Abstract

The radicalism of Christianity is often underplayed in literary studies by scholars who perceive its theology as politically suspect and inflexible. Yet an unwillingness to engage with Christian theology and experience produces critical mis-readings of literary texts that reveal Christianity’s doctrines and ideas as anything but myopic. This chapter explores the doctrine of kenōsis as integral to Christianity’s compassionate vision in the work of two writers associated with the nineteenth-century Catholic Revival: Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Kenōsis describes Christ’s becoming-human as a temporary letting-go of his divinity; for Rossetti and Hopkins this models a way of being and thinking in which the subject is untied from an ego desirous of control and power. Both writers consequently embraced the interdependence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Trinity as way of conceptualising faith through shared humility and weakness. This approach to the self, the world, and God is an important one to identify in Christian texts; but it also exemplifies a Christian way of thinking more broadly attuned to the depiction of vulnerability and introspection in literature and culture.

Keywords

Kenōsis; the Trinity; Christina Rossetti; Gerard Manley Hopkins; weak thinking; theology and feminism
This essay concerns how we read Christian experience in nineteenth-century literature and culture. As a context for reading, Christianity, especially Christian history, has been largely welcomed by literary critics, since its structures, liturgies, and doctrines provide a ready encyclopaedic resource for interpretation. The discipline is tolerant of Biblical and doctrinal illiteracy, a shortcoming that is often only apparent to specialists in religious studies. Yet the experience of Christianity remains suspicious as that which promises to blunt the intellect of the critic. My interest here is in how historical inquiries into phenomena like churchgoing, Christian reading practices, denominational affiliations, and conventions of worship and prayer might be successfully brought together with the affective and mysterious experiences of faith found within them. The field of affect theory offers a helpful example here, one that has returned critics to the validity and importance of emotion, feeling, sensibility, and the experiential. Affect theory’s reliance on literature to address why we feel the way we do parallels the insight literature offers the reader who seeks to understand the emotional connection between the believer and ancient doctrines like kenōsis, grace, prayer, spirit, apocalypse, incarnation, holiness, and the Trinity. These experiential and mysterious ideas make ontological sense when read in the context of how believers participated in them affectively and during worship. While history helps us make sense of why such scriptural and patristic theologies find new expression in certain periods or cultures, we also need methodologies that help us think about the actuality of Christian experience and the affective and existential conditions that structure such experience. If nineteenth-century Christian writers, like Christians today, sustain what Tanya Luhrmann calls a “commitment to the reality of invisible agents” and “deeply held feeling that gods and spirits are real in a way that matters,” literary criticism needs strategies for
understanding this reality (2020: xii). Without such strategies, we risk, in Bernadette Waterman Ward’s words, relegating “anything labelled ‘religious’ to a twilight zone inaccessible to rational thought” (2002: 164).

To explore the need for methodologies equipped to address the affective experience of religion, I consider the concept of kenōsis: the act of emptying, self-emptying, or weakness described by Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. The kenōsis text is one of the earliest in the New Testament, and so reveals how individual groups and people understood and felt about Christ only a few years after his death (Martin 1967: 17ff). It is also thought to have been modified by Paul for baptismal and eucharistic liturgies from a hymn or poem that directly addresses the crux of Christianity: Christ’s double nature as both divine and human. Consequently, the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar regards “the kenosis of Christ, consummated in the death on the Cross,” as the “point of origin of the Church,” and its emphasis on self-effacement a privileging of “utter powerlessness” (1991: 27-28). With such high stakes, kenōsis has generated multiple and often contradictory interpretations. For some, the implication of Christ “emptying” himself of his divinity troublingly implies his temporary disconnection from the Trinity. For others, the act of kenōsis is the primary condition of Christ’s divinity, a manifestation of his weakness and glory as inseparable in God’s infinity. It is thus a concept that requires a theological response to the meaning of the being of God and an affective response to God’s supposed weakness.

This essay focuses on interest in kenōsis during the nineteenth-century Catholic Revival, specifically in Christina Rossetti’s and Gerard Manley Hopkins’s reading of the Philippians passage. For both the Anglo-Catholic Rossetti and former Anglo-Catholic Roman
Catholic convert Hopkins, *kenōsis* was a guarantee of Christ’s compassion and the Trinity’s dynamism, neither of which could be explained by the higher historical criticism. The eternal and repeating movement of three persons in one substance required a contemplative imagining of both the mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and also the creation at whose beginning they were present. Such contemplative thinking, or thinking about thinking, defines a prayerful metacognition enabled by *kenōsis*, which empties the subject of ego and bias (Luhrmann 2020: 139). *Kenōsis* challenges the very intellectual inflexibility that would otherwise block its affective experience. It is therefore a historical idea in that it illuminates expressions of faith at particular times and in particular places, such as it does for Rossetti and Hopkins; and it is an affective idea in so far as it dislodges secular prejudices that reduce Christianity to dogmatism and dualisms. I argue that Rossetti and Hopkins sought to redress reductive approaches to faith by training the attention of their readers on a theological concept that defined Christianity through inner stillness, deferential being, and humility.

I begin by reflecting on the meaning of *kenōsis* or the kenōtic event in two of the Bible translations Rossetti and Hopkins read (King James and Douay-Rheims), and on its implications for reading, thinking, and being. Writing to the Philippians, Paul interprets the act of self-emptying as a model for and way into both the mind and body of Christ. For contemporary theologians, from Sarah Coakley and Rowan Williams to David Bentley Hart and John Caputo, the humility and weakness *kenōsis* reveals is a moment of egoic suspension in which the individual loses inner stability and self-belief to gain a greater connection with the divine. For Rossetti, this connection is abundantly available to all created things. I discuss her commentary on the weakness of divine power in her theological
prose volumes, *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies on the Benedicite* (1879) and *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (1883). Her reading of Philippians and a second Pauline passage in Corinthians enables Rossetti to argue for a contemplative and self-effacing model of spiritual leadership defined by qualities her readers would have associated with women rather than male priests. Such leadership is predicated on a contemplative form of thinking based on repetition and echo, actions that rebound in Rossetti’s prose and poetry and figure the eternally self-emptying movement of the Trinity. Hopkins also turns to this movement through gender by using it to define the Victorian gentleman in his own commentary on the Philippians passage, one in which he identifies Christ’s refusal to take advantage of his divine equality with God. Like Rossetti, Hopkins rethinks divinity through powerlessness and vulnerability, not least in his Marian poem, “The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe”, wherein Christ’s mother creates the conditions for kenōtic thinking and being. I conclude the essay by reflecting on the problems of idealising a feminized, deferential subjectivity, but ultimately argue for kenōsis as a patient, expectant, and open state of humility in which to read Christian theology and literature.

Based on the Greek κένωσις, *kenosis*—the act of emptying—and Paul’s reference in Philippians 2:7 to ἐκένωσεν, *ekénōsen*—to self-empty or make oneself nothing—kenōtic Christology addresses the view that in becoming incarnate, the second person of the Trinity emptied himself of divinity to become human. Rossetti and Hopkins would both have encountered the idea in the King James version of Philippians 2:5-8:
Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Hopkins would also have read the passage in the Douay-Rheims translation:

For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man.

He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.

The Douay-Rheims translation in particular stresses that the action of emptying—from the Latin *exinanivit*, to empty, pour out, weaken, exhaust—is a paradigm of how the believer should be and think: “ye be likeminded”, writes Paul, “having the same love, being of one accord of one mind” (KJV 2:2). In so doing, believers are encouraged to adopt the necessary “humility” (DR 2:3) or “lowness of mind” (KJV 2:3) in which “each esteem others better than themselves” (DR 2:3). Such unhindered self-giving finds culmination in the crucifixion, following which Paul is clear that Christ is “highly exalted” and given “a name which is above every name,” that commands all things to “bow” before it—“things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth”—and all tongues to “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (KJV 2:9-10). The moment of self-emptying thus coincides with the self-fulfilment of Christ, the “plerosis” or regeneration, indicating a profound connection
between descent and ascent, surrender and communion, emptying and receiving that models Christian ontology—that is, how the divine operates in the world and its inhabitants.

An act of both giving and emptying, receiving and pouring out, divinization and affirmation of material life appears on the surface to pull in two directions at once. Yet kenōsis is the intersection of divergent paths in its holding of God’s divinity as inexhaustible and coequal with Christ and the Holy Spirit. This three-in-one God, the Trinity, also requires a reading practice that perceives and understands relationships not as linear or binary, but co-inherent, multiple, and interconnected. The indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in creation manifests a communion, not just between its persons but between all things, a theme common to Rossetti’s and Hopkins’s work. As David Bentley Hart argues, the hypostatic union of the Trinity does not mean that God reveals himself in the world as a “manifestation” of created things, but rather that God is an “eternal reality” and “infinite revelation” as at once Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (2020: 252). Again, concepts like eternity and infinity invite an understanding of creation emptied of dualisms, just as the fully divine and fully human person of Christ exists without either element being diminished or in conflict with the other. Bentley Hart describes it as “a venturing forth from and return to the Father that is one motion, one life, one dramatic action that overcomes the fallen world’s defining horizon—death—not through reconciliation with the limits it marks, but through an infinite act of kenosis and glorification that transgresses it, passes it by as though it were nothing” (2020: 254). In other words, the event of kenosis suggests that the “form of God” and the “form of a servant” are always in relation at once and eternally: Christ does not move from divinity to humanity and then back to divinity because he is both simultaneously in an ever-flowing movement. For Rowan Williams, the revelation of kenosis for the
Christian constitutes a moment of alteration in which the subject is defined as “the dissolution of the ego’s defence and individual interest” (2021: 98-99). The act of pouring out is exemplary of opening the self to the suffering of others, and in that connection, one finds communion and joy—a “vision of love”, writes Bentley Hart, that “invites and compels us to find the whole glory of being in the brokenness and humility of a crucified slave” (2020: 255).

This understanding of reality is nondual, a word I use to define a way of thinking about meaning that brings together apparently opposing categories such as life and death, success and failure, transcendence and immanence. Christ’s death too is nondual, simultaneously a crucifixion and moment of new life and glorification. In accessing a way of thinking beyond the binary, the subject sees meanings as interdependent, each side of an opposition affirming its counterpart. While nonduality is woven into Buddhism, Vedānta, and Taoism, it is often perceived to be incompatible with a pragmatic, Western, Christian rationalism. Yet kenōtic Christianity is receptive to the experience of mystery and accommodating of theologians, philosophers, and poets who seek alternatives to empirical readings of the divine. Kenōsis and the Trinity will necessarily remain obscure to the reader of Christian thought who perceives God and creation as separate entities either distanced from each other like two points on a map or conflated as if God has been absorbed into creation. Rather these theological terms offer an index to their own meaning in their privileging of a nondual multiplicity such as hypostasis, signifying God’s being and reality as both three and one. The Trinity is dynamic because, as James Fredericks writes, it comprises the “three divine persons ... continuously realizing themselves as persons by emptying themselves into one another” (2011: 335). This eternal and repeating movement of divinity,
sometimes called perichoresis from the Greek word “rotation”, describes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit whirling and dancing around and into each other. This perichoreetic context helps elucidate kenōsis even as it highlights its controversy for our contemplation of the divine. For the co-inherence of three persons continuously emptying themselves into each other suggests that Christ’s emptying doesn’t imply a break from or temporary relinquishing of divinity, but instead calls for a rethinking of divinity as always in flux. As commentaries on kenōsis by Sarah Coakley (2002) and Alex Dubilet (2018) make clear, Christ’s emptying of the divine into human form and consequent humility and weakness intimates that divine power is vulnerable and weak, not hierarchical or abusive. The metaphysical authority of God is thus suspended for what John Caputo calls a “disseminative energy of the name” as invitation, solicitation, provocation, and possibility (2016: 110).

Kenōsis thus invites the believer to assume the watchful and gentle mind of Christ: “Let this mind be in you,” writes Paul. In this state of acuity and gentleness, the believer comes to perceive God through meditative humility rather than power, and to perceive his or her faith as determined by vulnerability and weakness. Coakley shrewdly warns of the necessity of making “fine, but important distinctions” between a “contemplative ‘self-effacement’ and self-destruction or self-repression” and the “productive suffering of self-disclosure and the decentring torture of pain for pain’s sake” (2002: 36-37). In doing so she challenges the pretence that humility and passivity are necessarily “female” and highlights the mystical Christian tradition that emphasises “psychic reversals for men engaged in such ‘submission’ to the divine” (2002: 37). This emptying out of power and machismo is especially relevant to nineteenth-century Britain’s changing religious tempers, which, as Boyd Hilton argues, were increasingly influenced not by a paternal and punitive God but by
a meek, tender, patient, and feminized Christ (Hilton, 1988). This Christ makes sense within the context of readings of Philippians 2:6 in which the word “robbery” (ἁρπαγμὸν) connotes “something to be grasped” or snatched, as in a refusal to grab at power in favour of assuming the form of a servant and so defining divine power as self-deprecating and “made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

In *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies on the Benedicite* (1879), Rossetti elevates spiritual leadership in the same terms, and argues that a compassionate “Christ” is the “High Priest over and among a brotherhood of subordinate priests” who should remember the kenōtic hymn in their ministries:

> St. Peter and St. Paul have left rules for men called to the heavenly office (see especially I St. Pet. v. 1-4; I Tim. iii. 1-7). Liable to such a standard, well may each priest re-echo St. Paul’s own request, “Brethren, pray for us” (I Thess. v. 25), and fall back upon that Divine assurance which he also needed and built upon, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. xii. 9).

Here Rossetti not only challenges male priestly authority by reconceiving it through weakness and prayer, but she imagines the “standard” of spiritual vocation in a language of repetition and re-echoing akin to kenōsis, the Trinity, and grace. The emptying movement of kenōsis, the perichoretic dance of the Trinity, and the invisible all-encompassing substance of grace conjure a recurring and mystical experience of faith accessible to the believer who enters the “mind of Christ.” Christological consciousness is not only contemplative and eternally repeating here, but also weak “all the way down,” as Caputo puts it, Jesus as God a
figure “of forgiveness not retaliation; of peace, not war; of preferring the poor, not the wealthy; of lambs among wolves” (2016: 113).

For Rossetti, the kenōsis passage informs the believer how to enter the mind of Christ by emptying herself of ego and epistemic certitude, but it also helps her decipher what kind of thinking this mind invites. In *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (1883), she identifies it as one in which reverence, attention, and discernment recur, a mode of contemplation ready to embrace nonduality. Through such contemplation, the believer can arrive at a deeper understanding of Christological ideas like kenōsis and the Trinity. She writes:

. . . we should exercise that far higher privilege which appertains to Christians, of having “the mind of Christ”; and then the two worlds, visible and invisible, will become familiar to us even as they were to Him (if reverently we may so so), as double against each other; and on occasion sparrow and lily will recall God’s Providence, seed His Word, earthly bread the Bread of Heaven, a plough the danger of drawing back; to fill a bason [sic] and take a towel will preach a sermon on self-abasement; boat, fishing-net, flock or fold of sheep, each will convey an allusion; wind, water, fire, the sun, a star, a vine, a door, a lamb, will shadow forth mysteries. Versed in such trains of thought the mind becomes reverential, composed, grave; the heart imbued with such associations becomes steadied and ennobled; and out of the abundance of such a heart the mouth impulsively speaks that which is good and edifying. (1883: 131-132)
The passage begins by asserting that all Christians can access the mind of Christ in order to perceive doubly: like Christ, Christians will “see” both the visible and invisible worlds as “double against each other.” Rossetti repeats the phrase in “From House to Home” (1858), a poem printed in the devotional section at the end of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), and expertly read by Elizabeth Ludlow (2020) as companion poem to “Goblin Market.” For Ludlow, the female speaker of “From House to Home” is presented with her spiritual double by “spheres and spirits” coming together to “Make her see” the complexity of her vision (l. 106). While her double initially appears against the backdrop of a conflictive binary—the reader is informed that “Night and new morning strive for domination” (l. 118)—this is quickly replaced by a mystical and various vision of the Communion of Saints: “Multitudes—multitudes—stood up in bliss” (l. 165). It is amidst their loving and salvific song that the phrase “double against each other” appears to usher in a union with Christ:

Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,

Double against each other, filled, sufficed:

All loving, loved of all; but loving best

And best beloved of Christ. (ll. 189-192)

The doubling here, as in *Letter and Spirit*, registers an ostensible opposition between things, whether it is the hearts and souls of specific believers, or the visible and invisible worlds. But by doubling them against each other, the texts confirm the repetition of things as continuous and correspondent, created by God and held in grace. Like the kenotic Christ and God, all things are at once the same and different, equivalent to and poured into each
other even as their particularity is sustained. All things are thus many and one as Paul confirms: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12).

As I have argued elsewhere, this body comprises all creation, human and more-than-human, in a vision recognizably ecological (Mason 2018). The passage in Letter and Spirit is characteristic of Rossetti’s work in revealing the invisible in the visible and the sacramental through the physical with equal reference to flora and fauna as much as to the human. This method is shaped by the Tractarian doctrine of analogy, wherein “material phenomena are both the types and the instruments of real things unseen” (Newman 1994: 37). But Rossetti is always clear that living elements of the created world are real sacraments that reveal spiritual truths and so should be treated as such by their human neighbors. In the passage from Letter and Spirit, the sparrow and lily “recall” God’s spiritual care and give life to his “Word”; domestic duties like baking bread and washing are as homiletic and sacred as any church ritual; and a multiplicity of beings and elements—from boats to sheep, vines to lambs—are analogous to and ultimately disclose God’s mysteries. Her deliberately orthodox spelling of “basin” as “bason” also signifies to the reader that even the humblest of actions warrants a Catholic meaning and presentation. The mutual constitution of material and immaterial, physical and experiential, is itself a kind of kenōsis, one in which all things empty themselves into each other as part of an image of unity in diversity (one also summoned by the Communion of Saints in “From House to Home”). But to reflect on all of this as a way of training one’s mind to be like Christ’s is no small task. The mind’s reverential and grave composure is dependent on spiritual commitment to God and his created world as Rossetti conveys in her reference to Luke 9:62, “No man, having put his hand to the
plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” The allusion, itself a commentary on 1 Kings 19:19, in which Elisha destroys his oxen to take up a spiritual plough, warns the reader against seeing the world dualistically as a resource for consumption or a hierarchy in which some assume importance over others. Luke bypasses Elisha’s slaughter of his animals to focus on the necessity of self-effacement in turning to God. For Rossetti, as for Luke, those without ego—sparrows, lilies, stars, the wind—are necessarily already part of the divine body and mind of Christ; only humans need to find a way of letting go of power so that they can think like Christ and participate in his divine body.

This kenōtic and nondual vision emphasizes a submission to God founded on humility, reserve, and patience, all qualities already associated with women in the period. It is thus striking that Hopkins applies this vision to the “gentleman” in his commentary, and in doing so offers a direct critique of muscular models of Christianity, promoting instead a vulnerable and uncertain ideal. I work here with Stephen Harrison’s definition of the Victorian gentleman as a homosocial and elite identity marked by sociability, gentility, patriotism, moderation, and Christian faith (2007: 207; see also Adams 1995; Gilmore 1990; Waters 1997). Writing to Robert Bridges on 3 February, 1883, Hopkins defines the true gentleman as one who holds to a “chastity of mind” without “allowing anything else” to intervene. His commentary is dependent on the kenōsis passage:

Christ’s life and character are such as appeal to all the world’s admiration, but there is one insight St Paul gives us of it which is very secret and seems to me more touching and constraining than everything else is: This mind he says, was in Christ Jesus—he means as man: being in the form of God—that is, finding, as in the first
instant of his incarnation he did, his human nature informed by the godhead—he thought it nevertheless no snatching-matter for him to be equal with God, but annihiliated himself, taking the form of servant; that is, he could not but see what he was, God, but he would see it as if he did not see it, and be it as if he were not and instead of snatching at once at what all the time was his, or was himself, he emptied or exhausted himself so far as that was possible, of godhead and behaved only as God’s slave, as his creature, as man, which also he was, and then being in the guise of man humbled himself to death, the death of the cross. (Phillips 1990: 182)

Like Rossetti, Hopkins illuminates the “mind of Christ” through Philippians 2:5-8, which he presents as a “secret” description of Christ’s incarnation as human and divine. Rossetti’s reading of kenōsis through echo and repetition finds analogy in Hopkins’s urgent explication of kenōsis, one so aurally unremitting in its attempt to reconcile human and divine that it is almost convoluted. The word “snatching” is distinctive amidst the density of the description, used twice by Hopkins to shift the meaning of “robbery” in the King James and Douay-Rheims Bibles to mean seizing or possession (see Youngs 2019: 62). For Hopkins, kenōsis becomes a moment in which Christ refuses to take advantage of his equality with God and reconceives the divinity of the Trinity as powerless and the incarnation and crucifixion as moments of profound humility. Christ’s kenōtic rejection of power thus models a Victorian gentleman who signifies and acts like a Victorian woman.

The fatigue and exhaustion of language that rings through the letter to Bridges is itself a kind of emptying and becoming-vulnerable that several critics have noted also at play in Hopkins’s poetry. For Lesley Higgins, Hopkins’s ellipses in “The Wreck of the
“Deutschland” represent an “emptying out of rhetoric and aesthesis” that serve to “strengthen” the poem’s “future-focused prayers” (2013: 82); and David J. Leigh numbers the paradox of kenōsis as one of several examples of Hopkins’s use of the language of the via paradoxica, in which one speaks of God in the language of mystery (2008: 112). Ralph Norman’s work is invaluable in tracing Hopkins’ interest in kenōsis to Henry Parry Liddon’s kenōtic Christology in a sermon preached in 1859 and that includes the phrase the “Great Sacrifice,” one to which Hopkins frequently returned (2018: 11). In her insightful work on Hopkins, Maria R. Lichtmann goes further to argue for kenōsis as a “principle pervading every aspect of his life and work,” an emptying of self that leads to the “fullness of grace” (1991: 39; 1989: 91). Lichtmann notes a reference to kenōsis in “The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe,” a poem written in May 1883 only a few months after the letter to Bridges: “God’s self-limitation is nearly infinite: ‘God’s infinity / Dwindled to infancy’” (1991: 40). But there are alternative readings to her conclusion that Hopkins’s “version of the Incarnation denies God not only divinity but humanity as well.” As I have argued, kenōsis enables and invites a way of thinking that holds opposites together so that infinity and infancy work simultaneously as a state of receptivity and openness, what Hopkins called, following Liddon, the “great sacrifice” (Hopkins, 2018: 358ff). But it also points to a way of being and thinking more commonly associated in the period with women: to “the anima,” as Waterman Ward puts it, “the feminine relation to Christ” (2012: 26). In “The Blessed Virgin,” it is Mary who gives God infinity and infancy and through whom “God’s glory” moves and in whom “we are wound / With mercy round and round” (Hopkins, 2009: ll. 31-35):

Mary Immaculate,
Merely a woman, yet
Whose presence, power is
Great as no goddess’s (Hopkins, 2009: ll. 24-27)

As Waterman Ward argues, Mary is the most significant of Hopkins’ holy and heroic women, “with power beyond the fables of any goddess” (2012: 34). She is the ground of Christ’s kenōsis being both his “flesh” and his “spirit,” but also the foundation for the Catholic who seeks to reconcile powerlessness with dependency on God. More than an intercessory Mediatrix of grace, Mary creates the conditions for a mode of contemplation able to comprehend the “many” in the “one” (1 Corinthians 12:12), and the three in one by being the “World-mothering air” we breathe and by embodying the kenotic state in “patience, penance, prayer” (ll. 123-124).

The idealization of a feminized self-effacement as patience, submission, reserve, and kenōsis itself is a challenging one. Many readers will have sympathy with Daphne Hampson’s statement that “for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm” (1990: 155). The call to discipleship has no doubt been distorted by those keen to oppress others. Yet feminist theologians such as Coakley argue persuasively for kenōsis as the basis of a distinct Christian feminism in which transformation and resistance to oppression are predicated on a reimagining of power as vulnerable and kenotic (Coakley 2002: 39; and see Selak 2017). I have argued that the experiential elements of Christianity in Rossetti’s and Hopkins’s poetry and prose embody a feminized holiness that manifests a relationship to the divine and a belonging to the mind and body of Christ. Where Rossetti reminds male spiritual leaders that kenōsis demands of them an emptying
of machismo, Hopkins elevates the Blessed Virgin beyond myths and fables as the being and reality of material creation. The implications of endorsing an emptied ego for our thinking today are already present in philosophies of weak thought founded on Gianni Vattimo’s *pensiero debole*, which frames kenōsis as a salvific narrative in which strong structures—ideological, ontological, political—soften into a weak, charitable, receptive thinking. A gay Catholic philosopher, Vattimo theorized weak thinking in the early 1990s as a way of refusing confrontational, exclusive, and oppositional politics to embrace an uncertain, vulnerable, and hospitable God of love and *caritas* (1999). Vattimo’s Catholic philosophy has often been overlooked by literary critics otherwise preoccupied with stripping hermeneutics of its theological foundations, and, until the rise of affect theory, uncomfortable with a critical approach and vocabulary shaped by weakness, tenderness, and forgiveness. Yet his embrace of charitable humility underpins a radical reading of art and poetry as a “figuring of possible historical worlds” and “unfolded meanings” that shatter as they are realized (1988: 67, 71). Poetic language obliquely shows itself as a “trace, a memory, or a monument” of different perspectives and ideas, rather than a composition of a text that refers directly to an external object; it consequently allows the reader to be acquainted with and experience truths without rushing to affirm them.

In other words, Christian theology read through kenōsis reveals itself as a foundation for a thinking that rejects the insurgent fundamentalism attributed to it by its detractors. I have in mind here not simply the overt and notably strong rejection of Christianity by scholars such as Daniel Dennett and Susan Blackmore, but also the responses of secular readers for whom religion is at best a historical curiosity.¹ Historical analyses of theological terms like kenōsis and the Trinity are no doubt vital to comprehending their evolving
etymologies and cultural meanings in different contexts. But literary reflections on these terms might be fine-tuned further by an awareness of the radicalism of Christian weakness. Kenōsis is radical because it places subjects in a state of expectancy and receptivity and demands of them both a “response to injustice”—an “attention to basic human need”—and “an unnerving faith that runs deeper” than “reassuring beliefs” (Rowland 1988: 161; Caputo 2020: 4). As the basis of a Christian poem or commentary, it becomes what David C. Mahan calls a “textual environment” in which the reader comprehends God’s “participation in our condition in the shape of a suffering servant” and thus offers a space for our own submission to others, human and more-than-human alike (2010: 197). Such submission is only possible because kenōsis is predicated on a vulnerable model of power that directly rejects relationships structured by oppression or violence. For Rossetti and Hopkins, kenōsis was the basis of their faith, one that reads to me as ecologically and socially transformative, offering all readers an experience of their commitment to hope and love. This perspective warrants a thoughtful approach disentangled from an anti-Christian rhetoric that has shut down discussion of religion to such an extent that the field is barely registered even by scholars who work in periods for whom it was so central.²

I close with an anecdote from Dorothe Soelle’s The Strength of the Weak: Towards a Christian Feminist Identity (1984) regarding a letter she received from a theology student following a conversation about the “intellectual climate at our universities” (170). The student writes:

Faith, prayer, and God are discussed in such tortured terms that nothing is left of them. ... I want to talk about God, not about the “ground of all being”. I’m learning to differentiate so well here that I’m becoming indifferent. ... I thought that taking
other people’s questions seriously was part of scholarly inquiry. The atheists and the shilly-shalliers insist that I understand their questions, but they refuse to see my positions as questions for them. ... I am against those people who want to tidy everything up and interpret everything away. I feel robbed (Soelle 1984: 170-171).

The student is a Young Socialist as well as a Christian, and longs for social and political change but has also lost the will to believe. For Soelle, the corrective to his condition is “an existential spiritual experience,” one in which “talking about, knowing about” is redressed by acceptance of and attention to mystery and faith. His feeling of being “robbed,” an echo of Philippians 5, is precisely that which an embrace of mystery might reverse. I do not suggest here that readers and critics of literature comprising Christian themes and references must find in it a “spiritual experience” or else risk intellectual indifference. Nor do I fully accept that philosophical readings of God as the “ground of all being” obstruct our access to writing about the divine. But I do think that as readers and critics of Christian literature we might more seriously register the mystical and experiential content of doctrines and mysteries like kenōsis, not least to encounter the radical vulnerability and weakness they encourage and embed.

REFERENCES


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1 Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris are collectively known as the ‘four horseman’ all of whom have penned various publications on modern atheism; Blackmore’s dismissal of religion as a virus or bacteria is showcased in many of her public lectures—for a summary of her views see: [https://humanists.uk/about/our-people/patrons/dr-susan-blackmore/](https://humanists.uk/about/our-people/patrons/dr-susan-blackmore/)

2 The British academic context appears to be one in which the significance of Christian theology and literature to the study of culture and politics is still side-lined or even dismissed; see, for example, the 2022 CFP for the first un-themed British Association of Victorian Studies annual conference, which includes an albeit non-exclusive suggestive list of twenty-six topics, none of which mention religion.