

A THEOLOGICAL TRILOGY OF RELATIONSHIP COUNSELLING

BY DRS PETER & GENEVIEVE MILNES

PART I: Are Other People Hell?

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In *No Exits*, Sartre (1944) wrote that *L'enfer, c'est les autres* or 'Hell is other people' - a cry that summarizes many issues presented to counsellors. The eternal hell endured by Sartre's three damned souls can be compared to the Trinitarian community as a human pathway to reconciliation of relationships. This trilogy of articles outlines a theological antidote for human alienation beginning with an encounter with the 'Eternal Thou' (Buber, 1923) which is viewed through the lens of Trinitarian theology as perichoresis (the Divine dance- the togetherness, space and movement in the Godhead) and kenosis (the Divine emptying of Godself in creation, incarnation and the cross). These relational models provide a basis grounded in Trinitarian theology to help alienated clients restore their spiritual, social and intrapersonal relationships.

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In *No Exit*, Jean Paul Sartre described three damned souls who find themselves trapped in the same room in hell. All of them expected to be punished by some mediaeval torturing device for all eternity but none of them will admit the reason for their damnation: Garcin says that he was executed for being a pacifist, Estelle insists that a mistake has been made, and Inez demands that they all stop lying to themselves and confess to their crimes. Estelle states that it was no accident that they all ended up in the same room and concludes that they have been placed together to make each other miserable. Garcin wants them all to leave each other alone, Inez sings about an execution and Estelle wants a mirror. Inez tries to seduce Estelle by offering to be her “mirror” and tell her everything she sees, but this frightens her instead. They then have an argument that ends with a decision that they should each confess their crimes so that they know what to expect from each other. Garcin cheated and mistreated his wife; Inez seduced her cousin’s wife while living with them; and Estelle cheated on her husband and drowned her illegitimate baby. Despite coming clean about their past lives they continue to get on each other’s nerves. Garcin begs Estelle to tell him he is not a coward because he attempted to flee the war and finally gives in to her attempts to seduce him. This drives Inez crazy and she tells Garcin that Estelle just wants to be with a man. Garcin tries to escape and even though the door suddenly opens, he is unable to leave because he can’t be saved until Inez has faith in him. She refuses this request and promises to make him miserable forever. Forgetting that they are all dead, Estelle unsuccessfully tries to kill Inez by repeated stabbing. Shocked at the absurdity of his fate, Garcin concludes, “*L’enfer, c’est les autres*” or ‘Hell is other people’¹.

Sartre may have wanted us to think that the hell of alienation is also here on earth and not just some other place. Many humans find themselves in a hell with no exits here on earth - trapped in loveless marriages, burdened with dysfunctional families or yoked together with abusive colleagues. The “hell” is mostly due to our relationships with ‘the other’. The pain of this hell may drive many to seek psychotherapeutic help.

Martin Buber² proposed that the “exit point from the hell of other people” can be found in an encounter with God. In 1923, the Austrian-born Jewish philosopher, inspired by Feuerbach³ and Kierkegaard⁴ wrote his thesis on human existence in the now famous work *I and Thou*. Buber explained humans found meaning in life by encountering the world and other people. He categorized human consciousness, interaction, and the ‘being’ of their interaction by using the opposing word pairs of *Ich-Du* (I-Thou) and *Ich-Es* (I-It).

1 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1944/1976) *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Vintage International, New York:45.

2 Buber, Martin (1923/1996) *I and Thou*. (Trans. Ronald Gregor Smith), T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

3 Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas von (1841/1987) *The Essence of Christianity*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

4 Kierkegaard, Soren (1843/1992) *Either – Or*. Middlesex, Penguin.

In *Ich-Es* interactions, humans treat things, animals, and people as objects to be used and classified according to the level the object serves their self-interest. In *Ich-Es* relationships, humans do not actually meet - the “I” merely conceptualizes others as objects that are mere mental representations, created and sustained by the mind⁵. As a result, an *Ich-Es* relationship is a relationship with oneself - not a dialogue, but a monologue. Transference, attribution and imagination drive *Ich-Es* relationships. The relationships in Sartre’s *No Exit* are essentially monologues where each of them tried to justify themselves, use and manipulate the others for personal pleasure, and argue their point of view in their descent into greater intrapsychic and extrapsychic alienation.

Ich-Du (“I-Thou”) relationships are encounters where people meet one another in their authentic existence, without any qualification, and without objectification of one another. *Ich-Du* relationships are characterized by encounter, meeting, dialogue, mutuality, and exchange. Buber argued that a key *Ich-Du* relationship was based in an encounter with the Eternal Thou (God) and then anything or anyone that was in some way connected with the eternal relation with God. Buber argued that the *Ich-Du* relationship with God does not come from human pursuit because that would turn God into an It. Instead the *Ich-Du* with God comes in our welcome of the other, and stays as long as we will it. For example, a person sitting next to a complete stranger on a park bench may enter into an *Ich-Du* relationship by thinking positively about people in general. The stranger is a person and responds to a mental or *Ich-Du* spiritual relationship.

Human life consists of an oscillation between *Ich-Du* and *Ich-Es*. While we may yearn for *Ich-Du* relationships, *Ich-Es* relationships are required for many of life’s functions where relationships are not necessarily required. Many of the ills of modernity (e.g. isolation and dehumanization) are the products of the expansion of a purely analytic, material view of existence at the heart of an *Ich Es* relations. All encounters, Buber tells us, are fleeting. It is only a matter of time before any Thou dissolves into an It and reflection on the Thou turns the other to an It. In the relationship of a married couple, the “Thou” may become an invisible It in the daily grind of raising a family. Even the composition of a romantic poem may turn the Thou into an It because the focus is on *my* words and *my* feelings rather than the other. Love, then, is a constant oscillation between encounter and experience that does not wholly fulfill our yearning for relation. In every human encounter, we feel that there could be something more lasting and more fulfilling. This “something more” Buber informs us, is encounter with the Eternal Thou, God, or the absolute relationship.

As stated earlier, we cannot pursue our encounter with God because that would turn God into an It. Buber suggests the experience and encounter with the Eternal Thou will definitely occur when we “ready” our souls and that a transformation

5 This concept is influenced by the philosophical concept of “phenomenology” where reality is reduced to human perceptions of the event, objects and experiences.

will be evident in our encounters others. We come to see every other being (nature, animals, people) as a Thou. We come to feel affection for everyone and everything. We acquire a sense of loving responsibility for the whole course of the world. This transformation, Buber tells us, is divine revelation. It is salvation. Filled with loving responsibility we are given the ability to say "Thou" to the world. The humans are no longer alienated and find meaning in life, become fulfilled and complete, and help others to find the *Ich-Du* relationships. Transformed humans help build an ideal society - a real community made up of people who are willing to say "Thou" to the entire world.

Paulo Freire⁶, writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1972 applied Buber's model in describing the effects of treating others as objects. The ultimate end is that they become alienated from their own reality and think with fantasized consciousness that is detached from reality. When counsellors have an *Ich-Es* relationship with their clients they can be stuck in their own counter-transference and may inevitably increase their client's sense of alienation. For example, the counsellor may see the client as "one of those cases" which diminishes the efficacy of the helping relationship. The client continues to think in a way that is divorced from reality – unable to see their way out except in fantasized dreams of escape. Freire contrasted this with the *Ich-Du* where others were treated as subjects. From a transforming relationship with the Eternal Thou, counsellors can rid themselves of damaging counter-transference and enter a transforming *Ich-Du* relationship with their clients. The *praxis* of counselling is focused on the client and combines reflection with action – resulting in the empowering of the client to experience and transform their reality.

Although Buber saw the *Ich-Du* encounter with the monotheistic God of Judaism, many⁷ Christians have applied this relationship to a Trinitarian God. Schaeffer⁸ suggested that the solution to the age-old philosophical problem of unity and diversity can be found in the Triune God. Our encounter with God should reconcile us with the *imago Dei* (image of God⁹) so that we experience a unity and diversity much like the Trinity. Jesus prayed "that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us"¹⁰. Moltmann¹¹ stressed that each person of the Trinity dwells in one another even though differentiated¹².

This is a basis of "true theological doctrine of freedom." Unlike the imprisonment in the "hell" that enveloped Garçon, Inez and Estelle in *No Exits* of an eternity of putting up with each other, the triune unity and diversity of God provides a model for human relationships in three models of human freedom¹³:

1. *Supremacy*. God rules over creation, which exists merely to serve God. Moltmann rejected this because of the possibility of this running counter to God entering into a relationship with the world as a subject. Similarly, humans may rule over the world (Genesis 1:28) but this is not without responsibility and the charge to be in a relationship with the world as subject.
2. *Socio-historical*. This Hegelian meaning of freedom includes communion of a relationship between subjects, and a relationship aimed at love and solidarity. This model corresponds to the *perichoresis* of the God the Father and the Son acting through the Son to the children of God or humanity. Moltmann considered this relationship as both liberating and loving.
3. *Passion for the potential of others*. Whereas the second model was historical, this model describes a common future project. Moltmann favoured this because it describes the freedom humans share with God the Holy Spirit in making us friends with God.

The first model of human freedom is the political focus on God the Father; the second is the communal focus on the Son; and the third is the spiritual focus on the Spirit.

Humans are created a communal creatures in the image of God whose life is expressed through the intimate relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Human *imago dei* is also the *imago trinitatis* that mirrors¹⁴ divine life in us as individuals and within community¹⁵. Communal life is a reflection of the indwelling mutual model of Trinitarian love (*Perichoresis*) and expressed as empowerment (*kenosis*)¹⁶. Our life together then, should be a reflection of the mutual indwelling in love that is found in the Trinity. Obviously our communal lives, even at their very best, are only ever tarnished image of the Triune community. The Trinity

6 Freire, Paulo (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin, Middlesex.

7 This includes "Trinitarian Christians" who have "orthodox theology" defined by the ancient Creeds as opposed to "Unitarian Christians" who have a differing theology about the conception of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, it is suggested most Christians will benefit from this trilogy of articles because the focus is on the relationship rather than the definition of God.

8 Schaeffer, Francis A. (1985) *He Is There and He Is Not Silent, "The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer Vol.1*. Crossway, Westchester, Illinois: 288-289

9 Genesis 1:26.

10 John 17:21 (KJV)

11 Moltmann, Jurgen (1981) *The Trinity and the Kingdom* Harper & Row, San Francisco:xi; 169; 107

12 Since the beginning of the Christian Church, there has been controversy about the nature of the Trinity. Rigid acceptance of an Orthodox *hypostatic union* (in which Christ possesses a full undiminished human nature and a full undiminished divine nature at all times) means that some reject *kenosis* is heresy because it does not

explain the *hypostatic union*. On the other hand, Unitarians may base their argument for a diminished divinity of Christ on *kenosis*. Either way, the mystery of the Trinity is diminished by adherence to dogmatic belief that does not allow for the scriptural *kenosis* metaphor. Similarly, the beauty of the dance metaphor (*perichoresis*) has been rejected as an incomplete vision of the Godhead. Like all metaphors, *perichoresis* and *kenosis* are incomplete explanations of the Trinity. This should not deter us from their appropriate usage.

13 Moltmann, Jurgen (1981) *The Trinity and the Kingdom* Harper & Row, San Francisco:xi; 169; 107

14 Pembroke, Neil (2006) *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot:43-54.

15 Pembroke, Neil (2006). *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot:43-54.

16 Some are quick to remind us that the *kenotic* process did not include Jesus emptying himself of his divinity – to do so would mean that the Son was no longer part of the Trinity. However, *kenosis* does mean that God empties Godself of protection from the impurity of sin and descends all the way to the lowest of the low in the human spectrum – the level of a slave (Philippians 2:4-8).

is a model of communal life, but it is much more than that - we are granted the enormous privilege of participating in the divine communion. As we encounter the triune "Eternal Thou", we are enriched and empowered to build a communion of love here on earth.

We will use the theological notions of the Trinity as a model (*perichoresis*) and the Trinity as empowerment (*kenosis*) in subsequent articles to inform our task of building a relational community:

- *Perichoresis* is the mutual indwelling of the Triune God in each other that contains both closeness and open space and is unified by love. Much like a dance¹⁷, there is a requirement of individual space and mutual contact for the movement that creates the unity and diversity within the Godhead. Similarly, the Christian community needs a balance of intimacy, respect for individuality, and the personal freedom to move¹⁸.
- *Kenosis* is the authentic relational life that "empties" one of self in order to be receptive to the other¹⁹. *Kenosis* is a Trinitarian dynamic that began at creation and is continued in the incarnation and reconciliation:

Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status, no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion²⁰.

Kenosis is the foundation of the grace given to humans to restore relationship with God.

Sartre's "Hell is other people" is evident in "I-It" relationships of alienated humans treating each other as objects of personal usefulness. In contrast, our human relationships can be transformed by an encounter with the "Eternal Thou". Christians who believe that God provides a Trinitarian theological model for reconciling spiritual, social and intrapersonal relationships see God's *perichoresis* (John 17:21) as a social model of closeness, space and movement, and God's *kenosis* as an empowerment. Effective counselling requires counsellors to encounter the "Eternal Thou", the practice of *perichoresis* and the empowerment

of *kenosis* so that they can assist alienated clients restore their spiritual, social and intrapersonal relationships.

■ **Drs Peter & Genevieve Milnes.** Drs Peter and Genevieve Milnes are the co-directors of Psychology Australia Mt Lawley. Genevieve is the immediate past-president of CCAA and works as a Clinical Psychologist travelling to country locations. Peter is a Certified Transactional Analyst. They were schoolteachers for many years, then missionaries to Brazil for a decade and now work in tandem in psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology in their Perth and Albany Clinics.



¹⁷ Kruger, C.Baxter (2005) *The Great Dance: The Christian Vision Revisited*. Regent College Publishing, Vancouver.

¹⁸ Pembroke, Neil (2006). *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot:43-54..

¹⁹ Pembroke, Neil (2006). *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot:43-54..

²⁰ Philippians 2.4-8 (Message Bible)