

## Econokenosis

### Three Meanings of Kenosis in 'Post-modern' Thought On Derrida, with references to Vattimo and Barth

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#### 1. Rescuing Religion...

Religion, the religious, the sacred, transcendence, spirituality: these classic, complex and diffuse concepts are back on the philosophical agenda, so it appears. The various philosophies of difference and of deconstruction in particular, involved as they are in radically calling into question the discourse of modern humanism, have created a renewed interest in religion on a fundamental and on a practical level: an interest in the philosophical meaning of religion, as well as in the concrete and tangible 'turn' to religious experiences and practices in post-modern culture. This growing philosophical interest can be detected on both sides of the Atlantic, whether philosophers are attempting to reassess or restate the Western legacy of – predominantly Christian – traditions and institutions, or conversely try to 'invent' new, 'secular', and adventurous concepts and approaches to religion. I will not examine the issue of the increasing philosophical popularity of religion any further here, except for making one key observation that seems very relevant to me in this context.

Among contemporary philosophers who have, in many different ways, turned to the study of religion, one often finds an interesting tendency: the tendency to *rescue* religion, however minimal or reticent this rescue operation might be. They try to *save* something of/in religion that should be kept 'safe' in their view from the immense criticism that religion has been subjected to in modern thinking, with which they otherwise – apart from this small remainder to be saved, this 'rest' as some of the authors in question call it – fully agree. My hypothesis is that this saving-something-of/in-religion usually follows the ambivalent structure and discourse of *kenosis*.

#### 2. ...By Rescuing Kenosis: Distance over against Proximity

Kenosis can be described as one of the key notions that evoke the complex relationship between God and humanity, between transcendence and immanence, between the sacred and the profane, between the Other and the Self – in short, the *religious* relationship, or the specific and enigmatic relationship we call religion. If it is true that on a fundamental level kenosis *is* this relationship, then we can observe that many of today's leading thinkers on religion are actually interested in the problem of kenosis again. With some of them kenosis is explicitly and prominently present as a crucial concept used, discussed, or criticised; in most others the problem or question of kenosis implicitly plays a role in their thought, but the concept is not treated explicitly. In any case, whether it is an ingredient on the surface of their writings or operating in the background, kenosis, originally an ancient Christian notion derived from Paul's letter to the Philippians (2: 6-8), is used to refer to two entirely opposite meanings with regard to the religious relationship. It is this ambiguity of kenosis that interests

me in particular in what follows. We will discover that the ‘problem’ of kenosis we mentioned above, is precisely this ambiguity.

\* Examples of the *first* meaning can be found in thinkers, who stress the infinite distance between God and humanity. This is implicitly there in Jean-Luc Marion or Jean Louis Chrétien, more explicitly in Emmanuel Levinas or - in America - in Mark C. Taylor. Here kenosis literally means the ‘emptying’, the exhausting of any positive relationship between God and human beings. Radical transcendence, infinite ‘erring’ (Taylor), the divine secret (Chrétien), and the Heideggerian critique of *onto-theology* (Marion) are the prime notions here, and echoes of the medieval tradition of *negative theology* (Marion) can be heard. The being ‘otherwise than being’ (Levinas) of God is at stake here and should be retained as the kenotic moment of religion, the only aspect of religion that would be worthy of preservation in ‘post-modernity’.<sup>1</sup>

Going back in time a little further we find examples of this first meaning of kenosis in 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, especially in Karl Barth’s work and in the tradition of ‘dialectical theology’ of which he an originator. His program to rescue the Christian God from natural theology as well as from the ‘Kulturreligion’ of his time is a typically kenotic operation, postulating a crucial void, emptiness, or distance between the divine and the human. Nonetheless, towards the end of my essay we will discover that Barth’s work is a bit more complicated in this respect.

\* The *second* meaning, however, opens up an entirely different discourse, pointing at the proximity of the divine and the human ‘worlds’. Keeping in mind the original Christian meaning of God becoming human in Christ (God ‘empties’ himself in order to become human), kenosis is considered the ‘friendship’ of high and low, of God and humankind, and of a certain de-hierarchisation and de-totalisation of the religious relationship. The only religion that should be retained in our pluralistic times is a kenotic religion, i.e., a religion in which the humiliation and vulgarisation of the Highest Being or the Being beyond Being is the central event and experience. Since this discourse of friendship and proximity is a slightly more recent and less well-known development than the discourse of distance described above as the first meaning of kenosis, I will give a number of more detailed examples of the former.

### *Zizek: a Political Discourse of Proximity*

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek on a political level supports the idea of kenosis as infinite proximity, for example. To him, the ‘death of the Son of God’ on the cross – the pre-eminent kenotic event – is a mysterious, but ultimately ‘happy’ event, ‘giving birth to a new subject no longer rooted in a particular substance, redeemed of all particular links’. Kenosis is ‘happy’ because here God and human beings come together to form a new humanity that sheds its old nationalistic and ethnic identities (Zizek calls them ‘substances’, ‘links’, ‘phantasms’) which have terrorised south-eastern Europe, e.g., at least since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Christian legacy is ‘worth fighting for’, because its kenotic structure sacrifices identities (and their conservatism or even fundamentalism) in order to open up new possibilities for our socio-political reality. The spiritual reality of the Holy Spirit (to Zizek a

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<sup>1</sup> For an elaborate survey and evaluation of this way of thinking about the religious relationship, see Ilse N. Bulhof, Laurens ten Kate (eds.), *Flight of the Gods. Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, New York: Fordham University Press 2000. See on Levinas and kenosis Renée van Riessen’s contribution to this volume, on Taylor and kenosis Leddy Karelse’s contribution.

Regarding non-contemporary sources for this first meaning of kenosis one may well mention Pascal, the late Schelling, and esp. Kierkegaard, as far as philosophy is concerned; in theology, one may point to Barth’s work (see just below), and to a rich tradition of Jewish thought (e.g. Buber, Rosenzweig).

much more essential outcome of the kenosis on the cross than the resurrection) fights and replaces the phantasmatic reality of the soil and the ethnos. But this new ‘presence’ of the Spirit, which is Zizek’s secular and quite radically Hegelian modulation of Christian pneumatology, is yet to come – and fragile. Now this becoming ‘fragile’ of the Absolute is what must be kept, be saved of religion, or, more precisely, of the western religious legacy, Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

*Milbank: a Linguistic Discourse of Proximity as Incarnation*

We find quite a different example of the same discourse of proximity in John Milbank’s attempts to define kenosis as the incarnation of God in human language. Here language as a gift from the Creator, in which He himself is involved via Christ’s kenosis – emptying, exhausting himself in becoming human – serves as the ‘meeting point’ of the divine and the human. Christ’s kenosis is supposed to involve the disruption of the Logos with its claims to identity, unity and universality, and the liberation of language towards a plurality of meanings, truths and values. A new ‘participation’ of human beings and God is supposed to be the result of this liberating incarnation, aiming at overcoming the ‘void’ between them.<sup>3</sup> Zizek’s political criticism of identity appears as a linguistic criticism of identity here.

*Vattimo: an Existential Discourse of Proximity*

Probably the most important protagonist of the discourse of proximity and friendship, however, is Gianni Vattimo.<sup>4</sup> Kenosis is not only a central concept, but also indeed a central experience in his work: object of study and analysis as well as subject of inspiration. Here, we find a truly existential criticism of the logic of identity that has dominated modernity, parallel to the political and linguistic criticisms of which Zizek and Milbank resp. were shown to be examples. Kenosis, according to Vattimo, not only forms an interesting part of Christian doctrine, it *is* or rather *should be* the essence of the divine and of belief or religion in general. Of course the second meaning of kenosis, the model of friendship and togetherness, is applied here in a massive way: the Absolute must be ‘weakened’, just like Zizek wants, if it has not always been ‘weak’ and ‘fragile’ in the first place, at least since it received its Christian form in the gospels, only to be perverted by the Logos of metaphysics that has contaminated Western-Christian thought in Vattimo’s opinion. ‘The violence of the transcendent principle, the ground that silences all questions should be eliminated.’<sup>5</sup> Silence and ‘unknowing’, vital motives in the first meaning of kenosis, are taken over by the abundance of symbolic polysemy and the richness of infinite interpretation. God is no longer *beyond* human existence, human speech and action, but completely involved in it: He is engaged in this feast of reason and language that only the post-modern, i.e. the post-metaphysical epoch has been able to unleash. In fact, we should have the courage to say, Vattimo’s states, that God quite simply *is* this feast of language and nothing else; the divine is involved in our history, has

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<sup>2</sup> See S. Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute – or, why is the christian legacy worth fighting for?*, London/New York: Verso 2000, 158.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, and Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 1997, and J. Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: a New Theology*, London: Routledge 1999, esp. Milbank, Pickstock, Ward, ‘Introduction: Suspending the Material: the Turn of Radical Theology’, 1-20; 3/4: ‘The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is ‘participation’ as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God’.

<sup>4</sup> See esp. his *Belief*, trans. Luca d’Isanto and David Webb, Cambridge: Polity Press 1999; orig. Italian 1996; and his *Beyond Interpretation: the Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. David Webb, Cambridge: Polity Press 1996.

<sup>5</sup> L. d’Isanto, *Introduction*, in G. Vattimo, *Belief*, 10.

entered the horizon of our language, only to become the last holy symbol left to us: the symbol of peaceful, dialogical and pluralistic communication. Early Christian kenosis has therefore reached its belated fulfilment in secular times, in particular in *our* times, in which the 'Great Narratives' of modern culture have evaporated. Vattimo even goes so far as to equate kenosis with God's presumed declaration of friendship, taking not only Philippians 2: 6-8 as the key reference for his theory of kenosis, but also John 15: 15: 'No longer do I call you servants... I have called you friends'.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. The loss of relationship in Vattimo's discussion of kenosis

So, what is happening here? One feature of Vattimo's idea of kenosis is of special interest to me here, and this is what will be discussed in what follows. Although the author of *Belief* beautifully evokes kenosis as an event, an occurrence between God and human beings suggesting some kind of *relationship* between the two, the outcome of this event makes any real relationship impossible. Vattimo adopts a truly *fusional* discourse: in kenosis, the infinite confrontation, the tension between God and human beings, their being exposed to each other has been abolished in favour of their fusion. Vattimo is so happy to prove and plead for the radical historicity of God, for His inner-worldliness, for His being non-authoritarian and 'just like us' that in the end of his kenotic adventure the entire duality of God and human beings is diluted, suppressed and finally negated. In kenosis, and indeed in any idea of religion that would be worth rescuing in our times, humanity is all-important: humanity integrates and absorbs the divine. The radical pluralism and contingency of language, mirroring the pluralism and contingency of reality, of Being as a whole, is supplied with a divine aura. If God is to be found anywhere, it is in and *as* this pluralism – our pluralism; in other words, it is in and *as* us. Remarkable as it may seem, this is the consequence of Vattimo's strategy of weakening: God is weakened in His alterity, whereas humanity – in its secular, post-modern state – is strengthened, even glorified. If God is anywhere, He 'is' us.

This implication of Vattimo's reading of kenosis, however popular this reading may be among those interested in and inspired by the turn to religion in our times mentioned earlier, is quite shocking. After all, the protest against the static, dichotomistic transcendence of the 'old' metaphysical God (with His parameters of Truth, Unity, Authority etc.) is radicalised towards a protest against transcendence as such. Transcendence is pronounced taboo in his texts. However, without transcendence, or rather, in relational terms, without 'an other', without *otherness*, there can be no relationship; and – taking the next step, following from the first immediately – without relationship, there can be no religion. If the enigmatic relationship between God and human beings, if the primordial as well as *historical* experience of an 'outside', of a limit *to human history* and existence, of the 'sacred' or the 'inhuman', is kenotically sacrificed for the total absorption of this relationship *into human history*, then in the end religion is sacrificed for the 'purified faith of secularisation'.<sup>7</sup> Vattimo's rehabilitation of belief and Christianity boils down to a Christianity without duality – without this strange and irritating little word: God. What remains, what is saved of religion, is only the plurality of human meanings, interpretations, truths, desires, creations and communications in which God and human beings participate as indistinguishable friends. Monotheism is made obsolete by monopluralism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Belief*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> *Belief*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Those thinkers, who pay attention to this difficult duality each in their own way, are all too easily dismissed by Vattimo. He criticises existentialist philosophy of religion for its scepticism about the human condition and its plea for a 'leap of faith' – Pascal, Kierkegaard – (*Belief*, 39) and 'apocalyptic' theology (87) or dialectical

So, if Vattimo – seen as the most powerful representative of the current discourse of proximity, fusing kenosis with friendship – reduces the religious relationship to peace and ‘continuity’<sup>9</sup>, he in fact loses this relationship altogether. God plays no part in this relationship of humanity to itself, except as a symbol and ‘example’ (in Christ’s kenosis) of human pluralism that will triumph as ‘charity’ and ‘tenderness’ on earth in the end.<sup>10</sup>

Yet no relationship and certainly not the religious relationship, can do without the duality of the ‘more than one’, the ‘one to one’, the ‘facing one another’ and the tension that goes with it; and this duality presupposes strangeness, separation, interruption, discontinuity, conflict, misunderstanding, antagonism, as well as friendship, proximity and peace. One might even argue, as the tradition of thought on friendship (from Aristotle to Nietzsche and Bataille – virtually ignored by Vattimo) has done so often and so convincingly, that no friendship is possible without separation and conflict: without enmity. Every relationship essentially needs an *other*, who at one moment may be far away and very close at another, who may be friend and enemy almost at the same time; and precisely because of this every relationship is, in a way, violent. Since the religious relationship more than any relationship bears the marks and stamps of strangeness and separation, of *difference*, one of the relating poles being non-human, being ‘God’, it is always a violent rapport from the outset. The essential asymmetry of this rapport (how can one relate to ‘no-body’, to someone who is the radical opposite of humanity, who always is ‘present’ in his withdrawal – how can one relate to a ‘god’?) implies an enormous tension between God and human beings, in which *both* friendship and enmity, peace and violence, proximity and distance should be granted their place.<sup>11</sup>

If one misses this ambivalence of the relationship between God and human beings, if one misses the *impossibility* and *improbability* of it, one misses religion altogether. Religion is only possible as an impossible intrusion into our existence, whether it brings joy and friendship or fear and conflict: an intrusion in which God and human beings are mutually involved, haunting and wounding, loving and touching each other, and above all losing, just for a moment, their ‘identities’, their ‘substances’ as Žižek would say. Religion is the relational event between God and human beings. And in this event anything can happen, nothing is guaranteed; it is the realm of the wholly unexpected or, anticipating a word I will return to later on, of *singularity*.

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theology (48, note; the critique is weakened obligatorily in the ‘Post-Scriptum’, 95) for stressing a vertical relationship to God. On the other hand Nietzsche and Heidegger are all too quickly called in as allies. On Vattimo’s rather naive reading of Nietzsche, see Theo W.A. de Wit, ‘The Return to Religion. Vattimo’s Reconciliation of Christian Faith and Post-modern Philosophy’, in *Bijdragen. Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 61 (2000), 390-411.

<sup>9</sup> *Belief*, 48, note.

<sup>10</sup> *Belief*, 98.

<sup>11</sup> This fundamental violence of and in the religious relationship as such is, of course, not identical with the practical violence committed in the name of religion, nor is this fundamental peace or friendship that might be a possibility of the religious relationship identical with the practical pacificatory and humanitarian work done in the name of religion. Nevertheless the tension I have described can be rephrased without much effort in terms of the painful discrepancy of religious practices around the world today. From the terror of the Lord’s Resistance Army in North-Uganda to the interventions of the Truth Committee in South-Africa: in other words, from religion kidnapping young children in order to brainwash and train them to participate in murder squadrons of God, which are supposed to bring revolution to a country – in this case Uganda – and install a Heavenly Kingdom, to the impressive as well as controversial public rituals of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation directed by a black bishop, Tutu, and meant to help people come to terms with the terror of comparable murder squadrons in the land of Apartheid – both extremes belong to this elusive and irritating phenomenon called religion, which simply will not disappear from our international socio-political scene in spite of quite a history of secularisation.

Meanwhile, in Vattimo's idea of kenosis, the ambivalence of violence and peace is unthinkable, and here lies the blind spot of his argument, which, I repeat, actually means that the religious relationship as such is the blind spot of his kenotic approach. Vattimo's praise of Christian kenosis is the dilution of religion, and in particular of Christianity; his difficulties in taking seriously Christ's crucifixion – the core event of kenosis, in which it is 'finished' as the gospels proclaim<sup>12</sup> – and his inclination to allegorise and moralise the violence of the cross in a highly abstract manner, is only one of the proofs of this dilution.<sup>13</sup>

4. Toward an Economy of Distance and Proximity: Derrida and a Third Meaning of Kenosis  
So there can only be a relationship – an event – between God and human beings, there can only be religion, if the ambivalence I analysed above is, in a sense, active and operational. There can only be a relationship if there is distance, otherness, separation and at the same time proximity, approaching, touching, contact, exposure. With their version of kenosis, the exponents of the discourse of proximity described above try to do away with this 'double bind', Vattimo being their pre-eminent spokesman. On the other hand, with *their* version of kenosis, the exponents of the discourse of distance – although they pay far more attention to the complex duality of the religious relationship than their counterparts – equally try to do away with the double bind: the concrete and the 'taking place' in time of the event of kenosis, God and human beings baring themselves to one another, humanity touching divinity, divinity touching humanity, or in theological language: the incarnational centre of kenosis, remains the unthinkable part in their thought.

So far it may have gradually become clear that the opposition of the two meanings of kenosis belongs to a scheme that is in itself insufficient for a philosophical analysis and understanding of religion, and of its 'turn' or 'return' into 21st century culture. We need to study and analyse the *economy* of both aspects of kenosis, instead of bringing them into diametrical and static opposition to each other. We need to confront the constant 'negotiation' between both extremes, and to underline the 'undecidability' of both kenotic operations. This negotiation between the pure and the vulgar, between distance and proximity, between hierarchy and friendship, might well be unavoidable in any conception of religion. Among the thinkers of this 'third way', affirming, in a sense, the intricate complexity of the two kenoses, Jacques Derrida is without any doubt the most powerful and important. In his work one finds a thorough account of what I would like to call an economy of kenosis, an 'econokenosis' that lies at the heart of the religious relationship. In formulating this economy, Derrida attempts to

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<sup>12</sup> John 19:30. The Greek text reads τετελεσται, which rather means 'having reached its goal', 'fulfilled'.

<sup>13</sup> Vattimo relies heavily on René Girard's critical equation of the sacred and violence in *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. P. Gregory, London: Athlone Press 1988; orig. 1972). Basically Girard claims that true religion should be without sacrifice, but the biblical Crucifixion of Christ would be a different story... In Vattimo's words: 'Jesus' incarnation did not take place to supply the father with a victim adequate to his wrath; rather, Jesus came into the world precisely to reveal and abolish the nexus between violence and the sacred. He was put to death because such a revelation was intolerable to a humanity rooted in the violent tradition of sacrificial religions.' (*Belief*, 37) Of course the idea of a wrathful God sadistically sending down his son is rightly rejected by Girard and Vattimo. But the event of the cross is the key event to which the entire narrative of the four synoptic gospels clearly leads and for which each gospel carefully prepares its readers, linking this event to the Hebrew Scriptures. In Pauline theology kenosis is subsequently made to cohere explicitly with the same event of the cross. Of course Vattimo is free to eliminate the violence of this event from kenosis, but to present this as a new and better reading of the Scriptures is rather unconvincing, to say the least. That God would sacrifice his own son only to show an evil humanity that sacrifice is wrong, seems to be quite an artificial and superficial interpretation of this tragedy, which the New Testament displays four times. That the 'evil humanity' Vattimo accuses in retrospect consists of the Jewish people, whose religion can hardly be counted among the 'traditions of sacrificial religions' adds to the unhistorical character of Vattimo's and Girard's philosophical improvisations.

understand in an original way religion's healing *and* violating structure, its salvific *and* haunting features, its 'making us whole and holy' *and* its tearing us apart, its construction *and* destruction, its hope *and* despair, in short, its being radically good *and* radically evil. One will immediately notice that an entire tradition of thought reverberates here, from Kant's insights into the difficult relationship of religion and reason, e.g., via Kierkegaard's anti-dialectical, paradoxical treatment of religious experience, to Otto's double determination of the mysterium. Still, Derrida's decision to rethink all these programmatic efforts to break up the one-sidedness and self-containment of religion in terms of an economy is innovative in contemporary philosophy of religion.<sup>14</sup>

##### 5. Econokenosis: the Place of *différance*

The concept of economy is decisively present in Derrida's earlier writings, notably in *Writing and Difference* (orig. 1967<sup>15</sup>). It is then continuously refined and discussed by Derrida until 'Economimesis' (1975<sup>16</sup>).<sup>17</sup> Later it recedes to the background a bit. The term is used less frequently, but still plays a crucial role in Derrida's research.

But what is economy? It has very little to do with the logic of calculation, production, utility and gain that belongs to economics; on the contrary, to Derrida it is a philosophical category that at *first calls into question* every type of oppositional or dualistic thinking. Economy designates two or more extremes or poles, two or more binary entities (for example, good and evil, truth and lying, past and future, life and death, or I and the other), in order to give full attention to their interplay. Precisely in their being opposed the poles do no longer rest – and actually never have rested – in themselves, as if they were pre-existing substances, but they are *exposed* to one another in a play of negotiation, contamination, mutual influence, and manipulation, etc. In short, they never form a pure opposition, but are always already involved in a third term: a 'household' (οικονομία), an economy *between* them in which they are no longer fully themselves. Economy as a concept that continuously calls into question the stable oppositions that structure western thought and culture by turning them into what they do not want to be, a dynamics, thus wounds any dialectic system as well. Dialectics accept a

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<sup>14</sup> I would include the following authors among contemporary thinkers interested in this 'third way', stressing a certain economy of religion and avoiding any idealistic theory of religion. Explicitly following Derrida: Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference. On Jacques Derrida*, Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press 1994, esp. ch. 6: 'God, for Example', 150-170; John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1997; Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999. Working in a less 'Derridean' but nonetheless related way: Jean-Luc Nancy, 'La déconstruction du christianisme', in *Les Études Philosophiques* 4/1998, 503-519; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue*, Paris: Seuil 1997 (orig. 1995), and *Le temps qui reste. Un commentaire de l'Épître aux Romains*, Paris: Rivages 2000 (orig. 2000); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. La fondation de l'universalisme*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1997; Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris: Gallimard 1985; and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1993.

Derrida's other relevant publications on religion (not mentioned below) include: 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. K. Frieden, in S. Budick, W. Iser (eds.), *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press 1989, 3-70; 'Avances', Introduction to Serge Margel, *Le Tombeau du dieu artisan. Sur Platon*, Paris: Minuit 1995, 11-43; and 'Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' within the Mere Limits of Reason', in J. Derrida, G. Vattimo (eds.), *Religion*, trans. S. Weber, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998, 1-78 (orig. 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge 1978

<sup>16</sup> In S. Agacinski et al., *Mimesis: Des articulations*, Paris: Aubier-Flammarion 1975, 57-93.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed study of the concept of economy in Derrida, see Joost de Bloois, *Derrida et l'économie*, dissertation, University of Utrecht, forthcoming 2002; and Gido Berns, *Kringloop en Woekering. Een deconstructieve filosofie van de economie*, Amsterdam: Boom 1998.

certain interplay – often portrayed as a battle – between positivity and negativity, but this economy is only tolerated temporarily in view of its annihilation and elevation to a new, stable, synthesising third term: for instance, ‘Aufhebung’, world spirit, absolute knowledge in Hegel’s discourse.

Needless to say, the ‘economical’<sup>18</sup> calling into question or ‘deconstruction’ of opposition is immediately joined by a *second calling into question*: that of the logic of presence and identity. Neither things nor human beings, i.e., no entities generally speaking can have a simple and undivided presence as such in this ‘econology’ designed by Derrida to interrupt and intervene into western metaphysics and particularly into the latter’s postulate of a human subject being the foundation of the world and of history, master and possessor all at once. The whole claim to a ‘self’ is called into question as soon as we accept an economy, in which we are always already engaged (there is no pre-existing ‘self’, the latter rather being produced by the economy) and in which we only *become* a ‘self’, however temporary, contingent and finite. The ‘self’ is produced, time and again, by the economy, the interplay with the other, and can no longer be thought of as primordial substance. The ‘in between’, the ‘inter-’ the economy is primordial with regard to its actors, just like we have seen when analysing the religious relationship above: the ‘relata’ come second, the relationship first.

The economy then brings presence, substance, essence, identity and the oppositional logic belonging to these determinations into play and calls them in question; it does so by letting them enter the realm of the ‘in between’, the interval of mere relationality. It is this place, this topos around which Derrida’s entire work circles. The names he gives to this place are ‘event’, ‘gift’, ‘khora’<sup>19</sup>, but the most categorical one is *différance*: difference in a verbalised, active mode, difference as relational event. I will return to that shortly.

Derrida’s econological preoccupations are *at first* quite relevant to our discussion of kenosis and its two meanings, because indeed they make it possible to add a third: Derrida does not agree with the antagonism of distance against proximity, but much prefers an ‘economical’ relationship between both extremes. Kenosis is always high *and* low: it is the depletion of the religious relationship into transcendence *and* its repletion into immanence, it is negative theology *and* positive theology, it is the withdrawal of God *and* His incarnation. Only by highlighting and studying, as well as choosing and living this double bind of kenosis, this ‘econokenosis’, can one do justice to kenosis. However, there is a *second* relevance of the econological approach to kenosis, one more important to my present argument. Taking into account the economy of the two discourses of kenosis in contemporary thought is one thing; we have to go a step further and consider the possibility whether kenosis *is* this economy: whether kenosis, in its third meaning, is not merely the intermingling of both meanings, but something radically new. Might not kenosis *be* this ‘place’, this ‘event’ of *différance* *between* God and human beings that is opened up by the economy?

In my view, Derrida gives a clear affirmative answer to this question in his small treatise *Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)*<sup>20</sup> (orig. 1993). In this remarkable book, written as a

<sup>18</sup> I use this adjective in a formal and thus uncommon meaning: ‘belonging/referring to the economy’; it has nothing to do with being frugal, economising, or being profitable etc.

<sup>19</sup> Plato develops this enigmatic concept in his *Timaeus*. It eludes all meaning, all being: a ‘place’ of emptiness and passivity that only ‘gives’ (gives language, meaning, being); Derrida studies this Platonic concept, which can hardly be considered a ‘concept’, in *Khôra* (orig. 1987/1993), in J. Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. I. McLeod, Stanford, Ca : Stanford University Press 1995, 89-127. There he states that khôra is in fact the ‘surname’ (*On the Name*, 126) of *différance* (see below).

<sup>20</sup> In *On the Name*, trans. John P. Leavey, 35-85. An earlier English version of *Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)* appeared in H. Coward, T. Foshay (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: SUNY 1992, then titled ‘Post-Scriptum: Aporia’s, Ways and Voices’, trans. John P. Leavy. Elaborate discussions of *Sauf le nom* can be found in Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University

dialogue between two voices,<sup>21</sup> the author delivers a succinct but quite powerful discussion of kenosis and its coherence with the economy, with this 'place' of différance we have dealt with so far. This 'place' is vital to Derrida's own idea of kenosis in *Sauf le nom*, and we will see that it is this place and the subtle *topological* approach to the religious relationship it involves, that leads us towards a series of double binds: place – non-place, name – namelessness, infinite gift – singular gift, all paralleled by the double bind we meanwhile have become used to, that of proximity – distance.<sup>22</sup> These double binds turn kenosis into econokenosis, into a never-ending negotiation between always two 'competing' parameters, culminating in the negotiation between humanity and God. Finally I will conclude with a brief reflection on prayer and its relationship to this topology. Here Barth's views on prayer in his *Church Dogmatics* will be discussed.

## 6. Kenosis in *Sauf le nom*

The general notion of place, of the 'topos' is quite important to Derrida in *Sauf le nom*. It is not just any place, but always the place of kenosis: Derrida uses the word only a few times, one time however at a very important moment in the dialogue, where he gives a sharp summary of his discussion of negative theology (55/56). Negative theology – probably the most unreserved discourse of distance Christianity has produced, from its medieval Neoplatonic and mystical sources onward toward the secular voices of those representing the first meaning of kenosis in our time as we just studied above – is right:

- Certainly, the 'unknowable God'<sup>23</sup>, the ignored or unrecognised God that we spoke of, says nothing: of him nothing is said that might hold...
- Save his name...
- Save the name that names nothing that might hold, not even a divinity (*Gottheit*), nothing whose withdrawal does not carry away every phrase that tries to measure itself against him. 'God' 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language...

But *is* negative theology right? Derrida immediately continues:

- ... But the trace of this negative operation is inscribed *in* and *on* and *as* the *event* (what *comes*, what there is and which is always singular, what finds in this kenosis the most decisive condition of its coming or its upsurging). (55/56)

So the second meaning is right as well! In other words, both sides of the antagonism, both

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Press 1999, esp. ch. 5, 'The Kenosis of Discourse', 305-358; and in Dutch in Rico Sneller, *Het Woord is schrift geworden. Derrida en de negatieve theologie* (The Word has Become Scripture. Derrida and Negative Theology), Kampen: Kok Agora 1998. De Vries pays attention in particular to the econological side of kenosis, although the term 'economy' is not frequently used in his book: 'The apophatic path of the *über*, of the *überunmöglichste*, the most impossible or more than impossible [these expressions are taken from the language of Angelus Silesius (see below) – LtK], is attested to as *möglich*, as possible; this movement of elevation, transcendence, hyperbole, rhetorical exaggeration, and excess paradoxically coincides with a descent and humiliation, a coming down to earth, or incarnation of the concept, of ontology, of phenomenology, as well as of their deconstruction.' (340)

<sup>21</sup> The voices might well represent the two meanings of kenosis described earlier, although Derrida does not identify them any further: they seem to oscillate continuously between the radicalism of Angelus Silesius' (1624-1677; the book is a reading of the latter's famous *Cherubic Wanderer*) negative theology, underlining the 'nothingness' between God and humanity, and the equally radical passion in Silesius for the topos where the 'Unknown God' and the 'unknowing human' may have their impossible and improbable encounter... Both voices alternately represent both positions.

<sup>22</sup> On the possible coherence of religion and topology, see also J.S. O'Leary, 'Topologie de l'être et topographie de la révélation', in R. Kearney, J.S. O'Leary (eds.), *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, Paris: Grasset 1980, 194-237.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida quotes Silesius.

kenotic operations might well be wrong. They both miss the economy of which kenosis consists: the economy between on the one hand ‘withdrawal’, the void, the ‘nothing’, the non-place, in short, the kenotic distance that rules between God and human beings, and on the other hand the place (‘in’ and ‘on’) where God and human beings have to ‘come’, only to be involved in an ‘event’ that is radically singular and unique, once-only and time and again once-only, an event that makes these two – God and human beings – into concrete, singular beings, for as long as the event lasts. Singularity defined this way has little to do with the logic of identity and presence discussed above; ‘singular’ is he or she that exposes him- or herself – or rather, suddenly finds him- or herself exposed – to the topos between the self and the other, between identities. Being an act (exposure) and not a state of being, singularity goes together with temporality and finitude.

So the topos of kenosis can only refer to the non-topos of kenosis, the concrete event of the religious relationship to the silence of the void, of the non-relationship. Analysed this way, the topos is indeed a double bind, as I suggested above: one of the double binds specified and formulated by Derrida’s remarkable topology of religion, and doubtless the most essential one: by means of the topological determination, kenosis turns into econokenosis. Topology invites economy, and vice versa.

The same dynamics can be shown in other double binds that ring through in this quotation, for example, name – namelessness. God is the unnameable, transcending human language, human naming. Still His name must be ‘saved’, excepted, barred from this namelessness and nothingness (‘Sauf le nom’), although it is a name ‘that names nothing’; for this name is also the most concrete, ‘singular’ name that ‘comes’ to the place where the ‘event’ will take place. This ‘name of a bottomless collapse’ is at the same time the name of an intimate event... between nameless transcendence and named immanence, between ‘over there’ and ‘here’ (56, see below).<sup>24</sup>

Pursuing his topological vocabulary quite rigorously, Derrida continues the quote given earlier – the same voice in the dialogue is still speaking:

... *There* is this event, which remains, even if this remnant<sup>25</sup> is not more substantial, more essential than this God, more ontologically determinable than this name of God of whom it is said that he names nothing that is, neither this nor that. (56)

A little further, the other voice reminds his conversational partner:

– *In* and *on*, you said, that implies, apparently, some *topos*...

Then the first voice describes this topos as the topos of *différance*, albeit with its ‘surname’, that of the Platonic *khôra* I mentioned earlier; and again the double bind is ‘played out’: being ‘absent’ *and* ‘unique’:

–...or some *khôra* (body without body, absent body but unique body and place of everything, in the place of everything, interval, place, spacing). Would you also say of *khôra*, as you were just doing in a murmur, ‘save its name’? Everything secret is played out here. For this location displaces and disorganises all our onto-topological prejudices, in particular the objective science of space. *Khôra* is over there but more

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<sup>24</sup> See also on 58, where Derrida defines the name econokenotically as a passage (‘goes through’, ‘traversing’): ‘As if it was necessary both to save the name and to save everything except the name, *save the name*, as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name, or toward which one goes through the name. But to lose the name is not to attack it, to destroy it or wound it. On the contrary, to lose the name is quite simply to respect it: as name. That is to say to pronounce it, which comes down to traversing it toward the other...’ On the question of name and namelessness, see also J. Rogozinski, ‘Cet innommable dans le secret des noms’, in P. Gisel, P. Evrard (eds.), *La théologie en postmodernité*, Geneva: Labor et Fides 1996, 155-170.

<sup>25</sup> In French Derrida uses the newly invented ‘restance’ parallel to ‘différance’: the *active* remaining of the remainder.

‘here’ than any ‘here’ ... (56)

So what exactly is this place, and what is the event taking place in it, as if place and event were virtually indistinguishable?

If it is the place of *khôra*, as we just heard Derrida confirm, then the event of, on and as this place is *différance*. We know that this newly invented word ‘*différance*’ is, from the very beginning of Derrida’s work, one of its prime philosophical categories. It ‘verbalises’ the French word ‘*différence*’ by inserting an *a* towards the end of the word, thus changing it into a verb, or rather, a verbal noun: an act, a movement, a happening. Following the same line of thought when analysing the particular relationality of religious religion, difference here is not a static, logical term, used to distinguish two or more entities or identities, showing simply in what respect they differ. On the contrary, it goes beyond its function of distinguishing two pre-existent identities, becoming something ‘in itself’. It is a further, more radical and literal expression of ‘*die Differenz als solche*’ which the later Heidegger tried to think about in *Identität und Differenz*.<sup>26</sup> This difference-as-act, as event, creates something new between the identities, something that cannot be reduced to the logic of identity and the realisation of the self. *Différance* is this ‘in between’, conceived as a place, for example as a desert, as *khôra*, as an interval, a spacing, as we saw in *Sauf le nom*, and at the same time as an event taking place on this place and changing this place into a mere event, a moment of incision and interruption: this ‘desert’ is ‘desertification’ (56), this space is spacing, etc.

#### 7. Kenosis and the death of Christ

Would this topos in fact be the topos of the revelation, in a Christian sense, the place where God speaks and gives Himself to human beings – a gift that can only be returned by humanity? Would it, more directly than we have supposed so far, refer to Christ’s kenosis ending in His death on the cross – an event I called pre-eminently kenotic? That would mean that the biblical figure of Christ is the ‘incarnation’ (in all its concreteness and singularity, in all the irreplaceability that is the hallmark of an *event* – the interruption, incision, intervention: the unexpected) of the *différance* between God and humanity, of this ‘in between’ or interval where the gift takes place. Closest proximity, most remote distance in one: ‘*vere deus, vere homo*’, the Christological dogma of the old church as yet another double bind in our series. Of course, this gift, taken seriously, can only be a tragic gift, the topos a tragic and violent scene. For this gift which brings along the absolutely new, singular – Derrida would make variations on the ancient dogma: the Messiah will be neither god nor human, but someone that cannot be reduced to these categories – can only forget itself, destroy itself, in order to *be* an event, to *be* *différance*, to *be* the deferral of identity and of presence that the economy of *différance* generates. This gift can only be kenosis, if this kenosis culminates in the depletion of life itself: death. Maybe that, quite simply, and well beyond the doctrines of sin and reconciliation that Christian theology has built, is the meaning of the suffering and dying of Christ. It would be the violence that is essential to kenosis, the violence that Vattimo can only eliminate from his post-modernist conception of kenosis, as I showed in the beginning. Derrida points to this violence of the kenotic gift, to this ‘death’ that is essential to its singularity, in his *The Gift of Death*, commenting on the *Essays hérétiques* (1975) of Jan Patočka. We discover the same tension here again: in order to really give oneself in a concrete event, come close to the other, who receives, one has to give oneself away, forget oneself as a gift, die as the giver, and become distant to the other. In order to become ‘finite’ and ‘someone’ in a kenotic gift, – ‘yet’ – one has to become ‘infinite’ and no

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<sup>26</sup> Pfullingen: Neske 1957.

one in the same kenotic gift. The echoes of the death of Christ can hardly be missed:

On what condition does goodness exist beyond all calculation? On the condition that goodness forget itself, that the movement be a movement of the gift that renounces itself, hence a movement of infinite love. Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to *become finite*, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other. This gift of infinite love comes from someone and is addressed to someone; responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity. Yet only death or rather the apprehension of death can give this irreplaceability...<sup>27</sup>

#### 8. Prayer as Prayer for Kenosis: Barth and Derrida

Meanwhile the relevance of the topos/event of *différance*<sup>28</sup> studied so far for a theological reflection on revelation may well be worth further investigation. It might be necessary then to compare this event of *différance* with the event of the Word of God ('Geschehen des Wortes'), which Karl Barth has declared to be the centre of Christian theology in the first half of the previous century.

Derrida also is interested in the Word. Reading Silesius in *Sauf le nom*, he posits the Word of God as the topos between God and human beings, where these identities get lost in a way in a radical kenosis. 'Der Ort ist das Wort' (The place is the Word), Derrida quotes Silesius throughout *Sauf le nom* (notably 57). It is the topos where God becomes the 'name of a bottomless collapse', as we already saw (55), and 'the trace of this negative operation is inscribed in and on and as the event' (56). Human beings are equally haunted by this topos, this Word/Place is *in us* (57), instead of us being in this place: in the same kenotic, 'bottomless' movement that applies to God, we no longer are the subject of this place, but this place is subject of us, or rather between us, and between God and us.

'Geh hin wo du nicht kannst: sieh wo du siehest nicht: Hör wo nichts schallt und klingt, so bist du wo Gott spricht.' (Go there where you cannot; see where you do not see; Hear where nothing rings or sounds, so are you where God speaks) (44; 59; 75)

And after this quotation Derrida affirms:

'This adverb of place (wo) of the word of God, of God as word [...] indeed affirms the place as word of God.' (75)

Now one of the concrete and practical acts or actions that belong to this event of the Word/Place, of this 'in between' of *différance*, is *prayer*. Prayer viewed this way is nothing more than a question, a wish: may this event take place. What event? The event of revelation, the event of God giving Himself and man giving himself to... the topos of the 'gift of loss' that is kenosis. So prayer asks, in a way, only for itself: may there be nothing more than prayer, may there be kenosis, right there at this strange place of *différance*. Right after the crucial quotation on kenosis discussed above (55/56), Derrida shifts to the topic of prayer and states: 'Prayer asks God to give himself rather than gifts.' Prayer asks for 'the divinity of God as gift or desire of giving.' Prayer interprets God and addresses itself to God as a name for this event of giving. 'And prayer is this interpretation, the very body of this interpretation (...) which 'implies, apparently, some *topos*...' (56)

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<sup>27</sup> Trans. D. Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995;50-51; orig. 1992.

<sup>28</sup> One often refers to this double structure place – event as to the 'spatio-temporality' of *différance*, following Derrida's own initial definitions of the concept in 'La *différance*' (1968), included in *Margins – of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982; orig. 1972.

It has struck me that Barth, in paragraph 49 of his *Church Dogmatics* (vol. III.3<sup>29</sup>), also analyses prayer as the central event between 'God the Father' and His 'Creature'. The Christian, who bares himself, who gives himself to the 'Universal Lordship' of this God, is characterised by faith, by obedience, but right in the 'middle' (Mitte) of these features Barth posits prayer as the key event, as a 'primitive moment' (265). From this 'middle', all aspects of religious existence can always begin again:

In all its forms prayer is this answering, this going to meet, this direct expression of the truth of the situation in which the christian finds himself as christian. When he prays, he puts himself in the position in which faith and obedience can always begin again at the beginning. As this primitive moment, prayer, which is the basis of all other activity, is included in obedience. It is itself the act of obedience *par excellence*, the act of obedience from which all other acts must spring. (265)

This 'primitive moment' of prayer lies at the heart of the relationship between Creator and creature, which occupies Barth in this volume of *Church Dogmatics* which focuses on the relation between Creator and creature. It is always more and less than the other major ways of giving expression to one's religious experience, 'praise, thanksgiving, confession and penitence' (266), because it is 'Bitten', 'petition' before anything else. It asks simply and only for the event of the Word, and, as this asking, it *is* this event, in the sense of a 'beginning again at the beginning'. From this beginning, all the other acts, resumed through faith and obedience, can take their course, become meaningful, and offer an identity, however temporary, to human beings *and* to God, until they return again towards this beginning, this topos of the Word, this 'Mitte', this middle, this 'in between', in order to empty themselves, give themselves away in kenosis. Prayer is this strange answering *as* questioning, questioning *as* answering; it asks for the event, desires it, and in this asking, this 'Bitten', it is the event itself, it is the 'Mitte'.

Although sketched out tentatively here, it seems to me that the resemblance between Barth's articulation of prayer and Derrida's kenotic approach is considerable. This resemblance, this touching in the formal and thematic dynamics of their writing becomes even more penetrating if we realise that Barth tries to formulate a certain topology of prayer. Prayer is a place or a space where the 'qualitative difference' between God and man, which plays such an important role in Barth's second Romans commentary<sup>30</sup>, becomes an event in itself (this difference, in Derrida's words, is a quality in itself, a *différance*) apart from who God is and who human beings are. Prayer is a topos of 'Bitte', exactly because it is a 'Mitte'. But what does this topological passion in Barth's text mean?

I will make one observation that seems theologically and philosophically important to me. The topos of prayer leads us back immediately to Barth's Christology, and thus to the beginning of 49 mentioned above. For what is this 'Mitte' of prayer in its purest, 'primitive' form? What is at stake in this topology of a place between God and human beings, where the event of gift and giving away (kenosis) takes place, where the event simply seems to *be* this place, where prayer seems to be at first a prayer for the event of prayer, where prayer 'happens' with a specific dynamic of its own, irreducible to any 'content'? The event of prayer as 'Mitte' refers unmistakably, as I see it, to the Christ event. Christ is proclaimed to be the 'constitutive and organising centre (Mitte) of the world process' (241), and the Christian, who is defined ultimately and decisively as 'someone who prays' in the later stages of the paragraph, is nothing more and nothing less than the one who opens himself onto this 'Mitte',

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<sup>29</sup> Eds. G.W. Bromley, T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke 1936-1977. The paragraph is entitled 'God the Father as Lord of His Creature'

<sup>30</sup> *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns, London: Oxford University Press 1933, 39; orig. 1922.

where he or she sees the invisible and encounters the impossible, as Derrida would say (see e.g. *Sauf le nom*, 75). That is to say, this invisible and impossible place/event is invisible and impossible according to the logic of the world process. The 'Mitte' haunts this process and interrupts it from within, being its 'other'. We know that this topos of the Christ event, that Barth sometimes calls 'Ort' ('point' 239), sometimes 'Stelle' ('source', 243), sometimes 'Wirklichkeit' ('actuality', 268), is everything but a foundational substance of the so-called world process; rather it splits this process in two, like an abyss or a limit or a crisis. It is the 'vacuum', 'die leere Mitte' (empty middle) in the relationship between God and human beings, it is the 'offene Stelle' (unoccupied place) in our knowledge of God and also in every dogmatics, as Barth formulates towards the end of *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I.2. Or, in the language of the second Romans commentary, this topos of the Christ event is 'the opening in the centre (Mitte) of a wheel', a metaphor he uses again in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I.2., describing Christian doctrine – and his own theology as well – as the wheel.<sup>31</sup>

It appears to me that it is Barth's challenge but also his struggle to use this radically kenotic topology of a 'Mitte' to structure his reflection on prayer and thence his entire Christology within the framework of a doctrine of providence, and more specifically, to use it as a paradoxical foundation or ground for God's 'Weltherrschaft' (world reign). For however difficult it is to define and delimit kenosis in a straightforward manner seeing that the term is an economy *between* terms, as I have shown, at least it can be defined as the opposite of providence. At least we find a sharp contrast here with Derrida's topologies, because the latter's work does not seem to be interested in providence, salvation or any other victorious logic. For Derrida, the providence of God, like any concept of a history of salvation, still falls back into the logocentric structure of identity, which manoeuvres God – and maybe even humanity after the 'death of God' – into some stable, universal, or eternal position with regard to the topos of différance. But if this topos is Barth's 'Mitte', and this 'Mitte' is Christ, and Christ, as the son of human beings ('Menschensohn') is the Son of God, then God is not an identity. God is not an identity, but a name to be 'saved': a name involved in an event that Derrida reticently calls différance and Barth, much less reticently, calls 'das geschehende Wort'.<sup>32</sup>

The place and the *Word* is one,  
and were the place not  
(of all eternal eternity!)  
the *Word* would not be.

Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, I: 205

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<sup>31</sup> *Church Dogmatics* I.2, 867.

<sup>32</sup> I would like to refer to an earlier publication on the philosophical analysis of economy: L. ten Kate, 'Economies of Excess', in D. Dolron, *Exaltation - Images of Religion and Death*, DDH Foundation, Amsterdam 2000, 14-19; and to an earlier publication on Barth and Derrida: L. ten Kate, 'Randgänge der Theologie. Prolegomena einer "Theologie der Differenz" im Ausgang von Derrida und Barth', in *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 14-1, autumn 1998, 9-31, which will be followed by a book on this subject in 2002.