

IN THE IMAGE OF TRINITY: TO BE IS TO BE IN RELATION

Gloria L. Schaab, SSJ

“To be, or not to be: that is the question” – at least according to Hamlet. But for us, perhaps a better question is “What does it mean ‘to be’?”

At this assembly we gather to *contemplate* a particular understanding of what it means 'to be' – namely, to be the presence of *love*, to be persons in *communion*. And we do so from the vantage point of God as Trinity, the One Who is the presence of Love itself, who is Persons in Communion. Before I began this theological work, I was an elementary school teacher and principal. I remember a conversation I had after I had announced that I was leaving my position as principal after eight years to study for a PhD in theology at Fordham University. A parent with whom I had journeyed through the death of his wife and the difficult reactions of their three daughters said to me, “You know, Sister Gloria, somehow I cannot imagine you sitting in a corner, contemplating the Trinity.” I laughed and replied, “Tom, I hardly think that is how I will be spending my time.” Yet, these 18 years later, it seems that is precisely what I have spent my time doing – contemplating the Trinity as Persons in loving relation to one another and to all of creation. Nevertheless, it wasn't in a corner, but in dialogue with science, with feminist theology, and with the human experience of suffering. Having done so situates me in a long line of far more illustrious theologians of the Trinity than I, a line that stretches from Augustine, the Cappadocians, and Aquinas, to Karl Rahner, Walter Kasper, and Elizabeth Johnson my dissertation mentor at Fordham. Each of us has grappled with the question of what it means for God to be “three in one,” a unity in diversity. In western theology, Augustine and Aquinas grounded their thinking in the monotheistic understanding of God as One, and so began with the question, “How can the One [God] be Three [Persons]?” In eastern theology, however,

the Cappadocians took their starting point from Jesus in the Gospels, and so they began with the question, “How can the Three [Persons] be One [God]?”

Despite beginning from opposite ends of the question, the answer arrived at by theologians from both West and East was the same. In the Trinity, the One is Three and the Three are One because *to be a person is to be a relation*. According to these theologians, the persons of the Trinity do not *have* relation to one another; their divine nature is relation. The *reality* of God as Trinity is essentially *relational*. And what’s more, this relational reality of God has ramifications for all of creation, both human and non-human. As Christians, we profess that God is Creator, the very Source of Being from whom all creation receives its being. So what does this mean for creation? Well, Aquinas spoke eloquently of what this intimate relation between Creator and creation means. He taught that creation participates in the very Being of God and pointed out that this participation is not reserved to humans alone. Aquinas stated, “God is in *all* things ...since God is being itself.... Therefore, as long as a thing has being, **God must be present to it,in all things, and innermostly.**”¹ Hence, *if* God is the Source of Being for all creation, *and if* God’s Being *by nature* is relation, *then* the being of all creation – human and non-human – is *by nature* relation.

Now, for some, the claims that I just made about relation in creation are merely theological speculation. Nevertheless, this conclusion would be ill-founded. For, beyond any claims based on the Trinitarian life of God, the physical and social sciences have observed, described, and demonstrated that relations constitute the very nature of all creation. As Margaret Wheatley stated in a phrase familiar to many of us, “[In the quantum world in which we live], Relationships are not just interesting; they are all there is to reality.”²

Recall too that her vision of effective leadership is of those who dance through the changes in an organization based on the flux and flow of relationships. This dynamic reflects what the Cappadocians called “perichoresis.” It was a term they used to describe the dynamic of divine unity in diversity, divine communion in difference, the divine dance of the Trinity.

Indeed, insights about the universe from cosmology, biology, and physics; about humans from sociology and psychology; and about God from classical and contemporary theology clearly affirm that the nature of everything that exists is relational. “All of us...are our relationships. We are nothing other than our relationships—with each other, with the world. **We are patterns that connect.**”³

So, what is the nature of these relationships? In my research and writings, I have proposed that whether we contemplate the cosmos, humanity, or God, three types of relation interact to make us who or what we are. These three relations are (1) a *relation of origin*, (2) a *relation of effect*, and (3) a *relation of emergence*.

The *relation of origin* stems from the fact that living beings share a common source that binds them together by nature. Because of this common origin, such as a biological family, certain qualities can be gleaned from or applied to the whole group. An example of a relation of origin from the cosmos is our “common creation story.” This story looks to a time some 13.7 billion years ago when the cosmos took the form of a compressed fireball.⁴ All the elements of matter, energy, space, and time that would ever exist erupted as a single quantum gift from which came all life on planet Earth and beyond.⁵

The second kind of relation is the *relation of effect*. This implies that everything that exists is a unique outcome or *effect* of the elements that caused it. Orbits from gravitational pull, mountains from tectonic shifts or, as Lorenz might say, a tornado from a butterfly flapping its wings - all of these demonstrate relations of cause and effect that sometimes interact to produce living things in far-reaching and unanticipated ways. As one atomic physicist pointed out, “The world [is] a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds...overlap [and] combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole.”⁶

The final of the three relations I have described is the *relation of emergence*. In evolutionary theory, emergence implies that truly novel forms of life tend to develop from simpler forms of life, but require new language to describe them. However, even though they are novel, they are by nature related to the forms that came before them and, in fact, actualize the potential of those simpler forms. Think, for example, of a book: letters join as words; words link into sentences; sentences combine into paragraphs; paragraphs build chapters; and so on until the finished product emerges. The book is, simultaneously, more than, related to, and actualizing the potential of the parts that comprise it. A similar dynamic occurs in any creative activity, whether a symphony, a painting, or a skyscraper. None of these outcomes can be reduced to their component parts. Yet none of them could have come into being without the forms that preceded them and none of them exist unrelated to these earlier forms.

So whether from evolutionary and quantum science, sociology and psychology, or classical and contemporary theology, voices ring with a singular resonance. We are, *in essence*, our relationships: “In a relational universe, to speak of ‘an object’ is to speak in a short-handed way...of complex, dynamically interpenetrating relationships.... As A interacts with B, the identity of A changes...[and] likewise for B. As A and B continue to interact, along with

innumerable others, changes to their “identity” complexify beyond measure and prediction.... All of us...are our relationships. We are nothing other than our relationships.... We are patterns that connect."⁷

As you may have anticipated, the interacting relations that produce cosmic life also produce social systems, and, among them, religious congregations. I suggest that, for religious orders, the *relation of origin* is represented by the *charism*, the *relation of effect* is embodied in *ministry and community life*, and the *relation of emergence* is expressed in *governance*, defined as *the creative structures and processes through which we engage one another*.

In a religious congregation, the charism is our *relation of origin*; it is our common creation story. We are often attracted to a particular community because something resonates within us; we recognize it within ourselves as a part of who we already are. Before we can even name it, we sense its familiarity and its attraction, often through our experience of that charism embodied in another.

For me, I knew I wanted to be one of the “great women,” the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia, whom I had come to love over the many years they taught me. I remember the attraction, alive within me, calling for me to embrace it. It is an attraction that is present even in the cosmos. In his book, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*,⁸ Brian Swimme writes of a conversation between “Youth,” who represents humanity, and “Thomas,” the late Earth scholar Thomas Berry. Youth asks Thomas about the destiny of the cosmos and Thomas responds that Youth’s destiny is “To become love – the presence of love – in human form.” Thomas goes on to explain: “Love begins as allurements—as attraction.... When we look at love from a cosmic perspective, we see attraction operating at every level.” The charism is that attraction. And it is not only our common story, but also our creation story because, as grace, it has the power to attract us, allure us, and transform us into love as we live it in ministry and community.

These lived responses in ministry and in community embody our *relations of effect*. We know that the identities of our religious congregations are shaped not only by our charism, but also by our way of life in community and by our ministerial commitments. The promise of community and the appeal of ministry to those who are poor, disenfranchised, and marginalized are sometimes the most alluring things about us. In the 2015 CARA report, nine in ten respondents were at least “somewhat” attracted to religious life by a desire to be of service and almost as many by the desire to be part of a community. For more than six in ten, these aspects attracted them “very much.”

Beyond the effects of ministry and community that shape part of our corporate identity, ministry and community have a considerable relation of effect on each other. When the majority of sisters in our Congregations were in common forms of ministry, be it educational, social, health, or pastoral, it had ramifications for our common life of prayer, of meals, of recreation, of support. However, we know that communal and ministerial relations of effect are dynamic and evolving from one time period to the next and for a number of good reasons. One is that the emerging, unmet needs of the people of God require new and creative responses; another is that the gifts and skills of those whom God calls to religious life provide fresh opportunities and resources. But there are consequences. What happens to our relations when ministries change or when one is no longer capable of serving in a ministry? What happens to our community when we can no longer maintain common prayer, common meals, and common presence to one another because of diverging ministries? How is communion with one another and with those whom we serve affected or, perhaps, disaffected? New challenges, evolving needs call for novel ways of being of service and in community. Old forms no longer suffice; something new must emerge.

If we are responsive to our relations of origin and effect, then new ways of engaging one another – governance – emerges. And my, how new modes of governance have emerged. Contemplative dialogue, dynamic engagement, communal discernment; base communities, consensus groups, designated reflectors; circles and clusters and loops – oh my! A vast number of collaborative models of governance have emerged in recent years, all based in the understanding of the critical roles of contemplation, of dialogue, of relationship – the seeds of which were sown in the earliest days of our foundations. As a Sister of Saint Joseph, I ask myself, were these seeds not taking root in the hearts and lives of our first six sisters, gathered by the hearth in Le Puy? Were they not taking root in the lives of your first sisters, only to emerge in different forms throughout your histories?

So, at this point, I hope we have established the fact that “to be is to be in relation.”

However, although relation is our reality, communion must be an intentional choice. For communion to come about, I propose that the relations of charism, ministry and community, and governance must be contemplated, assessed, and engaged interactively at different moments in a congregation’s history through dynamic processes involving the entire membership. To demonstrate this dynamic, I offer the symbol of the kaleidoscope.

The kaleidoscope, from the Greek, meaning a "beautiful-form-to-see" is a structure that creates a myriad of patterns from fragments of colored material, when illuminated by a source of light, and reflected by mirrors positioned at different angles. The materials that produce the patterns are commonly broken shards or fragments of stained glass. However, while the shards are the stuff of which the image is formed, the mirrors of the kaleidoscope are its heart. These mirrors, or reflectors, if you will, vary in quality, quantity, and perspective.

- The better the quality of the mirrors, the sharper the image.
- The keener the angles of the mirror, the more accurate the image.
- The greater the number of mirrors, the more inclusive the image.

When directed toward the light and rotated, the casing which contains the shards of various forms, colors, and densities creates an interaction with the mirrors to produce a *mandala*, a universal symbol of oneness and wisdom. Obviously, while each of the elements of the kaleidoscope can be defined and discussed independently, it is only in their collaboration with one another that the beauty, clarity, and variety of patterns can be produced.

Applied the model to religious life, the shards and fragments are the present realities of ministry, of community, and of membership. Note that, while an image of wholeness emerges, it does so from brokenness, from the sharp and irregular edges of glass, when they are illuminated, reflected, and acted upon through structures that promote interaction and engagement. The casing which holds both the beauty and the brokenness is our governance – the creative structures and processes that have emerged through which we engage one another in response to the changing realities of ministry, membership, and community. **[Showing three kaleidoscopes in sequence]**

- Some governance has emerged like the deep rich wood of this kaleidoscope, formed from a living, growing, breathing source, which has the capacity to expand and contract with changing conditions and from which new forms can be shaped.
- Some governance has emerged like the brass of this kaleidoscope, formed from a firm, durable substance, intended to be timeless, although eventually it tends to tarnish and thus lose its attractiveness to people.
- Some governance has emerged like the tin of this kaleidoscope, formed from a brittle, impermanent material, visually interesting, but hardly robust enough to respond to changing circumstances and threatening to break through strain or improper use.

The mirrors or reflectors are the members of the Congregation. Remember:

- The better the quality of the reflectors, the sharper the image.
- The keener the angles of the reflectors, the more accurate the image.
- The greater the number of reflectors, the more inclusive the image.

So, you ask, what happened to the charism? To my mind, the charism is the light that illuminates the entire process. It is the source of enlightenment that produces living, dynamic, expansive, and inclusive forms of being together, of being for the other – **communion**. It is the charism that enables our membership to engage the changing realities of ministry and community at particular moments of history, while remaining faithful to our origins, our common creation stories. In the light of the charism – original grace, gift of God for the life of the world – the interacting relations within a religious congregation have the capacity to produce a dynamic unity in diversity, a shared vision, a mandala of communion through the power of active, inclusive, faithful love.

What does this communion of active, inclusive, faithful love in the image of God as Trinity look like in the world? I propose that living in Trinitarian relation in our world calls us to foster nonhierarchical relationships of inclusivity; to transform social, ethical, and political systems; and to imitate divine solidarity with human suffering.

To foster nonhierarchical relationships of inclusivity in the image of Trinity calls persons and communities to welcome and support a diversity of life, recognizing that each person, each creature, contributes a giftedness unlimited by gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or culture. Nowhere is this better modeled than in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, who invited all comers to table fellowship. He challenged his followers to subvert the usual order of things, “to build...relationships of love and mutuality,” and to assure that no person was isolated, marginalized, or ostracized by human judgment or social class.

The God who in Jesus Christ subverted the social order challenges us to do the same in our world by reconstructing social, ethical, and political systems. All patterns of relation that alienate, dominate, and divide or that shore up oppressive political or patriarchal structures of power must be reordered according to the relationality and inclusivity of Trinitarian life. Modeled on the life of the Trinity, power is shared, elitism is dismantled, discrimination is eliminated, and competition is neutralized. Modeling such inclusiveness, interdependence, and cooperation in our religious congregations can serve as a prophetic counter-cultural presence in the midst of a suffering world.

And in this suffering world, living in Trinitarian relation calls us to imitate divine solidarity with those who suffer, incarnating the very nature of God as Love. Revealed as self-limited, self-emptying love in Jesus Christ, what were hints of the divine nature in history became a resonating word to humanity from God's very self. This Word of self-emptying and creative Love revealed a suffering God, who nonetheless brings newness of life from suffering and death for the transformation and liberation of the world.

What does it mean to be the presence of love, to be persons in communion? To the extent that we foster inclusivity, transform unjust societal structures, and imitate the God who suffers with victims of violence and oppression; with women afflicted by cultural, economic, and sexual degradation; and with the families shattered by political crises, to that extent is the radical power of communion and love in the image of Trinity dynamic, emergent, and effective in the Church and in our world.

Notes

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.8.1.

² Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992), 32.

³ Heesoon Bai and Hartley Banack, "'To See a World in a Grain of Sand': Complexity Ethics and Moral Education," *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education* 3:1 (2006): 5–20 at 9–10.

⁴ Arthur Peacocke, "Theology and Science Today," 30.

⁵ John Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1986), 56.

⁶ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: Harper, 1958), 96.

⁷ Bai and Banack, "'To See a World in a Grain of Sand.'" 9-10.

⁸ Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Co., 1984). The excerpts used in this section are drawn from *In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*, Context Institute; available from <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC12/Swimme.htm> (accessed August 18, 2011).