

Dignity and Respect for Human Persons:

A Trinitarian, Christological and Dialectical Approach

**“...God Will Save And Where There Is Doubt, Treat With Respect All
Who Share The Human Form”**

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Abstract

The author appeals to trinitarian theology and Christology to assist in a universal call to respect all human persons. There is also focus on the Paschal mystery as a means of motivating civil discourse and respect within all human relationships. Finally, a dialectical method is proposed. [Editor]

Establishing some questions

Basil Mitchell, in a chapter titled *The Dilemma Illustrated: The Sanctity of Life*, develops his discussion to the point where he can state:

It is men’s (sic) capacity to love one another and to love God, rather than their powers of self-legislation, that makes men proper objects of respect, and since love involves the entire person, this doctrine escapes the intellectualism which, bedevils Kant, but problems still arise as to where the limits of humanity are to be drawn. Here we can only rely on the conviction that what is there to be saved God will save and, where there is doubt, treat with respect all who share the human form. [1] (my highlighting)

In claiming that it is our ‘capacity to love one another and to love God’ that ‘makes us proper objects of respect’ Mitchell has recognized the important link between our human relationships and our potential to enter into a divine relationship been offered by a covenantal God. This in no way dismiss the ‘the limits’ to any purely human endeavour but reinforces the above soteriological statement, ‘we can only rely on the conviction that

what is there to be saved, God will save' plus highlights the ethical imperative 'where there is doubt, treat with respect all who share the human form'. This still leaves us with the necessary theological question, how does God save and how are we involved in God's saving action? Plus the even deeper ethically relevant question, how do we 'share the human form'? A detailed study of the God revealed in and through Jesus Christ, may go some way towards offering some answers to these significant questions.

Respect for the human person in a trinitarian setting

Robert Gascoigne in his work *Freedom and Purpose*, commences his study of 'the meaning of a moral life' by listing and detailing the most fundamental of Christian teachings. He states that while these teachings are "not specifically ethical in themselves, (they) can deeply affect our understanding of the meaning of life which is the context within which we think, value and act."^[2] His opening study of 'God as Trinity' cuts to the heart of the meeting of the human and divine, in both its psychological analogy and lived human reality:

The Christian belief that God is a communion of persons, sharing an infinite life of love, emphasizes that community, a oneness that affirms and celebrates diversity, is the true destiny of human beings, created in the 'image of God'.^[3]

Mary Ann Fatula in her book, *The Triune God of Christian Faith*, develops this study of divine 'persons' and in doing so advances an important understanding of what it is to be truly a 'person' of both human and divine potential:

We apply the word "person" to the three who are God in order to hint at the unsurpassable truth that God is not something, to be used and manipulated, but someone, with whom we can be in relationship precisely because the divine persons are sheer subsistent relations to one another (*Summa Theologiae*, I,q.29,a.4). ^[4]

Fatula's citing of Aquinas' use of the concept of 'sheer subsistence' is significant. It points to the real mystery not only of the inner life of God but also an insight into our human reality. She continues with this insightful yet realistic study of what constitutes the human person:

It is true that each of us knows from experience what it means to thirst in some way for a person who would be totally for us, someone turned unreservedly towards us, we know, too, the pain of wounded or broken relationships and shattered hopes that a human person would or could meet all of our needs. However, the fact is that we are not sheer relationships of love to one another. We remain always and necessarily separate individuals making a choice to reach out in love to others. We have our own interests and activities, and are neither willing nor able to be there for one another at every second. Because we exist first as persons in our own right, and then have relationships to others, our relationships can come and go. They do not define (totally) who we are, nor do they constitute the whole identity of our person.[5]

The sad pastoral reality which confirm what Fatula is stressing inform us that sometimes when we claim to know, understand or love another person, we are not experiencing true knowledge, understanding or love but possibly only the fanaticism of ownership and control of the other person – this is succinctly explained by Mitchell when citing Austin Farrer, “I am to love my neighbour, and not my idea of my neighbour...”[6]

This may seem a rather depressing view of the human condition based on the truth or otherwise of a universal selfishness and/ or self-survival instinct of the human person against which the Christian faith is a simple counter balance trying to restore the natural order and value to human relations. Robert Gascoigne however concludes:

The Christian is not trying to (just) preserve some semblance of order and value in the face of a bleak and ultimately meaningless (selfish) universe, but cooperating with God in developing the potential of the human persons and the other living beings that we share our lives with.[7]

But how do we involve ourselves in ‘cooperating with God’ and truly ‘share our lives with’ others and God? Returning to our trinitarian theology for a moment, Fatula adds a remarkably powerful exegesis of the psychological analogy of the Trinity itself:

The divine persons are their relations to one another; their relationship to one another defines each person’s entire identity and is who each one is. They are not first of all (three different) persons who then turn towards one another in self-giving. Rather, their total identity is to be unreserved givenness: there is no Father, Son and Spirit except the three who are complete self-bestowal upon one another. Absolute self-giving is who each divine person is, and if they were not total self-communication to one another, they would not be at all.[8]

Kathryn Tanner would caution we “should avoid modelling human relations directly on trinitarian (relations)”.^[9] Fatula response to Tanner’s theological caution is found in a concluding question she poses –“What are the implications (of our trinitarian faith) for us?” She gives this equally powerful answer to her own question:

Our inmost call is to live this paradox at the heart of God “If you would gain your life, you must let go of it” (Mk 8:35). To be capable of giving this kind of love is, paradoxically, the fullness of our own identity as unique persons: we become who we are as persons only by growing in communion and relationship with other persons. The more truly distinct and self-possessed we ourselves are, the more generous we are with our persons. Secure in our identity, we have a surplus of being and love to give to others. ^[10]

Yet, is this where our Christian faith/theology becomes just too sophisticated for human reality, and could possible go the way of much religious endeavour? Our religion becomes at best high ideals out of reach, or worse becomes dualistic, otherworldly, and actually demeaning of the human condition. Well as the saying goes - thank God for Jesus of Nazareth! For it is at this juncture trinitarian theology, in all its beauty and analogy of personhood and relationship, makes way ever so cautiously for a study of Christology. For it is within orthodox Christology we find the ‘sacred heart’ of the matter, the very ‘paradox’ of our human reality and divine potential.

Respect for the human person in a Christological setting

As noted above within trinitarian theology there is always room for theological caution when modelling human relations on divine trinitarian relations. When it comes to orthodox Christology there is no room for such caution. The incarnational bridge between the human and the divine was, is, and always will be Jesus Christ. There is no such creature as an exclusively high christology and likewise, no exclusively low christology. The moment you privilege one of these two theological constructs over the other you are placing your theology against the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.^[11]

Concerning the core question how we perceive and realise this worth, there is two possible ways a christological study could lead. One would highlight that orthodox christology requires the acceptance of the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus Christ

and in so doing support Aquinas when he states that, “the only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men (sic) gods”.[12] This is surely enough to move any ethical debate about the worth or potential of the human person beyond our important yet still limiting Judeo-Christian understanding of humanity made in the ‘image of God’.

Yet another important, and possibly more demanding direction our Christology could lead, could be as Robert Gascoigne emphasises:

While the Christian story can enrich our sense of the value of persons...it is in the motivation for morality that we see another influence of religious faith that can affect the whole of the moral life.[13]



But from where does this ‘motivation’ and ‘influence’ come? Bernhard Häring in writing of, the truth of love revealed in Jesus Christ, from his second volume of *Free and Faithful in Christ*, declares:

With the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the divine and the human love takes on the dimension of (living) history. Jesus loves as an Israelite, a carpenter’s son and a man of his time. He enters history, acts historically, and shapes history by the manifestation of his divine and humans love. After him, history will never be the same, nor will it be a mere repetition of his actions and words. He has initiated a history of love to be lived in ever new forms - a history that as it unfolds must be constantly interpreted in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.[14] (my addition and emphasis)

What exactly is this ‘history of love to be lived in ever new forms’? Häring citing both Augustine and Aquinas emphasises “the great new theme in the moral message of Jesus, is the mystery of God’s sharing his own love with his people”:

St. Augustine is very explicit on this point. ‘With one and the same love, we love God and neighbour, God for God’s sake, ourselves and our neighbour, however, for the sake of God’. Thomas Aquinas, too, insists that this love includes the love of neighbour. One cannot love the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ without joining him in his love for all people.[15]

And how is this ‘one and the same love’ of God’s realised and ‘interpreted in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ’? Häring would take us back to the graced hope and motivating challenge of the now famed opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes*:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the human beings of this age especially those who are poor or afflicted; these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the disciples of Christ, and there is nothing genuinely human which does not raise an echo in their hearts.[16]

Though it still has to be asked what are the ethical considerations of this declaration centred on the human paradox of joy and grief, hope and anxiety? Interestingly, hidden within this conciliar statement is a remarkable revelation and clarification concerning Christian faith and its motivating challenge to the ‘disciples of Christ’ living ‘in the modern world’. The Second Vatican Council and its fathers, such as Häring, were attempting to declare that the ethical concerns were not simply about knowing, understanding or defining, the joy or grief, the right or wrong of a particular issue, behaviour, or individual. The ethical considerations are much more demanding for the ‘disciples of Christ’.

Joining Augustine and Aquinas, if we love God and neighbour with the ‘one and the same love’ (God’s love) we are required to go beyond the mere intellectualised observation which can lead to self-deluding claims such as, “I thank you, God, that I am not like others...” (cf. Lk 18:11) No, the disciple of Christ is not only like other men or women, he or she is called to be like other men and women in Christ. And like Christ we have to confront the joy and grief, the right and wrong of this world. As the Paschal mystery itself continues to reveal, the grief and wrongs of this world can more often than not be occasions of greatest revelation and motivation. Grief and wrong, more so than joy and right, requires understanding - an understanding based on God’s love and in particular God’s forgiveness.

As the reality of both human life, and divine revelation informs us, forgiveness is more important and more demanding than mere judgement. The forgiveness revealed in Christ does what judgement cannot do. Forgiveness restores relationships and directly motivates our understanding of the other great theme of Bernard Häring’s writings and *Gaudium et Spes* – Covenant:

The I-Thou relationship between Jesus and the disciples is, by necessity, a we-relationship, for Christ is the Covenant. He calls his disciples to be one in him, so

that all people may come to know that he is the saviour of the world, the covenant of the people (Jn 17:20-23).[17]

This is where Mitchell's mere 'conviction that what is there to be saved God will save' and the natural question, how does God save, takes on greater meaning and reality. And his almost pithy 'treat with respect all who share the human form', takes on a whole new form – the truly human and truly divine forms revealed in Jesus Christ.

A summary of the above trinitarian and christological considerations



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If trinitarian theology can assist Christian faith to give understanding to the universal call to respect all human persons and if orthodox christology, can challenge and motivate the disciples of Christ to move beyond entrapping selfishness and self-righteous judgement, to embrace

the true salvific work of forgiveness in Christ, it could be argued that the actual bond between Christian faith and ethics is not only established but is given added revelation and universal relevance. In turn it could be suggested that Christian faith, Christian ethics and the Christian churches are made more secure in their role in the salvific mission of Christ.

There is however, a final theological caution that must be addressed. Could this emphasis on salvation in Christ not be seen as an ongoing attempt to turn Christian faith into what Häring titles a "Meta-ethics"?[18] This important question, especially within the context of ongoing interfaith dialogue, could be answered in one of two ways. Christian faith could respond with a hopefully not too triumphal yes, or it could see the question itself, as yet another possibility for the disciples of Christ to join more purposefully in the reality which is Christ's salvific mission.

What ever the answer to the above, what remains significant is the concept of, and search for a possible 'Meta-ethics' based on trust and respect of the other. Putting to one side the possibility of ecclesial triumphalism or even theological absolutism, what has been the motivation of those such as "Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant and Hegel (who) have tried to crystallize a universally valid meta-ethics?"^[19] The writer of this paper suspects nothing more than to assist this ever-changing, and often frightening world, to at least maintain a universal respect for all human person and cultures. This sincere motivation however, still cries out for some method to assist this respect and associated civil discourse.

Attempting a dialectic method fulfilled in Jesus Christ

To conclude, I wish to return to the 'sacred heart' of the matter. If we believe "all things, whether on earth or in heaven, are reconciled through Christ" (cf. Col 1:19-20), Christian ethics cannot be seen trapped in a limiting dialectic of human discourse based on 'I'm right and your wrong'. Christian ethics motivated solely by and through Christ must never be limited to a conflict mode based on what is perceived as right or wrong, however right or wrong a particular issue, behaviour or individual may be. Furthermore, if "nothing... can separate us from the love of God" (Rom 8:39) resolution of conflict and debate must always be based on civil discourse centred on assisting Christ's reconciling love (grace). In Christian ethics the dialectic must never be closed off, it must always find its synthesis in Christ. To deny this or to support closed systems that work against the law of love, is a denial of Christ's love and salvific mission. Bernard Häring, ever the pastoral realist, understands the conflict mode, but never as an end in itself:

Conflict can be used creatively if we refuse to explain everything as caused by bad will and sinfulness by others. Christ, the Saviour of the world, is also the saving Conflict...To the fatalism of hatred and violence, the moral message of the gospel contraposes the good news of reconciliation.^[20]

Yet again, the important question how does God save or more specifically to this paper what method does the revelation of Jesus Christ employ to ‘reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven’? Could a possible dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis be found in the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ? Further could our ongoing understanding of the Paschal mystery give some added direction to the historical search for a ‘Meta-ethics’?

To close this paper I advance a possible dialectic method based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The ‘thesis’ being the life and ministry of the historical Jesus as revealed in scripture. The ‘antithesis’ being the death of Jesus on the cross, Jesus’ life and message of love of God and neighbour is killed off by a culture of death and hate. Thus maintaining a closed system and a closed debate. But as Paul asked the Corinthians of the Hellenistic world of his day, “Where are the philosophers? Where are the experts? And where are the debaters of this age?” (1Cor 1:20). Well in answer to the closed system of life (thesis) and death (antithesis) we are invited to join Paul and a great many other ‘debaters’ in the difficult synthesis of the resurrection. A synthesis, that must be accepted on faith alone, but a dialectic method that, also through faith and good will, remains ever open, ever open to such notions as respect for all humanity. Now that is an Easter morning challenge!

Notes

[1] Basil Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 134. (The first part of this final sentence within this quotation is referenced to Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, (Collins 1962), 167.

[2] Robert Gascoigne *Freedom and Purpose, An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 44.

[3] *Ibid.*, 44-45.

[4] Mary Ann Fatula, *The Triune God of Christian Faith*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1990), 70.

[5] Mary Ann Fatula, *The Triune God of Christian Faith*, 71.

[6] Basil Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular*, 132.

[7] Robert Gascoigne, *Freedom and Purpose*, 48.

[8] Mary Ann Fatula, *The Triune God of Christian Faith*, 71.

[9] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, Chapter 3, 'The Shape of Human Life', (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 82.

[10] Mary Ann Fatula, *The Triune God of Christian Faith*, 71.

[11] The long and faith testing debates between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, is one of the clearest examples of this. The dismissal of much biblical scholarship centred on the authentic search for the historical Jesus is as frustrating to Christian incarnational theology as is the dismissal of Christian tradition and church authority based on the ongoing revelation contained within the *sensus fidei fidelium*.

[12] *Opusculum*, 57,1-4.

[13] Robert Gascoigne, *Freedom and Purpose*, 47-48.

[14] Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Volume 2, (Homebush: St. Paul, 1979), 421.

[15] Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Volume 2, 426.

[16] *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, (1) This translation is taken in part from Robert Gascoigne, *Freedom and Purpose*, 51.

[17] Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Volume 2, 422.

[18] See Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Volume 3, 222.

[19] See again Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Volume 3, 222.

[20] Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Volume 3, 266.

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