# Kenosis in Catastrophe

Anna Mercedes

**Abstract**

Kenosis has long been a controversial Christian theological topic for those concerned with the flourishing of oppressed or marginalized people. Feminist theologians in particular have asked: Is self-emptying a harmful ethic when starting from an oppressed stance? This article revisits the challenges of kenosis from a feminist perspective and advocates for kenosis, despite the risks of doing so, for people in marginalized and oppressed social positions, even and especially in the catastrophic conditions that have characterized the 2020s thus far in so much of the world. Even in catastrophe, kenosis may offer power for the self made new, power for communities restored to health, and power for divine incarnation ongoing in our suffering world.

A question of balance seems to be a perennial issue and a recurring challenge, whether in academic theological discussions or in popular self-help magazines: how do we balance self-care and other-care? As on the airplane when we hear, "Secure your mask before helping others," or in the friendly advice that "you can't feed other from an empty cup," self-care seems the wiser choice. Yet at the same time, we live in an age of so many examples of blatant selfishness and greed, such that the message to put our focus on others, including non-human others and the earth itself, seems vitally and urgently important. Where is the balance? Which do we choose?

This tricky topic can be engaged theologically under the motif of *kenosis*, or self-giving, rooting itself to the self-emptying of Christ lauded by the apostle Paul in the baptismal hymn embedded in his letter to the Philippians.[1] Kenosis inspires the life-giving social organization envisioned by this journal, "*Kenarchy*."[2] And kenosis has for years now inspired my thinking between gender studies and Christian

[1] See Philippians 2:6-11, with the verb for kenosis in verse 7.
[2] On this term see Roger Haydon Mitchell's introduction to *Discovering Kenarchy: Contemporary Resources for the Politics of Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

  

theology.[3] This article revisits the challenges of kenosis from a feminist perspective and advocates for kenosis, despite the risks of doing so, for people in marginalized and oppressed social positions, even and especially in the catastrophic conditions that have characterized the 2020s thus far in so much of the world: pandemic, climate collapse, political turmoil and violence.

Kenosis in catastrophe can seem like precisely the wrong response: surely when stakes are high, all should be done to protect oneself, not give the self away. But this self-emptying posture, which is dear to many spiritual paths[4] and central to a Christian charism, holds the kinetics of empowerment and life abundance, not the destruction of life or the loss of power.

Feminist theologians have by now solidly demonstrated the ways in which tendencies toward either self-care or other-care are heavily gendered in patriarchal cultures.[5] Women have been taught to serve others, so deeply that this service becomes a personality structure or indeed a gender category. Womanhood becomes that form of personhood that is focused on service to others. Conversely then, in a patriarchal culture the category of man becomes the body that is gendered as served by or bolstered by others.

For such a tenacious patriarchal conundrum, a Christian ethos of self-emptying can provide a corrective to patriarchal egoism, and make way for a more community-focused vision as seen in the ministry of Jesus. Rosemary Radford Ruether's midrashic introduction to *Sexism and God talk* captures that reading well: God chooses to kenotically let go of any hold on patriarchal power.[6] The question then arises of whether kenosis is only rightly prescribed for those who have patriarchal power to empty: not all men, but those men bulked by their financial status, their racial superiority, their heterosexual status, and in a world of colonizing hegemonic Christian norms, by their Christian identity. Perhaps the Christian ethic of self-emptying is meant only for them, and oppressed or marginalized peoples need a different ethic, found in other contours of the Christian story or beyond it.

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[3] For short engagements with my work on *kenosis*, see my "Christ as Chrism, Christ Given Away," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53.3 (2014) or my "Who are you? Christ and the Imperative of Subjectivity," in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives,* Mary Streufert, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

[4] *Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation,* eds. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

[5] To sample this analysis, see the work of Valerie Saiving, Catherine Keller, Daphne Hampson, or Carol Lakey Hess.

[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk* (Boston: Beacon Pres, 1993).

Feminist theologians moving through this analysis have come to different responses, though all in the name of liberation. Some have advocated for a more self-care focused Christian ethic for those most constrained to the servile roles of a patriarchal culture.[7] Others have found Christianity's self-sacrificial messages incompatible with the depth of women's empowerment or life beyond patriarchy.[8] Others have argued for kenosis from a feminist perspective.[9]

When approaching questions of kenosis from a feminist perspective, I have found it important to emphasize that for many people the starting epistemological frame for these questions is already a patriarchal one. The quandary of self-care or other-care is itself situated in a fundamentally individualized model. It is from that individualized perspective that the quandary of "self" care versus "other" care for different, separate entities might present itself as a question or a problem. From a more relational understanding of selfhood, the quandary would appear differently. In relational frameworks of self, there would still be challenges, to be sure, but these would arise without a clear distinction between what is self-care and what is other-care, or indeed what is self and what is other.

Because a feminist model is one of many frameworks for a more relational sense of self (other examples, among many, include trinitarian theologies and eco theologies),[10] for feminist theologies the starting questions about kenosis need to be different. That is, the starting questions are not primarily about self-care and other-care but about life's flourishing, a widely accessed flourishing. We are looking for empowerment, for communal health, which we might experience both as our own, and as that of the community, and also perhaps that of empowerment for the divine.

If we come at the same quandaries that in our life give us pause about self-care and other-care from a relational-self perspective, that of a flourishing of the community which we can experience as our own and that of the Divine, the questions will add up differently than they do when we start from a self-care versus other-care binary, and we will derive our theological ethos apart from the individualizing frame of a patriarchal context.

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[7] Lisa Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009).
[8] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
[9] Sarah Coakley, Sarah, *Powers and Submission: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002)
[10] See the work of Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Salie McFague.

From a relational framework of self, to decide that self-emptying would only be rightly prescribed to those with patriarchal power to release seems inadequate. To keep kenosis away from those who have been historically constrained to service roles seemed to cheat them of some of the vital power of a Christian charism. As I struggled with these questions as a theological student, I asked, "Why must I have to give up such a potent strain of the Christian story just because others have hurt me when I was in the service roles of patriarchy? Isn't it the violence of a patriarchal society I need to change, not my commitment to a Christian lifeway? And isn't the specialty of this Christian lifeway the overturning of such violence and oppressive death-dealing tendencies?" That struggle informed my first book, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving*.[11]

One can argue that in order for a violent society to change, it is those wielding the most oppressive power that need the kenosis; everybody else just needs more power. But the Christian story did not begin as a story of power holders divesting of power, but rather with a story of people under the heels of oppressive imperial power moving, through kenosis, into power. This kenotic power was their own in terms of identity and joy. This kenotic power was also catalytic in changing community life, and in some times and places, in bringing down the mighty from their thrones. And this kenotic power was holy, was indeed God's power: it was part of God's own story, arrived at in the world not through acts of patriarchal domination but through God moving into God's self through kenosis.

Kenotic power can be power for the flourishing of self, community, and God, so far as those things can even be distinguished. It is not "power over" others in a dominating move; it's power given away or poured out. It is self-emptying power. Kenotic power is like water that has a perpetual current to it: a current *for* the other. Its life-giving nature is such that also, in the same other-love current, the self is birthed and rebirthed through this fluid, rightly called this "chrism." "Chrism" is the right name for kenotic flow because it is a christic essence: it is power for the world's flourishing, for our own, and for God's life. And none of those three are easily distinguished from one another.

In the New Testament account, kenosis was not only the kenosis of Jesus but also of the baptismal communities in Christ's memory, the ones who, as Philippians tells, "let the same mind" be in them that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself. That this kenosis passage was likely a song for early Christian baptisms, quoted by Paul in his letter, indicates to us how much kenosis, even from

[11] Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

disenfranchised positions, was part of what it meant to assume a Christian identity under first century Roman rule. I have argued that, similarly, this old Christian path–which began with the disempowered and becomes a story of transformative power– has vital power today, even for contemporary feminists and others rightly concerned about the exploitation of people that can be masked under an oppressor's propaganda in a prescribed self-giving scheme.[12]

I focus on three ways that this power might flow, though there are surely more. These three help me to detect what I am searching for when I trace a vector of christic kenosis. We cannot know in advance what kenotic ethics will look like; there is no one-size-fits all prescription or list of what self-giving ethics that are christic would be. They empty out even any hold on their own outcome: they are that fully focused on other. They are that risky. Amid such a lack of direct instructions, these three characteristics of christic kenosis, derived from the biblical story, from lived experience (and yes, from tradition and reason), give me textures to sense in finding my way in the perpetually unknown terrain of a kenotic life. I have alluded to these already above: power for the self made new, power for communities restored to health, and power for divine incarnation.

First, kenosis can be self-care. It can be through gifts of outward or other-reaching energy, that is, through self-giving, that we might arrive at our deepest sense of who we are in the world. I am in relation to the we that we are, and my self-care is something I know up against the touch of your needs. I *am* in the care that it takes to bring us both into flourishing. It is power for you, through which I come into myself. And again, tomorrow.

Second, christic kenosis functions for the overturning of oppressive structures. Its flow is for the world: for the life and flourishing of the earth and its non-human and human creatures. Far from any "learned helplessness" stance inured to giving power away, kenosis is a world changer.[13] It reconfigures the grid of our social connection. It weaves a healing container. We find this in scripture and in tradition and in the power of so many emboldened everyday saints: Christic kenosis is power for our world.

Thirdly (or firstly, because these are all in some sense the same thing), christic kenosis is power for God. In the Christian story it is how we see God's musculature working. The body of God has this flowing kinetics, a kenotic kinetics. That is what we can know through the Christian story of how God

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid, chapter five.

moves in the world. It is not the fullness of everything to be known about God's movement in the world. Yet it is a Christian gift or charism that could still be so much more deeply explored.

God moves in a kinetic kenotic current through our own embodied self-giving. "Our own embodied self-giving" is also a way of saying the birth of our own selves. This is a birth God is here for, a birth God wants first and foremost, as a kenotic God. And so in the flow of our giving, our self-revelation in relational webs, God's own future lies. God arrives at the birth of God's self in this same relational way, moving through kenosis to the crowning of God's next moment of self-revelation. But as kenosis, this is not God wanting God's own future, it is instead God's love for us: God's wanting our future for us. It is God's pull toward us that births God's future, punctuates the next moment of self-continuity in this kenotic holy one, whose only continuity is complete love for us creatures. Kenosis is for God's life in the world.

Sometimes, God gets hurt in the flow. Sometimes, we get hurt in this flow. Badly. Often times, despite our most passionate self-giving, some of the ominous oppressive structures stand firm in ways that are physically and spiritually wounding. They threaten to utterly destroy.

This harm too has always been part of the Christian story. It is not a reason for feminist Christians to back away from self-giving, this fact that abuse continues. It is the fallen destruction of our world that we are facing lovingly and tenaciously head on. It is a fierce maelstrom of everyday violence in which we are dancing, and in dancing kenotically inside it, we alter the beat of it. However slight the change of sound in the maelstrom, kenosis changes the vibrations of violence with its gifts for others sake. The fierce endurance of abuse and violence continues to mean not that we are doing something wrong but that it is doing something wrong.

Another part of the kenotic Christian story is this: we have access in some way to the fullness of divine life now, even as all the violence of our time persists. Think for example of the book of Acts, of the inspired proliferation of the fires of Pentecost while the brutality of empire continued.[14] We have access to fullness of life in the catastrophic maelstroms of our time because through kenosis, perhaps especially God's tenacity with kenosis when we ourselves tap out or are squashed out, we have access always to vivacious life flow that is unquenchable, that has no bottom point. Therefore the oppressive structures will not have the last word. They do not have it now. We are most of us hurting, and some of

.[14] Acts 2:1-13

us chronically and crushingly so; but we have also the fullness of divine life in this moment, given for us. This is simply the old and beloved Easter story. It is also a way to articulate a contemporary world-changing counter-oppressive spiritual ethic. It is, perhaps surprisingly, deeply feminist.

Things that many people find central to Christianity might fall away in such a kenotic ethic. Crucially, there cannot be much of any hold on Christian doctrinal rightness if the Christian story and indeed the Christian ethic is one that constantly gives itself away. Yet "constantly gives itself away" also has its own vector or musculature, so there is a continuity of some sort for generations to trace. That is, in order to continue as an organism, its process or its flow is kenotic: other focused and life generating as we have been exploring above. This also means that where it has stopped giving itself away, the organism died a long time ago. Multiple Christian institutions, sadly, merit that assessment.

A kenotic Christian ethic gives itself away in different ways in different places all the time, and is thus remarkably difficult to trace as any unified institutional story. I have found it delightfully easy to trace in an embodied relational quotidian sense, and I suspect that that is the case for many others as well. The christic body is a surprisingly verdant and common organism when noticed for its capacity to survive in the everyday. One thinks, for example, of what grows from a mustard seed. From this perspective of an everyday kenotic ethic, questions of right religious doctrine or correct ecclesial body are like pondering the architecture of static skyscrapers built yesterday, rather than foraging in the green things alive for us right now today.

In a kenotic ethic, ethical certainty falls away quickly, maintaining no hold on certainty about right religious action, following rules, or avoiding sin. The minute that protecting one's own status, whether through spiritual goodness or physical property or future in heaven, becomes prioritized over the outward embodied kinetics of the Christian body, the organism has stopped moving with the Spirit's kenotic flow. The body begins to decay backward into a history of what Christianity was yesterday, rather than getting folded, as it ages, into the always becoming of the living chrism and communal embodiment. This means that in trying to avoid sin or to follow the religious rules of yesterday we can miss the flow of God's today.

In this way religious doctrinal rightness falls away as a possible defining structure of Christianity under a kenotic relational frame. This can seem a revolutionary claim if it is not the way Christianity has been given to you, or it can seem like the oldest story in the book, since indeed Christianity was born in a kenotic relational frame. The story of Jesus is a kenotic relational story, and it is the story of one Jew

among many in a larger Jewish story, which is itself a kenotic relational frame: for the widow, the orphan, the stranger; for Miriam's dance and Ruth's hope; for the wiping away of tears on all faces, and the tearing away of the shroud cast over all people.

In the catastrophes of this decade, I have become especially interested in the ways in which trauma, especially generational and systemic trauma, shape the social categories in which we live. An example would be, as explored by philosopher Maria Lugones, the way in which colonial violence creates racialized categories, categories of sexual orientation, and indeed categories of gender.[15] Another example would be, as trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem emphasizes, the way in which trauma patterns, in individuals and in whole groups of people, can become so familiar, as the most readily available options in response to oppressive violence, that over time these trauma responses come to look like a personality or indeed a culture.[16]

Bringing those two ideas together, a trauma pattern can also come to look like a gender. We take on categories of personhood that are readily available to us, but that are at root trauma response patterns. In this sense the category of "woman" appears as a trauma shape, a response pattern that makes way for survival in a traumatizing society, but a shape that is not the full range of choice for embodied life available when we heal and integrate generational systemic trauma. What we have known to be "woman," embodied over long duration as an appeasement pattern or sometimes as a freeze pattern in the face of trauma, becomes naturalized and embodied and helps humans survive, but it also fails to interrupt oppressive traumatizing structures and their continued embodiment.

We can continue this thought experiment with the categories of "man," and beyond gender, with racialized categories, with categories of sexual identity like queerness, and with categories of ability and class status. We can ask ourselves: which categories that appear as naturalized are at root generationally embodied trauma response shapes?

[15] Maria Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22:1 (Winter 2007): 186–209.
[16] Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

What will healing look like in a catastrophic frame in which trauma is profoundly normalized and widely embodied in the fiber of our social lives and in our physical cells?[17] And what potential does Christian self-giving offer? What might christic kenotic musculature look like in that frame?[18]

If the body itself (the individual body, and the social body) is in a corrupted shape, is in the shape of a cog for oppressive systems, then a new shape, a new Incarnation, a new embodiment is a holy and life-giving possibility. We are regarded "as dying, and see—we are alive."[19] The unique material conditions of our present moment can reorganize and innovatively shift toward more health and more abundant holy possibility. This can be called trauma healing, served by many givers but also in part by those in the thrall of specifically christic kenosis. Or it can be called a retelling of the loaves and fishes miracle story, or the resurrection itself.

As with the release on a hold of Christian doctrinal rightness, in the desire for a world unhindered by oppressive forces, there can be another kenotic letting go or a release of our scripts of how to be as a community or people. That is, we can lose some of our social norms, especially if we regard them to be norms formed to help the oppressive system function or to help us survive it. God's life in the world offers more plural shapes and other options.

Losing hold on categories that have felt very familiar, like "woman," or "straight," can feel deeply unsettling, and yet there is new embodiment available to us as God greets our rebirth in a world with norms made new. As in another early baptismal identity formula, this one in Galatians, in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer man and woman."[20]

Even when established categories of our selfhood have been somewhat liberating survival categories for us, christic kenosis in catastrophe might sometimes mean a self-emptying of what we have known to be the parameters available to the self, for the sake of becoming the relational and relationally healed expansive self we hear prophesied in holy stories and communal songs and in our own dreams. Kenotic ethics will overturn social norms and categories for what people are allowed to be, and what the earth's creatures are able to be, as God's love for us makes the world new and shows us

[17] Staci K. Haines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justic*e (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2019).
[18] Anna Mercedes, *Interrupting a Gendered, Violent Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).
[19] 2 Corinthians 6: 9.
[20] Galatians 3:28.

just how vivid holy unending life always was. Kenosis in catastrophe is the banquet of eternal life, given away and already in play.

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