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Domeniul de doctorat Filologie/Teologie

*The kenotic dimension of public Christian presence.*
*An analysis from an evangelical perspective of the public*
*relevance of the concept of kenosis in the thought of*
*Dumitru Stăniloae and Vasile Voiculescu.*
*Abstract*

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**Motivation**

This research started from the observation according to which, in recent years, Christians of all denominations are increasingly present in the public space, but not necessarily to the benefit of the church and Christianity. During the 2018 referendum to change an article in the Constitution, for example, it was possible to notice a rather ardent disposition, sometimes even aggressive or slanderous but paved with various noble legitimizations and abusive interpretations of Scripture. Also, the way that various leaders communicated revealed, not infrequently, the inadequacy of their terminology and religious jargon in a public debate - it could at best mobilize the previously convinced people. One can also note a circumstantial (most likely moral) common front of Christians, but not discussed from a theological perspective. It was taken for granted.

One can thus notice – and this is the second element that legitimizes the present research – the scarcity of models that link, either from a confessional perspective or independently of confessional nuances (but using a Christian theological foundation), personal Christian identity with public presence and manifestation. Often the discussion about what it would mean to be 'Christian' is conducted from the

perspective of church institutions, or from a reductionist perspective limited strictly to immediate communities, or from an exclusively confessional perspective, or through the lenses of more or less distorted media reflections in the public space - thus reverting to the media clichés. We do not have a theology of public space, nor a structured public theology, nor a social ethics. Instead, we have some guidelines for a social theology from an Orthodox perspective, and some general outlines for a public theology from an evangelical perspective, but these do not yet seem to have acquired sufficient influence either at the institutional level (whether we are referring to church hierarchies or educational institutions) or at the popular-community level to shape the expressions of Christians (leaders and parishioners) in the public space and in the sphere of civil society.

In these circumstances, we wondered whether another model could be found, and we tried to look in the opposite direction of the reflex of claiming a privileged position in relation to the state and the political (which tempts churches of all denominations). We have thus arrived at kenosis, always linked to humility, reconciliation, goodwill or self-sacrifice, i.e. in opposition to the idea of earthly power manifested through coercion, control or violence. But it

seems to obey the secularist imperative of removing religion altogether from the public sphere. On a closer examination, however, we can see that, on the contrary, kenosis also means courage, perseverance and prophetic opposition to abuses. Moreover, we believe that it can be shown to have an inherent public dimension and that it does not require withdrawal from the world, but participation in its redemption in a specific way.

**Objectives and importance of the research**

The aim of this research was to configure the elements of a kenotic Christian identity that would help the lay believers to link their allegedly Christian identity more coherently, more consciously and more assertively to their presence in the public space, resisting both the temptation of reclusion and the temptation of being subservient to political ideologies that guarantee their survival by strictly external means.

The significance of this research would derive from the choice of a rather unpopular model, but one which seeks to mirror the kenosis of Christ, reflected in his living in the world, in a kenosis of man, which – if we admit that Christ is the image of the perfect image of God in humans and thus the

prototype of huma being – must also be found at the core of the identity of the believer, and even (at least potentially) of every man.

This thesis brings together the Orthodox theology of kenosis (as elaborated by Dumitru Stăniloae) with the need for public presence of Christians in the context of Romanian realities. The proposals in this work, although accessible to a specialized theological audience, can pave the way for the shaping of a Christian identity that harnesses the public, ethical and aesthetic potential of kenosis. We believe that we have succeeded in taking some steps towards articulating a theological basis on which Christians with diverse vocations might root their public identity.

## Methodological considerations

Our research is part of what Harold Breitenberg – in an attempt to systematize the field and define concepts – labeled a "constructive public theology", which envisages "theologically grounded and informed interpretations of and guidance for institutions, interactions, events, circumstances,

policies, and practices, both within and outside the church"[1]. More specifically, it is about "constructive efforts, descriptive accounts, and normative proposals" that address public life in general, but from a perspective of theological ethics, [2] with the important specification that, in our case, kenosis itself is presumed to be a public truth. This constructive model of public theology provides the methodological solution to hold together the three pillars of the analysis: the kenotic (as a Christological foundation), the Christian (seen by Christological anthropology and Christian identity perspective) and the public space (analyzed insofar as the discussion also involves the presence of religion in the public sphere).

If we look at some significant works in the field of public theology, we can only conclude that there is no "orthodox" corpus of public theology, no unanimously accepted definition, but various attempts that come from different directions and reflect, most likely, an increasingly

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[1] E. Harold Breitenberg, „To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?", în *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23, 2, 2003, p. 64.

[2] E. Harold Breitenberg, „What is Public Theology?, în Deirdre King Hainsworth şi Scott R. Paeth (ed.), *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009, p. 12.

acute need, noticed by theologians, to return to the public arena – where religion has already returned sometimes brutally, for example, through manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism. We have therefore not tried to respond to all the demands that can be deduced from the various theoretical configurations, but to illustrate some of the main lines of an approach that claims to be in public theology's field. The research deals simultaneously, though not to the same extent, with two dimensions inherent to public theology: communication with society (a direction that concerns the elaboration of a theological discourse) and serving civic good (which would represent the transformative-applicative dimension) – with an important clarification: as such, this work does not address "the world" or society (i.e. a particular audience outside), so it does not necessarily attempt to establish a common language or common ground with those outside the church, but suggests ways in which this language can be achieved; regarding the practical steps, it only outlines a possible ethical framework for action, not a plan for action. Therefore, the ultimate target of the whole effort is primarily the common believer, and maybe some leaders and theologians within the church and/or theological schools to

whom it is presented as a proposal to be considered, not as a normative standard.

In this way, as a constructive public theology attempt, this enterprise makes use not only in a legitimate but in a mandatory way, of the signals that society sends towards church – most often through the humanistic and social sciences – and integrates them into the theological reflection. Thus, this is an inductive approach, starting from society and moving towards what theology says about the phenomena considered. Also, in public theology, there is no obligation that the perspective to be necessarily a confessional one – although it is not excluded – but it can be an ecumenical or interreligious one. At least in this present case, the perspective underlying the whole project is an evangelical one, even if altered by the dialogue with some Christian traditions, but revolving around a core constituted by the kenosis, interpreted in an Eastern theological paradigm.

Ultimately, although the argument of the present work makes significant use of the technical language of academic theology, the ultimate target to which it seeks to draw attention and channel energies is, as repeatedly pointed out, the ordinary Christian, not the highly theologically educated specialist. This openness – assumed as an aspiration and a

hope – is based at the theological level on the accessibility of public theology imperative, which makes room for more popular and atypical forms of theological expression: "public theology does not remotely look like that of an academic paper, lecture or text book. Public theology emerges in multifarious facets: in movies, songs, poems, novels, art, architecture, protest marches, clothing, newspaper and magazine articles." [3]

There is a clear temptation to figure out a negative identity in conflict with what is perceived as hostile (secularization, EU, minorities' rights, the rise of Islam, etc.) and that might have an underlying continuity with the habit of defining through differentiation and delimitation to the atheistic communist regime. The place in democratic societies thus seems more difficult to find.[4] The kenotic paradigm, paradoxically, makes it possible to build positive identities in the new democratic context, although (or perhaps precisely *because*) it starts from a self-limitation, from self-

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[3] Andries van Aarde, „What is «Theology» in «Public Theology» and What is «Public» about «Public Theology»?", *HTS Theological Studies*, 64:3, 2008, p. 1216.

[4] Cf., pentru o situație similară, discuția lui W. Storrar cu Desmond Tutu, în William Storrar, „Naming of Parts. Doing Public Theology in a Global Era", în *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5, 2011, p. 36.

sacrifice, from a humble and generous attitude towards the other.

In conclusion, we hope to be able to demonstrate that building on the idea of kenosis offers the possibility for a critical evaluation of the actual presence of Christians in society, but at the same time provides a solid foundation for a constructive approach, based on a kenotic dialogue, on a presence seen as a Christian virtue, on an ethical structure that is rooted in the Sermon on the Mount (precisely because it seems idealistic and because only Christ seems able to meet his own standards) and that can be translated aesthetically. The discussion will focus on the structure of an identity which, having this kenotic core, is constructed narratively. Building on the importance that many theorists give to narrative, we will try to illustrate the kenotic dimension in some of Vasile Voiculescu's plays, while also exploring the ethical value of fiction narrative.

**The structure of the thesis**

The first two chapters are concerned with methodological considerations and literature review of the relevant material (and this was already explored before), so

that the ground is prepared for the actual demonstration. The next concrete steps will be made, in chapter 3, with the existing theorizations of public Christian presence and the features by which "Christianity" is usually interpreted in the Romanian public space. This chapter is organized in three main parts:

- Church presence in society;

- The manifestation of the lay believers in the public space;

- Social theology and public theology in the Romanian context.

First of all, however, some necessary conceptual delimitations are to be made: secular, secularization, secularism, secularization and post-secularization; public space; civil society. Three sub-chapters follow, focusing on the relationships and perceptions of institutions which, not infrequently, are overlapped on Christian identity. But, as we shall try to show, although they may contain genuine Christian elements, they do not run through this identity entirely and, perhaps even more importantly, do not say much about the characteristics of people who hold Christian beliefs.

The second part of this chapter discusses the manifestations of the lay believers in the public sphere as

assessed through surveys and censuses, public mores (reflected in reactions to sensitive ethical issues) and philanthropic activity. Even after this more applied exploration some gaps remain that need to be filled.

Finally, in the last part of the chapter, two lines of reflection will be analyzed both of them aiming to develop a social theology (in the Orthodox tradition) and a public theology (evangelical) that open up the possibility of a public ethics and a more informed and theologically aware expression of Christian identity by the laity.

Chapter 4 constitutes, in a sense, the theological core of the research, since it explores, starting from the biblical text of Philippians 2, the meanings of kenosis, interpreting it theologically along the orthodox line proposed by the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae. This choice was based on several reasons: the desire of Orthodox theology to stay close to the definitions of the ecumenical councils; the possibility of a dialogue with the tradition of the majority Christian confession in Romania; the value of Stăniloae's perspective in itself as well as the personal-relational implications that he identifies in reflecting on the kenosis of Jesus Christ. Kenosis is thus seen as "the interweaving of the divine nature in its existence and activity with the human

nature, showing itself to humans in no other way than through the humble image of man, and to the other Persons of the Holy Trinity not separately but as a whole with the human nature."[5] Bringing together the relational implications of kenosis – i.e., how Christ's kenosis affects our existence as persons in community and communion – and the fact that "the impulse to understand Christology and anthropology together is a classic hallmark of Eastern theology, which always seeks to resist the force of over-systematization and specialization"[6], we have the premises for capitalizing the theoretical acquisitions thus far through the lenses of a Christological anthropology. In order to make this transition we have accepted the premise that in Christ we are shown the perfect image of God in human beings and consequently any discussion about the foundations of our humanity starts from the New Adam, not from the Old Adam. So our human and Christian identities meet at the same point.

This Christian identity has three supporting pillars: (1) self-identification; (2) belonging to a Christian community;

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[5] Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, p. 176-177.
[6] Rytsar, *Teologia chenotică*, p. 37. Ca ilustrare a acestei orientări, a se vedea lucrarea de doctorat a teologului Vasile Cristescu, *Antropologia şi fundamentarea ei hristologică la Wolfhart Pannenberg şi Dumitru Stăniloae*, Iaşi, Trinitas, 2004.

(3) the appropriation of a set of beliefs and related practices.[7] As we have tried to show, this identity is constructed narratively, and the kenotic dimension is no exception, since we share the conviction that even in the verse where kenosis is spoken of (Philippians 2:7), it functions as the abbreviation of several narratives.

In the end, a dynamic identity will take shape, in which the person of Jesus Christ is the ontological ground and ethical model for human, and human persons can narratively appropriate the kenotic disposition through participation in the history of God's redemption of the world through Christ. The chapter concludes with an exercise of critical evaluation of the Romanian Christian-national identity from the perspective of the public and kenotic qualities and virtues that it does (not) manifest. We show that there is a risk for national identities overlapping with religious ones to fall into the pitfall of the political religion of nationalism. Then, from the perspective of public narrative theology, we explore how foundational narratives can be ajusted without abolishing the need for national myths that can unite a country around common landmarks, but the minority narratives must also be

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allowed to correct the master narrative. Finally, from a kenotic perspective, we stress the impossibility of cultivating ethnically motivated superiority or conflict, as well as how is reinforced the universality of Christianity and its primacy over any ideology.

In chapter 5, this kenotic identity – unavoidable public – will be analyzed in the light of different ways of interacting with society, through a dialogical presence, which implies not only exchange of information, but also change of attitude or discourse; through Christomorphic action, guided by an ethic based on the teaching of the famous Sermon on the Mount; and through some very interesting literary works written by Vasile Voiculescu. All this will be preceded, however, by a summary of the current theological discussions about the how is the presence of Christian laity in society imagined by both Romanian Orthodox and Evangelical theologians.

Presence is analyzed as a Christian virtue characterized by intentionality and a prophetic attitude on which the openness to a kenotic dialogue with society is based. This presupposes both "bilingual" skills (the bilingualism of public theology implies knowledge of theological and public language, in order to be able to mediate, translate and interpret messages in both directions)

and a dialectical approach to speaking and remaining silent in the public square.

Christomorphic action is essentially about an ethic that best reflects what we have characterized as the kenotic dimension of Christian identity. And the Sermon on the Mount as a biblical foundation is worth exploring for at least three reasons: (1) it is an explicitly Christ's teaching; (2) it seems to set intangible standards; (3) it grounds the behavior in the Kingdom of God. But we did not seek to develop a public kenotic ethic *per se*, but rather to demonstrate that even if we start from the Sermon on the Mount, there is a possibility of shaping such an ethic. The suggestion, then, is rather that the public dimension of Christianity is not optional (even if it can be assumed in different degrees by people with different vocations), but is at the heart of the Gospel of redemption. And, if we accept the kenosis as a framework, than it becomes fundamentally kenotic.

The discussion about speaking the truth in the public space illustrates quite well, we believe, various kenotic virtues, proving that it is possible to lay down a model that positions the Christian critically and prophetically both towards society and, where nedeed, towards the church, giving priority to fidelity to the Incarnate Truth.

In the last sub-chapter, we have tried to exploit the capacity of the narrative to function as a "laboratory of moral judgment" and have applied, through typological analysis, a kenotic grid to some of the characters of Voiculescu's theatre. The result was that we discovered both reflections of the Christ's kenosis and complete failures of it.

There are several directions in which further research could go: the development of an coherent ethics based on the kenotic paradigm; the exploration of a kenotic aesthetics; the articulation of a more "applied" public theology approach to various current problems, which would make the most of this public kenotic identity of the ordinary Christian believers.

## Main conclusions

One of the initial findings is that there is quite a lot of confusion in the public space about what public identity entails. Sometimes the same confusion prevails in ecclesial communities. This confusion could be cast away if social theology and public theology – two salutary approaches rooted in the Orthodox and evangelical traditions respectively – were to become more popular at the university and ecclesial levels, but also if they were to gain momentum by engaging more theologians in this kind of reflection. This could also

create the conditions for a social ethic. The increasing presence of Christians in public debates in recent years suggests that a coherently articulated public ethics is still needed.

Confusion in the public sphere has another source: a lack of understanding of the context with its secular, global or pluralist features. The religious resurgence has not been accompanied by either a religious literacy of a majority of citizens or an initiation into civic and active support for democratic values.

By using the concept of kenosis, we have basically announced a critical evaluation of existing models, proposing a reflection on a Christic mode par excellence. Since we are talking about the kenosis of Christ, the "place" where God encounters with human being, we have explored the anthropological and identity implications of kenotic theology for the lay believer. Here again there may be some confusion, as kenoticism is associated – not without reason – with a predominantly conciliatory, generous, sacrificial attitude. However, self-sacrifice is not an end, the end is the greater good of the other. So, in its most intense form, kenosis presupposes the sacrifice for the good of the other.

Christian kenotic identity, narratively appropriated through participation in the narrative of Christ and identification with him, is not so much about hiding or bosting, but about faithful witness to the truth of the Gospel. A gospel that announces the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. To illustrate the revelatory-critical potential of kenosis, we have proposed the exercise of evaluating national identity based on the fusion of religious and ethnic or cultural elements and have concluded that we can preserve master identity narratives, but ajusted with contributions from all who are part of a nation defined politically and civically, not ethnically or racially.

Noting that there is still plenty of space for reflection to be covered on the question of lay presence in society, we have proposed in the last chapter a form of presence that distinguishes itself by readiness, compassion, and perseverance. Characterized by a prophetic attitude (which presupposes independence from human powers and criticism toward the systems that perpetuate evil) and accompanied by the ability to speak the language of theology and the language of society (i.e. of the various 'publics'), this presence forms the basis for the kenotic dialogue. It is a complex process that involves honest bidirectional communication between the

Christian community and society, but also a communication with God in prayer, which entails not only speaking, but also silence and listening.

Dialogue can be extended into action, insofar as there is an ethic that supports the same kind of kenotic act and attitude. And we tried rooting this attitude – and we believe we have succeed – in the Sermon on the Mount. Without necessarily imposing such an ethic as a standard, we suggest, however, that the public dimension of Christian living is not optional, but inherent in Christian identity and biblical teaching. And even when a kenotic perspective is involved, it remains under the imperative of "salt" and "light", which imply more than preaching or evangelism.

The test of speaking the truth publicly remains an important one for Christians, because often there are different kind of attitudes underlying the guise of an naked truth. That is why we chose it as an illustrative example. If we consider the conclusions of the discussions on presence and dialogue, then speaking the truth is a laborious process that requires a good understanding of the context and mastery of appropriate language on the one hand, and discernment, humility and courage on the other. Moreover, Christian truth is an embodied truth, both in the person of Christ and in every

Christian who not only speaks the truth but is required to live the truth as a way of life. At the same time, this truth exists in the narrative of redemption, in which we participate. In fact, it is precisely its narrative quality that makes it easier to bring it to the public, in a time when any claim to universality has been vehemently contested by the theorists of postmodernism. As a narrative, however, it can be proposed to others and brought into the public dialogue without Christians having to adjust it, but also without the claim to be imposed by coercive means on others.

Finally, we have "played" (at Ricoeur's suggestion) on the field of fictional narrative, to highlight kenotic typologies in Voiculescu's plays. This was not merely a neat addition, but we believe that in literary work, the elements of a kenotic identity or attitude are more easily accessible to Christians assuming different vocations and to those that lack the theoretical tools to understand the complex discussion of kenosis, with all its subtleties.

All this has opened up several directions in which further research could go: the development of a coherent ethic based on the kenotic paradigm; a possible exploration of a kenotic aesthetics; the deveopment of more "applied" public theology approaches to various current issues that would

capitalize on this public kenotic identity of the ordinary Christian.

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