

# TRINITY AND PERSONALITY

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In the God-talk of today the dogma of the Trinity and its history is a minimal object. The person of today is interested in one's own personality and in the question of its realization in the world. Taking God into account or not, one's own personality becomes for one's self a problem. Not if God may be a unity in three persons, but if God could be thought of as a person at all, and what our own being-a-person could mean in this connection is for us a problem. This latter question is for the person of today more a problem than the question of the personality of God—only with the distinction that it is for that person not only a historical more or less occasional question as the latter, but an essential substantial one, a problem of one's own self-understanding.

Our human concept of personality—as far as we have one—not only puts in question the Trinity speculation, but our concept of personality itself represents a problem for us. In view of this situation I ask myself, if the Personality of the triune God questioned by our concept of the person could represent an answer to our question about our human personality, and it is my thesis that *personality is just as much the problem of the divine Trinity as the Trinity is the solution of the problem of human Personality*.

In the following I shall develop this thesis—personality as the problem of the Trinity and as its solution—in four parts, based on the third volume of my *Dogmatics: The Threefold Creation of the Triune God as the Transcendence of Responsibility*.

In the *first part* we shall analyze the Trinity in its entirety as a rational Irrationality or an irrational Rationality in view of its historical genesis.

In the *second part* we shall recognize in its dogmatic formulations symbols of the mystery of being and of the riddle of meaning with which we are confronted by means of the question of the meaning of our existence as persons.

In the *third part* I shall show how the statements of the dogma about the immanent Trinity—the generation of the Son through the Father, the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son and the perichoresis of the three persons—can serve us as a symbol of our self-understanding and of our destiny toward responsible personhood in community.

In the *fourth part* we shall explain the relationship between the Trinity and the world in the economical Trinity to find in the creation as creation out of nothing and as continuing creation—conservation, companionship and gubernation—in redemption and glorification, symbols for the realization of our destiny in a graced self-realization.

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As in my *Dogmatics as Self-understanding of the Christian Faith* I use the concept of symbol as an unavoidable objectivation of the nonobjectifiable Self, of Being, and of the relations of both of them.

## I.

Let us first remember the *basic concepts and structures of the Trinity* for which the dogma refers to the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum (389) and the Athanasianum (the *symbolum Quicumque*). According to their definitions the Trinity consists in one divine substance in the three separate persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (*una divina essentia in tribus personis*). The three persons have no essences of their own but they have them in community. Nevertheless they have their own qualities through which they operate in different manner, first of all in the in-itselfness of the Trinity in eternity. In this eternal immanence the Father in his fatherhood (*paternitas*) generates the Son in his sonhood (*filiatio*) and from both of them—from the Father and the Son—proceeds the Holy Spirit in its spiration (*spiratio in processione spiritus sancti ex patre filioque*). Although these functions of the three divine persons occur in accordance with their qualities separately (*divise*) the three persons envelop and penetrate one another (*perichoresis* or *circumincessio*).

But the three divine persons do not work only in the immanent realm of the Trinity in eternity (*opera ad intra Trinitatis*) since they are working also in the world in the sphere of time in a threefold manner: in the creation of the world and its conservation, in the redemption of the fallen world and in the glorious fulfillment of this history of salvation at the end. Although in all these three works in the direction of the world (*opera ad extra Trinitatis*) the three persons operate together (*indivise*) it is supposed (*per appropriationem*) that creation and conservation are mainly the work of the Father, redemption the special work of the Son and that the glorification belongs especially to the Holy Spirit.

It is not astonishing that the dogma assumes for all three parts of the doctrine of the Trinity—the basic definition of the triune God and of the working of the three persons *ad intra* and *ad extra*—a supernatural revelation and faith for its acceptance and recognition. For rational thinking the outlined description of the Trinity is indeed not understandable and not acceptable since it consists in a series of logical contradictions. Although the dogma rejects reason as inadequate for its understanding, it uses reason for the definition of its different parts and represents in its totality an illogical system through an admirable logical subtlety of conceptual differentiations. But it is not able to overcome the inadequacies of its definitions: In how it is that persons can be distinguished if they are one in their essence? How qualities can remain different when their owners interpenetrate one another, and how is it then possi-

ble that they work independently from one another? Is a working at all thinkable in eternity that is before there is a realm and a time in which it could happen? In the *opera Trinitatis ad extra* after the creation out of nothing such a worldly surrounding is at hand. But when all three persons are working together (*indivise*), the Father is in danger of suffering and dying together with the Son so that the Allmightiness of God would be put in question or for a time no God would exist.

The situation for the dogma becomes even more difficult if one appeals for its statements to the Bible as their revelatory fundament since the Scriptures do not contain any similar speculations. It is even easier to delineate some of them from the realms of nature and reason than from the Bible. But such profane similarities are taken only as hints of the superrational revelation (*vestigia*) and not as their full proofs. So with the rise of the sciences of nature and history there remained not only a mystery of faith but nonsense for reason so that the dogma was more and more abolished. For modern Protestant Theology the Trinity formula only played the role of a historical problem and the *opera ad extra* were used only as a summary of the dogmatics but without their basis in the *opera ad intra*.

It is indeed easy to explain in a historical manner the origin and the development of the trinitarian dogma as a consequence of the process of the biblical-Christian world of representation and thought. In the Old Testament there is no problem in the relationship of the creator-God and his Messiah since the latter is thought of as a new David or in the late Jewish Apocalypics as a heavenly angel created and chosen by God. As this Son of Man Jesus probably expected to appear after his death from heaven to realize the kingdom of God on earth in a new world. But because his parousia did not occur and since the history went on, his salvatory work had to be changed by his adherents. In the meantime they had to proclaim their faith in the world of the late Hellenistic mystery religions. Under the pressure of the nonarrival of the parousia and under the influence of their new surroundings they had to reinterpret the eschatological work of Christ in sacramental terms, that means that it no longer consisted in the change of the aeons but in the foundation of the church as a salvatory institution through whose sacraments humans could get immortality. But to work in this manner Jesus Christ had to be deified. The change in soteriology necessitated a change in Christology, a double change which was already working in the gospel of John. That is, in short, the origin of the Christological debate in the Early Church leading to the Trinitarian Dogma.

## II.

In contradistinction there are the theologians who concluded from this history of the dogma of the Trinity its dispatch and uselessness for modern

people from Feuerbach to Albert Schweitzer. I am convinced that it is still of value for us as a symbol for our self-understanding in a manner in which the original meaning of the biblical eschatology can be understood in a better way than in the traditional use of it—not in the speculative Hegelian method as D.Fr. Strauss interpreted it, but in an existential interpretation of its mythological content.

The origin of the biblical eschatology, that is the expectation of a new world as the completion of the present distorted world or as a completely new creation lies in the problem of the idea of the world as the creation of an almighty good God. For Israel the liberation from Egypt and the foundation of the nation through Moyses the prophet and guide was the basis for its religion. In this situation Jahve was for it the power of the foundation of its being and of the solution of its meaning-problem. Under the influence of the Babylonian myth of Marduk and his killing of the dragon Tiamat, this national experience was enlarged in a cosmological drama of the creation of the world within which God preserved a special place for his elected people and guided its history. But when Israel succumbed to its enemies and lost its land, this faith in an innerworldly reign of David was changed into a hope of a Messiah coming from heaven in the future to solve all the earthly problems. This late Jewish eschatology was taken over by Christianity, which concentrated on the belief in the resurrection of Jesus and to substitute for "Israel" "the Church" for whose completion the return of the raised Christ is expected.

In this manner the biblical-Christian eschatology is an expression of the being-meaning-problem and a speculative construction of its solution. Although its basic structure is dualistic and world-pessimistic it is in its goal not less optimistic and monistic than other worldviews which are in their entirety optimistic on the basis of a total harmony. In view of the reality in which we can find only particular meanings but not a total overcoming of the meaninglessness, the biblical-Christian dualism is less illusionary than any harmonious optimistic monism, although it is in its final vision not less illusionary. In using the idea of history as the means of overcoming in a supernatural or natural manner the meaning riddle it is burdened with the problem of the beginning of history, that is, with the question of the origin of being from which the harmonious eternal return seems to be free. But as the cyclic worldview does not give an answer on the question of the why of being, also creation out of nothing does not answer this question. Neither of these worldviews solves the mystery of being and its riddle of meaning with which we are confronted in reality when we are asking: Why is there something and not nothing, and what is the meaning of our being in the world? Both worldviews are not solutions but expressions of these two problems which arise for all thinking about our situation in the world.

Usually we find ourselves confronted primarily with the *meaning-problem* since it is important for our physical and spiritual life. The criteria we use

thereby are not only subjective in relation to what is meaningful for us, but we observe also facts and events which are independent from us in their own relationship of a positive or a negative value. But as our judgment is always relative, since we do not know the whole realm, so our realizing of intended meanings remains always relative since we cannot know all the consequences of our doing and even our best doing has its shadows for us or for our surroundings. In any case we have always to do with a *riddle of meaning*. But while in the question of meaning we are dealing only with a riddle, in the *question of being* we are confronted with a *mystery* in which we cannot take any step toward its enlightenment or we would have to extinguish our thinking consciousness which would produce for us a night in which all cows are dark. We are not able to say anything about being since in our necessarily objectifying thinking we have always to do with beings and not with being as such. In our work we have to do with the same absolute boundary, since we are not able to produce something out of nothing but are always dependent on something to create something. Being remains for us an absolute mystery.

To speak about this mystery of being and to explain in some measure its riddle of meaning, we have to use inadequate concepts in which we objectify what is lastly not objectifiable, a mythological or speculative imagery understood as *symbols*, that is, as objectifications of the nonobjectifiable, which have their truth in pointing beyond to an existential reality.

In this manner of *symbolizing an existential truth the dogma of the Trinity in its rational irrationality as a whole can serve us as a symbol of the mystery of being and its riddle of meaning*. Although it is constructed by reason it is said that it can be understood only by faith, that is, in acknowledging the boundaries of rational knowledge and pointing to that which cannot be explained in conceptual logic. As such, its function is only a formal one and it is a basic symbol for our thinking about being and its meaning. Already in this formal boundary marking manner it preserves us from an illusionary natural or supernatural universal teleology and from a nihilism despairing of all meaning. But as we are not only interested in the forms of our thinking but in their content, so the dogma of the Trinity, too, is for us not only of formal importance, but has a content which for our self-understanding is of even greater importance in view of the *opera Trinitatis ad intra* and in view of the *opera Trinitatis ad extra*. First we take in account the context of the doctrines of the *opera Trinitatis ad intra* in connection with the positive content of the above mentioned boundaries of our knowledge symbolized in the rational-irrational mystery of the Trinity as a whole.

### III.

*The shattering of our objectifying thinking* in the question of being and its meaning has—as already mentioned in view of the exclusion of an illusionary

teleology and a despairing nihilism—not merely negative consequences, but this shattering includes also *a positive turn* insofar as it opens for us a new horizon of our being in the world and its meaning. To acknowledge the impossibility of a universal teleology and of the self-contradiction of nihilism is more than such an illusion and self-contradiction. Already in this negative manner it is truth instead of untruth or halftruth. It frees us from self-deception and leads us to a positive solution of the basic problem of our life. We experience in this shattering of our asking for meaning in the midst of the meaning riddle of the mystery of being the fact that we are forced and destined to confront this question. In view of the inevitable shattering we would not choose this undertaking. But we acknowledge ourselves as forced and destined to it. With its problematical form it belongs to our essence without which we would lose ourselves. So in the shattering of our asking about being and meaning we discover our real being and meaning through which we are distinguished from all other forms of being. It is the human personality which appears here and with it we have no more to do with an opaque transcendence but with a special revelation of the transcendence knowable not in its wholeness but in this special destiny to be responsible for this question of being and meaning. It is upon us to ask this question, but we feel ourselves inevitably destined to ask it and to take on us its shattering. To understand oneself as responsible for this undertaking is a special occurrence in the world. It is not an objectifiable causality but a free decision to which we find ourselves destined. This destination cannot be found in the world as a whole and it is not our work, but it is a special particular working of the transcendence in our self-understanding. We understand ourselves in this manner, but the enactment of it is in the same manner as this enactment not objectifiable, a nonobjectifiable experience of the working of the transcendence in us and through us. It is a special kind of mystique, not a becoming one with the mystery of being, but with a special working of it, not experiential without it.

But as our self-understanding is not objectifiable in its enactment, so this special appearance of transcendence does not become an object of our discursive thought and to say something about it we have to use the language of symbols—in this case not the Trinity in its entirety as we use it as the symbol of the mystery of being and its meaning-riddle but *the opera Trinitatis ad intra in which we have the adequate symbol of the special revelation* of this mystery and of the manner in which it solves the meaning of our destiny to become a person in community with other persons to whom we are in relation with the transcendence operating in this manner. Each of the three kinds of working of the Trinity in its immanence represents a *symbol of our destiny to become a responsible person in community*.

*First the generation of the Son* through the Father as an eternal act outside of space and time. As the generation of the Son is the irreducible free will of the Father so our destination to become a responsible person is not our choice and—without losing it—we are not able to reduce it to a causal occur-

rence in space and time but it occurs itself in the enactment of our non-objectifiable self-understanding. In its interiority occurs the birth of our personal being in a once-for-allness of each person. Personhood in its essence has the character of once-for-allness.

*Second:* as the *filiatio* is at the same time the work of the Father as it is the essence of the Son so our self-understanding as a person is in one an act of the transcendence and of ours. We are negated in it as much as the transcendence itself. Neither the destinal working of the transcendence nor our self-understanding realizing this destination occurs independently from one another. In its nonobjectifiability is an ontological-existential event for which the dogma uses—*third*—the symbols of the Holy Spirit and of the *spiratio*. In the enactment of our self-understanding as destined to become a personal being we realize this transcendental destiny in our existence. That is what the dogma calls the *spiratio* as the working of the Father in the third person as the Holy Spirit and that is the reason why it lets the Spirit go out from the Father and *filiouque*, from the Son. In our personal self-understanding we have no more to do only with transcendence as such and in itself, but with its working in its special revelation of our destiny in our inwardness symbolized in the Holy Spirit.

Here we have to do with a *fourth* aspect of the immanent Trinity, with the *Perichoresis* of the three trinitarian persons, that is, in its comprehension of one another in the separateness of their individual working. This *Perichoresis* has for us a double meaning. *First:* it symbolizes in our relationship with transcendence, in which it does not work without our self-understanding but only through it, the distinction between both of them. We do never become identical with transcendence but stand in a transcendental relation to it. We have to understand ourselves, we are the subject of our self-understanding although it is not possible without the revelation of transcendence. In our conceptual thinking we have to go around (*circum ambulare*) the transcendence which remains finally a mystery, never unveiled totally, but only revealed in the nonobjectifiable realization of our self-understanding as responsible persons.

*Secondly*, this *Perichoresis* does not remain in the inwardness of our personal self, but comprehends in the same manner other persons. We have to respect them in their own personal destiny which remains for us a mystery with its meaning problems. And it is the same with all kinds of beings which are to be respected in their dignity. This enlarged aspect of the *Perichoresis* leads us now to the *opera Trinitatis ad extra* as the symbols of the realization of our destiny in the world and of the world as the place for the realization of this destination.

#### IV.

In the foregoing we have dealt only with the *opera Trinitatis ad intra* and

have found it in the symbols for the relationship of our self-understanding with its transcendence. But as the transcendence is not without the immanence, so our transcendental self-understanding stands in connection to the world. Christianity formulates this relation between transcendence and immanence in the doctrine of creation and in the trinitarian dogma it is taken into account as the outer working of the Trinity. They consist in the doctrines of the creation as *creatio ex nihilo* at the beginning and the continuing creation, of the redemption after the Fall and of the final glorification at the end of time. In contradistinction from the *opera ad intra* these *opera Trinitatis ad extra* occur *indivise*, separated from one another.

For the objectifying thinking of the natural and historical sciences these doctrines are untenable but for our existential self-understanding and its realization in the world, they can serve us as the adequate symbols in different directions corresponding to the doctrinal specifications.

First, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This nonbiblical philosophical speculation which was originally constructed to distinguish God the creator from any *demiourgoi* which needs for the creation of the world some material, can serve us not only, as already mentioned, as the symbolic answer of the unanswerable question: Why is there something and not nothing? but also as a *symbol of the essence of the unconditionedness of responsibility*. For objectifying thinking no such unconditionedness is possible, since in each decision can be discovered a reason for its causal effect so that it can be explained in the schema of cause and effect, which excludes unconditionedness. It is not recommendable to neglect this calling in question of responsibility since its unconditionedness occurs only at the boundary of objectifying knowledge after passing its criteria and acknowledging them as far as it realizes itself in the realm of demonstrable causality in which there is no absolutely new beginning possible. But in the midst of the beginningless and unending relative connection of causal conditioned factors one has the chance to understand oneself as free and responsible for decision in overtaking its consequences and to set in this realm of liberty a new beginning. Insofar as one does not acknowledge a ground of one's decision outside of one's free will, in which one acknowledges personal duty, one acts in a creative way out of nothing objectively demonstrable. For such a kind of unconditioned responsible self-understanding *creatio ex nihilo* is the adequate symbol.

Not only the creative effects of this existentially understood *creatio ex nihilo* but already its fundamental enactment occurs in space and time and needs being for its execution, which is not in our disposition but must be given by a special creative working of the mystery of being as a not foreseeable grace. As for the existential understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* so, too, for its consequences in the continuation of this creativity (*creatio continua*) we appeal not only to God as the creator but—in accordance with the trinitarian doctrine—to all three persons of the Trinity. The three parts of the *creatio continua* as preservation (*conservatio*), divine concomitance (*concursus divinus*) and



gubernation to the fulfillment (*gubernatio*) are, as the dogma says, the common (*indivise*) work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, although the preservation may be mostly the work of the Father, the accompanying is mainly the work of the second person and the gubernation the part of the Holy Spirit.

In our *existential interpretation* of these dogmatic distinctions we would say *conservation* means the understanding of *being as wonder*. The *divine accompanying* consists in our consciousness to be accompanied by others in a responsible manner for our neighbors from far and near—as Luther said, “We have to be Christ to one another”—that is, to form a *responsible society* which would be the definition of the true church. *Gubernatio* would then consist in the *personal and political realization* of such a program under the guidance of this spirit, which means liberty in obligation and contains in it the *hope of its fulfillment*.

But before we say more about this goal we have to take into account not only that in the trinitarian dogma but also in our existential realization of its content must be acknowledged the great hindrance to this personal and societal way of meaningful behavior. The dogma speaks here about *the Fall and its consequences*. We understand them as symbols for the possibility of missing destination through outer or inner fallacies. In view of this problematic human situation, Christianity proclaims the *salvatory work of Christ* in his preaching, vicarious atoning death and his resurrection, which consists in the content of the second trinitarian *opus ad extra: Redemption*.

It is not the place here to develop the different stations of the redemptive work of Christ as the Son of God in whose passion and death even the Father is involved. We content ourselves with the existential interpretation of this mythology as a symbol of the *saving insight and acceptance of our guilt* for the possibility of its *expiation through our own atonement and regaining of our lost identity as a resurrection* from the spiritual death.

As creation out of nothing goes on in the continuing creation so redemption works in our individual and collective history to its fulfillment in the final *Glorification* as the third *opus Trinitatis ad extra*. In it we find not only the symbols for the *meaning of culture and its history* for its *decays* and its *judgments* but also for the *hope* which is *included in responsibility* since we have the right to hope as much as we realize our destination to nonconditional responsibility in community. In each moment of such a personal realization the last judgment occurs with a new creation of our world wherein we find a full compensation of an illusionary so-called history of salvation or pseudo-Futurology in an actualized *real eschatology*.

In this manner we deliberate the biblical Christian eschatology from its fallacy in which we have found the origin of the doctrine of the Trinity with whose symbols we are able to overcome the historical problematic of this doctrine, understanding the *Trinity as the symbol of personality*.

Let me close with an allusion to a speciality of the last treated *opus*

*Trinitatis ad extra.* Although the dogmatic stresses the *indivise* character of these *opera ad extra* it allows nevertheless to speak *per appropriationem*, in approximation of the creation as the work of the Father and of the redemption as the work of the Son and of the glorification as the work of the Holy Spirit. We would enlarge this appropriation of these main Christian doctrines to the trinitarian schemas of other religions in the Buddhist *Trikaya* or in *Trimurti* of the Hindus and especially to say about Christ what is said in the Bhagavadgita about Krishna: "In what name a person does venerate me, if he does it with all his heart, it is all right." In our terminology that means: in unconditional personal responsibility in community in the transcendental relationship to the special revelation of the mystery of being and its riddle of meaning as it is symbolized in the symbol of the triune God.

In view of the problem of God-talk in contemporary discussion, the result of our deliberations, in their methodological importance could be summarized in the following thesis: *In the encounter of the different beliefs in God and of their negations we have not to insist on their positive or negative positions, but we have to bring in connection the problems of both of them and to interpret these positions as expressions of the basic problem of being and its riddle of meaning which cannot be solved in objectifying thinking but only in existentially understood symbols in whose hermeneutical dialectic the God-problem reveals itself as the problem of becoming-human.*



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