

# BUT YOU, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

By KYM HARRIS

**P**ERSONAL IDENTITY IS ENIGMATIC. Only I can say who I am but I come to self-knowledge in relationship with others. And not only with other people but also with God. Yet the Christian God is not a single entity but a community of Persons, whom we normally experience working as one. Our path to identity is woven around with a web of relationships, human and divine, in which we experience our selves as both unique and connected with others.

Today both the science of God's personal life, Trinitarian theology, and the science of human life, psychology, are in a state of flux. In the fourth and fifth centuries the theologians of the Church developed ways of talking about the inner life of God using categories from the culture and theology of their time. In the ensuing centuries these reflections were developed, reaching their best expression in the Middle Ages in the writings of Thomas Aquinas in the Western Church, and Gregory Palamas in the Eastern Church. Ironically, while the idea of the communitarian nature of God was developed in Aquinas, it has never been an integral part of Catholic spirituality. God has been approached as one in spite of the liturgical formulae. It can be argued that the notion of *person* as it was taken up and used in the theological debates had a major influence in the West in the development and notion of the person that has come to characterize modern psychology, yet the relational aspect of the Persons in the Trinity has been neglected.

The icon of modern psychology has been the autonomous individual: the person who could act from their own centre independently of other people. In recent years this icon has been challenged from different quarters. Work by people as diverse as William Menninger<sup>1</sup> and Nancy Choderow<sup>2</sup> stresses the web of relationships in which we experience ourselves and within which we learn to discover our uniqueness from others. Yet the image of the autonomous individual has been such a dominant ideal we find it hard to think of personal identity in relational images other than those that have a hierarchical style in which one individual directs or controls the other. Consequently relationships that should have a positive role in personal development like parent-child, husband-wife, teacher-student, religious leader-member of com-

munity, are frequently seen and experienced as repressive of personal identity. But it need not be so.

### *Unity in diversity*

Being made in the image of God, we also relate to God in images drawn from our experience. The image we have of ourselves will affect the image we have of God. So image of self and image of God are interwoven with each other; neither is wholly dependent yet both profoundly influence the other. To appreciate our calling into the divine life we need models of relationships in which people can respect each other as equals in communion while celebrating the differences between them.

In the last discourse of the Gospel of John, Jesus calls his disciples friends, saying that he has made known to them all that the Father has told him, that he loves them as the Father loves him and that he will send them the Spirit of truth. In short, the disciples are drawn into the life of love of the Godhead which Jesus' words imply is one of equality, mutual trust and self-giving love. Loved as much as the Persons of the Trinity love each other, the Christian always remains a creature dependent on the mercy of God. Our challenge is to find images that help us hold these two seemingly contradictory realities together. Perhaps the place to start is with relationships in which people treat each other as equals but in which difference is integral to the relationship.

In the Acts of the Apostles the model of the Christian community was of a group of people who held everything in common and shared according to need. While seeing themselves as one, united in mind and heart (Acts 4:32), their personal differences were recognized and respected. Aquinas teaches that the Persons of the Trinity have everything in common. The only differences between the Persons are those of relationship.<sup>3</sup> Difference in God is constitutive of relationship because difference between the divine Persons provides the tension in which the divine energy of love flows. While all the attributes normally associated with the Godhead, e.g. power, knowledge, are held by the three Persons as one, the greatest gift, love, flows from that one intermingling as three.

Relationships, as they are presented in popular culture, are quite the opposite of this. The difference is epitomized in the marriages of the aristocracy of our society – the movie actors and pop musicians. Their loves are presented as relationships where the partners become one in their union with each other while their marriage contracts witness that the property, the children and rights about anything else are clearly kept separate.

The popular image of two people dissolving into one in relationship is so pervasive that it is difficult to imagine relationships of equality and mutual respect flourishing in the presence of diversity and flowering into love. Yet the Christian calling is precisely that, and therefore we need models of relationship where our differences are not only respected but are treated as a positive reflection of the divine life. Our images of what is possible will help or hinder the relationships that we have with God and other people and ultimately our sense of personal identity. What are some images from human experience, where difference can contribute positively to our relationship with the Trinity and to the forming of our identity in interdependence?

### *Mentor*

In growing up it was assumed that I had no artistic talent. After a few years in the monastery our community was given a pottery wheel and the question arose as to who was to use it. My name came up, as it was said, 'She always likes being in a mess'. I began classes with Tom Mormoyle FSC. He brought abilities out of me that I had never dreamed were there (nor had anyone else). Once I showed talent, his attitude as a teacher changed. I felt accepted as a potter equal in potential, but was continually challenged to pursue an excellence that was ever open-ended. If I ever balked at a suggestion saying 'I can't do it' his reply would invariably be 'You've never tried'. At first I thought he was an exceptional teacher but now I realize that I was being mentored.

A mentor does not only encourage a person in their potential, a mentor draws out ability by accepting a person as an equal, as one who has ability but who has yet to attain the skills to express that potential. A mentor invites the one being mentored into the circle of those already able to create and the trust itself is creative. Most scholars, sports people and artists will refer to the mentors who have been instrumental in their personal development in their field. After his first success in the tour of Australian cricketers to England last year, Shane Warne spoke of the way Allan Border put his faith in him when he, Warne, had previously failed miserably. In his usual dour way, Border had told Warne that perseverance was the key to success and had thereby identified that quality in Warne which between them they should nurture.

Mentors have authority, not only by virtue of their own capabilities, but by their capacity to author life in others. People who seem ungifted in one area can foster growth in others by the faith and trust they engender. Consider Allan Border again. His captaincy has always been under criticism, to a large degree because he does not look good. His

public manner seems uninspiring, he bats like the man next door, yet under his captaincy he has forged a team known for its diversity of skills and style. And not only on the field. Once, pressure was on him to drop a batsman who was not getting the runs. He refused because what that batsman gave in team spirit was more important than runs.

While mentoring is a common relationship its dynamics have not been well studied. Interest in it is coming from an unexpected source – namely those studying sexual abuse by men in authority. In his excellent book *Sex in the forbidden zone* (subtitled *When men in power – therapists, doctors, clergy, teachers and others – betray women's trust*) Peter Rutter<sup>4</sup> describes the destruction that happens to a woman when a mentor uses his power for himself. As women have not been in traditional mentoring roles the abuse has usually been male to female, though no doubt that will change. At the end of the book a mentoring relationship<sup>5</sup> is chronicled in which the mentor chose *not* to subvert the relationship to his own sexual needs. What then occurred for both parties was healing in other parts of their personality. For the man, he was relieved 'of the illusion men have that women hold the secret cure for us'. He discovered an 'access to a quality of strength and inner satisfaction that [he] had never known before'. Not that he still did not have difficult times, but in Rutter's imagery he released the 'woman' within his own personality. The woman concerned described her healing in the strong terms of being released from the 'incest pact' in which women are made to feel that nothing they do has meaning unless they receive the approval of a man. She goes on to say: 'And I'm sure that my ability to have the kind of intimate relationship with a man I have now, which is one of pretty much complete psychological equality, also grew from that healing moment'.

The mentoring relationship was healing for both parties but in different ways. In using strength to encourage growth in another, the mentor releases within his or her self the weaker side in a controlled manner that is at the service of another. Thus the mentor has the power to create and the ability to respect the difference of the other. It is a generative power, in which power nurtures vulnerability, tenderness is mingled with toughness, and criticism challenges growth. It is highly reminiscent of the parental relationship but carries both paternal and maternal roles without locking into gender categories and without relating to the other as though they were a child. The mentor recognizes that each person has a different style and way. From the beginning, Tom respected that my pottery style was different. Allan Border will never be the spin bowler that Steve Warne will be. Their creative power allows diversity to flourish.

*Parent*

Jesus had problematic relationships with his parents in the New Testament. Aside from the infancy narratives, Jesus' relationship with his mother Mary was always undergoing change. In each of the gospel scenes their relationship to each other was being redefined. The incident of his mother and brothers wishing to see him and being rebuked is the *only* incident relating to Mary that appears in all three Synoptic Gospels. Jesus does not reject his mother but states clearly for his followers that the primary bond of relationship to him is to be one of union of will. In the story of the marriage feast of Cana (Jn 2:1–12) Jesus and Mary both seem to be redefining themselves in relationship to each other. Mary presumes the right to tell Jesus what to do; she has noticed the needs of others and wishes them to be served and calls on his power to do so. Jesus' response shifts the emphasis away from the needs of the others to the relationship between themselves. Her wishes will no longer determine his deeds: he is waiting upon another call. While he fulfils her request, she now knows that Jesus does it freely and under no compulsion to her due to his biological origin.

All the gospels attest to a struggle between Jesus and his Father over the death that Jesus was facing. The Synoptic Gospels describe in graphic terms the agony in the garden of Gethsemane that Jesus went through, to the point of sweating blood, in accepting the Father's 'cup of salvation'. The scandal of such agony has always been for Christians difficult to deal with. Both Matthew and Luke's versions scale down the raw intensity of the account in the Gospel of Mark. Even the Gospel of John which stresses the divine origin of Jesus and his unity with the Father contains a trace of Jesus' struggle with his fate and the Father's role in it. After describing the grain of wheat that must die Jesus says 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this hour that I have come. Father, glorify your name' (Jn 12:27–28a). In both the Synoptics and John, Jesus disagrees with the Father over that way of the cross and then moves freely into obedience to the Father's will. Freedom to differ is integral to the capacity to obey.

Given that the gospels retain incidents where Jesus clarifies his relationship with his Father and with Mary his mother we need to pause in considering our own parental relationships and what they mean for our images of God and own self-identity. I have read of people who have had wholly happy, positive and fulfilling relationships with at least one parent. But I have not met many. My own experience, with two excellent parents, and that of friends with good parents is that the reality

of coming to a mature relationship with our parents is very messy, involving pain, misunderstanding and a great deal of love and commitment on both parts. The guilt we feel because of what feels like a breakdown in relationship could well be done without. In the midst of pain and difficulty it is easy to think that this situation is wrong. From there it is a short step to feeling that it is sinful and from there it is an even shorter step to apportioning blame either to ourselves or to our parents.

But if Jesus, the sinless one, experienced a transformation in the parent-child relationship, there is another way of considering the changes that occur in this relationship, namely as part of our divinization process. The major shift in the parent-child relationship is one that we all need to undergo to come to our freedom as an adult and to our own self-identity. Once the bond of child-dependence has been broken we can move to a relationship where we obey or respond to their requests in adult freedom. The shift is not easily made as the recognition of parents is a basic human need. Whether for approval or disapproval it is like an umbilical cord connecting us with our origins. Till that is broken we cannot accept our origin in freedom because we are still emotionally connected. The transformation may take place in relatively minor situations, like Cana, or in experiences in which our personhood feels faced with extinction, like the Gethsemane experience.

*Friends and, more importantly, foes*

A relationship is not simply the sum of two people coming together. Between people, one plus one does not equal two. Rather a chemistry occurs between people in a relationship such that each affects the other transforming them, at least a little, in the interaction. This is obvious in romantic love and in those meetings when we strongly 'click' with another person. But considering the way we relate to our 'foes' can yield insight into how we come to personal identity.

In a novel I once read, a meeting was described between two women who had become estranged. One of the women had initiated the meeting in the hope that it would bring about a reconciliation. A blind friend offered to accompany her. Despite the best intentions of both women the meeting quickly became acrimonious and the relationship deteriorated further. As the woman who had initiated the meeting and her blind friend walked away, he mused: 'What were the tripwires between you that were hampering your coming together?' In other words, what unacknowledged forces were preventing them from fulfilling their desire for reconciliation?

We have all experienced relationships where thorniness constantly breaks down communication in spite of our best efforts to resolve the

difficulties between us. We try to change ourselves, we try to change the other, but have little joy with the result. But it could be the chemistry between the people that needs to be considered. Much of this will be unconscious but not all. How one reacts to the irksome in another can reveal part of the self that has not been discovered in more satisfying and fruitful relationships. Enemies can teach not only in the nasty truths they may speak but also in the forces they release in a relationship. By considering the tripwires, i.e. the dynamics between the people of the relationship, the differences between the people concerned can be considered more objectively. The tendency to blame one or the other for failure is suspended. The qualities of each can be assessed more neutrally and a more realistic basis for reconciliation and possibly relationship could be forthcoming.

### *Retain the sin*

How we react to being sinned against is one of the most problematic issues we face in life. When faced with a difficult situation our tendency is to 'fight or flight' and people seem to be either fighters or flighters. In relationships this often means that one is sinned against and the other is sinning. Or so it seems. Is there no third alternative to fight or flight?

In the resurrection scene of John 20:19-23, when the risen Christ gives his first gift to the disciples he says, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Those whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven. Those whose sins you retain they are retained.' While all of us have been encouraged to forgive sin, unfortunately the latter part of this quotation has only been applied to sacramental confession and, never having been refused absolution, I presume it is not applied too often even in that context. While I have no quibble with its application to confession, if the first part applies to ordinary Christian life, why not the latter? Ultimately forgiveness is the only Christian response to sin. Is the wife abused by her husband just to continue to take it? Is a husband to ignore his wife's alcoholism? Are religious in community to allow themselves to be dominated by the angry and experience situations in which we have suffered abuse and in which we do not feel we can forgive? Maybe the time for forgiveness has not yet arrived and the sin needs to be first recognized, explored and rectified before the healing of forgiveness is appropriate. With the gift of the Holy Spirit the sin needs to be retained.

By retaining sin one neither acquiesces in it nor fights it. One stays with it and accepts that sin is a fact. Rail against the presence of evil in our world we may but, till we face its presence in our hearts and in our lives, all our efforts to change evil into good will be at best ineffectual and

at worst compound the sin. Hardness of head as well as pain of heart is needed. To have these together is far more difficult than it seems and entails a high degree of detachment on our part, and the difficulty is that we are not detached from our pain.

Pain is a sign that something is wrong. The natural reaction is to alleviate the pain as soon as possible but that can be before the cause is determined, which is like the doctor curing the symptoms, but not the disease. The patient will only get worse. The gift of the Spirit is to allow us to be patient in pain until we have the wisdom to know how to respond in truth to ourselves and to the other. In the Spirit we can live in tension and learn a new way of relating to the other that calls for self-giving in a love that is not destructive of either person but has the potential for new life in both. Reconciliation of sin is the sign that the life of the Trinity is present between us.

Dealing with differences is part of our divinization process. As we patiently and creatively work through the pain of differences to a celebration of diversity, we develop within ourselves a variety of relational styles that can treat others with respect and love, while revealing the richness of our own personality. This experience of self-in-communion reflects the inner nature of God: Three Persons in the creative dance of relationship, One in Being. Meditating on this awesome beauty can give us the grace and insight to be faithful to others in relationship through the pain, difficulties and misunderstandings that are integral to the quest for true Love. To paraphrase the first letter of John:

What we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed. All we know is, that we shall be like Them for we shall see Them as They really are.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Popularized by writers like Harriet Goldher Lerner.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory* (New Haven and London, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> *Summa theologiae*, I, 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> London, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 215–223. The quotations here come from these pages.