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Problem? what problem? Personhood, late modern / postmodern rootlessness and contemporary identity crises

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'Have you read the *De Trinitate*, Gilles?'
  Gilles nodded. 'It is more than his accusers have, I'll be bound.'
  'And is it heretical?'
  'Of course it is heretical. Every book that ever was written about the Trinity is heretical, barring the Athanasian creed. And that only saves itself by contradicting everything it says as fast as it says it. ... Not but what Abelard does the same,' went on Gilles thoughtfully. 'But there is too great a space between the assertion and the contradiction for a porker like Alberic to carry it in his head.'[1]

Things don't generally become an issue until they become an issue. In recent years, personhood has certainly become an 'issue' for theology. That circumstance certainly is not without precedent, of course. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the 'persons' of the Trinity, the definition of their substances, essences and mutual relations, were prime battlegrounds in the *odium theologicum* and, via their politicisation in disputes between Antioch, Constantinople and Alexandria, even of war and persecution.[2]

Be that as it may, the 'persons' whose existence, essence etc. had become problematic were divine, not human. All of that looks very different now. Whatever might be said about revivals of trinitarian theology in the current climate, what is really driving this new (or, if one insists, renewed) mode of discourse is a deep-seated *Angst* about human personhood; the desire now is to say something persuasive – or even meaningful – about our own significance by analogy with the established Nicene and Chalcedonian doctrines concerning

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1 Helen Waddell, *Peter Abelard*, Book 4, ch.1.
2 Indeed, it is at least arguable that the Christological disputes were *instruments* of conflict between their big-city protagonists, rather than *causes* of it.

persons divine.[3] Needless to say, that was hardly the prime motivation for the formulation of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy.

Still, the fourth and fifth-century theologians were on what was, for them, new ground as well. The difficulty they faced in coming to an agreed, coherent orthodoxy that could be squared with the biblical revelation was the maddening diffidence of the latter about the whole subject. To be sure, the New Testament writers often took account of Greek thought when penning their works, but as often as not it was to confute it. The authors of the Old Testament, as has often been remarked, inhabited a different mental paradigm altogether. 'What the Bible says' about personhood and essence, therefore, had to be gleaned by inference or *eisegesis*. Questions of 'person', *hypostasis*, Trinity, *homoousios* and *homoiousios* are questions brought *to* Scripture rather than answers (easily) derived *from* it. The creedal formularies about divine personhood were thus attempts to make sense of biblical statements in terms of questions and thought structures which a different worldview was asking of the sacred text.

So far, so similar: the theological task confronting the late Early Church/early Middle Ages is the same one that confronts Christian thinkers and apologists of every age, ours included. Certainly it is no part of the brief of this paper to castigate the fathers of Nicæa or Chalcedon for presuming to pronounce upon questions which God does not ask of himself. However, we do wish to call into question the wisdom of calling 'personhood' into question. Once this happens, once it becomes an 'issue', personhood certainly becomes problematic! When this exercise was attempted in the fourth and fifth centuries the upshot was not only clearer doctrinal definition, but also schism, persecution and the delivery of theology into the shackles of Greek philosophical discourse and the hands of those who could master it. It is not at all clear that the balance sheet is in the black.

But even if we shrug this off and insist that our ability to identify and anathematise Arianism outweighs the disadvantages – or even (if we are building a certain kind of academic career for ourselves) that they are no disadvantages at all – it is still worth asking why God, the Supreme Person(s) and fount of personhood, says so little about the subject. In Scripture, he is depicted as acting, speaking, willing, loving, but not, in general, cogitating upon the nature of his existence or asking if it has an essence – let alone telling us what that essence

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3   There are other factors involved in this upsurge as well, of course, amongst which I would suggest the following:
   a) the search of liberal and postliberal Protestants for a new touchstone in creedalism after their confidence in Scripture has been shaken or, at any rate, rejected;
   b) the desire of some evangelical theologians to distance themselves from any hint of association with 'fundamentalism' by focusing on extra-biblical *loci* of orthodoxy;
   c) the new strength of 'high' churchmanships with a natural interest in the doctrinal formulations of church councils;
   d) the quest — or, at any rate, the hope — of all of these and others, for some common theological ground.

might be. We might surmise that such cogitations have the inherent danger of making the cogitator self-referential and self-obsessed and that God, in whose image we are made, would have us other-directed and not self-directed. This is mere conjecture, of course, but, if true, might account for divine reticence on the subject. Perhaps Gregory of Nyssa, himself a late-fourth-century theologian, was right in making the necessary transfer of that nescience to humanity, and concluding that inscrutability of essence is itself part of the 'image of God' into which we are made.[4] So if you don't understand yourself, that's fine; that's the deal. Woody Allen would approve – or at least understand. Think too much about who you are, and you're a self-obsessed nobody.

And here we come to the heart of what this paper is about. Most people in the human past did not spend their time anxiously wondering who or what they were. The Constantinian and post-Constantinian church leaders devoted much time to understanding the personhood(s) of God, but it is our own age which has found human personhood problematic, and whose theologians have sought a remedy in the analogy with the definitions of divine personhood in the creeds.

Pre-modernity

Most people in the human past knew who and what they were, not by precept or as a conclusion to an analytical discussion, but by constant, daily experience and reinforcement. Social stability and immobility combined (mostly) with relative geographical rootedness to place to produce a stable and, above all, unreflective sense of selfhood. Indeed, it was this which traditional religions both celebrated and reinforced. Religious ritual tells you, again and again and again, who you are and what it is that you are a part of, whilst investing the whole with significance by rooting it in transcendence. In this context, questions of human personhood are hardly likely to be raised, in that they are understood unreflectively.

Modernity

It was this stability which modernity destroyed. Where religion was not rejected entirely, ritual and personal relationships were replaced by texts and abstract ideas (so: priests/Pope and mass, out; Bible and 'justification by faith', in). Rootedness to place was replaced by getting on one's bike to find work. The suffocating familiarity of the village was replaced by the disorientating anonymity of the city. If Marx could speak of 'the idiocy of rural life', then the person rooted to place was the idiot, who was now derided for an ignorant bumpkin; he has made way for the commuter, the tourist and, in our own day, for the knowing cosmopolitan. In traditional society, the loner was to be feared (witches, you remember, always lived in the forest, didn't they?); in modernity, like the Wild West, the Lone Ranger was the hero. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, 'innovation' was a label you attempted to fasten round your political or religious

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4   Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 11:3.

enemy's neck in order to prove he was wrong; in Blair-speak, 'conservatism' (even with a small 'c') is a swear-word. Pre-moderns knew who they were – and who other people were – by reference to their families. In modern society, the teenager must prove himself an adult by 'finding himself', 'becoming his own person', and he is to do this precisely by rejecting his family: the crisis of adolescence is a crisis of our own making (in more than one sense of that phrase).

Modern social conditions spawned a raft of ideas and ideologies which both reflected and furthered the modernist project. Traditional restrictions were to be cast aside so that individuals could assert their own independence and define their own selfhood. This has been elevated to the supreme Western value, which the shift to postmodernity has not reversed, but reinforced. Yet the modernist affirmation of selfhood generally brought ambiguous gains, and made 'the self' problematic. Arranged marriages were out; men and women themselves should choose their spouses for love, not have them imposed by 'parents who know best' (or who may have wider agendas of their own). The result has been marriages that depend upon emotion, rather than being rooted in wider social and economic needs, and are thus far more fragile and prone to divorce (another innovation of personal choice) than what they have replaced: 'an American marries the woman he loves, but an Indian loves the woman he marries'. David Steel and his fellow campaigners in the 1960s promised that legalised abortion would make 'every child a wanted child', that is, a result of personal choice and self-affirmation rather than an imposition of nature. By the end of the century, the supposed gains in the 'wantedness' of children were not exactly obvious, at least not by reference to all of the indicators of child-abuse or child-neglect. And the adolescent, having once 'invented himself' in distinction from parents and family, now mostly finds that the process can be, or has to be, repeated throughout life, as he moves from one job or career, one geographical location or sexual partner, one group of friends, one religious or philosophical 'commitment',[5] to another – and then to another.

Modernity elevated the 'essence' of personhood, hoping to free it from the shackles of its social location i.e. imposed identity. The Rousseauian vision of the heroic self which needed to be recovered from the poisoned atmosphere of actual social conditions fuelled the revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which all claimed to be for 'liberty', whether defined in nationalist or socialist terms. Once achieved, the revolutions (particularly of the latter type) appeared to submerge the individual in the mass; the thrill was not in their attainment, but in the striving after them, and the postures of moral righteousness they enabled their protagonists to obtain in railing against the

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5   On 'commitment' see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1987), 146. Whilst appearing to be a 'conservative' concept, it does, in fact, exalt the self as chooser of relationships, systems of morals, beliefs etc. rather than as the recipient of, and participant in, these things being 'given'. It is thereby a term that affirms self-invention, and thus the contingency of identity upon (mutable) personal choices.

limitations which the *anciens régimes* placed in the way of self-fulfilment.

All of the modernist projects, whether capitalist, nationalist or socialist, dissolved traditional categories of identity. To be sure, nationalism and socialism erected new categories (those of nationhood and of class) to replace the old, but these were abstractions which had been self-consciously constructed for the purposes of furthering present antagonisms; they could not reassure and console like the old verities of family, ancestors, village, and inherited personal loyalties. Orthodoxy in mediæval Russia contributed to conferring identity upon peasants because of its immediacy and the tangibility of its rituals, *not* because it was 'the soul of Russian-ness'. The latter construction is a large-scale abstract, useful for encouraging fascist tendencies in the modern era, perhaps, but less stable in conveying identity. Capitalism did not even provide new categories to replace the old. The self was alone; its ideal was the 'self-made man'.

Postmodernity

All of this was sustainable whilst enough of stable social conditions remained intact for the content and meaning of the 'essential self' to be somehow above the need for investigation, a topic about which most people could remain un-reflective. But once the social demolition upon imposed identities had become all too successful, a point generally reached in western societies since the Second World War, the rootlessness of individuals left adrift in an anonymous pea-soup of humanity has become apparent. At that point, the question 'Who am I?' becomes more than a matter for philosophically minded souls who have toyed with it down the ages; it becomes an issue for every person. Personhood can no longer be taken for granted.

The problem of rootlessness has been compounded by the postmodern ideology (a contradiction in terms, of course – but then, postmodernity is big on irony) of repudiating all distinctions between people, or at least of making them newly problematic. Nowhere is this more true than in respect of gender. Anyone who is too sure of their identity (and, by necessary implication, of the identity of others) in this area is laying themselves wide open to denunciation. In consequence, few now are sure of what it means to 'be a man'/'be a woman'; a basic aspect of existence has been rendered problematic. The attack on traditional rôles and the assault on 'stereotypes' were doubtless intended to free groups deemed to have been oppressed by past metanarratives. But by kicking them aside, we render our own situatedness and identities problematic, since we only know who we are in relation to others. By forbidding ourselves to discriminate, we forbid ourselves to discern.

Lest this be construed as some kind of *apologia* for sexism, racism and goodness-knows-what other postmodern sins, let us hasten to add (since we all have jobs to hold down, friends to keep etc.) that we are simply identifying some undesirable outcomes of certain historical processes, not attacking those processes root and branch. (What after all, is Anabaptism, if not a 'chosen' community, as opposed to the inherited state churches of Christendom? What is

evangelicalism if not making a 'personal choice to follow Jesus'?)

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It will be objected also, perhaps, that this whole discussion has confounded 'personhood' with 'identity'. Objection refused. If we were minded to etymological quibbling, we might point out that 'persona' *means* the playing of a rôle (in a Greek drama) – and thus an identity. But in fact, the attempted distinction between 'person' and 'identity' is also unreal in practice. It is an attempt to emphasise human essence (the former), by way of distinction from relationality (the latter). Yet what we mean by a human person is an individuated human being. It is the modern/postmodern dilemma that has thrust upon us the quest for our personal 'essence', precisely because postmodern conditions have made our identity so unclear. In the absence of stable identity, we go looking for who we 'really' are; that is, we go in quest of personal essentialism, an essence that is not contingent upon our (fleeting) social relationalities.

But this is a vain quest. It is not that we have no essence, but that we can hardly know what it is, for reasons which Gregory of Nyssa could have explained to us, and that the quest itself simply exacerbates our problem by accentuating our modern-postmodern self-directedness.

The problem, of course, is that we cannot go back. We can no more recreate pre-modern conditions, and with it pre-modern unreflectiveness about selfhood / personhood, than we can turn back time itself. That being so, the *Angst* about personhood will continue, so our theologians had better address it. This paper is not calling for a moratorium, merely for caution. For our essence, like that of God, is beyond our grasp, and the feverish search for it merely fuels the self-obsession of our society, an obsession with which we are all (because we live in that society) tainted. Professor Rupp was right: it is the demythologising of one's own age that is the prime requisite for the biblical theologian.[6]

We might surmise that our personhood is found, as with the persons of the Trinity, precisely in the polarity between essence and relationality/identity. Quite likely so, but the former is still probably best left alone to its inscrutability. Certainly an unbalanced emphasis upon personhood as 'essentialism', leading to a ceaseless quest for the 'real self', can only fuel the monstrous egotism and self-centredness epitomised by the consumerist mind-set, that full flowering of self-assertion. On the other hand, the apparent corrective, namely that of rooting personhood in relationality, can only encourage the obverse side of the same coin, namely the pathetic self-loathing and 'low self-esteem' of (for example) the teenager who, empirically, may have more of this world's goods than the vast majority of humanity has ever needed for subsistence but who, left 'free' to invent themselves, lacks the inner strength to compete as hero, sportsman or sex-god and so adjudges themselves a failure. Avoiding these extremes by stressing the polarity or (ghastly Hegelianism) 'dialectic' between essence and relationality in personhood is, of course, a fine line: hence this paper's cautionary note.

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6   G. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (London: Epworth, 1969), xix.

We are, perhaps, reflecting God's image most faithfully if we can answer the question 'Who are you?' with an equal absence of introspection and blessed assurance of selfhood: 'I am who I am'. But the trick, perhaps, was easier for pre-moderns than it is ever likely to be for us.

Abstract

This article surveys changing perceptions of personhood in pre-modernity, modernity and postmodernity. Human personhood and identity was not perceived as an issue until modernity placed a heavy emphasis on the independence of the individual. Personhood should not be located exclusively either in essence or in relationships.