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Dependent Co-Origination and Universal Intersubjectivity

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Two essays in a recent issue of *Buddhist-Christian Studies* dealt with the topic “Buddhist and Christian Views of Community.” The first essay, by Rita Gross, was a careful analysis of the way in which the separation of home and workplace in contemporary Western society has tended to reduce effective community life to the nuclear family and thus pose significant disadvantages to everyone involved (not only mothers, fathers, and their children but also non-family members, friends, and neighbors) within the broader civic community.¹ A consumer-oriented culture catering to individual needs and desires has arisen to compensate for the pervasive feeling of loneliness and emptiness created by the relative lack of significant interpersonal relationships. In the second essay Donald Mitchell recounted the origin and unexpected growth of the International Focolare movement of which he is a longtime member.² He noted how the founder of the movement, Chiara Lubich, and her women friends found inspiration for living together and working for the poor and the homeless around them in what they saw as the self-giving love of the three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity both for one another and for all their creatures. This movement over time broadened to include first Protestant members, then Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus, all drawn by the goal of richer life in community along with group efforts to assist the underprivileged of this world.

My own contribution to the topic of Buddhist and Christian views of community will focus on the same communitarian model of the doctrine of the Trinity that originally inspired Lubich and her followers in the years during and after World War II, but my remarks will be more philosophically oriented. Following the lead of the late Colin Gunton in his book *The One, the Three and the Many*,³ I will analyze the communitarian model of the Trinity for its value in setting forth a new paradigm for the relationship of the One and the Many. As Gunton perceptively notes in the early chapters of his book, Western civilization seems to be still preoccupied with a basically Platonic understanding of the One and the Many in which the One enjoys primacy over the Many as their transcendent principle of order and intelligibility.⁴ As a result, even though freedom and individual self-expression are theoretically prized in Western societies, in point of

fact there is a great deal of uniformity and even repression of individual differences so as to conform to the cultural standards imposed by some dominant individual or minority group within each society. In the end people seem to fear the threat to personal security represented by wide diversity and plurality more than they value their individual liberty.

Looking to the doctrine of the Trinity set forth by the Greek-speaking fathers of the Church, however, Gunton finds a new paradigm for the One and the Many whereby the One is emergent out of the interplay of the Many with one another rather than transcendent over the Many as their necessary principle of order and intelligibility.⁵ The Many are defined by their internal relations to one another rather than by their common relation to an external One. The community thus achieved is a differentiated unity, not only tolerating differences of the Many among themselves, but even fostering those differences so as to produce in the end a more complex form of community. The application to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is obvious. The three divine persons are strictly defined with respect to one another; each of them has no self-identity apart from relation to the other two persons. Yet together they co-constitute the reality of the one God, a richly differentiated rather than blandly homogeneous unity.⁶

The application to human beings and their membership in various communities, of course, is not so obvious. But Gunton believes that three principles or “transcendentals” for the understanding of the relation of human beings with one another and with God are at hand, given careful study of this communitarian model of the Trinity: namely, *perichoresis*, substantiality or particularity, and relationality. The first, *perichoresis* (literally, moving in and out), was the term used by the Greek fathers to describe the dynamic unity of the divine persons with one another. They move into and out of one another’s individual spheres of existence and activity so as to create a fully conjoint form of existence and activity. Applied to the world of creation, this implies that everything contributes to the being of everything else, enabling each individual to be distinctively itself.⁷ The second principle, substantiality or particularity, emphasizes that self-identity and the identity of the other are dialectically related. Neither makes sense apart from the other. I am what I am only because you are what you are.⁸ The third principle, relationality, is explained as self-transcendence through ongoing self-giving.⁹ The loss to oneself is greater than the loss to the other if one refuses the gift of self to the other. Given the practical implementation of these three principles, says Gunton, human communities could be established in which diversity and plurality among the members would be cherished and cultivated rather than feared and repressed.

Admittedly, this is a highly idealistic approach to the reality of human community, but ideals are always needed to keep our focus on what needs to be done. Moreover, so stated, Gunton’s scheme seems to resonate quite nicely with the Buddhist doctrine of the no-self and dependent co-origination. That is, as I have been led to believe through contact with Buddhist friends and teachers, the doctrine of the no-self is both the denial of an independent self and the affirma-

tion of a true self, the self as necessarily constituted by its relation to other selves and the things of this world. Similarly, the notion of dependent co-origination has both a negative and a positive connotation: the denial of an unchanging world of independently existing things and the affirmation of a world in ongoing change or process.¹⁰ Apart from the reference to the Trinity, this likewise seems to be the world envisioned by Gunton in *The One, the Three and the Many*.

Much the same could be said about the worldview of Christian process theologians who, apart from embracing a robust communitarian model of the Trinity as Gunton does, would still affirm with him the reality of a world of interdependent subjects of experience constituted by their internal relations to one another.¹¹ But, in terms of Gunton's basic presupposition, namely, that a new paradigm for the relationship between the One and the Many is required for contemporary Western society, there are in my judgment some residual ambiguities still present in this scheme and in its application to the conventional worldviews of classical Buddhism and of process theology. Buddhists might possibly be excused from dealing with these ambiguities because of their strong focus on practice rather than theory. But within process theology these ambiguities are, upon closer inspection, just as obvious in Whitehead's metaphysics as in Gunton's scheme.

What I have in mind here is the deeper reality of the One when it is no longer transcendent to the Many but rather emergent out of the Many in their dynamic interplay with one another. Should we agree with Alfred North Whitehead in his description of "creativity" as the principle of process or becoming that "the many become one and are increased by one"?¹² In this case the One is simply the latest addition to the ranks of the Many, and the ongoing process of unification of the Many must inevitably start all over again. Or, as I myself would argue, is the One actually a different kind of reality than the Many even though it only exists in virtue of the dynamic interplay of the Many with one another? In other words, is the Whole (the One) simply the sum of its parts (the Many) or is it more than or even other than the sum of the parts? Furthermore, if the whole is more and other than the sum of its parts, what is it in itself as distinct from the parts? In my judgment, Gunton does not address this issue apart from appealing to the notion of *perichoresis* as, so to speak, the metaphysical glue holding the three divine persons together as one God.

Likewise, Whitehead is quite ambiguous in his description of "societies," groupings of actual occasions or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience that effectively represent the persons and things of common sense experience. Clearly, they are more than simple aggregates of actual occasions with a "common element of form" or analogous self-constitution.¹³ But what are they in themselves, and how are such "societies" related to one another except in and through those same constituent actual occasions that at any given moment have no direct causal impact on one another?¹⁴ In Buddhist teaching the individual human being "is made up of psychophysical elements, or *skandhas*: corporeality or physical form (which includes physical objects, the body, and the sense or-

gans); feelings or sensations; ideations with which we label and understand those feelings; mental formations or dispositions—the likes, dislikes, and impulses we have about those ideas; and consciousness, the awareness of any and all of these elements.”¹⁵ But if the One (the self) is thus emergent out of the interplay of the Many (the five *skandhas*) with one another at any given moment, does it have its own reality, albeit a constantly evolving reality, distinct from the *skandhas* as its constituents? Or is the One merely an illusory sense of the self within consciousness in no way distinct from the de facto interplay of those same constituents (the *skandhas*) with one another? For that matter, is the world as an ongoing cosmic process based on dependent co-origination simply the sum of its functioning parts or members? Or is it too a processive reality in its own right, distinct from the various processes that make it up even as it necessarily depends upon those processes for its very existence?

Admittedly, these are highly speculative and as a result somewhat elusive questions. But in my judgment their very elusiveness is one of the major reasons why we in the West cling to our individualistic ways of thinking and behavior long after we have conceptually realized that we should be more actively engaged in building community with family members, friends, business colleagues, neighbors, and so on. It is not simply that we do not have time for these other activities. For we generally find time for what we really want and value. No, in my judgment, we do not get involved in community building because we are not sure of what we are getting into as a result. We do not want to run the risk of losing ourselves in something bigger than ourselves that we only vaguely understand in terms of its potential demands on our time and energy. Our ancestors several thousand years ago came out of a tribal or collective mentality where the interests of the individual did not count for much and where everything depended upon the survival and well-being of the group. Beginning with Socrates in the Greek-speaking world and with the Hebrew prophets in the world of the Bible, Westerners began to lay heavy stress on the rights and duties of the individual as opposed to the governing mentality of the group.¹⁶ Now we belatedly realize that in the process of emphasizing our individual rights we have lost a strong sense of life in community. But we are still uneasy about how to recover that sense of community, because in the final analysis we worry about what such intensified life in community might practically involve. Only religiously inspired people such as Chiara Lubich and her followers have taken the plunge and reported to the rest of us that it is wonderfully self-fulfilling. But most of us still hang back and just complain about what’s wrong with the world.

Rather than end these remarks on a sour note, however, let me conclude with a suggestion for a way out of this dilemma, that is, a way to understand the reality of the One so that it is indeed more than and other than the sum of its parts and yet allows for its continued dependence on its constituent parts or members. In classical Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics the notion of “substance” was foundational. Everything that existed was either a substance, something that endured through space and time, or an accident, something that belonged to the

substance but in a nonessential or contingent way. Each human being, for example, was considered a substance, but one's skin coloration, physical size, and mental abilities were "accidents," contingent modifications of one's essential status as a human being. Within the process-oriented worldview of Buddhists and Whiteheadians, however, there are no independent substances but only a series of events in dynamic interrelation (dependent co-origination) from moment to moment. Yet even in a process-oriented worldview, something more seems to be needed to guarantee continuity of form and function over time within the cosmic process. Otherwise, there would be no orderly process but only chaos.

My proposal is that the notion of "field" within a process-oriented worldview could serve as the equivalent of "substance" within classical metaphysics. Like a substance in classical metaphysics, a field is an enduring physical reality that serves as a principle of continuity in the midst of constant change and thus provides for the stable transmission of form or pattern from one moment to the next.¹⁷ The events taking place within the field are necessarily affected by the shape or structure of the field in which they originate. Yet the structure or pattern within the field is itself dependent upon the ongoing interplay of events within the field; thus the structure or pattern within the field can undergo change or modification over time. The field, in other words, has no independent self-identity or reason to exist in itself apart from the events taking place within it, but it still plays a key role in regulating the pattern of ongoing events contained within it. Seen in this light, the notion of field is an instance of what I meant by the One as emergent out of the dynamic interplay of the Many with one another and yet as clearly different from the Many in its relation to them. It is their enduring principle of continuity over time as the events themselves come and go.

But what is the "cash value" of this notion of field for Gunton's trinitarian worldview, for Whitehead's category of "society," and for Buddhist understanding of the doctrine of dependent co-origination? All that I can offer here are passing comments that clearly need further specification to be properly understood. Applied to Gunton's trinitarian worldview, for example, this notion of "field" allows one to say that the three divine persons are one God because they share a single all-comprehensive field of activity. Likewise, within this divine field of activity the physical universe exists as a set of interlocking and graded subfields of activity representing all the individual persons and things co-existing at every moment.¹⁸ The divine persons and all their creatures thus share a common field of existence and activity, which the Bible calls the Kingdom of God.¹⁹ In terms of Whitehead's metaphysical scheme, "societies" should be seen as structured fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions. The common element of form that gives the society its ontological self-identity is to be seen as resident principally in the field and only secondarily in each of the constituent actual occasions. The constituent actual occasions, to be sure, contribute to the pattern of the field, but none of them in its individual self-constitution reproduces it exactly.²⁰ In this sense, the pattern proper to the field as a whole is

more than and other than the pattern found within each of the individual actual occasions.

Finally, for Buddhists dependent co-origination can be legitimately understood as a field-phenomenon: that is, the ever-changing and yet interdependent events of this world always take place within fields that are progressively structured by those same events in succession. Furthermore, these fields are themselves interrelated. The pattern of activity or succession of events in one field is different from the pattern in all the other fields, but these individual fields find themselves still interrelated as a result of being integrated into still more comprehensive fields of activity with still other governing structures. In effect, then, the world is made up of interrelated fields of activity structured by all the events taking place both within and between them. Here, it seems to me, one might have a possible explanation for the otherwise paradoxical Buddhist principle: form is emptiness and emptiness is form.²¹ Events and the fields of activity they constitute represent respectively form and emptiness, necessarily interdependent dimensions of one and the same ever-changing cosmic reality at different levels of existence and activity. A set of interrelated events shapes the pattern of activity within a given field at every moment, but then they cease to exist so as to allow still other events to arise out of the field and to add their contribution to the evolving structure of the field. Thus individual events come and go, but the field as the necessary context for their continuous coming to be and ceasing to be always remains. Yet, as noted above, these are only passing comments with the intent to arouse interest in a new concept, a new way of looking at the age-old problem of the One and the Many as it inevitably surfaces within human life, above all, in interreligious dialogue.

NOTES

1. Rita M. Gross, "Some Reflections about Community and Survival," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003), pp. 3–19.

2. Donald W. Mitchell, "Re-Creating Christian Community: A Response to Rita M. Gross," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003), pp. 21–32.

3. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–73.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 136–154.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 163–166. NB: This is, of course, a contemporary restatement of the doctrine of the Trinity to be found in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, part 1, question 29, article 4, where he describes the divine persons as "subsistent relations" within one and the same unitary essence or divine reality.

7. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, pp. 166–179.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 180–209.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 214–231. NB: While Gunton regards relationality as a transcendental applicable to all created entities in their dynamic interrelation, he reserves "sociality" to human beings in their exchange with one another. Sociality is thus more an ideal to be striven for than an empirical fact according to Gunton.

10. A convenient summary of basic Buddhist teachings is provided in *Religions of the*

World, 3rd ed., ed. Robert K. C. Forman et al. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 169–171.

11. Cf., e.g., Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), pp. 18–30.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35, 89–92.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 61: “as far as physical relations are concerned, contemporary events [actual occasions] happen in *causal* independence of one another.”

15. *Religions of the World*, p. 171.

16. Cf., e.g., Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 1–21.

17. Here I should concede that not all natural scientists regard the notion of “field” as corresponding to a physical reality. Many scientists treat it simply as a heuristic device for organizing empirical data. But other scientists point to the recognized existence and activity of electromagnetic fields, gravitational fields, and so on, to make clear that in their view fields do correspond to something objective in the physical order. I side obviously with the latter group of scientists but insist that “field” in my use of the term is in the first place a metaphysical concept, not a term out of a physics textbook. Physical fields, in other words, do not exhaust the meaning of “field.” Like any other genuinely metaphysical concept, “field” has somewhat different meanings in different contexts and yet still has a uniform intelligible structure linking them all together.

18. Joseph A. Bracken, S. J., *The One in the Many: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World Relationship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 131–135.

19. Joseph A. Bracken, S. J., *Christianity and Process Thought: Spirituality for a Changing World* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), pp. 53–64.

20. See here Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 34. Whitehead claims that the common element of form linking the actual occasions into a society “arises in each member of the nexus [society] by reason of the conditions imposed upon it by its prehensions of some other members of the nexus.” The key words here are “some other members of the nexus.” This indicates that there is only an analogous, not a univocal, relationship between the actual occasions constituting a given society. Hence, the pattern proper to the society as a whole must be other than the pattern exemplified in any of the individual constituent actual occasions.

21. *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology*, ed. Ninian Smart and Richard D. Hecht (New York: Crossroad, 1997): “The Heart Sutra” p. 246.