

Kenosis, Sunyata, and Comportment: Interreligious Discourse Beyond Concepts, by Eric Hall

Abstract

Here, I argue against Masao Abe's interpretation of the Christian notion of Kenosis. Kenosis supposedly coincides with the Buddhist notion of Sunyata, through which Abe attempts to build an interreligious bridge. Abe, however, presents Kenosis in such a manner that is too out of sync with most historical western understandings of it, meaning his interpretation cannot actually function as the bridge that he wants. Giving what I believe is a more "orthodox" interpretation of Kenosis, I argue that the idea still finds a parallel in Sunyata, only in terms of the notion of praxis rather than conceptuality.

Introduction

Interreligious discourse remains a potent tenant of much of U.S. religious life, both academic and lived. The possibility of such discourse, in fact, seems legally built into the denominational infrastructure supported by the U.S. Constitution, which acts as a grounding framework for cooperative Federal identification among competing, localized identities. However, religious traditions themselves have assumed the imperatives behind such discourse as meaningful beyond their political-social impact; the discourses are seen as a part of these traditions' emerging self-identities (Knitter 2009). At the same time, it has become more explicit in other recent books on the matter that certain forms of dialogue can be quite *unhelpful* (Cornille 2009; Cornille 2008; Fredericks 2004). These dialogues tend not only to force conceptual relationships that simply do not exist between respective "faiths," but, in such comparisons, attempt to gain the "truth" of the dialogue partner by showing how the one position's propositions are actually better accounted for in one's own. Such comparisons, then, force the religious "Other" not into a solidarity-creating dialogue, but a defensive posturing.

I believe that this very phenomenon takes place in the attempt of Masao Abe, a Zen practitioner and philosopher of the Kyoto School, to create a dialogue with Christians in the essay "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata (Abe 1995)." In it, he unfolds what he believes to be a direct conceptual relationship between the Christian idea of kenosis and Buddhist understanding Sunyata. However, Abe's interpretation is unconvincing, at least if a historical Christian self-understanding is taken more seriously. After expositing Abe's comparative interpretation of these two concepts and expressing why the comparison might not work from the Christian side of the dialogue, I offer a comparison of kenosis and Sunyata more sympathetic to both respective religious identity-traditions. My comparison is based on the religious praxis each concept signifies. By respecting the true conceptual differences in these religious traditions, such a method—based on James L. Fredericks understanding of the idea (Fredericks 2004)—I hope is far more conducive to the establishing a more substantive comparison.

"Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata"

Abe's interpretation of Incarnation begins with the kenosis passage found in Philippians 2:9-11. The passage says,

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man; and being found in the fashion of man, he humbled himself, becoming *obedient* even unto death, yea, the death of a cross.

Aside from a number of other interesting remarks on the passage, Abe is quick to point out that, at least as he perceives Paul to be describing Incarnation through kenosis, there can be no distinction between reality and appearance in the God-man; the simple and unified person acts as a *whole* person, not the appearance of a whole person. Accordingly, when Paul says that Christ empties himself, he does not merely say that the human nature of Christ empties itself, but that Christ *as a whole*—divinity included—empties himself. Incarnation through kenosis signifies “a radical and total self-negation of the Son of God (Abe 1995, 36).”

Of course, this interpretation of Incarnation through kenosis has immediate implications for Abe’s understanding of the meaning of the Son of God. If the Son empties himself completely into the person, and if this person is understood as a unified whole, the kenosis must be ascribed to the unified being of the Son, both in terms of divinity and humanity. The Son, in other words, is indistinct from its active self-emptying; the Son by nature is kenotic. To push this logic even further, if the Son is divine and if this divinity is also predicable of the entire person of Christ, then the divinity of the Son is found precisely in the Son’s self-emptying, which is an emptying of the Son’s Divinity. As such, Abe moves toward a new and paradoxical Christology. According to Abe, this Christology means that “The Son of God is not the Son of God (for he is essentially and fundamentally self-emptying): precisely because he *is not* the Son of God he *is truly* the Son of God.(Abe 1995, 37)” Because divinity and self-emptying are one and the same movement in the Son, the Son’s renunciation of his divinity is precisely what makes the Son divine. This logic has great effects on the Christian historical self-understanding of God, two of which I will point out.

An interpretation of Incarnation through kenosis allows for no Johannine pre-existing Son, at least not in the sense of a theoretically deduced divine substance existing above and beyond this immanent self-emptying Son. Pre-existence, rather, must be understood in terms of this self-emptying, self-emptying as revealed to humanity in the act of emptying. When one, then, engages in a substantializing form of thought, one can certainly abstract from the process of self-emptying itself and reify the Son as pre-existent; this is the mode of thinking historically rooted in the Church. But in itself, the truly, actively, and non-substantive reality of the kenotic Son contravenes this Johannine doctrine. The Son himself is not a divinity who self-empties its nature into finitude; the Son *is* the ever-present moment of self-emptying opened to us in the very God-man himself. This point, however, has further implications.

If the Son empties himself totally, and if this self-emptying is seen in the life and death of the Son, and *moreover* if the mission of the Son is consistent with the divine essence, the divine essence itself must be a total self-emptying. In other words, the Father—as ground of the divine essence, who by means of a perichoretic relationship empties himself absolutely into the Son—is one with the Son’s total kenosis. Just as Abe above could say by means of kenosis that, paradoxically, the Son’s divinity is found in the Son’s non-Divinity, so too is the Godhead’s Divinity found in its non-Divinity. Divinity in its entire Trinity becomes kenotic, leading to a loss of the Godhead

Fittingly, Abe interprets Sunyata as representing the Buddhist interpretation of “ultimate reality,” that location wherein a Christian would cement the notion of God

(Abe 1995, 50). But what this ultimate reality means is an entirely different question, a question that can only be intuitively grasped through an enlightenment experience that Zen Buddhists call Satori.

According to Abe, this Zen Buddhist moment of enlightenment is constituted by a double negation (Abe 1985, 110). The first negation negates the possibility of absolute identity and, accordingly, onto-theology (Abe 1985, 108). All beings, it ends up, are nothing in and of themselves; all beings, by means of their constant movements, are masks to the truth of their nothingness. Yet, simply to adhere to this perspective is to fall into western nihilism, a position that Abe reject (Abe 1995, 35-36). While it is true that no ultimate being grounds reality and hence nothing has absolute identity, it is just as true that one must negate this absolutely (and thus substantialized) nihilistic position (Abe 1985, 110). It is therefore true for Abe that no ontic being is anything more than it is, that no being is directed toward some absolute end found in pure being; but it is also true no one thing is anything less than it is—a pure nothingness is as false as a pure beingness. For Abe, then, the ontic and the ontological collapse into one, and the truth of a being is that it is just such a being at this point in time with this dynamic appearance (Abe 1985, 66).

This notion precisely signifies the meaning of Sunyata. Accordingly, Abe says that, “All that I have said about Sunyata can be summarized by saying that true Sunyata is not static but dynamic—it is a pure and unceasing function of self-emptying, making self and others manifest their suchness (Abe 1995, 87).” Buddhism, *qua* Sunyata, represents an absolute flowingness and dynamism—the eradication of identity as an absolute; and Sunyata, as a signifier of the meaning of ultimate reality, represents the absolute nothingness—the total transferability of identity—grasped in that moment of Satori.

With this explanation of Sunyata, it is not difficult to understand how it relates to Abe’s interpretation of kenosis. Kenosis, from Abe’s interpretation of it, becomes a definitive expression of the Buddhist’s interpretation of ultimate reality, namely, of Sunyata. Kenosis and Sunyata are one. And because these two concepts mean essentially the same thing, Buddhists and Christians have a conceptual way by means of which to relate to one another.

Kenosis as a Way of Being

From a conceptual level, *this* particular Christian will have to reject overall approach to kenosis by Abe, not least of which is due to Abe’s equivalent of a theology of religions approach (Fredericks 1999, 13-15). Such a rejection, of course, does not mean that the interpretation itself is without value, nor does it mean that Abe cannot interpret Incarnation through kenosis as such; Abe’s interpretation retains veracity within his own tradition and can and should be fully explored by the Christian tradition. The simple fact remains, however, that as a theology of religion this understanding is very unhelpful for interreligious dialogue precisely because it does not take historical doctrines in the Christian faith seriously enough.

On the other hand, I think that Abe is correct in noting that the Christian idea of kenosis grounds a way in which these two religious traditions can attempt to relate to one another. However, the relation will have to take place at a deeper, more fundamental level than the *content* revealed in the concept of kenosis as either Abe or more classical Christian traditions express the notion. Rather, kenosis will have to be used in such a way that it can express some more basic categories, categories potentially consistent with both Abe’s interpretation of Sunyata and the more classically approach to kenosis. Such a

project becomes possible if it attempt both to remain true to its Christian self-understanding while nonetheless reveal some common denominators that both Christianity and Buddhism might find acceptable for opening further dialogue. The common denominators will be isolated in terms of the ways that both Christianity and Buddhism *relate* to their respective interpretations of the category of ultimate reality.

Many Christian traditions might reject the notion of a total ontological kenosis; however, many Christian traditions can and do already accept what might be awkwardly called a *psychological* interpretation of kenosis. A psychological view of kenosis first signifies a psycho-intellectual emptying on the Son's part of the knowledge of his divinity. As Philippians presents the idea, Christ does not consider himself equal to the Father even though he is in the form of the Father. Indeed, according to Paul, Christ "finds" himself in the form of a human, hinting to the fact that Christ has given up his knowledge of the Father. Of course, from a historical Christian perspective, this ignorance can only have taken place in the Incarnation; thus, ignorance cannot be ascribed to the Son in his non-Incarnational form. Nonetheless, a psychological understanding of kenosis holds within it the possibility that Christ, as Incarnate Son, denies himself of the knowledge of his own equality with the Father in his Incarnation.

In denying knowledge of his own equality with the Father, Christ also denies his knowledge of the Father in any sort of direct, conceptual manner. If the Son in Christ actually knew the Father, he would be able to grasp, by means of the Father, his own equality with the Father. That is, because God (from more classicist understandings) is the absolutely simple insight within which all creation itself is known and conceived, Christ would know himself (in Trinitarian terms) as the second subsisting relation in the divine Godhead. As God, Christ would know himself as God. But, by means of his kenosis, he does not.

Christ, then, does not know the Father in the Father's self, nor does he know that he and the Father are one; Christ is only asked to listen for and to the Father when the Father actually speaks, of which there is no guarantee on the part of Christ, due his self-emptying, that the Father will actually speak and that Christ will follow. But who the Father is, why the Father says what the Father says, and what the Father eventually will ask of Christ is not known by Christ. Christ must simply allow the Father to be the Father, and act on the Father's words when the Father speaks.

In this regard, it also seems pertinent to point out that Christ's kenosis is tied directly to the possibility of Christ's free obedience, as explicitly stated in Philippians. But Christ's obedience signifies nothing other than his freely listening to, and freely acting upon, the Father's word—even to the point of death on a cross—without any divine knowledge of either the ultimate meaning or outcomes of his actions. The condition for the possibility of Christ's obedience is Christ's kenosis, but the meaning of Christ's kenosis is his obedience. Both are intrinsically linked to one another in Christ.

Thus far, I have presented little that would seem to offend more historical Christian ears, at least at a conceptual level. At the same time, I believe that by means of this brief and psychological explanation of kenosis, I am able to point out a certain way that Christ comports himself toward the Father; I am able to point out, in general, Christ's *way of being*, and how it is representative of a proper interpretation of a Christian way of being in general. Christ's way of being, then, suggests two insights, both of which I will try to show are functionally found in the Buddhist notion of Sunyata.

As I have already suggested, in his kenosis, Christ completely empties himself of his *divine knowledge* of the Father; Christ, then, must learn of the Father by means of

the tools and methods provided to human reason. Christ must learn of the Father by means of experience. Yet, at the level of human reason, there seems to exist no direct experience of the Father. Thus, knowledge of the Father depends, at worst, on transcendental inferences based on the material world; at best, on mystical revelations granted from the Father; and somewhere in between, on the oral and recorded history of these revelations found in his scriptures.

It is the first of these sources of knowledge that is probably most important for the current purposes. That is, for reasons I will not argue here, both the mystical and special-revelatory understandings of God eventually presuppose a hermeneutical transference back into humanity's more "natural" ways of thinking, and thus end up looking like transcendental inferences and explanations from an immanent perspective. But, regardless of this debate, at the level of natural human knowledge (so long as one takes Rahner's appropriation of Aquinas seriously), the Father exists as *something* like an unobjectifiable horizon; and though one can grasp the nature of the surrounding world through this horizon, the horizon itself remains beyond grasp (Waldenfels 1995, 155-160). The horizon constantly overturns itself, even in terms of being defined as a horizon.

All of this to say that, like us, Christ, in his kenosis, knows the Father only as unobjectifiable, as a horizon. Christ, accordingly, cannot grasp the Father in himself, and so cannot know the Father directly; likewise, Christ has no direct insight into the Father, meaning that he cannot reduce the Father to a conceptual object. At the same time that Christ remains ignorant of the Father's essence, he is also faithful and obedient to his experience of the Father—or, in Christian terms, the Father's revelations of himself. But, if Christ, while unable to objectify the Father, remains obedient to the Father, this obedience can be expressed more generally as a representational comportment toward the Father. Christ's comportment toward the Father can be expressed precisely as what Buber calls the "I-Thou" relationship, according to which the Thou in this relationship is heard rather than pre-categorized according to the I (Buber 1958, 39-40).

The treatment of the Father as a Thou can be understood most precisely as Christ's obedience. He constantly declines any attempt to instrumentalize the Father, to project a conception of what the Father is and thus what the Father ought to be asking of the Incarnate Son. Such truth is evidenced not only on the Mount of Olives—wherein Christ pleads with the Father to take this cup from him—but in the constant attitude of Christ which constantly says, "Not my will, but yours." Christ's obedience, then, is a reflection of his comportment toward and treatment of the Father as an absolute Thou—the Father always remains unschematized from the perspective of the kenotic Son. As with Christ, moreover, so with his followers—Christians must follow Christ's example in terms of how they relate to the Father, even through Christ. But, these two concepts reveal a similar way in which the Buddhist relates to the notion of Sunyata.

In the same way, then, that the Father remains unknown and, accordingly, addressed as a Thou by the kenotic Son, so too does Sunyata remain as such for the Buddhist. For one, and as already pointed out, Sunyata as an expression of ultimate reality is an expression of ultimate reality's unobjectifiability. Sunyata is and remains dynamic, one with the appearance of finite objects; accordingly, Sunyata cannot be captured in either human thought or language, to such a degree that Abe takes to describing Sunyata as Sunyata (Abe 1995, 57). Thus, in this same regard, Sunyata presents itself as something that must simply be attended to in its own terms, at least in the category of ultimate reality. While certainly such an I-Thou relationship cannot be interpreted as "obedience" as it is with Christ and the Christian, obedience was

interpreted in such a way that ultimate reality—the Father in Christian terms—is allowed to reveal itself as it is. How this ultimate reality *actually* reveals itself is and may remain a point of contention between the two traditions, but in terms of the content of these more basic categories, the Buddhist may interpret this comportment as “suchness.”

Without giving too much more detail, suchness precisely represents the non-instrumental way of relating not to Sunyata itself (which does not exist in itself) but to the beings that express Sunyata. Without trying to instrumentalize some being, get to the bottom of some being, or even understand the meaning of some being, suchness simply takes the being for what it appears as at any given point in time. Accordingly, through the insight that nirvana is samsara, it is possible to affirm the spontaneous dynamism that is Sunyata—the free flow of unconceptualized appearances. But to allow such appearances to come in and out of one’s consciousness without hindering these with conceptual and instrumentalizing baggage is to treat them as the Thou, even if the Buddhist cannot affirm the I!

Room for Dialogue?

From such an interpretation of kenosis, Buddhists and Christians can find a mutually beneficial understanding of the way in which each comports itself toward that category of ultimate reality. Neither can instrumentalize that ultimate reality, and hence both find themselves in a position wherein they must address the category as a Thou. But the true benefit of this mutually conceived relationship is that the concept itself presents a way of life rather than a doctrinal reinterpretation of either tradition. In other words, the mutual concept that allows both Buddhists and Christians to relate to one another is not a concept that does violence to either tradition’s historical self-understanding; each are allowed to let that ultimate reality present itself to each tradition precisely as it presents itself to the tradition in its own self-understanding—nothing more and nothing less. Based on this fact, each tradition may find solidarity with the other in the fact that neither is able ultimately to know its ultimate reality in any substantial manner, and that both traditions must learn to relate to it accordingly.

What such an interpretation accomplishes, and what it can concretely do for this particular religious dialogue at a practical level, I do not know. At the very least, it presents mutually informing concepts that negate the ultimate importance of finding mutually informing concepts; that is, and paradoxically speaking, these concepts allow Buddhists and Christians to relate at *perhaps* a more fundamental level than the level of concept, namely, at the level of religious praxis.

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