On the concept of person

Hans Urs von Balthasar

> The word 'person'
> receives its special dignity in history
> when it is illuminated by
> the unique theological meaning.

Few words have as many layers of meaning as *person*. On the surface it means just any human being, any countable individual. Its deeper senses, however, point to the individual's uniqueness which cannot be interchanged and therefore cannot be counted. The complexity of the word's history, almost impossible to unravel, corresponds to this multiplicity of meanings, and almost from the beginning this history reflects the word's various aspects of meaning that cannot be synthesized.

And yet there seems to be something like a string guiding us through this mazelike garden—Ariadne's red string in the Labyrinth—and we want to pick it up from the very beginning in order to find our way. Jacques Maritain, and not he alone, always held to the principle, "The individual exists for the society, but the society exists for the person." Herein lies implicit a first decision: if one distinguishes between *individual* and *person* (and we should for the sake of clarity), then a special dignity is ascribed to the person, which the individual as such does not possess. We see this in the animal kingdom where there are many individuals but no persons. Carrying the distinction over to the realm of human beings, we will speak in the same sense of "individuals" when primarily concerned with the identity of human nature, to which, of course, a certain dignity cannot be denied insofar as all human beings are spiritual subjects. We will speak of a "person," however, when considering the uniqueness, the incomparability and therefore irreplaceability of the individual. For now we want to leave aside the

consideration of primitive cultures, in which it might be that only a single individual or a few "persons" received this quality of incomparability (e.g., the tribal chief, the king or the pharaoh) or in which it might be that the "personal" character was collectively possessed by the community, the tribe, or the clan of which the individual had to become a member in order to share in its personality; for otherwise, separated from the tribe, he was lost. We want rather to begin at the point in mankind's development when the human being himself stands in the tension between the individual and the person—a tension, as one sees very easily, that cannot be resolved, for no one can be a person except on the basis of individuality. Yet the word *individuality*, which means the quality of not being broken into parts, always includes an element of singularity that, at least potentially, contains something of personality.

Looking however at the overall history of the word *person*, we catch sight of another principle that serves as the foundation for what has been said, one that is more hidden and that must be proven in order to be credible. It will, nevertheless, turn out to be that one bit of string that will really guide us. Historically, the word has vacillated between two very different realms: that of common sense (where the everyday understanding may be rendered more precise in moral theology, law, and philosophy) and that of Christian theology, in which the concept of person acquires a completely new sense first in trinitarian doctrine and then in christology. Now in the Christian era, the general (or philosophical) concept must already exist if it is to receive its special theological content. Yet the unique trinitarian or christological content that the concept acquires in theology casts its light back upon the general (or philosophical) understanding without the latter having, therefore, to leave the realm of what is generally human. If this is the case, then it can be asserted from the outset and still without proof that the word *person* in the sense of a human being, and in contradistinction to mere individuality, receives its special dignity in history when it is illuminated by the unique theological meaning. When this is not the case, however, the human person sinks back into the sphere of mere individuality, in illustration of Maritain's principle cited at the beginning. We must, however, immediately add that this important and fruitful illumination of the philosophical concept by theology has its obverse—and here all the complexity of the issue becomes evident. Philosophy can in some way appropriate for the human person the dignity bestowed on *person* by trinitarian doctrine and christology,

whether the concept of the human person as such then influences theology or seeks to make itself completely independent.

The ancient and medieval understanding of 'person'

The external history of the word *person* has been traced so often that we can treat it briefly. Clearly, in Greek and Roman antiquity there could be no concept of person in the Christian or modern sense. The derivation of *persons* from the Etruscan *phersu* is almost universally recognized today. *Phersu* evidently denoted a mask, or the wearer of the mask, at festivals in honor P(h)ersephone. On the stage, *persona* could denote both the actor (the one who puts the masks on), or the role (hence generally the "assignment") as well as the character represented—Oedipus, for example—or by extension that which is essential, the personal character, that which carries meaning (the "legal person"), or simply "this particular one."[1] With these origins we are close to a philosophy influential today once again that each individual human life has the character of a role.[2] Even before Christ, the manifold nuances of *persona* developed quickly. Already in everyday language and in Cicero one finds it differentiated: the juridical person, the personal character, and even the philosophical understanding.[3] Grammarians and rhetoricians and, correspondingly, Stoic and Platonic philosophers knew of an interpretation of poems (Homer) or philosophical works (Plato's Dialogues) in which the author speaks out of the "role"(*ex persona*) of a particular god, hero or interlocutor. This offered the Christian exegetes of the Psalms, for example, the opportunity of determining when the Psalmist (in the New Testament understanding) speaks out of the person of Christ or of God the Father, or of the Church, and so on. First René Braun[4] and then more completely Carl Andresen, without knowing the former's work, treated the transposition of the

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[1]See Hans Rheinfelder, *Das Wort "Persona"* . . . , *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* Beiheft 77 (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1928), pp.6-17.

[2]To name only a few, C. H. Cooley, G. H. Mead, R. Linton, Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, R. K. Merton.

[3]M. Nédoncelle, "Prosopon et persona dans l'antiquité classique," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 22 (1948):277-299.

[4]*Deus Christianorum: Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien* (Paris: P. U. F., 1962), pp. 212-216, 234-235. In the second edition (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1977), he remarks that C. Andresen was not familiar with his work (p.704).

"prosopographical" (and correspondingly "personological") method to Christian theology,[5] and Marie-Josèphe Rondeau[6] has followed this lead in such a way that its trinitarian and christological implications could be very clearly identified up to Ambrose and Augustine. All this says in effect that Tertullian could already have drawn on a concept of person prepared in various ways when he wrote about Christ that amazing sentence which seems to have anticipated everything that was to come later.[7] *Videmus duplicem statum non confusum sed conjunctum in una persona Deum et hominem Jesum.*[8] His formulation, however, remained for the time being without effect; on the other hand, the concept of person emerges almost at the same time in other church authors, and the Latin meaning of *persona* as a real spiritual subject (and not only as "role") gains increasing importance in theology, as becomes evident especially in the later adoption of the trinitarian usage by christology.[9]

With the transfer effected at Chalcedon (431), the concept's philosophical determination as noted above makes itself felt for the first time in christology. In establishing that in Christ two natures, the divine and the human, are united in one (divine) person, has one paid sufficient attention to the fact that this divine person can, as such, exist only in a (trinitarian)

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[5]"Die Entstehung und Geschichte des trinitarischen Personbegriffs," *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 52 (1961):1-39.

[6]"L'élucidation des interlocuteurs des Psaumes et le développement dogmatique (IIIe-Ve siècle)," in H. Becker and R. Kaczynski, *Liturgie und Dichtung: Ein interdisziplinäres Kompendium* (St. Ottilien: Eos-Verlag, 1983), pp.509-577.

[7]A summary interpretation can be found in Rainero Cantalamessa, *La cristologia di Tertulliano*, Paradosis 18 (Fribourg: Eds. Universitaires, 1962). The author maintains that in Tertullian *persona* does not as yet have the technical meaning of the Council of Chalcedon but means simply "divine person" (ch. 9). The point has been contested, however: M. Simonetti, "Persona Christi, Tertullien Adversus Praxeam 10-17, 11," *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 1 (1965):97-98; A. Grillmeier, *Jesus, der Christus, im Glauben der Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), pp. 245-257.

[8]*Adversus Praxeam*, 27.11.

[9]M. Richard, "L'introduction du mot 'hypostase' dans la théologie de l'incarnation," *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 2 (1945):243-270. The ambiguity of the word *hypostasis* created much more of a problem for the Greek Fathers in their transference of the term to trinitarian theology (Athanasius) and christology than the Latin Fathers encountered with the term *persona*. But here we need not go into that. Cf. above all Heinrich Dörrie, *Hypostasis, Wort- und Bedeutungsgeschichte* (1955), reworked in *Platonica Minora* (Munich: Fink, 1976), pp. 13-69.

relation, for otherwise we would end up with a doctrine of three gods? Is this inattention the prelude to the famous first philosophical definition of *person* by Boethius (ca. 480-524): *persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*[10]—"A person is the individual standing-in-itself of a spiritual nature"? Doesn't this definition, dominant throughout the whole Middle Ages, making it extremely difficult, on the one hand, to apply the term to God? (St. Thomas, who essentially takes its over, will have all sorts of difficulties in applying it to the triune God.) On the other hand, doesn't it level once again the difference between *persona* and individual? And something else must be added as well, something Cardinal Ratzinger labels an "unfortunately decisive abbreviation" of the concept of person.[11] In his great work on the Trinity, Augustine certainly understood the relational and dialogical character of the persons in God, but he placed the image of the Trinity in created man completely in the single individual—certainly from a fear of polytheism—in that he wanted to see this image only in the individual's spiritual faculties (memory, knowledge, and will).

Of course, during the Middle Ages the concept of the human person was illuminated by the theological concept. But the need was also felt to go consciously beyond the purely philosophical definition of Boethius. Richard of St. Victor made an interesting attempt in that in his treatise on the Trinity he created a concept that defined the (divine, but also human) person as *ex-sistentia*, as a spiritual subject that earns the name *person* only by going out beyond itself (*ex*)—in God as something relative.[12] Bonaventure picks up Richard's initiative; he seeks, moreover, to distinguish between *individuum* and *persona*. He does this, however, by philosophical means even though he makes use of the concept largely for theology. He follows, on the one hand, Boethius,[13] even when using Richard's terminol-

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[10]*PL* 64:1343.

[11]"Zum Personverständnis in der Theologie," *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Munich and Freiburg: Wewel, 1973), pp. 205-223, note 225.

[12]For God "nihil aliud est persona quam incommunicabilis existentia," in *De Trinitate*, 4.28, ed. Jean Ribailler (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958), p.181. Concerning the *ex*, see *De Trinitate*, 4.12, ed. Ribaillier, p. 174: "per adjunctam 'ex' propositionem notari potest quod (persona) pertinet ad aliam."

[13]For person as "per se existens," see *In Sent.*, lib.1 dist.25 cap.1 and dist.25 a.1 q.2.

ogy,[14] and he distinguishes, on the other hand, *person* from *individuum* by its "exalted dignity."[15] Duns Scotus follows him in the distinction between *individuum* ("to be one thing") and *person* ("to be one human being" with the dignity that sets one apart). Also St. Thomas, who holds to Boethius' definition or makes only minor changes, agrees in this approach. And in a remarkable passage he understands at the same time the original point of departure for the concept. It is worth hearing him:

Even if the designation person does not belong to God in virtue of that from which the designation originally derived, it nevertheless belongs to Him to the highest degree in virtue of what it is intended to mean. For because in comedy and tragedy famous men were presented, the designation *person* was used in order to characterize such as possessed a dignity. Thus it became customary to name such as had a certain dignity with the church *persons* ("personalities"). Thus some define *person* as a spiritual subject (*hypostasis*) that is distinguished through a characteristic lying in order of dignity. And because it constitutes a high dignity to be independent in a nature endowed with reason (Boethius), thus every individual of a nature endowed with reason is called *person*. Now the dignity of the divine nature exceeds every other dignity. Thus the designation *person* corresponds in the highest degree to God.[16]

One sees that here the concept is applied to God solely on the basis of the idea of dignity. The relation of the divine persons to one another is not mentioned here at all but only when the unity of the divine essence must be defended. The point is not that the philosophical concept would have obscured the theological insight, but that High Scholasticism is no longer aware that the dignity, which it here ascribes to the person (in distinction to the mere individual), is ultimately indebted to the light shed by theology on the understanding of man and angel.

The modern understanding of 'person'

This becomes clear time and again in the development of the Modern Age, in which the philosophical "independence" of the person sought first to define itself as subjective

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[14]*In Sent.*, lib.1 dist.25 a.1 qq.1-2: "juxta quemdam singularis existentiae modum."

[15]*In Sent.*, lib.3 dist.5 a.2 q.2 and dist.10 a.1 q.3: "distinctio supereminentis dignitatis." See also the numerous passages in the Quaracchi edition's index to the *Sentences*-commentary, pp. 265-266. Richard is said to have corrected the definition of Boethius: *In Sent.*, lib.1 dist.25 a.1 q.2.

[16]*Summa theologiae* 1, q.29 a.3 ad 2.

self-consciousness (Descartes), and this independence then absolutized itself very soon (Spinoza, Hegel) so that the individuals had to give themselves up to this Absolute. Kant's attempt to save the dignity of the person could not halt this drift. For even though it was demanded that the other person be respected, the absoluteness of the person was anchored simply in his ethical freedom. Thus there was nothing preserved of a fundamental interrelatedness of persons—as a meaningfully understood *imago Trinitatis* would have demanded. Every optic dimension of the person was lacking as well. And once again, it is certainly Christianity that illuminates Kant's concept of the person, but a protestant and enlightened Christianity, a religion within bare reason (though it still retains its Christian coloring), in which there is no place for either a divine Trinity or for a vicarious representation by Christ. For how could someone else take responsibility before God for my absolute, holy freedom? Representation (even that by Christ) seemed to Kant a theft.

In this way the paradoxical had to come about—that after a personless idealism met its end in Hegel, the popular atheistic materialism of a Feuerbach had to rediscover the elementary fact that there simply cannot be a single person, existing within himself, but that existence as a person comes about only in the relationship between the I and Thou. The atheistic materialist was the one who reached beyond Augustine to the insight about what man is, in Christian terms, as the personal *imago Trinitatis*. Martin Buber also began with Feuerbach and then sketched the history of modern personalism.[17] The history of the initially Jewish and Christian personalism has been described often enough, and its essential elements may be presupposed as familiar. Without the biblical background it is inconceivable: its forerunners (Pascal, Kierkegaard, Jacobi, Maine de Biran, Renouvier) and its main representatives (the late Cohen, Buber, Ebner, Guardini, and the strongest of them, Franz Rosenzweig)—they all live from their biblical inspiration. With Buber and Ebner one remains with merely an I-Thou relationship, where a divine Logos—and in the case of Ebner even an incarnate one—can be presupposed as background. However, one does not as yet reach an image of the Trinity, not even with Rosenzweig, for whom the negative "it"(Buber) or "One"(Ebner) is replaced by the World—certainly a throwback to Hegel's

[17]"Zur Geschichte des dialogischen Prinzips," in his *Werke*, vol. 1: *Schriften zur Philosophie* (Munich: Kösel-Lambert Schneider, 1962), pp. 293-305.

pseudo-trinity which he had taken as his starting point. First with Guardini, then more strongly with Mounier, Gabriel Marcel, and Denis de Rougemont does something of a true image of the Trinity appear—in any case, the connection of the I, which is open to the Thou and the We and which realizes itself only in self-giving, with the image of man in Scripture, and above all in the New Testament. "The individual" de Rougemont writes,

appears to me as the being that tears itself away from the dark sacredness, from the terror of the tribe, and profanes the taboos on the basis of an anti-social Reason. It appears to me a necessary, preliminary stage for the appearance of the person. But if one remains at this preliminary stage, then one receives nothing more than anarchy, the social vacuum. There are then two possibilities: either artificially reconstruct the sacred (racism or communism of the state) or accept an always urgent *vocation* that distinguishes the human being and binds him at the same time to his neighbor and founds the church. Only in such a community does the person exist truly. Person, act, vocation become for me virtually synonymous. The act is concrete obedience to a transcendent vocation: the vocation brings forth the person in the *individuum*. Hence this new definition: the *individuum* is the natural man; the person is the new creature, as Paul understands it.[18]

What de Rougemont calls "vocation" I have named "mission" in my definition of the person in the truly christological context. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," Christ says. Here we can presuppose, with St. Thomas, that in a trinitarian sense *missio* is the economic form of the eternal *processio* that constitutes the persons of the Son and of the Spirit in God. Participation in the mission of Christ (or that which in the building up of the church Paul calls "charisma" and which is given to each as his eternal idea with God and his social task)—that would be the actual core of the reality of the person.[19] The world situation today shows clearly enough that whoever discards this Christian or at least biblical view (in theology or philosophy) must in one way or another find in a personless collectivism or individualism (which converge upon one another) his downfall.

Let us add one last observation, very pertinent though it might seem to lie far afield. If one takes the Christian doctrine of the Trinity seriously, then the divine persons Father,

[18]From a letter of de Rougemont quoted by Roger Benjamin, *Notion de Personne et Personnnalisme chrétien* (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 111.
[19]See my *Theodramatik*, vol. 2/2 (Johannesverlag: Einsiedeln, 1978), pp. 136-259.

Son, and Spirit appear, if one wants to hold on to the unity of God, to be constituted in nothing other than pure love or self-lessness. And this is so from all eternity so that the person of the Father becomes the greatest mystery: "the first person does not generate in the sense that to the complete person the act of generating a son is added, but the person *is* the act of generating, of offering oneself and flowing out . . . the pure actuality."[20] What remains then for the nature common to the persons except for pure love? It is not as if one would thereby understand the divine selflessness of the person as negation of the person, for there is indeed the order of processions that constitutes the nature of God as absolute love. But what is discernible here at least from a distance is the dialogue with Buddhism with all its forms, for which the "tiny I" (roughly, the person in the definition of Boethius) must disappear for the sake of something that is inexpressible that one can describe paradoxically as the selfless self. As long as we do not see our I and our person in a trinitarian light but cling to a fundamental and lasting "independence," every encounter with the Asiatic search for selflessness is futile. It is not as if we might or could try to establish identities between the religious philosophy of Asia and the historically revealed religion of the Bible; such attempts would only end once again with the loss of the Christian concept of person. But insofar as we regard this concept in its eternal sources we will have to let much fall aside that hinders us in our own life of Christian love and also stands in the way to a possible dialogue with Asia. That has been grasped as yet by only a few.[21]—*Translated by Peter Verhalen, O. Cist.*   □

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[20]J. Ratzinger, "Zum Personverständis," p. 211.

[21]Here I name only Masumi Shimizu (from the Mission Sisters of the Heart of Jesus) and her work: *Das 'Selbst' im Mahayana-Buddhismus in japanischer Sicht und die 'Person' im Christentum im Licht des Neuen Testaments* (Bonn, 1979), with bibliography from both religions.

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The geography of the human person

Kenneth L. Schmitz

> It is upon the uniqueness
> of each person and the diversity
> of all that human dignity
> rests.

If an inquisitive acquaintance gets uncomfortably close to what we don't want broadcast to others, we are likely to demur with the excuse: "I really don't want to talk about that, it's very personal." If the questioner has any sensitivity at all, that should warn him or her off any further inquisition, since to cry "Personal" is one of our acceptable informal social ways of preserving our privacy. In another sense of the term, however, we may credit a person (sometimes a figure in authority) with treating us "as a person." By that, we mean that he or she respects us and accords us a particular dignity and value; he or she shows interest in us, not out of curiosity, but intrinsically "for ourselves." Some commercial interests have caught on to this, availing themselves of something from which they can profit. And so, not infrequently the mail delivers "personalized" letters, embossed with our names, not excluding degrees of familiarity, ranging from the formal to the informal. This trick,—aided by electronic devices nowadays—while itself a fraud, plays upon something genuine in the meaning of the term *person*, viz., that a person is a unique center and that access to a person is access to a certain privileged intimacy. In flattering us, the advertiser plays upon three facets of the term: he accords us the innate dignity of a unique status and claims a certain insider's knowledge of us, a kind of intimacy. *Dignity, uniqueness, and intimacy*: these cling to the meaning of the term *person*, and to the adjec-