ON KEEPING "PERSONS" IN THE TRINITY: A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO TRINITARIAN THOUGHT

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L ANGUAGE IS a great net of meanings in which we are all caught up. To an extent greater than we imagine, language affects our lives even to the point of shaping our individual existences. And yet at times there appear among us individuals or movements that, by insight or talent or maybe just the sheer force of numbers, are able to redress this imbalance, overcome the awkward limitations imposed on us by this net, and achieve for us all a greater measure of that freedom which is understanding. The language of theology has at times known such heroes or heroines.

In the year 213 of the Christian era, a Latin-speaking African composed a treatise in which he set forth his understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.[1] Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus, in the course of expounding his argument, employed the word *personae* to express the principle of plurality in the Christian notion of the Godhead. And alongside this word he ranged the term *substantia* in order to express the companion tenet of unity in the Christian God. This formula, *una substantia in tribus personis*, soon came to have something like normative status in Western theology, and this status was achieved despite the fact that the apparent conciseness of the formula only hides a real vagueness of meaning in its terms.

Although it can be demonstrated that both terms had some philosophical currency, neither *substantia* nor *persona* was a formal philosophical concept with a generally accepted precision of meaning. However, *substantia* and its Greek equivalents were soon given considerable precision of meaning during the great Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century. And even *persona* achieved at least determinative application in the Christological controversies that culminated in the Council of Chalcedon. But as a principal term in Trinitarian thought, *persona* never achieved a truly satisfactory and universally acknowledged definition. Whether this is a fact to be regretted or celebrated, however, is a judgment we shall reserve for later.

The fact is that though it did not achieve precise definition as did *substantia*, *persona* soon surpassed *substantia* as a significant term in Trinitarian thought. Though Augustine disliked it and expressed grave misgivings about its usefulness, and Boethius felt impelled to give it an

[1] Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean Liber*, text and translation by E. Evans (London, 1948).

Aristotelian precision of meaning, a meaning which Aquinas in turn felt he had to recast, all these writers used the term. And though today the word is an object of criticism and doubt, it is yet acknowledged as a classical expression, a traditional term of Trinitarian doctrine. It would not seem strange to pronounce it in classroom or chapel, to read it in textbook or prayerbook, or hear it affirmed as a credal statement: The Father is the First Person, the Son the Second Person, and the Holy Spirit the Third Person of the divine Trinity. However, it is the word's problematic aspect that concerns us. And something of the reason for this problematic status can be grasped in a simple lexical study of the English equivalent of *persona.*

The current edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* recognizes no less than nine uses or meanings for the word "person."[2] First place is given to the dramatic or histrionic sense whereby it is employed to designate "a character sustained or assumed in a drama or the like, or in actual life; part played." Perhaps the dictionary gives this meaning first place because it seems to be the oldest. In the past it was thought that the Latin *persona,* which is the etymological root for the English "person," was derived from the verb *personare,* meaning "to sound through," suggesting the actor's mask in classical drama through which the voice was projected out into the theater or arena. However, modern philology has demonstrated that this explanation is based on a grammatical impossibility.[3] Instead, it now seems that the Latin *persona* is linked to the Etruscan *persu,* a word found written beside two masked figures. Whatever may be the true origin, we know that *persona* was used to translate the Greek *prosōpon,* meaning countenance or face, but originally designating the mask worn by an actor. From this it was applied to the role assumed and finally to any character on "the stage of life." Thus even to this day the histrionic sense has been preserved whereby we can say: "Olivier will appear in the person of Hamlet." But the most significant thing to note here is that at this earliest stage in the historical use of the term, the word "person" exhibits a considerable flexibility; it is capable of more than one use or meaning. With a little metaphorical skill it can be used to refer to the drama of life as well as the drama of the stage: "He wanted to appear before his friends as a person of wealth and accomplishment." And related to this is the exalted sense of "personage."

Then there is the psychological meaning whereby we designate an individual human being, a woman, a man, or a child: "Some person was here to see you." But here too it is susceptible to fine shades of meaning,

    [2] "Person," *Oxford English Dictionary* 7 (London, 1933) 724–25.
    [3] F. Max Muller, "Persona," *Collected Works of F. Max Muller* 10 (London, 1912) 32 and 47.

each drawing upon the psychological meaning with increasing degrees of intensity. Here it is used in its most emphatic sense: "I want to be treated as a person, not a thing."

Then there is the philosophical sense in which we use the word to designate "a rational being."

And there is a physical or aesthetic sense of the word by which we refer to the living body of a human being apart from or abstracting from the mind or soul: "He suffered no injury to his person, only his pride was hurt." Or to refer to the body with all its clothing and adornments as these present themselves to others, we can use it to say: "In that setting her person took on an aura such that she seemed imperial, more powerful than us all."

And there is the use of the word to refer to the actual self, as when we say: "She will commit her person to the task," or: "he will appear in person."

Prominent among the specialized uses of the term is the juridical sense of "person" whereby we designate either a human being or body corporate (corporation). From this perspective a person is any being that can exercise rights and be held responsible to duties. Thus idiots and children are at times not treated as persons, not accorded recognition as persons, as when they are denied the right to vote. When contrasted with the psychological notion of person, the juridical sense seems almost arbitrary and wilful: Why should an estate be accorded rights that can be denied a human being?

The dictionary, in noting the theological sense of the term, is careful to distinguish between the Christological and Trinitarian notions whereby the one word can be used to distinguish plurality in the Godhead and then the personality of the Christ.[4]

Still to be acknowledged are the zoological and grammatical uses of the word. The former designates the individual, component element in a social organism, while the latter refers to classes of pronouns such as "1st person" or "2nd person plural."

What are we to make of this seemingly untidy and confusing collection of divergent referents grouped under one ideographic sign? Arthur Danto, in his essay for the entry "Persons" in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, offers this interpretation: "Neither in common usage nor in philosophy has there been a univocal concept of 'person.' Rather the word 'person'

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[4] However, it should be noted that classical theology saw more similarity than dissimilarity in these two uses of the term, that is, the ancients would have insisted that the person born of the Father before all ages (Trinitarian sense of the word) is born of Mary in time (Christological sense of the word). In contrast, Christology today is much more conscious of the implications of history and thus emphasizes the growth and development of the person of the Christ in time.

and its almost exact cognates in the modern Western languages as well
as in Sanskrit (*purusa*), have numerous uses which at best seem only to
border on one another."[5] And yet, later in his essay Danto admits that
"doubtless there is a connection among the myriad usages."[6]

From this we can see how the word "person" is extremely elusive, even
somewhat intractable. It is capable of a great number of subtle conceptual
distinctions. And these various meanings can depend upon something as
obvious as a manner of discourse (e.g., the language of jurisprudence) or
as subtle as a tone of voice (the intonation of sarcasm). However, I say it
is only "somewhat" intractable, because in fact it is common experience
that a modestly literate person can use at least five or six of these
meanings with considerable ease in order to communicate with a high
degree of subtlety. Indeed, probably only the zoological meaning is so
recondite as to escape recognition in colloquial speech. Moreover, it
might well be argued that in colloquial and literary discourse it is not so
much a conceptually elusive or overly subtle word as it is a creatively
allusive word exhibiting a flexibility that is one of its chief virtues and
that these very characteristics are what first recommended its use in
theological discourse. It can be used as a technical term whereby it avails
itself of a high degree of precision of meaning (the legal or theological or
zoological senses) or as a colloquial term whereby its very flexibility can
be employed to reflect something of each of these meanings but without
exclusive identification with or commitment to any one.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that such a word can pose consid-
erable difficulties for a dogmatic theologian, for whom precision of
thought and expression are values of paramount importance. Thus we
should not be surprised to find that the Trinitarian thought of Karl
Rahner and Karl Barth at times seems to clearly evidence their dogmatic
impatience with the linguistic phenomena characteristic of the word
"person." Both seem acutely aware of and perturbed by the elusiveness
and obscurity of the term. On the other hand, we might well be justified
in expressing alarm that neither of these theologians seems to be at all
appreciative of the more positive value and sense of the word's richly
allusive and cautiously provisional character. In the remainder of this
essay we shall note and compare Rahner and Barth's critical re-evalua-
tions of the word "person" in Trinitarian theology, with special attention
to their awareness of the linguistic phenomena that attend this word.
Then we shall assess their achievements in the light of the witness of
Scripture and the classical theological tradition and conclude with a

[5] A. C. Danto, "Persons," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 6 (New York, 1967) 110.
[6] Ibid. 111.

summary statement as to what all this means for the continued viability of the concept of person in Trinitarian thought.

THE INNOVATORS

Among twentieth-century theologians, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner share the distinction of not only having systematically rethought the doctrine of the Trinity but also having done this with greatest awareness of and accountability to the historical tradition of Trinitarian thought. Therefore we should not be surprised to find that a significant part of their work in this area takes the form of a critical re-examination of the traditional terminology. Foremost in this regard has been their consideration of the meaning and function of the word "person" in the history of this doctrine.

Both Rahner and Barth are aware of the theological history of the term. Both have weighed the added difficulties posed by the secular history of the term and especially the phenomenon whereby in modern times the psychological notion of person as a discrete center of consciousness has become the primary meaning of the word. Both have proposed alternative formulas for use at least in more strictly theological discourse. Their respective analyses and conclusions appear, at least on first impression, to be very much alike; in fact, it may be argued that on certain points they do indeed coincide in their judgments. However, there are some very significant differences between them, both in their respective perceptions of the problematic and their proffered solutions. Rahner himself has called our attention to this:

> We do not agree with Karl Barth that the word "person" is ill adapted to express the intended reality and that it should be replaced in ecclesiastical terminology by another word which produces fewer misunderstandings. Yet we must grant that the later development of the word "person" outside of the doctrine of the Trinity after the formulation of the dogma in the fourth century has further increased its ambiguity.[7]

Rahner's remarks here belie his keen awareness of the phenomenon of language. He is aware that the term "person" is ambiguous and needs to be carefully adapted if it is to express the intended reality. He differs from Barth in his conviction that the word has been well adapted in the past to express the Trinitarian reality intended. It is rather the fact that recent secular history has even further increased the ambiguity of the term that makes Rahner question its continued usefulness for expressing the doctrine adequately.

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[7] K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, tr. by J. Donceel (New York, 1970) 44. This work is a translation of chap. 5 (pp. 317–97) of *Mysterium salutis* 2 (Einsiedeln, 1967), an encyclopedia of theology to which Rahner was a contributor.

In contrast, Karl Barth's objections to the continued use of the term are rooted much more deeply in its history. From the viewpoint of a dogmatician and historian of Christian thought, Barth argues, the term "person" as used in the speculative theology of the Trinity has from the very beginning never had any real precision of meaning, has often been controverted, and is today, because of the common meaning assigned it in modern times, quite inappropriate to convey what should be intended:

> We have avoided the term "person" in the thesis at the head of the present section. It was never adequately clarified when first introduced into the Church's vocabulary, nor did the interpretation which it was later given and which prevailed in mediaeval and post-Reformation Scholasticism as a whole really bring this clarification, nor has the injection of the modern concept of personality into the debate achieved anything but fresh confusion.[8]

It is a decidedly negative and uncompromising judgment upon the tradition; however, the important point for our purpose is the focus of Barth's observations. He conceives the problem to be principally an academic one. Barth is concerned with the term's usefulness within a very special realm of human discourse, that is, the continuing dialogue which is dogmatic theology:

> In view of the history of the term person in the doctrine of the Trinity one may well ask whether *dogmatics* is wise to continue using it in this connexion. . . . The man who wants to retain it consistently will find that in addition to ancient ecclesiastical and academic usage about the only valid argument for its venerable position is that he does not have any other or better concept with which to replace it. Yet we must always ask seriously whether the argument of piety on the one side or the technical one on the other is weighty enough to cause the *dogmatician* to add to the thought of the Trinity, which is difficult in any case, the extra burden of an auxiliary thought which is itself so difficult and which can be used only with so many reservations.[9]

It is obvious from the foregoing that Barth's concern is solely with the language of theology. Throughout his consideration of the problematic at hand, he never significantly alludes to the fact that this same word "person," precisely as a Trinitarian concept, has a circulation far beyond the rather narrowly circumscribed boundaries of dogmatic discourse. This term indeed has other, analogous functions, and not merely in the colloquial sense of common parlance which Barth alludes to as causing fresh confusion. It plays an equally important role in credal statements,

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[8] K. Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh, 1975) 355. This volume is actually the Prolegomena to the *Church Dogmatics*, being Vol. 1/1.

[9] Ibid. 359 (my emphases).

catechetical discourse, and liturgical worship as well as in occasional expressions of individual piety.

Of course, we must concede to Barth his right to choose his perspective, and here it is probably at one with the general stance of his *Church Dogmatics* as a response to what he considered the excesses of Liberal Protestantism. Barth explicitly states regarding the modern notion of person: "In face of the danger which threatened at this point almost all Neo-Protestant theology obviously thought it had to seek refuge in Sabellianism."[10] Nevertheless, Barth's limitation of his considerations to one realm of discourse, dogmatic theology, does not adequately convey to us the full stature of the problematic, the extent of the danger inherent in the use of the term. Rahner is quick to point this out:

> The real danger in the doctrine of the Trinity [is], not so much in the abstract theology of the textbooks, but in the average conception of the normal Christian. This is the danger of a popular, unverbalized, but at bottom quite massive tritheism. Whenever efforts are made to think of the Trinity, this danger looms much larger than that of Sabellian modalism.[11]

This statement should not lead the reader to believe that Rahner ignores the more scholastic problem posed by the term. To the contrary, Rahner is particularly critical of misuses of the term within Catholic theological circles. In fact, in his work on the Trinity, the first time Rahner broaches the question of the term "person" it is to take issue with certain Catholic theologians whom he accuses of having used the term in a univocal sense, as though it meant quite simply the same thing in Christology as it does in Trinitarian thought.

However, it is principally the effect of this dogmatic term in other realms of human discourse—the language of creed, catechism, practical piety, and formal worship—that is Rahner's concern:

> When we say with the Christian catechism that in the one God there are three "persons" in the unity and unicity of one nature, in the absence of further theological explanation it is almost inevitable that whoever hears this formula will understand by the word "person" the content which he associates with this word elsewhere.[12]

And while insisting that "the Church's magisterium rightly upholds this concept (the word) by authoritatively determining the terminology in behalf of a common confession of the truth"[13] [in the sense of credal statements], Rahner is quick to point out that, "despite their orthodox

[10] Ibid. 358.
[11] Rahner, *Trinity* 42–43.
[12] K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, tr. W. V. Dych (New York, 1978) 134.
[13] Rahner, *Trinity* 57.

confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere monotheists."[14] Finally, Rahner calls our attention to the fact that piety can affect dogma. The rarefied atmosphere of dogmatic theology, with all its precise definitions and carefully drawn analogies, does not guarantee any necessary immunity from the afflictions which plague practical piety. At the same time Rahner reminds us how the problem of Trinitarian terminology also affects the formal language of worship: "We might mention other examples which show how the present climate of piety affects dogmatic theology, despite the faint opposition deriving from the frozen hieratic formulas of ancient liturgy."[15]

Thus Rahner and Barth are certainly at one in their basic intuition that the modern notion of person has so altered the traditional sense of the word "person" as to call into serious question the continued validity of the term for Trinitarian thought. However, for Barth this is merely one more example, only the most recent, of a problem of vocabulary that has plagued the dogmatics of the Trinity from the beginning. Thus Barth's solution to the problem is relatively simple, a matter of careful accommodation of formulas: "We have no cause to want to outlaw the concept of person or to put it out of circulation. But we can apply it only in the sense of a practical abbreviation and as a reminder of the historical continuity of the problem."[16]

For Rahner, the solution cannot be so simple. He might concede that it is not practical to expect to eliminate the use of the term, but there is in Rahner a strength of conviction regarding the significance of the pastoral problem posed by the term that causes him to insist that though the term cannot be eliminated from the textbook, it must be avoided in the pulpit:

This does not imply that the formula "one God in three persons" should be eliminated. No individual preacher has the authority to do so, and the magisterium is hardly in a position at present to produce a better formula which could be made official, that is, universally intelligible, obligatory and obviously acceptable as obligatory. Nevertheless, the preacher must recognize the existence of a problem and try to meet it as well as he can. But this means that he must have a number of alternatives to draw on, so that he can give his explanations and avoid the classical formulation, without having to improvise at every moment.[17]

It should be obvious that Rahner's pastoral focus hardly detracts from what Barth has said but rather gives even more strength to the general argument about the inadequacy of the traditional terminology. However,

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[14] Ibid. 10.
[15] Ibid. 12.
[16] Barth, *Doctrine* 359.
[17] K. Rahner, "Divine Trinity," *Sacramentum mundi* 6 (New York, 1970) 301–2.

this fact, if argued strongly, also makes for a decided weakness in Barth's proposal of an alternative formula to "one God in three *persons*": "By preference we do not use the term 'person' but rather 'mode (or way) of being,' our intention being to express by this term, not absolutely, but relatively better and more simply and clearly the same thing as is meant by 'person.'"[18]

In this regard Claude Welch's caveat is well taken: an acquaintance with Barth's reasoning behind this formulation makes it perfectly clear that his use of the word "mode" (*Seinsweise*) does not carry any implications of modalism.[19] However, the same argument could be given for the validity of the traditional terminology. The word "person" as used in Trinitarian thought, when properly understood, can be seen to have nothing to do with tritheism. In this sense Barth's formula shares the same practical and fatal ambiguity which he claims to find in the word "person." To be fair to Barth, however, we should consider his formula apart from the attractive, though for Barth's purposes extraneous, perspective which Rahner would bring to the issue.

Barth modestly proposes the formula "modes of being" as "relatively better." But his construction of this formula is no mean achievement. It is the product of a very intimate acquaintance with and intelligent, close study of the historical tradition. In several lengthy excursuses Barth traces the whole history of the concept and analyzes its various expressions in order to arrive at the basic underlying notion in this development. At the end of his analysis he concludes that what the tradition was trying to enunciate in its use of "persons" is better rendered by the Latin *subsistentia* than by *substantia*. He argues that it is this notion of subsistence which is the decisive factor in the Greek Trinitarian concept of *hypostasis* and its Latin counterpart *persona*. And so what was implied in the Latin formula of "one God in three persons" was the fact that God is one in three modes of being: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is important to see here in what sense this is not an assertion of modalism. Barth is not saying that the Christian Deity expresses itself in three different ways but that the Godhead in its nature subsists at once and always in different modes. For Barth, this means God is not now as the one now as the other but always at one with Himself. Barth uses the Latin to distinguish God's being *alius-alius-alius* from the tritheistic *aliud-aliud-aliud*, that is, "other-other-other" rather than "this thing-this thing-this thing."[20]

[18] Barth, *Doctrine* 359.

[19] C. Welch, *In This Name* (New York, 1952) 190.

[20] Barth cites as his origin for this distinction Fulgentius' *De fide ad Petrum* 5. My own impression, however, is that Barth's use of the distinction owes more to Boethius' *De Trinitate* 3.

Finally, as though this demonstration of his formula's logical strength were not enough to recommend its validity, Barth insists that his "modes of being" is really not the novelty it may at first seem to be. Rather, he argues, it is the literal translation of the formula *tropos hyparxeōs* already in use in the early Church debates.[21] And so, for all his criticism of the tradition, Barth sums up his labors with something that borders on irony: "Hence we are not introducing a new concept but simply putting in the centre an auxiliary concept which has been used from the very beginning and with great emphasis in the analysis of the concept of person."[22]

As with Barth, so with Rahner, at the heart of this theologian's critical re-evaluation of the traditional terminology and concept comes his own original proposal of an alternative for "persons." Rahner's proposal for an explanatory concept that can correctly interpret the use of "persons" in Trinitarian thought is the expression "distinct manner of subsisting." And Rahner explicates the logical force and meaning of this formula over against Barth's formulation which we have just seen: "We consider it better, simpler, and more in harmony with the traditional language of theology and the Church than the phrase suggested by Karl Barth."[23]

Rahner's claim of superiority for his own formula is a significant challenge. For one thing, he is challenging the accuracy of Barth's analysis of the tradition. At the same time, however, Rahner adopts Barth's basic premises. In fact, he even accepts, indeed takes over, the principal elements in Barth's formulation. But what Rahner adds to these elements makes for an appreciable difference. He wants to add to the concept of modality the note of "distinctness" and to stress that the sense of existence here is that of subsistence. And so he argues that to "subsist distinctly" is not the same thing as "to be"; rather, it includes the added note of "being-thus-and-not-otherwise." Moreover, "distinctly" implies the existence of "another" and thus underscores or at least suggests the essential relatedness of the elements involved, while "manner of being" leaves this fact unnoticed and unannounced.

In final estimation, there can be no doubt that Rahner's formula is an improvement over Barth's in the sense that it gives a greater precision to Barth's formula. Also, Rahner conceives of a subtle but appreciably different application of the formula he proposes. Barth proposed his own

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[21] Barth, *Doctrine* 359. Curiously, Barth gives no earlier reference to *tropos hyparxeōs* than that of a seventeenth-century manual. However, Basil's *De Spiritu sancto* 46 is a clear example: *"tou de tropou tēs huparxeōs arrētou phylassomenou...."* Benoît Pruche's footnote to this passage in his critical edition and translation of this work for the *Sources chrétiennes* series is instructive: *Basile de Césarée, Sur le Saint-Esprit* (2nd ed.; Paris, 1968) 408–9.

[22] Barth, *Doctrine* 359.

[23] Rahner, *Trinity* 100.

formula as a "subsidiary concept" which will allow us to relegate the traditional terminology to a secondary status, that of an "abbreviation" for the more precise formula he proposes or as an instructive curiosity, "a reminder of the historical continuity of the problem." In contrast, Rahner intends his formula to be "nothing more than an explanation of the concept of person,"[24] not to be used to replace the traditional formula but rather to be used "together with the concept of person."[25]

When viewed together, the work of Rahner and Barth in evaluating the concept of person in Trinitarian thought makes for a significant clarification and perhaps even development of a central concept in the doctrine. However, neither Barth nor Rahner has really solved the problematic. Rather, both have offered us more or less provisional measures by which the problematic is rendered somewhat more manageable and does not remain a simple obstacle to understanding. But the word "person" still remains: for Barth as a curious antique, for Rahner as something always to be explained. But even more significantly, it can be argued that both Rahner and Barth in their obvious distress over the ambiguity of the word "person" are overreacting to legitimate properties of a word that most of the theologians in the tradition seem to have been well aware of and quite capable of managing.

When Barth complains about what he has observed to be the obscurity and indefiniteness of the concept of person throughout the history of Christian thought, he is merely calling attention to the richly suggestive allusiveness of the term. Rahner, when he is alarmed by the emphatic bluntness of the word, that is, the linguistic phenomenon whereby a word can at least for a time take on one particular meaning to the effective exclusion of other legitimate meanings, is also confronting a linguistic phenomenon which earlier theologians seem to have managed more equitably. The point is that while many in the tradition have wanted to jettison the term—witness Augustine's reluctance to employ it—Barth and Rahner are the first to follow through upon this motive. Rahner wants it avoided in the pulpit, while Barth would give it secondary, antiquarian status in favor of his own formula in dogmatics. I would argue that something important is lost here by following the decision either of Barth or of Rahner. The ambiguity of the word "person" by which it resists precise conceptual definition is this term's greatest virtue, not only as we have seen it in colloquial speech but even more so for dogmatic theology and that of the Trinity in particular. Even today when, as Rahner would argue, the inherent ambiguity of the word has been compounded by the predominance of its psychological meaning, this

[24] Ibid. 115.
[25] Ibid.

elusiveness, or perhaps more to the point, the allusiveness of the term can serve the interests of theology much better than a precise technical formula that defies ambiguity. These, however, are all claims in need of substantiation.

Barth and Rahner are correct in noting how the modern psychological notion of person is the predominant meaning of the word today, maybe even its pre-eminent meaning. However, both the qualifications "predominant" and "pre-eminent" imply a tension with other meanings even while they underline the fact that these other meanings are now in the remote background of intention. Indeed, it is linguistically demonstrable that no one meaning of the word "person" ever entirely replaces or eclipses these other attendant meanings. What this implies for the doctrine of the Trinity and its dogmatic elaboration is that although one may never want to explicitly affirm the modern psychological notion of person with reference to distinctions in the Godhead (*pace* Leonard Hodgson), neither should one want to entirely forgo the proximate suggestion of it.

THE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS

Scripture itself witnesses to the fact that even when the word "person" is not explicitly used, even when it is not even in the vocabulary of a people, there has always been operative a powerful factor in human experience that seems to want to call it into presence. The example most to the point is that of the Old Testament's near hypostatizing of the concepts Word, Wisdom, and Spirit. Hardly are we trying to suggest that the Old Testament foreshadows, much less actually contains, a Trinitarian doctrine. Rather, we are merely calling attention to the service rendered by this emphatic personification that stops just short of hypostasis:

There is such a vivid personification of the Logos that some interpreters suppose that the Logos is here hypostatized as in Philo and John. This supposition is unwarranted.... Nowhere in the Old Testament is there any solid evidence that a sacred writer viewed the word of Yahweh as a personal being distinct from Yahweh.[26]

If we ask what wisdom is in itself, it can seem that wisdom is a person, a conscious agent.... The people of the Old Testament, however, did not see wisdom as a person to be addressed.[27]

The Spirit of Yahweh was often described in personal terms...but it seems quite clear that the Jews never regarded the Spirit as a person.[28]

[26] E. J. Fortman, *The Triune God* (Phila.. 1972) 5.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid. 6.

The sense of the biblical witness is that each time in the experience of word, wisdom, and spirit we encounter God's being as emphatically personal, but never in any instance is word, wisdom, or spirit experienced as a distinct personal consciousness. However, once we leave the descriptive language of Scripture behind, the more prosaic language of theology must be more explicit and thus make clear what Scripture could be satisfied only to suggest. And so we must secure the sense of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as each embodying, as it were, the personal being that is God, though none is a discrete center of personal consciousness.

Thus it is really not helpful to assert, as Rahner does: "The mere fact that this concept is not used from the start in the doctrine of the Trinity (neither in the New Testament, nor among the early Fathers). . .allows us to adopt a critical position, and to state that a concept of this kind is, at any rate, not *absolutely* constitutive of our knowledge in faith about Father, Son, and Spirit as the one God."[29] Here we do not want to argue that the concept of person is absolutely constitutive of our knowledge in faith; however, we do want to call attention to the fact that it is historically always present as a powerful suggestion. Hebrew is certainly without a term for our concept of person. Nevertheless, there are many instances in the Old Testament when the word *panim* (face) practically corresponds to our understanding of person.[30] *Panim* always appears in the plural, probably because the face is a combination of a number of features. The face identifies the person and reflects the sentiments and attitudes of the person, and thus it is frequently used in the Old Testament as a substitute for the self and the feelings and desires of the self. Israel's awareness of its rejection by God finds expression in such words as "How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?" (Ps 13:1). And often New Testament language is the same in style and effect: when Paul describes us as "all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18), he wants to convey a sense of intimate personal presence, the very kind of intersubjectivity which is expressed in the modern psychological notion of person. Thus, while the New Testament never refers to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit as persons, there are passages that suggest that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each someone who knows and acts.

However, we do not want to overdraw the significance of such texts; rather, we want to use them to legitimate the theological tradition which in departing from biblical style does employ the term "person" to call attention to distinctions in the unity of the Godhead. When that tradition

[29] Rahner, *Trinity* 104.
[30] This description follows that given in the entry "Face," in J. L. McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, 1965) 266–67.

employs the word "person," it is not a personal consciousness but a personal being that is referred to. But it is precisely this note of personal being that is lost sight of when formulas such as Barth's "mode of being" or Rahner's "distinct manner of subsistence" are employed. Even the precision of Rahner's reference to the "distinct manner of subsistence" does not remedy this lacuna; for it only adds the note of relation without identifying the specifically personal character of this relation. Thus Rahner's formula cannot help but render a sterile image of the Trinity as an impersonal system of relations among hypostases in an abstract essence.[31] It is certainly a sufficiently antiseptic concept, free of the unwanted inferences that may lurk in the street language of "persons," and as such apparently quite appropriate for use in the laboratory of dogmatic theology. However, there remains the sense that something vital has been lost.

THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

It is true that when we leave behind the descriptive language of Scripture and enter the more scientific, definitive language of theology, precision of thought and expression becomes an optimum value. However, this does not mean that we must abandon double intentions or multiple levels of meaning as scientifically useless. The ultimate triumph of the Nicene formula *homoousios* was due in no small measure to its peculiar linguistic character, by which it was at once precise enough to secure the truth of the matter and yet vague enough to allow for some flexibility in the interpretation of its content. Individual theologians also are aware of and employ, even at times exploit, these same properties of language.

The kind of attention to details of linguistic phenomena which we have been insisting upon is especially prominent in the tradition of Trinitarian thought. In part this is due to the fact that in theology's "prescientific" era, the patristic era in which the basic Trinitarian terminology was wrought, the principal tools of the theologian were rhetorical and literary skills. Thus Basil of Caesarea begins his treatise *De Spiritu sancto* with what might serve as a panegyric for a lexicographer; but it is also something of an object lesson illustrating Basil's method for doing Trinitarian theology:

Of all the terms concerning God in every mode of speech, not one ought to be left without exact investigation. . . . To count the terms used in theology as of primary importance, and to endeavour to trace out the hidden meaning in every phrase and in every syllable, is a characteristic. . .distinguishing all who get knowledge of "the mark" "of our calling" [Phil 3:14]. . .and knowledge is not got

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[31] This is precisely what Leonard Hodgson warns against in his *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York, 1944) 164-65.

without lessons. The beginning of teaching is speech. It follows then that to investigate syllables is not to shoot wide of the mark, nor, because the questions raised are what might seem to some insignificant, are they on that account to be held unworthy of heed. Truth is always a quarry hard to hunt, and therefore we must look everywhere for its tracks. The acquisition of true religion is just like that of crafts; both grow bit by bit; apprentices must despise nothing. If a man despise the first elements as small and insignificant, he will never reach the perfection of wisdom.[32]

These words preface Basil's painstaking analysis of the syntactical structure of some Pauline passages that treat of the Trinity. And after such analysis Basil is able to conclude that the different prepositions point to not differences in nature but differences in mutual relation and operation among the distinctions in the Godhead.

When at last Boethius brings to the arduous task of Trinitarian thought the consolation of scientific philosophy, he is acutely aware that theology will now speak a recondite and rarefied language. And he is very defensive of this decision:

I purposely use brevity and wrap up the ideas I draw from the deep questionings of philosophy in new and unaccustomed words such as speak only to you and to myself, that is, if you ever look at them. The rest of the world I simply disregard, since those who cannot understand seem unworthy even to read them.[33]

But, Boethius' "new and unaccustomed words" in no way replace or explain the traditional terminology. Rather, they only give to the word "person" a greater precision of meaning. Boethius appropriates Tertullian's formula and defines it in Aristotelian categories. However, the most cogent example of an acute literary sensitivity at work in Trinitarian thought is to be found in the work of the very one who originated the linguistic problematic.

Tertullian is generally regarded as the greatest Latin ecclesiastical writer, second only to Augustine, for the genius of his literary style. He was a master of traditional rhetoric, yet highly original in his prose, so original that he is among the most difficult to read. At the same time, he is the most quotable of all ancient Christian writers. We remember him for such epigrammatic utterances as "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" (De praescriptione 7) and "I believe it because it is absurd" (De carne Christi 5). But it is precisely this factor of literary genius that should alert us to some problems with his writings.

[32] Basil of Caesarea, Letters and Select Works, tr. B. Jackson (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 8) 2, De Spiritu sancto 1. This is pp. 250–54 in B. Pruche's edition cited n. 21 above.
[33] Boethius, The Theological Tractates, text and tr. H. F. Steward and E. K. Rand (New York, 1926; revised in 1973 by S. J. Tester) 5.

Though Tertullian is often quoted, he is seldom quoted at length. His gift was for the well-turned phrase, not for lucid and straightforward argument. Because of this, readers find it much easier to appreciate his wit than to follow his arguments. Moreover, the arguments themselves at times border on the merely ingenious, where logic is not so much the point as is brilliant display of wit (witness the legal sophistry of the *De praescriptione*). But none of this is said here with the intention of calling into question Tertullian's doctrine in the *Adversus Praxean*. Rather, it is merely to caution us against repeating errors of the past in the reading of Tertullian on the Trinity. The formula *una substantia in tribus personis* is all too much like an epigrammatic statement that allows us to forget its context. In fact, not enough commentators upon Trinitarian thought allude to the fact that the formula as it has been handed down in the tradition appears nowhere as such in the work of Tertullian. Chapter 12 of the *Adversus Praxean* comes close to it where it says: "teneo unam substantiam in tribus cohaerentibus. . . ."[34] Moreover, Tertullian employs the word *persona* several times thoughout the work and with varying connotations.

Several ingenious attempts have been made to identify precisely the sense in which Tertullian employs this word for his doctrine of the Trinity; all the explanations remain in some measure unsatisfying because all tend to assign a univocal meaning to *persona*. Harnack's exposition of the meaning of "person" in Tertullian's doctrine on the Trinity is probably the classical example of this error.[35] Harnack interprets both *substantia* and *persona* in their Roman juridical sense, and he has much on his side in doing this. For one thing, Tertullian's mastery of Roman legal concepts and procedure is well attested in his writings; then, too, the interpretation of *substantia* as property and *persona* as personal title of possession renders Tertullian's doctrine not only lucid and understandable but also orthodox and free from any hint of the modern notion of person as an individual consciousness. However, other literary evidence in the text indicates that such an interpretation is too simple, even reductionistic. No doubt, Harnack has identified at least one of the meanings Tertullian employs here. But there are no less than four discernible meanings of "person" operative in this text. There is present also the philosophical sense of the term. At times Tertullian uses it as a simple equivalent for *homo* or *vir*, with no psychological, metaphysical, or juristic reference intended. And in chapter 14 he equates *persona* with *facies*, quoting Yahweh's words to Moses: "My face cannot be seen." I am saying all this merely as a caution, to warn us against treating *persona* and *substantia*

[34] Ed. Evans 102.
[35] A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma* 4, tr. N. Buchanan (New York, 1958) 122–23.

in Tertullian as epigrammatic formulas. They must rather be understood in the context of the involved argument that is the *Adversus Praxean.*

The literary style of this treatise on the Trinity is overtly controversial. It takes as its point of departure and development a vehement critique of modalist monarchianism. Tertullian is out to destroy the unitarian theology of Praxeas, and to do this he uses every kind of rhetorical trick at his disposal, including ridicule and invective. In the opening chapter he dazzles us with his epigrammatic description of Praxeas: "he put to flight the Paraclete and crucified the Father." Surely it is a clever caricature, but it is something more: it is an accurate and concise summation of the error Praxeas represents. And this is the kind of argument, the quality of wit and intellect, that prevails throughout the *Adversus Praxean.* Even in his treatment of the Trinity here, Tertullian's style is vigorous and meant to appeal as much to the imagination as to the mind. This was an important part of his method, for as a rhetorician he wanted to sway his audience's opinion; and he knew his audience:

The simple people (and by this I do not mean the thoughtless and ignorant), who are always the majority among the faithful, shy at the expression of the divine economy. They think that economy, implying number and arrangement of Trinity, is really a division. And since the Rule of Faith brings us over from the many gods of the world to the one only true God, they do not understand how we can believe in this unity and at the same time hold for this economy.[36]

It is probably for this reason that Tertullian employs the word *persona:* for its shock value. In the word's analogous sense of *homo* and *vir,* it gives to his specifically theological, Trinitarian thought a vividness of expression that could positively obliterate the memory of any unitarian images of God. After a lengthy analysis of Tertullian's several uses of the word "person," Ernest Evans concludes:

We are left with the passages bearing a theological import, and our suggestion is that they are based on an analogy with things human, being saved from anthropomorphism not by any special meaning of the term *persona* but by consideration of the fact that the substance which the three Persons are is the divine substance.[37]

It is a daring use of language, something only to be expected from a

[36] My description of Tertullian and his work follows that of Ernest Evans (n. 1 above). However, Evans' translation is so literal and Tertullian's original so tortuous that what I cite here is my own translation-paraphrase, which is sufficiently faithful to the sense if not the style of the original: "Simplices enim quique, ne dixerim imprudentes et idiotes, quae maior semper credentium pars est, quoniam et ipsa regula fidei a pluribus diis saeculi ad unicum et verum deum transfert, non intelligentes unicum quidem sed cum oeconomia esse credendum, expavescunt ad oeconomiam" (Evans 91).

[37] From Evans' introduction 47.

literary artist; for a straightforward theologian would be much more circumspect and careful with his words. And yet it is successful here. Tertullian is not saved merely by the fact that the idea of self-consciousness today associated with "person" and "personal" were not at all prominent in his time.

The sense of the personal being, not consciousness, of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit needs as much to be preserved and expressed today as in Tertullian's time. By "personal being" we refer to a complexity of self-relatedness in the Godhead quite unlike anything within the ambit of human experience. Within human experience personal being is achieved only in relation to an other, a "thou," outside oneself. Moreover, human existence is always verging tragically upon the impersonal, and this as a result not merely of the subject's own actions or the responses of others but the simple exigencies of temporal existence. In contrast, the personal character of the Godhead is the result of a complexity of self-relatedness within the one eternal being that is God. And since each of these relations in the Godhead is seen as thus having the fullest expression of personal character, we use the metaphorical language of person to indicate this. Thus Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is each a distinct personal relation, the "other" in a relation of personal being, though none is in itself a separate consciousness. If today this language of persons in the Trinity entails more than ever the scandalous risk of implying a real self-consciousness too, the risk is still worth it.

It is the principal thesis of a book by John Courtney Murray that "Only within the biblical tradition is God exhibited so as to give rise to a problem in the mind of man. Only within this tradition as it has been historically wedded to Western culture has the mind of man been so tutored that it has come to grasp the God of the Bible as a problem."[38] In this sense the problematic status of the term "person" in Trinitarian thought is a positive virtue. Even the possible scandal that the doctrine of the Trinity might be misunderstood as polytheism only witnesses to the fact that Christian preaching must always remain a challenge to the mind, if at the same time an invitation to the heart. The alternative is to risk an all too simple monotheism that is hardly distinguishable from deism or some naively humanistic notion of deity.

CONCLUSION

The evidence for keeping the language of "persons" to refer to the distinctions in the Godhead is several. For one thing, this language preserves and conveys with laudable concision and emphasis the distinctive character of the scriptural revelation of God as pre-eminently and

[38] J. C. Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven, 1964) 1.

always personal. Moreover, the use of this language in the speculative theology of the Trinity underlines the personal character of the relations within the very nature of the Godhead itself. Secondly, there is the apologetic and probative value of such problematic language. The language of "persons" is instructively provocative as a challenge to the unitarian images of God common to humanistic and philosophical notions of deity. Last, and not least in weight, should be the consideration that the multiple applications and meanings of the word "person" make it an ideal means of preserving a link between theology and life. It is precisely the most speculative reaches of theology that most need to be kept in touch with domestic experience. The language of Trinitarian dogmatics should not be rendered unresponsive to the language and experience of worship, law, society, and psychology. The language of "persons" in the Trinity maintains a vital tension between dogmatic theology and these other religious and humanistic disciplines. The alternatives to the language of "persons" offered by Barth and Rahner are retreats within the preserve of very recondite notions and specialized realms of discourse. The attitude of Boethius, who simply disregarded how the rest of the world thought and spoke, is not recommendable for imitation today. It was perhaps appropriate for a time when the separation between cloister and world, between school and society, was clear and unresolvable. Such is not the situation today. Rahner and Barth have made valuable contributions to Trinitarian thought, but these should not be allowed to obscure the equally valuable contributions of Tertullian and his language of "persons" in the Trinity.