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Embodiment and Relationality: The Pastoral Encounter in a Postmodern Age

Roger Hurding uses the incarnation as a source of understanding of the function and importance of embodiment in a pastoral encounter. He explores what it means to meet with another person 'face-to-face', including reflection on the implications of the affirmation in Christ of bodies which are nonconventional through physical deformity or disability. Relationality in the moment of pastoral encounter is a potential source of healing, expressing the interdependence of God's people which images the triune God.

In recent years there has been a number of writings which have sought to address Christian pastoral care in the context of a culture deemed to be postmodern.[1] Without denying that contemporary societal structures contain clear residues of modernity, with its resolute commitment to human autonomy within a world of inexorable progress, and of premodernity, with its fundamental belief in traditions and providential order, an increasingly pervasive climate of postmodernity can be discerned at every level in society.[2] The threefold parameters of anti-foundationalism, deconstructionism and pluralism can be seen to leaven the lump of human existence at personal, communal and institutional levels, aided and abetted by the electronic and digital revolutions. And so, since the foundations have been shaken and found wanting and their overlying metanarratives have been discarded for their all-embracing presumption, the individual is left to pick and choose his or her own persona and style as a series of reinventions; the community is nudged towards a laisser-faire attitude that does not need to stir itself too readily

1 See, for example: F. Bridger, 'Christian Counselling and the Challenge of Postmodernism' (Lingdale Papers 26), Clinical Theology Association, Oxford 1999; P. Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate: Pastoral Care and Postmoden Culture*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1998; E. L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*, Mowbray, London 1996; and R. Hurding, *Pathways to Wholeness: Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Age*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1998.

2 Some see contemporary culture as still essentially modernist, as with Anthony Giddens who argues that we are within a milieu of 'high' or 'late' modernity: see *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991.

on behalf of widow, orphan or refugee; and institutions, as long as they can keep to budget and demonstrate productivity, can at least try to sidestep issues of injustice, incompetence and sleaze. Jonathan Culler paints a graphic arboreal picture of the bleaker and, ultimately, self-annihilatory, reaches of postmodernity:

> If 'sawing off the branch on which one is sitting' seems foolhardy to men of common sense, it is not so for Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida; for they suspect that if they fall there is no 'ground' to hit and that the most clear-sighted act may be a certain reckless sawing, a calculated dismemberment or deconstruction of the great cathedral-like trees in which Man has taken shelter for millenia.[3]

And yet, not least for the pastoral carer, there are, I suggest, dimensions in postmodernity that raise images of hope within Culler's ancient forest. There is indeed a perfectly solid woodland floor upon which the great variety and distinctiveness of human individuality and communality can be expressed, appraised and valued. Such plurality can, I would argue, enrich the pastoral encounter. I would like to consider this encounter, within today's postmodern contexts, under the headings of *embodiment*, with its clear correlation with the incarnational, and *relationality*, with its intimations of the trinitarian.

Embodiment: an incarnational perspective

The contemporary Western world is obsessed with the human body. Internet users at the beginning of the twenty-first century score the greatest number of 'hits' on material linked with sex and medicine. The preoccupation with the body beautiful in the media argues that if we can develop the right physique, wear the right clothes and live out a lifestyle emblazoned with the right persona, the right hair and the right designer labels, then we have joined the ranks of the marketable ones, because, to quote L'Oréal, "I'm worth it".

A similar, but more grassroots, trend is seen with society's restless search for health and healing. Those who are fit are often determined to push that fitness to the limit – regular workouts and meticulously adhered-to diets will surely achieve six-pack musculature and a finely tuned body. For those of us who are less than fit (the majority of us!) many will seek guidance for any bodily twinge or perceived dysfunction from magazines and newspapers, from diagnostic material on the world wide web and from the local health centre. This, at times, unhealthy interest in health, has pervaded the Christian Church for much of the twentieth century – from the first stirrings of Pentecostalism in 1906, through dialogue between theological and medical practice in the pre-First World War years, the acknowledgement of the 'ministry of healing' at the Lambeth Conference in 1930, to the successive waves of charismatic renewal from the 1960s onwards. Comparable enthusiasms for bodily health and healing are seen over the same period with the rise of the

3 J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1982, p 149.

body therapies in the seedbed of Freudianism[4] and the interplay between these and the diverse strands of complementary medicine and New Age healing, embracing a range of Eastern and esoteric approaches – acupuncture, homeopathy, the use of crystals, aromatherapy, colour therapy, reflexology and the 'laying-on-of-hands' method of Reiki.

To summarise society's love affair with the body in such a way is not to deny the essential nature of the bodily in our understanding of what it means to be human. It is part of this article's burden to seek, within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, a recovery of a wholesome understanding of bodiliness within our postmodern context. And to do this, I suggest, we need to reflect on an incarnational perspective.

Whether, within the constraints of orthodox Christianity, we take the Chalcedonian 'two-nature' understanding of Jesus Christ's incarnation (the 'God-Man') or a kenotic theory that sees his self-emptying as restrictive of memory and knowingness within his earthly life (the 'God-who-became-Man'),[5] Christ's enfleshment is surely the touchstone for what it means to live out our lives as embodied human beings. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statement is all-embracing and thus inclusive of the bodily: 'The man that I am, Jesus also was. Of him alone is it really true that nothing human remained alien to him. Of this man we say, "This is God for us."'[6]

Let us hold to this incarnational perspective as we consider embodiment and the pastoral encounter.

The body and the self

Embodiment has been defined as 'an intricate interweaving of physical sensations and emotional attachments'[7] and, we can say, notions of embodiment and selfhood are inextricably bound together. The bodiliness of Jesus Christ was integral to his identity as a unique self, fully human and fully divine. For each of us a sense of self is seamlessly tied into an awareness of individual bodiliness. As 'body-selves', to use James Nelson's term, we are reminded 'each of us of our uniqueness and particularity: we look different and we feel differently from any other person.'[8]

4 The so-called 'body therapies' have pursued a corrective of an earlier, Freudian emphasis on the psyche. In so doing they have not completely somatised approaches to healing. Wilhelm Reich, who broke from Freud, saw the body and mind as a unit and sought to interpret the body's 'armour' (tight muscles, postural rigidity, poor breathing patterns, etc) in order to release repressed emotion and inflexible thinking. Other important post-Reichians include Alexander Lowen and John Pierrakos, the founders of Bioenergetic Therapy, which, under Pierrakos, seeks an holistic approach to include the spiritual, and William R. Emerson's Somatotropic Therapy, which makes connections between body posture and perinatal experience. For an overview of these methodologies, see D. Jones, ed, *Innovative Therapy: A Handbook*, Open University Press, Buckingham 1994.

5 I am indebted here to Vernon White in his *Atonement and Incarnation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, pp 80f.

6 D. Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, Collins, London 1966, p 107.

7 N. L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1994, p 47.

8 J. B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, SPCK, London 1989, p 18.

And this particularity is fostered by how others see us or, more precisely, how we perceive that others see us. This interpenetration between embodiment and a sense of self is of the order of everyday life and is, thus, profoundly relevant within Christian pastoral care. Every pastoral encounter – whether that of a seemingly casual enquiry of another's welfare, a call to crisis intervention in the face of fatal illness or marital breakdown, or the steady commitment to long-term support of a depressed person or dysfunctional family – needs to be open to the close links between bodily awareness and notions of selfhood.

For Amanda (not her real name), pastoral counselling was the context in which she was able to declare and explore the tenuous connection between her fragile self-esteem and her desire for the perfect body. Her sense of value as a person was closely tied to her perception of how her husband viewed her body and sexuality. It was only as she learned to 'make friends' with her body and trust that she was both loveable and loved for who she was that she was able to move forward into a stronger sense of an assured identity.

Amanda's story illustrates that both bodily awareness and selfhood are not static entities with which we are saddled, without hope of change and progress. Growth in understanding, though, does require commitment and a certain trust in the possibilities of transformation. As Alistair McFadyen puts it, concerning the 'self':

> '...it is not some*thing* one *has* but something one *is* and *does*, a way of being in public and private. It is not a substance but a means of organising one's experience, thought, knowledge, beliefs, action, etc. *as though* centred on a substantial inner core. That is to say, it is something like a belief or theory.'[9]

Till we have faces

C. S. Lewis, in his retelling of the story of Psyche and Cupid, portrays the poignancy and power of the face as intrinsic to human embodiment and a sense of self. Orual, one of the king's daughters, although feeling blighted by her physical appearance, is stirred by nature's beauty to declare, 'Who can *feel* ugly when the heart meets delight? It as if, somewhere inside, within the hideous face and bony limbs, one is soft, fresh, lissom and desirable'.[10] Emerging from a series of trials, Orual resolves to be veiled for the rest of her days as 'a sort of treaty made with my ugliness'.[11] Now queen, her encounter with deity leads to her question, 'How can [the gods] meet us face to face till we have faces?'[12] Finally, it is the awesome countenance of a silent god which leads to her declaration, 'Before your face questions die away...'.[13]

Here, is a profound insight into human embodiment which has implications for every aspect of our being and relating. It is in the unveiling of our faces, and in the meeting of others face to face, that the depths of human respect, understanding and compassion can be fathomed. The very phrases we use around the word face

9 A. I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, p 98.

10 C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, Geoffrey Bles, London 1956, p 104.

11 Lewis, *Faces*, p 189.

12 Lewis, *Faces*, p 305.

13 Lewis, *Faces*, p 319.

and its cognomens imply the quest for openness, realism and focus: 'facing' a difficulty, an enemy, the future; engaging in face-to-face dialogue; facing up to myself; and, colloquially, of a situation or person that feels confrontational and intrusive – 'in your face'.

David Ford takes up the notion of 'facing' within the process of redemptive transformation. Seeing 'the face [as] a vital aspect of the embodied self',[14] he traces a series of dimensions of selfhood that reflect humanity's response to God: a hospitable self; a non-idolatrous self; a worshipping self; a singing self; and a eucharistic self. As subtexts to his discussion he points to the transformative thrust in 2 Cor. 3:18 and 4:6:

> 'And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit... For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who had shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

Just as Orual was changed through her face-to-face encounter with the gods, so we are transformed as we gaze into the countenance of Jesus Christ. Without denying the historical reality of Christ's visage, Ford admits that the concept of the face of Jesus is fraught with vagueness. Even so, he carries over this uncertainty into an acknowledgement that the face of Jesus Christ 'transcends simple recognisability... and stretches our capacities in the way in which God does.'[15] Here is a face that 'attracts trust, adoration, love, joy, repentance, attentive listening, and ultimate hope.'[16] And this facing spills over into all our facings:

> 'There is no need to think of just one face in our hearts: we live before many internalised others. But we do not worship them. Paul's complex naming of God is inseparable from the naming of Jesus Christ as Lord, one in whose face the glory of God is faced, and who is trusted to relate to all other faces too.'[17]

Ford's discussion of facing carries great relevance for the pastoral encounter. It is in the face, supremely, that so much of a person's story, experience and demeanour is written. It is in both the particularity (this face is unique) and universality (this face is expressive in ways common to humankind) of the face-to-face engagement that issues are addressed, emotions stirred, sins confessed and resolves quickened. Dimensions of culture and custom are woven into the language of the face: eye contact declares openness and attentive listening in one culture; eye avoidance denotes deference and respect in another. The facing of pastoral care – the face-to-face encounter before the face of God and

14 D. F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp 19f.
15 Ford, *Self*, p 172.
16 Ford, *Self*, p 175.
17 Ford, *Self*, p 104.

cognisant of the internalised faces of others – can enable all parties to live out lives where the embodied self is being changed 'from one degree of glory to another'.

The disabled God

In our discussion so far we have, in effect, been engaging in 'body theology', defined by Nelson as a theology which takes 'our body experiences seriously as occasions of revelation.'[18] What, we can then ask, is revelatory about our body experiences when our embodiment is assailed by affliction?

Perhaps the most extreme breaching of our bodily defences is perpetrated in the experience of torture. Here, the sense of self is attacked by the body's degradation. While the torturer appears to be disembodied and faceless, the victim's very existence hangs on the physical vulnerability of the body and the face. As Michael Korzinski, therapist at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, puts it, 'The torturer has... reached into their minds through their bodies. The body can heal well; what is far more fragile is the person's sense of their body, the way their self-worth is bound up with it.'[19]

It is in Nancy Eiesland's reflections on the notion of the 'disabled God' that we can, I believe, begin to find some incarnational perspective on the grim, and often awkward, realities of oppressed, tortured, diseased and disabled bodies. Such are essentially marginalised, Eiesland argues, not because of the individual's maladaptive psychology and behaviour but because the institutions and structures of society are inclusive of the 'temporarily able-bodied'[20] and exclusive of people with disability. And among such societal structures, Eiesland sees the Church as guilty in both its theologising and its praxis. She challenges the tendency to equate disability with virtuous suffering, on the one hand, and with culpability, on the other, at the same time decrying Christianity's tendency to treat those with disability as simply 'objects of ministry'.[21]

Eiesland's way forward is to propose a 'liberatory' theology which encourages the struggle against discrimination, seeks 'justice in concrete situations, creates new ways of resisting the theological symbols that exclude and devalue us, and reclaims our hidden history in the presence of God on earth.'[22] This incarnational thrust is brought to its most telling point in the picture of Jesus Christ as 'the disabled God'.[23] In this portrayal the resurrected Christ is seen as 'the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the imago Dei', thus 'underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.'[24]

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18 J. B. Nelson, *Body Theology*, Westminster/ John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1992, p 9.

19 M. Korzinski in Neil Belton, *The Good Listener: Helen Bamber: A Life Against Cruelty*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1998, p 349.

20 Eiesland's term for all people who are deemed not to be disabled.

21 Eiesland, *Disabled*, p 75.

22 Eiesland, *Disabled*, p 86.

23 For a biblically-based theodicy of the notion of 'the disabled God', see B. Cooper, 'The Disabled God', *Theology Today 49:2* (1992), pp 173-182.

24 Eiesland, *Disabled*, pp 99f.

The concept of the disabled God reaches into the very heart of the pastoral encounter. For all who are afflicted through long-term illness, failing faculties, physical deformity or disability, there is the need for a pastoral responsiveness that identifies with the one 'from whom others hide their faces' (Isa. 53:3). In particular, it is the eucharist that has the potential to resonate most powerfully with the daily realities of disabled embodiment. The sensate physicality of the visual drama, words of godly compassion, music of worship, and the touching, tasting and ingesting of bread and wine is an open invitation to all, temporarily able-bodied and people with disability alike. At such times, the broad canvas of pastoral care may be well represented: hands laid on as a vehicle of healing; the sharing of the peace as a mark of reconciliation; the gathered body of Christ imparting sustenance; word and sacrament offering guidance for times ahead. Where the local church is committed to inclusiveness in liturgy and practical access to the elements, those with disability are able to say, 'We, who through the Eucharist meditate on Jesus Christ, the disabled God, recognize in ourselves the imago Dei. We see in Christ the affirmation of nonconventional bodies.'[25]

Relationality: A Trinitarian Perspective

As we have seen throughout our discussion on embodiment, the concept of the body, face and self cannot be seen in isolation from the bodies, faces and selves of others. As McFadyen puts it, 'Persons are... literally called into personhood and selfhood by others'.[26] The embodied self cannot be defined in isolation. A sense of who we are is constructed and moulded largely by how others see us, by the contexts within which we are placed and, ultimately, by our relationship with God. To be human is to be connected, however tenuously, with others, with the created order and with its Creator.

And just as we have seen that light can be shed on human embodiment from an incarnational perspective, so, I suggest, we can illuminate human relationality[27] from a trinitarian perspective. It is the very nature of our humanity to be called into 'being-in-relationship'[28] and this dimension of our humanness is made sense of most in a consideration of the three-in-one 'being-in-relationship'. Here both the individual uniqueness and the commonality of our humanity are expressed. Colin Gunton makes the associations clear:

> '...an account of relationality that gives due weight to both one and many, to both particular and universal, to both otherness and relation, is to be derived from the one place where they can satisfactorily be based, a conception of God who is both one and three, whose being consists in a relationality that derives from the otherness-in-relation of Father, Son and Spirit.'[29]

25 Eiesland, *Disabled*, pp 115f.

26 McFadyen, *Personhood*, 95.

27 It is worth saying that relationality has been at the heart of the counselling movement since its early days and this emphasis has in turn been a great influence on the pastoral encounter. For an appraisal of five strands in 'relationship counselling', see Petruska Clarkson, *The Therapeutic Relationship in Psychoanalysis, Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy*, Whurr Publishers, London 1995.

28 J. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, SCM Press, London 1992, p 11.

29 C. E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and The Many: God, Creation and Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, 6f.

Let us explore relationality and its relevance to today's pastoral encounters, from a trinitarian perspective.

Particularity and Relationality

In understanding the free flow between particularity and universality, and between otherness and relationality, in the context of pastoral care, we need to be reminded that our concept of the embodied self is 'a social accomplishment'.[30] My understanding of myself is not only moulded by the views of others it is also shaped by the social constructions of my life – my familial roots in working-class London, training within the power-base of a prestigious medical school, marrying and fashioning a lifestyle amidst the context of the Christian faith and its traditions, subject to the constraints of professionalisation as a doctor, lecturing in the milieu of a theological college, facing a series of long-term illnesses with all the restrictions and dependencies associated with the word 'patient'. As Elaine Graham puts it, 'bodies are never innocent of social construction or unmarked by the dynamics of power and difference';[31] they thus offer us 'epiphanies of meaning'.[32]

Perhaps a paradigm for all pastoral encounters, however socially constructed, is found in the particularity and relationality of Christ's powerful picture of the final judgment in Matt. 25:31–46. Here is a narrative that is charged with 'epiphanies of meaning', revelatory of the divine in the ordinary. In verses 35 and 36, we read:

> '...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you game me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Here, each concrete pastoral situation is charged with relationality: nourishment, the quenching of thirst, hospitality, being clothed, nursing and visiting are all ministered within a threefold caring relationship – between the carer, the cared for, and the unseen Christ.

It is important here to see that the recipient of care is not passive, that she or he plays a vital part in the transformative process of relationship. For Graham:

> 'Bodies are active agents in the construction and mediation of our world; the creators, as well as the creations, of human social relations... The effects and dynamics of power, truth, reason, good and evil... remain to be embodied, enacted and performed in human communities as forms of bodily practice. So the deepest dynamics of the social, political and economic order are always incarnated into persons/bodies-in-relation.'[33]

Image and Identity

To be an embodied self caught up, by definition, in a network of relationality is the very stuff of what it means to be human. In the different languages of theology and psychology respectively such a sense of human being is interwoven with the concepts of the image of God and an understanding of personal and communal identity.

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30 Eiesland, *Disabled*, p 47.
31 E. Graham, 'Words Made Flesh: Women, Embodiment and Practical Theology', *Feminist Theology 21* (1999), p 114.
32 Graham, 'Words', p 115.
33 Graham, 'Words', p 115.

Image

Image is the common currency of postmodernity. It has been said that the logocentrism of modernity is giving way to an iconocentrism in which all is exterior, surface and gloss: an essential part of institutional and corporate presentation is in the hands of the image-makers and, as we have already seen, countless individuals spend time and money polishing their image through the language of fashion and style. And yet behind the hype and spin lurks a common humanity whose deepest essence and greatest freedoms lie in being made in the image of God. Gunton sees this twofold aspect (ontological and comparative) of our humanness in strongly relational and, thereby, trinitarian terms:

> 'To be in the image of God is at once to be created as a particular kind of being – a person – and to be called to realise a certain destiny. The shape of that destiny is to be found in God-given forms of human community and of human responsibility to the universe... The triune God has created humankind as finite persons-in-relation who are called to acknowledge his creation by becoming the persons they are and by enabling the rest of the creation to make its due response of praise.'[34]

And this reality of image-bearing, with its combined sense of being and awareness of the freedom to choose, is integral to every human being, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, bank balance, employment, intelligence, mental state, physique and bodily health. Such an understanding of our fellow human beings should be deeply woven into the fabric of every pastoral encounter, where the call to be 'who we are' and to lay claim to our inheritance as the people of God is part and parcel of the path toward Christian maturity.

Identity

Just as image has become an all-pervasive concept in postmodernity, identity, in its most commonly used form, is a buzz word of modernity's heyday in the 1960s. This was an era when the burgeoning of the student population and the psychologising of culture combined to give a mindset in which it became *de rigeur* to have an 'identity crisis' somewhere between the age of eighteen and twenty-one. This perspective, though, is a parody of the lifelong journey of establishing a sense of personal identity, of being able to say at life's various stages, "This is me". The nurturing of basic trust as a child, the building up of peer relationships around puberty, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, the reappraisals of mid-life, and the need to adjust to failing strength and faculties with ageing, all play their part in shaping a sense of self-identification. Anthony Giddens sees the quest for personal identity as a 'reflexive project',[35] a journey of continually honing self-awareness:

> 'The 'identity' of the self... is what the individual is conscious 'of' in the term 'self-consciousness'. Self-identity... is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has

34 C. E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1991, pp 119f.

35 Giddens, *Modernity*, p 32.

to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual.'[36]

And yet, as we have seen, the self-awareness of the embodied self is not engaged in separately from life's social constructs. Self-identity, whether seen positively or negatively, is subject to epiphanies of meaning fashioned from life's exigencies. Revelations of a particularly sombre hue are clear in the story of Davy McCuish, a thirty-eight-year-old, unemployed man desperately seeking work in Clydeside, a 'landscape of absences',[37] to use Fergal Keane's term, with twice the national average of unemployment in the late 1990s. Although his father had worked in the shipyards, Davy's dream to follow him was dashed on leaving school at the time of shipbuilding's steep decline. His relentless search for work had left him with a bleak sense of hopelessness in which he declared, "You're nothing to the community, you're nothing to anybody, you're not even a number any more... The biggest fear is that... when you stop believing in you, stop feeling real to you, then you just stop being." For Elaine his wife Davy's unemployment had caused a deep rift in their relationship, driven into two separate existences by the demands of their three children and the endless quest for work.

Davy's faltering sense of identity, with its fear of no longer 'feeling real' to himself, was continually undermined by a sense of isolation from the community, a loss of hope as a providing husband and father, a feeling of diminishment in relation to the officials at the benefit agency and powerlessness in the face of those market forces that were undercutting the shipbuilding industry

However slim our sense of identity may be, it is the profound link between self-identity and being made in God's image that gives the greatest hope for all – not least in the pastoral encounter. For, as Dick Keyes, puts it, we have an 'identity derived', rooted in 'our status as creatures of [the] infinite Creator God'.[38] Pastorally, it is as people struggle with a sense of who they are in relation to themselves, to others and to God that their experiences of loss, insufficiency, frustration, anger and marginalisation can be faced, assimilated and harnessed to redemptive ways of living. Here a sense of identity is caught up with the progressive conformity to the personhood of Jesus Christ, 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15), a work mediated, as we have seen, by the Holy Spirit – transforming us 'into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:18b). Thus, an 'identity derived' is integral to the image of God, the state of 'being human which takes shape by virtue of the creating and redeeming agency of the triune God.'[39]

The Perichoretic Dance

It is said that something like 60-70% of computer users are in relationship with someone through cyberspace and so the so-called 'Lovebug' virus, emanating from

36 Giddens, *Modernity*, p 52.

37 This story is taken from Fergal Keane's report 'Forgotten Britain', BBC One, 2000; see, too, F. Keane, *A Stranger's Eye: A Foreign Correspondent's View of Britain*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 2000, pp 25ff.

38 D. Keyes, *Beyond Identity: Finding Yourself in the Image and Character of God*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1986, p 76.

39 Gunton, *The Promise*, pp 116f.

Manila in the Philippines on 4 May 2000, proved irresistible with its simple message, 'I love you'. Those three words, as in this instance, can be used deceptively and destructively or they can be indicative of some of the deepest and truest of human instincts and commitments. At the heart of our understanding of the embodied self, its call to relationality and its raison d'être as made in the image of God with an 'identity derived', is the centrality of an interdependence marked by love: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God' (1 John 4:7a).

It is this God-love which is the mainspring of the ancient notion of perichoresis, a term (from the Greek *peri*, about or around, and *choros*, dance) which signifies something of a divine choreography, a dynamic interpenetration between the three persons of the Trinity which fosters relationality without loss of particularity. The centre of gravity of this dance, as it were, is God-love. As Jürgen Moltmann puts it, 'In the perichoresis... [t]he 'circulation' of the eternal divine life becomes perfect through the fellowship and unity of the three different Persons in the eternal love.'[40]

Gunton takes the analogy of perichoresis further by suggesting that what is integral to the three-in-oneness of the Trinity is carried over into the interpenetrating relationality of the created order, prompting an exploration of 'whether reality is on all its levels "perichoretic", a dynamism of relatedness.'[41] He challenges the mechanistic mindset of modernity with the relational fluidity of a perichoretic world, asking,

> 'Do we live in a world that can be understood relationally on all its levels? If things can be so understood, if to be temporal and spatial is to echo in some way, however faintly, the being of God, may we not find in this concept a way of holding things together that modernity so signally lacks? Does the concept enable us to find... coordinates for our human being in the world?'[42]

The implications of a perichoretic perspective dovetail with our considerations throughout this article of the embodied self as 'being-in-relationship', moulded through the interplay of social constructs and social relations with the essence and dynamic of being made in the image of God. The perichoretic view honours the wonder of our God-created humanity and , at the same time, cuts us down to size in our call away from individualism to a commitment to the communal and socio-political. Such a panoramic canvas needs to colour the pastoral encounter, which, if it is to be truly perichoretic, will take note of the wider contexts of people's lives and, where appropriate, seek social and economic change at local, national and global levels.

Such a far-reaching view and agenda will need to hold before it the centrality of Jesus Christ, in whom 'all things hold together' (Col. 1:17b), without losing sight of the full perichoretic dance: 'It is not... something which holds things together, but some*one*: the one through whom, in the unity of the Father and the Spirit, all

40 J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, SCM Press, London, 1981, p 175.
41 Gunton, *The One*, p 165.
42 Gunton, *The One*, pp 165f.

things have their being.'[43] And the 'all things' of Col. 1 is truly comprehensive: 'things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers' (v. 16). A perichoretic reality embraces both the self-evident and the hidden throughout the created order, including all the systems, constructions, corporations, institutions and vested interests of human ingenuity.

Further, bringing us full circle back to the concept of embodiment, the Trinity's perichoretic rule is given incarnational substance in Jesus Christ's pre-eminence as 'the head of the body, the church' (v. 18a). Bonhoeffer memorably made the link between Christ and the corporate, collective and communal embodiment of the Church in the phrase, 'Christ existing as community'.[44] This living out of the Christ-life among the people of God is not an insular, excluding affair, for the call is to a perichoretic engagement with 'all things' In the name of Jesus Christ. As McFadyen states it:

> 'Socio-political orders, personal relations and personal identities are all transformed through God's activity, which binds people together into a new community... In terms of Christian tradition, this new community is termed Church – at least in its ideal, if not in its empirical form.'[45]

And it as part of this outward-moving 'community of the face'[46] that the pastoral encounter in today's postmodern context can have its fullest, perichoretic expression. Here, the interdependence of God's people, valuing both particularity and relationality, can create a climate of healing, sustenance and loving confrontation amidst the multiple contexts of daily life – in the home, at the bedside, in the workplace, at the shopping mall, on the sport's field and on the streets.

Conclusion

And so, to return to Culler's picture in which the doyens of postmodernity's origins are engaged in 'a certain reckless sawing' amidst the trees of human cultures and traditions, we can, as we have seen, counter this deconstructive trend with the plurality of humanity's many conditions of being. Here, not least in the pastoral encounter, particularity, otherness and relationality interweave to fill out the concept of the embodied self and its 'facing' of others. This outward look finds its clearest identity as the image of God – an image restored in Christ and expressed through the Church, the 'community of the face'. In our arboreal metaphor the individual trees of the forest 'need' one another in order to simply *be* a forest, to fulfil their destiny as a windbreak, a green lung and a place of hallowed beauty.

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43 Gunton, *The Promise*, p 179.
44 Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, p 60.
45 McFadyen, *Personhood*, p 197.
46 Ford, *Self*, p 25.