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The Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality: A Neglected Nexus in the Fathers and Beyond

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by

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In this presentation, offered in honour of the founders of the Friars of the Atonement, and especially in honour of Mother Lurana White, I want to lay before you three theses about the Trinity which have been much exercising me in my recent theological research¹, and which are, I believe, intertwined in a complex and fascinating way. They relate to what I see as the interlocked themes of the Trinity, prayer, and sexuality. Let me start with a succinct enunciation of my three theses, and then proceed to a slightly more ramified explication of each in the time available.

I. The **first thesis** is this: *that the revival of a vibrant trinitarian conceptuality, an 'earthed' sense of the meaningfulness and truth of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, most naturally arises out of a simultaneous renewal of commitment to prayer, and especially prayer of a relatively wordless kind.* I shall try to explain why I think this is so with special reference to Paul's discussion of the nature of Christian prayer in Romans 8 as 'sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8:26), instituted by the Holy Spirit; and how I think this Spirit-leading approach to the Trinity through prayer is the only experientially-rooted one likely to provide some answer to the sceptical charge: why three 'persons' at all? Why believe in a trinitarian God in the first place?

So that will be my first thesis: the inextricability of renewed trinitarian conceptuality and the renewal of prayer-practice, and I shall be arguing that Christian prayer practice is inherently trinitarian. In a way this is a belated riposte to the charge of the great German 'liberal' theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, that the Trinity can never be experienced, can never be, as he put it, 'direct to consciousness'. This I want to challenge.

II. The **second thesis** goes on from this, and is perhaps a little more surprising; it is that *the close analysis of such prayer, and its implicitly trinitarian structure, makes the confrontation of a particular range of fundamental issues about sexuality unavoidable.* (Note that I use 'sexuality' in a wider sense than is often employed in North America – not restricting it to actual genital sexual activity.) The unavoidability of this confrontation seems to me to arise from the profound, but messy, entanglement of our human sexual desires and our desire for God; and in any prayer of the sort in which we radically cede control to the Spirit there is an instant reminder of the close analogue between this ceding (to the trinitarian God), and the *ekstasis* of human sexual passion. Thus it is not a coincidence that intimate relationship is at the heart of both these matters. That the early Fathers were aware of this nexus of associations (between trinitarian conceptuality, prayer of a deep sort, and the – to them – dangerous connections with issues of sex and gender), I shall illustrate with a particular example from the third century Alexandrian theologian, Origen. He was someone crucial in the early development of patristic trinitarianism, but whose doctrine of the Trinity is rarely discussed in relation to what he also writes about *eros*. What will emerge from this second thesis, I hope, is that no renewed trinitarian spirituality can *sidestep* these profound issues of the nature of sexual desire, issues which

¹ See S. COAKLEY, "Can God be Experienced as Trinity?" *The Modern Churchman* 28 (1986) 11-23; *idem*, "Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity," in S. COAKLEY and D.A. PAILIN (eds.), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and *idem*, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). An earlier version of this Wattson/White memorial lecture was published in *The Anglican Theological Review* 80, 2 (1998) 223-232, and is reproduced here with kind permission of the editor.

now so divisively exercise us in the Church's life, and are, in turn, of course, fundamentally connected with gender themes about women's roles, women's capacity for empowerment, and for professional equality.

In short, if I am right, then renewed prayer practice, enlivened trinitarian doctrine, and an honest confrontation of tough questions in the contemporary Church about issues of sexuality and gender constitute a thematic nexus. These three issues belong together, and can be shown with a bit of delicate archaeological digging beneath the polite edifice constructed by the standard history-of-doctrine textbooks, to have accompanied one another all along. Or do I shall argue.

III. My **third thesis**, then finally, is not so much a finished proposition, but a task in progress for us all. It is the task of *rethreading the strands of inherited tradition on these three matters in such a way that enacted sexual desire and desire for God are no longer seen in mutual enmity, as disjunctive alternatives, with the non-celibate woman or homosexual cast as the distractor from the divine goal*. Rather, I am seeking a renewed vision of divine desire (a trinitarian vision, I suggest) which may provide the guiding framework for a renewed theology of human sexuality — of godly sexual relations — rooted in, and analogously related to, trinitarian divine relations. In terms of the unfortunate polarities we face in contemporary Western culture between hedonism on the one hand and supposed 'repression' on the other, this very quest may appear 'subversive' of established ways of thinking. But again, I want to suggest, there are resources in the tradition for this task, even if one has to dig a bit.

Let me now say at least a bit more about these three theses in turn, and where my thinking has led me.

I. *The Trinity in prayer-practice.*

When we move to face the puzzling question of why perfect relationship in God was understood as triadic in the first place, I want to argue that an analysis of Christian prayer (especially relatively-wordless contemplative or charismatic prayer) provides an acutely-revealing matrix for explaining the origins of trinitarian reflection. Vital here is Paul's analysis of prayer in Romans 8, where he describes how, strictly speaking, we do not autonomously do the praying, for we do not even really know what to ask for; rather it is the 'Spirit' who prays in us

to the ultimate source in God ('the Father'², or 'Abba') and does so with 'sighs too deep for words' transcending normal human rationality. Into that ceaseless divine dialogue between Spirit and 'Father' the Christian pray-er is thus caught up, and so transformed, becoming a co-heir with Christ and being fashioned into an extension of redeemed, incarnate life. Recall how Paul puts it:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8:14-17a). ... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27).

Now it is important to underscore that what is going on here is not three distinguishable types of 'experience' (in the sense of emotional tonality), each experience relating to a different point of identity — 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit'. This in any case would prove to be a 'hunting of the snark' from the perspective of later developed orthodox trinitarianism, since the *homoousion* principle disallows that the different 'persons' should be experientially separate, or do different things. Rather, what is being described in Paul is *one* experience of an activity of prayer that is nonetheless ineluctably, though obscurely, triadic. It is *one* experience of God, but God as simultaneously (i) doing the praying in me, (ii) receiving that prayer, and (iii) in that exchange, consented to in me, inviting me into the Christic life of redeemed sonship. Or to put it another way: the 'Father' (so-called here) is both source and ultimate object of divine longing in us; the

² I do not here address the vexed issue of whether a feminist theologian should, under any circumstances, call God 'Father'. In *God, Sexuality and the Self* (see n. 1) I argue that in *inner-trinitarian* contexts there are theological reasons why it is difficult to insist on consistent substitutions for 'Father' language; 'creator', 'redeemer', and 'sanctifier', for instance, does not do the same theological work as 'Father', 'Son', and 'Holy Spirit'. In addition, the attempt to repress *all* 'Father' language out of liturgical usage may merely force paternal imagery underground, leaving it to continue its (often baleful) effects out of conscious sight. My solution is a multi-pronged one, including the use of deliberate illogical conjunction (maternal and paternal imagery combined) as a means of avoiding crass literalism in the attribution of parental characteristics; but I do not advocate the complete obliteration of 'Father' language, especially in the trinitarian context.

'Spirit' is that irreducibly- though obscurely- distinct enabler and incorporator of that longing in creation — that which *makes* the creation divine; and the 'Son' is that divine and perfected creation, into whose life I, as prayer, am caught up. In this sense, despite all the unclarity and doctrinal fuzziness of Romans 8, the prayer described here seems to be at least proto-trinitarian in its implications.

Now no-one would suggest that most of our prayer, sweated out as it so often is in states of dryness and distraction, may clearly feel like this. But just occasionally, I submit (at least if we allow enough space in which we are not insistently setting the agenda - if we allow, that is, this precious *hiatus* for the Spirit), then we breathe the Spirit's breath in this way; we see briefly that this is, theologically speaking, the triadic structure of God's graced ways with us — what is always going on though we mostly cannot see it. As John of the Cross puts it in a lovely passage in *The Spiritual Canticle* (39.3.4), not coincidentally quoting Romans 8: 'the Holy Spirit raises the soul most sublimely with that His divine breath ... that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father ...'

The Spirit, on this view, note, is no redundant third, no hypostatized afterthought, no cooing 'feminine' adjunct to an established male household. Rather, experientially speaking, the Spirit is *primary*, just as Pentecost is primary for the church; and leaving noncluttered space for the Spirit is the absolute precondition for the unimpeded flowing of this divine exchange in us, the 'breathing of the divine breath', as John of the Cross puts it.

Now what we want to know next is this (and it brings us to our second thesis): What happened to exegesis of Romans 8 in the critical early-patristic period? Why was it not the well-spring of the turbulent conciliar discussion of the Trinity? And why, as it seems from the standard textbooks, did the Spirit get properly attended to only third and last (in the later fourth century) in the development of trinitarian doctrine in the crucial early-patristic period, when the equality of the rational Logos with the 'Father' was discussed and established so much earlier? Or was this really so? Was there perhaps a 'soft underbelly' history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity which the textbooks have obscured, and in which the Spirit played a much more significant role from the outset?

II. *The Trinity and sexuality*

My answer to this last question, although it is a speculative answer, is 'Yes'. There is a 'soft underbelly' history of the early development of the doctrine of the Trinity which many of the Fathers themselves had reason to push to one side. What I suggest is that there is an alternative account of the genealogy of the doctrine which only becomes clear once we see the covert entanglement of this genealogy with questions

of sex and gender.

What is striking, first, is how little Romans 8 gets used as a basis for trinitarian argument and reflection in the early period (with some important exceptions in Irenaeus, Origen, and then the later Athanasius³). My hypothesis is that this is because this Romans 8 approach, fertile as it was theologically, proved a little too hot to handle. Why?

What I suggest here is that, from the second century on, there were both politico-ecclesiastical *and* gender reasons for keeping this approach to the Trinity away from the centre stage in the public conciliar discussions of the matter. For Paul's analysis of prayer in Romans 8 notably involves: (i) a certain loss of noetic control to the leading experiential force of the Spirit in the face of our weakness (8:26); (ii) an entry into a realm beyond words, beyond normal rationality or *logos* (*ibid.*); and (iii) the striking use of a (female) 'birth pangs' metaphor to describe the yearning of creation for its 'glorious liberty' (8:22). After Montanism (the prophetic and rigorist sectarian movement of the second century, ultimately condemned by Rome), it is not hard to see why any or all of these features could look less that attractive to developing mainstream 'orthodoxy', at least as a first basis for trinitarian reflection. The danger of ecstatic prophecy, when loosed from the primary control of an extrinsic Logos, was one matter. This had all the drawbacks of an essentially sectarian manifestation of the faith. The releasing of 'wretched women', as Hippolytus reports of early Montanism⁴, into positions of authority and prominence, was a second one. But there was a third danger, with which I think the third-century theologian Origen is primarily concerned (much more than he is with Montanism); and that is the danger, in any form of prayer that deliberately gives away rational mastery to the Spirit, of possible confusion between loss of control to that Spirit and loss of *sexual* control.

Let me just describe to you briefly what Origen says about prayer, trinitarianism and sexuality — all together in one nexus of association — in his fascinating treatise on prayer, the *De Oratione*⁵.

I shall just draw attention to the following four features of this work, especially of its open sections, from which you will see how closely related they are to the themes I have just

³ See, e.g. Irenaeus, *Ad haer.*, 5.20.2; Origen, *De oratione*, I.3-6 (see discussion below); Athanasius, *Ad Ser.* 1.6, 1.7, 1.19, 1.24, 1.25, 4.4. These passages are set in context in my article 'Why Three?' (see n. 1, above).

⁴ See Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haer.* 8.19; also discussed in 'Why Three?' (see n. 1, above).

⁵ I use here the English translation of the *De Oratione* (and the section divisions) in R.A. GREER (ed.), *Origen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) 81-170.

outlined:

(i) The work starts (I) with an insistence on the priority and primacy of the Holy Spirit in understanding the nature and purpose of prayer; and it stresses the capacity of the grace of God to take us beyond the 'worthless reasoning of mortals' to a sphere of unutterable mysteries (see 2 Cor 12), where 'spiritual prayer' occurs in the 'heart'. Already, then, there is the explicit willingness to allow that the Spirit – although from the start a 'fellow worker' with the Father and Son – escorts us to a realm beyond the normal constraints of human rationality, even though in Origen's case there is no suggestion that the Spirit finally undermines the significance of the rational sphere. (ii) Exegesis of Romans 8 is central to the argument from the start, and citations are reiterated more than once; it is through prayer, and being 'mingled with the Spirit', that we become 'partakers of the Word of God' (X.2). (iii) This form of prayer is repeatedly, and strikingly, compared to sexual intercourse and procreation. Thus, for instance, Origen writes: 'Just as it is not possible to beget children without a woman and without receiving the power that serves to beget children, so no one may obtain ... requests ... unless he/she has prayed with such and such a disposition' (VIII.1). The Old Testament figure of Hannah, on this view, becomes the supreme type of the pray-er who overcomes sterility through the Spirit (II.5, etc.). But finally (iv) (and this is where we see Origen putting the brakes on), an *absolute disjunction*, according to Origen, must be made between the sexual and procreative theme in its metaphorical force (as we would now call it), and in its normal human functioning. Thus Tatiana, the woman to whom (along with a man, Ambrose) this work is addressed, can be trusted with this approach only because she is 'most manly,' and has gone beyond 'womanish things' – in the 'manner of Sarah' (Genesis 18:11). And knowing how 'to pray as we ought' (Romans 8:26, see II.2) is paralleled with an appropriately 'passionless', 'deliberate,' and 'holy' performance of the 'mysteries of marriage,' lest 'Satan rejoice over you through lack of self control'. Unsurprisingly too, then, Origen's daring treatment of Romans 8 also occasions an immediate reminder (with reference to 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11), that women should always wear modest apparel and cover their heads at prayer, lest their distracting presence lead to the same sort of same loss of (male) sexual control. Later in the text, too, Origen advises against praying at all in a room in which sexual intercourse has taken place (XXXI.4). The intrinsic connections between (deep) trinitarian prayer and sex, it seems, are too close, but also too dangerous.

For Origen, the answer to this closeness between trinitarianism, contemplative ascent and sexuality, and the concomitant danger of a sinful confusion of the areas, must lie in allowing only advanced contemplatives ('enoptics') – those who have also shed actual physical sexual relations – into the

circle of those who may safely use the erotic language of the *Song of Songs* to describe Christ's intimate mystical embrace of us⁶. Hence erotic language becomes the (finally) indispensable mode of speaking of our intimacy with God, but only at the cost of renouncing the physical or fleshly expressions of sexuality. In other words, Origen, having charted the entanglement of deep trinitarian prayer and erotic thematization steps back and wrenches them apart again. To pray in this deep trinitarian way can only be the preserve of the celibate or a 'manly' woman who is beyond the menopause.

But it is precisely here, with this dilemma exposed, that our third question presses, one to which I have no complete answer, but only some speculative suggestions in closing.

III. *Divine and human desires*

My third thesis, you remember, is the call to rethread the strands of tradition on divine and human desires such that they are no longer set in fundamental enmity with one another, no longer failing in their alignment. For the fatal accompaniment of such a failure of alignment, as is all too clear in Origen (amongst others), is the implicit denigration of nonvirginal woman, or indeed any humanly desirable person, as a distractor for the contemplative from the divine goal.

What has the Trinity got to do with *this*? Let me just suggest two programmatic points in closing:

(i) The first is the hypothesis that unless we have some sense of the implications of the trinitarian God's proto-erotic desire for us, then we can hardly begin to get rightly-ordered our own erotic desires at the human level. Put another way, *we need to turn Freud on his head*. Instead of thinking of 'God' language as really being about sex (Freud's reductive ploy), we need to understand sex as really about God, and about the deep desire that we feel for God – the clue that is woven into our existence about the final and ultimate union that we seek. And it matters in this regard – or so I submit – that the God we desire is, in Godself, a desiring trinitarian God: the Spirit who longs for our response, who searches the hearts, and takes us to the divine source (the 'Father'), transforming us Christically as we are so taken.

In this connection there is a wonderfully suggestive passage in the fifth-century pseudo-Dionysius (*Divine Names*, IV) where Dionysius speaks of this divine *ekstasis* and yearning of God for creation catching up our human yearning into itself: 'This divine yearning', he writes, 'brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved ... This is why the great Paul, swept along by his yearning for God and seized of its ecstatic power, has these inspired words to say: "It is no

⁶ Origen makes this point emphatically at the opening of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Prologue, I); see tr. R.P. LAWSON, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957) 22-23.

longer I who live but Christ who lives in me". Paul was clearly a lover, and, as he says, he was beside himself for God⁷.

Now it needs to be admitted that this passage of Dionysius's is not worked out explicitly in trinitarian terms, indeed it is open to the charge of being more influenced by neo-Platonic notions of emanation and effusion than by a strictly Christian conceptuality. But I want to suggest here that it is at least capable of trinitarian glossing, according to the model provided in undeveloped form in Romans 8, and discussed above. And on this basis I suggest that we need to have a vision of trinitarian divine *ekstasis* if we are even to begin to construct a decent theology of human sexual desire that is in analogous relationship to divine desire.

(ii) Thus secondly, and lastly: if human loves are indeed made with the imprint of the divine upon them – *vestigia* of God's ways – then they too, at their best, will bear the trinitarian mark. Here we have to take off where Augustine left us, at that crucial moment in the *De Trinitate*, at the end of book VIII, when he rejects finally the analogy of 'the lover, the loved one, and the love that binds', as inadequate to the Trinity because it is bound to bodies. 'Let us tread the flesh underfoot and mount up to the soul,' as he puts it (*De Trinitate* VIII 14). But sexual loves *are* bodily, and if they are also to be godly, then they too should mirror forth the trinitarian image. And what would that involve? Surely, at the very least, a fundamental respect each for the other, an equality of exchange, and the mutual *ekstasis* of attending on the other's desire as distinct, *as other*. This is the opposite of abuse, the opposite of distanced sexual control; it is, as the French feminist Luce Irigaray has written, with uncanny insight, itself intrinsically trinitarian; sexual love at its best is not 'egological', not even a 'duality in closeness', but a shared transcendence of two selves toward the other, within a 'shared

space, a shared breath.' 'In this relation,' she writes, 'we are at least three ... you, me, and our creation of that ecstasy of ourself in us (*de nous en nous*) prior to any child'⁸. As each goes out to the other in mutual abandonment and attentiveness, so it becomes clear that a third is at play – the irreducibility of a 'shared transcendence'.

To speak thus of the trinitarian nature of sexual love at its best is a far remove from the grimy world of pornography and abuse from which Christian feminism has emerged to make its rightful protest. Unfortunately, no language of *eros* is safe from possible nefarious application; and hence the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion can never come to an end. Even these reflections on divine trinitarian *eros* could, I am well aware, be put to potentially dangerous and distorted applications⁹. In this regard, Origen's caution about putting the *Song of Songs* into the wrong hands looks less completely wrong-headed than we might have suggested earlier. We do indeed play with fire when we acknowledge the deep entanglement of sexual desire and desire for God.

But what, finally, I have been trying to lay before you tonight, in these reflections on the Trinity, prayer, and sexuality, is that this potent nexus of themes is one that no serious renewed and ecumenical 'Catholicism' can afford to ignore or repress; and that only the faithfulness of prayer that reveals the nexus in the first place can hope to deliver the insights we need in developing an adequately-rich trinitarian theology of sexuality to confront the ecclesiastical ructions on matters of sex and gender that now so profoundly exercise us.

⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 4.13; see tr. C. LUIBHEID, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (London: S.P.C.K., 1987) 82.

⁸ L. IRIGARAY, "Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas", in M. WHITFORD (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 180.

⁹ The point about the *dangers* of some feminists' use of the 'erotic' as a positive and transformative category is well made in K.M. SANDS, "Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (1992) 7-33.