The Self-emptying God

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An Undercurrent in Christian Theology
Helping the Relationship with Science

By

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INTRODUCTION

THE NEED FOR COMPATIBILITY

Many religious believers are double-minded when thinking about science or the nature of the physical world which science aims to explain. They are persuaded by the reasoning by which the sciences can explain processes in the natural world, and they recognise the successes which science has achieved in many fields. At the same time, they hold to beliefs which appear to require an alternative explanation of events, and feel uncomfortably disloyal if they move away from these traditional ideas. This double-mindedness was well illustrated by the comments of a Muslim student on the preservation of the mosques in areas of Banda Aceh, Indonesia, otherwise devastated by the 2004 tsunami:

> "Raja Muda, an engineering student at Syiah Kuala University, says that he interprets the sparing of the mosques in two ways. 'As a Muslim, I think that maybe it is God's warning to be good, and to pray in the mosque. As an engineer, though, maybe it's because the walls of the mosque were thick and strong and the water flowed around them.' "[1]

My purpose in this book is to help those who feel divided in this way between their religious beliefs and their views of science to reach a more unified state of mind. I shall propose that an understanding of God as self-emptying, self-denying or self-limiting is a valuable contribution to the reconciliation of Christian theistic belief with a scientific interpretation of the natural world. The concept of divine self-emptying will be described by the theological term *kenosis*, adjective *kenotic*, from the Greek word meaning to empty. In developing the relationship between divine kenosis and scientific explanation it will be necessary to enter several related fields, including biblical exposition, the history of Christian doctrine and the viewpoints of modern science.

The idea of kenosis is explicitly applied to God (or, more accurately, to Jesus Christ) only once in the writings of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verse 7: ἑαυτον εκενωσεν, "he emptied himself." The root word κενοω and its

cognates are used more frequently in the New Testament in their everyday sense of "to empty", or metaphorically in the sense of "empty of content", which helps to establish the meaning of the single theological use of the word. This linguistic background to the biblical basis of kenosis is examined later in this introductory chapter. In this chapter I also discuss whether the respective languages of theology and science preclude any serious communication between them; I argue that there is a real need for mutual respect and exchange of information. Some difficulties with the kenotic idea are also noted, and preliminary answers to a few basic questions are suggested. A finite, though unknown, limit to the period of God's kenosis is also proposed.

Four main themes

Four themes are developed in this book, as shown in the structure of the chapters:

Theme One: The failure of the monarchical model of God. Christian belief has always experienced difficulty in explaining God's sovereignty in face of the moral difficulties raised by actual events in the world (the problem of theodicy), but the sovereign, or monarchical, model of God's relationship to the natural world has encountered further difficulties in the light of scientific discoveries. Scientific explanations of many natural phenomena have rendered the monarchical understanding of God's relationship to the world particularly problematical.

Theme Two: The alternative in Christian theology. An alternative understanding of God's relationship to the world is already available in the Hebraic and Christian traditions: divine self-limitation is persistently present in the tradition as an undercurrent or minor theme in the understanding of God. This self-limitation allows space for the exercise of human choices and also for the operation of natural physical principles independently of any control by God.

Theme Three: Opposition to divine self-emptying. This understanding of God as self-emptying or kenotic has frequently been rejected because it comes into conflict with other beliefs which are regarded as primary. The absolute sovereignty of God has for long seemed an indispensible component in the Hebrew and Christian understanding of God, and the idea of divine kenosis, when worked through in detail, also appears to challenge the traditional Christian understandings of the person of Christ and, as a consequence, the divine Trinity.

Theme Four: A space for science. A kenotic understanding of God is particularly valuable alongside a scientific interpretation of the natural

world, as it permits scientific explanation to exist without removing the possibility of theistic faith. If the regular world order revealed by scientific research is to be free from arbitrary interruption, God must be under some self-imposed limitations. I therefore describe my proposal as a "binding kenosis" as, although voluntarily entered by God, it involves a degree of necessity upon God while the present world order continues.

Each of these four themes is important in the development of my argument, but they do not require the same degree of detailed examination. After a brief introduction to each theme immediately below, they are given differing degrees of attention; Themes Two and Four require greater detail than Themes One and Three.

Theme One, the failure of the monarchical model due in part to the explanatory power of the sciences, may be regarded as logically the starting point of my argument, and is therefore examined first. Theme Two, the availability in Christian theology of an alternative, kenotic understanding of God, is treated extensively, in sections examining the biblical material and the historical development of kenotic Christology. The two main periods of kenotic thought in British theology, in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and again in the third quarter of the twentieth century, are given particular attention. Theme Three, the frequent opposition to a kenotic understanding of God, receives a relatively brief treatment. Theme Four, on the space necessary for the autonomous operation of the physical processes described by science, examines several recent attempts to reconcile a scientific viewpoint with theistic faith, and discusses some of the impacts of a kenotic understanding of God. Occasionally some historical back-tracking is necessary, especially in relation to the support for and opposition to the kenotic idea, treated respectively under Themes Two and Three.

Theme One: The failure of the monarchical model of God

The understanding of God as ruler, Lord and sovereign of all things has a long history in the biblical faiths, and, indeed, is often regarded as essential to the role of God or gods. However, the idea of the sovereignty of God has proved difficult to reconcile with many human experiences, both at the individual level and in the development of societies. Partly because of these problems, some groups within the Christian traditions have understood divine sovereignty with highly differing emphases. The emergence of scientific explanations of phenomena which would once have been attributed to the divine will has exacerbated the problem. At this stage I note just two difficulties of a scientific nature. First, the monarchical

model related well to a world assumed to be of a fixed, created order which appeared to have been designed and provided by God for the benefit and enjoyment of mankind, but proved to be less acceptable when evolutionary theory pointed to a world in constant change, possibly even unplanned and undesigned. And second, the observed operation of chance in nature, at both the molecular and the organic levels, appears to undermine any serious claim to purposeful divine governance, though some scholars have attempted to integrate chance into a theistic worldview.[2]

Theme Two: The alternative in Christian theology

The Hebraic and Christian traditions, as set out in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, themselves contain an alternative view: a persistent, minor theme of the self-limiting, self-denying, kenotic character of God. This may at first appear a questionable claim: where is the self-denying, self-emptying God in these Scriptures? Do they not describe a God of might and power, who created the universe by his[3] will, who called and moved and protected his people, who rescued them on more than one occasion from oppression and empowered them to survive as a nation? Is not the God of Jesus Christ the God of healings and freedom, of resurrection and mighty deeds? It is indeed the case that a prominent theme of belief in the divine nature is that God is supremely powerful, mighty, transcendent and "other". And yet, in many of the biblical texts describing God in this way, God seemed to have done all these powerful things in the past, whereas the present was different. Some contributors to the total vision of God in the Bible felt that the picture of a powerful ruler was not the whole story. They maintained that God was infinitely patient, longsuffering and humble; that he was close to those he loved, perhaps even close to everyone; that he shared in and experienced their sufferings; and was himself abused when they were abused. As I shall demonstrate, these ideas were already present in the faith expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. God did not need to become incarnate to reveal these characteristics, but Christian faith claims that they are shown most clearly in the person and life of Jesus Christ. It is in the interpretation of Christ that kenotic theology has reached a new level of significance.

Theme Three: Opposition to divine self-emptying

Although kenosis is present as part of the Hebraic and Christian understandings of God, it has frequently been ignored or even opposed. This has occurred in part because the proponents of divine self-emptying

have produced inconsistent views of its impact on Christian theology, and in part because the kenotic theme runs into conflict with other Christian doctrines, particularly with the absolute sovereignty of God, with the doctrine of the two natures of Christ and, derivatively, with the doctrine of the Trinitarian nature of God. Since these doctrines have appeared to be more important or fundamental to Christian belief than any idea of kenosis, the latter has been neglected, denied and frequently abandoned, so that the perceived primary doctrines might remain unchallenged. Nevertheless, the persistent reappearance of kenosis shows that, although it has played a relatively minor role in the Christian understanding of Christ and of God, it is too deep-seated in the tradition to be ignored. It returns and demands attention. Kenosis has never been eliminated from Christian theology as one aspect of the character of God.

Theme Four: A space for science

An understanding of God as kenotic proves to have a profound benefit for the interrelationship of science and Christian faith. It has become commonplace to observe that since the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth-seventeenth century,[4] and especially during the last one hundred and fifty years, scientific understanding has increasingly eroded the role claimed for God in the physical and biological universe. Scientific explanations have progressively replaced non-scientific interpretations of natural events, creating the necessity for a revised understanding of God. While accepting many of these scientific explanations, I argue emphatically that this does not eliminate the place of God in a life of faith, nor does it question the supreme place of the historic figure of Jesus Christ as teacher, exemplar and saviour on the way to God. But it does demand that some aspects of Christianity's normative explanation of God's relationship to the world will have to be questioned and revised.

The word "kenosis"

Kenosis signifies emptying, from the Greek word κενοω and its cognates, meaning "empty" or "to empty" or "to pour out". Examples in the New Testament of this straightforward physical sense are:

- Mark 12.3, Luke 20.10f: the tenants in the parable beat the master's messenger and "sent him away *empty* [-handed]."
- Luke 1.53: "he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away *empty*."

The sense is extended metaphorically to include:

- "empty words" (Ephesians 5.6), "profane chatter" (1 Timothy 6.20; 2 Timothy 2.16)
- "vain things" (Acts 4.25), "empty deceit" (Colossians 2.8), "vain man" (James 2.20, KJV)
- lack of achievement ("in vain", 1 Corinthians 15.10, 14, 58; 2 Corinthians 6.1; Galatians 2.2; Philippians 2.16; 1 Thessalonians 2.1; 3.5; James 4.5) or lack of effect (Romans 4.14, 1 Corinthians 1.17, 9.15, 2 Corinthians 9.3)
- other forms of vanity such as "vainglorious" (a compound word, empty of glory, Galatians 5.26, Philippians 2.3).

The theological sense of kenosis derives from a single occurrence in Philippians 2.7: "Christ ... emptied himself (έαυτον εκενωσεν), taking the form of a slave ..." Kenosis understood theologically is not merely emptying, but *self*-emptying (έαυτον, himself). This verse is the source of the name of "kenotic" theology, based upon the theme of Christ having "emptied himself". The many interpretations and problems associated with this text will be examined later, but at this point I simply note that Christ accepted a lower role than might have been expected.

Although Philippians 2.7 is the only scriptural verse in which a process of self-emptying is described through the use of the word κενοω, it should not be thought that the idea of Christ's self-emptying is totally dependent on this single occurrence. The kenotic problem presents itself whenever the obvious humanity of Jesus, shown in his hunger and tiredness, his shared life with friends and disciples, his lack of knowledge and his eventual death, is supplemented by features in his personality which appeared to require some more-than-human characteristics. Assuming, for the present argument, that the Gospels give us a reasonably reliable account of his life, what was the source of his power to perform miracles? Whence came the authority in his teaching? Why did he apparently accept titles which no normal person could claim? How was it possible for his followers to affirm later that he never sinned and to give him some form of divine status? Did he really rise from the dead? The association of these extraordinary features, alongside his common human characteristics, sets out starkly the heart of the kenotic question: in what way had Christ emptied himself if he was also in some sense divine? This problem is not limited to Philippians 2.7, but is raised through the whole of the New Testament.[5]

Expressed in these terms, kenosis is a Christological issue and, as I shall show in the following chapters on the history of kenosis, it was the Christological problem which first exercised the theologians who took kenosis seriously. An examination of divine kenosis must contain a large component of Christology, as it is primarily through the person of Christ that the idea enters theology. But there is an additional aspect to kenosis, which becomes more significant in the context of the relationship between theology and science: kenosis is not only a matter of Christology, but is relevant to the whole being of God. Christians maintain that what is true of Christ is also true in some way of God. This "transfer" of kenotic characteristics from Christ to God his Father is to be understood here not as occurring in time, as though the recipient did not at one time possess the attributes transferred, but as an epistemological transfer, by which certain attributes first recognised in Christ are then seen to have existed also in the Father. Such a transfer is consistent with the Christian belief that Christ reveals to us the nature of God: Christ is like God and God is like Christ. From the example of Christ we may therefore affirm, or at least maintain the possibility, that God is kenotic. I shall show that biblical support for the kenotic nature of God is available not only in the person of Christ. Examples of God's kenotic nature in the Hebrew Scriptures will be examined. The existence of divine kenosis in the Hebrew Scriptures further demonstrates that the "transfer" of kenotic characteristics from Christ to God the Father is attributable to the gradual recognition through time of the nature of God, not to any new characteristic that arose first in Christ.

The Bible cannot be used alone to provide us with information about God. To be persuasive, biblical information has to be consistent with our own experience and with our view of the world. However, some readers may feel that science and theology are such diverse fields that a sensible conversation between them is difficult or even impossible. I therefore examine now the question of whether scientific evidence from the natural world may contribute to our understanding of God.

Is science a reliable partner?

It should be clear by this point that I have a positive view of the contribution made by science to our understanding of reality. Therefore an important preliminary question to be addressed is whether science merits such confidence, and whether a dialogue with theology is possible. Should scientific methods and discoveries be allowed to challenge theological traditions? Is science a source of truth to the extent that it may be placed

alongside, or even above, ancient texts and centuries of sacred practice in determining our understanding of God and of the world's relationship to God? Is not even science itself less confident than it once was in its own ability to provide intellectual certainty and to achieve positive benefits both for humans and for the rest of the world? If this is so, perhaps theology should yield no ground to this newcomer, but should continue to rely on its ancient and well-tried traditions, though it should also be recognised that theology, like science, is less confident of its conclusions than it used to be.

Until the early twentieth century science was progressing in the confidence that it could address natural phenomena with increasing certainty and that accurate predictions could be made. New scientific phenomena such as the full range of chemical elements, invisible electro-magnetic rays and radioactivity were being rapidly discovered, explanations were being developed, and some physicists even wondered whether the task of their particular discipline was almost complete. Results which had been obtained were regarded as secure and certain, with future work limited to improving the accuracy expressed in further places of decimals. Early in the twentieth century, however, this sense of confidence and security disappeared. In 1905 Albert Einstein published his Special Theory of Relativity, arguing that space and time, previously regarded as distinct phenomena, were inseparably linked in four-dimensional space-time. Space-time itself was subject to various distortions related to the velocities and masses of the objects or phenomena under consideration. The only physical absolute was the velocity of light, and at this velocity the meaning of space-time seemed to disappear altogether. The Newtonian absolutes of space and time remained valuable concepts for many purposes in earth-bound engineering, but nevertheless Einstein had created doubts about whether these dimensions retained any real existence.

As the twentieth century advanced, the sense of unreality in physics progressed even further, with the proposition in the 1920s of Quantum Mechanics by figures such as Max Planck, Louis De Broglie, Erwin Schrödinger, Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli and Paul Dirac. Research into the structure of the atom had revealed such phenomena as the existence of light energy in packets (quanta), the exclusion of particles from certain positions in the atom (Pauli's exclusion principle, 1925), the impossibility of measuring simultaneously both the position and the momentum of a particle (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, 1927), and the apparent nature of light as both wave-like and particle-like. It appeared that two particles could occupy the same space simultaneously (the principle of superposition). More recently the non-local behaviour of

particles has been confirmed: particles which are spatially separated, even by vast distances, appear to be instantly correlated when measurements are taken. Although Quantum Mechanics describes the behaviour of particles at the atomic and molecular levels, its many applications now include devices in everyday use, such as the lasers used in computers and CD players.

Quantum Mechanics introduced uncertainty to the heart of a science which had previously appeared the most supreme form of certainty. Observed regularity now seemed to be built on hidden irregularity. Scientists were readily using concepts which to an unspecialised observer appeared bizarre and counter-intuitive. The intellectual struggle which even Einstein experienced because of the apparent irrationality of Quantum theory is well known. It took Einstein from 1926 to 1931 to accept that the mathematics of Quantum Mechanics was correct, and even then he did not agree that it was a complete explanation.[6] At the very least, physics had opened itself to the reality of phenomena which previously would have been regarded as unacceptable.

More was to follow. In 1931 Kurt Gödel published his mathematical proof that any system of logic in number theory must include assumptions not provable within that system. And in the 1960s Edward Lorenz introduced Chaos theory, replacing the previously assumed stability in the physical world with profound instabilities: small variations in one part of the physical domain could lead to huge, apparently unconnected, changes elsewhere. Henri Poincaré had shown at the beginning of the twentieth century that even the simple three-body problem (for example, the relative motions of the Sun-Earth-Moon system) could not be solved exactly by classical mechanics – now it appeared that uncertainty and instability existed everywhere.

The claims of scientists thus became much less confident than had once appeared. Uncertainty extended both over the accuracy of the results, and even more over the reality and interpretation of the underlying concepts. These changes are sometimes regarded as positive developments for the relationship between science and religion; the former distinction between the reliability of the sciences based on facts and the uncertainties of a religious view based on "faith" is no longer valid. The knowledge systems of both theology and the sciences are seen to rely on a mixture of verifiable evidence and interpretation. In his Gifford Lectures of 1927, Sir Arthur Eddington raised the possibility that following the publication of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, 1927 might be the first year in which it was possible for a "reasonable scientific man" to be religious. Eddington immediately dismissed the thought, on the grounds that it was pedantic

and because thinking men had always found good reasons to embrace religion.[7] Nevertheless, the fact that Eddington even raised the idea illustrates the intellectual impact of uncertainty in science: it seemed to many that the principles underlying scientific methods and religious faith were closer than had once been assumed. But, to return to our immediate question, does this change in the character of science justify theology in refusing any accommodation with scientific knowledge systems?

Before this question can be answered, one further set of factors must be explored. The scientific endeavour, in addition to losing much of its certainty, has in the later twentieth century also lost much of the public's sympathy. This is partly due to what are seen as the negative achievements of scientific research. Perhaps beginning with the development and use of nuclear weapons in the Second World War, the growth of scientific knowledge is now frequently regarded as a mixed blessing at best. Natural resources, created during millions of years, have been perceptibly depleted in a few decades, and the environment has been contaminated by the residues of mining, energy production, industry, transport and chemically fortified agriculture. Some old diseases have been overcome and human life has been extended in the favoured parts of the world, but new diseases have appeared in their place. Much research warns that climate change, attributed largely to alterations of atmospheric chemistry consequent on the human use of energy, will disrupt global weather patterns and food production, while a rise in sea level following higher global temperatures may eliminate areas of low-lying land from human occupation. Increased knowledge of cell biology and the human genome has enabled biologists to transfer genes from one species to another, to produce clones, and to interfere profoundly with natural processes of reproduction. This raises a new set of ethical problems, which neither the Christian church nor society at large has yet been able to address with a firm and convincing voice. Should theology seek an alliance with sciences which have become uncertain, unpopular and arguably unethical?

It is remarkable that in spite of these changes in the character of science and the problems with some of its achievements, the demand for its technological products spreads relentlessly. New domestic devices are adopted rapidly, and information technologies are used increasingly in homes, offices and workshops. Very few people actually implement their dream of escape to their own version of Utopia; most prefer personal mobility, a convenient doctor, pharmacy and hospital, jet-based holidays and the longer life expectancy which seems to come with the package. Those levels of society, and developing countries, which have not previously enjoyed these things, desire them as much as anyone. The

underlying disposition of most people is to welcome the achievements of science, and that implies the acceptance of the thought forms and principles on which science is based. Certainties may have been replaced by statements expressed as probabilities, but these apparently less accurate claims are in fact more precise. Society has adopted a scientific approach to explanation. For these reasons theology must continue to take scientific thought forms seriously.

It also appears that the most likely way to avoid some of the disadvantages of a science-based world is to find better scientific solutions, rather than retreat to pre-scientific conditions. So if manufacturing is polluting, cleaner ways of manufacturing must be devised; much progress has already been made in this respect. If energy production creates too many dangerous by-products, new energy sources must be found. If engine exhausts are threatening our atmosphere, new fuels and more efficient engines are the way forward. Even the military, not normally noted for their social conscience, are now using "smart" bombs which can target an individual building without damaging others, and, in a total reversal of normal peacetime values, are investigating weapons systems which can kill humans without causing the destruction of property. If science has in the past been damaging, the answer seems to be the development of a less damaging science, not the abandonment of science.

A more philosophical objection against too close an alliance between theology and science might be raised. Scientific explanations, although superficially attractive, are always incomplete (as Einstein believed in relation to Quantum Mechanics). Any scientific explanation is always expressed in terms of another phenomenon, and therefore never achieves any ultimate status. For example, Isaac Newton produced a marvellous explanation of the operation of the solar system on the basis of universal gravitational forces related to the masses of the heavenly bodies, but he was unable to explain the exact nature of the gravitational force itself. Or again, certain phenomena in materials can be explained by the way in which they behave in response to variations in temperature, and this itself can be related to their molecular properties, but the reasons for certain molecules having certain properties require a different level of explanation. Every explanation includes hidden assumptions and unknowns. Behind every discovery and new explanation lies a further problem and mystery, so the opportunities for further scientific discovery expand as knowledge itself expands. Ignorance increases as knowledge increases.

Does this render science an unreliable guide? Is it overconfident to claim that natural phenomena may be scientifically explainable, when

science is merely opening a door to another set of unknowns? It must be recognised that the less certain science of the twentieth century has achieved much, in spite of its less than perfect foundations. Its increased uncertainty places science in an intellectual position closer to other disciplines. Just as there may be an infinite regression in many philosophical and theological arguments, so science may be engaged on an infinite exploration for another level of explanation, though this does not diminish the value of what is achieved at each level. Science is not a superior partner for theology, but a fellow traveller in the search for knowledge.

Respect between science and theology should therefore be a two way process. If theologians wish to be regarded by scientists as providing a valuable contribution to the interpretation of reality, theologians should also pay the same respect to science. The scientific endeavour is engaged upon the discovery of realities about the physical and material realm, which is a worthwhile and wholesome task. Science has sometimes led to products or practices which are harmful to people or the environment, but the responsibility lies with the technological development and application rather than with the underlying reality. No truths are evil. Theologically based ethics can therefore play a role with science in providing advice on the most beneficial use of discovered knowledge.

The debate between science and theology may be questioned at an even more fundamental level. Are God and the natural world realities of such differing kinds that it is deeply impossible to make comparisons between them? If philosophical words such as “existence”, “truth” or “cause” when applied to God and to physical nature take on enormously different meanings, is it even possible to conduct a meaningful dialogue between these two fields of knowledge? To this problem I now turn.

Scientific language and religious language

In this book I am making frequent comparisons between scientific and religious views and concepts. It is therefore necessary to establish whether religious language, including the concept of divine self-limitation, and scientific language may be used together in this way. Some scientists and some theologians may take the view that their own discipline is so superior to the other (or, more mildly, so different from the other) that sensible communication is impossible. In discussing this question I take as my interlocutor the German-American theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) who wrote explicitly on this subject.

Tillich maintained that there would be no conflict between science and religion so long as scientists and theologians, both professional and lay,

restricted their statements to the fields within which they were entitled to operate. Science was concerned with finite things and their interrelations, whilst religion addressed the encounter with the holy and matters of "ultimate concern" and meaning. "Science does not conflict with religion, Tillich claims, because religion operates at the level of meaning and symbol, not of actual object and conclusions."[8] In Tillich's own words, "There is no religious statement that can contradict a scientific statement if religion is understood in its fundamental sense as ultimate concern and science is understood as the inquiry into the finite facts and their relations."[9] Conflicts have indeed occurred between science and religion, Tillich recognised, but this has been due to scientists and theologians overstepping the boundary between them. Tillich's boundary has been described as a "semi-permeable membrane" which "protects the theologian qua-theologian from becoming theologian-cum-scientist." [10] Using the analogy of the "dimensions" or units of scientific nomenclature, Tillich argued that religious and scientific languages work in different dimensions which should not be confused. "All conflicts occur if the difference between the dimensions is denied and the two functions of man's spiritual life are seen on one and the same level."[11] Scientists trespass into the theological realm when they confuse their own religious views or presuppositions with their scientific results, and theologians make the same mistake when they use scientific results in support of theological statements. Both are examples of confusing the dimensions. Tillich argued that theology should remain within the "theological circle" which included a commitment to the Christian message and the theological self-interpretation of the church.[12]

While Tillich had many penetrating insights into the mid-twentieth century cultural situation, I find his attempt to isolate science and religion into rigorously defined language compartments ultimately unsatisfying and untenable. If religious discourse were concerned *only* with "ultimate reality" and with "meaning", and if the sciences were concerned *only* with physical objects and their interrelations, a clear separation between the domains might be acceptable. But neither of these limitations is valid. Scientific discoveries, especially in the biological fields, are increasingly raising questions about the nature of human life, perception and ethical response – Tillich's restrictions may have applied more appropriately to the physical sciences, but even in his own time a distinction between scientific "things" and religious "meanings" could not be maintained. And equally, religion cannot be limited to the area of ultimate reality: religion makes claims about the world and about things in physical space. In particular, the Christian religion has always given prominence to the

doctrines of divine creation and providence, affirming in some sense God's close involvement in the existence of things. These claims about creation and providence have referred not merely to abstract ideas of meaning and purpose, but to the existence of things on Earth. If this aspect of Christianity is to change (and I agree with Tillich that in some respects it should), then such change should be the result of new ways of understanding the world and not of an arbitrary limitation of religious discourse to abstractions.

This problem of creation and providence was of course recognised by Tillich, who dismissed some traditional beliefs as an aberration of religion:

> "there is another concept of religion out of which inescapably the conflicts with science follow. It is the concept of religion as the belief in the existence of a being, called God, who surpasses everything in power and value and with whom men communicate in terms of knowledge, adoration, obedience. The activities of this being in our world produce extraordinary effects, like miracles or revelations, that can be experienced like any other event. These last words already show where the conflict with science occurs. *The realm of God's activities in our world is the realm where science becomes a competitor to religion*."[13]

It appears, then, that Tillich's attempt to separate the language fields of science and religion can be achieved only by eviscerating the scope of both science and of religion. According to Tillich, ideas of creation, providence and miracle cannot be understood in relation to events in the physical world but only in relation to "ultimate meaning". In my view, the personal nature of the one called God, which Tillich appears to eliminate, should be maintained. I support the right of theologians-cum-scientists, whose intellectual credibility Tillich appears to deny, to throw more light on theological enquiries. I agree with the view of Robert J. Russell that "the theories and discoveries of ... [various sciences] ... should serve as crucial sources of data for theology, both inspiring new insights and challenging traditional outdated concepts of nature."[14] Tillich denied that scientific discovery could be a source of "data for theology", but I will defend the view that theology must be open to the arrival of new data from whatever source. The history of science provides regular examples of new data from science which have caused theology to be revised.

So far I have discussed two factors which may raise questions about traditional interpretations of Christian belief: the minor theme of God's self-emptying character, and the development of scientific knowledge in more recent centuries. Christianity was formulated when perceptions of the world can only be described as pre-scientific (though this does not

deny the value of ancient achievements in fields such as astronomy, construction, shipbuilding and navigation, and others). Therefore it may be expected that some Christian beliefs which impinge on physical realities will sit uncomfortably with scientific knowledge. Facing these problems seriously is one purpose of this book. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) argued that God is greater than anything we can imagine.[15] Contrary to Anselm's view, I propose that we are able to imagine superlative things which may be overstatements if applied to God, who may in some respects be less than the greatest we are able to imagine. In the developing human search for God which is described in the Bible and in subsequent history, the kenotic idea breaks through in the realisation that even God may be humble.

An extreme form of divine kenotic behaviour would be the complete disengagement of God from the world, leaving us with some form of deism (I say deliberately *some form* of deism; we should not use labels like deism too casually, as though they can have only one, universally understood, meaning). Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), from a Swiss Roman Catholic viewpoint, has warned against using kenosis as a "universal law" or as imposing necessity upon God, though he recognises kenosis as "no contradiction of [God's] own essence."[16] This is the form of divine kenosis I am proposing: freely entered into by God but, once entered, an essential aspect of the God-world relationship. This will raise several problems, in particular the following:

Question 1. Although in general God may be self-limiting and self-denying, allowing the worlds of mankind and nature to follow their own paths, is it necessary to conclude that God *never* intervenes, whether in ordinary events or by miracles? Or, to express the question in other terms, does absolute sovereignty have to be replaced by absolute kenosis?

Question 2. In particular, did God intervene in the great acts of salvation, especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Question 3. Many individuals will claim to have experienced actions by God on their behalf. Is this interpretation of personal experience misguided? If God is a loving Father is he prevented by his self-willed kenosis from doing things for his children?

Fuller answers to these questions will be offered as my case develops, but at this stage I propose some preliminary answers, indicating the direction in which my argument will follow.

A limit to self-limitation

A partial answer to the questions posed at the end of the previous section is that any action by God will be *eschatological*, a sign of his ultimately intended kingdom. In particular, the events surrounding the life of Jesus Christ were eschatological, bringing God's kingdom near in a new way. Question 1 above is really included within Questions 2 and 3, since any of the supposed actions by God are either exceptional (Question 2) or personal (Question 3). Question 2 is answered by the eschatological nature of God's work in Jesus Christ, while the issues addressed in Question 3, relating to the personal experience of individuals, will always be open to alternative interpretation. Believers will affirm the action of God in their lives, while sceptics will argue that other explanations are possible, or that particular outcomes did not depend on the intervention of God, or that an account has been over-elaborated to support a pre-existing viewpoint. To suggest that every experience of God in an individual's life is an eschatological event, and therefore falls under the answer to Question 2, is stretching definitions too far. But an aspect of God's kenosis could be that we can never be sure who or what is responsible for unusual events.

An eschatological conclusion to the time of God's self-limitation is hinted at by the Apostle Paul. It can be dangerous as well as anachronistic to mix biblical texts and scientific arguments, but the view of the Apostle Paul concerning the role of humans as well as of God in the redemption of the world is relevant here. In Romans 8, which has become such a happy hunting ground in recent discussion of the relations between science and religion, Paul wrote not only that the creation is "subjected to futility" (v20) and "groaning in labour pains" (v22) while awaiting its redemption, but also, and more importantly in this immediate context, that creation is waiting for "the revealing of the children of God" (v19) and "will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (v21). According to Paul the redemption of mankind will come first and the redemption of the whole creation will follow, being in some way dependent upon the redemption of mankind. This view differs from some modern attempts to grapple with the God-world relationship, in which the whole of creation with its different levels of consciousness moves together towards redemption.

Errors in Christianity often arise from excessive concentration on a single aspect of Christian teaching. A path of hard logic may be followed, with the result that one feature of Christian belief is extracted from its surrounding body of complementary belief and extrapolated beyond its proper limits, so that the whole becomes distorted. In this way, for

example, the sovereignty of God can be used to support cruelty and vindictiveness, the desire to be generous to others can cause a neglect of one's domestic responsibilities, and the command to pray can lead to isolation and inactivity. The same could happen with an emphasis upon the kenotic nature of God; it could lead to a view of God as totally detached, uninterested and unfeeling. This would plainly be at odds with other aspects of Christian teaching. God is not so kenotic that he does nothing. There must be limits to his self-limitation. God's humility and self-limitation are aspects of his being which may require re-emphasis in parts of contemporary theology and the contemporary church, and are particularly helpful aspects in relation to the scientific interpretation of the world. But these are not the only aspects of the multi-faceted being of God.

For many centuries, the kenotic theme was applied only in the area of Christology (because of the obvious Christ-related origins of kenosis in Philippians 2.7). Most early theologians found it easier to tilt their understanding of Christ towards a divine rather than a human emphasis. An over-emphasis on the divine appeared more spiritual, whereas an over-emphasis on the human was seen as deeply disloyal. More recently, a wider value of kenotic theology has been found. The application of kenotic thought to the entire being of God was briefly noted in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Christological debates, though the theological value of the kenotic theme of God's self-limitation in relation to the natural world was not appreciated at the time, at least partly because the extent to which scientific work would provide explanations of natural phenomena was not then realised.

God's self-limitation was not imposed upon God by some rival existence or force of inevitability, but was a free act bound into the nature of creation. But once the present world order was established, self-limitation was irrevocable and binding upon God. His self-limitation included limitations upon his freedom. These limitations could not be reversed, not even in relation to a Holocaust, nor at Hiroshima, nor on September 11, 2001. To reverse his kenotic decision will be to bring in his final fulfilment, which is not yet. The events surrounding the life of Christ, which were themselves so thoroughly kenotic, were also the only permitted departures from the kenotic principle, because they were themselves the anticipation of the eschatological completion.

In this chapter I have taken a large-scale view of the nature of divine kenosis. I have addressed issues concerning the relationship between theology and science, and have argued that it is essential for theological language and scientific language to seek convergence, as both fields of

knowledge have a bearing on both physical realities and ethical behaviour. I have addressed in a preliminary way some of the difficulties which a kenotic theology will raise for traditional Christian belief, and have suggested that an eschatological view of God's action will form part of the solution. I now turn to the theme I have described as Theme 1, The failure of the monarchical model of God.

THEME 1

THE FAILURE OF THE MONARCHICAL MODEL OF GOD

The evidence from the world

Most religions derive their beliefs from written texts or from a significant historical person, or a combination of the two. In the case of Christianity these major sources are, of course, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and the person of Jesus Christ. In most Christian traditions, these sources will be supplemented to varying degrees by the historical teaching and learning of the church. However, the surrounding world, and our personal experience of it, should also be used as part of the data on which to base our conclusions about God and his relationship to the world ("world" is used here in the sense of the entire universe). Such conclusions cannot be based solely on the writings of the Bible, which arose from a great variety of persons and in cultures very different from our own, almost totally lacking in scientific knowledge. Is evidence about the being of God available from our surroundings? In particular do we find evidence that God is kenotic or self-emptying, and that he does not behave in ways which the traditional attributes of God such as omniscience and omnipotence would lead us to expect? Is there any antagonism between what we may learn about God from our physical surroundings and the traditional teachings of Christianity?

First we may examine *the regularity of nature*. We see in the natural world a system that behaves in a regular, orderly way. Nature is to a large extent predictable and explicable, and the success of science over the past three or four hundred years leads us to expect that even in those areas in which we do not yet have explanations, they will eventually be found. This orderliness of nature suggests independence. If God were directly controlling nature on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment basis, we would expect to see more irregularities as God's particular wishes or plans led him to do things in one way today and in a different way tomorrow. Since human observers lack the knowledge of God's particular wishes, the

human perception would be of irregularity and unpredictability. But this is not the case. The overwhelming majority of nature's behaviour is regular, consistent and predictable. Even in situations which we are currently unable to predict, such as tomorrow's weather or the number of apples in this year's crop, we do not doubt that regular scientific principles are at work – the process is just too complex for us to know all the relevant variables and how they interact. The regularity of nature suggests that the natural world experiences a large degree of independence of God.

The conclusion of the preceding paragraph may appear to be a reversal of the usual argument of natural theology that the regularity of nature points to its origin in the supreme lawgiver, God. In this traditional interpretation, regularity was regarded as evidence not of nature's independence but of God's constancy. I have purposefully used in the preceding paragraph the words "regular" and "orderly" rather than "lawful" because the latter word immediately makes us think of a personal lawgiver. The so-called "laws of nature" are in fact expressions of observed regularity. The old natural theology of the divine lawgiver setting up a system which perfectly followed his design intentions failed because it could not account for the creativity within the system.[1] Pre-Darwinian natural theology was in reality an awkward blend of natural regularity based upon law plus special divine interventions when other explanations were not available.

Following the discovery of the enormous creativity which exists within the natural system, especially in the processes of evolution through natural selection, natural theology had to adopt a different attitude: for some interpreters, God became profoundly immanent, a superb lawgiver but also supremely active in ordering all natural events. This view was adopted by numerous nineteenth century Christians who wished to embrace Darwinism within their belief system, but the view itself runs into the enormous moral difficulties of theodicy: if an immanent God is directly responsible for and active within some parts of nature, he must be present within all. If we praise God for the parts of nature we perceive to be "good", we should also recognise that God must also be responsible for the cruel, the grotesque and the ugly. To avoid these difficulties, I suggest that we must regard the regularity of nature as a part of its independence of God rather than its dependence upon God. And if God has granted such independence to nature, this aspect of the world is evidence that God is self-limiting.

While natural theology frequently regarded the regularity of nature as evidence of the constancy of God, I maintain that the operations of the universe do not require the input of divine will at every moment. Rather,

its regularity and creativity are part of the independence which God has given. Many writers, not all of them theologians, have recognised this; for example in criticising what he described as "creationism" Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that "being ... can only affirm itself as distinct from and opposed to its creator; otherwise it dissolves in him."[2] I argue that God has acted kenoticly not only in giving the universe its very existence as something which is not God, but also in giving the universe freedom to develop in its own way. Every moment in which the universe behaves regularly is arguably evidence not of God the lawgiver, but of God the self-effacing and self-emptying creator who gives freedom.

The above considerations do not mean that all attempts to relate nature's regularity to the constant attention of God have ceased. Such attempts are still found, both in popular belief and in theological work. But, I maintain, they are ill-founded, being unnecessary in relation to those parts of the physical world that are adequately explained in scientific terms and dangerous in relation to the parts not yet understood. Every generation is tempted to place the name "God" over those parts of the natural world which are not amenable to present knowledge. Contemporary examples are found in the values of the fundamental physical constants which were necessary for the infant universe to continue in existence (described as "fine tuning" or the Anthropic Principle), and the supposed "irreducible complexity" used by the Intelligent Design movement to describe phenomena which, it is claimed, could not have emerged through the processes of evolution. The history of progressive scientific explanation provides warnings against following this type of argument. Today's unknowns may be explained tomorrow. Problems such as these are better regarded as areas of continuing scientific uncertainty rather than as evidence of divine activity.

A second area of evidence in the world for God's kenotic nature is *God's non-intervention in human affairs*. The twentieth century should have taught us this, even if previous centuries could not. As long as the development of the world appeared to be following a path which could be regarded as benevolent progress, it was possible to believe that the divine will was directing events. It was also helpful if the interpreter's own viewpoint was from a prosperous and improving world leader, such as Britain or one of the other European powers or the United States. Famines and other disasters were rarely heard of, and in any case they were usually far away and only affected people of supposed inferior quality. But the twentieth century showed us otherwise. The most advanced nations of the world could unleash on their equally advanced neighbours the most fiendish forms of cruelty and mechanised warfare, and God appeared not

to intervene. Christians from Britain and America fought and prayed against Christians from Germany, and God appeared to intervene rarely or not at all. Muslim terrorists flew aeroplanes into western office blocks, and God appeared not to intervene. Wars and hatred and other kinds of horror happen because men make them happen, and God appears not to intervene. These forms of evil end when men come to their senses or collapse in exhaustion and look for a better way.

God's non-intervention is also apparent in the natural world when the general regularity of nature breaks down into catastrophic irregularity. Divine non-intervention in the case of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes has been a long-standing theological problem. The Lisbon earthquake of All Saints Day 1755 which killed tens of thousands, many attending worship in churches which collapsed upon them, was for long the paradigm case. This event has now been superseded by the Indian Ocean tsunami of Boxing Day 2004 which killed hundreds of thousands in equally horrific circumstances. From the natural point of view, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis should not be regarded as irregularities; rather, they are aspects of the natural earth-forming process which occur on discrete occasions. Catastrophism and gradualism merge into a single system when viewed on a sufficiently long time-scale. But the theological point remains the same: in the face of life-destroying events, God did not intervene.

The theological choice seems to be between an immanent theistic God who does both good and nasty things, and a remote deistic God who can be criticised for not intervening more frequently. Against both these approaches, I argue that God has given independence to both the natural and the human worlds. The evidence from the natural world and from human affairs is that God is self-limiting.

It may be suggested that God acts in the personal lives of individuals, as many people will claim an action by God in their own experience. Such arguments, resting so firmly on an individual's experience and convictions, are difficult either to prove or to disprove. The individual concerned will affirm his or her experience, while the critic will be able to point to alternative explanations. It may even be argued that action by God in personal lives is a good example of kenotic behaviour. However, against such personal interventions by God is the implication that God does small things for individuals but not large things for millions. He seems to remain inactive in cases of genocide or mass murder, while supposedly intervening in personal details. Is this a distorted view of a God who is supposed to be supremely good? An appeal to the mystery of his ways is

not a satisfactory answer. God should not be privatised into someone who does good things for some clients and ignores the rest.

There is therefore a *moral argument* for the kenotic character of God. It is morally distasteful to attribute small apparently good things to God when huge apparent evils are ignored. Should we regard everything that happens as an act of God, so that what God does becomes the definition of what is "good"? This definition of goodness must be rejected. The human ability to distinguish between goodness and its opposite must be maintained even though the imperfections of human judgment are also admitted. Rather than accept that anything God does (that is, under this understanding, anything that happens) must be regarded as good, it is more persuasive to recognise that God is self-denying in relation to the world. The mixture of good and bad things which happen in the world suggests that a good God is directly responsible for none of them. God has created the world for independence, and God has given the natural world and human beings independence to develop as they choose, for good or ill.

Although this conclusion may appear to increase the distance between God and the natural world, I wish to maintain that God is intensely present in human lives. In the final chapter I shall propose that it remains possible for a self-limiting God, who has given independent space to nature and to humans to be themselves, to be present in human individuals.

Barbour's critique of the monarchical view of God

Many models of the relationship between God and the world have been devised. This relationship is commonly referred to in Christian theology as "creation", though it is not limited to an initial creation, nor to the sole activity of making things. The models most frequently used have changed as human understanding of the world has increased – it has been necessary for the models to become more sophisticated as the human relationship to nature has itself changed.

A comprehensive classification of models of the God-world relationship is found in the work of Ian Barbour. I use Barbour's classification here because of its detail and sophistication, especially in relation to models with a scientific component.[3] Barbour identified nine models, three from the classical theologies of historic Christianity and six twentieth century alternatives which attempt in various ways to take account of changes in scientific knowledge. I will examine this latter group under Theme 4, when I consider the recent search for compatibility between science and theology. At this point I examine only Barbour's critiques of the three traditional models. Only the first of the three is described as the

"monarchical" model, though all three include methods of dealing with the question of divine sovereignty.

The three models are:

- The monarchical model of omnipotence
- The deist model of a clockmaker or lawgiver
- The "neo-Thomist" model of a primary cause working through secondary causes.

The essential feature of all these categories is that God is supreme, totally other, and unaffected in himself by what happens in the world. The relationship is one-way, asymmetrical: in these interpretations, "God affects the world, but the world does not affect God who is eternal, unchanging, impassible."[4]

The *monarchical or imperial model* made use of the images and metaphors available in a world of kings and emperors. God, like the king or emperor, is the sovereign ruler over all things. He disposes of his creation according to his own will. Some of his actions are beneficent towards humanity while others appear not to be but have to be accepted. This model prevailed in what may be described as "pre-scientific" periods because it did not require any human understanding or explanation of the physical processes which shape the world, and because sovereignty was a well-understood aspect of human societies and was easily transferable to God.

Barbour identified six reasons for modern theological difficulties with the monarchical view:

- The existence of genuine human freedom
- The occurrence of natural evil
- The cultural characteristics of "maleness" usually associated with monarchical domination
- The tendency towards religious exclusivity and intolerance
- A lack of coherence with the evolutionary order revealed by scientific enquiry, which replaced the fixed created order associated with the monarchical view
- The observed operation in nature of both law and chance.

For these reasons, in spite of its associations with parts of the biblical literature and some sublime expressions of worship, Barbour finds the monarchical model inadequate. The monarchical model, though frequently