

# A THEOLOGICAL TRILOGY OF RELATIONSHIP COUNSELLING

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## PART III: Dealing with Disgust

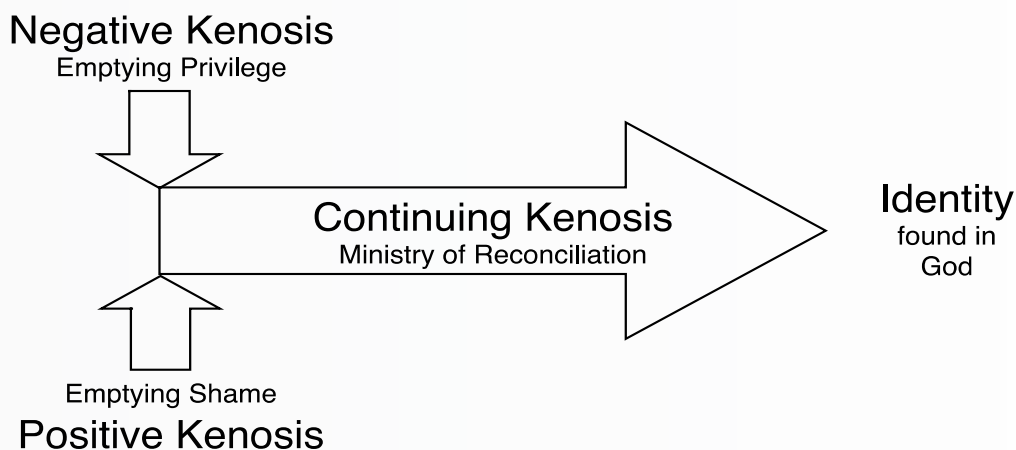
*Kenosis* is an authentic relational life that empties one of self in order to be receptive to the other<sup>1</sup>. Theologically, God revealed this in the creation, the incarnation and the cross:

*Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion<sup>2</sup>.*

In this article we reveal three different elements of *kenosis* that is a foundation of God's grace that restores human relationships:

- Negative *kenosis* in which the self is emptied to *descend*.
- Positive *kenosis* in which the self is emptied to *rise*.
- Continuing *kenosis* in which the on-going and humbling work of emptying is a precursor to our ministry of reconciliation<sup>3</sup>.

We<sup>4</sup> have represented this diagrammatically:



Each of these elements will be explained in God's grace that restores human relationships began at creation, evident in the incarnation and provides redemption and reconciliation to humanity. They provide a model for counselling that we as *imago trinitatis* can follow to the extent that our human mortality allows and leading us to find our identity in God.

### 1. Kenosis in Creation

Jurgen Moltmann<sup>5</sup> observed that *creation ex nihilo* meant that God had to go outside of Godself in the creative act. Before the world was, God was the fullness of existence – and no there was no *nihil* (emptiness). God needed to make space within and, in doing so, emptied Godself to make room for the creative act<sup>6</sup>. The *kenotic* act begins with the basic

1 Pembroke, Neil (2006). *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot:43-54.

2 Philippians 2:4-8 (Message Bible)

3 2 Corinthians 5:18.

4 Beck, Richard (2014) *Fuller Integration Lectures: Part 4, Kenosis as Pouring Out and Vomiting*. <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com.au/2014/03/the-fuller-integration-lectures-part-4.html>. Accessed 2016.

5 Moltmann, Jurgen (1981) *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*. SCM Press, London:108-114

6 This is drawn Isaac Luria's (1534-1572) kabalistic doctrine of *zimsum*.

requirement of making a space within so that there is opening to others.

This *kenotic* act is a pre-requisite in the formation of the psychotherapeutic relationship. We cannot be “full of ourselves” in the counselling room but need to consciously empty ourselves of our own concerns and issues so that we are fully present to each other<sup>7</sup>. *Kenosis* replaces the empty buzz of self-absorbed verbal communication. In western low-context communication cultures<sup>8</sup>, relationships are replaced with words and communion is replaced chatter. Personal needs, interests, plans, fears and joys blot out the other as people only half listen conversation partners – often waiting for an their turn to speak. *Kenosis* requires an emptying of chatter, definition and the provision of silence to others so that it can be filled if and when others are ready for relationships. *Kenosis* for counsellors from high context communication cultures<sup>9</sup> requires an emptying of space for outsiders to enter – something rather difficult for those whose identities are tied up in allegiance to in-groups and the exclusion of other outside. *Kenosis* means that space is provided for all people from anywhere to enter.

Mitchell<sup>10</sup> described a real life experiment in *kenotic* conversation at the Focalare community in Trent, Italy which began during the WWII under the leadership of Chiara Lubich. Inspired by Christ’s *kenosis*, the women emptied themselves before any of their neighbours and allowed for a silent space so that they could receive the needs, sorrows, joys and hopes so that a deeper, mutual “God-love” communion was formed. This experiment stands in stark contrast to the pseudo-community found in many churches where “genuine sharing of life” is the goal but fail because they merely provide opportunities for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract is weak - come if you have time, talk if you feel like it, respect everyone’s opinion, never criticize, and leave quietly if you are dissatisfied<sup>11</sup>. Counsellors need to learn the gift of silence, empty themselves and create the space for the other – to speak, to be silent, to yarn and tell the stories they believe are important. In so doing, the possibility of “God-love” is increased.

## 2. Kenosis in Incarnation

In divine love God the Father allows the Son to empty himself and take on the form of poverty and places the world’s sin on his Son<sup>12</sup>. In other words, God reaches out of the security and

splendor of Godself into a fallen world to deal with human sin and alienation. Although some theologians<sup>13</sup> are quick to remind us that Jesus did not empty himself of his divinity in this *kenotic* process, it remains that God emptied Godself of the protection from the impurity of sin to descend down to the lowest level in the human spectrum – a slave. Counselling requires us to put aside our own protections to identify with alienated clients who have lost control of their lives – slaves to corruption, circumstances and conceit.

The “psychology of disgust” means that church people seek a “purity and holiness” that end up as social exclusion and a Gnostic flight from “the world”<sup>14</sup>. The “Macbeth Effect” tempts Christians into believing that ritual acts of cleansing can replace moral and missional engagement<sup>15</sup>. The ritual cleansing regulates sub-cultural understanding of dirt, disgust, and defilement but this inevitably produces “a predictable wake of dysfunction, ruined self-images, social stigma, and communal conflict”<sup>16</sup>. Beck<sup>17</sup> proposes three elements of the psychology of disgust:

- I. **Boundary Monitoring:** Disgust occurs when a boundary is crossed. For example, I continually swallow my saliva during the day but find it disgusting to spit it into a cup and drink it. Saliva is fine until it crosses our lips. The same is true of hair – it is fine on my head but not on my food. Purity (the opposite of disgust) monitors boundaries. Once a boundary has been crossed it is contaminated so we expel it in order to purify ourselves again. In the Christian Church, there are many boundaries that are not to be crossed and have to be expelled – such as pre-marital sex, swearing, drinking, smoking, and dancing.
- II. **Contamination Appraisals:** The contamination of the “other” is basic to human psychology. For example, primary school boys say girls have “bugs” while the girls say boys have “germs”. When the “other” is contaminated, we pay attention to “proximity” - so that the boys and girls segregate themselves from each other. Proximity contaminates even if contact does not occur. For example, a cake that looked like dung would not be eaten because the similarity or proximity is enough to disgust us. In church circles, contamination appraisals of “other” people, ideas and behavior may cause “avoidance of the worldly”.

7 Pembroke, Neil (2006). *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot:43 -54.

8 Hofstede, Geert (1991) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill. N.Y.

9 R.Scollon & S.Wong-Scollon (1990) “Athabaskan-English Interethnic Communication,” *Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact* Hillsdale, New Jersey.

10 Mitchell, Donald William (2003) *Recreating the Christian Community: A Response to Rita M.Goss. Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23: 21-23.)

11 Wuthnow Robert (1994) *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community*. Free Press, New York:6.

12 Balthasar, Hans Urs von (1989) *The Glory of God, vol. 7; Theology: The New Covenant*. T&T Clark, Edinburgh:207-14.

13 E.g. Packer, J.I. (1973) *Knowing God*. Intervarsity Press. London:52.

14 Beck, Richard (2014) *Fuller Integration Lectures: Part 4, Kenosis as Pouring Out and Vomiting*. <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com.au/2014/03/the-fuller-integration-lectures-part-4.html>. Accessed 2016.)

15 Beck, Richard. *Unclean: Meditations of Purity, Hospitality and Mortality* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011)

16 Beck, Richard (2014) *Fuller Integration Lectures: Part 4, Kenosis as Pouring Out and Vomiting*. <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com.au/2014/03/the-fuller-integration-lectures-part-4.html>. Accessed 2016.)

17 Summary taken from Beck, Richard (2014) *Fuller Integration Lectures: Part 4, Kenosis as Pouring Out and Vomiting*. <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com.au/2014/03/the-fuller-integration-lectures-part-4.html>. Accessed 2016.)

**III. Negativity dominance:** Beck demonstrates this by touching an apple with what looks like dog feces even though it isn't. He then asks if anyone will eat the apple and usually finds that there are no one volunteers. The apple becomes disgusting because negativity dominance means that feces (impure) corrupts the apple (pure) and not the other way around. Negativity dominance in church circles means that contact with certain people (e.g. homosexuals), ideas (e.g. communism) and behaviours (e.g. drinking in a bar) will "pollute" the "pure" Christian.

Beck claimed that the Church has often become obsessed with purity – so much so that the boundaries of behaviour are vigilantly monitored, frequent contamination appraisals are made and any sign of impurity will be excised. This separation from "the world" leads to a common charge that church members are "holier than thou" and out of touch. Christian counsellors can also be affected by the psychology of disgust so that they feel ill at ease with contagion and encourage clients to rid themselves of corruption. *Kenosis* requires us to deal with our disgust of the impure in a very different way.

This leads us to the next question – what exactly is "disgusting"? Haidt, McAuley and Rozin<sup>18</sup> listed the seven domains of disgust elicitors as food, sex, body products, envelope violations (blood, gore and mutilation), socio-moral violations, animals, hygiene and death. Although the principles of disgust may keep our bodies safe, they can also cause problems when applied socially. The British-American anthropologist Mary Douglas<sup>19</sup> argued that "dirt" – that which pollutes - is a relative concept that depends entirely on cultural interpretation:

*Dirt is basically matter out-of-place. "Dangerous" and "polluting" are things that do not fit our usual framework of thinking or our normal classifications. A child has to learn is to classify clean things from dirty things and safe things from dangerous things.*

Children are taught that "dirty and dangerous" classifications are not limited to matter, but can also relate to *People* (e.g. prejudice, racism and discrimination), *Ideas* (e.g. 'evolution', "communism" and heresy), *Behaviour* (e.g. manner, sexual mores and modesty)<sup>20</sup>. Our disgust elicitors inform us that we can become unclean simply being in proximity with "others" and that evil will surely overcome the good and contaminate us.

In *kenosis*, Jesus descended from the advantages and privileges of equal status with God to become human, stay human and take the lowly status of a slave. Jesus also put aside the psychology of

disgust in social contexts. While boundary-monitoring religious Jews treated the Samaritans as disgusting and worthless, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus ignored the contamination appraisals made by Pharisees when he ate in the houses of sinners and tax collectors. While the religious psychology of disgust demanded avoidance because mere proximity made you unclean, Jesus touched lepers and bleeding women. His *kenotic* mission outweighed any disgust. He emptied himself of his "protective purity" and came to be among us to make a space for us.

*Kenotic* counselling requires us to be honest with ourselves and admit that mixing with the disgusting does not come easily to us. To spend quality time with the down and out, people who smell, people who are different and people who make us uncomfortable requires the *kenotic* act of emptying ourselves and making a space for them. Henri Nouwen's<sup>21</sup> unsettling questions "*Who am I when nobody pays attention, says thanks, or recognizes my work?*" leads to an obvious answer: I am a *no-body*. In our cultural system, we don't want to be a *nobody*, we want to be a *somebody* and so we resist the downward, self-emptying path of "negative *kenosis*". *Kenotic* counselling requires us to follow Christ's example and empty ourselves of the tendency to avoid the "dirty and dangerous" people whose ideas and behaviours we may find disgusting.

### 3. Kenosis in the Death on the Cross

Having lowered himself to the lowest of the low on earth, Jesus goes even further – he suffers the worst kind of death – a crucifixion. But even that was not the end – the Apostles' Creed, the Catholic Catechism<sup>22</sup> and the Athanasian Creed all describe Christ's descent even lower – into hell!<sup>23</sup> In this "negative *kenotic* process", Christ emptied himself of all protection from evil and experiences the absolute worst. This is the precursor to the "positive *kenosis*" which occurred when Christ rid himself of the power of death, the devil and became the author of life.<sup>24</sup> Christ threw off the shackles of death in the resurrection and brings life to the world again.

Positive *kenosis* requires the "vomiting up" of our sin, degradation and spiritual deadness. The downward trajectory of the traditional negative *kenotic* process made heroes of those who went to the absolute bottom but it fails to empty the person already at the bottom of their anguish, shame and guilt. Dr. Eriksson<sup>25</sup> described a client of hers who had been filled with such toxic experiences that she concluded that *kenotic* counselling required "vomiting out all the darkness within her". Positive *Kenosis* is a very

18 Haidt, Jonathon; McAuley Clark; Rozin, Paul (1993) Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Disgust: A scale sampling seven domains of disgust elicitors. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 16, 701-713.

19 Douglas, Mary. Quoted in Nagle, John (2009) The Idea of Pollution. *UC Davis Law Review*. 43; Milnes, P. & Grant, O. (1998) *Cultural Studies*, St John Ambulance Training School, Perth.

20 Hofstede, Geert (1991) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill. N.Y

21 Nouwen, Henri. (1992) *Quotes*. [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4837.Henri\\_J.\\_M.\\_Nouwen](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4837.Henri_J._M._Nouwen). Accessed 2016.

22 Catechism of the Catholic Church Article 5, Paragraph 1.

23 This is alluded to in 1 Peter 3:19-20 where Jesus preaches to the imprisoned spirits".

24 Hebrews 2:14-15

25 Erickson, Cynthia (2014) *Response to Richard Beck's Fuller Integration Lectures: Part 4, Kenosis as Pouring Out and Vomiting*. <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com.au/2014/03/the-fuller-integration-lectures-part-4.html>. Accessed 2016.



different sort of emptying to the negative *kenosis*. In negative *kenosis* the self is emptied to *descend*. In positive *kenosis* the self is emptied to *rise*. In negative *kenosis* the self is emptied to *offset the positive*, pre-existing privilege. In positive *kenosis* the self is emptied to *offset the negative* of the toxic self-images and darkness. The counselling room can provide our clients with the space and opportunity to vomit up their failure, disgust, misery and hopelessness.

## CONTINUING KENOSIS

Philippians 4:8 states that Christ “*having become human, stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process.*” This “*continuing kenosis*” describes the on-going and humbling work of reconciliation<sup>26</sup> that all of us have been called to do. Scripture teaches us that we first have to deal with the all of our disgust by a process of personal *kenosis* – *the old has gone, the new has come*<sup>27</sup>. It is only by encountering the Eternal Thou that we are able to pour out our pride and arrogance to make space for our clients (negative *kenosis*) and vomit out our shame and guilt on the other (positive *kenosis*) and take up the work of reconciliation (continuing *kenosis*). *Kenosis* empties us of the “*way the self is evaluated and the standards of significance/ insignificance, success/ failure, worthiness/ unworthiness, light/ darkness, pure / defiled, whole/ damaged.* *Kenosis* means dying to the system that places us on top, violates our standards of purity and places us in proximity of the disgusting. For some counsellors this will entail a *kenotic* “*descent*” from good reputation, and self-esteem while ministering to the impure.

An example of positive, negative and continuing *kenosis* can be found in the story of the well-known Pastor Ron Williams<sup>28</sup>. As an Aboriginal brought up in the 1950s milieu of racism and discrimination, he knew only too well the feelings of worthlessness, shame and guilt experienced on the fringes of society<sup>29</sup>. All of the internalized filth of destructive psychological and spiritual demons of darkness had to be vomited out like an exorcism<sup>30</sup>. Pastor Ron’s ministry made spaces for those who violated usual church boundaries of purity. He visited brothels to minister to prostitutes. This Christ-like *kenosis* was misunderstood and widely criticized by his fellow church-folk. Because of his past, Pastor Ron also knew of the *kenotic* “*ascent*” they needed to escape feelings of self-loathing, insignificance, damage, unworthiness, darkness and pollution of the soul. Pastor Ron’s continuing *kenotic* ministry of reconciliation required him to “*stay human*” and continue his battle with his personal human foibles of narcissism and self-

loathing. His wife Diana<sup>31</sup> has written an intimate description of the on-going battle he had with his Aboriginality, his past and his pain that oscillated between pride and shame, hurt and healing, and loving and loathing. The continuing hard work of emptying himself of shame and making a space for others became the basis of his on-going ministry of reconciliation.

*Kenosis* provides counsellors with a theological model based on the *imago trinitatis* demonstrated by God in the *kenosis* of creation, the *kenosis* of the incarnation and the *kenosis* of the cross. These *kenotic* events provide a constant challenge to us to empty ourselves so that a sufficiently wide space to provide God-love to our clients. Negative *kenosis* encourages us to become “*nobody* and sit where people sit, walk a mile in their shoes, and experience the counter-transference of their guilt and shame. In our descent into the hell of other people, we lay the foundation for positive *kenosis* to expel the filth and enter the task of continuing *kenosis* in the relational work of reconciliation.

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26 2 Corinthians 5:18.

27 2 Corinthians 5:17.

28 See Pastor Ron’s story in Milnes, Peter; Truscott, Keith; & Milnes, Genevieve (2014) Three Australian Aboriginal Pastors Interpret Forgiveness. *Counselling Connections Across Australia* Vol.5: 41–45.

29 Williams, Diana (2001) *Horizon is Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, Bantam, Sydney: 49–100.

30 Adapted from Beck, Richard (2014) *Fuller Integration Lectures: Part 4, Kenosis as Pouring Out and Vomiting*. <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com.au/2014/03/the-fuller-integration-lectures-part-4.html>. Accessed 2016.

31 Williams, Diana (2001) *Horizon is Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, Bantam, Sydney.