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A critical assessment of Bruce L. McCormack's christological proposal

Alex Irving (ID)

St Mellitus College, London, UK
Email: alex.irving@stmellitus.ac.uk

Abstract

Bruce L. McCormack's recent christological proposal intends to move beyond the apparent impasse in theological discourse between God's aseity and God's world relation. In describing the second mode of divine being as personally constituted by receptivity to the human Jesus of Nazareth without losing the *logos asarkos*, McCormack's proposed christological innovation offers a way to consider relation to the world as proper to God through the Son, without absolute pronobeity coming to dominate in the doctrine of God. This being said, his christological proposal, as it stands, implies both that election is antecedent to triunity and that the person of Jesus of Nazareth is antecedent to the act of the incarnation. With the former comes the problem of sequence in the priority of divine act over divine being. With the latter comes the problem of offering a unified account of two agencies. As such, while ontological receptivity continues to hold significant possibilities for the doctrine of God, it requires more careful coordination to the relation of passive generation as such.

If that which God reveals is God's own self, then God's relation to the world described by the doctrine of revelation must be proper to the self that is revealed. As John Webster puts it, if revelation is indeed s*elf*-revelation then 'the self-communicative movement in which God makes himself present to us and for us is not alien to his being'.[1] If not, then this relation to the world is other than the self who reveals and so would be in addition to God as such. Two alternative consequences would follow from such a mode of understanding: either immutability would have to be surrendered to allow this addition to God to have actual significance for theological ontology such that no metaphysical gap opens between God in the act of revelation and God as such; or immutability is retained, and the relation to the world is treated as a contingent property with no constitutive force upon God as such, rendering a God 'behind' God's world relation. If, however, the act of revelation is *self*-revelation without remainder, and if God is indeed

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[1]John Webster, 'Translator's Introduction', in Eberhard Jüngel (ed.), *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth: A Paraphrase* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p. xiii.

unchanging, then relation to the world must be proper (i.e. not incidental) to the being of God. But how could such a statement be made without emptying the category of the immanent Trinity wholly into the triune economy?

With his recent christological proposal, Bruce McCormack reaches for a theological ontology in which divine being is eternally self-determined to be for us, without entailing a process of teleological becoming in the fulfilment of that self-determination.[2] Such a theological ontology pursues a doctrine of God which does not proceed from the foundation of an antecedent metaphysic (e.g. *actus purus*), but only of God in 'God's lived relation to the world in Jesus Christ' (*actus purus et singularis*).[3] McCormack, though, is sensitive to the problem of absolute pronobeity (i.e. God's being *for us* without remainder). For this reason, trinitarian protology remains an important part of his theological ontology through reaching towards the equiprimordiality of election and triunity, alongside a qualified retention of the *logos asarkos*.[4] The christological mechanism by which McCormack has attempted to accomplish this end is ontological receptivity. By this mechanism, McCormack intends to set the christological conditions within which God's triunity is established protologically alongside God's eternal self-determination to be *for* creation through the incarnate Son. In so doing, McCormack has sharpened the Christology that underlies such a theological ontology.

This essay raises two critical questions about this christological proposal. First, does the proposal adequately unite human agency and divine agency? Second, does it fall short of the attempt to think of triunity and election without sequence in their equiprimordiality? In addressing these questions, I suggest that, while much of the discussion following the publication of McCormack's essay, 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', has addressed issues within the doctrine of God as such (divine freedom, the relation of God's action *ad extra* and God's being, the relations between the immanent and economic Trinity, etc.), McCormack's most recent contribution sharpens the focus on Christology, such that it is decisions made in this locus that determine his theological ontology.[5] This essay examines the christological conditions by which McCormack has sought to explicate the actuality of God's eternal self-determination to be God for us without emptying

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[2]Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: CUP, 2021).

[3]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 8.

[4]In this, McCormack has sought to modify his position relative to earlier accounts of the Trinity as a function of election. Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 458–68; idem, 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 92–110.

[5]For examples of responses to 'Grace and Being', see e.g. Kevin Hector, 'God's Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7/3 (2005), pp. 246–61; Paul D. Molnar, 'The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin W. Hector', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8/3 (2006), pp. 294–306; idem, 'Can the Electing God be God Without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionphilosophie* 49/2 (2007), pp. 199–222; idem, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (London: T&T Clark, 2017); Edwin Chr. van Driel, 'Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60/1 (2007), pp. 45–61; George Hunsinger, 'Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth', *Modern Theology* 24/2 (2008), pp. 179–98; Aaron T. Smith, 'God's Self-Specification: His Being is his Electing', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62/1 (2009), pp. 1–25.

trinitarian protology wholly into pronobeity. In this connection, it sets the critical groundwork from which a re-orientation of ontological receptivity to the Father–Son relation as such may follow.

McCormack's christological proposal

McCormack's intention is to articulate a Christology that provides the foundation upon which God as such (i.e. God considered aside from the eternal act of self-determination to be for us) is eliminated from theological discourse.[6] In this connection, any antecedent metaphysical commitments regarding absolute being, upon which Christian theism might be established, are to give way to the history of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the frame of reference from which McCormack argues that the two-nature Christology of Chalcedon is incapable of treating God the Son and Jesus as one subject in any consistent or realistic (as opposed to figurative) way. So far as McCormack is concerned, the intention of Chalcedon is right *vis-à-vis* the unity of the composite christological subject who is both divine and human. Yet the conditions on which it sets out to fulfil that intention are flawed *vis-à-vis* its guiding theological ontology, which resists any human operation being *actually* attributed to God the Son: 'Human properties cannot be predicated of a Logos understood to be simple and impassible'.[7] Within the categories of Chalcedon, the human nature can have no constitutive force on the person in whom the two natures subsist, if that person (viz., the impassable Logos) is unable to be the subject of human actions and experiences, resulting in a *de facto* two-subject Christology:

> The truth is that the Chalcedonian Definition *as it stands* can never succeed in producing the single-subject Christology for which it strove with might and main. It can never succeed because a *real* relation of Jesus to the 'person of the union' can never be allowed so long as one remains committed to the idea of impassibility. But in the absence of this real relation, the unity of the 'person' would always remain in doubt and the tendency to regard Jesus on occasion as an independent subject (and indeed, a hypostasis) in his own right would prove inescapable.[8]

This is the putative aporia of Chalcedon, in which its guiding theological ontology makes it impossible to identify this human agency as the agency of God the Son.[9] The result of this failure is the neglected husk of a stunted human agent of particular actions (i.e. suffering and dying),[10] and the expression of the chastened Nestorius lurking 'in the heart of every Cyrilline theologian'.[11] Effectively, McCormack's critique of

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[6]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 6, 286–88. See also Bruce L. McCormack, 'Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63/2 (2010), pp. 203–24.

[7]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 31.

[8]Ibid., p. 64.

[9]Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 205. Darren Sumner offers a similar perspective, describing this as the 'identity problem' inherent in the Chalcedonian formula. Darren O. Sumner, *Karl Barth and the Incarnation: Christology and the Humility of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), pp. 3–4, 17–69, especially pp. 31–32, 38–39.

[10]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 257; Sumner, *Karl Barth and the Incarnation*, p. 68.

[11]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 64; cf. idem, *Orthodox and Modern*, pp. 205–6. This is a tendency that McCormack observes in classical Reformed Christology; see Bruce L. McCormack, '"With

the composite hypostasis *as it stands in an unreformed Chalcedonianism* is something like a Christology of mixed relations within which the human Jesus is constituted by his relation to the Logos, but the Logos bears no such reciprocal constitution by Jesus (i.e. the human is in real relation to the divine, but the divine in a merely figurative relation to the human). As a result, the operative theological ontology in which the simple and impassible Logos cannot be the recipient of the human actions and experiences of Jesus, and the mode of operation of the human nature is, consequently, treated as that of a self-activating subject.[12]

However, McCormack has come neither to bury nor to praise Chalcedon. McCormack's goal is to reconceive of theological ontology upon the ground of the actuality of the one composite christological subject. If the second mode of divine being really (as opposed to figuratively) is the subject of the history of Jesus of Nazareth, then theological ontology cannot rest easy with an antecedent metaphysic of pure actuality. Classical kenoticism sought to address this in the form of depotentia-tion: God the Son's self-surrender of the relative attributes of divinity so to be capable of receiving the human act of being. For McCormack this is impossible: God's act in the world cannot be at a point of division from God's divinity.[13] For McCormack, the solution involves not divesting the Son of his divinity so he can receive humanity, *but in divesting theological ontology from an antecedent metaphysic that makes such receptivity impossible in the first place*. In this connection, the kenotic act of Philippians 2:7 consists in the second mode of divine being always making the humility and obedience of Jesus to be his own.[14] There is a true human mode of operation which the Son receives into his own identity.

> Kenosis, as I understand the term, refers to that *ontological receptivity* in relation to the human Jesus by which the identity of the Son is established in eternity (as the personal property of the second 'person' of the Trinity, we might say), and the unity of the Christological subject is secured in time. Insofar as ontological receptivity makes the Son to be an experiencing participant in the suffering and death of Jesus, the gap opened up traditionally between the natures of Christ by a prior commitment to simplicity and impassibility (so that suffering and death are confined to the human nature alone) is overcome. *Kenosis*, then, is just this:

Loud Cries and Tears": The Humanity of the Son in the Epistle to the Hebrews', in Richard Bauckham et al. (eds), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 44–5.

[12]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 64.

[13]Ibid., p. 99.

[14]So far as McCormack sees it, the consistency between this and the notion of divestment is of a piece with his broader reversal of Logos Christology as such. That is to say, the Logos does not act through and/or upon the human Jesus, but the Logos takes to himself the acts of the human Jesus. For McCormack, it is this act of receptivity that is the self-emptying of the Logos. Ostensibly, this is held in the context of the self-determination of the eternal God to be a subject *in time*. See Bruce McCormack, 'Kenoticism in Modern Theology', in Francesca Murphy (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 444–58. McCormack styles this as a *Reformed* version of kenosis, inasmuch as he judges Reformed Christology to deny the communication of attributes across natures, through which he attempts to assert both that no surrender of divine properties is necessary and that the integrity of the human act of being of Jesus is maintained (rather than ascribing the agency of the christological subject to the kenotic Logos). See McCormack, '"With Loud Cries and Tears"', pp. 39, 50–51. In this sense, the Christology is kenotic in that the Son wills to not exert his own act of being, but rather to receive the act of being of the human Jesus. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 263–64.

that ontological receptivity on the part of the eternal Son that makes the humility and obedience of Jesus to be his 'own' – not merely in a figurative sense but in a sense that makes it clear that the subject of the human attitude and activity is *also* the eternal Son.[15]

Several important moves are being made in this dense paragraph.

First, it is a kenotic christology that conceives of the kenotic act as assumption rather than divestment. McCormack considers this a Reformed version of kenoticism inasmuch as it coheres with the Reformed emphasis on the *unimpaired integrity* of the two natures of Christ after their union in one person.[16] However, McCormack does not reject the Lutheran *genus majesticum* on the grounds of the interpenetration of the natures, as did the Reformed (on which grounds they also rejected the *genus tapeinocticum*). Instead, McCormack rejects the substantialist metaphysics that produced it (i.e. the natures as constituted by essential predicates, which are communicated to the person of the union for the Reformed or to the human nature for the Lutherans). Classical kenoticism included the divestment of relative properties of divinity (e.g. omnipotence, omniscience) so that the Son could act as the mode of existence of a genuinely anhypostatic human nature. The problem with all such Christologies of divestment is that it 'makes something less than God to be the redeemer'.[17] By contrast, kenosis as receptivity entails that the second mode of divine being is able to receive as his own the actions and experiences of Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, the unity of the christological subject is secured by the *uniting of agencies*. However, this is not the uniting of agencies as a coordination of two sets of activities communicated to the person of the union. Nor is it the unity of the christological subject by the human Jesus' receptivity to the activity of the Logos. Instead, McCormack's unified christological subject is constituted by two agents who unite their distinct agencies to form a single activity.[18] In this connection, the classical *communicatio operationum* has been replaced with the *assumptio* of operations which includes both a divine agent and a human agent, with the agency of the latter being received into the former.[19] The unity of act that results is the one work of the God–human, with the second mode of divine being receiving to be his own everything that is undertaken and experienced by the human agent. It is in this sense that McCormack recommends dispensing the Chalcedonian affirmation of two natures but retaining the language of hypostatic union: a singular entity of both divine and human agency that are unified as one activity through the ontological receptivity of the Son.[20] Such a unified christological subject continues to have two minds and two wills, unified by the divine agent's kenotic act of taking to himself the action and experiences of the human agent. This is of a piece with McCormack's broader project to operate with a theological ontology wholly derived from God's lived relation to the world in Jesus Christ, because such a proposition would be untenable if impassibility were to obtain. This allows McCormack to reverse the logic of an anhypostatic Christology. The performative agent of the history of Jesus of Nazareth is not the Logos, but the human Jesus who is empowered by the

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[15]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 19.
[16]Ibid., p. 249.
[17]Ibid., p. 99.
[18]Ibid., p. 12.
[19]Ibid., pp. 252–3.
[20]Ibid., pp. 254–5.

Spirit to undertake his mission.[21] This does not, however, entail the instrumentalisation of the Logos, because it belongs to the Son as the second mode of divine being to be *teleologically* orientated towards incarnation, as is elaborated upon in the following point.

Third, by this receptivity to the human agent, the personal identity of the second mode of divine being is established in eternity (and, hence, the form of this receptivity is 'ontological'). There is no second mode of divine being in abstraction from the history of Jesus of Nazareth: the hypostasis of the Son is who he is by merit of his unique receptivity to *this* human being. There are a number of components to this move.

(i) It is a function of the intersection of the doctrine of election and the doctrine of God. As is well known, on McCormack's reading, the significance of Barth's relocation of the doctrine of election within the doctrine of God is that there is no indeterminate God *in se*; no self-enclosed triune being to be the ground of contingent acts *ad extra*. God assigns to himself his way of being for us.[22] As the personal identity of the second mode of divine being is established by this act of receptivity to the human Jesus, there can be no undetermined God behind the decision to be God for us (i.e. no God as such); for McCormack, God has his triune being *in* the act of self-determination to be God for us in Jesus Christ.[23] Christologically speaking, if God is eternally self-constituted in orientation to creation through the Son, then the eternal generation is never in abstraction from incarnation.[24]

(ii) Therefore, there is a teleological relation between eternal generation and incarnation: 'eternal begetting is teleologically ordered to incarnation'.[25] Given that there is no God as such behind the turn to the world in Jesus Christ, the personal identity of the Son is always towards the incarnation. In other words, the mission of the Son is proper to the procession of the Son.[26] McCormack parses this out in sequential terms of 'anticipation' and 'fulfilment'.[27] The Son is unfleshed until the incarnation takes place in history,[28] but the Son is never unfleshed in abstraction from the teleological realisation of the self-determination of God to receive the human act of being of Jesus of Nazareth.[29] It is important to note, however, that McCormack understands this in the form of reading the mission back into the procession (such a proposition is unavoidable if the Son's personal identity is *constituted* by receptivity to the human Jesus).

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[21]Ibid., pp. 250–51.
[22]McCormack, 'Grace and Being', p. 98.
[23]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 286–8; idem, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 266; idem, 'The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism', in Bruce L. McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 210.
[24]McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 459–61; idem, '"With Loud Cries and Tears"', pp. 47–8.
[25]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 257, cf. pp. 211, 253, 258, 286.
[26]Ibid., p. 253.
[27]Ibid., pp. 11–12.
[28]Ibid., pp. 282–3.
[29]Ibid., p. 258.

(iii) There is no *logos asarkos* without remainder; the *logos asarkos* is always *logos incarnandus*.[30] If the relation of eternal generation and incarnation is teleological, then the *logos asarkos* is always towards incarnation. This is not to say that the Logos is always *logos ensarkos*. It is not that the Son is always incarnate; it is that the Son is always determined for incarnation. On these grounds, McCormack retains a distinction between the *logos incarnandus* and the *logos incarnatus*.[31]

(iv) The second mode of divine being is always constituted by the history of Jesus such that the relation of Jesus is intrinsic to him, rendering the second mode of divine being eternally a composite 'hypostasis'.[32] Far from McCormack's proposal emptying the history of Jesus of significance, Jesus' life carries person-forming significance for the Logos! Again, this is a function of the intersection of election and the doctrine of God: if God is the eternal determination to adopt humanity as his children through the incarnate Son, it follows that the human act of being of Jesus of Nazareth has person-constituting force for the Son.[33] If the identity of the second mode of divine being is eternally constituted by ontological receptivity to Jesus (which it is if the Logos is never *asarkos* without remainder), then the identification of the second mode of divine being by Jesus is true 'even before the actual uniting occurs'.[34] As such, McCormack holds that the anticipation of the incarnation is 'identity-constituting' for the second mode of divine being.[35] It is in this connection, that the identity of the second mode of divine being is always and eternally Jesus in anticipation of the receptivity to Jesus that will take place in time.

It is the Son's 'ontological receptivity' that makes the eternal *act* of 'identification' on the part of the Logos with the human Jesus to be constitutive of his identity as the second 'person' of the Trinity, even before the actual uniting occurs…. The 'Son' has as the 'Son' an eternal determination for incarnation and, therefore, for uniting through 'receptivity'. He is, in himself, 'receptive'.[36]

In this way, ontological receptivity embraces the intention of the *genus tapeinocticum* but without the substance metaphysics of essential properties: it is always proper to the Son to have the obedience and humiliation of Jesus as his own.

(a) If the identity of the second mode of divine being is constituted in eternity by receptivity to the human Jesus, then, by necessity, the *anhypostasia* must be repudiated without remainder. The *anhypostasia* affirms that the human nature of Jesus has no personal actuality other than that of the Son; the Son gives the human nature actuality in his own hypostasis. The whole point of the doctrine is to deny that the human nature of Jesus is a self-activating subject aside from the incarnation. Simply, for McCormack, the human cannot be hypostasised in

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[30]McCormack, 'Grace and Being', p. 104; idem, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 253–4.
[31]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 282–3.
[32]Ibid., pp. 214, 253.
[33]Ibid., p. 253.
[34]Ibid., p. 252.
[35]Ibid., p. 10.
[36]Ibid., p. 252.

another and retain its own act of being.[37] McCormack explicitly departs from Barth on this issue.

> The problem was created by [Barth's] affirmation of the *an-* and *enhypostasia* in its traditional form. The human 'subsists' not in itself (as an independent existent) but 'directly in and with the one God in the mode of existence of his eternal Son and Logos'. The problem with affirming this piece of ancient Christology is that it demands that the Logos be understood as the 'acting subject' of all that is done by the God–human; the ancient active–passive paradigm for relating the divine and human in Christ is built directly into it.[38]

For McCormack, to affirm the anhypostatic character of the human nature is to render the human nature as the passive instrument of the Logos, rendering impossible both a genuine human act of being and so disqualifying its ontological significance for the person of the Logos.

Critical questions
Divine freedom and pronobeity

Any treatment of McCormack's proposal must grapple with its ground-breaking possibilities for theological ontology. McCormack's proposed Christology points beyond the apparent impasse between God's aseity and God's world relation. As his 'mild critique' of Robert Jenson and Eberhard Jüngel suggests, McCormack is sensitive to the problem of absolute pronobeity (i.e. God *for us* without remainder).[39] For example, in McCormack's assessment Jenson's actualism renders the non-transitive relation of generation an eschatological reality alone, ultimately indistinguishable from the transitive mission.[40] The result of this is the abrogation of God *in se* and the determination of divine being as an eschatological reality alone (because it is envisaged as being produced by the divine economy) whereupon divine unity can only be parsed out in social categories (because unity predicated of the one eternal being has been ruled out by making temporality and relations *ad extra* constitutive of that being, whereupon the only ground of unity left is that of will).[41] Against this, McCormack insists upon the actuality of the *logos asarkos* (even in teleological orientation towards incarnation through the doctrine of election). In this way, the history of God's activity in the world is made proper to the being of God as an act of God's self-determination, ostensibly without surrendering trinitarian protology. Against the absolute pronobeity of the most Hegelian of interpretations of Barth's doctrine of election, McCormack insists upon the actuality of the *logos asarkos*. Against the absolute metaphysical aseity of the most Gollwitzian interpretation of Barth's account of divine freedom, McCormack insists that the God–world relation is eternally proper to God as a function of his self-determined being for us. Ontological receptivity is the christological mechanism that describes how it is that the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth is proper to God *as a function of God's Lordship over his own existence.*

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[37]Ibid., pp. 118–9.

[38]Ibid., p. 118. McCormack cites Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1974), IV/2, pp. 49, 70.

[39]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 14–5, 177, 186.

[40]Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 140–41.

[41]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 14–5.

However, does the teleological relation between the *logos asarkos* and the *logos ensarkos*, whereupon the *logos asarkos* is always and essentially *logos incarnandus* empty the notion of divine freedom from any intelligible content? I think not. For Paul Molnar, for example, to assert God's triunity in any form of reciprocal relation to God's self-determination to be God for us dilutes the immanent Trinity as a function of the will-to-covenant.[42] Thus, the proposition that the *logos asarkos* is essentially *logos incarnandus* ties the immanent to the economic Trinity, thereby rendering creation necessary to God.[43] For Molnar, divine freedom requires that God *in se* be without remainder. God's ontological independence is found in the integrity of God as such (i.e. without relation to us). Thus conceived, divine freedom is the ontological independence of God *in se*, which is the necessary basis of his free actions towards us, and from which God's acts can be understood as free (i.e. self-moved) and gratuitous.[44] Because it is only as God is ontologically free from us that he can be free for us, Molnar establishes the following counterfactual as a necessary proposition for theological speech: 'God exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and would so exist even if there had been no creation, reconciliation or redemption'.[45]

Given the contours of his proposal, McCormack cannot conceive of trinitarian protology in the form of absolute ontological independence. Even so, trinitarian protology remains an important part of his proposal in the form of the *logos asarkos*. As such, he must have another conception of divine freedom up and running. For McCormack, God is *actus purus et singularis*[46]: there is no potentiality in God to be other than that which he is which is the particular happening of his self-determination.[47] God's freedom is the freedom to be the God he has eternally determined to be, namely, God for us.[48] There is no act that is *necessary* to God other than that which he has determined (i.e. God is not compelled from beyond himself to be constituted in his relation to us, but is the consequence of his Lordship over his existence).[49] In other words, freedom cannot be predicated of God and creatures in univocal fashion. Its intention with regards to God is *sui generis* because created beings – precisely as those who are brought into being – cannot be characterised by an ontology in which act and being are equally basic.[50] As such, McCormack's proposal maintains freedom in as far as God is not determined by anything outside of himself, but this is never freedom aside from the act of his self-determination to be for us. However, whether

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[42]Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 97–8.

[43]Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine*, p. 99; idem, 'Can the Electing God be God Without Us?', pp. 74–75; idem, 'The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom', pp. 294–306.

[44]Molnar, 'The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom', p. 300–02.

[45]Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine*, p. 99; idem, 'The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom', pp. 295–6.

[46]McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 272; idem, 'The Actuality of God', p. 213; idem, 'Let's Speak Plainly: A Response to Paul Molnar', *Theology Today* 67/1 (2010), p. 60.

[47]McCormack, 'The Actuality of God', p. 215; idem, 'Missions and Processions', in Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas J. White, O.P. (eds), *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic–Protestant Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), p. 124.

[48]McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, pp. 272–3; See also, Hector, 'God's Triunity and Self-Determination'.

[49]McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 271.

[50]A point McCormack makes in response to Hunsinger's proposition that the triune being precedes God's work *ad extra*. McCormack, 'Election and the Trinity', pp. 117, 134–5.

McCormack's proposal does, in fact, secure that equiprimordiality between act and being is addressed in what follows.

Election and triunity

Does McCormack's proposal establish election as prior to triunity? Certainly, at one time McCormack held that Barth's reorientation of the doctrine of election entailed that triunity is a 'function' of election.[51] On this reading, divine intentionality is antecedent to divine processions.[52] Clearly, unmodified such a proposition could be held as establishing a divine subject behind the trinitarian life,[53] or conceptualising God as an abstract determining thing behind the triune being.[54] However, McCormack's thinking has evolved over time, and he now describes the relation between election and Trinity as one of eternal simultaneity,[55] with the divine being eternally in the act of self-determination to be for us.[56] While McCormack now eschews the description of triunity as a function of election, the central premise remains that God's self-determination to be for us is eternal, such that God does not stand behind that decision as a subject with alternative options.[57] What has changed is that McCormack now seeks to explicate that premise in a way that reaches for the 'the elimination of all "before and after" thinking with respect to the relation of election and triunity, which requires that the divine self-constitution as triune and the divine election be understood as the same event'.[58]

However, it is not self-evident that McCormack's christological proposal does indeed eliminate the category of sequence within the relation of election and triunity. The issue, though, is not that of an indeterminate eternal subject settling on a purposive mode of being (i.e. a divine identity behind the determination to be God for us). The point of McCormack's christological proposal is to exclude a conception of divine aseity that is constructed aside from the actuality of God's self-constitution as a being towards us. That is, to establish theological ontology on the history of Jesus of Nazareth, theology cannot speak of divine being aside from this self-determination. Even so, I think that the problem of sequence has not been wholly addressed. The problem is that if the eternal personal identity of the Son is established in relation to the human Jesus, then logical priority must be given to the mission over the procession.

For example, if the humility of the Son is only that of the human Jesus which the Son takes to be his own, then this humility is not proper to the Son as such, *but is only true*

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[51]McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 266; idem, 'Grace and Being', pp. 98–9.

[52]McCormack, 'Grace and Being', pp. 101–4; idem, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 217; idem, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 257. The proposition that Barth's theological ontology considers divine intentionality to be antecedent to divine triunity has been expressed in Paul M. Collins, *Trinitarian Theology West and East: Karl Barth, The Cappadocian Fathers and John Zizioulas* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 84–5.

[53]As is the criticism offered by Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 175–81.

[54]Hector, 'God's Trinity and Self-Determination'.

[55]See also Hector, 'God's Trinity and Self-Determination'; Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), p. 81; Christophe Chalamet, 'No Timelessness in God: On Differing Interpretations of Karl Barth's Theology of Eternity, Time and Election', *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie*, Supplement Series 4 (2010), pp. 21–37.

[56]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 284–5; idem, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 265; idem, 'The Actuality of God', p. 210.

[57]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 284.

[58]Ibid.

of the Son in receptivity to the human Jesus. The economic humility is not grounded in anything beyond itself. Now, it might be objected that the Son is personally constituted by eternally receiving the human act of being to himself as a function of the simultaneity between election and triunity (and so it is proper to the Son as such). But, if this is so, then why should it be the *Son* that is so determined? Why, for example, should it not be the Spirit? Unless the receptivity to the human Jesus of Nazareth is *ad approprium* to eternal generation itself, the Son's ontological receptivity to Jesus of Nazareth either appears arbitrary and additional to the Son or else becomes maximal in identifying the Son as Son. In the case of McCormack's christological proposal, the latter appears to be the case. For example, in his critical analysis of the theme of kenosis in Barth's later Christology, specifically his treatment of Barth's proposition that 'humility is grounded in the being of God',[59] McCormack offers the following explanation:

> What is happening here, I think, is that Barth is reading the lived relation of the Son to the Father characteristic of the Son's mission in time back onto the eternal processions – given that humility and obedience are grounded in the being of God.[60]

To say the least, this is an illuminating interpretative decision on the part of McCormack. The flow of Barth's thought in §59 of the *Church Dogmatics* seems to be going in the opposite direction: Jesus' human obedience is derivative from the Son's eternal obedience. God is both fully himself as the one who commands and as the one who obeys such that humility and obedience are proper to the second mode of divine being as such which is given economic realisation in the obedience of Jesus.

> If in faith in Jesus Christ we are ready to learn, to be told, what Godhead, or the divine nature, is, we are confronted with the revelation of what is and always will be to all other ways of looking and thinking of a mystery, and indeed a mystery which offends. The mystery reveals to us that for God it is just as natural to be lowly as it is to be high, to be near as it is to be far, to be little as it is to be great, to be abroad as it is to be at home. Thus that when in the presence and action of Jesus Christ in the world created by Him […] in the form of a servant, He is not untrue to Himself, but genuinely true to Himself, to the freedom which is that of His love. He does not have to choose to do this, He is free in relation to it. We are therefore dealing with the genuine article when He does choose and do this. Even in the form of a servant, which is the form of his presence and action in Jesus Christ, we have to do with God himself in his true deity. The humility in which He dwells and acts in Jesus Christ is not alien to him but proper to Him.[61]

The opposition of freedom and choice suggests that, for Barth, the Son does not have to do anything other than be himself in his economic obedience. The form of the servant is not an addition to the Son as such. On this reading, the incarnate obedience of the Son in Jesus is proper to the Son as divine being in begotten mode: the procession contains the mission.

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[59]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, p. 193.
[60]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, p. 10.
[61]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, pp. 192–3.

By contrast, McCormack's proposal that Barth can only say this as he is reading the missions back into the processions adds that it is proper to the Son as *Son eternally constituted by the human Jesus of Nazareth*. For McCormack, this is a function of election: in determining his own being, God makes the content of his self-determination to be essential to his being, with that content being God for us as Jesus in his obedience to death.[62] There is no divine being behind this act as God is 'being in the act of electing'.[63] However, for McCormack, there is a 'logical priority' given to the mission, such that the second mode of divine being is defined in relation to it, rather than the mission defined in relation to the second mode of divine being.[64] What could this logical priority mean if not that the mission in some ways configures the procession in as much as it constitutes divine being in begotten mode? This is the same thing as to make election prior to triunity and so God for us without a before or after begins to recede from view again. The eternal simultaneity of act and being, in other words, is not consistent with the proposition that the mission has logical priority over the procession.

Two agents united into one agency

Does McCormack's proposal adequately unite the two agencies? Certainly, the description of two agents who unite their distinct agencies to form a single activity could be understood to have some correspondence to a central element of Nestorian Christology. However, there is a great deal in McCormack's proposal that differentiates it sharply from a Nestorian grammar.[65] McCormack is turning away from the substance-metaphysics within which Nestorian Christology was articulated,[66] and so his proposal does not operate by conceiving of two distinct natures with their own field of operation in prosopic union. Instead, the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ are conceived of as something closer to an act, wherein the two acts are one by the receptivity of the second mode of divine being to the human act.[67] Also, McCormack demonstrates a marked preference for Cyrilline Christological emphases in his retention of the language of hypostatic union on the grounds that there is one concrete entity (one history) and, by extension, that *Theotokos* remain a 'necessary article of faith'.[68]

Even so, with his repudiation of the *anhypostasia*, McCormack's proposal appears to attribute self-activating reality to the human Jesus. For McCormack, *anhypostasia* necessarily renders the human passive in its enhypostatic existence within the person of the Son. However, in rejecting *anhypostasia*, personal existence is attributed to the human aside from the incarnating act in time. When this is allied to the proposition that the human nature exercises person-constituting force upon the identity of the Son in eternity, the human is described as in act whereupon the *logos asarkos* is eternally the *logos incarnandus*. In short, McCormack's proposal seems to position the human Jesus as a second, self-activating subject alongside the second mode of divine being. Devoid of the *anhypostasia* the agency of the

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[62]McCormack, 'Missions and Processions', pp. 115–6.

[63]Ibid., p. 123.

[64]Ibid., p. 122.

[65]McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, pp. 10–11.

[66]Ibid., pp. 254–5.

[67]Ibid., p. 255.

[68]Ibid., p. 257.

human nature risks being treated as a separate subject who moves with the Son in a history of hypostatic uniting. It is for this reason that McCormack, on occasion, describes the incarnation as the Son uniting with an *already existing* human person. For example:

> The 'assumption' might be construed as an *act of receptivity on the part of the Logos*, as an act by means of which the Logos continuously unites takes to himself all that 'comes to him' from the human with whom he is joined.[69]

> God is acted upon in this one human being because God unites himself with this one human being and with him alone.[70]

Inasmuch as the human act of being is exercised in eternity, McCormack's proposal is clearly not adoptionist. However, it seems integral to the way ontological receptivity has been described with respect to the eternal identity of the Son that the human Jesus acts as a discrete subject prior to the incarnation. Without being held in equipoise with *anhypostasia* it is not clear how the proposition that Jesus Christ is the subject of election avoids the actuality of two christological subjects. In short, it is not self-evident that McCormack's intention to retain the hypostatic union via ontological receptivity has been achieved. Now, it may be objected that this criticism is misplaced, as the human only has existence by merit of God's election to be God for us in Jesus, and so it does not have any self-activating subjectivity aside from this. However, this is not sufficient. It is perfectly possible to hold both that Jesus exercises an act of being prior to the incarnation (by the identity of the Son being established in eternity in relation to Jesus), while recognising that the human who is assumed into union with God is deliberatively created for the purpose of that union. The problem is not that one might be set aside for union; the problem is in self-activating agency prior to the union.

Conclusion

Bruce McCormack's christological proposals carry potentially ground-breaking possibilities for any who assert that God's self-revelation is without remainder while yet seeking to maintain trinitarian protology. The ontological receptivity of the Son to the human Jesus of Nazareth is able to affirm that the world relation of incarnation is proper to the Son without collapsing the Son into that world relation. However, as it is currently constructed, two problems do obtain. In my view, the cause of both problems is that McCormack's christological proposal is not as coordinated to eternal generation as it should be. In the case of the first problem, the second mode of divine being is receptive to the human act of being in a way that the mission takes logical priority over the procession, inserting a sequential relation between election and triunity. In the case of the second problem, the Son is constituted as the person he eternally is by the proleptic act of the human nature, which affords to the human nature its own self-activating reality prior to the incarnation undermining McCormack's claim that his Christology results in a singular concrete entity. Both problems would be addressed by a closer coordination of ontological receptivity and passive generation. The second mode of divine being is receptive to the human act of being *because* of that which

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[69]Ibid., p. 11.
[70]Ibid., p. 6; see also note 36.

he is in relation to the Father. The second mode of divine being is constituted in eternity by the proleptic act of the human nature *because* this is proper to who he is as God in mode of being as passive generation. In other words, McCormack's christological proposal requires some reorientation such that ontological receptivity is more closely correlated to eternal generation itself. This will be elaborated upon elsewhere.