Don Browning's Christian Humanism

with Don Browning, "Reviving Christian Humanism: Science and Religion"; Terry D. Cooper, "Psychology, Religion, and Critical Hermeneutics: Don Browning as a 'Horizon Analyst'"; Wesley J. Wildman, "The Artful Humanism of Don Browning"; Don S. Browning and John Witte, Jr., "Christianity's Mixed Contributions to Children's Rights"; and Don S. Browning, "A Natural Law Theory of Marriage"

THE ARTFUL HUMANISM OF DON BROWNING

by Wesley J. Wildman

Abstract.   Don Browning's intellectual artfulness is particularly evident in three areas: as analyst of basic assumptions in intellectual systems, as fundamental ethicist, and as mediating theologian. His work in each area has been extraordinarily fruitful, both theoretically and practically. In each area, however, his skillful handling of complex issues also has subtle limitations. This paper identifies those limitations, analyzes them as facets of an articulate but preemptive defense of a preferred theological outlook, and thus as a limited failure of Browning's otherwise broadly successful implementation of a critical hermeneutical method.

Keywords: Don Browning (1934–2010); critical hermeneutics; foundational ethics; humanism; mediating theology

Don Browning instinctively realized early in his career that scholarly discourse about human beings was apt to elide elements of complex human reality that did not fit the ruling method or prevalent assumptions of whatever discipline was being employed at the time. When this happens, the result is often a tragic foreshortening of perspective, and Browning had an almost allergic reaction to such voluntary or unwitting distortion in intellectual models of human life, particularly when there could be deleterious practical consequences in the therapy room, the courts, or social policy deliberations. So especially from *Generative Man* in 1973 until *Reviving Christian Humanism* in 2010, Browning willingly took upon his shoulders the burden of pointing out where interpretations of the human condition, and of the ideals for human life that guide our strategies for healthy change, go wrong.

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Browning found a lot to criticize. He was convinced that even the keenest observers readily latch onto a promising angle of analysis even though it might exclude valuable alternative perspectives. I will not summarize the problems Browning believed he diagnosed in scholarly writing about the human condition, especially in psychology of religion and religious interpretations of therapeutic ideals, which is where he invested most of his effort. One of Browning's close collaborators, Terry Cooper, has tackled that task in his essay for this memorial of Browning's intellectual legacy. Cooper (2011) aptly describes Browning as *horizon analyst* and I shall borrow this well-crafted designation here. But I do want to point out how artful Browning has been in identifying these failures of a full-bodied hermeneutics of the human condition. He had a talent for detecting hidden premises and surfacing them for all to see in the process of executing his critical hermeneutic method. Occasionally, he confronted people with what they took to be unduly vigorous criticisms of their frameworks for interpreting ideals of human health and thriving but that is all part of the fun of academic life, such as it is.

The *artfulness* of Browning's work as horizon analyst is enormously impressive. He is equally artful in less-celebrated aspects of his intellectual work, including the nuanced handling of ethical and moral questions, and the mediation of theology and culture. These three types of artfulness—as horizon analyst, as fundamental ethicist, and as mediating theologian—define the structure of this essay. But the result is not merely an appreciation of Browning's artfulness. In each case, I venture to show how this artfulness deflected or marginalized certain pointed questions that might, and probably should, have had a greater impact on Browning's thought than they in fact did. That is part of the point of intellectual artfulness, of course: reality is sufficiently complex that any conceptually coherent model of it requires intelligent simplification, and all synthetic thinkers embrace such simplifications for the sake of creating a compelling intellectual project that can exercise an impact on others. Browning does this better than most, which is why he has been so treasured by so many for so long. But one effect of his particular artful simplifications has been to hold off pressing questions that threaten to stress the theological heart of his intellectual project. I shall draw attention to these limitations even as I celebrate the artfulness with which Browning managed the corresponding stresses. And I shall focus especially on his final theological statement in *Reviving Christian Humanism: The New Conversation on Spirituality, Theology, and Psychology* (2010; hereafter RCH; see also Browning 2011a).

ARTFULNESS AS HORIZON ANALYST

Browning's characteristic insistence is that reality, and especially human reality, is complex, multifaceted, burdened with existential and social

investments, and potentially internally contradictory, so it needs to be interpreted carefully. Such interpretation needs to be sharply aware of the impact of contextual assumptions flowing from cultural settings, from disciplinary habits of mind, and from the personal experience of interpreters. The result is a critical hermeneutics that clearly acknowledges interpretation (following Hans Georg Gadamer; see Gadamer 1989) as a fusing of the horizon of the "text" (i.e., the logical object of interpretation) with the horizon of the interpreter. When this acknowledgement is not made, or is somehow finessed or compromised, the interpretation of the subject matter will inevitably suffer. Thus, horizon analysis is a key phase of Browning's critical hermeneutics, in much the way that is was for Paul Ricoeur, who increasingly became a vital intellectual model for Browning (see Ricoeur 1976).

Browning was supremely confident that every attempt to short circuit the process of a critical hermeneutics will yield interpretative defects. This is probably the single most stable intuition and working assumption of his long career and his fidelity to it yielded numerous impressive insights that have helped American psychology of religion and theological ethics remain more agile and relevant than would otherwise have been the case.

In RCH, we see him deploying this analytical habit in what he calls "the new conversation on spirituality, theology, and psychology," battling the various reductionisms threatened by empirical psychology, insisting on the complexity of the human condition, and defending religious traditions as codifications of wisdom that possess ongoing relevance for today. In so doing, he does not confine himself to criticizing the easy targets of empirical psychologists who criticize religion while being tragically or comically ignorant of it; he also pushes deeper into the structures of thinking implicit in interpretative acts of generalizing from experimental results to the human condition as such.

For example, moral psychology has given ample evidence that human beings are guided by deep and relatively persistent moral intuitions when making moral decisions, and that moral reasoning—so far from being the progenitor of moral insight—merely serves the function of making rational sense of what is already intuited to be right or wrong, morally speaking (see Haidt 2000, 2007). On this view, moral reasoning is almost always *post hoc* rationalization of emotionally potent and genetically rooted moral instincts. Browning is not interested in contesting the empirical studies, of course. But he is interested in situating them in a wider hermeneutical context. So, he freely grants that *rapid-fire* moral decisions get made in this way and that moral reasoning has a *post hoc* rationalizing character *much of the time*. But he also points out that religious traditions (and other traditions of moral wisdom) function to form character in such a way that individuals are more likely to make wise and good decisions, and more likely to rationalize their decisions along the lines of the wisdom

conveniently codified in the traditions that form their moral imaginations. Such traditions both create good moral habits and make cognitive and social room for rational reflection on moral choices. Neglecting the sociality of moral behavior and moral reasoning destabilizes generalizations from the spectacular experiments of moral psychology to the moral capacities of all human beings. Browning simply points this out and in doing so elegantly makes the current enthusiastic ferment surrounding moral psychology seem slightly overblown. There is a lot to learn from moral psychologists, yes, but we ignore the wider task of a critical hermeneutics of human morality at our peril.

The limitation in Browning's particular way of performing horizon analysis in the course of his critical hermeneutics arises in negotiation with some of the sharpest critiques of religion. It is possible, in principle, for pointed critiques of religion to be correct, even though hearty defenders of religion are unconvinced. Even the gyroscopically stabilized wisdom of religious traditions might encode serious problems that, sooner or later, are brought to light (as was the case, surely, with the status and treatment of women, and with the acceptability of slavery). To allow for this possibility, a critical hermeneutics would have to take special care to be ready for such unexpected, improbable challenges, whether originating from inside the tradition or from outside. This would involve being particularly careful not to dismiss such challenges merely on the grounds that nothing thoroughly new could ever compete with established wisdom. Understandably, when critiques of religion prove to be superficial and unhelpfully reductionistic, time and time again, long habits of experience can leave the horizon analyst vulnerable to a lapse of attentiveness—indeed, to an almost automatic defense of religion when what is called for is a fundamental reappraisal. This hermeneutical slip could show itself in caricaturing critiques of religion, or in minimizing the importance of growing bodies of evidence. Browning as horizon analyst gives signs of both questionable moves within otherwise attractive lines of argument, and his artfulness gives these questionable moves a (misleadingly) charming character.

On the one hand, caricaturing critiques of religion is evident in RCH when he discusses the new atheists (Browning mentions four; see Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Harris 2006; Hitchens 2007). He robustly rejects what he takes to be their short-circuited accounts of religion, and he faults them for not realizing the good that religion can do. He also lumps them all together. In particular, he criticizes Daniel Dennett for interpretative mistakes that Dennett actually avoids making; Dennett is far more sophisticated as an interpreter of religion and its usefulness than Browning allows. In particular, Dennett acknowledges the value of religious traditions and insists that any secular world (which he thinks we badly need for a healthy human future) is profoundly fragile without the equivalent of the gyroscopic effects of religious practices, which range from the exercise of charity to the cultivation of self-transformation, and from

art to architecture. Yet, Browning accuses him along with the other new atheists of not understanding the transformative importance of religious practices. The unintended effect is that Dennett's critique of religion is not confronted, but rather simply avoided. Yet, Browning does this simply by listing Dennett with other new atheists as all holding the same point of view on the topic under discussion. There is no gauche characterization and no brutal mocking, as there is with a number of other respondents to the new atheists, but merely the artful setting of a boundary, the other side of which Browning estimates need not concern his interpretation of religion. The price paid is that traditional religion is effectively protected from the valid sharp points (as well as from any overstated elements) of Dennett's critique of religion.

On the other hand, minimizing the importance of growing bodies of evidence appears at several points in RCH. Consider Browning's handling of material from moral psychology, which I mentioned above as an instance of artful horizon analysis. Browning certainly does display admirable balance when he acknowledges that moral judgments are often largely automatic, guided by evolutionarily formed moral intuitions, and only subsequently rationalized, while also insisting that human beings can be formed by participation in traditions so as to alter the reflexive workings of moral judgment. But Browning's artfulness in this dimension of interpretation also eases him past a much sharper critical edge of moral psychology when applied to religion. The critical edge that he bypasses is the hard, hard fact that religious traditions themselves are built around the codification and rationalization of widespread moral intuitions. It is not just that religions do bad as well as good, which Browning does freely admit; it is that religions are socially and civilizationally committed to perpetuating moral frameworks that make most sense to most people so that they can compel and inspire compliance. The sociology of knowledge makes this abundantly clear (see Berger 1967), the epidemiology of representations explains the cognitive-cultural mechanisms (see Sperber 1996), and moral psychology explains precisely what moral values tend to win the day within a religion in practice, regardless of the religion's lofty moral ambitions. This is why religious traditions can find themselves caught up in evil even while they keep alive founding and life-giving moral insights that thoroughly contradict the obviously bad behavior.

To put the limitation on his artfulness as horizon analyst in plain language, Browning occasionally negotiates with the enemy on relatively easy issues and finesses issues that are much more difficult to assimilate into his interpretation of religion and the human condition.

Artfulness as Fundamental Ethicist

A classic instance of Browning's artfulness as a fundamental ethicist is clearly present in RCH as well as in a host of other works, including the

paper "A Natural Law Theory of Marriage" included in this collection of memorial papers (Browning 2011b). This is his distinction between the premoral and the moral (he uses a number of categories in different places to express the distinction but I agree with him that these terms are clearest).

The distinction between the premoral and the moral is much needed and Browning gets overwhelmingly positive work done with it. For example, in his various discussions of marriage and family, including in RCH, he notes that a host of human needs and desires have to be registered as in some sense premoral rather than straightforwardly moral ideas. These include sexual desires, procreation, caring for young children, being able to identify one's offspring, altruistic behavior especially toward kin, and so on. To treat these premoral facts of life as straightforwardly normatively, moral goods dramatically oversimplifies discourse about marriage and family and yields a kind of natural law theory that Browning freely admits is inadequate. By contrast, to recognize that these ideas are premoral is simultaneously to acknowledge that another level of discourse is required to sort and organize these premoral elements of life into defensible social arrangements and coherent explanatory narratives. Browning argues compellingly that traditional natural theology, at least in its best forms, worked with many of these basic ideas without ever trivializing the move from the existence of desired premoral goods of human life to their normative status as morally good. Natural theology in this sense, according to Browning, is a kind of "rational distanciation" aimed at getting the moral analysis clear and sorting all of the resources relevant to moral judgment. Indeed, in the final analysis, Browning argues, natural law at its best depends on traditions of revelation to complete the compelling narration of moral goods and to identify the ruling norms for the good in human life—and Browning follows suit in his own fundamental ethics.

This is just right, surely. The generous reading of natural law traditions in ethics is a blessed relief from the tediously artificial criticisms of them as committing the naturalistic fallacy by hastily leaping from *is* to *ought*. And the rich array of premoral goods that can be accommodated in this framework opens moral discourse up to a host of new insights from a wide variety of academic disciplines as well as from religious and secular traditions of moral wisdom. This is critical hermeneutics at its very best, and it is splendidly artful.

Around the edges of this brilliance, however, lurk some subtle limitations. It is precisely the artfulness that makes the limitations subtle, but they are there nonetheless. To state the difficulty before explaining it, at times Browning uses the process of registering premoral facts of life as a way of muting the challenges that some premoral resources present to the coherence of his preferred normative moral narrative. This, in effect, is to read back onto premoral facts of life the *way of seeing* that his full-blown

normative moral perspective promotes. I do not say that he deliberately ignores his own principles of critical hermeneutics, but I do intend to claim that the process of interpretation is occasionally short circuited due to the way he handles premoral facts of life.

To explain, consider the premoral facts of life Browning typically discusses when turning to sex roles, marriage, and family. Is there anything notable missing? There certainly is. Male dominance is missing. Outgroup hostility, hierarchical social organization, and purity-related restrictions are all muted. Let's focus just on the first of these to illustrate the artfulness-induced limitation to which I am drawing attention.

Browning speaks at length about parental investment but not about one of its most important consequences in virtually all mammalian species, including ours: male dominance. I think it is fair to say that there is a significant consensus by now that it is not body size or testosterone that produces male dominance, fundamentally, but patterns of parental investment (this emerging consensus is expressed compactly in Hrdy 1999). The nutritional dependence of baby mammals on their mothers, and especially the fragility of cognitively complex mammalian species, such as apes and human beings, requires powerful bonding among father, mother, and baby. This keeps the father around, at least long enough to help meet the prodigious caloric needs of feeding mothers and growing babies. Fighting for reproductive access to good maternal carers and defending mother and offspring from competitors is what then produces and reinforces body size differences and aggression differences between males and females. And this in turn leads to male dominance in most biological and social senses among almost all mammalian species (partial exceptions such as hyenas arise due to the absence of strong inhibitions toward eating their young; this forces females to be larger than males on average so that they can defend their young).

Interestingly, Browning writes movingly and at length about the three-way bonding between father, mother, and child associated with mammalian parental investment patterns, but he does not give much attention to its troubling twin of male dominance. It is natural to assume that his muting of the theme of male dominance, despite the fact that it goes hand in hand with family bonding, is because he opposes any form of human social organization that enables or promotes male dominance. But that ought to be no problem for him in principle; after all, he is willing to depend on traditions of revelation to achieve a normative determination and sorting of moral goods. Thus, for example, he could well argue that our religious traditions tell us that, in respect of one twin (parental investment and family bonding), we should capitalize on natural instincts and conceive of marriage as a partnership of loving equals, whereas in respect of the other twin (male dominance), we should use marriage and all other available social means to resist natural instincts toward socially realizing male dominance. Since

this is a possibility in Browning's conceptual framework for fundamental ethics, why does he not straightforwardly acknowledge that revelation (at least in his preferred tradition in its current form) proclaims the incoherence of premoral states of affairs in human life, and insists that we parse among them in a very particular way, declaring some good and some bad?

I think the answer is that complete frankness about the profound ambiguity of premoral resources—much more ambiguity than Browning actually admits, in my view—would undermine the persuasiveness of the integration of fact and value in the narrative of fundamental ethics that Browning wishes to defend. To draw into full consciousness the close relationship between human family bonding and male dominance would—as any feminist instantly recognizes—undermine the culturally crucial resources for defending the rights of women to self-determination and full self-expression. And to expect traditions of special revelation that have roundly supported social realization of male dominance for millennia to switch gears, now discriminating good and bad within the close relationship between human family bonding and male dominance in a way they never used to do, is vainly to attempt the slice between bone and marrow. This finally calls into question the plausibility of these traditions of revelation themselves. This is a harrowing path that Browning never has to walk, because his artful handling of the distinction between the premoral and the moral makes these undesirable problems more or less just disappear, unless and until we go looking for them.

ARTFULNESS AS MEDIATING THEOLOGIAN

Another way I view Browning as supremely intellectually artful, and the last to be discussed here, is the task of mediating between his preferred traditions of (Christian) theology, on the one hand, and burgeoning knowledge of the natural and human worlds, on the other hand. This is mediating theology, and Browning is as exemplary an exponent of it as American Christian theology has seen since Paul Tillich, fully the equal of John Cobb in their quite different ways. Many people beginning their careers in pastoral psychology, as Browning did, never get close to becoming expert theological ethicists, let alone almost fully developed systematic theologians. But Browning did that, along with becoming well versed in many other fields, from politics to law. It follows that the particular way he pursued mediating theology was informed by a staggering depth and breadth of knowledge about human life and the natural world, and this was matched by a subtle and rich appreciation for traditions of doctrine, ethics, and practice within Christianity.

By itself, this prodigious ability and unusually large knowledge base does not explain the artfulness with which Browning carried off the task

of mediating theology. To appreciate that, we need to consider a typical example. His Christology will serve, as this is the Christian theological doctrine to which he gave the most attention in RCH, and the doctrine that most clearly expresses his abiding Christian commitments.

Liberally oriented theologians sometimes obfuscate over metaphysical questions that may involve supernaturalism due to ambivalence: in some sense, they find supernaturalism distasteful or dangerous, while in another sense, they recognize that it is inevitably implied in what they have to say about ultimate matters. For example, figuring out precisely what liberal theologians mean by the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is typically an infuriating exercise in the subtle reading of endlessly qualified hints—the hermeneutics of breadcrumbs leading by meandering paths to metaphors with indeterminate reference to physical conditions. Browning is not one of the few exceptions to this lamentable trend, unfortunately. He does not stubbornly use unclarity merely to avoid being pinned down on metaphysical questions; rather unclarity is a side effect of what appears to be a belief that we can only gesture toward divine realities and human-divine transactions. Yet, the theological coherence challenges are nontrivial and his artfulness as a mediating theologian forestalls their full and fair consideration. This is what we need to consider here. It is in his doctrine of the atonement, which is what centrally functions for him as a doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ, that we get the clearest statement of his metaphysical commitments.

In RCH, Browning employs genuinely fascinating reasoning to defend the *Christus Victor* interpretation of the atonement. Traditionally, this view involves human beings needing to be liberated from the principalities and powers that condemn and enslave them. The best known narrative of the *Christus Victor* interpretation is sometimes called the "ransom" theory of the atonement. According to this theory, first human beings rightfully become the temporary property of the devil by virtue of their sinful nature and behavior, and subsequently are ransomed by the death of Christ (thought of as God Incarnate) before Christ somehow escapes the control of the devil, bursts through the gates of hell, and liberates the captives held there. After that, God closely limits the influence and power of the devil on earth, especially by means of the church, until the final divine victory over evil in the last days. This is the Christology indirectly expounded and celebrated in C.S. Lewis's well-known *Chronicles of Narnia* (see Lewis 2000), and it makes for a dramatic and thoroughly enjoyable narrative in Christian doctrine as well.

While Browning eliminates the more obviously mythical elements of the *Christus Victor* interpretation of the atonement, it is his final theological resting place, and in a deeply interesting manner. Indeed, as he discusses in RCH, in many ways, this Christological conclusion fulfills the fundamental intention of his theological reflection about personal transformation within

the Christian framework from the very beginning of his career, going all the way back to *Atonement and Psychotherapy* (1966). Browning emphasizes the necessity for radical empathy to be present if liberation and healing is to occur, and he argues that this is precisely what the *Christus Victor* account of the atonement supplies. It portrays Jesus the Christ as empathizing deeply with each one of us, and with the human condition in general, through his life and torturous death. In the empathic connection and attendant act of self-sacrificial love there is forged a transformative bond that does indeed liberate us, launching us into liberative empathic connections with others.

Unlike most exhibitions of the *Christus Victor* theory of atonement, I find Browning's interpretation deeply attractive, primarily because of the artful humaneness with which he argues for it. In the context of a brash modern world supremely confident in its ability to fix all manner of problems—an arrogance confirmed by the happy setting aside of endless evidence to the contrary—Browning, as usual, points us to the abiding wisdom of his preferred theological tradition. He reminds us that we are in some sense deeply broken creatures, that we are in fact in the grip of powers beyond our control, that we are finally unable to repair or liberate ourselves, and that we are profoundly dependent on our creator to save us from the powers that enslave us. He argues that this is the correct Christian framework for conceiving of pastoral therapeutic intervention, and there is very real peril in embracing one of the common contraries of this view, namely, that human beings are wholly (individually and corporately) in control of their own moral and spiritual destinies. It is bracing to be reminded of this deep strain of thought living on within Christian theology, particularly in an intellectual context in which it is unfashionable (to say the very least) to contest the near consensus within counseling psychology that optimizing psychotherapeutic healing requires nothing more than an accurate understanding of the human person and skillful practitioners of the psychotherapeutic arts. I doubt that anyone could join psychotherapy and the *Christus Victor* view of the atonement more persuasively, or more artfully, than Browning did.

With Browning's artfulness as a mediating theologian clearly acknowl-edged, I return once again to the limitations subtly present in this very artfulness. To get there, we need to ask precisely how Browning's *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement works. In other words, exactly what are the metaphysical commitments and historical dynamics of Browning's interpretation of the atonement? The answer to these questions has two sides, one having to do with Christ's *person*, and the other with Christ's *work*.

On the one hand, pertaining to the *person* of Christ, although Browning in RCH tends to avoid direct talk of the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is a touchstone of the *Christus Victor* tradition, he certainly speaks clearly of the incarnation. Evidently, Browning's world is

the sort of place where it is possible that God can literally and uniquely become incarnate (in some sense) in a human life. This is a nontrivial admission for a mediating theologian striving for consonance with modern knowledge; many prefer straightforwardly metaphorical interpretations in order to avoid outright conflict with modern scientific views of what is possible in nature and history (e.g., see Hick 2006). The metaphysically literal interpretation of incarnation is also problematic for any theology that seeks more than conversation with other religious traditions since it implies that (at best) Christian inclusivism is the correct universal account of how human beings extricate themselves from their ultimate moral and spiritual predicament: whether they know it or not, all human beings depend on *Christus Victor*. Yet, the incarnation is both a classical creedal view and retains strong credentials in modern times, having been expressed in a variety of notable theologies. Even when the traditional idea of the incarnation is questioned in modern times, it is reinterpreted creatively in a variety of ways. For example, Paul Tillich, while rejecting the incarnation as metaphysically innocent, affirmed the reality of the New Being in Jesus the Christ, which has much the same degree of metaphysical assertiveness (see Tillich 1951–1963). John Cobb used process metaphysics to reformulate the idea (see Cobb 1975). Karl Rahner developed a metaphysically fascinating version of the incarnation understood in evolutionary terms (see Rahner 1978). Browning does not say precisely what he means by the incarnation in RCH but, whatever it is, it certainly does appear to make Jesus a person with metaphysical powers that other human beings do not possess, as Browning's discussion of transformative radical empathizing indicates. In the final analysis, the conceptual specificity required for a responsible theological evaluation of Browning's idea of the incarnate Christ is lacking.

On the other hand, pertaining to the *work* of Christ, though it is not completely easy to discern, Browning apparently does not think that there is a literal devil with rightful claim to human souls based on their rebellion against God. Rather, the bonds that trap us are the problematic conditions of ordinary life. But why then should we regard these life conditions as intractable? Through lengthy education, wise social policy, and appropriate use of psychotherapeutic healing arts, is it not possible to improve our lot? Actually, Browning does admit that we can improve our lot in this way and he worked hard in a host of dimensions of his professional life to make exactly those sorts of improvements. But he continues to insist that it is a grave error to underestimate the depth of our entrapment and our powerlessness finally to liberate ourselves. He points to the evolutionary conditions of life and our complex sociality with its multiple unintended and uncontrollable side effects to explain himself. But he really has little more to say about the central problem of the human condition beyond this somewhat metaphysically minimal and indeterminate assertion

that we have fallen and we cannot get up by ourselves. Unfortunately, from the point of view of theological coherence, this metaphysical resting place is ill at ease with the narrative flow of the *Christus Victor* interpretation of the atonement, in which Christ is supposed to conquer something—whatever it is that binds us in the chains of sin and suffering and forfeits our true birthright as children in God's own family. But how does Christ's death do anything about the evolutionary conditions of human life, or about the unpredictable quality of complex forms of human togetherness, including their unintended negative consequences? How does Jesus the Christ's radical and personal empathy for every human being at every place and in every time help alleviate these conditions? The analogy with the empathic counselor only helps so much here. Browning is sympathetic to the exemplarist views of the atonement that offer a persuasive causal answer to this question (we change through learning from Jesus the Christ in the context of the religious tradition that springs from him) but finally rejects them because they do too little to safeguard the central Christian assertion of human helplessness in the face of sin, and because they portray Christ as a passive model rather than as a robust actor in breaking the chains of sin and suffering. Unfortunately, Browning offers no causal story in place of the causal accounts he rejects, once again making responsible theological evaluation quite difficult.

From both sides, I am arguing that Browning's artfulness as mediating theologian masks a certain degree of incoherence in his theological–metaphysical framework. This particular challenge of narrative and conceptual coherence is thoroughly familiar to contemporary Christian mediating theologians. All of them grapple with it on an almost daily basis, specifically in relation to the problems of religious pluralism, scientific naturalism, and narrative punch. But Browning really never resolves these challenges, leaving his theologically sensitive reader with more questions than answers about how Jesus the Christ is supposed to get any empathizing, ransoming, conquering, or transforming done, or indeed to have any victory over evil beyond setting an example and sparking a religious tradition in which this example is centralized and propagated. All we really know for sure is that Browning thinks these forms of influence are not enough to address the severity of the human condition and that the person and work of Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, is somehow metaphysically crucial for solving the problem in some other way.

CONCLUSION

I have spent about half of the pages in this essay praising Browning's intellectual artfulness and the other half pointing out subtle limitations that are embedded in, and to some extent masked by, that artfulness. This 50:50 ratio is a direct result of my specific task in this paper, but it is important

now to put this ratio in a wider perspective. Browning's writings execute the task of a critical hermeneutics of human reality in its proximate and ultimate contexts with extraordinary diligence and creativity. The result is overwhelmingly positive and the entire effort impressively, profoundly, and movingly successful. Many of his readers would probably have little interest in tracing out the occasional instances of short-circuited interpretation, regarding these points as tiny details without much significance for the ways in which they learn and borrow from Browning.

In closing, therefore, I want to ask whether the limitations I have surfaced in this essay amount to anything. Do they lead consistently in any particular direction? Do they disclose any deeper patterns? I believe they do. In the first limitation, we saw how Browning's artful management of critiques of religion serves to deflect the full force of these critiques rather than giving them proper and patient consideration. In the second limitation, the way he artfully deploys the vital distinction between the premoral and the moral serves improperly to increase the impression of coherence between premoral facts of human life and the received traditions of revealed normative moral orientation, which in turn hides conceptual fragility in those received traditions. In the third limitation, his artful moves as a mediating theologian mask conceptual incoherence in his metaphysical commitments, leaving his theology in the awkward position of being partly naturalized while also reproducing a painfully familiar intransigent inclusivism in the face of our knowledge of other religions. In all three limitations, I believe we see what amounts to a preemptive defense of a preferred theological outlook, and thus a limited and peripheral failure of Browning's critical hermeneutical method.

If Browning had the time and inclination to clarify these instances of short-circuited interpretation, it is not at all clear to me what he would have chosen to do. Unlike most mediating theologians, he had so much important practical work to accomplish that I do not know how he could possibly have prioritized the task of addressing the subtle but important theoretical problems to which I am drawing attention. As it happens, he chose not to confront head on the metaphysical and plausibility cracks—no, profound fissures—evident in the edifice of his preferred theological–ethical outlook, instead working hard on adapting it and reexpressing it for contemporary contexts, in the manner of the determined mediating theologian. Nevertheless, this involved protecting that edifice, sometimes by artful neglect of pervasive problems, sometimes by preemptive deflection of charges of structural flaws—and these are moves not available in his version of a critical hermeneutics. So what if he had faced the music, so to speak, along with other cutting-edge mediating theologians? What might the result of have been?

I suspect that squarely facing these challenges would have forced Browning to clarify his underarticulated distinction between Christian

Humanism and Religious Humanism. The way he deploys these two terms is, as ever, artful, but this smooth usage never really comes to grips with the coherence challenges associated with using both terms side by side. If Browning is right about his *Christus Victor* Christology, Christian Humanism is actually a competitor of Religious Humanism, disputing its fundamental metaphysical commitments. In this case, he moves closer to the position of John Milbank's radical orthodoxy or David Kelsey's theological anthropology, and he has a coherent, albeit dramatically supernaturalist and traditionalist, response to the finest contemporary critiques of religion (see Kelsey 2009; Milbank 2006). But if Browning is right to embrace a naturalized account of the human condition and its intractability, then Christian Humanism really is a distinctive species of Religious Humanism (which is what he sometimes says about this relation). In this case, his position is clarified in the direction of Gordon Kaufman's or my own religious naturalism, and he requires the best contemporary critiques of religion as guiding lights toward a more adequate and comprehensive theological appraisal of the human condition (see Kaufman 1993; Wildman 2009). In the middle, though, if there is a conceptually stable resting place, Browning does not do enough to help his reader understand what it might be.

It seems clear that Browning could not have clarified these points without thoroughly reconsidering much of his *oeuvre*, especially in its metaphysical, theological, and ethical aspects. Interestingly, Tillich faced a similar problem toward the end of his life, as he realized that he could not properly come to terms with what he was learning about the natural, human, and religious worlds without rewriting his *Systematic Theology* (see Tillich 1951–1963). Perhaps this is the fate of all brilliant mediating theologians: if they are good enough, they will encounter in their own lifetimes the fracturing of their own interpretative framework relative to the leading edge of human knowledge.

That brings us directly to an important difference between Tillich and Browning: Tillich was more unsettled, clearly knew about the pervasive systematic defects in his thought (that's how he thought of them), and longed in vain for energy and time enough to fix them. As RCH demonstrates repeatedly, Browning appears to have been relatively satisfied with the final state of his critical hermeneutical theory of human reality in its proximate and ultimate contexts. Perhaps this contrast is due to different levels of interest in fundamental philosophical and metaphysical issues, or perhaps to the fact that Browning wrote so much more than Tillich on practical issues in a way that had a huge influence on others. Or perhaps the difference is due to the fact that Browning was committed from the beginning to preserving the wisdom of a particular tradition of Christian theological and moral wisdom, and thus was predisposed to limit the effects of critiques that most deeply challenged that preferred

tradition. I find this last reason most persuasive, and thus consider Browning not only a brilliant mediating theologian but also a consummate apologetic theologian, laboring on behalf of a tradition that he did not hesitate to criticize but never stopped loving and reexpressing for each new context into which his prodigious appetite for knowledge led him.

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