Trinity and Personhood

Duncan Reid

We like to view persons as in some sense ultimately important, but also having been formed, and continuing to be formed, in relationship. We're unfortunately a long way from being consistent in this valuing of personhood: earlier this year some of us heard Frank Brennan pointing out that a recent terrorist attack in Spain that had claimed some 200 lives had been widely reported in the Australian and other western news media, but a massacre in the same week in western Sudan that claimed almost exactly the same number of lives had gone unreported. Well, we've now caught up with events in the Sudan, but it's taken six months longer. It's almost as if the value we theoretically place on human personhood is somehow less applicable in some cases than others. Until the news photographers are there. But at least theoretically, we regard (or like to think we regard) all persons as equally valuable.

Now, go back to Roman law: in the ancient world, a person was identical with his or her social role or function, so that some persons were inherently more important than others. Now as we know, the biblical God is no respecter of persons in this sense, no respecter of social roles. And so the *patria potestas*, the absolute power of the family patriarch, was modified only when Roman law reached its Christianised formulation in the Code of Justinian (AD 518–65).¹

But already by the fourth century, the Christian church had developed a way of speaking about God in terms of three persons, in eternal community. These persons were more substantial than roles or functions—they were called *hypostases* in Greek, a word that carried a sense of substantiality, and though in Latin the legal and theatrical term *persona* was used, the significance of this term was transformed by its new Christian usage: these persons in God were eternal, not limited to time, and they interacted in response to one another. In the economy of salvation there were patterns of sending and referring of praise.² But as far as eternity is concerned, the church found it had only two ways of speaking of the divine persons: doxologically, when it affirmed that the persons were equally to be praised, and relationally, when it affirmed that the Son and the Spirit had their origin in the person whom Jesus had called 'my father'. So while (and because) there was an equality of being, the only way Christians could distinguish between the persons was to speak of their relations of origin. But just as it was impossible to speak of Jesus without also speaking of the Father and the Spirit, so it was also impossible to speak of God the Father, without also speaking of Jesus. In fact it didn't make sense to speak of God as Father, in the way Jesus had taught his followers to do, without also speaking of the child (πρός) of the Father. So there was a mutual dependence of these sets of terms. In a similar way there was a long-standing mutual dependence of the language of word and breath (e.g. Ps. 33:6), and this was adapted to Christian purposes when Christ was spoken of as the Word—corresponding, of course, to the Spirit/breath (pneuma).

Now how did all this talk of origination fit with equality? I believe it transformed all relations of origin, and this was a new insight of the Christians. It wasn't the only new insight. The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt once remarked that 'the discoverer of the role of forgive-

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ness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. In the same way, the Christian community, in their reflection on their own speech about Jesus as the Son and Word of God, hit on the idea that to be a son, or a child, while it did mean a state of having one’s origin in someone else, did not imply inequality with or subordination to that person. As a minor there might be some necessary tutelage of a child, but a child, on reaching adulthood, becomes the equal of his or her parent without ceasing to be a child of their parent. Being originated does not mean being unequal or subordinate as a person. This was a new and radical idea. And this insight can be pushed back in the other direction: even as a minor, the child is no less a person in this new-minted sense, and persons are equals one to another. Children have their own authority, in relation to their parents, as children—and this authority, as David Cunningham has shown, emerges very clearly out of trinitarian thinking.

So this was the time bomb ticking away in the fourth-century doctrine of the Trinity of coequal persons: that because these divine persons were equals, then human persons were conceivably also equals. It took a long time for the time bomb to go off, or, to change the metaphor, for the penny to drop. In fact there was a movement in the reverse direction for a time. In the seventeenth century, to adhere to the doctrine of the Trinity was seen in some circles as being incurably conservative, supporting the divine right of absolute monarchs—in other words, the absolute inequality of some persons in relation to others. It was guilt by association, because if the lovelers of the time had looked more closely at what they were rejecting, they may have found some solid trinitarian support for their political egalitarianism.

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But already the Spirit was at work, if I may speak in these terms, moving God’s people, some of them anyway, to discern and name equalities where no one had seen them before. There were still contradictions of course. The signatories to the American Declaration of Independence articulated a belief in human equality while some of them continued to benefit from a slave economy. The sloggers of the French revolution declared a belief in liberty and equality, without noticing that when liberty increases, so equality tends to decrease, and vice versa.

The important thing for what emerged as the trinitarian orthodoxy of the fourth century was that to name the Father as the first person and origin of the other two persons is not to assert a priority either in time (the persons are co-eternal) or in eternal authority, but simply to give weight to personhood as the most primitive or irreducible concept there can be. Divinity cannot be understood ultimately in terms of being or essence but only, at the end of the day, in terms of persons. And this theological affirmation gives a huge dignity to persons of all sorts, human as well as divine. Just as there is no generalised divine nature that somehow underlies the divine persons, so there is no such thing as a generalised human nature that is somehow more fundamental than actual living human persons.

Now, one important clarification to this point. Some writers, notably John Zizioulas, and in a rather different way Catherine LaCugna, are keen to emphasise the priority of the Father. But note that this priority is a priority of origination, not a priority in time (unlike human parenthood) and not a priority of authority. The doctrine of the Trinity insists that it is possible to be originated but equal. What these writers are saying is that divinity is to be defined in terms of personhood, not vice versa. Personhood is the primary concept. But note also that this is not to affirm an uncritical individualism. The person is not some autonomous subject that surveys all else from a distance. Rather, the person is formed in community, and only in community. Each person receives his or her being from another, and from others. The parent, for example, is defined by having a child as much as the child is defined by being the child of a parent. The person is not a free agent preceding another and having authority over another. There is no subordination or superordination. But neither is there any essence or nature behind the person, that is somehow more real or abiding than the person, for the person is the irreducible, the primitive, the ultimate. In relation to God as well as in relation to human beings.

I want to restate this, because it is central. When the writers of the fourth century spoke of persons they didn’t mean autonomous individuals in the classic modern western sense. They weren’t talking of the self-made men of late capitalist mythology. It wouldn’t have entered their heads that a person, any person, could be understood apart from his or her relationships—parents, children, sisters, brothers, cousins and so on. The autonomous individual, the Robinson Crusoe on his desert island, is a fantasy of the modern western civilisation. For those early Christian writers, as for most people in the world still, persons are the products of their relationships. Persons are formed by their interactions with other persons. When both Karl Barth and Karl Rahner wanted to find an alternative trinitarian term to use instead of the traditional ‘person’, they were wanting a corrective to this modern western misappropriation of the term person to mean individual. And when Archbishop Peter Jensen in his book on revelation
critiques modern western individualism, I find myself completely in agreement with him—on this point anyway? But my interest is in reclaiming the term ‘person’ and not letting it be hijacked by the ideologues of individualism. ‘Person’ carries a much richer and deeper and broader set of connotations, and should not be so lightly surrendered. It is a fundamental term for trinitarian theology, and in due course it has worked to transform the political and social relationships in societies shaped by Christian faith. Its connotations are of being formed in relationship for the equality, the dignity and the ontological irreducibility that properly belong to persons—not formed for the autonomy that chooses to do whatever it likes, note, but for continuing and deepening life in mutual relationship.

This consensus we share about how we should treat each other, as persons, is something we and the world at large owe to the theology hammered out by the early Christian thinkers, a theology that spoke of an eternal Trinity of co-equal persons. So how to demonstrate the ancestry of this now commonly accepted notion of the equality of persons? Just that, given the natural differences and inequalities between human beings (which we’re very good at celebrating, for example during the recent Olympic Games), equality of persons is not all that obvious. It would seem far more obvious to encode these natural inequalities into legislation.

Societies shaped by Christian trinitarianism, at least in theory however, have taken a different path.

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2. The distinction between the inner and economic Trinity is an issue I have discussed elsewhere. See ‘The Defeat of Trinitarian Theology: an Alternative View’, *Pacifica*, 9, October 1996, pp.293–300. There is clearly a kenosis of the second person in the economy of salvation, but this should not be transferred to the inner life of God.
7. Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, IVP, Leicester, 2002, pp.146–50, 151–3. My problem with these passages is their emphasis on obedience or submission as the only alternative to autonomy.