

Article

Towards a Kenotic Identity Politics: Migration, Transformation and the Eucharist

Matthew John Paul Tan

School of Theology and Philosophy, University of Notre Dame Australia, Broadway,
Sydney, NSW 2008, Australia; matthew.tan@nd.edu.au

Abstract: This paper will focus on one element of the pushback against the massive influx of immigrants taken in for humanitarian purposes, namely, an identity-based chauvinism which uses identity as the point of resistance to the perceived dilution of that identity, brought about by the transformation of culture induced by the incorporation of a foreign other. The solution to this perceived dilution is a simultaneous defence of that culture and a demand for a conformity to it. While those in the critical tradition have encouraged a counter-position of revolutionary transformation by the other through ethics, dialogue, or the multitude, such a transformation is arguably impeded by what is ultimately a repetition of the metaphysics of conformity. Drawing on the personalism of Emmanuel Mounier and the Eucharistic theology of Creston Davis and Aaron Riches, this paper submits an alternative identity politics position that completes the revolutionary impulse. Identity here is not the flashpoint of a self-serving conflict, but the launch-point of politics of self-emptying, whose hallmarks include, on the one hand, a never-ending reception of transformation by the other, and on the other hand, an anchoring in the Body of Christ that is at once ever-changing and never-changing.



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1. Introduction

This article will focus on the pushback on a form of state-sponsored identity politics, which pits itself against migrant others in the name of maintaining an ostensible Christian identity. A recent example of this resistance includes that within certain European Union member states to the German-led humanitarian impulse to grant asylum to swathes of individuals claiming asylum from the war in Syria. The focus of this article's response would be a claim put forward by political leaders and entrepreneurs that accepting non-Christian asylum seekers will undermine the institutions and values shaped by the Christian faith, which in turn justifies restricting their migration into the polis (Reuters 2015).

This discourse of resistance to migration in the name of maintaining the Christian identity of the polis counters a well-trodden alternative where Christian identity demands a posture of charity towards humanitarian ends—including one of openness towards asylum seekers—on the grounds of an appeal to a common humanity and dignity of the personhood of the person seeking asylum. In this more recent counter-discourse, Christian identity is a barrier to those humanitarian ends. Rather than a portal to open to others, identity in this counter-discourse is taken to be a singular, unified point of resistance over and against a perceived cultural other. Due to this, an appeal to a polis' Christian identity seems to be deployed only when there is a perceived need to differentiate oneself from and resist a cultural other, and thereby resist any transformation of the Christian identity quotient of the polis.

Jumping off from the zero-sum logic of the discourse on identity raised above, this paper will focus on how theologically inflected philosophical discourse can go beyond this zero-sum game of transformation versus integrity that plays out in fully immanent identity politics. The key here is theology's re-framing of identity, from identity as a

private property to be protected from others, to identity as a gift which is received from God through others, a gift whose receipt, by necessity, transforms both the giver and the recipient. In this context, Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew, where he says, "whoever loses his life for [Jesus'] sake will find it" (Matt 10:39), is more than a spiritual nicety. It is the grounds for a theologically grounded immanent action that is also inextricably tied to a specifically theological conception of Christian identity. Put more specifically, it is a form of identity that requires not only a transformation but kenosis, an emptying of self, as the very precondition for identity. To put it in the context of the humanitarian incorporation of cultural others, this article asserts that identity emerges at the precise moment of its transformation. The very outcome so feared by political leaders touting the Christian credentials of their nations, in other words, is the very means by which the Christian identity they seek to protect emerges.

This article will establish its case in two moves. The first move will focus on the type of person predicated by what can be called kenotic identity politics, with reference to the personalist philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier. This focus on the person is important because it is the type of person, and not the brand of Christianity at play, on which any recalibration of the relationship between the absorption of cultural others and Christian identity would turn. Building on this personalist move, the article's second move will outline the relationship between transformation and identity, with reference to the theology of Creston Davis and Aaron Riches and their spin on Alain Badiou's concept of the Event. In this move, this article will argue that transformation, linked as it is to the kenosis of the incarnate Word, paradoxically marks the rupture and expression of the subject.

2. Identity and Person

One of the ironies of modern discourses about the invocation of identity at a corporate level is that their most foundational premise is that of a person that is autonomous, self-sufficient, and self-enclosed—what Charles Taylor might call a "bounded" or "buffered" self (Taylor 2007, p. 38). In this context, relationships with other self-sufficient and self-enclosed persons can be set only in dialectical terms. Individuals preceded communal belonging, making any communal belonging an artificial construct that leads to the subtraction of the individual. In the words of Emmanuel Mounier, "Associated man is [now] either a tyrant or a slave. The very look of another steals somewhat of my universe, his presence restricts my liberty, his promotion is my demotion" (Mounier 2010, p. 17). However, Mounier also argued that an individual so configured "never finds the doorway to being" (Mounier 2010, p. 20). In other words, one who is fundamentally a stranger to others is also a stranger to themselves.

By contrast, Mounier looked at the person as someone oriented towards communion. In a tantalising footnote, Mounier refers to a German conception of being as *Mittsein*, "being with", which implies an identity of a person that is inherently communal (Mounier 2010, p. 20, fn. 1). Furthermore, Mounier couples *Mittsein* together with *Zusein*, or "being towards". Not only is the person communal, but in their being communal, a person is always oriented outwards. This outward orientation was summarised many years later by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, when he said that to be is to "be other and move towards the other" (De Certeau 1984, p. 110).

For Mounier, the self can only be understood when there is a "decentralisation of self in order to become available for others" (Mounier 2010, p. 21). To know oneself, data presented by others must first be taken in, a phase in the constitution of self which he calls "self-recollection". Secondly, this sense of self must be sharpened, not via contemplation, but in action. However, action here is not just a static subject undergoing a transaction with a static other. If the self is *Mittsein*, an orientation to another, the self is then solidified by *Zusein*, what Mounier calls a "self bestowal" of one's own subjectivity to another, a "giving without measure and without hope for reward" (Mounier 2010, p. 22). Most importantly, Mounier speaks about the requirement for an "intimate conversion", which is a constant process of transformation where the other seeps into the fibres of one's own

being as the indispensable means of recentring the self (Mounier 2010, p. 21). There is thus a threefold movement necessary for a person in Mounier, a need for the recollection of self, a dispossessory reconstitution by another, before a final recentring. Such a constitution of a person is always in union with others; therefore, this is not only the duty of one person, but a duty of a community of persons. For the purposes of this article, this includes the political community of persons, the polis. For Mounier, transformation is not a threat to the self, but the very precondition of personhood. In light of Mounier's observations, a protectionist move to indefinitely block the polis off in the face of cultural other in the name of identity—this includes the closing off of the polis in the face of a great movement of non-Christian asylum seekers—constitutes a denial of identity, rather than an affirmation of it.

3. Identity and Revolution

At this point, we must ask whether there can be a political practice for this community of persons that institutionalises this politics of personhood that Mounier has laid out. To this end, this article will turn to Davis and Riches. What makes Davis and Riches interesting is that they do not rely on the good will of the state apparatus to institutionalise the politics which Mounier outlined. Instead, Davis and Riches turn to worship as the site of institutionalising Mounier's politics of transforming identity, what they call a "theological praxis of revolution".

The theological praxis of revolution builds upon Alain Badiou's idea of "the Event", an unexpected and revolutionary rupture in the political fabric which opens up a space to consider and create all material reality anew as a universal ontological condition (Badiou 2005, p. 173). Davis and Riches submit that there is an "uncanny realignment" between Christianity and Marxist engagements, of which Badiou's work is one (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 22). Moreover, they build upon Badiou, arguing that all that is "materially grounded in the name of the Event [...] must be recast as the material intersection of the transcendent with the immanent", and identifying this intersection with "the kenotic inbreaking of the God-man, Christ" (Mounier 2010, p. 23). Davis and Riches argue that the self-emptying of the incarnation can be plausibly identified with the Event, because in the Event, all materiality is interrupted, although this irruption literally comes out of nowhere (Badiou 2005, p. 175). It must be noted that Badiou situates the Event in a utopia, literally a non-place, because in his words, the Event emerges "from the edge of the void", which for him is what lies in the very foundation of all materiality (Badiou 2005, p. 175).

In recasting Badiou's Event, Davis and Riches also situate the emergence of the Event at a locus which also comes from no known spatial point. The crucial difference is that, unlike Badiou, Davis and Riches situate the site of the Event in a locus that transcends materiality. Another point of difference is that in contrast to Badiou's "edge of the void", Davis and Riches situated this transcendent locus in the Logos which preceded all space and time, and through which all material things were made. Further still, the Event did not cling to its equality with transcendence, but became incarnate within a particular space and time, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This is important because the Christ Event becomes two things at once. On the one hand, the Event is the singular moment of rupture of the immanent. At the same time, the cause of materiality's rupture is the very immanent presence of its own informing principle, the Logos, a presence summarised by the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, which culminates in the Resurrection.

In a world of determinate material things, the Resurrection—the bringing to life of something at the end of life—ruptures and defeats the logic of material determination that defines secular conceptions of material reality. On the other hand, this event is not exclusively singular. This is because the Christ Event finds its provenance in eternity, and the Event never loses its transcendent and eternal anchor simply because it has taken temporal and historical form. In taking historical form, the Event is moving towards its culmination—and bringing all material reality with it—and yet has also arrived. In Davis and Riches' words, the Event brings all to an "eternity of transcendent fulfilment". This

makes the Christ Event an ongoing and creative “overdetermination of all material and bodily things” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 23). We need to unpack the implications of this.

First, breaking in of the transcendent Logos takes hold of all material reality. All created matter, once unified through a common creator—that is the Divine Logos—in the Event becomes completely unified in its very structure to every other creature because of the Llogos which is coursing through each and every creature. In being so united to the Logos, which is, in turn, united in every created thing, every created thing thereby becomes more itself the more it unites itself to all created things. By contrast, the more it seeks to protect its identity by being an isolated monad in the material order, the less it becomes itself.

Second, because of its anchoring in the transcendent fulfilment of all things, the Logos defies any attempt to leave the material order in stasis. Instead, the Logos in every creature also transforms every creature, but not in a way that destroys the creature’s integrity. To understand the character of this transformation, we must focus first on Davis and Riches’ recalibration of “overdetermination of all material and bodily things”. In the original conception of the term (coined by Louis Althusser), overdetermination referred to the situation of things within a structure of a complex of dialectical causal relations (Althusser 1969, p. 209). This situatedness does not assign a fixed place in the complex, but sets in motion a whole network of transformations that feed one into the other. For Riches and Davis, this overdetermination is undergirded by Logos in all things, and that makes the former nothing short of a revolution, instigated by the latter, within the structure of the material order. Riches and Davis draw on Slavoj Žižek’s take of the Event in his *Ticklish Subject*, particularly the point that the Event does not merely emerge, but emerges ex nihilo. In other words, the Event constitutes not just a transformation of an existing object, but “is in fact the beginning of all materiality and the creation of all things” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 31). This presents a new angle on Paul’s the Incarnate Logos as the “firstborn of every creature”, because the Event is, to borrow Badiou’s language, nothing short of “pure beginning” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 31). In the Incarnation, the Christ Event ruptures the supposed stasis in the material order by rupturing the order of time, taking everything back to the very beginning of materiality itself, a material Eden. The Event as pure beginning within the material order reorients the material order towards a state of permanent revolution.

Third, while a revolution does occur within all things, the Christ Event does not destroy the integrity of all things. Remember that every particular creature is unified to every other particular creature. This is because of a prior unification in the universal Logos through which the creature came into being. There is a complexification of the metaphysical space beyond the flattened single plane of existence presumed in modern forms of political discourse. To borrow from William Cavanaugh, what this means is that breaking in of the universal into the particular does not pulverise the particular to absorb it into the universal. Rather, the universal is emptied into and gives rise to each particular manifestation, qua particular manifestation (Cavanaugh 2004, pp. 113–14). Davis and Riches put this relationship more strongly. It is not simply that the Event allows for a harmonious relationship between the one universal and the diverse particulars. Rather, “the Event as universal secures and establishes the possibility of the particular because the Event is the constitution of difference itself” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 28). In other words, the subsistence of the universal Event is what enables the unfurling of the many particulars in this world. Moreover, and paradoxically, because of this unfurling of the one in the many, it is precisely that multiplicity of differences that unites them all. This is a unity borne not of subjugation of the particular by the universal, but of the self-emptying kenosis of the universal into the particular.

Additionally, because of the kenosis of the Event into the particular, the resultant transformation of the particular is not the erasure of the political subject. Rather, the rupture of stasis by the Event grounds the subject’s very emergence. This sharpens Mounier’s point referred to earlier, concerning the recentring of the subject’s identity only insofar as it is

decentred from the self and oriented towards the other. In this instance, the other to which the subject is oriented is the Christ Event. More specifically, it is the Event that is present in the transcendental other, and also imprinted within the material other. This includes the cultural and political other. In Davis and Riches' words, the subject—the identity which one wants to assert or protect—only “realises subjective force and praxis through fidelity to the Event” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 31). This is a fidelity expressed not through pietistic enclosure, but through material work to and with others. This material work simultaneously expresses the subject and unfolds the Event. This work thereby crystallises the Event and, ultimately, our identity.

4. Revolution and Worship

While the material work mentioned above must inevitably take a public form, Davis and Riches note that the beating heart of this public work—this *leitourgia*—is to be found in acts of liturgical worship, more specifically, the Eucharist. Far from a mere exercise in individual piety, the link between identity and public work covered above highlights the way in which the Eucharistic liturgy is also the fulcrum of identity. This is not only because the Eucharist confects the Christ Event, which is the very grounds of our being and identity. The liturgy of the Eucharist also outlines the pattern by which such an identity is to be operationalised.

As earlier mentioned, the Event as incarnate Logos is irreducibly material and also overdetermines or recreates materiality. The body and blood of the Christ Event initiate a revolution in the inner structure of the material by being sacramentally present in the material elements of the Eucharist. This includes most immediately the bread and wine, but what is also brought into this revolution is every material, cultural, and political process that lead to the emergence of these elements in the first place. To borrow from Cavanaugh again, nothing short of the whole universe is present in the Eucharistic elements (Cavanaugh 2004, pp. 112–13). In a way that analogues the self-emptying *kenosis* of the God into the Christ Event, the material world, bound as it is to the Eucharist, undergoes its own *kenosis* to make way for the Christ Event. The only difference here is that what is emptied is not the identity of the material per se. Rather, what is emptied is the false identity constituted by a defensive self-containment, as *Sein* gives way to the *Mittsein*.

In the wake of the Christ Event that makes all things new, preventing this renewal and keeping things in stasis no longer expresses the identity of the material world. By extension, the politics of stasis in the name of identity paradoxically negates the true identity of the subject. After the Incarnation, the identity of the subject is now joined to the ongoing revolution, which is both emanating from and being sustained by the Event. Both *Mittsein* and the revolution come together in Davis and Riches' argument that “the material world, pregnant with the grace of Christ, is transfigurable beyond the bounds that would seem to mark one thing as being isolated from another” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 44). It must be remembered that transfiguration is not a destruction of the identity of the material. Rather, as a sign of fidelity to the Event, transfiguration becomes the very means by which the material perfects its identity as a subject, qua subject, becomes more itself.

5. Conclusions: Worship and Difference

At the same time, the revolution in identity emerging from the Event is not anarchic. The subject that participates in the revolution has two indispensable reference points. The first is the Christ Event itself, the ground of being and subjectivity. The second is that which is deemed to be fundamentally other by the politics of stasis. The Christ Event is the convergence of the transcendent and the material—the quintessentially different in cultural, political, and even religious terms—and thus “difference needs to be figured within materialism as the mediation of the immanent and the transcendent” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 44). We further claim that, because the Christ Event is what overdetermines the material, difference is also necessary within the material to mark that overdetermination,

or more specifically, “mark the flux wherein things can morph into other things and reconstitute themselves by change and becoming” (Davis and Riches 2005, p. 44).

In light of the above, we dispute the claim mentioned at the beginning that it is only in conformity that charity can be meaningfully expressed. We claim instead that it is difference that becomes the means by which the abundant charity of God is immanently expressed. Davis and Riches refer to a passage in the prima pars of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, in which what Thomas calls “distinction and multitude” in creation is treated as the sure sign of God’s goodness. In Thomas’ words, God “produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the significance of the divine goodness might be supplied by another [...] hence the whole universe together participates in divine goodness more perfectly”. In other words, God’s glory is “now made manifest in the irreducible difference of the world” (I-I, q. 47, a.2 in Davis and Riches 2005, p. 45). Immanent difference is an analogue of divine charity, and this couplet is a reminder that our individual and corporate identities both emerge via participation in divine charity as expressed in creaturely difference. That participation is expressed at the point of the emptying out of self to a different other in the course of our own immanent acts of charity. Set against the backdrop of the Christ Event, the very point at which the stasis of identity championed by political entrepreneurs gives way to flux in the face of the different other is paradoxically the very point at which a subject’s real identity emerges. Flux enfolded in the Event constitutes the renewal and perfection of all of creation under the Lordship of Christ.

To reiterate, this kenotic identity found in giving way to difference is expressed in the logic of the Eucharist. Recall that when bread, wine, and the material, social and cultural processes that generate them become overdetermined by the Christ Event, their substance as static commodities is lost as they are transformed into the host for the Event. As the stasis gives way to flux, each element increasingly becomes the bread and the wine the more the Event is present in it. The difference between bread and wine in themselves, when they are kenotically transformed by the Event, become expressive of the same abundant giving by the Event’s own self-emptying. Furthermore, the difference is extended between the Eucharist itself and the recipient of the Eucharist. When looking at these two entities, they cannot be more different, however in the reception of the Eucharist by the congregant, there is a joining of the two. This is a joining of difference to identity, which was sharpened by Augustine’s Pentecost sermon on the Eucharist, in which he describes the act of receiving the Eucharist with the line “be what you can see, and receive what you are.”. The Eucharist is not only the reception of the product of a material, social and cultural other, for Augustine it is “what you are” (Augustine of Hippo 1993, p. 301). He then enjoins the congregation to not only passively receive this identity in Christ, but to actively “become what you receive”, to empty oneself to give way to the Event.

In conclusion, this kenotic emptying of ourselves before the Event is not confined to the immediate space in which the Eucharist is celebrated. The old Latin ending to the Liturgy, *Go, It is Sent*, sends a strong reminder that this revolutionary kenosis is to continue to the ends of the earth, because it is by that very kenosis and transformation in the face of the other, where the Event has also taken hold, that the identity of Christian is recognised.

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