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The Strange Tongue of a Long Lost Christianity: The Spirit and the Trinity

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Theology, like history, in many ways, repeats itself. It has to: so few people pay heed to it. But Christian theology, unlike history, does so within the dialectic of two essentially different narratives—the historical and the trans-historical, or more blandly, the human and the divine. Herein lies its essential character: the belief that within human history the infinite and transcendent come to expression in a particular event—the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Within the interplay between history and narrative, Christian tradition glimpses both the being of God, essential and active, as well as the mystery of human being. In some way, the history of and narratives about Jesus Christ are determinative of this dialectic between the historic and the transcendent. However, an immediate hermeneutical problem is raised: the necessity for some device, some key, both to unlock and unpack the differentials existing between the historicised and the transcendent. The object of revelation requires a conceptual framework if it is to be expressed adequately, and Christian reflection and subsequent theology has sought to do so within the expression of both God's being and human being in light of a 'trinitarian' interpretation.

The mystery of language by which this task occurs, lies in its self-effacing character. It has its being in its revealing. The miracle of human language is expressed not only in this creative act, but in the fecundity and creativity to which these formulated ideas lend themselves. A word becomes the key to unlock a world of ideas; ideas, which in turn, take root, develop, and lend themselves to further creativity. If this human creativity manifests itself in the capacity to express and identify, then its supreme illustration lies in its ability to give form to that which has never before been expressed. So ventured Saint John, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (1:1, 14).

Never before had an event required such expression. Something hitherto unspoken broke through the established perimeters identifying God's being. What now does it mean to talk of a God whose Word is expressed in incarnation? Surely not that Jesus Christ introduces us for the first time to an understanding of God, but rather, according to

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Johnson, that 'the history of Jesus becomes a route to rethink the doctrine of God... Jesus Christ "intersects" with those understandings of and questions about God which human beings already have, calling into question what is known and compelling a rethinking of received conceptions.'[1]

So the hermeneutical task of the Church began, involving a longer and more protracted history of linguistic and philosophical definition. The history of this development assumed a twofold approach in its inquiry of divine being: the explication on the one hand of the essential unity of God, and the triunity of God on the other. Despite the human proclivity to

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[1] E. A. Johnson, 'Christology's Impact on the Doctrine of God', *Heythrop Journal* 26 (1985), 145.

stress either the unity or triunity of God, each at the expense of the other, the trinitarian theologoumenon became an interpretative principle by which God's being is explained, and thus an intrinsic part of Christian belief. Whilst faith is placed in the saving action of God in Jesus Christ, this saving action comes to expression through the trinitarian theologoumenon. Consequently, the earliest experiences of the God of Jesus Christ necessitated a distinction to be made within the Divine being, as Father, Son and Spirit, in order to make sense of this saving action. On the basis of their experience in and through Jesus Christ, the early Christian communities confessed faith in a God who is both the one and the many.

This hermeneutical task of the Church continues to intersect our own story. Following a historical neglect in trinitarian thinking, the task befalls contemporary theology to re-present and re-construct the givenness of the Christian story in a manner that both makes sense to its modern audience, and respects its content. Such a task involves a 'making-sense-of' the Christian story. If the hidden identity of divine being is revealed within the revelatory content of the Gospel story, then perhaps there is yet scope for a via media between the Scylla of trinitarian minimalism on the one hand and the Charybdis of trinitarian maximalism on the other. One possible solution is to unpack further the content of the trinitarian theologoumenon by means of exploring the person and work of the Spirit.

However much we may agree in sentiment with Mackey's remark that 'trinitarian theology stands or falls with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit,'[2] we must add that the degree to which it stands or falls is contingent upon the specific identity attributed the Spirit. The doctrine of the Spirit remains the Achilles' heel of trinitarian thought. Insofar as early christological thought developed within a pneumatological vacuum, it would be fair to say that this was merely a lack of reflective development. As Schweitzer points out, 'Long before the Spirit was a theme of doctrine, He was a fact in the experience of the community.'[3] The New Testament remarks concerning the Spirit reveal that the Spirit was experienced in the community and was not a matter of doctrinal propriety. Thus, whilst the early trinitarian theologoumenon lacked an

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explicitly doctrinal declaration about the Spirit, a spirituality of the Spirit, if I may coin the phrase, pervaded the early theological and christological developments.

What is so remarkable, therefore, is the degree to which this pneumatic element, essential to the Christian story, lay undeveloped. Perhaps the priority given to christology in early doctrinal development obscured the person and place of the Spirit. As christological thought developed in growing isolation from wider theological developments, the person and work of the Spirit became more and more 'the strange tongue of a long lost Christianity.'[4]

However, it was a tongue, nonetheless, not without interpreters. It is to one such interpreter we turn, a friend of Coleridge, and a contemporary of Schleiermacher, Hegel and Goethe. We concern ourselves with Edward Irving's interpretation.

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[2] J. P. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 173.

[3] E. Schweitzer, 'Pneuma', *TDNT* VI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 396.

[4] Taken from the short story of H. Hesse: 'Merkwürdigt Nachrich von einem andern stern' (Strange News from Another Star and Other Tales). Translated by J. Wright (New York: Farrer, Strava & Groux, 1972).

For Irving, the function of language lies not in making a word work 'terribly hard' and rewarding it for so doing, as did Humpty Dumpty, but rather in the ease and precision by which words express and illumine their subject. Like *Alice, in Through the Looking Glass*, Irving questions any extravagant claims attributed to particular words. Rather, there is an intimate link between word and object. We see this clearly in the way Irving stresses the relation between theologia and oikonomia. The relevance of 'God-talk' or the theologoumenon, for Irving, is derived from the incarnation, from the economy of salvation. The dynamic and content of incarnation are the hermeneutical keys to his understanding of divine being.

We may make two distinctions here. First, Irving's consideration of the significance of God's being as Word. Because Irving derives the basis of his knowledge from God's gracious activity towards us in incarnation, he is adamant that 'there could be no manifestation of the grace of God in the purpose of redemption from the simple knowledge of Christ as the Word.'[5]

The being of God as Word fails to express the essential nature of the one who is revealed through Jesus Christ. It is unable to communicate one reality of what God does in Christ. Irving identifies one significant implication in holding to a purely *Logos* christology. God's being as Word affords only the idea of *will* and as such, bears no revelation of personal attributes such as grace and love. The identification of Christ as God's Word can express at best only his ability to participate in and reveal the Father's will, in a manner similar to the way in which human words express the thoughts of the subject. However, in the same way that a word is not essential to the one from whom it proceeds, so the Word of God is neither essential to, nor capable of, expressing its subject, the one from whom it proceeds.

How, therefore, can God's being as Son express that which his being as Word cannot? The answer lies in the place Irving accords the notion

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of full and free love of one person to another. To identify Christ as Word is to identify him in a manner that is insufficient to express the rationality of God's being, not only *ad intra* but also in his being-for-others. If the Word contains in itself the idea of one who shares in and expresses the Father's will, it is Sonship which infers the notion of love. Thus Irving argues:

> The Word doth express His participation of all the Father's counsels, and His office in revealing them all: but the Son is that which expresseth His full possession of the Father's undivided affections, wrapping up in Himself all that love upon which the universe was to lean, as He wrapped up in His name of the Word all that wisdom by which the universe was to subsist. If it be an essential part of the eternal purpose of the Godhead revealed by Christ, that it contains the fulness of the Father's love in surrendering, as well as of the Father's wisdom in manifesting Christ, then I say that He who was surrendered must have been in the full possession of all the Father's love, as well as a sharer of all the Father's wisdom; or that He must have been the Son as well as Word from all eternity.[6]

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[5] E. Irving, in G. Carlyle (ed.), *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1864), 4: 245.
[6] Irving, *Collected Writings*, 4:241f.

Fundamental to Irving's christology, therefore, is the belief that Jesus Christ is God's being as Son for us. However, Irving is not content to rest at this. His concern involves the grounds of Sonship: *how* is he Son? It is at this point we are able to introduce his doctrine of the Spirit. The implications in attributing 'love' to the relation between Father and Son results in a displacement of the traditional, western understanding of the Spirit.

What does it mean to affirm God's Being as Spirit? In what way does his being Spirit increase our knowledge of the transcendent and divine mystery? Herein lies the hermeneutical problem of trinitarian theology: the God who identifies himself as Father and Son, is further differentiated as Spirit. But whilst we are able to comprehend the analogous relation of Father and Son, that of Spirit is more evasive in that it is less self-explanatory. Christian theology repeats itself in consistently succumbing to the danger of understanding God's being as Spirit both independent from and consequential to that of Father and Son. To various degrees, the Spirit becomes an appendage to any trinitarian 'God-talk'. By what means does Irving attempt to avoid this criticism?

Irving's solution to the trinitarian problematic does not remove God's being from the existential and practical needs of the Church. Rather, he contests that our knowledge of God's being cannot be divorced from the Christian experience of God in Christ and in the Church. Our knowledge of God as Father, Son and Spirit is derived from God's activity towards fallen humanity. To this extent, God's being is revealed in. God's becoming-he makes himself known in his action towards us. For

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Irving, the triune being of God is in harmony with the Christian experience of God.

Irving's doctrine of the Trinity turns specifically on the belief that God's being is in his relating. For Irving, the Father and Son establish a relationship of love. In so doing, Irving moves away from his western tradition which appropriates the title of 'Love' to the Spirit. Augustine suggested that if any of the Trinity 'be specifically called love, what more fitting than that this should be the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is specifically called love.'[7] In turn, Richard St. Victor went on to explain the Spirit as the overflow and perfection of the love between the Father and the Son. The Spirit is the one who exists to perfect divine love. It is interesting to note that here again, we meet a philosophically deduced interpretation of God's being as Spirit, for although Richard is at pains to develop a biblical perception of divine being as Love, the manner by which he attributes this to the Spirit reflects more his deductive rather than his incarnational presuppositions.[8]

However, when we turn to consider Irving's perception of God's being as Love, we discover that he applies the notion of love within the divine relations not to the Spirit but emphatically to the Father and Son, and in particular to the Son as the one who is the image of the Father's loving will. Thus he rejects the idea of identifying the Spirit as Love, on the grounds that 'we have no such expression as the Father loving the Holy Spirit, or the Son loving the Holy Spirit—the love being always from the Father to the Son, and termination in the Son.'[9]

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[7] *The Trinity*, translated by S. McKenna (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981, 3rd edn.) 15.17.29.

[8] Richard St. Victor, *Book 3 of the Trinity* (London: SPCK, 1979).

[9] Irving, *Collected Works*, 4:263.

How, then, does he identify God's being as Spirit? It is at this point that we are introduced to the corner-stone of his entire ontology. He continues the western stress in identifying the Spirit in terms off procession, whilst also seeking to identify the implications involved in this assertion. Like generation, procession implies both 'the idea of the originating will of another, and self-existence (not creature-existence) in that which is originated.' Irving uses the idea of generation to imply 'the most perfect love in him who begetteth, and the most perfect likeness in him who is begotten.' However, such an expression falls short of the Christian proclamation and experience of God. Herein we meet the complementary and necessary role assumed by the Spirit within the divine community. God's being as Spirit, as the one who proceeds, 'implies a full and fixed purpose in him from whom the procession is, and an active obedience and complete power of fulfilment in him who proceedeth.'[10] As such, the Spirit is differentiated from the Father, who is self-originated, and from the Son, who is generated and images the Father's love. The Spirit is further distinguished from the Son in that it is only in the filial and paternal divine relations that we are introduced to God's love.

Inasmuch as God's being as Spirit is distinguished in the act of procession, we continue to 'see in a glass dimly'. There is no immediate

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analogy by which we can interpret this particularising identity. Herein lies the 'self-effacing' nature of the Spirit: an implicit resistance to any thoroughly explicit identity. He is God's being in his 'otherness': both God's being as relating for the Other and God's being relating to the Other. For Irving, God's being *ad extra*, in his creatureliness, in incarnation, is the criterion by which we identify his being *ad intra*. If the purpose of creation and redemption 'revealeth the activity and power of the Holy Ghost to skew forth and outwardly realise... those correlative affections which existed in the Father and the Son, or, in Scripture language, to testify of the Father and the Son,' then, 'this procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son, and love to manifest their being, must have been in existence before the purpose to reveal the same could be formed.'[11]

Thus far, Irving has not generated any significant development within his theological tradition. This he does in the manner by which he identifies the Spirit as the vinculum trinitatis, the unifying relation with the divine community. Irving accords personal, though not ontological, priority to the Father. Traditionally this *monarchia* has been accommodated alongside the equality of essence shared by each of the divine persons. Consequently, God's being is both substantial and relational. In the history of dogmatic expressions, however, the former has emerged as the more dominant tool in expressing divine unity. Irving, however, moves away from this substantial priority to develop a more personal and relational understanding of divine unity.

> In the sublime exordium of the Gospel by John, it is said of the Word that He was with God, and that He was God, and that He came forth from the bosom of God; and in... Colossians, it is said that it pleased the Father that in Him all fulness should dwell: expressions there which convey in the strongest terms the diversity of person in the Godhead, the subordination of place in the unity of substance, between these two, the

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[10] Irving, ibid.
[11] Irving, *Collected Works*, 4:265.

> Father and the Son. But this unity of substance between two divers persons can only be maintained, even in idea, by the existence of a third person, who shall be the bond of that union. If the Father in His own personality were to speak or to do anything to the Son to the end of His coming into the bounds of the Christ, or if He were to express or skew forth any affection to Him, in that subsistence, then doth the Father Himself come within the limits thereof, and unlimitable infinite Godhead ceases to be the inalienable property of the Father.[12]

In this we confront the means by which Irving develops his Augustinian inheritance. The very unity of divine being implicates more than two persons. In this sense, Irving parallels Richard St. Victor, but differs in that whilst Richard argued for the Spirit's existence in order to perfect

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divine love, Irving does so in order to substantiate the grounds of divine self-relating. If God's being is his self-relating, then it is a self-relating that operates in a specifically *pneumatological* manner.

> As the Father doth, in the primeval and only one complete act of His will, generate the Son, in whom are included, and through whom are operated, all the various particular acts thereof; so from the Father and the Son, in their harmonious union, proceedeth the Holy Ghost; through whom, before creation, in the depths of eternity, the Son expresseth unto the Father the perfect unity of His being, notwithstanding that distinctness of personality which He had bestowed upon Him. The self-existence of the Son, and the self-existence of the Father would constitute them twain in existence, as well as in personality, *were it not for the procession of the Holy Ghost from both in whose self-existing intercommunion they behold, and are satisfied, with their oneness*. The Spirit being originated both from the Father and the Son, must in His self-existent being represent the unity and harmony of these two self-existent beings.[13]

The unity of God's trinitarian being becomes grounded neither in any abstracted manner, nor in the relation between primary and secondary substance, of *ousia* and *hypostasis*. The unity of God's-being-for-himself is grounded in and radicalised by the paradoxical triunity of God's-being-for-himself. The Achilles' heel of trinitarian theology, consequently, becomes the very corner-stone to Irving's entire ontology. It is a personal and thoroughly Pneumatic union.

In order to establish this point, as one implicit to his ontology, Irving returns to the key principle within his hermeneutic at this point, and one similar to that of Barth, that 'the reality of God which encounters us in His revelation is His reality in all the depths of eternity.'[14] The *ontological* identity of the Spirit should be harmonious with his *functional* identity as revealed in his relation to the incarnate Son.

> By going forth to set on foot any mighty work, and creating the elemental life of it, He doth thereby, in working his own personal and distinct work, so far forth express their unity and oneness of substance; whilst by staying at a certain point, and confessing His

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[12] E. Irving, in G. Carlyle (ed.), *The Prophetical Works of Edward Irving in Two Volumes* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1865), 1:335.

[13] Irving, *Collected Works*, 1:263f. Italics mine.

[14] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 480

inability to proceed further, He doth give honour to the superior place, and room for the independent self-sufficiency of the Son: who now cometh forth, whether as Word, or as the only-begotten Son... to give forms and functions, and laws of being: yet all the while declaring that He can work nothing by Himself, nor put will into anything, being Himself but the great offspring of the Father's will, for the decree of which every work awaiteth, and without which no work of the Godhead is complete. And the work being complete doth acknowledge the origination of its life to the Spirit,

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the excellent form and peculiar blessedness of its life to the Son, the end and continual support of its life to the Father's will.[15]

Who is God-in-his-being-for-himself? He is the one who reveals himself through his being-for-others. Both narratives meet in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet they are narratives that have, for too long, been skewed by an overly christological interpretation. Rather than dismissing the christological maximalism of his theological inheritance, Irving proffers an alternative by means of attacking the pneumatological minimalism that has characterised reflection on both narratives. This he has done by means of an explicitly trinitarian hermeneutic, a hermeneutic that requires much further analysis before it can be dismissed as easily as Irving's, and our own, contemporaries suggest.

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[15] Irving, *Collected Works*, 1:264.