Kenosis and the nature of the Persons in the Trinity

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Abstract

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Philippians 2:7 describes the kenosis of Christ, that is Christ's free choice to limit himself for the sake of human salvation. Although the idea of Christ's kenosis as an explanation of the incarnation has generated considerable controversy and has largely been rejected in its original form, it is clear that in this process Christ did humble himself. This view is consistent with some contemporary perspectives on God's self-limitation; in particular as this view provides a justification for human freedom of choice. As kenosis implies a freely chosen action of God, and not an inherent and temporary limitation, kenosis is consistent with an affirmation of God's sovereignty. This view is particularly true if Christ's kenosis is seen as a limitation of action and not of his attributes. Such an idea does not present problems concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, specifically regarding the relation between the economic and the immanent nature of the Trinity. The Trinitarian doctrine, on the contrary, indeed complements this idea – specifically the concept of perichoresis (the inter-relatedness among the Persons of the Triniy and the relation between the two natures of Christ).

Opsomming

Kenosis en die aard van die Persone in die Drie-eenheid

Filippense 2:7 beskryf die kenosis van Christus – sy vrye keuse om homself te ontledig ter wille van die mens se verlossing. Alhoewel die gedagte van Christus se kenosis as 'n verklaring vir die vleeswording van Christus skerp meningsverskille veroorsaak het en tot 'n groot mate in sy oorspronklike vorm verwerp is, is dit duidelik dat Christus homself deur sy selfontlediging (kenosis) verneder het. Hierdie siening is in ooreenstemming met sekere hedendaagse perspektiewe op God

se selfbeperking – in die besonder omdat dié siening 'n regverdiging bied vir die mens se vryheid om 'n keuse te maak. Omdat kenosis 'n handeling impliseer wat God vrywillig gekies het, en dus nie 'n inherente en tydelike beperking is nie, is kenosis tegelyk 'n bevestiging van God se soewereiniteit. Die waarheid van hierdie siening kom spesifiek na vore as Christus se kenosis nie beskou word as 'n beperking van Christus se dade en sy eienskappe nie. Hierdie opvatting skep nie probleme ten opsigte van die leerstuk van die Drie-eenheid nie, veral probleme aangaande die verhouding tussen die ekonomie van die Drie-eenheid en die immanente aard van die Drie-eenheid. Die leerstuk van die Drie-eenheid is inderdaad 'n aanvulling van genoemde idee – veral dan die konsep van perekoresis (die onderlinge verbondenheid van die drie Persone in die Drie-eenheid en die verhouding tussen die twee nature van Christus).

1. Introduction

The so-called "hymn to Christ", *Carmen Christi* (Martin, 1983), in Philippians 2:5-11, contains within it the statement of Jesus' self-emptying, or *kenosis*. The concept of *kenosis* is certainly striking, especially in the context of the affirmation of the full deity of the second Person of the Trinity, and as such has attracted a vast amount of scholarly attention as to its meaning. It would seem to be obvious from the preceding verse that *kenosis* implies that Jesus divested himself of the full attributes of deity; he in fact "emptied" himself of his Godly attributes. Christ thus was no longer equal to God, in order to become fully human and ultimately die on the cross. This act has been seen as part of the process of atonement, by which human salvation was achieved.

Alternative explanations to this view have, however, been suggested. The influential scholar, James Dunn, for example in keeping with his advocacy of an "Adam Christology", has rejected such a metaphysical interpretation in favour of viewing the *kenosis* as explained by the next phrase in the hymn. According to this explanation Jesus accepted the powerlessness of a slave (Dunn, 1989:116). Martin (1983:170) also supports this view, believing that the emptying must be interpreted metaphorically. Such an approach would be consistent with 2 Corinthians 8:9, which is often cited to support the idea of *kenosis*. It may be commented that this "powerlessness" is indeed part of Christ's *kenosis* and in fact, that crucifixion was a punishment reserved for slaves and for insurrectionists, even if the accusation of the latter was the official justification for Jesus' execution. If, however, a more traditional Christology is accepted, especially in keeping with Chalcedon, such an idea can be a part of the whole picture. In this regard John 17:5,

also a "kenotic" verse, implies a glory in his pre-existence. Dunn (1989:31), however, simply rejects this testimony to Jesus' self-consciousness.

Traditional theology also includes affirmation of the Trinity, a doctrine which has also been subject to considerable questioning and reinterpretation. Although it is not always done, any discussion of Christology should take cognisance of its implications for the Trinity. Indeed, Philippians 2 has distinct Trinitarian implications. The fear of any hint of Arian subordination has also influenced many against a view of *kenosis*. However, recent suggestions, such as put forward by Moltmann, have indicated that a form of *kenosis* is actually characteristic of the divine nature as such. In this case *kenosis* would be a feature of all three of the Persons. Regarding the latter view Moltmann is concerned to relate his view of God to the current situation in the world, especially to that of human suffering. He writes from the framework of being a German who participated in the second World War. Certainly a suggestion of God's self-limitation can provide an explanation for suffering, and if for no other reason, can justify a re-examination of the concept of *kenosis*, especially against the background of the Trinity. Even more recently, the "open theism" movement (cf. Pinnock, 2001) has stressed human free will, but their belief in God's limitation has incurred the wrath of many Calvinists.

2. *Kenosis*

The "kenotic theory" was popular in Germany between about 1860 and 1880, and then in England from about 1890 to 1910 (Grudem, 1994:550). The originator of the idea on the continent was the Lutheran, Thomasius, who taught that the Son had abandoned the metaphysical attributes of deity (McGrath, 1997:355). Gess went further, including other aspects of divinity and also the idea of generation and the exercise of Christ's cosmic functions, such as upholding the universe (Macleod, 1998:206).

Essentially, what was suggested was that in order to become incarnate, the second Person of the Trinity "emptied" himself of the attributes that are characteristic of being God – attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience, so that his exercise of power and knowledge were equal to those of an ordinary human being. The kenotic theory was at least an attempt to probe a little into the mystery of the incarnation and not just to ignore it. In fact, it is often felt that the statement of Chalcedon is not so much an explanation

of the incarnation, but a statement of its parameters – even of the problem.

This view of *kenosis* was immediately attractive to the Enlightenment world-view, for it implied that Jesus could share the understanding of the Bible of the "unenlightened" world of his time. He would therefore accept the narratives of creation and of Jonah as being historically determined, and ascribe the authorship of the Pentateuch to Moses and the Psalms to David, all of which traditional beliefs were increasingly questioned at that time. This approach also reflects the Biblical assertions of Jesus' ignorance (e.g. Matt. 24:36; Mark 9:21) and growth (Luk. 2:52). On the other hand, the Gospels do indicate that Jesus did know and claimed that he was indeed the Son, and that the disciples also recognised his divinity. He also is recorded as having performed significant miracles. These miracles could, however, well be attributed, not to the divinity of the Son, but to the action of the Spirit, who empowered Christ at his baptism, then inspired him and his disciples. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was largely neglected at the time when the kenotic theory developed, but if the role of the Holy Spirit had not been neglected, the idea of the self-limitation of Jesus may perhaps have met with fewer objections.

In England, the idea was espoused by Gore, who saw it as a way of reconciling Anglo-Catholics and liberals (Macleod, 1998:206). As in the early Church, it was hard to separate theological discussion from more worldly concerns. Gore sometimes spoke in terms of "refraining", sometimes of "abandoning" when trying to define *kenosis.* It is notable that Gore accepted the definitions of Nicaea and of Chalcedon without reservation (Macleod, 1998:206).

The idea of *kenosis* was attacked for a number of reasons. Creed cites the admission of Thomasius himself, that is, that there is little support for the notion of *kenosis* in the views of the Fathers. Furthermore Creed indicates that the closest form of support was a comment in Apollinarius that "incarnation is self-emptying" (Baillie, 1956:94). Grudem (1994:550) believes that no recognised teacher taught the idea for 1 800 years, including native Greek speakers. Apollinarius was of course condemned as a heretic for his Christological views. This fact in itself is not too serious: all theology must be seen in its own context. In fact, many of the Fathers would have been condemned by later standards. Thinkers such as Apollinarius were trying to understand and had no intention of being heretical or of denying what had previously been accepted. On the contrary, Erickson (1991:78) asserts that the idea of *kenosis* has

featured in Christologies from the earliest days. Augustine can of course be relied upon to make at least some comments relevant to the issue. According to Augustine "Jesus emptied himself not by changing his own divinity but by assuming our changeableness" (Macleod, 1998:216). A more modern belief is that of Calvin, who said that whereas Jesus could not divest himself of his Godhead, he concealed it for a time (Macleod, 1998:218). Relating to humanity renders *kenosis* essential. Calvin even speaks of God's "baby-talk" in order to communicate with us (Horton, 2002:324).

A common point of criticism was made by Archbishop William Temple, who voiced an objection based on Hebrews 1:3. He could not see that a *kenotic* Christ could fulfil his function of upholding the universe (Macleod, 1998:209). It may be commented that pro-vidence does not in fact need the constant and direct involvement of Christ, but as long as the possibility of God's intervention in the process is affirmed, this view need not then imply Deism (cf. Sanders, 1998:10). Many open theists, while respecting free choice, and thus seeing a limitation of God's control, speak of God intervening if his overall intention is threatened (Nicholls, 2002:629 ff.) – the same can be true of a *kenotic* God.

The theory did go out of favour and the word *kenosis* gained a measure of notoriety. More recent thought has expressed some sympathy with the idea of *kenosis*; thus allowing the world to affect God (Pinnock, 2001:12). This interpretation is also attractive, especially as it is in keeping with the preferred approach to Christology "from below", to start from the evidence of Jesus' humanity and to seek to understand him from that context. It is suggested that the traditional view of God's attributes is actually foreign to Christianity, but is imported from Greek philosophy (Horton, 2002:317). It must be observed that a similar accusation is often made about the doctrine of the Trinity. This view is in contrast to early kenoticism, which was really "from above", and tried to relate it to an assumed immutability – an approach that certainly contributed to its downfall.

A recent approach rather attempts to understand God from the experience of Christ's *kenosis* (Richard, 1997:84). Moltmann is particularly noteworthy in this respect. As in other areas, he expresses an appreciation for the insights of Eastern Orthodoxy. Russians, such as Bulgakov in *The wisdom of God*, have used this idea in respect of creation and the Trinity, not only within the context of Christology (Baillie, 1956:98). Moltmann (1981:219) thus has described the act of creation as a limitation in God, in so far as it

was the result of a choice to create an entity which has an existence distinct from God, and therefore to an extent is independent of him. God then suffers with, and therefore for his creation – hardly the traditional impassibility. In this case, God is "open", because he is affected by what happens in the world. Bonhoeffer (e.g. 1967:196) also has similar views, which should also be evaluated within the framework of his historical context – the Germany of the Second World War.

A major objection to the earlier concept of *kenosis* rests on the belief that *kenosis* implies a change in the nature of the second Person – at least for a while. This interpretation seems to be in conflict with the traditional teaching of immutability. If this change in the nature of Christ is, however, seen not so much as an aspect of a divine attribute, but as consistency or faithfulness (e.g. König, 1982:89), this problem is resolved. Such an approach also explains such problems as God's repentance as in the story of Jonah (also Pinnock, 2001:85 ff.). Mackintosh accepts *kenosis,* as the only immutability is that of love (Macleod, 1998:218). Later development avoided this problem by arguing that God's attributes were not abandoned, but rather either "hidden" or that Jesus abstained from using them. The former viewpoint is often called the theory of *krypsis* (Greek "hidden"), and was advocated by the University of Tübingen. The latter is referred to as *kenosis* by Griessen. Such an interpretation of *kenosis*, seeing it not so much as divestment, but as self-limitation, avoids much of the criticism of the original idea.

The British scholar, Forsyth, was also associated with the idea of *kenosis.* He pointed out some of the problems with the traditional view, such that it is hard to see how there could in fact be two wills in Christ, if one was divinely omniscient, while the other was human and fallible (Macleod, 1998:208). Significantly he saw the aspects of omnipotence not so much as attributes, but rather as functions of deity. Martin (1983:171) indeed comments that any metaphysical "laying off" of attributes is foreign to Paul, or, he suggests, to reality. The respected New Testament scholar, Lightfoot, observed that the schema of Philippians 2 was outward and accidental (Macleod, 1998:216). The use of *morphe* ("form") in Philippians was not based on Greek philosophy, but on the Septuagint: it implies outward appearance and change, the accessibility of what is there. A further significant observation that Macleod made was that the humility that Jesus expressed in the incident where he washed the feet of his disciples was in the immediate context of his coming from the Father (John 13:2 ff.). "It is his very form to forgo his rights" – so He felt that it was inherent to the very nature of God to humble himself. This

point becomes clearer with the realisation that the *kenosis* mentioned in Philippians should be regarded as in relation – not to Christ's humanity in relation to deity – but to the lordship which Christ refused to use (Martin, 1983:175), until later, after the cross and resurrection, when it was clearly granted. Thus *kenosis* points to a self-limitation, a rejection of the use of power and authority that is still available.

3.   Self-limitation

There is a natural inclination to view limitation as inherently bad and thus inappropriate to God. Part of the reason for this inclination is that many of the limitations that are experienced by human beings are not inherent, but on the contrary, have been received by choice, by sin and are thus indeed bad. Boyd (2001:251) suggests that Jesus' power was that which people would have had should they have been unfallen. The connection of human limitation with sin is certainly implied in the Genesis account of the fall. Quite apart from the Genesis account, the limitation of humanity follows as an inevitable consequence of the nature of sin itself. This alleged consequence may be understood as a breakdown in relationship. Boyd (2001:346) suggests the sin lies in self-centredness – thus closedness. As a result of sin humanity lost the ability to live forever, as humanity also lost access to the tree of life. They lost eternal life. Because of the breakdown of the link with God, divine life is not enjoyed and death is inevitable. Death will in any case result as bodily inter-relationships deteriorate. Then people certainly lost their power to affect the environment, because of the curse that was laid upon it (Gen. 3:17). As the power that humanity has over its environment is largely enabled by cooperation among people, any breakdown in this cooperation results in a diminishing of that power. Adam and Eve also lost an aspect of the freedom of movement in their exclusion from the garden. Perhaps it is even the case that although the first sin is described as due to eating from the tree of knowledge, this act is specifically referred to as connected to "good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). Certainly Adam and Eve's knowledge was also affected. As human knowledge is also dependent on interaction both with other people and on the internal brain processes, knowledge is also affected.

However, even if sin and thus the limitation due to it is wrong, the power of choice that enabled sin is not. In fact, the ability to choose is part of the human role as in *imago Dei* – being able to choose, because God himself has chosen. Such choice can be to self-limit. Philippians 2:5 ff. indicates the free choice of the second Person in this regard. Christ chose, but choice does not have to result in sin; the

New Testament witness is indeed of Christ's sinlessness. Likewise, whereas the choice to sin restricts relationships, Christ's choice to self-limit was in order to enhance relationships. Incidentally it is the absence of sin in the Trinity that enables the possibility of the full inter-relationship of *perichoresis* between the Persons and between the two natures of Christ.

It must be stressed that the *kenosis* of the second Person need not be thought of as affecting his fundamental nature. Although Baillie (1956:97), in his study of Christology, feels that the suggestion of *kenosis* came from a presupposition that unlimited divinity and humanity cannot be united, the Fathers constantly applied Philippians 2 to the incarnation, seeing no change in the eternal *logos* (Richard, 1997:75). Emphatically *kenosis* does not imply something imposed from outside, which would indeed be contrary to the sovereignty of God. *Kenosis* is a voluntary self-limitation and does not imply any change in the essential nature of God. Richard (1997:38) stresses that redemption occurred because Jesus positively accepted death; it was by his choice of love, not by something forced on him. As omnipotent, Christ is freely able to limit his own omnipotence and his omniscience. To say that God cannot limit himself, is itself a limitation (Erickson, 1991:81). In this regard, an useful distinction has been suggested between *omnipotence*, i.e. being able to do anything, and *almightiness*, i.e. being able to do all that is wanted (Van den Brink, 1993:215). Pinnock (2001:96) therefore criticises Wright for believing that God's sovereignty demands that he actually controls everything.

Macleod (1998:219) states that "it is perfectly possible to speak of real renunciation without defining it as renunciation of deity". By accepting this stance no conflict with pre-existence exists, as Temple feared (Macleod, 1998:210). In an article Smith endorses *kenosis* as orthodox (Grudem, [1994:550], however finds this assessment surprising). Similarly, the open theists commonly assert that far from compromising God's power, their stand rather enhances it (Boyd, 2001:147). A fixed and therefore known future effectively also limits God. On the contrary, self-limitation enables a real gain for God, enabling relationships with free agents that would otherwise not have been possible (Pinnock, 2002:216). Again, an open future means that God is open to being affected by it, while opening to relationships involves being affected by them. God is so great that he is able to cope with the uncertainty generated by the freedom of others. The point is also made that God would have been limited if he could not have created free agents. Although there

are things that God cannot do, such as sin or die, these are in fact negations of limitation (Highfield, 2002:286).

4. Immanent and economic Trinity

Any discussion of Christology naturally relates to the doctrine of the Trinity. The objections to *kenosis* can largely be met through the doctrine of the Trinity. The argument defending immutability is weakened in the fact that the second Person did become incarnate. König (1982:86) insists that as the Word became flesh this involvement changed. The upholding of the universe could also be maintained by the other Persons, especially as all three are involved in all actions of God.

Even if it may be stated that if the *kenosis* of the second Person is not a change in his essence, and does not imply an inherent limitation, the fact, however, remains that the second Person, in his incarnation, was not manifesting the attributes of divinity. Jesus could indeed affirm that "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), for that was the case. Even though, at that time, the second Person was actually less than the first Person, it would, however, be wrong to understand this as inherent subordination – the view supported by Arius. During the period of the earthly incarnation and even until the consummation of all things, when God is "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), the second Person limited himself for the sake of humanity. This does imply that the nature of the Trinity manifested to the world, is not the same as it is in itself.

Thus the concept of *kenosis* can be understood to imply a difference between the so-called immanent Trinity – God in himself, in which there is total equality – and the economic Trinity – God as manifested to the world, where *kenosis* and thus subordination exist. This idea had been proposed by Joachim of Fiore, but it was condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council (Gresham, 1993:331). Certainly many people would dispute this distinction and insist that the revelation of God in the world is a reflection of what he really is, so that there is no real distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. Rahner (1970:22) in particular is well known for his insistence that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. His view would certainly seem to be more in keeping with the character of God. It seems more logical to see the revelation of God as reflecting what he really is.

This distinction has often been made in recent times. This contrasts the "processions" of the second and third Persons in the inner being of

God and the "missions" of Son and Spirit to the world (cf. Thompson, 1994:27, 35). Indeed it has been suggested, as in the "social Trinity", that the idea of the "processions" pertains only to the economic relations and that the immanent relations are simply eternal states (Hodgson, 1943:102). Richard (1997:108), interestingly, sees the processions as aspects of *kenosis.* Pannenberg notes that texts referring to Jesus' sonship, although they need not rule out the idea of eternal generation, do not demand it (cited in Erickson, 1991:305). The *kenosis* of the second Person actually demands that he be generated, at least in that period. However, this does not pertain to the immanence, where his full divinity really excludes it, because while equal to the first Person, he is in himself *autotheos*. Whether this is indeed so, it is clear that relationships in the immanence and economy need not be the same, as is the case in life, where a person may present a picture to the world which greatly differs from that of the real self.

A distinction between immanent and economic Trinities may in fact even be demanded by the nature of God. LaCugna (1993:219) remarks that God's self-communication in himself must be different from his communication to the world. Molnar (1989:398) comments, particularly referring to Barth, that a theology based on revelation must separate the two Trinities. For example, the incarnate Son came from the Spirit, while the traditional understanding is that the second Person was generated from the Father (LaCugna, 1993:220). Thompson (1994:27) points out that if the economic and immanent Trinities were the same, God would have been forced to act in a particular way, that would deny God;s freedom (Molnar, 1989:367). This point is particularly significant in the current debate concerning "open theism". Congar (1983:13) points out that although the economic Trinity is immanent, this is not reversible, as Rahner alleges. There is more to the immanent Trinity than that which has been revealed to us. As Athanasius observed, the three Persons must be distinguished, but also be related (Torrance, 1996:7). Gollwitzer is effectively saying the same thing by insisting that God;s "being for us" should not overshadow his "being in himself" (Bracken, 1979:53). The eastern Orthodox, since Palamas (1296-1359), distinguish the incommunicable "essence" of God from his expression in his "energies", which are what we experience. Incidentally this distinction implies that the eastern Orthodox can say that the essence of the Spirit is from the Father alone, while his energies are through the Son (Gaybba, 1987:55). Even Rahner in fact distinguishes between the immanent and economic Trinity; it is not consistent to refer to "modes" within the immanent Trinity, but to respect real personal distinction in the

economic (Bracken, in Hill, 1982:219). There must be a distinction in both the immanent and the economic, but there need not be the same distinction, even if they are related. It is quite possible to understand that God's inner being is far more complex than has been revealed to us and indeed it ought to be. What is necessary is that the economic Trinity must be consistent with the immanent, even if it is only a part of it. Any person is a mystery to others – and God even more. The Trinity as we understand it, can be a single facet of the richness of God's full being: "... the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, but not the whole of the immanent Trinity" (Boff, 1988:215). This view of the Trinity need not imply a loss of perfection as Greek theology assumed, thereby putting God firmly outside time (Peters, 1993:129). Of course, the Persons of the Trinity must not be excessively separated. Peters (1993:8, 39) points out that God in immanence must be affected by the world, a belief particularly associated with Moltmann's thought. This approach especially pertains to the cross episode (Olson, 1989:218). Many scholars, such as Moltmann and Jenson (Peters, 1993:24, 133), suggest that the economic Trinity not only reveals the immanent, but becomes it at the end of time, when "Rahner's rule" becomes really true (Peters, 1993:16, 177). At this point, as salvation is fully completed, *kenosis* comes to an end.

5. *Perichoresis*

Far from the idea of *kenosis* being incompatible with the Trinity, the concepts may rather be seen as clarifying one another. This view follows from the suggestion of *perichoresis* as part of the commonly accepted formula of the Trinity. This angle of interpretation was brought in to explain that which was otherwise a fundamental difficulty in understanding the Trinity. How could the three Persons be totally equal, yet distinct; for once they are distinct, they can surely not be equal? *Perichoresis* or in its closest English equivalent, "inter-penetration", represents the idea that the Persons are mutually involved in one another to such a degree that they are equal. They are fully open to one another (Torrance, 1996:153). The classic manifestation of the working out of this principle was the Augustinian affirmation, *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* ("the external works of the Trinity are undivided"). This principle implies that every action of God, even if it is through one of the Persons, has the total involvement of the other two Persons. This perspective was not just put forward as a neat theological idea, but, like the idea of *kenosis*, was believed to be based on the Scriptures (in this case especially John 14:11). The Fathers were always concerned to develop their theology in accordance with the Scriptures.

It must be noted that the context of John 14:11, thus of *perichoresis,* represents the incarnate state. This is the same point that pertains to Jesus' remark that "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) which is true only for the economic Trinity, and for the incarnation. This statement does not refer, as Arius thought, to the immanence, the essential nature of God. What this perspective implies is that even in the incarnation, even in a state of *kenosis*, Jesus remained true and essential God, due to the complete relation to the other Persons through *perichoresis*.

Whereas *perichoresis* is the means by which the Persons of the Trinity relate to one another and thus maintain their essential natures, *kenosis* is the means by which the Persons, especially the second Person, relate to creation, especially humanity, so that both humanity and the second Person maintain their essential natures. It is because of the very nature of humanity that *kenosis* was necessary at all. In order to relate to a fallen humanity, it was absolutely essential for the second Person to limit the expression of his divinity. Each of the concepts implies mutual interaction and openness, in that each of the elements of the relationship affects the other. This interaction is perhaps obvious in the Trinity, in that the nature of the first Person must be affected simply by relating to the others. For example, because of the existence of the second Person, the first Person is the Father. He could not be the Father unless there was also the Son. Likewise, the third Person, as the *vinculum amoris*, bond of love between the other two, only possesses this nature because of them. This relation would not be the same if even one of them did not exist. Because the divinity of the second Person experienced self-limitation, this characterictic reflected onto the other Persons as well. In particular, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit was restricted during the period of Jesus' *kenosis*, but when he ascended, the Spirit manifested itself in greater measure. The obscure comment of John 7:39 indeed links the giving of the Spirit with the glorification of Jesus (Murray, 1963:39). Congar (1983:5) suggests that the *kenosis* of the Spirit is in terms of his personality, so that he has no name. Moltmann (1985:102) also speaks of the *kenosis* of the Spirit, resulting in his suffering in the face of ecological destruction. Likewise the *kenosis* of the Father is seen in his transcendence. Eschatologically, however, this also passes away, when "the dwelling of God is with men" (Rev. 21:3).

This point is reflected in the parallel to *perichoresis* that applies in the case of the incarnation. The two natures in Christ are believed to mutually affect each other – an idea known as the *communicatio idiomatum*. On the one side of the causal effect, the divinity of Christ

implies that although he was fully and totally human, "consubstantial with us" in terms of the Chalcedonian definition, that humanity was sinless. This aspect is indeed reflected in Biblical material (Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22). Although it has been suggested that this view implies that Jesus could not be fully human, it also implies that sin is surely not part of the essence of humanity. The original understanding of *kenosis* was that while the metaphysical attributes of the second Person were curtailed, the moral ones, such as love and holiness, were, however, unaffected (McGrath, 1997:260). In this case the holiness of Christ's deity affects his humanity and renders it sinless. This situation is possible because of the effect of the divine will upon the human will. Even though Christ, as fully human, had a human will, this was in total harmony with the divine.

The other side of the causal effect then explains why *kenosis* was necessary in the first place. If the deity of Christ is affected by his human nature, which acts in a limited way, the divine, as incarnate, also limits himself. Thomasius pointed out that as the divinity of the second Person affected his humanity, as traditionally is noted, the limitation of humanity also affected the divinity (Erickson, 1991:80). It may be noted that Jesus was not only limited as human, but further chose humility (Philip. 2:8). The choice of *kenosis* parallels the choice of humility. This also means that divinity is open. As the nature of humanity is to be open to be affected by the world, so is the divine.

Finally, this will mean that in the reversing of *kenosis* after the depths of humiliation at the cross, the humanity of Jesus is also glorified as is seen in the resurrection body and the appearance to the seer of Patmos (Rev. 1:12 ff.).

6. Relationality

Understanding God primarily in relational rather than substantive categories, strengthens the acceptance of the idea of *kenosis* as a real self-limitation of especially the second Person. Seeing it in these terms, as a restriction in relation, may well be more satisfactory than the removal of attributes, which need not be affected. A constantly recurring point of criticism of traditional theology, particularly pertinent to the Trinity, is its expression in terms of substance. It is this which generates so many of its difficulties. Contemporary thinking is, however, generally more sympathetic to see the nature of something in terms of relation (Pinnock, 2001:79). A human being is such as he or she relates to others and the environment in a human way; a solitary person is effectively less than human. God exists as such – not because he has attributes – but because he relates divinely.

Perichoresis is a relational term and the same is basically true of *kenosis*.

This approach is especially pertinent to the Christian concept of God, for the Trinity is fundamentally relational. Indeed, there is a strand which sees the difference between the Persons simply as differences in relation. This interpretation means that these relations in the immanent Trinity are not essentially changed by the addition of other relationships, which are, however, limited. More pertinently, the essential relationships to the other Persons did not change when the second Person became incarnate, relating to humanity, even though they must have been affected. Thus a man does not change his basic relationships to other people, and thus his humanity, when he becomes a father, even though other relationships could be affected. Nevertheless, the relationship to his child undergoes considerable alteration over time and must always involve self-limitation.

7.   Why the concern with *kenosis*?

Although it is always interesting to follow academic questions for their own sake, the matter of *kenosis* is of intense practical value.

The idea is immediately attractive as it provides a solution to the contentious issue of human suffering and the wider matter of evil. Richard (1997:4) observes that suffering is the human experience most in need of elucidation. As God is indeed omnipotent and fully loving, it has been very hard to understand why suffering should occur. Particularly if the sovereignty of God is emphasised as the direct cause of all that occurs, it is hard to avoid retreating behind the inscrutability of the divine (Wright, 1996:197). It is not surprising that the issue of suffering has driven many from a Christian affirmation. In this respect part of the response, in agreement with Moltmann and Bonhoeffer's views, is that God suffers with the human situation, sharing its pain, but this cannot really help too much. An affirmation of *kenosis,* however, has a direct bearing on the issue.

- Even though God, as omnipotent, can stop suffering, He rather has chosen to limit himself in order to respect human freedom. Freedom, despite its cost, is of immense value and this is only possible if God restricts his absolute control, at least in the present.

- Secondly, it must be appreciated that the depths of *kenosis* in the cross of Christ were just for human benefit in salvation.

- Thirdly, unlike other suggestions, e.g. in process theology, *kenosis* does not reflect an inherent limitation in God, but includes the affirmation of God's ultimate control.

Kenosis should be seen in the context of its eschatological reversal, when all suffering and pain is seen to have been worthwhile. John's illustration of the attitude of the total joy of a woman who has come through the pain of childbirth into the joy of a new life (John 16:21) is very apt and applicable. It is significant that the proponents of "open theism" cannot really tolerate an absolutely open and thus insecure future – albeit inconsistently, they often affirm a measure of determinism.

Kenosis, as a voluntary self-limitation, carries with it the possibility of God's intervention even in the present, such as miracles and the answering of prayer, provided that they do not conflict with its basic purpose of enabling human freedom. There is no suggestion of God's inability to act. It should always be borne in mind that even pain can have a good result. God's apparent lack of action may thus indeed be for the best and actually perceived as pointing to his love.

Finally, the idea of *kenosis* contributes to the understanding of the means of salvation. It is significant that, just as the limitation of humanity is due to a free choice of sin, it is this limitation which is also behind the *kenosis* of Christ. The Philippian hymn puts this idea firmly in the context of atonement: it was because of sin that atonement was necessary at all. It is also evident that *kenosis* deepened as the drama of the atonement progressed, with the most complete emptying occurring in the actual crucifixion. This process must always be seen in a Trinitarian context, that is, God desiring "new partners for the eternal dance" (Pinnock, 2001:30), which is how *perichoresis* has been described.

A frequent theme in the Patristic understanding of salvation is that of the so-called "amazing exchange": Jesus, as sinless and divine, died for sinful human people, experiencing the effect of their sin in his death and giving them his life. Although this perspective is usually presented in the obvious terms of the contrast between life and death, sin and holiness, the same principle is applicable in the wider context of the humiliation of Christ. The reason for his assumption of *kenosis* was that people, through the effect of their sin, were already experiencing emptiness. Certainly an aspect of salvation is the giving of wholeness, enabled by the voluntary yielding up by Christ of his own – again, there is an exchange. This act highlights the Christian message that Jesus did come to help

people to salvation. Salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins, not even the attainment of eternal life, but so that people could become whole, as fully human as God created them to be, open in their relationship to God and so to one another – also thus more Christ-like. Although after the glorification of Christ, his *kenosis* would have ceased, Jesus would not have stopped being human; indeed he is only what humans should be. At our resurrection, we will become really human for the first time!

8. Conclusion

A major reason for the questioning of the idea of *kenosis* might be that it is so contrary to the reigning ethos, where people are constantly being urged to promote themselves, to acquire all that they can, even at the expense of other people. Humility, and especially self-limitation, are totally unfashionable. Yet such a practice cannot be acceptable to Christians. At the very least it is non-sustainable and damaging the world – which is one of the reasons for its rejection by Moltmann. Perpaps more importantly, such an attitude and way of behaviour is above all destructive of human relationships.

Perhaps the early Christians were right in their practice of self-limitation in that this practice was not just due to a dualistic rejection of the material, but served as a fundamental issue of their faith. Such a conclusion would have far-reaching consequences, but if it is a valid part of the imitation of Christ, it must be taken seriously. It is indeed necessary to consider in all seriousness what the emptying of Christ was all about.

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Key concepts:

divine nature of Christ
human nature of Christ
incarnation of Christ
kenosis; self-limitation, self-emptying
Trinity: nature of the three Persons

Kernbegrippe:

Drie-eenheid – aard van die drie Persone
Goddelike natuur van Christus
kenosis: selfontlediging
menslike natuur van Christus
menswording (van Christus)