



# Secularisation from *kenosis*

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## Abstract

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*Recent decades have witnessed the acceleration of the process of secularisation, along with related effects in society such as a decline in morals. Christians must wonder why God allows this to happen. The suggestion is that this is a result of God's self-limitation, kenosis, allowing a process of which He does not approve for the sake of human free will. Kenosis follows as a possible result of a distinction between the divine and the created world, which permits secularisation. This is generally seen as a result of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, with effects in industrialisation and urbanisation; all of these can be linked with God's kenosis. However, secularisation must not be seen as inevitable, but as having been exacerbated by the state of the church. If the result is a refining of the church, it could eventually lead to a resacralising of society.*

## Opsomming

### Sekularisasie van *kenosis*

*Die afgelope dekades word gekenmerk deur 'n groeiende bewuswording van 'n sekulariseringsproses met opmerklike uitwerkinge in die gemeenskap. Die verandering en selfs agteruitgang van morele waardesisteme is hiervan 'n voorbeeld. Vir Christene roep dit die die vraag op: "Waarom laat God dit toe?". Die voorstel in hierdie artikel is dat dit die resultaat is van God se self-beperking, kenosis. God laat 'n proses toe wat nie sy goedkeuring wegdra nie, maar ter wille van die vrye menslike wil laat Hy dit toe. Kenosis hou verband met die moontlike resultaat van 'n onderskeid tussen die goddelike en die geskape werklikheid. Hierdeur word sekularisasie moontlik gemaak. In die algemeen word dit gesien as die gevolg van die Renaissance, Reformasie en Verligting, soos dit tot uitdrukking kom in*

*industrialisasie en verstedeliking. Al hierdie prosesse kan in verband gebring word met die goddelike kenosis. Tog, sekularisasie moet nie gesien word as 'n noodwendigheid nie, maar hou verband met die verandering en agteruitgang in die stand van die kerk. As die gevolg 'n herwaardering van die essensie van kerkwees is, sou dit eventueel kon lei tot die hersakralisering van die samelewing.*

## 1. Introduction

At the turn of the century, along with all the other fuss about the change of millennia and possible impact of the date on computer systems, the so-called Y2k effect, there was a little light-hearted banter about what the first decade of the new century and new millennium would be called. It was easy to refer to the “nineties”, and indeed all of the decades can be referred to similarly, except, due to the strangeness of the English language, the first two. One very nice suggestion, which, just like all the other ideas, has not caught on, was that it be called the “noughties”, opening it up to the idea of the “naughty noughties”! This would certainly fit one of the characteristics of the age.

However, it is more likely that the first decade of the 21st century will be remembered not for moral decline, perhaps more a characteristic of the “swinging sixties”, but for the impact that Islam has had on the Western world, and especially on the United States and its major allies. Prompted by the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on “9-11” in 2001, America in particular has identified the “naughty one” as Osama bin Laden, and the “naughties” are fundamentalist Moslems.

But actually this is not so different, for the underlying reason for the opposition of such groups to the West is its lack of religion, and therefore low moral standards. The opposition to the West is not fundamentally against Christianity; indeed from the early days of Islam, it was more prepared to tolerate the other monotheistic “religions of the Book” than those of other religions or of none. On the contrary, the issue with the West is not with its Christianity, but with its lack thereof – its secularisation.

Secularisation is the process by which a society becomes centred on, or dominated by, secular as distinct from religious concerns. Even if, as Blumenberg (1983:30) argues, the structure of Western society was largely moulded by Christianity, and still shows it in many ways, without the underpinning of real faith it will lose the

benefits of its past. Morals are then presented not from God's authority, but from secular logic; an example is that divorce is argued not as against God's will, but as bad for society (Bruce, 2002:21). They are controlled by technology rather than religion (Wilson, quoted in Dobbelaere, 2002:32).

For a religious person, secularism is hard. It is, or should be, heart-breaking to see society dominated by other matters, which fill the place that should be occupied by God. Essentially, these things have become idols; it is totally understandable that Islam, which originated in an intense rejection of polytheistic idolatry, finds the ethos of the secular West abhorrent. Religion has many benefits, not least moral upliftment; even such notoriously irreligious people as Hume (Barry, 1969:11) and Voltaire (Chadwick, 1975:10) said that religious doubts must be kept from the common people for this reason. Voltaire said that for the sake of morals, "if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him" (Chadwick, 1975:104). Just like a person whose spirit left dies, is not religion essential for the life of society? Secularisation thus tends to be viewed negatively, as a "spiritual anathema" against changes since the Middle Ages (Blumenberg, 1983:5). Such bewilderment is actually not new; nearly three millennia ago, the prophet Jeremiah reflected the divine mind:

my people have committed two evils:  
    they have forsaken me,  
the fountain of living waters,  
    and hewed out cisterns for themselves,  
broken cisterns,  
    that can hold no water (Jer. 2:13).

More than the attitude, the religious person finds secularism hard to understand. If there is indeed a God, the very nature of deity should mean that belief in Him and obeying Him should dominate every part of life. Even more than this, the religious person must be further perplexed, for if there is indeed a God, particularly the sort of God that Christians proclaim, how has He allowed this situation? If God is indeed all powerful, all-knowing, totally perfect, could He not have intervened to display his existence in a way that would compel the sort of response that He is worthy of? And if He is as loving as Christianity proclaims Him to be, surely He would act, for following Him must be the best for people. The similarity to the old dilemma concerning the existence of evil is of course obvious.

## 2. Secularisation a result of *kenosis*

Just as with the problem of evil, perhaps a solution to the question rests in the nature of God. Just as Jesus in his incarnation acted in *kenosis*, or self-limitation, this is fundamental to what God is like; all the Persons of the Trinity limit themselves (cf. Williams, 2004). He is the *deus absconditus* (Cox, 1968:267), although not in any gnostic sense; indeed his limitation is done for quite the opposite reason, just so that it is possible to relate directly to the world. It must also be stressed that God’s *kenosis* is fundamentally different from the understanding of God in process theology. Whereas the latter understands God as inherently limited, *kenosis* is a deliberate self-restriction. In line with traditional Christian doctrine, God is totally perfect, so fully omnipotent, omniscient, and so on, but has chosen to restrict the use of his abilities in dealing with the world.

It is therefore no surprise that in God’s hiddenness a process of secularisation becomes almost inevitable. Indeed the word *kenosis* means “empty of significance”, and this is exactly what secularisation is; God loses significance for society. This is to make a direct link between *kenosis* and secularisation. Even the original meaning of the word, where a monk or priest was secularised from a monastic environment to one with involvement with the world (Berger, 1969:106) has a hint of this; in a sense God gives them up, empties himself of them to a degree. It may then be suggested that secularisation has occurred as a natural consequence of the sort of world that God has made, which in turn reflects something of the nature of the creator. However, in this *kenosis*, experience of God naturally tends to fade, especially when life becomes more secure. Religion tends to be weaker in the prosperity of economic centres, stronger in the peripheries (Martin, 2005:59). Nevertheless, when there are situations of rapid change, and when what is needed for living becomes scarce, people are drawn to remember God; thus religion temporarily revived in Eastern Europe with the loss of the security that socialism gave (Norris & Inglehart, 2004:114).

In God’s *kenosis*, knowledge of him is limited, so that human free-will is a real possibility. Pannenberg (1989:vii) feels that the central idea of modernity is human freedom, and that, very significantly, this is Christian in origin. This freedom incidentally means that secularisation is not inevitable (Bruce, 2002:37)! But because of God’s *kenosis*, his very existence becomes less apparent to people, who then naturally espouse agnosticism, their own lack of knowledge, a natural companion to secularism. Ironically, as God limits his manifestation in the world, people reflect this *kenosis* in restricting

their perception of him (Richard, 1982:19). People choose to limit their relationship with God to be a part of their lives (Mackay in Japinga, 1997:29), resulting in secularisation.

Even if his desire is that all are committed to Him, that all are “saved” and that society is sacralised, God has deemed it better that people are free. Even if a result of God’s *kenosis* is moral decline, which is a bad thing, it also enables freedom as part of humanity, and from this comes the possibility of secularity (Richard, 1982:263). This means that there is a possibility of rejecting Him; this implies that the chance of a secularised society is acceptable to God. The first “secularisation”, the expulsion from Eden, was a direct result of the choice to disobey God, made possible by God’s *kenosis*! The alternative would only be achievable by force, a removal of human free will, which then would be worse.

### 3. Compartmentalism

For secularisation to be even a possibility, there must be a distinction between the secular, things of the world (Latin *saeculum*), and the sacred (Pannenberg, 1989:3). If everything is treated as essentially united, aspects of one reality, then the sacred naturally constantly affects the secular. Modern Western life, in contrast to this, tends to be viewed as highly compartmentalised where one aspect of life is treated as distinct from others, and not inherently related to them. In one way, this is part of the reason for its success, because this attitude favours organised thought and thus the development of science. The success of the modern world is deeply rooted in Christianity (Barry, 1969:39). At the same time, the application of science in technology is facilitated by division of labour and the mass production process, which depends on the separation of aspects of production, one person concentrating on one aspect, and doing it efficiently.

But this compartmentalisation is fertile ground for the growth of secularisation, for the things related to the divine are naturally separated from other aspects of life, which are then unaffected by them (Dobbelaere, 2002:166). Marty has described secularism as the “chopping up of reality” (Japinga, 1997:39). But again, such compartmentalisation is fundamental to Christianity. Not only does it follow from monotheism (Bruce, 2002:6), but the initial expression of Christianity was of a definite distinction from the *saeculum*. Berger (1969:117) comments that the Old Testament clearly separates the divine and the world, contrasting strongly with the worldview of the ancient near East; this secularisation did, however, give a sense of

insecurity, and so the surrounding beliefs were always attractive to Israel (1969:114). Christians were “saints”, *hagioi* (e.g. Rom. 1:7; Phil. 1:1), a word which referred not only to the ethical holiness of the Christian life, but also to a separation from the rest of humanity.

Compartmentalism is also what Jesus did in *kenosis*. In creation, God effectively established a category in distinction from himself. There was a difference between secular and sacred. The second Person then entered the category of the secular by becoming incarnate. Christianity is in essence a “secular” religion (Martin, 1967:25). More than this, human society, especially in those days, was compartmentalised, and Jesus chose the specific categories of the humbler in society, even being reckoned as a slave. The distinction between slave and free was a major division at that time (cf. Gal. 3:28). Then the result of Jesus’ *kenosis* in his incarnation was further division; even if Jesus wanted to identify with humanity, most of humanity did not reciprocate, which is why He was finally crucified. Indeed, rather than integrate, the coming of Jesus rather divided (Matt. 10:34).

#### 4. The growth of secularisation

If the *kenosis* of God is to be accepted as an explanation of the phenomenon of secularisation, it must be asked how it was that society was even sacralised. One possibility is that it in fact never was, that there never was an overall commitment of the people to God. Lyon (1985:18), specifically citing France, suggests a generalisation that in Medieval society, Christianity was only ever the faith of the rulers; Mehl says that the common people were essentially pagan in ideas (Lyon, 1985:21); Chadwick (1975:3) simply asserts that before the nineteenth century, a truly religious society never existed. When political and intellectual currents shifted, the natural result was a move to what was really the case all along. Nevertheless, even if the religion of the pre-secularised world may not have really been total or widespread, society was definitely centred upon it. Bruce (2002:45 ff.) insists that basic Christian beliefs were held, even if not really understood; however, lack of understanding must encourage their abandoning. It was this basic acceptance that changed, a change that can be linked to a number of key trends in thought. In this case, the attribution to *kenosis* suggests that there can well be a connection between these shifts in thought with that of *kenosis*, that these trends were a working through of it.

## 4.1 Renaissance

Because of the almost total integration of religion into society in the Middle Ages, there had been ignorance of anything outside of the church in that period. The collapse of the Roman Empire had left Europe in the “Dark Ages”. However, particularly due to the crusades and the contact with the Eastern Mediterranean where part of the old Roman Empire had survived, centred on Byzantium, came an appreciation of a different way of life. Contact with pre-Christian Greek and Roman culture stimulated thought in the West with awareness of long-forgotten riches. Not only was there development of science and culture, but there arose an appreciation that life before the coming of Christianity had also been good. It could be worth living without a Christian framework, and life could be more than just a preparation for heaven, which it could well tend to be in the difficult and chaotic days after the collapse of the Roman Empire. A secular lifestyle was then perceived to be a possibility. At the same time, the influence of Greek thought and culture injected a humanism into the theocratic view of the Middle Ages. It put people, rather than God, at the centre (Lyon, 1985:36).

Such opening to other influences was also part of the *kenosis* of incarnation itself. Before that event, the pre-incarnate *logos*, the second Person, was distinct from humanity, but when the incarnation occurred, He limited himself so that He could be opened not just to a human nature, but also to all the thoughts, emotions, and culture of a person in that particular situation. It is a commonplace to point to the fact of Jesus’ thirst and tiredness as indicative of a real and full humanity, but humanity is far more than just the physical. There were mundane thoughts, feelings and emotions, even temptations. There is more than just a sense that in the very incarnation, God himself experienced something of secularisation.

Barry (1969:41) identifies a recovered sense of history as a major feature of the Renaissance. This was contrary to the belief in essential stability of the Middle Ages. Such opened minds to the possibility of change. Here the incarnation, and other aspects of *kenosis*, are most definitely acts in history; indeed one of the things that distinguishes Christianity from many other religions is its link to, and, it must be said, its verification by, the process of history.

## 4.2 Reformation

Thus resting to some extent on the Renaissance, came the Reformation. But despite a re-emphasis on the divine, it was a movement

which Lyon (1985:19) believes also accelerated secularisation; religion was “digging its own grave”. Pannenberg (1989:11) asserts that it did not in itself cause secularisation, but its consequences promoted it. The Reformation prompted a process which led ultimately to religious toleration, and so the emancipation of the political order from the church (Pannenberg, 1989:24). Berger (1969:123) notes that the Lutheran idea of the “two kingdoms” gives theological legitimation to the autonomy of the secular. Certainly it enhanced both compartmentalism, in the division into denominations, and also the loss of a single authority, thereby encouraging doubt and so disbelief (Dobbelaere, 2002:89). Although some believers have suggested otherwise, religious diversity weakens overall commitment (Bruce, 2002:22). The resultant competition has not increased religious participation (Norris & Inglehart, 2004:100).

A part of this was the increased dignity given to the secular. The Reformation removed a stress on miracle, mystery, and a quasi-magical interpretation of the sacraments (Dobbelaere, 2002:37). The magic which had characterised the Middle Ages was denied (Berger, 1969:111). Secularisation can then even be seen as good, an enrichment of Christianity by regarding all of the creation as God’s (Barry, 1969:15). In his *kenosis*, Jesus sanctified the world. Luther saw that a secular occupation, as much as the clerical, can well be a valid vocation from God. It was not a second class occupation, so naturally it became more attractive. It is notable that Jesus himself was not born into a priestly family, but embraced the secular occupation of carpentry, even if He did desert it later for “full-time” ministry, and, as the epistle to the Hebrews indicates, He did become a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:20). Paul also had a secular occupation, and was proud that he did not have to be supported by gifts but could earn his own living (1 Cor. 9:6).

In initiating the Reformation, Martin Luther in particular reacted to what he saw as abuses and corruption in the church, notably in the sale of indulgences, which purported to free the purchaser from a period in purgatory. What is important here is that the church claimed authority to do this. Luther, however, said that authority did not primarily reside in the church but is vested in the Bible. Then whereas the Catholic church of the day claimed that only it had the power to interpret the Bible, the Reformers insisted that any Christian, aided by the Holy Spirit, could validly interpret the Bible. The church, as a body, loses significance, so experiences *kenosis*, as authority resides in other people.



This was a situation that was certainly paralleled in the ministry of Jesus, who rejected the authority of his day, and the interpretation that they put on the law – for them the Scriptures. He effectively claimed freedom from unquestioning obedience to such authority; it was his understanding of what it meant to be obedient to the law and to the Sabbath that ultimately led him to the cross. He was accused of undermining faith and morals (Barry, 1969:30). This was a part of Jesus' *kenosis*. Each step was a shedding of reliance, a leaving of a comfort zone. In the incarnation He left the security of heaven and the temptation to accept a place in the religious establishment would be great. That was given up, as it is given up by any who claim God's leading in a way outside of normal human channels. Even physically, from the events in Gethsemane to the horror of the cross, Jesus was yielding himself to the authority of others.

At the same time, the understanding of the Reformers was that a person was saved not primarily by the action of the church but through individual faith. The essence of the Protestant view of salvation was of a yielding to God, a passive acceptance. This is effectively a *kenosis*, so hardly surprisingly reflects the action of Christ, who in his own *kenosis*, yielded Himself to the will and action of God for our salvation.

### 4.3 Enlightenment

The church lost significance, as salvation did not depend on its action; in fact the church became the result of salvation, rather than its enabler. There was an inevitable growth of appreciation for the differing views of others. Each person's thought was valid in itself without reference to the authority of the church. The movements both of growing individuality and freedom from the church strengthened. These came to blossom in a further major movement, the Enlightenment, the *Aufklärung*. Secularisation occurred when its ideas extended to the masses (Chadwick, 1975:9). The major feature of the Enlightenment was the belief in human autonomy. This was enabled by God's *kenosis*. The belief was that people had "come of age" and could make rational decisions for themselves. Feuerbach and Nietzsche saw God as the supreme enemy of this (Mascall, 1965:175). People had "grown up", and like children, no longer needed to relate all to their Father. There was no need to just believe and accept on authority, but people had the ability to assess for themselves. Berger (1969:78) comments that increased knowledge at the time led to increased awareness of evil, sharpening the

problem of theodicy, and encouraging secularisation. It is in this thoughts that secularisation has become highly significant in modern society. Blamires (quoted in Mascall, 1965:43) speaks of the demise of the Christian mind. This is a relevant comment in view of the fact that the passage in Philippians 2:5 ff. urges a conformity of the Christian mind to that of Christ, which manifested in *kenosis*. Secularisation is indeed essentially a mental matter, which has societal effects when its attitudes are adopted corporately.

#### 4.3.1 Science and technology

One effect of the stress of the Enlightenment on the rational was the development of science, and therefore technology. This is effectively in control of things (Richard, 1982:22) and is enabled by God’s granting of dominion in his *kenosis*. Rejection of religion is often attributed to a perception that it is contrary to science, although this is questionable (Barry, 1969:30). Science does not cause atheism, but its underlying stress on rationality weakens the role of religion; an empirical attitude cannot accept the talk of God (Richard, 1967:100). Nevertheless they can happily coexist, and the wonders of the universe even stimulate worship (Bruce, 2002:27). Bruce (2002:117) asserts that no sociologist says that science fatally undermines Christianity. Nevertheless, even if the rise of science does not directly undermine religion, it does result in a pragmatism and a profanity (in a neutral sense of “this worldliness”) (Cox, 1968:73). This has touched the church. Blumenberg (1983:44) notes that there had to be less emphasis on unverifiable eschatology, and therefore the church had to be relevant by involvement in this world. As Cox (1968:76) says, pragmatism is actually a form of asceticism, a giving up of less tangible concerns; the same is of course true of profanity – both are therefore kenotic.

#### 4.3.2 Industrialisation

As a result of the growth of technology, industrialisation naturally followed. This had a number of effects which encouraged the process of secularisation. Lyon (1985:7) suggests that religion is one of the casualties of the adoption of industrialisation. For Berger, secularisation was an inevitable concomitant of industrial society (Pannenberg, 1989:28). The increased production that industrialisation produced resulted ultimately in economic security for many. This resulted in less perceived need for God’s provision, and thus stimulated secularisation. A further result of this security was a reduced demand for children to provide in old age. In contrast, Norris and Inglehart (2004:53) note that in less developed societies there is

increased religiosity and population. The combination of these results in increasing religiosity; the world as a whole is in fact becoming less secular!

The essential reason for industrialisation was production, the creation of items in an efficient way. This demanded division of labour in the manufacturing process. One individual concentrated on only one element, contrasting with the following of very many activities in pre-industrial society. May it be suggested that this is what Jesus was doing in the incarnation, the creation of a church by the re-creation of individuals (2 Cor. 5:17); moreover this was enabled by the concentration of his action in *kenosis*. This latter was appreciated when suggestions of kenotic Christology were revived and popularised in the nineteenth century, as it was quickly objected that the second Person could not empty Himself as He could then not fulfil the function of upholding the universe. The objection, however, does not stand in the light of the activity of the other Persons, but the point is clear, there was a limitation, a concentration of activity into one purpose. The former feature of industrial production is also paralleled in Jesus' *kenosis*, as it is the means for most efficient production. Salvation is more likely if its means is understood, and this is what Jesus was doing in his *kenosis*. He was demonstrating how salvation is possible, just so that "production" is maximised, so that as many people as possible do receive what God intends.

### 4.3.3 Urbanisation

Industrialisation was accompanied by urbanisation, which Chadwick (1975:100) feels was more significant for secularisation than industrialisation as such: Cox's major exposition is *The secular city*. It may just be observed that the depths of Jesus' *kenosis* were experienced in an urban environment: "it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33). Particularly, in the loss of contact with nature, awareness of God dims. Ellul has suggested that the city provides an alternative to religious faith and trust (Frank, 1986:26). The city dweller, although not characteristically atheistic, becomes indifferent (Chadwick, 1975:95). Statistically, the bigger the city, the smaller the proportion who attend church (Chadwick, 1975:94). In any case, the infrastructure of the churches just did not keep up with the growth in population (Chadwick, 1975:97).

Perhaps more fundamentally, Engels (in Lyon, 1985:26) saw the city as exacerbating individualism, and the growth of selfish egotism; this is a worldview very different from the Christian ideal. The essence of

secularisation is that religion becomes simply a private matter (Lyon, 1985:60). In contrast with the Christianity of the Middle Ages and of the Reformation, much of its modern expression is restricted to the individual, not to society (Martin, 2005:135). This naturally follows from pluralism, the multiplicity of beliefs (Dobbelaere, 2002:89). Richard (1967:58) suggests that in the complexity of modern life, especially in the urban setting, it is essential for people to limit themselves in order to cope with the multitude of demands. Some things just have to be eliminated, and one of these is most likely to be religion, if it is perceived as of little value. Nevertheless, although the limitation of relationships is a form of *kenosis*, the desire to be anonymous may also be a refusal to yield to others, a form of self-assertion. Here it may be noted that part of Jesus’ experience of *kenosis*, perhaps even its ultimate, was an experience of forsakenness by his Father, and the cry of dereliction (Matt. 27:46, quoting Ps. 22:1). In fact one aspect of crucifixion was the sheer loneliness of it; the victim died totally alone. Of course after the experience of his *kenosis* went to the extreme, Jesus entered the process of glorification, and increasing relationships, finally being acknowledged as Lord (Phil. 2:11).

A factor, due to industrialisation, was increased mobility. This can be understood in two senses, firstly the physical, in movement to the cities and increasing ability to move from home, and secondly movement from one social class to another (Martin, 1978:83). The first naturally includes being absent from the place of worship as well (Richard, 1967:144). At the same time, work and residence have been separated (Richard, 1967:155), another example of *kenosis*. Interestingly modern technology has enabled more people to work at home. Both forms of mobility are destructive of a sense of immediate community, so exacerbated secularisation. It must be observed that Jesus’ *kenosis* involved both senses of mobility: He left heaven, and became a slave. But the result of this, the essence of Christianity, is a relationship with God in Christ, which then, of course, should result in improved interpersonal relationships, and so enhance community.

Despite its enhancement of individualism, industrial activity is dependent upon cooperative human effort, each making use of the material and the work of others. This aspect is also part of the process of *kenosis*, for rather than God working directly in the world, He chose to limit his own action and working by means of agents. A major part of Jesus’ ministry in the incarnation was the training of

the small group of disciples, who would carry on his work, acting for Him, after his departure in the ascension.

#### 4.3.4 Capitalist worldview

Not unconnected with the growth of industry was a move towards a capitalist ethos. This was naturally encouraged by the Enlightenment view of individual freedom. In general, however, the result of capitalism was an increasingly pronounced division in society between rich and poor (Chadwick, 1975:46). This division eventually prompted a socialist reaction, spearheaded by the writings of Marx and Engels. Marxism then became “the most powerful philosophy of secularisation in the nineteenth century”; the idea of religion as the “opium of the people” appeared in 1843 (Chadwick, 1975:66, 49). It has been particularly significant for Christians who have adopted the economic understanding of Marx that Jesus identified with the poorer elements in society, to the chagrin of the affluent of his day. 2 Corinthians 8:9, “for your sake he became poor”, in the context of the charitable relief of the Jerusalem poor by the Macedonian church, is often linked to the more famous *kenosis* passage of Philippians 2. Even the idea of alienation, integral to a Marxist understanding (Chadwick, 1975:63), bears more than a passing resemblance to *kenosis*. Certainly any form of care for the poor, whether by individual charity, or socialism, involves a *kenosis* for the good of others; there has to be restriction for the sake of morality and justice (Chadwick, 1975:47).

Most societies then espouse a measure of socialist practice, the state taking over much of what was previously done through religion. When the state took more responsibility for social welfare (Martin, 2005:123), not only did people no longer need the church to provide for them, but the link to God’s provision became attenuated. Not surprisingly, Norris and Inglehart (2004:10) document the decline of religion in states with a developed welfare system. As with God, the church was limited, resulting in secularisation; the difference is that usually the latter was compelled.

A capitalist view results from an affirmation of freedom of choice, which can manifest either, as with Jesus, in *kenosis*, self-limitation, or in the opposite. Indeed, an original feature of early capitalism was self-limitation, under the influence of the Protestant work ethic. Capitalism originated in Protestantism, with its antipathy to luxury (Lyon, 1985:39). Even asceticism has been a strong feature of Christianity, especially in the Early Church. The ethos of capitalism is, however, of concern for the self, an attitude contrary to self-

limitation; this latter is never popular, and effectively absent from the modern worldview. Likewise, it is also almost absent from modern Christianity as influenced by modern culture, thus by secularisation (e.g. Bruce, 2002:181). Indeed, Norris and Inglehart (2004:178) observe that compared to other societies, the work ethic is weakest in historically Protestant societies.

It may just be noted that urbanisation was also made possible by other factors, even if they had considerably predated the modern era. Cox (1968:24) observes that the introduction of currency and the alphabet made less personal relationships possible in that economic life and the transfer of information did not need face to face contact. Incidentally, both enable increased choice, which is always kenotic, as it involves rejection of some possibilities. Nevertheless, both of these can become idols (1 Cor. 2:5; 1 Tim. 6:10), but are fulfilled in Christ as true riches as well as the wisdom of God.

## **5. The state of the church**

It is natural for the church, in the face of its declining influence, to try and place the blame for this elsewhere, and society itself is the obvious culprit. However, it must be suggested that the state of the church itself, as well as trends in society, can be seen as contributing to secularisation. Norris and Inglehart (2004:223) note that while people have often stopped supporting the church, decline in belief has been less. If the church was effective in its core functions of worship and aiding the people, particularly if it did facilitate in meeting the felt needs of people, they would surely not have deserted it, no matter what the external circumstances. Stott (1984:3) points out that the situation in Britain was dramatically changed as a result of the evangelical revival at the time of Wesley; and this was when the effect of the Enlightenment was having such an influence on the church in Europe. But whereas the growth of the Early Church was stimulated by the quality of life experienced by Christians, the opposite can also be true. If the church is perceived as cold and uninspired in its worship, irrelevant to the problems of the people round about, why should they attend its meetings and support it? If the church is seen to be full of people, especially its leaders, who manifestly do not live up to the message that they proclaim, their hypocrisy will repel. The philosopher Nietzsche was hardly an advocate of Christianity. He said, “who among us would be a freethinker, were it not for the church?” (Chadwick, 1975:250).

It must be suggested that part of the problem has been due to the message proclaimed. Under the influence of an intrusive dualism,

Christianity has so often been presented as offering only benefits after death, but with minimal help in this, indeed rather an onerous demand. It is hardly surprising that when conditions in this life improved, interest in the next life waned (Martin, 1967:11). This is obviously exacerbated when the worldview becomes more material. Nevertheless, as Richard (1967:169) observes, secularism has of course no answer to death.

At the same time, the church itself has shared in the secularisation of society and has tended to become simply a human organisation, with social and political aims. It has generally done this while paying lipservice to the transcendent, whereas for most this must have seemed to be a sham. However, without the reality of the spiritual, the church surely has no distinct role in society; it might as well cease to exist for 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). Robinson, author of the notorious *Honest to God*, despaired of converting the world to Christianity (Mascall, 1965:105), so attempted to convert Christianity to the world. In this case, secularisation is complete. Berger has described three reactions of the church to secularisation. He feels that two of these, accommodating to it, are effectively suicidal, while the third is to resist and reassert the authority of the faith (Dekker, 1997:14). People will surely only support the church if they can see the reality of a relationship with God that it embodies, but if they indeed see this, it must assuredly maintain a role, indeed a growing one.

What has happened is that instead of the church continuing to influence the world, the opposite has happened. This cannot be seen as inevitable, as for example most strikingly in the expansion of the Early Church in the midst of a pagan society, or again, at the time of Wesley. Is this not the intention of Jesus (Matt. 5:14 ff.), or of Paul (Phil. 2:15, a verse following quickly after the *kenosis* passage)?

Without real commitment to Christ, the church cannot produce a change in life that will be attractive, such as manifest peacefulness. In particular, it is the pursuing of a moral life that is a strong recommendation for religion. In the Early Church it was the evident love expressed between followers of the “way” that attracted new disciples, and it is still the case. This love is an imitation of Jesus, and specifically of his willingness to act, even in sacrifice, for people. Essentially the response of the church to secularisation is its affirmation of the Lordship of Christ, which, significantly, Philippians

2 presents in the context of his *kenosis*. An attractive Christian lifestyle therefore manifests in self-limitation, *kenosis*. Without this being seen in the church, how likely is it that people will put their trust in what they perceive to be ineffective?

In fact, such commitment is more likely in a secularised society, where belonging to a church is not just a matter of culture (Häring, 1973:12). Secularisation may then have a good result, purifying the church (Blumenberg, 1983:7). In itself, it may not be God’s desire, but it is noteworthy that the period which witnessed the strongest Enlightenment thinking also birthed Christian revival, with associated societal effects, and a flowering of missionary activity. An example of this, especially pertinent in Southern Africa, is that mission and colonialism are used to go together, to the particular detriment of the former; mission is usually detached from economic and political goals (Martin, 2005:27). Indeed, just as the result of *kenosis* was the glorification of Christ and the expansion of God’s kingdom, so the result of secularisation is ultimately good; the two processes are linked.

What is striking is the fact that God’s solution to the *kenosis* of people that has produced secularisation (that can only be characterised as “sin”), can itself be characterised as *kenosis*. This is not surprising, insofar as God naturally acts in terms of his nature. *Kenosis* is typical of God’s action, not affecting a problem directly, but by providing a solution which then does. He deals with sin, not by destroying the sinners and their actions, which He could, but by providing the means of atonement. This involved *kenosis*. In fact, to deal with the effect of human *kenosis*, Christ himself accepted it and bore its effects.

This process of Jesus’ *kenosis* did finish with the cross, but this led to his glorification and will ultimately result in the re-creation of the world, and the establishment of a new society, totally sacral. It is therefore by no means an impossibility that the effects of secularisation can be reversed, and a sacral society re-established. Indeed it must be affirmed that this is ultimately God’s intention!

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**Key concepts:**

enlightenment  
*kenosis*, self-limiting  
secularisation  
urbanisation

**Kernbegrippe:**

*kenosis*, self-beperking  
sekularisasie  
verligting  
verstedeliking