

THE RELATIONAL GOD: AQUINAS AND BEYOND

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THE RELIGIOUS mind hesitates not at all to say that God is "personal," or even that God is a "person"; for personhood denotes relationship, intersubjectivity, freedom, identity, consciousness, and the capacity to know and love, to be known and be loved. The name of God, Yahweh, rendered in Latin as *Adsum*, or in English as "I shall be with you as Who I Am," displays the personal character of God as one who is engaged in a particular covenanted history with the people of Israel. The name of God, 'ehyeh asher ehyeh', is a verbal name which discloses that God is the One who acts salvifically on our behalf. For Christians, the life of Jesus is further testimony to the personal character of the God-with-us. In coming to experience how we are related to God, we characterize it as a personal relationship. And yet, when the word "person" is used in the plural of God, as in the trinitarian assertion "God is one (nature) in three persons," the suitability of using person language is called into question.

This problem is not a new one.¹ The vocabulary of the early Church consisted of a variety of terms (*hypostasis*; *subsistentia*; *prosōpon*, *persona*) which were intended to preserve the transcendental oneness of God while explaining God's presence in Jesus and Jesus' unique eternal relationship to God. It was the genius of the Cappadocians and Augustine to use the terminology of "relative distinctions" as a way of showing how God could continue to be thought of as one, but simultaneously be conceived as Father, Son, and Spirit.² Many difficulties were caused by the fact that exact equivalents could not always be established between Greek and Latin words. When Augustine asked his famous question "Three what?" he was aware that the Greeks could answer "one essence, three substances" (*mia ousia, tres hypostaseis*), whereas the Latins would answer "one essence or substance, three persons" (*una substantia/natura, tres personae*), and that these answers could be considered as equivalent

¹ See A. Michel, "L'Évolution du concept de 'personne' dans la philosophie chrétienne," *Révue de philosophie* 20 (1919) 351-83, 487-515; C. J. De Vogel, "The Concept of Personality in Greek and Christian Thought," *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* 2 (1963) 20-60; C. Anderson, "Zur Entstehung und Geschichte des trinitarischen Personbegriffs," *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 52 (1961) 1-38.

² The term "relation" is first used in the West by Tertullian, *Adv. Praxean* 25 (PL 2, 153-96), and in the East by Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 25 (PG 35, 1197-1226).

(*De trin.* 7, 4, 7). Even in antiquity theologians had to fight against giving the impression that Christians were tritheists.³

In the context of the current recovery and renewal of the trinitarian tradition, the problem of person language has surfaced in a new and acute way. According to modern thought patterns, "person" is no longer understood in its metaphysical sense (*hypostasis*) but as a psychological reality, generally as "distinct center of consciousness." If God is three distinct centers of consciousness, are there not three Gods?

Karl Barth recognized the difficulty and suggested that theologians substitute "modes of being" (*Seinsweisen*).⁴ This literal translation of *tropoi hyparxeōs* brings out the ancient meaning of *hypostasis*. Karl Rahner, basically in agreement with Barth, introduced the phrase "distinct manners of subsisting."⁵ Rahner's translation emphasizes that there is only one consciousness in God, one "person," who nonetheless subsists in three distinct ways. Many contemporary theologians have followed Barth's and Rahner's lead, arguing that "person" is not a biblical term and that its modern connotations make tritheism unavoidable. Others have defended the use of "person" on the grounds of its prominence in the tradition, its emphasis on relationality, and its focus on intersubjectivity, and have pointed out that alternatives like Barth's or Rahner's are unsuitable for preaching.⁶ J. P. Mackey has reminded us not to make the term "person" into something of a scapegoat, as if we could "drive this term out of inherited trinitarian theology into the wilderness and all will be well!"⁷

Still, arguments on both sides often seem to come down simply to a matter of preference, often disguising a more fundamental concern about the obligation of the theologian to tradition.⁸ It may be more productive to call attention to the fact that beneath the language of person lies the

³ See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa's reply to Ablabius, "On That There Are Not Three Gods" (*Quod non sunt tres Dei*) (PG 45, 115-36). See also *Ep.* 38 (attributed to Basil but probably written by Gregory) on the difference between *hypostasis* and *ousia* (PG 37, 79-80).

⁴ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 348-51.

⁵ K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) 109-13.

⁶ Cf. W. J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), and L. B. Porter, "On Keeping 'Person' in the Trinity: A Linguistic Approach to Trinitarian Thought," *TS* 41 (1980) 530-48.

⁷ J. P. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God As Trinity* (London: SCM, 1983) 103. The word "person" is hardly univocal. In addition to its metaphysical meaning as hypostasis, several other denotations come immediately to mind. For example, it can be used grammatically, as in "third person singular," or it can mean any human individual, as in "look at that person over there," or "she is a competent person." Person also retains its theatrical sense of mask, as in "she appeared in the person of St. Joan."

⁸ E.g., Rahner goes to great lengths to justify his decision not to use "person" despite its prominent place in the dogmatic tradition (*Trinity* 103-15).

category of relation. Shifting the discussion away from person language as such to the category which undergirds it puts us in accord not only with the earliest patristic tradition but even with the medieval trinitarian tradition. Moreover, there have been several recent attempts to use relation rather than substance as a fundamental category for rethinking trinitarian theology.⁹ On the other hand, G. Hibbert has expressed his reservation about relation in the following way:

... it may not be necessary for us to maintain with (Aquinas) that *relation* for example, understood as derived from the Aristotelian category, is the only way of talking deeply about the Persons of the Trinity. And if we find that for fundamentally sound psychological reasons such an approach is for us today too restricting, then we would do well to search for another way of expressing the reality which Saint Thomas is trying to indicate.¹⁰

I agree with Hibbert that a new language must be developed to express the trinitarian insight into the divine relationality, but the eclipse of relation by "person" in the tradition leads me to think that a retrieval of the richness of the term "relation" is needed before a new language is found.

The following essay examines the highly refined treatment of the category of relation in the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*).¹¹ It will be argued from the point of view of both the internal structure of the *ST* and from its theological positions that being-related is the very heart of what it means for God to be God. In order that these remarks not be interpreted as a speculative exercise, some theological implications of retrieving and refocusing on the category of relation will be outlined in the final section.

Two remarks on the choice of Aquinas seem to be in order. Aquinas formulated a sophisticated account of the divine relations. Yet he is not necessarily a theologian whom many today would think to consult in the course of developing a more contemporary theology of God's "real relatedness."¹² One of the shibboleths arising from Aquinas' theology is that

⁹ See W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1982); E. Jünger, *God As the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). Also, feminist theologians have called attention to the fundamentally relational character of reality. See, e.g., R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); P. Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); C. Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

¹⁰ "Mystery and Metaphysics in the Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 31 (1964) 213.

¹¹ All references are to the *Prima pars*, and are indicated in the text, prefaced by Arabic numeral 1 (e.g., 1, q. 29, a. 1). I am using the Blackfriars edition (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1976), Vol. 6, ed. Ceslaus Velecky, and Vol. 7, ed. T. C. O'Brien.

¹² An important exception is Hill (*Three-Personed God* 69-78, 263-72), whose work is very much inspired by Aquinas' theology.

God is not "really" related to the world. Due to ignorance about Aristotle or medieval theology, or to a baroque and neo-scholastic static ontology, there has been a not infrequent assessment by many thinkers that Aquinas' God is static. Process theology's critique of "classical theism" has been signal on this score.¹³

Moreover, Karl Rahner has criticized Aquinas for representing the decline of Latin trinitarian theology on the matter of its methodology.¹⁴ In the West, following Augustine, theologians found their starting point in the divine unity rather than with the *ad extra* activity of God in salvation history. One of the results of this approach was the general practice in medieval theology of separating firmly the two treatises on God.¹⁵ The impression is forcefully given that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a teaching about the mystery of salvation but information on God's "inner life." Rahner's charge can be directed to much trinitarian theology after the fifth century, whether that of the neo-scholastics or manuals. Rahner is correct, I think, in insisting that the soteriological dimensions of the doctrine of God ought to be more readily recognizable. If a theology starts with the divine unity, there is the danger that it will remain only a speculation about God's inner being.¹⁶

These two important criticisms of Aquinas notwithstanding, I propose to stay within the *ST*, to examine Aquinas' theology of divine relationality. We will see that God is personal because God is relational, not vice versa. Shifting the focus on to-be (as act) to a focus on to-be-relating (as act) will develop an oversight in Aquinas' own treatment, and will help to correct the prevalent reading of his God as "impersonal" because not really related to the world. Taking the lead from Aquinas, then, I will show how a trinitarian theology which revolves around the category of relation can do justice both to the kinds of objections registered by process theologians, as well as to the soteriological demands of a contemporary trinitarian theology.

TO BE GOD IS TO BE RELATED

The two sections in the *ST* essential to Aquinas' trinitarian theology are "On the One God" (qq. 1-26) and "On the Triune God" (qq. 27-43).

¹³ Cf. D. Burrell's assessment of some process theologians' equation of "classical theism" and Thomistic theology, in "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?" *TS* 43 (1982) 125-35.

¹⁴ Cf. Rahner, *Trinity*; also his *Sacramentum mundi* 6 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) *s.v.* "Trinity, Divine."

¹⁵ Peter Lombard is an exception; cf. *Sententiae* (PL 192, 12-111).

¹⁶ Hill (*Three-Personed God*) tries to counteract this danger by balancing his own Latin trinitarian methodology (predominantly a psychological approach) with some of the concerns of social trinitarianism.

Structural analysis shows how these distinct but interrelated units display parallels in format and in the order of questions.

There are three major clusters of questions: first, on the nature of divine being; second, on theological language appropriate to that being; finally, on additional metaphysical and theological characteristics of the manner of that being.

The structural comparison looks like this:

<i>ST: On the One God</i>	<i>ST: On the Triune God</i>
qq. 2–11 the divine to-be	qq. 27–28 the divine to-be-related
qq. 12–13 knowing and naming God	qq. 29–32 naming and knowing God
qq. 14–26 the divine operation	qq. 33–43 the divine persons

On the One God

In qq. 2–11, the first of these clusters, we have what may be characterized as Aquinas' teaching on the divine to-be, that is, on the existence of God. In q. 2 Aquinas shows not *what* God is but *that* God is. This is followed by q. 3 on the divine simplicity, in which Aquinas explains that God lacks composition of any kind. In q. 3, a. 4 we are told the implication of this, namely, that God's essence and existence are identical. "To be God is to be to-be."¹⁷ However, Aquinas treats the divine simplicity not by showing us what God is but by showing us what the manner of God's existence is not. Questions 4–11 follow as part of the enterprise of showing what and how God is not.

Questions 12–13 form the second cluster and consider how God is known by us and how God is to be named. We can know God insofar as God exists. This knowledge comes through creatures, that is, as effects of a cause. Since all our language is drawn from a world of beings whose essence is not the same as their existence, when we come to use the same language for God, our efforts must fall short:

... we can give a name to anything in as far as we can understand it. Now it was shown above that in this life we cannot see the essence of God; but we know God from creatures as their cause, and also by way of excellence and remotion. In this way, therefore, He can be named by us from creatures, yet not so that the name which signifies Him expresses the divine essence itself. . . . (1, q. 13, a. 1)

We cannot name God by expressing the divine essence but, as Aquinas instructs us in q. 13, by analogy we can affirm that "He Who Is" is the most proper name of God (a. 11).

¹⁷ D. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1979) 48. Burrell characterizes this word-unit as a predicate nominative.

The third cluster of questions (14–26) pertains to the divine operation in its immanent effects (in God's knowledge and will, qq. 14–24) and in its exterior effects (in divine power, q. 25). Finally, q. 26 on the divine beatitude acts as an "immanent bridge" leading to the doctrine of the Trinity.

On the Triune God

With q. 27 Aquinas turns to the triune God. The challenge to Aquinas in this part of the *Summa* was to show how God's simplicity—an ontological requirement—was not compromised by the trinity of persons—the Christian theological requirement. Aquinas works out the complementarity between unity and trinity by putting to work what was in Augustine an occasional use of "relation" along with Aristotle's category of relation (*pros ti*). The divine simplicity is not violated by such distinctions within God, because Aquinas shows that they are relative, not essential, distinctions. In fact, it is the ontology of simplicity which allows the ontology of relationality.¹⁸

The questions on the triune God mirror those on the one God. In a first cluster, just as qq. 2–11 had pertained to the divine to-be, qq. 27–28 show the divine *esse* to be intrinsically fruitful: to be God means necessarily to-be-related. *To be God is to be to-be-rationally*. This is an all-important development in Aquinas' theology of God and will be explored further below.

The second cluster of questions on the Trinity (qq. 29–32) is on language appropriate to the being-relational of God. Again there are parallels between the two treatises. As in the initial treatise on God, Aquinas is concerned both with how we name God and how we know God.¹⁹ In qq. 29–31 he works out the linguistic implications of the divine simplicity now expressed as a dynamic to-be-related. He considers the meaning of the word "person," the plurality of divine persons, and terms referring to unity and plurality in God.

Knowledge of the triune God is covered in q. 32 (on knowing the divine persons). It is important to note that Aquinas' treatment of how we know the divine persons is not articulated in light of events in salvation history

¹⁸ We might even formulate it axiomatically: "the more simple, the more related." Aquinas writes in *De potentia Dei* q. 7, a. 8: "from God's supreme simplicity there results an infinite number of respects or relations between creatures and Him, inasmuch as He produced creatures distinct from Himself and yet somewhat likened to Him." For the *De potentia* I am using the translation by the English Dominicans (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1932–33) in 3 volumes, hereafter given in the text as *De pot.*

¹⁹ It may not be especially significant, but in the treatise "On the One God" the question on knowledge of God (q. 12) precedes the question on the divine names (q. 13); in "On the Triune God" it is the reverse: qq. 29–31 on naming the divine persons precede q. 32 on knowing the divine persons.

(Incarnation; the sending of the Spirit). This might be surprising, since in the treatise on the one God the point had been made that we know God only from God's relations with creatures, i.e., as the cause of all things (1, q. 12, a. 12). However, since the exercise of God's causality as Creator applies to the whole Trinity²⁰ and not to the distinction of persons, we cannot know God's trinity apart from revelation. Thus Aquinas' theology of person emerges from a logic dictated by the previous questions on processions and relations. That is, Aquinas first teaches how God is God, namely, by being-relational, and second, how we know and express this truth about God.

Finally, in the third cluster (qq. 33–43) Aquinas treats several topics pertaining to the divine persons.²¹ This segment parallels qq. 14–26 (on the divine operation): qq. 14–24 had concerned the immanent effects of the divine power, and qq. 25–26 had touched on its exterior effects. The immanent effects of God's unity are divine knowledge (qq. 14–18), divine will (19–21), and features they have in common (22–24). The trinitarian pattern, taken up in qq. 33–38, suggests this earlier theology of God. While divine knowledge and will are considered in the first treatise on God, they are now referred specifically to the divine persons, first considered separately (qq. 33–38) and then comparatively (39–42). The final question in the treatise on the Trinity, q. 43 on the divine missions, matches q. 25 on the power of God. The power of God is understood by Aquinas to be the principle of the divine operation proceeding to an exterior effect; the divine missions proceed to the exterior effect of the production of creatures.

In sum, Aquinas' treatment of divine unity and plurality takes place according to the structure of three sets of questions: on the nature of being, on the nature of language about that being, and on further implications for the manner of that being. These parallel sets of questions provide a point of entry into Aquinas' theology of God. There are not two theologies separable into two domains (reason and faith). Faith and revelation do not suddenly enter with q. 27, nor do they provide mysterious information superadded to natural knowledge of God. Most importantly, the teaching on divine simplicity is not at all obscured or preempted by the doctrine of processions, relations, and persons. Indeed, it

²⁰ Following Augustine's axiom *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*.

²¹ The term "person" was part of Aquinas' heritage mainly because of its use by early councils. Medieval thought also drew on Boethius and used his definition of person as "individual substance of a rational nature" (*individua substantia naturae rationalis*). Even though most of the treatise is devoted to the divine persons (15 of 17 questions), I believe this segment is theologically less significant than the treatment of processions and relations. For a contrary view, cf. G. Lafont, *Structures et méthode dans la Somme théologique de saint Thomas D'Aquin* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1960) 84.

is rigidly upheld by Aquinas in his trinitarian theology. From the point of view of structure we see that the divine simplicity is understood by him to be a *relational* simplicity. The theological key to this structural configuration will lie in Aquinas' trinitarian starting point in the divine processions.

THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF GOD

The parallels in structure between the first two parts of the *ST* reveal that God's to-be is understood by Aquinas to be a relational to-be. His ontology of relation can be seen by calling attention to the order of the questions in the *De Deo trino*. The treatise begins with a question on processions, followed by the question on relations, followed by 15 questions on the divine persons. If relationality (relatedness, relating) is at the heart of the divine to-be, might we not have expected Aquinas to begin the treatise with the divine relations? By way of contrast, it is significant that in *De potentia Dei* (1265-67) the order of questions is relations, persons, processions.²²

This structural observation draws us into Aquinas' theology of processions and relations. His starting point for the theology of processions is Jn 8:42, "I came forth from God." The divine missions (Incarnation, the sending of the Spirit), which will be treated by Aquinas only in q. 43 at the end of the *De Deo trino* and as a bridge to the treatise on creation, give rise to Aquinas' theory about the dynamics of God's internal being. Processions are the acts which are always taking place within the divine nature. God's being is fecund, intrinsically dynamic, and therefore intrinsically relational. Because of the philosophical requirement of divine simplicity, the task was to show how the revealed names of Father, Son, and Spirit could be applied to God without entailing tritheism. The answer was provided by the ontology of relation.

Relation (*pros ti* for Aristotle, *ad aliquid* for Boethius) indicates the reference of one thing to another.²³ Relation is always based on another category—for example, quantity (as in "double and half"). Aristotle says that every relative term, if properly predicated, has a correlative. For example, "slave" implies "master." This grammatical observation is a way of noting that along with any relative term is given that to which the term relates. Relationality may not be predicated of a single subject, but only of two in reference to each other. One can see why this category would be genial in the trinitarian tradition, since it allows one to introduce distinctions in the Godhead without introducing division into God.

²² Q. 7 is on divine simplicity, q. 8 on relations, q. 9 on persons, q. 10 on processions.

²³ On the distinction between *esse in* and *esse ad*, cf. Hibbert, "Mystery and Metaphysics" 204-7.

Real and Logical Relations

Much of Aquinas' metaphysics of God hinges on the distinction between real and logical relations. A real relation is one which inheres in the very nature of a thing (e.g., father-son). Relations of reason, on the other hand, are conventions of the intellect as it links one thing with another (e.g., the tree is at this moment on my right; if I turn around, it will be in a logically left relation to me).

Are the relations in God real or logical? If relations were not real in the sense of not identical with the divine essence, then relations would be accidents inhering in the nature. This would undo Aquinas' rule of divine simplicity. Second, there would be something eternal besides the divine essence, and God's substance would be imperfect if there were anything distinct in it therefrom (*De pot.* q. 8, a. 1, ad 3). Thus in God relations (*esse ad*) cannot differ from the divine essence.

For Aristotle, relation is always dependent on another category; real relations arise from quantity, action, and passion (1, q. 28, a. 1). Since there is no such thing as quantity in God, Aquinas ascribes to God the relation that arises from action (1, q. 28, a. 1, *sed contra*). This particular action does not pass into something passive but remains in the agent.²⁴ The intradivine relationality is to be understood by way of the twofold activity of knowing and willing, both of which are actions of spirit and person. Again, the divine processions are the foundation of the divine relations. In God, then, real relations arise when God proceeds from God by way of nature, that is, when the nature of the source and the terminus are the same (as is the case with father and son).²⁵

Aquinas helps us understand further why relations in God must be real by showing how the opposite view would lead to untenable logical implications for the divine persons. The divine relations constitute the divine persons. If the persons differ essentially and not relatively, then one would have reproduced the Arian error; if, on the other hand, the persons were to differ in name only, one would have reiterated the Sabellian error. The relations must be real if there are to be persons in God (1, q. 28, a. 1 and a. 3). Yet the relations must be—even in their active self-realization—one with the divine being.²⁶

The argument is continued by Aquinas' contrast of God's real internal relatedness with God's logical relation to the creature. Being related to

²⁴ Cf. 1, q. 28, a. 1; q. 14, a. 8; q. 19, a. 3, ad 2; q. 19, a. 4; q. 20, a. 2; q. 32, a. 1, ad 3; q. 32, a. 2.

²⁵ See the extensive treatment of this by A. Michel, "Relations divines," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 13, 2 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1937) 2135–56.

²⁶ Aquinas distinguishes himself from the alleged view of Gilbert de la Porrée that relations are assistant or adjacent to the divine essence (in *ST* 1, q. 33, a. 2; q. 39, a. 1; q. 39, a. 7, ad 2). Gilbert's views were condemned in four propositions at the Council of Rheims.

creatures is not part of God's nature, for the creature is produced by freedom (1, q. 28, a. 1, *sed contra*), whereas being self-related is the nature of God. Still, the creature has a real relation to God, because it depends on God for its very existence. Some in the 13th century had argued for parity between God and creature, claiming that if God has no real relation to the creature which is produced, then God has no real relation to the Word produced internally. Or, stated in the opposite way, if God has a real relation to the Word, then God should have the same to the creature (*De pot.* q. 8, a. 1, ad 3). Aquinas' reply emphasizes the identity of the divine relations with the divine essence. He shows that the divine essence is not communicated to the creature, so that the relation of God to creature results from nothing in God, whereas the Word is coessential with God and the procession of Son from Father produces a real relation.

Aquinas' insistence that no real relation obtains between God and the world can hardly be construed to mean that God remains "uninvolved" with the world. A less misleading way of interpreting Aquinas would show how the intrinsic relatedness of the divine *esse* grounds the created sphere of relations, since the inner divine relatedness issues forth, albeit freely, in the production of creatures. To be God is to be relationally, that is, ontologically related. Yet for Aquinas this essential relatedness of God is confined to the immanent divine life (God's self-relatedness) and does not necessarily extend to God's relations to creatures. The integrity of the category of relation, along with the theological requirement of upholding divine freedom, requires the distinction between "logical" and "real" relations.

We have seen how Aquinas proposes that we understand the ongoing essential self-relating activity of God (the procession of God from God) in light of the ontology of relations. The divine relations, signified by their mode of origin, are their own foundation. Ontologically speaking, processions and relations are only logically distinguishable. Aquinas' view on relations in turn gives rise to his theology of the divine persons. Person is defined as a subsistent relation (1, q. 30, a. 1). Subsistent relations, precisely because they are subsistent, are also their own foundation. In both cases there is no real distinction between processions and relations or between relations and persons. Nor is there a real distinction between processions, relations, persons, and essence. But the divine relations remain the foundation of the divine persons, as the following exposition shows.

Relation qua Relation

There is a difference between considering relation qua relation, and relation as constituting a (divine) person. When one considers relation

qua relation, the relation *presupposes* the procession. On the other hand, when one considers relation as constituting a divine person, the relation *precedes* that procession. In the first case, nativity (being born) precedes filiation. In the second case, paternity precedes generation (*De pot.* q. 8, a. 3, ad 7). This distinction sheds light on the structural observation made earlier about the order of questions in the *De Deo trino*. In the *ST*, then, Aquinas is considering relation qua relation. The decision to begin the treatise with the divine processions signals not so much a didactic choice but a theological decision to elevate relation as the category by which to explain the mystery of God's trinitarian act of to-be.

We are given a further reading of this distinction in *De pot.* q. 10, a. 3, "On the Order between Processions and Relations." Aquinas gives us two ways of ordering these two ideas. According to the first, relations neither constitute nor distinguish the hypostases but show *that* they are constituted and distinguished. Hypostasis denotes an individual substance (as contrasted with genera or species). The divine essence cannot distinguish and constitute hypostases, because the Godhead is predicated of several subjects; it is common to the three and therefore it is not incommunicable. That which does distinguish and constitute hypostases must be whatever is not predicated of several but of one only, namely, relation and origin, and generation and paternity. Aquinas tells us that origin is logically first, for the divine relation follows the origin. According to this first view, then, the divine hypostases are constituted and distinguished by their origin. That is, "the relations of paternity and filiation logically follow the constitution and distinction of the persons, and indicate the constitution and distinction of the hypostases" (*De pot.* q. 10, a. 3).²⁷ This view amounts to that of considering relation qua relation.

The second view regards relations as constituting and distinguishing persons and hypostases. Aquinas argues, counter to the first view, that "a thing's origin cannot be understood as constituting and distinguishing except in reference to that which constitutes and distinguishes formally" (*De pot.* q. 10, a. 3). The hypostasis of the Son is not constituted and distinguished by its nativity (its origin) but by filiation. The hypostasis of the Son is also not constituted by the relation implied in the origin, "since the relation implied in the origin, like the origin itself, denotes something not as yet subsistent in the nature but as tending thereto" (*De pot.* q. 10, a. 3). Likewise, the hypostasis of the Father is constituted and distinguished by paternity, not by active generation. This view amounts to that of considering relation as constituting a divine person.

On the basis of this second view, Aquinas concludes that paternity is the same as the divine essence. The Father is the same as God. Paternity,

²⁷ Thus generation and nativity precede paternity and filiation.

by constituting the Father, constitutes God. And yet paternity, though it is the essence, is not common to all the persons. Fatherhood is not common but proper (notional). God the Father as God is common in having the divine nature, but qua Father is proper and distinct. The Father is a hypostasis. Therefore paternity, by constituting the Father, constitutes the hypostasis.

This analysis of *De pot.* q. 10, a. 3 shows that the two treatments of relation in *De potentia* and the *Summa theologiae* are complementary. Just as we are challenged to keep together both divine unity and divine threefoldness,²⁸ even though it is impossible to conceive of them simultaneously, so are we to keep together relation as such and relation as constituting the hypostases, even though these are distinct only logically. For in God, relation is also something besides relation, namely, the divine substance. Thus it can constitute a subsistent and not merely relative thing (*De pot.* q. 8, a. 3, ad 8). And relation as relation distinguishes the hypostases, while as identical with the divine essence it constitutes the hypostases (*De pot.* q. 8, a. 3, ad 9). Relation thereby becomes the premiere category for explaining a triune God whose ontological simplicity is not undone by ontological relatedness. Recognizing this, "subsistent relation" becomes Aquinas' definition of divine person. Person "signifies a relation by way of substance not qua essence but qua hypostasis, even as it signifies a relation not qua relation but qua relative: for example, as signifying *father*, not as signifying *paternity*" (*De pot.* q. 9, a. 4; 1, q. 29, a. 4).

Up to this point, in defining relation, we have seen that there are only real relations in God, and we have distinguished between the real divine relations and the divine essence. Throughout Aquinas' deliberations there is the persistent tension between the divine simplicity and its essential relationality. He is fond of repeating Boethius to the effect that "relation alone multiplies the Trinity." One has the sense, from reading all 68 objections in the articles on relation, that this was the central point after all, to show that divine perfection and unity are not compromised by the essential to-be-related.

RESUMING AQUINAS

This structural and theological analysis has shown that the central category by which we are to understand God is "relation." If qq. 1-26 of

²⁸ C. Sträter, "Le point de départ du traité thomiste de la trinité," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 14 (1962) 71-87, is very critical of the often-held view that in the first treatise on God Aquinas has in mind a divine essence *different* from the essence of the *triune* God. He takes the phrase "divine nature" to indicate the *whole* of the divine reality, not only that which is common to the divine persons. He supports his argument not only textually (based on the *ST*) but on the fact that the magisterium teaches that it is the divine essence which is the object of the beatific vision. In that vision, he notes, one would hardly be making a distinction of reason between absolute perfection and relations or persons.

the *ST* are circumspect because they say only what God is not, qq. 27–43 are forthcoming in saying who God is: Father, Son, and Spirit. On the one hand, God's nature might be to-be, but we cannot know by reason alone what such a to-be is like. On the other hand, we can know through revelation what God's to-be is like, namely, it is a relational to-be. To be God is to be related. Just as *esse* is the category used by Aquinas to explicate philosophically the nature of the divine *actus*, so *relatio* is the category used to explicate theologically the revealed character of the divine *actus*. The structural comparison between the two treatises on God shows that the philosophical requirement of divine simplicity is not compromised by Christian faith in the threefoldness of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Indeed, as fully worked out by Aquinas, in God there are four real (i.e., person-constituting) relations: fatherhood, sonship, spiration, and procession. And in God, real relations are based on action (internal, not external actions such as creating). Real relations in God, therefore, follow upon actions which entail processions within God, not a going forth outside God.

SOME THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

It would be a mistake to regard the God of Aquinas' trinitarian theology as static. The *esse* of God is to-be, and the idiom proper to such a being is to-be-in-act. We have seen that the trinitarian portion of the *Summa* develops an onto-theology of the divine relationality. Trinitarian reflection leads us to see that the *esse* of God is to-be-related, and the activity proper to such a being is relating. Thus to be God is to-be-rationally.

The theology of Aquinas shows that it would be quite in line with the patristic and medieval trinitarian tradition to emphasize the trinitarian relations. God is personal *because* God is relational, and not vice versa. The classical "one nature, three persons" formula (of Tertullian) is not the only, the unchanging, or even the best summary of the trinitarian insight into God's essential relationality. Given the contemporary difficulties created by predicating "person" of God in the plural, it seems all the more fitting that a contemporary trinitarian theology be reconstructed around the category of relation.

An ontology of divine relationality has important consequences for theology. One of the classical doctrines which illustrates how theologians have understood God's "personal" character is creation. Is it or is it not essential to God to be related to God's other?²⁹ This is the kind of question which underlies speculative test-cases such as whether or not creation is coeternal with God (a question which received a good deal of

²⁹ Precisely to avoid having to answer this question in the affirmative, Hill, Kasper, Rahner, and others posit the eternal Logos as God's "other." Jüngel, on the other hand, regards creation as an entailment of understanding God as love (cf. "God As the Mystery" 364 ff.).

attention in the 12th and 13th centuries³⁰). How might the understanding of God's to-be as to-be-related, sharpened by trinitarian reflection, clarify our grasp of the *fact* of God's "external relatedness" to creation?

The Christian tradition has always insisted that God freely or gratuitously relates to what God creates. This relating is a thoroughly intentional activity, in which God bestows a participation in divine being to what otherwise would not even be at all (1, q. 45). Created to-be can be characterized as created by its being related to that intentional activity whereby God brings it into being absolutely. Thus the radical contingency of our being is the other face of the intentionality of God's act of creating.

This view harmonizes the theological concern that creation be regarded as a gift because it is a gratuitous act. The caricature of "divine self-sufficiency" is moved off stage as an inevitably inadequate formulation of a situation we are inherently unable to characterize: God alone. (Inherently unable because the scenario excludes us in principle.) Moreover, the focus on the intentionality of God's relating helps to underscore the freedom entailed in this act of bestowing a participation in divine being to what otherwise would not be at all. God freely (decides to?) relates to what otherwise would not be at all,³¹ while God's relating to God's own "self" is constitutive of what we have come to understand divinity to be. None of this could be asserted, of course, without some indication through revelation that God is to be understood as love.³²

Might we infer, however, that God is "really" related to the world? If not, what keeps us from inferring as much? Internal or real relatedness would be ontologically constitutive of God. In light of this, Aquinas himself demurs, preferring to regard creation as a gift by using language drawn from metaphysical constraints. For reasons noted above, this ought not to be construed to mean that God is disinterested in or uninvolved with the world. The distinction between real and logical relations is nothing more than a device which enables Aquinas to uphold divine freedom. What he has in mind is not the freedom of God not to be related, for God is already, antecedently, eternally, and by nature *self-*

³⁰ Cf. Cyril Vollert, Lottie Kendzierski, and Paul Byrne, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Siger of Brabant, St. Bonaventure, On the Eternity of the World* (Medieval Texts in Translation 16; (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ. Press, 1964).

³¹ "God freely acts" is often equated with "God decides to act," where decision is viewed as a choice among several possible alternatives. Such a use *in divinis* needs much more critical scrutiny than it usually receives. I am suggesting an alternative rendering for divine freedom, but the entire topic needs further study.

³² To ask why Aquinas does not allow revelation to play back upon his treatment of God's to-be in qq. 1-26 is a complex question. The standard answer invokes the nature/supernature distinction, closely related to the philosophy/theology distinction. Aquinas' treatment of God as simple and one is said to be a properly philosophical elucidation, while the questions on God as triune incorporate revelation. Yet the entire treatment in the *ST* is theological, and the theology of Trinity is a special argument for this.

related. It is the freedom only for God to be related to what is other than God.³³

Nonetheless, it may be possible to rethink God as having a real relation to creation when the framework is the trinitarian self-relating of God. If it is the very nature of God to be related (to-be-toward, to-be-for), then it is difficult to see that God can be *God* without creation. Calling to mind the name of God may be helpful here. "God" is the name of the one who is God-for-us. If we could abstract from creation for a moment (which it is, of course, impossible to do completely) and consider God altogether apart from and without creation, the being to which this word "God" refers would not really be God, for something can be God only *in relation* to what is other than God. The name "God" is an essentially relational term (1, q. 13, a. 8).³⁴ We may say, then, that God comes to be (called) God in relation to creation and in the ongoing activity of creating. In this sense it is correct to say that God is constituted *as God* by having a real relation to creation.

To say that God has a real relation to creation makes sense out of Rahner's axiom that the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa. The two-directional requirement of the axiom means both that who God is (*in se*) is revealed completely in the economic activities (relations *ad extra*) of creating, redeeming, and sustaining, *and* that these economic activities are constitutive of God's being as such (relations *ad intra*). In more traditional language, processions and missions are identical. God is to be understood to be self-related as love from eternity, a love which then becomes embodied in creation and its history. Otherwise we cannot be certain that the manifestations of God are real *self-*communications (in Rahner's sense). The distinction between God's oneness and threeness—the very distinction which makes it possible to deny God's real relatedness to creation—is thoroughly overcome in a salvation-history perspective.³⁵

³³ It is Jüngel's view that we cannot really speak of God as love if God desires to love Godself without also loving the creature (*God As the Mystery*, 364).

³⁴ There is precedent for this view in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 29, 12. Scholastic theology, on the contrary, would assert that those names which require a relation between God and creature, such as Father, Lord, Creator, cannot be applied to God from all eternity but only in time (cf. *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 7). This distinction is necessary in a theology which denies that God has a real relation to creation.

³⁵ P. Schoonenberg warns against trying to settle whether God is triune apart from creation. He writes: "The question of whether God is trinitarian apart from his self-communication in salvation history could be answered if the relationship between God's immutability and his free self-determination were accessible to us. Because this is not the case, the question remains unanswered and unanswerable. It is thereby eliminated from theology as a meaningless question" (Thesis 8 in "Trinity—the Consummated Covenant: Theses on the Doctrine of the Trinitarian God," *Studies in Religion* 5 [1975–76] 112). See also thesis 25.

The question whether God has a real relation to creation is clarified when it is considered in the context of trinitarian theology. Recast in light of a relational metaphysics, the question reads, whether the *triune* God has a real relation to creation. In its nontrinitarian form, the question must be answered in the negative (as Aquinas does). In its revised form, however, the question must be answered in the affirmative *and* the first question must be rejected as reflecting a theologically inadequate doctrine of God.

The freedom of God is not at all compromised by positing a real relation between God and world. Nor is the ontological distinction between God and world blurred for a moment.³⁶ Freedom in its theological sense is primarily an intentional activity, not a metaphysical constraint (though, of course, in God the distinction is moot). In a relational or love ontology, freedom does not mean having the widest range of choices. Rather, freedom means freedom for, freedom towards, the other. Freedom entails self-dispossession, which in the creaturely realm is always limited and only partially realized. But in God there is absolute capacity for self-dispossession (*kenōsis*). Creation—indeed, this particular creation—is the result of God's self-emptying into God's other.

In the purview of a personalist ontology, self-enactment is the hallmark of freedom. Absolute freedom would mean absolute self-enactment. M. Scanlon brings out an important distinction when the idea of self-enactment is applied to God. Whereas Hegel required God's self-enactment in order for God to be God, Rahner, by contrast, requires God's self-enactment in order for God to be our God. In Rahner's view, God enters history, not to know Godself as God, but to know Godself as God *pro nobis*.³⁷

Concern for the reality of creation points us back in the direction of a salvation-history framework as the preferred starting point for trinitarian reflection. Is not Rahner correct in advocating a methodological reversal of Aquinas' procedure of beginning with the abstract divine unity of nature?³⁸ If the very nature of God is to be in relationship, should not the various stories of salvation play a central role in informing our account of the character of the One who is related to us? Trinitarian theology, which is reflection on the God who is God-with-us, might profitably begin, as the Hebrew Scriptures do, with the giving of the

³⁶ Cf. R. Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1982) esp. chap. 5.

³⁷ M. Scanlon, "Systematic Theology and the World Church," *Proceedings*, Catholic Theological Society of America, 39 (1984) 18.

³⁸ Burrell believes that Aquinas' preoccupation with his Jewish and Muslim counterparts led him to begin as he did with God's oneness. Cf. *Knowing the Unknowable God*, forthcoming from the University of Notre Dame Press.

divine image in the relatedness between male and female, the giving of the divine name to Moses, the sealing of the covenant on Sinai; these and other acts of God give evidence of the character of God's being.

The "personal" character of God might more effectively be highlighted if the essentially relational nature of God is emphasized. Aquinas' theology of God in the *ST* has helped us to see what it means to say that it is the very essence of God to exercise divinity in a relational way. Both the structure of the *ST* and its theology disclosed this pattern. Taking our lead from Aquinas' trinitarian metaphysics, we have argued that a trinitarian framework sheds light on God's (real) relation with creation. To experience God's relations to us—relations which come to be known within a concrete history of salvation—is to experience the very being of God as such.

The religious mind has no real interest in a God who is one-sided, self-sufficient, and not "really related." But the religious mind becomes ecstatic upon discovering that the name of the God who is so deeply involved with creation amounts to a promise always to-be-there. For relationality is at the heart of what it means for God to be God.