

A person's a person, no matter how divine? The question of univocity and personhood in Richard of St Victor's *De Trinitate*

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Abstract

This article offers a reading of Richard of St Victor's medieval treatise *On the Trinity*. It suggests that while Richard interrogates the question of trinitarian personhood in innovative ways, his contribution lies in the way he emphasises how *nature* influences the criteria for personhood with respect to different modes of existence. Thus, while human personhood shares certain features in common with divine personhood, the two concepts must remain distinguishable with reference to the type of natures they uniquely 'person'. This conclusion may serve to chastise modern forms of trinitarianism which assume 'univocity' of divine and human personhood too hastily.

Keywords: personhood, Richard of St Victor, social trinitarianism, Trinity, univocity

My concern in this essay is to examine Richard of St Victor's twelfth-century treatise *De Trinitate* in order to determine the extent to which the category of the person can be applied univocally with reference to various kinds of beings. I situate this examination in the context of the modern debate between proponents of the classical, Catholic view of the Trinity and those who advocate for some version of what is generally called social trinitarianism. What I expect to gain from this study is not a pure polemic against one or the other side of the debate, but rather to acquire some helpful definitions and questions which may bring to light more adequate ways of expressing what, it seems to me, most Christians are seeking to confess, namely, that God is love.

What makes Richard of St Victor such an interesting dialogue partner in this endeavour is the fact that he seems to represent values that are dear to both social and non-social trinitarians. On the one hand, Richard was a medieval theologian firmly situated in the Western tradition, the prior of an abbey dedicated to the rule of St Augustine, and a firm believer in what is today sometimes called 'perfect being theology' (including its emphasis on divine simplicity). On the other hand, his famous argument for the triunity of God puts a strong emphasis on the importance of 'otherness' and the

necessity of mutuality in the Godhead, even using the term *societas* at certain points in the reasoning. Such language is taken to be such an innovation in these writings that one scholar has suggested that it is Richard who ‘opens the way to a social rather than a psychological model for thinking about the Trinity’.¹ While no one, so far as I know, has argued at length that Richard himself was a social trinitarian, it is interesting nevertheless that proponents of the social model have occasionally found such a commensurable vocabulary for their own projects in the writings of this medieval canon regular.² Jürgen Moltmann, for one, couples Richard of St Victor’s emphasis on relationality to Hegel’s understanding of divine history in order to make the case that ‘it is possible to perceive . . . living changes in the trinitarian relations and the Persons which come about through the revelation, the self-emptying and the glorification of the triune God’.³ Divine love, then, in this scheme, is precisely the opening up of the trinitarian relations to make space for fellowship with creation – a theory that requires an insistence on intra-divine ‘alterity’, which Richard of St Victor perhaps provides.

Now, I ought to make it clear that this essay does not purport to be a specialist treatment of Victorine theology. Nevertheless, I find in Richard an interesting set of categories and distinctions that I believe can aid constructive theological thought today. This essay will proceed in three sections and will, of necessity, involve some basic exposition of the text. In the first section, I present Richard’s argument for defining God as the *summa substantia*, or the supreme substance. In the second section, I examine his well-known argument for the necessity of trinitarian plurality in the divine substance. In the third section I turn to Richard’s own definition of personhood in terms of ‘incommunicable existence’, and suggest that this is best understood as a basic outline to which particular instances of personhood must then be related. In the conclusion, I suggest that Richard is a valuable dialogue partner for contemporary theology in that he reminds us always to keep in tension both the distinction between God and creation and the speculative possibilities that our relationship to God the creator allow with respect to theological language.

¹ William J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), p. 227.

² In one passage, Stanley J. Grenz does briefly suggest that Richard advocated a ‘social understanding of God as triune’, and that Hegel’s influence ‘led to a renewal of social trinitarianism reminiscent of that pioneered by Richard of St. Victor’. See his *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 31.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 174.

Unity

Richard begins his quest to understand that which he believes about the Trinity by offering an innovative argument for the existence of God, sometimes labelled the *ratio Richardi*. The basis of his argument is the rather tautological claim that any necessarily existing being must cohere with the principle of necessity (if not demonstrably, at least theoretically). So, regarding the existence of God, reason would dictate that, if there is a being which is not a constituent of the world, a being upon which the world depends for its existence (i.e. the typical understanding of 'God'), then that being's existence must accord with necessity, rather than contingency. Yet there is more at stake. Richard is also out to demonstrate that the kind of God which the Christian faith professes also coheres with the demands of logical consistency: that is, God as eternal, uncreated, omnipotent, immense, simple, and ultimately, triune. There is, then, a strong notion of 'faith seeking understanding' operative in this argument. Richard, of course, already believes that such a God exists; his aim in the treatise is to demonstrate how the God he confesses by faith is in fact the God who must exist.

According to Richard, there are three particular ways in which a being can exist: eternally from itself, eternally from another and non-eternally from another. The third category is most typical to our everyday experience: those things we encounter in the world are not eternal (evident from the phenomenon of change), nor are they self-existent (evident from the phenomenon of coming-to-be). The fact of non-self-existent realities therefore raises the question: from what did these objects ultimately receive their existence? This question must be answered, Richard argues, otherwise one would either have to admit an infinite regress (i.e. the denial of any principle of being whatsoever) or posit an absolutely spontaneous coming-to-be from nothing, which is absurd. Hence, from the existence of non-eternal, non-self-existent reality, Richard deduces the existence of an eternal, self-existent being upon which the former depends for its existence. Methodologically, then, 'In the created nature we see mirrored that which we need to believe regarding the uncreated nature', a principle which Richard repeatedly extracts from Romans 1:20.⁴ Consequently, 'The evidence of experience persuades us of the need for a substance that originated from itself'.⁵

⁴ 'For the invisible things concerning him are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood by things that are made' (Vulgate: *invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur*).

⁵ Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity: Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Ruben Angelici (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), p. 81.

The next step in the argument is to suggest that an eternally self-existent being must be all-powerful. It would not be enough for this being simply to have sufficient power to bring everything else into existence; rather, Richard says, this being must be the very power by which it operates. If this were not the case, then there would have to be something called 'power' in which this being would participate, leading to the conclusion that it is not, in the end, self-existent, but rather *receives* an element of its being from elsewhere. For a being to be regarded as the cause of all other being, then, it must not only be the highest being, but also the *principle* of being itself, or what Richard deems 'the supreme substance' (*summa substantia*): 'Rightfully, then, this substance is called primordial, since every existing thing derives its principle and origin from it.'⁶ Moreover, because this substance is likewise the cause of both rational and non-rational being, it must itself be the principle of rationality as well, that is, God must be all-wise. Crucially, if God does not *have* power and wisdom – that is, if God does not participate in power and wisdom, but rather is the principle of all power and wisdom – then it must be the case that power and wisdom are *both* identical with the supreme substance. The supreme substance must therefore necessarily be simple, otherwise it would not be 'supreme', but merely exemplary of various pre-existing excellencies.

Now, obviously, if God is the supreme substance, which exists eternally and of itself, then that divine substance must be incommunicable. There can be only one God, at least on account of the indiscernibility of identicals – two beings who possess the same eternally self-existent substance either admit of a hierarchy (which denies the definition of the *summa substantia*), or they are in fact one and the same being. Thus, Richard says, 'in spite of whether one says that in the single divinity there is only one person or whether one claims that there is a plurality [of persons], God cannot be but only one in the substance'.⁷

Richard's insistence on the simplicity of the divine substance must be registered now as an absolute commitment. The consequence of denying this understanding of the divine substance would be tantamount to demoting God to the level of created, and therefore mutable, being. If God is not simple, then his very existence would be contingent upon realities which precede him. This is not merely impiety for Richard; in his mind, it also pushes the theologian to admit either the eternal self-existence of the world (which Richard believes is insufficient to explain the phenomena of motion and change), or simply to capitulate to the sin of idolatry, that is, choosing to worship as God that which is less than divine. Although Richard relies to

⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

some extent on his readers' assumption that God is a perfect being, to him 'the attribution of every highest conceivable thought to God' is a logically necessary consequence of contemplating the very idea of God in the first place. In order to be considered the *summa substantia*, God must be and not have his attributes, and thus God must be simple and substantially singular.

So, to summarise, for Richard 'God' indicates, at the very least, an eternally self-existent substance that is in itself the very principle of all power and wisdom. In the next book, Richard will argue that a series of other divine attributes are entailed by such a substance – attributes such as immutability and immensity – although in fact he is working toward the completion of a key triad of attributes that will drive the remainder of his argument. For Richard, God's omnipotence entails his ability to do all that is logically possible, while his omniscience entails his ability to know all that is logically possible. The missing element is God's supreme goodness, which directs God's power in the direction of the very best logical possibility, which is, of course, God's self. This triad – power, wisdom and goodness – functions as a kind of operative set of criteria for the rest of the treatise, and is that which leads Richard to the conclusion that the supreme substance (if it is, in fact, supreme) must also be triune.

Plurality

Book III of *De Trinitate* is, of course, the most familiar to contemporary readers. In this book Richard argues that, in order for God not only to be supreme power and wisdom, but also supreme goodness, he must also be triune. He makes this case on the basis of a consideration of *caritas* and what supremely perfect *caritas* must entail. In the course of this exposition, many of the key terms that will inform our concern for the definition of the person emerge.

Richard begins by reminding his readers that the supreme substance must be equivalent to the 'fullness and perfection all goodness'.⁸ His next move (left unexplained in context) is to suppose that the highest good must be identified with *caritas*, or love, 'since nothing is better or more perfect than *caritas*'.⁹ *Caritas*, it seems for Richard, is the perfection of *amor*; or *amor* becomes *caritas* only when it 'tends toward another'.¹⁰ Hence, he concludes, 'If a multiplicity of persons is absent, there can be no place for *caritas*.'¹¹

⁸ 'Didicimus ex superioribus quod in illo summo bono universaliterque perfecto sit totius bonitatis plenitudo atque perfectio.' Richard of St Victor, *De Trinitate: Texte Critique avec Introduction, Notes et Tables* [hereafter: *De Trin.*], ed. Jean Ribailier (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958), III.ii.4–5.

⁹ Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, p. 116.

¹⁰ *De Trin.*, III.ii.9–10: *Oportet itaque ut amor in alterum tendat, ut caritas esse queat.*

¹¹ Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, p. 116.

What we glean from this argument, then, is twofold. First, Richard believes that God's nature entails not only that God recognises *caritas* as the highest good (otherwise he would not be all-wise), but also that he does not fail to possess such a good (otherwise he would not be all-powerful). Second, Richard also believes that *caritas* requires the presence of 'otherness' (*alteritas*) in order to be realised – thereby raising the question of the necessary and sufficient conditions for 'otherness' that must be met in the divine substance in order for God to be *caritas* in himself. This latter point will be the subject of book IV.

Now, in order for God to instantiate the perfection of love, his love must be directed toward the *summum bonum*, which is God himself. If he were to love a lesser being (for instance, humanity), his love would be *good*, but not yet the necessary entailment of the good. In fact, Richard says, it would be disordered love (*caritas inordinata*), which is impossible for God, since a being who both knows the highest good and has the power to possess it would not fail to do so. Hence, to satisfy the demands of both proper order and the supreme goodness in the divine substance, otherness must be found within the divine substance itself: 'in order for fullness of *caritas* to reside in the very divinity, a divine person had to be united with another person of his same dignity, and thus, also divine'.¹²

Richard then proceeds to add another plank to his reasoning: that of the divine happiness (*felicitas*). His belief is that if God is to be supremely happy, he must embody all that most contributes to such a state of affairs. For Richard, a prerequisite for happiness is benevolence: one cannot be happy unless he shares, unselfishly, all that he has with another. This is concordant with certain prevalent notions at the Abbey of St Victor. As Nico den Bok comments: 'The background of Richard's argument from perfect mental powers to a plurality of *Persons* reflects a particular stage in the attempt to baptize an ancient idea: The good is not envious. . . . This aspect was also one of the most important spiritual features of St. Victor from its foundation at the beginning of the twelfth century. . . . the desire to communicate to others without reservation is one of the most intimate hallmarks of the Victorine mentality.'¹³ For God to be *caritas*, then, there must be a person who is equal to the divine substance who can donate his love to an 'other' who likewise possesses that substance. This second person must therefore also share the love he receives from the first in order to fulfil the divine

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹³ Nico den Bok, *Communicating the Most High: A Systematic Study of Person and Trinity in the Theology of Richard of St. Victor (d.1173)* (Paris: Brepols, 1996), pp. 285–6.

happiness. Hence, 'in that true and supreme happiness, neither joyous love nor reciprocal love can be absent'.¹⁴

At this point, Richard has achieved a 'binity', but of course not yet a Trinity. The argument for the third person again flows from his belief that the divine substance must be supremely happy. Imagining the logic sequentially, then, the reasoning proceeds as follows: having achieved the reality of *caritas* between the first and second persons of the divine substance, God acquires a new measure of happiness: that of giving and receiving love. In other words, a new 'good' now resides in the divine substance. But if the good is not envious, then now this good – the good of reciprocal love – must be shared as well. As Richard puts it: 'in authentic *caritas*, the greatest excellence seems to be this: to will that someone else be loved just as we are'.¹⁵ To put it another way: whatever good the divine substance possesses, this good must be shared with a worthy 'other'. God himself is this worthy other, but in experiencing the joy of reciprocal love in dual personhood, a new 'sharing' is necessitated if God is to retain supreme happiness – what Richard terms *condilectio* or 'co-love', the terminus of perfect *caritas*. Hence, three persons are necessary in the divine substance if it is in fact to be the *summa substantia* characterised by the plenitude of power, wisdom and goodness: 'in true unity is found not just a generic plurality, but a true Trinity, and a true unity [is found] in the true Trinity'.¹⁶ In other words, for Richard the eternally self-existent substance, which also reveals itself as the principle of the world's existence, must be singular in substance and triune in personhood.

And yet, what sort of personhood is required by this account of necessary triunity? In book III, Richard uses words to describe the relations of the Trinity that may incline the modern reader toward a particular interpretation. For instance, he refers to the Trinity as a 'community of love' (*consortium amoris*), and even, at one point, 'society in community' (*societas consortio*). In common parlance, of course, words like 'society' and 'community' imply the joining together of discrete individuals to either constitute or be constituted by a larger whole. But how can Richard really mean this, especially in light of all that he says concerning divine simplicity? How can there be community within a single, absolutely simple substance? This is the subject of book IV, which is our last stop in this brief exposition of *De Trinitate* before we gather up these thoughts and attempt a constructive appropriation of Richard's trinitarianism.

¹⁴ Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, p. 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

Personhood

For Richard, understanding the plurality of persons in the Trinity all depends on how one defines the term 'person'. Indeed, he says, 'if we want to interpret the word "person" both according to its common meaning and in a technical way, we cannot conceive how a plurality of persons – understood commonly (*sub ea acceptione*) – can subsist in a unity of substance'.¹⁷ This is an important point that will significantly influence our interpretation. Richard is suggesting that there are features of 'personhood', as commonly understood, which are inappropriate when applied to the divine persons. He therefore has several options before him if he wants to reconcile the tension. First, he could simply jettison the word 'person' altogether as wholly misleading (as Karl Barth famously recommends in *Church Dogmatics*, I/1). This option is unthinkable for Richard, however, since he regards the church's language, particularly that found in the *Quicumque*, as possessing Spirit-inspired authority. Second, he could redefine personhood generally in light of the divine persons, thereby orienting metaphysics entirely around this newly discovered and perhaps counterintuitive dynamic (as many modern theologians, such as Catherine LaCugna, have opted to do). This route also seems to be unavailable to Richard, however, since he clearly regards the created realm as theologically informative as a 'mirror' of the divine (recall his appeal to our experience of contingency as a starting point for his theistic argument from book I). In other words, Richard would expect something of the 'substance-nature' of personhood, as evidently seen in human individuality, to be somehow reflective of God. The third option, which I think he actually takes, is to admit levels of similarity and dissimilarity between the concepts of the person vis-à-vis the divine and the human, such that certain aspects of God's personal life are evident in creation, while others are not. He does this, moreover, by establishing what we might call gradations of personhood – or categories which aim to pick out what personhood looks like in specific contexts and under certain conditions. When this is kept in mind, I suggest, it becomes easier to make sense of some of Richard's more suggestive language.

To begin with, Richard agrees with Boethius that personhood has to do with *rationality*. This is because personhood speaks not to a substance's 'what-ness', but more specifically to its 'who-ness'. And yet, in our common experience, we experience a 'who' only in terms of an *individual* substance. In other words, I can recognise you as a 'you' because you possess as an *individual* the rationality that human nature includes. More strongly: you do not merely 'have' personhood; rather you *are* a person. The rational substance which you

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–2.

possess has, in Richard's parlance, *danielitas* – Daniel-ness; you are a uniquely circumscribed instance of rational substance. All of this lends credence, then, to Boethius' famous definition: a person is an 'individual substance of a rational nature'. If, then, the 'what' question pertains to a common property, and the 'who' question pertains to an individual property (as Richard says), in the case of human personhood, being a 'who' entails very specifically the individuation of human nature. This is the import of Boethius' definition, which Richard rightly perceives.

If God is simple, however, then clearly the plurality of persons cannot result in the individuation of the divine substance. This would entail tritheism, which Richard already argued in books I–II is impossible. Hence, Boethius' definition simply will not do as a means of designating divine persons. Alterity is required, as the argument from love insists, but it cannot be the alterity of individuals.¹⁸ When it comes to the Trinity, a personal property cannot be an individuating property – a new definition is needed.

Richard begins to construct such a definition by suggesting that personal properties can pertain to nature and/or origin. This he says corresponds to the etymology of the verb *existere*, according to which the prefix *ex* refers to origin and the root *sistere* to nature. In the case of human beings, our personhood rests on both: we are persons because we receive our substance from other persons, and because our nature is such that we possess it by individual participation and not simply by be-ing (or: we are non-eternal, non-self-existent persons). As Richard puts it: 'specific existences in the human persons are differentiated both according to the quality of each of them and according to their very individual origin'.¹⁹ In God, however, personal properties must pertain particularly to origin and not nature, as the divine persons are absolutely consubstantial: 'since the identity of the substance excludes any difference of quality, different [divine] persons' properties will have to be sought with regards to the sole origin'.²⁰

All of this leads Richard very naturally to the traditional processional model of the Trinity, propounded at least since the time of Origen (whose works were studied in St Victor) but defended more recently to Richard's day by Anselm of Canterbury.²¹ What distinguishes the three persons of the Godhead, according to this model, are ultimately their relations of origin (what Anselm calls 'oppositional relations'): one generates another, another

¹⁸ Contra Richard Swinburne, who claims that Richard of St Victor offers an argument for 'three divine individuals': *The Christian God* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 189.

¹⁹ Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, p. 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²¹ Especially in Anselm's *De processione Spiritus Sancti*.

is generated, and a third proceeds from the first two. Each person of the Trinity is in full possession of the divine substance, and yet their personal properties, on account of the diversity and relativity of their respective origins, are necessarily incommunicable. The definition on which Richard ultimately settles to speak of divine personhood, then, is the following: 'a divine person is an incommunicable existence of the divine nature'.²² Recalling my earlier claim that Richard speaks in 'gradations' of personhood, this definition would be the most specific he can offer with respect to the divine substance. To understand the significance of this, however, we must take a step back.

The most general condition of personhood, according to Richard, is to have an incommunicable existence in a manner that accords with a particular kind of rational substance. What makes me 'me', then, is twofold. First, I participate in a particular kind of nature: human nature. This means that, like all other human beings, I receive my existence 'from outside' (i.e. I am contingent), I do not exist eternally and I possess rationality; my nature is a factor in my personhood. Second, while 'what' I am is therefore communicable, 'who' I am is incommunicable. This is because my origin is unique, and the quality of my 'substance' is to a certain extent singular (e.g. my body takes up a different space than all other bodies, even if I were to be somehow 'cloned'). The factors that make my personal identity incommunicable, then, again, pertain to origin and nature. A shorthand definition for a human person in Richard's terms, then, would be an 'incommunicable existence of the human nature'. The important element to notice in all of this is that the kind of nature that one possesses dictates precisely the kinds of conditions which will establish their personhood (and consequently, the kinds of relations that one can have with other persons, both with respect to and beyond one's own nature).

To put the matter more clearly: it seems to me that any univocity implied in Richard's definition of the 'person' represents only a part of what his reasoning seeks to achieve. All persons, whether human, angelic, divine or anything else must be rational and irreducible – that much is clear. But within those extremely generic parameters a whole series of 'blanks' must be filled in which radically qualify both the definition of the person in question and any kind of potential relationality that person might experience (including, for instance, 'communion'). Moreover, it is important to remember that the purpose of *De Trinitate* is not to reason to definitions that would ultimately comprehend the divine nature, but to direct the mind to contemplation

²² Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, p. 163; *De Trin.* IV.xxii.8–9: *persona divina sit divine nature incommunicabilis existentia*.

of the divine nature precisely as the highest and therefore incomparable reality. Thus, while Richard assumes that 'person' must be a meaningful term when applied to God in the *Quicumque*, even so, its meaning 'is specified and determined by reference to divine nature'.²³ This, to my mind, is a vastly important point, and so, in our final section, I would like to explore how this might impact our understanding of the Trinity today.

Conclusion

As mentioned, Richard's understanding of personhood is composed of a set of generic conditions along with a consideration of the particular substance to which these conditions apply. The divine substance, as books I-II of the treatise demonstrate, is *sui generis*; by definition, there is no one like God, because the supreme substance must logically be singular. Consequently, while God does *relate*, both to himself and to other beings, he only does so in a way that accords with his own unique nature. For instance, God does not share properties in common with other substances, but rather other substances participate – by grace and not nature – in the properties that the divine substance does not *have* but *is*. This means that God must necessarily *relate* to creatures hierarchically, or, in Thomas Aquinas' terminology, God does not have 'real relations' (i.e. fully mutual relations) with creatures. By contrast, creaturely substances of course have 'real relations' with one another, as they mutually affect one another.

Within the divine substance, then, the kind of 'communion' between the divine persons must differ greatly from that which occurs between individuated rational substances, such as human beings and angels. To give but one example, in Richard's model, the clear implication of plurality from *origin* rather than *individuation* means that there must only be one will in the divine substance.²⁴ Recall that personal properties, according to Richard, must be incommunicable. Moreover, on account of divine simplicity, if a divine property *can* be shared amongst the persons, it must be shared. Thus, as there is no logical reason, derived from the relations of origin, that the divine will must be threefold, we cannot deny that the divine will is associated with the substance and not the persons (even in terms of 'agreement'). Relatedly, then, there are not three 'loves' in the Godhead, but only one supreme love

²³ Richard of St Victor, *On the Trinity*, p. 163; *De Trin.*, IV.xxii.15–16: *Sed huiusmodi omnes excluduntur in eo quod existentie significatio restringitur et divine nature additione determinatur.*

²⁴ 'One act cannot be produced by three wills. This means that God must be one Person (in the [modern sense]). It also means that the three Persons cannot have three wills; they cannot inter-act. Together, they have only one will, the act of which comprises all contingent things: all things factually willed by God with respect to non-divine beings.' Den Bok, *Communicating*, p. 482.

that, as Richard puts it, is ‘beautifully distinct’ according to the personal properties:²⁵ in one love is given, in another love is received and given, and in a third love is simply received – but it is all the same ‘love’ (the same ‘substance’) being communicated between the three. Richard evocatively likens this to a ‘wave of divinity’ that flows through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁶

Communion between the divine persons, therefore, is unlike communion between human persons. The divine persons do not relate ‘to’ one another, as if they existed in some kind of perpetual dialogical encounter; rather, the divine substance ‘is relational’ in the mode of three incommunicable existences. Put another way: the divine substance does not *have* relationships (the way that individuals ‘have’ relationships with other individuals); the divine substance simply is a set of relations.

It is too generic therefore to say (despite the implied analogical caveat) that ‘the church is what it is by virtue of being called to be a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is’,²⁷ or that ‘the contemplative restoration of the human person takes place within the context of a community which mirrors the shared life of the Trinity’.²⁸ One must also add the very strict qualification that any ‘mirroring’ or ‘echoing’ must take into account the fact that the type of *caritas* enjoyed by the Trinity is as different from the life of the creature as the creature is from the Creator. They are simply two different modes of relationality.

What I think we gain from Richard, then, is a deft mixture of both equivocity and univocity with regard to the category of the person that allows theological speech to be both communicative and respect the absolute otherness of God.²⁹ Nico den Bok makes the point well. According to his reading of Richard, we *are* personal in the way that God is personal, just not with respect to the *divine persons*, yet with respect to the personal-ness of the entire divine substance. Like the divine substance, we are singular, volitional, self-conscious and capable of spontaneous motion (in a qualified sense). And yet, within our own human substance, we are persons in a way that

²⁵ Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, p. 197.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁷ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 78.

²⁸ Michael W. Blastic, ‘*Condilectio*: Personal Mysticism and Speculative Theology in the Works of Richard of Saint Victor’, Ph.D. dissertation, St Louis University, 1991, p. 147.

²⁹ This is, of course, essentially the principle of analogy applied to theological speech. Richard’s contribution is to specify with greater precision than certain of his forebears (and some contemporary theologians) the nature of the similarity and dissimilarity in the concept of the person as it is applied to God and creatures.

completely differs from divine personhood: to be a human person means to stand over against other persons (including God) – and this is simply not the type of personhood that we see in the Trinity.

Reading Richard, we are reminded of the way that straight lines between the divine experience of existence and the human experience of existence cannot be drawn. This means that we ought to avoid models which envision the God–human relation as one in which God draws us up to experience the divine life *as he himself experiences it*. Similarly, we cannot discern the *telos* of human life in a way that mirrors without qualification the divine life, as in the manner of a crude *imitatio trinitatis*. What we need is to determine how imaging the divine life is possible for creatures such as ourselves.³⁰

³⁰ Thanks are due to the Centre for Catholic Studies (Durham University) and the Systematic Theology Faculty at Aberdeen University for the chance to present an earlier draft of this material at their respective seminars.