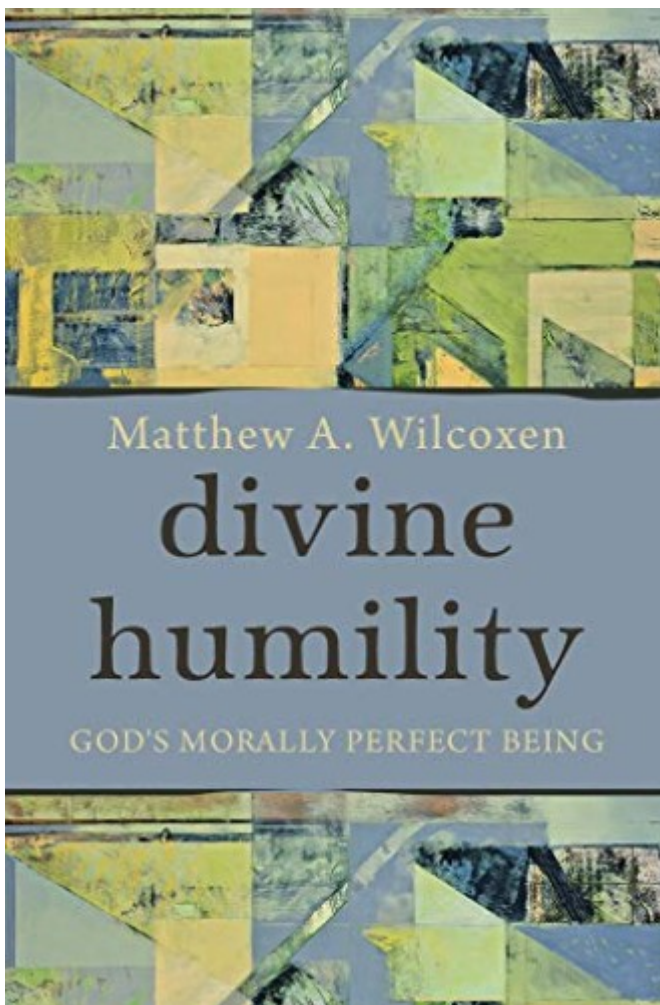


A humble God?

Matthew Wilcoxon traces the idea from Augustine through Katherine Sonderegger.

by [J. Scott Jackson](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Divine Humility

God's Morally Perfect Being

By Matthew A. Wilcoxen

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Christian thinkers have long wrestled with what it means to claim that the God of Jesus Christ is *for us*. In a dense, probing work of constructive theology, Matthew A. Wilcoxen asks: What if *humility* best names the character of the morally perfect one who “is always and already oriented toward his creature”? Might this concept help illuminate the unity between God’s transcendence and immanence? The project is ambitious, as the portrayal of God as humble is a minority report in the history of doctrine. It situates Wilcoxen somewhere in the spectrum between classical theists, who stress God’s self-subsistence, and revisionists, who emphasize God’s openness and relatedness to creation.

Wilcoxen begins with a whirlwind survey of modern philosophical challenges to the reality and knowability of God. Kant claimed that God, because of the limits of reason, is not objectively knowable. Feuerbach argued that all notions of a transcendent, beneficent deity stem from projections of human ideals and needs. Heidegger shifted the conversation away from what had riddled Western metaphysics for centuries—the nature of being itself—toward the concrete existence of the individual knower.

As a theological realist, Wilcoxen argues that the divine being is truly knowable in revelation. His terse account of Jean-Luc Marion’s postmetaphysical account of God as pure gift and agapic love “beyond being” shortchanges the French Catholic philosopher a bit, it seems to me. A more fruitful dialogue between these positions should be possible.

Many have seen the framing of humility as a virtue as morally dubious, and Wilcoxen does acknowledge this problem. Nietzsche pointed out the passive-aggressive dimension of this quality, by which the weak in their resentment of the strong seek to clip the wings of human achievement. And feminists and liberation theologians have objected that counsels of humility legitimate oppression. Wilcoxen recalls Valerie Saiving Goldstein’s retort to Reinhold Niebuhr: naming pride as the besetting sin with humility as its antidote may speak prophetically to men in power, but it cannot name the experiences of women struggling to realize the fruits of their full humanity.

Wilcoxon also offers a brief but illuminating genealogy of humility in Christian tradition. Such early divines as Basil and Athanasius embraced this virtue, but over time the scope of humility was progressively narrowed. The Rule of St. Benedict equates humility with a monk's obedience to the abbot. Thomas Aquinas devotes only one question of his *Summa* to the topic, treating it as a subset of temperance that pertains to the realm of created human nature, not divine grace.

To recover the notion of humility, Wilcoxon seeks to redefine it with solid grounding in scripture and tradition. Taking the incarnation of Christ as paradigmatic, he construes humility as the epitome, rather than the antithesis, of strength and magnanimity.

The bellwether of the project, "the theologian of humility par excellence," is Augustine, and Wilcoxon is most engaging when he is plumbing the African bishop's myriad writings on the subject. Christological reflection has long held Jesus' human obedience to the Father as the paradigm of humility, but Augustine says more than this. Humility, Augustine holds, is the Christian's grateful joy, for through it they participate in God's mysterious, self-emptying gift of God's self in the incarnation and crucifixion. Humility enfleshes divine love.

In the 20th century, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner seeded a renewal of theology through their assertion that the economic and immanent lives of the Trinity are one: that who God *is* in essence is what God *does* in the world, in revelation and salvation. Wilcoxon accepts this dictum, but he cautions that it can lead to error.

Barth, for instance, reads the humble obedience of the incarnate Jesus back into the eternal triune relations, to odd effect. Wilcoxon writes, "Barth concludes that obedience itself is an eternal, inter-Trinitarian reality. The result is a kind of subordination within the Godhead." Among other problems, this construction—against Barth's intention—seems to imply that three volitional agents constitute a communal life in God, a claim that social trinitarians explicitly embrace but which renders the divine unity problematic.

Wilcoxon draws a thread from Augustine to Katherine Sonderegger's new systematics, the second volume of which will be published this fall. With Augustine, he returns to the formative event of the covenant, God's revelation to Moses in the burning bush at Horeb (Exod. 3:14-15). Christian theologians have long pointed to the naming of the unnameable as "I am who I am" as the lodestar of monotheist

faith. Less noted is what Augustine discerns as a second self-naming of the deity at this theophany: God is the one who is *merciful*, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Augustine does not claim that the transcendent, eternal, self-sufficient God is merciful only in the economy of salvation. Rather, God is merciful intrinsically. God *just is* full of compassion and care for creatures.

How do these two namings of the one God hang together? Augustine never fully answers that question. What bridges the two dimensions is the mystery of divine humility itself, though “he does not spell out with precision what it would mean doctrinally to attribute humility to God.” This ambiguity is “theologically generative,” as becomes clear in Augustine’s exposition of the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5–11, which offers no clear demarcation between the divine form the Son possesses in eternity and the form of the servant assumed in his incarnation and death on the cross. The key point is that for Augustine, humility is not, first and foremost, embodied in the servility of the inferior but in the self-abasement of the superior.

Wilcoxon credits Sonderegger with helping to clarify and extend this Augustinian contribution to theology. Against critics of theological realism, Sonderegger insists that “being” is not predicated in the same way for God and created beings, as if they were on some sort of continuum. Her notion of God’s noncompetitive coexistence with creatures is rooted in “the conviction that God’s being itself is not remote from but, rather, known within creaturely reality,” Wilcoxon writes. The burning bush, a sign of the dual character of the incarnation, in one sense is and in another sense is not the Lord. Because God transcends all categories of our being, without contradicting them, God is perfectly free to be savingly present with us.

Crucially, for Sonderegger, this being of God with and for us in revelation *just is* the very being of God in itself. This existence of the one God with creation is that of humility, which pertains not just to the Son but to the triune life as a whole. According to Sonderegger, the best metaphor for expressing God’s relationship to creation is neither will nor cause but rather presence—an enlivening, dynamic, and personal energy. Similarly, Sonderegger reconceives the traditional perfection of omnipotence as “holy humility.” As Wilcoxon puts it, “her version of humility is not the restriction of power, but the sheer exercise of it.”

How this constructive position might ramify throughout a host of theological conundrums—those regarding the character of divine providence and the problem of evil, for example—is not explored here. No doubt, as with Sonderegger’s theology, so with Wilcoxon: we can expect more to come.