

Theological Education's Relational Mandate: Warrants, Risks and Limitations

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I tend to distrust “magic” words, with which many speakers and writers are wont to strew their discourse in order to show they are “in” – though there be little identifiable contents. “Relational” looks suspiciously like one of them. One cannot deny, at any rate, that it expresses a most general concept, and as such a most abstract one. Abstraction is even more glaring when one glorifies, as F. LeRon Shults does, the “turn to relationality.”¹ With characteristic irony, Søren Kierkegaard proved he could match Hegelian abstraction when he famously defined the self: “a relation that relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self.”² We need abstractions, but, maybe, not too many of them...

I nevertheless accepted the assignment to explore the warrants, risks and limitations of the relational emphasis in theological education out of trust in the ICETE leaders, and when I received the preparatory documents, I found such a balance in the guidelines that I felt my trusting decision had been fully warranted, without limitations!

The complexion of the notion on which we are to focus calls for an attempt to trace out its contours first. Mine will be a groping attempt, using a quick analysis of the motives of the relational “turn.” Once a sufficient approximation of the meaning of “relational” has been gained, the effort should be to probe the grounds and warrants of the emphasis on relationality at three levels, of the primary apprehension of reality, of Trinitarian theology, and of theological anthropology. The last part should be the longest, with the more obvious consequences for the ways of theological education briefly indicated.

Acquainting ourselves with the “relational” trend

Why has relationality grown so popular in recent times? As often happens, the *vagueness* of the concept may have played a positive role! Lack of a precise meaning is an asset when people wish to accommodate the theme each to their own concern. Yet, this requires the presence of concerns that have, at least confusedly, something in common. It appears that the call for more relations, the higher valuation of them, proceeds from a common *uneasiness* with the *status quo* and with the legacy of former generations; it is to a great extent born of dissatisfaction, a negation of traits felt to be negative.

¹ *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn To Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). F. LeRon Shults shows such brilliancy and, in several respects, such competence that I will often refer to him in this essay as to a chief representative of the “relational” trend in theology.

² At the beginning of *The Sickness unto Death*, as translated by Walter Lowrie, and reproduced by Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1947), p.340; Bretall notes that Kierkegaard expresses himself “almost with tongue in cheek.”

The relational emphasis stems from the *lonely crowd* experience. Urbanization and mobility – that mobility which Harvey Cox extolled in his *Secular City* – have destroyed the multiple ties that supported, nourished – and fettered! – individuals in traditional societies. The breakdown of family units leaves an amazing number anonymously alone, or coupled on a temporary and precarious basis – the relationship may be intense, but it remains superficial. Commodities and services that used to be provided under the standards of honour, loyalty, benevolence, have increasingly fallen into the commercial sphere, so that impressions sneak in that the relationships thus established merely disguise self-interest. There is craving for enduring bonds that will not depend on fleeting emotions, that will provide unconditional acceptance and effective help in times of trouble. Not a few hunger and thirst for a sharing and caring community. I do not intend to paint the modes of bygone days in rosy colours; they were oppressive, and unsparing for most of the weak; they also involved much hypocrisy and frustration; I do not claim they were happier. I only explain the present cry for “relations.”

Some observers see new bonds, new communities, emerging from the use of internet and mobile phones. Indeed, the desire for relations plays a significant part in the fantastic success of electronic devices. Will the technically mediated relationships prove real enough and assuage the relational hunger and thirst? Will extended communication bring forth a fruit of communion? It is probably too early to tell.

A second factor could be called the *post-colonial syndrome*. The withering of the relational dimension of life is currently blamed on *Western* “individualism,” while “non-Western”³ cultures are credited with preserving the sense of community-belonging and values that go with it. A remarkable alliance is being established. Western intellectuals, whose motivation has often been, for three centuries, Nietzschean resentment against their social order and the powers that be, harbour guilt-feelings for the wrongs the colonial system perpetrated; they join hands in this critique of the West with representatives of formerly colonized peoples – these find in the affirmation of a non-Western superiority a balm for their wounds, a compensation for judgments of inferiority that still hurt in their memories. This simplified scheme does not only apply in the world, but also in the world church.

A third factor of relational promotion has been *modern and hyper-modern preferences in philosophy*. As F. LeRon Shults aptly recalls, the move away from Platonic and Aristotelian “essentialism,” whose rule over the Western mind St. Augustine made so strong and so lasting, was decisively the work of Kant and Hegel.⁴ In classical philosophy, the *substance* was treated as the “really real” while relations fell into the less real category of the *accidents*; the substance and essence of a thing was considered unchanging, and the locus of identity; this mode of thinking also inclined towards hierarchy. The reverse among the modern! Modern science no longer deals with “substances” but with fields, forces, waves.⁵ Relations are most real. The Dutch philosopher Cornelis A. van Peursen would label the new mind-set “functional” when describing similar features, which play in the process of secularization⁶; the functional age followed

³ I confess terminological embarrassment. Harold A. Netland, in the “Introduction: Globalization and Theology Today” to the book he co-edited with Craig Ott, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p.14 n.1, writes: “There is no uniformly accepted or nonproblematic way of speaking of various parts of the world. Some use terms such as *two-thirds world*, *three-fourths world*, or *majority world* to denote the nations and cultures outside Europe and North America. While there is some variety in use among contributors to this volume, in general we use ‘Western’ to refer to the nations and cultures of Europe and North America and ‘non-Western’ for all others.” Later in the book, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, in his essay “‘One Rule to Rule Them All?’ Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” p.91 n.11, notes that “many non-Western theologians themselves continue to use the rubric third world ‘as a self-designation of peoples who have been excluded from power and the authority to shape their own lives and destiny’ (Fabella 2000c, 202).”

⁴ *Reforming Theological anthropology*, 21-25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17f, Shults appeals to the new Physics.

⁶ “Pensée moderne et sécularisation,” *Etudes Evangéliques* 22/4 (October 1962): 125-148, especially 129-134, 136-138; as a Christian philosopher, van Peursen is rather sympathetic to the functional mind (145-147). It is of interest to note that van Peursen's lessons, in an English version parallel to the French article, inspired Harvey Cox in his *Secular City* (though van Peursen belonged to the *Gereformeerde Kerken*, still a bastion of Reformed orthodoxy at the time).

the “mythical” and the “ontological” ones, a scheme reminiscent of Auguste Comte's “law of the three states” of human history, theological, metaphysical, and “positive” (corresponding to childhood, adolescence and maturity). The turn to relationality is a turn away from metaphysical, substance, thinking.

Two late modern⁷ developments reinforce the distaste for classical philosophy. Michel Foucault discerned that Nietzsche's death of God, *murder* of God, entailed the death of the murderer⁸ and, in his famous final simile, saw “man” being effaced as the rising tide effaces a figure in the sand.⁹ By “man” Foucault meant the idea of man that prevailed for two or three centuries, the autonomous subject characterized by the possession of reason. This modern subject is heir to Descartes' *res cogitans*, “thinking substance,” with even earlier roots in the substantial view of the self, as expressed in Boethius' definition of the person as an “individual substance of a rational nature.” The deconstruction of anthropology pushes towards the relational side. At the same time, a new awareness of the many ways cognitive endeavours are conditioned and ethical concerns about tolerance and power struggles have led to a *distrust of dogma*, a distrust of any claim to adequacy and unchangeable, universal, validity. An absolute viewpoint is a contradiction in terms; at best, we reach a diversity of perspectives, and these open to revision, and these impossible to synthesize finally.

Obviously, the search for the relational is not the same with all. The quick survey of main motives, however, suggests that the search springs first and foremost from the refusal of *isolation*. Relationality should be the cure of isolation in the pursuit of knowledge, relationality should be the cure of isolation in daily life, in the selection of values, in the ordering of social exchanges, in the preparation of public policies. Since “isolation” comes from *insula*, “island,” I don't resist the pleasure of quoting from John Donne's immortal lines:

No man is an island, entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.
If a clod is washed away, Europe is the less as well as
if a promontory were or a manor of thy friends.
Every man's death diminishes *me*, because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls:
It tolls for thee.

Reconnoitring what is real

Favourable circumstances, John Donne's genius, are not enough to justify the relational emphasis. Is it *warranted*, especially if we consider the supreme criterion, the verdict of Holy Scripture? Our exploration starts at a level which may lie below clear or clearest consciousness and appears to be determinative of all developments, of our apprehension of everything we can call “real.” There is no “pure,” entirely passive apprehension in experience; even perception through the senses happens through a “grid,” presupposes horizons, reference points, directions, and immediately slides into some interpretation of the *data*. The need for a “fiduciary framework” (from *fides*, “faith”) in every science as in everyday activities has been recognized by Michael Polanyi; it corresponds to Cornelius Van Til's set of presuppositions. I am aiming at the root and core of such a framework, the scheme that organizes our whole experience of “reality.” It

⁷ I refrain from using the word “postmodern” since I concur with Craig M. Gay's lucid summary, *The Way of the (Modern) World. Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, etc., 1998), 17: “it is increasingly used to suggest that we have entered into an entirely new cultural situation in which none of the old 'modern' rules and habits of mind need be taken seriously anymore. All such suggestions are mistaken and misleading.” He goes on to write (18): “the essential features of 'postmodernism' – however this term is defined – are demonstrably modern in origin. Indeed, I would contend that 'postmodernity' represents only a kind of *extension* of modernity, a kind of 'hyper-modernity,’” and quotes from Anthony Giddens to the same effect. In French I suggested using *moderne-post* to avoid any insinuation of another era succeeding the modern era and making it obsolete, and to mark distinct developments of late and hyper-modernity.

⁸ *Les Mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1966), 396.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 398: “l'homme s'effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable” (the last words in the book).

could be compared with Herman Dooyeweerd's "ground-motive" or, probably, with F. LeRon Shults' "fiduciary structure."¹⁰

The turn to relationality starts at this deeper level. Reality is basically apprehended as a network, as a web of relations, as a tissue of connections, as a field of interlacing forces. This scheme affirms plurality: it implies the rejection of that ontological passion we may call Parmenidian, which devalues plurality, and therefore relation, as mere appearance, *doxa*. It cannot accept Spinoza's more differentiated monism which reduces all diversity to the unity of the one Substance. It cannot accept, either, mere plurality (which is unthinkable). It opposes the more common and moderate plurality of the Platonic "essences" which are thought to exist by themselves, separate, unchanging, though (inconsistently?) relations are then posited between them. This Platonic plurality is still present in classical Christian thought as the plurality of created substances. For advocates of the relational emphasis, if no man, and nothing, is an island, reality is no archipelago! The key proposition is this, which Shults apparently endorses: "Relationship is seen as prior to the elements in relation."¹¹ The reversal of the *relatio-relata* order is the cutting edge of the relational disposition.

As Shults himself recounts, the emphasis on relations is nothing new in Western philosophy and in Christian thought. One may recall Dooyeweerd's thesis that the world should not be ascribed being, *zijn* (corresponds to German *Sein*) but *zin* (corresponds to German *Sinn*), and his dislike for the "scholastic" category of substance. Beyond all controversy, Scripture sees nothing and nobody in isolation. None of us lives for himself or herself. Everything is of God, through God and ordained to God. Creation immediately institutes a relation that defines the creature's being: every element and aspect in the creature's identity is founded and embraced by the creature's relationship with God the Creator. In other words, the creature's being is through and through "relational." The reality of *time* in biblical sight, against devaluations of succession as mere appearance "for us," also witnesses to the importance of relations.¹² We may even go one step further: inasmuch as Plato's philosophy reflected his polytheistic religious background and lacked the biblical sense of a monotheistic creation, its influence on Christian thought did contribute to obscure the radical dependence (a relation!) of all creatures, inclusive of human freedom, on God. When one stresses the notion of substance, the Spinozistic temptation is lurking in the shadows of a self-contained, self-referential, Substance.

The tradition, however, carefully distinguished between being *per se*, "by itself," which pertains to created substances (and not to accidents) and being *a se*, "of or from itself," which is only valid of the *absolute* Substance, God. Naïve experience does seem to encounter some difference between things that can be identified as remaining more or less "the same" through time and what happens to them. G. C. Berkouwer, who did not lack openness to contemporary innovations, asks his colleague at the Amsterdam *Vrij Universiteit* Herman Dooyeweerd "why the concept of substance could not also be used [since Dooyeweerd uses the concept of *aevum*], freed from its scholastic contexts."¹³ Berkouwer mentions that Hendrik Stoker has done so; Stoker himself later states that he was not persuaded by Dooyeweerd's strictures, but that, in order to avoid misunderstandings, he "substituted a neologism, namely 'idiostance,'" in later writings.¹⁴ What must be maintained at all costs is the *vis à vis* structure of the Creator-creature relation. This requires a certain density of existence, a weight and consistency, an "idiostance" to borrow Stoker's word, that enables the creature to correspond to God in order to respond to him: the gift of *being*. Though it is not conspicuous, the "ontological" interest is not absent from Scripture. The form of the

¹⁰ *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 40-43, 47-58. It is deeper than worldview, "the 'holding structure' that subtends the self and its relation to its worldview" (42); other writers may locate the worldview at a deeper level.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹² I tried to bring out the teaching of Scripture, against "timelessness" interpretations, in my "Yesterday, Today, Forever: Time, Times, Eternity in Biblical Perspective," *Tyndale Bulletin* 52.2 (2001): 183-202.

¹³ *Man: the Image of God*, transl. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962¹), 262 n.44.

¹⁴ "Reconnoitering the Theory of Knowledge of Prof. Dr. Cornelius Van Til," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. by E. R. Geehan (s.l.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 456 n.35.

command in Genesis 1, three times, *y^ehî*, “let there be,” was carefully chosen, and a few texts affirm the conferral of being (Is 66:2; Rev 4:11; cf. Acts 17:28); it is probably implied in the gift of breath and life, that fullness and “redoubling” of existence (e.g. Ps 104:29f., and so many texts¹⁵). Though Dooyeweerd tries to safeguard the consistency of creatures through his theory of typical individual structures and the “subject-side” correlative of the “law-side,” he leaves the impression that he cannot render full justice to the *vis à vis* structure. Critics, even sympathetic ones, have charged him with a tendency towards *idealism*, remembering that his main “sparring-partners” were the neo-Kantian, idealist, philosophers¹⁶; other Kuyperian thinkers have parted company with him on the issue of knowledge and complained that one cannot be sure of his commitment to *realism*.¹⁷ Idealistic metaphysics reduce being to relations.

The most problematic proposition of all is that of *relatio* prior to *relata*. I confess myself unable to see how it can be responsibly maintained. The very notion of “relation” (in all dictionary definitions) is that it takes place *between* terms, it is a link, a connection; it presupposes the terms. What can a relation be if there is nothing to relate? Free from all babble, Scripture teaches that God both, and at the same time, confers being and establishes relation – the *quidditas*, “whatness,” of a created being is determined by its relations in God’s work and plan, but there is no relation prior to the terms.¹⁸ Even the relationality of time is not *mere* network: events have their own consistency, ultimately as acts of God (Eph 1:11) who is sovereign over time: without that transcendent sovereignty, time would dissolve into meaningless dust, and if humans share analogically in the ability to act, it is because God has put ‘*ôlam*, “eternity,” in their hearts (Eccl. 3:11).

Idealism vs. realism – I would recommend “critical realism”¹⁹ – is an engagement which deals with knowledge. Realism seeks to model knowledge after the form of reality (mapping is a good illustration of the part of convention in the modelling): since relations *are* an essential dimension of reality according to biblical teaching, biblical realism will make every effort to take them into account. However, if everything is reduced to relations, the danger of *relativism* draws near, the deadly danger of self-destructive relativism. Mere perspectivism cannot adjudicate between “views” (on what basis could our every utterances be judged, Mt 12:36?); it cannot deliver us out of the morass of subjectivism. What should we make of the argument about “absolute viewpoint”? Speaking of “viewpoints,” one must beware of taking too literally what is, after all, only a (spatial) metaphor. At any rate, the transcendence and immanence of the sovereign God ensures that all perspectives remain subordinate to his Word of Truth, a Truth which is characterized biblically²⁰ by permanence (Ps 119:160) and clear-cut opposition to non-truth. God judges of all things with perfect rightness and is able to signify his definitions and assessments at the level of our *dianoia*, “discursive thought,” (1 Jn 5:20), so that we may think his

¹⁵ It might be included etymologically in the divine name Yahweh, since the vowel *a* suggests a Hiphil, that is causative, derivation: the One who causes to be (with *ts^evàôôt*, who causes to be the hosts of heaven). However, Ex 3 does not exploit the suggestion.

¹⁶ I was warned of the fact already by Pierre Ch. Marcel’s dissertation, “Le Criticisme transcendantal de la pensée théorique: Prolégomènes à la Philosophie de l’Idée de Loi de Herman Dooyeweerd,” Faculté Libre de Théologie Protestante de Montpellier, especially p. 114 (cf. 94).

¹⁷ William Young (Dooyeweerd’s translator!), “Herman Dooyeweerd,” in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, ed. by Philip E. Hughes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966¹), 295f.

¹⁸ Robert Neville, *Eternity and Time’s Flow* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 75, as quoted by F. LeRon Shults, 30 n.43, wisely maintains that “things are harmonies of both conditional and essential features, conditional ones in order to be determinately related to other things with respect to which they are determinate, and essential ones in order to be determinately different from those other things.”

¹⁹ Cf. Thorsten Moritz, “Critical Realism,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. by Kevin J. Vanhoozer & associates (Grand Rapids, MI/London: Baker Academic/SPCK, 2005), 147a-150b. I draw attention to the work of Ben F. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), who draws on the work of the Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan and illustrates how critical realism applies in the study of texts.

²⁰ I may recall my study, “Qu’est-ce que la Vérité?” *Hokhma* n°12 (1979): 2-13 and n°13 (1980): 38-49.

thoughts after him, that is, that we may bring every thought (*noëma*) captive in the obedience of Christ (2 Co 10:5).

What lessons for “theological education” are we to draw from such considerations? It appears that we cannot elude some confrontation with philosophy, and that philosophical orientations are *not neutral* spiritually, and not of equal use: they may collide with God's own Word or they may become servants in the service of divine Truth. Whether we strive to build a radically Christian philosophy, as Dooyeweerd undertook, or use elements of some human philosophy after due cleansing and reforming, as, apparently the apostle Paul did for Stoicism and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews did for Alexandrian middle-Platonism, ultimate normativity lies with the biblical Word. We should take advantage of our relationship with past Christian generations and welcome their wisdom as regards alliances with philosophies: it will help us to discern the frequent association of idealism and liberal theologies, for two centuries, and resist the lure of fashionable novelties.

Confessing the one true God

The biblical teaching on creation strikes the normative balance of being and relation: created “substances” (idiostances) have being in relation, in relation to God (total dependence) and in relation to one another within God's plan. But what about being and relation *in God himself*, in the God who explains his name by calling himself I AM (Ex 3:14), a substitute of the name which Revelation further expands as “the One Being, the He Was, and the One Coming” (literally, Rev 1:4,8; 4:8; cf. 11:17 and 16:5)? This question introduces into *Trinitarian* theology: for this theology (theology “proper”), which aims at describing the divine being, has classically used the concept of “relations” as a central one.²¹

It did not happen by chance: the overall turn to relationality has gone hand in hand with a new interest in Trinitarian theology. Here also the critique of the legacy of tradition, at least Western tradition, has been vocal, and the desire to change the *status quo* an obvious motive. Western orthodoxy has been charged with a unitary tendency: a tendency to value the oneness of the Godhead to the detriment of the threeness (*trinitas*) of the persons, and therefore of the relational character of divine life. Since St. Augustine has been responsible for shaping, through his *De Trinitate*, the theology of the West, he has been the target of much criticism: one notes that he hesitates to speak of persons, that the truth of their threeness, being a matter of relations, nearly becomes relative (weaker indeed) for him, while oneness is absolute...²² It has been one occasion of that sport that has been practiced on a variety of fields, and which Ted Peters calls “Augustine bashing.”²³ St. Thomas Aquinas' order of treatment has been considered significant: first, *De Deo uno*, the foundational chapter. To remedy this deficiency, appeal has been made to the Greek fathers, who insisted more strongly on the threeness of hypostases. The title coined by John Zizioulas (the Orthodox bishop of Pergamon), *Being As Communion*, defining the divine being as the communion of the three Persons, has become a rallying cry; one starts with the several Persons, and through their relations, one sees their unity. The cutting edge of the thesis is being sharpened by various authors: the unity of the Godhead is *not* to be referred to the one essence of deity; it should be understood as the fruit of their relational communion, of their mutual indwelling called in Greek *perichorèsis*. For Miroslav Volf, “it is advisable to dispense entirely with the one numerically identical divine nature and instead to conceive the unity of God *perichoretically*.”²⁴

²¹ What follows was developed more fully in my article “La Trinité, une communauté an-archique?” *Théologie Evangélique* 1/2 (2002): 3-20; this excuses me from giving all the documentary evidence and the references the article provides.

²² See, e.g., Colin Gunton, “Augustine, the Trinity and the theological crisis of the West,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990), 33-58. He later mellowed his criticisms, in the second edition of his main book (1997), and orally, in the dialogue we had at the 1993 Edinburgh Conference on Dogmatics – I defended Augustine, and he would readily agree.

²³ *Sin. Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 140.

²⁴ *After Our Likeness The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 203.

Such a divine Trinity is proposed as the foundation and model of the relationality of creatures, of the “body politic,” and especially that relationality which should shine forth in the community of creation *restored*: the church. Many take to hear Nicolaï Fedorov's dictum: “The Trinity is our social program.”²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann attacks “monotheism” as the model that favours absolute monarchy; the social Trinity is an encouragement for socialist forms of political organization. Zizioulas and Volf focus on ecclesiological consequences.

There is much, in the new Trinitarian trends, that can be approved. Globally, one regrets an over-emphasis on unity in Western tradition; St. Augustine, though his primary and conscious effort was to follow Scripture (the first half of the treatise on the Trinity is devoted to Biblical proof), had imbibed much neo-Platonic influence: it slanted his construction in the unitary direction. One must observe that he found the category of relations, as the only way to distinguish between the persons, in the Cappadocian fathers (the Greek word is *schêsis*); yet, inasmuch as the Greek fathers (especially Basil) distinguished the Hypostases by “personal properties” (*idioteis*) of unclarified character, they were *less* relational than St. Augustine and St. Thomas. The latter calls the Persons “subsisting relations.”²⁶ Far from minimizing the distinction and firm consistency of the Persons (as one may fear in the case of St. Augustine), St. Thomas thus establishes both – as André Malet powerfully demonstrated.²⁷

One can also accept that the being of God constitutes the archetypal foundation of the being of creatures (which, as “general revelation” displays, at a lower level, the facets of the Creator's perfection), and, therefore, that the presence of relations in God is the ontological ground of created relationality. Consistent deniers of plurality in God (as in Islam) cannot maintain real plurality in the world, and even between God and the world (see the case of al-Hallaj, who died a martyr of his pantheistic mysticism in Bagdad, in 922 A.D./309 Hegira). The monistic All swallows all distinctions and relations. Cornelius Van Til is well-known for his insistence that only the Tri-Unity of the Christian God can solve the perennial problem of the One and the Many.²⁸ Together with foundation there is room for reflection (in the physical sense, metaphorically): the way God is reflects itself in his works, and they are adorned with analogies of his relational being, the *vestigia trinitatis* St. Augustine brilliantly collected and interpreted. Our Lord's “high-priestly prayer” asks for such a union of his disciples that they be one as (*kathôs*) the Father and himself are one (Jn 17:21f.): looking for an analogy of God's relational Tri-Unity in the church is warranted.

However, warnings must be sounded. Any suggestion that the Greek fathers *founded* divine unity on the relations and *perichorêsis* flies in the face of historical evidence. The Cappadocians and still St. John of Damascus affirm the one essence as the basis of unity. The word *perichôrêsis* is first used (in available sources) of the Trinity at the end of the VIIth century, more than three centuries after the Cappadocians! Jean-Pierre Batut can mock its use, today, as a “magic word.”²⁹ F. Leron Shults falls into a trap, unworthy of his scholarly calibre: he buys the comparison of divine life with a dance – dancing is so popular today! – and offers as the “Greek etymology”: “*peri*, 'around,' and *choreô*, from which we get 'choreography'.”³⁰

²⁵ Quoted by Barbara Nichtweiss, “Mysterium Trinitatis et Unitatis. Communauté et société à la lumière de la foi trinitaire et des heresies antitrinitaires,” *Communio* 24/5-6 (Sept. 1999), 188. Fedorov was a friend of Dostoevski, Soloviev, Tolstoi.

²⁶ *Summa theologica* I^a, qu.29, art.4 (Respondeo): Persona enim divina significat relationem “ut subsistentem.”

²⁷ *Personne et amour dans la théologie trinitaire de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1956). Bernard Sesboüé concurs.

²⁸ Since Van Til's always brief comments are scattered among many more or less repetitive books, I recommend using works that gather his thoughts: here Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), 238-241, 325-328; Jim S. Halsey, *For a Time Such as This: An Introduction to the Reformed Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 40-44; Rousas John Rushdoony, “The One and Many Problem: The Contribution of Van Til,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, especially 343-347.

²⁹ “Monarchie du Père, ordre des processions, périchorèse: trois clés théologiques pour une droite confession trinitaire,” *Communio* 24/5-6 (Sept. 1999): 27 with n.34.

³⁰ *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 92.

But this must be corrected: it mistakes *chôra*, *chôros*, indeed the root in *perichôrêsis* and which carries the idea of space, and the altogether different root *choros*, “dance,” (from which the verb is *choreuô*)! And what is much worse: *perichôrêsis*, mutual indwelling, compenetration, the most intimate and “dynamic” relational communion, is utterly unable to give us *one God*. The mutual indwelling phrases are also used of the union between the Lord and us, believers! It is no fusion! The denial of the (numerically) one essence is tantamount to the rejection of monotheism,³¹ the truth that God chose to engrave *first* in the hearts of his people. Even theologians who have shown sympathy for the trend have warned about the danger of *tritheism*.

The problem with creaturely and ecclesial analogy is the difficulty to identify its precise import. At the August 2009 Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, the able theologian Stephen R. Holmes launched a ruthless attack against the procedure. The distance between God, the *Analogans*, and our reality (*analogata*) is such that no one can tell how the analogy will work. Holmes pointed out that Zizioulas the Orthodox hierarch and Volf the Baptist (he appeals to John Smyth) draw consequences from similar communion and social Trinity theologies that are worlds apart. Volf himself acknowledges of reconstructions of the correspondences between the Trinity and ecclesial communion that they

...often say nothing more than the platitude that unity cannot exist without multiplicity nor multiplicity without unity, or demand of human beings in the church the (allegedly) completely selfless love of God. The former is so vague that no one cares to dispute it, and the latter so divine that no one can live it.³²

The risk is most present that theologians will simply authorize their own ideas while claiming that they apply the Trinitarian model. Gisbert Greshake's manner illustrates the point: he “sees in *perichôrêsis* the basis for a differentiated and reciprocal recognition of religions,”³³ Christian and non-Christian, of course. A far cry from the Fathers' meaning!

Our theological education will indeed do well to set forth the revelation of the Tri-One God as the divine reply to, and correction of, of human constructions, whether monistic or polytheistic, and as the deepest ground for unity and diversity, therefore relations, in creation and in the church. The analogy is inspiring – provided all consequences are tested and controlled by Scripture.

I dare suggest that the most fruitful application of the Trinitarian model considers the Trinitarian economy of salvation, with the two divine Missions, of the Son and of the Spirit. The emphasis on each corresponds roughly with the two main components of our evangelical heritage: that of the XVIth century magisterial Reformation (Christocentric, the Word paramount) and that of Pietism and Revivals (with the emphasis on Spirit-wrought experience). A Trinitarian ordering will help us better to integrate these and achieve the proper, beautiful, balance.

Unravelling the human privilege

Since humans were created as images of the Tri-One God, their privilege, I anticipated anthropological considerations when dealing with the divine Trinity. But these considerations must now be extended. How should we appreciate the turn to relationality in theological anthropology? We shall investigate two distinct fields, just as the word “humanity” bears two meanings.

A. Humanity as the gathering of humans

Relational emphasis on community belonging appears to be true to experience and to accord with Scripture. The place of genealogies in the Bible witnesses to the truth of the human chain, of which each

³¹ Moltmann has openly repudiated “monotheism”; Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Die Subjektivität Gottes und die Trinitätslehre. Ein Beitrag zur Beziehung zwischen Karl Barth und der Philosophie Hegels,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 23 (1977): 39-40 n.34, chides him for so doing (though his own construction owes too much to Hegel to satisfy an orthodox reader).

³² *After Our Likeness*, 191.

³³ Barbara Nichtweiss, in *Communio*, 193.

one is a link. Without the nurturing role of the social group no individual can grow and live. Relationships shape and nourish personality; language which is socially received is the usual condition of thought. Calls for mutual service and support throughout the New Testament (Rm 14) highlight the relationality of Christian existence. It is a fitting symbol if the early church coined the word *adelphotès*, “brotherhood,” of which no occurrence is known before 1 Peter 5:9. No one lives for himself or for herself. No man is an island.

One important insight may be offered. The bond that unites all humans is richer and tighter than the biological solidarity of an animal species. Humanity is given by God a *Head*. There is one man who is at the same time himself and, as it were, the whole race; all bear his image (1 Co 15:49) which makes them humans; his action engages the destiny of the whole community which depends on him; all are born, and die, *in Adam* (1 Co 15:22), for he was instituted the Head. Nothing of the kind among lions, peacocks or mosquitoes! This structure of “headship” (a better term, I feel, than “corporate personality”³⁴) belongs essentially to humanity as such, but it is also reflected at various levels and in various sectors of human life: the king is the “head” of his people, the patriarch, the “head” of the household (the ancestor, in some respects, of his descendants), the husband, of the new “fleshly” whole constituted by marriage, and which possesses a differentiated relational structure. This structure of “headship” is again prominent in redemption, in which the destiny of the whole community which depends on him is determined by the action of the *New Adam*, the “Head” of his Body, which is the humanity of the new creation. The bond, then, is deeper, richer and tighter than the natural one, for it is the work of God the Holy Spirit. It is supernatural. And it is the basis of relationality in the church.

In this light, the modern and hyper-modern isolation of individuals is exposed as a grievous attack upon humanity itself, deeply opposed to God's work. One cannot deny that it started and spread first in the West, though globalisation tends to spread it far beyond. One can only bring the following nuances: collectivism, and even totalitarian collectivism, also flourished in the West (with its ugly, deadly, flowers); Karl Marx was a typical Western thinker... And the success of Eastern religions in the West today rather reinforces the isolation factor: as Vinoth Ramachandra notes, “the individualist spiritual techniques of Hindu and Buddhist traditions (shorn of their temple rituals and social practices) make them more attractive to cultures of individualist consumerism.”³⁵

Not as a nuance, but as a main fact of the case, one must then add that Scripture *promotes* individuals, in their individual character, as no culture, religion or “wisdom” had ever done before. In his influential *Before Philosophy*, the great anthropologist Henry Frankfort underlined the breakthrough the new emphasis represented; he was impressed by the loneliness of Bible characters such as Abraham and Job (we could call it supra-social). Individual responsibility is formalized (Dt 24:16; Jer 31:29f.; Ez 18 and 33). God knows his servants *by name* (Ex 33:12,17). In the New Testament Jesus' radical relativisation of family ties, his demand that his disciples should leave father and mother – still strongly *unethical* behaviour for members of many cultures today – frees individuals for personal commitment. Decision is required of individuals “away from” (*apo*) their natural community (Acts 2:40). It is a misreading when the phrase “disciple all the *ethnè*” in Matthew 28:19 is interpreted of the evangelisation of groups as such, whole nations as collective bodies; it is never given that meaning in the fulfilment of their mission by the apostles (see, for instance, the use of *ethnè* in the story of Cornelius (Acts 10:45; 11:18)).³⁶ The individual character of judgment – each person will give an account for herself or himself – as in Romans 14 and Galatians 6 – is an decisive proof of the truth of individuality. Human beings are no mere cogs in the universal machine, not even mere cells in the big body. Each human individual *transcends* the belonging dimensions of his life – one sign in common experience that it is so is the failure of attempts to foretell *with a 100% certainty* the reaction a given individual will have to pressures and conditionings, to

³⁴ For further developments, one can see my *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Leicester: Apollos/IVP, 1997), especially 96f.

³⁵ “Globalization, Nationalism, and Religious Resurgence,” in *Globalizing Theology*, 229.

³⁶ It is also clear in the wording of Mt 28:19, since the pronoun, baptizing *them*, is masculine (whereas *ethnos* is neuter).

education and influence (language is absorbed, but the use of language, what a person will say, is never entirely predictable). The principle of this human transcendence is the foundational relation to the infinite Transcendence: no one can be reduced to the communal dimensions of his being because she or he is made for God. We live for or unto the Lord, we are his: this is the principle which grounds ultimate individual responsibility and rules out isolation (Rm 14:7-13,19). Kierkegaard, the champion of the Individual (he wanted this epitaph to be written on his tomb: He was an individual) was also *the* thinker of relation to the Transcendent. The truth of individuality is “relational,” since it depends on the relation to God, but many who turn to “relationality” seem to forget it.

Isolation “individualism” started in the Christianised part of the world, and mostly in those countries that were affected by the more biblical form of Christianity! We are now in a position to understand why. It is the Scriptural truth of individuality which was uprooted from its native soil, cut off from its transcendent ground, made into an idolatrous self-asserting claim, in the process called secularisation. To paraphrase Chesterton's saying, in *Orthodoxy*, about modern virtues, individualism is biblical individuality *gone mad*. The old maxim applies: *Corruptio optimi pessima*. Using biblical categories, we could say that the old absorption of the individual by the social body was *pagan*, and modern individualism is *antichristian*: the Antichrist uses the Christ figure to refurbish the old idolatrous dream, and it is even worse than the old oppression of Nature divinised. The self-destructive effect of this idolatry becomes obvious in late modernity: Gilles Lipovetsky, a lucid prophet of the late modern mindset and sensitivity, has discerned that individuals become *zombies* (no cause for serious alarm in his estimate).³⁷ It should also become obvious that going back to the pre-Christian, “pagan,” collectivism is no true solution.

For more than a century, one aspect of plurality within humankind has attracted much attention: the plurality of *cultures*. During several decades, what has been called “culturalism” dominated the field of anthropology and ethnology and impregnated public opinion. Paul G. Hiebert aptly summarises the corresponding way of thinking:

Cultures were seen as unique and autonomous. Each was seen as discrete, bounded, and self-contained and functioned to maintain a harmonious society. Cultures were also seen as morally neutral. People in one culture should not judge other cultures. To do so was ethnocentric and imperialistic.³⁸

Advocates of relationality often adopted culturalist talk. Presumably, they saw the rebuttal of Western colonial arrogance and imperialism as a means to promote more reciprocal exchanges, more relations, with other cultures; however we must note the paradox, or even the contradiction: culturalism strictly, by making each culture self-contained, suppresses the possibility of relations! Anthropology, since, has undergone remarkable mutations³⁹; some theologians, and even missiologists, have not yet realised; others have, and do hedge about their anthropological statements with proper qualifications, and yet, they seem to take no account of these as they go on developing their views... Researchers have realised that cultures are heterogeneous conglomerates, always changing, with contrary forces at work (George Devereux even posited a socio-psychological “Newton's law” according to which every tendency in culture is matched by a contrary one, more or less hidden). Even more important (as Marcel Gauchet stressed), the diversity of cultures must not blind us to the *constants* and *common* traits that are found in all cultures. They make translation possible: even if it is never perfect, translation *is* possible. They make relations possible. They probably outweigh differences, though differences, through various mechanisms of our common make-up, attract more attention and fascinate our eyes. This, I submit, accords with the

³⁷ *L'Ere du vide. Essai sur l'individualisme contemporain* (“Folio Essais”; Paris: Gallimard, 1983¹), 81,209.

³⁸ “The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing,” in *Globalizing Theology*, 292.

³⁹ For a quick survey, Elizabeth Yao-Hwa Sung, “Culture and Hermeneutics,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 150b-155b.

biblical vision of humankind, its essential unity, its determination by the laws instituted at creation, its sharing in the same history, which is one as the one plan of God unfolds itself.⁴⁰

Consequences of the relational structure of humankind, one and diverse, for theological education can be drawn at many levels. Encouragements towards exchanges, cooperation, *translation*, flow naturally from what we have seen; there is no need for me to enlarge upon this point: it has been done, and well done, by others and more qualified.⁴¹ I would insist on the right of all to the common treasure of humankind, and of all Christians to the whole Christian heritage – for this emphasis is counter-cultural, given the ideological culture of most world intellectuals. We should not be too much impressed by these academic stars who all sing to the same tune the praise of difference and universally reject the idea of universal truth. Vinoth Ramachandra offers a fine example of the sound, mature, truly de-colonised, attitude:

What this means is that, for me as an Asian Christian, Augustine and Irenaeus, Teresa of Avila and Mary Slessor, Calvin and Bonhoeffer all become my ancestors, part of my personal family tree. And, for Western Christians, their family tree now includes John of Damascus, Panditha Rambai, Sadu Sundar Singh, Kagawa and a host of outstanding Asian Christian men and women.⁴²

The best service one can render her or his culture is a contribution to the universal treasure of all people, that will glorify *excellently*, for all, the Truth of the one Lord (as Ramachandra, again, offers a model).

B. Humanity as exemplified in each person

Traditional theology affirmed divine *simplicity* of the divine essence: it may be followed, despite the infinite riches of its variegated perfections, if one means the supreme degree of unity it possesses. Not so the human creature. Though created as God's image, and even before the Fall, the human person is a bundle of properties, components, functions. These are united, a reflection of divine unity: they are more united than in any other earthly creature, so that human persons only say "I." Yet the degree of their unity is not maximal. *Inner relations*, therefore, obtain between components and functions. Since the Genesis 3 catastrophe, disorder affects the inner relations – passions wage war against the soul (1 Pet 2:11) – making the task of unifying oneself arduous and frustrating: only Jesus Christ, in his sinlessness, was perfectly successful. Hence the exhortation: "Gird up the loins of your minds" (1 Pet 1:13, KJV), remembering the role of the soldier's belt, keeping together, in unifying order, all the pieces of his equipment.

Different pictures have been drawn of the person's inner diversity, and they are not necessarily exclusive of one another. A basic distinction, frequently referred to in Scripture, mostly in the New Testament, is that of inner and outer *anthrôpos*; Jesus contrasts body and soul (Mt 10:28). St. Augustine found in the inner person a remarkable analogy of the Trinity, with the three faculties of memory (the meaning is broader than ours, the continuity of inner life and the possession of oneself are involved), intelligence and will: these are fully themselves as the mind contemplates God and reflects his glory (a point Shults seems to by-pass). Calvin, in his commitment to sober brevity, was content to keep only intelligence and will. Countless writers and preachers have accepted a threefold division of mind, will and affections. The psychoanalytical model, with the Conscious/Unconscious division, and then the Ego/Id/Super-Ego triad may fit some biblical data (the "kidneys" which only the Lord can sound may be compared to the Unconscious; some have seen in the miserable "I" of Rm 7 the Ego battling with the contrary demands of

⁴⁰ With Christian universality in view, Paul Hiebert, 305, quotes an impressive paragraph from Herbert Kane: "As a child of the kingdom the believer then becomes a World Christian. By calling he belongs to a universal fellowship – the Christian church. By conviction he claims a universal message – the Christian gospel. By commitment he owes his allegiance to a universal king – Jesus Christ. By vocation, he is part of a universal movement – the Christian mission" (*Wanted: World Christians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986], 137f.).

⁴¹ See, e.g. the book *Globalizing Theology*.

⁴² Quoted by Craig Ott, "Conclusion," *Globalizing Theology*, 334, from Ramachandra's book *Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 136-137.

the Id and of the Super-Ego). Reflection, the human privilege, implies a distinction from, and a relation to, oneself – made possible by what we called human transcendence.

Advocates of the relational “turn” complain that traditional anthropologies – which were mostly interested in the composition of individual persons – were not relational enough. F. LeRon Shults unsurprisingly attacks the view of body and soul as two “substances”⁴³; I leave this issue aside – there have been several traditional analyses – and only note that his intimidating claim that the scholarly consensus rules out a duality of body and soul in the Bible⁴⁴ is simply contrary to fact.⁴⁵ The most relevant criticism targets the *isolation* of reason, autonomous reason, which has been given absolute rule over knowledge.⁴⁶ A more relational outlook will acknowledge the multiple conditionings of reason, the influence of affections, the precious role of imagination (often said to be “creative”), intuition or insight as ways of knowing... The West has dried up these sources and resources, while non-Western cultures had the wisdom of preserving them.

This assessment calls for nuances in reception. For much of it, I join the applause. Indeed, reason has been turned into an Enlightenment idol – and the idolatry was literally materialised in one of the feasts of the French Revolution, with a courtesan representing the goddess Reason on a chariot – and the “rationalistic” pretension that reason is autonomous should be exposed as a poisonous illusion. In philosophical epistemology it has been widely recognised, and we may recall that neo-Calvinists were pioneers in the demonstration. Scripture reveals that a religious motive (the fear of the Lord) operates as the *principle* (*ré'sît*) of true knowledge and wisdom; the organ of thought is the “heart,” the nexus of intellectual and volitive functions, and also involved in emotions. Pedagogical experience shows how decisive the affective relation between teacher and student can be, and Shults' chapter on the inhibiting role of fear, generally repressed fears, in learning is the most illuminating part of his book: a splendour. Imagination is not the “mad girl in the house,” as it was nicknamed in French tradition (“la folle du logis”), but is part of the symbolic function and it is indispensable in the construction of hypotheses. As for intuition, it is probably the case that we all fall back on intuition at the beginning of our reasoning chains: What is the warrant of my saying so? I see it...

The relationship of reason and will is a complex matter, and current accounts of views of leading thinkers, such as St. Thomas Aquinas' and Calvin's, over-simplify them. An article by Richard A. Muller finely restores the complexity.⁴⁷ Suffice it to say that reason and will do work together, with priority to the one or to the other depending on the aspect (especially in the fallen state). The key issue remaining is that of the distinctive role of human reason. However conditioned and part of a relational network, reason is a distinct function or faculty. One could consider it an active sensitivity to the *necessity* which binds together the facts of God's world: if A, then *necessarily* B. Through reason, humans do not master the relationships – this is the mortal illusion, tragic conceit – but submit to the authority of the divine institution and decision. As such, reason plays a unique role: it is not the only access to knowledge, but the organ of discernment, control, validation. It plays this role in Scripture. Bernard Ramm once collected samples of all the main forms of logical argument in Jesus' teaching and discussions.⁴⁸ Logic appears in various garbs,⁴⁹ but it can be argued that all human minds feel the “necessity” expressed by logical arguments. There is something compelling for all, whatever the way it is dressed.

⁴³ *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 166-169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 175-178.

⁴⁵ He also claims the support of Neurobiology, *ibid.*, 179f., and even there one should acknowledge major exceptions. On the whole debate, see the forthcoming book on the brain and the mind (soul), edited by Lydia Jaeger.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 169-174 (*et passim*).

⁴⁷ “*Fides and Cognitio in Relation to the Problem of the Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin*,” in his book *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 159-173 (notes 255-262).

⁴⁸ *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 51.

⁴⁹ See John M. Frame, “Logic,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 462a-464a.

In our *media*-manipulated world, including Christian churches, one can observe a disquieting phenomenon: ideas succeed as they please. To avoid a dangerous “anything goes” provided it sounds spiritual, provided it generates beneficial feelings, and draws crowds, I see no other way than a rational discipline in the study and application of Bible teaching.

The motto for theological education should then be *rigour*, as reason demands, in exegesis and systematisation, *without* treating reason in isolated ways. A context of loving relationships uniting students and staff; realistic care for material conditions and for *bodies*: they are also, in this life at least, instruments of our thinking life; association of activities in the learning process itself; a framework of spiritual life, personal, inter-personal and communal worship... all these are recommended in order that reason may be the *blessing* it was originally meant to be.

Two final remarks. Whatever we practice, we must attend to the question of the right *dosage*. God put his creation, including humankind, under the law of measure (Job 28:5; 38:5, with an echo in Wisdom 11:20, the verse that so impressed St. Augustine; Eph 4:7,13, and probably Rm 12:3). One aspect of our *relational* being, in dependence upon God and placed in the harmony of his work, is submission to measure (e.g., distance must be measured between two persons...). And, second recommendation: again our relation to our elder brothers and sisters, and even fathers and mothers,⁵⁰ is a God-given safeguard against faddish deviations and the special seductions of the *Zeitgeist*; they will help us to be relational according to the right measure, the God-measured measure...

⁵⁰ I have been impressed by the recommendation in the famous linguist Noam Chomsky's book, *Language and Mind* to seek the wisdom of the great “amateurs” of the past, to avoid the lack of balance in new approaches (in the French translation by Louis-Jean Calvet, *Le Langage et la pensée* [Paris: Payot, 1970], 39).