



Relative Monism: New approaches to a panentheistic understanding of the relation between God and creation

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Relatywny monizm: nowe podejście do panenteistycznego rozumienia relacji między Bogiem a stworzeniem

STRESZCZENIE

Będąc w dialogu ze współczesnością, z nauką i z religijnym pluralizmem, chrześcijańska teologia pilnie potrzebuje krytycznej oceny tzw. trynitarnego paradygmatu. „Nowy” paradygmat definicje Boga głównie jako związane ze stworzeniem i pozostawia na boku interwencjonistyczne i nadprzyrodzone modele boskiego działania. Model postteistyczny Boga pozwala na nowo odkryć wpływ neoplatonicki na teologię średniowieczną, zwłaszcza w dziełach św. Tomasza z Akwinu, w mystyce Mistrza Eckharta oraz w myśli Mikołaja z Kuzu, aby uzasadnić panenteistyczne rozumienie relacji między Bogiem a stworzeniem. Jedność bytu Boga z bytem stworzenia, Bóg jako „non-aliud”, rozróżnienie między Bogiem a Bóstwem oraz tożsamość ducha Bożego z ludzką duszą stanowią główne tematy klasycznego teizmu, które mogą być przyjęte w ramach zmiany paradygmatu, jaki dokonał się we współczesnej chrystologii i teologii trynitarniej. *Grundaxiom* Rahnera znajduje szczególne miejsce w tej refleksji, ponieważ jego idea dotycząca tożsamości Trójcy *immanentnej* i Trójcy *ekonomicznej* zmierza do ukazania doświadczalnego wymiaru tryzosobowego Boga, utrzymując jednocześnie prawdę o niemożności wyrażenia słowami boskości Boga. Postteistyczne spojrzenie na teologię chrześcijańską umożliwia to, co może być nazwane *relatywnym monizmem*.

Słowa kluczowe: Teizm, chrystologia, panenteizm, postteizm, ontologia relacyjna, Boże działanie, monizm relatywny, Trójca, głębokie Wcielenie, Chrystus kosmiczny

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In his address to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2019, Pope Francis underlined that “what we are experiencing is *not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change*. We find ourselves living at a time when change is no longer linear, but epochal. It entails decisions that rapidly transform our ways of living, of relating to one another, of communicating and thinking, of how different generations relate to one another and how we understand and experience faith and science”¹. Borrowing an expression Thomas Kuhn used in his book *The Structure of scientific revolutions*, we may say that we are experiencing a “paradigm shift” at various levels: in culture and in the church, in how we act and think². In the Forward to *Veritatis gaudium*, Pope Francis has invited those responsible for academic training and scientific investigation, especially in theological faculties, to realize this radical paradigm shift, and to carry out “a bold cultural revolution” (no. 3).

The change of paradigm is the basis for any sort of cultural revolution. Concerning science, we speak of a revolution from the Geocentric to the Heliocentric model (Copernican revolution); from an understanding of time and space as independent realities (Classical Mechanics) to their correlated conception as the Theory of Relativity (Einstein) suggests; from a static and monadic model (Classical Physics) to basic connectivity of all reality, in which observation plays an active role in determining what is real, as some theorists of Quantum Physics advocate. “In truth, there can be no break between the observer and the observed. If the two are split, the reality is gone”³.

Paradigm shifts do not occur only in science. Even in philosophy, we have moved from a model in which reason or spirit were considered as passive, *vis-à-vis* the objective and external reality (ontological realism), to an understanding of reality in which the *cogito* is the pivotal center of all (critical transcendentalism). Such a shift has led Western Philosophy to consider the “thing in itself” (*noumenon*) not apart from reason but in dialectical correlation. “What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational”⁴. Reality is not disconnected from what is rational, we may say: “consciousness” and “spirit.” Subject and object are *interconnected* by an inseparable identity.

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana.html. Pope Francis had already used this expression in his speech on the occasion of the V National Convention of the Italian Church in Florence (10 November 2015) and in the Forward of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* (29 January 2018): “we are not only living in a time of changes but are experiencing a true epochal shift, marked by a wide-ranging ‘anthropological’ and ‘environmental crisis’” (no. 3).

² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

³ Robert Lanza, *Biocentrism* (Nashville: BenBella Books, 2009), 123.

⁴ Cf Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Preface to The Philosophy of Right”, in *The Philosophy of Right – The Philosophy of History* (London: William Benton, 1952), 6.

Esse est percipi (George Berkeley). Τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι (Parmenides). Such “connection” is nothing but *consciousness* and refers to λόγος, from the Greek verb λέγειν which means “to relate” and “to link”.

The Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, refers to such a change of paradigms. “Thus, the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one. In consequence, there has arisen a new series of problems, a series as numerous as can be, calling for efforts of analysis and synthesis” (no. 5). In his address to the *Italian Theological Association* (ATI), Pope Francis remarks that a change and a reformulation in religious discourse are necessary: “the task of theology is essential today, with its effort to rethink the great themes of Christian faith within a profoundly changed culture”⁵.

One of these great themes is certainly how to understand God and His revelation. From an anthropomorphic-mythical understanding of divine revelation in which God is seen as an “objective” and “external” reality, transcendent to humanity, we moved to consider the recipient of revelation – that is subjectivity – as essential in the fulfillment of revelation itself⁶. “R v lation n’existerait pas sans l’acte qui la re oit”⁷. Revelation is not something that simply happens *extra nos*. The act of receiving, that is *faith*, represents the “intra nos” aspect of revelation⁸. The *internal* event of faith reveals the eternal mystery of God (Col 1:26). “Seulement une r v lation peut d couvrir ce qui  tait”⁹. *What* is unveiled is the eternal mystery (Col 1:26); *how* it is revealed, that is faith. “Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. So, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Gal 3:25-28).

We may use an image. In this room there is electricity; but the only way to know that there is power is to turn on the light. If I do not switch on the light, I do *not* know whether there is power in the room. I may also switch it *on* and *off*, continuously. That does not mean that the power is off and on again. God (the *power*) is “present” (the *light*) when I believe (switch *on*) and is “absent” when I do not believe (switch *off*). It is nonsense to say that God plays hide-and-seek with us. God’s being and love are always eternally present, but it depends on *our* faith that God may be consciously active. “The knowledge of God is, nevertheless, a *transcendental* knowledge because man’s basic and original orientation towards absolute mys-

⁵ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Italian Theological Association (29 December 2017)”, www.vatican.va.

⁶ Brown Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language”, *The Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 194-205.

⁷ Christoph Theobald, *R v lation* (Paris: Editions de l’Atelier, 2006), 53.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, art. 1.

⁹ Paul Beauchamp, *L’Un et l’autre Testament* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), 295.

tery, which constitutes his fundamental experience of God, is a permanent existential of man as a spiritual subject”¹⁰.

As it is for science (*Quantum Physics*) and philosophy (*Transcendentalism*), even for theology there’s no divine objectivity without human subjectivity. This change of paradigm in theology – from static to dynamic; from substantialist to relational – is questioning the basic assumptions of Classical theism within which Christian faith, and particularly Christology and the doctrine of Trinity, have been elaborated through the centuries.

1. Beyond Classical Theism

In his essay *Rethinking the Concept of a personal God* Thomas Schärtl distinguishes Classical theism from Personal theism¹¹. Both forms of theism maintain an *interventionist* and *supernaturalistic* understanding of divine agency.

A post-theistic approach to the Christian concept of God criticizes such a model of God¹². While maintaining the idea of a transcendent Being, advocates for a Christian version of Post-theism consider the transcendence of God as the ontological condition (*Being*) that makes the positing of createdness possible.

This kind of post-theistic approach questions two basic assumptions of theism: the *aseity* of God and the *contingency* of creation for God. To rethink Christian theology from a post-theistic perspective we need first:

- a. To elaborate a concept of a divine being that includes creation. The creative act belongs to the very essence of God’s being. “This creative *act* of God is, however, nothing else than God’s *being*, which as such is *creative being*”¹³;
- b. To move beyond an interventionist and supernaturalistic understanding of God’s agency in the universe and particularly in hu-

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 52.

¹¹ Thomas Schärtl, Christian Tapp, Veronika Wegener (eds.). *Rethinking the Concept of a Personal God: Classical Theism, Personal Theism, and Alternative Concepts of God* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016), 3-27.

¹² By the term “Post-theism” we primarily mean an existential and intellectual attitude by which the God of transcendence – as religion pursues – no longer makes sense. Religion and faith in God are a relic of human history. The post-theistic attitude is at the same time atheistic, not only because it denies the existence of God as religion continues conceiving that but also considers as meaningless any attempt to think of God in such a manner. There are various versions of this trend of thought. In this text, we examine a possible Christian version of Post-theism.

¹³ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 223.

man history, without making God neither a “portion”, a “sector” within the world: nor a separate, distant deity;

- c. To understand God as “creator spiritus”. Since spirit has no boundaries and limitations and can become everything (*fit quodammodo omnia*), it follows that what constitutes the nature of God – spirit – is shared to every being in the form of self-transcendence.

While rethinking Christian theology from a post-theistic perspective, we will resume insights of Classical theism that can be helpful to overcome the separation within which God and creation have been traditionally considered. We will retrieve the Neoplatonic influence in Medieval theology, especially in the works of Thomas Aquinas, in Eckhart’s mysticism, and Nicholas of Cusa’s thought, in order to support the panentheistic understanding which is constitutive of contemporary Post-theism. The oneness of God’s being with created being, God as “non-aliud”, the distinction between God and Godhead, and the identity of God’s spirit with the human soul, are some of the major themes from Classical theism that can be assumed within the framework of the paradigm shift that has been occurring in Contemporary Christology and Trinitarian theology. Special attention will be dedicated to Rahner’s *Grundaxiom*, because his idea of the identity of *immanent* and *economic* Trinity aims at unfolding the experiential dimension of the tripersonal God and the ineffability of God’s divinity which is basic for the foundation of what may be called *Relational Monism*. *God* and *creation*, *spirit* and *matter*, are no more to be thought of as two separate entities but two aspects of the same reality which is “God’s spirit”. From such “monistic” and “panentheistic” perspective, we will examine the cosmic dimension of Christ’s incarnation and what it means that God “may be all in all” (1Cor 15:28) and Christ “all, and in all” (Col 3:11).

2. The divine equation

God’s life is creative. *First*, because creation (in its *active* aspect) is nothing but divine essence, and therefore creation adds nothing to God’s essence (God + creature = God). God’s being is essentially and eternally related to createdness but createdness is not “something” God depends on, because it is the eternal expression of God’s creativity. “Si on regarde [la creation] du côté de Dieu, on la conçoit comme une action d’un certain genre, qu’on appelle aussi une émanation, une *communication d’être*, une *manifestation objective* [...] [du côté créé] sera alors *participation de Dieu*,

ressemblance *de Dieu*, image *ou* vestige”¹⁴. Such creative act is not subsequent to God’s nature. God does not move from potentiality to actuality, by creating the world. In God, there is no change. God’s being is immutable. God’s creative act is God’s essence.

Second, because creation (in its *passive* aspect) is not something added to being. Createdness is neither a motion from *being* to *created* being, nor a motion from *nonbeing* to *being*: “for creation is not a change, but the very dependency of the created act of being upon the principle from which it is produced. And thus, creation is a kind of relation”¹⁵. *Relatedness* defines the ontology of createdness: “being dependent and coming from God has the same meaning as being created from nothing”¹⁶. Since createdness adds nothing to God’s essence, according to Thomas Aquinas the relation that occurs between God and creation – by the creative act – is not a real relation (*relatio realis*) but only a relation of reason (*relatio rationis tantum*)¹⁷.

We may use in a symbolic way an equation to express how transcendence, relationality, and creativity are connected. “X” stands for God and “Y” for createdness. In stating that “ $x = x + y$ ” we affirm that God’s being (x) is ($=$) nothing but His relation to createdness ($x + y$). The *relatio* between God and creation is not external or accidental to its *relata* (God, creation), rather *internal*, and *essential*. “God is God” (x) just in His relatedness ($x + y$); “createdness” is nothing but being-related to God. The relation between God and creation has its ground in God’s being, whose essence is relatedness (*natura in divinis ipsa relatio*¹⁸): “the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempted expression of the fact that the essential nature of God is about relatedness and the capacity to relate, that the propensity and power to relate is, in fact, the very essence of God”¹⁹. If I solve the equation the result is ($x = x$) and ($y = 0$). In being essentially related to creation ($x + y$), divinity identifies itself as God ($x = x$) without being changed by creation; while creation adds nothing to God’s essence ($y = 0$). In his IV German Sermon, Meister Eckhart says that „all creatures are a pure nothing. [...] They are pure nothing. Whatever has no being, *is* not. Creatures have no being because totally depending on God’s presence. If God were to turn away from creatures for an instant, they would turn to nothing. [...] if someone were

¹⁴ Antonin-Dalmace Sertillanges, *L'idée de création et ses retentissements en philosophie* (Paris: Aubier, 1945), 44.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, Book II, chapter 18.

¹⁶ Saskia Wendel, “*Einung mit Gott. Mystik und Monismus*”, *Glaube und Leben* 87 (2014): 387-397, at 392.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45, art. 3, *ad primum*; I, q. 28, art 1, *ad tertium*.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.39, art. 1.

¹⁹ Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology. Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 89.

to have the whole world and God, he would not have more than if he had God alone. All creatures have nothing more without God than a gnat has without God – [they are] just the same, neither less nor more”²⁰. Createdness adds nothing to God’s essence because the essence of createdness consists in its being related to God and this “being-related-to” reveals and unfolds God’s essence. As Nicholas of Cusa clearly states: “If you consider things in their independence from God, they are nothing – even as number without oneness [is nothing]. If you consider God in His independence from things, He exists, and the things are nothing”²¹. Therefore, it is said that creation is *ex nihilo*, which is from nothing or nobody but God. *Ex nihilo* means *ex sese*. In this respect, createdness is “God’s *other*”. Such “otherness” is nothing but relatedness, formally different from God’s being but identical with God’s essence. “God saw nothing outside Himself, [...] in the sense that what is outside Himself He does not see except in Himself”²².

According to Anselm’s definition, God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived (*id quo maius cogitari non potest*)²³. If we combine Anselm’s definition with Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of God as *actus purus, ipsum esse subsistens*, then God is the most *perfect* reality, the whole of reality, which contains all possible realities. Created beings have potentiality that is not actuality, imperfections as well as perfection. Only God is all that He can be, infinitely real, therefore perfect: “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14). Because God is the whole of reality which nothing more real can be conceived, then God is *the Real* or Reality itself, complete comprehensiveness. God encompasses absolutely everything and there is nothing beyond God. “According to this understanding, God, as that than which no greater can be thought, is the maximally encompassing being”²⁴. Being “*esse qua se*”, God is the *actual* infinite and “contains” any other possible reality. Let us say, if the totality is 10, then all the other numbers within 10 are included in 10. For example, 5 is included in 10 *non qua talis sed eminenter*, whereas 5 does not contain 10 but it is *related to* 10 as its reality. Being contained in the infinite does not make the infinite a kind of “container” where the finite beings would be considered as parts of a sum. God is *not* the sum of its parts but the *whole* of its parts. The “whole” transcends both each single part and the sum of all parts. It follows that such understanding of God’s reality cannot be identified

²⁰ Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 250.

²¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On learned Ignorance* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning, 1981), 119; 67.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, art. 5, *ad primum*.

²³ Anselm, *Proslogion*, chapters II-III.

²⁴ Yujin Nagasawa, “Modal Panentheism”, in *Alternative Concepts of God. Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, edd. Andrei A. Buckareff, Yujin Nagasawa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91-105, 93.

with “pantheism” but with “panentheism” which holds that God’s being is “the totality of all possible worlds as it encompasses everything”²⁵.

God includes all possibilities, in such a way that everything emerges from within Godself; everything is the unfolding and bursting of Godself in the manifold of all beings. The only reason God discloses Godself into the multitude of beings is divine generativity. In his Latin Sermon 66 (*In diebus suis placuit Deo*), Meister Eckhart so explains the identity between *God* (spirit) and the *soul* (spirit): “The nearness of God and the soul makes no distinction in truth. The same knowing in which God knows Himself is the knowing of every detached spirit, and no other. The soul takes her being immediately from God: therefore God is nearer to the soul than she is to herself, and therefore God is in the ground of the soul with all His Godhead. [...] the soul has her being immediately from God, and the powers derive without mediation from the essence of the soul”²⁶.

This paradoxical assertion can only be understood from the perspective of the equation above ($x = x + y$). “Being one with God” does not conflate createdness and divinity. It refers to a “oneness” which is neither *one* nor *two-together*. It points to “non-duality”. “Creation is therefore synonymous with creativity, and it does not happen *ex nihilo*, but from God, and thus God and what originates from Him are ‘one and the same being’ (Eckhart). So there is no divine being on one hand and the created being on the other hand. This also would imply that the absolute would be limited by the finite, created being. In this respect, there is only one reality, not many and possibly graded realities”²⁷. In one of her visions, Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) contemplates with the eyes of the souls – as she says in her *Memoriale* – and saw the single fullness of God in which the whole world is encompassed. “Then my soul in a state of awe cried out, ‘This world is pregnant with God!’ [...] I also see the One who is Being, and I see how He is the Being of all creatures”²⁸. Friedrich Schelling proposed to express such a *non-dual* aspect of divine essence by using the verb *to be* in transitive form and to build it with accusative: “twisting the grammar, [Schelling] aims at the root: *Deus est res cunctas*. ‘Cunctas,’ not ‘cunctae,’ as the verb *to be* would require, because here the ‘is’, without losing its value of identity, become transitive: God is the creatures causing them to be”²⁹.

²⁵ Nagasawa, “Modal Panentheism”, 93.

²⁶ Bernard McGinn, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 334.

²⁷ Wendel, “*Einung mit Gott*. Mystik und Monismus”, 392.

²⁸ Angela of Foligno, *Memoriale* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 55; 75.

²⁹ Andres Torres Queiruga, “God’s Journey in Religious Consciousness: From ‘He’ to ‘I’”, *Archivio di filosofia* 74 (2006), 404-441, 411. Cf Manfred Frank, “Reduplikative Identität”: *der Schlüssel zu Schellings reifer Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Holzboog, 2018), 249.

Thomas Aquinas uses an analogy to understand such oneness of God and creation. “Although corporeal things are said to be in another as in that which contains them, nevertheless, spiritual things contain those things in which they are; as the soul contains the body. Hence also God is in things containing them; nevertheless, by a certain similitude to corporeal things, it is said that all things are in God; inasmuch as they are contained by Him.”³⁰ Since God is intellect and spirit, all things created are in God’s *consciousness*.

3. Indeterminate Godhead and determinate God

The identity expressed by the symbol of “equal to” (=) refers to what Thomas Aquinas affirms: “the divine essence is the likeness of all things. Thereby it follows that the conception of the divine intellect as understanding itself, which is its Word, is the likeness not only of God Himself understood but also of all those things of which the divine essence is the likeness. In this way, therefore, through one intelligible species, which is the divine essence, and through one understood intention, which is the divine Word, God can understand many things”³¹. According to Neoplatonism, *beings* are God’s *ideas*, not only known and perceived but being as such *by* and *in* God’s simple act of Self-knowledge. All things are in God’s mind: all things in Him are God. “[The creature] is God, or the very essence of God, as God thinks of Himself as participable and intelligible by other than Himself”³².

We may compare the relation between God and the world to possible combinations of number 10, such as: $8 + 2$; $15 - 5$; 2×5 ; $10 - 2$; $9 + 1$; etc. If $8 + 2$ is equal to 10, we do not say that only $8 + 2$ is 10. If 10 were to see itself, seeing itself would see all the numbers and their possible combinations of 10. Number 10 is the complication of combinations, as Nicholas of Cusa would say. As 10 is not something in “ 2×5 ” but everything (*totum*), so God is not “other” or “something” in *this* single creature but everything (*totum*), “not-other”³³. “If you consider [God] as He is in things, you consider things to be something in which He is. And in this regard, you err [...] For it is not the case that the being of a thing is another thing, as a different thing is [another thing]; rather, its being is derivative being. If you consider a thing as it is in God, it is God and Oneness”³⁴. God is *totum* in every single creature (single operation), but it would be false to say that God is *totaliter* in *this* or

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 8, art. 1, *ad secundum*.

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, Book I, chapter 53.

³² Giuseppe Barzaghi, *Dialettica della rivelazione* (Bologna: EDS, 1996), 45.

³³ Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other. A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

³⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 67.

that single creature, as if there were an *absolute* identity between God and creation. God encloses every single being and each being is permeated by God, but *this* or *that* being does not comprehend God's being. God transcends not only all *creaturely* distinctions (*this* or *that*) but also what makes the distinction between God and createdness. "God and the world are not two things to be added together. Neither are they two things that are 'really' one thing. [...] Nicholas of Cusa, whose characterization of God as *non aliud* – 'not another thing' – in relation to the world expresses the heart of this point [...] This *non aliud* principle, or what I have called – in what I know is a rather awkward phrase – 'non-dual non-identity', is at the heart of the relation between the infinite and the finite"³⁵. God is not only the totally (*totaliter*) Other (*transcendent*) but He is all (*totum*) in all things (*immanent*)³⁶. For this reason, Nicholas of Cusa speaks of createdness (finite) as a created god (*deus creatus*), a finite infinity³⁷. In terms of Rahner's theology, we speak of "formal causality" between God and createdness. Since God is the absolute reality, He is not only *the giver* of being, according to the efficient causality, but *the gift* itself. In efficient causality the effect is always different from the cause; in formal causality the cause is an essential element of the effect. "God in his absolute being is related to the created existent in the mode of formal causality, that is, that he does not originally cause and produce something different from himself in the creature, but rather that he communicates his own divine reality and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfillment of the creature"³⁸.

Createdness is nothing outside God's creative act, and God's act is His essence. Created beings subsist in God's being as God's thought and perception; and "all that exists in God, is God" (*quidquid est in Deo Deus est*)³⁹. Thomas Aquinas argues that we may approach the understanding of createdness *in* God's essence from two different perspectives⁴⁰. "We should say that one says in two ways that a creature is in God. One says it in one way as in the cause governing and preserving the existing of a creature to say that the creature is from God. For we understand that a creature is preserved in existing only insofar as it already has its existence in its own nature, as the existing of a creature is distinguished from God. And so a creature being in God in this way is not his creative essence. One says in a second

³⁵ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), XIV.

³⁶ Nicholas of Cusa defines God as "non-aliud", "not-other." There is no difference between Godself and every single creature, since He is the essence of every single essence (Cf Werner Beierwaltes, *Identità e differenza* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1989), 155.

³⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 64.

³⁸ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 121.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 27, art. 3, *ad secundum*.

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae* "De Potentia", q. 13, art. 16, arg. 24.

way that a creature is in God as in the power of its active cause or in the one who knows it, and so the creature in God is the very divine essence, as Jn 1:13 says: ‘What was made was life in him.’ And although a creature being in God is this way is the divine essence, there are many creatures, not only one, in the essence in this way since God’s essence is the sufficient means to know different creatures and sufficient power to produce them”⁴¹.

The definition of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* indicates that God should not be understood as *a* greater or *the* greatest being (*summum ens*). God’s being is defined by the infinitive form of the verb *to be* (*esse*). His being is actuality and activity: perfection of all reality. The interpretation of God’s being as *subsistent* has caused us to conceive of God’s *esse* in terms of *ens*, whereas God’s being is beyond any determination⁴². “Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being. There is no proportion or gradation between the finite and the infinite. There is an absolute break, an infinite ‘jump’. On the other hand, everything finite participates in being-itself and in its infinity. Otherwise, it would not have the power of being. It would be swallowed by nonbeing, or it never would have emerged out of nothing”⁴³.

Thomas Aquinas’ definition of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* can be interpreted as the original structure of divinity, the *ground* of being, the foundation of everything. God’s being is *infinite*, but God’s nature is not mere substantiality but *substantial relativity*. God is to be conceived of as “infinite relation”. Thomas Aquinas’ definition of divine nature as “relational” (*natura in divinis ipsa relatio*⁴⁴) envisions God’s divinity as “absolute relativity” in which *relatio* is at the foundation of the *relata*, and not vice versa. The *relata* are what they are through the relation: *a* and *b* are “beings” not *prior to* (*ArB*) but *subsequent to* relation (*aRb*)⁴⁵. If *relations* are fundamental and essential, then *relata* are functions or derivatives of

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, *The Power of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88-89.

⁴² Giovanni Ventimiglia, “Dio non ‘esiste’ ma ‘avviene’”, *Rivista di filosofia* 37 (2017), 121-138.

⁴³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), vol. 1, 237.

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.39, art. 1.

⁴⁵ “We can think of the world as made up of *things*. Of *substances*. Of *entities*. Of something that is. Or we can think of it as made up of *events*. Of *happenings*. Of *processes*. Of something that *occurs*. Something that does not last, and that undergoes continual transformation, that is not permanent in time. The destruction of the notion of time in fundamental physics is the crumbling of the first of these two perspectives, not of the second. It is the realization of the ubiquity of impermanence, not of stasis in a motionless time. Thinking of the world as a collection of events, of processes, is the way that allows us to better grasp, comprehend, and describe it. It is the only way that is compatible with relativity. The world is not a collection of things, it is a collection of events. The difference between things and events is that *things* persist in time; *events* have a limited duration. A stone is a prototypical “thing”: we can ask ourselves where it will be tomorrow. Conversely, a kiss is an “event.” It makes no sense to ask where the kiss will be tomorrow. The world is made up of networks [...]” (Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* [New York: Riverhead Books, 2018], 97).

the infinite relating: “primitive relations – relations without preexisting *relata*”⁴⁶. God’s infinite essence, is “like a sea of essence infinite and unseen” (*substantiae pelagus infinitum*), as John Damascene defines God’s being⁴⁷. In God’s indeterminate, formless, and boundless sea of substance, all beings are comprised and defined. God’s *infinite* ground of being is *indeterminate*. It exceeds and is beyond all determinations (*relata*), even the trinitarian distinctions. According to the 4th Latheran Council (1215) the Godhead “neither begets nor is begotten nor proceeds; the Father begets, the Son is begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeds” (DH 804).

Following Meister Eckhart, we need to differentiate between *divinitas* and *deus*, Godhead (*relatio*) and the *tripersonal* God (*relata*), and to think of the Godhead as *absolute relativity* or *primitive relatedness*, from which the *persons* within the Godhead *eksist* and emerge. In Sermon 56 (*Nolite timere eos qui corpus occidunt*), Meister Eckhart thus describes this distinction between *Godhead* and *God*. “God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth. I say further: the inner and the outer man are as different as heaven and earth. But God is loftier by many thousands of miles. God becomes and unbecomes [...] God becomes when all creatures say ‘God’ – then God comes to be”⁴⁸. In Sermon 60, the trinitarian distinctions in God are derived from such simple ground, the silent desert of the Godhead in which there is no distinction of Father, Son or Holy Spirit⁴⁹.

We may compare the *divinitas* to a light which is *not colored* (without qualities and limitations) but let all colors be visible and manifest. The infinite ground of being is *indeterminate* while *determining*. “It is solely the Spirit of God as the relation of the relations who constitutes the being of love as event. This love as event is what makes up the essence of deity”⁵⁰. By “relation of relations,” we do not mean the *spirit* as a *third* person after the Father and the Son, or as the link of love between the Father and the Son. The *spirit* is the source of relatedness, the gush of the manifold *relata*. “The Third is not a Third Person, but the power of the between [...] God is not a Person: it is the relation”⁵¹.

The *plenitudo fontalis* and the *origo totius divinitatis* has been usually identified with the Father, according to 6th and 9th Council of Toledo (DH 490; 525) and later Scholastic theology (Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas). The Son and the Spirit emanate from the Father, and the *relatio*

⁴⁶ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 333.

⁴⁷ John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, Book I, chapter 12.

⁴⁸ Mc Ginn, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 293-294.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 31.

⁵⁰ Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 375.

⁵¹ Laura Candiotti, Giacomo Pezzano, *Filosofia delle relazioni* (Genova: Il Melangolo, 2019), 41.

is not thought of as pure relatedness but as “subsistent relations” and considered as *relata*. The nature of divinity is to bring forth, to give out beingness: both created and uncreated. Divinity is “givenness” *itself*. In German: “Es gibt.” We may say: *Isness* is Givenness⁵². *Givenness* is the deep nature of divine *relativity*, the self-giving of the fullness. “God, as absolutely absolute reality, is absolute dynamism, an absolute ‘self-giving’. Since by being absolutely absolute reality He is absolutely ‘His own’. It follows that this self-giving cannot be transitive, either in the sense of making another out of Himself, or in the sense of making Himself out of Himself. It is a giving to Himself, that which He already is as His-own”⁵³. The ground of being determines itself as a *grounding* ground. The indeterminate *Godhead* gives itself out (*bullitio*, according to Eckhart) and determines Godself as the *creator*. “[God’s] capacity to be creator, that is, the capacity merely to establish the other without giving himself, is only a derived, delimited, and secondary possibility which ultimately is grounded in this real and primordial possibility of God, namely, to be able to give himself to what is not God”⁵⁴. Divine “self-giving” is the event of absolute relativity in which greater selflessness *happens* within such great self-relatedness⁵⁵.

4. Unfolding Rahner’s Grundaxiom

As *creator, redeemer, and sanctifier*, God is defined by His relatedness to creation (οἰκονομία). God’s *infinite* ground of being transcends any determination. Since determination is related to createdness, the Godhead (*relatio*) exceeds and is beyond all determinations (*relata*), even the trinitarian distinctions. The divine ground of relativity (x) identifies itself as God (θεολογία) in relation to createdness (x + y). The variable (x) is only *formally* distinct in the first and in the second member of the equation (x = x₁ + y). In reality they are identical: createdness (y) adds nothing (y = 0) to God’s being (x).

In the first member, the variable (x) represents the *Godhead*; in the second member, the variable (x₁) represents *God* as *subject* and creation as the *object* of divine relation (y). The Godhead identifies itself as God (x ⇒ x₁) by being related to creation (x + y). God’s *relatedness* to creation (*subjective* genitive) can be thought of as the union of God with creation, especially the union of God with human nature. Only in such relation to creation, the Godhead (*divinitas*) becomes determinate as “God” (*deus-trinitas*). Such union

⁵² Yves Congar, *Gesù Cristo* (Torino: Marietti, 1966), 32.

⁵³ Xavier Zubiri, *Man and God* (New York: University Press of America, 2009), 127.

⁵⁴ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 222.

⁵⁵ Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 374.

of God with humanity is what the New Testament indicates with the term “Christ”, and the subsequent Christological councils of Chalcedon (451) and Constantinople II (553) have defined as “hypostatic union”. Such “union” cannot be considered as consequently added to God by a divine decision. It is a *union* ($x + y$) which is not other (*non aliud*) than the divine essence ($x = x + y$). God’s relation to creation ($\text{oikovo}\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$) “is” God in itself ($\text{\theta}\epsilon\omicron\lambda\omicron\gamma\iota\alpha$). Rahner’s trinitarian *Grundaxiom* – “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa”⁵⁶ – does properly express such consequence. We need to unfold further what is still concealed in such axiom.

According to Thomas Aquinas the relation that occurs between God and creation by the creative act is not a real relation, but a relation of reason⁵⁷. If we unfold the *Grundaxiom*, it follows that the *immanent* Trinity is *real*, only as *our* experience of God.

Reflecting on the concept of Mystery in Catholic theology, Karl Rahner highlights that the theological reflection on the Trinity had its starting point in the “experience” of salvation in the person of Jesus. “If we wish to understand the use of ‘three persons’ correctly (this supposes that we forget the usual meaning of the words), we must always return to the original experience of salvation history. Here we experience the Spirit, and we experience him as God (who is only one); we experience the Son, as God; and the Father, as God. When we generalize and say that we experience ‘three’ persons, we do so subsequently to our experience. Our generalization is, at least at first, a logical explanation, not some new extra knowledge not included in the original experience”⁵⁸.

The experience of God’s salvation, articulated as the “economic Trinity,” is the immanent Trinity. “This means that the Trinity of God’s relationship to us is the reality of God as he is in himself: a trinity of persons”⁵⁹. There is a correlation between the mystery of God as triune and human experience, so that without human reception in faith and reason there would be no self-communication of God. “Thus man in grace can find the ground for his belief by reading his own subjectivity correctly. Insofar as God is the objective correlate of man’s spiritual dynamism, by studying his own structure in grace, man can know the truth of God, even the inner-Trinitarian life. There is the validity of Rahner’s later claim that anthropology in its most radical sense is theology. In all of this there resounds more than

⁵⁶ Karl Rahner, “Oneness and Threefoldness of God in Discussion with Islam”, in *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), vol. 18, 105-121, 114.

⁵⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45, art. 3, *ad primum*; I, q. 28, art 1, *ad tertium*.

⁵⁸ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Continuum, 2001), 105-106.

⁵⁹ Karl Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology”, in *Theological Investigation* (New York: Crossroads, 1966), vol. 4, 36-73, 69.

a faint echo of Augustine's prayer, *noverim me, noverim Te*⁶⁰. It is quite clear that the way to bring Rahner's Trinitarian axiom to its extreme consequences would be to acknowledge that God (*divinitas*) is to be thought of as a person or *three* persons (*deus-trinitas*) in His relation to that which is other-than-Godself ($x + y$)⁶¹. "God's relationship to us is three-fold. And this three-fold (free and unmerited) relationship to us is not merely an image or analogy of the immanent Trinity; it is this Trinity itself, even though communicated as free grace. For what is communicated is precisely the triune personal God"⁶².

When Rahner underlines that the three-fold aspect of the self-communication "must not be considered as a merely *verbal* development of a communication which is of itself undifferentiated" whose distinctions (Father-Son-Holy Spirit) are *not* real and *not* a true difference, we should remind that the *immanent* Trinity is *real* only as *our* experience of God. By saying that does not mean that we do not experience God's *being*. Because the relation between *God* and *us* is not external or accidental, rather *internal*, and *essential* to God's being, *our* experience of God (*objective* genitive) reveals *who* God is "for us" (*deus-trinitas*). "[The] salvific self-communication of God is really three-fold, and a Sabellian view of the economy of salvation is false. And again, the modes of being whereby God comes to us are not created intermediaries or powers of this world"⁶³. However, *what* God is "in se" (*divinitas*) remains the absolute and incomprehensible mystery. *Id quo maius cogitari nequit*. "God remains incomprehensible, and the object of vision is precisely this incomprehensibility, which we may not therefore think of as a sort of regrettably permanent limitation of our blessed comprehension of God. It must rather be thought of as the very substance of our vision and the very object of our blissful love. In other words, if God is directly seen as the infinite and incomprehensible, and if the *visio beatifica* must then be the permanent presence of the inexpressible and nameless"⁶⁴. God's being (*divinitas*) cannot be experienced since the Godhead *transcends* any kind of experience. According to Meister Eckhart only in the *spirit* the Godhead is immediately and directly present to us. In his Latin Sermon 1 (*Dum medium silentium*). Meister Eckhart states that the soul's essence "is by nature receptive to nothing save only the divine essence, without mediation. Here God enters the soul with His all, not merely with a part. God enters here the

⁶⁰ John M. McDermott, "The Christologies of Karl Rahner", *Gregorianum* 67 (1986), 87-123, 103-104.

⁶¹ Wendel, "Einung mit Gott. Mystik und Monismus", 395.

⁶² Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate'", in *Theological Investigation* (New York: Crossroads, 1966), vol. 4, 77-102, 96.

⁶³ Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate'", 97.

⁶⁴ Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology", 41.

ground of the soul. None can touch the ground of the soul but God alone⁶⁵. In the “center of the soul”⁶⁶ or in the ground of the soul⁶⁷, our spirit becomes one with the Spirit of God. As Eckhart formulates: “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me: my eye and God’s eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing and one love”⁶⁸. The mystical oneness with the Godhead (*divinitas*) that happens in the *spirit* surpasses any experience and any discourse of God (*deus-trinitas*).

We are reminded of what Roger Haight – in the final chapter of his *Jesus Symbol of God* – states about Rahner’s axiom: “Rahner’s immanent trinity runs parallel to but is not really determined by the experience of the economic trinity. It is this economic trinity that represents the very essence and structure of the Christian encounter with God”⁶⁹. Trinitarian talk about God expresses that no less than God is encountered in Jesus and no less than God is encountered in the experience we have with him in the Spirit. “But this encounter does not *necessarily* yield distinct differentiations within God that can be named. These are objects of speculation which whether or not they correspond to real differentiations within God, are not the *point* of the doctrine of the Trinity”⁷⁰. That’s why we may understand Augustine’s affirmation in the treatise *De Trinitate* (5,9) that “human language labors altogether under great poverty of speech” and we say three persons (*tres personae*), “non ut illud diceretur, sed ne taceretur” (not that it might be spoken, but that it might not be left unspoken).

Speaking about the notion of person in theology, Joseph Ratzinger is mindful to underline that “the concept ‘person’ grew out of reading the Bible, as something needed for its interpretation. It is a product of reading the Bible. [...] it grew as an explanation of the phenomenon of the God who speaks dialogically. The Bible with its phenomenon of the God who speaks, the God who is *in* dialogue, stimulated the concept ‘person’”⁷¹.

According to Piet Schoonenberg – in his book on Spirit Christology: *Der Geist, das Wort und der Sohn* – the Word and the Spirit – before incarnation – should be considered more as “principles of divine creativity” than “persons” in God. In the *θεολογία* they are to be identified as *Verbum incarnandum* and *Spiritus effundendus*⁷². They are “personalizing principles”. As the New Testament scholar James Dunn highlights in his study on the

⁶⁵ McGinn, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 31.

⁶⁶ John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 1.12 (trans., 645).

⁶⁷ McGinn, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, Sermon 66, 334.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, Sermon 57, 298.

⁶⁹ Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 488.

⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁷¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the notion of person in theology”, *Communio* 17 (1990), 438-454, 443.

⁷² Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 93.

origins of the doctrine of the incarnation, “the revolutionary significance of [Joh 1:14] may well be that it marks *not only the transition in the thought of the poem from preexistence to incarnation, but also the transition from impersonal personification to actual person*”⁷³. From being *hypostatizations* “in God”, Word and Spirit became *hypostasis* in the οἰκονομία⁷⁴.

We may refer to the image of the moon. The “three persons” in God resemble the *visible* side of the moon: what we see of the moon is what we experience of God: God’s *face* to humanity. “[The] God who speaks and the human person who is addressed”⁷⁵. But such divine turning to creation – a “turning to” interpreted as *persona* and πρόσωπον – is *real* for us because we are *really* referred to God (*quoad nos*). But God in itself (*quoad se*) is not related to us as *a* person or *three* persons⁷⁶. Creatures are *persons*: the God whom creatures experience to be addressed by, is *personal* or *person* “quoad nos” but not “quoad se”. That does not diminish the reality of our encounter with God ($x + y$) as revelation of God’s being. *Our* experience of God (*objective* genitive) as *deus-trinitas* truly reveals God’s relatedness to us (*subjective* genitive). Such divine relatedness is “subjective” because God is “subject” but also “person” because He relates to everything that exists⁷⁷.

A comparison with the Eastern tradition of *advaita vedānta* may be helpful. Shankara – the renowned exponent of this school of philosophy – distinguishes two ways of understanding the absolute (*Brahman*): without attributes (*nirguna*) and with attributes (*saguna*). “Nirguna brahman” is the absolute reality in its transcendence without any relation to the world. Nirguna brahman is ineffable and unknown. “Saguna brahman”, instead, is the absolute known through *personal* traits and relations (*saguna*). Humans identify brahman as *nirguna* through their experience and the way they articulate it. The many and various names, therefore, refer to the relationship – each one experiences – with the ineffable Mystery. It is a *real* experience of God: however, it does not reveal anything of God *quoad se* but *of us* as being spoken by God to ourselves: “the word of God that we ourselves are and as such is spoken to us”⁷⁸.

Brahman is *personal* as related to us (*quoad nos*) but God is not personal in itself (*quoad se*). The Godhead is not *a* person or *personal* but

⁷³ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1996), 243.

⁷⁴ Piet Schoonenberg, *Der Geist, das Wort und der Sohn. Eine Geist-Christologie* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1992), 201.

⁷⁵ Ratzinger, “Concerning the notion of person in theology”, 443.

⁷⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13, art. 7, *ad quintum*; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 2, art. 7.

⁷⁷ Saskia Wendel, “Gott – Prinzip und Person zugleich”, in *Das Ewige im Fluss der Zeit. Der Gott, den wir brauchen*, ed. Karlheinz Ruhstorfer (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 94-109, 108.

⁷⁸ Karl Rahner, “Dialogue with God”, in *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad: 1983), vol. 18, 122-131, 128.

trans-personal. The term “hypostasis” was originally introduced to distinguish the modes of existence within the triune God, to indicate the distinct identities of the one essence of God. The Western translation of “hypostasis” into “persona” has been influenced by Boethius’ definition “naturalis naturae individua substantia”⁷⁹. Such definition led to identifying „person” with „individual”, with the risk of a *tritheistic* understanding of God. “Person/individual” can never define God, the Trinity or Christ. Everything that is meant by “Person/individual” is very different from the original meaning of “hypostasis”. They are not synonyms and can never be exchanged.

The *advaita* approach helps us to distinguish “identity” from “individual” within the Godhead and clarify the dialectic between the Godhead and the Trinitarian God. Since God *experienced* only as related to createdness ($x + y$), what we know of God as *a* person or *three* “persons” (*theologia*) is our *relatedness-to-Him* (*oikonomia*). God is a “Thou” the believer addresses to, although God transcends such *interpersonal* determination. God’s divinity remains *indeterminate*. God’s *divinity* is without boundaries and without personal traits. God remains essentially ineffable. God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived (*id quo maius cogitari non potest*)⁸⁰. Neither God’s being nor His self-communication can be adequately represented in conceptual thoughts and statements⁸¹. Only by transcending our *anthropomorphic* approach, we may be drawn to the depth of the Godhead and become aware of the mystery of *our* being within the incomprehensible reality of God’s mystery. “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (Joh 4:24).

5. Relative monism: Spirit and Incarnation

The original identity of God ($x = x + y$) can be considered a “relative” form of theological monism, in which divinity has a dual aspect: (x) and ($x + y$), *formally* distinct but in reality, identical⁸². This relative form of

⁷⁹ Boethius, *De persona et duabus naturis*, cap. 3: PL 64, 1343.

⁸⁰ Anselm, *Proslogion*, chapters II-III.

⁸¹ Avery Dulles, “The Ignatian Experience as reflected in the Spiritual Theology of Karl Rahner”, *Philippine Studies* 13 (1965), 471-491.

⁸² It is worth noting the important research project, led by the philosopher and theologian of Münster, Prof. Dr. Klaus Müller, who traces monistic trends in the history of Western philosophy and theology. Müller systematically elaborates a monistic (rather than monotheistic) understanding of Christian faith. This project has aroused a lively and heated discussion among German theologians (*Monismusstreit*), particularly between Klaus Müller and Magnus Striet. Cf Klaus Müller, “Der Monotheismus im philosophischen Diskurs der Moderne”, in *Nimmt der Glaube die Freiheit? Die neue Debatte um den Monotheismus*, ed. Thomas Söding (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 176-213; “Über den monistischen Tiefenstrom der christlichen Gottesrede”, in *Dogma und Denkform. Strittiges in der Grundlegung vom Offenbarungsbegriff und Gottesgedanke*, edd. Klaus Müller, Markus Striet, (Regensburg: Pustet, 2005), 47-84.

monism is well expressed by the term: *pan-en-theism*. The constituent elements of this term are „all” (*pan*), “God” (*theos*), and the preposition “in” (*en*) which connects them. Panentheism indicates intimate unity between creation and God. Panentheism implies mutual immanence between God and the world ($x + y$), thus distinguishing itself from Classical *pantheism*, in which the relation between God and the world is nullified ($x = y$). In *panentheism*, God’s being is *all (totum)* in every created being but not *totaliter*. If the identity (\equiv) of God (x) and the world (y) points to “monism”, the relationality between God and world ($x + y$) hints to its *relative* form. As two different sides of *one* coin, the dual aspect of divine identity (*in se* and *pro nobis*) refers to the same reality. God’s relation to createdness ($x + y$) and God’s relation to Godself ($x = x$) are two aspects of the same divine identity as *spirit*.

By “spirit” we mean the ability of a subject to come out of oneself and to be another as oneself (*fit quodammodo omnia*). As Paul Ricoeur vehemently states – in his study *Oneself as Another* – “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other”⁸³. When we apply such understanding of the “spirit” to God, it follows that God exists, by being beyond Godself⁸⁴. God’s *esse* as *actus purus* is an act of pure spirit. God is both “out of himself” and “in Godself”. God’s *ek-stasis* is nothing but God’s *ek-sistere*. God exists as Spirit. God’s Spirit is always and everywhere active. “God is eternally creative being in that he *goes out of himself*”⁸⁵.

Such understanding of God’s creative being sets aside the interventionist perspective which identifies God’s agency in certain points in space and time. God’s spirit encompasses and permeates the secular world from the outset with the power of self-transcendence. “[God’s] grace is always and everywhere present in the world”⁸⁶. God and world, Creator and creature do not compete. God’s being and createdness, God’s action (*first* cause) and created actions (*secondary* causes), are not inversely but directly proportionate. God’s spirit is the *transcendental* condition for createdness. “God causes *the* world, but not really in the world”⁸⁷. If God were to act and be present *in* the world as God, and acting as a secondary cause, then God (*infinite*) would be identified with a *finite* being. God’s agency in the world would be one among other mundane causes, distinguished by being *extra-ordinary* or *super-natural*. As a final consequence, divine tran-

⁸³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

⁸⁴ Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 222.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, 224.

⁸⁶ Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of Worship”, in *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), vol. 19, 141-149, 142-143.

⁸⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 86.

scendence would be denied. Whereas God's spirit is *totum* in every single creature. His spirit moves continuously createdness beyond itself. Createdness is like a *prism* or *spectrum* that bends and separates the white light into its various colors. Colors (*created* beings) are not external to the light (God's spirit); they already are contained in the white beam of light and they belong to the light. The prism represents *createdness* and it causes the white light to be differentiated and seen as colorful. The cosmos and humanity actualize divinity through evolution and differentiations, in different places and various times. *Omne quod recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*.

When God's self-consciousness (*logos/spirit*) is received, *incarnation* happens, and God is made visible. "If man is thus the self-transcendence of living matter, then the history of nature and of spirit form an intrinsic and stratified unity in which the history of nature develops towards man, continues on in him as *his* history, is preserved and surpassed in him, and therefore reaches its own goal with and in the history of man's spirit"⁸⁸.

6. Christ's Cosmic incarnation

Pope John XXII's Constitution "In agro dominico" (1329) condemned 28 Propositions selected throughout Meister Eckhart's several writings. Three of these propositions have become more and more a source of inspiration for a *post-theistic* approach to Christian faith:

We are totally transformed into God, and we are changed (*convertimur*) into Him; in a similar way, as in the sacrament the bread is changed (*convertitur*) into the body of Christ, so I am changed (*convertor*) into Him, since He Himself makes me one with Himself, not similar. On the part of the living God, it is true that there is no distinction there. (10)

All that God the Father gave to His Only Begotten Son in human nature, all this He gave to me. In this I do not exclude anything, neither union, nor holiness, but He gave everything to me as to Himself. (11)

Everything that Sacred Scripture says about Christ, all this is also true for every good and divine man. (12)

In a post-theistic paradigm, both incarnation and hypostatic union are considered not exclusive events but participatory. "When God wants to be what is not God, man comes to be"⁸⁹. What Rahner refers to the "not God" as *man*, we may refer to *matter* from which all creation emerges and from which also humanity comes forth. "For as a human being, Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stone he shares existence; with plants he shares life; with animals he shares sensation; and with the angels

⁸⁸ Ibidem, 187.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, 225.

he shares intelligence. Therefore, all things are said to be transformed in Christ since—in his human nature—he embraces something of every creature in himself when he is transfigured”⁹⁰. If we define “spirit” as the ability to go out of oneself, then God communicates His very Self (*spirit*) even to *not*-spirit, to matter, as Rahner says: “the Logos actually constitutes a hypostatic union with matter”⁹¹. “Matter is, therefore, the openness and the bringing-itself-to-appear of the personal spirit in the finite world and hence is from its very origin related to the spirit, is a moment in the spirit, and indeed a moment of the eternal Logos as he freely but in fact exists, and this for all eternity”⁹². In his encyclical *Laudato sii* (no. 80), Pope Francis highlights this aspect of God’s spirit: “God is intimately present to each being, without impinging on the autonomy of his creature, and this gives rise to the rightful autonomy of earthly affairs. His divine presence, which ensures the subsistence and growth of each being, ‘continues the work of creation’. The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge”. The creative Spirit of God finitizes itself in creation as creativity, saturating everything with its dynamics⁹³.

Such a cosmic vision of the divine presence urges us to think of the *uniqueness* of Jesus within the structure of interrelatedness in creation. In his encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem*, John Paul II writes: „The incarnation of God’s Son means not only the assumption of human nature into unity with God but in some sense the assumption of everything that is ‚flesh’—the assumption of the whole humanity, of the whole visible and material world. The incarnation therefore also has a cosmic significance and dimension” (no. 50). As human nature “subsists” in the Word, so the whole creation “subsists” in Him (Col 1:17). The Word has not assumed one individual human being (*homo assumptus*) but human nature (*natura humana*)⁹⁴. By “human nature” we mean everything that is *flesh*: the whole visible and material world.

⁹⁰ Bonaventure, *Dominica prima in quadragesima*, Sermo I (IX, 215-219).

⁹¹ Karl Rahner, “Christology in the Setting of Modern Man’s Understanding of Himself and of His World”, in *Theological Investigations* (London: Seabury Press, 1974), vol. 11, 215-230, 219. “I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works for my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God” (John Damascene, *Contra imaginum calumniatores*, I, 16).

⁹² Karl Rahner, “The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith”, in *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, 1979), vol. 6, 53-177, 171.

⁹³ “Since Nicholas of Cusa has never conceived the proposition *Deus est omnia* isolated from the proposition that God is *above* everything or *nothing* of all, he was never suspected of being pantheist. In the world God does not appear in a worldly way” (Beierwaltes, *Identità e differenza*, 154).

⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 4, art. 3, *ad secundum*.

The cosmic dimension of God's incarnation reached its climax in the emergence of human consciousness. "[This] cosmic self-consciousness takes place in its own unique way in each individual person. The one material cosmos is the *single* body as it were of a *multiple* self-presence of this very cosmos and its orientation towards its absolute and infinite ground"⁹⁵. The incarnation of the Logos in the human Jesus is "a concrete moment within the process by which the divinization of all spiritual creatures is realized"⁹⁶. When God's absolute self-communication is *fully* realized in creation's self-transcendence into God, "then we have precisely what is signified by *hypostatic union*"⁹⁷. Jesus of Nazareth is the highest conceivable moment of God's self-communication, "unique" in its essence but not exclusive. *Jesus'* and *our* reception of God's self-communication "are of the same essential nature as those which are also intended for other spiritual subjects through grace"⁹⁸.

Because of this *deep* and *cosmic incarnation*⁹⁹, I disagree with the theologian Richard Bauckham¹⁰⁰ for whom God's presence in the world and history is participated in different ways, according to the will of God who wants to be localized or identified with creation *more* here and *less* there. Bauckham distinguishes different ways God is to be present. God is present "to" *all* creation (in every being); God is present "in" creation, dwelling in every human being; God is present "with" creation, in His chosen people; and finally, God is present "as" created, through the hypostatic union *as* the man Jesus. These are four different ways in which God distinguishes His very self.

I object that such discrimination cannot be grounded in God, because God does not give His infinite being by degrees, but fully. God *fully* (*totum*) communicates Godself (*esse*) always, everywhere and to every created being. "Christ is all and is in all" (Col 3:11); although Godself is not always, everywhere and by each creature *totaliter* received. In Jesus *happened* such total reception and Christians confess that *in him* God became flesh. Degrees and distinctions lie not on God's side but belong to createdness. Differentiations depend on the distinctive "degrees" through which creation has evolved in its different phases until the emergence of religious consciousness in humanity: from stone to trees, from animals to humans, from

⁹⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith*, 189.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, 200.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 201.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 200.

⁹⁹ Niels Henrik Gregersen (ed.), *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (New York: Orbis, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ Richard Bauckham, "The Incarnation and the Cosmic Christ", in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, 24-58.

sages to prophets, from prophets to the historical Jesus, from Jesus to the cosmic Christ when “God will be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

God’s spirit – who inhabits all beings – drives creation forward to be “new” creation, when God will be *fully* incarnated. Such an approach to God’s incarnation in Jesus endorses an understanding of God’s presence that does not assume the mythical mindset of Biblical language and avoids objectifying Godself in something extraordinary *added* to creation through special divine actions. Christ’s incarnation grounds and exemplifies the grammar by which theology realizes the *post-theistic* transformation of Christian faith. Instead of being a stumbling block, contemporary theology can become an opportunity to retrieve and rediscover our Christian theological and dogmatic resources, and even deepen their understanding through the process of a never-ending unfolding of the Christian faith. “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Mat 13:52).

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**Relative Monism: New approaches to a panentheistic understanding
of the relation between God and creation**

SUMMARY

Christian theology urgently needs – in dialogue with modernity, science and religious pluralism – a critical assessment of the so-called theistic paradigm. Such a “new” paradigm defines God as essentially related to createdness and lays aside an interventionist and supernaturalistic model of divine agency. A post-theistic model of God may revisit the Neoplatonic influence in Medieval theology, especially in the works of Thomas Aquinas, in Eckhart’s mysticism, and Nicholas of Cusa’s thought, to support a panentheistic understanding of the relation between God and creation. The oneness of God’s being with created being, God as “non-aliud”, the distinction between God and Godhead, and the identity of God’s spirit with the human soul, are some of the major themes from Classical theism that can be assumed within the framework of the paradigm shift that has been occurring in Contemporary Christology and Trinitarian theology. Special attention will be dedicated to Rahner’s *Grundaxiom* because his idea of the identity of *immanent* and *economic* Trinity aims at unfolding the experiential dimension of the tripersonal God while maintaining the ineffability of God’s divinity. A Post-theistic approach to Christian theology makes possible what may be called a theological *Relative Monism*.