



# A kenotic response to secularity

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## Abstract

### A kenotic response to secularity

*The church must be concerned to make the correct response to its increasing impotence and marginalisation in Western society due to secularisation. Past reaction has been to accommodate to the changed worldview, even to identify with it. A more appropriate response is to be Christocentric, so as to reflect the action of God himself in the sending of Christ for salvation. This involved his kenosis. In this case the response of the church is its own kenosis. This is also appropriate as secularisation was possible through the kenosis of God. The kenosis of the church is not an acceptance of defeat, but on the contrary, just as the kenosis of Christ, it aims at a positive result, the transformation of society.*

## Opsomming

### 'n Kenotiese reaksie op sekulariteit

*Die kerk moet sorg dra om op 'n verantwoordelike wyse te reageer teenoor haar toenemende onvermoë sowel as haar marginalisering in die Westerse samelewing as gevolg van sekularisering. Histories gesproke was haar strategie dié van akkommodasie en selfs identifikasie. 'n Meer gepaste respons sou wees om Christosentries te reageer – om die handeling van God self in sy missie van Christus, naamlik verlossing, te reflekteer. Dit het sy kenosis (Selfontlediging) tot gevolg gehad. In hierdie geval is die respons van die kerk haar eie selfontlediging. Dit is moontlik, want sekularisasie was moontlik as gevolg van die Selfontlediging van God. Die selfontlediging van die kerk is nie om die aftog te blaas nie. Inteendeel, soos die Selfontlediging van Christus, het dit 'n positiewe resultaat ten doel, naamlik die transformasie van die samelewing.*

## 1. Introduction

I suggested in a recent edition of *Koers* (Williams, 2007) that the experience of secularisation in the modern Western world is something that is allowed by God as part of his self-limitation, or *kenosis*. In this, God allows a measure of freedom of action in the world, also by human beings, as this is better than the alternative of his absolute control. This does not mean that he approves of all of the results of this freedom, but as *kenosis* is a self-limitation, there remains the possibility of his action to ensure that his final goals are met.

It is inconceivable that a secularised society is what God actually desires to see. In this case, He then acts to produce a society more in keeping with his nature. The prime example of this is the incarnation of Christ, which enabled the redemption of human beings. This action was, however, consistent with the nature of God, thus involved *kenosis*, as Paul explained in Philippians 2:5 ff. As it was kenotic, it was not coercive of human beings, but invited their response, not only in accepting salvation, but also in adoption of God's desires for their conduct. If God's nature is kenotic, the correct human action is likewise kenotic, as people become more in *imago Dei*. This is clearly the case in accepting personal salvation, as it is essentially a response to God's grace, thus necessitates humble acceptance, a personal *kenosis*. It should then follow that human action to produce a society more in keeping with God's desires is likewise kenotic.

## 2. The emergence of a secularised society

In recent years the Western world has been going through a process of secularisation. Berger (1969:107) defines this as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols". It is therefore the decreasing influence of religion upon society, the decline of the faith that has been dominant, in many areas of society for over a millennium. Whereas in the Middle Ages the whole of society operated with reference to the church, which exerted considerable influence on how it functioned and upon the lifestyles of everybody, nowadays the church is regarded as simply another organisation, competing with many others to have its voice heard. It has become irrelevant to many and is often ignored. Churches have lost membership, and for many of those who remain, their faith affects just a part of their lives, and has to compete with other demands.

It must immediately be said that this is a particular issue in the modern West. In many other parts of the world, belief remains strong and religious organisations are thriving. As a generalisation, these are in what is usually referred to as the “third world” – thus in a situation of poverty. Religion has always thrived where people are insecure (Norris & Inglehart, 2004:5); it is the prosperous West which has experienced its decline, where people often do not feel such a need for God. However, at the same time, where there is economic insecurity, people have tended to have large families; while the population in the developed world is declining, it is still rapidly growing in the less developed. In large areas of the world, such as Latin America, Christianity is thriving in a situation of poverty, and also in sub-Saharan Africa, Christianity is growing rapidly. Indeed, overall, the world is becoming more religious (Norris & Inglehart, 2004:124). It must also be said that in contrast with other religions, it is Christianity that has been particularly affected by secularisation, as it has largely been the traditionally Christian world which has developed.

Unlike non-Western societies, the situation of secularisation is particularly serious for the West, simply because its culture is so integral with Christianity. The modern age is unthinkable without Christianity (Blumenberg, 1983:30); Troeltsch states that the two are totally intertwined, and that people outside the West cannot see Christ without the other (Niebuhr, 1952:44). Certainly it is true that many Africans perceive Christianity simply as the “white” religion.

It is also often noted that the situation seems to be very different in the United States, where in contrast to Europe, churches are thriving, albeit with some slow decline; this is more marked, as in Europe, in the traditional denominations. Growth in the newer churches, notably the ones with a charismatic emphasis, has nearly balanced loss in the others. However, it has been suggested that the situation in America is actually not so different from that in Europe, in that the nature of the churches themselves has changed. In practice they are more like secular organisations, with people belonging to them not so much for religious reasons, but for social contacts and even business benefits. Luckmann describes the situation as “internal secularization” as distinct from the “external” found in Europe (Berger, 1970:17). Nevertheless, there are several other factors which may well mean that religion in America has been able to survive better than in Europe. For one thing the constitutional separation of church and state has meant that a person belonging to the church has made a deliberate choice to do so. The situation is a

little similar to that in the fourth century Constantinian church, where, after acceptance by the Roman Empire, it became both fashionable and expedient to belong to a church, and therefore nominalism flourished. Secondly, the American ethos of competition means that churches openly compete, and deliberately provide attractive programmes; here again this may well produce adherents, but not necessarily those who are really concerned to worship. However, while noting this, Norris and Inglehart (2004:96, 100) state that the evidence suggests that pluralism has not increased participation. Thirdly, it is probably still relevant that many of the original settlers arrived in America for religious reasons (Norris & Inglehart, 2004:225).

Secularisation in the developed West possibly reflects more disenchantment with the church than with the faith that it represents. Dekker *et al.* (1997:280) finds that individual faith has proved to be much more resilient than the institution; this is of course a definite sign of hope for the Church. Nevertheless, this is also declining, and without the support of a vigorous community, it is not likely that the faith of most individuals would prosper. At the same time, even without widespread personal faith, and in the weakness of the churches, Christian values have also not decayed as rapidly; there is still a Christian ethos in Europe, such as the upholding of the ideal of honesty. However, secularisation in time naturally affects all these, the churches as organisations, individual faith and Christian values; they may not be the same, but they are related. Dobbelaere (2002: 24 ff.) distinguishes individual secularisation (the lack of individual practice), from societal secularisation (the loss of religious influence on society), and from organisational secularisation (the effect on religious organisations by changes in society).

### **3. Christian response to secularisation**

Insofar as it represents a decline in Christianity and its influence, secularisation must strike Christians as tragic and demand a response from them. Berger (1969:156) indicates that there are essentially two possible things that the church and individual Christians can do, and indeed have done. On the one hand, they can accommodate themselves to what has happened around them, and on the other, they can withdraw to preserve their distinctive beliefs and practices. Within that framework there are a number of possibilities; in particular, he sub-divides each major option into two (Dekker, 1997:14). In his later book, Dekker points out that these reactions are not a particular feature of religion, but occur wherever people find themselves holding minority views or practices. They either

withdraw to prevent attack on them, aggressively propagate them, or try to justify themselves in a rational way (Berger, 1970:20) the last option is well-known as “culture shock”.

### 3.1 Accommodation

Webber (1981) describes three basic approaches of Christians to society, namely separation, identification, and transformation. It is the second which has been most characteristic of the church for most of its history, since it became the norm when the Roman emperor Constantine accepted Christianity as the religion of the Empire in the early fourth century. He believes there was mutual interaction and support between the two, resulting in popular Christianity becoming “somewhat nominal” (Webber, 1981:113). Even today, many states acknowledge the value of religion, as in providing moral guidance (Niebuhr, 1952:94 ff.). Right throughout the following period, however, there were repeated realisations that the church was not as it should be. There were both attempts to reform it and the establishment of groups within it, which were intended to be purer expressions of the faith, such as in monasticism.

It had been natural for the churches of the Reformation to continue the essence of the tradition that they inherited from the Catholic Church. It is these that exist in modern society as the so-called “mainline” churches. The assumption basically made of “Christendom”, was that the church is a fundamental part of society, influencing it as the spirit of a person drives and motivates his/her actions. All the major reformed churches set up facsimiles of this in their own territories (Berger, 1969:157). A good example of this is Calvin’s Geneva, where the whole society continued to be dominated by the church, in essentially the same way as previously with the Catholic Church. The church may have been reformed, but the interplay with society had not. And it had been an interplay, not simply the action of the church on society, but also of society on the church. Part of the history of the Middle Ages was of the church adopting the methods of the political and social society in which it found itself.

When society changed in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the church again adapted. In particular, it accepted the authority of modern thought and accommodated to it. Berger (1970:22) sees this as early as 1799 when Schleiermacher’s *Addresses on religion to its cultured despisers* was published. In a later work, Berger refers to this as the “reductive option” (Dekker, 1997:14). Of course the church may well not simply accommodate to the patterns around it, but try to negotiate, to “bargain” – an option which he calls “induc-

tive". The church may for example give up belief in miracles while trying to retain the ethics of Jesus (Berger, 1969:159). Berger (1970:37) does, however, feel that the attempt to translate the tradition of the church into the modern world generally leads to disaster for the church (cf. Dekker, 1997:14). It is hardly surprising that it is exactly those mainline churches which are declining under the pressures of secularity. Berger's conclusion is supported by empirical research; Veeren (1997:169) has investigated the attitudes towards society in adherents to Reformed churches in The Netherlands, and concludes that those who did not belong to pietistic groups were indistinguishable from the average Dutch.

Luther's own attempt to reform the church led to schism from it, yet he continued the essential idea of the relationship with the State that pertained previously. This was perhaps hardly surprising, as his success, indeed his very survival, depended upon the patronage of the political authorities. Yet again he was most aware of the distinction between the church and the rest of society. After all, his new church could hardly be viewed as coextensive with all of human society. He solved his problem by advocacy of the "Two Kingdoms" idea, whereby a Christian lives in two spheres simultaneously (Webber, 1981: 113 ff.), and in which there are different practices. In the state is the normal rule of law, but in the church the teachings of Jesus; this latter would be impracticable in the world as a whole. Emphatically, God is sovereign over both, but in different ways. Webber (1981: 133) comments that although a Christian is committed to both spheres, there is great difficulty in determining the balance between the two. As part of the world, a Christian is "living according to a law that appears contradictory to his Christian persuasion" (Webber, 1981:120).

### **3.2 Accommodation a disastrous option**

Accommodation became even more difficult when the ethos of the world shifted. In Luther's time, his world basically still accepted the Christian faith. Despite the need for reform, it had not, at least formally, rejected it. There had been some changes before the Reformation in the Renaissance, which had contributed to secularisation in a reaffirmation of the world and of humanity, but it was the Enlightenment that really altered the world. Its influence in society as a whole were far-reaching in industrialisation, urbanisation, scientific development, and so on, but the impact on Christianity was of a major contribution to the process of secularisation. It was no longer satisfying to be told what to believe, but people wanted to know the

reasons for belief. Essentially, as the name suggests, people claimed to be “enlightened”, able to reason in a new way, and no longer felt the need to rely on the authority of the church for what they believed. It was assumed that a human being was capable of sensible decisions, and could be autonomous. It was no longer enough to rely on the authority of the Bible, but the Bible itself was brought under the spotlight of reason. Many aspects, such as the stories of miracles, were doubted as contrary to reason. At the same time, science developed an understanding of the world that differed from that of the Bible, putting forward ideas of evolution instead of a six day creation, and much else. What was important was that reasonable evidence was available for the new views, while traditional Christian teachings could often only rely on an untestable claim of revelation. For many, the belief of the church seemed to be impossible, and therefore felt that it should be rejected. There was no need to relate to God, and in any case his very existence was unprovable. The world became more secular. Blamires (1978:79) aptly describes the secular view of Christianity:

... your central teachings are wholly incredible, your theology a tangle of outmoded obscurantist metaphysics, your basic doctrines utterly discredited, your view of man’s situation and destiny totally incompatible with modern knowledge.

It was this that sharpened the dichotomy that Luther had given. Not only was a Christian called to live in both the world and the church, trying to balance their claims, but now it was necessary to try to hold in tension two apparently contradictory systems. As Webber (1981: 133) points out, this proved a difficult situation, and so it was here that major accommodation of the church to the thought of society, its secularisation, occurred. Niebuhr (1952:146) states that a synthesis of Christianity with culture, as occurred in the Middle Ages, was no longer possible.

Once the authority of the church was lost, which was natural once it had become divided in the Reformation, and once the authority of the Bible was questioned in the rationalist assaults on it from the assertions of the Enlightenment worldview, the belief of the church, especially in the Protestant sections, naturally shifted. The foundations had weakened. Once it was accepted that belief had to be rational, and empirically justifiable, many of the traditional assertions proved untenable by many. There was progressive dismantling of the supernatural scaffolding of Christianity (Berger, 1970:23). Even such a fundamental tenet of the faith as the incarnation was disputed. Naturally the essential message of the church became in line

with Enlightenment thought. Liberal Christianity advocated little more than the love of people one to another. Only the goodness of God and his love for the world, seen very indirectly, could be tolerated of the supernatural. The church paid lipservice to the transcendent, whereas for most this must have seemed to be a sham. The tendency was for religion to be reduced to a form of psychology; in this case, Christianity can then be viewed as simply subjective (Berger, 1969:168). Most recently, the Enlightenment rejection of authority has been further enhanced by the rejection and defeat of totalitarianism, and the realisation of what could be the result of such forms of authoritarian government (Blamires, 1978:133). This would partly account for the acceleration of secularisation after the Second World War, although it is far from the only factor. Perhaps more significant are the increased prosperity and development of social security.

At the same time, the church itself was affected by the secularisation of society and has tended to become simply a human organisation, with social and political aims. Dekker (1997:17 ff.) catalogues a number of changes in the Reformed churches of The Netherlands, which would not be unique to that country. The principle changes were changes in ecclesiastical organisation, in the view of the Bible, in the content of doctrine and its significance, in the relationship between religiosity and other aspects of life, and in the attitude towards non-church members and to other churches. Shiner comments that this sort of accommodation is itself a secularisation (Lyon, 1985:119).

#### **4. Secularised Christianity**

More recently, there were those people who openly advocate a Christianity without the transcendent. Bonhoeffer, notably, called for a religionless Christianity, removing the other-worldly (Richard, 1967:11); in a secular society, "honesty demands that we recognise that we must live in the world as if there were no God. And this is just what we do recognize – before God" (cited in Richard, 1967:24). He did, however, see this as consistent with Christianity's distinction between the sacred and the secular (Berger, 1969:106). Bultmann advocated demythologisation of elements in the Bible, such as the stories of miracle, which he felt were incredible to modern people (Mascall, 1965:8). On a more popular level, the bishop of Woolwich notoriously published *Honest to God*. Arguably, the motives of the latter were to preserve the "essence" of Christianity in a way acceptable to the modern worldview. Significantly, both Robinson



and Cox still accepted the reality of the incarnation and the formula of Chalcedon (Richard, 1967:33). For these the essence of Jesus is the “man for others” (Richard, 1967:44), or his perfect response (Van Buren, quoted in Mascall, 1965:51), which is close to the reason for Christ’s *kenosis* – a link that Bonhoeffer made (Richard, 1967:122). Van Buren continued seeking to eliminate all traces of the supernatural (Mascall, 1965:7). However, without the reality of the spiritual, the church really has no distinct role in society. It might as well cease to exist, as what it does can be more adequately done by other bodies. Barth commented on Bultmann that he effectively evacuated the gospel in his attempt to make it acceptable (Mascall, 1965:46). Likewise, Mascall (1965:105) says that Robinson despaired of converting the world to Christianity, thus attempted to convert Christianity to the world. In this case, secularisation is complete. People will surely only support the church if they can see the reality of a relationship with God that it embodies. If they indeed see this, it must assuredly maintain a role, indeed one that could well grow. What has happened is that in many cases, Christian thinking has been transformed to that of the rest of society, a stark contrast to the call that the Philippian hymn makes for people to conform their mind to that of Christ.

## 5. Resistance to secularisation

However, in distinction to the two accommodative options, Berger described a third, which is to resist accommodation and reassert the authority of the faith (Dekker, 1997:14). This often manifests in an attempt to preserve the faith by withdrawing from society. This is Webber’s option of “separation” (1981:75 ff.), and has always been done in the church. Niebuhr (1952:60 ff.) traces this from the New Testament, such as in 1 John, through the Early Church, as in the *Didache* and Tertullian, and then through monasticism to modern expressions in Mennonites and Quakers – he especially mentions Tolstoy. As Gibbons said, Christians are “animated by a contempt for present existence and by confidence in immortality” (Niebuhr, 1952:21). The reaction of the first hermits and the monks in the face of what they saw as the loss of the purity of the church after its acceptance by the Roman Empire, was to escape to form an alternative society. They rejected a church which they saw as secularised, which is how many modern Christians view the institutionalised church of today (Webber, 1981:98). At the time of the Reformation there were also those who felt that society as a whole was beyond hope and so the only option was to withdraw from it (Yoder, 1997:202). Interestingly this was not done by Calvin, despite

his belief in the distinctiveness of Christians from the world due to their predestination. He rather tried to reform society, a paradoxical action which could be seen as inherently doomed. Perhaps, as most people, he found it impossible to move too far out of the worldview that he inherited. The action of the Anabaptists is continued today in various groups, some of which, like the Amish, try to avoid as much of modern society as they can, so as to preserve their faith and culture. They desire a pure church (Webber, 1981:87), and so separate it from culture (Webber, 1981:92). Berger (quoted in Dekker, 1997:14) says that “the deductive option is to reassert the authority of a religious tradition in the face of modern secularity”. Even among Christians who are more accepting of society, there is often the appreciation of the need to be distinctive. This manifests in, for example, the desire to establish Christian schools to try to maintain the influence of the faith on the young. Quite often dissatisfaction with the church as a whole has led to the formation of smaller groups, sometimes within the existing congregations. This latter was a characteristic feature of the charismatic “renewal” which started in the 1960s. At the same time, the establishment of a Christian subculture, with its own music, holidays and so on, is a useful mechanism for survival as it enhances the mutual support that is so helpful (Lyon, 1985:124). This gives a fresh dimension to the creedal affirmation of the “communion of saints” (Berger, 1970:26)!

## **5.1 A reaffirmation of belief**

It would seem that if Berger is right, the only hope for the church is to reaffirm its traditional beliefs, insisting that they are in fact valid, despite the lack of scientific verification for them. The Catholic attitude all along had been just this. Pius IX, in 1864, rejected any idea of reconciliation with “progress, liberalism and civilization as lately introduced” (Berger, 1970:26). This is not just a “head-in-the-sand” option. Lyon (1985:118) notes that sociologists and historians of religion “cannot but notice the persistence, revival or resurgence of the more orthodox, Biblically-based versions of Christianity”. Perhaps, however, it must be insisted at this stage that it is not necessary to affirm with Tertullian that Christianity is believed just because it is absurd! Niebuhr (1952:87) explains the sense in which he meant this, that the events of the cross and resurrection are so wonderful as beyond understanding. Paul indicates the same in 1 Corinthians 1:18 ff. Rather, unlike many systems of belief which are just that, sets of ideas, Christianity can claim a measure of verification, and it is impressive evidence. Lyon (1985:123) notes that one reason for the survival of conservative Protestantism in a

modern scientific world is that it can claim rationality. Indeed, Biblical Christianity can emphasise this as Jesus is the *logos*, the rationality of God. It is not surprising that the church contains a relatively high proportion of natural scientists, doctors and other professionals (Lyon, 1985:123). 2 Peter 1:16 ff. insists that the gospel message is not “cleverly devised myths” but rests on eyewitness evidence. The same stress on experience is characteristic of 1 John. Examples could be multiplied. The obvious one is Paul’s appeal to the resurrection, underpinning his teaching (1 Cor. 15:13). The danger is that retrenchment can well be a closure of the mind, whereas Philippians 2 calls for the transformation of the mind. Intellectual defense of the faith, and of the basis for belief, remains imperative. Yet, although the evidence for the resurrection is impressive, it falls short of the sort of proof that is presented for many scientific tenets. Likewise, although it is possible to defend and explain Biblical assertions of miracle, the point is that it is a defense. Whereas in the past the miracles were presented as solid evidence for Christianity, they are now often seen as a burden. This is of course why Bultmann had proposed a programme of “demythologization” to remove the miraculous, interpreting the stories in a way acceptable to modern scientific people. But again, this is a capitulation to the ideas and system of the modern world. Hardly surprising in the complexity of arguments, there are many who opt for Berger’s retrenchment option, affirming the beliefs of Christianity, and just rejecting the secular view, which, of course, despite the impressive amount of evidence, is not fully provable either.

## 6. Reflecting the example of Christ

Assessing two sets of evidence in order to reach a decision is actually the method of the Enlightenment and thus of secular society. It cannot be acceptable to Christians as such. Blamires (1978:107) stresses the Christian claim to absolute truth and decries the Enlightenment idea that it is merely necessary to adopt a majority consensus. This indicates a replacement of truth by simply what is liked (Blamires, 1978:112). Christians can thus query the use of reason as a base for other ideas (Niebuhr, 1952:26). In contrast, Christian action and belief, which includes the response to secularisation, as any other issue, should be based on a criterion that is itself Christian and not secular. Here Christianity has usually sought to be just that, Christian, and therefore take Christ as the basic reason for their belief. Christianity is in essence a relationship to Christ, using him as its paradigm. 1 John stresses revelation by encounter. This means that affirmation of traditional belief is not just

because of the length of time that it has been believed, or its acceptance by the church over centuries, but because it is Christocentric. This criterion further supports a reaffirmation of traditional beliefs. As Niebuhr (1952:117) points out, accommodation had had to distort the New Testament figure of Christ.

Christocentricity was the key concept of a major reaction to the prevalent liberal theology in the early part of the twentieth century. Karl Barth spearheaded the “neo-orthodox” reaffirmation of more traditional Christianity. He trumpeted that the Christian message is to be accepted independently of human thought and human history, insisting on its externality and non-subjectivity (Berger, 1969:163). Its popularity was, however, only a temporary reversal of the overall trend of secularisation, due to the situation of the time. Berger (1970:24) sees the influence of the shocks to Western cultural optimism centred on the First World War. Perhaps it failed more because its essential idea was not applied to Christian life and practice.

## **6.1 A kenotic response**

A Christocentric approach to secularisation is the one which best reflects Christ. A questioning of the accommodative options is not just because they have proved to be disastrous, as Berger indeed indicated, but because his third option is more fundamentally Christian, because it better reflects the nature of Christ himself. This option is the option of *kenosis*, and the essence of the retrenchment option is that it also is kenotic. In retrenchment, a clear division is made between those who accept the faith and those who reject it. Thus while relationships with the likeminded are enhanced, they are restricted with others. There is self-limitation, while the essential nature of the church is reaffirmed. This is what Jesus was doing in his *kenosis*, in effect restraining the exercise of his divinity in the manifestation of his humanity. This had to be restrained, for it is impossible for a human being to manifest the fullness of God. Yet the fullness of deity was maintained; it was this that was not understood by the Arians or some of the early proponents of a kenotic Christology. The divinity of the second Person was not inherently limited, or “emptied”, but rather its manifestation was self-limited by choice. In his incarnation, Jesus was still fully divine. In parallel to this, the churches that followed this option affirmed their historic doctrines without compromise.

Yet the action of Christ was not done simply to preserve his nature; far from it, as the Philippian hymn stresses that he did not grasp at

deity (Phil. 2:6). On the contrary, his *kenosis* was done for the benefit of the world. While it was the *kenosis* of God in creation that enabled human freedom and so the possibility of sin, it was the *kenosis* of Christ that enabled the solution to that sin. While people used the freedom that God had given them and restricted their relationship with God, which resulted in secularisation, Jesus shared in that *kenosis*, experiencing its effects to the uttermost in himself. In his resurrection he enabled a restoration of life to people in union with himself. Thus the *kenosis* of Christ was done simply for the benefit of others, to remove the effects of the limitation that they experienced due to sin.

It is this that gives a paradigm for a Christian response to secularisation. Berger (Dekker, *et al.*, 1997:4) in fact indicates that the retrenchment option can have two purposes; a reaffirmation of essential Christianity can lead either to the ghetto or to the crusade. Even the first, as in monasticism, can have a decided effect on society, even if unintentionally (Niebuhr, 1952:78). However, in the second case, a reaffirmation is done simply to confront, and hopefully change, those who attack and deny the essential nature of the church. In the case of Barth's affirmations, neo-orthodoxy was a form of resistance to the state, at that time Nazi Germany (Berger, 1969:162). In fact, insofar as culture is often a way of dominating nature, *kenosis* must always question it, bearing in mind that a questioning of culture is often merely on the basis of a different culture (Niebuhr, 1952:110).

It is simply not true that Berger's two basic options are to be either relevant and nondistinctive or distinctive but irrelevant (Lyon, 1985:119). Christian self-limitation need not be introspective, but can be aggressive towards a secular worldview. According to Webber's third option, that of "transformation" (1981:135 ff.), he believes that a Christian approach to society must be fundamentally Christocentric. Niebuhr (1952:207) feels that this avoids either the rejection of culture or simply accommodating to it. However, while Hunter observes the "inner posture of mastery of ascetic Protestantism", he bemoans that this "has given way to an inner flaccidity of a largely subjectivistically-orientated [sic] evangelicalism" (Lyon, 1985:121). Blamires (1978:9) also complains that while modern society is being critiqued, it is not by Christians.

As Yoder (1997:209) comments, on the basis of the church in Iowa, it is extremely difficult for a church to simultaneously maintain its purity and aim to transform society. However, this was exactly what was done in Christ's *kenosis*. He did remain pure, as can be seen in

his refusal to grasp, but also remained obedient to God (Phil. 2:6). Other New Testament witness vouches for his sinlessness (eg. Heb. 4:15). The whole purpose of the *kenosis* was ultimately transformative. Thus Blamires (1978:190) rejects the idea of self-limitation if just results in “steps towards a withdrawn and departmentalized Christian spirituality severed from contemporary culture by the drugged inoperacy of the Christian mind”. As in the case of Jesus, any withdrawal is to be better able to confront the world. Niebuhr (1952:113) points out that an accommodating Christianity is not more effective in making disciples than a radical one.

Of course it hardly needs to be said that this aggression is not simply polemics, but motivated from pity, for a secular person has no hope, whether for eternity, or even in the inevitable calamities of this life (Blamires, 1978:81). The *kenosis* of Christ was done for the sake of human salvation, and any *kenosis* of Christians must have the same motive, to liberate men and women from the effects of a secular environment. The word *liberate* is apt, for Christianity does not only liberate from hopelessness, but also from the dehumanising that is part of modern life, such as in the urban environment that is one part of the cause of the secularisation process. Indeed, much of modern life can be seen as slavery, such as to keep up with neighbours in the consumer race, or to the machines that should help our lives (Blamires, 1978:156). Schumacher (1973:25, 30) comments that it is the prevalent greed that removes a sense of perspective and delivers people up to the power of the machine. Again both aspects are from trends in society, the capitalist process and technology, that have contributed to secularisation. A kenotic attitude immediately blunts the effects of these in lessening the urge to acquire and in willingness to live a little less frenetically. Schumacher (1973:124) is tempted to suggest that the amount of real leisure is in inverse proportion to the number of labour-saving devices; the back cover of his book speaks of slavery to capital. It is no accident that the Philippian hymn describes Jesus as coming in the form of a slave; it is this that can atone for our slavery. In union with him comes liberation and the fullness of what human life should be.

## **6.2 The necessity for *kenosis***

As the action of God in creation and in the atonement was kenotic, the action of people in the image of God should also be kenotic. Therefore the action of Christians in confronting a sinful and secularised world, indeed its defining ethos, has to involve its own self-

limitation. It cannot replicate the attitude of selfish acquisition that is characteristic of modern Western society.

This has at least two aspects. On the one hand there will be a limitation of belief. Just as the Israelites had to reject belief in the deities of the surrounding nations, so Christians cannot add to their belief. This is not just a rejection of others who are called “gods”, but also of anything which would be an idol. This includes any other value beside the claim of Christ (Niebuhr, 1952:24). “Belief” in this sense is not so much acceptance of their existence, but relating to them. Syncretism, not only in the sense of worshipping other gods as well as the Father, but also of reliance on other things such as money or education, must be rejected. It is this, rather than the traditional idea of polytheism, which is more applicable in a European context. Nevertheless it is a feature of the modern world that various new forms of spirituality have emerged, such as the “New Age” movement. As Augustine realised, there is a deep need in people that cannot be satisfied simply on the secular level. Of course he also knew that only God is able to satisfy that desire in a full way.

Actual belief is important and this is also an aspect of *kenosis*, because it is a limitation to some truths only. It is sometimes pointed out that modern Christians have affinity to other religions, particularly Judaism and Islam, as rejecting secularity. But the heart of Christianity is not being religious but is a relationship to Christ. This means that even if faith is a positive thing, the negative rejection of other ideas is important. Faith is also more than a technique for life improvement, but does include doctrinal matters. The common neglect of these in modern churches is in fact a yielding to the ideas of secularisation. For Barth, faith is based on the acceptance of revelation; this is therefore a form of retrenchment. Some decades ago, developing ecumenical relations between churches was looked upon as a bulwark against secularism, but this view is now considerably jaded (Lyon, 1985:117). Any growth in numbers by mergers is likely to be temporary, and gives the message that distinctive belief does not matter. This latter is serious if it implies that it is simply belief without real reason or substance.

A further example of this, particularly pertinent to the African context, is the matter of ancestors. In keeping with the Biblical injunctions, Christians have, since the coming of the missionaries, rejected the practices of veneration of the dead. However, this need not be seen in the sense of the denial of existence, but a rejection of any dealings with the dead. This is, in any case, for a number of reasons.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19 ff.) indicates that the dead cannot communicate with the living, and so there is likelihood that any contact with the dead is deceptive, and if it is real, could well be with demons, with all the implications of that. There is no guarantee as to who is being communicated with. Although the African custom is viewed as respecting God in that, communication is via an intermediary, it is actually insulting to use a different method as direct communication is possible with God in Christ.

This point is very applicable to the modern view that all beliefs should be accepted as valid. Pluralism is often connected to secularisation, although opinion is varied as to which is the cause of the other (Berger, 1969:155). Pluralism may be due to a belief that religious belief does not reflect reality because the world is simply secular, but that it should not be rejected if it has psychological benefit. However, it may also reflect a belief that all religions are real, and that a specific faith may be only an aspect of a wider reality; in this case, adherence to one is indeed kenotic!

On the other hand, the Christian ethos of *kenosis* applies not only to a limitation of belief and relationship but also to practice. It involves a rejection of many things done in society. So much of what passes for Christianity today is deeply affected by secular ideas and values, often presented with a Christian veneer. Lyon (1985:121) includes even the drive for slimness: "Trim for Him." Classically, of course, the ten commandments are almost all negative, excluding some otherwise attractive practices, no matter how rational they would appear to be. An example of the latter is the observance of one day in seven, which at first glance does seem most arbitrary. However, the very survival of the Jews in repeated experiences of persecution was dependent upon maintenance of their distinctiveness, of which Sabbath observation was a major part. Nevertheless, the commandment was not just arbitrary, but as any form of *kenosis*, was practised for positive value. For these two reasons it should not simply be rejected by Christians as outmoded and irrelevant (Williams, 1989).

This highlights the point that any practice of *kenosis* is done for positive benefit. Moreover, it is not done simply for the benefit of the one practising it, as is often the case, such as with asceticism, but for the benefit of others. God limited his relationship to Abraham for the blessing of the nations (Gen. 12:3), and the same would be true of limitations in the Old Testament period. Several people, e.g. Cullmann (König, 1988:28) have seen the action of God as a progressive limitation, reversing in the New Testament. Then of course,



the *kenosis* of Jesus himself was essential for his becoming incarnate, but this was done for a very positive purpose; just as the case of Abraham was done for the sake of salvation.

### 6.3 Continued separation

The goal of Christianity need not be a reinstatement of integration of the state and church, as was the case in the Middle Ages; in fact Martin suggests that the breakdown of this relationship is of the “essence of Christianity” (Lyon, 1985:133). Rather it seeks the presentation of the Gospel so that people have the opportunity to accept the message of salvation and so belong to the kingdom, not of this world, but of God. And if the appeal of the gospel is to be communicated, it is essential for it to be clearly distinctive from the ethos of the world as a whole. Certainly any kenoticism is diametrically opposed to the ethos of the modern West, where the idea of “enough” hardly exists, where any idea of sacrifice is foreign, and even avarice is put forward as a virtue (Schumacher, 1973:18, 19, particularly referring to Keynes). Economic growth is viewed as unquestionably good, a keynote of economics the world over (Schumacher, 1973:40, 200). It has become an idol. If it highlights the distinctiveness of Christianity, then the secularisation of society is not a bad thing, but essential for the gospel. At least for the present, current secularity is not only possible because God allows it, as part of his *kenosis*, but like that *kenosis*, is an essential step towards the establishing of the society that God does desire. This would be a truly sacral society, God-centred in the full sense, not just superficially as it was in the Middle Ages, which was far from total (Lyon, 1985:18). The Biblical indication is, however, that this will not occur, but that society will always be divided until God finally intervenes in Christ’s *parousia*, a manifestation not in *kenosis* but in glory (Phil. 2:10). After all, God’s *kenosis* is not an inherent limitation, but by his choice. He can intervene if and when he desires. It is only in the recreation that a sacral society will occur. Until then the ideal is for the church to reflect that kind of society in the midst of a secular world. Webber (1981:79) highlights the fact that early church separation was underpinned by their eschatological hope; indeed, the *kenosis* of Christ was succeeded by eschatological glorification, which adds sense to it, and any Christian adoption of *kenosis* likewise is justified by a future hope. Interestingly, Blumenberg (1983:44) believes that it was the non-appearance of the expected end that moved the church towards involvement in the world for the sake of being relevant, and so contributed to its secularisation.

Perhaps the church needs to take 2 Peter 3 to heart and remain distinctive by patience.

This confrontation must involve a measure of relationship with those confronted, but not a full identification. A battle must involve contact, but also difference. Jesus became human, but with qualifications: He was “born in the *likeness* of men” and was “found in human *form*” (Phil. 2:7-8; emphasis – DTW). Jesus did not adopt human sinfulness. So whereas it can be suggested that Jesus saved people by identifying with them, this can only be part of the option. He did not adopt their error. On the contrary, He confronted it. While humility means restricting desire, especially when it is to benefit oneself, it does not include withholding an opinion (Blamires, 1978:39). Thus although accommodation to humanity may well seem to be kenotic in the sense that Jesus limited Himself to become human, this cannot be an option in the resistance of secularisation – it is not an adoption of the human worldview.

In fact, Jesus was identifying with humanity in a full sense, thus with humanity as it should have been. In its sin, humanity had limited itself, specifically in its relationship with God. In essence, it had become less than human in the sense that it had been created. What Jesus was doing in the atonement was restoring humanity to wholeness.

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**Key concepts:**

Christocentric  
culture

*kenosis*: self-limiting  
secularisation

**Kernbegrippe:**

Christosentries

*kenosis*: selfbeperving  
kultuur  
sekularisasie

