee, “Closer than Kissing: Sarah Coakley’s Early Work,” *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 1 (2008): 139–55 (143).

¹⁷⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 112.

(Rom. 8.17).¹⁷⁵ Coakley highlights that this trinitarian incorporation of a prayer involves patient endurance of progressive purgation in painful darkness and vulnerability, for the prayerful incorporation is engendered “*in and through* the passion of Christ”¹⁷⁶ towards being “conformed to the likeness of his Son’, to use Paul’s memorable phrase in Romans 8.29.”¹⁷⁷ She understands “being conformed to Christ” as spiritual conformity made “progressively into the life of crucified and resurrected ‘Sonship’.”¹⁷⁸ (In this sense, she finds problematic contemporary strands of social trinitarianism which attempt directly to “imitate” the life of the Trinity “without Christ’s mediation.”¹⁷⁹) The ascetical conformity to the *passion* of Christ involves the painful endurance of “darkening” the spirit; the “disconcerting reorientation of the senses”; “a form of naked dispossession before God”; “the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God”; “disconcerting bombardments from the realm of the ‘unconscious’”;¹⁸⁰ and so on. Human prayer is incorporated into the divine life in conformity to “genuinely Christlike dereliction.”¹⁸¹ In short, the spiritual suffering as being conformed to the image of the Son with the pain of dereliction undergirds her trinitarian ontology of desire and prayer-based incorporative trinitarianism. The ascetical emphasis of John of the Cross converges on Paul’s emphasis on cruciformity to the likeness of the Son, according to Coakley’s trinitarian ontology of desire based on the prayer-based incorporative model of the Trinity of Romans 8.

Although her thoughts here are heavily reliant upon Romans 8, surprisingly, one may be bewildered by the fact that Coakley dedicates little to “an interpretation of this text, let alone its author” such that it leads one to take a dim view as to “whether such an impressive theological construction has been placed upon an exegetical foundation that may be unable to support its weight.”¹⁸² The credibility of

¹⁷⁵ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 109–10.

¹⁷⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 14.

¹⁷⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 112, 113; 6, 87.

¹⁷⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 67.

¹⁷⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 309.

¹⁸⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 19.

¹⁸¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 179. The chapter “The Charismatic Constituency: Embarrassment or Riches?” where the quotation is located is chiefly developed from “Charismatic Experience: Praying ‘In the Spirit,’” in *We Believe in the Holy Spirit: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991), 17–36. An interesting difference is that she drops her original appreciation of Balthasar’s trinitarianism. She originally commented: “What then of the possibility of genuinely Christ-like dereliction? Could it not be, as von Balthasar has so movingly expressed it in his theology of ‘Holy Saturday’, that the Spirit may not only on occasion drive one into a sharing of Christ’s desolation, but actually be that in God which spans the unimaginable gulf between despair and victory?” (31). This abandonment of her early appreciation of Balthasar’s trinitarianism squares with her late critique of Balthasar’s trinitarianism as assuming a competitive understanding of otherness and pedestalizing suffering. See “Suffering and Death Latent and Implicit in God” in the first chapter of the present thesis.

¹⁸² Joshua McNall, “Shrinking Pigeon, Brooding Dove: The Holy Spirit in Recent Works by Sarah Coakley and N. T. Wright,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69, no. 3 (2016): 295–308 (299–300).

Coakley's ascetic exposition of Romans 8 could be significantly undermined, for example, by Haley Jacob's recent exegesis of Romans 8 which thus deserves a brief introduction, although I intend neither to approve a definitive exegesis of Romans 8, nor to refute Coakley's exegesis wholesale.

According to Haley Jacob's categorization, Coakley's ascetical exposition of the "conformity to the likeness of the Son" in Romans 8 may be categorized as "a spiritual or moral conformity" or "a sacrificial conformity," which is the most fashionable interpretation in popular Christian devotional writing.¹⁸³ According to this interpretation, to be conformed to the image of Christ is a narrative of suffering and glory with a prioritized focus on suffering. Michael Gorman encapsulates this type of understanding: "Conformity, for Paul, is narrative in character, a two-part drama of suffering/death followed by resurrection/exaltation. . . . Conformity to Christ—to the image of [God's] Son—in resurrection is the logical and guaranteed *sequel* to a life of death to self and of suffering for the gospel that corresponds to the narrative of Christ's dying and rising."¹⁸⁴ This suffering-prioritizing "cruciformity" (Michael Gorman's nomenclature¹⁸⁵) is "primarily dependent on Romans 8:17, where suffering with Christ (συμπάσχω) is deemed a prerequisite for being glorified with Christ (συνδοξάζω)."¹⁸⁶ Haley Jacob observes that in this framework of spiritual, moral, or sacrificial conformity, "suffering takes precedence"¹⁸⁷ in the chronology of "present suffering and future glory,"¹⁸⁸ which holds true for Coakley's understanding of conformity to the passion of Christ, as well as in her paradox of power-in-vulnerability.

However, Jacob emphatically notes that although it is true that "suffering with Christ is part of the life of the believer this side of eternity," nonetheless, "this does not mean that suffering with Christ is part of the telos of salvation."¹⁸⁹ Sympathizing with the interpretations of James Dunn and N. T. Wright, Jacob rather contends that "σύμμορφος [conformed to] is not linked with the suffering but with the glory. In fact, conformity to the image of the Son is the exact opposite of suffering with Christ."¹⁹⁰ The conformity to Christ is rather linked with the resurrection life and glory of Christ. It follows that believers' conformity to the likeness of the Son indicates "believers' participation with

¹⁸³ Haley Goranson Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son: Reconsidering Paul's Theology of Glory in Romans*, foreword by N. T. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 3–7.

¹⁸⁴ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 327, cited in Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 8.

¹⁸⁵ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 4–5, n. 10.

¹⁸⁶ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 8.

¹⁸⁷ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 8.

¹⁸⁸ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 9.

¹⁸⁹ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 253.

¹⁹⁰ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 253–54. Jacob underlines that to interpret conformity to Christ as a spiritual or sacrificial conformity to Christ's suffering is "to deny the much stronger semantic structure of the passage linking Romans 8:29b to *glorified* in Romans 8:30, which is linked to *coglorified* and *cobeirs* in Romans 8:17" (254).

the Son in his unique role as sovereign over creation:¹⁹¹ “when believers are conformed to the image of the Son, they are conformed to his status and function as the Son of God who rules over creation.”¹⁹² On the basis of Pauline “dual motifs of *union* and *participation* with or in Christ”¹⁹³ as “believers’ active share in the resurrection life and glory of Christ as redeemed humans in him,”¹⁹⁴ Jacob maintains that “in being conformed to the Son, believers participate with the Son in his rule over creation as people renewed in the image of God.”¹⁹⁵ This “vocational” conformity to Christ is “at the heart of Paul’s meaning behind ‘conformed to the image of his Son’ in Romans 8:29b.”¹⁹⁶

It is quite clear that Jacob’s exposition seems to move in a very different—if not the opposite—direction to Coakley’s ascetical exegesis on conformity to the crucified Son. While Coakley is intent on construing human conformity to the Son as a dark progressive purgation “*in via*” or “*en route*” in and through the dereliction of Christ, Jacob quotes: “Paul is spelling out here the goal of the divine *prosthesis*—the end God has in view for us . . . rather than the stages on the way”¹⁹⁷ (“*in via*” or “*en route*”). Likewise, regarding the theme of “adoption” into God, Coakley considers the “Romans 8 approach, . . . an incorporative ‘adoption’ into Sonship by the Spirit”¹⁹⁸ as the painful life-long process, even enduring dereliction, of progressive purgation.¹⁹⁹

In contrast, Jacob understands conformity to Christ as the restored creature’s vocational participation in the resurrection life and glory of Christ, and this makes a further difference to the understanding of adoption: “Paul articulates that God’s children are called with a purpose. This purpose is their glorification—a future reality, no doubt, but also a present reality;”²⁰⁰ “God’s children are called to function as vicegerents of God, not only in the eschaton but, however paradoxically, also in the present.”²⁰¹ Whereas Coakley establishes a strict ascetical chronology of the painful endurance of suffering in the present, and of the joyful delight of glory in the future from reading Romans 8 in accordance with the chronological understanding of cross and resurrection, Jacob shows that the children of God are conformed to the resurrection life and glory of Christ in the present without

¹⁹¹ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 16.

¹⁹² Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 10.

¹⁹³ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 15.

¹⁹⁵ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 16.

¹⁹⁶ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 11.

¹⁹⁷ Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007; originally published 1996), 272–73, n. 29, cited in Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 254.

¹⁹⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 136.

¹⁹⁹ I have discussed in the previous chapter, Rowan Williams is also keen to understand that being adopted children of the Father unavoidably involves the cruciform absence of the Father.

²⁰⁰ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 16.

²⁰¹ Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 17.

denying its aspects of gradual transformation or of eschatological fulfilment.²⁰² To sum up, Jacob's biblical scholarship on Romans 8 poses a non-negligible question to Coakley's ascetical reading of Romans 8 that undergirds her trinitarian ontology of desire and incorporative model of the Trinity.

Created Dependence on God: From the View of Creation ex nihilo

The critical, yet brief, examination of Coakley's ascetical reading above may throw further critical light on Coakley's ascetical propensity itself. She has a strong proclivity for beginning her theological arguments from epistemic disjunction and breach in the divine-human relation and lavishing attention on how to *endure and repair* it without paying due regard to divine gift and human receptivity in terms of ontological goodness. In other words, it is a trinitarian ontology of *broken* desire which constitutes the fundamental basis of her own kneeling theology.

In order to delve deeper into Sarah Coakley's trinitarian ontology of desire, it is important to be reminded of the fact that she turns away from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* which provides a set of fundamental ontological grounds for Christian theology. She makes a critical decision to avert her gaze from creation *ex nihilo*, because, although she aims to articulate what it means to be created, it is difficult (for her) to justify creation *ex nihilo* from *sola scriptura*. She avers, there is not "a *uniquely* 'Christian' standpoint on creatureliness"²⁰³ in the Christian tradition; there is "no single normative understanding of what it means to be a creature." Instead she attends to the darkness of dereliction in ascetical practice in order to figure out what created dependence on God means. It gives an impression that she thinks it less difficult and more proper to construe created dependence on God from the darkness of dereliction than to "justify from Scripture alone"²⁰⁴ (a disassociation which is deeply evocative of Balthasar's separation of divine immutability from biblical imagination) the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* which mainly concerns the fundamental characteristics of the creator-creature relation. And she runs the risk of overemphasizing the extremely painful experiences of dereliction and then jumbling up or even equating them with absolute created dependence on the divine gift of the creator.

²⁰² One may wonder how some of the early Christian thinkers understood the themes in Romans 8 as illustrations of the Pauline concept of deification. Here it would be sufficient to mention Norman Russell's conclusion that adoption in Romans 8 means that "the sonship of believers is therefore both a present reality and a future hope," neither denying the need of ascetic life nor disregarding the present reality of adoption. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 82.

²⁰³ Coakley, "Creaturehood before God," 55.

²⁰⁴ Coakley, "Creaturehood before God," 55.

Creation ex nihilo and Scripture

Coakley's negative observations of creation *ex nihilo*, in fact, not only show why Coakley taps into the darkness of dereliction at the expense of creation *ex nihilo*, but also explain why she fails to do justice to the doctrine of creation from nothing. Markus Bockmeuhl seems at first glance to be sympathetic with Coakley in admitting that "*creatio ex nihilo* is a doctrine that cannot be straightforwardly established by a *sola scriptura* approach."²⁰⁵ However, his meticulous understanding of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* shows what she falls short of in making a decision to abandon it.

What scripture and its earliest Jewish and Christian interpretation do confirm, however, is the central concern which that doctrine seeks to safeguard. . . . The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in its origin states the creation's comprehensive and absolute contingency on the Creator while at the same time affirming his unlimited sovereignty and freedom. . . . The meaning and substance of the doctrine, though not the terminology, is firmly rooted in scripture and pre-Christian Jewish literature.²⁰⁶

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* teaches the absolute dependence of the creature on the creator as the infinite source which is deeply rooted in and solidly confirmed by Jewish and Christian literature. In a similar spirit with Bockmeuhl, Janet Soskice and David Fergusson highlight that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* presents, not an exclusively and purely biblical concept though, a biblically grounded articulation of creator-creature relation. Soskice underlines that the doctrine of creation is to be considered as "a *biblically compelled* piece of metaphysical theology,"²⁰⁷ and Fergusson enunciates that it is the doctrine that "adequately articulate[s] the relation of God to God's creation as it is understood throughout the Bible."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Markus Bockmeuhl, "*Creatio ex nihilo* in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 3 (August 2012): 253–70 (268). See also Markus Bockmeuhl, "The Idea of Creation out of Nothing: From Qumran to Genesis Rabbah," in *Visualising Jews through the Ages: Literary and Material Representations of Jewishness and Judaism*, ed. Hannah Ewence and Helen Spurling (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17–31.

²⁰⁶ Bockmeuhl, "*Creatio ex nihilo* in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity," 268–70. Matthew Levering concurs with Bockmeuhl's remark. Mathew Levering, *The Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 36–37. See also Nathan Chambers, "Divine and Creaturely Agency in Genesis 1," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72, no. 1 (2019): 1–19.

²⁰⁷ Janet Martin Soskice, "*Creatio ex nihilo*: Its Jewish and Christian Foundations," in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 24–39 (25).

²⁰⁸ David Fergusson, "Loved by the Other: *Creatio ex nihilo* as an Act of Divine Love," in *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity*, 265–73 (266).

It is well acknowledged that in *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) Gerhard May notes that creation *ex nihilo* was formulated as an alternative against the Greek model, yet was still interpreted within the latter's framework and terms. In response to May, Paul Copan concludes that "we have good reason to believe that the doctrine of creation out of nothing is rooted in biblical passages indicating that God is the ontological Originator of all that exists." Paul Copan, "Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* a Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May's Proposal," *Trinity Journal* 17, no. 1 (1996): 77–93 (93).

Young claims that creation *ex nihilo* is "from the beginning, at the heart of what was distinctive of Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world." Frances M. Young, "Creation: A Catalyst Shaping Early Christian Life and Thought," in

It is also worth noting that the doctrine of creation is “a first-order teaching (fundamental in that sense)”²⁰⁹ and “a cardinal doctrine”²¹⁰ in the sense that it opens the way for all subsequent theological assertions about the beginning, flourishing, and fulfilment of the created world in relation to its creator. Frances Young maintains that creation from nothing characterizes Christian doctrines as well as practices:

‘Creation out of nothing’ was the first Christian ‘doctrine’ to be established through debate; . . . it subsequently had a determinative effect on the shape of later doctrinal conclusions [such as the resurrection, the Trinity, and the Eucharist].²¹¹

Given that the doctrine of creation out of nothing is the first doctrine, one might want critically to ask whether Coakley contributes to the “ample evidence in modern systematic theology of the unfortunate consequences of a rush to link different areas of Christian doctrine [in her case, asceticism, christology, and trinitarianism] without first clarifying the fundamental doctrines of God and creation.”²¹² If what created dependence on God means is one of the central concerns that creation *ex nihilo* seeks to maintain, it would stand to reason to draw upon creation *ex nihilo* to uncover how created beings are radically and absolutely dependent upon the divine gift of power. Yet Coakley franchises the created dependence on God out to the experience of darkness in vulnerability.

The Non-Competition and the Goodness of Divine Gift and the Gratitude of Human Reception

It would be enlightening, then, to examine what absolute dependence on God would look like in the light of creation *ex nihilo*, which Coakley sidelines, in order to make clear what her exposition of ascetical theology falls short of. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* seeks to articulate what it means to

Schools of Faith, 23–33 (23). She enunciates that it was “affirmed in the face of Greek assumptions: ‘nothing comes from nothing’ . . . , [and] self-consciously in confrontation with [the] ancient culture” of Greek philosophy as a second-century Hellenistic challenge. Creation *ex nihilo* thus, for Young, gives a good example of the falsity of the fashionable suspicion that “Hebraic understanding lost out in the assimilation of the Bible to Greek philosophy, but increasingly this seems to be a false estimate of what was going on in the formation of Christian doctrine. The development of the distinctively Christian doctrine of creation is a clear sign that Christian intellectuals were not ‘captured’ by Greek philosophy.” Young, “‘Creatio ex Nihilo’: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation,” 139. David Fergusson also approves creation *ex nihilo* “as the only adequate Christian alternative against Greek accounts of matter [as eternal] and Gnostic myths of emanation.” Fergusson, “Loved by the Other,” 266. See also “Divine Immutability and Scripture” in the first chapter of the present thesis. Andrew Davison affirms that the doctrine of creation is “part of the *revolutionary difference* that the Judaeo-Christian tradition made to the thinking of the ancient world” rather than being held in captivity. Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 67; italics mine.

²⁰⁹ Janet Martin Soskice, “Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?,” in *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Challenges*, 37–54 (41).

²¹⁰ Webster, “Love is also a Lover of Life,” 99.

²¹¹ Young, “Creation: A Catalyst Shaping Early Christian Life and Thought,” 23.

²¹² Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 5.

say that God creates what is not God out of nothing. On the one hand, God the creator is utterly transcendent as the source and cause of everything other than God; on the other hand, God the creator is profoundly immanent as the created world is thoroughly dependent on the divine giver. “All creatures share the fact of otherness from God and unilateral dependence on God, who is the sole source of the various forms of existence, movement, and place that creatures enjoy.”²¹³ It indicates that the doctrine of creation forecloses the possibility of a *contrastive* account of divine transcendence–immanence as if the more God is transcendent, the less immanent, which is discernible, as I have argued, in Balthasar’s theo-dramatics. As Susannah Ticciati makes clear, “God’s utter transcendence is complemented by God’s utter immanence. . . . True transcendence does not foreclose the possibilities of creation, but is their liberating context.”²¹⁴ As Andrew Louth encapsulates, the seemingly *contrasting* pair of commitments to the divine transcendence and immanence in fact discloses the truth that God’s being “is utterly unlike ours, but also infinitely close, *for the same reason*.”²¹⁵ The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* enunciates that God is “*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*, ‘more inward than my inmost self and higher than my highest self’.”²¹⁶ In other words, God is transcendent and immanent in relation to the world at the same time in a *non-contrastive* way. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is understood from a non-contrastive perspective to mean that the transcendent sovereignty and power of God, and the immanent love and care of God, are not in opposition but rather make each other possible. David Fergusson articulates this non-contrastive meaning of divine sovereignty and love as follows: “The ontological otherness of God is a necessary condition for the particular forms that the love of God takes for creation. Hence, the story of divine love requires as its accompaniment the theoretical shape supplied by the *ex nihilo* doctrine; it is a fitting testimony to the love of God as the divine Other.”²¹⁷

The non-contrastive account further is able to prevent a *competitive* account of the divine–human relationship as “if God is elevated, then man is denigrated.”²¹⁸ A competitive relationship of rivalry and conflict is likely to be engendered between created agencies in a hostile environment of

²¹³ Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 67.

²¹⁴ Susannah Ticciati, “Anachronism or Illumination? Genesis 1 and Creation *ex nihilo*,” *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no. 4 (2017): 691–712 (703–4). Both Soskice and Ticciati seek to validate and confirm the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* over against Catherine Keller’s revisionist notion of creation. Alongside Keller, John Caputo is one of the fiercest opponents of creation *ex nihilo*, which he calls the “dream of metaphysical theology” attached to the idea of divine omnipotent dominion over creation. See also David Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator: An Introduction to the Theology of Creation* (London: SPCK, 1998), 2–3, 31–33. For a defence of creation *ex nihilo*, in reliance on Kathryn Tanner and against Caputo’s divine power as a “weak force,” see Brian Robinette, “The Difference Nothing Makes: *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, Resurrection, and Divine Gratuity,” *Theological Studies* 72, no. 3 (2011): 525–57.

²¹⁵ Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (London: SPCK, 2013), 39; italics mine.

²¹⁶ Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 39.

²¹⁷ Fergusson, “Loved by the Other,” 273. He argues, in line with Kathryn Tanner, that the ontological *difference* between God and the world makes divine love for the world radically *personal*. See Tanner, “Creation *Ex Nihilo* as Mixed Metaphor.”

²¹⁸ Soskice, “Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?,” 52.

lack and loss. One may find it quite *counterintuitive* to appreciate the non-competitiveness of the divine–human relation because it is beyond inter-human relations which are often conditioned by an apparent environment of scarcity and deficiency and its accompanying violence and vulnerability.²¹⁹ However, the divine–human relationship should not be conceived as a competition because it is a relation of superabundant divine gift and absolute human dependence. It is a non-competitive relation.

A radical appreciation of divine non-competitiveness carries a particularly significant theological implication. The non-competitive relation does not just negatively mean a relation without competition or rivalry between God and the world, but a radically positive relation of divine empowerment for human flourishing in the most profound sense. This creator–creature relation is nothing but the relation of divine gift and fundamental human dependence on it, namely, “the ultimate ontological dependence of the existence of all things upon God as its cause, of all that which is created out of nothing upon the Creator.”²²⁰ The divine non-competitiveness “grounds the creature’s action in divine action, such that the divine act empowers the act of the creature, rather than occluding it.”²²¹ Here one may find it crucial that a significant convergence comes into view on non-competitive divine empowerment both in Paul’s understanding of divine grace that John Barclay underlines, and in the understanding of creation *ex nihilo* of divine–human relation which particularly Kathryn Tanner brings into focus. I find it interesting to see that Gary Anderson²²² and Christopher Insole²²³ also take note, though in passing, of the convergence of Barclay and Tanner in terms of the non-competitive relation of divine and human agency.

And the profound import of non-competitive divine empowerment acquires exhaustive expression in the recognition that the created agency’s dependence on and reception of divine gift is already embraced in the economy of divine gift. As Simon Oliver remarks, “Creation’s ability to receive the gifts of God *is itself a gift*.”²²⁴ He perceptively expands on this as follows:

Creation’s fundamental character is gift. Creation *ex nihilo* implies that nothing stands outside the divine economy of the gift, for even creation’s otherness from God—its

²¹⁹ Christopher Insole notes that “the relationship between God and the creature, between the creator *ex nihilo* and the created, is utterly unlike any relationship between creature and creature.” Insole, *The Intolerable God*, 121.

²²⁰ Carlo Cogliati, “Introduction,” in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 1–10 (8).

²²¹ Andrew Davison, “Looking Back toward the Origin: Scientific Cosmology as Creation *ex nihilo* Considered ‘from the Inside’,” in *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Challenges*, 367–89 (376, 385–86, n. 22, 387, n. 28).

²²² Gary A. Anderson, “Creation: *Creatio ex Nihilo* and the Bible,” in *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 41–58 (50); and “*Creatio ex nihilo* and the Bible,” in *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Challenges*, 15–35 (24). He adds that the significant convergence of the divine grace in creation and resurrection “makes us better readers of the biblical text.”

²²³ Christopher J. Insole, *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 197–200.

²²⁴ Oliver, *Creation*, 146.

ability to be the recipient of God’s good gifts—is itself a gift of God. This implies that the first mode of creaturely existence is receptivity—the receipt of being and life—which elicits in creatures the return gift of thankfulness and praise to God.²²⁵

Thus it is not that created being is dependent on God *outside of God* as if the creator *cooperates* with the creature on ontologically the same level.²²⁶ The creature is dependent on the divine gift within the divine economy of gift. Created dependence is *already* graced into reception of the divine gift. This is what it means to say that the created world is absolutely and radically dependent upon God who creates *ex nihilo*. And this non-competitive gift–dependence divine–human relation is more properly characterized, on the side of human agency, by “gratitude and praise to God” than “vulnerability and submission to God.”

The non-competitive nature of divine empowerment is given fuller account when taking into consideration the gift–dependence relation of divine and created *goodness*, which I believe shows that *dependence on God* does not necessarily translate into *vulnerability to God*. To be in a relation of created dependence upon God means, first and foremost, to be in divine goodness; for what is not God to come into existence must be created and so is intrinsically linked with the goodness of God. As Kathryn Tanner articulates, “To be created is to be in a relation of dependence upon God that holds whenever and for however long one exists.”²²⁷ She continues to claim, “This relation of dependence upon God is . . . always and in every aspect a *direct* or immediate relation of dependence upon God,”²²⁸ and “God is by definition a supremely good God who brings forth, therefore, only the good as creator.”²²⁹ Janet Soskice also highlights that the doctrine of creation from nothing primarily

²²⁵ Simon Oliver, “Every Good and Perfect Gift is from Above: Creation *Ex Nihilo* before Nature and Culture,” in *Knowing Creation: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy, and Science*, ed. Andrew B. Torrance and Thomas H. McCall (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 27–45 (44). Oliver makes a reference to John Milbank’s statement, “the act of creation is at one and the same time ‘a gift of a gift to a gift,’” which is found in John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 96. Oliver unravels what it means elsewhere. “God’s creation establishes a threefold order of gratuity: the recipient of the gift, the gift itself and the donation of one to the other. This seems to establish, however, a radically unilateral gift: God simply gives everything.” Simon Oliver, “Henri de Lubac and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *The T&T Clark Companion to Henri de Lubac*, ed. Jordan Hillebert (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 393–417 (404).

²²⁶ Coakley makes occasional references to the “graced” aspect of the human practice of vulnerability such as “the energizing prompting of the Holy Spirit” (*God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 112) and “the necessity of God’s own prior activity” (*God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 55) alongside its “willed” aspect. She calls contemplative practice of vulnerability as, for instance, “the willed (and graced) response to God” (“Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 192). And she conceives of the relation of divine grace and human will as a “two-way relationship” of “cooperation” between divine and human agency. However, as John Barclay emphasizes, “cooperation” between divine and human agency is more fitting for the category of *competitive* relation, which *falls far behind* the non-competitive feature of divine empowerment “from the roots up” in Paul. In such a cooperative divine–human relation, the “willed” nakedness to God is spoken of as prioritized and productive, and that grace is only recognized in retrospective. What she falls short of will be enunciated in the following paragraphs.

²²⁷ Tanner, “Human Freedom, Human Sin, and God the Creator,” 113.

²²⁸ Tanner, “Human Freedom, Human Sin, and God the Creator,” 113.

²²⁹ Tanner, “Human Freedom, Human Sin, and God the Creator,” 113. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann helpfully corroborate the convertibility of being and goodness: “the terms ‘being’ and ‘goodness’ are the same in reference, differing only in sense. . . . What is desired solely for its own sake is what the desirer perceives as the desirer’s final good. . . . Every action is ordered towards being, towards perceiving or enhancing being in some respect either in

concerns “the power, goodness, and freedom of God, and the dependence of ‘all that is’ . . . on God.”²³⁰ “At the heart of the doctrine are God’s power and loving-kindness”;²³¹ “the dependence of ‘all that is’”²³² lies on God’s “grace and gift.”²³³ Created beings are radically dependent upon divine grace as the loving and kind gift of power, freedom, and goodness for its initiation, growth, and perfection. The non-competitive relationship of divine empowerment and human reception then makes the case only when divine gift is spoken of as empowering the human recipient by renewing and reviving the goodness of joy, peace, and rest in the journey of transformation and purification.

The non-competitive divine–human relation of goodness still remains valid as the relation of the invariable divine donation of goodness and of created dependence on it even in the human struggling to receive the divine gift. Even when human sinfulness so tenaciously disrupts and painfully frustrates intentional reception to the divine gift that a human recipient is failing to recognize and receive this divine gift, which is Coakley’s undergirding concern, divine agency works as a gift-giver to enlighten her to recognize the goodness of the divine gift, energize her more clearly to realize her receptive capability and thereby to more fully receive divine gifts by recreating and revitalizing her created goodness which coincides with the divine goodness. God gives all good gifts to finite and sinful beings, enables them to acknowledge the gifts, and empowers them to redirect their misdirected desires so that they can pass through darkness and pain, caused not by divine gift but by human fallibility, and attune themselves into the divine life. God’s resuscitation and revitalization of the inherent created goodness *from within* energizes created agency to realize the darkness of misdirected desire and to turn towards God (*metanoia*), who works to facilitate, actualize, and invigorate the created goodness in the infinite process of journey towards the creator (*epektasis*). God radically nurtures and empowers the human self, created by divine gift and recreated by the Christ-gift, to recognize, perceive, and appreciate more fully the divine gift of all goodness in delight and gratitude. To put it differently, created dependence on the non-competitive divine gift-giving is more justifiably translated into *receptive appreciation, joy, and gratitude to God than painful vulnerability, darkness, and submission to God*.

the individual or in its species: in acting all things aim at being. Therefore, again, being is what all desire; and so being is goodness. . . . Generally, then, ‘being’ and ‘goodness’ have the same referent: the actualization of specifying potentialities.” Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Being and Goodness,” in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 281–312 (282–84).

²³⁰ Soskice, “Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?,” 38.

²³¹ Soskice, “Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?,” 41.

²³² Soskice, “*Creatio ex nihilo*: Its Jewish and Christian Foundations,” 24.

²³³ Soskice, “Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?,” 40.

Dependence as Vulnerability or Union: Interpretations of John of the Cross

Dependence as Vulnerability in Darkness: Coakley and Williams

I have sought to show that in the kneeling theology of Coakley, created dependence on God is illegitimately hived off from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* into an ascetical experience of dereliction. And then I have attempted to show that the non-competitive relation of absolute created dependence on radical divine grace viewed from the perspective of creation *ex nihilo* makes it possible to portray a genuinely non-competitive divine–human relation in terms of the goodness of divine gift and the gratitude of human dependence. And the gift and gratitude of goodness also gives a robust account of human purgation and transformation without necessarily translating created dependence on God into ascetic vulnerability to God. Now I would like to show that what I have argued above may offer a possibility to shed light on Coakley’s as well as Williams’s appropriations of John of the Cross. In this final section of this chapter, as well as of this thesis, I will seek to show how the perspective of creation *ex nihilo*, which Coakley hastily dispenses with from the beginning, leads to a markedly differing appropriation of John’s mystical theology from hers.

Coakley’s dereliction-centred account of “the dark night of the soul” of John of the Cross sets the tone for her ascetical paradox of power-in-vulnerability: divine omnipotence is most gently and tenderly present in the suffering of the darkest vulnerability of dereliction which most profoundly engenders divine empowerment.²³⁴ The darkness of “genuinely Christlike dereliction”²³⁵ is thus not only essentialized but also glamorized. The darkness of suffering becomes perilously far too proximate to the joy of divine presence and gift. It is worth noting that Rowan Williams’s exposition of John’s mysticism shares much with Coakley’s ascetical emphasis on the cry of dereliction in her interpretation of John.²³⁶ I believe that to devote a series of paragraphs to discuss Williams’s account of John serves to instantiate Williams’s tendency towards ontologically radicalizing the tragic, which I have argued in the foregoing chapter. And I am discussing it here, rather than in the previous chapter, because David Burrell’s creation-centred exposition of John can accentuate a dereliction-centred focus on John’s ascetical programme that the two prominent contemporary Anglican theologians emphatically share.

²³⁴ Sarah Coakley, “Divine Hiddenness or Dark Intimacy? How John of the Cross Dissolves a Contemporary Philosophical Dilemma,” in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 229–45; Coakley, “Redeeming Human Nature according to John of the Cross,” 1–13; and Coakley, “Palliative or Intensification? Pain and Christian Contemplation in the Spirituality of the Sixteenth-Century Carmelites,” in *Pain and Its Transformation*, 77–100.

²³⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 179.

²³⁶ See also “Eternal Deflections of Desire as Divine Self-Dispossession” in the previous chapter.

Rowan Williams places great emphasis on the centrality of Christ in John's spirituality: "Christ himself, then, is for John 'the ultimate touchstone of spiritual authenticity'."²³⁷ And he encapsulates the spiritual authenticity in the teaching of John (in particular, his exhortation in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.7, which features Jesus's cry of dereliction) as follows: "We cannot expect that the discipleship of the crucified Christ will be without cost to us; we cannot pray to be spared what Christ was not spared"²³⁸ on the cross. For Williams, above all, "the model for this [the dark night of the soul] is the dereliction of Jesus on the cross: if Jesus is the way to the Father, our way involves the same death he endured."²³⁹

Yet Williams seems too audaciously to understand the darkness and anguish of dereliction, not simply as that which Jesus experiences by "the privation of specific, determinate goods,"²⁴⁰ but also by *the agonizingly deflective nature of the Father's love itself*.

To share Christ's relation to the Father is not to enjoy a supreme experience of emotional intimacy, but to be drawn into the profoundly elusive and alarming "deflections" of love that constitute the life of the Trinity; it is to share in Jesus' confrontation of the divine absence.²⁴¹

Even for the human subjectivity of Jesus, the *non aliud* of the Father's reality, the excess and elusiveness of the Father's love, appears concretely as the black void of Gethsemane and Calvary, the "annihilation" of the dereliction on the cross.²⁴²

Williams contends that Christ's painful agony of abandonment is associated with the anguished apophatic nature of the divine love itself. It enables him to establish a paradox of love and pain, intimacy and abandonment—which is akin to Balthasar's and Williams's paradox of the negative and positive extremes which I discussed earlier.²⁴³ He associates the agony of Christ with the divine love itself such that the most negative sinful extremes (pain, agony, darkness, abandonment, loss, and so on) can be paradoxically and internally related to the most positive divine extremes (joy, love, intimacy, union, grace, and so on). By associating the human darkness of dereliction *intrinsically* with the inner nature of the triune love itself—not simply with human finite encounter with the divine transcendence and with human sinfulness—²⁴⁴ he puts a divinely positive light on the agony of

²³⁷ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 180.

²³⁸ Rowan Williams, "Teresa, the Eucharist and the Reformation," in *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition*, ed. Peter Tyler and Edward Howells (New York: Routledge, 2017), 67–76 (71).

²³⁹ Williams, "The Deflection of Desire," 121.

²⁴⁰ Williams, "The Deflection of Desire," 120–121.

²⁴¹ Williams, "The Deflection of Desire," 128.

²⁴² Williams, "The Deflection of Desire," 121.

²⁴³ See "The Paradox of Dereliction and Intimacy in the Gospel of John" in the previous chapter.

²⁴⁴ John of course states that the darkness happens when the divine transcendent light goes over the limit of finite human faculties. But the agony and anguish within the darkness of loss and privation are caused by the human soul, not by divine transcendent light. "Why, if it is a divine light (for it illumines souls and purges them of their

darkness. The tragic paradox of abandonment and unity in christology and asceticism²⁴⁵ acquires a good deal of expression in Williams's multifarious references to John of the Cross.

Jesus is presented to us as the one human being who enjoys unconditional intimacy with God, who in some sense shares God's own authority, but this intimacy presses him to go to his death, a death of agony and senselessness—"Why hast thou forsaken me?" It is this very closeness to God that sends him into this hell of suffering.²⁴⁶

Christ's destitution calls forth our setting out on the path of risk and loss, our journey into darkness; only in the heart of the darkness is the union consummated that brings us into the active life of God.²⁴⁷

And this tragically "difficult" paradox of abandonment and unity is inclined to further create an impression of making a *competitive* relation with regard to the most profound relationship of the Father and the incarnate Son, which in turn defines and characterizes the adoptive relationship of God and his children.

On the cross, Jesus is left without any perceptible consolation or sense of support from the Father; the Father, we might say, has ceased to be in any way a graspable other for the subjectivity of Jesus. . . . *When the negation of all determinate consolation is arrived at, what is "left" is the purpose and act of God.*²⁴⁸

The more Jesus is willing to be entirely dispossessed of the divine presence, fully annihilated of the sense of intimacy, and completely vulnerable to the divine absence, the more the Father-Son unity is

ignorance), does the soul call it a dark night? In answer to this, there are two reasons this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul but also affliction and torment. First, because of the height of the divine wisdom that exceeds the abilities of the soul; and on this account the wisdom is dark for the soul. Second, because of the soul's baseness and impurity; and on this account the wisdom is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul" (*Night* 2.5.2). In this regard, as Colin Thompson points out, "San Juan explains that the experience of darkness is soul-engendered and not inherent in the light." Colin Thompson, *St John of the Cross: Songs in the Night* (London: SPCK, 2002), 219. See also Colin Thompson, "The Spanish Mystics," in *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward (London: SPCK, 1999), 65–90.

²⁴⁵ It is important to underline that Williams as well as Coakley are quite *clear* in the first place about how darkness in human spiritual transformation is conjoined with Christ's tormented consciousness of dereliction in John's mysticism. On the contrary, according to Edward Howells's interpretation of John of the Cross in *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), it remains *unclear* how exactly John relates Christ's cry of dereliction with the dark night of the human soul: "Certain difficulties of interpretation arise over precisely how far John thinks that we can identify with the humanity of Christ in our own dark night, given that Christ's humanity was in some respects unique" (133–34); "The difficulty arises over the sense in which Christ's spiritual suffering was like our own" (196–97, n. 36). See also Edward Ingram Watkin, *The Philosophy of Mysticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 297–98.

²⁴⁶ Rowan Williams, "The Dark Night," in *Open to Judgement*, 95–100 (98). See also Rowan Williams, "A History of Faith in Jesus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 220–36 (228); Rowan Williams, "Religious Experience in the Era of Reform," in *The Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London: Routledge, 1995), 576–93 (589); Rowan Williams, "To Stand where Christ Stands," in *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 1–13 (10–11); Williams, "Word and Spirit," 125; and Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 170–71.

²⁴⁷ Williams, "Against Anxiety, Beyond Triumphalism," 275.

²⁴⁸ Williams, "The Deflections of Desire," 121; italics mine.

fully unveiled and revealed. The intimacy with the Father is fully validated and manifested *insofar as* the Son is utterly abandoned by the Father and fully embraces the agony of abandonment. Similarly, he also comes close to associating the darkness of dereliction with the divine will: “If God is to work in us as he wills, we must become Christlike; and that is to bear the ‘living death’ of inward and outward darkness and lack of consolation.”²⁴⁹

In putting a divinely positive light on the anguish of the dereliction, Rowan Williams encourages us to see the divine presence in our agony and anticipate the divine joy in our pain. “For John, it was fundamentally important to be able to interpret his mental anguish as itself ‘grace,’ the mark of God’s intimacy.”²⁵⁰ Human agony of abandonment by the divine absence in effect proves the divine intimacy. When the one who prays experiences unbearable agony by God’s absence, he or she is urged to see this agony as “the mark of God’s intimacy.” Likewise, Williams suggests, in a radically trinitarian apophaticism of John of the Cross, “the facing and negotiating of need and lack as they are experienced in specific lives and specific relations” within history are given “the joy or fruition of the other,”²⁵¹ “the radical delight in the otherness of the other’s desire that is rooted in the love of the Trinity.”²⁵² Here the horizon of the divine–human relation *and* the intra–trinitarian relations is retracted into nothing other than seeing the endless reckoning with *interminable* pain as joy, agony as delight, and darkness as light. It harks back to part of what I have agreed in the previous chapter that God simply *echoes* the moment of brokenness and mourning.

Such a tragic paradox is only possible on the premise that the darkness and agony of dereliction has an *internal* relevance to the nature of the intra-trinitarian love in John’s mysticism. It is, of course, hardly disputable that the ascetic programme of John of the Cross is uncomfortably, in greater or lesser degree, agonized: “The journey, then, does not consist in consolations, delights, and spiritual feelings, but in the living death of the cross, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior” (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.7.11).²⁵³ Yet it seems that John associates the anguish of Christ on the cross primarily with “a death to *our natural selves*” (*Ascent* 2.7.9) rather than death to the elusive nature of the triune love or *vulnerability to God*. In this light, Williams’s mooring of the ascetical darkness of agony in the intra-trinitarian nature of divine love in John’s mysticism may perhaps be able to lay an *intra-trinitarian* foundation for a “difficult” spirituality and ethics of endless human self-dispossession, but *only at the cost of internally associating the human darkness with the divine love and thereby sacralizing and divinizing it*. And if we are reminded that the tragic finitude and sinfulness of human life is, as I have argued, projected onto the trinitarian life so that “there is

²⁴⁹ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 171.

²⁵⁰ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 164.

²⁵¹ Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 132.

²⁵² Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 133.

²⁵³ I refer to *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute for Carmelite Studies, 1991).

something very like a tragedy going on forever between the persons of the Trinity”²⁵⁴ in Williams’s apophatic exposition of John of the Cross, it could be said that the christological darkness of dereliction corresponds to the intra-trinitarian dereliction-like darkness within the tragically interminable absence of consolation and satisfaction, analogously with his tragic imagination of the cry of dereliction with regards to the intra-trinitarian difference and otherness.

In one way or another, Sarah Coakley and Rowan Williams are inclined to elevate the darkness of dereliction into something essential, meaningful, even something divine, as internally associated with the divine life. Yet one may want, rightly, to attract attention to the Carmelite’s principle:

There can be no concordance between light and darkness; as St. John says: *Tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt* (The darkness could not receive the light) [Jn. 1:5]. . . . Two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject. Darkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries and bear no likeness toward each other, as St. Paul teaches in his letter to the Corinthians: *Quae conventio lucis ad tenebras?* (What conformity is there between light and darkness?) [2 Cor. 6:14] (*Ascent* 1.4.1–2).

John’s principle may cohere well with a thoughtful insight that Edward Howells offers as regards the vexing matter of human suffering and divine presence in John’s writings:

John’s teaching becomes complex, however, when he asserts that these two opposites, the destruction of the soul in abandonment, and the direct presence of God which fulfils the soul, are to be found together in human experience. The task of spiritual growth becomes one of learning how to *distinguish* them, so that the direct presence of God can be pursued and the destruction of the soul rejected. Why they are found together remains a mystery: it is a fact of life. But he is clear that they do not *belong* together, and his efforts go into providing means to *separate* them.²⁵⁵

The interpreters of John are thus required to bear a fundamental principle in mind: there is no likeness between darkness and God, whereas there is an essential likeness between light and God. John of the Cross neither invites us into putting a positive light on darkness, nor acquaints us with any kind of fertility of suffering itself, as does Coakley. In spite of a really knotty reality of painful darkness and human transformation in the world, for John of the Cross, “darkness is nothing and less than nothing since it is a privation of light” (*Ascent* 1.4.3). John’s understanding of darkness as “nothing” coheres well with the idea of evil as nonsubstance that is implied in the teaching of creation *ex nihilo*. A careful reading of John thus does not necessarily intensify a fascination with a paradox of darkness and presence, vulnerability and empowerment, “the destruction of the soul in abandonment” and “the

²⁵⁴ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 112. See “The Eternal Deflections of Divine Desire as Divine Self-Dispossession” in the foregoing chapter.

²⁵⁵ Edward Howells, “Suffering and the Desire for God in John of the Cross,” in *Suffering and the Christian Life* (forthcoming).

direct presence of God which fulfils the soul”—however attractive it looks, however distressingly suffering and pain are woven into the fabric of the reality of vulnerable, frail, and precarious human life.²⁵⁶ And such a meticulous reading of John of the Cross is, I believe, aptly epitomized by David Burrell’s creation-centred exposition.

Dependence as Union with the Creator: David Burrell

In a fascinating parallel to Sarah Coakley (as well as to Rowan Williams), David Burrell offers a robust exposition of the mysticism of John of the Cross on the basis of creation *ex nihilo*. His case is of particular interest and importance for the purpose of this chapter as well as of this thesis in that it offers an exposition of John of the Cross that contrasts significantly with Coakley’s which draws upon a kind of mystical dereliction while averting her gaze from creation *ex nihilo*. Burrell explains the ascetic mysticism of John in light of the creature’s fundamental dependence on the creator’s unceasing gift rather than the darkness of dereliction. Whereas Coakley’s ascetical theology seems to begin from *epistemic disjunction* between God and us, Burrell starts with contemplation of the intrinsic *ontological intimacy* of creator and creature and proceeds to excavate and disclose its theological implications. In this regard, I hope that Burrell’s understanding of John’s spirituality serves as a counterexample to show how a more comprehensive picture of the teaching of John is portrayed with due regard to the Carmelite’s fundamental commitment to *creation*; and that it subsequently shows that a theological and spiritual commitment to *dependence on God* does not necessarily conceive of a kneeling theology as *vulnerability to God*.

It would be helpful to begin with an examination of how Burrell appreciates the meaning of the creational relation of God and the world. It is also beneficial in that it reminds us of how I have discussed the divine–human relation so far in terms of non-reciprocity, non-contrast, non-competition, and so on. In *Faith and Freedom* (2004) and elsewhere, Burrell regularly endorses a pair of axioms: the “non-reciprocal relation of dependence” of creature on creator,²⁵⁷ and a “non-contrastive relation of creator and creature”²⁵⁸ (Kathryn Tanner), articulating the conception of God as a free creator and an intentional cause of being in Thomas Aquinas, along with al-Ghazali in Muslim, and Moses

²⁵⁶ Whereas Brian Robinette rightly takes the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as the richest source of Christian contemplation, he acquires rationales for an “ascetic–contemplative” mode of theology from Sarah Coakley without noticing that, as I have delineated, she dispensed with creation *ex nihilo* and gravitates toward dereliction. Brian Robinette, “Undergoing Something from Nothing: The Doctrine of Creation as Contemplative Insight,” in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 17–28.

²⁵⁷ Sara Grant, *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Nondualist Christian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002; originally published 1991), 40. See David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 120, 134, 139, 154.

²⁵⁸ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*. See Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 134, 139.

Maimonides in Jewish, traditions.²⁵⁹ Burrell maintains that the doctrine of creation in each tradition brings into sharp focus that, as Stanley Hauerwas encapsulates, “as creatures we are necessarily related to our creator in a manner that makes possible the living of our lives as gift.”²⁶⁰ Aquinas as well as al-Ghazali and Maimonides, for Burrell, are content to insist that “the creator who is the cause of being is also an intentional cause”;²⁶¹ first, as the cause of being, “the First or the One as the free source of all” does not compete with the creature at all and is “the source of all perfections”; second, as intentional cause, “the creator is open to a personal relationship with created persons,”²⁶² and the focus of the creature’s gratitude to the creator lies in the creature’s recognition of the creator as the “source of their being and well-being.”²⁶³ In other words, the creature is dependent on the creator for its existence and perfection in gratitude, which squares with Tanner’s remark: “The more full the creature is with gifts the more the creature should look in gratitude to the fullness of the gift-giver.”²⁶⁴

The primary contribution of Aquinas’s exploration of creation, for Burrell, lies in characterizing “the singularity of the *relation* of creator to creation”²⁶⁵ and locating “the paradigmatic meaning of creation as dependence in existing.”²⁶⁶ All creatures, “all-that-is is freely originated and exists in dependence on the One.”²⁶⁷ In this sense, “the creator’s primary effect is the *existence* of things,”²⁶⁸ and creation itself is “the unique founding relation,”²⁶⁹ the one between the creator who freely bestows the gift of being, and the creature who is *non-reciprocally* dependent on the divine gift. Burrell cites Aquinas: “This [the creator’s activity of bestowing the very *existence* of things] is how things receiving existence from God resemble [God]; for precisely as things possessing existence they resemble the primary and universal source of all existence (*Summa Theologiae* 1.4.3).”²⁷⁰ For Burrell, Aquinas, denying a reciprocal relation in the relation between creator and creature (the “unreal” relation of the world to God, which is, I have argued, obscured in Balthasar’s theo-dramatics),²⁷¹ he intends to claim the full force of the fact that “creatures have their very being from the One who is,

²⁵⁹ David Burrell, “The Act of Creation with Its Theological Consequences,” in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 40–52.

²⁶⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, “The End of Religious Pluralism: A Tribute to David Burrell,” in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, ed. Thomas Banchoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 283–300 (293).

²⁶¹ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 153.

²⁶² Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 153.

²⁶³ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 153.

²⁶⁴ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 2–3.

²⁶⁵ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 134.

²⁶⁶ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 153.

²⁶⁷ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 78.

²⁶⁸ David Burrell, “Divine Action and Human Freedom in the Context of Creation,” in *The God who Acts*, 103–9 (106).

²⁶⁹ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 171.

²⁷⁰ Burrell, “Divine Action and Human Freedom in the Context of Creation,” 106.

²⁷¹ See “Locating Sin and Evil in God: The ‘Real’ Relation of the World to God” in the first chapter of the present thesis.

while that One's being in no way depends on creating."²⁷² This is what the "ontological distinction"²⁷³ of creator as source, and the creature whose being it causes, means.

Burrell also regularly underscores that "the inexpressible relation of creator to creatures,"²⁷⁴ namely, the non-reciprocal relation of the creator's gift and created dependence, presumes the non-contrastive or non-competitive relation as dubbed by Kathryn Tanner,²⁷⁵ to whom Burrell's non-competitive "mode of thinking"²⁷⁶ owes much: "Non-divine being must be talked about as always and in every respect *constituted* by, and therefore *nothing apart from*, an immediate relation with the founding agency of God."²⁷⁷

Once we grasp the implications of the doctrine of free creation, we will not be tempted to conceive God over against the world, so that we will then be constrained to make such a one "more accessible;" rather, understanding God as the freely originating source of all-that-is, we will find in that gracious "transcendence" all the "immanence" we might need.²⁷⁸

The free creator is the source that originates and sustains the creature's being and the cause that initiates and perfects the creature's well-being; the creature is entirely dependent on the divine gift from the very beginning to the end. At this most fundamental, metaphysical level, a crucial question is given an answer:

Why must the divine agent be seen as the only proper agent? Because all-that-is is always dependent upon the divine power, of course. Yet that same power empowers creatures to act in their own right; that is precisely how we distinguish a creator from agents acting within the universe.²⁷⁹

There is a radical acknowledgement of the priority and gratuity of the divine gift-giving of empowerment towards the creature. The creature is created and embraced within the divine economy of gift from the beginning to the end. It is what absolute created dependence on the creator means, to which little regard is paid by Coakley's paradox of practising vulnerability to divine power and producing divine empowerment.

²⁷² Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 134.

²⁷³ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995; originally published 1982). See also Bernard McGinn, "Do Christian Platonists Really Believe in Creation?" in *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 197–219 (209).

²⁷⁴ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 233.

²⁷⁵ See also David Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 185, n. 2, 201, n. 16.

²⁷⁶ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xxi.

²⁷⁷ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 84, cited in Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 237.

²⁷⁸ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 209.

²⁷⁹ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 229.

What is of particular relevance is that the connection between creation and Christ sheds light on the sheer difference of theological paradigms between Coakley and Burrell. The connection of the doctrine of creation with christological themes carries a significant theological implication. Coakley sees that “through prayer God can be recognized both as the creative power on whom all depend for their existence, and also as the one who in the dereliction of Christ’s cross is disclosed as enduring in patient weakness, and coming perilously close to defeat.”²⁸⁰ Burrell views that “the One who comes to us in Jesus is the same One through whom we are all created, and so is that One ‘in whom we live, move, and have our being’.”²⁸¹ In other words, while Coakley intends to contemplate the creating and sustaining power of God with and from God enduring the cross of Christ with the cry of dereliction, Burrell views God the creator with the incarnation—rather than dereliction—and makes “the intrinsic connection of redemption with creation.”²⁸² It is thus hardly a surprise that Coakley translates created dependence on God into created vulnerability to God as she is intent on contemplating creation almost always from the perspective of darkness, death, or decreation. This is the difference between seeing the God of creation as the God of suffering and death, and seeing the God of creation as the God of incarnation and redemption—an underlying difference which makes a difference to a good deal of subsequent discussion.

Burrell’s creation-centred view makes a difference even to a recent trend of interpreting the ascetic ascent of John of the Cross as dereliction-driven, a trend to which Rowan Williams and Sarah Coakley contribute, and which has dominated for a long time. Burrell lays a foundation for understanding the dark night of the soul in John of the Cross on the ground of the creature’s absolute dependence on the creator’s gift in its existence and perfection. He notes that “a proper articulation of the mystery of creation undergirds any robust account of human freedom, as well as any attempt to articulate our *intentional* relations to our creator, any ‘spiritual’ discourse.”²⁸³ For Burrell, God, the source of all that is, is an “intentional” creator who is the source of “all perfections” or the “well-being” of the creature, as well as of its being; the divine activity of the source of all is “thoroughly ‘intentional’ in character, relating to itself and its creation with an understanding love which is the quintessence of responsiveness,”²⁸⁴ as Aquinas articulates; the divine activity is an “intentional activity whereby the creator of all ‘knows each particular thing, not only as they are in their causes, but even as each one of them is itself in act’.”²⁸⁵ It means that Christians as well as Jews and Muslims

²⁸⁰ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 121.

²⁸¹ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 239.

²⁸² Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 239.

²⁸³ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xxi; italics mine.

²⁸⁴ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 18.

²⁸⁵ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 63.

pray to “the One who is the very source of their being,”²⁸⁶ the most profound, fundamental, and radical sense of source, in “the unique character of the *relation* called ‘creation’.”²⁸⁷ In other words, for Burrell, a Christian understanding of human intentional practice or ascetic discipline bears closest relation to human contemplation on the mystery of *creation*, our deepest dependence on the source of our being and well-being. As Aquinas underscores, the word “creation” is “an expression of a faithful experience of the world as a whole in the light of God’s revelation,”²⁸⁸ and thus “to speak of the world as created by God is primarily a statement of *faith*.”²⁸⁹ “For once we appreciate how radical is our act of faith in a free creator,” therefore, Burrell highlights, “then it becomes clear that we cannot *be* separate from God.”²⁹⁰

Burrell extends the question of how faith in the creator’s gift and the creature’s absolute dependence on it undergirds mystical theology in *Towards a Jewish–Christian–Muslim Theology* (2011) and “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered” (2013). In the latter, he reiterates the aforementioned commitment verbatim: “Once we appreciate how radical is our act of faith in a free creator, then it becomes clear that we cannot *be* separate from God.”²⁹¹ In the article, Burrell is convinced that a theological articulation of creation as the most profound and fundamental relation of creator and creature properly and profoundly upholds the spiritual practice of kneeling to God. What is of particular interest and relevance is that, according to Burrell, this interconnection of faith in the creator and ascetical practice is epitomized by no less a person than John of the Cross,²⁹² which is the fact that enables us to place him in counterpoint to Coakley’s construal of John’s mysticism.

Burrell makes a significant point about the theme of union in the spirituality of John by pointing out that John’s “dark night of the soul” presumes a uniquely metaphysical, primordial relation of all creatures to their source from the perspective of creation that is examined above. And he uncovers a specifically theological and spiritual dimension of creation *ex nihilo*. Burrell suggests

²⁸⁶ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xxi.

²⁸⁷ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xxi.

²⁸⁸ Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 124.

²⁸⁹ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xxi; italics mine. Burrell delineates what Aquinas means by faith in connection with John of the Cross as follows: “Aquinas will characterize faith as ‘an act of mental assent commanded by the will, [so] to believe perfectly our mind must tend unfailingly towards the perfection of truth, in unfailing service of that ultimate goal for the sake of which our will is commanding our mind’s assent’ (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2.4.5). Unlike ordinary belief, then, faith must be an act of the whole person, involving a personal and critical quest for a truth which outreaches our proper expression. John will focus critically on our concepts: ‘nothing which could possibly be imagined or comprehended in this life can be a proximate means of union with God’ (*Ascent*, 2.8.4), since ‘nothing created or imagined can serve the intellect as a proper means for union with God; [rather], all that can be grasped by the intellect would serve as an obstacle rather than a means, if a person were to become attached to it’ (*Ascent* 2.8.1).” Burrell, *Towards a Jewish–Christian–Muslim Theology*, 104–5.

²⁹⁰ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xxi.

²⁹¹ David Burrell, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered,” *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (April 2013): 5–21 (14).

²⁹² He has conducted preliminary research on John of the Cross from the perspective of the creator–creature relation, and of the creature’s faith in it, in *Towards a Jewish–Christian–Muslim Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 103–6.

that John of the Cross, as one of great mystics and “distinctive followers” of Aquinas, along with Meister Eckhart,²⁹³ is concerned to uphold and advance the primordial and fundamental union between creator and creature together with the recognition of the distinction between the transcendent God and the world dependent on that God. According to Burrell, John distinguishes metaphysical union and intentional union: the metaphysical union means the “union between God and creatures [which] always exists [and by which] God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially. . . . ‘By it He conserves their being so that if the union would end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist’ (*Ascent* 2.5.3).”²⁹⁴ This underlying fact of “essential or substantial union” concerns and attends all creatures, thus it is “found in everything,”²⁹⁵ even in “the greatest sinner in the world” (*Ascent* 2.5.3); the intentional union indicates the union only exists “‘where there is a likeness of love [such that] God’s will and the [person’s] are in conformity’ (*Ascent* 2.5.3),”²⁹⁶ that is, only found in the soul’s right purgation and purification into divine life which Coakley is greatly concerned about. Burrell argues, however, there is no indication of “heteronomy” between the essential union and the intentional union in *Living Flame of Love*, in which John poetically describes the joy of the intentional union because “John presumes that unique metaphysical relation of person (‘soul’) to its source.”²⁹⁷ Burrell notes that, consequently,

all of this culminates in the realization that “relating to God”, as in “praying to God”, should take no effort, as there can be no “gap” to be bridged. For if our very being is a “being to the creator”, then the interior path to one’s own self will lead us invariably to the One who sustains us in existence. There will of course be many obstacles blocking the way to one’s own self, as we know very well and as John of the Cross will

²⁹³ As I have introduced earlier, Lossky emphasizes that a tradition of “mystical dereliction” has little or no influence in the Eastern spirituality. It is also interesting to note that that tradition also admits of notable exceptions even in the Western tradition as well, most notably, according to Bernard McGinn, in Meister Eckhart. McGinn underlines that Eckhart’s mystical theology teaches us to take note of “*the difference between the negativity of apophysis and the negativity of dereliction*” (McGinn, “*Vere tu es Deus absconditus*,” 103; italics mine). It is related to McGinn’s observation that “Meister Eckhart emphasized divine hiddenness, but not the anguish of the believer in the face of the mystery of God who seems to draw away and abandon his lovers” (McGinn, *The Presence of God*, 286). According to McGinn, “The German Dominican is the premier exponent of divine nothingness; his entire mysticism is founded on the teaching that there is no ‘God’, at least as humans could ever conceive him. . . . Nevertheless, Eckhart’s view of God’s hiddenness has nothing of the tortuous character of Luther’s *Deus absconditus*, or of what we find in some of Eckhart’s mystical contemporaries. The divine nothing (*nihil*) that Eckhart preaches, unlike the God attained in Gregory’s contemplative ascent, or the predestinating God of Luther, does not induce fear and anxiety in the mystic. For the Dominican, sinking into the indistinct nothingness of God (*sink all min iht in gotes nit*, as the *Granum sinapis* poem puts it) does not result in anything like Luther’s *Anfechtung*, or mystical dereliction. . . . This is a powerful statement of the darkness of God, but not of the torture of the believer in the face of the divine mystery. Though many of the thirteenth-century women mystics [such as Angela of Foligno, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Catherine of Bologna], like Eckhart, aspired to a unitive goal beyond distinction and all human modes of knowing and willing, their accounts of how the unknown God is encountered often contain strong doses of a mystical dereliction not found in Eckhart” (McGinn, “*Vere tu es Deus absconditus*,” 103–104). I have pointed out that a kind of mystical dereliction sets the tone for Coakley’s ascetical theology.

²⁹⁴ Burrell, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered,” 15.

²⁹⁵ Burrell, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered,” 15.

²⁹⁶ Burrell, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered,” 15.

²⁹⁷ Burrell, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered,” 16; Burrell, *Towards a Jewish–Christian–Muslim Theology*, 106.

abundantly delineate, but there can be no “distance” from that created self to its creator.²⁹⁸

What is distinctive in Burrell’s account of John’s ascetical programme is that “‘relating to God’ . . . should take no effort” as “praying to God” should do. His account is grounded on John’s acknowledgement of the exhaustive importance of a radical relation of the creator’s gift and the creature’s dependence on the divine gift. According to Burrell, this theological commitment performs a culminating role in constructing John’s ascetic programme. It suggests that the union with God can be rightly understood first and foremost within the essential creator–creature relation and in the creature’s faith in its source, without creating the need to prioritize vulnerability and darkness. Sarah Coakley’s understanding of “relating to God” and “praying to God” differs markedly from Burrell’s. The following paragraph encapsulates, in a striking contrast with the citation above from Burrell, Coakley’s strong emphasis on *epistemic darkness* and the sheer lack of *ontological goodness* in the account of the divine–human relation:

It must be admitted, what will be encountered [in contemplative prayer] is darkness, obscurity and distraction. It is no wonder that the experience has such a strange lack of obvious content, for the relationship is one unlike any other, one that relates those who pray to that without which they would not be in being at all.²⁹⁹

Thus, on the contrary to Burrell, to have a “*right dependence*”³⁰⁰ on God is, for Coakley, “an elusive goal”³⁰¹ and “hard work”³⁰² achieved through enduring the painful suffering of vulnerability to God.

Burrell nominates faith as the most profound factor of the soul’s union with God in stark contrast to Coakley who consistently underscores the painstaking lifelong endurance of darkness in purgation. He maintains that the profound recognition of the underlying dependence of creature on creator is, for John, *faith in the creator*. The spiritual discourse of John has to do with a faith in the fundamental truth of divine gift and created dependence, that our being is nothing other than being from the creator to begin with.³⁰³ Following Aquinas’s understanding of faith, Burrell argues that John is concerned to reveal “how it [faith] alone can be the proper way by which human beings can activate that *sui generis* relation which is their very ‘being to the creator’.”³⁰⁴ Burrell emphatically notes that in the ascetical mysticism of John of the Cross

²⁹⁸ Burrell, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered,” 14.

²⁹⁹ Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 108

³⁰⁰ Coakley, “Creaturehood before God,” 68.

³⁰¹ Coakley, “Creaturehood before God,” 68.

³⁰² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 92.

³⁰³ See Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 87: “The One from which all-that-is comes to be exists in and by itself. What it bestows in creating will be a share in that perfection of existing, so that the very existence of the creature will consist in ‘a relation to the creator as the origin of its existence’ [*Summa Theologiae* 1.45.3].”

³⁰⁴ Burrell, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* Recovered,” 15.

no apperception—other than the activity of faith—can be an adequate means of effecting our goal: union with God. . . . The only possible agent would be a spiritual power able to mold our very spirit—although other individuals may well catalyse the process. The creator emerges as the only candidate, for nothing or no one else would be able to come closer to us than we are to ourselves and hence alter our most characteristic attitudes.³⁰⁵

Burrell makes a significant correlation between the soul's union with God as goal and faith as its means in John: the "goal" of the journey of faith which activates that *sui generis* relation is "the union and transformation of the [person] in God" (*Ascent* 2.5.3), and the means is "faith alone, which is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God" (*Ascent* 2.9.1).³⁰⁶ Colin Thompson offers expositions that appear supportive of Burrell's emphasis on faith: he notes, in the works of John, that "the work of faith is to propose to us the very nature of God. It teaches that he is infinite, Three and One. Therefore faith and only faith possesses that essential likeness which can make it the immediate means to the end",³⁰⁷ therefore, for John, "the spiritual life is mercifully not all a matter of human effort" when taking into consideration "San Juan's insistence on faith as the only way to union."³⁰⁸ From the perspective of "the internal connection between faith and union which John confidently asserts,"³⁰⁹ then, it may make sense to realize that "'relating to God', as in 'praying to God', should take no effort"—which sounds absurd at first. It enables us to comprehend the rationale that David Burrell maintains; that even in John's emphasis on the dark night of the soul, the most profound relation of the creator's gift and the creature's dependence on it lays a foundation for a non-competitive divine-human relation.

When John calls the soul's union with and transformation in God "the union of likeness" (*Ascent* 2.5.3), it corresponds to his statement that "for the likeness between faith and God is so close that no other difference exists than that between believing in God and seeing him" (*Night* 2.9.1). Regarding the attainment of union with God, John lays a greater emphasis on faith, *not* on the darkness and diminishment in the journey of purgation, and thus firmly holds a *non-competitive* account of the divine-human relation: "Only by means of faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest himself to the soul. The greater one's faith the closer is one's union with God" (*Night* 2.9.1).³¹⁰

³⁰⁵ David Burrell, "Contemplation and Action: Personal Spirituality/World Reality," in *Dimensions of Contemporary Spirituality*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Philadelphia, PA: Villanova University Press, 1982), 143–62 (158).

³⁰⁶ Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, 103; Burrell, "Creatio Ex Nihilo Recovered," 15.

³⁰⁷ Thompson, *St John of the Cross*, 193.

³⁰⁸ Thompson, *St John of the Cross*, 218.

³⁰⁹ Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, 104; Burrell, "Creatio Ex Nihilo Recovered," 15.

³¹⁰ Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, 177.

Conclusion

To address the life of the Trinity, the life of Christ, and the Christian life in the light of Jesus's cry of dereliction is a governing tenet in and beyond the Anglo-European post-war theologies. Their close attention to the cry of dereliction, on the one hand, seems to terrorize the Christian life: the state of dereliction is normalized as a necessary moment in the course of spiritual flourishing, sacralized as a genuine mark of imitating Christ, glamorized as a penultimate stage of final ecstatic delight and illumination, and sanctified as reflective of the condition of the intra-trinitarian relation. On the other hand, insofar as it is possible to have an insight into the most inscrutably collapsed, tragically tormented consciousness of a particular individual, and thereby (adequately and beautifully) to verbalize it, their attention to the cry of dereliction seems to mollify human tragedy at the deepest level of the human mind. In short, to be able to see through and draw upon the cry of dereliction may be comfortingly terrifying or relievingly petrifying. The kenotic theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the tragic theology of Rowan Williams, and the ascetic theology of Sarah Coakley take on this feature in one way or another. While I have not intended to reconsider such a tenet as such, I have paid critical attention to their respective focuses on suffering, tragedy, and vulnerability.

I have chosen to triangulate the three the scholar-priests are neither just because these three are profoundly influential figures in the contemporary theological scene who purvey the wisdom of Christian life, nor just because Williams and Coakley show interesting engagements with Balthasar. It is also because an examination of these three prominent figures sheds light on a current tendency towards putting a theologically positive light on the darkness of negatives such as suffering, tragedy, and vulnerability in the manner of unduly associating them with the divine attributes and gifts, and the divine-human or the creator-creature relationship. By putting the three thinkers into conversation, I have tried to make a contribution to mapping one aspect of the contemporary theological scene. To summarize briefly the three points that I have made about the three theologians in common: they are, first, inclined to portray the divine-human relationship as competitive such that divine agency can work and operate in direct proportion to how much human agency renounces and dispossesses; second, homogenize every kind of suffering in christological terms and presents it as teleologically meaningful; and, third, heavily draw upon the cry of dereliction so as to create an absolute Christic and Christian paradox of suffering and love, and abandonment and unity.

Apart from what these three share, I have intended that each of the chapters makes a contribution to, respectively, the debate over whether Balthasar's theo-dramatic theology represents suffering and death as real in the Trinity; the dispute over whether Williams's tragic imagination brings into focus the tragic truth without falling into the error of ontologically radicalizing the tragic; and the question that Linn Marie Tonstad has raised, but still not answered, as to why Coakley

translates created dependence on God into dark vulnerability to God, the question that has been overlooked by most of her opponents as well as proponents.

More particularly, I have argued in the first chapter, against Williams's espousal of Balthasar, that suffering and death, sin and evil of both Christ *and* the world are elevated into the heart of the Trinity at the same ontological level as the unity, love, and life of the Trinity, and that the intra-trinitarian theo-dramatic event of divine gift, reception, and redemption is thus portrayed as an eternal event of the negativity of abandonment negated into unity, death into life, and tragedy into comedy. I have argued in the second chapter that Williams comes close to ending up ontologically radicalizing the tragic vis-à-vis the world *and* the Trinity. He does so in relation to the world by making the ontological value of created goodness insubstantial and the privative power of shadowy evil substantial; and in relation to the Trinity by projecting the tragic human predicament of self-interest onto the trinitarian relation so as to establish a trinitarian ground for the ethics of self-dispossession. I have argued in the last chapter that the created dependence on God is hived off from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, on the once prevalent yet now dubious suspicion of the doctrine's lack of scriptural basis, and franchised out to the experience of dereliction in the ascetic theology of Coakley. Alongside the main arguments above, I have shown that how these prominent theologians combine biblical understanding with theological thought—Balthasar in relation to the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, Williams in relation to the Gospel of John, and Sarah Coakley in relation to the Letter to the Romans. In sum, the thoughts of Balthasar, Williams, and Coakley are inclined to characterize the divine life and the divine-human relationship in terms of the pain and darkness of suffering, tragedy, and vulnerability.

What I have argued in the present thesis encourages us to consider a direction of contemporary kneeling theology that is not caught up in a tendency towards sacralizing suffering, tragedy, and vulnerability. We may glimpse such a path by unthinking a contemporary propensity for projecting human finitude and sinfulness onto the divine life, substantializing the privative power of evil, or essentializing the suffering of vulnerability in the life of contemplation. I believe what I have argued in the present thesis makes a contribution to doing so by shedding light on such a tendency.

Accordingly, I believe, as I have intimated throughout the thesis, we can tread such a path by not losing the sight of and paying due attention to the ideas of God as the unconditioned source of being and goodness and evil as the privation of goodness: divine agency acts priorly and non-competitively vis-à-vis human agency as the infinite fountain of every goodness at an ontologically distinct level; and it is where God as the source of goodness implants goodness in the created world that a teleological meaning lies, and there is accordingly no *telos* where goodness is absent.

These patristic teachings thus invite us to cultivate the wisdom to disentangle the knotty realities of suffering and love, the wisdom to distinguish between the darkness of human vulnerability and the light of divine goodness, though we find them entangled in our existence. And this wisdom of discernment finally enables us to practice a kneeling theology that intends to perceive and appreciate

“the source of the economy [of the divine gift] by contemplating the transcendent being of God in itself,”³¹¹ God who creates, nurtures, and fulfils the world in benevolence and superabundance.

³¹¹ Emery, “The Immutability of the God of Love,” 71. This statement is presented as an alternative to Balthasar’s competitive picture of God and the world.

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