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# Kenosis

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In Christian theology, ***kenosis*** (Greek: κένωσις, *kénōsis*, lit. [the act of emptying]) is the 'self-emptying' of Jesus' own will and becoming entirely receptive to God's divine will.

The word ἐκένωσεν (*ekénōsen*) is used in Philippians 2:7, "[Jesus] made himself nothing..."<sup>[Phil. 2:7]</sup> (NIV) or "...[he] emptied himself..."<sup>[Phil. 2:7]</sup> (NRSV), using the verb form κενόω (*kenóō*) "to empty".

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## Etymology and definition

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Etymology is from Greek κενόω (*kenóō*) "to empty out". The Liddell–Scott Greek–English Lexicon gives the following definition simplified for the noun:<sup>[1]</sup>

- emptying, depletion, emptiness (of life) (e.g. Vettius Valens)
- depletion, low diet, as opposed to *plerosis* fullness (e.g. Hippocrates)
- waning (of the moon) (e.g. Epicurus)

## New Testament usage

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The New Testament does not use the actual noun *kénōsis*<sup>[2]</sup> but the verb form *kenóō* occurs five times (Ro.4:14, 1Co.1:17, 9:15, 2Co.9:3, Phil.2:7). Of these five times it is Phil 2:7, in which Jesus is said to have "emptied himself", which is the starting point of Christian ideas of kenosis.

John the Baptist displayed the attitude when he said of Jesus: "He must become greater; I must become less." (Jn 3:30).<sup>[3]</sup>

## In Christology

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## Kenotic ethic

The **kenotic ethic** is based on Philippians 2:7, where Jesus is described as having "emptied himself...". Proponents of a Kenotic ethic take this passage not primarily as Paul putting forth a theory about God in this passage, but as using God's humility exhibited in the incarnation as a call for Christians to be similarly subservient to others.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

## Eastern Orthodoxy

Orthodox theology emphasises following the example of Christ. Kenosis is only possible through humility and presupposes that one seeks union with God. The Poustinia tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church is one major expression of this search.

Kenosis is not only a Christological issue in Orthodox theology, it has moreover to do with Pneumatology, namely to do with the Holy Spirit. Kenosis, relative to the human nature, denotes the continual epiklesis and self-denial of one's own human will and desire. With regard to Christ, there is a kenosis of the Son of God, a condescension and self-sacrifice for the redemption and salvation of all humanity. Humanity can also participate in God's saving work through theosis; becoming holy by grace.<sup>[6]</sup>

Therefore, in Eastern Orthodoxy, theosis never concerns becoming like God in essence or being, which is pantheism; instead, it concerns becoming united to God by grace, through his Energies. Orthodox theology distinguishes between divine Essence and Energies. Kenosis therefore is a paradox and a mystery since "emptying oneself" in fact fills the person with divine grace and results in union with God. Kenosis in Orthodox theology is the transcending or detaching of oneself from the world or the passions, it is a component of dispassionation. Much of the earliest debates between the Arian and Orthodox Christians were over kenosis. The need for clarification about the human and divine nature of the Christ (see the hypostatic union) were fought over the meaning and example that Christ set, as an example of kenosis or ekkenosis.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Catholicism

Pope Pius XII in 1951 wrote *Sempiternus Rex Christus*, in which he condemns a particular interpretation of Philippians in regards to the kenosis:

There is another enemy of the faith of Chalcedon, widely diffused outside the fold of the Catholic religion. This is an opinion for which a rashly and falsely understood sentence of St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (ii, 7), supplies a basis and a shape. This is called the kenotic doctrine, and according to it, they imagine that the divinity was taken away from the Word in Christ. It is a wicked invention, equally to be condemned with the Docetism opposed to it. It reduces the whole mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption to empty the bloodless imaginations. 'With the entire and perfect nature of man'—thus grandly St. Leo the Great—'He Who was true God was born, complete in his own nature, complete in ours' (Ep. xxviii, 3. PL. Liv, 763. Cf. Serm. xxiii, 2. PL. lvi, 201).<sup>[8]</sup>

In John of the Cross's thinking, *kenosis* is the concept of the 'self-emptying' of one's own will and becoming entirely receptive to God and the divine will. It is used both as an explanation of the Incarnation, and an indication of the nature of God's activity and will. Mystical theologian John of the Cross's work "Dark Night of the Soul" is a particularly lucid explanation of God's process of

transforming the believer into the icon or "likeness of Christ".<sup>[9]</sup>

## Unitarianism

Since some forms of Unitarianism do not accept the personal pre-existence of Christ their interpretations of Phil. 2:7, and the concept of "kenosis", Christ "emptying" himself, take as a starting point that his "emptying" occurred in life, and not before birth. However, as Thomas Belsham put it, there are varying views on when in life this emptying occurred.<sup>[10]</sup> Belsham took this to be at the crucifixion, whereas Joseph Priestley<sup>[11]</sup> took this to be in the Garden of Gethsemane when Christ did not resist arrest. The Christadelphian Tom Barling considered that the "emptying" of Christ was a continual process which started in the earliest references to Christ's character, Luke 2:40,52, and continued through the temptations of Christ and his ministry.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Gnosticism

The equivalent to kenōsis in Gnostic literature is Christ's withdrawal of his own luminosity into himself, so as to cease dazzling his own disciples. At the request of his disciples, "Jesus drew to himself the glory of his light".<sup>[13]</sup>

## See also

- Chalcedonian Creed
- Charles Gore
- *Communicatio idiomatum*
- *Dark Night of the Soul*
- Depersonalization
- Desert Fathers
- Ego death
- Eternal super-kenosis
- George Ellis
- Gnosis
- John of the Cross
- Surrender (religion)


## References

- ↑ κέν-ωσις , εως (<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dke%2Fnwsis&highlight=empty>) — A. emptying, depletion, οὐχὶ πείνα καὶ δίψα . . κενώσεις τινές εἰσι . . ; Plato Republic 585b, cf. Philebus 35b, BGU904.13 (ii A.D.): —poet. κενέωσις , “πόντου κ. ἀνὰ πέδον” Pindar Fragments 107.12: metaph., emptiness of life “κένωσις βίου” Vettius Valens 190.30; “κ. τοῦ γιννώσκειν” Iamblichus De communi mathematica scientia, 11. 2. (Medical), emptying, evacuation, Hippocrates Aphorisms 3.8, interpolated in Dsc.2.50; κ. τῶν οικείων, [opposite *katharsis* κάθαρσις τῶν ἀλλοτρίων], Galenus 18(2).134. b. depletion, low diet, [opposite *plerosis* πλήρωσις, Hippocrates VM9, cf. Art.49; κ. σίτου ib.50. 3. (of the moon) waning, [opposite *plerosis* πλήρωσις], Epicurus Epistles 2p.40U.
- ↑ 1 Corinthians (ed. Brooke Foss Westcott, Fenton John Anthony Hort) in I Corinthians, chapter 9: ... γάρ μοι μᾶλλον ἀποθανεῖν ἢ – τὸ καύχημά μου οὐδεὶς **κενώσει**. ἐὰν γὰρ εὐαγγελίζωμαι, οὐκ ἔστιν μοι καύχημα, ἀνάγκη
- ↑ Fr. J. Guy Winfrey. "The Initial Movement of the Eucharist" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20111002071453/http://padretex.com/?p=27>). Archived from the original on 2011-10-02. Retrieved 2011-08-04.
- ↑ Thomas Jay Oord *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement*, Brazos Press, 2010. 1-58743-257-9
- ↑ Oord. T.J. "Essential Kenosis" in *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, Chalice Press, 2010. ISBN 978-082720828-5 pp. 149,155.

6. "The oneness of Essence, the Equality of Divinity, and the Equality of Honor of God the Son with the God the Father." *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky pages 92-95 [1] ([http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0824/\\_P16.HTM#N5](http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0824/_P16.HTM#N5))
7. "The oneness of Essence, the Equality of Divinity, and the Equality of Honor of God the Son with the God the Father." *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky pages 92-95
8. *Sempiternus Rex Christus* ([http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs\\_pi12sr.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_pi12sr.htm))
9. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D; Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., *The collected Works of St. John of The Cross*, ICS Publications, 1991. pp. 353-457.
10. Thomas Belsham *American Unitarianism: or A Brief history of the progress and present state of the Unitarian Churches in America* 1816 p. 119 "In answer to the inquiry ; when was it, after entering on bis publick ministry, that Christ emptied himself of the form of God, and look on him the form of a servant and the fashion of a man?"
11. Belsham, op. cit., p. 119 citing Priestley's *Letters* p139
12. T.J. Barling *The Letter to the Philippians* CMPA Birmingham 1957 p46-47
13. G. R. S. Mead (translator) : *Pistis Sophia*. (lib. 1, cap. 6) ) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/ps/ps010.htm> (p. 6)

## External links

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- Herbermann, Charles, ed. (1913). "Kenosis" ([https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic\\_Encyclopedia\\_\(1913\)/Kenosis](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Kenosis)). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company.
  -  Works related to *The Tome of St. Leo* at Wikisource
  - George Ellis interview ([https://web.archive.org/web/20050420015215/http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2004/06/24\\_scienceandhope/rafiles/20040624\\_scienceandhope.ram](https://web.archive.org/web/20050420015215/http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2004/06/24_scienceandhope/rafiles/20040624_scienceandhope.ram)) - from NPR
  - Kenosis - Christ "Emptied Himself" (<https://danmusicktheology.com/kenosis/>) - essays from Dan Musick.
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