

# Performing Christianities, Christofascism and Becoming-Palestinian: Gianni Vattimo's concept of Kenosis

*Joost van Loon*

## *Abstract*

Christianity ought to be pluralized, at least whenever we leave narrow theological debates about the essence of what it means to follow Christ as a praxis. This contribution is an attempt to provide a sociological analysis of an internal opposition within currently existing Christianities that cuts across all known denominations. In the words of Tim Noble (in this edited book), this opposition could be referred to as between the “gospel of entitlement” and “the gospel of liberation”. This internal opposition between Christianities has immense consequences for the way the planet might be able to deal with the immanent challenges it currently faces. The challenge this contribution focuses on, is probably the most acute one: the resurgence of fascism and its love affair with Christian Nationalism. This sociological analysis will particularly focus on how the gospel of entitlement has contributed to the cultivation of narcissistic impotence as a cultural epidemic and seeks to justify itself through practicing denegation. In the face of this, the undoing of Christofascism has to be the top priority not just for the whole of humanity, but for the sake of the entire planet. The concept of kenosis as a very particular performativity of the gospel of liberation may provide a radically subversive alternative to the (meta-)physical violence one might normally assume with opposing fascism. As derived from Gianni Vattimo's critique of the violence of metaphysics, kenosis is a prime modality of weak thought and by the performative opposition to all forms of identity politics. Through kenosis, we may be able to embrace the notion of “becoming-Palestinian” as that which opposes the colonial mind-set, which dominates the current geopolitical order and justifies genocide and planetary destruction.

## *Key-Words*

Kenosis, Impotence, Violence of Metaphysics, Denegation, Weak Thought, Christian Nationalism, Zionism

## 1. Christian Nationalism, Zionism and emergent Fascism

There are now abundant conceptions of the end of society within and beyond the discipline of Sociology such the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene (Brand/Wissen 2017), the Occidentalocene (Moreau 2023) or the Chtulucene (Haraway 2016) that can be successfully applied (but never without invoking criticisms) to characterize the global (dis)order, whose unfolding have been able to witness over the past few decades. My particular concern in this contribution is the re-emergence of fascism within the political mainstream in most, if not all, nations associated with “Western Civilization”.<sup>1</sup> The reason behind this concern is fascism accelerates almost everything that is geared towards planetary destruction and hence its undoing has to be given the highest priority.

One of the more obvious initial observations is the ambivalent roles played by specific forms of Christianity<sup>2</sup> in relation to the re-emergence of fascism. Although it is clear that the major representatives of Christian denominations have been outspoken in their condemnation of political, judicial and extrajudicial attacks on human dignity and universal human rights, there are also noticeable alliances between advocates and representatives of Christianity and the resurgence of right wing political extremism (e. g. especially in the context of the USA, this is called “Christian Nationalism”), which should not be underestimated. Christian Nationalism here refers to any movement that instrumentalizes self-proclaimed allegiances to Christianity for the sake of justifying politics that prioritize ethno-national privileges over concepts of universal justice and human rights. Realizing that this is a very broad definition - as it also includes mainstream political parties that actively oppose applications of, for example the international Refugee Convention or the Genocide Convention in the name of protecting Western, Judeo-Christian values<sup>3</sup> - I therefore also imply that the re-emergence of fascism is far more normalized than official rhetoric seems willing

---

1 I speak of re-emergence rather than return or rebirth because even in its oldest form, fascism has never really completely disappeared as a political ideology, it has merely remained mostly hidden, until more recently.

2 This is why we should always refer to Christianities in the plural because practically speaking, those claiming to follow Christ do not have enough in common in terms of practicing this, to justify grouping them together under a single denomination.

3 This contradiction is better understood as a denegation. The actual destruction of western values is the repressed desire of those claiming to act in its defence. Western values are thus, practically speaking, barbaric.

to acknowledge. Christian Nationalism is a significant conduit for the normalization of fascism.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2023, the evangelical pastor John Hagee (founder of Christians United for Israel) spoke at a rally "March for Israel" in Washington. Hagee is well known for claiming that "Adolf Hitler had been born from a lineage of 'accursed, genocidally murderous half-breed Jews' and sent by God to help the Jews reach the promised land" in 2006 (Wolfson 2023). Although he offered a partial apology for this in 2008, he has since then continued to preach that the Holocaust was a necessary step in the fulfilment of the Zionist project of creating the state of Israel and condemning diasporic Jews who reject Zionism.

The relevance of this event cannot be overstated. Christian Nationalism is well known for its strong anti-Semitic roots as it takes on exactly the same position as, for example, the one deployed in medieval discourses around blood libel, in which Jews are defined as the murderers of Jesus Christ *because* they are inherently opposed to God's work of salvation.<sup>4</sup> The anti-Semitism that oozes from Hagee's original statement is completely in line with what Christian nationalists have been propagating ever since the birth of nation states in early modernity. From the outset, European nationalisms defined Jews as "the enemy within". It also makes it clear that there is a direct, historical and strategic affinity between Christian nationalism and Zionism that feeds off this cultivation of anti-Semitism. The latter being able to use it as the *raison d'être* for the inauguration of a Jewish, ethno-nationalist state.

In its unwavering support for the "Making America Great Again" (MAGA) movement, Christian Zionists such as Hagee have become a pivotal part of right wing extremism in USA politics; thereby fostering an instrumentalization of anti-Semitism to further both a racist, Christian Nationalism within the USA and aggressive pro-Israel geo political destabilization as a central part of the foreign politics not only of the Trump Administration, but also that of Biden's which seems to have become even more pro-Zionist.<sup>5</sup> Both forms of politics are geared towards fascism in that they combine hatred of all that may stand in their way (whom they cannot

---

4 It is important to note here that the old Hebrew word for "obstacle" is Satan (שָׂטָן), also see Pagels (1995). This enabled the spread of allegations of natural affinities between alleged Jewish conspiracies and Satanism.

5 The "recognition" of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, substantiated by moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, was a clear signal that the Trump regime is fully supportive of accelerating this destructive agenda.

recognize as equal human beings let alone grant them human rights) with an indiscriminate yet systemic deployment of (threats of) violence as the means to achieve their political ends.

Under the umbrella of Christian Nationalism, MAGA activists are focusing on a range of “domestic” issues that have been deployed to suspend constitutionally anchored democratic processes and replace them with modalities of authoritarian rule akin to those of fascism. For example, the trials against Trump and his co-conspirators have revealed explicit strategies and tactics of seizing governmental control through extra-judicial means, for which one requires *squadrissimo* such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, as the function as the storm troopers of the destruction of the legal order. This culminated in the attack on the Capitol in Washington on January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021. These tactics come straight out of the playbooks of both the Italian Fascist Party and the German NSDAP during the 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

For Christian Nationalism, fascist politics are perfectly acceptable as a means to an end: to restore an (imaginary) national-moral order that reflects its vision of what life on earth should look like. Hence, the term “Christofascism” seems an apt description of this movement. Whereas some may embrace this “ideology” opportunistically, for example as a means to become elected to public office or to stay out of jail, it would be sociologically unwise to *a priori* deny that the majority of those calling themselves “Christian Nationalists” do so completely cynically. When considering issues that reveal a close ideological kinship between Christian Nationalism and fascism (in the USA), the list is quite substantial: eliminating gun control, eliminating women’s rights to determine their own reproductive health, a centralization of power in the executive branch when in power (Project 2025) and in the hands of paramilitary militia when not in power, the manipulation of electoral procedures (including gerrymandering, voter suppression, as well as determining whether state legislatures can overrule election results in their states), the criminalization of immigrants and refugees and the suspension of asylum laws, the sustained attacks on LGBTQ+ communities and of course the banning of books in schools and restrictions on education, libraries and research institutes.

---

6 Project 2025 describes in detail how after its re-election, the Trump regime is planning to radically transform the government of the USA. This programme, inspired by Steve Bannon’s accelerationism, is undeniably fascist. See [<https://www.project2025.org/>]. For a wider analysis of the embedding of Trumpism in Christian Nationalism, see Sharlett (2023).

From this list of priorities of Christian Nationalism, one can easily deduce that it is cultivated not only by hatred but also by fear. This fear is of losing entitlements to privileges that have been bestowed upon the followers of Christian Nationalism ("white folks") for generations. Hence, it is perfectly logical to refer to Christian Nationalism as a prime example of what Tim Noble (in this volume) refers to as "the gospel of entitlement". It understands grace as earned by the mere virtue of having been chosen by God as "His" people. This is exactly the same language deployed by Zionists in defence of their settler colonial project called "Israel". It has enabled them to justify the dehumanization of Palestinians and deny them the right to life, resulting in what the International Court of Justice has referred to as "a probable genocide in Gaza" on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2024.

As a twin of Christian Nationalism, Christian Zionism extends the cultivation of fascism within and beyond the borders of the USA. One of its main targets are anti-Zionist diasporic Jews, who they refer to as "false Jews" or "self-hating Jews" (which is a typical example of *denegation*<sup>7</sup>). It should thus not come as a surprise that after the attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup>, the growing anti-Semitism in for example in the USA and Germany disproportionately affects non-Zionist Jews, and is in fact actively supported by the American and German state apparatuses themselves (by prohibiting demonstrations, police violence against and arrests of protestors, cancelling cultural events, blocking bank accounts, etc). That is, the accusation of anti-Semitism is only applicable when it concerns criticisms of Zionism, even if this is done by Jewish people in the name of Judaism.

Anti-Semitism and Zionism have been close collaborators from the latter's inception in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Rabbi Yaakov Shapiro (2018) explains in great historical detail, how antisemitism was deployed by the Zionist movement to accelerate its objectives. Whereas Zionism is usually understood as a response to anti-Semitism, leading to justification of the State of Israel as the only viable protection against anti-Semitic violence, Shapiro points out that the early representatives of Zionism were quite happy to affirm anti-Semitic sentiments to explain why many Europeans disliked Jewish people. It is on this basis that a denegation could be cultivated. By identifying themselves with the anti-Semitic trope of the "unlike-

---

7 Denegation is a psychoanalytic principle that insists that whatever a subject rejects most forcefully is in fact that which the subject most innately desires to affirm. In the practice of denouncing the "self-hating Jew", this denegation is thus the affirmation of the inherent anti-Semitism within Zionism.

able Jew”, Zionists were much better able to gain political credit amongst leading political parties in European nation states, while establishing themselves as a new Jewish political class by replacing the religious focus on Judaism with a nationalist focus on Jewishness as an ethnic identity.

Shapiro also points out that Zionism and Judaism are by their very nature mutually exclusive, because the first instrumentalizes God for the pursuit of secular interests, which is what Judaism condemns as idolatry (and which Shapiro refers to as “identity theft”). Hence, for many orthodox Jews, “religious Zionism” is an oxymoron. In a similar vein, many established Churches in the USA have also condemned Christian Nationalism as an oxymoron. However, this has stopped neither Zionists nor Christian nationalists from deploying their religiously motivated hatred to justify their allegiance to fascism.

Instead of Zionism, Shapiro stresses the actual universality of Judaism, which addresses everyone; its appeal to peace and justice does not apply to merely “God’s chosen people” or a reward for following the 613 commandments set out by the Thora (that they may live in peace and justice), but is relational: Peace cannot be forged by acts of war and justice cannot be forged by acts of injustice as the goal does not justify the means. Whereas this resonates extremely well with Christian movements that understand the calling of following Christ to be a universal, performative one, namely as one of practicing – for example – the promotion of justice and peace, it goes against the grain of that which is at the core of the global geopolitical order. Performing Judeo-Christianity in this “universalist” sense is inherently subversive (See for example Kirschner 2020).

## *2. Impotence and the thirst for revenge*

The litany of hate of these (nationalist and Zionist) forms of Christofascism attacks human dignity and universal rights and is embedded in a more general erosion of social (as well as environmental) justice that can be witnessed in almost all parts of the globe. It has sparked many commentators to refer to the “end of society”, no longer as a possible threat, but as a matter of fact. Criticizing the historian Timothy Schnyder - for arguing that this end of society is primarily the consequence of a sustained spreading misinformation through mainstream media, which has lured people into believing lies and suspending their own experiences and beliefs (also

referred to as *gaslighting*) - Franco Berardi (2017) poses that actual experiences of humiliation of many “ordinary people” by mainstream political parties and the disappointments and frustrations these have generated, play a much more pivotal role. Saving democracy is not a mere matter of strengthening and enforcing political or journalistic ethics, instead, it is the very digital-technological setting of disenfranchisement that amplifies this process of systemic humiliation.<sup>8</sup>

I want to take up Berardi's materialist conception of the end of society, because it highlights an important element that can also be found in some religious practices, including certain forms<sup>9</sup> of Christianity: the thirst for revenge. As a type of “performing Christianity”, revenge might sound in complete contradiction to Christ's teaching to “turn the other cheek”, but this does not seem to bother those whose fear of the loss of privileges turns to a gospel of entitlement to justify acts of violence. According to its Zionist protagonists, Judaism accepts justifications of acts of revenge<sup>10</sup>; however, this is also strongly disputed, again with reference to whom the *Thora* allocates its mode of reference.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately both Christofascism and Zionism stem from identity politics: they assume that their gospels of entitlement exclusively apply to their own protagonists, and these are racially (and tribally) categorized.

The corporeal element of revenge is an embodied experience that manifests itself in a combination of anger and humiliation. Instead of focusing on ideology and legitimation, Berardi's analysis links the unfolding of humiliation with the techno-political economy of neoliberalism and in particular, its articulation to the expansion of digitalized mediations of the culture industries. Rather than limiting this analysis to the formation of opinion bubbles and echo chambers, Berardi (similar to Žižek) highlights the libidinal economy of the systemic co-reproduction and subsequent

---

8 Bernard Stiegler (2011) refers to this process as proletarianization, which has the advantage of removing the highly personalized, mental connotations from the term humiliation. However, in this contribution, it is exactly this aspect that is being highlighted because of its significance for understanding kenosis.

9 There is a close affinity between the concepts of “form”, “in-formation” and “performativity” which can be derived from the work of Gilbert Simondon, but which unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this contribution.

10 A current example of this Benjamin Netanyahu's reference to Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16) as an analogy to the ongoing slaughter of Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

11 [<https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/revenge-violation-torah>] (last accessed: 8 August 2024).

amplification of desire and impotence. Impotence is a corporeal-material condition that is the very opposite of what is believed to be emancipation or empowerment.<sup>12</sup> Whereas in most political analyses, this manufactured impotence tends to result in apathy and acquiescence, Berardi argues that in the case of the MAGA movement (as the flagship of Christian Nationalism), it is linked to experiences of humiliation, resulting in a (sadistic) desire for revenge. This thirst for revenge has been re-articulated in a particular understanding of messianic redemption: Christ will return with an army of AR-15 bearing angels of the apocalypse, to cleanse this earth of all evil (as that which threatens to take away their privileges).<sup>13</sup>

The concept of Christ-as-avenger resonates with particular interpretations of eschatological passages in the bible, but of course completely contradicts Christ's own teachings on redemption. Realizing full well that engaging in a theological debate will not be accepted as the basis of a sociological analysis, I decided to turn to the work of the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, who in criticizing the violence of metaphysics, developed a very persuasive hermeneutic analysis of the end of modernity, which can be sociologized as the end of society-as-we-know-it. Given his unapologetic embrace of the postmodern condition (as a matter of concern), Vattimo may thereby appear as an unlikely advocate for a very different conception of the gospel of liberation.

### 3. *The Violence of Metaphysics*

Like many of his contemporaries, most of whom were associated with "postmodern theory", Vattimo (1988) recognized that the anchoring of

---

12 Again, this underscores the usefulness of Noble's contrast. The condition of impotence is the opposite of that which the gospel of liberation seeks to cultivate. It is thus logically associated with the gospel of entitlement.

13 The thirst for revenge is also evident in those who assert that October 7th 2023 justifies the genocide in Gaza, even if they object to the word itself because of its horrific implications. Let there be no doubt that the claim of the State of Israel that it has an innate and inalienable right to defend itself is used to justify every war crime perpetrated in its name. Since Zionism has been cultivated upon a dual notion of Jewish victimhood and Jewish superiority, the genocide in Gaza is its logical fulfilment. It had been prepared a long time ago, with the inception of a sovereign Jewish State. Revenge is merely the emotional energy that has accelerated it. The hatred was already there and there are amply examples of it having manifested itself on many occasions during the 75 years since its inception. There is thus a very close affinity between the resentments of Christian Nationalism and Zionism.

“enlightenment ideals” and “proclamations of emancipation” in a capitalist mode of production whose sustainability hinged on ideological and repressive state apparatuses, had run its course and could only be pursued under conditions of increasing incredulity. We are faced not with an overarching totalitarian ideological narrative but with a seemingly contradictory condition: On the one hand, there is a radical pluralization and diffusion of beliefs, identifications, ideological assertions and matters of fact; whereas, on the other hand, there is an inherent violence not only in terms of a growing arbitrariness of relationships between legislative, executive and judicial powers but also in the way in which it imposes itself as a narrative of authoritarian populism (Hall 1985). It is that latter aspect that can be best understood as a consequence of “the violence of metaphysics”.

The violence of metaphysics has been exposed by the arbitrariness of the chosen “objects of belief”. Therefore, it is merely logical that under the postmodern condition, Habermas’ (Theory of Communicative Action) ideal speech community has descended into the so-called culture wars (see Hunter 1991). Reasoned deliberation, acting in good faith, following due process and so on, have become increasingly isolated at one side of the culture wars and are now open considered as acts of hostility in themselves by the other side.

In a desperate search for a Third Way, social theorists of the big ideas of the late 1990s have subsequently tried to salvage a concept of modernity by pointing towards the emergence of new forms of society: Global Society, Information Society, Network Society, Risk Society, Post-Traditional Society, Individualized Society, Cosmopolitan Society and so on. Even Vattimo himself offered his own version: the *Transparent Society* (1992), in which he focused on the operationalization of the violence of metaphysics in practices of (mass) mediation and art. However, unlike the previously cited sociological texts, Vattimo (1997) links this to his notion of the End of History as a narrative of ordering. For him it is instead, the realization of an accomplished nihilism, a working through, or *anamnesis*, of multiple trajectories that do not add up.

This thesis, which is quite similar to Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* (1979), however, is in need of some adjustments. The violence of metaphysics has not been completely usurped by cynical neoliberalism, datafication and governmental overreach, it has also engendered a second strand in the cultivation of actual violence as an acceptable form of political discourse (usually in the name of having the right to defend oneself, as victimhood

absolves the need for critical reflection).<sup>14</sup> The idea of being forced to resort to violence as the last line of defence is of course easier to propagate, if there is no longer a distinction between assertion and evidence. This is what performativity also implies: the assertion simply becomes evidence. This combination of metaphysical violence and actual violence is what has enabled the normalization of fascism.

Hence, whereas the violence of metaphysics uses to be the work of Western Philosophy, it has now “descended” into practices of misinformation, gaslighting and trolling. The second strand of metaphysical violence comes in the form of justifying criminal acts by means of deflection, projection, denial and false testimonies as well as intimidation, extortion, blackmail and bribery. This is the armoury of modern politics. It enables us to turn a blind eye to crimes against humanity such as the genocides of indigenous peoples in Gaza and Amazonia as well as the deliberate planetary destruction in search of more energy resources, water and minerals. As the forgetting of the historical-material contingency of thinking as praxis, the violence of metaphysics easily morphs into the performativity of narcissistic self-valorization.

The violence of metaphysics is thus a precursor to the cultivation of impotence and the spreading of the gospel of entitlement. Its consequences are not merely devastating for humanity and the planet as a whole, but can also be experienced in the minutia of everyday life. A particular example of this is the spreading of narcissism, not as an individual psychopathology, but as an epidemic. It is literally transmitted from one person to the next, as people who are victims of narcissistic abuse are more likely to develop similar abusive behavioural traits, simply because the available alternatives become severely limited.

A key aspect of narcissism is that its protagonist is always the victim.<sup>15</sup> That is, the experience of impotence easily translates into adopting the position of victim, namely the victim of losing entitlements. Whereas Berardi is absolutely correct in pointing out that many supporters of the MAGA movement are indeed facing huge challenges that are related to growing

---

14 This second strand is not to be understood as the antithesis to neoliberalism. Fascism and Neoliberalism have always been two sides of the same coin as both are manifestations of same process of real abstraction that enables the violence of metaphysics.

15 The Egyptian comedian Bassem Youssef equates Israel to a “narcissistic psychopath”, because despite having completely surrounded Gaza and incarcerating its inhabitants, it still proclaims to be the victim, see [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nx\\_L9To\\_LZA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nx_L9To_LZA)] (last accessed: 8 August 2024).

lack of socio-economic security as well as, for example, of medical support, those that appeal to and cultivate these fears and insecurities do so by deflecting this onto those who are isolated and apparently defenceless, such as Palestinian refugees, Jewish Voices in Germany or student protesters on university campuses across the USA. The ultimate hallmark of Christofascism is the transformation of the Passion of Christ into both the passion as well as the cynical deployment of hatred.

The epidemic of narcissism that is currently raging across (mostly but not exclusively) “western” nations is not merely destroying humanity, it is also destroying the planet itself. The question becomes what may stop the spreading of a narcissistic *Communitas*. Where might we find its opposite, i. e. the *Immunitas*?<sup>16</sup> Whereas *Immunitas* is often associated with preemptive rejection through a strict separation between “us and them”, immunity also comes through healing and in a more sustainable way than that of prevention.

#### 4. *The Kenosis of Becoming-Palestinian*

The late Gianni Vattimo (1988, 1992, 1997) has provided a sustained analysis that highlights the fragmentation of perspectives, experiences, identifications, sympathies and antipathies as a hallmark of the unravelling of modernity. The conception of Christianity as a performative multiplicity, however, is not a sign of its obsolescence. It is within this multiplicity that new forms may emerge. In this multitude of trajectories, impotence is then merely the realization that there is no obvious pathway to take. Indeed, it might be that Hölderlin was right when he wrote in *Patmos* “wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch”.<sup>17</sup> That is, in that which generates the association between impotence and narcissism – i. e. the ethos of Christofascism – may also generate the conditions of its undoing. In this final section, I suggest that this may lie with the very notion of *kenosis* as passion.

Berardi's insistence on impotence being a logical consequence of alienation under neoliberal capitalism highlights that there is a confrontation

---

16 The terms *communitas* and *immunitas* are derived from the work of Roberto Esposito (cf Langford 2015).

17 [<http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/H%C3%B6lderlin,+Friedrich/Gedichte/Gedichte+1800-1804/%5BHymnen%5D/Patmos.+Dem+Landgrafen+von+Homburg>] (last accessed: 13 August 2024).

with a reality that does not bend its knee to ideological manipulation or gaslighting. However, Berardi contradicts himself by linking the impotence to a thirst for revenge, i.e. the embrace of Christofascism as the road to redemption. The idolization of a cult leader displaces the impotence, which was then never really an impotence to begin with. That is, the embrace of Christofascism is the acceleration of the actualization of impotence.

In his later works, Vattimo (1999), by contrast, turns more to religion and deploys the concept of “Kenosis” (abasement) as a way to think through what he meant by rejecting the violence of metaphysics and the acceptance of weak thought. Kenosis is derived from an understanding of the life, suffering and death of Christ as a process of “self-emptying”. This may be experienced as an ultimate form of humiliation, but at the same time, as a life-affirming force. It is both subversive – in that it non-violently rejects the violence of metaphysics – and transformative, as the performativity of a *denegation* of identity politics as a process of differentiation.

Kenosis – self-emptying – is the opposite of identity politics; it derives from giving (*agape*); it is still a prehension<sup>18</sup>, however, as the close link between passion and suffering makes clear, it is thus not an indifference. Humiliation is nothing to be celebrated of course, but it can be the transformative amplification of the experience (rather than the actual condition) of impotence into a form of liberation-as-empowerment. Kenosis is necessary as an antidote against violence, including the violence of metaphysics. Instead of asserting one’s identity as the basis of justifying the pursuit of one’s interests, kenosis releases attachments to particular interests and transforms them into a singular one: the kenosis itself. If identity politics is the collectivization of narcissism, kenosis could be its antidote.

This is what western journalists and politicians have failed to understand when commenting on the student protests against the genocide in Gaza throughout the USA at the time of this writing (April 2024). In a desperate and cynical attempt to smear these collective actions as a form of identity politics, accusing the participants – many of whom identify as Jewish - of anti-Semitism and supporting terrorism, they have completely failed to comprehend the kenosis of peaceful protest. The violence exercised by both Zionist militia and the police – the combination of the paralegal and legal

---

18 Prehension plays a pivotal role in Whitehead’s (1978) attempt to develop processual thought as it refers to interactions between actual occasions. These are not to be understood as mutual, but as singular events, each occasion prehends another occasion differently. For those more inclined to embrace empirical philosophy, one could use the term “experience”.

exercise of violence by the state is indeed a hallmark of fascism – does not weaken the resolve of the protests, nor does it erase their justification. Instead, opposing kenosis with violence is the ultimate fatal strategy.

The contrast between the kenosis of opposing genocide and its violent repression in a state of denial could not be more profound. The latter justifies its actions with reference to identities that are *prima facie* coded as a struggle of good versus evil, in exactly the same way as the Third Reich justified its genocide of Jews, Roma, Sinti, Communists, homosexuals etc. Their barbaric notions of nationalism are unable to differentiate between strangers and enemies.<sup>19</sup> The former, by contrast, speaks on behalf of a society for everyone. Their kenosis is that of a “becoming-society”. The articulation between kenosis and the process of becoming-society (*Vergesellschaftung*) is not an absolute limit, let alone an objective, but a movement of detachment from particular identifications towards an emptying out of what it means to exist-with: The condition of becoming-society is enabled by the appearance of the stranger, first as other then as other-within. Existing-with emerges from existing-without. Instead of violent assertions of identities as the last line of defence, the prehension of sociality as being-with-strangers cultivates estrangement.<sup>20</sup> Kenosis opposes all forms of identity politics, instead it is a mode of prehension that shifts our attention to *being held accountable* for the things one does, rather than reduce prehensions to ascriptions, assertions or allegations of what one is or claims to be. *Being held accountable* does not refer to who or what one is, but exclusively to what one does.

A more sociological analysis of kenosis shifts away from its close relationship with spirituality and salvation, but instead focuses more on its modulations of relationality, which have to be understood as praxis instead of identity. As a modulation of praxis, kenosis is closely related to debt, not in terms of demanding repayment but as *being held accountable*. The debt, which one may call existence, has always-already been incurred but has not yet “taken place” (Schmidt/Van Loon, 2024). Kenosis implies that this debt may have to be paid on demand. Rather than asserting rights and

19 Student protesters were also denounced by mainstream media as Anti-American, even if the entire opposition to genocide is framed with reference to “American values”.

20 For example the deployment of the chant „in our thousands, in our millions, we are all Palestinians” that accompanied many protests against the genocide in Gaza, embraces that estrangement: identifying with the plight of Palestinians derives from the inculcation that the genocide is perpetrated in our name.

entitlements based on notions of property, which is for example central to the settler-colonial mind set and leads to territorialisation as the sole basis of legal entitlement, kenosis appears with an ethos of hospitality and generosity.

The history of colonialism teaches us that when faced with the Real-politik of territorialisation, kenosis may (and often does) lead to being subjected to nakba, displacement, and destruction. It is certainly not an effective strategy for survival in the face of a collective narcissism that drives the self-proclaimed right of a “state” to defend itself. Its weakness seems easily exploited by those whose needs can never be satisfied, i. e. those who continuously claim that they own the debt. Those who demand the debt to be repaid with interest, without ever being able to pay it back in full. The second real danger of kenosis is slave morality. That is the case, when kenosis is corrupted by another form of identity politics that emerges from alleged victimhood. This is merely another form of collective narcissism, but one that presupposes a more powerful scapegoat. Many so called progressive forms of identity politics have taken on this form under the aegis of “culture wars”.

Kenosis, however, has a strength hidden deep inside its apparent weakness. Whereas collectivized narcissism is ultimately self-destructive as it is haunted by neurotic paranoia and can only flourish if it keeps inventing its enemies-within (such as the denegation of the so called “self-hating Jew”) to function as scapegoats, kenosis abandons this need for scapegoats. It is not driven by lack, but instead by abundance. It can thus not be bribed or blackmailed and it is not driven by the fear of death. Hence, as we have seen with the campus protests against the genocide in Gaza, violence cannot defeat kenosis.

It is for this reason, that kenosis is a precondition for abandoning the trap set by Carl Schmitt (1974), that the political can only emerge from the dichotomy between friend and fiend. This trap, which has led to the highly dysfunctional international legal order based on sovereign nation-states, has been recently revealed in its entire ugliness when the International Court of Justice investigated the allegations, initially put forward by South Africa, that Israel is plausibly conducting a genocide in Gaza. All of a sudden, for Israel and its allies, international law, which they proclaim to uphold, has to be reduced to a tool for “terrorism”. Apparently, in a world governed by collective narcissism, everything becomes an instrument of warfare. However, without any means of enforcing its own rulings, the ICJ is still able to operate by a mode of kenosis and is thereby not destined to

be subjected to identity politics. Exactly because it does not have to serve the interest of a unified sovereign state, it could choose the side of universal human rights and a form of justice – even if only limited to stating concerns about a possible genocide – that unconditionally applies to everyone. The *ad hominem* attacks on the ICJ and those bringing the case against Israel by the perpetrators and enablers of the genocide in Gaza such as the USA and Germany prove that they have already lost the case. *Kenosis* is not destined for oblivion but the resurrection of what has been humiliated. *Kenosis* is transformative humiliation.

The fact that Israel and its allies simply ignore the ICJ ruling but instead have chosen the propagandistic narrative of the UN being corrupted by Hamas, is thus not a sign that *kenosis* has failed. Instead, like every other *ad hominem* attack, it is the sign of its resilience. Of course, we cannot expect that the perpetrators of a genocide are celebrating this as a great achievement. Whenever reports appear that the IDF or Israeli government officials or Israeli citizens are celebrating the genocide, these are quickly repressed and silenced, simply because they are incredibly embarrassing, especially for governments that actively support Israel. This again proves the resilience of *kenosis* as transformative humiliation.

Disciplined as a sociologist, I am called to avoid presenting this as a moral appeal. I cannot offer *kenosis* as a moral, ethical or political solution to the problem of the re-emergence of fascism. Instead, my job is to identify its operations empirically. *Kenosis* is not a political choice. Instead, it is the nagging doubt that makes us question whether the world is really carved up into friends versus enemies. Against this schmittian trap, *Kenosis* is the opening up of estrangement as a precondition for more sustainable peaceful modes of existence.

At the time of this writing, all around the world, people of all kinds of backgrounds are protesting against the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and against the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. They are doing so while being systematically criminalized, thereby risking prosecution, their jobs, their university registration, and their freedom. *Kenosis* is driving this movement, especially in countries such as Germany, the UK, the USA and of course Israel itself, where criticism of Israel is silenced and/or criminalized as *prima facie* anti-Semitic. In a world driven by the opportunistic interests of a small number of powerful, cynical narcissists, becoming-Palestinian is not an expression of identity politics (that would be, for example, becoming-Hamas), but its deflation.

Those continue to the call of performing Christianities thus face the ultimate challenge as “a choice” of either accepting or rejecting Kenosis. In the face of individuation of the Homo Sacer in the form of “becoming-Palestinian”, which is globally accelerated by Christofascism, kenosis may be the decisive abyss that cannot be bridged or erased by negotiations and compromises. This is why there are no “both sides” to this story. Becoming-Palestinian is the universal condition of kenosis today and it is something that nobody can bypass without consequences.

### *Bibliography*

- Berardi, Franco: *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. London 2017.
- Brand, Ulrich/Wissen, Markus: *Imperiale Lebensweise: Zur Ausbeutung von Mensch und Natur in Zeiten des globalen Kapitalismus*. München 2017.
- Hall, Stuart: *Authoritarian Populism: A Reply*, in: *New Left Review* (May/June 1985), 115-124.
- Haraway, Donna: *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*. Durham 2016.
- Hunter, James Davison: *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York 1991.
- Kirschner, Martin (Ed.): *Subersiver Messianismus: Interdisziplinäre Agamben-Lektüren*. Baden-Baden 2020.
- Langford, Peter: *Roberto Esposito: Law Community and the Political*. London 2015.
- Lyotard, Jean-François: *La Condition Postmoderne, rapport sûr le savoir*. Paris 1979.
- Moreau, Yoann: *Who Is the Subject of the Anthropocene? The Use of Personal Pronouns to Express Degrees of Human Involvement*, in: Nathaniel Wallenhorst, Renaud Hétier, Jean-Philippe Pierron, Christoph Wulf (eds.): *Political Education in the Anthropocene. Anthropocene – Humanities and Social Sciences*. Cham 2023, 47-58.
- Pagels, Elaine: *The Origins of Satan*. New York 1995.
- Schmitt, Carl: *Das Nomos von der Erde*. Berlin 1974.
- Schmidt, Kerstin/van Loon, Joost: *Introduction*, in: Kerstin Schmidt, Joost van Loon (eds.): *Herausforderung Solidarität: Konzepte – Kontroversen – Perspektiven*. Bielefeld 2024, 9-27.
- Shapiro, Yaakov: *The Empty Wagon: Zionism's Journey from Identity Crisis to Identity Theft*. Shawnee (KA) 2018.
- Sharlett, Jeff: *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War*. New York 2023.
- Stiegler, Bernard: *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies. Volume I: Disbelief and Discredit*. Cambridge 2011.
- Vattimo, Gianni: *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. Cambridge 1988.
- Vattimo, Gianni: *The Transparent Society*. Cambridge 1992.

Vattimo, Gianni: *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*. Cambridge 1997.

Vattimo, Gianni: *Belief*. Cambridge 1999.

Whitehead, Alfred North: *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. New York 1978 (corrected edition).

Wolfson, Sam: Antisemites supporting Israel is weird, Jewish support of them is even weirder, in: *The Guardian*, 27 November 2023: [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/27/jewish-antisemitism-support-israel-gaza-zionism>] (last accessed: 8 August 2024).