'Probably the Best Kenoticism in the World': Exploring Paul S. Fiddes' Kenosis of Suffering Love in Dialogue with the Kenotic Theology of Denmark's Hans Lassen Martensen

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to come to a definition of divine power as kenosis that theologically helps explain the wide spectrum of experience Christian believers have of divine power or lack thereof, ranging from divine hiddenness to signs and wonders. To this end, Paul Fiddes' kenosis as suffering love theology is delineated, analysed, and critiqued. Certain weaknesses in the account are identified at which point Hans Lassen Martensen is introduced as an interlocutor and his kenotic theology explained and applied as a potential enhancer of Fiddes' definition of kenosis. By situating the exploration in a kenotic definition of omnipotence within a context of spiritual conflict and evil, this nuanced account of the nature and scope of kenosis offers a very plausible articulation of divine omnipotence congruent with the current now-and-not-yet age of tension and the promised future of an eschaton free of all evil and suffering.

Keywords
Fiddes; kenosis; Martensen, omnipotence; suffering love

Introduction

The infinite *dunamis* (and *doxa*) of God is central to a number of the incommunicable attributes of God. Indeed, it has been claimed that omnipotence is the pre-eminent attribute and the key idea because all other divine characteristics flow from it.[1] However, what exactly does it mean to talk about the omnipotence of God? What conclusions, exactly,

[1] Richard Swinburne, 'Is God All-powerful?', Closer to Truth <https://closertotruth.com/video/swiri-037/?referrer=8285> [accessed 15 August 2023].

are we to draw when we consider the spectrum of claims and anecdotal evidence concerning expressions of the power of God, ranging from supernatural, sovereign demonstrations of signs and wonders, as regularly witnessed to by the church of the global south,[2] through to the current post-evangelical/charismatic milieu in the west which appears to be more comfortable with the concept of God's hiddenness (or even absence)?[3]

The intention of this article, as inferred by its title, is to explore the nature and scope of the New Testament concept of kenosis[4] in order to arrive at a theological definition and understanding of divine omnipotence; ideally, one that helps explain the spectrum of experience and also acts as a corrective to less-than-biblical notions of divine power. To effectively do this, the theology of kenosis as suffering love advanced by the contemporary Baptist theologian Paul S. Fiddes is introduced, analysed, and discussed. As a Baptist scholar who offers a well-articulated contemporary kenotic model of power as suffering love,[5] this makes him a salient choice for an article of Baptist constructive theology that seeks to identify and build upon theological connections between different denominational traditions.

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[2] Philip Jenkins contends that theological conservatism and signs and wonders experiences are the key factors for church growth in the global south. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1–14.

[3] Michael Rea claims that theological exploration into the question of divine hiddenness has become a significant focus of academic theology since the second half of the twentieth century. Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 6.

[4] *Kenosis*, *kenoticism*, and *kenotic theology* is a theological concept within Christology that articulates the idea of divine self-limitation. Taken from the Greek *kenosis*, meaning 'an emptying', it is found in Philippians 2:6–7 in which Paul describes Christ as 'emptying himself' in his incarnational descent. Since the early nineteenth century, theologians in Germany and the United Kingdom have explored what divine attributes (if any) Christ divested when he became human. It is particularly pertinent when exploring divine omnipotence, the subject matter of this article. For a helpful introduction to kenotic theology, see Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 283–284, 377–378.

[5] Fiddes develops his model of kenotic power as suffering love within the context of the problem of evil and suffering (i.e. theodicy). He argues that to offer any in part satisfactory answer to theodicy questions, we need a doctrine of God built upon divine passibility, divine-self-emptying, and a vulnerability which leads God to suffer alongside those experiencing pain and evil. For a full articulation of this model, see Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2000), pp. 152–190.

Once the analysis of Fiddes is finished, the historical Danish theologian Hans Lassen Martensen will be brought into the frame as an interlocutor in order to explore whether or not his kenotic theology can add to and possibly strengthen Fiddes' account of divine omnipotence based upon kenosis. As a nineteenth-century Danish social critic and the Lutheran Bishop of Seeland (1854–1884), Martensen has in recent centuries received greater attention for his own writings instead of simply being the object of Kierkegaard's antipathy.[6] As a churchman trained in philosophy and theology, there has been a gradual increase in English translations of his work since the first translation into English in the 1860s.[7] Intellectually, Martensen stood between Hegel and Kierkegaard and was partly responsible for introducing the former to the Danish intellectual world of the latter.[8] Martensen published work in kenotic Christology which later went on to influence British-Anglican kenotic theology.[9] As constructive theology looks to broaden discourse and develop understanding across denominational lines, the choice of Martensen aims to stimulate some fresh perspective as a conversation partner who has, as far as I am aware, not previously been engaged with Fiddes.

Since our understanding of divine omnipotence has something relevant to say to a significant number of theological subjects, it is imperative for the purposes of this short article to limit the discussion of the omnipotence of God to one specific doctrinal matter: specifically, the nature and reality of evil and associated suffering. For if God is omnipotent as traditionally articulated, why does he not simply bring the event of the *parousia* forward to the present, thus ending the age of now-and-not-yet tension, and inaugurate the new heavens and new earth? Given the fact that he has not done this, what does this suggest about

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[6] For a helpful overview of Martensen's intellectual journey, see *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Terry Godlove, trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 5–17.

[7] H. L. Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics: Compendium of the Doctrines of Christianity*, trans. by W. Urwick (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1866).

[8] Godlove, *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard*, pp. 1–4.

[9] See below, n. 53.

God's being and character, as well as the nature and necessary make-up of his operational power?

Fiddes' Suffering Love Kenosis: An Ontology of Omnipotence

> But this kind of vulnerability can be combined with the faith that God's love can never fail or be destroyed, and that love is — finally — the strongest power in the universe, able to overcome evil with its resources of persuasion.[10]

Fiddes constructs his theology using a less-than-traditional definition of omnipotence. He maintains that God's ultimate and most effective power is the power of suffering love, which is grounded in divine vulnerability and freely-chosen self-limitation. It is all centred in the perichoretic dance of the Trinity and operates via persuasion and influence.[11] Granted there is risk involved, but this does not, as is often claimed, make God impotent, since God's 'weak power' of cruciform persuasion can be very constraining and if it aligns with the wishes and desires of creation will result in actualising God's will without the need of any strong intervention or coercion.[12]

As is well known, Fiddes is influenced by process thought when it comes to defining omnipotence in terms of divine persuasion and influence.[13] His embrace of the non-unilateral power of suffering love

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[10] Paul S. Fiddes, 'A Theological Reconsideration of "the Wild": A Response to Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolpho', *Louvain Studies*, 41, no. 3 (2018), 317–327 (pp. 326–327).

[11] Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 144–173; Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 71–81. As well as the obvious Moltmannian influence, Fiddes also draws from Eberhard Jüngel and Alfred North Whitehead when constructing his doctrine of omnipotence.

[12] Fiddes rejects all worldly ideas of coercive and dominant power when defining divine power. Paul S. Fiddes, 'Is God All-Powerful?', Closer to Truth <https://closertotruth.com/video/fidpa-006/?referrer=8285> [accessed 15 August 2023].

[13] Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, pp. 37–42. Where Fiddes diverges from process theology is in his locating God's persuasion and influence within the freedom of God. Defining God's omnipotence as persuasion and influence in the power of suffering love is a central tenet which Fiddes has consistently purported since the beginning of his academic career. See Paul S. Fiddes, *The Escape and the City,* Old Testament Study, Baptist Union Christian Training Programme (London: Baptist Union, 1974), pp. 1–36 (pp. 18–21); Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 166–175; Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Place of Christian Theology in the Modern University', *Baptist Quarterly*, 42 (April, 2007), 71– 88 (pp. 74–80); Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ancient and Modern Wisdom: The Intersection of Clinical and

simultaneously aligns him with and sets his face against different Christian scholars.[14] For Fiddes, the conflation of process theology's emphasis on persuasion with no domination and the biblical theme of God's suffering, found especially in the Prophets, goes a considerable way to help understand God in the context of a fallen creation which exercises its full access to irrevocable freedom in order to use it for good or ill.[15]

However, this conflation by Fiddes immediately raises two critical questions. First, has Fiddes accepted process theology's non-coercive persuasive position without careful consideration of whether it is logically coherent? As David Basinger asks, is it necessarily impossible for the process God to intervene or coerce, or is it rather an act of self-limitation? If the former, then this raises the challenge of talking about a necessarily powerless deity without any experiential base to draw from, especially when human experience consistently demonstrates the ability to control other human behaviour whether through ultra-soft, soft, mid or hard coercion.[16] If the latter, which is Fiddes' position as determined by his account of divine freedom, then the same charge can be brought

Theological Understanding of Health', in *Wisdom, Science and the Scriptures: Essays in Honour of Ernest Lucas*, ed. by Stephen Finamore and John Weaver (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage and Bristol Baptist College, 2012), pp. 75–98 (pp. 90–95); Paul S. Fiddes, 'Covenant and Participation: A Personal Review of the Essays', *Perspectives in Religious Studies,* 44, no. 1 (2017), 119–137 (pp. 129–132).

[14] Fiddes rejects Nicholas Healy's unilateralist position in favour of Stanley Hauerwas's human-divine co-operation stance. See Paul S. Fiddes, 'Versions of Ecclesiology: Stanley Hauerwas and Nicholas Healy', *Ecclesiology*, 12, no. 3 (2016), 331–353 (pp. 332–342); Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: One World Revisited', *Journal Teologic*, 15, no. 1 (2016), 5–36 (pp. 29–32). Moreover, Fiddes is highly critical of Aquinas's Thomistic causation theology which views God as the primary cause, arguing instead that it is better to imagine God acting persuasively. Paul S. Fiddes, '*Ex Opere Operato*: Rethinking a Historic Baptist Rejection', in *Baptist Sacramentalism 2*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 25, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 219–238 (pp. 222–229).

[15] Paul S. Fiddes, '"Father, Son, and Holy Spirit": The Triune Creator in Hymn and Theology', in *Gathering Disciples: Essays in Honour of Christopher J. Ellis*, ed. by Myra Blyth and Andy Goodliff (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), pp. 204–220 (pp. 217–219).

[16] David Basinger, 'Divine Power: Do Process Theists Have a Better Idea?', in *Process Theology*, ed. by Ronald H. Nash. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), pp. 197–213 (pp. 203–205).

as is made against the classic freewill theist: why does God not freely choose to intervene in cases of meaningless evil such as the holocaust?[17]

The second question concerns Fiddes' use of the Prophets, especially Hosea, and whether he correctly uses these prophetic passages to develop this kenotic-based understanding of divine passibility, that is, God's capability to feel or suffer. As Frances Young points out, as well as Hosea's language of the 'man-like' God (the one who walks in the garden and woos his lover), other prophets such as Isaiah and Amos describe Yahweh as 'wholly other' in contrast to the popular gods of the nations around Israel. Therefore, this leads to the use of *synthesis* (observing the highest and most beautiful things of creation), *analysis* (using the technique of abstraction, taking away what we know and arriving at apophatic terms), and *analogy* (creating myths and similes) in order to understand God as both infinite, incomprehensible, beyond human knowledge but, via revelation, accommodating and speaking to us in human language that we understand. Fiddes, she suggests, would do well incorporating a more sophisticated form of anthropomorphism into his theology.[18]

Notwithstanding the above comments, the overarching rubric of Fiddes' position regarding the persuasive power of suffering love is kenosis. He defines God as the one who humbly reveals himself and freely desires to limit himself and be the self-emptying kenotic God.[19] Despite Fiddes' denial of being a social trinitarian,[20] a theology of divine triune society is the best setting for a doctrine of kenosis.[21] That said, however, there is still an imperative to converge our focus on the

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17 David Basinger, 'Divine Persuasion: Could the Process God Do More?', *Journal of Religion*, 64, no. 3 (1984), 332–347 (pp. 334–335).

18 Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. 242–247.

19 Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Making of a Christian Mind', in *Faith in the Centre: Christianity and Culture*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Press, 2001), pp. 1–24 (pp. 14–18); Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Story and the Stories: Revelation and the Challenge of Postmodern Culture', in *Faith in the Centre*, ed. by Fiddes, pp. 75–96 (pp. 89–94).

20 Paul S. Fiddes, 'Relational Trinity: Radical Perspective', in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. by Jason Sexton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), pp. 159–185 (pp. 159–161).

21 Thomas R. Thompson and Cornelius Plantinga Jr, 'Trinity and Kenosis', in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. by C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 165–189.

specific nature of Fiddes' understanding of kenosis in terms of scope and implications.[22]

A synthesis of Fiddes' panentheistic vision and definition of power as persuasion and suffering love results in a capacious definition and scope of kenosis. There are, in the main, three theological meanings of the term 'kenosis': christological, trinitarian, and generalised.[23] Similarly, Fiddes writes about three kinds of kenosis which he calls *three kenotic moments*, namely 'the eternal kenosis of the Father in the sending out of the Son; the kenosis of creation in which God brings into being something that has reality over against God's self who is himself self-emptying; and the cross, which is the deepest kind of self-emptying.'[24] In a reversal of the temporal-chronological order of the three kenotic moments, it is the final 'moment', the cross in the heart of God, that Fiddes uses as the foundation for kenotic theological development concerned with trinitarian and generalised meanings of kenosis.[25]

In fact, grounding omnipotence as suffering love in a cruciform kenosis helps delineate a trinitarian kenosis, both of which can be situated within a generalised kenosis. This can be an appropriate way to locate omnipotence for two reasons. First, methodologically, theodicy is a theological concept that can be extrapolated from experience, which is an important source of theological method when dealing with

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22 Fiddes claims that a kenotic definition of God also affects our understanding of God's omniscience. Paul S. Fiddes, 'Charles Williams and the Problem of Evil', in *Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, ed. by Judith Wolfe and Brendan Wolfe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 65–88 (p. 77).

23 Sarah Coakley, 'Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations', in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. by J. Polkinghorne (London: SPCK, 2001), pp. 192–210 (pp. 192–204).

24 Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 and 16 March 2016. Cf. Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 34–46; Paul S. Fiddes, 'Participating in the Trinity', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 33, no. 3 (2006), 375–391 (pp. 379–383). Of note is that Fiddes here departs from H. Wheeler Robinson, a significant influence on Fiddes, who held that kenosis of the Spirit is the deepest kind of kenosis (H. Wheeler Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation: In the Actuality of History* (London: Nisbet, 1942), pp. 294–295).

25 At this point, the limitations of temporal language such as 'moment' (borrowed from Sergei Bulgakov and Hans Urs von Balthasar) become significant. Coakley rightly notes that the majority of essays (including Fiddes' chapter) in *The Work of Love* address the significance of kenosis in regard to God's relation to the world and subsequently only turn to christological or trinitarian meaning for illustration (Coakley, 'Kenosis: Theological', p. 193).

theodicy and human suffering.[26] Of course, not all agree and some see great danger in rooting any aspect of the doctrine of God in experience which may lead to over-anthropomorphising.[27] However, the lack of biblical detail and historical-theological material on the spirit world can legitimately invite human experience to help form our knowledge base.[28] Second, generalised kenosis helps to explain perceived divine hiddenness amidst evil and suffering before and after the incarnation of Christ. Those who posit kenosis in the Hebrew Bible without any Christological considerations, relate God's omnipotence to humility. The kenosis of God is realised while retaining transcendence when God manifests himself in humility alongside the defeated, the poor, and the expelled via a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:12).[29]

However, these strengths do not negate a significant weakness in Fiddes' account, in that he presumes God's self-emptying on the cross when exploring the atonement without any serious exegetical work on Philippians 2 and other examples of divine limitation in the biblical account.[30] Consequently, he does not enter into some of the kenotic

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[26] Take Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, who wrote philosophy as someone who survived incarceration in Auschwitz. See Renee D. N. Van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas' Hermeneutics of Kenosis* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 101–130. Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstoff starts his philosophy of divine passibility not from philosophy but from experience after the premature death of his son; a tragic event Fiddes has also experienced. See Kelly J. Clark, 'Hold Not Thy Peace At My Tears: Methodological Reflections on Divine Impassibility', in *Our Knowledge of God: Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology*, ed. by Kelly J. Clark (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1992), pp. 167–193 (pp. 167–168).

[27] David Cook believes that titles like *The Human Face of God* and *The Crucified God* use language that reflects weakness in human experience without necessarily differentiating between weakness caused by sin, weakness affected by circumstances, and weakness through an inability to cope. Such an account may well give too much power and significance to circumstances, sin, or the power of the evil one, and we need to avoid this. See David Cook, 'Weak Church, Weak God', in *The Power & Weakness of God: Impassibility and Orthodoxy,* ed. by Nigel M. De S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), pp. 69–92.

[28] Clark suggests that *sola scriptura* will not produce the full answer needed due to an 'under-determination' of Scripture. This can happen when Scripture rightly interpreted may not settle the issue as it may not address the issue at all; when Scripture rightly interpreted could settle the issue but the right rules of interpretation may not be discernible; and there may be no such thing as the 'right' interpretation of Scripture. There may be competing explanations of the text all of which are compatible with the text. Clark, 'Hold Not Thy Peace', pp. 176–177.

[29] Van Riessen, *Man as a Place*, pp. 173–187.

[30] Gordon D. Fee, 'The New Testament and Kenosis Christology', in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. by C. Stephen Evans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 25–44; N. T. Wright, '*Arpagmos* and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11', *Journal of Theological*

Christology debates such as whether the kenotic state of Christ was for the duration of the incarnation or only between crucifixion and Holy Saturday;[31] the relation between kenosis and glorification;[32] the difference between ontological, functional, and kryptic kenosis;[33] or what divine attributes did Christ capitulate in the incarnation without loss of divinity?[34]

Moreover, Fiddes argues that this idea of kenosis has to be an essential concept from which to construct a doctrine of God for today's world, despite the fact that kenotic theology predicated on divine mutability and passibility is a recent development with little precedent. Unlike other kenoticists, Fiddes spills little ink analysing the development of modern-period kenoticism from nineteenth-century German theology into Anglophone theology in an attempt to make sense of Christ's incarnation as one person with two natures in light of a newly emerging understanding of personality and self-consciousness.[35] Instead, he simply presupposes God's kenotic ontology and from this starting-point differentiates his understanding of God as intrinsically

Studies, 37, no. 2 (1986), 321–352; Kenneth S. Wuest, 'When Jesus Emptied Himself', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 115, no. 458 (1958), 153–158.

31 Without fully aligning with his Holy Saturday kenosis descent, Fiddes appreciates von Balthasar's theory of atonement based upon the formlessness of the Word and Christ's kenotic obedience to descend into hell. See Paul S. Fiddes, 'Review of *The Glory of the Lord Vol. VII: Theology: The New Covenant,* by Hans Urs von Balthasar', *The Expository Times,* 102, no. 11 (1991), 349–350.

32 For a helpful discussion on this, see C. Stephen Evans, 'Kenotic Christology and the Nature of God', in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. by Evans, pp. 190–217 (pp. 200–202).

33 For a clear articulation of these types of kenosis, see Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 118–153.

34 Graham James, 'The Enduring Appeal of a Kenotic Christology', *Theology*, 86 (1983), 7–14.

35 For a recent thorough historical overview of the development of modern kenoticism spreading from the continent to Scotland and England, see David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis and the Construction of a Christian Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), pp. 36–171. Other historical analyses of modern kenosis development include D. G. Dawe, 'A Fresh Look at the Kenotic Christologies', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 15 (1962), 337–349; D. G. Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: A Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 47–176; Friedrich Loofs, 'Kenosis', in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics VII*, ed. by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914), pp. 680–687; Bruce McCormack, 'Kenoticism in Modern Christology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. by Francesca Aran Murphy and Troy A. Stephano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 444–457.

kenotic from that of others, and what it means for God to be kenotic in his triune being.

As suggested, this lack of analysis, together with little serious exegetical work on those scriptural passages which possibly suggest kenosis, weakens Fiddes' account. Ronald Feenstra, for instance, argues for a kenotic Christology that is faithful to Scripture and Chalcedon by adopting an 'omni-unless-freely-and-temporarily choosing to be otherwise for the purpose of incarnation and reconciliation' definition. Moreover, in order to avoid the common objections of traditional theologians, he concludes that all discussion of kenosis and divine attributes *has to* start with testimony of Jesus of Nazareth, not the doctrine of God.[36] This indeed raises a number of interesting possibilities about God's power and logical limitation: if God can bring into being a pregnant virgin then can he also create a married bachelor or make two plus two equal five? Also, there is a broad critique of kenotic Christology by Thomas Weinandy who argues that we should define personhood ontologically instead of psychologically. If that is done, then kenotic problems disappear, such as postulating the incarnation in compositional ways in which the union of Christ's humanity and divinity inevitably reduces his divinity.[37]

Notwithstanding these potential criticisms, Fiddes purports that God *is* necessarily kenotic, but not because of any necessity imposed on him by an external force.[38] Rather his kenosis is rooted in an 'internal necessity' caused by his eternal desire and divine will.[39] God chooses kenosis but not in the sense of choosing between option A and option

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[36] Ronald J. Feenstra, 'A Kenotic Christological Method for Understanding the Divine Attributes', in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. by Evans, pp. 139–165 (pp. 150–164).

[37] Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change? The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River, MA: St Bede's Publications, 1985), pp. 118–123.

[38] As widely known, process theology postulates that God has always had a universe somewhere and has always known limitation because of free acts of creatures. Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 29–30; David R. Griffin, *God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 279–280.

[39] Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 2.1 of *Church Dogmatics,* ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. by T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J. L. M. Haire (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), §28, pp. 257–321.

B.[40] God's forming of covenant with creation means he becomes necessarily kenotic and this is perfectly demonstrated when there is a convergence of creation's responsiveness and the desire of God. This accounts for miracles, as well as emancipation from evil forces, which can often happen if there is a complete alignment of God's will and desire with the free acts and petitions of creation.[41]

There exist other benefits within Fiddes' account of necessary kenosis as suffering love, especially when it comes to articulating divine relations with creation in kenotic terms. Yet, despite these positives, there is still the need for greater development and clarity of Fiddes' model of kenosis in order to arrive at a definition of divine power in kenotic terms which helps explain theologically the spectrum of experience that Christians have when it comes to demonstrations of divine power, or lack thereof. For this, we shall enlist the help of Martensen's kenotic theology.

A Danish Flavoured Kenotic Theology of Suffering Love

Before developing Fiddes' kenotic model through interlocution with Martensen, some further preparatory work needs to be done by way of critical comments on Fiddes' propositions, especially on his notion of divine power. First, is the definition of power as 'suffering love' the only way God exercises power? If no, then what other facets of power sit comfortably with a non-coercive, softly-persuasive idea of the power of suffering love? Other paradigms of omnipotence are predicated upon a strong definition of sovereign and providential divine power, which seems unlikely to be consistent with power as suffering love.

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[40] Fiddes believes that words such as 'choose', 'desire', and 'will' all have their place and so this slightly sets him apart from other necessary kenoticists such as Thomas Oord, who believes that God's kenosis is involuntary because it derives from God's eternal and unchanging nature of love. Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 and 16 March 2016. Cf. Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Press, 2015), pp. 94–95.

[41] The resurrection is the unique and quintessential great miracle that comes from the perfect response of Jesus and the desire of the Father. Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 and 16 March 2016.

If, however, power as suffering love is the only form of divine power, then a corollary, which also applies to discussions on divine omniscience, is that it is not obvious how a divine being who operates power *only* by persuasion can actualise the *parousia* in a way faithful to Scripture if God can only bring it about in co-operation with creation in a non-unilateral way. Also, given that Fiddes focuses most of his 'power of suffering love' account on soteriological matters, it is unclear whether non-coercive suffering love will overcome and finally eradicate diabolical evil, especially if evil, as Fiddes claims, has no ontological status but is rather 'the absence of good' (*privatio boni*) ambiguously expressed as 'nothing' (*nihil*).[42]

Then add into the mix some of Fiddes' early ecclesiological work which unambiguously claims that God can and does *overcome* hostile forces including powers and principalities. Conflict is represented by the symbol of chaotic water and so the exodus and baptism are understood as overcoming the hostile powers that oppress human beings.[43] However, these powers are not demonic but rather this-worldly and political, which means that divine creative power is not battling it out with Satan *per se* but rather emancipating the people of God by leading them out of exilic despair and disillusionment back to Canaan in order to rebuild Zion.[44] Therefore, does this suggest that God *can* act unilaterally when he has to, or that interventionist-causal power has evolved into the power of suffering love as part of the theological drama of God's people, especially this side of Golgotha? Fiddes unquestionably takes the latter option. The problem of evil and suffering can *only* be satisfactorily explained by divine mutability and vulnerability. Whatever the type of theodicy — consolation, story, protest, or freewill

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42 Paul S. Fiddes, 'Something Will Come of Nothing: On a Theology of the Dark Side', in *Challenging to Change: Dialogues with a Radical Baptist Theologian, Essays Presented to Dr Nigel G. Wright on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Pieter J. Lalleman (London: Spurgeon's College, 2009), pp. 87–104 (pp. 94–95); Paul S. Fiddes, 'Tragedy as Rhetoric of Evil', in *Rhetorik des Bösen / The Rhetoric of Evil*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes and Jochen Schmidt (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2013), pp. 165–192 (p. 170); Paul S. Fiddes, 'Christianity, Atonement and Evil', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. by Paul Mosser and Chad Meister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 210–229 (p. 213).

43 Paul S. Fiddes, 'Baptism and Creation', in *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World Through the Baptism of Believers*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1996), pp. 47–67 (pp. 53-55).

44 Fiddes, *The Escape*, pp. 32–36.

— it has to be addressed by the full passibility of the divine and the reality that evil, whether moral or natural, which is totally alien to God, does actually befall him.[45]

So, there remains a consistent challenge to any delineation of kenosis, whether that be christological, trinitarian, or generalised. Moreover, since our primary concern is with kenotic *theology* it is imperative that the biblical witness on this question is given priority over more philosophical approaches to the theodicy question. It does not take long for a student of the New Testament to note the logical challenge a synoptic reading of Jesus's return to Nazareth raises in the face of the various reasonings given by commentators for the lack of miracles performed.[46] Furthermore, the sheer ambiguity of New Testament data, especially in the pertinent gospel texts that display some form of self-limitation of divine prerogatives in the life of Jesus of Nazareth,[47] suggests that there can be limitations placed on God by creation that thwart the divine plan; God is not simply deciding to accede or not to a prayer petition or cry for deliverance.

Therefore, having critically explored some of Fiddes' propositions, let us now articulate Martensen's model of kenotic power found in his Christology and then explore what happens when Fiddes' kenotic definition of omnipotence as suffering love is juxtaposed with that model. After this we will apply the Fiddes-Martensen collocation to the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:5–11, the clearest articulation of kenotic Christology in the New Testament.

Martensen embraced and promulgated a Lutheran theology of divine kenosis, a condescension of God in solidarity with humanity which revealed the capacious nature of divine love.[48] As a scholar of Christology he was, amongst other things, very aware of the historical

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[45] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 152–179.

[46] Mark 6:5–6 cf. Matthew 13:58. Commentators go to great lengths to avoid the natural conclusion that the lack of faith seemed to have limited Jesus's ability to display *dunamis* in Nazareth. See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 550; and Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 367.

[47] See Fee, 'The New Testament', pp. 37–44 for an insightful discussion into these passages.

[48] 'We follow, therefore, the apostle Paul, who represented to himself the incarnation of God as a self-emptying (ἐκένωσεν) of the divine logos, manifesting itself primarily as self-abasement […] (Phil 2:6,7)' (Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, §133, p. 265).

christological heresies to avoid, such as the deficient denial of the distinction of Christ's two natures found in Eutychianism.[49] Like other Lutherans, he intentionally aligned with the early Alexandrian tradition which consequentially lead him to reject any christological trajectories of the Antiochene school, especially Nestorianism and its division of the operations of the human and divine natures of Christ.[50] Instead, he developed unique christological language that spoke of Christ as the one who was 'the fullness of divinity framed in the ring of humanity'.[51]

This originality continued when he suggested, noting a major modification of the earlier work of Thomasius, that the Son has two centres of consciousness: one in heaven and one on earth. Christ grew in his divine consciousness while incarnated on earth and this climaxed during the passion. The major impact of his idea was that the two-fold actuality of the Son was 'not divine and human as on the two-natures model but rather one divine nature simultaneously in full power and kenotic'.[52] Omnipotence is dialectic, a synthesis of full and varying kenotic power:

> In the place of world-creating omnipotence enters the world-vanquishing and world-completing power, the infinite power and fullness of love and holiness in virtue of which the God-man was able to testify "all power is given to me in heaven and earth" (Matthew 28:18).[53]

Moreover, Martensen's claim that the Son has two centres of consciousness also produced the corollary that the incarnation would

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[49] Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, §135, pp. 267–268.

[50] Lee C. Barrett, 'Martensen as Systematic Theologian: The Architectonics of Incarnation', in *Hans Lassen Martensen: Theologian, Philosopher and Social Critic*, ed. by Jon Stewart (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2012), pp. 73–98 (p. 88).

[51] Brown, *Divine Humanity*, p. 60. Brown notes that while the language is unique, the idea expressed was similar to the kenoticism of Thomasius.

[52] Brown, *Divine Humanity*, p. 61.

[53] Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, §136, pp. 268–270. Brown notes that this kenotic model had significant influence on British kenoticists, most probably because Martensen wrote theology as a Bishop, and this influence led British kenoticists to search for a suitable analogy in order to best describe full and kenotic power within the divine nature. Brown's suggestion is to imagine God as the ultimate divine method actor as this explains the divine living in purely human conditions and drawing into the kenotic divine life new experiences. The life of sacrifice, exemplified by his death on the cross, explains Christ's inward struggle as the divine nature accepts social conditioning. This model best communicates, for instance, Jesus's growth in wisdom (Luke 2:52). Brown, *Divine Humanity*, pp. 246–259.

have taken place whether or not the Fall had happened.[54] The Logos has existed from all eternity as the divine God-man and so the main objective of the incarnation was the reunification of God and God's objectification of himself in the created order.[55] Within the context of the Fall of humankind, this re-frames the story of Jesus of Nazareth as a narrative about the elevation of humanity, as well as the descent of God: 'Through the necessary regimen of obedience to the divine, the human nature of Jesus was glorified and can become the font of new life for all of Jesus' brothers and sisters.'[56] This, in turn, connects the resurrected Christ to his church on a cosmological level since Jesus's process of transition from Easter Sunday to the Ascension proleptically announces the future transformation of all reality in the yet-to-be-inaugurated new heavens and new earth.[57]

This succinct description of Martensen's articulation of kenosis demonstrates that it holds much explanatory capacity for God's omnipotence within the current now-and-not-yet, evil-ridden creation. The idea of two lateral strands within the life of God, one permanently in the triune divine life and one kenotically in the incarnation and after, coheres well with the Christ hymn of Philippians 2. Not only does the story of Jesus function as a tale of God's assumption of finitude but it also narrates the ascendancy of humanity, a humanity originally formed to be the temple of the divine. Consequentially, 'Jesus' human nature is eternally receptive to divinity and in Jesus human nature is perfected and reaches its true idea.'[58] Overall, therefore, the kenotic Christ cannot remain unchanged: not only is there an internalising of new experiences for the first time but also, after Christ's exaltation, a continuation through the Spirit's ministry of drawing people to himself.[59]

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54 A view first asserted by John Duns Scotus who is not cited (or known?) by Martensen since Scotus was not well-known outside of the Franciscan order or its theological work.

55 Barrett, 'Martensen as Systematic Theologian', pp. 86–87.

56 Barrett, 'Martensen as Systematic Theologian', p. 89, cf. Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, §146, p. 292.

57 Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, §173–179, pp. 321–329.

58 Barrett, 'Martensen as Systematic Theologian', p. 89.

59 Against the possible charge that Martensen is falling into Monophysitism in which the human Jesus is being remotely driven by the divine Jesus since the divine is superior and more dominant, Martensen (*Christian Dogmatics*, §136, p. 269) clearly articulates the nuanced difference between his account and this heresy: 'Although the Church condemned the monophysite error in the

This narrative movement maps effortlessly onto the Christ hymn's self-emptying descent, death, and exaltation of the Son. The Son descends to earth through kenosis in the heart of God, gives up dominant and full creative power for persuasive influence, and is filled with the Spirit of God which manifests in love, compassion, and miraculous signs (Phil 2:6–7).[60] Upon his crucifixion and death, the ultimate *moral* kenosis of suffering love is exemplified by a fatal rupture in the body-ness of the incarnation and alienating forsakenness within the Trinity (Phil 2:8).[61] God's self-emptying is followed by the exaltation of Christ at his resurrection, a state of plerosis or full self-realisation of the Son, which establishes our redemption (Phil 2:9).[62]

Collectively, the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ allows us theologically to describe the now and not-yet milieu we currently inhabit as a continuum that moves between the poles of kenotic emptiness and the fullness of plerosis. As Scripture, tradition, and experience reiterate, this current time between Pentecost and the full *parousia* of Christ consists of moments of healings and death, forgiveness and resentment, deliverance and torment; all evidence of full

most distinct terms, the current orthodoxy still contains monophysitic elements […] it has been maintained that Christ, during His death struggle on the cross, omnipotently and omnipresently ruled heaven and earth; […] such representations destroy the unity of His person and force us to the supposition of two different series of consciousness in Christ which can never blend and unite […] what this theory lacks is the rightly understood *conception of κένωσις, of the divine self-limitation'* (emphasis mine).

[60] Brown, *Divine Humanity*, pp. 259–261; Keith Ward, 'Cosmos and Kenosis', in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. by Polkinghorne, pp. 152–166 (pp. 161–164).

[61] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 224–250; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. by Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. 23–36; W. H. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), pp. 55–74. Alan Torrance argues, following Rahner, that since the imminent Trinity is the economic Trinity then only Christ can speak into the stark meaninglessness as the one God enters into and takes into himself all aspects of earthly pain and suffering. Alan Torrance, 'Does God Suffer? Incarnation and Impassibility', in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, ed. by Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), pp. 364–368.

[62] The plerosis establishes both the humanward movement to God and the Godward movement to humankind. See P. T. Forsyth, *The Person & Place of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 321–357.

power, under-used power, and no available power.[63] Finally, when the full eschatological consummation happens, as described in Philippians 2:10–11, it is the sublime and supreme henotic moment, an intimate uniting of infinite and finite personhood resulting in the divine and many creaturely persons becoming one,[64] which concludes with theosis, that complete unity with the triune God and sharing in the divine life (2 Peter 1:4), which, according to Keith Ward, is the final telos of God for creation.[65]

Because the death and resurrection of the Son signifies a permanent cross in the being of God, the kenotic journey of Christ is foundational for pathways into trinitarian and generalised kenotic accounts. What is true of kenotic Christology is true of kenotic Trinitarianism and kenotic cosmology.[66] Therefore, to better understand the kenotic reality that conflicts with spiritual powers of evil, extrapolation from the life of Jesus is needed. First, Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, often operates with full power through authoritative usage of his being and instruction (Luke 4:1; 10:21; Mark 4:39; 5:7).[67]

Second, after his death, he plunges the depths of hell in a radical descent of kenosis to have solidarity with the dead and identify with the complete godforsaken-ness and outright evil he wants to defeat and rescue humanity from (Ephesians 4:7–9; 1 Peter 3:19; 4:5–6).[68] Third, following the precedent established by Jesus empowering his disciples over the demonic (Mark 6:7, 13), after his ascension his name was authoritatively used by his apostles to command demonic powers to leave (Acts 16:18).[69] Finally, at the final consummation of the eschaton, there will be the full eradication of all evil — Satan, demons, the beast,

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63 Brown, *Divine Humanity*, pp. 264–266. Brown notes, 'The attempt to follow Christ in this world should not always take the kenotic path. Sometimes [unilateral] power is the right instrument to use' (p. 264).

64 Galatians 2:20.

65 Keith Ward, *The Christian Idea of God: A Philosophical Foundation for Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 191–203.

66 Ward, 'Cosmos and Kenosis', pp. 152–166.

67 Fee, 'The New Testament', pp. 37–39.

68 Edward Oakes, 'The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 9, no. 2 (2007), 188–193.

69 Conversely, we can also see the fluctuation within the kenosis-plerosis continuum where Jesus's name is used without authority with powerless and disastrous results (Acts 19:13–16).

false prophet — initiated by the Son appearing in full glory and power (Revelation 19:11–21) and completed by the great judge on the almighty throne (Revelation 20:7–15).

Theologically, spiritually, and phenomenologically, our current epoch is one which fluctuates between kenosis and plerosis. The reason for the coming of the Son incarnate was to destroy the works of the demonic (1 John 3:8) yet the total eradication of evil is still to happen. In the meantime, we see and experience divine events of emancipation from the diabolical, fuelled by the plerosis of the triune God, that anticipate the exhaustive destruction of evil. Unfortunately, we also see moments of kenotic servitude when humanity and creation remain enslaved to the free-but-always-evil decisions of the demonic. So, because of the nature of enslaved freedom of Satan and his hordes, for which they will be held morally responsible,[70] the power of suffering love will never persuade or influence them to change, thereby only leaving one apocalyptic option: the exhaustive eternal destruction of all evil in the all-consuming henotic and theosic power of the triune God.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to delineate a contemporary theology of divine omnipotence grounded in the kenotic power of God; an incommunicable attribute of the infinite God that helps explain the spiritual now-and-not-yet global reality currently inhabited by humanity. As argued, any theology of divine power has to comprise the spiritual concept of kenosis in order to have congruence with much of the witness of Scripture and experience of real life; one where all creation continues to endure between the kingdom of God and the realm of darkness, and groans in labour pains longing for the day of redemption and renewal (Romans 8:20–23).

The above-given kenotic definition of omnipotence has been contextualised within the dynamics and reality of the experience of evil and its corollaries. Even though the understanding of omnipotence

[70] For a helpful account of the philosophy and theology of Jonathan Edwards concerning the type of freedom a person (or spiritual being) needs to have to be morally culpable, see Steve Holmes, 'Edwards on the Will', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 1, no. 3 (1999), 273–285.

described could offer some explanations to power-related questions in other areas of the Christian life — whether healing, salvation, and so on — the larger theodicy questions are the central testing ground for a satisfactory definition of omnipotence, especially when attributed to an all-good, benevolent deity. As suggested, there are good reasons for using the concept of kenosis to form an instructive framework in order to define and understand divine omnipotence, a nuanced version that shows congruence with the current reality of the now and not yet and the full eradication of evil at the consummation of the eschaton.

Of course, this proffered definition does not answer all questions raised by theodicy, in that while it insists that God *could* bring about the end of suffering and eradicate evil, it does not suggest *when* he will do it, or indeed *why* he has not already done it. Notwithstanding this limitation, however, the alternative definition of kenosis as suggested by Martensen and used to supplement and develop Fiddes' definition of omnipotence as suffering love, holds much potential for further understanding of God's power in the midst of a reality of evil. First and foremost, it coheres well with the descent and glorification of Christ as described in Philippians 2 and this forms a satisfactory *Christian* theology based on the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, which according to the gospels and letters of Paul, was rooted in human weakness (1 Corinthians 1; 2 Corinthians 12). Hence, this offers a theological account of variable demonstrations of power in the gospels but without concluding, as in process theology, necessary kenosis since this does not account for answered prayer and the consummation of the *parousia*.

Second, the use of Martensen's account helps negate a couple of the weaknesses of Fiddes' account. It allows us to articulate how kenosis can be extrapolated from Christology to a trinitarian and generalised concept. The juxtaposition of full and varying kenotic power permits the idea of suffering love to be one *mode* of divine omnipotence, not omnipotence in and of itself. Second, Martensen's dialectic of kenotic power offers a way to further advance Fiddes' kenotic theology by emphasising subjective experience, which includes genuine events of exorcism and deliverance when full kenotic power is at work; this is all a foretaste of the ultimate end of all evil. Overall, this definition of omnipotence goes a considerable way to maintain a

traditional understanding of divine power in the now-and-not-yet milieu of the contemporary reality while helping to address some of the perennial questions of theodicy.