

# ONE:

## The Quest for a Personalistic Ontology

### *1. Transcending the tragedy*

Man walks along weeping, and no one can say why. The integrity of the human being, its deliverance from fragmentation, denial, annihilation and all forms of death, has been an innate demand, a perennial call to a 'blissful seat'<sup>1</sup> in a world that turns and changes. The human person, no matter whether or in what way it has been conceived and defined,<sup>2</sup> lies at the heart of the human struggle through the dramatic flow of the streams of history. Truly, over the ages, the concrete human subject – the living person with a proper name – has often been buried and lost in a vast glimmering desert of structures and ideologies and vague '-isms', creations of a fragmented vision utterly discredited. This, in turn, has led to polarisation and antagonism between the individual and society, between the unique particular and the undifferentiated whole, the personal and the impersonal. The consequence of this has been the creation of mirror images: both individualism and collectivism 'signal the loss of the person, the disappearance of the one into the many and the many into the one' and the person, in the syncretism of our times, remains 'most fervently celebrated and most ardently denounced',<sup>3</sup> enhanced and evaporated in the post-modern 'irony which plays not on negation but on empty positivity'.<sup>4</sup>

This theme takes as a point of departure a dilemma that strikes at the very core of being. It was first raised by Heraclitus and Parmenides, who posed clearly and reflected remarkably upon the ontological question: What has priority, the one or the many? Unity or diversity? Since this is primarily applicable to the being of God, the Supreme Being, philosophy enters in a fertile manner into the field of theology. And since God reveals and, in some way, presents His own 'mode of existence' to human beings as a model to imitate, the way one conceives and approaches God determines one's own perception of oneself and, consequently, theology affects society's *modus vivendi*.

In the last five decades, theologians and religious thinkers have been wholeheartedly committed to establishing and safeguarding the reality of the person on a personalistic ontology of the Deity. Personal ontology has become an assertion of the metaphysics of particularity.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, following the thread that runs through modern philosophical thought from Kant to Heidegger, and after inheriting the dialectical scheme in construing reality, the same thinkers have built upon the severance of the individual, understood as 'person', from the common and supposedly static essential nature. On theological and anthropological levels, total precedence has been afforded to the notion of the person, as a distinct category, over essence or substance.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this precedence has been narrated as the alternative presented by the Greek East to the 'essentialism' ascribed to the Latin West.<sup>7</sup>

'No, the ground of God's ontological freedom lies not in His nature, but in His personal existence,' asserts one of the more influential contemporary Orthodox theologians, John Zizioulas.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, since *person* transcends nature, the notion of the image of God 'cannot relate to nature . . . but to personhood'.<sup>9</sup> The identification of God's being with a *person*, whose will abolishes the necessity of its essence, carries profound existential significance, for it liberates the human being from the 'necessity' of existence, which is the ultimate challenge to the freedom of the person. Nature, signifying the common substrate, represents the impersonal element or, worse, a blind force opposing the realisation of the authentic person. Indeed, should one accept that God's freedom lies in His 'nature', the created human being cannot be expected to receive authentic personhood. If personhood is to achieve otherness, it must be freed from nature.<sup>10</sup> Personhood, as absolute freedom, is incommensurable with existence, let alone created existence, in which nature has priority over the person; for nature 'subjugates' the person within its homogeneous prescriptions. The vain pursuit of freedom is a tragic and intrinsic feature of humanity, a feature stemming from the very condition of being created. It follows that the ancestral and ongoing Fall is inherent in the human being or, more specifically, in the 'biological' hypostasis.<sup>11</sup>

This biological hypostasis is associated with the notion of the *individual*, which is to be distinguished from and opposed to the notion of *person*. The *individual* – a natural category – denotes the isolated entity, the autonomous, monolithic, singular self, the post-lapsarian self, an 'island' determined by its own boundaries and equated with the 'essential' being. On the other hand, *person* means a 'being in relationship', a being that breaks through the natural boundaries in a movement of communion. This is 'the hypostasis of ecclesial existence', not determined by nature, but born from above.<sup>12</sup>

On closer inspection, these positions reflect the absolute divisions, existential oppositions and antithetical schemes that are used to decipher the intricate fabric of creation, life, history and culture.

## 2. *The monarchy of the Father*

St Gregory Nazianzen witnesses the paradox of the personal encounter with the Trinity when he confesses that he conceives the One in the splendour of the Three, contemplating each One as the whole, and the Three together as one torch.<sup>13</sup> The mind is invited to be filled with the perception of the Trinity, for, as another representative of the same tradition states, such perception is the Kingdom of God.<sup>14</sup> Trinitarian doctrine lifts the mind to dizzying heights; it appears, at least to Western reasoning, as a logical antinomy – a dynamic dialectic – that calls for an unfolding of its secret layers.

The fact that the one and undivided Divine Being *is* three distinctive hypostatic Realities provides a firm basis for the validation of the essential content of the person. The fact that these persons are One points to a common essence, by virtue of which they constitute the being of God. Yet, how are we to understand this unity if not monadically? Does it suffice to anchor the oneness in the perfect empathy of the distinct persons, thus presenting a social model?<sup>15</sup> According to John Zizioulas, who strives for the justification of the person, ‘if otherness is to be ontologically primary, the one in God has to be a person and not substance, for substance is a monistic category by definition.’<sup>16</sup> This personalistic ontology, as opposed to essentialism, is allegedly ratified by the emphasis on the monarchy of the Father that figures in the Greek Patristic literature.

John Zizioulas is the theologian *par excellence* who has been engaged in a prolific outworking of this notion with a view to meeting contemporary existential questions and tensions head on. For him, ‘unless the ontological ἀρχή [principle] in God is placed clearly and unequivocally in a Person – and who else but the Father could be such a person in the Trinity? – substance becomes the obvious candidate for such an ontological ἀρχή.’<sup>17</sup> Thus, the teaching of the monarchy in God is understood and used within the conceptual system of antithetical schemes; namely that the unequivocal aim of the Greek Fathers was to stress and undergird the precedence of the person over a common substance; a precedence that determines a new ontology. In this way, from the anthropological point of view, the priority of the particular over the whole, the many over the one, the difference over the identity, would also be sustained.

According to this view, the person of the Father in the Triune Deity is the ultimate ontological principle, ground or, more precisely, cause of the divine being itself. The personal existence of the Father not only generates the other divine Persons, but constitutes His very substance,

the common divine nature. On similar lines, every attribute of God, say love, freedom, or immortality, derives from the person of the Father in juxtaposition with the common essential ground.<sup>18</sup> The word 'one' referring to God in the first clause of the Nicene Creed is deemed an intentional addition to the early Western 'limited' version, which confesses simply '*deum patrem*'. In contrast, in the Eastern Creed, and according to Greek patristic thought and biblical language, the 'one' God is identified with the Person of the Father, thus providing a final answer to the question of divine unity, without recourse to the category of essence/substance that subjects freedom to necessity.<sup>19</sup>

Zizioulas admits that in St Gregory Nazianzen one encounters the two senses of *monarchia*: as unity of rule, 'or what we may call the "moral" sense' and as personal origination, 'which can be described as the ontological sense'. It seems strange that beyond the sense of personal derivation, the unity has to be illustrated in moral terms, as if it were lacking any ontological basis. It is at this point that we find a biased gap between person and substance. The Father 'as a person, and not as substance', formulates what God is.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the persons' common essence receives a derivative value. The creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (AD 381) supposedly promotes this new ontology by striking out the word '*ousia*' from the Nicene Creed, yielding that the Son was born *simply* 'from the Father'.<sup>21</sup>

This thesis is a logical outflow of the premise that has deep roots in philosophical discussion: *ousia* (essence) is equated with necessity, whereas the person represents freedom from necessity. The unequivocal connection of essence with freedom, made by St Athanasius, supposedly falls short of being an accurate response to the Arian contrivance.<sup>22</sup> Instead, St Gregory Nazianzen and St Maximus the Confessor are recruited by Zizioulas in support of his assumption, as the former rejects the Platonic automatic 'overflowing' of essence and the latter refers to the element of love in the generating movement of the Father.<sup>23</sup> The modern theologian seems confined in this bipolarity of exclusive and evident opposites inherited from the Western tradition: essence, associated with blind necessity, *versus* person as ontological freedom and love.

Thus, love becomes a personal rather than an essential property. The person of God the Father is the absolute Willing One, the ultimate ontological category, the initiator of the otherness of other persons and of divine freedom itself. This assumption has immense and far-reaching consequences. Given that such interpretation includes a kind of subordination of the Son to the Father – albeit without degrading the Son's ontological status – it is most likely that the oppressive and totalitarian element, which the personalist strives to avert, would eventually enter the scene in a more subtle way.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Drawing implications for the many

We are images of God – of the trinitarian prototype. As St Porphyrios says, ‘the three persons of the Holy Trinity constitute the eternal Church . . . the uncreated Church’ and, since ‘the love of God created us in his image and likeness’,<sup>25</sup> theology is transferred into ecclesiology and the matrix of human relations. Yet, danger always lurks insofar as human conceptual images, societal or ecclesial, are projected on to God’s mystery.

What do we learn from the immanent Trinity? ‘Freedom from nature and dependence on the person is a lesson learnt from divine causality.’<sup>26</sup> This is how the personalist unravels the implications of his trinitarian concept for anthropology. Moreover, personal otherness, being dictated by the one, cannot but be ‘a-symmetrical’.<sup>27</sup> The other, who bestows us otherness, is ‘ontologically prior’ to us. Thus, we are directed to the field of ecclesiology, where the asymmetrical character of personhood implies hierarchical structures grounded in ontology. Since the person can exist only in communion, and communion can never exist without the one, the concept of hierarchy is inherent in the idea of a personhood.<sup>28</sup> Strangely enough, it is such hierarchy that ‘brings forth . . . equality of nature’.<sup>29</sup> The ministry and, in the first instance, the bishop, reflect and image God the Father to the rest of the members. The bishop is ‘the one in whom the “many” united would become “one”, being brought back to him who had made them’. He comprises the unity of the Church, and it is in his person and in his role that all divisions are transcended. Such relational primacy is to be seen even in God’s being.<sup>30</sup>

Undoubtedly, the conviction about the ontological priority of the person has served as the theoretical basis for an ecclesiological vision that accords a supremacy of power to the person of the bishop in the ecclesial community, notwithstanding the rhetoric of service. For, if a bishop is to be placed *ex officio* on the seat of God the Father, the assumption above, by giving particular emphasis to the role of a hierarchical ‘primus’, paves the way for excessive exaltation and cloaks him with dominating authority, even if his status is described in relational terms. Within this interpretative framework, it has been argued in an exaggerated manner that the denial of a primacy among bishops cannot but be a heresy. The belief that common faith and worship are the locus of unity is considered no less false, since these are ‘impersonal factors’, whereas the cause of unity is always a person and not an ‘idea’.<sup>31</sup> This is commensurate with the triadological thesis: the explanation of the Divine Being lies ‘in a free person’, the ‘One of the Many’. On this view, caution has been drawn: is not this precedence, although presented as emerging ‘freely from the communion of love’,

in great peril of rendering the communion of love an empty demand degenerating into ideology with regard to the relationship between bishop and congregation?<sup>32</sup> Therefore, may not the 'homogeneity' of the essence be substituted by the despotism of the one, even though the one is conditioned by the many?

No less significant is the anthropological corollary. The Person of the Father is the ultimate ontological principle that causes the being and secures the otherness of the other Persons, while keeping for Himself the monarchy in a non-reciprocal manner.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in anthropological terms, personhood is something that comes from outside, as an addition to the natural concrete being, the outcome of an external will. While this idea may be speculated upon with reference to the relationship between the creature and the Creator, what significance does it acquire when woven into the fabric of human relationships? The concrete person is in danger of losing any internal dimension, any substantial inherent character, insofar as it receives its being and identity exclusively from the 'willing' and 'loving' Other, whose love is not a common essential fund but a personal property. Not surprisingly, when treated in the wrong manner, personhood is dissolved. After all, personhood is not ascribed to any individual who remains within the confines of nature.<sup>34</sup>

Working towards recapturing the patristic threads, one is bound to ask: Does this 'monarchical' logic actually stem from a coherent reading of the theology of the Cappadocians and the Greek Fathers in general? This question – raised also in the recent past – does not touch solely upon a historical issue; rather, it opens or blocks paths towards the charismatic experience of the saints. To this venture we now turn, seeking to come closer to the patristic trinitarian mind and draw out its impact – factual and potential – on anthropology and ecclesiology. At the same time one should never lose sight of the fact that according to the methodology of the Fathers, approaching the divine mystery is not a matter of speculation, nor a product of a historical evolutionary process, but rather a personal initiation in the event of Pentecost, attained by cleansing the divine image within.