

The human person as an icon
Of the Trinity*

KALLISTOS OF DIOKLEIA
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Batter my heart, three person'd God

John Donne

'One-in-Three': does it make any difference?

Some twenty years ago a slim publication appeared with the title *The Good Cuppa Guide*. It described places, varying from the Ritz to stalls in the East End, where a satisfying cup of tea might be procured. Among other establishments the author, Jonathan Routh, visited the Surrey Room Restaurant at Waterloo Station, where at that time – now, alas, all has changed – it was possible to have tea served by a uniformed waitress at a table with a linen cloth and a linen napkin. 'I was met as I entered it', records the author, 'by a lady who asked "Are you one person?" which I found difficult to deny, so she escorted me to a table for one'. In due course he was brought tea, toast, bread-and-butter, jam and 'some slightly Fruit Cake'. 'I consumed all this while deliberating upon her original question [...]. Was she in the habit of receiving visitations from persons who suddenly proclaimed that they were 'Three-in-One and One-in-Three' and demanded bigger tables?'¹

What are we to make of Jonathan Routh's reflection in the Surrey Room Restaurant? 'Three-in-One and One-in-Three': is this no more than a conundrum, a theological riddle, or does it radically affect our entire religious experience? What difference does it actually make to us as Christians that, unlike Jews and Muslims, we are not simply monotheists, nor yet are we polytheists, but we see in God both complete unity and genuine personal diversity? Commenting on the current neglect of the Trinity in the West, Karl Rahner is scarcely exaggerating when he observes:

Christians, for all their orthodox profession of faith in the Trinity, are almost just 'monotheist' in their actual religious experience. One might almost dare to affirm that if the doctrine of the Trinity were to be erased as false, most religious literature could be preserved almost unchanged throughout the process.²

*Revised text of university sermon preached in Great St Mary's, Cambridge (13th October 1985).

¹ *The Good Cuppa Guide: Where to have Tea in London*, blended by Jonathan Routh, milked and sugared by John Glashan (London 1966), p.38.

² Karl Rahner, 'Remarks in the Dogmatic Treatise "De Deo"', *Theological Investigations*, vol iv (London 1966), p. 38.

Karen Blixen called the Trinity ‘the most deadly dull of all male companies.’³ Is it not true that all too often Christians find the doctrine of the Trinity an embarrassing complication, unhelpful and irrelevant?

And yet it ought not be so. We should each be able to feel that the doctrine of the Trinity has something directly to do with *me*, that it has practical consequences for *my* personhood. Not long ago I was listening to a talk in Oxford by an Egyptian friend, Dr George Bebawi, who read from a thirteenth-century Coptic manuscript in his possession. These words by the anonymous author imprinted on my memory: ‘Life begins with the Trinity, and its end and aim is the Trinity’. Life begins with the Trinity – with the baptism in the threefold name. Its end and aim is the Trinity – in heaven with the eternal Three. Yet how many of us can truthfully say that the Trinity does indeed mean to us no less than this – our beginning and foundation, our final hope, the heart of our life?

With good reason we speak of the mystery of the Trinity, meaning that the Trinity is not simply a speculative theory, to be analyzed by the reasoning of the brain; rather it is a living presence experienced in our prayer, the personal God whom we stand in adoration. The best approach to the Trinity is through doxology and silence. In Vladimir Lossky’s words, ‘the dogma of the Trinity is the cross for ways of human thought [...]. No philosophical speculation has ever succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity.’⁴ Yet at the same time, as Dom Illtyd Trethowan reminds us, ‘a “mystery”, in the proper theological sense, is something revealed for our understanding [...] but which we never understand *exhaustively*, because it leads into the darkness of God’.⁵ Since then the Trinity as ‘mystery’ is ‘revealed for our understanding’, let us try as best as we can to explore its meaning. This may be done at two connected levels. What does it tell me about myself, about my human personhood? It will help us to think visually of two circles: the eternal circle and the circle enlarged.

God as Communion

Our starting point in any discussion of the Trinity must always be the history of salvation, the movement within time of God’s self revelation. For God is not an abstraction, but discloses himself in specific ways and at definite moments, through a series of encounters with particular men and women. In this series of encounters there is a gradual evolution, with three developing stages, states Gregory of Nazianzus in a celebrated passage, ‘the Old Testament proclaimed the Father plainly, but the Son in a more obscure fashion through types and prophecy. At the second stage, the New Testament ‘revealed the Son’ openly and explicitly, but did no more than ‘hint at the Godhead of the Spirit’. At the third and final stage, the era of the church, the period in which we are now living, ‘the Spirit dwells among us, manifesting himself to us more and more clearly’. Anticipating modern ideas about the development of doctrine’ St Gregory concludes: ‘You see illuminations breaking upon us successively, while the order of theology, which is better for us to observe, prevents us both

³ Clara Svendsen, *Notator om Karen Blixen* (Copenhagen 1974), p 16.

⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London 1957), p. 66.

⁵ Illtyd Trethowan, *Mysticism and Theology: An Essay in Christian Metaphysics* (London 1975), p.65

from proclaiming everything at once and from keeping it hidden to the end.’ In this way, ‘by progressive additions’ humankind ‘advances from glory to glory’.⁶

While accepting as normative this biblical, historical approach, we need at the same time to go further. What is the ‘inner logic’ of the doctrine of the Trinity, its coherence, its basic information, and what are its moral and spiritual implications? The historical approach tells us that God is threefold, but by itself it does not indicate why. An answer to this latter question – in so far as any answer is possible – is provided by another way of approaching the Trinity, supplementing but not replacing the historical. It is a way found in both Eastern and Western Christendom, and it consists in thinking of God in terms of mutual love. In my own personal quest for the Trinity, three writers above all, one Greek and two Latin, have helped me to appreciate this approach.

First in time among the three is St Basil the Great. In his work *On the Holy Spirit*, his key term is the word *koinonia*, ‘communion’ or ‘fellowship’. Whereas St Athanasius speaks of God’s unity primarily in terms of substance or essence, assigning central significance to the word *homoousios*, ‘consubstantial’, Basil and the other Cappadocians prefer to express God’s unity in terms of communion between the three *hypostaseis* or persons. ‘The unity of God’, writes St Basil ‘lies in the communion [*koinonia*] of the Godhead,’⁷ The notion of Trinitarian *koinonia* is likewise emphasized by St Gregory of Nyssa:

In the life creating nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit there is no division, only a continuous and inseparable communion [*koinonia*] between them [...]. It is not possible to envisage any severance or division, such as one might think of the Son without the Father, or separate the Spirit from the Son; but between them there is an ineffable and inconceivable communion [*koinonia*] and distinction.⁸

Here, then, is a first clue to the inner meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is a way of saying that God is communion or community. God is ‘social’, ‘conciliar’; there is something in him that corresponds with the notion of ‘*sobornost*’

A second clue I found in *De Trinitate* of St Augustine of Hippo. At first sight his treatment of the Trinity appears different from that of the Cappadocians. Whereas Basil bases his doctrine of divine unity upon the three persons in their mutual *koinonia*, Augustine bases it upon shared essence: “The divinity [...] is the unity of the Trinity”,⁹ The Cappadocians envisage the Trinity on the analogy of three humans in relationship with each other; and while they are careful to underline the limitations of this tri-personal ‘model’, making it clear that the unity of the three divine *hypostaseis* is radically different from, and far closer than, that prevailing between three human persons, yet their primary analogy remains nonetheless that

⁶ *Oration 31 (Theological Oration 5), On the Holy Spirit* §§26-27 (PG 36. 161C-164B).

⁷ *On the Holy Spirit* xviii, §45 (PG 32. 149C). On the importance of the term *koinonia* in Basil’s Trinitarian theology, see John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London 1985), p. 134; see also Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (An inaugural lecture in the chair of Christian Doctrine)[...]Kings College, London)(London 1985), pp. 10-11.

⁸ *On the Difference between the Essence and Hypostasis* [= Basil Letter 38], §4 (PG 32, 332A, D)

⁹ *De Trin.* I viii. 15

of three humans. St Augustine, by contrast, in his psychological analogies works with a one-person ‘model’, likening the three divine *hypostaseis* to the various faculties or aspects of the single human being: most notably to the mind, its knowledge of itself, and its love of itself;¹⁰ also to memory, understanding and will.¹¹ While he too is careful to emphasize the shortcomings of these ‘models’, insisting that in God’s case the faculties are truly persons, yet his primary analogy remains that of one person, not three.

The difference, however, between St Augustine and the Greek fathers should not be exaggerated.¹² Even if the ‘models’ to which Augustine devotes his main attention in *De Trinitate* are uni-personal, yet before expounding them he puts forward an analogy, based on love, which can be understood in an interpersonal way. And here precisely I have found my second clue. Although Augustine himself devotes only a little space to this analogy, I have found it far more helpful than the psychological explanations of the Trinity that he develops at so much greater length. Love, he says in a well known sentence, implies three things: the lover (*amans*), the object that is loved (*quod amatur*), and the love (*amor*) passing reciprocally between lover and beloved.¹³ When this analogy is applied to the Trinity, the Father is seen as the Lover, the Son as the Beloved, and the Spirit as the *vinculum* or bond of love uniting them both, as the ‘communion’ between them;

From an Orthodox point of view this scheme might be thought to have two defects. First, it seems to lead directly to the *Filioque*, to the doctrine of the double procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son. In reality, however, Augustine was never a ‘Filioquist’ in any unqualified sense, for like the Cappadocians, he regarded the Father as the *principium*, the ultimate source and origin of being within the Godhead. He insisted that the Spirit proceeds from the Father ‘principally’ or ‘principally’ (*principaliter*), and from the Son only in a secondary and derivative sense; all that the Son has he receives from the Father, and so it is from the Father that he receives also the power to cause the Spirit to proceed.¹⁴ The Father remains for the Cappadocians called the ‘fountainhead’, the *pégaia theotés*.

¹⁰ *De Trin* IX. li. 2-v, 8

¹¹ *De Trin*. X. xi. 17-18. Psychological analogies of this kind are rare in Greek Trinitarian texts, but they are not altogether lacking. A notable instance is St Gregory Palamas, Natural, Theological, Moral and Practical Chapters 35-7 (Pg 150. 1144B)-1145D). On this, see M. Edmund Hussey, ‘The Palamite Trinitarian Models’, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 16 (1972), pp. 83-9; Georgios I. Matzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood 1984), p. 18.

¹² This is a point well made by Gerald Bonner, ‘St Augustine’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit’, *Sobornorst* 4:2 (1960), pp. 51-56. I cannot agree with all the criticism made of Augustine in the challenging but one-sided monograph of Richard Haugh, *Photius and the Carolingians: The Trinitarian Controversy* (Belmont, Mass. 1975).

¹³ *De Trin*. VIII. x. 14.

¹⁴ *De Trin*. XV. xvii. 29. Anselm of Havelberg, in his debate with Nicetas of Nicodemia in 1136, appealing to Augustine’s authority, likewise argues that the Holy Spirit proceeds ‘properly and principally’ (*proprie et principaliter*) from the Father: *Dialogues II*. 25 (PL 188. 1206A); see Norman Russell, ‘Anselm of Havelburg and the Union of the Churches’, *Sobornorst/ECR* 1:2 (1979), pp. 38-41. At the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-9, the Latin spokesman John of Montenero unambiguously reaffirmed the Augustine position. The Father is the first source of the Spirit’s procession, he said, since the Son derives the power of the spirating the Spirit not from Himself but from the Father: Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge 1959), pp. 214-15. See also the council’s final decree of

The second and, in my judgment, more serious objection to Augustine's scheme is that it tends to depersonalize the Spirit. He himself certainly believed the Spirit to be genuinely a person, but the analogy that he has here adopted does not itself imply this. For while lover and beloved are both in the full sense persons, the mutual love passing between them is not a third person alongside the other two. His 'model' has thus the disadvantage of being bi-personal rather than tri-personal. But it possesses an outstanding virtue: it interprets God in terms of mutual love. 'God is love' (1John 4:8) – it is this, surely, above all else that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is saying to us.

The notion of God as mutual love is worked out in a more complete and Triadic fashion by the last of my three witnesses, a native of Scotland, Richard of St Victor (d. 1173) in book iii of his *De Trinitate*, now fortunately available in English translation.¹⁵ I look in this as one of the most moving and persuasive presentations of God's tri-unity that I have ever read. It is not in the strict sense a proof of the doctrine of the Trinity – although Richard may perhaps have intended it as that – but is undoubtedly a powerful illustration of what the doctrine signifies. Richard starts from the idea of God as love. Since love is the perfection of human nature, the highest reality within our personal experience, it is also the quality within our experience that brings us closest to God; it expresses, better than anything else that we know, the perfection of the divine nature. But self love is not true love. Love is gift and exchange, and so to be present in its fullness it needs to be mutual. It requires a 'thou' as well as an 'I', and can only truly exist where there is a plurality of persons: 'The perfection of one requires fellowship with another.'¹⁶ This is the case not only with humans but with God: divine love, as well as human, is characterized by sharing and communion, the fullness of glory, says Richard, requires that a sharer of glory be not lacking'; in God's case, as that of humans, 'nothing is more glorious [. . .] than to wish to have nothing that you do not wish to share'.¹⁷ If, then, God is love, it is impossible that should be merely one person loving himself. He must be at least two persons, Father and Son, loving each other.

Richard now takes a further step in his argument. To exist in its plenitude, love needs to be not only 'mutual' but 'shared'. The closed circle of mutual love between two persons still falls short of the perfection of love; in order that the perfection of love may exist, the two must share their mutual love with a third. 'Perfect love casts out fear' (1John 4:18); love in its perfection is unselfish, without jealousy, without fear of a rival. Where love is perfect, then, the lover not only loves the beloved as a second self, but wishes the beloved to have the further joy of loving the third, jointly with the lover, and of being jointly loved by that third. 'The sharing of love cannot exist among any less than three persons [. . .]. Shared love is properly said to exist when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community, and the affection of the two persons is fused into one affection by the flame of

union, *Laetentur Caeli*, where it is explicitly stated that the Father is 'fount and principle of the whole Godhead', *fons ac principium totius deitatis* (Gill, p. 413).

¹⁵ PL 196. 915-30; critical text by Jean Ribailier (Paris 1958); English tr. (in the series *The Classics of Western Spirituality*) by Grover A. Zinn, *Richard of St Victor: The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity* (New York 1979), pp. 337-97.

¹⁶ *De Trin.* III. 6

¹⁷ *De Trin.*, III. 4 and 6

love for a third.¹⁸ In the case of God, this ‘third’ with whom the other two share their mutual love is the Holy Spirit, whom Richard terms *condilectus*, the co-beloved’.¹⁹

In this way, Richard sees God, as the Cappadocians do, in terms of interpersonal community. In his argument there is a movement from self love (the Father alone) to mutual love (Father and Son), and so to shared love (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). In all this, as he himself recognizes, he is offering no more than an analogy; and this analogy is incomplete, as all human analogies of the divine life must inevitably be, because the Trinity – so he warns the reader – is a mystery ‘above your understanding’.²⁰ He is by no means blind to the apophatic aspect of the Trinity. Yet his analogy remains deeply convincing, with fewer drawbacks than any of the alternative ‘models’.

St Thomas Aquinas objected to Richard’s analogy of shared love on the grounds that, while it is true of humans that they can only enjoy good fellowship, the same cannot be asserted of God. Since he is all-good, he needs no fellow, no *consociatus*, for his self-fulfillment and perfection. Love, Aquinas argued, is a striving to gain what one does not yet possess; it implies a lack or deficiency, and it is inconceivable that God should be lacking in anything. Thus Richard’s analogy based on the sharing of love among humans is not applicable to God.²¹ But in Richard’s defense it may be asked how genuinely Christian is Aquinas’ picture of God as self-sufficient, needing no *consociatus*; does not this suggest One of Neoplatonism, static transcendent, contemplating itself alone, rather than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Richard’s more dynamic vision of God in terms of exchange and reciprocity comes closer to the spirit of the Bible. And when Aquinas characterizes love as a deficiency, this brings to our mind Plato’s argument in the *Symposium*, where *eros* as described as the offspring of poverty and resourcefulness. Richard is surely right to regard love, not as an effort to acquire what one lacks, but as an attitude of self giving. The true essence of love lies not in taking but in giving; to love is not primarily to make up a deficiency in oneself, but to offer oneself as a gift to the other. Richard has seen further than Thomas. The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of saying that God’s eternal being is self-giving.

The ‘social’ doctrine and its critics

Combining Basil, Augustine and Richard of St Victor, we arrive at a ‘social’ doctrine of the Trinity. This involves thinking of God in terms of life rather than substance – of life and love. ‘God is love’: not self love, the love of one isolated, turned in upon himself, but mutual love that is exchanged and shared. In other words of Professor John Zizioulas (now Metropolitan of Pergamos), ‘The being of God is a relational being’;²² there is within God a relationship of ‘I-and-Thou’. God is not just personal but interpersonal. He is not a unit but a union; not a lonely God’, as Karl Barth puts it,²³ not the eternal monad, the self sufficient and transcendent One of Neoplatonism, but a *koinonia* or communion of three persons, coeternal,

¹⁸ *De Trin.* III 14 and 19

¹⁹ *De Trin.* III. 15

²⁰ *De Trin.* III. 10.

²¹ *Summa Theologia* I. 32. 1 ad 2

²² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 17

²³ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York 1959), p. 42.

coequal. God is 'social'; he contains within himself something corresponding to what we mean by 'society', but at an infinitely higher level. We are thus to see God's oneness, not as a mathematical unity, but as an organic, structured unity, an 'internally constitutive unity', in Leonard Hodgson's phrase.²⁴ The divine simplicity is a complex simplicity. The three persons are joined to one another in a union that does not destroy but enhances and fulfills the distinctive character of each.

In our human experience of personhood, at any rate in a fallen world, there is in each person an inevitable element of exclusiveness, of opaqueness and impenetrability. But with the three divine persons it is not so. Each is entirely 'open' to the others, totally transparent and receptive. This transparency and receptivity is summed up in the Greek notion of *perichoresis*, which Gibbon called 'the deepest and darkest corner of the whole theological abyss'. Rendered in Latin as *circuminessio* and in English as 'co-inherence', the Greek term means literally 'cyclic movement', and so reciprocity, interchange, mutual indwelling.²⁵ The prefix *peri* bears the sense 'around', while *choresis* is linked with *chora*, 'room', 'space', 'place' or 'container', and with *chorein*, to 'go', 'advance', 'make room for' or 'contain'. Some also see a connection with *choros*, 'dance'. And so they take *perichoresis* to mean 'round dance'. Applied to Christ, the term signifies that his two natures, the divine and the human, interpenetrate one another without separation and without confusion. Applied to the Trinity, it signifies that each person 'contains' the other two and 'moves' within them. In the word of St Gregory of Nyssa, 'All that is the Father's is seen in the Son, and all that is the Son's belongs also to the Father. For the whole Son abides in the Father, and he has in turn the whole Father abiding in himself.'²⁶

By virtue of this *perichoresis*, Father, Son and Holy Spirit 'co-inhere' in one another, each dwelling in the other two through an unceasing movement of mutual love – the 'round dance' of the Trinity. There is between them a timeless dialogue, beautifully depicted in Rublev's Icon of the three angels, to which we shall shortly return. From all eternity the first person is saying to the second, 'You are my beloved Son' (Mark 1:11); from all eternity the second replies, 'Abba Father; Abba Father' (Romans 8:15; Gal 4:6); from all eternity the Spirit sets his seal upon the interchange. Into this divine dialogue we ourselves enter through prayer.²⁷

When we try to pray, what happens? Initially, we experience emptiness, obscurity, distraction. Then perhaps we have a dim awareness that the activity of prayer, which at first we take to be of our making, is actually the activity of Another. We have the sense of being 'prayed in'; we realise that on the deepest level it is not we who pray, but God who is praying in us. And God who so prays within us is specifically God the Trinity. We find ourselves

²⁴ Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London 1943), p. 107.

²⁵ On the history of the term *perichoresis*, see G. L. Prestige, *god in Patristic thought* (London, 1952), pp 291-9.

²⁶ *On the Difference between Essence and Hypostasis*, §8 (PG 32. 340C)

²⁷ Here, and elsewhere in the article, I am indebted to the unpublished paper by Dr Sarah Coakley, 'The Trinitarian Concept of God', shortly to appear in J. A. Baker, ed., *We Believe in God* (a report on the doctrine of God by the Church of England Doctrine Commission).

caught up into a conversation that is already in progress – a divine conversation, the eternal dialogue of the Trinity. We each hear God the Father saying to us personally, ‘You are my beloved Son’; we become sons in the Son, and though the Spirit we make our own filial response ‘Abba, Father’.

Such is the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. God is love – not self-love but mutual, shared love. God is exchange, self-giving, solidarity. If that is indeed what the doctrine of the Trinity is saying, then manifestly it is no mere piece of abstract speculation, devoid of practical content, but something that has startling, revolutionary consequences for our own personhood. It is concerned with matters of life and death – of eternal life and eternal death. As Vladimir Lossky said, ‘Between the Trinity and hell there lies no other choice.’²⁸

But, before considering what these practical consequences may be, there is a serious difficulty to be faced. Have we perhaps deviated into tritheism? It has often been objected to the ‘social’ understanding of the Trinity, such as we have here attempted to present, that it undermines the divine unity, in effect positing the existence of three God’s, not one. In 1745 Pope Benedict XV, for precisely this reason, criticised the kind of representation that is found in Rublev’s Icon, with the Trinity depicted as three distinct figures.²⁹ Modern exponents of a ‘social’ Trinity, so its critics allege, read back into patristic terms *prosopon* and *hypostasis* our contemporary sense of what it is to be a person. The modern term ‘person’ has a strongly psychological emphasis largely absent (so it is argued) from the ancient Greek terms *prosopon* and *hypostasis*. In present-day usage the person is understood subjectively, in terms of self-consciousness, whereas the patristic terms possess a more objective character. Starting from the modern idea of the person as a distinct centre of self-consciousness, of knowing, feeling and willing, the upholders of the ‘social’ approach (so its critics claim) are thus led to ascribe three such centres to the Deity, and so in effect to assert the existence of three Gods. But when the Fathers spoke of three *prosopa* or three *hypostasies*, it was never their intention to affirm three distinct centres of consciousness in God.

So runs the argument of the critics, and it deserves to be taken seriously. It is certainly true that the Greek terms in question are less psychological, less inward-looking, than the modern notion of the person.³⁰ *Prosopon* in Greek is formed from *pros*, ‘towards’, and *opsis* ‘face’ or ‘aspect’, and so it means literally ‘facing towards’. The Latin equivalent *persona* has the literal sense of ‘sounding through’ (*per* + *sonare*). A *prosopon* or *persona*, then, means a discrete entity with which one enters into contact by looking at him or her, or by hearing him or her speak. In neither case does the primary emphasis of the word fall, in a subjective manner, upon the person’s own inner sense of self-awareness. The terms have an objective reference, indicating the way in which the person appears to an outside observer; they suggest, not self-consciousness, but encounter and confrontation. So in the case of the Trinity, when early Christian writers distinguish Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three *prosopa*

²⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 66 Lossky is adapting a saying of Fr. Pavel Florensky.

²⁹ Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian* (London 1977), p. 474.

³⁰ What follows is no more than a brief summary of a complex topic. For fuller treatment, see Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*; Cyril C, Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York 1958)

and *personae*, it does not follow that they are positing three distinct centres of self-consciousness in God. They are merely stating that Father, Son and Holy Spirit each express a special ‘face’, a distinct ‘aspect’ or ‘voice’ of divine being.

A similar case can be argued for the term *hypostasis*. This is connected with the verb *hypistémi*, which means ‘stand under’, ‘support’, and when intransitive ‘exist firmly’. Thus understood transitively, *hypostasis* means that which ‘stands under’ qualities or attributes, giving them solidity and genuine existence; understood intransitively, it means that which has firm subsistence, stability and durability, as contrasted with mirage or passing phase. Once more, then, the sense is objective rather than subjective. A *hypostasis* is not understood primarily in terms of self-consciousness, but signifies that which has concrete and specific existence, which is unique, differentiated and permanent. If, then, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinguished as three *hypostaseis*, this means, as before, not necessarily that they are three centres of self-consciousness, but that each of them is a distinct and enduring ‘mode of existence’ (*tropos hyparxeōs*).

From all of this Karl Barth draws the conclusion that what we today mean by ‘personality’ should be assigned in God’s case, not to three *prosopa* or *hypostaseis* but to one essence. God is not three personalities but one, not three ‘I’s but one ‘I’ three times over.³¹ Barth therefore prefers to speak, not of three persons in the Trinity, but of three ‘ways of being’.³² Karl Rahner in his book *The Trinity* (New York 1970) adopts a parallel position and talks of three ‘manners of subsisting’, while John Macquarie in his *Principles of Christian Theology* (1977) speaks of three ‘movements of Beings’.

Barth is undoubtedly making an important point. We are not to assume that the Fathers meant *prosopon* or *hypostasis* precisely what we today mean by ‘person’ or ‘personality’. Our sense of personalness has altered over the centuries in subtle but different ways. New insights at the Renaissance, and more recently through the work of Freud, Jung and other psychological investigators, have greatly enlarged our sensitivity to the inner process of self awareness. Yet we should be careful not to overstate the extent of the change. The person is not just a modern discovery. In the Greek classical world there was definitely an understanding of the person as a conscious subject, and this sense of personhood is also evident in the New Testament and in patristic texts. In the Gospel, when Jesus prays to his Father and the Father replies, surely we are not altogether wrong to see here a dialogue between two ‘persons’ in the modern sense. Much more is involved than the interaction between two ‘manners of subsisting’. It is specifically in terms of mutual love that the Fourth Gospel understands the relationship between the Father and Son (John 3:35; 10:17; 15:9; 17:23-24). But ‘movements’ or ‘ways of being’ cannot love each other, for it only persons that are capable of mutual love. Does Barth’s approach allow sufficient place for this interpersonal, Trinitarian love? If the ‘social’ doctrine, pushed to extremes, is in danger of becoming tritheistic, do we not see in theologians such as Barth, Rahner and Macquarie a corresponding tendency in the opposite direction towards modalism? Is there not a risk here

³¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* i. 1 (Edinburgh 1936), p. 403

³² Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 42

of depersonalising the Trinity? This is something that disturbs not only Orthodox, but also some Romans Catholics.³³

It was Newman, I believe, who once described theology as ‘saying and unsaying to a positive effect’, and that is certainly true of the theology of the Trinity. We have continually to ‘say’ and ‘unsay’, checking and counterbalancing one approach with another. This applies to the ‘social’ approach, as to others. But an interpersonal view of the Trinity, drawing on the Cappadocian notion of divine *koinonia*, need not in itself be tritheist. It has this incomparable advantage: it ‘makes sense’ of the Trinity by representing God in terms of mutual love. For, as Richard of St Victor rightly perceived, it is mutual love that provides, within our human experience, the least imperfect analogue of divine life.

The human person as communion

Having spoken thus far about the eternal circle of love with the Trinity, let us look at the circle enlarged so as to embrace creation. What does faith in the Trinity tell me about myself? What is the theology of the human person implicit; more particularly, in the ‘social’ understanding of the Trinity? Having sought to interpret God as mutual love, let us attempt the same for humanity.

‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ (Gen 1:26). Why does God speak here in the plural, saying ‘us’ and ‘our’? Whatever the original intention of the Hebrew author, Christian thinkers from the second century onwards have been quick to see in this a reference to the Trinity. The *Epistle to Baranbas* understands the words as addressed by God the Father to the Son;³⁴ the same exegesis is offered by Justin,³⁵ Theophilus³⁶ and Irenaeus³⁷ represent the Father as speaking jointly to the Son and the Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity are seen in this way as ‘taking council’ together before they create humankind. The making of the human person is a ‘councillor act’, the shared work of all three members of the divine Triad, and the image of God within us is thus a distinctively Trinitarian image.

The words immediately follow in the first chapter of Genesis extend and deepen the Trinitarian meaning of image: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them’ (1:27). The divine, Trinitarian image is not given to man alone or to the woman alone, but to the two of them together; it comes to fulfilment in the ‘between’ that unites them. The image of the ‘social’ God has an irreducibly social expression within humanity. It is a ‘relational’ image, reflected in the relationship between man and woman, in the primordial social bond that is the foundation of all other forms of social life. Only within an interpersonal community can the triune likeness be properly realised.

³³ See for example Joseph A Bracken, *What are they saying about the Trinity?* (New York 1979).

³⁴ *Epistle of Barnabas* v. 5; vi. 12

³⁵ *Dialogue with Trypho* 62.

³⁶ *To Autolytus* ii. 18.

³⁷ *Against the Heresies* IV, preface 3; V. i. 3; cf. V. Xv. 4.

If humans are so made in the image of the Trinitarian God, then all that was said earlier about God as Trinity is also to be affirmed of the human person. We are to see the Trinity, in the words of Raimundo Panikkar, as ‘the ultimate paradigm of personal relationships’. The doctrine of the Trinity he insists, ‘is not mere speculation about the depths of God; it is equally an analysis of the heights of Man’.³⁸ Taking up St John’s statement, ‘God is love’, William Blake rightly adds, ‘Man is love’.³⁹ God is not self-love but mutual or shared love, and so the same is true of the human person. God, we said earlier, is exchange, self-giving, solidarity; so likewise is the human person in God’s image.

Because the being of God is a relational being, the human person in God’s image is also relational. John Macmurray rightly points out that, as persons, we are what we are only in relation to other persons: ‘the Self exists only in dynamic relation with the Other [. . .] the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other [. . .] it has its being in its relationship’.⁴⁰ There is no true person except when there are at least two persons communicating with each other; to be human is to be dialogic. ‘Since mutuality is constitutive for the personal, it follows that “I” need “you” in order to be myself.’⁴¹ Selfhood is social, or it is nothing. This authentic human is not egocentric but exocentric. I am only truly human, truly personal, if I relate to others after the likeness of the Holy Trinity, if I express myself, as God does, in a relationship of ‘I’-and-‘Thou’. I shall not be a *prosopon*, a face or person, unless I face others, looking at them and allowing them to look at me. I realise myself as *prosopon*, a person rather than an individual, only so far as I greet others as persons. In the words of St Basil, ‘Who does not know that the human animal is tame and social, not solitary and wild? For nothing is so characteristic of our nature as to communicate with one another, and to need one another, and to love our own kind.’⁴² All this is true *because God is Trinity*.

Formed in the image of the Trinity, the human person is the one who has brothers and sisters, who says – in the Lord’s Prayer – not ‘me’ but ‘us’, not ‘my’ but ‘our’. In Dostoevsky’s story of the old woman and the onion, no sooner had she said ‘It’s *my* onion, not yours’, than the onion immediately snapped in two and she fell back into the lake of fire.⁴³ In refusing to share, in failing to say ‘It’s *our* onion’, she had denied her personhood in the Trinitarian likeness. To be human is to share. Because we believe that God is not merely one but one-in-three, we are, in *starets* Zosima’s phrase, ‘responsible for everyone and everything’.⁴⁴ Not at the Eucharist only but throughout the entire Liturgy of human life we offer ‘in all and for all’. ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ The answer to Cain’s question lies in the dogma of the Trinity.

³⁸ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York/London 1948), p. 564.

³⁹ ‘Jerusalem’, §96, 1.26, in Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (London 1948), p. 564.

⁴⁰ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London 1961), p. 17, cited in Gunton, *The One the Three and the Many*, p. 6. But, as Gunton points out, Macmurray does not connect the relational character of the person with the doctrine of the Trinity.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 69.

⁴² *Longer Rules* iii 1 (PG 31. 917A).

⁴³ *The Brothers Karanazov* III. Vii. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* II. vi. 2 (a).

Viewing human nature in the light of the Trinity, we can make a distinction between the *individual* and the *person*.⁴⁵ Although they are often employed indifferently as synonyms, there is in reality a vital difference between the two terms. When we speak of the individual (in Greek *atomon*), we speak of the human being in isolation, in separateness, of the human being as competitor. When we speak of the person (in Greek *prosopon*), we speak of the human being in relationship, in communion, of the human being as co-worker. Shut off from the others, self-centred, unrelated, each is an individual – a unit recorded in a census – but not an authentic person. It is our relationship that makes us personal. There can be *one* person only when there is the possibility of *every* person, when there is a shared world. Personalism stands in the way at the opposite extreme of individualism. It is exactly communion after the likeness of the Trinity that distinguishes the person from the individual. It is not the individual who is the image of the Trinity but only the person.

‘May they all be one’, Jesus says in his high-priestly prayer to the Father. ‘Even as thou, Father art in me, and I in thee, may they also be one in us [. . .]. May they be one as we are one, I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one’ (John 17:21-3). ‘Even as’, says Christ. We may apply the platonic adage, ‘As above, so below’, or the clause in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘as in heaven, so on earth’. We humans, icons of the Trinity, are called to figure forth on earth the movement of God’s *perichoresis*, reproducing here below the mutual love that passes unceasingly in heaven between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian *even as* is vital for our salvation. In the words of a contemporary Athonite witness, Fr Vasileios of Stavronikita:

There is one centre and principle of the world both visible and invisible. There is one way of true unity and existence: the way of life of the Holy Trinity. And this what Jesus asks of the Father: that the faithful may be united *even as we are*, that they may be united because we are united; and there is no other way of authentic and fruitful living. This holy Trinitarian ‘even as’ [. . .] is the one thing which is needful.⁴⁶

The Trinitarian ‘even as’ applies to every level of human society. ‘Our social programme is the dogma of the Trinity’, said the nineteenth-century Russian thinker Nikolai Fedorov.⁴⁷ Each social grouping – family, parish, diocese, church government, school, office, factory, nation – has its vocation to be transformed by grace into a living icon of the divine *perichoresis*. Each grouping is to reflect what we have called the *sobornost*’ of God, to effect a reconciling harmony between diversity and unity, between freedom and mutual solidarity, after the pattern of the Trinity. Our belief in a Trinitarian God, in a God of social inter-relationship and shared love, commits us to opposing all forms of exploitation, injustice and discrimination. In our struggle for human rights, we are acting in the name of the Trinity.

⁴⁵ See Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 121-2.

⁴⁶ Vasileios Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and life of the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood 1984), p. 43.

⁴⁷ Cited in Oliver Clément, *L’Eglise orthodoxe* (Paris 1961), p. 63.

Figure 1: The Old Testament Trinity: icon by Andrei Rublev, early fifteenth century



The meaning of God as Trinity and the human person is summed up in Andrei Rublev's icon, dating from the early fifteenth century, in which the Holy Trinity is symbolically shown in the form of the three angels who visited Abraham (Genesis 18). Taking Paul Evdokimov as our chief guide,⁴⁸ what do we learn from this visual expression of the mystery of the Trinity?

⁴⁸ Paul Evdokimov, *L'Orthodoxie* (Neuchâtel/Paris 1959). Pp. 233-8; *L'art de L'cône* (Bruges 1970). pp.

Looking first at the inclination of the three heads, at the position of the shoulders, hands and feet, at the lines of the drapery, we observe in the icon as a whole a circular pattern. This circle expresses the ‘round dance’ or *perichoresis* of the Trinity, the movement of love passing eternally between the three persons, in which we humans are to be assumed. Next we notice how the three are turned towards each other, and we are reminded of the literal sense of *prosopon*. Each of the three faces the others, each is a *prosopon*, a person or face, in relation to the remaining two. They are engaged in dialogue.

Of what are they speaking? Their theme is ‘pre-eternal’ counsel’,⁴⁹ the creation of the world, and the creation of the human person as the living heart of that world: ‘Let us make man in our image’. For the eternal circle does not remain a closed circle, but leads on to the circle enlarged. The shared love of the Trinity is an outgoing, self-giving love. According to the treatise *On the Divine Names* ascribed to St Dionysius the Aroepagite, ‘Divine *eros* is ecstatic; it does not allow lovers to belong to themselves, but they belong only to the beloved’.⁵⁰ Moved by this ‘ecstatic’ outgoing love, the Trinity creates the world, not as an act of necessity, but an act of sovereign choice and freedom; for love is always free, and without freedom there is no love. But this act of sovereign choice is at the same time a true reflection of the inner, Trinitarian life of God as mutual love.

The three angels in Rublev’s icon are seated around a cube-shaped table that strongly resembles an altar. The hands of the three are pointing to the chalice on the centre of the table, and in this chalice there is the head of an animal (compare Gen. 18:7-8). This brings us to an aspect of the Trinitarian image not so far mentioned. Self giving signifies *sacrifice*. Mutual love after the likeness of the Trinity is *kenotic*, suffering love. This is why the table around which the Trinity is seated is shown as a table of sacrifice, bearing the head of a sacrificial victim, ‘the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world’ (Rev 13:8). The three are speaking, in their dialogue of shared love, not only about the creation of the world and of humanity, but about all there is to come after: how creation will lead to the fall, how the fall will be followed by the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. All this is included in the ‘pre-eternal counsel’. The three are speaking to each other about the oblation of the Son: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son . . . (John 3:16). The gesture whereby all three point to the chalice indicates that they are all alike sharing in the Son’s self-offering. In the words of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow:

The love of the Father crucifying
The love of the Son crucified
The love of the Spirit triumphing by the power of the Cross.⁵¹

205-16.

⁴⁹ Great Vespers for the feast of the Annunciation: *The Festal Menaion*, tr. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London 1969), p. 439.

⁵⁰ *On the Divine Names* iv 13 (PG 3. 712A).

⁵¹ Cited in Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology 1* (Belmont, Mass. 1979). P. 217. I have modified the translation.

Figure 2: In Rublev's icon: the central angel blesses the chalice



Sacrificial love

Such is the deeper meaning to be found in Rublev's icon. It tells us that the mutual, outgoing love of the Trinity, expressed in the creation of the human person, is at the same time a sacrificial love. In total solidarity with the world, God the Trinity takes responsibility for all the consequences of the act of creation. The point is strikingly made in the seventeenth-century autobiography of Archpriest Avvakum. Before the creation of Adam, the Father said to the Son, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'. 'Let us create him, Father', responded the Son; 'but see he will fall into sin.' 'Yes', said the Father, 'and in your care for your creation you will be obliged to array yourself in the perishable flesh of man, to suffer and accomplish all things.' And the Son replied, 'Father, your will be done.' After that Adam was created.⁵² Here Avvakum is stating in dramatic form the profound truth that the sacrifice of the Son did not commence only at Bethlehem or on Calvary, but has its origin in the timeless life of the Trinity, in the 'pre-eternal counsel' of the Three. 'There was a cross in the heart of God', writes Fr Lev Gillet, 'before there was one planted outside of Jerusalem.'⁵³ When God the Trinity willed the creation of humanity, this was by an act that was already sacrificial.

Here, then, is a further corollary of the Trinitarian image. To be human, after the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity, means to love others with a love that is costly and sacrificial. If God the Father so loved us that he gave his only-begotten Son to die for us on the Cross, if God the Son so loved us that he descended into hell on our behalf, then we shall only be truly in the image and likeness of the Trinity if we also lay down our lives for each other. Without *kenosis* and cross-bearing, without the exchange of substituted love and all the voluntary suffering which this involves, there can be no genuine likeness to the Trinity. 'Let us love one another', we proclaim in the Liturgy, 'that with one mind we may confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinity consubstantial and undivided.' Without mutual love there is no true confession of faith in the Trinity. But, 'love one another' means 'lay down your lives for one another'.

⁵² Archpriest Avvakum, *The Life written by Himself*, tr. K. N. Brostrom (Ann Arbor 1979), p. 42.

⁵³ Lev Gillet 'Does God Suffer?', *Sobornost* 3:15 (1954), p. 120.

It will now be apparent why Lossky should have insisted that between the Trinity and hell there lies no other choice. To refuse to love others leads eventually to the loss of all joy and meaning, as Charles Williams shows in the account of the Wentworth's disintegration at the end of *Descent into Hell*: 'The silence lasted; nothing happened. In that pause expectancy faded [. . .]. He was drawn, steadily, everlasting, inward and down through the bottomless circles of void'.⁵⁴ It is a daunting passage, which needs to be read in full. Either we love others, after the image of God the Trinity, or we condemn ourselves to the void. God does not condemn us: it is we who pass sentence on ourselves. 'L'enfer, c'est les autres'? No, Sartre is wrong: hell is not other people – it is myself, cut off from others, refusing to relate, denying the Trinity. But I have before me another possibility. 'Love is the Kingdom which the Lord mystically promised to the disciples', St Isaac the Syrian '[. . .] When we have reached love, we have reached God and our journey is complete. We have crossed over to the island that lies beyond the world, where are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Charles William *Descent into Hell* (London 1949), p. 222

⁵⁵ A. J. Wensinck, tr., *Mystic Treatise by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam 1923), pp. 211-12.