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'Not apart from us' (Hebrews 11:40): physical community in the Letter to the Hebrews

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KEY WORDS: Hebrews, person, personhood, Christ, incarnation, humanity, death, blood, physicality, solidarity, faith.

Introduction and a thesis

This series of essays on 'personhood' takes its starting-point in a series of seminars held for faculty, research students and some visiting scholars in the spring of 2001. When I wrote this paper, in the sequence of the seminars, I was able to interact particularly with the papers by Peter Hicks and Meic Pearse, which were published in an earlier issue of *EQ*, and also to some extent with that by Cornel Boingeanu, which is scheduled for publication in a future issue.¹

Our deliberations thus far had focused around the definition and description of personhood. How can it be something shared by God and human beings? What constitutes this common 'personhood'? Are angels, too, to be thought of as 'persons'? We began by considering the traditional view that it is our *rationality* – our status as creatures of *logos* – which defines our personhood: and we discussed together a paper by Steve Bachmann which argued that this is too individualistic an approach, and that we need to supplement rationality with *moral-ity* and with *relationality* as equally essential to our personhood.

This same trio – rationality, morality (or will) and relationality – appear through Peter Hick's descriptive analysis, also: with his added emphasis on the way in which, until Locke, reason and morality were not divorced, but felt to co-inhere with each other. And he also illustrates the way in which the more recent appearance of the third (relationality) arises from the *fragmentation* of the sciences, followed by a movement to reintegrate the now divided human person and to see us as 'a system within a system within a system.'

If we are to seek some kind of hierarchy within these three, I would suggest that rationality and morality are foundational to relationality. For it is rationality and morality which enable us to recognize that our relations *with other humans*

1 M. Pearse, 'Problem? What problem? Personhood, late modern/postmodern rootlessness and contemporary identity crises,' *EQ* 77 (2005), 5-11; P. Hicks, 'One or two? A historical survey of an aspect of personhood,' *EQ* 77 (2005), 35-45; C. Boingeanu, 'Personhood in its Protological and Eschatological Patterns: An Eastern Orthodox View on the Ontology of Personality,' forthcoming in *EQ* 78:1 (2006).

have a different quality from our relations with animals or inanimate objects. We *classify* other human beings differently, and then *structure our relations* with them according to different mores.

But are these three sufficient in themselves to define personhood? All three are strangely *disembodied*, strangely *unemotional*, and strangely *unspiritual*. In themselves – in terms of Peter Hicks’s analysis – they are Aristotelian rather than Platonic, supplying a definition based not on revelation, but on what we see ourselves to be, and avoiding a spirit-flesh dualism. However, these three could be defined in such a way as to *contain* embodiment, spirituality and emotions (what the Puritans called ‘the affections’). We could suggest (a) that our relationality depends upon our embodiment and embraces our (‘spiritual’) relationship with God, (b) that all our mental processes including our emotions have a fundamentally physical basis in the chemistry of the brain, and (c) that the moral will expresses itself almost wholly in terms of the structuring of relations between embodied human beings (and between human beings and God), and commends relational qualities (e.g. ‘the fruit of the Spirit’) which are both emotional states and strategies for action in relationship. But, rather than extending the definitions like this, it would seem more appropriate to supplement these three in some way, in order to encompass more of what we find ourselves to be. But with what?

In one of the early seminars we had an inconclusive discussion as to whether there is some kind of ‘nature’ or ‘substance’ which fundamentally distinguishes human from all other being, and which we instinctively recognise in each other *apart from* our shared rationality, morality and relationality. Some resisted this suggestion, because they wanted to argue that, just as relationality is fundamental to God in his trinitarian being, so it is to us – that is, that our ‘nature’ is not some kind of human ‘substance’, but that we are fundamentally constituted by the relations in which we find ourselves (both with others and with God). It is something along these lines for which Alistair McFadyen argues in *A Call to Personhood*, where he defines human being as ‘a structure of address and response’, in which the image of God in us forms an ‘ontological ... universal structure of human being to which all human persons correspond without exception as *defined by their relations*.²

This is an attractive view, which would allow us to escape from Meic Pearse’s ‘ghastly Hegelian dialectic’ between essence and relationality, by simply striking out the former. And clearly it is true to say, as he so powerfully does, that we can’t ultimately separate personhood and *identity*, and that our identities are *socially constructed* (hence all the misery and Angst in our post-modern rootlessness). ‘We only know who we are in relation to others.’³ We are indeed ‘defined’ by our

2 Alistair I. McFadyen, *A Call to Personhood. A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 39, 41 (emphasis added).

3 Pearse, ‘Problem? What problem?’, 9.

relationships in the sense that we are *shaped*, for good or ill, by the sexual, familial, social, political and of course spiritual relations in which we are located. But Meic Pearce will not let us leave go of 'essence' (although he says we can never know it and shouldn't look for it!), and I am sure he is right. If personhood is constructed solely in relational terms, then we end up denying personhood to the relationally destitute. There must be *something* to which social 'shaping' is added, an underlying 'stuff' which can either be ruined or re-built by our relations – a 'stuff' which makes it possible for us to say decisively that certain ways of relating will be wrong for us, and others right for us, because we are 'made' to be in one way, and not in another.

McFadyen does not address this. In fact, he seems to me to confuse 'shaping' with 'definition'. But having objected to him on these grounds I need to make a proposal: what is this 'stuff'? I suggest quite simply that our *physicality* forms a fourth 'element' to add to rationality, morality and relationality. I suggest that it is not only essential, but also profoundly *biblical*, to include our physicality in our understanding of human personhood.

McFadyen deals with our physicality quite extensively in his discussion of 'The creation of individuality in God's image' (his first chapter), because he takes gender relations between male and female as 'a structural paradigm of human life.'⁴ But his repeated use of the word 'paradigm' in this section reveals that the physicality of male-female relatedness is incidental to his fundamental thesis about human being. It simply *pictures* helpfully for us the basic 'structures' (another favourite word) of all human relating – 'the structure of distinction and relation in dialogical encounter.'⁵ Our physicality seems strangely incidental to what we are, on his account of human being. Gnosticism looms large, again.

And Gnosticism looms large also in the Orthodox account which Cornel Boingeanu describes in his paper shortly to be published in *EQ*. Orthodox theology fails to ask whether there are any distinctly *human* aspects or components of personhood which would distinguish *our* personhood from that of the holy Trinity in his eternal perichoretic dance – and also from the 'personhood' of the an-

4 McFadyen, *Personhood*, 36. The section 'The image as male and female' occupies pp 31-39.

5 McFadyen, *Personhood*, 38. The physicality of human personhood is everywhere implicit but nowhere explicit in Christoph Schwöbel's important summary presentation, 'Human Being as Relational Being: Twelve Theses for a Christian Anthropology' in Christoph Schwöbel and Colin Gunton (eds.) *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 141-70.

gels.⁶ Two such components immediately suggest themselves: (a) that as humans in Christ we are and will always be *redeemed* persons, that is, shaped by a history of alienation and suffering, and by the experience of rescue; and (b) that, underlying this history and experience, we are and will always be *embodied* persons, that is, faced (now, at least) with the challenge of learning obedience and worship through frail lips and hands and in the context of *physical* relationships.

Incarnation and salvation in Hebrews

These thoughts lead us nicely to Hebrews. Hebrews is not necessarily, in itself, an obvious dialogue-partner for thinking about these questions, but my own current interest in this amazing letter naturally takes me there: and I find that Hebrews has a great deal to say about them. Hebrews dramatically *qualifies*, for instance, the extent to which those two features of our human personhood – our experience of alienation and rescue, and our inescapable physical weakness – really separate us from divine personhood. I felt quite horrified about the marginalisation of the incarnation in the Orthodox account, as Cornel Boingeanu relayed it to us. The emphasis in Hebrews is quite the reverse. Here we even find Jesus dramatically pictured as himself undergoing a process of redemption through which he ‘learned obedience’:

In the days of his flesh, he offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (Heb. 5:7-8)

And equally dramatically Hebrews makes Jesus’ humanity, his sharing of our flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14), a permanent feature of his identity, for – as we will see – he does not leave it behind when he enters the Most Holy Place as our ‘forerunner’. As High Priest he is *one of us* (Heb. 5:1, etc). For the author of Hebrews, a permanent change has been introduced into God, signalled by the ‘sitting’ of the Son at the right hand of the majesty on high (1:3, etc): and we may summarise that change by saying that, as a result of the incarnation, flesh and blood have been taken into deity.

6 In one of the seminars Conrad Gempf pointed out that our discussions needed to develop a distinction between ‘humanness’ and ‘personhood’, and to ask in what sense angels are ‘persons’. If personhood is defined by bearing ‘the image of God’, then presumably angels are not persons. But biblically they exhibit ‘personal’ traits: self-consciousness, individuality, language, response of obedience and worship ... Yet if the angels are ‘persons’, then clearly physicality can only be a contingent component of personhood. And yet it is so fundamental to our experience of *human* personhood that we cannot ignore it. I would want to affirm, with Schwöbel, that ‘in faith the destiny of humanity to live as created in the image of God is recreated as life in the image of Christ’ (‘Twelve Theses’, 151 – his 6th thesis): but if the image of God has become for us the image of *Christ*, then our life must be embodied life as his is. So we may need to work with different types of personhood – divine, angelic, and human – exhibiting different combinations or expressions of the same constituent elements (rationality, morality (will), relationality and physicality).

This entails an understanding of 'flesh' which does not see it as essentially inimical to 'spirit'. It used to be held that Hebrews works with a Platonic dualism, seeing the earthly tabernacle as a 'shadow' of 'the greater and more perfect tent not made by hands, that is, not of this creation' (9:11).⁷ But this view has now given way to something much more Jewish (and Aristotelian?), in which the polarity is not between 'flesh' and 'spirit' (or 'earth' and 'heaven') but between 'holy' and 'profane', and the tabernacle forms a kind of 'transition zone' between the two.⁸ On this model it is quite possible for Jesus as High Priest to pass *as flesh* into the realm of the sacred, where God dwells. So when Hebrews 9:14 says: '... how much more will the blood of Christ, who *through the eternal Spirit* offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!' – the reference to 'Spirit' does not imply that Christ left his flesh behind in order to make his offering. Rather, 'the eternal Spirit' provides the means and the *context* by which the sacrifice of Jesus' flesh for us actually *works*, and by which he is actually able to 'enter the Holy Place ... *through his own blood*' (9:12). The phrases 'through his own blood' and 'through the eternal Spirit' (9:12 and 14) are cognate with each other, and the Spirit (of God) works in and through the (broken) flesh of Christ to enable 'eternal redemption' to take place.

This provides a fascinating understanding of physicality which *embraces* 'spirituality' defined as *the capacity to enjoy a loving person-to-person relationship with God*, or, as Hebrews puts it, the capacity to 'worship the living God' from a pure 'conscience'. Once again, we must resist a dualistic interpretation which sees 'conscience'⁹ as belonging to a 'spirit' side of our fabric, divorced from the physical. This is because the 'dead works' which defile the conscience, and from which it has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, illustrate precisely this 'cross-over' where sins of *the flesh* impinge with deadly effect on the realm of the sacred. Robert Gordon argues that the 'dead works' of Hebrews 6:1 and 9:14 are specifically the 'high-handed sins' of Numbers 15:30-31, for which no atonement was possible.¹⁰ 'High-handed' sins were distinguished from other sins by being *deliberate* (i.e. conscientious) acts of rebellion. Rabbinic theology maintained

7 One of the most persuasive representatives of this view is J.W. Thompson, who has devoted several essays to it: e.g. 'Hebrews 9 and Hellenistic Concepts of Sacrifice', *JBL* 98 (1979), 567-78; "'That which cannot be shaken": Some Metaphysical Assumptions in Heb 12:27', *JBL* 94 (1975), 580-87.

8 See Richard D. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest. Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). 'Transition zone' is his phrase. The reference to the 'cherubim of glory' over the Ark in Heb. 9:5 points to this 'transitional' quality of *ta hagia*: God's glory is really present in this physical location.

9 A vital Hebrews term: see also 9:9, 10:2, 10:22, 13:18.

10 Robert P. Gordon, *Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 101-102; also *idem*, 'Better Promises: Two Passages in Hebrews Against the Background of the Old Testament Cultus' in W. Horbury (ed.) *Templum Amicitiae. Essays on the Second Temple Presented to Ernst Bammel* (JSNTSupp 48; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 434-49 (here 443-46). This suggestion is also made – apparently independently – by Nelson, *Raising Up*, 145-46.

that such sins could not be atoned for by sacrifice, but only by repentance – only an act of conscience could atone for an act of conscience. But Hebrews works with a more holistic anthropology. ‘Works which produce [physical] death’ (i.e. ‘dead works’) necessarily involve the whole person – as in the case of the young man who immediately illustrates Numbers 15:30-31 by being stoned for gathering sticks on the sabbath (Num. 15:32-36). His physical action was motivated by inner, deliberate rejection of the will of God, and in such a case a merely *physical* animal sacrifice could not atone.

But Jesus *does* atone for such sins. So the *conscientious* self-offering of his *body* becomes the perfect sacrifice designed to meet our need of body-spirit purification. This is beautifully expressed through the quotation of Psalm 40:6-8 in Hebrews 10:5-7, especially with its change (probably deliberate) of the LXX ‘ears’ into ‘body’.¹¹ God does not desire animal sacrifices, but he has prepared a ‘body’ for Christ, through which his will will be done. And so, ‘It is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (Heb. 10:10). The new and living way into the Most Holy Place has been opened for us ‘through the curtain, that is, through his flesh’ (Heb. 10:20), because his flesh is ‘the essential pre-requisite for salvation. Only flesh can die!

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. (Heb. 2:14-15)

Death is therefore the focus of the work of salvation in Hebrews. This is so, despite the concentration on issues of sin and purity. The Honours List in Hebrews 11 concerns those who in different ways were victorious, not over sin, but over death and the fear of it.¹² Impurity is life-threatening – this is why it must be dealt with. The connection between the Devil, impurity and death is illustrated in 11:28, where ‘by faith [Moses] held the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the Destroyer might not touch their first-born’.¹³ Already, ‘by faith’ and by ‘blood’, the power of death is being held at bay. God, too, is a Destroyer before whom Moses shrinks, according to Deuteronomy 9:19 quoted in Hebrews 12:21.¹⁴ He is a ‘consuming fire’ (12:29).

Here we must ask: what exactly is ‘death’, and how does the death of Christ deliver us from it? This leads us into our next section.

11 It is just possible that *soma* for *otia* represents an LXX textual variant, but it seems more likely that the author has taken it upon himself to clarify a nonsensical translation (‘sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but you prepared ears for me’) by treating ‘ears’ as *pars pro toto* for the whole body.

12 This is one of the insights which distinguishes Robert Gordon’s recent commentary: Gordon, *Hebrews*, 17-19.

13 Following the translation option favoured by Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), 618.

14 Moses is fearful not for himself but for Israel, ‘because the Lord’s anger was kindled against you, to destroy you.’ Here the same verbal root is used as in Heb. 11:28.

Incarnation, death and solidarity

If Hebrews offers us a definition of death, then it would emerge through its connection with this notion of 'destruction'. 'We are not marked by shrinking back to destruction (*eis apoletian*), but by faith, so as to gain our souls (*eis peripoiessin psuches*)!' (10:39). Believers who reject Christ will experience 'a storm of fire which will consume his adversaries' (10:27). Following through his gardening metaphor in 6:7-8, the author writes that those who re-crucify the Son of God are like the earth in Genesis 3:17, 'rejected and nearly cursed, destined for burning' (6:8). The picture of the two-edged sword in 4:12-13, allegorized so enthusiastically in prayers before sermons, is actually a horrifying image of radical dismemberment before the judgment of God: the fate of all who disobey, illustrated in the preceding verses by the Exodus generation 'whose bodies fell in the wilderness' (3:17).

Hebrews could so easily make use of a distinction between physical and spiritual death: or between the first and second death, as in Revelation 20:6, 21:8. But it does not. In fact it seems to eschew such an idea in 9:27: 'it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment.'¹⁵ This actually creates a bit of a problem for the eschatology of Hebrews, for on the one hand we read that the dead heroes of faith 'are not to be perfected apart from us' (11:40) – suggesting that they are somehow held in suspension until the end of the earthly story – but on the other hand we then meet them described as 'the spirits of the righteous, made perfect' already with Christ on Mount Zion, to which we have already 'drawn near' (12:22-23). A distinction between two deaths, or rather a time-gap between physical death and final resurrection, would resolve this tension. And of course we find such a distinction elsewhere in the New Testament, not just in Revelation.¹⁶ Why not in Hebrews?

I suspect that the answer lies in Hebrews' radically *monistic* anthropology. Physical death is destruction of the person. Even though judgment takes place *after* death (9:27), nothing is made of any 'gap' between death and judgment. For the point of the comment in 9:27 is to emphasize the tight connection between the two comings of Christ: he was sacrificed for sin 'at the fulfilment of the ages' (9:26), which is about as 'eschatological' an expression as we could ask for.¹⁷ And so – the implication is – his second coming cannot be 'the fulfilment of the ages'. It is as tightly bound to his first as death is to judgment, and as the emerging of the High Priest from the Most Holy Place is to the sprinkling of blood within. In fact there is a strong implication in this passage that Christ's second appearance 'to save those who are eagerly waiting for him' (9:28) is not just the end-of-the-age 'Day' (10:25), but an individual post-mortem appearance to save us in the

15 This is all the more remarkable, in the light of the many apocalyptic features of Hebrews and parallels with Revelation.

16 E.g. John 5:28-29, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, 1 Cor. 15:20-23.

17 See the details given by E. Grässer, *An die Hebräer* (EKK 17/2; Zürich/Neukirchen: Benziger/Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 196, and cf. Matt. 13:39-40; 24:3.

context of the judgment which we face in and at the very moment of our death – the moment when the sword of God's judgment is raised to dismember our bodies (4:12-13).¹⁸

It looks, therefore, as though the author of Hebrews is trying to carry through the implications of a monistic anthropology at the expense of 'realising' his eschatology somewhat. Yes, there comes a Day of 'shaking', when heaven and earth will be 'removed' (12:27). But at that point 'what cannot be shaken will remain', and it appears that 'we are [already] receiving an unshakable kingdom' (12:28). Our *present* experience of Mount Zion, therefore, to which we draw close, is not just an anticipatory foretaste of what will be, but a *real participation* in the present unshakable kingdom of God, a participation which will not be broken by our death *even though* death is by definition a fundamental destruction of the person.

Of course this paradoxical survival is only possible because of Jesus. But *how?* The immediate answer of Hebrews, in the foundational chapter 2, is in terms of *family*. Jesus is the No 1 Human Being, who alone makes sense of the extravagant statements of Psalm 8 about humankind, for only in him do we see one 'crowned with glory and honour', with 'everything in submission under his feet' (2:7-9). But potentially this No 1 Human Being will enable the Psalm to be true of others, too, as he 'leads many sons to glory'.¹⁹ He does this by 'tasting death on behalf of each' (2:9), so that we become not just the sons he leads to glory, but his brothers (2:12,17) and adopted children given to him by God (2:13-14).

But how does this 'becoming family with us' enable him to lead us to glory? Erich Grässer answers this with reference to the Gnostic redeemer-myth which he finds reflected in 2:11 and 2:14: 'he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all of one origin' (*ex henos pantes*, 2:11) – that is, they have the same heavenly origin: and then both become incarnate, both the Redeemer and the redeemed (2:14). The Redeemer follows the redeemed into flesh and blood so that they may all be restored to their heavenly origin.²⁰

However, it is highly unlikely that 2:14 refers to an *incarnation* (from pre-existence) of 'the children' as well as of the Son. This element of later Gnosticism

18 This is not a line of exegesis represented in the major current commentaries. In fact Weiß and Ellingworth argue in the opposite direction: the reference to the Parousia in 9:28 makes it necessary that the judgment in 9:27 is not immediately post-mortem (H.-F. Weiß, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK 13/15; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 494; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 486). If they are right, this would be the only place in the New Testament where the passive of *horao* (*ophtenai*) would be used of the Parousia, while this expression is typically used of the resurrection 'appearances' (e.g. 1 Cor 15:5-8, Luke 24:34, Acts 9:17, 13:31). And this association of the Parousia solely with *salvation* would also be unusual.

19 This phrase in 2:10 is best taken as predicated of Jesus rather than of God.

20 E. Grässer, 'Die Heilsbedeutung des Todes Jesu in Hebräer 2,14-18' in Carl Andresen and Günter Klein (ed.) *Theologia Crucis – Signum Crucis* (FS Erich Dinkler zum 70. Geburtstag; Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1979), 165-84. Also Grässer, *Hebräer*, 1:133-36, 143-46.

has no biblical footholds and there is thus no *pressure* to find it here, especially since a less 'technical' interpretation is perfectly possible. 2:14-15 moves seamlessly into a presentation of atonement in very biblical terms, involving priesthood and the expiation of sin. In fact the structure of the paragraph 2:14-18, with its repeated three-fold pattern, puts 2:14a in clear parallel with 2:17a, which cannot be interpreted in terms of an 'incarnation' of the children. In simplified terms:

A He became like us (14a, 17a)

B So that (*hina*) he might deal with our problem (14b-15, 17b)

C For (*gar*) he wanted to help us (*epilambanesthai // boethein*, 16, 18)

But this leaves us with the intriguing question: do verses 14 and 17 imply that 'we' were 'children' or 'brothers' *before* the incarnation of the Son, and that his incarnation was motivated by this kinship? If so, what sort of kinship was it? Or was the kinship *actually* established by the incarnation, even though these verses seem to put it the other way round?

To answer this we need to go back to Psalm 8, the source from which this whole argument flows (2:5ff). This is a creation Psalm, reflecting on the role assigned to humankind in the creation stories. This is a role assigned by God, in which the place of humankind vis-à-vis the rest of creation is one of rule which shares the 'glory' of the Creator himself. The notion of 'glory' is of course cognate with that of 'image'. This point is made for Psalm 8 itself by Artur Weiser,²¹ and we can see how the development of the theme of 'glory' in Hebrews 2 is parallel to the Pauline application of the term 'image' to Jesus in a closely parallel context, Colossians 1:15ff.

The author then suggests that this 'glory' of humankind is only (yet) to be seen in Jesus, who has reached this position of rulership at the *end* of his career as Saviour, 'because of the suffering of death' (2:9). He has been made perfect through sufferings, and thus is able to 'lead many sons to glory' (2:10) – that is, to lead us to the perfection of our true humanity, made like him in the 'image of God'. So to be 'of one' with him (2:11) refers, I suggest, to our common bearing of the 'image of God': something which, for him as for us, is realised fully at the *end* of the history of incarnation, both his and ours.

Solidarity with Christ ...

We have a kinship with him, therefore, which is defined in our shared relationship to God: we are both 'of' God, bearing his image and *growing into* that likeness. But that still leaves us to ask, How exactly does this kinship work salvation, so that the presence of the Son in flesh, blood and death actually changes death to life for these 'children'? Clearly it is by repairing the breach between them and God (atoning for their sins, 2:17), but to say this is simply to reword the question: by what kind of solidarity between 'the Sanctifier' and 'the sanctified' (2:11) does his action achieve atonement for *them*?

21 Artur Weiser, *The Psalms. A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1962), 144.

When McFadyen addresses this issue, he comes up with an essentially *Pauline* answer, although he approaches it through the metaphor of 'call' – helpfully pictured for us in the literal, physical call of the first disciples, who left their nets and followed Jesus. He realises, of course, that a gap needs to be bridged between the physical 'call' received by the first disciples and the 'call' of Christ to us today, and in order to bridge this gap he suddenly introduces the notion of 'spirit':

Individual identity is attributable to a person's spirit of communication ... An individual's spirit organises his or her communication and relatedness which, through communication, becomes formed and structured into an individual entity ... The Holy Spirit may then be conceived as the organisational energy of communication ... which, through co-inherence with the Word, the ordering logos, produces open forms of individual and communal life.²²

He is clearly tending here towards (or smuggling in?) a 'realist' description of human and divine being (we have a 'S/spirit'), while struggling to maintain his definition of personhood as *essentially* relational. But of course: if the communication gap between the physical, earthly church and the risen Christ is to be bridged, don't we need some kind of 'substance' out of which to construct the bridge? 'Spirit' is an obvious candidate, even though it rather undermines McFadyen's overall case about an essentially relational personhood. This is also the way in which Paul bridges the gap:

You are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of Christ dwells in you ... When we cry 'Abba, Father!', it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (Rom. 8:9,15f)

The 'call' of Christ is mediated to us by the Spirit of Christ (who for Paul is much more than some kind of 'organisational energy of communication'). But Hebrews does not do this. The pneumatology of Hebrews is fascinating, but it does not focus on mediating salvation between the Saviour and the saved.

If we fire the question at Hebrews: What mediates salvation between the Saviour and the saved? – the answer will certainly be 'faith'. The vital passage in 10:19-25, which draws the 'conclusions' from the whole central section of the letter, focuses around the exhortation 'let us draw near with a true heart, in full conviction of faith' (10:22). It is faith which enables us to see the truth about Jesus (NB all the references to 'sight' in chapter 11), and then to turn that sight into persevering obedience. Faith is the appropriate human response to the faithfulness and word of God ('for faithful is he who promised', 10:23). Without faith, or after the renunciation of faith, forgiveness is impossible.

And solidarity with the Church ...

I want to suggest that, for Hebrews, our sharing of flesh and blood with each other, and with Jesus, extends to a sharing with all others who have believed, and hoped, and lived in the love and worship of the Saviour. There is something

²² McFadyen, *Personhood*, 63.

about our *common humanity*, expressed through our shared physicality, which means that when faith comes to fruition in us, a bond across space and time is created that joins us in love and worship with each other. The 'heroes of faith' in Hebrews 11 are introduced, not just as encouraging illustrations of what the author means by 'faith which leads to the salvation of our souls' (10:39), but as 'witnesses' who gather around us like the spectators at the games (12:1). Indeed they are part of the same contest, who 'have not received the promise, because God intended something better involving us, so that they might not be perfected apart from us' (11:40).

Having been critical of Orthodox theology earlier in this paper, it is nice to say something more positive at the end. Orthodoxy emphasizes the communion of the church on earth with the glorified church in heaven. The Orthodox theologian Michael Pomazansky especially underlines this feature of Orthodox theology, regarding it as a truth which 'has been forgotten, ignored or completely rejected in the great part of what is called Christianity.'²³ And on at least three occasions in his *Dogmatic Theology* Pomazansky uses Hebrews 12:22-23 as a proof-text for this view.²⁴

I suggest that the picture of 'approach' to Mount Zion in 12:22-24 – modelled on the notion of pilgrimage to Zion but using specifically cultic language which casts the readers in the role of priests – has a 'realistic' edge to it. It is not just an evocative picture of life in Christ. Christian believers must *fear* because they stand on the very threshold of heaven itself – the Most Holy Place. The Way into that Place stands open before them, and they have 'boldness to enter because of the blood of Jesus' (10:19). They draw near to the veil, which is the flesh of Jesus, where they must 'worship in a way pleasing to God, with reverence and fear' (12:28). Thus, on this side of the veil, they worship in harmony with the 'myriads of angels in festal array', and also with 'the spirits of the righteous made perfect' (12:23). 'Spirits' here does not indicate a disembodied existence, but an embodied existence suitable for habitation beyond the veil. We may think of the risen body of the Lord Jesus, which was as physical as before crucifixion, but now able to appear and disappear at will – i.e. capable of relationship with the whole people of God, both on the mountain and at its foot.

So I want to argue for an understanding of 'flesh', or of physicality, which does not treat it just as an *illustration* or *index* of our relatedness but sees it as the *actual arena* of our encounter with Christ in the Spirit, on both sides of death. And I suggest that Hebrews helps us toward such an understanding, in the highly suggestive way in which it presents our relationship both with Jesus and with the wider community of faith.

23 Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology. A Concise Exposition* (Platina, California: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1984), 20.

24 Pomazansky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 20, 230, 316.

Some conclusions

So, prompted by Hebrews, I want to argue for the following as a contribution to our understanding of 'personhood' (bearing in mind the focus of this paper on *human* personhood, i.e. anthropology):

- that *faith* forms an organising centre for our rationality, morality and relationality (reason, will, and togetherness). We are designed to live in relationships of trust and love, and to organise our reflection on God and the world around the experience of such relationships. Faith is both reflection (confession) and action (trust).

- that our relationships are irreducibly physical, because all our mental and emotional processes and our contact both with each other and with God depend on our physical nature. Our 'spirituality' does not arise from a 'spirit' within which is separable from the body and continues after death.

- that our shared physicality extends beyond the relationships of immediate contact. At the most basic level there is a physical unity of human being, signalled by our genetic heritage which bind us to all others of the same 'race', both past and present.

- that this physical 'corporateness' comes to fullest and deepest expression in the church, where faith binds us deeply together, both with each other and with the No 1 Human Being, Jesus Christ. Worship is the archetypal expression of this faith and togetherness.

- that this physical unity in faith also binds us to 'the church in glory', the company of those for whom judgment and salvation are past, who are already 'perfected' with Christ, and to whom we 'draw near' in worship.

- that we must conceive of a *type* of physicality (and consequent 'togetherness') which is illustrated by the risen body of Jesus, and his entry into the heavenly temple 'bearing his own blood'. His victory over his own physical dissolution (because he is the Son of God) is the basis of our hope (faith, trust) that the destruction of our bodies will not be the end of us, but will be a moment of re-constitution, introducing us into a relationship of immediate contact with him.

- and, we may add, that this kind of physical togetherness matches what quantum physics now tells us about the nature of the relationships that bind our world together at sub-atomic level. The particles out of which atoms are made are held together by enormous and apparently *immaterial* forces. These particles, as described by quantum physics, can have location and velocity but not both at the same time – so that amazingly, in experiments conducted in accelerators, particles can communicate with separated parts of themselves across considerable distances.²⁵ I am not suggesting, of course, that this mysterious *shading into the immaterial* at the sub-atomic level can be equated with spirit or Spirit: rather that it can be read theologically as an index of the 'openness' of the material world. In its very substance it points beyond itself. The goalposts of material life are decisively shifted in quantum physics, so as decisively to break

25 On all this, see Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (London: Penguin, 1990).

down the old spirit-flesh dualism, and to allow for a conception of matter which permits the mutual penetration of matter and spirit, body and God. The author of Hebrews would be at home in this world!

Abstract

In the context of a wider discussion of the nature of 'personhood', this article argues that Hebrews deepens and refines our understanding of personhood by its presentation of the incarnation of Christ, and of our physical bondedness or solidarity with him, and with the rest of the church.

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ISBN: 1-84227-260-8 / 229x145mm / 272pp / £19.99



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