

SEMINAR ON TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

“PERSON” IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT, EAST AND WEST

The second session was chaired by Earl C. Muller, S.J., Marquette University. Papers were presented by Petro B. T. Bilaniuk, University of St. Michael's College, on Eastern perspectives and (in absentia) by Anne King-Lenzmeier, University of St. Thomas, on Western ones.

The pre-Christian world had a limited concept of person though certain elements (Aristotle on the intellect [*nous*] or Plato on friendship and freedom, for instance) entered into later Christian understandings. The Hebrew tradition used the term *face*, *panim*, which was translated into Greek as *prosopon* and into Latin as *persona*. The New Testament, in affirming the divinity of Christ, was in tension with Old Testament monotheism. Jesus is clearly described as an acting person. There is sufficient data to affirm the same of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament most interestingly expresses the concept of “person” where it expresses the dazzling divine glory of the human face (Lk 9:28-29; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6). This suggests a dynamic concept of person in the process of becoming and divinization or *theosis*. There is an ascent to and establishment of an intimate relationship with the three divine persons.

Prosopon was supplanted by the term *hypostasis* toward the end of the third century. The latter came to indicate a concrete individual with definite characteristics as opposed to the common substrate or *ousia*. *Prosopon* came back in the next century, creating a confusion not resolved until Chalcedon. Both Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus had taken the unique step of using *prosopon* and *hypostasis* as synonyms. This worked against a modalistic understanding of the divine persons as “apparitions.” Distinguishing *ousia* from *hypostasis* preserved the divine unity, a solution codified at Constantinople and developed by John of Damascus.

The notion of “person” thus originally emerged from a purely theological interest rather than from an anthropological one (a point emphasized in later discussion—words were lying about and were picked up in response to a new experience of God). No one provided an exact ontological definition until Boethius in the early sixth century. His definition, while static in expression, is open to dynamic interpretation and preserves a number of important elements: inseity, individuality, and the spiritual, rational nature of a person. Subsequent development took place primarily in the West rather than in the East. The tendency there has been either to repeat patristic statements or to borrow Western notions. In the East, relating the human person (made “in the image and likeness of God”) to God ran against apophatic tendencies, with the result that a metaphysical understanding of the term “person” remained weak. Discussion rarely went beyond de-

scriptive elements such as rationality, freedom, dominion over nature, or the aesthetic sense.

Bilaniuk himself defined person as "an impenetrable and divine mystery of a being, which is a substance possessing either aseity, or at least inseity, the essence of which is not only a supposit, but also a rational subsistence which makes it possible for it to lead a self-conscious and free existence as a self-standing, self-possessing and autonomous centre of attribution; it is incommunicable, indestructible, and unique in its individuality, and in its positive transcendental relationship to being, to the ground of all being, to existence, and to becoming." This description is applicable *mutatis mutandis* to any person angelic, human, or divine.

It is precisely the infinitely perfect and unique divine essence which makes it possible for each of the divine persons to be infinitely distinct from the other two yet infinitely inseparable. This is rooted in the *perichoresis*. Thus each divine person leads a self-conscious and free existence as a self-standing, self-possessing, and autonomous centre of attribution, capable of receiving adoration and of communicating with His creatures.

In the West, *persona(e)* and *substantia* are most frequent encountered. The former is used to describe the threeness of God as early as Tertullian, not in the sense of "self-consciousness," but as a concreteness which denotes independent subsistence, a concretization and individuation of the more general term *substantia*. The earliest Latin terminology thus reflects the same realities as the Greek terms *hypostasis* and *ousia*.

For Augustine human beings are made in the trinitarian image and likeness of God; yet it is the unity of God and the unity in creatures that is stressed. Augustine was uncomfortable with the word "person" and ended by redefining it, only in partial dependence on the Cappadocians, by using the category of *relation*. The divine persons exist insofar as they are relations within the divine unity and simplicity.

Boethius, important for reintroducing Aristotelian thought to the West, defined "person" as "an individual substance of a rational nature." His definition introduces the ideas of substantiality, intellectuality, and incommunicability. Richard of St. Victor more clearly distinguishes between "person" and "individual" than did Boethius and rejects his reliance on the category of subsistence, defining a "divine person" as "an incommunicable existence of the divine nature." Thomas uses Boethius's definition but with Richard stresses relationality in the Godhead. A "divine person" is a subsistent relation within the divine nature. "Person" in God has the double connotation of *esse* in (identity with the divine substance) and *esse ad* (relationship to the others).

The definitions given by Boethius and Thomas were generally acceptable until the nineteenth century when these sorts of abstractions were seen as remote from experience. By then the Trinity was virtually ignored. Experience, in the wake of the modern "turn to the subject," was increasingly placed at the center of knowledge. The twentieth century lays greater stress on an *individual subject who is an historical, developmental being with a self-consciousness*. Nature is consequent on personhood, being developed and formed by a self-creating subject, rather than being the essential structure by which a "person" exists. This effectively reverses the way the term is used in the Middle Ages.

Barth, challenging the use of the term "person" in trinitarian theology, argues for speaking of "three modes of being" in one personal God who is singular in purpose and action yet threefold in revelation. Similarly Rahner argues that the unity of God is the subjectivity of God the absolute subject. Since a "person" is a subjective, self-reflective, individual center of consciousness, use of the term in a trinitarian context can lead to tritheism. He prefers to speak of "three modes of subsistence"—God's self-communication is of the three relative ways in which God subsists. Moltmann criticizes both approaches as modalistic. He and process theologians attempt to base trinitarian theology on a social and organic view. "Person" is not a separate center of consciousness but is constituted by relationship to others. The unity of God is *perichoretic*, an everlasting and complete communion of persons. If one accepts both views in part one might say that "self-possession" and "relationality" are both essential qualities of personhood. As such they are reminiscent of former usages.

Subsequent discussion looked at the incommunicability of the person. There is the theological commonplace in this regard that we do not know the state of our own soul. There is also a notion of the indestructible in the incommunicable which carries ontological connotations. The necessity of communication for persons on the other hand carries psychological connotations. It is too little to say that the incommunicable grows through communication; one needs to say that the incommunicable is established through communication.

The theological use of the term "person" suggests the co-personal reality of humanity versus a notion of many persons as separated substances. Augustine manifested a kind of schizophrenia in this regard. Even as the divine persons are understood as essentially and internally relational, human persons are understood as accidentally and externally relational. In trying to understand other cultures one discovers not only who one is but who one is not. One of the dangers is that difference can become distance which is a typical distortion of human community. Diversity itself is good, it is human perversity which misuses these distinctions.

EARL C. MULLER, S.J.
Marquette University, Milwaukee