The Trinity and the Enhypostasia

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ONE learns from one's critics; and I should like in this article to address myself to a fundamental point which has been raised by critics (both the sympathetic and the censorious) of my recent book *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Abingdon, 1958). The issue is this: Does not an orthodox doctrine of the Person of Christ demand the dogma that in the divine life there are Father and Son, who mutally love each other? Do not the Gospel record and the divine consciousness of Jesus require a trinitarian formulation, in which Father and Son are appropriate terms to distinguish *personal* principles of the divine life? The doctrine of the Trinity is essential (it is claimed) to Christianity, because its primary purpose is to guard the truth of Christology. It is not first a speculative doctrine about God as absolute and as related; but a Christological doctrine which safeguards the divine person of the Incarnate Lord.

I must confess that while I have, to some measure, treated this question in my book, I have not treated it adequately. For it has been my general assumption that He who was active in Jesus of Nazareth, accomplishing the world's salvation, was God in his relations with the world. The paradoxical principles of God as Absolute and God as Related, I have urged, cannot form a trinitarian pattern; and, indeed, the symbols Father and Son are highly inappropriate for them. To this paradox I will return later. Our immediate concern here, however, is with the implications of an orthodox Christology.

In another article (*Religion in Life*, Autumn, 1958) I have tried to show that the *idea* lying behind the *enhypostasia* is the essence of orthodox Christology. It was the basic premise of the Chalcedonian formula, and of its further explication at III Constantinople. The idea is this: the Person of Jesus of Nazareth was the Second Person of the Trinity. The center, subject, metaphysical Ego of Jesus was the Word of God. In the incarnation the Second Person of the Trinity assumed all the attributes of human (even fallen, human) nature. But the metaphysical identity of this particular instance of human nature was the Word of God, and not *a* man. The humanity never had independent existence in its own right. It had no ontological reality apart from its union with the Word which was its *hypostasis*. The Logos (as Cyril of Alexandria was never tired of urging) assumed "flesh," and *a* human being. This is, to be sure, a moderate form of Monophysitism, and indeed a highly refined type of Apollinarianism. Yet it is the orthodox position. It raises many serious problems (as I have tried to indicate in the article to which I have referred); but it is certainly a tenable position and has been championed by Karl Barth as well as more recently

by Vincent Taylor (*The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching,* Macmillan, 1958). Taylor sets the doctrine, to be sure, within a kenotic context, and does not seem to me to fully understand the *enhypostasia* which he eschews. Yet his fundamental point of view is precisely that; and indeed he is even more Monophysite than III Constantinople in his denial of two wills (or energies) in Christ. Be that as it may, there can be no question that the orthodox Christology affirms that the center, subject, principle of identity, metaphysical Ego (or whatever term one chooses to express the same idea) of Jesus was the Second Person of the Trinity.

I do not wish to argue the validity of this position here. My purpose is rather to wrestle with its supposed Trinitarian implications *on the assumption it is true.* For myself, I find it an inadequate Christology, but it is tenable, and certainly highly respectable. What I want to show is that *classical* trinitarianism, *far from being its necessary corollary, involves insuperable problems for it.* I want thus to turn the tables on my critics, and to force them to see the difficulties of their own position, which they almost invariably fail to face.

If one holds this Christological viewpoint, one is forced at the very outset to decide in what sense "Father" and "Son" are used in the Gospel record with respect to God and Jesus. Two possibilities are open to theologians of this persuasion. The terms may, on the one hand, refer to the *human nature* of Jesus, in its relation to God, its Creator. Or, on the other hand, such terms may be expressive of *trinitarian relations in the Godhead.* We may, that is, read off divine relations in terms of Jesus praying to his heavenly Father; *or* we may regard such prayers as the condition of finitude, which the Second Person of the Trinity accepts, but which are *not* congruous with his divine nature and *not* expressive of relations in the Godhead. Let us consider the implications of these two possibilities in turn.

We begin with the assumption that the divine consciousness of Jesus expresses a relation within the Godhead. This is the view of Leonard Hodgson and Vincent Taylor (among others), and has a long history reaching back to the Patristic period. Jesus (in this view) speaks to his Father, *not* as a creature addressing his Creator, but as the divine Son addressing the Father who begot him from all eternity. The doctrine of the Spirit would similarly rest upon the assumption that, in promising the Paraclete, Jesus (as divine Son) is talking of the Third Person of the Trinity. We cannot pursue the question of the Spirit here, however; but must confine ourselves to the first two Persons of the Trinity. For it is this distinction which determines the whole structure of trinitarian thinking.

Now, what is the distinction between Father and Son on this first premise? What is the character of Father over against Son? It is at this point that untold confusion enters the picture. For, to answer this question, a structure of thought from Middle Platonism was introduced, and has remained to the present day to plague trinitarian thinking. I cannot here review its history and the way it came into Christian thought. It has its origin in Old Testament metaphorical expressions of God's action which in the

inter-Testamental period and in philosophic writers like Philo, take over themes from Greek philosophy. Here I am only concerned with the basic idea itself. It is this: that God acts by mediators. He does not act directly, but employs intermediaries to fulfill his purposes. Primarily he acts by the Logos, by which he created and sustains and redeems the world.

This idea involves two assumptions: (1) that God is not exhausted in his activity—he does not in his "wholeness" come forth. Always his absolute and transcendent nature is guarded, and set over against his activity. He is always "beyond," despite his appearing. In Greek thought (and in the Pauline "Kyrios") there lurks the belief that God's action is secondary to, and inferior to, his real Being. Hence the subordinationism of early Patristic writers. But the triumph of the *homoousios* in Nicene Christianity assured the conviction that it was the divine nature itself, and not an inferior mediator, which created and redeemed.

(2) The second assumption is that the mediating or acting principle in the divine is *begotten* of the Father. This is a metaphor for the Platonic notion of the fecundity of the absolute. God's absolute and transcendent nature is ontologically prior. His creativity and action are secondary, and *derived* from his Beyondness. This assumption has all too long gone unchallenged in Christian orthodoxy with its Greek roots. One result of this has been that my attack upon the idea has seemed to some critics unintelligible. To many Christians the notion partakes of a self-evident and necessary truth. Yet it involves a logical inconsistency, which Parmenides (against Plato) saw. The Many *cannot* be derived from the One, the Relative from Absolute. To do so, is to compromise the first term of a paradox. If the Many is implicit in the One, the One is no longer the One. If God's Absolute nature is the source of his relatedness, the Absolute is no longer Absolute. These notions can only be expressed paradoxically. The principle of derivation only reads back the paradox into the first term of the dilemma. Where Parmenides went wrong was in denying the *reality* of the Many. His basic point, however, was correct: that the Many cannot be derived from the One.

This problem runs through all Christian theology, and its only possible statement is paradoxical. One must both *affirm* and *deny* that motion and non-being are in the Godhead. To fail to do this is to get into the insuperable difficulties of Aquinas who presents the *actus purus* in such a way that it logically cannot create the world or even love; or of Tillich who says, "God as being itself transcends non-being absolutely" (S.T. 1.270) and yet "God as created life includes the finite and, with it, non-being" (S.T. ibid.). The fact is one can only express God's absolute and related character in paradoxical terms. Unless we do this, we either state flat contradictions without recognizing them as such (as Tillich seems to do), or we invent meaningless categories, as Aquinas does (S.T. 1a, q.27), with his distinction of motion *ad intra* and *ad extra*, which is really to talk about "motionless motion." The contention, furthermore, that the Process Theology has solved the problem by saying that God is A and R (to use Charles Hartshorne's

terms)—absolute only in love, and relative in other respects—is equally fallacious. For one absolute implies *all* the others. How could God's love be absolute unless he had the infinite power of being in *every* respect to sustain this? If he lacked wisdom and power in an absolute sense, his love would be threatened *qua* love.

In short, the idea that God in his motion, creativity and limitation is *begotten* of his absolute nature, is derived from Plato's unsatisfactory notion of the fecundity of the absolute.

I have been at pains to outline these assumptions, for they are essential to classical trinitarian doctrine. The Father and Son of the Trinity are distinguished in terms that the Father does things *through* the Son. This is still the Eastern view, as it was the patristic view. The Son brings to actuality (as Gregory of Nyssa says) what the Father, the origin of all, plans and wills. Now to read Jesus' relation to his Father in terms like these is to make no sense at all. It involves confusing paradoxical principles of the divine with persons who have dialogue with each other and love each other. And it involves the further false assumption that the one is begotten of the other. Innumerable nonsensical questions arise from such notions. We ask: how was the world sustained in actuality while the Son condescended to the incarnation? Godet answers: by the Father taking over the Son's cosmic role temporarily for thirty years! Or the answer is given: we simply do not know (Taylor). But the deepest difficulty lies in *personalizing* paradoxical divine attributes. We are saying Jesus (as God in his relations) is praying to the Father (as God in his absolute transcendence). Not only is the term "Father" highly unfortunate for such an idea, seeing in the Biblical record it refers to the Living God in his active relations with his children, but the whole structure of thought is open to question, once the paradoxical nature of God as absolute and related is grasped.

To some measure Western Catholic thought since Augustine has revised the typical Patristic and Greek viewpoint. We cannot pursue it here; it is outlined in my book (Chapter 5). It must suffice to comment that the revision has been far from complete; and on the *central* issue why it was the Son and not the Father who became incarnate, the old Logos notions still survive. The doctrine of the appropriations, which tried to do away with the idea of the Son as the actualizer or agent of the divine plans, was never extended (as it *logically* should have been) to the "missions" of the Trinity. Thus in Augustine, Aquinas and western Catholicism today the old confusion still remains. Its most remarkable Protestant representative is Karl Barth.

If then (to conclude the first of the two alternatives of the *enhypostasia,* with which we started), we assume the prayers of Jesus reflect a dialogue in the Godhead between two Persons, we can only say this is a fact of revelation. We are not justified in giving any other character to the terms Father and Son in this connection than to say Jesus is the Son of his Father, and both are God. To introduce the whole way of thinking from Middle Platonism with its Logos doctrine is to confuse this fact of revelation with

philosophical issues which are irrelevant, and which on analysis appear to be incorrectly stated. When wedded to the relation of Jesus to his Father, these issues not only confuse the question but end up in nonsensical statements. A Trinity certainly can be affirmed; but it is somewhat remote from the *classical* doctrine of the Trinity. We can say there are three Persons in the Godhead because Jesus' divine consciousness implies this, and because his life of prayer with his Father expresses it, and the gift of the Spirit confirms it. But these distinctions in the Godhead have little to do with the classical ones, which are grounded in the Logos doctrine (e.g. parts of the Nicene Creed), and which involve the contrast between God in his transcendent and self-sufficient glory and God in his active relations with the world.

The second possibility for those who affirm the *enhypostasia*, is to interpret the Gospel relation of Jesus to his heavenly Father in terms of his *human* nature. It would be contended that the conditions of finitude imply the relation of creature to Creator; and in his prayers to God Jesus voices what is appropriate to his human status. It is his human not his divine consciousness which is involved. Here he speaks and acts as *man*; and although the ultimate metaphysical subject of such actions is the Second Person of the Trinity, this is not given direct expression in the address to the heavenly Father. Just as Jesus eats, drinks and suffers as *man*, so he prays as *man*. Hence the Father-Son relation is not a trinitarian one, but a condition of mortal existence. In short, to the extent we take seriously the limitations imposed by incarnation we cannot read off divine relations from words and actions of the human scene. We may well believe that behind the incarnate life lies the Second Person of the Trinity; but we cannot speak of this Person and his relations with the other divine Persons in terms proper to the incarnate life. For these terms are qualified by the human nature and bespeak relations between creature and Creator. If the Second Person of the Trinity condescended to men's estate, and emptied himself of the divine glory for our salvation, then his conscious acts are in terms of a *human* consciousness, and not of a divine one. The metaphysical Ego of Jesus is not *identical* with his human knowledge of himself.

Such a position has to face grave issues for trinitarian thinking. For the terms Father and Son are now divested of a divine connection. They belong to the human nature. We have no way of knowing, therefore, whether there is any personal distinction between the metaphysical Ego of Jesus and God the Father himself. Why should we strive to make *any* ontological and personal distinctions in the Godhead? Should we not content ourselves with saying that behind this human life there was God, acting for our salvation?

The answer must surely be in the affirmative. For there is no way of knowing and no necessity for assuming any distinction of Father and Son. Indeed, as soon as a distinction is pressed upon us, we instantly discover it arises from the faulty assumptions of the Logos theology, and Father and Son are contrasted in terms that ultimately derive from the notion of the fecundity of the absolute. The usual distinction concerns Patripassianism.

It is said the Son is nearer to suffering than the Father. The Son can appropriate suffering in a way the Father cannot, since the Father is the absolute, the Son God in his relations. But this involves all the difficulty we have already surveyed in connection with the absolute-related problem. There simply is no reason for saying that the *hypostasis* of Jesus differs from the First Person of the Trinity to the extent that the one and not the other can appropriate suffering. We are mixing up paradoxical, metaphysical principles in the Godhead with Persons who have relations with each other. Another way of putting it is to assume that the *kenosis* is possible for the Second Person and not for the First, since God must still exercise his Lordship and sustaining of the world, during the incarnation. There must, therefore, be two Persons. But this is an equally faulty way of thinking. For what is needed to express this truth adequately is a recognition of the paradoxical nature of God, not the assumption of two Persons in the Trinity, so that the ultimate Ego of Jesus stands (*qua* Person) over against the Person of the Father. Again we are mixing up metaphysical principles in God with Persons.

Finally, it is often contended that the Trinity is essential to express the reality of God as love. Only in a relation of Persons can love find its fulfillment. It is inadequate to say God loves himself, for the outgoing quality of love lies precisely in the Lover having another than himself to love. I have treated this problem in Chapter 5 of my book. Here I will only recall that while there is value in the social analogy in our thinking about God, the terms do not have to be those of Father and Son. Indeed, once we assume that Jesus' address to the Father is *not* indicative of a divine relation, but bespeaks the conditions of finitude, there is no reason for using the terms Father and Son to express the social analogy with the Godhead. All we need to say is that the ultimate Ego of Jesus loves and is loved by another Person of the Godhead. There is no need to say this ultimate Ego is derived *from* that other Person. Indeed, to do so invariably involves us in the faulty thinking of the Logos theology.

We conclude then that while some conception of Persons in the Godhead may be a consequence of the *enhypostasia*, the *classical* trinitarian doctrine is *not* a necessary corollary of it. Those who would read off divine relations from Gospel sayings in which Jesus addresses his Father, can speak of Father, Son and Spirit as divinely revealed Persons of the Trinity. But no other content can be given to the doctrine; and the attempt to interpret it further in Logos terms is open to grave objections. Those, on the other hand, who regard Jesus' conscious relation with his Father as an aspect of the *human* nature, cannot even establish that the terms Father and Son are appropriate to the Godhead. On the grounds of the social analogy they may urge that the ultimate Ego of Jesus loves and is loved by a Person or Persons of the Godhead. But nothing more can be said without introducing metaphysical considerations which are seriously open to question.