

2. POSITIVE SIGNIFICANCE

The inner limitation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the sense of a negative theology, upon which we have tried to throw some light in the foregoing discussion, cannot mean all the same that its formulas remain impenetrable, empty verbal constructs. They can and must be understood as meaningful statements, representing, it is true, references to the ineffable, not its adaptation to our mental world. To conclude our reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity we shall now try to elucidate the signpost character of these references by means of three theses.

Thesis No. 1

The paradox "una essentia tres personae"—one Being in three Persons—is associated with the question of the original meaning of unity and plurality.

What is meant by this is best illustrated by a glance at the background of pre-Christian Greek thought against which faith in the trine God emerges. To ancient thought, only unity (that is, oneness) is divine; plurality seems in contrast to be secondary, the disintegration of unity. It proceeds from disintegration and tends toward it. The Christian confession of faith in God as the Three-in-One, as he who is simultaneously the *monas* and the *trias*, absolute unity and fullness, signifies the conviction that divinity lies beyond our categories of unity and plurality. Although to us, the nondivine, it is one and single, the one and only divine as opposed to all that is not divine; nevertheless in itself it is truly fullness and plurality, so that creaturely unity and plurality are both in the same degree a likeness and a share of the divine. Not only unity is divine; plurality, too, is something primordial

and has its inner ground in God himself. Plurality is not just disintegration that sets in outside the divinity; it does not arise simply through the intervention of the *dys*, of disintegration; it is not the result of the dualism of two opposing powers; it corresponds to the creative fullness of God, who himself stands above plurality and unity, encompassing both.⁷ So at bottom the belief in the Trinity, which recognizes the plural in the unity of God, is the only way to the final elimination of dualism as a means of explaining plurality alongside unity; only through this belief is the positive validation of the many given a definitive base. God stands above singular and plural. He bursts both categories.

This has a further important consequence. To him who believes in God as tri-une, the highest unity is not the unity of inflexible monotony. The model of unity or oneness toward which one should strive is consequently not the indivisibility of the atom, the smallest unity, which cannot be divided up any further; the authentic acme of unity is the unity created by love. The multi-unity that grows in love is a more radical, truer unity than the unity of the "atom".

Thesis No. 2

The paradox "una essentia tres personae" is a function of the concept of person and is to be understood as an intrinsic implication of the concept of person.

Inasmuch as Christian faith acknowledges God, the creative meaning, as person it acknowledges him as knowledge, word, and love. But the profession of faith in God as a person necessarily includes the acknowledgment of God as relatedness,

⁷ Cf. on this point W. Kern, "Einheit-in-Mannigfaltigkeit", in *Gott in Welt* (essays presented to K. Rahner), vol. 1 (Freiburg, 1964), pp. 207-39; see also what we said on p. 125, n. 5, about Maximus Confessor.

as communicability, as fruitfulness. The unrelated, unrelatable, absolutely One could not be person. There is no such thing as person in the categorical singular. This is already apparent in the words in which the concept of person developed: the Greek word *prosopon* means literally "look toward"; with the prefix *pros* (toward), it includes the notion of relatedness as an integral part of itself. It is the same with the Latin *persona* = "sounding through"; again, the *per* = "through . . . to" expresses relatedness, this time in the form of communication through speech. In other words, if the absolute is person, it is not an absolute singular. To this extent the overstepping of the singular is implicit in the concept of person. Of course, we shall have to say at the same time that the acknowledgment that God is a person in the guise of a triple personality explodes the naïve, anthropomorphic concept of person. It declares in a sort of cipher that the personality of God infinitely exceeds the human kind of personality; so that the concept of person, illuminating as it is, once again reveals itself as an inadequate metaphor.

Thesis No. 3

The paradox "una essentia tres personae" is connected with the problem of absolute and relative and emphasizes the absoluteness of the relative, of that which is in relation.

a. Dogma as speech form

Let us try to feel our way to this idea by means of the following reflections. If faith has expressed the three-in-oneness of God since the fourth century in the formula "one Being—three Persons", this distribution of the concepts is

first of all largely just a form of words.⁸ The only thing certain at first was that the element of oneness, that of three-ness, and the complete simultaneity of both in the all-embracing dominance of oneness had all to be expressed. That the two things were allotted to the concepts of substance and person, as they were, is in a certain sense accidental; in the last resort it is only a case of ensuring that both are put into words and not left to individual whim, which at bottom could always dissipate and destroy the thing itself as well as the words. In face of this discovery one is not entitled to go too far in the direction of taking these words as the only possible ones and deducing that the matter can be stated only in this way and in no other. That would mean a failure to recognize the negative character of the language of theology, the purely tentative fashion in which it speaks.

b. The concept of person

On the other hand, it remains true that this speech form is more than just a final decision to cling to some string of letters or other. In the struggle over the language of the profession of faith, the struggle over the thing itself was settled, so that in this language, inadequate as it may be, contact with the reality does take place. We can say from the history of ideas that it was here that the reality "person" was first fully sighted; the only way that the concept and idea of "person" dawned on the human mind was in the struggle over the Christian image of God and the interpretation of the figure

⁸ Cf. the article by K. Rahner mentioned above: "Was ist eine dogmatische Aussage?" in *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 5 (Einsiedeln, 1962), pp. 54–81, especially 67–72.

of Jesus of Nazareth. If we try to test the intrinsic suitability of our formula while bearing these points in mind, we find that it was imposed by two basic premises. First, it was clear that, seen absolutely, God is only One, that there is not a plurality of divine principles. Once this has been established, it is also clear that the oneness lies on the plane of substance; consequently the three-ness that must also be mentioned is not to be sought here. It must therefore exist on a different level, on that of relation, of the "relative".

This result was also recommended above all by the evidence of the Bible. Here one met the fact that God seems to converse with himself. There is a "We" in God—the Fathers found it on the very first page of the Bible in the words "Let us make man" (Gen 1:26); there are an "I" and a "You" in him—the Fathers found this in the Psalms ("The Lord said to my lord": Ps 110:1) as well as in Jesus' conversations with the Father. The discovery of the dialogue within God led to the assumption of the presence in God of an "I" and a "You", an element of relationship, of coexistent diversity and affinity, for which the concept of *persona* absolutely dictated itself. It thereby acquired, over and above its theatrical and literary significance, a new depth of meaning without losing the vagueness that made it suitable for such a use.⁹

With the insight that, seen as substance, God is One but that there exists in him the phenomenon of dialogue, of differentiation, and of relationship through speech, the category of *relatio* gained a completely new significance for Christian thought. To Aristotle, it was among the "accidents", the chance

⁹ Cf. C. Andresen, "Zur Entstehung und Geschichte des trinitarischen Personbegriffs", *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 52 (1961): 1–38; J. Ratzinger, "Zum Personenverständnis in der Dogmatik", in J. Speck, *Das Personenverständnis in der Pädagogik und ihren Nachbardisziplinen* (Münster, 1966), pp. 157–71.

circumstances of being, which are separate from substance, the sole sustaining form of the real. The experience of the God who conducts a dialogue, of the God who is not only *logos* but also *dia-logos*, not only idea and meaning but speech and word in the reciprocal exchanges of partners in conversation—this experience exploded the ancient division of reality into substance, the real thing, and accidents, the merely circumstantial. It now became clear that the dialogue, the *relatio*, stands beside the substance as an equally primordial form of being.

With that, the wording of the dogma was to all intents and purposes settled. It expresses the perception that God as substance, as "being", is absolutely one. If we nevertheless have to speak of him in the category of triplicity, this does not imply any multiplication of substances but means that in the one and indivisible God there exists the phenomenon of dialogue, the reciprocal exchange of word and love. This again signifies that the "three Persons" who exist in God are the reality of word and love in their attachment to each other. They are not substances, personalities in the modern sense, but the relatedness whose pure actuality ("parcel of waves"!) does not impair the unity of the highest being but fills it out. St. Augustine once enshrined this idea in the following formula: "He is not called Father with reference to himself but only in relation to the Son; seen by himself he is simply God."¹⁰ Here the decisive point comes beautifully to light. "Father" is purely a concept of relationship. Only in being for the other is he Father; in his own being in himself he is simply God. Person is the pure relation of being related, nothing else. Relationship is not something extra added to the person, as it is with us; it only exists at all as relatedness.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 68, p. 1, 5, in CChr 39:905 (*Patrologia Latina* [PL] 36:845).

Expressed in the imagery of Christian tradition, this means that the first Person does not beget the Son as if the act of begetting were subsequent to the finished Person; it is the act of begetting, of giving oneself, of streaming forth. It is identical with the act of self-giving. Only as this act is it person, and therefore it is not the giver but the act of giving, "wave" not "particle" . . . In this idea of relatedness in word and love, independent of the concept of substance and not to be classified among the "accidents", Christian thought discovered the kernel of the concept of person, which describes something other and infinitely more than the mere idea of the "individual". Let us listen once again to St. Augustine: "In God there are no accidents, only substance and relation."¹¹ Therein lies concealed a revolution in man's view of the world: the sole dominion of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality. It becomes possible to surmount what we call today "objectifying thought"; a new plane of being comes into view. It is probably true to say that the task imposed on philosophy as a result of these facts is far from being completed—so much does modern thought depend on the possibilities thus disclosed, without which it would be inconceivable.

c. *The connection back to biblical thought and the question of Christian existence*

But let us return to our question. The reflections just described can easily give the impression that one has here arrived at

¹¹ Cf. *De Trinitate* 5, 5, 6 (PL 42:913f.): "In Deo autem nihil quidem secundum accidentis dicitur, quia nihil in eo mutabile est, nec tamen omne quod dicitur, secundum substantiam dicitur . . . quod tamen relativum non est accidentis, quia non est mutabile." See also on the whole question M. Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Munich, 1948), pp. 425–32 (§58).

the outermost point of speculative theology, which in elaborating on what is found in Scripture has moved far away from Scripture and lost itself in purely philosophical speculation. It will be all the more surprising to hear that closer inspection discloses that here the most extreme speculation leads directly back to biblical thought. For at bottom the ideas just outlined are to a large extent already present in Johannine thought, albeit expressed in different concepts and with a somewhat different aim. A brief indication will have to suffice. In St. John's Gospel Christ says of himself: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord" (5:19 and 30). This seems to rob the Son of all power; he has nothing of his own; precisely because he is the Son he can only *operate* by virtue of him to whom he owes his whole existence. What first becomes evident here is that the concept "Son" is a concept of relation. By calling the Lord "Son", John gives him a name that always points away from him and beyond him; he thus employs a term that denotes essentially a relatedness. He thereby puts his whole Christology into the context of the idea of relation. Formulas like the one just mentioned only emphasize this; they only, as it were, draw out what is implicit in the word "son", the relativity it contains. On the face of it, a contradiction arises when the same Christ says of himself in St. John: "I and the Father are one" (10:30). But anyone who looks more closely will see at once that in reality the two statements are complementary. In that Jesus is called "Son" and is thereby made "relative" to the Father, and in that Christology is ratified as a statement of relation, the automatic result is the total reference of Christ back to the Father. Precisely because he does not stand in *himself*, he stands in *him*, constantly one with him.

What this signifies, not just for Christology, but for the illumination of the whole meaning of being a Christian at all, comes to light when John extends these ideas to

Christians, who proceed from Christ. It then becomes apparent that he explains by Christology what the Christian's situation really is. We find here precisely the same interplay of the two series of statements as before. Parallel to the formula "The Son can do nothing of his own accord", which illumines Christology from the son concept as a doctrine of relativity, is the statement about those who belong to Christ, the disciples: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Thus Christian existence is put with Christ into the category of relationship. And parallel to the logic that makes Christ say, "I and the Father are one", we find here the petition "that they may be one, even as we are one" (17:11 and 22). The significant difference from Christology comes to light in the fact that the unity of Christians is expressed, not in the indicative, but in the form of a prayer.

Let us now try briefly to consider the significance of the line of thought that has become visible. The Son as Son, and insofar as he is Son, does not proceed in any way from himself and so is completely one with the Father; since he is nothing beside him, claims no special position of his own, confronts the Father with nothing belonging only to him, makes no reservations for what is specifically his own, therefore he is completely equal to the Father. The logic is compelling: If there is nothing in which he is just he, no kind of fenced-off private ground, then he coincides with the Father, is "one" with him. It is precisely this totality of interplay that the word "Son" aims at expressing. To John, "Son" means being from another; thus, with this word he defines the being of this man as being from another and for others, as a being that is completely open on both sides, knows no reserved area of the mere "I". When it thus becomes clear that the being of Jesus as Christ is a completely open being, a being "from" and "toward", which nowhere clings to itself and nowhere stands on its own, then it is also clear at the same

time that this being is pure relation (not substantiality) and, as pure relation, pure unity. This fundamental statement about Christ becomes, as we have seen, at the same time the explanation of Christian existence. To John, being a Christian means being like the Son, becoming a son; that is, not standing on one's own and in oneself, but living completely open in the "from" and "toward". Insofar as the Christian is a "Christian", this is true of him. And certainly such utterances will make him realize to how small an extent he is a Christian.

It seems to me that this illuminates the ecumenical character of the passage from a quite unexpected angle. Everyone knows, it is true, that Jesus' "high priestly prayer" (Jn 17), of which we are speaking, is the basic charter of all efforts for the unity of the Church. But do we not often take far too superficial a view of it? Our reflections have shown that Christian unity is first of all unity with Christ, which becomes possible where insistence on one's own individuality ceases and is replaced by pure, unreserved being "from" and "for". From such being with Christ, which enters completely into the openness of the one who willed to hold on to nothing of his own individuality (cf. also Phil 2:6f.), follows the complete "at-one-ness"—"that they may be one, even as we are one". All not-at-one-ness, all division, rests on a concealed lack of real Christliness, on a clinging to individuality that hinders the coalescence into unity.

I think it is not unimportant to note how the doctrine of the Trinity here passes over into an existential statement, how the assertion that relation is at the same time pure unity becomes transparently clear to us. It is the nature of the trinitarian personality to be pure relation and so the most absolute unity. That there is no contradiction in this is probably now evident. And one can understand from now on more clearly than before that it is not the "atom", the indivisible

smallest piece of matter,¹² that possesses the highest unity; that, on the contrary, pure oneness can only occur in the spirit and embraces the relatedness of love. Thus in Christianity the profession of faith in the oneness of God is just as radical as in any other monotheistic religion; indeed, only in Christianity does it reach its full stature. But it is the nature of Christian existence to receive and to live life as relatedness and, thus, to enter into that unity which is the ground of all reality and sustains it. This will perhaps make it clear how the doctrine of the Trinity, when properly understood, can become the reference point of theology that anchors all other lines of Christian thought.

Let us turn here once again to St. John's Gospel, which offers the decisive assistance. One can well say that the line we have indicated forms the dominant one in his theology. As well as in the "Son" idea it appears especially in two further christological concepts that must at least be briefly outlined here for the sake of completeness. These are the idea of the "mission" and the description of Jesus as the "Word" (*logos*) of God. "Mission" theology is again theology of being as relation and of relation as mode of unity. There is a well-known late Jewish saying: "The ambassador of a man is like the man himself."¹³ Jesus appears in St. John as the Father's ambassador, in whom is really fulfilled what all other ambassadors can only aim at asymptotically: he really loses his own identity in the role of ambassador; he is nothing but the ambassador who represents the other without interposing his own individuality. And so, as the true ambassador, he is one with him who sends him. Once again, through the concept of the mission, being is interpreted as being "from" and as being

¹² Cf. the short survey of the history of the concept "atom" by C. F. von Weizsäcker, in RGG 1:682-86.

¹³ Quoted in K. H. Schellke, *Jüngerschaft und Apostolat* (Freiburg, 1957), p. 30.

"for"; once again being is conceived as absolute openness without reservation. And again we find the extension to Christian existence in the words, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (13:20; 17:18, 20:21). In the classification of this existence as mission it is again expounded as being "from" and "for", as relatedness and hence as unity.

Finally, a remark on the concept of *logos* would also be appropriate. When John characterizes the Lord as *Logos* he is employing a term widely current in both Greek and Jewish thought and taking over with it a series of ideas implicit in it that are in this way transferred to Christ. But perhaps one can say that the new element that John has added to the *logos* concept lies not least in the fact that, to him, *logos* does not mean simply the idea of the eternal rationality of being, as it did essentially in Greek thought. By its application to Jesus of Nazareth, the concept of *logos* acquires a new dimension. It no longer denotes simply the permeation of all being by meaning; it characterizes this man: he who is here is "Word". The concept of *logos*, which to the Greeks meant "meaning" (*ratio*), changes here really into "word" (*verbum*). He who is here is Word; he is consequently "spoken" and, hence, the pure relation between the speaker and the spoken to. Thus *logos* Christology, as "word" theology, is once again the opening up of being to the idea of relationship. For again it is true that "word" comes essentially "from someone else" and "to someone else"; word is an existence that is entirely way and openness.

Let us round off the whole discussion with a passage from St. Augustine that elucidates splendidly what we mean. It occurs in his commentary on St. John and hinges on the sentence in the Gospel that runs, "Mea doctrina non est mea"—"My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (7:16). Augustine has used the paradox in this sentence to illuminate the paradoxical nature of the Christian image of

God and of Christian existence. He asks himself first whether it is not a sheer contradiction, an offense against the elementary rules of logic, to say something like "Mine is not mine." But, he goes on to ask, digging deeper, what, then, is the teaching of Jesus that is simultaneously his and not his? Jesus is "word", and thus it becomes clear that his teaching is he himself. If one reads the sentence again with this insight, it then says: I am by no means just I; I am not mine at all; my I is that of another. With this we have moved on out of Christology and arrived at ourselves: "*Quid tam tuum quam tu, quid tam non tuum quam tu*"—What is so much yours as yourself, and what is so little yours as yourself?¹⁴ The most individual element in us—the only thing that belongs to us in the last analysis—our own "I", is at the same time the least individual element of all, for it is precisely our "I" that we have neither from ourselves nor for ourselves. The "I" is simultaneously what I have completely and what least of all belongs to me. Thus here again the concept of mere substance (= what stands in itself!) is shattered, and it is made apparent how being that truly understands itself grasps at the same time that *in* being itself it does not belong to itself; that it only comes to itself by moving away from itself and finding its way back as relatedness to its true primordial state.

Such thoughts do not make the doctrine of the Trinity unmysteriously comprehensible, but they do help, I think, to open up a new understanding of reality, of what man is and of what God is. Just when we seem to have reached the extreme limit of theory, the extreme of practicality comes into view: talking about God discloses what man is; the most paradoxical approach is at the same time the most illuminating and helpful one.

PART TWO

JESUS CHRIST

¹⁴ Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus* 29, 3 (on Jn 7:16), in CChr 36:285.