

Cultural Psychology, Consciousness and Theology: Continuing the Dialogue

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Abstract

This essay extends arguments that cultural psychology is useful for dialogue with Christian theology by indicating its relevance for theologies of consciousness. Donald's cultural account is outlined, followed by Davies's theological treatment of compassionate consciousness. Interactions are considered between the two approaches, which are shown to be co-implicated in the teaching ministry of Jesus, and the subsequent development of the Christian religion, and to accompany the shift from discipleship, through apostleship, to a trans-generational cultural-symbolic system assisted by the development of theology. The essay concludes with reflections on the challenge to psychology of the ontological reality of being 'in Christ'.

Keywords

Compassion, Cultural psychology, Mimesis, Narrative, Symbolic-Consciousness

In an earlier paper, I outlined the potential benefits of cultural psychology as a dialogue partner for theology.¹ I argued that as a sub-field of its parent discipline, cultural psychology has the flexibility and sophistication to interface with a range of theological issues. By means of one particular, recent psychology, Benson's cultural theory of the self,² I identified several areas in which the two disciplines might usefully interact. These included categories of incarnation, self-knowing and God-knowing, and theological method. The examples, although somewhat arbitrary in themselves, were deliberately chosen from incarnational theology, revealed (Biblical) theology, historico-philosophical (mystical) theology and theological method. They indicated the potential range and applicability of Benson's theory in

¹ Peter Hampson, "Cultural Psychology and Theology: Partners in Dialogue," *Theology and Science*, 3:3 (November 2005): 259–274.

² Ciarán Benson, *The Cultural Psychology of Self* (London: Routledge, 2001).

particular, and the flexibility of the cultural psychological approach as a whole. I also took the opportunity to review possible connections and implications between theology and psychology in terms of their interdisciplinary relationships. These included: postmodern, polyvalent co-existence, compatibilism, interaction, and theist-superordinacy. Although I adopted a broadly compatibilist position as the basis for the paper, I identified areas where a faith commitment would be likely to impel the believer-researcher toward the interactive or even theist superordinate positions.

My purpose in this paper is to extend and consolidate these arguments by introducing a complementary cultural psychological approach to Benson's, namely that of Merlin Donald, as outlined in his recent monograph, *A Mind so Rare*.³ My reasons for doing so are threefold.

First, it allows me to demonstrate the wider applicability of cultural psychology, beyond the confines of one particular approach or theory, thereby strengthening the general claims made in my earlier paper. Second, by introducing Donald's account to students of science and theology I am able to suggest the usefulness of a joint psycho-theological focus on issues of consciousness rather than the self. This is not to deny or decry the utility of the self as a point of common interest, but simply to show that a shift of emphasis back to what has, over the years, been an equally important theological concern, the related issue of our subjectivity and awareness, could be timely. Third, the focus on consciousness allows me to open up a discussion of the wider meaning and purpose of consciousness to both disciplines. So far, the God-grounded actuality and Christ-conforming possibilities of consciousness have been examined by theology,⁴ but these wider ontological issues have effectively been ignored by psychology, perhaps not surprisingly given its history and concerns. Here I argue that any psychology prepared to take seriously its own possible position as a sub-ordinate discipline to theology will be impelled in turn to take seriously such theological claims and is thereby challenged to provide a plausible account of their psychological bases.

The essay is organised as follows. Following a brief recapitulation of the general benefits of a cultural psychological approach to issues of the person in theological anthropology, I outline the key features of Donald's cultural-cognitive, evolutionary approach to consciousness. Moving from psychology to theology, I then indicate how certain currents in contemporary Catholic theology, skillfully explored by Oliver Davies in *A Theology of Compassion*, force a deeper understanding of the meaning and purpose of consciousness, and its relation with

³ Merlin Donald, *A Mind so Rare* (New York: Norton, 2001).

⁴ See for example Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion* (London: SCM, 2001).

being, than can be achieved by secular science alone. By bringing these themes into dialogue with cultural psychology and allowing them to set the questions, I discuss how the Christian theological claim that humans are capable of ‘conforming to Christ’ or what the Orthodox tradition calls ‘Christification’ can be explicated psychologically. Finally, I examine how some of the various possible interdisciplinary relationships between psychology and theology impel psychology to examine its implicit ontology, and challenge it to take seriously Christological realism.

Benefits of cultural psychology

What then are the general strengths and opportunities of cultural psychology as a dialogue partner with theology? As I have already outlined some of these elsewhere,⁵ I shall mention them only briefly here in so far as they help to frame the discussion that follows.

Cultural psychology stresses the importance of the evolutionary, historical and socio-cultural influences on the formation of the self, and generally acknowledges the centrality of embodiment, emotions and other intra-psychic factors too, making it a promising conversation partner for theology on issues of self.

In a typical cultural psychological account, the self is implicitly treated across three dimensions: the ‘vertical’, from bodily being ‘up’ to consciousness, the ‘horizontal’ in terms of the self’s relationality with others, and the ‘temporal’ in terms of the ontogenetic, historical and phylogenetic changes which occur in and to the species and the person through time. It is these dimensions of selfhood, I have suggested, which make cultural psychology uniquely suited to underpin theologies which lay similar stress on the levels of incarnation and creation, on persons in relation with God and their fellows, and on the temporal development of the person and of religious thought. Benson’s account in particular, I noted, is especially useful for conversations with theologies that include concepts of embodiment, relationality, boundary, memory, point of view, positioning, narrative, and metaphor, in that all these are key components of his integrated model.

Because cultural psychology stresses the fact that humans are as much shaped by culture as they are constrained by their biological and psychological nature, it is able to transact meanings across personal and public domains. Internal and external factors are both implicated in the shaping of personhood. Thus, consciousness, for the cultural psychologist, is neither an internal product or property of

⁵ Hampson, “Cultural Psychology and Theology,” 262–266.

a solipistic self, nor solely the result of linguistically based enculturation or social construction. Instead it is a joint product arising from the internalisation of historically fashioned and socially influenced meanings, conjoined with the sense of self awareness and the continuity of selfhood through time, that depends as much on our having bodies, perceptual-motor systems, memories and so on as it does on language. I intend to develop this point later, show how it emerges from Donald's theory, and indicate points of connection with recent theology.

For now it is sufficient to note that this leads to a third benefit. Cultural psychologies, at least of the sort that I am outlining here, resist two major reductions: 'downward' through individual psychology to our biological and physical nature, and outward or sideways via purely social accounts of mind, consciousness, self and personhood. This is because they pay due attention to both bio-cognitive and socio-cultural factors, or, in more theological terms, to issues of substantiality and relationality.⁶ In terms of the wider philosophical climate they thus offer an interesting alternative to both (modernist), physicalism with its overextensions into a scientific worldview and (postmodernist) constructivism and associated linguistic imperialism.⁷

By holding these two reductive forces in tension, cultural psychology thus possesses eclectic and synthetic qualities that make it suitable for dialogue across a wide range of issues with theology. With respect to this, which we might call its *range of application*, it is far better placed, for example, than purely intra-psychic, cognitive accounts; purely social distributed theories; or purely psycho-dynamic theories whether of the psycho-analytic, analytical psychology or neo-Freudian varieties.

As well as its breadth, cultural psychology is also flexible with regard to the range of stances or positions it can adopt with respect to psychology. Again, as I have introduced these already, I simply remind us here that cultural psychology can, in principle at least, stand as easily in a sub-ordinate relation with theology, or in a position of compatibility but with no necessary interconnection, or in a position which accommodates theology, polyvalently, as yet another cultural narrative.

It can be argued, of course, that the breadth and flexibility of cultural psychology are at the same time its chief weaknesses as a dialogue candidate. As far as its breadth is concerned, when detailed discussions on points of conflict or interaction between psychology and religion arise, cultural psychology must give way inevitably to

⁶ For a theological contextualization see Tracey Rowlands, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 142.

⁷ Cf. J. Lave, *Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988).

more detailed accounts of behaviour, mental or social life or human experience. For instance, where issues of spiritual experience are discussed, reference to cognitive and possibly even neural events is likely to arise at some stage. Or when religious development is considered, for example, developmental psychological processes are likely to be invoked. Nevertheless, its very breadth does protect against the premature reduction or closure of issues which can arise when alternative more restricted even if more detailed theories are used too early instead.

Similarly, the positional scope of cultural psychology brings with it possible pitfalls. Its sheer flexibility means that there is invariably a temptation for its practitioners simply to admit all cultural discourses as equally valid as shapers of self, without further enquiring about their truth, or considering their quality, or exhibiting any moral commitment toward them in one or other direction. On cultural psychology's own admission, cultural narratives are effective in changing the person as well as the cultural climate as a whole. Cultural psychology itself is also a 'market provider' of further cultural narratives.⁸ This brings a dual moral responsibility: first to identify correctly those cultural systems and narratives which more readily bring about states of human flourishing; second, *pari passu*, to challenge and critique those narratives, including those from cultural psychology itself, which, although they may be powerful self-shapers, do not necessarily increase human well-being, whether physical, psychological or spiritual. I suggest, and will argue later, that this is a task which can only be accomplished if cultural psychologists first examine their own ontological commitments, in order to position themselves properly with respect to those of theology. To do otherwise, I argue, is to exchange moral responsibility for moral relativism, and, unwittingly, to trade a realist ontology for a postmodern anti-realism, without even checking one's change!

Donald's account of consciousness

From its position as a neglected if not completely ignored topic for scientific enquiry during the middle half of the last century, consciousness has moved centre stage in the past twenty-five years or so. This renewed interest which has coincided with a variety of developments in the cognitive and neural sciences,⁹ has been accompanied by an equally lively interest in philosophy and philosophical

⁸ Benson, *The Cultural Psychology of Self*, 222–236.

⁹ These include the emergence of brain imaging methods, the emergence of cognitive neuropsychology and increased interest in the neural substrates of awareness.

psychology,¹⁰ and matched by similar interest in the other humanities.¹¹

Among the variety of philosophical approaches to consciousness, some recent ones are, to a large extent, parasitic on the cognitive sciences. Daniel Dennett's account is a particularly good example here.¹² Dennett bases considerable portions of his argument in *Consciousness Explained* against simple dualist theories and in favour of his own basically epiphenomenalist, multiple drafts account, on a detailed (though highly selective) examination of work in cognitive psychology. As Donald correctly points out, Dennett's model implies consciousness to be the passive product of the real engines of cognitive life, the underlying, unconscious, mental modules or 'agents'. These are not under the control of some 'Central Meander' but, rather, act autonomously and are conjointly responsible for the repeated and constantly re-drafted 'print outs' of analyses of already past sensations, thoughts and activities. Whatever the philosophical merits of Dennett's position, and there are for example doubts as to whether he has dealt adequately with this issue of qualia,¹³ Donald takes it to task for its selective and overly simplistic focus on the short and very short term dimensions of consciousness, and for its neglect of large and potentially relevant areas of cognitive psychology.

On the one hand, therefore, Donald's account can be read as a negative critique or rebuttal of Dennett's position, a point which he himself makes clearly and forcibly early on in his book. More positively, though again in contrast to Dennett, Donald examines the wider functions of consciousness, its evolution, levels and purpose. Unlike Dennett, who by focussing on the micro-temporal properties of consciousness is led to regard consciousness as the effect rather the cause of underlying mental activity, and, therefore, as essentially epiphenomenal, Donald clearly identifies a function for conscious awareness in the planning, monitoring and overall governance of extended activity, especially over intermediate time frames. Thus, we are conscious of planning our actions, of intentionally retrieving material from memory, of making stories about ourselves and others, of making decisions and so on. In all such and similar domains, consciousness is critical in allowing us to keep track, evaluate and remain in overall control of

¹⁰ For example Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little Brown, 1991); John Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (London: Granta, 1997); Colin McGinn, *The Problem of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991); Bernard Baars, *A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989); *In the Theater of Consciousness: the Workspace of the Mind* (Oxford: OUP, 1997).

¹¹ For a good example see David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel* (London: Penguin, 2003).

¹² Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, op. cit.

¹³ Richard Gregory, personal communication, (Bristol, October 2001).

what we are doing.¹⁴ Seen in this light, Donald's contribution might be thought of as re-establishing a more appropriate framework for thinking about consciousness, but not as offering anything especially new. In fact, Donald has extended our understanding of consciousness by constructing his theory with due regard to the development of consciousness, both ontogenetic, historical and phylogenetic, its function, and its socio-cultural shaping and self-forming qualities. By holding in the same frame these biological, cognitive, social and cultural aspects, and attempting to satisfy their mutual constraints, he provides a more comprehensive and more plausible account than any which entertains only one or two of these dimensions to the neglect of the others.

A key to understanding Donald's account is his claim that human adult consciousness is characterised by the stages or levels of awareness which are determined both by our ontogeny and phylogeny as well as discerned in modern, adult, human consciousness.

Starting with but going beyond our simple embodied sense of awareness, Donald identifies its episodic, mimetic, mythic-narrative and symbolic levels. The episodic level refers to our immediate, perceptual awareness of events and of being in the world, of being conscious or awake; Donald assumes that we share this level with higher mammals (our animal soul?). The mimetic corresponds to our understanding of mime, gesture, imitation and so on. The mythic-narrative, which makes its appearance with the emergence of language, corresponds to the powerful way in which we interpret and become aware of the world in our story-telling and narrative. However, the crown of consciousness, which liberates it from many of the limitations of memory and personal experience, is our immersion in and enculturation by an external world of cultural meaning and symbolic products. It is important to grasp that the levels of consciousness that Donald outlines are not, in his opinion, of differing degrees of importance. It is not the case, for example, that the symbolic is somehow 'higher' or 'more advanced' than the mimetic, say, (although it is later in its phylogenetic and ontogenetic appearance.) All levels and their associated modes of being are needed for fully developed human consciousness, it is simply that they differ in their order of emergence.

Critical, however, to understanding the symbolic level, the cause and effect of our enculturation, is to grasp that for Donald, our symbolic power is not reducible to our linguistic abilities alone, nor is it simply an optional behavioral or cognitive style to be taken up or set down. (In this he goes well beyond a simple cultural-linguistic

¹⁴ In this regard Donald is much closer to the spirit of large parts of modern cognitive psychology than Dennett.

position.¹⁵) For Donald, the open, creative, striving powers of consciousness are what are primary, and which allow us to reach to undiscovered meanings beyond ourselves. The symbolic level is not, however, for Donald, a purely internal property. One of its essential features is that the human world of culture and symbols has been externalised by writing, art, social institutions and so on, in a way that places self-shaping meaning in our external environments rather than locking it solipsistically inside our heads.

Consciousness evolves, and so, in terms of its basic properties we should expect to see some continuity between the nature of consciousness in mammals and in particular the higher primates and ourselves. Donald points out that we presumably share our core, episodic awareness, our perceptual-motor and working-memory sense of being in the world with the higher primates, but it is the evolutionarily later aspects of awareness that properly characterise the emergence of our species. So, while early hominids, he suggests, will most likely have had access to mimetic levels of awareness, it is only with *homo sapiens* that we see the emergence of the narrative-linguistic and only then, with the emergence of language and early human culture, our fully developed modern human consciousness.

It is instructive to compare Donald's cultural account with Benson's. Like Benson's, Donald's theory bridges the gap between our embodied, biological nature and our conscious life in the social world of the world of human symbolic and cultural product. Like Benson too, Donald effectively resists reductionisms of either the biological, social and, interestingly, the temporal variety. Thus, concerning the latter, ontogenetically later aspects of consciousness and selfhood depend on but are not reducible to earlier ones. Both accounts are also well positioned to permit dialogue with wider, socio-cultural analyses of belief systems since both see the self or consciousness as culturally grounded and therefore partially belief system constituted. While on these attributes the Benson and Donald's accounts coincide, they are not identical, though where they differ they are complementary. Benson's focus, as we have seen, is on the self, Donald's on consciousness. Benson stresses locative qualities of the self as a system for positioning in and navigating through physical, psychological and socio-cultural worlds, Donald emphasises to a greater extent the self or consciousness shaping qualities of those same worlds. At the risk of caricaturing two sophisticated accounts, Benson focusses on the guidance systems needed to navigate physical, psychological and cultural worlds; Donald on the effects for consciousness of going on

¹⁵ Donald's views contrast with the implicit anthropology and accounts assuming the predominance of language which characterises some postliberal theological positions. See for example, George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

such journeys, and the quality of consciousness such forays require. Theologically, as we shall see, this allows different applications or points of connection. Benson's theory with its emphasis on relocation, space and movement is well positioned to deal with corresponding concepts in theology; Donald's with its emphasis on enculturation, levels of consciousness and symbolic worlds, is better suited to issues such as religious belief, conformity to Christ, and, arguably, sacramental theology, though the latter will not be further developed in this essay.

Theological analyses of consciousness

There are, of course, a wide variety of treatments of consciousness within theology including Schleiermacher's 'God-consciousness', Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary accounts, and the implicit treatment of the relation between conscious and non-conscious (illative) dimensions of religious knowing by John Henry Newman. This is not the place to review these in detail. It is worth noting, however, that theological accounts have been as much the victims as the beneficiaries of secular treatments. In particular they have had to contend with the pull toward dualism on the one hand, and reductive materialism on the other. In a helpful review of the area, Fraser Watts reminds us that many scholars have tried to resist these potentially unattractive positions.¹⁶ Others, however, as he points out, have embraced dualism more readily, seeing evidence for the existence of God in the fact that it is hard to explain the emergence of consciousness and the subjective experiences or *qualia* which accompany it simply by reference to brain or matter.¹⁷

An interesting characteristic of theological treatments, particularly dualist ones therefore, is the parallel they often forge between the human mind and God. Fraser Watts puts it clearly:

In dualist theology, the link between them [the human mind and the mind of God] tends to be taken both ways. If a dualistic view of the human mind has been accepted, then it is easier to conceive of God as a kind of disembodied mind too. Equally, if the idea of a disembodied mind has been accepted in the case of God, it is a modest further step to accept substance dualism in the case of human beings. Further, a dualistic view of mind may be attractive precisely because it links human beings to the mind of God. If the human mind is a substance, relatively independent of matter and additional to it, that appears to

¹⁶ Nancey Murphy, "On the Role of Philosophy in Theology-Science Dialogue", *Theology and Science* vol. 1, no.1 (Spring 2003): 79–93; Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (London: SPCK, 1997, 2nd edition).

¹⁷ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

make human beings more similar to God, more open to him, more capable of becoming like him, than if an account of human beings is given in purely natural terms.¹⁸ (Parenthetical material added).

Watts rightly reminds of us the dangers of too close a reading of this analogy. Not only might it be a comparatively recent, post-Cartesian strain in theological thinking, but also, possibly, one without particularly strong Scriptural warrant. In practice, of course, dualism leads easily to a situation in which both terms of the equation can be seriously misconstrued: God by being viewed as a spirit somehow equivalent to the human mind and consciousness, but then, by analogy, possessed of many of the same properties as mind and consciousness and subject to similar limitations; the human by being construed as somehow more 'God-like' than she actually is. Watts, therefore, again sensibly in my opinion, warns that 'we should simply recognise that the mind of God and the human mind may have different ontological bases, and not force them into the same straight-jacket.'¹⁹

What then are the parameters of non-dualist, theological accounts of consciousness? What properties would we expect such accounts to possess, and what would they need to explain? First, they will most likely offer non-epiphenomenal treatments of consciousness since, in rejecting dualism, they will at the same time need to resist the pull back into reductive, materialist, monism. So, more positively, we expect our theological models to show the need for consciousness and its associated intentionality to have clear *religious* as well as merely psychological functions. A shorthand way of putting this is that these will be functions we expect be implicated in the process of God-knowing, as well as being recruited in support of our ability to know the world and our fellows. Second, we would further expect theological models, in asserting some function for consciousness and its associated states of awareness, to affirm the validity of such states and potential link with outer events. In other words, we would expect a nuanced theological account to resist the partition of inner, spirituality, based on conscious awareness and experience from outer religious meaning. Again more positively, we would expect the model to be sensitive to the need as Mary Midgely puts it, 'to be realist about subjects'.²⁰ Third, the sheer variety of religious conscious states that can be envisaged – states ranging from, for example, prayer and contemplation, reflecting on the Word of God, aligning one's will with God, to acting empathically toward others and so on – suggests that any model of consciousness, suitable for

¹⁸ Fraser Watts, *Theology and Psychology* (London: Ashgate, 2001), 42.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Mary Midgely, *Science and Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2001), 83.

handling a variety of religious and spiritual states will need to have some internal differentiation. That is to say, it will probably not be sufficient to speak of consciousness as if it were a one-levelled or unitary property in its operation, despite, of course, the seeming phenomenological unity and continuity of human, conscious experience. Fourth, we might also expect theological models to focus on the open-ended or 'transcendent' possibilities of consciousness.²¹

Finally, and most importantly, while resisting the naïve equivalence between consciousness and the mind of God, the obverse must also be resisted. The doctrine of *imago Dei* does suggest that we should still be looking for some correspondences between our understanding of God and the human condition including consciousness, whether in its intra or intersubjective aspects.²²

A theological model with these general characteristics has been outlined by Oliver Davies in his seminal study: *A Theology of Compassion*. Davies considers carefully the ontological grounding of consciousness in his book. His purpose is 'to contribute to the establishing of a new narrative and philosophical space that is hospitable to the human self, in all its creative possibilities, through the renewal of the language of being.'²³ Davies sees the ontological project as essential if 'the self is not to be put at risk in a sea of incommensurability, fragmentation and the impersonal play of forces, and if Christianity itself is not to be put at risk as a religion of personalist and existential commitments.'²⁴ Rejecting the ontological project, as much of theology has done, is certainly 'to step outside the order of Catholic thinking. But the ontological project stands in need of renewal.'²⁵ With this in mind, Davies carefully reviews and critically evaluates earlier approaches to being, and, finding them wanting, settles on what he terms a *kenotic* or *dispossessive* ontology of consciousness and personal existence. The concept of kenotic ontology is postmodern to the extent that it is predicated on the 'primacy' of difference. For Davies, 'being' is not 'beyond or above difference, but rather within difference: indeed precisely as ontology of difference.'²⁶ 'Difference' can, of course, appear in terms of the violence of the other and the self, and Davies is alert to the need, especially post Holocaust, to construct a renewed metaphysics in the context and memory of such violence. Yet in such extreme situations, a dramatic rejection of the ontology of violence can be found in the

²¹ Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads* (London: Burns and Oates, 1975).

²² Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

²³ Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. xvi

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xviii.

‘interweaving’ of self with other in acts of self-emptying or kenotic compassion:

‘In compassion the self experiences the other primordially, not as a ‘second subject’ whose own experiences are to be exploited for our own pleasures (‘sharing another’s joys’) but as another who suffers and whose sufferings – against perceivable self interest or motivation of the self – become not our own, since they are always recognized as being the suffering of another, but become the cause of our action as if they were our own. It is natural for us to seek to escape from pain, but in compassionate acts we expose ourselves to the possibility of suffering by acting on behalf of another whose suffering nevertheless remains their suffering and not ours. In the compassionate moment we acknowledge. . .the deep sociality of consciousness in the embrace of a dialectical mutuality of self and other.’²⁷

One feature that distinguishes Davies’ project from a mere ontology of difference, therefore, is its emphasis on compassion, but there is a second, crucial difference, which simultaneously rescues it from the charge that it is simply a moralised or ethicised postmodernism. This is its solid theological foundation. Davies effects what he calls a twofold ‘theological reduction of compassion’.²⁸ First he elucidates the dynamics of consciousness in more detail and discusses the difference and links between ‘inner’ and ‘outer transcendence’. Inner transcendence is the affirmation of self in its relationships with the other. In the fullest sense this ‘presupposes reconciliation with and acceptance of the world and all its constituent narratives. . . Affirmation of self thus implies healing, forgiveness, resignation and the acceptance of the existential condition which the self finds itself in.’²⁹ Occlusion of self, the opposite of self affirmation, ‘leads to poor styles of living. Extreme cases of alienation from self lead to self-mutilation and suicide.’³⁰ The fullest affirmation of self, for Davies, which gives it its transcendent quality, is its openness to and celebration of the totality of the self in relation to the other, as world, whether in its specificity or generality. This is particularly ‘nowhere tested so rigorously as in the knowledge of our own mortality.’³¹

Outer transcendence likewise involves affirmation, but this time of the other, the ‘Not-I’. For Davies, ‘(a)ffirmation of the personal other is . . .simultaneously affirmation of them as the centre of their own world, and of the structures, logic and meaning of that world.’ ‘Occlusion’ again the opposite of affirmation ‘is the suppression of the other precisely as free world-centre and appropriation of the other as

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xix.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xx.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

object into the parameters and good of our own world.’³² Transcendence is revealed most clearly here by compassionate identification with the sufferings of the other. Compassion expressed through outer transcendence now becomes ‘an epiphany of being, or site of the dialectical disclosure of the fullest ontological possibilities of the self.’³³

Davies second theological move is to locate the logic of inner and outer transcendence firmly within the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. The dynamics of human kenotic consciousness thus come to reflect at least partially the dynamics of the Trinitarian life.

‘...we can only think about God in depth, and draw near to him in understanding where we re-enact within ourselves the conditions of his own being, which is to say dispossession of the self for the sake of the other. This is to begin to realize the symmetry that exists between his Trinitarian nature and the structure of our own consciousness, as the dialectical and mutually grounding relation of self and other. And it is the enlivening of the divine image in us, when our natural affections becomes *σπλάγγνα* [emotionally ‘entrained’ or moved with compassion] in Christ, our existence with and towards others is a full lived expression of the divine *rah‘mīm* [compassion].³⁴ (Parenthetical material added).

Davies argues that it is ‘in the epiphany of the personal other to ourselves in the phenomenon of compassion that we discover the Trinitarian character of consciousness in which self and other encounter each other through the medium of a third, which is the mutually possessed life of consciousness itself.’ This, he further argues, ‘corresponds to the *similitudo* or ‘likeness’ to God which tradition affirms to be the activation of the image.’³⁵ ‘Recognition in dispossession’ is the phrase Davies uses for the acknowledgement of this image in which, through ‘the immediacy of our own truth, we begin well to apprehend the prior immediacy of divine truth’.³⁶ This is also a theme which resonates well with Orthodox theology which has stressed the possibility of deification and Christification.³⁷

Cultural psychology and a theology of compassion

The present proposal is quite simple. It is that Donald’s, multi-levelled, cultural-evolutionary, psychological account of

³² Ibid., 35.

³³ Ibid., 36. (Davies contrasts his account with Karl Rahner’s, 43.)

³⁴ Ibid., 253.

³⁵ Ibid., 251.

³⁶ Ibid., 45

³⁷ For example Panayiotis Nellis, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of The Human Person*, St (New York: Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1997).

consciousness can usefully be brought into dialogue with theologies such as Davies' which emphasize 'dispossessive intentionality' as a key component of consciousness. The question thus arises as to what types of 'dispossessive' or 'kenotic' intentionality can be discerned in the Christian tradition and whether in particular there are examples of Christian dispossession at each of Donald's levels. In other words we are looking for examples of Christ-conforming dispossession at the level of mimesis, narrative and symbolism. If all things find their unity in Christ we should expect all aspects to be represented in this way and represented in His reality.

Mimetic dispossession: Showing, following and imitating

Mimesis involves imitation, gesture, skill and role play. In mimetic dispossession the Christian is called to act as if they were Christ. In their gestures, actions, practices and basic level of discipleship, the Christian is called to be a follower of Christ, and to deal with the world in a Christ like way.

There are numerous examples of the invitation to follow and imitate Christ in the Scriptures and of its acceptance or rejection (e.g. Mk 1:14; 8:32; 9:41; 10:21; Mt 12:29–30; 14:36; Lk 9:59–62; 18:22), and Christ frequently leads the way by *showing*. For example, consider the washing of the disciples' feet. After this ritual act, and fielding Peter's protests, Jesus says: 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done onto you.' (Jn 12: 14–16). At other times the acts of others are commended and offered as role models. The woman who annoints Christ's feet with expensive oil is not only praised but will also be remembered (Mk 13: 3–8). While at yet other times, mimetic acts are offered as negative role models, but ironically re-interpreted and transformed. The soldiers at the crucifixion dress Jesus in purple robes and pay him mock homage, but the role play is, of course, used to point to an underlying kingly reality and its location in the distressed (Mk 15 17–19).

An important distinction is worth making here between emulation and imitation. Following Michael Tomasello's careful analysis, we can define emulation as the copying or mimicking of another's actions or behaviours whereas true imitation is the making the other's intentions one's own.³⁸ Since dispossessive mimesis is close to action and embodiment, so the most basic level of discipleship is expressed

³⁸ Tomasello provides evidence that primates exhibit the former only while humans also accomplish the latter. See: Michael Tomasello *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1999).

at this level, we *act* for the other, we *help* the blind *see* and lame *walk*, we *follow* on our faith *journey*. But mimesis can be abstracted from the particular circumstances and its lessons applied more widely. It then truly becomes imitative not merely emulative. So, it is also required as an attribute of consciousness to underpin the virtues, which in turn are recruited in support of wider Christian practices. According to the Aristotelian tradition, for example, virtues, understood as skills or dispositions, are acquired through practice in traditions which nurture and value them. Mimesis is, therefore, a social activity too, not merely in its acquisition, but in its transmission and preservation as well.³⁹

Mythic-narrative dispossession: teaching, preaching and the narrative self

It is a theological cliché to state that Jesus came to bring the Good News and preach the coming of the Kingdom but it is, of course, true. Large parts of the Gospels and NT in general refer to Jesus' preaching ministry, and capture his teachings, sayings and parables. In addition, the Christian Church sees itself as charged with the transmission of the very same Gospel message. At the heart of Jesus preaching is the counter cultural message of the Kingdom is at hand but is shaped by values at variance with the honor-driven *mores* of the day. At the heart of his preaching is a kenotic narrative.

Once again there are abundant examples of this in scripture ranging from explicit exhortations and teachings, (for example Mt 5), to parables and allegories. In addition, as the life and teachings of Jesus were passed down orally by members of the early church, narrative awareness was invoked, which emphasised the self and other affirming nature of the teaching and the contradictions of self occlusion. 'He who is first will be last'. 'He who loses his life for my sake will save it.' 'Give all you have to the poor', and so on.

A full analysis of these narrative dimensions of Christianity is beyond the scope of this paper. There is also, still, much work to be done on the interaction between external and internal narratives and stories. But for now two points are worth noting: first in many instances where the narrative level is invoked, there is a clear representational redescription of the mimetic.⁴⁰ In the example of washing

³⁹ Michael Sherwin, OP, *Aquinas at the well house: language acquisition and moral development, the case of Hellen Keller*. Talk given at the 1st Aquinas Colloquium, Blackfriars, Oxford, 11 March, 2006.

⁴⁰ See Annette Karmiloff-Smith, *Beyond Modularity: A Developmental Perspective on Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT, 1992) for an exposition of representational redescription.

feet above, the act itself and its symbolic derivatives are commended directly to others. Often, as in this case, this occurs as a response to particular episodes, which Jesus then narrativises, and explicates at a higher level. For example, in Mt 8:10, after being criticised for the mimetic act of eating with tax collectors he states: 'those who are well have no need of the physician'.

Second, it is important not to confuse a description of narrative, religious, kenotic *consciousness* with the statements of narrative *theology*. The former is a facet of the narrative self, predicated on our ability to form descriptions and create stories about ourselves and others. Narrative theology on the other hand is the expression and intratextual codification of theological meanings and truths in narrative form.⁴¹ While narrative consciousness is certainly necessary to engage with and appreciate narrative theology, the latter is not reducible, without residue, to the narrative contents of religious consciousness. Narrative theology is not only a second order reflection on religious narratives, it is also an external, symbolic, cultural product of that reflection. A full engagement with narrative and other types of theology and doctrine will therefore engage consciousness in its symbolic-cultural aspects, as we shall see shortly.

Whereas mimetic imitation typically fosters discipleship, the narrativisation of Christianity appears to lead naturally to apostleship: 'Follow me' becomes 'go out and instruct'. This is an interesting change, which on the one hand reflects the familiar powers of language, identified by Hockett for example, namely its displacement, productivity and so on which permit it to be used to go beyond a description of the immediate situation in the here and now. Thus the narrativisation of Christian message begins the process of freeing it from its first century Palestinian context and starts to provide it with a portability across space and time. A second aspect of language, the powers of abstraction to which its semanticity gives access, allows a further liberation from the concrete aspects of space-time and immediate embodiment.

Symbolic dispossession: pointing

If Jesus preached the Kingdom, St Paul preached the crucified Christ and the Risen Lord. If Jesus preached the Kingdom, St John preached the Word incarnate and the light of the World. Codification, interpretation and recording of the meanings of the Christian narrative helped lift the level of Christian consciousness in the early Church from a set of stories about the Good News to a complex, cultural-symbolic system for future generations to grow within.

⁴¹ cf Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 120–121.

In what is arguably one of the most important acts of 'representational redescription' of all time, St. Paul, St John, and the other NT writers, transformed the orally transmitted message of the Kingdom and narratives of the life of Jesus into a permanent record and theological reflection on Christ. In this way they helped create the Christian religion and in the process paved the way for a deeper and deeper, cultural-symbolic understanding of the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. This has been developed and explored more fully through the growth of theology, and cultural transmission of doctrine.

In general terms, this shift from the narrative to symbolic modes mirrors, indeed maps, the shift from the particularities of Jesus of Nazareth to the universality of the Christ of history, as the quasi-millenarian Kingdom message becomes carried up into a wider account of His life-death-resurrection cycle as a cosmic event. The primary symbol of this process is clearly Christ. With Christ understood variously as model, speech act or sacrament, ontologically the focus is now Christocentric, not Jesus-centric. Follow me, which became instruct and preach in the transition from the mimetic to the narrative, now becomes a mandate to transmit and allow Spirit-filled development to take place through the time transcending structures and activities of the Body of Christ in the *ecclesia*. Assuming the validity of this overall framework, a future task for theology-psychology dialogue is how to illuminate in more detail the relationship between such symbolic and *kenotic* dimensions of consciousness as expressed through church, history and tradition.

For the moment, however, it is crucially important for a proper theological framing of the present proposal to grasp that the shift under discussion here is a *symbolic*-cultural and not simply a cultural *linguistic* phenomenon. There are several reasons why this is critical and which help create space between the current proposal and more standard, postliberal positions, though to do full justice to this will need a further essay. For a start, the symbolic cultural approach emphasises that this level of consciousness is not limited by limits of language. Fed and constructed by external cultural products, which in many cases refer to aspects of reality beyond themselves, the symbolic cultural is not to be reduced simply to language games embedded in forms of life and their associated codified narratives. In many cases, our cultural symbols point to ultimate realities beyond themselves; this is especially apparent in the case of the church and its sacraments. These symbolic modes are not simply intra-systemically connected. Second, a proper understanding of the symbolic levels of consciousness helps explicate our tradition as the self-formative set practices received from previous generations and transmitted to future ones as the deposit of faith, whereas the cultural-linguistic

position has at times been critiqued for its ahistorical character.⁴² In addition, the fact is that through its basic reflexivity, whether in its mimetic, narrative or symbolic modes, human awareness can be used to critique and reconstruct the culture which has shaped it. In this sense we are culture constitutive as well as culture constituted; we are rational, culture dependent yet ultimately culture transforming creatures.⁴³ Third, Donald's account of consciousness is also basically (critically) realist in its ontology, through its grounding in embodiment, cognition and action, unlike the anti-realist flavour of some postliberal theories. When positioned subordinate to a theology such as Davies', however, while this basic realist character is preserved, it is transmuted from a world centred critical realism to a logos centred, Christological realism, as we shall see shortly. Fourth, the model of consciousness explored here admits experiential-affective as well as more cognitive dimensions, it thus indicates how such an anthropology can hold together the expressivist as well as the cultural-symbolic dimensions of religion.

Psychology and theology: positions and limits in interdisciplinary debates

Clearly, Donald's and Davies' accounts can usefully be brought into dialogue, but how far can this be sustained and extended? At one level it is easy to see that Davies offers an account of consciousness that is dialectically *structured*, in terms of relations within the self, and between self and other, and kenotic in *content*, while Donald provides an account of the *modes* or *levels* at which consciousness operates. Roughly, Davies tells what consciousness is like and what it is for, while Donald tells us *how* it works, *how* it has evolved and *how* it develops. What is interesting here is that while the respective ontological and epistemological emphases of the theological and psychological treatments are clear, so too is their complementarity. Donalds account can be seen as demonstrating how, in more detail, the kenotic dynamics of consciousness can be realised, while Davies shows what those kenotic functions are and what they mean.

⁴² See for example comments by Alister McGrath *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1990), 14–34 and John Milbank *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford Blackwell, 1990), 382–8 on Lindbeck.

⁴³ For a progressive development of this idea see: Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edition (London: Duckworth, 1994); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); *Three Rivals Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1988); *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

Given this, providing psychology is prepared to accept in principle, and therefore to work within, the basic ontological structure for consciousness which Davies' theology provides, it should be possible in the future to examine the interconnections between such a theology and psychology of consciousness in more detail. So, for example, by taking seriously Davies' claims regarding inner transcendence, self affirmation and self alienation it should be possible in principle to identify the psychological underpinnings of these states. For example, relational models of the self, would seem to lend themselves admirably to a psychological understanding of the theological construction of sin implied by Davies' model. To operate at these levels, psychology need only accept the basic ontological structure, without inquiring further into its ultimate grounding or meaning, and then proceed on its own terms.

But it is precisely this ultimate grounding which Davies secures by his second theological move. Moreover, this is a move which copper fastens his entire kenotic ontological project in the Trinitarian life and the doctrine of *imago Dei*. For those who follow his journey of intensification there is then a seamless route available between human and divine kenosis, a natural theological route, we might say, as much as one based in Revelation, instantiated and perfectly revealed in Christ, for sure, but available in principle to all to follow.

Does this second theological move make any psychological difference, or is the basal psychological account I provided earlier not only necessary but also sufficient to support both levels of theological analyses? I have argued elsewhere, though not originally, that God as such, *deus per se*, makes no *particular* difference to how things work.⁴⁴ Whether an object or a person is created or not makes no difference to their functioning. On the other hand, I suggested, God as made known to us, *deus se revalans (deus pro nobis)* must make a difference, otherwise Christian Revelation is meaningless or at least ineffective.⁴⁵ The psychologist is however in a quandary. Approaching the matter from a naturalist perspective it seems that she is able to provide essentially the same account of behaviour and experience whether or not the second theological move is effected.

This contrast, between the theological and psychological accounts, can easily be illustrated by comparing two cases: a humanist or atheist who acts in a self-dispossessive manner, who considers it worthwhile 'to lay down his life for his friends', perhaps for a political or social

⁴⁴ The point was originally made by St Thomas Aquinas; see also Herbert McCabe for a lucid treatment of what is essentially a Thomist distinction: Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Mowbray, 1987), 2–9.

⁴⁵ Peter Hampson "Beyond Unity, Integration and Experience: Cultural Psychology and the Theology of mediaeval Mysticism," *New Blackfriars*, 86:1006 (November 2005): 622–641.

cause, and a professed Christian who does the same. In both cases, a basic psychological analysis of this kenotic form of life should yield the same or broadly similar results. The fear, perception of risk, but ultimate regard for the other over self, the emulation of self sacrificing others, and so on, are likely to be broadly similar in both cases. Further, though the *content* of our heroes' explanatory narratives would be expected to differ, their existence and dependence on their initial dramatic, mimetic gesture would not. Likewise any future symbolic rendering of their acts by others would both require formally similar acts of representational redescription, although again differing in content. On this model, the psychologist rests content with an account of the overall shape of conscious kenosis, and sets aside any considerations of the truth or referential meaning of any of its constituent narrative or symbolic redescriptions. We can choose, she suggests, to argue that the structure of kenosis is ultimately Trinitarian in its *modus operandi* and that Christification is a route available for us to follow if we wish. Or we can forego this move. But either way it would be irrelevant, indeed it would be closed to a psychological analysis.

On the other hand, a psychologist who accepts what I have called a theist superordinate position,⁴⁶ rather than remaining content with a naturalist compatibilism, may wish to follow their theological colleague further, and ask what if any difference being an explicit Christian makes here. Davies' analysis, here, would suggest that it does:

...(it reveals) a self who, in contrasts to the 'grey' self of many postmodern texts is exuberantly self-possessing in its own existence, foundationally reciprocal and inhabiting a space which is co-gifted by and inhabited by the other. Knowing itself to be self-in-relation, self-through-relation, it discovers too, in the theological reduction, that it is already in relation with the ecstatic personhood of Christ, who – as the compassion of God – speaks *with us*, through the combining of past and future in the unfolding of a eucharistic present that is at once eschatological and anamnetic.⁴⁷ (Italics in original).

According to this, recognition that one is *in Christ* is of fundamental importance. At the very least, as we have seen, it is likely to shape the Christian's narrative consciousness, but, more importantly, it enhances their symbolic being, and they are thereby changed ontologically. By engaging fully with what is effectively for them a eucharistic moment, the believer is not simply enthused, they *become Christ-like-for-themselves-and-for-others*.

If Davies and others are correct, such Christ-like conforming is the ultimate *knowable* reality for the self. Christians claim that

⁴⁶ Hampson, "Cultural Psychology and Theology," 266.

⁴⁷ Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, xxi.

people can not only follow, imitate and conform to Christ, wittingly or unwittingly, they can also come to be 'in Christ', to have the mind of Christ, and to *know and rejoice in the fact that this is occurring*. This raises the stakes in science and religion debates. Any cultural psychology committed to the self-shaping meaning of belief, is now challenged to interpret psychologically, and thereby to understand more fully the mental, emotional and behavioural implications of such conscious states with due regard to their potential truth and reality, as well their intra-personal validity.

To do so, however, it first needs to take such claims seriously, seeking both to distinguish them clearly from more superficial or even at times specious claims of 'spiritual experience' and encounter, and then to explore the psychological concomitants of such explicit manifestations of Christian being.

Is psychology yet ready to do this?

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