

# BATTERED HEARTS AND THE TRINITY OF COMPASSION

## Women, the Cross and *Kenōsis*

Mark L. Yenson

IN THE 1996 FILM *Breaking the Waves*, Bess, a young woman reared in a Puritanical Scottish coastal village, falls in love with Jan, a Scandinavian oil rig worker. In spite of the opposition of her community, Bess marries Jan and discovers her sexuality with him. Jan is then called back to the oil rig. She prays for his swift return, but he has an accident and returns paralyzed. Bess blames herself for what has happened. From his hospital bed, Jan encourages Bess to pursue sexual encounters with strangers as a vicarious form of marital intimacy, and Bess complies to the point of giving herself up to be raped and killed. Miraculously, Jan is healed (heavenly bells ring out to drive the point home); Bess's sacrifice is efficacious.

Many critics and filmgoers have responded positively to the 'romance' of *Breaking the Waves*. Yet the film, whose female Christ-figure becomes the acceptable sacrifice, amounts to a profoundly disturbing restatement of some Christian theologies of atonement, theologies which have particularly devastating implications for women. The gap between the idea of Bess's atoning sacrifice and Christian rhetoric directed against women is not all that broad.

Some feminists have argued that women should no longer see the cross as a positive symbol at all, and instead abandon it altogether: 'Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering', Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker conclude.<sup>1</sup> And this rejection of the cross, as a symbol of violence and abuse, goes along with a

<sup>1</sup> 'For God So Loved the World?' in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, edited by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30, here 26.

rejection of the Christian rhetoric of self-emptying and submission exemplified by Philippians 2:5-8: 'let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who ... emptied himself (*heauton ekenōsen*) ... and became obedient to the point of death'. The language of *kenōsis*, self-emptying, appears only to perpetuate hierarchies, and to keep women, along with other marginalised individuals, obedient and disempowered.

I would suggest, however, that it is possible to make the shift from atonement to *kenōsis* more delicately and carefully, and in a way that avoids the romanticising of suffering and the reinforcement of abusive power.<sup>2</sup> Rightly understood, the idea of *kenōsis* is grounded not only in the human attitude of Jesus of Nazareth but also in the relational identity of the three-personed God. It can challenge and subvert prevailing Western understandings of what it is to be human, both liberal and masculinist; it can also offer a positive ethic of transformative self-surrender and non-abusive power.

### ***Classical Atonement Theories and Feminist Critique***

Feminist critiques of classical soteriologies have tended to focus on the theory of satisfaction associated with Anselm of Canterbury.<sup>3</sup> Anselm argues that the order of the universe is violated by sin, and can only be restored by the payment of a debt (satisfaction). Justice demands that the debt be paid by a human being rather than by God, yet the debt is infinite because God is infinite. The debt can only be paid by one who is both divine and human, and hence the Incarnation takes place.<sup>4</sup> The sinless one, not subject to death, pays a debt which God is then able to impute to sinful humanity: 'Through his voluntary death, therefore, Jesus has again "adjusted" the disturbed order of the

<sup>2</sup> My survey of feminist responses is in no way meant to be exhaustive, and I am conscious that it does not include womanist, *mujerista*, African or Asian perspectives. My concern in this paper with European and North American feminist theologies of the cross is based on an understanding that these too are contextual, responding specifically to themes in the Western/Latin tradition and to the social context of developed societies.

<sup>3</sup> Feminist writers, like many others, are still influenced by the classification given in Gustaf Aulén's classic *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, translated by A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1965 [1930]). Compare, for example, Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 109-111; Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 4-13.

<sup>4</sup> See Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, in *The Major Works*, edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), especially 262-265.

universe and has made satisfaction for all'.<sup>5</sup> But, as Elizabeth Johnson writes, 'the fundamental connection made by the satisfaction theory between God's mercy and the suffering of an innocent person is repugnant to contemporary sensibilities'.<sup>6</sup> And Rita Nakashima Brock goes further, seeing the Anselmian vision as amounting to 'cosmic child abuse'.<sup>7</sup> For Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, 'The image of God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression'.<sup>8</sup> As Christ suffered to free others,

... the imitator of Christ, which every faithful person is exhorted to be, can find herself choosing to endure suffering because she has become convinced that through her pain another whom she loves will escape pain.<sup>9</sup>

The onus falls on the victim, rather than on the victimiser, to right the wrong. This emphasis is reinforced by a lack of attention to the life and ministry of Jesus and to the resurrection; in this view of salvation, Jesus came solely to die for sinners. While Anselm himself distinguishes satisfaction or recompense from punishment, the theory associates retributive justice and suffering with God's will:

Every form of the satisfaction motif itself assumes divinely initiated or divinely sanctioned violence—the Father needing or willing the death of the Son as the basis for satisfying divine honour or divine justice or divine law.<sup>10</sup>

Anselm's theory of satisfaction thus proves to be highly unsatisfactory.

Anselm's voice is not the only one in the tradition, obviously. Even in the middle ages, Peter Abelard could present the salvation which comes through the cross as the supreme demonstration of God's love,

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, translated by V. Green (London: Burns and Oates, 1976 [1974]), 220.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Jesus and Salvation', *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, 49 (1994), 1-18, here 6.

<sup>7</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 9.

<sup>9</sup> Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 8.

<sup>10</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mi, and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 19.



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and as such effecting the conversion and reconciliation of sinful humanity:

... for Abelard, Jesus died as the demonstration of God's love. And the change that results from that loving death is not in God but in the subjective consciousness of the sinners, who repent and cease their rebellion against God and turn toward God.<sup>11</sup>

Again, however, the victimisation, suffering and death of Jesus appear as things *required* in order to persuade the sinner of God's love. Jesus

<sup>11</sup> Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 18.

appears once again to be exploited in the dysfunctional family relationship between God and humanity. The practical import of this soteriology, according to Brown and Parker, is that the onus is placed on the victim to 'change the heart' of the victimiser by suffering. They cite Helmut Thielicke's ethical development of the moral influence theory:

In Thielicke's view, men are saved from their inherent destructiveness when they are moved by the suffering of victimised women. When a man sees the holiness and fragility of woman, he may be persuaded to repent of his destructive behaviour, discipline himself to be obedient to love's demand, and thereby become a saved, holy, good human being himself.<sup>12</sup>

In the classical models, it is suffering and death in themselves which are salvific—albeit in different ways. Moreover, these models can easily suggest that what Jesus has done should become a model for contemporary victims:

If one extols the silent and freely chosen suffering of Christ, who was 'obedient to death' (Philippians 2:8), as an example to be imitated by all those victimised by patriarchal oppression, particularly by those suffering from domestic and sexual abuse, one not only legitimates but also enables acts of violence against women and children.<sup>13</sup>

The monarchical Father-God and the quietly obedient Jesus are two sides of the same coin: the former has served as a powerful theological basis for the masculinist exercise of power, while the latter has been a model of perfect submission to such power, to the particular detriment of women.

### ***Feminist Theology and the Suffering of God***

A more promising response to the problematic legacy of classical atonement theologies is the interpretation of the cross as a divine event, in which God does not abandon the human Jesus; rather God,

<sup>12</sup> Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 12. The reference is to Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 106.

in Jesus, enters the depths of human suffering. Jon Sobrino incorporates insights from Jürgen Moltmann into his own liberationist approach: 'On the cross of Jesus, God himself is crucified. The Father suffers the death of the Son and takes upon Himself all the pain and suffering of history.'<sup>14</sup> Theologies of a suffering God counteract the separation of Jesus as sacrificial victim from God as placated lord. What renders the cross 'efficacious' is not that it is the sacrifice of a mere human being, but that it is the historical out-working and expression of divine *kenōsis*; as Janet Martin Soskice argues:

... if one believes that Jesus was not just a man but God incarnate then we do not have 'a man *simpliciter*' intervening between us and God, but God, in divine self-emptying, 'one-ing' the world with God. Nor do we have one man who is a hero. Christ becomes not an obtrusive historical stranger but 'God with us'.<sup>15</sup>

As Anselm's account has been passed down, God appears to operate at a remove from human history, the object rather than the subject of atonement, 'the lonely, spectral father-god—aloof, above and indifferent'.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the theology of a suffering God allows God to be seen in true solidarity with human experiences of suffering. Language about a suffering God must be qualified in such a way that God does not become simply another victim of history—the patristic and medieval adherence to the doctrine of divine impassibility arose out of a legitimate concern to safeguard divine sovereignty. But the theology of a God who embraces the sufferings of creation and humanity, and who is able to bring about healing from within rather than by external decree, suggests that divine vulnerability enriches rather than diminishes the identity of God: 'Natural humanity did not and could not have imagined that suffering rather than power might be a mode of being for God'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, translated by John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: 1978 [1976]), 224.

<sup>15</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, 'Turning the Symbols', in *Swallowing a Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, edited by Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, edited by Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 135-150, here 139.

<sup>17</sup> Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 371.

Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, however, argue that contemporary theologies of a suffering God fall into the same trap as classical soteriologies, by leaving oppressive social realities intact:

The identification in Suffering God theology of solidarity with redemption should be questioned. Bearing the burden with another does not take the burden away. Sympathetic companionship makes suffering more bearable, but the friendship between slaves, for example, does not stop the master from wielding the lash.<sup>18</sup>

They go on to put their point more sharply:

The Suffering God theologies continue in a new form the traditional piety that sanctions suffering as imitation of the holy one. Because God suffers and God is good, we are good if we suffer ....<sup>19</sup>

They argue that even Sobrino, who takes serious account of the injustice of Jesus' death, ends up glorifying suffering by his assertion that God is active in and through the cross.<sup>20</sup>

Brown and Parker, however, seem to misread theologies of the cross such as Sobrino's. When Sobrino says that God the Father suffers the death of His Son, this is not an *a priori* statement about how God *ought* to have acted in history, but a faith statement about how God *did* act, within a given human situation of sinfulness and



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<sup>18</sup> Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 16-17.

<sup>19</sup> Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 19.

<sup>20</sup> See Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 23, quoting Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 371.

injustice and within a particular historical and political context. To say that God *did* suffer on the cross is not the same thing as saying that God *had to* suffer on the cross in order to come fully into history, or in order to complete God's self. Nor is it to say that suffering is necessary for *human* completeness. The statement that God suffered on the cross entails neither divine nor cosmic inevitability, nor does it affirm the necessity of human suffering.

In their concentration on the effects of patriarchy, Brown and Parker, furthermore, offer too narrow an understanding of suffering. For them, suffering appears to be the result of patriarchy and structural oppression, and it is from patriarchy that we need to be liberated. They effectively ignore any form of suffering other than those attributable to social injustice. They simply fail to address such

***A theology of the cross addresses intractable realities that our culture seeks to hide***

evils as terminal illness and death, evils which can call forth a caring and healing community. How, for instance, does a theology of the cross illuminate not only resistance to structural oppression, but also the role of care-givers and the community gathered around the sick and dying? To speak of God's presence in suffering not only challenges, rather than canonises, the evils of patriarchy; it also addresses intractable realities which modern Western culture seeks to hide. Elizabeth Johnson speaks of 'the pathological tendency in the present culture of First World countries to deny suffering and

death in human experience, which leads to banality in thought and superficiality in values'. In such a context, it becomes radically counter-cultural to speak of a God who suffers and, in particular, to return to the suffering of women as a locus of God's presence.<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Crysdale writes of a solidarity with the suffering of others that we can either avoid or freely choose:

This direct choice to embrace gratuitously another's travail is precisely what Jesus and his *kenōsis* were all about. *This* kind of imitation of Jesus is well worth emulating.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 254.

<sup>22</sup> Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 67.



The choice to be with another who suffers and not to turn away is something other than taking on suffering for its own sake, or acquiescing in needless suffering. It represents a prophetic option.

A rediscovery of the role of women in the gospel accounts of Jesus' death brings to light a powerful scriptural image for 'embracing another's travail'. Androcentric readings of the passion narratives would suggest that Jesus was in the end a 'lone ranger', abandoned by his (male) disciples and by his Father. During the hiatus of the cross and burial, however, Jesus is cared for by his female disciples:

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. (Mark 15:40)

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid. (Mark 15:47)

When the response of the male disciples is to turn away from suffering, the response of the women is courageous accompaniment, sustaining community where none would otherwise exist.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sees the presence of women at the cross as a witness to the absence of God.<sup>23</sup> In his reading of the passion narratives, Hans Urs von Balthasar makes much of Jesus' 'handing-over' by Judas, and of the Father's 'handing-over' of the Son 'into the hands of sinners'.<sup>24</sup> But I suggest that in the presence of the women at the crucifixion a different kind of handing over is occurring: the God who suffers on the cross is dependent on the compassionate presence of the women, the only countersign and token of resistance to the injustice of the authorities and the flight of the male disciples. Sometimes suffering enables the values of solidarity, gratuitous love, and prophetic resistance to come to the fore. And then God is indeed to be found in it. Those who have embraced the suffering of another are also the ones who go on to proclaim the resurrection.

<sup>23</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, 124.

<sup>24</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, translated by Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990 [1969]), 108.

### **Reconceptualising Kenōsis, Power and Relationality**

Brown's and Parker's critique of theologies of the cross, while offering important warnings, remains entrenched within contrasts characteristic of modernity: contrasts between power and powerlessness, between active control and passive obedience, between freedom and dependence, between 'sympathetic companionship' and proactive resistance to injustice.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Daphne Hampson lets masculinist discourse set the terms of discussion when she portrays kenotic theology as a response to a specifically *male* problem of control:

It may well be a model which men need to appropriate and which may helpfully be built into the male understanding of God. But ... for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm.

Hampson opts for the language of empowerment over that of *kenōsis*.<sup>26</sup> As long as feminist theology accepts the terms of the debate from liberal humanist androcentrism, the notion of a kenotic God of the cross will remain unacceptable, because vulnerability and passibility can only appear as disvalues.

But sympathetic companionship need not exclude active resistance, and kenotic vulnerability need not exclude empowerment. Rather, a kenotic theology which emphasizes relationality challenges the liberal humanist ideal of individualised power. Von Balthasar, while elaborating what many feminists would consider a highly rigid and problematic theology of the sexes,<sup>27</sup> can nonetheless provide a valuable theological resource in the form of his profoundly relational account of the Trinity. According to von Balthasar, the *kenōsis* of Jesus Christ's life and death reveals a God who is primordially and eternally a Triunity of mutually self-giving Persons, inclusive of otherness: 'in the Incarnation the triune God has not simply helped the world, but has disclosed Himself in what is most deeply His own'.<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that

<sup>25</sup> *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 155.

<sup>27</sup> See Tina Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama: A Feminist Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar', *The Way*, 44/4 (October 2005), 160-176; Michelle A. Gonzalez, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology', *Theological Studies*, 65 (2004), 566-595.

<sup>28</sup> Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 29.

omnipotence is wrongly ascribed to God; but the attribute of God most central to scriptural revelation, and most challenging to patriarchal values, is love, not power:

God is not, in the first place, ‘absolute power’, but ‘absolute love’, and His sovereignty manifests itself not in holding on to what is its own but in its abandonment—all this in such a way that this sovereignty displays itself in transcending the opposition, known to us from the world, between power and impotence.<sup>29</sup>

The eternal self-giving of God grounds the *kenōsis* of Jesus in his life and death, and radically disrupts the deep-seated illusion of human independence and competitive self-assertion. The vision here of full humanity, formed in the image and likeness of God, is not simply an inversion of patriarchal hierarchies, but the theologically grounded repudiation of all such hierarchies.

To claim that God is most truthfully represented in terms of self-giving rather than of power is not to deny that theology and human relationships are deeply immersed in issues of power: the call to sacrifice rather than to empowerment coincides all too easily with a patriarchal rhetoric which pretends that power differentials do not exist or matter. A contemporary kenotic theology needs to address questions of power; it does not, however, need to be limited to a liberal—or Marxist—analysis of power, as Hampson’s appears to be,



*Jesus meets Mary on the  
Way of the Cross*

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<sup>29</sup> Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 28. See Anne Hunt’s fine summary, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: Love Alone is Credible’, in *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery: A Development in Recent Catholic Theology* (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical Press, 1997), 57-90.

power and female need for empowerment. Michel Foucault has argued that power is fluid and dynamic, diffused throughout social structures.<sup>30</sup>

In this light, *kenōsis* is about actively resisting the zero-sum game of masculinist power, and about finding ways to exercise power non-abusively. 'If "abusive" human power is ... always potentially within our grasp, how can we best approach the healing resources of a non-abusive divine power?' asks Sarah Coakley.<sup>31</sup> *Kenōsis* here is the movement not into powerlessness or masochistic self-sacrifice but into a new paradigm of mutuality and relationality, of non-coercive power and vulnerability. Coakley speaks eloquently of the empowering vulnerability of 'waiting on the divine', 'the unique intersection of vulnerable, "non-grasping" humanity and authentic divine power, itself "made perfect in weakness"'.<sup>32</sup>

### **Kenōsis and Victims**

As Aristotle Papanikolaou argues, however, a question remains whether this kind of subversion is subversive enough: Coakley clarifies what *kenōsis* means before a God of non-abusive power, but what shape does *kenōsis* take within human relationships and institutions? In particular, how does *kenōsis* contribute to the welfare of those victimised by violence and abuse?<sup>33</sup>

For the victim of violence or abuse, *kenōsis* does not mean patient and humble submission to one's lot, the passive acceptance of abusive power. Rather, it means embracing the risk and the vulnerability of trusting in the divine and communal resources that can help one confront trauma and find healing. *Kenōsis*, for the victim, means emptying oneself in vulnerability and trust, opening oneself to the divine and communal resources, not acquiescing in silence. Drawing on the work of René Girard, Cynthia Crysdale calls Jesus the 'pure victim' who breaks the cycle of violence and thus enables the naming of victimisation:

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Coakley, 'Kenōsis and Subversion: On the Repression of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing', in *Swallowing a Fishbone*, 107. This essay has been reprinted in Coakley's own collection, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 3-39. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 26-27.

<sup>31</sup> Coakley, 'Kenōsis and Subversion', 107.

<sup>32</sup> Coakley, 'Kenōsis and Subversion', 110.

<sup>33</sup> See Aristotle Papanikolaou, 'Person, Kenōsis and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation', *Modern Theology*, 19/1 (January 2003), 46.

But in contemplating Jesus on the cross, one discovers oneself, not as the crucifier who willed this death, but as the victim who has been slain .... By identifying with Jesus the Crucified, one is able to name one's own victimisation, to face the wounds that have hampered one's full human flourishing.<sup>34</sup>

Again, empowering transformation cannot mean the denial and avoidance of one's experience of suffering in a pretence of stoic independence; rather, one must confront the pain and suffering one has experienced and name it for what it is. As Elizabeth Johnson argues, the naming of women's experiences of suffering generates new metaphors for the God who suffers: the God who brings a new world to birth, the God who grieves over injustice and violence, the God who stands against the unredeemable excess of suffering.<sup>35</sup> The truth-telling of victims produces new ways of speaking about God and breaks the dominance of patriarchal images.

Such naming, however, is facilitated not by the stubborn exercise of one's own resources, but by relationships of trust; it is a kind of self-emptying to the other. Rita Nakashima Brock captures this kenotic movement in her interpretation of the stories of the woman with the haemorrhage and of Jairus' daughter. These figures whom Mark interweaves are for Brock one representative woman:

As a woman, she had sought a source to remove her isolation and restore her to wholeness. In doing so, she created the possibility for the child in her to come back to life. As a child in the sleeping girl, she is helped by someone who loves her and brings healing to her, but her own courage makes that act possible. In joining the two stories, the two aspects of one woman are returned into the wholeness of woman/child. Vulnerability reveals God.<sup>36</sup>

By merging these two scriptural figures, Brock breaks down the dichotomy between self-empowerment and dependence, and offers a parable of healing and empowerment through trusting vulnerability. The parable suggests that liberal humanism has it wrong to think that recovery from trauma (or for that matter salvation) is a 'do-it-yourself'

<sup>34</sup> Papanikolaou, 'Person, Kenosis and Abuse', 9.

<sup>35</sup> See Johnson, *She Who Is*, 254-264.

<sup>36</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, 'And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse', in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, 42-61, at 57.

project. As Papanikolaou says, ‘What an abused victim is emptying is fear, fear of the other created by abuse . . . . The active recognition and seeking of help is itself a *kenotic* act.’<sup>37</sup> There is no hint here of the glorification of suffering, of abuse and injustice seen as a kind of ‘happy fault’ paving the way to salvation. Rather, within a world in which abusive power, unjust structures, and violence are already historical and personal realities, *kenōsis*—as a divine act, a christological act and a human act—converts the victim to self-appropriation, healing, and indeed empowerment.

Feminist critique has made it clear that, despite their positive theological insights, classical atonement theories have proven far from salvific for women. Downplaying the cross entirely, however, does not appear to be a helpful option: to deny the cross as a historical and political fact amounts to a denial of the suffering that women and men *do* in fact experience in myriad forms in their lives. Instead, contemporary feminist theologians such as Sarah Coakley, Elizabeth Johnson and Cynthia Crysdale lay the groundwork for a renewed understanding of *kenōsis* that can be amplified through Hans Urs von

Balthasar’s account of the Trinity in terms of *kenōsis* and mutual self-giving.

This renewal remains grounded in the Christian tradition, in the themes of God as triune; of the life and death of Jesus as fully human and fully divine; and of humanity, both women and men, as created in the image of God. This kenotic theology is also fully compatible with the New Testament witness to the life and preaching of Jesus. It expresses God’s repudiation, in Jesus, of imperial values and of the exploitation



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*Veronica wipes the face of Jesus*

<sup>37</sup> Papanikolaou, ‘Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse’, 55.

of power. It affirms that Jesus was not merely ‘handed over’ as a passive victim to be abused and killed (like Bess in *Breaking the Waves*). Rather, he gave himself over to the cause of God’s reign, and entrusted himself to the women and men who had become his disciples. Jesus’ entire life was kenotic, not just his death. In this light, Christian discipleship is a call not to suffer, but rather to live kenotically—that is, to throw oneself in trust upon the God who is eternally self-giving, and to find in this trust the strength not to tolerate but to confront abusive power, to name suffering for what it is, and to seek healing in community.<sup>38</sup>

**Mark L. Yenson** is a doctoral student in systematic theology at the University of St Michael’s College, Toronto. He is interested in modern developments in Roman Catholic christology and theological anthropology, and particularly in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

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