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# PERSON AND COMMUNITY

BRIAN HORNE

## Prologue

For some years it was my duty (and privilege) to look after an old lady who began to suffer serious mental deterioration as she became more and more frail physically. Eventually, in an advanced state of senility she was admitted to a nursing-home where she continued to live for nearly two more years. I visited her regularly, but was hardly ever able to make contact with her at any level that I recognised as meaningful. And, like everyone else who has had to cope with another human being in this condition, I was distressed and perplexed. Questions — theological, philosophical and psychological — presented themselves to me: 'Where was "she"? What has happened to the "person"? How can one be sure, since there is no obvious contact between minds, that there is any "person" left at all? And what is a human "person"? Soon after her death, I put these questions to one of my old philosophy tutors. His answer, as it turned out, was not unexpected: 'Memory, that is the clue.' Admittedly, we may have almost no way of knowing what is going on inside the head of a person who has become senile, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that what is going on is an act of remembering; and as long as the memory remains I would be prepared to argue that "personhood" exists. It was not unexpected because I had been groping towards a similar kind of definition in my own mind: personal identity was ultimately connected to one's capacity to remember; perhaps, even, personhood was the product of memory. But, even as I was formulating this, I was wondering about the adequacy of the definition and where the notion had originated. I had the suspicion that as a definition it was both incomplete and relatively modern.

## I

The word and the concept of the person did not enter Christian Theology until the beginning of the third century when it was used by Tertullian (160-220), not as a means of describing human beings, but as a means of talking about the being of God: the triune being worshipped by Christians. *Una Substantia, tres Personae*.<sup>1</sup> However, Tertullian was not, as one might have thought, taking up a Biblical term. The Hebrew language of the Old Testament can provide no word for our English 'person'. It has words for soul, and mankind, and individual men and women but no equivalent of person. The roots of the word are to be found in Greek philosophy; but even here it is difficult to be specific about its precise meaning (there are two, perhaps three, Greek words that can be translated into 'persona', person). And the concept of the person, as a philosophical problem, is not an issue for either of the two greatest philosophers of ancient Greece: Plato and Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> When we turn to the New Testament we see that there are only two instances when a Greek word might possibly be translated into the English 'person': 2 Corinthians 2.10 and Hebrews 1.3. But we have to be very careful here too. The word 'person' appears in the Authorised version, but no reputable modern translator is prepared to translate either *prosopon* (2 Corinthians) or *hypostasis* (Hebrews) as 'person'. It is clear that the modern translators are deliberately avoiding an anachronism: the word and the concept seem to be too modern if one is trying to render the thought of the original writers of those documents accurately.

The third, fourth and fifth centuries saw a great deal of theological controversy about the concept of the person, but it was the philosopher Boethius (c. 487 — c. 524) who provided western European culture with its most concise and, in time, its most influential definition of person: an individual substance of a rational nature. But Boethius was led into this definition both by Greek philosophy (especially that of Plato) and the writing of the most powerful mind of an earlier century, Augustine of Hippo (354 — 430). From the thought of Plato, Boethius drew the concept of human nature as a kind of underlying substance in which individual human beings participated. These individuals owed their being to that prior substance to which has been added the element of 'rationality' as they emerge into individual and separate existences. But Boethius was not only a Platonist; he was writing in a tradition whose shape had already been determined by Augustine. It is in Augustine's *Confessions*, written in the closing years of the fourth century, that the idea of the person, the *human* person, is treated in depth. This book is an autobiography of a peculiar kind: it is more than the attempt to recount the story of a past life, it is also the attempt to discover meaning in that life by means of relating, and forming into a narrative, selected previous experiences. It might even be true to say that the shape of the writer's personal identity is constructed by this action; and memory is central to the whole enterprise. Augustine informs his reader that he is both fascinated and bewildered by the connection between the power of the memory and the realisation of personal identity.<sup>3</sup> He finds he can make sense not only of his life, but of himself by an act of remembering; and the tenth book is a long meditation on the significance and use of the memory. In it he considers the relation between two words: *cogito* (I think) and *cogo* (I gather or collect). To think is to do more than speculate abstractly, it is also to recall; memory is, therefore, an activity of the intellect, a rational operation. Hence Boethius, when trying to describe the being of God, could define a person as an individual substance of a rational nature and remain within the Augustinian tradition.

The definition passed into the thinking of the Western Church and, in the thirteenth century, when Thomas Aquinas addressed himself to the question of person, it was Boethius's definition that he used and was concerned to uphold.

For person in general signifies the individual substance of a rational nature. The individual in itself is undivided, but is distinct from others. Therefore person in any nature signifies what is distinct in that nature...<sup>4</sup>

I mention and quote from Thomas Aquinas because of his central place in Catholic theology up until our own century. But it was not merely in Catholic thought that this notion of the nature of person has persisted and been developed; I doubt if there was a single thinker in the centuries that followed who was not influenced by the Boethian definition.

A picture of the way in which the concept was accepted and developed is provided by J. R. Illingworth (1848 — 1915) in his Bampton lectures for 1894 entitled *Personality, Human and Divine*. Illingworth was a prominent Christian philosopher and an important member of a group of thinkers that published the influential and widely-read volume of essays *Lux Mundi*. He was regarded as an enlightened traditionalist and saw himself fulfilling the task of interpreting orthodox Christian teaching to the man and woman of his own age. In his historical survey of the idea of personality, Boethius is, oddly enough, not mentioned, but Illingworth nonetheless confidently links the

philosophy of Descartes (1596 — 1650) with its famous dictum *cogito ergo sum* to the thought of Augustine.<sup>5</sup> He traces the continuous development of the concept through Leibniz (1646 — 1716) to Kant (1724 — 1804) who, according to Illingworth 'inaugurated the modern epoch in the treatment of personality.'<sup>6</sup> He goes on 'A person, then, for Kant, was a self-conscious and self-determining individual, and as such an end in himself.....'<sup>7</sup> Illingworth was far from being a disciple of Kant, but he did write in and for an age which was deeply influenced by Kant's idealism and he feels he has to say the 'the fundamental characteristic of personality is self-consciousness.'<sup>8</sup> In a long footnote to this statement he begins by asserting that 'self-consciousness may be called the forum of personality.... The introspective Augustine developed the significance of self-consciousness more fully than any of his predecessors in the western world; while the schoolmen did little more than clothe his thoughts upon the subject in more accurate and appropriate phraseology.'<sup>9</sup> (There follow a number of quotations from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century — Bonaventura to Tennyson — in support of this claim).

And so we, in western European culture, have inherited (and usually assume almost without thinking) a notion of person which lays stress upon 'individuality'; and a vital part of this concrete individuality is, of course, the power of memory: interior, private recollections of the past.<sup>10</sup> We are, each of us, in the strict and non-pejorative sense of the word 'ego-centric', and we achieve our sense of identity by knowing ourselves as unique beings in contrast to everyone else. We believe ourselves to be at our most 'personal' when we realise and assert our distinctiveness. The emphasis is on separation, differentiation, uniqueness, self-absorption, introspection, isolation. It is easy to see how profoundly this notion has affected our religion, philosophy, politics, art and, even, our science.

I will give only two examples of modern phenomena which are directly reliant upon this concept of the person. First, without it there could have been no formulation of that idea which has become almost commonplace today: the idea of human rights. 'All men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights....namely the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property and the means of obtaining happiness and safety.' (The Virginia Bill of Rights, June 1777). What follows from this is the assertion of the priority of the individual over society (a concept that Marx was to reject a century later); and the concept of individual human worth, dignity and rights could only have grown in the soil of a religious and philosophical tradition which had been able to give each human being the capacity to define himself or herself in distinction from other human beings, and demand that society recognise certain inalienable 'rights'. Secondly, without some such notion of person, there could never have evolved that sense of the tragedy of human existence which has imbued western culture since the thirteenth century — and which has become more and more pervasive as our own century was reached.

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key  
 Turn once in the door and turn once only  
 We think of the key, each in his own prison  
 Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison  
 Only at nightfall, as the real rumours  
 Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus  
 (T.S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*)

This tragic motif in our culture differs from that of ancient

Greece, for example, in that it is not related to the idea of implacable fate or knowledge of mortality. It is the awareness of individual isolation; in the perception of ultimate aloneness and the despair growing out of loneliness. It has become the dominant note in nearly all western European art as well as the preoccupation of psychologists and much western European philosophy. It reaches its most extreme, and expressive, form in certain kinds of existentialism.

'Aloneness is man's real condition'? Alienation and estrangement are basic terms for describing the human personality. There is no possibility of knowing anyone else and the attempt to overcome separation by love is illusory. The ego-centric self is continually reconstructing itself in isolation from other, unknowable, selves. This is the end of the line: this notion of person, the seed of which was planted in the fourth century, can produce no more flowers.

## II

But there is a different, and complementary, way of approaching the problem of the person: it is the attempt to define the person not in terms of the irreducible ego, but in terms of relationship and community.

It can be argued that, from the very beginning, the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition has portrayed the human being as, essentially, a relational being. There are, for example, two accounts of creation in the book *Genesis*. The second, and more primitive, account depicts the creation of Eve as the creation of a being without whom Adam would be incomplete.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (2.18)

The account given by the later writer, in the opening chapter of the book, is no less concerned to stress the complementarity of two beings that God has created.

So God created man in his own image,  
 in the image of God he created him;  
 male and female he created them. (1.27)

The relational character of the human being is seen as the image of the mystery of the creator's own being (and the theologians of the Early Church were quick to pick up the plural form of verse 26, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.....' as they sought scriptural proof for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity). And so it can be seen that throughout the Old Testament the communal life of the people of Israel is in the foreground. The great commandments given at Mount Sinai constitute a codification of relationships: they legislate for the nation's proper relationship to God in the first place, and, in the second place, for individuals' relationships with each other within the community of the nation. Outside the complex network of relationships which establishes the community, the individual ceases to have meaning and purpose. There is no mention of human rights as such: they may only be inferences drawn from the recognition of mutual duty, i.e. duty towards parents, children, neighbours, strangers etc. It is true that by the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (seventh and sixth centuries B.C.) the prophets are intent upon impressing upon individuals the idea of individual responsibility for some, nonetheless corporate responsibility remains and sin

itself is seen as a violation of relationship: original sin (the myth of the fall) as the violation of the relationship between God and His creatures, and all other sin as the violation of right relationships within the community. The community itself is revered as the properly ordered life established by the covenant and maintained by the law and within that network of relationships individuals discover their worth and purpose.

In his teaching, Jesus does nothing to change this essentially relational emphasis, though one must notice that his parables and acts of healing are directed primarily at individual men and women either as challenges to individual decision or for individual healing. Yet, the restoration to 'wholeness' whether by faith or healing is also to be seen as restoration to proper relationships with others and also the creation of a new set of relationships in the lives of many who had lost identity because they had previously been excluded from society. A new kind of community is also envisaged in which the essentially relational character of human life is even more strongly stressed. It is chiefly in the letters of Paul that the implications, for community, of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are spelled out practically, mystically and theologically. The old set of relationships which was Israel, and which was sustained by obedience to the Law, would now be transcended by a community which is established by incorporation into Christ by the power of the spirit; and it is to be called the Body of Christ. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians gives us a vision of growth into 'personhood':

for building up of the Body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the status of the fullness of Christ. (4.13)

The individual, far from being an end in himself or herself, self-conscious and self-determining (Kant) can only become personal — that which he or she is called to be — when each is in proper relation to Christ and to one another. In this way, the individual is dependent upon the community in order to be able to grow into the person.

But the word 'person' had still not entered the Christian vocabulary, and it did not appear until the third century when (as we have seen) it was introduced by Tertullian and then taken up by the theologians of the Greek Church who, in exploring its possibilities, arrived at a notion that differed markedly from that which was later supplied to Latin Christendom by Boethius.

John Zizioulas begins his recently published essay *Personhood and Being* by recognising that 'Respect for man's "personal identity" is perhaps the most important ideal of our time' and he proceeds to his thesis that 'although the person and "personal identity" are widely discussed nowadays as a supreme ideal, nobody seems to recognise that *historically* as well as *existentially* the concept of the person is indissolubly bound with theology' and further that 'the person both as a concept and as a living reality is purely the product of patristic thought'.<sup>11</sup> There is neither space nor, perhaps, need to rehearse the arguments of this magisterial essay, I should like only to say that we should recognise that it is in the context of theological debate about the nature of God that the word person (hypostasis or prosopon) began to take on specific meaning and became a way of describing not only the nature of the Divine Being but also the nature of human beings. Anthropology is an extrapolation of theology. It is obvious that

if the notion of person as a separate concrete individuality had been the only notion available to the Fathers it could never have been possible for it to be used to refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Instead of one God there would have been three centres of being: three gods. But then person in the Greek theology of the patristic period is not defined as ego-centric being: a person only comes into existence as a result of relationship, i.e. in a community. There can be no such thing as autonomous existence for a person. The Son of God is a personal title only because of the nature of the relationship the Son enjoys with the Father. Similarly the Spirit is defined by the relationships with the Father and the Son. The mutual interdependence of the three "members" of the Trinity enables the persons to be persons; they are defined not by an intrinsic characteristic but by their relationships.<sup>12</sup>

If this is correct (and I believe it is) and if Christian anthropology — our doctrine of man — arises out of Christian theology — our doctrine of God, one can begin to see what it must mean to talk of the human person. Since it is a basic article of faith that we are made 'in the image of God' we must therefore exist as beings in relation, and we must 'find' ourselves as persons in community. It is true that each one of us possesses and cherishes a sense of uniqueness, but far from being self-determining individuals whose sense of identity and consciousness of worth grows out of a knowledge of self-sufficiency our identity and value proceed from both our uniqueness as individuals and our relationships with others. Free and loving association (an image of the life of the Holy Trinity) will confer upon us the dignity of personhood. We are defined by our loves. We grow and mature out of lonely, and ultimately selfish, individuality into personhood as we freely enter more and more deeply into communion with others. The biological necessity (physical interdependence) is mirrored and completed by the theological necessity (spiritual interdependence); and love becomes the formative power of personality.

Life and love are identified in the person: the person does not die only because it is loved and loves; outside the communion of love the person loses its uniqueness and becomes a being like other beings, a "thing" without absolute "identity" and "name", without a face.<sup>13</sup>

### III

The implications of all that has been said so far may be too obvious to need drawing out. At the risk of stating the obvious I will suggest two consequences of the previous theology.

First, it is a travesty of the Gospel to characterise the Christian religion as something to do only with individual spiritual redemption and not with the creation, purification and perfection of human relationships, i.e. society. This entails the effort at the achievement of that most social of all virtues: justice. And this in turn suggests the need for social reform wherever there is injustice; and the Church's involvement in such reforms. If it is to the Christian religion that we owe the concept of the person, and if we understand the relational content of that concept, there can be no purely individual redemption. We come into being as persons only in community, and where the community itself is corrupted by greed, oppression, poverty, the possibility for the free expression and exercise of love by members of the community is thwarted: in these conditions human beings are stunted, compelled to remain at the level of individuals without realising the potential

of personality. So if the Church is committed to the vocation of enabling the achievement of the truly personal in each individual, she will be committed to the task of ensuring that society is organised in such a way that human beings can enter freely into these relationships of spiritual and material exchange that we call loving relationships. It can be seen from this that at the basis of many of the theologies of liberation lies this notion of person as relational being. Love, it is argued, must be 'actualised as the unconditional determination to freedom and justice for others'<sup>14</sup> and the Church must press forward in the hope that the eschatological promises of God — justice, liberty, reconciliation, peace — are not only vague dreams for a future state beyond this life, but are promises whose beginning is here and now. Nearly half a century ago, before there were any 'theologians of liberation', Eric Mascall expressed the point with characteristic precision. 'And so from the Christian doctrine of man there proceeds a Christian doctrine of society; the Christian anthropology generates a Christian sociology'.<sup>15</sup> Such a sociology will recognise the need of human beings to live in a society which will provide the conditions to enable them to become persons by living, serving, worshipping and playing.

Secondly, the Church must be seen as the sacramental sign of community. If the world were 'unfallen' and all human society was capable of achieving perfect relationships there would be no necessity for this sign, for the world itself would then reflect perfectly the glory of God; but in a fallen world and in the midst of human wickedness she exists as a sign of the eternal love of God and must realise this sign in concrete form. She is not merely 'the act of salvation' — a place of escape from the corruption of mankind — nor a collection of disparate individuals gathered together for the purpose of worshipping the creator; she is the 'place' of the most profound communion of all, and the means by which individual human persons are drawn, by grace, into the life of the eternal, divine Persons of God.

God did not make us "to remain within the limits of nature", or for the fulfilling of a solitary destiny; on the contrary, He made us to be brought together into the heart of the life of the Trinity. Christ offered Himself in sacrifice so that we might be one in that unity of the divine Persons.<sup>16</sup>

The Church exists, therefore, to bring a new perfected kind of person into being. That she has the power and obligation to do this is because she exists as the Person of Christ in the world.<sup>17</sup>

#### Footnotes

- 1 *Adversus Praxean* 11-12.
- 2 'In Platonic thought the person is a concept which is ontologically impossible, because the soul, which ensures man's continuity, is not united permanently with the concrete, "individual" man: it lives eternally but it can be united with another concrete body and can constitute another "individuality", e.g. by reincarnation. With Aristotle, on the other hand, the person proves to be a logically impossible concept precisely because the soul is indissolubly united with the concrete and "individual": a man is a concrete individuality; he endures, however, only for as long as his psychosomatic union endures — death dissolves the concrete "individuality" completely and definitely'. John Zizioulas, *Being as Community*, p.28.
- 3 *Confessions*, Trans, R.S. Pine-Coffin; Penguin Books, 10. viii.
- 4 *Summa Theologiae*, xxix, Art 4.
- 5 J.R. Illingworth, *Personality, Human and Divine*, Macmillan & Co. 1894. p.20.

- 6 *Ibid*, p.21.
- 7 *Ibid*, p.22.
- 8 *Ibid*, p.21.
- 9 *Ibid*, p.224.
- 10 This notion reaches its most profound literary expression in Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* published in 1922 in which self and memory are identical.
- 11 J. Zizioulas. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, DLT, 1985. p.27.
- 12 'The survival of a personal identity is possible for God not on account of His substance but on account of His Trinitarian existence. If God the Father is immortal, it is because His unique and unrepeatable identity as Father is distinguished eternally from that of the Son and of the Spirit, who call Him "Father". If the Son is immortal, He owes this primarily not to His substance but to His being the "only-begotten".....and His being the one in whom the Father is "well-pleased". Likewise the Spirit is "self-giving" because He is "communion". Zizioulas, pp.48-49.
- 13 *Ibid*, p.49.
- 14 J.B. Metz. *The Relationship of the Church and the World in the Light of a Political Theology*, p.266.
- 15 E.L. Mascall, *Man: His Origin and Destiny*, Dacre Press, 1940, p.53. He goes on to make some trenchant remarks about the state of society in 1940 that might be applied equally to the state of contemporary Britain. "The individualism which is the professed doctrine of living of so many people today....is not only a direct denial of the Christian teaching about the nature of man, it is simply impossible to put into practice without rapid death from starvation.....we have now a state of affairs in which, instead of that natural and spontaneous unity of society which comes when men know that they are all engaged, in their different ways, upon the same task, we have an unnatural and unstable equilibrium in which the only forces making for coherence are hatred, fear and greed.' He produces the following Christian scheme:
  - 1 Man is for the glory of God.
  - 2 Things are for the good of man.
  - 3 Money is for the production and distribution of things.
 then comments on the modern perversion of the Christian scheme. What we now have may be represented as follows:
  - 1 Things are for the production of money.
  - 2 Man is for the production and consumption of things.
  - 3 God (if he exists) is for the convenience of man. pp 54-65.
- 16 *The Splendour of the Church*, Henri de Lubac, Sheed and Ward, 1976, pp 174-175.
- 17 This paper was first presented to the members of the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas.