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The Human Identity Crisis:

Can we do without the Trinity?

by Michael Ovey

Summary

This paper examines contemporary problems surrounding human identity and discusses their causes and consequences. It analyses the claim that trinitarian doctrine is now redundant and argues that, far from being a mere parlour game, it alone allows the perfect personal characteristics of the God revealed in the Bible to be fully expressed. The doctrine also confronts the tendencies both to individualism and uniformity which characterise western societies, thereby providing an essential justification for the identity and value of humanity.

Preface

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" The Stepmother of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* is an unlikely place to start a discussion of the Trinity, but there is something fascinating about her question. It is not enough for her to have her own opinion about her beauty. Above all she craves objective knowledge of herself, something which only someone other than herself can provide. The mirror in the tale witnesses truthfully to who she really is and accordingly she needs it to know her place in the world. On her own, she lacks, so to speak, definition.

The problem of who we are

Perhaps unflatteringly, we share this question with the Stepmother. Of course, this is a perennial question since it deals with a permanent human problem. Yet the end of the twentieth century poses it exceptionally acutely. It is worth reflecting which features today make this so. Two are of particular interest here:

(i) Individualism

One of the most striking aspects of modern life is the place of the individual. The individual is often increasingly isolated as communitarian dimensions to life become more difficult to protect.

Naturally, this has its attractions, since the burden of responsibility is often lessened as the social bond dissolves. This offers very considerable freedom of action, but what we observe goes beyond the simple fact or phenomenon that late twentieth century life is individual: it is also individualist. The fact is ideologically justified - individualism is a creed.

In practice this creed means I am ultimately answerable to myself, not others. My first duty is to my own self, an attitude resonating with a market-oriented culture. But there is a price: others too owe a duty to themselves in the first instance, they are not primarily accountable to me. In that sense individualism is a lonely creed.

(ii) Uniformity

Paradoxically, a trend to uniformity coexists with individualism. Modern lifestyles have tended to create a global, mass culture in which differences are gradually eliminated. You can have a McDonald fries in New York, Moscow and Bangkok. Even languages, those badges of human cultural diversity, are becoming extinct as a global culture puts a premium on relatively few languages.

However, in such a climate it becomes increasingly difficult to see what makes any given human individual unique. He/she has so much in common with such huge numbers of others that they seem interchangeable. Indeed, twentieth century culture with its drive

for efficiency and convenience has a vested interest in uniformity. Interchangeability amongst the workforce can seem highly desirable to an employer, and having the "standard" customer makes for streamlining.

The causes of our problem

Of course, no factor is solely responsible for these features of life. It is only possible to scratch the surface of what has contributed to our present situation. But a number of different factors require comment.

(i) Modern lifestyle

A combination of trends and developments makes modern life distinctive and contributes both to our individualism and our uniformity. Whatever the original intention, our patterns of work and leisure in large, fluid and anonymous cities can make us remote from extended family. Close friendships can become temporary. This tends to create isolated and atomised individuals.

Moreover, family breakdown and a careerist ethic can so focus attention on identity as a function of work that broader questions about the individual are submerged. As work emerges as the central function for an individual's life, and since that work is often far from unique, the differences between individuals can sink from view. It is no surprise to see the individual him/herself becoming merely one of many in a mass, global culture. Personal relationships tend to become dispensable and the individual can become insulated from others and indeed insular.

(ii) Reductionism

Our understanding of the mechanics of our universe has increased and we are more and more able to "reduce" events by providing explanations in terms of more and more basic scientific laws. This type of reduction is, of course, a perfectly proper part of the scientific method. Yet with this has also come a different type of reductionism, an ideological tendency to say that philosophically "all" we are is nothing but a collection of organs, or a collection of atoms: our existence has no transcendent or metaphysical dimension. This type of reductionism is the ideology of "nothing buttery".

This reductionism takes many forms. At a popular level psychology has been seen as reducing human beings to a bundle of instincts, conditioned reflexes and neuroses, a crude behaviourism, in which it is redundant to talk of a coherent "self". More radically, others argue that we are simply biological machines for propagating our genes. Going still further, we could be analysed as conglomerations of subatomic particles whose activity is governed by the fundamental laws of physics.

Reductionism of this type could be criticised on several grounds, but for present purposes it is worth noting that it "levels" humanity out: there is nothing intrinsically different between different members of the human race. Indeed, there is no intrinsic difference between us and the rest of the universe.

The significance of this for twentieth century attitudes is profound. It provides a reason, in fact something like a moral justification, for treating individual human beings as essentially interchangeable. One is very much the same as another, since all can be reduced to the same basic constituents. It legitimates the uniformity of our culture.

(iii) Western philosophical tradition

Some aspects of mainstream western philosophy can also prove less than beneficial. There has been a tendency to seek answers to human identity by looking at individuals as individuals, self-contained and self-existent, with no necessary contact or communion with others.

This is deeply rooted. Boethius is an example with his assertion that a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. This stresses the individual both as self-contained and also as purely rational. Descartes continues this approach in stating: "I think therefore I am". This is clearly ego-centred since all inquiry starts with me, the thinker, and that inquiry needs no external input.

A successor in this tradition of the self-existent "I" is Kant. Kant was attempting to meet David Hume's scepticism about our knowledge of the physical world. To do this, he investigated the faculty of human reason, which involved looking at how "I" perceive the world and my abilities and my limitations in doing that. But in starting there, Kant finds it difficult to verify that the human mind can indeed scrutinise its abilities and limitations correctly. If this were verifiable then, of course, the Stepmother in *Snow White* would not require the external aid of her mirror: she would know herself. If only she had read her Kant...

Disconcertingly, this philosophical tradition provides an ideological underpinning for both individualism and uniformity.

Thus, if the self is approached in terms of a self-contained, self-explaining entity, then others are in some ways irrelevant to that self. Indeed, verifying the existence of other "selves" is problematic. I know that I am rational since I can observe my own mental processes (following Boethius) but I cannot observe others in the same way.

This tends to justify me in holding myself accountable only to myself: after all, I can only speak for myself as definitely being an individual. Tragically, though, this has a corollary: as an ideological individualist I can have no call on others; I have conceded they are unaccountable to me.

However this philosophical tradition can also legitimate uniformity when developed slightly differently. If I assume that what makes me "human" is my rationality and that others actually do exercise rationality, then what makes me different from all of them? One Apple Mac computer is very like another. Others share my "human" faculty almost indistinguishably.

What is so potent about these three influences is not their individual impact. Rather, they form a cocktail of influences, in which social facts and ideology combine together and reinforce each other to produce a culture in which individual definition becomes extremely problematic and in which human identity becomes, in practice, epiphenomenal, something that, if there, is secondary and not an essential part of the basic model.

The results

(i) Civic relationships: fragility of human rights

Given these twin features of individualism and uniformity, the basis for human rights to be enjoyed by all starts to become fragile. After all, on an individualist level, if I am a self-contained, self-existent ego, why should I bother with your rights at all? My world is complete without you, and respecting your rights or invading your rights are equal options, dependent on my personal sovereign choice alone. What is more, on a uniformity basis, there is nothing in you which cannot be replaced by another creature from the global community: your value is undercut.

We naturally resist such conclusions, and historically have attempted to find a grounding for rights in pragmatism: I demand and assert certain rights but am willing to accord reciprocal rights to others in exchange for those rights so that society can function. The difficulty here is our inclination to freeload, to demand our "rights" while trying to withhold the "rights" of others. And pragmatism cannot ultimately provide a moral framework to say this is wrong.

(ii) Transcendental relationships: the exclusion of God

Naturally a society that has bought heavily into ideological individualism puts the self at the centre of the universe. This means that God cannot be treated "as God" (Romans 1:21), because to treat God as God must include seeing him as the centre of existence rather than ourselves. Moreover, reductionism tends to deny either the existence of God or the necessity of relationship with him: if I am truly "nothing but" atoms and molecules, it seems farcical to demand that it is necessary for me to know God and enjoy him forever.

Dispensing with the Trinity?

At first glance the doctrine of the Trinity appears to deal with a completely different area of thought, the nature and person of God, rather than the character of being human. The only thing in common, some would argue, is that trinitarian doctrine is equally an "add-on", a non-essential: an epiphenomenal dogma.

In recent years several considerations, even though hardly Christian orthodoxy, push us in this direction.

First, there is the sheer difficulty of explanation. The old joke is that in mathematics one plus one plus one is three, while in theology one plus one plus one is one. And it is argued that something so difficult to believe and comprehend makes evangelism more difficult. Moreover, it may make us dishonest as we insist on something that we do not clearly comprehend ourselves.

Secondly, there are the demands of interfaith dialogue. The Trinity is such a distinctively Christian doctrine that it prevents co-operation with the monotheistic religions of Islam and Judaism, and with monist streams in Hinduism and Buddhism too. And, the argument runs, we could happily jettison the Trinity as a non-essential, or refrain from mentioning it in polite interfaith company.

Thirdly, the doctrine stems from a view of Jesus as fully and uniquely divine, which can only separate us from a secular world which would like to embrace Christian ethics, and from other faiths which, like us, want to oppose the materialism and inhumanity of modern life.

Fourthly, it is said that the doctrine is a post-biblical development, only one of a number of theological "options" available on the biblical material.

Nevertheless, dispensing with the trinitarian doctrine of God has a very high price tag.

(i) The personhood of God

If God is not trinitarian, but is still the sole God who is uncreated and eternal, and therefore without any existing personal relationships within his own being, then we end up having to say some very odd things about his nature. One of two things must be true:

(a) On the one hand we could say that he simply does not have personal relationships. He did not have them before creation and creation has not altered this: whatever his relationship is with creation, it would not be personal. He is in fact incapable of personal relationships. Rather his relationship with creation resembles that of a giant supercomputer towards the objects of its thought or that of electricity towards the object it affects.

However, this creates unpalatable consequences. If we are capable of personal relationships, this means we have a capacity, not inherently immoral, which God does not, a bizarre result for an omnipotent God. Or we could conclude that, since we are in God's image, our own claims to personal relationships are in fact as illusory as his.

(b) On the other hand, we could say that God is only potentially personal. Before creation he had no personal relationships and only started to have them when he embarked on creation. On this view God is having to find out about relationships as he goes along (scarcely an encouraging thought). But this view leaves us with an acute dilemma:

(i) if God was self-sufficient before creation (as the major monotheistic traditions maintain) then personal relationship is not essential for him, he does not need it: it is epiphenomenal, and at rock bottom God is impersonal, which leaves us with a picture which differs little from (a) above.

(ii) if God was not self-sufficient before creation, but was essentially personal, and had to create the universe in order to complete himself, then our relationship with him is obviously not what, for example, Paul depicts in Acts 17:24-27, where Paul insists on God's complete independence of creation. He becomes a God who needs us and depends on us in order to fulfil himself. That would put us in a position to bargain (we will love him if he drops the adultery clause from the Decalogue).

Whichever non-trinitarian course one takes here, we are left with a lesser God, because we are left with a God for whom personhood is unsatisfied in his essential being before creation.

That in turn creates other tensions. John (one of the most explicitly "trinitarian" of the New Testament writers) speaks of God as love (1 John 4:8). And in this he is speaking of God's essential being. But it is hard to see how this could be true if God is either impersonal or not essentially personal. Moreover, the love of the biblical God towards us is free and gracious. Indeed our salvation depends on that very quality (Romans 5:6-8), and it is one we are called to imitate. Yet, the character of God's love, if there at all, changes if God is not trinitarian: it becomes self-seeking and conditional, because God needs our love in order to complete himself.

However, it is not just God's loving character that is affected. Other fundamental aspects of God's character become problematic, too. For instance, the Bible stresses God's faithfulness. But faithfulness is possible only within an existing personal relationship. The same arguments apply to faithfulness as do to love. A non-trinitarian God means a God for whom faithfulness is either irrelevant since he is not personal, or else a God who is finding out about faithfulness as he experiences personal relationships with his creation for the first time. This is devastating since it means we do not actually know now that God is permanently faithful - he might turn out not to be. That doubt eats away at the assurance of our destiny with Him.

Similarly, Broughton Knox remarks in *The Everlasting God* that God's character as just also becomes questionable under a straightforward non-trinitarian monotheism. To be just, Knox argues, requires that there be someone to whom to be just. It certainly is hard to see how a self-existent, not essentially personal being can be properly described as "just".

(ii) A diminution of humanity

If God is not essentially personal, then we too are affected by that. The biblical claim is that we were made in God's image. But as we have seen above, a non-trinitarian God is at best only potentially personal. But in that case personhood ought only to be potential and non-essential for us too. On that basis, personhood really is only epiphenomenal for us, just as it is with God.

That again would have implications for the values of personal identity: they cannot be as fundamental as all that. Rather it would be more accurate to say that God has created a universe that is sublimely indifferent to these things. That is scarcely desirable since it undermines the importance of maintaining both the rights of individuals and the dignity of the race as a whole. These things we are so keen to protect would be merely interesting accidents of creation, but nothing more.

The relevance of the Trinity

In fact the Bible presents a picture of God which inevitably pushes us in a trinitarian direction. God is consistently portrayed as personal (to love and to be faithful are personal qualities). But he is also portrayed as complete in himself, needing nothing from creation, us included. For this to be true his nature must be such as to enable those personal attributes to be actual before creation and not merely potential.

This is indicated in passages like John 1:1ff, Hebrews 1:1ff and Colossians 1:15-20, which speak of the *eternal* co-existence of the Son with the Father. The existence of the other person enables these personal qualities to be actual: following Augustine, love requires an object, and the different persons of the Trinity fulfil that. Moreover, as Richard of Saint Victor noted, the fact that there are three and not two persons in the Trinity gives an extra dimension to the personal relationships involved: the Son and Spirit *join* in loving the Father and doing his will. The Spirit and Father *join* in loving the Son and so on.

As regards God, therefore, the Trinity underlines the *personal* perfection of God: we need this as a guarantee of the perfection of his

personal characteristics and of our own security with him.

However, we also need the doctrine to underwrite our own identities and value. For we are made in the image of God, and therefore an essentially personal God indicates both that we too are created to be personal beings, and also that this aspect of our existence is not epiphenomenal and dispensable. We are given a vital basis for our claims to personhood, and this helps us answer the individualism and uniformity of our own time.

(i) Individualism

In terms of God himself, Father, Son and Spirit, the Trinity means that we do not have a monist or "individualist" God. For God, personal identity is found in relationships rather than in the kind of self-contained, undifferentiated unity that tends to underlie Boethius, Descartes and Kant. We "locate" the Father by reference to his relationships with the Son and the Spirit: he himself as Father is, in a way, defined by where he stands with respect to the other persons of the Trinity (Calvin raises this in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Book 1 Chapter 13, section 6). In that way, personal relationships are essential and not optional extras. And this implies for humans made in his image that we know ourselves truly in relationship, not in isolation.

Trinitarian doctrine provides a rationale defending individuality without degenerating into individualism. We can justify the common value of each member of the human race without depending on the notion of the self-contained ego with the problems that entails.

(ii) Uniformity

This trinitarian understanding also guarantees diversity rather than uniformity. The Son and the Spirit have distinct roles within the Godhead, mirrored for instance by the way the Spirit acts as a pointer to the achievements of the Father and the Son (Acts 2:1-11) or the way the Son supremely obeys the will of the Father (e.g. John 17:4). Although equally divine, there is a diversity between the persons: they are not mere clones nor simply interchangeable. Equality of value does not mean symmetry of role.

It is for this reason that some recent developments of trinitarian doctrine seem rash. It has been suggested that there is a symmetrical, mutual submission between the persons of the Trinity. This makes the Father completely interchangeable with the Son and the Spirit in their relationships. That in turn starts to eliminate the individuality of the persons of the Trinity since they are a common coin. Obviously that is not the way the persons appear in salvation history. (Biblically, the Father does not submit to the Son: in fact, 1 Corinthians 15:24 makes it clear that the Father is the final monarch after the general resurrection and the conquest of evil.)

This suggestion is disastrous, both for our doctrine of God, because it tends to make the persons of God contingent and not essential, and also for our doctrine of humanity, because we would be persons in the image of a clone-type God who could not guarantee our unique value as human individuals. (As it happens, this argument emerged during the ordination discussions in order to safeguard the value of women. Ironically, it undercuts their value as human beings.)

However, orthodox trinitarian doctrine gives a rationale for seeing ourselves as unique individuals rather than as essentially uniform, interchangeable clones. With God, we find that relationships are, as it were, constitutive of us as persons, and our very diversity of relationships indicates a diversity of persons enjoying them. Accordingly, I am not simply substitutable by any other member of the human race in my relationships: someone else could not straightforwardly replace me as friend or parent or spouse or child. Rather they would form different constitutive relationships in their own right.

In this way the Trinity gives an account of human uniqueness which tends to compel respect for the dignity of each individual. This in turn implies an objectivity to human rights and responsibilities, and the significance of that in a world so often lukewarm to both is obvious.

Conclusion

This means that the trinitarian account of God is necessary for us. We need it to understand and value both our relationship with him and also our relationships with one another. The Trinity is a uniquely Christian doctrine and underlines what Christian belief contributes to understanding ourselves, our God and our place in his world. In fact, in a world struggling to validate human values, it could be presented as one of the most attractive features of our faith to those outside, a tool for evangelism and a feature of our apologetics, not a disability for which we apologise.

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