

in our hearts (cf. Jer. 31. 31). We are one with Christ, the fulness of the law; his Spirit is our Spirit; and by that Spirit we are led (Rom. 8. 15). We do indeed follow the law; but the law is a person, Jesus Christ, our model. The law is simply the expression of the life of Christ in us.

## The Trinity and our Society

CLARE DAWSON

To say that the being of God is the basis of human society may seem to anyone who believes in the procession of creatures from the divine mind, conceived by his thought, made actual by his will, a statement of the obvious; indeed any theist would be likely to agree that since the nature of ultimate truth must be the source of all truth and being, whatever theory of creation is held, it is from God that the shape of what concerns human destiny must descend. Any real belief in God affects our ideas about man and human society, but the Christian belief in the Trinity most profoundly tempers the structure of our thought.

The idea of society (as an unspecified notion, not tied down to this society or that, in one age or another), and of man's life in common is closely related to the mystery of divine society. It could hardly be otherwise since the fundamental doctrine of Christianity shows God as knowing and loving, having within his essential unity true interchange and the mutual give-and-take indispensable to the concept of community or society.

If there were no divine society, if God were one not only in the oneness of nature but as a solitary being, human society might exist, since man is a social animal, depending on the first and smallest unit of society for his existence and preservation, on the larger society or group, nation or state for his well-being. But it would be very different. Instead of being the goal towards which we move and which we try to express by successive social patterns it would be something of a makeshift, a utility rather than an end in which human persons are to achieve completion.

Religious communities, such as the religious orders, existed before Christ and in other than Christian religions, but their existence in the Christian community bears continual witness to the social nature of Christianity. They began, perhaps, through a desire for individual perfection, but they testify to the fact that persons are perfected in voluntary association, mounting at last to the heights of true friendship.

Those who attempt to live a shared or common life at an heroic level can do so only because their minds and hearts are directed continually towards one supreme truth, one ideal. Contemplation is the core of the monastic life and Christian monasticism (in all its forms, not only in the orders commonly called contemplative), is founded in the contemplation of God revealed in Christ, fashioning and governing the lives of its members in their relationship with each other and with the whole body of Christ.

What any person or group of persons understands by 'God' varies a great deal, but nature precedes grace. Christ did not bring the fullness of revelation into a world of men without any concept of transcendent being. The image of God is impressed in human persons and reflected with decreasing clarity through the entire range of creatures down to inanimate matter. We know nothing that is, in the scholastic sense, formless, and increasing knowledge of the material world seems to show more, and more subtle, forms than Aristotle was able to perceive. Believing men in this modern age find more rather than less trace of God in the material universe.

Into this world of shadowy perceptions, to a people prepared by the revelation of the one God, but whose vision of their own vocation had grown dim, Christ came, the blinding splendour of eternal Truth veiled in the real humanity of the carpenter from Nazareth. It was not until his short life was over that the effects of his mission could be seen, but what contemporary witnesses remarked was the fearlessness of those who preached Christ and the depth and reality of the shared life, the brotherly love between Christians.

A shared life seems to be the opposite of all we understand by private ownership, even when the words are lifted out of their political context, but when we look a little closer we find that the one is obverse to the other, for the right to own is conceded to individuals to perfect them as persons for the good of the whole community.

For the Christian this community is primarily the Church, both in its earthly state of becoming, holding the truth in the darkness of faith, receiving grace under the secrecy of sacraments, and in its final beauty

as the Bride adorned for the Lamb. It is a people made one in Christ, the one mediator between God and man, growing into the complete Christ who is one with his members as they yield themselves to the Holy Spirit who forms Christ in them.

The communism of the apostolic days did not deny private ownership without which, in some form, with its rights and responsibilities, human persons can hardly attain full adult status; service to the community becomes servitude rather than the voluntary action of free men if the means to serve is denied to the individual. Many of the first Christians were slaves, but they brought to the Christian assembly that which was their own—a little bread, a small flask of wine.

The kind of private ownership, whether of material or spiritual goods, that Christianity rebukes by its very existence is the ownership that intends to amass simply, in excess of individual need, and without intention to distribute directly or indirectly. Private ownership that is selfish and greedy distorts rather than perfects the owner. (Was this the flaw in the character of the rich young man whom our Lord looked at and loved but who refused his terms of discipleship?) It is not ownership but the manner of it that distorts or perfects human character.

God is not to be compared to any creature, as if he were this or that; even the word 'person' when applied to him means something far exceeding our innate knowledge and experience of personality. But that does not make it a lie. The Christian revelation tells us that God is three persons in society and that the perfection of each person is as absolute as the perfection of the divine nature equally possessed by all. It is in the light of this mystery that individual perfecting and whatever is needed for it is seen to be not only permissible but necessary for the perfecting of the whole body; that body which is actually human society in every age, race and state, but potentially and intentionally the Church which exists always, for all men, everywhere. The truth that outside the Church there is no salvation has a meaning other than the narrow, sectarian and heretical interpretation occasionally read into it.

Christians rightly shrink with horror from the idea that any human being can know God in the same sense as he knows matters for which the human mind is naturally competent; on the other hand knowledge of God is the primary gift and ministry of the incarnate Word. Strictly Christian thinking is surely the turning of minds gratuitously enlightened by the highest truth to the consideration of anything and everything humanly knowable, so as to relate all things to the supreme Truth.

If we compare, then, the social obligations of Christian living with the great mystery of the Three in Unity our minds are making a quite proper return to the source of truth. It reminds us that we cannot be saved alone and that love of our neighbours, in which we may fail but must intend or be cast out from the divine society, is the very means of perfecting in us the likeness to the God who in himself loves and is loved.

The use of private good for social end, the desire for individual perfection for the sake of the Church, the Bride-elect of Christ, moving through time to the fullness of the heavenly marriage, is indeed an image of the Trinity, a reflection of the divine life. This comes out plainly in the stringent commands of Christ about duty towards our neighbours. The commandments given through Moses teach us the bare bones of reasonable behaviour towards our fellows, but in Christ's teaching the only law is charity because such is the 'law' of the divine Being.

In God equality is an essential note of the relationship of the three persons, an equality that includes freedom in giving and taking. We get a hint of this from John 16. 15, 'all that belongs to the Father belongs to me', and again, very much to the point of this essay, in John 5. 19 'the Son . . . can do only what he sees his Father doing'. What more positive basis could the children of God find for their social thinking than what has been taught of the life of God himself? But without freedom there can be no love, for a gift given under compulsion ceases to be truly a sign of love and of love's surrender and acceptance which gifts, as tokens of the self, signify.

This is as true of the love and service of the community as it is of the love one human person may have for another. Take away the freedom that is exercised in ownership and the human person is deprived of the natural means of expressing his love. In a sinful world compulsion may be necessary, but the voluntary use of private goods and personal possessions for the common good of society is a great good and one that satisfies a real need. The need to give is as great, perhaps psychologically greater than the need to get.

When we profess belief in one God in Trinity of persons every adult Christian, adult that is in St Paul's sense of growing up in Christ, knows that the words mean incomparably more than they say, but the words alone are not enough. They live and become fruitful in our minds, our lives, only when they are watered, so to speak, by the grace of faith. It is faith that gives to individuals as to the Church itself insight into the

mysteries of God. By the gift of faith God enlightens us with a gleam of his self-knowledge. Faith is never *less* than that, whatever the degree of its presence in an individual. Believing is something we do, but it is something God initiates in us and sustains, so that every act of faith is at once the act of man towards God and of God towards and in man.

There are plenty of practical difficulties in the way of perfect or even tolerable human society, notably the common human failings of greed, selfishness, fear and lust, but the difficulty is woefully increased by inability to see clearly what sort of society human persons really want. The practical difficulties can be overcome only by the power of God enabling us to exercise the charity of Christ laying down his life for his friends, and this may be present by the working of the Holy Ghost even in those who do not know Christ, but the idea of society comes from the vision of man's beginning and his last end.

This is no more than good sense. When we know what a thing is for we are able to see how it can best be used and though we may hit on the right idea by a lucky guess we are likely to do a great deal of damage in the process of finding out, including perhaps our own destruction. Human beings have always had a perfectly natural interest in what concerns them so intimately as their own origin and end and if minds on account of sin have a tendency to shy away from truth at least we have not lost our hunger for complete happiness.

Without this vision of the end we are in danger not only of making mistakes, which might not matter very much, but of wasting our energies in attempts that are doomed to frustration because the good rather than the evil in human nature rejects the narrowness of a goal enclosed in time. The end which Christ reveals as man's true goal is a life in society, a society where happiness is not a fleeting glance but a constant and vital reality. It is a life of union with God and in the society of the Trinity, never comprehended, but known and possessed perhaps so far as the mind has yielded itself on earth to be possessed by its maker.

Other-worldliness is sometimes damned, not unreasonably, for obstructing the work of building here and now a society fit for the children of God, but the purpose of keeping our final end before our eyes is not that we may avoid life's hardships—though a measure of relief from the pressure of temporal disaster may be exactly what we need in order to embrace the inescapable cross. It is that we may be able to discern the proper shape not only of good human society, but of real persons and real human needs. A materialist society fails to satisfy human desire for happiness because happiness is always in some degree

transcendent. A society that worked efficiently and displayed external justice would not necessarily be a happy society. It may be one of the errors of our plan-dominated age to forget (as architects have been known to forget stairs) that the transcendent must be allowed for in any structure of society where human persons are expected to be happy.

It may be argued that the only thing politicians can do is to frame laws to ensure that happiness is not made impossible for anyone from force of circumstances. That I suppose was the Greek ideal, whether or not it was achieved. But is the humanist view sufficient? And can any of us feel confident that modern politicians, however well intentioned, driven into party membership and the pressure of what might be termed (without reflection either on individual clear-mindedness or honesty) mass-thinking can be sufficiently free from the mechanics of political action to retain their hold on happiness as human goal? A materialist economy, for instance, may make demands that are contrary to the human good life that prepares for and receives, even in this mortal chrysalis condition, an inflow of grace from the perfect society of the Trinity.

The Church of the apostolic age was a very compact society, more than it has been in any age since the conversion of Constantine, and the singular closeness of its brotherhood is something to which we look back in admiration; nevertheless, the near invasion of the Church by the world when converts flocked, possibly with a too easy *insouciance*, after the convert emperor, was not the end of the Church nor its total loss. Good came of it as well as bad, if only in the progressive clarification of Christian theological thinking.

We cannot if we wanted go back, but the Spirit that animated the first Christians animates us. The Church has still the mind of Christ even if, since the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not automatic, it has to struggle with human weakness and prejudice. The present Council may do much to guide human beings, outside as well as within the Church, to a kind of social thinking more proportionate to the end for which we all were made. There are no short cuts, no easy solutions to lift from any of us the burden of living together not only with tolerance and good humour, but with a love that reflects and is the Love of God, mutual bond between Father and Son in the society of the Trinity.