

THE ORTHODOX-REFORMED CONVERSATIONS

A Common Reflection on the Agreed Statement Kappel, Germany, March 1992

The theological orientation of the agreed statement [on the Holy Trinity] is governed by the fact that it is only through God that God may be known. The self-revelation of God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit provides the framework within which alone it is to be interpreted. It is fidelity to the supreme truth that through Christ and in one Spirit we have access to the Father which opens a way through divergent traditions in the East and West for ecumenical agreement.

Trinitarian language

Throughout the statement attention is given to the fact that human language when applied to God is inevitably and rightly stretched beyond its ordinary or conventional sense if it is to serve the purpose intended. Accordingly terms like *οὐσία*, *ὑπόστασις* and *Φύσις* borrowed by the church from Greek are consistently handled in the new shape given to them as they are harnessed in the service of God's trinitarian self-revelation. Thus no use is made of Aristotle's distinction between primary and secondary substance which has troubled Western theology, while Latin translations like "substance" or "essence" of more concrete Greek notions of being are usually avoided. Similarly the terms *οὐσία* and *Φύσις* are not used in an abstract generic sense. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity expounded here is: one God, three Persons, not three Persons, one nature.

Care has been taken in this statement to recall our Lord's teaching that "God is Spirit". This means that terms like *οὐσία*, *ὑπόστασις* or *Φύσις* when applied to God must be understood in a wholly spiritual, personal yet genderless way. It also means that any images taken from creaturely being have to be understood in a diaphanous or "see-through" way, in which they are used like lenses through which vision of truth may take place, but which are not themselves projected into deity. They are used like all biblical and theological terms to point spiritually beyond the images themselves to truth independent of them. Hence when the incarnate Son is said to be the image of the Father, and the Holy Spirit is spoken of as the image of Christ, stress is laid upon a wholly spiritual way of understanding the consubstantial relation of the incarnate Son to the Father and of all hypostatic relations in God, which cuts away the arguments advanced by the Arians in reading back the images of creaturely sonship and fatherhood into God.

Of particular significance is the deepening of the Nicene conception of *οὐσία* through its coordination with the divine "I am who I am/I shall be who I shall be", on the one hand, and with the co-inherence of the three Persons in the unity of the God-head, on the other hand. The effect of this is to give the term *οὐσία* a personal meaning under the impact of divine revelation, and to develop the understanding of *οὐσία* as being in its internal relations along with *ὑπόστασις* as being in its objective relations. Thus *ὑπόστασις* is used to denote the three divine Persons in the distinctive otherness of their relations with one another within the oneness of the *οὐσία* of the Godhead. The words for "face" (*πρόσωπον*) and "name" are also allied to *ὑπόστασις* which has the effect of giving it the meaning of self-identifying personal being. It was through this unique coordination of the concepts of *οὐσία* and *ὑπόστασις* together with the co-inherent relations of the divine hypostases who are the consubstantial Trinity, that birth was given to the concept of "person" and of "personal" unknown before in the ancient tradition of either the Hebrews or the Greeks. The relations between persons are integral to what persons are - which holds in an uncreated way in the Trinity and in a creaturely way in human being. It is in this sense, not in a subjective or psychological sense, that the statement on the Holy Trinity uses the terms "person" and "personal".

The monarchy

Of far-reaching importance is the stress laid upon the monarchy of the Godhead in which all three divine Persons share, for the whole indivisible Being of God belongs to each of them as it belongs to all of them together. This is reinforced by the unique conception of co-inherent or perichoretic relations between the different Persons in which

they completely contain and interpenetrate one another while remaining what they distinctively are in their otherness as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is intrinsically triune, Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity. There are no degrees of deity in the Holy Trinity, as is implied in a distinction between the underived deity of the Father and the derived deity of the Son and the Spirit. Any notion of subordination in God is completely ruled out. The perfect simplicity and the indivisibility of God in his triune Being mean that the *ἀρχή* or *μοναρχία* cannot be limited to one Person, as Gregory the Theologian pointed out. While there are inviolable distinctions within the Holy Trinity, this does not detract from the truth that the whole Being of God belongs to each divine Person as it belongs to all of them and belongs to all of them as it belongs to each of them, and thus does not detract from the truth that the monarchy is One and indivisible, the Trinity in unity and the unity in Trinity.

The doctrine of the monarchy that is not limited to one Person, and the doctrine of the *περιχώρησι* of the three divine Persons, or their reciprocal containing of one another, when taken together, may help towards a fuller understanding of the mission of the Holy Spirit from the Father and gift of the Holy Spirit by the Son. As the agreed statement says: "The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, but because of the unity of the Godhead in which each Person is perfectly and wholly God, he proceeds from the Father through the Son for the Spirit belongs to and is inseparable from the Being of the Father and of the Son." A further study in depth of this procession might help us to find ways of cutting behind the division between the East and the West over the so-called "filioque", for it does not allow of any idea of the procession of the Spirit from two ultimate principles or *ἀρχαί*.

Ecumenical significance

The statement on the Holy Trinity is thus of considerable ecumenical significance in offering an approach to the doctrine of the Trinity which is neither from the three persons to the one Being of God, nor from the one Being of God to the three Persons. The account of the Trinity given by the statement stresses at one and the same time the Trinity and the unity of God, through guidance taken mostly from Athanasius and Gregory the Theologian. As such, it cuts across mistaken polarized views of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to which Latin theology moves from the oneness of God to the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while Greek theology moves from the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the oneness of God. What is provided by the agreed statement of the Orthodox theologians in the East and the Reformed theologians in the West is pre-eminently a statement on the tri-unity of God as Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity.

[GROS, J., H. MEYER, W, RUSCH. Eds. *Growth in Agreement II. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*. Faith & Order Paper, 187. (Geneva/Grand Rapids, MI: WCC Publications/William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000) 285-287].