

The “A-theist” Christ: Kenosis as a Way of an Identification with Atheists in the Theology of Anthony Bloom

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Abstract

For Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, the kenosis of Christ climaxes with his God-forsakenness on the cross. It is this aspect of kenosis that the present article tries to explore and build upon. One key element will be the meaning of the concept of “a-theist” Christ – coined by Bloom – and how this status of the incarnated Son can function as a basis for our identification and solidarity with today’s atheists. By the way of kenosis, the incarnation brings together in one hypostasis the divine and human nature. This reality endowed both our nature and created order with significant dignity. This paper explores the possibilities from this dignity and how it can serve as a bridge for dialogue with humanists and materialists. As Bloom suggests, this can open the discussion towards the secular world and Christians could take some responsibility for the process of secularization. The objective of this article is to demonstrate that Anthony Bloom’s controversial idea of “a-theist” Christ can become a connection point with the other and a mirror in which western Christians might look at some of their anthropological shortcomings that hamper their solidarity and dialogue with those who do not share the faith in God.

Keywords: *atheism, solidarity, kenosis, God-forsakenness, secular world*

Introduction

Kenotic theology has a long and tormented history as an attempt to explain what happened to the Son of God in the incarnation. Aware of the controversies and various approaches in Western theology (Coakley 2002, 3–39),¹ we will turn in this article to the kenosis in an Orthodox perspective² of one famous Russian lay theologian, exiled (in his childhood, together with his family) by the communist regime: Anthony Bloom, Metropolitan of Sourozh.³

Vladimir Lossky (2005), the famous Orthodox Russian theologian, considers that: [t]he *κνωσις* is the mode of existence of the Divine Person who was sent into the world, the Person in whom was accomplished the common will of the Trinity whose source is the Father. Christ's saying, 'the Father is greater than I,' expresses this kenotic renunciation of his own will." When trying to define this mode of existence, he also states that "the perfection of the person consists in self-abandonment: the person expresses itself most truly in that it renounces to exist for itself. It is the self-emptying of the Person of the Son, the Divine *κνωσις*."

- 1 As reflected, for instance, by Sarah Coakley, in chapter "Kenōsis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing" (Coakley 2002, 3–39). It also could be noted here that "it is possible to categorize the theological interpretation of kenosis in terms of four broad historical phases": patristic period (especially the era of Ecumenical Councils and afterwards); the 16th century Lutheran discussions entailing some sort of divine concealment; the late 19th and early 20th century protestant (German and British) kenoticism debating the divine nature of Jesus Christ; and the second half of the 20th century, when the kenosis is applied to Godhead itself (Brierley 2009, 71). These stages generated a large corpus of writings and subsequent interpretations and debates. Two broad categories were proposed to account for the kenotic Christological approaches: ontological and functionalist – with strong ontological account at one end and weak functionalist kenoticism at the other and an entire cohort of different approaches in between (Crisp 2007, 119–120ff).
- 2 The orthodox kenotic theology has not been yet evaluated from a taxonomic perspective, although there are some systematization attempts such as Florin Tomoioagă's *Taina chenozei în teologia ortodoxă a secolului al XX-lea* [The Mystery of Kenosis in the Orthodox Theology of the XXth Century]. The book is based on a PhD dissertation defended at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. His purpose was "to analyze and compare different contemporary stances on kenosis" through the lenses of patristic hermeneutics (Tomoioagă 2015, 16). This comparison though is not resulting in a taxonomy *per se*, but rather in a descriptive image with some important hints about the Eastern Orthodox doctrine guiding marks. To be sure, after reading the book, one cannot tell which theologian – among those analyzed – is more faithful to a particular patristic tradition.
- 3 Some clarifications are necessary here. In this article, the standard name used to identify the Orthodox theologian is Anthony Bloom. However, when quoted, the name used for the specific article or sermon is required (hence, Sourozh appears sometimes). Because Anthony Bloom wrote also in Russian, in some cases, due to language barrier, the ideas or even quotations are attributed to Roman Rytsar, who translated them for his research.

It is an understanding of kenosis that Metropolitan of Sourozh – as well as many Orthodox thinkers – would embrace with some specific emphasis, since “in his kenotic theology, Anthony Bloom did not mention any changes in Christ’s Divine nature as a result of the Incarnation” (Rytsar 2012, 110).

Like most of the Orthodox theologians, Bloom sought to preserve the patristic and Chalcedonian perspective in his theology. This theological stance affirms that it is by way of kenosis that God the Son became human flesh, but his divine nature did not suffer any diminishment in the process. At the same time, Christ’s human and divine natures were in full unity but without changes. This Chalcedonian core belief is surrounded by an entire constellation of interpretations even in Eastern Orthodox theology, ranging from the more rigorous view of Justin Popovich (who reiterates ancient dogmatic affirmations) to the more provocative and daring kenoticism of Sergius Bulgakov.⁴

In the following pages, I will briefly present Bloom’s perspective on kenosis. Based on his view, I will subsequently discuss two important contact points where believers could meet atheists due to the kenosis of the Son of God in his incarnation: solidarity in the shared separation from God and human dignity that could be extended to the created order (investing humanism and materialism with new, transcendent meaning). These could prompt believers to a more genuine and profound identification with any other human being by following the example of Jesus Christ. Hence, this might result in a new approach to secularism that could be understood not only as a religion’s enemy but also as an unwanted consequence of the way Christians represented God in the world throughout history and of the diminishment of the legitimate human value.

The culminating point of Christ’s kenosis – his suffering and his crucifixion – was understood by Bloom as a separation from God and it is precisely this state that every mortal shares and thus having a common ground with the incarnated Word. The exploration of some of the consequences entailed by this reality will reveal useful insights that could challenge the way we see those who do not believe in God, the created order, and the secular society surrounding us.

1. Anthony Bloom on Kenosis

It may be argued that Bloom’s view of kenotic theology “is based on his interpretation of the God-forsakenness of Christ on the cross” (Rytsar 2012, 127), whereas this climactic experience of crucifixion is also “the key to understanding the human person” (Rytsar 2012, 20). For the Russian metropolitan, the death

4 Vladimir Lossky, for example, criticized fiercely Bulgakov’s “heretical” teachings (Gavrilyuk 2005, 265–267).

of Jesus Christ on the cross is central to his understanding of the incarnation of God, as the supreme expression of God's love, and as well to his conception of human personhood.

For Bloom, the kenosis begins with the act of creation, when the very decision of the Trinity was to take the "risk" and "responsibility" to create the world and human beings endowed with freedom and own will (Rytsar 2012, 102–103) and at this point, one could find similarities with Serge Bulgakov (Gavrilyuk 2005, 254). The kenosis is afterward displayed in the incarnation, seen by Anthony Bloom (1971, 55) as "an unreserved and unlimited solidarity with men in all their conditions" in which God revealed himself as "humiliated, vulnerable and defenseless human," but without change in his divine nature and his glory (Rytsar 2012, 111–112).

The entire life of Jesus Christ is understood in a kenotic perspective including his baptism, temptations, prayers to the Father, transfiguration, entry into Jerusalem, Gethsemane, but the culmination is in God-forsakenness and death on Golgotha. The possibility of death is in itself conceivable only as a separation from God, the source of life. Human beings turned away from God because of the original sin (Adam's decision to turn away from God), they separated themselves from God, and thus death entered their existence and became a common life experience. Human nature was affected by the fall and its consequences, including death. In the incarnation, the Son of God accepted human nature in his hypostasis and made it immortal (Bloom 1971, 55). Although he could not die, he freely accepted to experience death – the loss of God – in his human nature. He joined the cause of our death, he became one of us, he was in front of God "together with us, not only for us" (Rytsar 2012, 137–140).

2. Atheism and Solidarity

Following Maximus the Confessor for the metropolitan of Sourozh, the death and the loss of God are synonyms. Although the death of Jesus Christ remains a great mystery, his separation from God is certain, not by way of sin but by his own free choice to join our fundamentally tragic and mortal condition. He proved his full solidarity with his creatures. The perfect and sinless man accepted to share the extreme experience of death and God-forsakenness. And his experience was far more tragic because he had to lose what he loved the most, the sense and the reality of an intimate relationship with God the Father, in contrast with us who do not know or even reject God (Bloom 1971, 55). At the same time, Christ was also rejected by humans, facing a double abandonment.

If we admit the reality of Christ's experience of feeling rejected by God, then in his death the incarnated Son was literally without God, etymologically *a-theos*. He was in a paradoxical state of Godlessness but without sin (Bloom 1971, 56).

Bloom speaks of the etymological a-theism of Christ (Sourozh 1967). This language can be slippery and misleading and was indeed interpreted negatively and considered scandalous (Rytsar 2012, 222). But this did not stop the metropolitan of Sourozh to use it because he considered it meaningful.

It is precisely in this essentially human experience that any other atheist, any human being that turned away from God, can have a connection point, a common ground with Jesus Christ as a human. No atheist in this world “ever plunged into the depths of godlessness as the Son of God... has done” (Bloom 1971, 56). It must be stressed out, he did all we know in solidarity⁵ – another controversial term deliberately used by Bloom – with human beings. And that solidarity implies that “no atheist has ever gone into the loss of God, into atheism, in the way in which Christ has gone into it, has experienced it and has died of it – he, immortal in his humanity as in his divinity” (Sourozh 1967).

The measure and significance of this kind of solidarity are far-reaching and richly meaningful. We shall explore two directions here: dignity and identification. But before moving a step forward, there must be highlighted one important idea. Although our shared human nature is the common ground we have with Jesus Christ, it must be clarified that in his case that human nature was taken into the divine hypostasis of the Son (but without being absorbed by it) and consequently was free of any sin and sin’s effects. The fact that he experienced human suffering, abandonment, and death was possible only because he freely accepted all these in his immortal and sinless deified humanity (Rytsar 2012, 105). Some may argue that he did not take our full humanity (since his humanity was deified and he did not experience all our sin-generated shortcomings) but he revealed the “true humanity... the vocation and goal for humans” is available to all because of that common ground. He was the human being Adam and Eve were meant to be before the fall and nevertheless, he freely shared our limitations without sin and our suffering without guilt.

3. Dignity

Anthony Bloom speaks of the greatness of the man (Sourozh 1967 and 1983), which is derived from the high price God is willing to pay for restoring the man

5 He chooses this “political word” (Rytsar 2012, 180) on purpose. And, in fact, he had in mind an ontological “two-fold solidarity,” with God and with humans: “I have used the word solidarity advisedly: it is a word of current usage, it denotes a relation with which we are quite familiar: the idea of solidarity with each other is easy for us to grasp clearly. Christ chose that two-fold solidarity which leads him to the Cross. He chose to be man in the truest and fullest sense of the word, to be a stranger to our humanity in nothing except his freedom from sin, but to belong to it utterly, because he takes upon himself the sins of the world” (Sourozh 1980).

to his original destiny. This included the incarnation, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So great and so deep was God's love for his creature that he has done everything to bring the human being back in his communion. He humbled himself and readily accepted the humiliation of being rejected and killed by those created in his image and likeness.

With its hypostatic union of the two natures, human and divine, the incarnation and the high price of salvation also proved the great value of man. A value that is to be understood only in this equation includes both God and the human person. Without God and without the eternal dimension that is a godly dimension, the greatness of a man is pure idolatry because it lacks depth; its very content is "two-dimensional" (Sourozh 1967).

Bloom makes one step further and talks about God's faith in the human person (Rytsar 2012, 185–188).⁶ This is a debatable point and one may depart here from Bloom but the sense of dignity that God's love and actions assigned to a human being could still be retained from his idea. A dignity that at very least means an equal right to sonship for everyone no matter what her or his present status is. We can be disobedient, departed, and unworthy but we remain children of God. He will not disinherit anyone and every person that will turn back to him will have the same status: child of God – not a servant or anything less the sonship. The consequence is that each rebel of this world is a dignified son of God and potentially repentant child, as we can see in the parable of the prodigal son (Sourozh 1967). If this is true, then we must have this in mind when we look at the prodigals of this world, be they rebellious by choice or just people who never heard of God. It seems safe to state that this could be designated as true and legitimate humanism – a "theocentric humanism" as it was called by another orthodox thinker (Nellas 1987, 145–152).

On the other hand, this dignity can be extended to the created order. Since the Son of God dwelt in a human body, the material world became "pervaded with divinity" in him (Bloom 1971, 66) and thus it was restored to its original purpose. In this light, the natural order has a new status, and our bodies are not just a burden, which must be mortified, but temples of the Holy Spirit in which God could live as the incarnation proved this as possible. The goodness of creation could then be understood from a fresh perspective. And materialism is not only a doctrine to be refuted, but also a possible common ground with those who advocate it, considering that Christianity could value the matter in a way that no other materialist could, not because of the matter as such but because of its ability to be transparent to the divine (Rytsar 2012, 143). An adequate perspective on the material world could give scope and an ultimate purpose that lacks in every ma-

6 This "faith" means that he knows we were not created in vain and that he believes we will fulfill our creational purpose.

terialistic view. The matter is not the product of a cosmic accident but the result of intentional action and it encapsulates a transcendent significance.

4. Identification

What Christians have in common with Jesus and any non-believer is human nature and the experience of being separated from God. For obviously different reasons already discussed, this separation from God is a central experience that Jesus Christ accepted in solidarity with us.

Even if for believers this can be only a distant memory, from a time they conflicted with God, still there is a way of experiencing something similar in God's silence. Whether this silence is caused by sin, a false vision of oneself, or is just an opportunity for spiritual growth (Rytsar 2012, 333–343),⁷ this experience could connect Christians with everyone else that is alienated from God.

The challenge that the metropolitan of Surozh is making goes even farther: if Jesus was willing to accept the loss of God for us, how far would we go? If we say that we are in Christ, would we share "the full measure of life and death" in the way he did? Would we risk everything to the point of "either salvation together or lose all things together"? (Sourozh 1967). Although this could suggest some problematic views – a purported universalism or a kind of salvation we can offer – the idea that Bloom is trying to underline goes in another direction:

Our solidarity must be with Christ first, and in him with all men to the last point, to the full measure of life and death. Only then, if we accept this, can we, each of us, and can the congregation of all faithful people, the people of God, grow into what it was in Christ and into what it was in the Apostles, into a group of people whose vision was greater than the vision of the world, whose scope was greater than the scope of the world so that the Church in the beginning could contain all these, could be partakers of all those things which were the condition of man, and therefore could lead mankind into salvation. And this is not the state in which we are (Sourozh 1967).

One should not fully agree with Bloom, but his provocative questions and insights do reveal the extent and the completeness of Christ's identification with us in our tragic human condition. His boldness could be eye-opening to the vast and bewildering actions of God. We truly are agents of God's love and we need to feel and practice genuine solidarity with those who do not share the same faith

7 Rytsar discusses the reasons why, according to Bloom, we encounter God's absence in prayer, but this is not identical with to the absence experienced by those who do not know God, although could be experienced in a similar manner and could give us a hint about and atheist experience.

in God. Salvation is in no way in our power, but we can open the way for others towards it instead of blocking it because of our lack of empathy.

If the cross witnessed the God-forsakenness of Jesus Christ, the “a-theist” moment of his death, then the atheism of human beings could be seen in itself as a cross since it is a way of life without God (Bloom 1996). Nevertheless, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the most desired goal of one’s life is the God-Man, our eschatological *telos*, which is our perfect model of humanity revealed by God. This can be seen in believers by anyone (Rytsar 2012, 230). Since this point remains unexplained, one could only speculate – but Bloom’s offers some hints in different parts of his work⁸ – what features of God’s image, the redeemed human being, could be seen in a believer’s eyes. Maybe a warmth and a gentleness that welcomes the others without judging them and an understanding of the common shortcomings and caprices of our fallen humanity. And also the joy, love, and kindness we share that is not from us but only through us. In any case, it seems that there is a great responsibility that Christians have but also a great opportunity to live out as God-bearers. And they can display that new humanity that any human being desires.

5. Secularism

Anthony Bloom considered that secularism has “two general strands” in the world: “the loss of sense of God” and “excessive attentiveness to the world’s desires, pressures, and demands” (Rytsar 2012, 230). Both these strands could be roughly assimilated to what Charles Taylor sets out as the second meaning of secular as “the falling religious belief and practice” (Taylor 2007, 2) but they could also be partially related especially to Taylor’s third sense, in which “faith... is one human possibility among others” (Taylor 2007, 3).

Bloom’s goal was not so much to have a polished definition for what it means secular as to point out a possible explanation for the situation itself. And he identified a two-folded cause for which Christians are responsible. On one hand, they represented God poorly throughout history and they diminished the human being to the point of granting it no value whatsoever (Rytsar 2012, 230–231). So neither God nor man is rightfully presented to the world and to those who are atheists. Given these circumstances, it is no wonder that people react to this falling short. A God who is misrepresented can justly stir refusal and contempt. A human being is too insignificant and risible fuels rejection and compensatory

8 Rytsar surveyed some aspects in a section called “Vocation of Christians to the Kenotic Way of Life”, where he emphasizes “renouncing oneself”, “sacrificial generous life-giving”, “risk of being abandoned”, “being sensitive to the needs of others”, all because of love and because of our identification with Christ for the sake of our neighbours (Rytsar 2016, 374–378).

attempts of restoring his or her value on the cost of God and thus protracting the opposition and the conflict Jesus came to resolve in himself (Sourozh 1983).

However, Bloom's explanation for secularism is debatable but it offers a perspective that is often stated (in different forms which underline our inadequacy as God's witnesses), though rarely explored in depth. And whereas we represent God poorly, there can be something challenging and fruitful in pondering whether our anthropology is taking into account the incredible high-status a human person achieves in the Son of Man and of God. The Orthodox metropolitan is careful to relate this value of man to God who supplies its content. In his anthropological view, a human being cannot achieve greatness without God as the alternative is idolatry.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored the potential of the kenotic theology of Anthony Bloom for identifying with atheists. In the mystery of the cross, we could see Christ experiencing our death, freely chosen, and in that experience, the loss of God as an etymological "a-theism." But human beings live a life of separation from God because of sin. We all start as atheists, in this etymological sense, as we are without God. Christ decided to identify with us in our tragic condition. Therefore, there is this common ground where all can see how he could understand our state by partaking in it. This image could help us to look differently at those who do not believe in God or any god.

At the same time, the incarnation was a demonstration that God values his creatures enough to give his only Son to die for them to get them back in a proper relationship with him. This invests human nature with great dignity and also brings matter itself to new worthiness. Moreover, the respect for human beings and the material order is a point that Christians and atheists could easily share, although they undoubtedly start with different assumptions, this could nevertheless be a bridge for dialogue. And it is in this dialogue that Christians could show the Christlike persons they could become, offering a glimpse of the ideal man all humans beings crave.

In the end, we could ponder on some possible responsibilities of Christians for the present process of secularization. In Bloom's view, Christians must restore the image of God and the image of a man they are projecting because these are both distorted. If that is the case, then we are prompted to ponder some changes.

All these have some possible consequences for every missionary project as we are all missionaries or witnesses in a legitimate sense. In the first place, we can take upon ourselves some responsibilities for the bad things we rightly rebuke in the world. In other words, a critical attitude would be two-ways, and this fa-

cilitates a humbler starting point for the Christian's part. Secondly, the atheists could be looked at through Christ's own experience of God-forsakenness. The perspective is truly bewildering and could generate new insights worth exploring. Thirdly, Bloom can help us to reconsider the image we have of God, of man, and the material world. It is not necessary to embrace metropolitan's view entirely but it remains useful to stir an awareness about our underlying convictions and beliefs in our interpersonal relationships and attitudes.

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Teofil Stanciu

A-teistički Krist: kenoza kao način identifikacije s ateistima u teologiji Anthonyja Blooma

Sažetak

Za metropolita Anthonyja Blooma, kenoza Isusa Krista doživljava svoj vrhunac njegovim napuštanjem od strane Boga na križu. Upravo taj aspekt kenoze nastoji se u ovom članku obraditi i dodatno produbiti. Ključni element bit će značenje pojma „a-teistički“ Krist – izraza kojeg je skovao Bloom – te kako njegov status kao utjelovljenog Sina može biti temelj naše identifikacije i solidarnosti s današnjim ateistima. Budući da inkarnacija, na osnovi kenoze, spaja u jednu hipostazu božansku i ljudsku narav, ta stvarnost daruje našoj naravi i stvorenom poretku važnost. Ovaj članak istražuje mogućnosti koje proizlaze iz te važnosti i kako to može poslužiti kao sredstvo dijaloga s humanistima i materijalistima. To može otvoriti dijalog sa sekularnim svijetom i, kao što Bloom predlaže, kršćani mogu preuzeti određenu odgovornost za proces sekularizacije. Svrha je ovog članka pokazati da Bloomova kontroverzna ideja a-teističkog Krista može postati točka poveznica s „drugom stranom“ i ogledalo u kojem zapadni kršćani mogu promotriti neke od svojih antropoloških nedostataka koji sprječavaju njihovu solidarnost i dijalog s onima koji ne dijele njihovu vjeru u Boga.