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Ratzinger's Trinitarian Ontology and Its Patristic Roots: The Breakthrough of *Introduction to Christianity*

Trynitarna ontologia Ratzingera i jej patrystyczne korzenie: nowatorskie ujęcie we *Wprowadzeniu w chrześcijaństwo*

ABSTRACT: The article shows the existence in Joseph Ratzinger's thought of a true Trinitarian ontology, which is a relational ontology, particularly with regard to the Trinitarian part of *Introduction to Christianity*, which originates with the patristic inspiration, in particular that of Augustine, but also of the Greek Fathers, in other words: of such an ontology of the Trinity, which can be understood both as an objective genitive, i.e. as a re-understanding of God's being in the light of Christian revelation, and as a subjective genitive, i.e. as a re-reading of the world and history in the light that comes precisely from the re-understanding of being in a Trinitarian key. The proof of the thesis is developed in three steps, starting with a rereading of negative theology, proposed by Ratzinger, as a cipher of Trinitarian doctrine, in the line of Trinitarian epistemology, insofar as it is relational. From here, it goes on to Ratzinger's view of the person as the epiphanic locus of Trinitarian ontology, and concludes through his Christology that the transition to a Trinitarian re-comprehension of creation is inescapable.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Ratzinger, Trinity, Trinitarian ontology, Trinitarian epistemology, relational ontology, relation, *Introduction to Christianity*, patristic roots of Trinitology, negative theology

ABSTRAKT: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie relacyjnej ontologii trynitarnej w nowatorskim ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera, zaproponowanej przede wszystkim w trynitarnej części *Wprowadzenia w chrześcijaństwo*. Relacyjna ontologia trynitarna, zainspirowana pismami św. Augustyna, ale także innych ojców greckich, może być pojmowana jako próba ponownego zrozumienia istoty Boga w świetle Objawienia chrześcijańskiego (gdy dopełniacz w wyrażeniu „ontologia Trójcy Świętej" jest interpretowany jako *genetivus obiectivus*) lub jako ponowne odczytanie świata i historii w kluczu trynitarnym (gdy

dopełniacz jest interpretowany jako *genetivus subiectivus*). Badanie propozycji Ratzingera przebiega w trzech etapach. Autor zaczyna od ponownego odczytania teologii negatywnej jako swoistego kodu doktryny trynitarnej, zgodnie z relacyjną epistemologią trynitarną, następnie analizuje pogląd Ratzingera na osobę jako epifaniczny *locus* trynitarnej ontologii, a kończy uzasadnieniem na podstawie Ratzingerowskiej chrystologii, że przejście do nowej trynitarnej koncepcji stworzenia jest nieuniknione.

Sᴌᴏᴡᴀ ᴋʟᴜᴄᴢᴏᴡᴇ: Joseph Ratzinger, Trójca Święta, ontologia trynitarna, epistemologia trynitarna, ontologia relacyjna, relacja, *Wprowadzenie do chrześcijaństwa*, patrystyczne korzenie trynitologii, teologia negatywna

Introduction

The thesis of this contribution is that Joseph Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity*[1] presents a true Trinitarian ontology whose inspiration is patristic, relating to both Augustine and the Greek Fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa.[2] By Trinitarian ontology is to be understood as a rethinking of metaphysical thought stemming from the light emanating from Trinitarian revelation. Even before Klaus Hemmerle made this expression famous in his book *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*,[3] written in the form of a theological letter to Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean Daniélou[4] had written the following words just in 1968, the very year of the publication of Ratzinger's work in which the great German theologian collected the lectures given in Tübingen the previous year:

> We thus touch upon the depths of Christian Trinitarian ontology. One of the ways that the Trinitarian mystery better illuminates the human situation [is that] it indicates to us that the very depth of existence, the basis of reality, the form of everything in that it is the origin of all things, is love – that is, it is love in the sense of interpersonal community. The foundation of being is the community of persons. Those who say that the basis of being is material, those who say it

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[1]   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, transl. J.R. Foster, San Francisco, CA 2004.

[2]   For an introduction to Ratzinger's thought useful for the reading here proposed, see P. Blanco, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger: Nuclear Ideas*, "Theology Today" 68 (2011), pp. 153–173; E. de Gaál, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift*, New York 2010; A. Nichols, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI. An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*, London–New York 2007; T. Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, Oxford 2008.

[3]   Cf. K. Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*, Einsiedeln 1976.

[4]   On the relationships between Ratzinger's and Daniélou's theologies, see G. Maspero, J. Lynch (eds.), *Storia e Mistero. Una chiave di accesso alla teologia di Joseph Ratzinger e Jean Daniélou*, Series: ROR Studies Series 2, Roma 2016.

is the spirit, those who say it is the One: they are all wrong. The basis of being is communion.[5]

As can be seen, ontology referred to above is not used in the Heideggerian sense. Concurrently, it is not possible to call it only Christian metaphysics because the ultimate principle sought here is not merely the first cause that lies beyond (*meta*) cosmic realities (*ta physika*), since the incarnate Word has revealed that the deepest dimension of created being is the personal one. Ontology is, therefore, understood here in the etymological sense as discourse (*logos*) on being (*to on*). In turn, the specification "of the Trinity" juxtaposed with the noun "ontology" can be understood as either an objective genitive or a subjective genitive: in the first case, the thought on being has the triune God as its object, while in the second case, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the subjects of the thought on being itself. In other words, the genitive in the objective sense refers to the work done by Christian thinkers to change metaphysics and think the being of God according to revelation.[6] In the case of the subjective genitive, on the other hand, one re-reads the world in the light that the Trinity itself radiates upon it. In a nutshell, one re-reads creation, starting from the revelation of the Creator's Trinitarian immanence. It will be shown that Joseph Ratzinger's thought, precisely because of its patristic inspiration, contains both a Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the objective genitive and in the sense of the subjective one.

The demonstration of the thesis will take place in three steps, following the path traced by Ratzinger himself in the Trinitarian part of *Introduction to Christianity* and in a certain sense in his whole intellectual discourse. For this, we will start from an aspect of great significance for fundamental theology, which is the proper epistemology of a form of thought that moves from Christian Revelation with respect to philosophy, in particular considering this form as negative theology. Then we will move on to the Trinitarian-ontological sphere proper by exploring how the theological work on the concept of "person," required by the very exegesis of the scriptural texts, led to the discovery of a new dimension of Being which is the relational one. Finally, everything will be re-read from the dogmatic perspective in terms of Christology and relational identity, in a certain sense summarizing the first two passages. In each

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5   J. Daniélou, *La Trinité et le mystère de l'existence*, Paris 1968, p. 52.
6   On this point, see G. Maspero, *Patristic Trinitarian Ontology*, [in:] *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology. Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, eds. R.J. Woźniak, G. Maspero, London–New York 2012, pp. 211–229.

part we will try to highlight the patristic contribution, also referring to other works by Ratzinger. From this path, the presence of a Trinitarian ontology in both an objective and subjective sense should appear clear, together with its patristic inspiration.

Apophatism according to Ratzinger

The starting point of the proposed reading of the Trinitarian doctrine in *Introduction to Christianity* is very concrete and, in fact, already relational. Both Jean Daniélou and Joseph Ratzinger believe that the essential point that indicates the direction of Trinitarian ontology is the ontological depth of love, which is in itself a mystery not because of the insufficiency of the knowing subject, but because of the inexhaustibility of the known object. This is why, paradoxically, the limits that reason discovers in addressing the question of God reveal the proximity to the truth of the search itself:

> On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that we are now touching a realm in which Christian theology must be more aware of its limits than it has often been in the past; a realm in which any false forthrightness in the attempt to gain too precise a knowledge is bound to end in disastrous foolishness; a realm in which only the humble admission of ignorance can be true knowledge and only wondering attendance before the incomprehensible mystery can be the right profession of faith in God. Love is always *mysterium*—more than one can reckon or grasp by subsequent reckoning. Love itself—the uncreated, eternal God—must therefore be in the highest degree a mystery—"the" *mysterium* itself.[7]

Such an approach allows Ratzinger to base his proposal on the tension present in Scripture between the personal distinction revealed by the fact that Jesus calls the Father "thou" and the affirmation of substantial identity with Him. This tension is read as a "curious paradox."[8] But what is crucial to recognise for the proposed reading here is the question of truth that underlies the approach described here: as the Fathers taught, if the dialogue between the Father and the Son were merely a theatrical fiction, then Christian salvation would not be real and the triune God could be reduced to a projection of human psyche, according to the position of the modern philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach.

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[7] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 162.
[8] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 163.

Theologically, the question is about mediation and this leads directly back to the confrontation with metaphysics because if Jesus were not just one thing with the Father, He would be no more than an intermediate ontological degree, like Platonic eros or one of the Aristotelian motors. Indeed, without substantial identity, Jesus' mediation would separate instead of uniting. This question arises again for the Holy Spirit, in whom mediation is given as God's presence in the human being who at the same time does not cease to be God's total and absolute excess and transcendence with respect to His creature.

The shift to the ontological question is, therefore, dictated by the need to show in personal faith the foundation of prayer and worship, that is, of the truth of the relationship between God and the human being. The history of dogma, with the contrasts and difficulties that characterised it, is thus removed from an intellectual and merely theoretical context in order to show its practical and fundamental significance. It is not about abstract questions but about the very truth of the relationship with God: "God *is* as he *shows* himself."[9] Being and appearing cannot contradict each other if God is the truth. The point introduced in Ratzinger's Trinitarian epistemology is that God's truth is relational because God himself is relational as will be seen in the next section.

This is intrinsically connected to Christology because this relationality is founded on the fact that Jesus is perfect God and perfect man. Such a perspective allows us to grasp the seriousness of the history of the relationship between the Trinity and mankind, which cannot be reduced to a simple "masked ball."[10] The monarchist and modalistic crisis is read from this perspective as one of the fundamental shortcuts that human reason can take to dodge the (epistemological) paradox and, hence, the (ontological) mystery. The fact that the term "person" originally had the meaning of a theatrical role made this false solution attractive. The other main possibility of reducing the mystery was subordinationism which read the Son as a substance different from God even though close to Him, undermining the truth of both Christian salvation and the personal relationship with the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit. On this front, Ratzinger highlights the political fallout, showing how these shortcuts pave the way to the manipulation of the Christian thought by civil power.

The Trinitarian ontological direction is also demonstrated by the connection stressed by our author between Monarchianism and the idealist metaphysics of Friedrich W.J. Schelling and Georg W.F. Hegel, with their historicization

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9   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 165.
10   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 166.

and secularisation of the Trinitarian mystery itself, due to the identification between the revelatory process and the very being of God. Ratzinger highlights the political dimension of these theologies, pointing also to the Marxist proposal, in which meaning is not presupposed, but is to be produced in the future. This, in fact, is the crux of the matter: "Thus the 'historicization' of the doctrine of the Trinity, as contained in Monarchianism, now becomes the 'historicization' of God. This again signifies that meaning is no longer simply the creator of history; instead, history becomes the creator of meaning, and the latter becomes its creation."[11]

This proves that these shortcuts are only logical in appearance, but in reality they lose the (relational) truth that characterises the Christian Mystery. The result, paradoxically, is to bring Christianity back to a mythological dimension:

> But something else, too, comes to light here: the radical attempt to fathom the doctrine of the Trinity, the thoroughly logical approach that ends in the "historicization" of the *logos* itself and, with the comprehension of God, also wants to abolish mystery and comprehend the history of God, to construct it itself according to its own logic—this grandiose attempt to lay hands on the logic of the *logos* itself leads us back to a mythology of history, to the myth of a God who brings himself to birth historically. The attempt at total logic ends in illogicality, in the self-dissolution of logic into myth.[12]

The political abuse of Christian revelation would be precisely an expression of such a mythological reduction of the mystery of the God of Jesus Christ. This is why it is essential to conceive of Trinitarian theology as negative theology, according to an epistemology that cannot be reduced to that of Aristotle.

From the point of view of the history of metaphysics, Ratzinger's choice is extremely interesting because it courageously addresses an *aporia* that has been present since its origin, which historical development had exacerbated, particularly in the Christian era.

Metaphysics, in fact, arose as a response to the pre-Socratic tension between the reduction of being to the One, in Parmenides, and the reduction of being to pure multiplicity, in Heraclitus. A diametrically opposed conception of the *logos* depended on these two options, even temporally contemporaneous (5th century BC). In the first case, in fact, all that is multiple was identified with non-being because only Being is in such a way that every possibility of

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11   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 169.
12   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 170.

reasoning necessarily had to prove aporetic. The paradoxes of the Eleatic school, such as that of Achilles and the tortoise in Zeno[13] or the paradox of the liar,[14] had the function of demonstrating the contradictory nature of the *logos*, since all reasoning is movement, i.e. it implies a passage through the manifold. For Heraclitus, however, everything *was* movement and the *logos* was precisely the law of such mutation.[15] The philosopher's aim was precisely to recognise such harmony in multiplicity and dynamics. For Parmenides everything was one and not multiple, for Heraclitus everything was multiple and not one.

The connection of these understandings of unity and multiplicity with the *logos* is fundamental to the birth of metaphysics. In fact, the operation of Socrates-Plato that resematised the myths of the Greek religious tradition, bringing out the elements of immutable truth beneath the narrative covering, consisted in the search for the first principle or ultimate cause beyond (*meta*) the cosmic elements (*ta physika*) realised precisely through the *logos* in order to counter the relativism of the sophists who had radically separated being and thought. The answer of the physical philosophers was not sufficient, as they had mistaken second causes for first causes.

This is why Plato, in his *Sophist*, speaks of his symbolic parricide of Parmenides,[16] giving a step that is as fundamental as it is irreversible in the history of thought. Indeed, the assertion that non-being somehow (*kata ti*) is, and that being somehow is not, calls into question precisely the relationship between the one and the many. This refers to participation on the ontological side and dialectics on the epistemological one. At the root of this metaphysical structure, Plato finds the pair One and Dyad, from which the multiplicity of ideas descends.[17] Thus we have the affirmation of a twofold original principle, the foundation of the rationality of all things, in such a way as to bar the way for the very operation of the sophists who reduced the *logos* to mere words

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[13] Aristotle, *Physics*, vol. 2: *Books 5–8*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 255, transl. P.H. Wicksteed, F.M. Cornford, Cambridge, MA 1934, 239b.14–20.

[14] Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations*, [in:] Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations. On Coming-to-be and Passing Away. On the Cosmos*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 400, transl. E.S. Forster, D.J. Furley, Cambridge, MA 1955, 180a32–180b7.

[15] Heraclitus, *Fragments*, ed., transl. T.M. Robinson, Toronto 1987, fragm. 1 and 31, pp. 10–11, 26–27.

[16] Plato, *Sophist*, [in:] Plato, *Theaetetus. Sophist.* Series: Loeb Classical Library 123, transl. H.N. Fowler, Cambridge, MA 1921, 241d.

[17] Aristotle speaks of this in relation to Plato's Pythagoreanism: Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, vol. 1: *Books 1–9*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 271, transl. H. Tredennick, Cambridge, MA 1933, 987b.18–988a.1.

that could be used to achieve their own partisan ends, without reference to a founding unity.

Aristotle's reworking maintained this metaphysical structure based on the dual principle, despite the overcoming of the eidetic dimension through the introduction of form. In fact, the One and the Dyad are replaced by the act and the purely potential matter as co-principles. To see this proximity it is sufficient to compare the construction of the chain of motors[18] with that introduced by Plato to prove that God is the "First Friend"[19] or to prove the existence of the world soul.[20]

Such brief historical remarks[21] are given here only to highlight how the metaphysical question has extremely practical consequences when read from the point of view of its relationship to the *logos*, i.e. to thought and reason. The relationship with truth is at the heart of Ratzinger's research, which is why he was progressively drawn in his intellectual parabola towards Trinitarian ontology. He rethought thought starting from faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, inseparably from the value this faith assumes with respect to knowledge of the real. The comparison is no longer here with the sophists, but with post-modernity that the German theologian prophetically saw in advance.

This is why it may be extremely interesting to read his proposal of negative theology in *Introduction to Christianity* against the backdrop of the criticism that the sceptical school addressed to the Platonic Aristotelian and Stoic traditions.

Indeed, in the 2nd century A.D., Sextus Empiricus took up the Pyrrhonian legacy to radically criticise what the sceptics called the "dogmatists," i.e. the metaphysicians of both Platonic, Peripatetic and Stoic imprint. His argument aimed at the heart of the tension between Parmenides and Heraclitus, revealing the aporetic insufficiency of the Platonic-Aristotelian dualist solution. In fact, the assertion that everything is relative is not proposed in the wake of the sophists, but from the ontological irreconcilability of the One and the many. Sceptics claimed, therefore, that if it is not true that everything is relative, then there must be realities that differ on the basis of a substantial, not merely accidental identity, for if there were no such realities, everything would be relative. But if

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[18]   Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, vol. 2: *Books 10–14*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 287, transl. H. Tredennick, G.C. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA 1933, 1072.a.21–b.30.

[19]   Plato, *Lysis*, [in:] Plato, *Lysis. Symposium. Phaedrus*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 166, eds., transl. C. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy, Cambridge, MA 2022, 219.d.

[20]   Plato, *The Laws*, vol. 2: *Books 7–12*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 192, transl. R.G. Bury, Cambridge, MA 1926, 895.ce.

[21]   More on this in G. Maspero, *The Trinity*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Philosophy*, ed. M. Edwards, London–New York 2021, pp. 125–138.

they do exist, they will be distinct in relation to something else, i.e. they will be distinct insofar as they are relative to something else, and thus they, too, will be relative.[22] Diogenes Laertius translated this approach into epistemological terms, applying the same principle to the sign,[23] in such a way as to challenge the possibility of expressing the true, to which the metaphysical tradition appealed.

The relevance of such thought in post-modernity is apparent. Yet, it is essential not to fall into anachronism by projecting our contemporary questions (and wounds) onto the past. What the sceptical critique points out is that the tension between the one and the many remains aporetic unless a leap is made to abandon the identification between being and the intelligible, which would have led the Neo-Platonists, after the shift to an authentic monism with neo-Pythagoreans, to dialectically oppose the material world and the One, proposing not a salvation *of* the world, as Christianity does, but a salvation *from* the world. The negative theology of the Fathers was grafted onto this very point, responding to the challenge that the sceptical critique brought out as an *aporia* of Greek metaphysics. This did not mean theological denial of the convertibility of the *ens* with the *verum*. Rather, the serious sceptical contribution leads one to recognise the excess of the real over the human possibility of expressing it conceptually.

In a sense, Platonic-Aristotelian dualism had to introduce a pair of first principles (One-Dyad, Act-matter) to preserve the possibility of relationship with the world, while the subsequent history of metaphysics had sought to preserve the uniqueness of the principle, but at the price of losing the relationship between it and the material world.

Herein lies the very strength of Ratzinger's thought, which presents the negative dimension of theology precisely from the point of view of the mystery's excess over human expressive capacity. Without resorting to abstract terms, he moves almost phenomenologically[24] from historical observation, highlighting how not only the history of metaphysics, but also history of theology intertwined with and inseparable from it leads to an aporetic outcome, if one does not accept the excess of the real with respect to its formulation in conceptual terms:

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[22] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 273, transl. R.G. Bury, Cambridge, MA 1933, I, 137.3–138.1.

[23] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2: *Books 6–10*, Series: Loeb Classical Library 185, transl. R.D. Hicks, Cambridge, MA 1925, IX, 96.

[24] On this point, see R.J. Woźniak, *Phenomenological Fragments of Trinitarian Discourse: Being, Having, Relating*, "Religions" 14/7 (2023), article no. 929.

> If the painful history of the human and Christian striving for God proves anything, it surely proves this: that any attempt to reduce God to the scope of our own comprehension leads to the absurd. We can only speak rightly about him if we renounce the attempt to comprehend and let him be the uncomprehended. Any doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, cannot aim at being a perfect comprehension of God. It is a frontier notice, a discouraging gesture pointing over to uncharitable territory. It is not a definition that confines a thing to the pigeonholes of human knowledge, nor is it a concept that would put the thing within the grasp of the human mind.[25]

From such a perspective, Trinitarian theology is not presented as a synthesis that replaces the metaphysical enterprise. Exactly the opposite, the thought that allows itself to be illuminated by the revelation of the triune God shares the path of those who have attempted to think about Being, according to a relational approach that does not epistemologically oppose theology or philosophy, in fidelity to the epistemology of the Fathers. In fact, the concepts introduced by them in an attempt to express the mystery in order to proclaim it without violating its inexhaustible depth are not the "right answers," nor the result of a Hegelian-type *Aufhebung*; rather, they are mere indications which relationally point towards that one inexhaustible Source that can explain the thirst for the infinite that dwells in the heart of every human being: "Every one of the main basic concepts in the doctrine of the Trinity was condemned at one time or another; they were all adopted only after the frustration of a condemnation; they are accepted only inasmuch as they are at the same time branded as unusable and admitted simply as poor stammering utterances—and no more."[26]

The remark refers to the terms *prosopon*, *homoousios* and *procession*, which were used by the modalists, monarchians and gnostics.[27] In Ratzinger's reading, it is not a matter of right or wrong words, but of the relationships between terms. The dogma itself would have a structure of communion as each of its elements was condemned by itself while it is in their symphonic relationship that the Trinitarian categories are able to effectively refer to the Mystery. We could think of the formula *one substance and three hypostases*, where the two

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[25] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 171.
[26] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 172.
[27] This recalls the condemnation in 269 at the Synod of Antioch of the term *homoousios*, used by Paul of Samosata in the context of dynamic monarchianism to describe the Logos as a simple force emanating from the sole essence of the Father; cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Councils*, [in:] *Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, transl. E.W. Watson et al., Peabody, MA 1994, 81, p. 26.

terms were synonymous until the mid-4th century: it was only thanks to the Cappadocian interpretative work that the double reference of hypostases to the substantial and personal dimensions was resolved. The formula opposes substance and hypostasis by distinguishing them with the predication of one and three. Thus, those who interpreted the expression *three hypostases* as Arian, meaning three substances, were reassured by the presence of the one substance, which implied the personal interpretation of hypostasis in the formula itself. Similarly, it was the case for those who regarded the expression *three hypostases* as Sabellian. In this way, the two terms constitute a real and effective formulation of the dogma not in themselves, but in their mutual relationship.[28]

Real Trinitarian epistemology is in action here, i.e. it translates into the convergence of knowledge and relationship in an authentically theological approach. From this perspective, heresies cannot be read merely as errors of human thought or language, but have a value linked to the role of history and the common structure of human thought and heart. Joseph Ratzinger resorts to bold imagery, comparing the textbook reconstruction of the history of Trinitarian doctrine to a graveyard of heresies, full of tombstones that would be nothing more than reminders of a failure of human thought and a dialectical moment resolved in favour of the Church. On the contrary, the framework so proposed is not dialectical, but relational: "One must say, I think, that these condemnations of the later formulas of faith form an intimate part of them: it is only through the negation, and the infinite indirectness implicit in it, that they are usable. The doctrine of the Trinity is only possible as a piece of baffled theology, so to speak."[29]

Trinitarian doctrine is presented as a cathedral whose stones are just stones which in their mutual leaning on each other form that marvellous edifice that gives glory to God, helping souls to rise up to Him. Trinitarian dogma cannot be conceived, therefore, only as the right answer to the errors of the heretics, but presents itself as a place of praise, as a space where the human being can meet God to worship Him. In the perspective of relationship, apophaticism from negation becomes affirmation: "In other words, all these statements are not so much gravestones as the bricks of a cathedral, which are, of course, only useful when they do not remain alone but are inserted into something bigger, just as even the positively accepted formulas are valid only if they are at the same time aware of their own inadequacy."[30]

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[28] Cf. G. Maspero*, The Mystery of Communion. Encountering the Trinity*, South Bend, IN 2021, pp. 43–44.
[29] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 172.
[30] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 173.

The point of arrival of this first fundamental epistemological step taken by Joseph Ratzinger leads to rereading dogma in a relational sense in the light of the negative dimension of theology that biblical revelation indicates as a necessary path to interface with God's excess and transcendence. This undermines all dialectical and ideological approaches because one can no longer affirm that a certain position is true *a priori* against another, reducing truth to the conceptual dimension; rather, truth is given here as relation. In fact, the magisterium of the first seven ecumenical councils cannot be considered in an absolute way, regardless of the Fathers who were protagonists in them and their interlocutors, however heretical. Truth emerges from dialogue. And this happens because the Christian God is in Himself Dialogue, as we will see. The gnoseological relationship thus appears as a reflection of the ontological relation. This is why it is necessary to take a second step in the analysis proposed here, entering properly into the Trinitarian ontology presented in *Introduction to Christianity*.

Relational (Trinitarian) ontology

Etienne Gilson said: "it is because of their physics that metaphysics grow old."[31] This profound expression may illuminate the theological value of Ratzinger's choice to use images taken from contemporary physics to express the Trinitarian-ontological novelty that we seek to highlight here. One might think that the use of such images was merely a pedagogical and didactic expedient, given that the audience present at the Tübingen lectures came from various faculties, not only those of theology and philosophy. The thesis advanced here is that, instead, the choice of resorting to elements taken from quantum mechanics accurately reflects the perspective of a Trinitarian ontology, which seeks to reread creation, and thus also the necessary laws of the material world, in the light of Trinitarian revelation, thus starting from the freedom and reciprocity of the gift as the meaning of all that is.

Etienne Gilson's sentence effectively highlights the inseparability of physics and metaphysics, contradicting what could be considered a dogma of modernity, as the separation of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* in Descartes shows. Aristotelian metaphysics was, in fact, based on a physics that, from today's perspective, is profoundly limited. For the Greek man, this was not a problem because for him being was perfectly identifiable with the intelligible, since the infinite ontological hiatus between God and the world did not exist. For Plato and

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[31]   Quoted in G. Lafont, *Peut-on connaitre Dieu en Jésus-Christ?*, Paris 1969, p. 10.

Aristotle, the first principle and the cosmos are both eternal and finite, whereas in a theological perspective that assumes the revelation of God as creator, God's transcendence; eternity and infinite being radically distinguish Him from the finitude and temporality of the world. This infinite ontological hiatus, emphasised by the Fathers of the Church, particularly from the 4th century onwards, seems on the surface to distance the first principle from mankind, but in reality brings Him closer to them because it implies that the relationship that God has freely established with us is a personal gift and not the result of a graduated metaphysical scale, as in the case of the Aristotelian motors.

This conception based on the infinite ontological gap between God and the world implies the impossibility of perfectly translating truths about God into conceptual terms. In fact, whereas for Plato the ground of being had to be sought in the eidetic structure, as in Aristotle in the intelligible form, with biblical revelation it is discovered that every term preached by the human being about God originated in the created world, hence in the finite and temporal sphere. In this way, the efficacy of signifiers will be based entirely on their relationship to signifieds.

This is analogous to what happens precisely in quantum mechanics. Ratzinger mentions the inseparability between the observer and the measurement process, which in the smallest dimensions, where quantum effects are fundamental, disrupts and modifies the measured phenomenon, collapsing the claim to objectivity.[32] One could say that Ratzinger is leaning on a relational analogy because he knows perfectly well that God is absolutely distant with respect to the physical phenomenon, but at the same time he highlights the relational trace that, without the risk of confusion of planes, allows one to rediscover the value of theological statements from both physics and metaphysics:[33]

> We know today that in a physical experiment the observer himself enters into the experiment and only by doing so can arrive at a physical experience. This means that there is no such thing as pure objectivity even in physics, that even here the result of the experiment, nature's answer, depends on the question put to it. In the answer there is always a bit of the question and a bit of the questioner himself; it reflects not only nature in itself, in its pure objectivity, but

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[32]   Cf. G. Maspero, *La fisica contemporanea e la teologia trinitaria possono avere qualcosa in comune? Un suggerimento dall'ontologia relazionale*, "Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica" 108/2 (2016), pp. 321–333.

[33]   In this, the German theologian is in perfect harmony with the Cappadocians, who mainly resorted to Trinitarian metaphors of a material kind, in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding in the Neo-Platonic line.

also gives back something of man, of what is characteristically ours, a bit of the human subject. This too, *mutatis mutandis*, is true of the question of God. There is no such thing as a mere observer. There is no such thing as pure objectivity. One can even say that the higher an object stands in human terms, the more it penetrates the center of individuality; and the more it engages the beholder's individuality, then the smaller the possibility of the mere distancing involved in pure objectivity. Thus, wherever an answer is presented as unemotionally objective, as a statement that finally goes beyond the prejudices of the pious and provides purely factual, scientific information, then it has to be said that the speaker has here fallen victim to self-deception. This kind of objectivity is quite simply denied to man. He cannot ask and exist as a mere observer. He who tries to be a mere observer experiences nothing. Even the reality "God" can only impinge on the vision of him who enters into the experiment with God—the experiment that we call faith. Only by entering does one experience; only by cooperating in the experiment does one ask at all; and only he who asks receives an answer.[34]

The inseparability of question and answer is therefore not perceived as an effect of limitation, but on the contrary it expresses the ontological depth reflected in the physical phenomena. One can read Ratzinger's reference to quantum mechanics only in an apologetic sense, as if to say that the accusation of a lack of objectivity levelled at those who pursue knowledge through faith is falsified by physical research itself. But there is more here, as shown by what he writes below:

Certainly it is true here, even more than it is in physics, that anyone who enters into the experiment of belief receives an answer that reflects not only God but also his own questioning and that, through the refraction of his own personality, lets us know something about God. Even dogmatic formulas such as "one being in three Persons" include this refraction of the human element; they reflect in this case the man of late antiquity, whose questions and experiments are governed by the categories of late antique philosophy, which provide him with his observation post. Indeed, we must go a step farther: that we put any questions or make any experiments at all is due to the fact that God for his part has agreed to the experiment, has entered into it himself as man. Through the human refraction of this one man we can thus come to know more than the mere man; in him who is both man and God, God has demonstrated his humanity and in the man has let himself be experienced.[35]

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[34] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 175–176.
[35] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 177.

It is evident that Ratzinger's theological perspective is the relational one because it is not limited to the apologetic or theological-fundamental dimension, but reinterprets everything starting from the personal relationship of God with the human being, opening up the properly Trinitarian-ontological question of the correspondence or not of the gift with the being of God. What was said in the brief outline of the history of metaphysics proposed in the previous section immediately shows that for Aristotle or Plato's heirs such a relational perspective would be contradictory to the very being of God. Quite different is the theological perspective.

The statement that in every answer there is always a shred of the question refers precisely to Ratzinger's assertion of the need to study the Church Fathers in order to approach Scripture, since only those who testify to the answer (*Antwort*) can lead us to an understanding of the Word (*Wort*), since this was addressed to someone.[36] Hence also the need not to separate the Old and New Testaments and not to oppose Greek thought and Christian revelation. Developing Joseph Ratzinger's play on words, it can be added that this connection between the Word and the answer, which in the German language are referred to in the terms *Wort* and *Antwort*, must constitute for us a responsibility, which in German is expressed by the word *Verantwortung*, which is linked to the same root.

Underlying this vision, one can trace a profound affirmation of the relational dimension of Being itself, which has been called Trinitarian ontology inasmuch as it is only thanks to the Revelation of the triune God that mankind has recognised relation, and therefore the Person as eternal and constitutive elements, together with the essence of the Being of God.

Joseph Ratzinger perfectly highlights the revolutionary scope of the Trinitarian doctrine from a metaphysical point of view, in particular because of the new ontological status it gave to relation. In fact, speaking of the Father as relation and the Son as relation and therefore of their being one God in correlation, he wrote:

> In this idea of relatedness in word and love, independent of the concept of substance and not to be classified among the "accidents", Christian thought discovered the kernel of the concept of person, which describes something

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[36] Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, transl. M.F. McCarthy, San Francisco, CA 1987, p. 147. See on this M. Arostegi Esnaola, *I Padri come risposta (Antwort) alla Parola (Wort)*, [in:] *Storia e Mistero. Una chiave di accesso alla teologia di Joseph Ratzinger e Jean Daniélou*, eds. G. Maspero, J. Lynch, Roma 2016, pp. 41–68.

other and infinitely more than the mere idea of the "individual". Let us listen once again to St. Augustine: "In God there are no accidents, only substance and relation." (Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 5, 5,6). Therein lies concealed a revolution in man's view of the world: the sole dominion of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality. It becomes possible to surmount what we call today "objectifying thought"; a new plane of being comes into view. It is probably true to say that the task imposed on philosophy as a result of these facts is far from being completed—so much does modern thought depend on the possibilities thus disclosed, without which it would be inconceivable.[37]

Therefore, in Ratzinger one can recognise an authentic Trinitarian ontology that is a relational ontology because, referring back to Augustine's thought, it recognises a new ontological value to relation, compared to the accidental conception that characterised it in Greek metaphysics. In *Introduction to Christianity,* this point of arrival of the theoretical path is gained through three theses that constitute other fundamental steps in the construction of the new ontological architecture proper to Ratzinger's thought. The sequence can be sketched as: (i) the question of *the one and the many*; (ii) the link this has with the ontological novelty of the *person* according to Christian revelation; (iii) the new ontological conception of *relation* as the foundation of this. Here are the theses in sequence:

(i) The paradox "*una essentia tres personae*"—one Being in three Persons—is associated with the question of the original meaning of unity and plurality.[38]

(ii) The paradox "*una essentia tres personae*" is a function of the concept of person and is to be understood as an intrinsic implication of the concept of person.[39]

(iii) The paradox "*una essentia tres personae*" is connected with the problem of absolute and relative and emphasizes the absoluteness of the relative, of that which is in relation.[40]

The Trinitarian ontological intention is evident, as shown by the first thesis, which places the Trinitarian dogma in the background of the development of metaphysics, with the tension that we have tried to highlight: for the Greeks either the one was divine or the manifold, while Christian revelation implies

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[37]   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 184.
[38]   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 178.
[39]   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 179.
[40]   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 180.

that both the one and the manifold are so, overcoming the ancient *aut-aut*. Equally evident is that the core of Ratzinger's ontological Trinitarian conception is the person.[41] This acts as a bridge between the ancient world and the contemporary one, avoiding the risk of dialectical opposition between the metaphysical substantiality that characterised the former and the sensitivity to existence developed by the latter. Thus the awareness of being in front of a greater unity than the one identified by Aristotle is apparent:

> To him who believes in God as triune, the highest unity is not the unity of inflexible monotony. The model of unity or oneness toward which one should strive is consequently not the indivisibility of the atom, the smallest unity, which cannot be divided up any further; the authentic acme of unity is the unity created by love. The multi-unity that grows in love is a more radical, truer unity than the unity of the "atom".[42]

It is as if Christian revelation made possible access to a deeper dimension of unity, a dimension, indeed, characterised by personal plurality. Through Christian revelation it is possible to discover the relational immanence of ontological unity. It is precisely this new dimension that makes it possible to read the goodness of plurality also in the world as an expression of intratrinitarian relationality, shifting from a Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the objective genitive to the one in the sense of the subjective genitive.

Such a gain required a long terminological journey, a veritable re-sematisation of the terms substance, hypostasis and person, which ran parallel in East and West, with a more visual form in the former, and a more verbal one in the latter, in correspondence with the etymology of *pros-opon* (related to looking towards) and *per-sona* (i.e. resonating through).

Hence, negative theology is not, according to Ratzinger, a mere *pars destruens*, but already carries within itself a *pars construens*, which has made possible the elaboration of concepts and categories that although not in themselves capable of capturing the Mystery, are apt to refer back to it, fully accomplishing their function in the Trinitarian and relational epistemology outlined by the German theologian.

On the ontological front, his position is sharp. The fundamental principle of his Trinitarian ontology is "the overstepping of the singular is implicit in

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[41] On the structural role of this element see A. Proniewski, *Joseph Ratzinger's Philosophical Theology of the Person*, "Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej" 17/3 (2018), pp. 219–236.
[42] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 179.

the concept of person."[43] Affirmation and negation here are given together precisely because the relation says being and non-being at the same time. Not an absolute non-being, as Parmenides thought, nor a merely participatory non-being, as the Platonic correction required, but a non-being that refers back to another, thus remaining in the bosom of Being. This is an absolute novelty brought by Christianity into history (and which without Christianity proves impossible to preserve[44]):

> In the struggle over the language of the profession of faith, the struggle over the thing itself was settled, so that in this language, inadequate as it may be, contact with the reality does take place. We can say from the history of ideas that it was here that the reality "person" was first fully sighted; the only way that the concept and idea of "person" dawned on the human mind was in the struggle over the Christian image of God and the interpretation of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth.[45]

These statements reveal clearly the theological legacy of the Cappadocians, who in their confrontation with the heirs of Eunomius had to break the necessary correspondence between entity, concept and word, which (neo-)Platonically led Eunomius to deny that the Son was God, since as such He was begotten and was therefore characterised by a term apparently incompatible with the Father's being ingenerate. Only a relational reading could resolve the issue without denying divine oneness, as shown by the Cappadocians,[46] especially Gregory of Nyssa in the East, and Augustine in the West:

> First, it was clear that, seen absolutely, God is only One, that there is not a plurality of divine principles. Once this has been established, it is also clear that the oneness lies on the plane of substance; consequently the three-ness that must also be mentioned is not to be sought here. It must therefore exist on a different level, on that of relation, of the "relative".[47]

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[43] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 180.

[44] Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (*Religion, Law, and Democracy: Selected Writings*, eds. M. Künkler, T. Stein, Oxford 2021) showed the crisis of the liberal state that, without the Christian background, is not able any more to protect the freedom it should based on.

[45] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 181–182.

[46] For a detailed study of the Cappadocian approach, see G. Maspero, *The Cappadocian Reshaping of Metaphysics: Relational Being*, Cambridge 2024, pp. 135–161.

[47] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 182.

From this perspective, it can be shown that it is precisely relational Trinitarian ontology that allows Ratzinger not to contrast the God of philosophers and the God of theologians, since the new ontology that Christian revelation has made possible does not contradict metaphysics but complements it. Parmenides and Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle were not wrong. Rather, they were faced with the paradox of the one and the many without that relationship with the triune God who alone can unveil His immanence, where the personal dimension recapitulates unity and multiplicity. The clarity of Ratzinger's thought is extreme here:

> With the insight that, seen as substance, God is One but that there exists in him the phenomenon of dialogue, of differentiation, and of relationship through speech, the category of *relatio* gained a completely new significance for Christian thought. To Aristotle, it was among the "accidents", the chance circumstances of being, which are separate from substance, the sole sustaining form of the real. The experience of the God who conducts a dialogue, of the God who is not only logos but also *dia-logos*, not only idea and meaning but speech and word in the reciprocal exchanges of partners in conversation—this experience exploded the ancient division of reality into substance, the real thing, and accidents, the merely circumstantial. It now became clear that the dialogue, the *relatio*, stands beside the substance as an equally primordial form of being.[48]

As this text shows, relation and substance are not opposed, but rather are recognised as co-principles of being. This makes it possible to avoid the risk of projecting anthropology onto the divine immanence, depowering the path and opening it to relativistic outcomes, as a certain type of personalism of the previous century has done against its own intentions. History and being do not oppose each other in Ratzinger's ontological thought,[49] who here presents a synthesis of his entire intellectual journey, juxtaposing the conception of the relationship in Augustine with the pure Bonaventurian *actualitas*[50] to (boldly)

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[48] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 182–183.

[49] See on this point I.C. Troconis Iribarren, *Dimensión histórica y dimensión ontológica del cumplimiento del hombre. La salvación cristiana según Joseph Ratzinger*, Roma 2019.

[50] *Actualitas* is a fundamental concept that Ratzinger takes from Bonaventure, to distinguish the realities for which *esse* and *factum esse* and *fieri* are distinct, such as substance and accidents, from those in which *esse* and *fieri* coincide, as in changes of state, from, finally, the category of realities for which *esse*, *fieri* and *factum* coincide, such as grace and, in a certain sense, the person and God himself, which is supreme *Actualitas*. See on this J. Ratzinger, *Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie Bonaventuras. Habilitationsschrift und*

include the quantum principle of complementarity in a Trinitarian ontological perspective. In doing so, the German theologian also poses a challenge to contemporary philosophy, with which he has always sought both intellectually and personally to be in relation: "It is probably true to say that the task imposed on philosophy as a result of these facts is far from being completed—so much does modern thought depend on the possibilities thus disclosed, without which it would be inconceivable."[51]

There is here an opening of perspective to post-modernism, today almost paralysed when faced with the crossroads between challenging some of the principles of modernity, which have led to outcomes contrary to those expected, or pushing towards a further radicalisation of these principles. Ratzinger, on the strength of the response offered by Trinitarian ontology to the cry that rises in the face of the tension between the One and the many in the history of metaphysics, prophetically indicates a way out of this paralysis in relational identity, a philosophical expression, as well as a theological one, that he derives from Christology and the theology of divine filiation, but which also opens up perspectives for those who do not believe.

The ontology of filiation

The proposed path thus makes it possible to grasp the strength of the conclusion towards which the Trinitarian part of *Introduction to Christianity* tends. Specifically, after presenting Trinitarian doctrine as negative theology, through the proposal of an epistemological approach that is authentically theological, i.e. Trinitarian, and after having stressed that the foundation of such an approach is the ontology of the Trinity in which the relation is a co-principle together with (and not against) the substance, Ratzinger proves that the passage from Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the objective genitive to Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive cannot be avoided. And this is precisely due to Christology.[52]

Bonaventuras-Studien, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 2, ed. G.L. Müller, Freiburg 2009, p. 337. On the non dialectical relationship of Ratzinger with Aquinas, see J.I. Belleza, *Joseph Ratzinger, Student of Thomas*, "Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology" 5/1 (2019), pp. 94–120.

[51] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 184.

[52] The following text is also crucial for this passage J. Ratzinger, *Die legitimität des christologischen Dogmas*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Jesus von Nazareth, Beiträge zur Christologie*, vol. 2, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 6/2, ed. G.L. Müller, Freiburg 2013, pp. 832–849.

The German theologian, in fact, after highlighting on a theoretical level the relation as a constitutive element of the new ontological vision that emerges when one takes seriously Trinitarian dogma with its development for the understanding of the world, returns to Scripture, as a sort of litmus test, to show how what is affirmed gives reason to the very setting of the fourth gospel.

The starting point is the Johannine statement that "The Son can do nothing of himself" (John 5:19 and 30):

> This seems to rob the Son of all power; he has nothing of his own; precisely because he is the Son he can only operate by virtue of him to whom he owes his whole existence. What first becomes evident here is that the concept "Son" is a concept of relation. By calling the Lord "Son", John gives him a name that always points away from him and beyond him; he thus employs a term that denotes essentially a relatedness. He thereby puts his whole Christology into the context of the idea of relation.[53]

In Christ, the ontology of the Trinity in an objective sense spills over into creation because the Filiation of the Word who became flesh is the eternal Relation with the Father. The life of Jesus of Nazareth is thus read as a translation into human terms; hence, as a personal, historical and narrative existence, of that pure being in relation to the first divine Person of the Son.

Essential to Ratzinger's ontology of the Filiation is the comparison with the paradox presented by the juxtaposition of the quoted Johannine expressions with the statement in John 10:30 that the Father and the Son are one. The Trinitarian ontology presented in the previous sections makes it possible here to grasp that the two statements do not contradict each other, but are perfectly complementary. In fact, if the Son is pure Relation, He is not necessarily alone, but precisely because of this He will not be separated in anything from the Father, being one with Him. Essential in this passage is precisely the fact that substance and relation are not dialectically opposed in the relational ontology of the German theologian, but are two co-principles that refer to each other.

From here follows, again at the level of Johannine exegesis, the shift to Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive. In fact, if the identity of Christ is totally relational with respect to the Father, the identity of the Christian is also totally relational with respect to Christ, as indicated by the very name introduced at Antioch, when the first non-Jews began to be baptised (Acts 11:19–26).

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[53] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 185.

Thus, John 5:19–30 translates into Christ's statement that Christians can do nothing without Him in John 15:5. So, precisely because Christology is radically under the sign of relation, so is being a Christian. Likewise, John 10:30 corresponds to the statements of the priestly prayer in John 17:11 and 22, when Jesus asks the Father to grant the disciples that same (relational) unity that characterises the Life of the divine Persons.

Ratzinger thus leads the reader to the nuclear junction of his relational Trinitarian ontology, a junction that shows the inevitability of the passage from the objective to the subjective genitive:

> The logic is compelling: If there is nothing in which he is just he, no kind of fenced-off private ground, then he coincides with the Father, is "one" with him. It is precisely this totality of interplay that the word "Son" aims at expressing. To John, "Son" means being from another; thus, with this word he defines the being of this man as being from another and for others, as a being that is completely open on both sides, knows no reserved area of the mere "I". When it thus becomes clear that the being of Jesus as Christ is a completely open being, a being "from" and "toward", which nowhere clings to itself and nowhere stands on its own, then it is also clear at the same time that this being is pure relation (not substantiality) and, as pure relation, pure unity. This fundamental statement about Christ becomes, as we have seen, at the same time the explanation of Christian existence.[54]

So also for the Christian, being totally *from* Christ and totally *for* the brethren does not constitute a loss, but on the contrary is the foundation of his own ontology. Herein lies the fundamental anthropological point that the consideration of substance and relation as co-principles induces. In fact, if relation were dialectically opposed to substance, as a certain theological tradition has claimed, the risk would be moralism because being *from* and being *for* would have no substantial content and would not represent a gain. Instead, being generated and giving oneself to one's brothers does not imply any loss because relations are in the substance, i.e. they are in being. This is why Ratzinger's Trinitarian ontology is also extremely valuable for our post-modern times. He proposes the example of ecumenism, for the context in which he lectured, but today his proposal can be grasped in a far greater horizon of unity because the

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[54] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 186–187.

one-sided emphasis on existence against essence or the dialectical opposition of the many to the one have produced a generalised loneliness.[55]

In contrast, in the context of Joseph Ratzinger's Trinitarian ontology, unity is always relational, both at the level of God, and for humans, created in His image and likeness:

> It is the nature of the trinitarian personality to be pure relation and so the most absolute unity. That there is no contradiction in this is probably now evident. And one can understand from now on more clearly than before that it is not the "atom", the indivisible smallest piece of matter, that possesses the highest unity; that, on the contrary, pure oneness can only occur in the spirit and embraces the relatedness of love. Thus in Christianity the profession of faith in the oneness of God is just as radical as in any other monotheistic religion; indeed, only in Christianity does it reach its full stature. But it is the nature of Christian existence to receive and to live life as relatedness and, thus, to enter into that unity which is the ground of all reality and sustains it. This will perhaps make it clear how the doctrine of the Trinity, when properly understood, can become the reference point of theology that anchors all other lines of Christian thought.[56]

The Trinitarian doctrine is called upon to be the point of reference, almost the origin of the coordinate axes of theology, precisely because it constitutes the equivalent of metaphysics with respect to ethics or anthropology in philosophy. When revealed light is allowed to illuminate ontology, then new categories emerge, as the Church Fathers have shown, both in the East and the West, that do not dialectically supplant the old ones, but rather complement them. Thus, Trinitarian theology makes it possible to reread Being and Unity "from within," through the relational reconfiguration it makes possible. Likewise, from here derives a principle of individuation that is not merely substantial, for which being a given reality necessarily requires being separate from the others, but relational:

> Let us round off the whole discussion with a passage from St Augustine which elucidates splendidly what we mean. It occurs in his commentary on St John and hinges on the sentence in the Gospel which runs, *"Mea doctrina non est mea"*

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[55] For application to moral theology, see J. Ratzinger, *The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of the Vatican II and* Veritatis Splendor, [in:] *Joseph Ratzinger in* Communio, vol. 1: *The Unity of the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI 2010, pp. 183–194, sp. p. 192 for the relational foundation.

[56] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 187–188.

– "My teaching is not my teaching, but that of the Father who sent me" (7,16). Augustine has used the paradox in this sentence to illuminate the paradoxical nature of the Christian image of God and of Christian existence. He asks himself first whether it is not a sheer contradiction, an offence against the elementary rules of logic, to say something like "Mine is not mine". But, he goes on to say, digging deeper, what really is the teaching of Jesus which is simultaneously his and not his? Jesus is "word", and thus it becomes clear that his teaching is he himself. If one reads the sentence again from this angle it then says: I am by no means just I; I am not mine at all; my I is that of another. With this we have moved on out of Christology and arrived at ourselves: *Quid tam tuum quam tu, quid tam non tuum quam tu*" – "What is so much yours as yourself and what is so little yours as yourself?" (*In Iohan.* 29,3). The most individual element in us – the only thing that belongs to us in the last analysis – our own "I", is at the same time the least individual element of all, for it is precisely our "I" that we have neither from ourselves nor for ourselves. The "I" is simultaneously what I have completely and what least of all belongs to me. Thus here again the concept of mere substance (=what stands in itself!) is shattered and it is made apparent how being that truly understands itself grasps at the same time that in it does not belong to itself; that it only comes to itself by moving away from itself and finding its way back as relatedness to its true primordial state.[57]

The role of Augustine's writings in inspiring Ratzinger's Trinitarian ontology formulated in *Introduction to Christianity* is evident from the quotations from the commentary on the fourth gospel by the bishop of Hippo in the text just quoted, preceded by those from *On the Trinity* 5, 5,6 and *Exposition of Psalm* 68, 1,5.[58]

The patristic inspiration of this point of arrival is particularly evident also in *The Unity of the Nations*, which in a sense recapitulates Ratzinger's own intellectual and academic journey.[59] Here, commenting on Eph 2:14–15, he explains that for the Fathers, unity was not one theme among others, but the centre of all their teaching. Original sin is read as the source of division. But both Augustine[60]

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[57]   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 190.
[58]   J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 183–184.
[59]   See, for example, J. Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations. A Vision of the Church Fathers*, transl. B. Ramsey, Washington, DC 2015, pp. 23–32.
[60]   For the Pneumatological dimension see J. Ratzinger, *The Holy Spirit as Communio: Concerning the Relationship of Pneumatology and Spirituality in Augustine*, "Communio" 25 (1998), pp. 324–337.

and Gregory of Nyssa[61] present the unity of men as a relational unity because their very identity is relational (see *On the Song of Songs* 2, quoted at p. 27).[62] The former, in fact, in his commentary on the Psalms, interprets the name Adam as a reference to the four cardinal points because the original Adam embraces the whole earth and even when sin broke this unity, God gathered and reunited the pieces (*Exposition of Psalm* 95, 15). The Cappadocian even believes, as Ratzinger himself explains, that one cannot use the plural when speaking of three men, just as one cannot talk of three gods when speaking of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Here the German theologian draws on Henry de Lubac's *Catholicism*, as the note in the text shows. The same happens with a further pair of proposed images that illustrate a similar line of interpretation: that of the lost sheep referring to humanity in the exegesis of Gregory of Nyssa and that of the coin that bears the image of God and must be given back to God in the exegesis of Augustine.[63]

At the root of this possibility of re-reading humanity in the light of the relational unity and relational identity of the triune God is precisely the gift of Christ:

> Jesus' human will assimilates itself to the will of the Son. In doing this, he receives the Son's identity, i.e., the complete subordination of the I to the Thou, the self-giving and self-expropriation of the I to the Thou. This is the very essence of him who is pure relation and act. Wherever the I gives itself to the Thou, there is freedom because this involves the reception of the "form of God."[64]

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[61] Gregory of Nyssa is particularly present in Joseph Ratzinger's thought, precisely because of his relational ontology and epistemology, the foundation of his negative theology. See, for example, the Christological interpretation of the fact that Moses only sees God from behind (see Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Series: The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. A.J. Malherbe, New York 1978, II, 251, somehow parallel to Augustine, *On the Trinity*, [in:] *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, vol. 7, ed. M. Dods, transl. A.W. Haddan, Edinburgh 1873, 2, 17,28, pp. 70–72). Here too there is a parallelism with Augustine in Ratzinger's quotations. Cf. J. Ratzinger, "*Wer mich gesehen hat, hat den Vater gesehen" (Joh 14,9). Das Antlitz Christi in der Heiligen Schrift*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Jesus von Nazareth. Beiträge zur Christologie*, vol. 2, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 6/2, ed. G.L. Müller, Freiburg 2013, p. 772.

[62] An really interesting question would be if Ratzinger, who is clearly inspired by Augustine, is in reality closer to him or to Gregory of Nyssa, but this exceeds the scope of the present paper. For a comparison of Augustine's and Gregory's versions of Trinitarian ontology, see G. Maspero, *Rethinking the Filioque with the Greek Fathers*, Grand Rapids, MI 2023, pp. 242–265.

[63] Cf. J. Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations…*, op. cit., pp. 23–32.

[64] J. Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, San Francisco, CA 1986, p. 41.

In the school of Maximus the Confessor, Joseph Ratzinger shows in the free giving of the human will of Christ to the divine will the point of passage through which the relationality of God gives itself to the relationality of mankind.

Conclusion

At the end of this path we have tried to show that the Trinitarian part of *Introduction to Christianity* contains a Trinitarian ontology that is a relational ontology, understood in both the objective and subjective genitive sense. Relation is, by Ratzinger, recognised as a co-principle of being that does not supplant substance, but opens it up. This founds Trinitarian epistemology, which is a negative theology because it is relational, and Trinitarian anthropology, in which the unity and identity of human beings is founded precisely on the ontological value of relationship.[65] The German theologian's approach makes it crystal clear that the shift to a Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive cannot be avoided if one takes Christology seriously. Thus, history and eternity, existence and essence, can be reconciled in the school of both Eastern and Western Fathers:

> For Catholic theology, this is a fairly recent problem, even though the underlying matter, simply from the structure of the Christian, which appeared as the message of God's action in history, was always present in some form and, in the interrelation of οἰκονομία and θεολογία, of *dispositio* and *natura*, is even at the centre of the thinking of Christian reality in the Fathers of the Church.[66]

Precisely the patristic articulation between *theologia* and *oikonomia* is the point of transition from a Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the objective genitive to the subjective genitive. This is why Ratzinger's patristic inspiration, beyond the study of quotations and references, is given at a structural level. And this makes it possible to present his theology as a powerful response to the cry that rises from the history of metaphysics in the face of the tension between the one and the many, an *aporia* whose topicality is evident in contemporary times.

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[65]   On Ratzinger's anthropology, see I. Troconis, *Joseph Ratzinger's* Imago Dei *Anthropology: The Reconciliation of Ontology and Salvation History*, [in:] *Between Being and Time. From Ontology to Eschatology*, eds. A. Kaethler, S. Mitralexis, Lanham, MD 2019, pp. 189–203.

[66]   J. Ratzinger, *Heilsgeschichte und Eschatologie. Zur Frage nach dem Ansatz des theologischen Denkens*, [in:] *Theologie im Wandel. Festschrift zum 150 jährigen Bestehen der kath. theologischen Fakultät an der Universität Tübingen, 1817–1967*, München 1967, p. 68.

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