

Personhood, Community and Solitude

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Abstract

In this article I examine the role of community and solitude for human personhood from a trinitarian perspective. As well as discussing issues of particularity and freedom as they relate to personhood, I look at the way narrative story-telling in community, and divine encounter in solitude work together to develop a sense of personhood grounded in a relationship with the Triune God. I propose that, despite rightful moves away from isolationist individualism, there is the potential for trinitarian theology to encourage a healthy, positive exploration of human solitude. There are grounds for arguing that a Christian experience and understanding of solitude can speak missionally into the postmodern experience of isolation. While firmly grounded and centred in theology, I dialogue with psychological and sociological perspectives on the role of solitude, never as an end in itself, but as a means of creating healthy faith communities.

The goal here is to examine the role of community and of solitude for human personhood from a trinitarian theological perspective. As well as discussing aspects of particularity and freedom, I dialogue with psychological and sociological perspectives in looking at how narrative story-telling in community and divine encounter in solitude work together to develop our sense of personhood grounded in our relationship with the Triune God. I propose that, despite rightful moves away from isolationist individualism, there is potential in trinitarian theology to be a more open field for the exploration of human solitude as a healthy, positive experience. Christian communities need to welcome people in and also to let people *out* to wander, to be alone, and then to return.¹ From there, there are grounds for arguing that a Christian experience and understanding of solitude can speak missionally into the postmodern experience of isolation.

In this postmodern age in the west, loneliness, disconnection and oppressive systems are perceived and experienced as defining problems for human individuals and their communities. In addition, while feeling

¹ It is important to note from the outset that one can experience solitude in the presence of other people. Keeping silence together is a pivotal aspect of many spiritual traditions including Quakerism and provides a fascinating liminal context between solitude and community. For the purposes of this paper, solitude is generally intended to refer to the absence of human company unless otherwise stated.

increasingly disconnected and isolated we are rapidly losing the art of being alone.² In post-Reformation history, those who pursue solitude as a lifestyle have often been scorned or persecuted as leading lives that served “no manner of purpose” and even “detract[ed] from human welfare.”³ It is not just within Christian society that solitude is viewed with suspicion. Anthony Storr notes:

Current wisdom, especially that propagated by the various schools of psycho-analysis, assumes that [a human being] is a social being who needs the companionship and affection of other human beings from cradle to grave. It is widely believed that interpersonal relationships of an intimate kind are the chief, if not the only, source of human happiness.⁴

Storr adds that psycho-analysis “promises a form of salvation...to be attained by purging an individual of the emotional blocks or blind spots which prevent [a person] from achieving fulfilling interpersonal relationships,” an attitude which reflects the widely-held assumption that “those who do not enjoy the satisfactions provided by such relationships are neurotic, immature, or in some other way abnormal.”⁵ In fact, fear of loneliness is central to our human experience and can motivate a premature drive to community as a saviour in order to avoid solitude and its perceived negative impact. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes,

Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people...They are generally disappointed...The Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium. The person who comes into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion, no matter how spiritual this diversion may appear.⁶

Furthermore, introverts in particular can feel helpless in the face of a persistent focus on vocal participation in community with other people as being inherently healthier, both for faith and for life, than silence or solitude.⁷

Experiences of solitude are nonetheless central to our human experience; human cultures often include liminal solitary experiences as marking the passage into adulthood or to mark spiritual maturity.⁸ Such

² We thus see recent books such as Tanya Davis, *How to Be Alone* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), Sara Maitland, *How to Be Alone* (London: MacMillan, 2014) and Jonathan Frantzen, *How to Be Alone: Essays* (New York: Picador, 2002).

³ Charles Taylor (2007) describing the opinion of Hume. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 263.

⁴ Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (New York: Free, 1988), ix.

⁵ Storr, *Solitude*, 2, 5.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 76.

⁷ See Adam S. McHugh, *Introverts in the Church: Finding our Place in an Extroverted Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009). This bias can also be seen in pedagogical practice when vocal participation is measured by quantity.

⁸ See, for example, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1966; repr., Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 1995).

solitary experiences can be challenging trials, not to be undertaken lightly or without support. Turning to Bonhoeffer once more, he cautions,

Let [the one] who is not in community beware of being alone. Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ. If you scorn the fellowship of [others]..., you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be hurtful to you.⁹

However, solitude can also represent rest, set apart from worries and troubles, as poet William Wordsworth describes:

“When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude.”¹⁰

Within this context, recent developments in the theology of the Trinity have engaged with developing notions of personhood as relational at its core and focused on these social or relational aspects, both within the Trinity and in terms of their application to anthropology and ecclesiology; that is, to building healthy human relationships and communities. Alongside this development, however, we have also seen a growing interest in monastic practices, pilgrimages and retreats. Consequently, we find a diversity of perspectives, with liberation theologian Leonardo Boff’s claim that “solitude is hell” at one end of the spectrum and the mystical theologian John O’Donohue’s assertion that “solitude is luminous” at the other.¹¹

I argue that an understanding of the place of solitude and oneness can provide a balance within the frame of contemporary trinitarian theology. It is problematic when theologies and theories of personal identity that stress relationality seem to source individual and communal redemption within human community. While we are created for, and called into, community, I propose that a place and purpose for solitude provides a balance and contribution to community both in terms of trinitarian theology and, consequently, in terms of a healthy human life and faith both alone and together. In other words, it is possible to say that the Triune God and our relationship with God is the “absolute antithesis of loneliness,” while not necessarily needing it to be the absolute antithesis of solitude.¹²

If we look to the Trinity for a model of human personhood and community, as many theologians do, we would need to note that the way that God lives in communion with Godself is different in its perfection

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 77.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind: An Autobiographical Poem* (London: Moxon, 1850), 99. Quoted in Storr, *Solitude*, 202.

¹¹ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (1988; repr., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 2. John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 78.

¹² John G. McGraw, “God and the Problem of Loneliness,” *Religious Studies* 28, no. 3 (September 1992): 320.

from the way we live in communion with others and with God.¹³ God's will and consciousness is shared, rather than particular, within the Trinity, and God does not approach relationality from a place of need, obligation or lack. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff describes how, in the divine "reciprocal communion...[e]ach person enwraps the others; all permeate one another and live in one another...[in] radical mutuality."¹⁴ In applying his understanding of the Trinity as a model for human community, Boff goes on to suggest that the "unity of Christians lies in a commingling of the faithful with one another and with their pastors," which sounds rather terrifying.¹⁵ Even if it were seen as desirable, this would clearly be impossible for human beings; Colin Gunton is right to observe that we can only be "bound up together...in a way appropriate to our createdness."¹⁶ Kathryn Tanner adds that human beings retain their "finitude [which] prevents interpenetration in human relations,"¹⁷ a reflection of the "absence of an ontological continuum spanning the difference between God and creatures."¹⁸

In theological views of personhood that prioritize relationality, community is paramount and definitional of personhood. In such contexts, "individuals are internally structured as persons through their membership of and engagement in a primary public world. In the matrix of persons a person is a point location."¹⁹ The danger here is that if individuals are deemed to be constituted entirely by their relations at any given moment, the person becomes an interchangeable node in a network or web of relations; there is "nothing distinctive about any given individual in the network other than their location in that network":²⁰ they become part of "a grey mass of uniform men" and women.²¹

It is clear that as finite and embodied human beings we cannot be wholly determined and identified, even theoretically, solely by our relations to others. As David Kelsey argues, "it is conceptually impossible to talk about human beings without acknowledging that they are not only social beings standing in and shaped by many kinds of relations, but also are concrete individuals who are not wholly reducible to mental constructs abstracted from concrete social entities."²² Rather, we join each other in our "mutual vulnerability," seeking a balance somewhere between isolationist autonomy and indiscriminate

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the personhood of God and how it relates to ideas of solitude and community see Emma Pavey, *Finding a Place for Solitude in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology and Christian Practice*. ThM Thesis, 2014. Available online https://www.academia.edu/6860406/Finding_a_Place_for_Solitude_in_Contemporary_Trinitarian_Theology_and_Christian_Practice

¹⁴ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁶ Colin Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 16.

¹⁷ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 82.

¹⁸ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.

¹⁹ Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90.

²⁰ Léon Turner, *Theology, Psychology, and the Plural Self* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 26.

²¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. Robert A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1974), 333.

²² David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 400.

absorption.²³ As human beings, a degree of separation from community (in solitude, for example) contributes uniquely and significantly to a sense of our own particularity and distinctiveness. This degree of separation may indeed be essential if that community is oppressive. Thomas Merton argues too that solitude enhances compassion because when someone is “lost in the wheels of a social machine” they are “no longer aware of human needs as a matter of personal responsibility...[they] escape into the great formless sea of irresponsibility which is the crowd.”²⁴

Theologies differ in their understandings of where and how the particularity of each person (whether human or divine) is sourced. Latin theologians have tended to associate the particularity of personhood with a notion of an individually-distinctive, static, bounded, unity, from which base the person engages with community. From a relational theological perspective, our particularity emerges, at least in part, from the unique (yet ordered and structured) placement of our node in the network; in other words, from the “unique framework of personal meanings [that] derives from the uniqueness of social location.”²⁵ Greek theologian John Zizioulas, on the other hand, sees the particularity – the ‘otherness’ – of personhood as emerging “only in relation to other beings,” not apart from them, and, with this understanding, as being ontologically primary.²⁶ Zizioulas emphasizes that the danger of ‘absorption’ by a community is more evident where currents of thought see communion as a threat to particularity or otherness, rather than as constitutive of it, as he argues it is.

While God does not need solitude or separation for a sense of freedom or a sense of identity as distinctive, as finite human beings we often feel that we do. Kelsey suggests that Jesus’ need for solitude in his earthly life is a feature of his existence as a personal creaturely embodied person, just as hunger and tiredness are.²⁷ God created us as separate from Godself, granting us free will to choose to be in communion with God. Similarly, we are created to be separate from each other precisely so that we can freely choose to be with each other in communion. We see Jesus using solitude in just this way, retreating both as a necessary move away from crowds and a chosen move towards solitary prayer and rest rejuvenating him for ministry (e.g. Mark 1: 35, 6: 31-32). Placher sees Jesus’ social withdrawal in Mark 1, seeming to sneak out before dawn, as a response to being “pressed in on all sides” by those seeking his attention, a response to which we can relate.²⁸ In Mark 6: 31-32, Jesus recognizes a need for retreat for his disciples too.²⁹ In these passages, then, solitude (whether strictly alone or with close companions) is associated with necessary rest.

²³ Anthony R Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: the Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 83.

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962; repr., New York: New Directions, 2007), 53-4.

²⁵ McFadyen, *Call to Personhood*, 107.

²⁶ John D. Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), 39.

²⁷ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1013.

²⁸ William C. Placher, *Mark. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 40.

²⁹ Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark. Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 126.

In addition to prioritizing relationality, postmodern theories tend to de-center the self, or deny it altogether as a foundation and we find this reflected in theological literature. Alistair McFadyen, for example, conceives of persons as dialogical and dialectical, as utterly defined by relations, and for him it is therefore “impossible to think of us as having a clearly defined ‘centre’ or ‘foundation.’”³⁰ He argues that the self exists experientially as a system of beliefs, “a means of organising one’s experience, thought, knowledge, beliefs, action, etc. as *though* centred on a substantial inner core.”³¹ There is a tension in McFadyen’s argument, however, between this de-centred self and his simultaneous maintenance of the idea of the person as autonomous, as a “singular, unified and continuous subject” who “understands oneself as a unified source of interaction, consciousness and experience who has continuity through different times and places.”³² This tension characterizes the contemporary transition from a Cartesian, individualist, foundationalist modern paradigm that values objectivity to a relational, situated postmodern context that engages with subjectivity.

In Léon Turner’s psychological approach, the emphasis is not so much on a de-centred self as on a plural self with no single, necessarily primary instantiation. Turner is at pains to argue that psychological concepts of the self as a unified whole are outdated, and that self-multiplicity need not be inherently pathological: he states, “a divided self is not always a troubled self.”³³ Anthony Storr also argues that solitude, keeping one’s own company, should likewise not be viewed as inherently psychologically pathological either.³⁴

In his seminal work *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor refers to the last half of the twentieth century as the “age of authenticity.”³⁵ What we might say is that the idea of authenticity is changing, as is its significance for the ethics of the Christian life. On the one hand, there is a turn from purely individualist notions of personal authenticity to those engaging with relational, community-driven contexts. In addition, rather than seeking a notion of a singular, ‘true’ self in this context, we might see if the multiple identities and roles (the ‘selves’) that we adopt flow from, and are commensurate with, our relationship with God and our created, relational personhood. Turner suggests that the way forward is to accept that “self-alienation is conquered not through the restoration of common stable systems of meaning, or through the discovery of an authentic enduring self.”³⁶ He adds that the “conflict that theologians have sought to resolve can be alleviated, not by seeking to reaffirm a strong sense of self-unity, but by surrendering it, and accepting that the continuity of personhood is not coterminous with the singularity of the self.”³⁷ God the Father is the Creator of distinctive, free, relational creatures with the capacity to evolve and adapt to changing

³⁰ McFadyen, *Call to Personhood*, 9-10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 98, emphasis in original.

³² *Ibid.*, 75-6, 69.

³³ Turner, *Theology*, 179. See also Turner, *Theology*, 60, 66.

³⁴ Storr, *Solitude*, 75.

³⁵ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 473.

³⁶ Léon Turner, “First Person Plural: Self-Unity and Self-Multiplicity in Theology’s Dialogue with Psychology,” *Zygon* 42, no. 1 (March 2007): 21.

³⁷ Turner, *Theology*, 186-7.

circumstances. To be 'authentic' need mean neither to be unified and singular, nor to be isolated; as with gifts of the Spirit, a sense of authenticity comes from God and a sense that we are living into a multi-faceted call to communion. However, we find that this adaptation to a sense of a plural self supports a place for both solitude and being in community in negotiating this diversity of authentic personhood. With our limited capacities as humans, and the imperfect nature of human community making us different selves in company than we are alone,³⁸ we do find that we may need to step back into solitude to find or assert our identity or to feel free in our choices.³⁹

We turn now to examine theologically the relationship between community, solitude and personhood through narrative story-telling and through divine encounter as two ways to re-imagine our personhood and sense of self in a postmodern era. Turner points out that when narrative theory is engaged for theological discussions of personhood, it is often used in relation to "how communal narrative traditions might be actively reformed in the face of a crippling social malaise, not in relation to the understanding of how individuals piece themselves together."⁴⁰ As he argues, the latter purpose is equally important.

In support of the narrative project, Kelsey argues that, "if 'image of God' is to norm and organize Christian anthropological claims, the claims ought to be grounded in canonical narratives of God relating to reconcile humankind when it is estranged from God...That is exactly the context in which the phrase is used in the New Testament."⁴¹ In terms of trinitarian theology and theological anthropology, just as we do not need to view God's personhood, or our own human personhood, as static in order to view it as unified, we might also find particularity in a more process-oriented environment, specifically in our unique journeys and the narratives through which we live and describe them. This gives notions of freedom and particularity a dynamic, diachronic quality. It still allows a degree of space for human beings from others (both human and divine) to facilitate freedom and particularity and, as we argue, grants openness to solitude. However, it also recognizes the crucial relational context of our narratives: essentially, and with a flavour of Zizioulas's perspective, Turner suggests that "individual human beings are unified by virtue of their relationality, not in spite of it."⁴²

This leads us to examine the ways in which narrative serves to bring a sense of continuity and unity to our human personhood that often feels disconnected. As we have seen, we receive a notion of a self that is fragmented and isolated within a postmodern context that increases pressure in these areas. Turner's thesis, however, is that, "a person's ability to tell coherent life stories exposes a sense of singularity and continuity that is an essential component of normal psychological functioning."⁴³ He adds,

³⁸ Storr, *Solitude*, 94.

³⁹ Kelsey points out that our freedom as finite human beings is necessarily "severely constrained." Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 837.

⁴⁰ Turner, *Theology*, 163.

⁴¹ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 901.

⁴² Turner, *Theology*, 138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 179.

narrative identity...refers to the narrative history of a life (constructed according to the story-telling standards of a particular time and place) that unites past experiences with the present manifestation of personality and anticipates its future development. As well as mediating between the extremes of total self-fragmentation and undifferentiated self-unity, the concept of narrative identity also provides a means of understanding the difference between pathological and natural forms of self- multiplicity.⁴⁴

The postmodern person is described as de-centred because of outside cultural and social forces. In theological terms, by contrast, a person is ex-centric – in the sense of “hav[ing] one’s being outside of oneself” – in that our identity and personhood have their roots outside of ourselves, in God.⁴⁵ In our created nature, there is a sense of vitality that is nourished by God; “all living creatures become themselves...by actually taking in things from outside themselves...Because they are made to be in the image of God, humans require God for their nourishment.”⁴⁶ In this sense, our personhood is a gift: it is God’s relationship with us as our multi-faceted selves and in the living and telling of our developing journeys that constitutes the unity of personhood that we seek because it emerges from God’s own story of generous love and grace to us. Furthermore, this living and telling – our ‘becoming’ – has purpose and is our calling.⁴⁷ We discover how our narratives are distinct and yet also embedded within, and grounded in, God’s own narrative and initiative. If we experience a sense of plurality of personhood as fragmentation, or perceive fragmentation as sin, as some do, we might thus consider this as consequences of a shift in focus away from our central relationship with God and, consequently, a shift away from others.⁴⁸

Turner’s emphasis in assessing the role of narrative for a sense of personal continuity is on the telling of stories rather than the content per se. In the telling, we are social in practice, we are the ‘beings-in-relation’ of current trinitarian theology, and this enactment of personhood feeds back into our sense of self, that is, as “not so much a foundation for practice as that which issues from engagement in practice.”⁴⁹ A narrative approach emphasizes that we do not, and cannot, discover our identity and personhood as creatures beloved by God best (if at all) by thinking about it but by living it.

Postmodern theorists are quick to recognize agendas round every corner, or as the corner, and thus see no place for objective ‘truth’.⁵⁰ It may be possible, and indeed preferable, to turn the ‘obscuring’ filter of subjectivity into a lens, and this is often the emphasis of postmodern and feminist theologies. Our ideas of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁵ John Webster, “The Human Person,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 228.

⁴⁶ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 41-2.

⁴⁷ Webster, “Human Person,” 228.

⁴⁸ Gunton, *Father*, 15.

⁴⁹ Webster, “Human Person,” 227.

⁵⁰ See Robert Jenson on this topic, in relation to the interpretation of texts. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

truth and knowledge, and, consequently, our theologies, are inextricably embedded in our story, in our narrative. LeFevre writes of Kierkegaard's thoughts on the matter that "[a]bstract thought distorts the existential quality of the question by leaving out the subjective thinker whose deep personal concern the question is."⁵¹ In telling stories about our history with God, we are subjective, and helpfully so; after all, "the thinker who leaves himself out of his thought can hardly explain life."⁵² In telling stories about ourselves, we make ourselves subjects of our own stories and this new angle on experience helps to frame how we see ourselves. Furthermore, Turner argues that useful notions of personhood need this room to account for a process of self-development through and within relational contexts. In theological terms the process of sanctification also requires such room for personhood not to be static but to shift and change through time.⁵³

In this process we are supported in recognizing the influence of our stories on our theology and, hopefully, in moderating our tendency to assume that our resulting theology is a perfect fit for all others. We need to know each other personally in the context of our stories to better understand our theologies. In the following story from Rita Nakashima Brock, we see that correlation clearly. In this part of her story she seems to recognize that any positive theological understanding or experience of solitude has been essentially stolen by a traumatized past. On the other hand, we also see light in this story as she gains a particularly personal and meaningful understanding of God's vulnerable love.

I realized long after I was a theologian that my interest in religion and my focus on the violence done to Jesus are grounded in my childhood experiences of racism. I have concluded that the Christian theological tradition has interpreted Jesus' life in ways that reinforced trauma. I was isolated by the traumatic events of my childhood. The tradition has isolated Jesus as a singular savior, alone in his private relationship with God. Jesus is depicted as unique and separate, carrying salvation on his own solitary shoulders. His relationships to others are described paternalistically, as if they needed him but he did not need them. To be saved, I was supposed to have an isolated relationship with him, to need him when he did not need me.

I knew, from my own experience, that there is no grace in such isolation. Isolating Jesus from mutual relationships carried forward the trauma of violence without healing it. My theological obsession became how to show that vulnerability, mutuality, and openness demonstrate love, that these bonds of love and care reveal the presence of God. If Jesus did not participate in these bonds, if he was isolated, he could not offer any grace.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Perry D. LeFevre, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 156.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵³ Turner, *Theology*, 26; see also 122.

⁵⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 53.

Rather than see ourselves as tainted by our subjectivity, then, we might learn to embrace it since, firstly, it is inevitable, and secondly because it is what creates our different stories. Thirdly and consequently, we should embrace our subjectivity because it leads us into community as we listen to stories and unique perspectives from which we can all learn. Stiver concurs, stating that a “capacity for encounter across horizons is also a counter-balance to the emphasis upon the situatedness of every theology.”⁵⁵ The consequence, he suggests, is that while “one’s location should be considered a strength as well as an unavoidable reality, we thus have an obligation to dialogue with theologies...from other perspectives.”⁵⁶

It is not so much that God is a projection of our beliefs and our wishes, as some have claimed. It is more that God speaks to us with and through the beliefs and wishes, needs and wounds that we hold up. It is through and with these particularities that we relate to God and God relates to us, through a particular individual narrative, transforming them all in unexpected ways. As Robert Jenson argues, if there is a postmodern suspicion that there is an agenda to be hermeneutically unearthed in our narrative, it is God’s, as mediator, bond and source of love: “it is the triune God who is up to something,...whose agenda is to be discovered, to be affirmed by the church and denounced by others.”⁵⁷

I have examined the ways in which the telling of our life-stories can bring a sense of unity to our personhood. This places our unified sense of self in a diachronic process, a relationship, rather than being necessarily an underlying substance or essence of self. As Turner describes it, “a person is revealed in the act of telling stories.”⁵⁸ What we find is that our narratives are also not our own creation; they are the stories of how we learn to respond to God’s narrative, to God’s relating to us, to God’s story.

When we examine personhood through the lens of narrative theory, we see the broad sweep of our history and our relationships. However, in addition to an overall arc of shared narrative, particular pivotal events in our relationship with God provide landmarks for the journey, liminal moments of encounter that can change our direction and our identity. They may be times when we seek God or they may be times when we unexpectedly are made aware of God seeking us. These experiences—often crucially in solitude—form the substance of the stories that we later tell to those who were not present.

In scripture, we find that these pivotal events often occur in solitude and often involve hearing one’s name. We think, for example, of Moses (Exod. 3:1-6), Samuel (1 Sam. 3: 1-10), Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-17), and Paul (Acts 9:1-6). In each case, these human beings unexpectedly hear God speaking their name and through the encounter receive their identity and purpose.⁵⁹ We might even speak of

⁵⁵ Dan Stiver, “Theological Method,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 181.

⁵⁶ Stiver, “Theological Method,” 181.

⁵⁷ Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 81.

⁵⁸ Turner, “First Person Plural,” 17.

⁵⁹ It is beyond our scope and intention here to examine in detail what is variously understood by the notion of God speaking except to say that the word is used here in its broadest sense. For more discussion on this, using speech act theory, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Israel's wandering as 'societal' solitude, a time of separation and wandering during which they received their identity, law and purpose (e.g. Exod. 6:1-8, 20:1-24). In these relational but largely solitary experiences we find another source of the particularity of our human personhood. As Tanner writes, the "distinctness of the creature is...the consequence of relationship with God as its creator; here difference is the product of unity, of what brings together, of relationship...the closer the better."⁶⁰

Solitary encounters and events play a key role in Jesus' call and identity. After his baptism, Jesus is led directly into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he is tested and tried alone (Matt. 4:1-11). Placher notes that in Mark's account (1:12) Jesus is *driven* into the wilderness by the Spirit: "The verb is strong, the same one later used for driving evil spirits out of the possessed. This is no casual trip."⁶¹ This is significant because, as Douglas Hare points out (with reference to the account in Matthew), "God's intention must be regarded as taking priority over Satan's, [and so] the passage is to be seen as a story about the testing of God's son."⁶² Similarly, in the garden of Gethsemane, let down by his disciples, Jesus struggles fiercely with his call to do the will of the Father (Matt. 26:36-46).

It is on the cross where Jesus perhaps most deeply experiences the human condition, suffering in solidarity with our vulnerability, separation, and humility: Kelsey writes that "God enters into solidarity with humankind in their estrangement from God, and into solidarity with their bondage to the full consequences of that estrangement – for example, in the utter estrangement in Jesus' dereliction on the cross".⁶³ In addition to these observations, we suggest that in his suffering Jesus Christ was not only acting alongside us in solidarity, not only experiencing what we experience in our human lives but Christ the Son of God was also changing reality for us: the solitude of exile lost its sting. It is because of this liminal moment that we need not fear isolation. Jürgen Moltmann supports this very point,

It is not that through the representative work of Christ [human beings] are relieved of something of their needs, but that Christ experiences a hell of rejection and loneliness on the cross which need no longer be suffered by believers in this way. As a forerunner he paves the way. The way is laid open for his successors. Christ experiences death and hell in solitude. His followers experience it in his company.⁶⁴

Jenson thus argues that in Jesus' forsakenness, even isolation and separation are redeemed: "Jesus' abandonment and death do not interrupt the relation to the Father by which he is the Son but, rather, belong to that relation."⁶⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar adds that, "[t]hanks to his intimate experience of the world, as the Incarnate One who knows experientially every dimension of the world's being down to the

⁶⁰ Tanner, *Jesus*, 3.

⁶¹ Placher, *Mark*, 27.

⁶² Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 23.

⁶³ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1024.

⁶⁴ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 263.

⁶⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 49.

abyss of Hell, God now becomes the measure of [humanity].⁶⁶ The degree to which the Son of God is forsaken is matched by the extent to which, in his resurrection, “God unites God with God in the most intimate fellowship.”⁶⁷ After Jesus’ death and ascension, the Holy Spirit is sent as bond of love so that solitude is redeemed – God is with us always and the Holy Spirit reveals this truth to us. Kees Waaijman describes the lament of Lamentations 3, verses 53-57 where the human sufferer experiences this closeness of God in the act of calling God’s name: we read, “I called on Your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit; you heard my plea, ‘Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!’ You came near when I called on you; you said, ‘Do not fear!’”⁶⁸ Once again, naming is the liminal ‘space’ where God dwells and the call to God’s name is the counterpart to God’s call to not be afraid.⁶⁹

In describing the theology of Barth, Robinson points to speaking and hearing encounters such as these as the location of the likeness between humanity and God. He writes: “For human beings, fallen yet in faith giving their assent to God’s being for them in Christ, their whole lives of faith will radiate the truth of this point of contact with God in Christ.”⁷⁰ He continues, quoting Barth: “In fallen human beings there is in this sense a ‘likeness’ to God: it is ‘a likeness of the known in the knowing, of the object in thought, of the Word of God in the word that is thought and spoken’” by human beings.⁷¹

From this perspective we are beings-in-encounter before we are beings-in-relation. Referring to Barth again: “at the very root of my being and from the very first I am in encounter with the being of the Thou...the humanity of human being is this total determination as being in encounter with the being of the Thou, as being with...fellow-humanity.”⁷²

There is a sense in which a discourse involving the importance of a name serves to balance out the boundless, ‘verbal’, process-orientation of narrative for personhood with a more bounded, ‘nominal’ aspect, staking a claim for identity through singular points in our stories, moments when we sense “the presence of the eternal upon the crowded road of the temporal.”⁷³ Similarly, it balances giving and receiving, freedom and call. Balancing out narrative with encounter means that our identity is not wholly determined or limited by our language, but also with experience of God’s love that may be beyond words and which breaks through to our hearts. As John McGraw explains, “[p]athological loneliness is surely a devastating suffering, one which can render its victim incommunicative, a prisoner...Jesus is the absolute

⁶⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 13-14.

⁶⁷ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 152.

⁶⁸ Lamentations 3: 55-57 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁶⁹ Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, trans. by John Vriend (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 263.

⁷⁰ Dominic Robinson, *Understanding the “Imago Dei”: The Thought of Barth, von Balthasar and Moltmann* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 55.

⁷¹ Robinson, *Understanding the “Imago Dei”*, 55-6, Robinson quotes Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, volume 1, part 1*, 2nd ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 1975), 243.

⁷² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, volume 3, part 2*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 1960), 247. Quoted in Robinson, *Understanding the “Imago Dei”*, 46.

⁷³ McGraw, “God and the Problem,” 342, referencing Tillich.

message and the messenger who dislodges the barriers to communication, including any self-imposed barricades.”⁷⁴

In this approach, the relational act of story-telling with other human beings is balanced by a particular theological purpose for human solitude, a notion supported by Paul Tillich: “[God] wants to penetrate us to the boundaries of our being, where the mystery of life appears” and, “it can only appear in moments of solitude.”⁷⁵ Here is where we may listen to the mystics who teach us about contemplative listening as a component of solitude. Waaijman describes the approach of John of the Cross, for whom solitude involved “pure silence...in the state of listening...in a spiritual manner...[recognized by] its peaceful calm and inward absorption...pure reception.”⁷⁶

Quiet and contemplative solitude, in the presence of God, is a way to learn to bear the beams of love of which William Blake writes.⁷⁷ It is also a place to recover one’s identity and personhood in a way that is distinct from this process as it takes place during story-telling and listening within community: “in God’s face the mystic discovers the essential features of [their] own face...When a person permits and accepts that God looks at [them] with creative love and thus calls [them] to life”; they discover their “own divine dignity and worth...Ultimately people discover God in themselves and themselves only really in God.”⁷⁸

In these events, a sense of unity of personhood is found in the immediacy of the encounter in the moment, as well as in the telling of the story, the broader process of the narrative arc. In the experience of hearing one’s name spoken by God, the de-centred self finds its centre, not only as the node in a relationship but through a particular event, as particular people, and as loved. In a shifting world, God is our constant. We discover that we are “never companionless, for God is within reach of [our] heart[s]...[our] grief is outflanked by the compassion of God.”⁷⁹ As Catherine Mowry LaCugna notes, this view is grounded in trinitarian doctrine: “the true person is neither autonomous [naming oneself with reference to oneself] nor heteronomous [naming oneself in relation to another] but *theonomous*: The human person is named with reference to [their] origin and destiny in God.”⁸⁰

The hearing of our name in one-on-one relationship with God is an enactment of our story with God and God’s persistent and pro-active invitation to us, an invitation that lies at the heart of our identity and our personhood. In this light, we are asked to *live* the questions rather than answer them. In incorporating the idea of hearing God speak our name, as illustrated in scripture and the experiences of Christian tradition,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 329.

⁷⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 23. Quoted in John D. Barbour, *The Value of Solitude: the Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 3.

⁷⁶ Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 914.

⁷⁷ In the poem *The Little Black Boy*.

⁷⁸ Hein H. Blommestijn and Frans A. Maas, *Kruispunten in de Mystieke Traditie* (The Hague: Meinema, 1990), 169. Quoted in (and translated by) Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 687.

⁷⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 311.

⁸⁰ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 290.

we also allow for a less predictable, almost anarchic, Spirit-led element to the particularity of our identity. This approach lends itself to practical theology allowing crossover between experience and learning, emotion and reason, and in emphasizing the dialogue that occurs when the solitary returns to community.

In summary, the unity of personhood which we seek in a postmodern age is not static, nor an essence or substance, but is founded at its heart on a relationship with God, and our story of our God-given relationship with God. As Turner notes, this is a theological idea not found in secular thought “where the idea of personal continuity, even when understood in narrative terms, must ultimately be a contingent feature of socially constructed personhood.”⁸¹ In the terms that Charles Taylor’s applies, retaining the importance of divine encounter introduces a way to “re-enchant” our postmodern lives; it offers us space and freedom to be “porous” selves once again, open to the inner working of God’s Spirit.⁸² Taylor notes that an engagement with enchantment through a ‘porous self’ is an engagement with society, and likewise here I emphasize solitary encounter from a place within community, and ultimately for the benefit of that community.⁸³

This sense of personal unity and continuity in a shared narrative with God and a foundational relationship with God thus lends itself both to communal *and* individual experience. We see that not only can human beings be unified through their relationality but also made particularly distinctive by it.⁸⁴ The particularity emerges in the uniqueness of the stories we experience and tell each other, as well as the values of “equality, mutuality and reciprocity” that emerge when Christian communities seek to engage in the giving and receiving that constitutes *perichoresis*.⁸⁵ Putting together narrative story-telling and solitary divine encounter provides a balance that indicates that our own personhood and identity depends on resting on a claim and a process.

We are beings-in-relation first and foremost to God the Father, through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, and objects of God’s love. By God’s grace and love we are created with a latent potential to seek God, by God’s grace we are awoken to the call of our name by God and in our identity as adopted children of God we are oriented towards God in faith (i.e. we believe), and are enabled to respond both once and throughout our lives to God’s invitational love. Ultimately, by God’s grace, we are welcomed into full communion with God “in a way that surpasses all forms of created communion.”⁸⁶

This discussion has shown that, despite rightful moves away from isolationist individualism, there is potential in trinitarian theology to be a more open field for the exploration of human solitude as a healthy positive experience, and thus the grounds for arguing that Christian experience of solitude can speak to

⁸¹ Turner, *Theology*, 144.

⁸² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 42.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Turner, “First Person Plural,” 11.

⁸⁵ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 274.

⁸⁶ Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 316.

the postmodern experience of isolation. Solitude is never an end in itself, but as a part of creating healthy faith communities and each balances the excesses, the “profound pitfalls and perils,” of the other.⁸⁷ Christian theology has an opportunity to re-imagine solitude and lead the way in reclaiming solitude as a positive contribution to healthy communities. Essentially, I suggest that as well as welcoming people *in*, Christian community needs also to let people *out* and provide safe, hospitable spaces for people to wander, to be silent and to be alone. Bonhoeffer is urgent and direct in his argument for a balance of solitude and community, in order to avoid what McGraw calls the “pooling of...loneliness,”⁸⁸ and what Mark Davies calls “compulsive sociability.”⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer notes in support of solitude that community is not an escape from facing oneself:

Let [the one] who cannot be alone beware of community. [They] will only do harm to [themselves] and to the community. Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out. If you refuse to be alone you are rejecting Christ’s call to you, and you can have no part in the community of those who are called.⁹⁰

From this Christian theological perspective solitude and community are not two polar opposites but, in a sense, two ends of a scale. In solitude we are never utterly alone, and in relational community we are still particular, unique, story-telling persons. Our source of courage and blessing through both these ways of being is “the strength of the Word of God.”⁹¹ We are bound together first of all through Jesus Christ as “the only foundation of our fellowship.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 78.

⁸⁸ McGraw, “God and the Problem,” 340.

⁸⁹ Mark G. Davies, “Solitude and Loneliness: An Integrative Model,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 24, no.1 (1996): 8.

⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 77.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 28.

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